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Year XLVII New series  
January-April 2025

# Frameless Experiences

For a Multidisciplinary Approach to Immersive Media

Edited by Piermarco Aroldi, Adriano D'Aloia and Barbara Scifo



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PIERMARCO AROLDI - ADRIANO D'ALOIA - BARBARA SCIFO\*

## UNFRAMING/REFRAMING THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE\*\*

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### 1. INTO THE VELDT

In 1950, *The Saturday Evening Post* published Ray Bradbury's short story entitled "The Veldt"; the protagonists of the story are George and Lydia Hadley, a wealthy couple with two children, proud of their new home "HappyLife", a fully automated living device that constantly takes care of the family, looking after their every daily need. The children, Peter and Wendy (and at these names, the reader begins to feel a shiver of anxiety) have at their disposal a technological nursery that can perfectly simulate any physical environment, automatically tuning in to the wishes of the two kids. At the beginning of the story, the parents, concerned about abnormal behaviour of the device, enter the nursery unbeknownst to their children:

The nursery was silent. It was empty as a jungle glade at hot high noon. The walls were blank and two dimensional. Now, as George and Lydia Hadley stood in the center of the room, the walls began to purr and recede into crystalline distance, it seemed, and presently an African veldt appeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to the final pebble and bit of straw. The ceiling above them became a deep sky with a hot yellow sun.

Today we would call it an immersive, three-dimensional, multisensory, interactive environment; hyper-realistic in its ability to simulate and reproduce reality:

George Hadley felt the perspiration start on his brow. "Let's get out of this sun", he said. "This is a little too real. But I don't see anything wrong?". "Wait a moment, you'll see", said his wife. Now the hidden odorophonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor at the two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rusty smell of animals, the smell of dust like a red paprika in the hot air. And now the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on grassy sod,

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\*\* The article was discussed and developed jointly by the three authors, the first paragraph was written by Piermarco Aroldi, the second by Barbara Scifo, and the third by Adriano D'Aloia.

the papery rustling of vultures. A shadow passed through the sky. The shadow flickered on George Hadley's upturned, sweating face. "Filthy creatures", he heard his wife say. "The vultures".

The reader's disquiet grows throughout the story in parallel with that of the protagonists; a visit to the nursery by a psychologist friend of theirs confirms their suspicions: the device now responds only to the commands of Peter and Wendy who, having lost all interest in the fairy-tale environments of their childhood, have fixated on the vision of the bush, populating it with ferocious lions and projecting onto it thoughts of death anomalous for their age. Spoiler alert: George and Lydia's decision to prohibit their children from using the nursery will trigger their testy reaction, and the immersive playroom will become a trap destined to phagocyte (in the literal sense of the word) the improvident parents.

So far, Bradbury's story: for today's reader an excellent example of unintentional literary Retrofuturism, for the 1950s reader a metaphor for the entry of television into the single-family homes of US citizens; and thus, a text littered with clues about the expectations and fears that accompanied the early years of the new medium and its domestication process.

Placed, as an exergue, at the introduction of this special issue, the narrative tells us, first of all, of the historical tension of media technologies to saturate the sensory experience of their spectators/users, constantly increasing their own artificiality in order to make the reproduction of the physical world more and more realistic. As will be seen in the following pages, this tension finds concrete evidence in the often fleeting appearance of technological devices that today are the object of a media-archaeological approach, such as the *Sensorama*, but also configures the, more or less, recent expectations of Virtual Reality (VR) and the Metaverse. At the same time, the narrative warns against the illusion that technological development constitutes a simple and neutral quest for perfection in the simulation of human experience, capable of expanding the knowledge of its users, without coming to terms with the – equally human – tangles of their bonds, their passions, their desires, their fears.

## 2. THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMERSION

The development of perceptual and narrative environments enabled by immersive digital technologies – such as videomapping and extended realities (virtual, augmented and mixed) associated with increasingly high-performance artificial intelligence systems – has long been the basis for new media experiences in various fields: from entertainment (cinema, video games, theme parks, live events, etc.) to education and training; from cultural and scientific dissemination (documentaries, exhibitions, etc.) to experimentation in the visual and performing arts or advertising and retail.

These environments go beyond and transfigure the traditional *framed* vision of classical art works and media screens, moving towards a synesthetic, participatory and total user experience, characterised by immediacy and presence: real environments that can be explored by users, according to the different degrees of interactivity envisaged, which can both enable the user to "immerse" himself in another world (although in a continuum with the perceptual dimensions of physical reality) and allow the digital contents to *emerge* within the physical space, integrating it with new meanings and new narratives.

In the public debate, however, the diffusion of such technologies is often associated with both forms of hype and moral panic, both often animated by technocentric and solutionist perspectives. One can think, emblematically, of the public discourse on the Metaverse and its interpretative instability, in which different visions of its operating model (centralised and closed or interoperable and open) and its desirable future coexist in an often-incompatible manner, in an attempt to establish a dominant definition. These are controversial visions held, from time to time, by different relevant social groups: on the one hand, the utopian imaginaries – fuelled by big technology companies, game producers, and economic investors – focused on the advent of the new immersive frontier of social media, gaming and the mediatisation of many other domains of social life (work, public services, etc.), and on the benefits brought by the improvement of “closeness at a distance”; on the other hand, critical discourses by users, civil society, and governments on the social and psychological implications, such as the detachment from physical reality, the amplification of anti-social tendencies (harassment, hate speech, disinformation) and the loss of control over data and privacy.

Instead, there is a need to offer solid knowledge and reflection around the concept and experience of immersivity, reconstructing the roots and the cultural, social and economic paradigms that are driving the development of these new media and environments, in order to also fully grasp their potential for communication and other applications or, conversely, their limitations.

This reflection can be promoted starting from the adoption of a multidisciplinary and systemic approach, able to put into historical perspective the recent technological development of the digital media immersivity paradigm, in order to overcome both the rhetoric and ideology of revolutionary technological novelty, and to put at the centre of the reflection on immersive technologies the question of their transformative potential of experience. The aim is to trace the cultural, anthropological, narrative, artistic and media origins of the ‘total’ experience based on the interaction and physical, multi-sensorial and emotional involvement of the spectator, as well as the commercial and industrial drives.

In contemporary media culture, the experience of immersion is increasingly considered as a hallmark of innovation – whether in VR environments, 360° video, multi-sensory installations, live augmented performances, or interactive journalism. Likely because it is deeply rooted in the origins of human perceptual and cognitive experience, the pursuit of immersion reflects a desire for centrality and contact, one that is now fuelled by the momentum of digital media and takes shape through modes of media engagement that are enveloping, engaging, and surrounding. Combined with – or at times more problematically opposed to – the concepts of presence, empathy, and embodiment, immersion does not merely denote a condition of experience, but above all a form of more immediate and direct (and apparently passive) comprehension of the world. Such an “immersive episteme” consists in a way of producing knowledge that is grounded in experiential immersion, rather than in rational distance or mere abstract representation.

Indeed, the immersion enabled by technologies such as VR, 360° video, but also spatial computing and Mixed Reality, by creating the illusion of an inclusive and vivid reality from which it is difficult to distance oneself, increases the possibility for users to feel spatially and psychologically present within the represented reality and to foster knowledge and understanding of it. This is a subjective sense of presence, the sensation of being in an environment despite being physically located elsewhere, which reduces the cognitive effort required, for example, to imagine the situation and conditions of the other, thanks to “immersive witnessing” (the experience of being there with the other) or

the “immersive first-person experience” (being the other), nourishing forms of empathy or even compassion, not comparable to those aroused by viewing on a screen or reading.

It is precisely the shift from traditional forms of “storytelling” to immersive forms of “storyliving” that generates enthusiasm for the ability of these technological systems to induce empathic responses (hence the appellation “empathy machines”); the recognition of the prosocial potential enabled by cognitive and emotional embodiment is especially relevant in relation to members of outgroups who are victims of discrimination or exclusion (ethnic minorities, refugees and migrants, prisoners, etc.). Naturally, there is debate about the effectiveness of the empathy induced by these technologies: on the one hand, there is the risk that empathy may be reduced to a “narrative placebo” rather than a true driver of social change; on the other hand, there is the overestimation of the technology itself as the cause of the prosocial effect and the underestimation of other factors, such as design choices and formal and content variables of the proposed narrative.

### 3. FRAMELESS? UNFRAMING/REFRAMING THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE

In any case, the conditions for such a form of knowledge to take root involve an oxymoronic tendency to break free from the constraints of ordinary perception, while at the same time seeking a new, broader framework in which to exercise this novel form of agency.

On the one hand, this ‘liberation’ consists in the dismantling of the *frame*. The escape from the “cage” of reality and the entry into alternative virtual worlds – as happens in VR – is nothing more than the most contemporary expression of the human drive toward *illusion*. Thanks to their ability to (re)create realistic and plausible virtual environments, digital media serve as the key to unlock the bars of reality and to “escape”.

Such an escape takes on specific forms of breaking boundaries and reorganizing the perceptual field, which are characteristic of audiovisual media. In the case of VR, for example, if the screen extends in all directions at 360° around the viewer, then the screen as we always know it, seems to disappear entirely. Even the composition of a shot, no longer confined to a rectangular frame, breaks away from the tradition of cinematic syntax and instead comes closer to that of theatre (as live performance) and sculpture (due to its three-dimensional plasticity).

As the essays in this dossier demonstrate, the disappearance of the screen’s edges does not necessarily imply a rejection of all forms of perceptual organization. Rather, by moving beyond the literal meaning of the term *frame*, it points to the need for a broader logical and conceptual expansion: breaking free from the strict logic of the *frame* also means breaking established patterns and structures, transforming the conceptual framework, and redefining the conditions and dynamics of experience.

The notion of *unframing* has gained traction across media studies and cultural theory as a way to describe the transformation of spectatorship and representation in immersive and interactive media. Traditionally associated with the pictorial frame, the boundary that separates image from world, *framing* is not merely a technical or aesthetic device but a cultural and perceptual convention that organizes how media are experienced. In contrast, *unframing* gestures toward the dissolution or reconfiguration of this boundary, typically enabled by technologies such as VR, spatial audio, newsgames, or phigital performances.

In this context, and in relation to the transformation of spectatorship, the collapse of the perceived distance between user and representational space is pivotal. This collapse is achieved by isolating the user, surrounding him/her with three-dimensional images and sounds, and stimulating a sense of immediacy and intimacy with the simulated environ-

ment. VR and 360° videos, for example, produce seemingly autonomous environments in which the user, as an acting subject rather than a spectator, can formally move and with which he or she can sometimes interact, through kinaesthetic and bodily intervention. Such a shift in spectatorship, from a distant position of observation to a proactive, bodily and sensory experience, is crucial to understanding how immersive media potentially challenge traditional Western theorisations about the image and the spectator: although the rise of immersive media experiences has expanded traditional conceptions and perceptions of representation, currently the aesthetic and experiential products of immersive media often remain limited and disappointing in their outcomes for users.

However, as recent scholarship demonstrates, what appears as a loss of the frame often entails its reframing on new terms – via the body, the code, the interface, or the spatial environment. This collection of essays interrogates the tension between *unframing* and *reframing* as a dynamic process that redefines media experience in both conceptual and practical terms.

But what does it mean, precisely, to speak of an *unframed* media experience? Does the disappearance of the visible frame around an image or screen truly imply a loss of mediation, or are we witnessing a shift in the logic of framing itself? This special issue investigates these questions by examining how different media – across formats, technologies, and sensory regimes – dismantle, disguise, or reconfigure their own representational boundaries. The central claim uniting these contributions is that unframing is never a pure absence of mediation, but rather a process of *reframing*, one that redistributes attention, agency, and sensory involvement across users, devices, and environments.

The theoretical and historical lineage of ‘framing’ in visual culture spans from Alberti’s window to Simmel’s aesthetics, from film theory’s *découpage* to Foucauldian discourses of the gaze. In immersive and post-screen media, however, the traditional frame – once easily locatable at the edge of the canvas or screen – is no longer perceptually stable. It may now reside in the software that regulates the user’s interaction, in the spatial boundaries of a VR environment, in the directional logic of binaural sound, or in the proprioceptive rhythms of a body in motion. Rather than negating the frame, immersive media technologies *externalize* or *internalize* it – delegating framing operations to the user’s body, the designer’s algorithms, or the environment itself.

This phenomenon is approached from a variety of disciplinary perspectives in the essays here collected.

Drawing on phenomenology and attention studies, Giulia Andreini’s contribution proposes that immersive experiences in VR are better understood through the Husserlian concept of *Versunkenheit* – a state of absorption akin to phantasy consciousness. Rather than viewing VR immersion as a stable, device-driven condition, Andreini maps it as a fluctuating experiential modality governed by oscillations between immersion and emersion. Importantly, she argues that the body retains a framing function, serving as the site through which presence and detachment are negotiated.

Fabrizia Bandi complements this phenomenological approach with a media-archeological and aesthetic perspective. Her essay traces a historical genealogy from panoramic paintings and stereoscopic postcards to virtual landscapes generated in contemporary VR. She highlights how the promise of “unframed” experience in VR environments – where the image envelops the viewer – is in fact part of a longer trajectory of technological and aesthetic attempts to immerse the spectator within the image. Far from erasing the frame, VR displaces it: from the canvas to the space, from the picture plane to the body. In doing so, Bandi reframes landscape not only as visual spectacle, but as a

site of operational and aesthetic negotiation, where the user becomes a co-author of the experience.

A media-archeological and sensory perspective is taken up also by Giancarlo Grossi, who foregrounds multisensoriality as a long-standing utopia of immersive media. His study of olfactory media – from Sensorama to VR olfactory interfaces – demonstrates how the sense of smell, long marginalized in media discourse, resists mediatization precisely because of its intimacy and imprecision. Grossi argues that immersive media have historically aimed to overcome this resistance, generating what he calls a utopia of multisensoriality, in which the entire sensorium is absorbed by the media apparatus. Yet this ideal often remains unfulfilled, revealing the persistent tensions between embodiment and abstraction, between technical control and affective immediacy.

Other contributions expand the inquiry into the social, industrial, and narrative dimensions of unframing. In their study of *ABBA Voyage*, Bengtsson, Karlsson, Edlom, and Camén adopt the concept of the “phygital” experience – a hybrid format where physical venues and digital media converge to produce a collectively immersive concert. Here, framing is redefined not as visual delimitation but as spatio-narrative orchestration, combining holography, transmedia storytelling, and fandom practices into an experience where audiences participate in the co-construction of meaning. In contrast, Anja Boato’s historical reconstruction of early immersive experiments by VR pioneers Heilig, Sutherland, and Krueger (*Sensorama*, *Sword of Damocles*, and *Videoplax*, respectively) challenges the ahistorical discourse of novelty that often accompanies VR. She argues that these prototypes established not just technical precedents, but rhetorical frames that continue to shape how we imagine immersion today.

Nicoletta Vittadini’s essay serves as a critical lens on the imaginaries of immersion. Through a comparative analysis of immersive narratives from the 1980s to the present, she interrogates the so-called ‘newness’ of the Metaverse as articulated by tech companies like Meta. She argues that contemporary promotional discourses construct a “narrative without history” – a rhetorical strategy that obscures the cultural and ideological continuities of immersive media while projecting a vision of seamless, embodied connectivity. Her critique exposes how corporate framing of immersion serves to legitimize specific socio-technical imaginaries while effacing the complexities of historical development and cultural contingency.

The theme of participatory framing is also central to Conti, Montanari, and Panarari’s analysis of newsgames and immersive journalism. Their essay examines how games such as *Syrian Journey* and *The Waiting Game* reconfigure journalism by inviting players to engage with current events through branching narratives and procedural logic. These formats challenge the conventional objectivity of news reportage by offering embodied, interactive entry points into complex issues. In doing so, newsgames instantiate a form of immersive storytelling that reframes news consumption as a reflexive, empathetic encounter, rather than a detached act of reading.

Finally, sound studies and musicology provide a further angle. Gianni Sibilla’s essay explores how spatial audio and immersive sound design contribute to the construction of narrative environments. Situating sound as a framing device in its own right, he examines how technologies like Dolby Atmos and 3D audio formats redefine the listener’s orientation in media space. Sound becomes not just a complement to vision, but a primary vector of immersion, guiding perception, emotion, and movement across platforms ranging from home theatres to virtual concerts. Sound, here, is not simply background but a structuring force that shapes how users inhabit mediated environments.

Collectively, these essays reveal that to *unframe* the media experience is never simply to remove boundaries, but to negotiate new ones – technological, cognitive, affective, and political. *Unframing/reframing* emerge not as opposing poles, but as coexisting operations in the evolving grammar of media experience. Whether in the design of digital environments, the layering of sensory inputs, or the narrative structuring of space and time, immersion always implies a logic of inclusion and exclusion, attention and redirection, construction and illusion. By foregrounding the multiple ways in which media are framed – technologically, perceptually, ideologically – this special issue offers a multifaceted exploration of what it means to experience media today: not from a fixed position, but from within the unstable thresholds where bodies, technologies, and images meet.

GIULIA ANDREINI\*

## FROM PHANTASY TO VR IMMERSION: PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON ‘UNFRAMED’ EXPERIENCES

### *Abstract*

Originally tied to cinematic experience, immersion is frequently associated in media discourse with Virtual Reality (VR) and often regarded as a media-property. For instance, ‘fully immersive VR’ refers to a setup enabling a unique form of image appreciation: the digital image displayed through a headset respond to user’s movements, simulating an environment filled with perceptual affordances. Thus, it has been claimed that VR displays a peculiar kind of image that attempts to negate its iconic nature, by rejecting the traditional frame of pictorial representation. Though bodily engagement, the user indeed often feels immersed in the artificial image-world. However, a purely technological view of immersivity overlooks the immersive and emersive shifts in user experience throughout VR consumption. To address this issue, the article proves the value of theoretical insights coming from phenomenology to tackle immersion as a variable condition rather than a homogeneous state. Drawing on phenomenological considerations on digital images accessible through fully immersive VR set-ups, the contribution explores the concept of *Versunkenheit*, testing its potential to address active and passive moments as well as shifts in VR immersion. In phenomenology, *Versunkenheit* is closely related to phantasy consciousness, whereby absent objects are presentified through mental images, that can sometime evolve into actual visions. Daydreams, for instance, entail the subject’s absorption into an inner pseudo-world, while temporary losing awareness of its actual surroundings. On these grounds, the contribution compares phantasy and VR immersion, arguing that similar attentional dynamics are at stake. In VR, however, immersion is achieved through the sensory engagement of the user’s body, still bearing a framing function. By integrating phenomenology with media studies, the article ultimately provides a theoretical framework for analyzing immersion in VR digital images, contributing to a critical assessment of ‘unframed’ experiences.

### *Keywords*

Immersion; phenomenology; virtual reality; attention; frame.

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### 1. IMMERSION: TOWARD AN EXPERIENTIAL UNDERSTANDING

A widely used notion in media studies, ‘immersion’ is commonly conceived as a key concept of ‘new’ media’s drive. Throughout history, the development of mediated experiences has often been viewed, in a rather teleological attitude, as a progressive effort

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to draw the spectator closer to the image by plunging them in spaces of representation. This claim, notably supported by Oliver Grau<sup>1</sup>, has reached an increasing popularity among media theorists. Even though proto-immersive experiences can be traced back to frescoes in Roman villas<sup>2</sup>, 19th-century media are distinguished by a particular mode of spectator engagement, that seeks “a reduction in critical distance from what is shown and an increasing emotional involvement in what is happening”<sup>3</sup>. According to Grau, this effect is achieved by creating spaces of illusion, through images that aim to hermetically isolate the viewer from the outside world, by saturating their field of vision. This is particularly the case of 19<sup>th</sup>-century panoramas, which used large-scale images to create immersive spaces to experience collectively, ultimately enhancing illusion’s effectiveness and deepening the viewer’s sense of immersion in the pictorial space.

This pursuit is carried on by ‘new’ media, developing increasingly refined image-production techniques and sophisticated consumption devices. From the 1960s, the first experiments with head-mounted displays (HMDs), such as the notorious “Ultimate Display” by Ivan E. Sutherland in 1965, built on the results of wartime research<sup>4</sup>. The capabilities of these devices were decisively shaped by the introduction of motion-tracking systems, particularly in the 1990s. These sensors, embedded in the visor, enabled real-time tracking of user’s movements, enhancing the sense of immersion – an effect further reinforced by increasing multi-sensory saturation, which facilitated a more effective and sustained detachment of the user from its surroundings. All these elements, along with the burst of CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) and of HCI (Human-Computer Interaction) supporting more natural interactions<sup>5</sup>, facilitated the creation of increasingly sophisticated spaces of illusion – an essential factor in achieving immersion, as Grau posits.

However, scholars have pointed out that the term ‘immersion’ does not originate in media theory, which appropriates it metaphorically. From the Latin *immersionem*, an action noun from the past participle of *immergere* – composed of the prefix *in-* and *mērgere* – the term literally means ‘to plunge in’, ‘to dip into’, ‘to sink’ or even ‘to submerge’ an object in a liquid, typically water. This aquatic resonance is reinforced by its use in everyday language, where it primarily refers to physical immersion in water. Therefore, the term broadly describes the state of an object being immersed, sunk, submerged or even diving<sup>6</sup>.

When used reflexively, the act of immersing oneself denotes a deliberate and voluntary action. This aquatic origin is especially highlighted by Janet Murray, who explores how the term transitions metaphorically from the physical and corporeal realm of elemental immersion in water to the media experience. “In a psychologically immersive experience”, such as that promised by Virtual Reality (VR), “we seek the same sensation we experience when diving into the ocean or a pool” that is, “the feeling of being

<sup>1</sup> See O. Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> The expression refers to a prototype visor (see I.E. Sutherland, “The Ultimate Display”, *Proceedings of IFIP Congress*, 1965: 506-508).

<sup>5</sup> See P. Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction*, Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2001 and Grau, *Virtual Art*, 198-201.

<sup>6</sup> For in-depth etymological considerations see F. Freitag *et al.*, “Immersivity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spaces of Immersion”, *Ambiances. International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*, Varia, 2020. Accessed December 12, 2024. DOI: 10.4000/ambiances.3233, and S. Agrawal *et al.*, “Defining Immersion: Literature Review and Implications for Research on Immersive Audiovisual Experience”, *Journal of Audio Engineering Society*, 68, 6 (2019): 404-417. DOI: 10.17743/jaes.2020.0039.

surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all our attention and perceptual faculties”<sup>7</sup>.

Nonetheless, as Marie-Laure Ryan notes, following Murray, the first psychologically immersive experiences were not visual but narrative in nature. Building on this, Ryan suggests extending immersion beyond the purely technological to the literary realm<sup>8</sup>. The enduring appeal of immersive motifs over the centuries is tied to the “success of an aesthetics of illusion”<sup>9</sup>, particularly effective since the 19th century in both artistic and textual representations. These rely on strategies designed to render mediation transparent<sup>10</sup> – a process through which the interface seeks to erase itself, receding into the experiential background and allowing the displayed content to come to the foreground. The epitome of the immersed subject is Don Quixote, the protagonist of Cervantes’ novel. A celebration of the imaginative idyll, Don Quixote is the eponymous immersive hero who becomes so deeply absorbed in the fictional worlds his imagination creates – fueled by literature – that he eventually loses touch with his surroundings, ultimately mistaking fiction for reality. Immersion, therefore, is closely linked to questions of *reality* and the search for criteria to distinguish it from unreality. In this respect, the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz, building on William James’ theory of “sub-universes”<sup>11</sup>, views Don Quixote as a proof of the existence of multiple realities. “Each world”, Schütz notes, “whilst it is attended to, is real after its own fashion, and any relation to our mind at all in the absence of a stronger relation with which it clashes, suffices to make an object real”<sup>12</sup>. This potential, inherent in human nature, finds its ultimate expression in extreme imaginative products like dreams, that media experiences have been attempting to reproduce for centuries<sup>13</sup>.

Further insights on immersion come from game studies. By denouncing the lack of a common definition, Gordon Calleja notes that the concept is often conflated with that of ‘presence’<sup>14</sup>. For instance, Mel Slater and Silvia Wilbur define presence as consciousness’ state in which users develop “the psychological sensation of being in the virtual environment”<sup>15</sup>, while immersion simply refers to “what technology objectively offers”<sup>16</sup>. This stance aligns with a recent trend that views immersion as an inherent

<sup>7</sup> J.H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York-London: The Free Press, 1997, 99.

<sup>8</sup> See M.-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Narrative and Electronic Media*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding media transparency see J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2000. For a phenomenological account of transparency in the body-technology relationship see D. Idhe, *Technology and the Lifeworld. From Garden to Earth*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 73-80.

<sup>11</sup> The expression recurs in W. James, *The Principles of Psychology. Volume II*, New York: Dover Publications, 1950, 291-294.

<sup>12</sup> A. Schütz, “Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality”, in *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory*, edited by A. Brodersen, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976: 136. See Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 98. Her observation is echoed by Ryan, who coined the expression “Don Quixote Syndrome” to designate the temporary impairment to distinguish the text-inspired fictional world from the perceptual one (*Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 99).

<sup>13</sup> See G. Grossi, *La notte dei simulacri. Sogno, cinema, realtà virtuale*, Monza: Johan & Levy, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> See G. Calleja, *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2011, 18-23.

<sup>15</sup> M. Slater, S. Wilbur, “A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments”, *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, 6 (1997): 603-616 (607).

<sup>16</sup> M. Slater, “A Note on Presence Terminology”, *Presence Connect*, 3, 3 (2003): 1-5 (1).

property of the device, assumed to automatically provide the user with an immersive experience. This is particularly the case with VR, often regarded as an immersive medium<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, depending on the technological set-up, VR can offer different levels of immersion, ranging from low-immersive computer-based systems to high-immersive to HMD-based setups. While low-immersive systems, such as large projection screens or multi-display systems with basic motion tracking, enhance user engagement while preserving its awareness of the surroundings, high-immersive setup through HMDs or Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE), fully envelop users in a 360-degree digital image with advanced motion tracking, optimizing presence<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, by reducing immersion to a feature of the “basic apparatus”<sup>19</sup>, one risks overlooking the oscillation between immersive and emersive moments that characterizes all media consumption – even within so-called ‘fully-immersive’ setups. Emissive instants occur when the user’s attention is redirected toward their own state of absorption, fostering an explicit self-awareness without necessarily disrupting the immersive condition altogether. Furthermore, this perspective fails to account for the emergence of immersive states even when using devices considered as ‘non-immersive’. Against this simplified view, this article aligns with perspectives that regard immersion primarily as a feature of subjective experience<sup>20</sup>, stemming from “the user’s mental absorption in the world”<sup>21</sup>, rather than as an ontological property of the technical apparatus. Often associated with a shift of attention from a ‘real’ and perceptual space to a representational one, this study praise for envisioning immersion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, depending on multiple factors and branching out into different types: from perceptual or sensory (induced by sensory saturation and temporary detachment from the external world)<sup>22</sup>, to narrative or imaginative<sup>23</sup>, to strategic or tactical challenges-fostered immersion<sup>24</sup>.

In line with these perspectives, the study aims to prove the value of a phenomenological approach in framing immersion in an unprecedented way, grounding this concept in a theoretical reflection on the mechanisms of consciousness’ life. The phenomenological notion of *Versunkenheit*, translated either as ‘absorption’, ‘sinking’, or even ‘immersion’, introduced by Edmund Husserl and later developed by Eugen Fink, Theodor Conrad and by Jean Paul Sartre, and primarily linked to the experience of *Phantasie* [phantasy], allows reframing immersion as an inherent possibility of the subject’s experience. By conceiving it not as a fixed state but as a modality with degrees and fluctuations,

<sup>17</sup> For instance, this claim is advanced by Bolter, Grusin, *Remediation*; Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*; Grau, *Virtual Art*.

<sup>18</sup> See F. Biocca, B. Delaney, “Immersive Virtual Reality Technology”, in *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality*, edited by F. Biocca and M.R. Levy, New York: Routledge, 1995: 57-124 (59).

<sup>19</sup> J.-L. Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus”, *Film Quarterly*, 28, 2 (1974-1975): 46.

<sup>20</sup> Consider the positions of Biocca and Delaney (“Immersive Virtual Reality Technology”) and A. McMahan (“Immersion, Engagement, and Presence. A Method for Analysing 3-D Video Games”, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by M.J.P. Wolf and B. Perron, New York: Routledge, 2004: 67-86).

<sup>21</sup> McMahan “Immersion, Engagement, and Presence”, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Among the various types of immersion, Biocca and Delaney mention ‘perceptual immersion’, while Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä prefer the term ‘sensory immersion’ (“Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion”, in *DIGAREC Keynote Lectures 2009/10*, edited by S. Günzel and M. Liebe, Potsdam: Potsdam University Press, 2011: 88-115).

<sup>23</sup> Ryan suggests extending the notion of immersion to the narrative experience, while Ermi and Mäyrä consider the relevance of ‘imaginative immersion’. Thon prefers instead ‘narrative immersion’.

<sup>24</sup> The tripartition between sensory, narrative and challenge-based immersion is from Ermi and Mäyrä. In contrast, Thon proposes a fourfold distinction between spatial immersion, playful immersion (generated by a shift of attention toward interaction with the game), narrative immersion and social immersion, directed at others in multiplayer environments.

these phenomenological accounts provide a unique lens for understanding its origin and the fundamental principles governing its emergence and variation over time.

Building on recent phenomenological investigations of digital images accessible through VR<sup>25</sup>, this contribution explores the phenomenological experience of *Versunkenheit* emerging in phantasy, assessing its relevance for encompassing both active and passive dimensions of immersion in VR. Building on recent insights that highlight its proximity to the media notion of immersion<sup>26</sup>, this article develops a comparative assessment between immersion in phantasy image-worlds and in virtual image-environments, with a focus on HMD fully immersive VR. To establish the relevance of this comparison, *Versunkenheit* in phantasy will be briefly introduced, focusing on cases where phantasy formations evolve into vivid, quasi-perceptual visions that create pseudo-worlds, absorbing the subject's attention and leading temporary detachments from the immediate surroundings. This analysis will serve as a foundation for examining the key features of VR immersion, highlighting its similarities and differences with the phantasy one. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of the sensory engagement of the user's body, which not only deepens immersion, but also preserves a connection to the real world. Ultimately, this will prompt a critical reassessment of the unframedness frequently attributed to VR, proposing instead that the body itself serves as a frame, regulating the interplay between immersive and emersive moments.

## 2. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF *VERSUNKENHEIT*: THE *PHANTASIE*'S CASE

Although lingering in the background of his reflections since the early 20th century<sup>27</sup>, Husserl introduces the notion of *Versunkenheit* only in the 1930s. Often translated as 'absorption' or 'sinking', this concept is closely associated with the notion of 'presentifications' (*Vergegenwärtigung*).

Within phenomenology, consciousness's life unfolds as a flow of intentional acts. These latter are distinguished between presentations, such as perceptions, which offer their object in the flesh (*Leibhaftig*), and presentifications, like phantasy (*Phantasie*), memory, and expectation, which modify these acts by offering objects in an 'as-if' mode. Presenting an object as "as though it were there, but only as though"<sup>28</sup>, phantasy formations, Husserl observes, appear as "empty phantoms"<sup>29</sup>, and are thus marked by unreality.

Essential to presentation is then, as Nicolas De Warren posits, a "pre-reflective self-awareness"<sup>30</sup>, i.e. an implicit consciousness of the unreal character of its contents,

<sup>25</sup> L. Wiesing, *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; S. Geniusas, "What Is Immersion? Towards a Phenomenology of Virtual Reality", *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 53, 1 (2022): 1-24; M. Cavallaro, N. De Warren, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Digital Age. The Virtual, the Fictional, the Magical*, New York: Routledge, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> N. De Warren, "Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of Virtual Fictions", *Metodo. International Studies in Phenomenology and Philosophy*, 2, 2 (2014): 91-112; E. Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; Geniusas, *What is Immersion?*

<sup>27</sup> S. Geniusas, "Absorption, as a Theme in Phenomenology", in *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, edited by N. De Warren and T. Toadvine, Dordrecht: Springer, 2023. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-47253-5\_404-1.

<sup>28</sup> E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness and Memory (1898-1925)*, translated by J.B. Brough, Dordrecht: Springer 2005, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness and Memory*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> N. De Warren, "The Third Life of Subjectivity: Towards a Phenomenology of Dreaming", in *Life*,

which occur in the present but are directed toward what is absent. Indeed, Husserl emphasizes that phantasms ‘hover’ before us “in a completely different world that is totally separate from the world of the actual present”<sup>31</sup>, forming a distinct pseudo-world. And yet, as his analysis of internal time consciousness and passive synthesis prove, no experience is ever completely isolated within the stream of consciousness: phantasms, like perceptual contents, remain connected to other experiences, emerging through contrast with the field of actuality.

This dynamic becomes even clearer when viewed through Husserl’s account of attention<sup>32</sup>. Described both as a ‘special intention’ and as an ‘emotional interest’, attention is an “extractive intending [*Herausmeinen*]”<sup>33</sup> of an intentional content from the perceptual field, resulting in its differentiation. As a light beam emanating from the subject, attention establishes a privileged foreground, that always emerges from an unattended background, which is nonetheless co-perceived and constantly poised to become a future object of attention<sup>34</sup>.

Thus, attention appears as a continuous, processual state, marked by oscillations and degrees through which the perceptual field is relentlessly reshaped. This ongoing process generates a dynamic interplay between an attentive foreground and an inattentive background, which can be fruitfully framed in terms of wakefulness and sleep. The Ego is ‘awake’ toward the foregrounded content, while it is temporarily ‘asleep’ toward what recedes in the background – establishing a correlation between attentiveness and wakefulness, and inattentiveness and sleep<sup>35</sup>. It is no coincidence, then, that Husserl addresses *Versunkenheit* with respect to limit-phenomena, identifying dreamless sleep as its most radical outcome: a complete submersion wherein the Ego, devoid of consciousness, becomes a self of absolute disinterest<sup>36</sup>.

Although the phenomenologist primarily associates attention to perception, he admits its extension to non-perceptual content, such as fictions or hallucinations<sup>37</sup>. According to this claim, daydreaming could be framed as a condition of temporary absorption, whereby the Ego’s attention privileges presentified contents coming to the foreground, while the perceptual surroundings recede into the background. Wholly caught up in imaginative consciousness, the Ego would momentarily fall ‘asleep’ to its perceptual surroundings, deprived – albeit only temporarily – of the emotional relief capable of re-awakening its interest.

The possibility of experiencing a stable contrast between presentified and perceptual content is, indeed, what allows the emergence of phantasy, that tends to compete

*Subjectivity and Art: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bernet*, edited by R. Breuer and U. Melle, Dordrecht: Springer, 2012: 469-471.

<sup>31</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 70.

<sup>32</sup> E. Husserl, *Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit: Texte aus dem Nachlass (1893-1912)*, hrsgg. von T. Vongehr, New York: Springer, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Husserl, *Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit*, § 18.

<sup>34</sup> Please refer to Husserl, *Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit*, § 28.

<sup>35</sup> H. Jacobs, “I Am Awake: Husserlian Reflections on Attention and Wakefulness”, *Alter: Revue de Phénoménologie*, 18 (2010): 183-201. DOI: 10.4000/alter.1676.

<sup>36</sup> E. Husserl, *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie. Analysen des Unbewusstseins und der Instinkte. Metaphysik. Späte Ethik. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1908-1937)*, hrsgg. von R. Sowa und T. Vongehr, Dordrecht: Springer, 2014, Appendix I.

<sup>37</sup> See Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 116. This link between attention and presentifications has been explored by A. Scanziani in “Attention and the Subject of Depiction. Some Remarks on Husserl’s Approach to the Function of Attention in Phantasy, Image Consciousness and Pictorial Experience”, *Phainomenon*, 29 (2019): 83-114. Accessed December 12, 2024. DOI: 10.2478/phainomenon-2019-0005.

with the perceptual present. As Sartre further corroborates<sup>38</sup>, a contrastive dynamic thus arises between perceptual and phantasy consciousness, with each defining the other reciprocally: imaginative apprehension is recognized as such insofar as it emerges, so to speak, against the background of perceptual apprehension. This oscillation can rightly be understood as an attentional one, where attention alternates between fantasized and perceived content, so that even when fully immersed in phantasy, the perceptual horizon never entirely vanish.

Husserl's pupil, Conrad, offers further clarification<sup>39</sup> by proposing to recast the presentation-presentification distinction in terms of 'displaced' and 'non-displaced' experiences – two ideal poles of a spectrum within which the life of consciousness unfolds<sup>40</sup>. According to this view, while perception situates the Ego in the 'here and now', phantasy displaces it into a 'there and then', causing a momentary loss of awareness of its actual location. This lost awareness is coupled with a temporary detachment from the field of presence, allowing for immersion in the phantasy's world. Yet, in the absence of the ability to shift attention freely between phantasy and perceptual content, as occurs in dreams, phantasy could easily be mistaken for reality<sup>41</sup>. Typically, however, during phantasy perceptual consciousness loses its actuality but lingers, as the Ego retains a form of self-awareness – albeit at a pre-reflective level – thereby preventing complete absorption.

This condition can be more effectively understood through the phenomenon of "Ego-splitting" (*Ich-Spaltung*)<sup>42</sup>, which characterizes presentifications. In acts of phantasy, the Ego and, consequently, the stream of consciousness undergo a doubling. As a first phantasizing Ego imagines an object or a scene, reproducing its perceptual experience in an 'as-if' mode, it gives rise to second, phantasized Ego, which so to speak 'quasi-perceives' the phantasy world. For instance, as I sit at my desk writing this essay, I may phantasize about taking a walk in the park. In doing so, I tend to reproduce the semblance of a perception: I quasi-feel the sunlight on my skin, I quasi-hear the wind rustling the leaves, and so forth. The imagined experience is thus apprehended by a phantasized Ego, which is not a full Ego but rather a 'pseudo'-Ego. As explained by Husserl, the phantasy world "presupposes a center of apprehension at which I continually place myself"; consequently, the Ego always occupies "a place in the phantasy world as phantasied Ego, *quasi*-seeing the phantasy world from the phantasied Ego's standpoint"<sup>43</sup>. In other words, the imagined object is quasi-perceived by a phantasied I, itself embedded within the actual I, giving rise to a doubling of the Ego. Yet, as Marc Richir notes, this doubling remains inchoate, for a genuine splitting only occurs

<sup>38</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, translated by J. Webber, London-New York: Routledge, 2004, 123-175.

<sup>39</sup> T. Conrad, *Zur Wesenlehre des psychischen Lebens und Erlebens*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968, 59-62. For a more in-depth account see Geniusas ("Absorption as a Theme in Phenomenology"; "Towards a Phenomenology of the Unconscious", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 53 (2022): 1-23. DOI: 10.1080/00071773.2020.1834334) and R.T. Dible, "Theodor Conrad and Hedwig Conrad-Martius on Versunkenheit", paper presented at The North American Society for Early Phenomenology Conference, UC San Diego, 2-4 June 2023.

<sup>40</sup> This has been suggested by Geniusas, who has recently recovered the fruitfulness of Conrad's theory.

<sup>41</sup> This hypothesis has been explored in G. Andreini, "Phenomenologies of Immersion. Dream and Virtual Environment", PhD diss., IULM University, 2025.

<sup>42</sup> For an exhaustive account of Ego-splitting in Husserl see M. Cavallaro, "The Phenomenon of Ego-Splitting in Husserl's Phenomenology of Pure Phantasy", *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 48, 2 (2017): 162-177.

<sup>43</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 556.

when the phantasized Ego “[leads] its own life, overflowing from that of the fantasizing Ego”<sup>44</sup>. At that point, exemplified by nocturnal dreams, the two aspects become mutually exclusive: the fantasizing Ego’s awareness of its imaginative engagement becomes incompatible with the phantasized pseudo-Ego’s quasi-perception of the imagined content. Yet, as Geniusas emphasizes<sup>45</sup>, in most cases this doubling remains incomplete, sustaining a dual self-consciousness of both the immediate perceptual world and of the phantasized pseudo-world, preserving the possibility of contrast.

The situation changes significantly when we turn to what Husserl describes as ‘visions’ but could be termed ‘daydreams’. In these cases, “the reality in which the visionary as a bodily organism lives, is suspended”, and simultaneously “the opposition between this reality and the phantasy imagery” disappears<sup>46</sup>. More commonly, however, as we surrender to our fantasies, the perceptual surroundings recede into the background while still asserting their presence, thereby preserving the awareness of the imaginative content’s inactual character.

This radical form of phantasy aptly exemplifies the condition of *Versunkenheit*, which, as Fink, Conrad, and Sartre suggest, finds its most radical expression in dreams. While absorbed phantasy (*versunkene Phantasie*) represents an extreme case within a broader range of immersive experiences, the oneiric state reveals its connection to a structural weakening of contrast’s awareness with the perceptual present. According to Fink, absorption is driven by affect<sup>47</sup>, a pull exerted by a conscious object on the Ego and following a proportional logic: the stronger the affective engagement elicited by the imagined content, the greater the Ego’s detachment from the perceptual world and the deeper its immersion into the phantasy pseudo-world. Consequently, the ‘as-if’ quality of phantasy gradually fades into the background, allowing the presentified content to acquire perceptual qualities. As a result, “in a presentification conducted in profound absorption, the fictitious nature of the *fictum* is not explicitly thematized”<sup>48</sup>.

Since, as Husserl asserts, every intentional act presupposes an egoic polarity (*Ich-Zentrum*), this sinking of the actual Ego becomes clearer when linked to Ego-splitting in presentifications. Thus, for presentifications to turn into daydreams, a self-forgetfulness akin to that of nocturnal dreams – though less persistent and more fleeting – is necessary. To resume, the consideration of daydreams suggests that absorption in a phantasy consciousness entails a temporary sinking of the actual Ego and of its interest toward the field of presence.

### 3. VERSUNKENHEIT AND THE VR IMAGE-ENVIRONMENT

Yet, how does this process intersect with VR experience, and in what ways does it relate to the concept of immersion?

From an ontological standpoint, the VR content presents a certain ambivalence. Giving credit to Philippe Quéau’s observations<sup>49</sup>, Roberto Diodato has emphasized

<sup>44</sup> M. Richir, *Phantasia, Imagination, Affectivité*, Grenoble: Millon, 2004, 37.

<sup>45</sup> S. Geniusas, “Conscious and Unconscious Phantasy and the Phenomenology of Dreams”, *Research in Phenomenology*, 51 (2021): 189-191.

<sup>46</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> See E. Fink, “Vergegenwärtigung und Bild”, in *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966, §22.

<sup>48</sup> Fink, “Vergegenwärtigung und Bild”, § 22.

<sup>49</sup> See especially P. Quéau, *Metaxu. Théorie de l’art intermédiaire*, Paris: Champ Vallon-INA, 1993.

its intermediary nature, asserting the problematic status of digital content accessible through an HMD. Virtual reality displays indeed hybrid entities: digital images that nonetheless give the impression of generating a virtual “body-environment”. A similar claim has been sustained by Andrea Pinotti, observing how VR concretizes a peculiar “environmentalization of the image”<sup>50</sup>. According to this view, VR would display an image presenting itself as an *an-icon*: i.e. a picture disrupting conventional representation paradigms of mediatedness, by simulating immediatedness, separatedness, by aiming to unframedness, and referentiality, by inducing presentness<sup>51</sup>. More interestingly for our purposes, VR images would fall under this category as they explicitly deny the frame-device<sup>52</sup>, separating the depictive space from its surroundings. In addition, and as a result, such ontological hybrid challenges several other distinctions, including that between body and event: “the virtual body”, as Diodato notes, “while not reducible to representation, does not exist as body except in interactivity, *is* an interaction, an event-object”, materializing “an action (relation of interactivity) that is a body (virtual body) inasmuch as it possesses the characteristics usually attributed to bodies”<sup>53</sup>. Nonetheless, phenomenological studies have yet to fully articulate an account of the experience shaped by this image-environment<sup>54</sup> – a shortcoming that this article begins to address. To meaningfully grasp the intermediary status of virtual bodies, it is crucial to acknowledge that VR content, despite appearing as an environment, remains at its core a digital stereoscopic image, albeit of very peculiar kind<sup>55</sup>.

Indeed, the aforementioned peculiarities of VR images profoundly challenge its phenomenological experience – a shift that warrants closer examination. From a phenomenological perspective, consciousness is always oriented toward an object or experience, a central quality known as intentionality. When engaging with an image, consciousness operates in the mode of image-consciousness, which should then be thoughtfully considered to grasp the peculiar transformations triggered by these digital images.

Unlike perception, image apprehension is a complex and multi-layered intentional act, directed at three distinct yet intrinsically interrelated objects<sup>56</sup> – outlining three different meanings of the word ‘image’<sup>57</sup>. First, image-consciousness implies an image-thing (*Bildding*), the material support that makes the depiction perceivable (for instance the photographic paper). Second, image-consciousness encompasses an image-object (*Bildobjekt*), meaning the specific object displayed on the support (the child in black and white the photo), characterized by a particular figurative style and coloration. Third, image-consciousness implies the image-subject (*Bildsujet*), the extra-iconic

<sup>50</sup> A Pinotti, “Towards An-Iconology: the Image as Environment”, *Screen*, 61, 4 (2020): 594.

<sup>51</sup> See Pinotti, “Towards An-Iconology”: 594.

<sup>52</sup> See P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis International 2020. For an in-depth account of the frame role in depiction see A. Pinotti, D. Ferrari, eds., *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*, Monza: Johan & Levy, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> R. Diodato, *Aesthetics of the Virtual*, translated by J. L. Harmon, edited by S. Benso, Albany: Suny Press 2012, 11. The concept of ‘body-environment’ is furtherly explored by the author in “Virtual Reality and Aesthetic Experience”, *Philosophies*, 7, 2, 29 (2022). DOI: 10.3390/philosophies7020029.

<sup>54</sup> Only recently have the first attempts been made in this direction by Daniel O’Shiel (*The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology: Perception and Imagination in the Digital Age*, London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2022), Saulius Geniusas (“What is Immersion?”), and Fabrizia Bandi (“Phenomenology of VR Images”, *Studia Phaenomenologica*, 23 (2023): 295-310).

<sup>55</sup> See Wiesing, *Artificial Presence*, 87-101.

<sup>56</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 20-22.

<sup>57</sup> For an insightful overview of image apprehension in Husserlian phenomenology, see C. Cali, *Husserl e l’immagine*, Sesto San Giovanni: Aesthetica Preprint, 2002.

referent presented by the image (the child in the flesh). These three intentional layers are intricately interwoven within image-consciousness, each essentially building on one another. Through this interrelation, the image-subject becomes visible via the image-object, which is displayed on the image-carrier.

In the case of VR images, the traditional dynamics of image-consciousness undergo a profound transformation, largely due to their ambiguous ontological nature. Unlike conventional representations, VR images seem to lack a tangible support and, with it, the frame. Yet, as problematized by Grant Tavinor<sup>58</sup>, despite the apparent omission of a depictive surface, VR images still depend on a material support: a screening device that, though not visually perceivable, allows the image-object to appear.

In addition, VR images undermine the double consciousness of contrast, fundamental to image-consciousness. First, by seemingly rejecting the frame, VR images undermine the contrast recognition between the perceptual whereabouts of the image-object and the depictive space, traditionally guaranteeing the unreality-character of the depictions. Second, these images blur the boundary between the image-object and the image-subject. If the former can only make the latter present insofar as it shares with it some analogizing traits, while nonetheless being clearly distinguishable from it, VR image tends to obliterate their differences.

Both of these preconditions are challenged by VR images, which, due to their image-environment nature, tend to disrupt awareness of these contrasts. On the one hand, the HDM device prevents the user from visually locating the image-thing as a distinct object within its environment. Due to its extreme proximity to the body, the VR device prevents the Ego to experience any visual contrast between the image, now all-encompassing, and the adjacent space. However, one must acknowledge that this lack of visual contrast is often contradicted by experience. While, during a VR experience, one can occasionally succumb to the illusion, ascribing a perceptual character to virtual objects and immersing oneself in the image-world, in most cases this immersion is accompanied by a self-awareness of the modified nature of this perception. This suggests that contrast awareness is not entirely erased; rather, it persists, though it is not given in a punctual manner and not conveyed purely through the visual field. On the other hand, as Pietro Conte has rightly remarked<sup>59</sup>, VR images pursue a hyper-realistic aesthetics, by blurring the distinction between the image-object and the image-subject, achieved through the integration of motion-tracking and CGI, which enables hyper-realistic effects. By narrowing this gap, VR images would pursue an 'aesthetic of illusion', following a trajectory already set by cinematic images. Unlike traditional pictorial representations, VR image-objects are not static or silent; instead, like the cinematic ones, they are animated, but with the added dimension of interactivity. By re-mediating the features of moving images, objects within virtual image-worlds appear 'alive', displaying the semblance of agency and directly engaging the viewer (now turned into a user). Thus, although presenting itself with an unreality quality, VR images-objects engage the subjects affectively to such an extent that their quasi-reality fades into the background.

VR images thus elicit a quite paradoxical experience. On the one hand, it aligns with image-consciousness, accompanied by a self-awareness of its modified nature, which is always borne in mind using the HDM and the other prosthetic devices. On the other, though, the image-environment itself attempts to sabotage the essential traits

<sup>58</sup> G. Tavinor, *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality*, London: Routledge, 2022, 66.

<sup>59</sup> Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics*, 97-98.

of image-consciousness, pursuing perceptual illusions à la waxworks or panoramas<sup>60</sup>, striving to undermine the essential traits of image consciousness, but never quite fully succeeding. The two aforementioned contrasting consciousnesses may indeed still emerge, even though their occurrence is less dependent on subject's control, as the Ego cannot freely direct switch attention from the image to the surrounding space.

On this basis, and bearing in mind the peculiar condition of daydreaming, one could argue that VR experience tries to replicate an immersive condition akin to that of wakeful dreaming. This is achieved through a technically-induced sensory isolation, by saturating the user's visual field, and through hyper-realistic imagery. By inducing a sensory detachment from perceptual actuality, that momentarily recedes into the background, VR images appear to aim at technically inducing the same temporary disconnection from the field of actuality characteristic of daydreaming<sup>61</sup>. Yet, while daydreaming involves an Ego sinking regarding its surroundings, prompting its immersion into an inner phantasy pseud-world, VR consciousness leads to its momentarily disconnection from the surrounding world to fully inhabit the externalized digital image-world.

Consequently, one should consider whether the VR experience, unfolding on the edge of image-consciousness and perception, involves a form of Ego doubling – a hypothesis that requires further investigations. Dethatched (or 'asleep') from the field of presence, to which it remains still anchored through its body, the Ego is drawn by the technological set-up to immerse in a digital image-world, manifesting what Lambert Wiesing has insightfully named an *artificial presence*, i.e. a world "reduced to mere visibility"<sup>62</sup>. Such an expression well describes the unprecedented form of presence exhibited by VR images, which is neither that of real nor purely imaginary entities, creating a reality that is perceived 'as' present, albeit non existing in the same way as perceptual objects.

#### 4. QUESTIONING UNFRAMEDNESS

Upon closer examination, however, this attempt appears phenomenologically unsuccessful. Although VR consciousness, in Conrad's terms, can be classified as a dislocated experience, it fails to replicate the Ego-doubling occurring in daydreaming, or, more profoundly, in dreams.

This is mainly because of the active role played by the user's body throughout this experience. Indeed, the body facilitates the Ego's immersion in VR consciousness, temporarily disinterested from its perceptual surroundings, as well as the persistence of a self-awareness regarding the 'as if' nature of the VR experience, thus preserving the Ego's connection to its actual surroundings. Rather than a genuine Ego-splitting, VR situation entails a dynamic interplay of immersive and emersive shifts – shaped by various factors such as affective pulls from the image-world, sensory-motor engagement and hyper-realism – where the intentional center continuously oscillates between two opposing egoic polarities.

In these oscillations, a crucial role is played by the user's body. In fact, as Anna Caterina Dalmasso notes, the body takes on a framing function in engaging with VR, acting

<sup>60</sup> P. Conte, "The Fleshiness of Wax", in *The Matter of Mimesis*, edited by M. Bol and E.C., Spray, Leida: Brill, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> This hypothesis is further explored in Andreini, "Phenomenologies of Immersion".

<sup>62</sup> Wiesing, *Artificial Presence*, 51.

as a “virtual frame”<sup>63</sup>. Although VR images seem to have done away with the materiality of the object-frame, its deictic function has not yet disappeared. Instead, it has been internalized by the Ego and is now enacted through its body. Through the technological mediation of the device, the body then becomes a threshold that mediates between the pseudo-world of the VR image and the actual world of perception. VR images and their experience – an image-consciousness striving to mimic perception – are then ultimately very far from being truly unframed.

To conclude, this study has proven the value of a phenomenological account of *Versunkenheit* in phantasy for a renewed understanding of immersion, envisioning it as an inherent possibility of consciousness to become absorbed in a lived experience. By reconnecting immersion to its experiential roots and emphasizing its connection to attentional shifts, this perspective allows us to reframe and critically assess so-called ‘immersive experiences’ like those offered by digital images through HMD, fundamentally defined by unframedness. Rather than a device property, immersion emerges as a dynamic, meta-stable condition, ultimately shaped by the rhythmic interplay between immersive and emersive moments, and shedding light on the body’s acting as a framing device.

<sup>63</sup> A.C. Dalmasso, “The Body as Virtual Frame: Performativity of the Image in Immersive Environments”, *Cinéma&Cie. International Film Studies Journal*, 9, 32 (2019): 117.

FABRIZIA BANDI\*

## VIRTUAL (REALITY) LANDSCAPES From Panorama to Immersive Digital Places

### *Abstract*

This article explores the concept of virtual landscapes as immersive digital representations, tracing the evolution of landscape depictions from traditional framed panoramas and stereoscopic devices to contemporary Virtual Reality (VR) environments. It emphasises the shift from static visual representations to interactive and multi-sensory experiences. The philosophical implications of framing and immersiveness are examined, highlighting how VR dissolves traditional boundaries between viewer and image, transforming landscapes into dynamic, participatory spaces where technological immersion meets aesthetic appreciation and operativity. Case studies include ULTRA's *L'inganno dei sensi*, which presents a VR adaptation of the Mesdag Panorama; Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's *Phantom*, a digital recreation of the endangered Brazilian Mata Atlántica rainforest; and Patricia Liras' *Remember This Place*, which documents displaced Bedouin communities through immersive storytelling. These examples reveal how VR reshapes the role of landscape as a cultural medium.

### *Keywords*

Landscape; immersiveness; virtual reality; frame; aesthetic experience.

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*Landscape is an exhausted medium,  
no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression.  
Like life, landscape is boring; we must not say so.*

W.J.T. Mitchell

The concept of a virtual landscape is broad and multifaceted, serving as a foundational element in the exploration of digital representations of places. A virtual landscape can be understood as the digital reconstruction or reinterpretation of a physical environment. For instance, satellite imagery<sup>1</sup> often alters the natural appearance of a location – such as its colours – in order to highlight specific types of data. A striking example is the depiction of the River Nile by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) (Fig. 1). Virtual Reality (VR) technology, combined with 3D modelling, enables the creation of

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see T. Morawski, M. Vegetti, a cura di, *Earthscapes. Le conseguenze della visione della Terra dallo spazio*, Roma: Donzelli, 2023. This work explores the transformative impact of aerial and satellite imagery on the representation and understanding of the Earth.

immersive representations of the landscape. These tools enhance the visualization of geographic data, significantly advancing the field of Geographic Information Science (GI-Science)<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, virtual landscapes play a prominent role in video games, where realistic environments are designed to enrich gameplay. Noteworthy examples include the digital reconstruction of Los Angeles in *GTA V* and San Francisco in the action-adventure game *Watch Dogs 2*<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 1 - *River Nile, Sudan. United States Geological Survey (USGS), 2020. Public domain*



Notwithstanding the various ways in which virtual landscapes may be considered, this article focuses on describing immersive virtual landscapes, specifically those represented through environmental images generated by VR headsets<sup>4</sup>. The discussion centres on the interplay between rendering and inhabiting a place – as seen in video games – and

<sup>2</sup> M. Vetter, *Technical Potentials for the Visualization in Virtual Reality*, in D. Edler, C. Jenal, O. Kühne, eds., *Modern Approaches to the Visualization of Landscapes*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021: 307-317.

<sup>3</sup> D. Fontaine, *Landscapes in Computer Games – The Examples of GTA V and Watch Dogs 2*, in *ibid.*: 293-306.

<sup>4</sup> This article was written in the framework of the research project “AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images”. The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON) and is hosted by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” at the University of Milan (Project “Departments of Excellence 2023-2027” awarded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research).

experiencing landscapes as a form of visual art. This article argues that VR landscapes are best understood as standing at the intersection of these two dimensions, where technological immersion meets aesthetic appreciation and operativity.

Before entering the main discussion, three preliminary clarifications are necessary. Firstly, it is essential to define the scope of the term *virtual immersive environment*. At its core, VR refers to a digital environment which creates the sensation of being present in a real space, a concept often described in *presence studies* as ‘being there’<sup>5</sup>. Through the combination of a headset display and stereoscopic lenses, VR images acquire depth, allowing for a three-dimensional experience. Additionally, these environments are often interactive, responding to the user’s physical movements through software and motion-tracking technologies, even though the user’s physical body remains external to the virtual scenario.

Secondly, understanding the landscapes represented in these environments requires an examination of the media and technologies which preceded immersive digital spaces. While VR headsets may seem to offer a novel experience, they are part of a continuum of visual and sensory techniques. Examining VR from a media-archaeological perspective involves exploring earlier devices, media, and methods that were precursors of the experiential dynamics found in today’s immersive virtual environments. This approach highlights how past apparatuses ‘spoke the same language’ and laid the groundwork for contemporary VR technologies.

Thirdly, the concept of the *virtual* used here extends beyond the digital or computational realm. As Mikel Dufrenne already discusses in *L’oeil et l’oreille*, the virtual relates to a specifically human capacity to intuit the imperceptible, a phenomenon that accompanies aesthetic perception<sup>6</sup>. Dufrenne further associates the virtual with the workings of the imaginary – not as mere products of imagination but as dimensions of meaning embedded within the real. This imaginary operates as a transcendent force that reveals itself through sensory experiences, continuously generating new meanings and perspectives within reality. Building on this idea, media can be understood as conduits for a latent imaginary, actively shaping the meanings they convey. Drawing on Dufrenne’s concept of an “imaginary immanent to the perceived”, this framework embraces not only contemporary digital imagery but also traditional visual media. Such a perspective is crucial for exploring *the dimension of virtuality* embedded in the depiction and representation of landscapes which predates the emergence of VR headsets.

This conception of the virtual as an immanent dimension of meaning finds resonance in the analyses of media and perception by Anne Friedberg and Mark Hansen. In *The Virtual Window*, Friedberg explores how visual media reconfigure spatial percep-

<sup>5</sup> The field of *presence studies* is extensive, and this article highlights some foundational works in the discipline. Among these are W. Ijsselstein, G. Riva, *Being There: Concepts, Effects and Measurements of User Presence in Synthetic Environments*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2003, which explores key concepts and effects of presence in virtual environments. M. Slater, M. Usoh, “Representation Systems, Perceptual Position, and Presence in Immersive Virtual Environments”, *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 2 (1993): 221-233 examines how perceptual positioning impacts the sense of presence. Another significant contribution is F. Biocca, B. Delaney, “Immersive Virtual Reality Technology” *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality*, Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995. Further foundational works include M. Lombard, T. Ditton, “At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3, 2 (1997): . DOI 10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x; M. Slater, S. Wilbur, “A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments”, *Presence*, 6 (1997): 603-616. DOI: 10.1162/pres.1997.6.6.603, that proposes a structured framework for understanding the role of presence in immersive technologies.

<sup>6</sup> M. Dufrenne, *L’oeil et l’oreille*, Montréal, L’Hexagone, 1987.

tion, extending the imaginary beyond physical constraints and historicising virtuality as a transformation in representation<sup>7</sup>. The convergence of these ideas underscores the notion that media do not merely mirror reality, but rather, they actively shape and mediate our perception of it. In this regard, the representation of landscapes, be it through painting, cinema, or screen-based environments, can be conceptualised as inherently virtual. This is not because these media simulate an external reality, but rather because they catalyse an imaginary that is intrinsic to our perception.

## 1. FRAMED/UNFRAMED

The concept of the *frame* can serve as a critical bridge in aesthetics between a theory of virtual reality and a theory of landscape. One of the often-cited characteristics of VR technology is its so-called ‘unframedness’<sup>8</sup>. The headset display, along with the stereoscopic lenses that mediate the visualization of images, is positioned so close to the viewer’s eyes that the hardware itself tends to disappear from perception. This creates an immersive and seemingly unmediated experience where the image occupies the observer’s entire field of vision, blurring the traditional sense of a frame – the boundary device that has historically demarcated the distinction between the inside and outside of an image.

Conversely, the philosophical significance of the frame was thoroughly examined by Georg Simmel in the early 20th century, particularly in his seminal essay *The Picture Frame* (1902), but also in *The Philosophy of Landscape* (1913). In this latter essay, Simmel argues that the frame is essential to the ‘birth’ of the landscape as a distinct phenomenon. In his view, the landscape is not merely a portion of nature, but an act of perception performed by the subject. It becomes a self-contained entity, separate from, but still part of, the whole. The frame, both literal and conceptual, is what allows this transformation by isolating a segment of the infinite continuity of nature and imbuing it with its own identity:

To conceive of a piece of ground and what is on it as a landscape means that one now conceives of a segment of nature itself as a separate unity, which estranges it from the concept of nature. This seems to me to be happening when someone shapes a field of apperception into the category of ‘landscape’: a self-contained perception intuited as a self-sufficient unity, which is nevertheless intermeshed with an infinite expansiveness and a continual flux<sup>9</sup>.

A key theme in Simmel’s philosophy emerges here: the interplay [*Wechselwirkung*] between the whole and its parts, a fundamental concept for understanding the idea of landscape. However, the focus here lies on the active role of the subject in ‘cutting out’ a portion of nature. According to Simmel, this action mirrors the process undertaken by a painter: “As far as landscape is concerned, however, a boundary, a way of being encompassed by a momentary or permanent field of vision, is quite essential”<sup>10</sup>. This

<sup>7</sup> A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics*, Milan-Udine: Mimesis International, 2020; A.C. Dalmasso, “The Body as Virtual Frame: Performativity of the Image in Immersive Environments”, *Cinéma & Cie. Film and Media Studies Journal*, 19, 32 (2019): 101-119; A. Pinotti, “Autopsia in 360°. Il rigor mortis dell’empatia nel fuori-cornice del virtuale”, *Fata Morgana*, 39 (2019): 17-31.

<sup>9</sup> G. Simmel, *Philosophy of Landscape* [1913], in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Los Angeles-London-New Delhi-Singapore: Sage, 24 (7-8), 22.

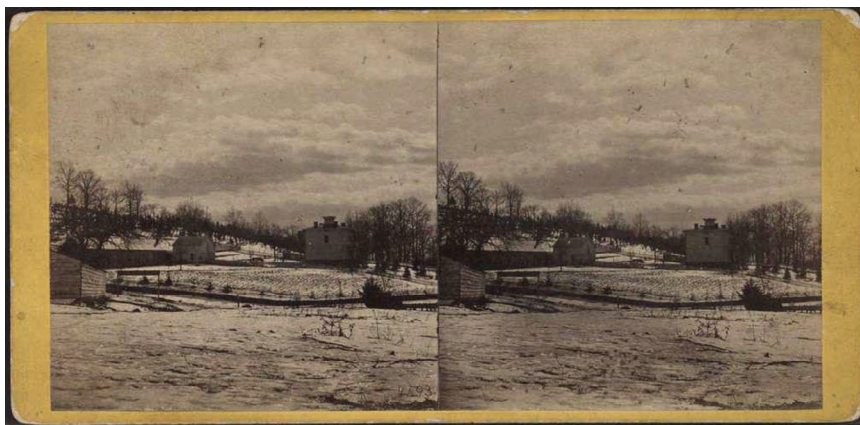
<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

act introduces a creative dimension, enabling the comparison of creating a border for a landscape to an embryonic form of artistic expression. The analogy with the work of the artist is particularly compelling: framing a portion of nature grants it a degree of autonomy, transforming it into a *proto-picture*. In this process, nature is not merely observed but reimagined and composed into a distinct entity, much like a work of art. Framing, a concept central to Simmel's thought, underscores the transformation of nature into an image-like construct, bridging the natural and the representational horizon.

Transferring a landscape from perception to a medium of representation appears not only intuitive but almost intrinsic to the very concept of landscape itself, as Mitchell convincingly argues<sup>11</sup>. Painting of this genre, in particular, extends and refines the initial act of framing performed by the person contemplating the scene, but it is far from the only art form that adopts the landscape as a central motif. Reproductions of landscapes frequently appear in printed media, such as postcards and stamps, and become a recurring visual theme in the decoration of everyday objects, including vases, coins, tableware, and more.

In all these cases, the landscape adheres to Simmel's principle: it is clearly constrained, cut out, and framed. However, certain tools have sought to liberate the image from its frame, with the stereoscope being a prime example<sup>12</sup>. This device creates the illusion of three-dimensional (3D) depth from two-dimensional (2D) photograph by presenting slightly different pictures to each eye, mimicking the way human vision perceives depth in the real world. This subtle difference between the two pictures generates a convincing sense of spatial depth, making the flat image appear three-dimensional. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, stereoscopic postcards (Fig. 2) gained widespread popularity, and landscapes emerged as one of their most frequently depicted subjects.

Figure 2 - Landscape and sky, High Bridge, from Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views. Public domain via GetArchive. Original source: Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views. / United States. / States / New York / New York City / Stereoscopic views of the Bronx, New York, New York (1825-1925)



<sup>11</sup> "Landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation". W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. O. Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2003, 141-143.

In these instances, the stereoscope can be seen as an attempt to transform the subject of the landscape from a static representation to the dimension of an environment. The device conveys an impression that, despite the image's immobility, it gains depth and occupies much of the viewer's visual field<sup>13</sup>. This suggests an effort to unframe the image, making the experience closer to ordinary real-world perception and, in a sense, restoring the landscape to a more 'natural' dimension.

Another approach to achieving this sense of unframedness can be found in illusionistic landscape rooms. The desire to create immersive, enveloping experiences is evident even in ancient frescoed spaces, such as the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii<sup>14</sup>, where the walls depicted elaborate scenes which blurred the boundaries between real and painted environments. Similarly, certain chamber tombs reproduced interior spaces on their walls, complete with painted windows offering views of imagined landscapes and life-sized human figures<sup>15</sup>.

A notable example of an illusionistic room designed to immerse its viewers in a landscape is Paul Sandby's creation in 1793. After years of working as a military cartographer, Sandby crafted a private 'room of illusion' for Sir Nigel Bowyer at Drakelowe Hall. This project transformed the space into a panoramic environment where painted landscapes enveloped the viewer, creating the sensation of being within a continuous and unbroken visual field. Oliver Grau describes this unique artistic endeavour, underscoring its significance as an early experiment in immersive environmental art:

Sandby covered three walls with a wild and romantic landscape *without framing elements*. Visitors found themselves under the canopy of a blue sky, painted on the arched ceiling, and mighty trees, several meters high. Between the trees, prospects of undulating countryside, crossed by cuttings, with wide clearings and grassy banks, stretched into to the distance<sup>16</sup>.

This form of modern landscape painting, as seen in Sandby's work, has often been considered a precursor to the panorama. This, first devised by Robert Barker, was described as "a panoramic view depicted on a completely circular canvas in correct perspective"<sup>17</sup>. Its realization required an entirely new architectural framework (Fig. 3). The circular canvas and the surrounding structure aimed to immerse viewers, positioning them on a central platform to create the illusion of being surrounded by a real landscape. Notably, Barker's invention was more than an artistic novelty – it was also a 'scientific' device. By standardizing and formalizing a specific mode of vision, he established a calculated visual system that was officially patented in 1787.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Crary's work, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1990 offers an important historical context for stereoscopic devices and their role in visual culture.

<sup>14</sup> Grau, *Virtual Art*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> A. Rossi, S. Gonizzi Barsanti, "Aumentare" la realtà: un obiettivo recente?", in S. Brusaporci *et al.*, a cura di, *IMG23. Atti del IV Convegno Internazionale e Interdisciplinare su Immagini e Immaginazione*, Publica. Sharing Knowledge, 2023: 535-542.

<sup>16</sup> Grau, *Virtual Art*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

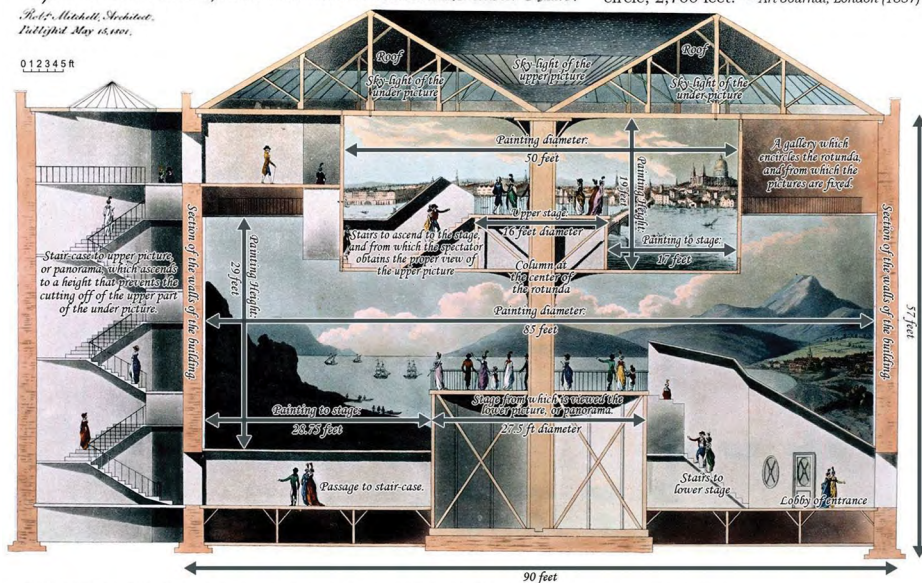
Figure 3 - Robert Mitchell, *Architect. Published May 15th, 1801. Adapted from Mitchell, R. (1801). Plans, and in perspective, with descriptions, of buildings erected in England and Scotland: etc. London: Printed by Wilson & Co. for the author. Sources: [https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125008065258/page/n14/](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125008065258/page/n14/) | British Library, shelfmark 56.i.12. (Plate 14). The rotunda was designed and built by Robert Mitchell for Robert Barker. This adaptation incorporates the architect's own description and key into the diagram. This 12/2019 adaptation shared under the Creative Commons 4.0 license*

Plate 14

Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square, in which is exhibited the PANORAMA.  
 Coupe de la Rotonde, dans laquelle on l'exhibition du PANORAMA, Leicester Square.

Robt. Mitchell, Architect.  
 Dattigt May 18, 1801.

"Each of the large circle pictures averaged 10,000 square feet of canvas; the small circle, 2,700 feet." - Art Journal, London (1857)



Adapted from Mitchell, R. (1801). Plans, and in perspective, with descriptions, of buildings erected in England and Scotland: etc. London: Printed by Wilson & Co. for the author. Sources: [https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125008065258/page/n14/](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125008065258/page/n14/) | British Library, shelfmark 56.i.12. (Plate 14)



This innovation significantly altered the viewing experience. With the stereoscope, viewers project themselves into the image through their gaze; with the panorama, the image itself envelops and absorbs the viewer through its monumental dimensions. We need to imagine entering an enormous circular space. Another of Barker's most famous works, the *Panorama of London* from 1791, was displayed in a specially built structure called the "Rotunda", which had two floors and covered an area of 930 square meters. This illustrates not just the sense of immersion but even the feeling of being overwhelmed created by the circular image, leading to the idea that the panorama created a true 'artificial world'. In addition to its unframed quality, the panorama emphasizes another key characteristic: the immersive nature of this type of representation. The viewer is no longer just observing but becomes physically surrounded by the scene, heightening the illusion of presence within the landscape depicted.

## 2. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF DEPICTIONS AND VIRTUAL REALITY LANDSCAPES

This ‘being within the image’ fosters a unique mode of interaction with pictures. The aesthetic experience in such settings suggests a state that oscillates between direct perception and image consciousness. This form of perception underpins the sense of immersiveness that certain types of images – such as the VR landscapes to be discussed below – are designed to evoke. Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the Twentieth century, elaborates on this phenomenon in his lectures on *Phantasy and Image*:

The frequently mentioned deceptions like waxworks, panoramas, and so on, show that the transformation of an image phenomenon through the cessation of the imaginative function allows an ordinary perceptual apprehension to come forth, perhaps even a full perception furnished with normal belief. If we suddenly become conscious of the deception, image consciousness makes its appearance<sup>18</sup>.

This insight suggests that certain visual experiences, such as those provided by panoramas, emulate aspects of ordinary perception, even though they remain images. What begins as the representation of an object in the image (*presentification*) shifts to the illusion of a tangible, external reality (*presentation*). The subject immersed in the panorama temporarily engages in a mode of perception imbued with belief, experiencing the depicted scene as though it were real. The content of the apprehension remains consistent, but the manner in which the subject interprets or *intends* the visual phenomenon changes, creating a momentary suspension of disbelief and deepened engagement<sup>19</sup>.

Experiments in unframing the image and enhancing immersiveness raise significant questions when examined through the lens of contemporary digital technologies, particularly VR. What does it mean to experience a landscape in immersive environments? How do virtual landscapes differ from traditional picturing representations, and what kind of experiences do they provoke? Moreover, how does the immersive nature of virtual reality alter our engagement with the landscape, particularly when contemporary media devices present increasingly sophisticated and interactive images? These questions underscore the need to re-evaluate the evolution of the concept of the landscape within the context of virtual environments.

Immersion introduces new dimensions of interaction with landscape imagery. The landscape in VR, while still a product of a selective framing process, involves a significant shift. In Simmel’s perspective, the act of framing carries specific aesthetic value, traditionally performed by the observer. In virtual environments, this creative operation is instead undertaken by software. Here, the designer curates and orchestrates a segment of a digital world, endowing it with autonomy and visual appeal. The resulting image invites viewers to engage with the landscape in novel ways, while still adhering to the underlying principles of selective framing.

However, the subjectivity intrinsic to virtual immersive landscape experiences introduces greater complexity. Much like the stereoscope or panorama, VR headsets challenge traditional boundaries of perception. By enveloping the viewer in an immersive environment, they blur the distinction between framed and unframed images, between

<sup>18</sup> E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness and Memory (1898-1925)*, translated by J.B. Brough, Dordrecht: Springer, 2005, 43.

<sup>19</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic experience in immersive environments – both virtual and non-virtual – see F. Bandi, *Spazi virtuali. Esplorazioni estetiche tra ambienti elettronici e immersivi*, Pisa: ETS, 2024.

artistic representation and the perception of an actual environment. In this sense, the virtual landscape becomes more than a static image – it transforms into an experience which surrounds the viewer, reconfiguring our relationship with both the image and the space it represents. This interplay between technology, design, and the user’s perception calls for a deeper understanding of how VR redefines the very notion of ‘landscape’. Thanks to the different *degrees of freedom*<sup>20</sup> offered to the experienter, the traditional, static and pictorial depiction seems to be deconstructed in favour of a simulated ‘natural’ experience. But actually, in the virtual realm the two accounts of the term seem to coexist: the landscape as a visual/pictorial construction (and deconstruction) and as an aesthetic object of contemplation<sup>21</sup>. At this threshold lies the potential imagery of VR landscape: the capability of fusing the subject’s aesthetic appreciation and operativity, as described by Simmel, with the artificial horizon projected by the headset.

This shift aligns with Lev Manovich’s broader argument that digital media turns images into interfaces, where meaning emerges through navigation rather than passive observation generating “navigable spaces” and the subject becomes an “explorer”<sup>22</sup>. In turn, Mark Hansen has emphasised the role of the body in constructing meaning within digital environments, suggesting that immersion in virtual landscapes is not merely about representation but about *participation*. He critiques classical visual theories that prioritize the eye, proposing instead that immersive media engage the entire sensorium, fostering a more affective and embodied interaction with space<sup>23</sup>.

While acknowledging these perspectives, it is essential to attempt an inversion. The image we perceive when wearing a VR headset, in fact, does not exist in a fixed form. Rather, what truly exists is an infinite series of programming strings that are dynamically implemented, varying each time according to the user’s bodily movements. If VR compels us into a more immersive and embodied relationship with the image – engaging not only movements of the limbs but also auditory stimuli – then it is equally true that vision remains the primary sense that allows us to feel present in a space other than where our feet are. This is because the experience itself *is shaped* through the interaction between visual and auditory stimuli (and in some cases also haptic ones) and kinaesthetic bodily movement. Therefore, users should not be considered mere ‘participants’, rather, they should be considered *co-creators*, if not *creators*, alongside the designer of the artificial environment<sup>24</sup>. Hence, the digital space within the headset is not a pre-existing entity but is instead constructed step by step – quite literally – by users.

This final point reconnects us with the central theme of this article: landscape. In the context of VR, the subjective and creative act that Simmel identified as fundamental to the very essence of the pictorial artifact appears to resurface. At the outset of this article, I cited Mitchell’s claim that landscape is an exhausted medium. However, it can be argued that, with the advent of immersive and digital technologies, landscape has regained its potential as a dynamic and expressive medium. Far from being obsolete, it is once again capable of renegotiating the intricate and evolving cultural relationship between humans and nature. This renewed vitality will become evident in the case studies

<sup>20</sup> Certain VR experiences, depending on the design, provide three degrees of freedom (3-DoF), which permit the user to enjoy the experience by limiting their movement to head rotations, thereby effectively maintaining a stationary position in space. While others are structured according to six degrees of freedom (6-DoF), that allow the user to move freely within a circumscribed area with their feet or otherwise by teleporting.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2001, 303-352.

<sup>23</sup> M. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Bandi, *Spazi virtuali*.

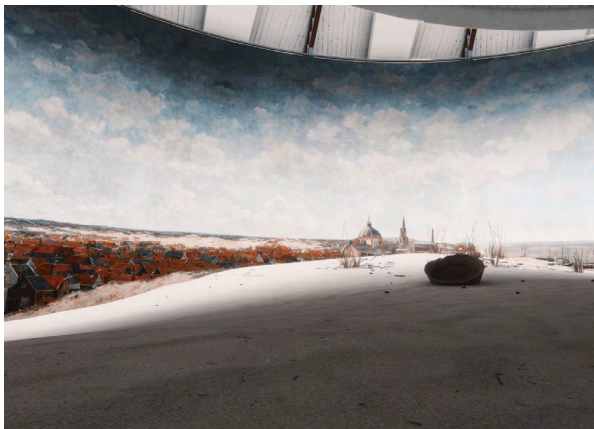
that follow, where landscape emerges not only as a site of representation but also as a space of re-enactment, collective awareness and memory in the digital era.

### 3. CASE STUDIES

#### 3.1. A Deception of Senses *by Ultra*

One of the most notable, and still surviving, examples of a panorama is that created by Hendrik Willem Mesdag known worldwide as the Panorama Mesdag. It is the largest circular painting in the world, measuring 36 meters in circumference. The cylindrical perspective creates the illusion of standing on an elevated dune overlooking the landscape of Scheveningen (The Hague) in 1881. This artwork was meticulously recreated through the use of a VR application, as part of the immersive experience entitled *L'inganno dei sensi* [A Deception of Senses] (Fig. 4), created by the Italian studio ULTRA in 2022. Entering the panorama marks one of the culminating stages of an immersive experience, itself part of a broader media-archaeological journey through prominent illusion devices, such as mirrors or kinetic artworks. Users can walk around the platform and observe the view from different vantage points, recreating the virtual landscape experience. In physical panoramas, the platform's balustrade, from which the audience contemplate the view, serves not just as a safety measure but as a *framing* device: it constrains the viewer to a circumscribed space, functioning as an apparatus that regulates the viewer's gaze. If the Panorama Mesdag were to be traversed as a physical object, the play of perspective would cease to exist. On the contrary, in ULTRA's digital reconstruction, users are invited to break the rules: they can cross over the balustrade and make their way along the beach. They gradually find themselves inhabiting a landscape that is increasingly distant from the original view, and which is also responsive and generative. In this way, the illusion is dispelled, and the actual 'dream' is realised: the image is turned into a traversable space in which the user can move freely and choose the perspective from which to observe. Ultimately, *L'inganno dei sensi* transforms the landscape from a distant, observed entity into an embodied, lived experience, inviting users to *inhabit* and *co-create* their own journey through the virtual landscape.

Figure 4 - *Still from L'inganno dei sensi, ULTRA, 2022. Courtesy of the artists*



3.2. Phantom (Kingdom of all the animals and all the beasts is my name) by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané (2015)

In the installation *Phantom (Kingdom of all the animals and all the beasts is my name)* (Fig. 5), Daniel Steegmann Mangrané creates a digital cast of the Brazilian Mata Atlántica rainforest using Unity 3D scanning, presenting it to visitors as a 360° image<sup>25</sup>. The ‘ghost’ in the title evokes the progressive disappearance of this tropical ecosystem, its essence captured and suspended in the ephemeral, intangible realm of virtual reality, offering a poignant reflection on environmental loss and preservation through digital media. The Spanish artist, known for his interdisciplinary approach, often explores the intersection of nature and technology in his work. *Phantom* is a notable example of this exploration, using advanced digital techniques to capture and represent the delicate and endangered ecosystems of the Atlantic Forest: it immerses viewers in a meticulously reconstructed digital environment, offering an intimate encounter with a landscape that is rapidly vanishing in the real world. By doing so, Mangrané not only preserves a fleeting natural beauty but also raises awareness about the degradation of the environment and the urgent need for conservation. The use of VR in this context serves as a powerful tool for both ecological education and awareness, allowing us to experience the profound loss of biodiversity.

Finally, the virtual rainforest in *Phantom* exists in a liminal space between presence and absence. Unlike a physical landscape, it cannot be touched, smelled, or truly inhabited, yet it retains an immersive, almost hyperreal quality. This duality mirrors the broader human experience of contemporary landscapes, where digital technologies increasingly shape our interactions with the natural world. Social media, satellite imagery, and virtual simulations often replace direct encounters with nature, making *Phantom* a powerful reflection on how landscapes today are as much digital constructs as they are physical spaces. Through this work, the artist underscores the evolving role of landscape: no longer merely a representation, the landscape becomes an interactive space for negotiation between reality and image, absence and presence, loss and preservation.

Figure 5 - *Still from Phantom (Kingdom of all the animals and all the beasts is my name) virtual reality environment, VR Headset, tracking system. Developed by ScanLab Projects, London Installation view at New Museum Triennial “Surround Audience”, New York, 2015. Photography: Daniel Steegmann Mangrané. Courtesy of the artist*



<sup>25</sup> On this installation see L. Aspesi, F. Griccioli, “A Leaf-Shaped Animal Draws the Hand”, in *Daniel Steegmann Mangrané. A Leaf-Shaped Animal Draws the Hand*, edited by L. Aspesi and F. Griccioli, Lausanne: Skira, 2020: 21-23.

### 3.3. Remember This Place: 31°20'46"N 34°46'46"E by Patricia Liras (2023)

A compelling example can be found in a recent project presented at Venice Immersive, one that holds particular significance due to its tragic contemporary relevance. Patricia Liras' work, *Remember This Place: 31°20'46"N 34°46'46"E* (Fig. 6-7), employs VR to investigate a particular form of landscape. She aims to capture and document the emotional and historical significance of destroyed Palestinian homes. The narrative is centred on the numerous Bedouin communities which have repeatedly been forced to relocate and rebuild their settlements each time due to military occupation. Women's voices weave a complex tapestry of tales, with the common theme being the instability of their dwellings, which mirrors the fragility of their lives.

Figures 6-7 - *Stills from Remember This Place: 31°20'46"N 34°46'46"E*, Patricia Liras, 2023. Courtesy of the artist



From an exchange of emails with the director and from materials she provided, it became evident that her initial concept was to digitise dwellings, particularly the inside spaces. However, as her investigation progressed, it became apparent that, in Bedouin culture and history, ‘dwelling’ was more closely aligned with the relationship between the body and the landscape. This perspective challenges conventional Western notions of home – an idea likely familiar to the intended audience, predominantly a Western observer, who may conceive of home as a fixed, enclosed space – emphasizing instead a more fluid and embodied experience of place. In light of this, the director collaborated with artist and photographer Roba Fraowna to explore the body’s relationship to the landscape in different locations in the desert (Fig. 8).

Figure 8 - *Roba Fraowna, Watertank, 2023. Courtesy of the artist*



In this VR work the landscape takes on a central role, functioning as one of the protagonists in the narrative, as it symbolises the communities’ historic relationship with the land, their semi-nomadic culture and lifestyle. Although many of these communities are currently urbanised or semi-urbanised, they maintain close ties to the land and a rich body of traditions reflecting this history.

The ‘natural’ environment is depicted as undergoing transformation over time and space. Throughout the VR experience, users are presented with a mutation of the landscape, from a state of naturalness to one that becomes colonized by external forces. Entire territories (and ecosystems) are being altered in a manner that debilitates the Bedouin population which has historically inhabited the area.

Finally, the inclusion of coordinates in the title – rendered as illegible – suggests both the precision of geographical mapping and the simultaneous inaccessibility of these locations. This paradox underscores the precarious status of these sites: they exist

in people *memory* and in digital form, but their physical presence is unstable or, in the worst cases, has been erased. In this sense, the VR project constructs a ‘virtual topology’ of lives, mapping out stories that are rooted in specific places but remain threatened by geopolitical forces. By crafting a virtual space where the past can be re-experienced and the present critically examined, in *Remember This Place: 31°20’46’’N 34°46’46’’E* the act of mapping in VR thus becomes a gesture of preservation, reinforcing the power of immersive digital landscapes to document histories that might otherwise be lost.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The case studies analysed in this article illustrate how landscapes in VR environments are not merely simulations of physical places, but dynamic arenas where aesthetic experience, technological mediation, and cultural memory converge. From the re-enactment of unrealized projects to the documentation of disappearing ecosystems and contested territories, these immersive worlds serve to reaffirm the landscape as an operative and reflective medium in the digital age.

Contrary to the notion that it is a form that is both residual and obsolete, landscape in VR has been shown to revive its critical potential: a cultural medium capable of negotiating the tensions between representation and presence, memory and erasure, autonomy and control. Moreover, the specificity of the medium (which allows for the integration of sound, movement and spatial disorientation, facilitated by the ability to involve the perceiving body) allows for the exposure and reconfiguration of the mechanisms by which images construct space and its meaning.

Finally, the resulting concept of landscape at stake is not static but dynamic, with the capacity to be performed, felt, and engaged with. In this sense, VR landscapes do not merely depict worlds: they create operative spaces of negotiation, where the aesthetic, the imaginary, the real and the political intersect.

GIANCARLO GROSSI\*

## THE SMELL OF VISION Immersive Media and Multisensoriality

### *Abstract*

One of the most relevant and disruptive aspects of the environments organized by immersive media consists of multisensoriality. It is not a case that the device historically recognized as the first virtual reality system, Morton Heilig's *Sensorama*, was explicitly designed to achieve the agreement of different senses (vision, sound, smell, balance, touch) more than the immersion in a virtual space. The article interrogates the relationship between multisensoriality and immersive media devices from a media-archaeological perspective, focusing on the relationship that media have historically had with a sense that is culturally classified as inferior, such as smell. Indeed, smell is a sensory sphere that seems to resist attempts at mediatization – understood as a process of recording and transmission – precisely because it is linked to the dimension of immediate contact. The main goal of the investigation is to trace the failed, merely imagined, and rarely realized attempts to channel smell into the media experience as a model for the relationship that new technologies have with the senses today. From this perspective, the article will focus on several phenomena, such as 1) the processes of media transcoding of smell into the spheres of sight and hearing; 2) the failed attempts to integrate smell into media experiences (the utopia of the olfactory cinema, from Smell-O-Vision to Odorama); 3) the purely imagined multisensory media (such as the Feelies, the tactile-smelling cinema imagined by Aldous Huxley); 4) The ways in which the new media of Virtual and Mixed Reality address the need for synchronization between smells and images, while new research explores the possibility of digitizing and transmitting smells. Considering these models, which belong to different epistemes and historical horizons, the article investigates the role covered by multisensoriality in general and the canalization of smell in particular in defining the purpose of media experiences, especially the immersive ones.

### *Keywords*

Multisensoriality; cultural history of smell; olfactory cinema; imaginary media.

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### 1. IMMERSIVE MEDIA AS “SENSORAMAS”

Among the Virtual Reality (VR) experiences at the 2023 edition of Venice Immersive there was a particularly sensory estranging installation. Indeed, *Forager* (Winslow Porter and Elie Zananiri 2023) had the ambition to hurl the user into a point of view that was neither human nor even animal – and, one might add, not even individual: the perspec-

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tive of mushrooms. This was only possible by overcoming two aspects that characterize human condition: upright position and a hierarchy of senses in which sight and hearing dominate. The user wears the VR head mounted display and is lying on a vibrating pouf, swept by the wind and scents of underbrush. Helpless to the multiplicity of sensory impulses, he or she is led to identify with new forms of perception of the world and of the body; this latter remains partly static, yet active in its ability to receive affect and develop connections, as when the user is invited to trace the roots of mycelia with the two controllers. In this way he or she immerses him or herself in the mushrooms life, whose evolution, from birth to decay, punctuates in chapters a path into the unknown.

Despite the fact that the world appears from this point of view abstract and unrecognizable, the experience is based on a photographic relationship with reality: in fact, Porter and Zanariri designed it using photogrammetry<sup>1</sup>, that is, reproducing in 3D the different stages of mushroom development and reassembling them in an immersive time lapse. The kinetic, tactile and olfactory sensations present in the experience also contribute to the idea of a medium able of reproducing reality in all its sensitive facets. However, this is a reality that eludes human perception, representing yet another edition of the Benjaminian optical unconscious, with the medium revealing microscopic details or time fragments that human psychophysiology cannot grasp.

The vibrating and moving footstool, the olfactory emanations, and the artificial wind are elements that harken back to an older experience of immersive media; to be precise, what is conventionally identified as the first VR device: the Sensorama invented in 1957 but patented only in 1962 by cinematographer Morton Heilig. It is a metal apparatus similar to a videogame arcade cabinet, equipped with a stereoscopic color display, stereophonic audio, a movable chair, a vibrating dumbbell, and most importantly, a scent emitter. For the device Heilig had designed five short films (today we would call them experiences): three of them are rides by motorcycle, helicopter, and dune buggy, the fourth is a belly dance show; the last one a date with a girl named Sabina. In an interview given in 2010 to Itsuo Sakane<sup>2</sup>, Heilig specifies how he had designed ten odorous stimuli, two per film. In the motorcycle ride, for example, the user perceived the smell of gasoline in the vicinity with the bus stop and the flavor of pizzas near a bar.

An articulate theorization of the device, however, had been provided by Heilig as early as 1955, in an article titled “The Cinema of the Future”. Despite the naiveté with which the cinematographer ventured into fields of knowledge such as aesthetics, film theory and even the sciences of the mind, the text presents some extremely innovative insights when compared with more recent developments in immersive media (including the example from which we started). Heilig is writing at a time when a number of technical innovations are contributing to the spectacularization of Hollywood cinema (“Cinerama, Colorama, Panoramic Screen, Cinemascope, Three-D, and Stereoscopic Sound”)<sup>3</sup>. At stake for him was the possibility of radically rethinking the identity of the medium itself to bring it to adhere mimetically to the dynamics by which the human psyche experiences reality: “‘Realism,’ or, in aesthetic terms, ‘experience’, is that something which is created by the unity of the outer world with the inner”<sup>4</sup>. For this to

<sup>1</sup> B. Grespi, “Foto(gram)metrie”, in *Il postfotografico*, edited by B. Grespi and F. Villa, Torino: Einaudi, 2024: 125-142.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSINEBZNcks>. Accessed December 22, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> M. Heilig, “El Cine del Futuro: The Cinema of the Future”, *Presence*, 1, 3 (1992): 279-294 (279). DOI: 10.1162/pres.1992.1.3.279.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

be possible, the medium will have to take into account the proportions by which the different senses monopolize human attention: according to Heilig's account, sight 70%, hearing 20%, smell 5%, touch 4%, taste 1%. The screen itself will have to adhere to the entirety of the viewer's field of vision – and not just 18%, like Cinemascope, or 25%, like Cinerama. The main goal is to take away from film editing and completely devolve to a definitively interactive viewer the power to focus attention on different fragments of reality. In this way, according to Heilig, “the cinema of the future will no longer be a ‘visual art,’ but an ‘art of consciousness’<sup>5</sup>.”

Heilig's text, read from a mediarcheological perspective, reveals how at the origin of VR lies not so much a discourse related to immersivity as to multisensoriality. The immersive medium is conceived first and foremost as a “Sensorama”, that is, as a technical reproduction of the sensory experience as a whole. The enveloping quality of the screen and the interactivity of the viewer are only consequences of this reproduction, which totally demotes to the percipient subject the narrative organization of the experienced media content.

The most complex revolution envisioned by Heilig, however, concerns the process of smell capture, recording, and transmission:

Odors will be reduced to basic qualities the way color is into primary colors. The intensity of these will be recorded on magnetic tape, which in turn will control the release from vials into the theater's air conditioning system. In time, all of the above elements will be recorded, mixed, and projected electronically – a reel of the cinema of the future being a roll of magnetic tape with a separate track for each sense material. With those problems solved it is easy to imagine the cinema of the future<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, the two processes envisioned by Heilig – the decomposition of odors into elemental stimuli to be recorded on a magnetic tape and their distribution through the air conditioning system of movie theaters – represent a utopia that media technologies have pursued throughout the 20th century and that can be summarized in the concept of the *mediatization of smell*. Considering the idea of medium in a broad sense, a primary form of mediatization of smell is represented by scent itself. In scent, a series of elemental stimuli is combined into a designed and codified experience whose support is constituted by the body or the environment<sup>7</sup>. If, on the other hand, we consider the concept of medium in a more specific sense, related to the possibility of recording and transmitting an experience, the path leading to the mediatization of smell represents a still utopian possibility, which has, however, sparked imaginaries, attempts, and undertakings of all kinds. In this article we will investigate how media immersivity depends on the utopia of multisensoriality, through the analysis of historical attempts to integrate the lower senses and especially smell into the media experience. With this in mind, we will ask why olfaction has been a sense resistant to the processes of mediatization; whether it can actually be captured in the media experience; and how the history of realized, failed, or merely imagined attempts to technologically capture the realm of smell meaningfully expresses the processes underlying the functioning of today's media.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>7</sup> I take this idea of media as elements in a process of an experiential design involving sensory, narrative and discursive remodulations from R. Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza*, Roma: Carocci, 2010.

## 2. HEARING AND SEEING SCENTS

The first complexity that the mediatization of smell presents concerns the very reason why it has historically been categorized, along with touch and taste – limiting ourselves to the canonical Aristotelian taxonomy of the five senses – among the lower senses: its im-mediacy. Smell, touch and taste resist the processes of *mediatization* precisely because of the *immediacy* of the physical contact they entertain with the object of experience. Even before the technological registration of stimuli related to these senses, their very linguistic codification is problematic. It is a question that is posed in relation to smells in the early 20th century in an extremely clear way by Georg Simmel. In a chapter of his monumental *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* entitled “Excursus on the Sociology of Sense Impression”, the German philosopher considers smell to be a purely subjective sense, linked to the dimensions of pleasure and displeasure and not to the cognitive apprehension of the object. In support of this thesis, Simmel notes how there are no independent expressions to signify the distinctions of the nose, but only similarities – “If we say: it smells sour, that means only that it smells like something that tastes sour”<sup>8</sup>. Olfactory sensations are the most complex to describe precisely because it is not possible to translate them to the plane of abstraction. This impossibility is linked to the intimate relationship, of assimilation and introjection, that the subject establishes with the smelled object: “When we smell something, we draw this impression or this radiating object so deeply into ourselves, into our center, we assimilate it, so to speak, through the vital process of respiration as close to us as is possible through no other sense in relation to an object”<sup>9</sup>. It is precisely this intimacy that is linked to the sense of repulsion that smell entails, and which, according to Simmel, underlies the distance that is created between ethnic groups and social classes.

The second aspect that makes the sphere of the olfactory culturally elusive is its character as a repressed sense, closer to the dimension of the unconscious than to that of consciousness. As Freud explains in a note in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), smell is a sense devalued since the process of homination, which, with the acquisition of upright stature, has favored more abstract and rational sensory channels.

The removal of smell also corresponds for Freud to a sense of repugnance towards sexuality:

It is to the effect that, with the assumption of an erect posture by man and with the depreciation of his sense of smell, it was not only his anal erotism which threatened to fall a victim to organic repression, but the whole of his sexuality. [...] so that since this, the sexual function has been accompanied by a repugnance which cannot further be accounted for, and which prevents its complete satisfaction and forces it away from the sexual aim into sublimations and libidinal displacements<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> G. Simmel, *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, translated and edited by A.J. Blasi, A.K. Jacobs, M. Kanjirathinkal, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009: 577. For a socio-aesthetic analysis of the role of the smell in Simmel, see B. Carnevali, “Social Sensibility. Simmel, the Senses, and the Aesthetics of Rrecognition”, *Simmel Studies*, 21, 2 (2017): 9-39.

<sup>9</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, 578.

<sup>10</sup> S. Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents” [1930], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1961: 57-146, ch. 4, n. 3.

Historian Annick Le Guerèr, studying the fundamental role of the sense of smell in Freud (but also its marginality in later developments in psychoanalysis) recalls the clinical case of Lucy R., the hysterical young woman whose symptoms consist as much in anosmia (the inability to perceive smells) as in a series of olfactory hallucinations (a burnt cake, the smell of a cigar) symbolic of a series of removed conflicts<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, the sense of smell, removed in the process of civilization and oppressed by social and educational norms, returns central in neuroses and fetishes, representing the main channel for the return of the repressed and, accordingly, a direct expression of unconscious drives.

But despite this subjective and unconscious character of smell, elusive to both linguistic codification and conscious rationalization, there is no doubt that odors are associated with certain cultural values. This is something that has been extensively explored by *sensory studies* (the research of David Howes, Constance Classen, Mark M. Smith among others)<sup>12</sup> and by social histories of smells (especially the monumental works of Alain Corbin)<sup>13</sup> but which is already glaringly apparent upon entering any perfume discount store. A fragrance is identified by gender factors (masculine, feminine and, since the 1990s, precisely because of a changed sensitivity about distinctions between the sexes, unisex); seasonal (Summer or Winter); even colonial (the oriental scent, whose representation blurs into exoticism: think of Guerlain's *Shalimar*). What makes *fougère* masculine, with the different variations of its classic lavender and coumarin accord, or aldehydate floral fragrances feminine? Although contemporary perfumery has largely transcended some of these distinctions (especially in relation to gender), it remains interesting to note how scent not only produces but also inherits the cultural trademarks of historical and geographic horizons close and far.

However, these meanings are never constructed without the cooperation of other sensory channels, precisely because of the difficulty of smell in structuring complete and coherent cognitive objects. At stake here is that aesthetic regime that sensory studies has defined in the terms of *intersensoriality*, meaning “the interrelation and/or transmutation of the senses, which may take many forms, such as: a) cooperation/opposition, b) hierarchy/equality, c) fusion/separation, and d) simultaneity/sequentiality”<sup>14</sup>, not to be confused with *multisensoriality*, which represents only one of these options, namely the agreement between the senses. The first process of mediatization of an elusive and immediate sense such as smell is thus represented by its translation within the codes of another dominant sensory channel capable of producing the cognitive process of abstraction.

In the 19th century, one of the earliest and most significant attempts to encode olfactory stimuli occurs in relation to the dimension of sound. The London perfumer Septimus Piesse, in his *The Art of Perfumery* (1855) conceptualizes the existence of

<sup>11</sup> A. Le Guèrer, “The Psychoanalysts’ Nose”, *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 88, 3 (2001): 401-453.

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to the disciplinary field and especially to Howes’ research I refer to *The Sensory Studies Manifesto*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022 and *The Sixth Sense Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2009. A study that more specifically reconstructs the cultural history of olfaction from the perspective of *sensory studies* is C. Classen, D. Howes, A. Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, London-New York: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> A. Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bull, D. Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies”, *The Senses and Society*, 11, 1 (2016): 1-2.

an olfactory scale analogous to the musical scale and also of semi-odors comparable to semitones:

Scents, like sounds, appear to influence the olfactory nerve in certain definite degrees. There is, as it were, an octave of odours like an octave in music; certain odours coincide, like the keys of an instrument. Such as almond, heliotrope, vanilla, and orange-blossoms blend together, each producing different degrees of a nearly similar impression. Again, we have citron, lemon, orange-peel, and verbena, forming a higher octave of smells, which blend in a similar manner. The metaphor is completed by what we are pleased to call semi-odors, such as rose and rose geranium for the half note; petty grain, neroli, a black key, followed by *fleur d'orange*. Then we have patchouli, sandal-wood, and *vitiver* [sic., ed.], and many others running into each other<sup>15</sup>.

Instead, in the 20th century, the codification of smell comes primarily through the contribution of the visual arts and their ability to narrate sensory stimuli through the narrative construction of imagery. This is a process that marketing has largely taken over, especially in terms of translating the sensations articulated by fragrances into visual or audiovisual codes. As Fred Naraschkewitz noted in relation to photography, “Photography’s task in perfume advertising is to translate into visual terms the olfactory impression of a perfume, together with the lifestyle associated with the fragrance by the marketing experts”<sup>16</sup>. The visual regime is thus faced with having to meet two requirements: on the one hand to remain consistent with the eminently subjective character of smell, and on the other to materialize the diegetic universe evoked by it.

In the audiovisual field, and especially when considering perfume advertisements, the most frequent solution is characterized by the adoption of the Eizensteinian montage of attractions, with the association of disjointed visual fragments of increasing intensity that collide with each other, reinterpreted in the video clip format. This style appears prominently when considering several perfume commercials directed by prominent film directors: Baz Luhrmann’s *Chanel No. 5* (2004), Wong Kar-Wai’s *Midnight Poison* (2007), Joe Wright’s *Coco Mademoiselle* (2014), Spike Jonze’s *Kenzo World* (2016), Martin Scorsese’s two *Bleu de Chanel* commercials (2010 and 2024). In all these advertisements a common plot presents itself, even if barely suggested by the paratactic adopted by the editing: the escape of a diva from the star system, often realized by a fleeting and transient encounter such as the permanence of perfume on the body. A greater originality and ability to reflect on the unconscious and pulsional character of smell is present in Spike Jonze’s commercial, in which a young woman (played by Margaret Qualley, *persona* of the out-of-joint body in contemporary cinema) is forced to interrupt a boring *vernissage* because she is seized by uncontrollable hysterical urges that take the form of a wild dance. The visual narrative repurposes an idea of scent as a return of the repressed – the propulsive principle of hysteria – that subjugates the body while freeing it from social and cultural conventions. The images thus express the surplus of smell itself over any process of capture, including that of visual codification. A different story concerns the channeling of odors in media devices, from cinema to VR, a process that passes more through imagination and failure than through actual realization.

<sup>15</sup> S. Piesse, *The Art of Perfumery and the Methods of Obtaining the Odours of Plants* [1855], London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1867: 38-39.

<sup>16</sup> F. Naraschkewitz, “Focus on Fragrance: Photography in Perfume Advertising”, *Dragoco Report*, 6 (1990): 222.

### 3. AN IMAGINARY OLFACTORY MEDIUM: ALDOUS HUXLEY'S "FEELIES"

A common reference for both theorists and creators who have sought to design media experiences that include the olfactory sphere is a fictional medium found in Aldous Huxley's 1932 science fiction novel *Brave New World*. This is represented by the Feelies, the films projected into the dystopian future of 632 AF (After Ford), which integrate tactile and olfactory stimuli. Their very name, "Feelies" is a parody of "talkies", the newly invented sound films harshly criticized by Huxley himself in a 1929 article<sup>17</sup>. The Feelies are described in detail in Chapter XI, when Lenina Crowne and John the Savage meet at the "screening" of "*THREE WEEKS IN A HELICOPTER. AN ALL-SINGING, SYNTHETICAL TALKING, COLORED, STEREOSCOPIC FEELY. WITH SYNCHRONIZED SCENT-ORGAN ACCOMPANIMENT*"<sup>18</sup>. In the device, odor stimuli are produced by a smell organ, while tactile stimuli come to life by pressing a button located on the armrest of the chair. In Huxley's imagination, while the tactile stimuli have a mimetic function, departing from the objects depicted on the screen, the sound stimuli are as abstract as musical notes, forming first the overture and then the soundtrack of the multisensory film. The screening of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* is in fact preceded by an olfactory concert, of which Huxley offers a precise account:

The scent organ was playing a delightfully refreshing Herbal Capriccio – rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon; a series of daring modulations through the spice keys into ambergis; and a slow return through sandalwood, camphor, cedar and newmown hay (with occasional subtle touches of discord – a whiff of kidney pudding, the faintest suspicion of pig's dung) back to the simple aromatics with which the piece began. The final blast of thyme died away; there was a round of applause; the lights went up<sup>19</sup>.

Even in this distinction between a mimetic tactile sphere concretely anchored to objects and an abstract olfactory one, the idea of the inability of smell to determine the object of experience returns, in this aspect closer to music than to other arts. Despite the lack of a mimetic function of smells, the Feelies remained an indispensable reference even for those who imagined olfactory cinema in a radically different way. Morton Heilig in "The Cinema of the Future" explicitly refers to Huxley as a model not only to be imitated, but more importantly to be surpassed:

Yes, the cinema of the future will far surpass the "Feelies" of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. And like many other things in this book that are nightmarish because superficially understood, it will be a great new power, surpassing conventional art forms like a Rocket Ship outspeeds the horse and whose ability to destroy or build men's souls will depend purely on the people behind it<sup>20</sup>.

The idea of having to go beyond the model proposed by Huxley has clear reasons. In *Brave New World*, Feelies represent not so much a technological utopia as a dystopian

<sup>17</sup> A. Huxley, "Silence is Golden. Being the Misanthropic Reflections of the English Novelist on First Hearing a Picture Talk", *Vanity Fair*, 32 (1929): 72-94.

<sup>18</sup> A. Huxley, *Brave New World* [1932], New York NY-London-Toronto-Sydney: HarperCollins, 2006: 167. For an analysis of Huxley's imaginary medium from a mediarchaeological perspective, see G. Grossi, "Epistemology of the Feelies. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the Dream of Smell Media", *Cinéma & Cie. Film and Media Studies Journal*, 23, 40 (2023): 89-103.

<sup>19</sup> Huxley, *Brave New World*, 166-167.

<sup>20</sup> Heilig, "El Cine del Futuro", 284.

parody of contemporary entertainment, which merely conveys pure sensations to the exclusion of intellectual reflection. In this regard, tactile and olfactory cinema functions in accord with other technologies of programming the unconscious envisioned by Huxley, such as *hypnopædia*, the conditioning instruction imparted during sleep, or *soma*, the drug that allows citizens to endure reality by evading it. The fact that a cinema of pure sensation participates in these engineering processes of the mind – and particularly of the unconscious – is extremely interesting. This is especially significant given that the technological conquest of the unconscious passes through the channeling of the sense of smell into the cinematic experience. We have already seen how smell represented for Freud the unconscious sense par excellence. The father of psychoanalysis also has a definite role in the diegetic universe imagined by Huxley: ‘Freud’ is in fact considered to be the heteronym Henry Ford adopted when dealing with psychological matters (Ford in the dystopia of *Brave New World* is equivalent to Christ, with the years counting from his birth).

The imaginary medium of Feelies, cleansed of its dystopian component, is also an obligatory reference for 1950s film theory, especially in relation to the Bazinian idea of ‘total cinema’. It is explicitly referred to by Edgar Morin in *The Cinema or Imaginary Man* (1956), when he considers the coincidence between the myth of total cinema and “the singing, speaking, synthetic film, in color, stereoscopic, scented”<sup>21</sup> portrayed in *Brave New World*.

The role of imagined media has been thoroughly investigated by media archaeology and epistemology. Exclusively imagined and never realized technologies help build the cultural ground in which a new media experience can emerge and be then recognized and institutionalized. Eric Kluitenberg in the preface of his *Book of Imaginary Media* points out how the identity of each medium is constituted by components that are as real as they are imaginary, and how without these no medium could actually function<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, the same process occurs for media that transforms a collection of individuals into an organic community: an imaginary entity serves to hold together a series of aspects that would remain disjointed without it. In the same vein, François Albera and Maria Tortajada have pointed out that at the origins of cinema is the assemblage of a series of real components from other pre-existing arts (photography, plastic arts, etc.) with a cultural identity that is already being imagined, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by literature, and especially in science fiction, through the imaginary devices found in the works of Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Jules Verne or Raymond Roussel<sup>23</sup>.

The imagination of a cinema that involves the lower senses (touch, smell, taste) no less than the higher ones (sight, hearing) equally contributes to the idea of cinema as Sensorama, a medium that has not, however, experienced historical institutionalization nor has it ever become widespread or socially recognizable. That is, unless one considers VR as its realization, into whose identity the histories of both simply imagined multisensory media and/or already realized but completely failed media converge.

<sup>21</sup> E. Morin, *The Cinema or the Imaginary Man* [1956], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 42.

<sup>22</sup> E. Kluitenberg, ed., *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, Amsterdam-Rotterdam: De Balie-NAiPublishers, 2006, 7-25.

<sup>23</sup> F. Albera, M. Tortajada, “The Dispositive Does Not Exist!”, in *Cine-Dispositives. Essays in Epistemology Across Media*, edited by F. Albera and M. Tortajada, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015: 21-44. DOI: 10.1515/9789048523443-004.

## 4. THE UNSUCCESSFUL HISTORY OF OLFACTORY CINEMA

In fact, the history of the integration of cinema and scent dates back to early movies and is riddled with failures<sup>24</sup>. This is due to a different order of reasons, ranging from the confusion of ‘diegetic’ olfactory sensations with those present in the viewing environment to the difficulty of synchronizing smells and images. Above all, central to the issue is the inability of analog media to register and transmit olfactory stimuli as they do in relation to other sensory spheres. As Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnot note in their extensive survey of the cultural history of smell, “nor can odours be recorded: there is no effective way of either capturing scents or storing them over time. In the realm of olfaction, we must make do with descriptions and recollections”<sup>25</sup>. Throughout the 20th century and even in some recent multisensory virtual reality installations, the mediatization of smell consists of accompanying prerecorded audiovisual experiences with aromatic stimuli actually present in the environment of fruition<sup>26</sup>.

One of the earliest (and primitive) attempts was related to the 1929 screening of *Lilac Time* (George Fitzmaurice, 1928) at the Fenway Theatre in Boston, in which a lilac scent was added to the theater’s ventilation system simultaneously with the appearance of the film’s title<sup>27</sup>. This despite the fact that only in the film’s ending lilac flowers play a decisive role. The farmer’s daughter Jeannie (Colleen Moore) sends a bouquet of them to the hospital room where Philip Blythe (Gary Cooper), the aviator she loves and believes died on a mission, is lying, asking that they be placed “very close behind his cheek”. It is because of this olfactory proximity that the aviator recognizes the gift’s provenance and laboriously drags himself to the window just in time to call his beloved to him.

One has to wait until the 1950s, however, to see more complex synchronization experiments, which still exploit the ventilation systems of theaters giving rise to specific patents. In 1959 the American screening of Carlo Lizzani’s documentary *Behind the Great Wall* (1958) at the DeMille Theatre in New York was accompanied by a new system called AromaRama. The olfactory differences were meant to further deepen the contrast at the heart of the documentary: that between a portion of China colonized by the British – Hong Kong, to be exact – and the rest of the country, itself divided between exotic animals, ancestral rituals and the advent of the Maoist Revolution. AromaRama also uses the movie theater’s aeration system, but the scent there takes on a more articulated mimetic function, synchronizing with the different landscapes depicted. The aromas are additionally identified by the subtitles that appear throughout the projection. A 1960 account, published by Ira Newman in the university newspaper *Columbia Daily Spectator*, however, expresses the partial failure of this mimesis:

The main disappointment of ‘AromaRama’ is its inability to capture the subtle nuances of an area’s smell. The pure aroma of foods and spices was represented as the smell of a Hong

<sup>24</sup> The failure of olfactory cinema should not be understood solely in technical terms but rather in relation to its unsuccessful institutionalization and broader social diffusion. While the integration of scent and film has never ceased to exist, it has remained confined to marginal or niche contexts, such as 4D cinemas in amusement parks and tourist resorts.

<sup>25</sup> Classen, Howes, Synnot, *Aroma*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> In his bestselling popular science book on smell, Avery Gilbert reconstructs the history of attempts to reconstruct an olfactory cinema, individuating their malfunctions specifically in the accumulation and mixture of the different smells within the hall environment, and in the persistence of these same smells on the spectators’ bodies even after the show has ended. See A. Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows. The Science of Scent in Everyday Life*, New York: Crown, 2009, 162-186.

<sup>27</sup> C. Spence, “Scent and the Cinema”, *i-Perception* 11, 6 (2020): 1-22.

Kong street, although a bus spouting gas fumes passes directly before the camera. It also seemed that many of the smells were repeated again and again, although the localities associated with them were different<sup>28</sup>.

An early attempt at greater personalization of the experience occurred in 1960 with the Smell-O-Vision, patented by Swiss inventor Hans Laube for the screening of Jack Cardiff's *Scent of Mystery* (1960). In the invention, aromas are conveyed through plastic tubes to individual stations. Their activation, however, is no longer indicated by subtitles, but by certain signals within the soundtrack. The role of aroma also becomes an essential element in the construction of the mystery. In Cardiff's project, the killer was to be characterized by a definite tobacco scent, which would serve as a clue to his passing or imminent incursion into diegetic space. In an interview in 1986, however, Cardiff himself recalls the first screening at the Cinestage Theatre in Chicago as "a complete disaster"<sup>29</sup>. The reason is that the audience would have had difficulty distinguishing the different scents (the fragrance worn by the mystery girl played by Elizabeth Taylor, the tobacco already mentioned, even the Port in a sequence in which a man is run over by a cascade of barrels), would have perceived them late in the unfolding of the images<sup>30</sup>, or would not have felt them at all.

Twenty years later, in 1980, it is instead the iconoclastic film-maker John Waters who invents a new odor-image synchronization tool, the Odorama, for the film *Polyester*. The device this time no longer uses the aeration system; in this sense, it represents not only a further attempt to individualize the experience, but also provides for the manual interaction of the spectators. Indeed, at the entrance of the cinema they were given a scratch-and-sniff card, a paperboard with different numbers that, scratched in the right moment of the movie, released particular odors, or better, stinks (of flatulence, feet, gasoline, etc.) synchronized with the narration. As Vinzenz Hediger and Alexandra Schneider have well pointed out, the Odorama travels a path opposite to that of deodorizing the fruition space, bringing back to the center of the spectacle all the elements that the social order marginalizes or removes:

Waters used Odorama to bring into the cinema precisely those odors that the system of hygiene of the last two hundred years had gone to such great length to ban from public as well as private spaces. It's easy to call Waters' films perverse. The true perversion of *Polyester*, however, lies in the fact that the film uses the technology of the controlled reproduction of smell to reproduce and represent precisely those smells that the control systems of public and personal hygiene tried to contain. In psychoanalytical terms, John Waters' use of Odorama marks the return of the repressed into the cultural realm of the olfactory<sup>31</sup>.

If Freud considered smell as a repressed sense, the Odorama represents a channel for mediating this same removal. As in fetishes and perversions, the device brings back to presence exactly that never-vanished universe, full of drives and primal instincts,

<sup>28</sup> I. Newman, "Smelling the Movies", *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 8, 1960, CIII, 63: 5.

<sup>29</sup> I refer to the interview granted by Cardiff to Tammy Brunstock, which can be found at the link [https://www.in70mm.com/presents/1960\\_smell\\_o\\_vision/library/jack\\_cardiff/index.htm](https://www.in70mm.com/presents/1960_smell_o_vision/library/jack_cardiff/index.htm) (Accessed December 22, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> This is what was reported in a New York Variety article in an anonymous Jan. 12, 1960 review of the Chicago event.

<sup>31</sup> V. Hediger, A. Schneider, "The Deferral of Smell: Cinema, Modernity and the Reconfiguration of the Olfactory Experience", in *The Five Senses of Cinema/The Five Senses of Cinema*, edited by A. Aurelitanò, V. Innocenti, V. Re, Udine: Forum 2005: 241-264 (247).

that acts as a substratum for those very processes of civilization that have expelled and forgotten it. It does so by combining a technique (the scratch-and-sniff card) with a technology (cinema), that is, by associating vision with the activation of tactile and olfactory sensations usually relegated to the background of media experience. It is precisely this oscillation of spectatorial attention between intradiegetic content and extradiegetic makeup (the *gimmick*, as in the William Castle's films that clearly inspire the operation) that constitutes the greatest difficulty – and ultimately failure – of Odorama. The very mechanism that was supposed to ensure a sensory augmented version of the cinematic experience ends up radically compromising its immersive power.

## 5. THE VIRTUAL REALITY OF THE SENSES

If olfactory cinema remains largely an imaginary or failed medium, the same cannot be said of today's immersive media and especially VR. There are many recent experiences involving interaction with the 'lower senses'. In addition to the example we started with, *Forager* by Winslow Porter and Elie Zananiri, one may recall a complex installation such as *Cosmos Within Us* (Tupac Martir, 2019), presented in the immersive section of the 2019 Venice Film Festival and focused on the possibility of experiencing firsthand the cognitive, perceptual, and emotional experience of a person with Alzheimer's disease. *Cosmos Within Us* is a layered reality experience, since it allows the user to move freely within a bounded physical area, while tracking technologies reflect his or her bodily movement in real time within the virtual environment. In this way, the intermingling of physical elements and immersive images transforms the installation into a performative space: both the narrator, who gives voice to the thoughts of the protagonist whose gaze the user incorporates, and the orchestra and noise makers in fact perform live during the experience. Added to them is the fundamental role of the shadow, a choreographer who invisibly accompanies the user incapacitated by the identification with the protagonist, orienting him or her within the stage and producing at every required moment tactile, olfactory, and even gustatory sensations. In fact, one of the most important moments of the experience is represented by the resurfacing, in the Alzheimer's-damaged memory of the protagonist, of a childhood memory related to cookies freshly baked by his grandmother. At that precise moment, the user is actually munching and enjoying the virtual cookie offered by an immersive image. In *layered reality*, the object of experience arises from a synthesis between, on the one hand, an immersive environment and visible virtual characters, and on the other hand, an invisible physical and bodily reality that continues to act subterraneously, integrating the image with other sensory impulses – like the one produced by the cookies materially offered by the shadow.

Again, however, the multisensoriality of the media experience is gained only through the presence of the actual sensory stimuli in the physical environment in which the experience takes place (in *Cosmos Within Us* real cookies synchronized with their virtual representation; in *Forager* the actual presence of undergrowth aromas in the user's location). The question is whether VR or digital technologies in general are capable, unlike previous media, of recording and transmitting these stimuli in the same way it happens for visual and auditory stimuli, allowing one to smell something distant in space or time. Some new contemporary technologies are intervening in precisely these aspects, following the model of data transmission (whether text, image or sound) ushered in by the advent of digital media. A recent example of this attempt is represented by Osmo, a company founded by Alex Wiltschko of Google Research with the aim of

digitizing the sense of smell, enabling computers to interpret and reproduce odors in the same way they do with images and sounds. According to Wiltschko and his team, the digitization of a sensory modality relies on identifying essential maps that can be technologically reproduced (such as the relationship between red, green, and blue for vision, or different frequencies for sound)<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, the digitization of smell would be based on mapping the relationship between the chemical structure of molecules and the odor perceived by humans (POM, Principal Odor Map), reconstructed through graph-based neural networks (GNNs) to generate a predictive model that is interpretable and reproducible by computers.

As with other technologies, these are still experimental attempts that cannot demonstrate the full conquest of the realm of smell by media devices, let alone the widespread adoption and institutionalization of this practice. However, it is interesting to note how, even within the current digital landscape, the need to integrate smell into media experiences – whether immersive or not – continues to resurface. It then becomes necessary to understand what process lies at the heart of the technological capture of smell and its recurring reappearance in different epistemes despite repeated failures.

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE SMELL OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

In the itinerary so far, we have seen how the integration of the lower senses, and especially smell, into media experiences is a complex and still unresolved process, to which a number of imaginary elements and failed experiences contribute. At the same time, this project seems to characterize VR from its origins, with Morton Heilig's design of Sensorama, conceived not so much as an immersive device but as a multisensory cinema. Compared to the possibility of reproducing the sensory experience as a whole, immersivity and interactivity turned out to be complementary and secondary properties of this medium. If the sense of smell seems to resist all processes of mediatization – from encoding to channeling within complex media experiences – by virtue of its subjective and unconscious character, it is clear, on the other hand, that for media this achievement constitutes an essential process that occurs and returns in different historical epochs. What is at stake is in fact a process that underlies mediality itself, namely, the ability to colonize and externalize subjectivity, even reaching into its unconscious and drive dimensions. VR, enveloping its user in the meanderings of a technologized dream, appears today as the most suitable medium to realize this project of conquering the unconscious, of which the sense of smell represents the privileged sensory channel.

<sup>32</sup> W.W. Qian *et al.*, "A Principal Odor Map Unifies Diverse Tasks in Olfactory Perception", *Science*, 381, 6661 (2023): 999-1006.

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## PHYGITAL EXPERIENCES THROUGH IMMERSIVE LIVE PERFORMANCES: THE ABBA VOYAGE CASE\*\*

### *Abstract*

The premiere of ABBA Voyage marked a milestone in the experience industry. In a purpose-built arena in London, the Swedish popular music group ABBA performed as holographic representations (ABBAtars) in their first concert in 40 years. This event combined hologram technology, animations, film sequences, live music, and pre-recorded vocals to create an immersive experience. In this article, ABBA Voyage forms a case study for investigating how the intersection between immersive live performances, transmedia narratives, and place unfolds. The analysis draws on interviews and observations conducted at the arena and online. Findings reveal how ABBA Voyage combines a specific site with a digitally based performance, interconnecting the web of transmedia narratives and fandom that constitutes the ABBA universe. This paper suggests the concept of 'phygital experiences' to address the significance of blending immersive experiences, transmedia narratives, fandom, and place-specific events in the expanding experience industry, contributing to the commercialization of public and semi-public spaces.

### *Keywords*

Immersive experiences; transmedia narratives; phygital experiences; fandom; audience engagement.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The immersive production “ABBA Voyage” premiered on May 27, 2022. In a purposely built arena in London, the Swedish music group ABBA entered the stage as avatars (or ABBAtars) – holographic representations of themselves – performing their first concert in 40 years. Using hologram techniques, multiple screens, lights, animations, film sequences, light reflections, and a live band combined with ABBA’s pre-recorded voices, the event’s intention was to give the audience an immersive experience. Due to the technological backbone, the ABBAtars performed multiple concerts daily with 3,000 visitors each time.

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\*\* This article was developed through collaboration, with each author contributing with their expertise to the different sections. However, Ryan Bengtsson framed the article in accordance to the special issue, and Karlsson wrote the section on phygital experiences.

The hologram technique is not new to the music industry. Holograms have been used in concerts with cartoon artists such as Godzilla or Hatsune Miku, allowing the virtual artist to perform on a stage or bringing life to artists that have passed away, such as Whitney Houston, Elvis, or Tupac. However, ABBA Voyage was one of the first full-scale immersive experience turned into commercial production, not only using hologram techniques but also building an arena that allowed for multiple concerts over time. According to the financial report of Aniera Limited, the company that runs the show and operates the arena, there were 374 shows attracting 1.1 million visitors in 2023, with a profit of £8 million.

Although ABBA Voyage is a specific event, it was integrated into the extended transmedia world building of ABBA<sup>1</sup>. The popular music group gained international fame after winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974. It was active from 1972 to 1982; however, since its members split up, their music and narrative have been continuously re-used and reformulated within new contexts. For example, ABBA fandom and ABBA music played an important role in the movies *Priscilla the Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), which revitalized the interest in the band. In 1999, the musical *Mamma Mia!* opened in London, based on ABBA's music, and is still playing. The musical was transformed into a movie with the same name in 2008, featuring famous actors such as Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan, and became a box office success. A sequel, *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, was launched in 2018, again with high-profile actors and ABBA's music as the background. Moreover, in 2013, the ABBA Museum opened in Stockholm, built around ABBA's history and memorabilia, attracting international visitors. By continuously extending and renewing the ABBA narrative, ABBA has re-invented itself, maintained and renewed its audience and fanbase, managed to revitalize its brand, and generated economic profit over time.

In this study, we address ABBA Voyage as an immersive experience combining holographic media, live performance, lights, animations, video, and architecture, giving the audience a collective sensation of being surrounded by and integrated into a mediated environment. In addition, the immersive experience of ABBA Voyage should also be understood as part of a larger transmedia narrative that forms the ABBA brand. In this context, transmedia refers to Jenkins<sup>2</sup> transmedia concept of how narratives expand and are co-created with fans across various media forms. Within the music industry, transmedia world building is constructed around an artist to engage fans and generate both cultural and economic value<sup>3</sup>. We argue that the evolving commercialization of immersive experiences within the music industry is yet another way to exploit immersive technologies and transmedia narratives to engage fans for economic gain. Lately some studies have demonstrated that the integration of online and offline encourages audience engagement with the physical, tangible, and virtual aspects of their experiences<sup>4</sup>. In strategic marketing, the phygital (physical and digital) concept

<sup>1</sup> C.H. Mortensen, J.W. Madsen, "The Sound of Yesteryear on Display: A Rethinking of Nostalgia as a Strategy for Exhibiting Pop/Rock Heritage", *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21, 3 (2015): 250-263.

<sup>2</sup> H. Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, New York-London: New York University Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> N.K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences and the Intimate Work of Connection*, New York: New York University Press, 2018; P. Brembilla, "Transmedia Music, the Values of Music as a Transmedia Asset", in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by M. Freeman and R.R. Garbarato, New York: Routledge, 2019: 82-89.

<sup>4</sup> L. Ryan Bengtsson, J. Edlom, "Commodifying Participation Through Choreographed Engagement: The Taylor Swift Case", *Arts and the Market*, 13, 2 (2023): 65-79; D. Cui, F. Wu, "Toward an Operation-

has emerged to explain how companies prolong and utilize customers' engagement over time by combining smart technologies with places in specific physical activities<sup>5</sup>. However, so far, little research has addressed how commercial phygital experiences feed on transmedia narratives.

In this study, we identify the ABBA brand as a transmedia narrative, where the immersive experience production ABBA Voyage revitalizes fan engagement and extends the ABBA world building. ABBA Voyage illustrates how combining immersive media, transmedia narratives, and the physical location allows audiences to experience immersion as an authentic live performance. Thus, ABBA Voyage serves as a case to examine the following research question: How does the intersection between immersive productions, transmedia narratives, and place unfold in a phygital experience? The data corpus consists of qualitative interviews and observations conducted at the ABBA Voyage arena, capturing how the event was staged and how the audience acted, received, and experienced the event. The findings reveal that visitors' ABBA Voyage experience was deeply connected to ABBA's background, narratives associated with the band over time, and the visitors' own fandom. The arena provides a space for fans to gather around a collective experience and a site for weaving together the web of transmedia narratives that forms the ABBA universe. At the core of the immersive experiences is the audience's collective engagement, facilitated by their fandom and a carefully curated space and show.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Immersive experiences

An immersive experience refers to the sensation of being surrounded by and integrated into a digitally created, modulated, or enhanced environment<sup>6</sup>. Immersion is often constructed by virtual reality (VR) using headsets or 3D glasses, allowing users to navigate a 360° digitally constructed environment or enhanced spaces incorporating interactive media elements in physical environments. Immersive productions are utilized in a broad range of settings, including healthcare, art, education, and entertainment, to simulate a reality or provide emotional engagement, or both<sup>7</sup>. However, despite the diverse applications of immersion, much of the academic literature on immersive experiences focus on the technological aspects of these productions and the individual user immersed in a 360° digitally constructed environment, such as VR. The experience of immersion is often described through three distinct concepts: presence, interactivity, and plausibility. These concepts are understood as dimensions that can vary in degree rather than as mutually exclusive states. Presence refers to the experience of being "there" in the immer-

ality Perspective on Fandom: Exploring Chinese Fans' Emerging Practices in Platform-Mediated Environments", *New Media & Society*, 0, 0 (2024).

<sup>5</sup> C. Mele *et al.*, "Phygital Customer Journey: A Practice-Based Approach", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 27, 3 (2024): 388-412.

<sup>6</sup> J.D. Bolter, M. Engberg, B. MacIntyre, *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021; M-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bailenson, *Experience on Demand: What Virtual Reality Is, How it Works, and What it Can Do*, London: Norton & Company, 2018; K. Nash, "Virtual Reality Witness: Exploring the Ethics of Mediated Presence", *Studies in Documentary Film*, 12,2 (2018): 119-131

sive environment<sup>8</sup>. Interactivity describes how a user can respond to the environment or a narrative and how the digital context responds to the user's actions<sup>9</sup>. Plausibility captures the extent to which the experience appears reasonable, depending on whether the narrative and interaction make sense to the user<sup>10</sup>. While the production itself does not need to be realistic, the user must accept the conditions as real. In our study, these three dimensions of immersion are the theoretical foundation through which we analyze ABBA Voyage. However, little attention has been given to immersive experiences that involve larger audiences, particularly in the context of commercial entertainment in specific venues such as museums, exhibits, amusement parks, and concert halls, as exemplified by ABBA Voyage<sup>11</sup>. These productions are produced and interpreted within a cultural and economic context, which needs further attention. In the case of ABBA Voyage, it is developed in the context of the music industry and the immersive collective experiences situated within the contemporary music industry, such as transmedia marketing, fan practices, and audience engagement both offline and online. Most notably, it aligns with the concert format as a specific type of event.

Immersive experiences in a concert hall involve audiences in the co-creation of the experiences. They are there physically, and they experience a live act, but the act relies on digital elements. This integration of digital and physical realms enables a dynamic, co-created experience where participants not only consume content but also actively contribute to shaping the experience. Thus, the collective experience is entangled with previous transmedia narratives and the concert format, which gathers the audience at a specific time and place. To fully understand immersive experiences, it is crucial to explore how audiences engage in this collaborative process, highlighting the interconnectedness of digital technologies and physical presence in the creation of meaningful, participatory environments, blurring the boundaries of what is physical and digital. To expand the theoretical discussion of commercial immersive experiences such as ABBA Voyage, we will complement the theoretical underpinnings with two perspectives – transmedia narratives and phygital experiences. These two perspectives are further described below.

## 2.2. Transmedia narratives and transmedia marketing

The concept of transmedia narratives was developed by Jenkins<sup>12</sup> to describe how media texts are constructed, expanded, and co-created by fans across various media forms. Initially, the concept emphasized creativity, collaboration, and the connection of people with specific interests worldwide. Thereafter, transmedia narratives have been discussed more critically. The Internet's structural shift from a network of websites to commercial

<sup>8</sup> J. Cummings, J. Bailenson, "How Immersive Is Enough? A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Immersive Technology on User Presence", *Media Psychology*, 1, 29 (2016): 272-309; P. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, New York: Pleum Trade, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> J.H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997; M.C. Green, K.M. Jenkins, "Interactive Narratives: Processes and Outcomes in User-Directed Stories", *Journal of Communication*, 64, 3 (2014): 479-500.

<sup>10</sup> M. Slater, "Place Illusion and Plausibility Can Lead to Realistic Behaviour in Immersive Virtual Environments", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364, 1535 (2009): 3549-3557.

<sup>11</sup> A. Theodoropoulos *et al.*, "Developing an Interactive VR CAVE for Immersive Shared Gaming Experiences", *Virtual Worlds*, 2, 2 (2023): 162-181.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*.

platforms, referred to as platformization<sup>13</sup>, allowed media companies to profit from fans' engagement and content production<sup>14</sup>. The music industry, a pioneer industry in the digitalization of content, has developed strategies to monetize the spreadability potential of transmedia narratives<sup>15</sup> by producing diverse forms of activities across various media platforms such as Spotify, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook<sup>16</sup>.

In the contemporary music industry, music consumption has become a commodity that relies heavily on social media logic<sup>17</sup>. The commodification is achieved through strategic planning of fan engagement through transmedia marketing<sup>18</sup> for continuous audience outreach and presence. By carefully curating activities online, fan engagement is defined and guided across various platforms to generate cultural and economic value<sup>19</sup>. Narrative continuity is created by strategically embedding communicative elements<sup>20</sup> that associate with the artist (or brand) in different ways, enabling transmedia world building – a transmedia storyline that unfolds and expands over time<sup>21</sup>. By utilizing the affordances of specific platforms, transmedia marketing strategically leverages established fan practices to create engagement and steer audiences across diverse media platforms<sup>22</sup>. Traditionally, the music industry has been based on live performance. By intersecting digital platforms with live performances through broadcast and streaming, the music industry has promoted formats for “live” interaction between production and audiences. Digital platforms have played a strategic role in liveness – broadcast integrated with social media engagement in real time<sup>23</sup>. Liveness offer a temporal frame for audience engagement with a live broadcasted event. From a transmedia marketing perspective, liveness is an event executed during a specific time frame where audiences co-create experiences, brand promotion and audience data can be collected<sup>24</sup>. Thus, contemporary liveness must be understood as situated “platform owners, technology’s mediation of spatial and temporal relations, and user/viewer expectations of the live”<sup>25</sup>.

However, so far, less attention has been given to how the physical and the digital are integrated through co-created transmedia narratives and how they contribute to

<sup>13</sup> A. Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready”, *Social Media+ Society*, 1, 2 (2015).

<sup>14</sup> A. Caliandro *et al.*, “The Platformization of Consumer Culture: A Theoretical Framework”, *Marketing Theory*, 24, 1 (2025): 3-12.

<sup>15</sup> H. Jenkins, S. Ford, J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York: University Press, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> P. Wikström, *The Music Industry: Music in the Cloud*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> D.B. Nieborg, T. Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity”, *New Media & Society*, 20, 11 (2018): 4275-4292.

<sup>18</sup> J. Edlom, “The Engagement Imperative: Experiences of Communication Practitioners’ Brand Work in the Music Industry”, *Media and Communication*, 10, 1 (2022): 66-76.

<sup>19</sup> N. Carah, D. Angus, “Algorithmic Brand Culture: Participatory Labour, Machine Learning and Branding on Social Media”, *Media, Culture and Society*, 40, 2 (2018): 78-194. DOI: 10.1177/0163443718754648.

<sup>20</sup> U.H. Mohd Hasri, M.A. Md Syed, “Enhancing Transmedia Component through World Building: The Case of Ejen Ali Franchise”, *Communication Research and Practice*, 2024: 1-17.

<sup>21</sup> Brembilla, “Transmedia Music, the Values of Music as a Transmedia Asset”, 82-89.

<sup>22</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*.

<sup>23</sup> L. Lupinacci, “‘Absentmindedly Scrolling through Nothing’: Liveness and Compulsory Continuous Connectedness in Social Media”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 43, 2 (2021): 273-290; K.K. Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and Their Claim to Be Live”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 39, 8 (2017): 1245-1256

<sup>24</sup> R. Rialti *et al.*, “Co-creation of Experiences in Social Media Brand Communities: Analyzing the Main Types of Co-Created Experiences”, *Spanish Journal of Marketing*, 22, 2 (2018): 122-141; Carah, Angus, “Algorithmic Brand Culture: Participatory Labour, Machine Learning and Branding on Social Media”: 78-194.

<sup>25</sup> Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and Their Claim to Be Live”: 1245-1256.

transmedia marketing. Girginova<sup>26</sup> discussed how fans are encouraged to participate in specific activities or visit specific places while sharing their experiences on social media, thereby intertwining certain places with social-media-driven narratives through choreographed engagement. People are invited to engage and co-create in both physical and virtual spaces, leading to what has been called phygital experiences in the customer experience literature. In the ABBA Voyage context, phygital experiences allow us to explore the interconnectedness between the digital and physical, acknowledging how experiences are spatially connected.

### 2.3. Phygital customer experiences

The term “phygital,” has been developed within strategic marketing, combining “physical” and “digital” to describe companies’ efforts to engage customers through the customer journey by merging the virtual and the physical<sup>27</sup> through digital technologies<sup>28</sup>. Customer experience can be described as a dynamic and iterative customer journey with a service provider over time and across multiple touch points<sup>29</sup>. Phygital experiences address the hybrid nature of contemporary consumption<sup>30</sup> tailored to meet customers’ tangible (e.g., service) and intangible (e.g., emotional) values and responses<sup>31</sup>. Various immersive technologies, such as Augmented Reality (AR), VR, and social media, are strategically utilized by brands and companies to strengthen their relationship with the customer<sup>32</sup>. Customer experiences and brand management have evolved significantly, leading to a transformation in the industry’s infrastructure. This change now emphasizes building long-term relationships with customers, moving away from a focus on one-time purchases<sup>33</sup>. We argue that the customer’s journey extends before and beyond the purchase cycle – in this case, through the audiences’ fandom practices.

Phygital experiences acknowledge the circular paths of small physical and digital events staged through interactions, relationships, and emotional relations with a brand<sup>34</sup>. Aspects of phygital experiences include 1) resources (objects and applications for services and engagement), 2) contexts (space/place), 3) decisions (the audience’s actions and purchase), and 4) the outcome (emotions, feelings, and purchase)<sup>35</sup>. Customers interpret and act as the digital and physical are merged spaces<sup>36</sup>, influencing each

<sup>26</sup> K. Girginova *et al.*, “Augmented Landscapes of Empathy: Community Voices in Augmented Reality Campaigns”, *Media and Communication*, 12 (2024).

<sup>27</sup> W. Batat, *Strategies for the Digital Customer Experience: Connecting Customers with Brands in the Phygital Age*, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> C. Mele, T.R. Spena, “The Architecture of the Phygital Customer Journey: A Dynamic Interplay Between Systems of Insights and Systems of Engagement”, *European Journal of Marketing*, 56, 1 (2022): 72-91.

<sup>29</sup> K.N. Lemon, P.C. Verhoef, “Understanding Customer Experience throughout the Customer Journey”, *Journal of Marketing*, 80, 6 (2016): 69-96.

<sup>30</sup> P. Klaus, “Phygital – The Emperor’s New Clothes?”, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 2021: 1-8.

<sup>31</sup> W. Batat, “What Does Phygital Really Mean? A Conceptual Introduction to the Phygital Customer Experience (PH-CX) Framework”, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 32, 8 (2024): 1220-1243.

<sup>32</sup> Mele, Spena, “The Architecture of the Phygital Customer Journey”.

<sup>33</sup> J.G. Andrade, P. Dias, “A Phygital Approach to Cultural Heritage: Augmented Reality at Regaleira”, *Virtual Archaeology Review*, 11, 22 (2020): 15-25.

<sup>34</sup> C. Mele *et al.*, “The Millennial Customer Journey: A Phygital Mapping of Emotional, Behavioural, and Social Experiences”, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 38, 4 (2021): 420-433.

<sup>35</sup> C. Mele *et al.*, “The Phygital Transformation: A Systematic Review and a Research Agenda”, *Italian Journal of Marketing*, 3 (2023): 323-349.

<sup>36</sup> K. Fast, A. Jansson, M. Tesfahuney, L. Ryan Bengtsson, J. Lindell, *Introduction to Geomedia Studies*, Geomedia Studies, New York: Routledge, 2017, 1-17.

other significantly<sup>37</sup>. Carefully designed paths are created, leading the user through the phygital environment to create customer engagement, both between the brand and the customers – in this case, the audience<sup>38</sup> – and among customers themselves.

In this article, we understand this path as where transmedia marketing encompasses digital and physical fan engagement with the outcome of an affective dimension of phygital experiences relating to emotions, feelings, and moods such as joy, frustration, excitement, wonder, or nostalgia<sup>39</sup>. Customer experiences – here referred to as audience experiences – encompass roles beyond merely being part of an audience or engaging in a customer journey.

### 3. METHOD

To investigate the intersection between immersive experiences and transmedia narratives, a qualitative study focusing on the ABBA Voyage has been conducted. The ABBA Voyage and its international audience/fans have been observed in physical and digital contexts. An ethnographic approach allowed us to closely examine the phenomenon and gain a deeper understanding of online and offline spaces<sup>40</sup>. Ethnography, as both a method and process, is inherently exploratory and adaptive, requiring us to maintain openness and flexibility in our research strategy and process, adopting a reflexive approach throughout<sup>41</sup>. Holt<sup>42</sup> suggested that by studying live music in its context, one can understand cultural practices and their ability to evoke a sense of authenticity and social presence, even in partially digitized settings. The empirical investigation focused on ABBA Voyage, spanning from the initial announcement of ABBA Voyage in September 2021 to September 2023.

Data were collected through observations during three visits to the ABBA Voyage Arena in London. The observations included carefully documenting fan behavior patterns, clothing, interactions with one another, purchases of artist-related merchandise, and activities before, during, and after the concerts, as well as the structure of the immersive production. Overall, 50 hours of participatory observations were conducted during seven concerts. To ensure credibility, three researchers participated in each observation session. In addition, 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site and after the concerts, lasting between five and 60 minutes. All respondents remain anonymous, and the names in the article are fictitious. The interview questions included background inquiries, questions about the experience/concert, the arrangements, the digital aspects, and other related topics. Digital data were also collected via ABBA's own communication channels, streamed live events, and various dedicated online fan sites on Facebook and Instagram, documented through screenshots. Overall, the data collection provided a comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

<sup>37</sup> Mele *et al.*, "The Phygital Transformation".

<sup>38</sup> Mele, Spina, "The Architecture of the Phygital Customer Journey".

<sup>39</sup> M. Gahler, J.F. Klein, M. Paul, "Customer Experience: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Application in Omnichannel Environments", *Journal of Service Research*, 26, 2 (2023): 191-211.

<sup>40</sup> C. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*, London: Routledge, 2020; S. Pink, "Experience. Digital ethnography", in *Innovative Methods in Media and Communication Research*, edited by S. Kubitschko and A. Kaun, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 161-165.

<sup>41</sup> Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*.

<sup>42</sup> F. Holt, "The Economy of Live Music in the Digital Age", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 2 (2010): 243-261.

Our analysis was characterized by an iterative approach. Inspired by the constant comparative method<sup>43</sup>, key themes were identified. Through selective coding, we integrated the themes with theoretical perspectives on immersive and phygital experiences, transmedia narratives, and fandom. The findings of this study were validated through triangulation across methods, researchers, respondents, and data sources<sup>44</sup>. Although this article is based on a single case study, ABBA Voyage allows findings to be applicable and transferable to other contexts, specifically in creative industries. To ensure robust findings, the data were independently analyzed by the researchers. Results were then compared and cross-checked to confirm that they accurately reflected the diversity of respondents. One significant concern was maintaining openness and transparency about the study's intentions while safeguarding the audience's privacy and anonymity. Ethical considerations were guided by the AoIR ethics guidelines<sup>45</sup>. This methodological rigor allowed for in-depth insights into the phenomenon.

#### 4. IMMersed IN THE ABBA UNIVERSE

To enter the concert hall within the ABBA Voyage Arena, the audience walks through an aisle with buzzing music and fluorescent light, simulating the ambience of boarding a spaceship. Inside, the concert hall has a traditional setup, a stage at the front, a standing area below, and seats around the arena, with several dancing booths included. Animated lights and an opening sequence depicting a vehicle departing a yellow globe enhance the thematic journey. One of the respondents described it as follows: “*The entire arena seems to envelop the audience, something they’ve succeeded to achieve through their use of sound and light. It creates a real ‘wow feeling’*” (Emma, 43).

When ABBA entered the stage, the audience behaved as if the artists were physically present. Throughout the performance, the audience acted as expected in any concert. They were cheering, clapping, dancing, and singing along to the music, thus interacting with the content as well as other fans. There seemed to be an unarticulated agreement among the visitors that even though the artists were avatars, and the avatars represented ABBA in the past, they were present in the room. “*I did not feel that there was any kind of disconnect between the live orchestra and the avatars [...] it strangely felt that there was a real connection between the avatars and the audience*” (John, 51). There were also animations and close-ups of the 3D-rendered artists on screens around the arena. “*The combination of seeing Agnetha, Benny, Björn & Anne-Frid on stage along with close-ups from the large digital screens makes it feel like you are at a real concert*”, Toby (49) described. The architecture, sound design, visuals, screens, and advanced technology worked together to seamlessly transition the audiences' experience between the physical and the digital and made the setting plausible and an experience of presence.

The sense of presence was heightened when the ABBAtars addressed the audience directly, sharing anecdotes and jokes and engaging with the audience. This subtle interaction made the audience feel like they were in dialogue with the artists. However, observations showed that a few glitches occurred in the interaction when the avatars'

<sup>43</sup> A.L. Strauss, J.M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for developing Grounded Theory*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> M. Wallendorf, R.W. Belk, “Assessing Trustworthiness in Naturalistic Consumer Research”, in *Interpretative Consumer Research*, edited by E.C. Hirschman, Association for Consumer Research, 1989: 69-84.

<sup>45</sup> A.S. Franzke, A. Bechmann, M. Zimmer, C.M Ess, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0.*, 2020.

dialogues did not align with the audiences' reactions, momentarily revealing the holographic nature of the interaction. An example was when the ABBAtar joked and the audience still laughed when the ABBAtar continued to talk. A speaker would normally have waited for the audience to finish laughing. However, the audience was then disciplined, adapting their responses accordingly, thus diminishing the glitch throughout the concert to withhold the immersive experience.

The time difference between present-day ABBA members and their youthful holograms did not detract from the experience but rather the opposite. Toby (49) noted: *"You really feel like you're seeing the original ABBA when they perform at their best"*. The reference to the past highlighted the narrative of entering a time capsule traveling back in time, or as John (51) explained: *"I just felt transported into this – it feels like another universe that they have created"*. ABBA's digital avatars – young digital twins – offered a nostalgic yet futuristic experience. Edna (74) observed, *"I didn't have any expectations of the avatars, but they are artists in younger bodies"*. Two fans from Germany and Switzerland, dressed in ABBA-themed outfits, shared: *"It was something totally different from what we thought it would be. It was fascinating, and we felt we were really a part of it"*.

The stage scenes were meticulously crafted to enhance the illusion, with large screens showing complementary imageries, strobing lights, and mirrors moving in the ceiling. The scenery, in combination with the stage performances, created an immersive atmosphere that engaged the audience with the show and each other. They expressed emotional and sensory engagement and presence as being in a real concert with real artists. The audience collectively accepted the digital ABBA avatars as authentic performers and the situation as plausible. The audience was enveloped in a multisensory immersive environment, forming a sense of presence and being genuinely connected to the avatars on stage.

## 5. COMING TOGETHER: THE ABBA FANDOM AND COMMUNITY

People arrived in groups at the arena. Most of the visitors were dressed up in clothing or accessories associated with the narratives built around the music group over the years. A recurring theme was the white shirts with cat prints from the 1977 Australia tour or the clothes resembling ABBA's stage costumes from winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974. Others dressed as characters from the "Mamma Mia!" movies and musicals. Our interviews revealed that these references often aligned with the production that originally made them fans. Dressing up and wearing items that reference a brand is a common fan practice, enabling fans to recognize one another, foster a sense of unity, and strengthen the fan community<sup>46</sup>.

Social media platforms, especially TikTok and Facebook, were utilized for marketing and fan engagement. Fans – referred to as "voyagers" – were encouraged to share their expectations and reflections, their experience of traveling to London, how they planned to dress, their expectations, and their experiences. It fostered a sense of anticipation and connection before arriving at the venue and after the event. *"We did the obligatory selfies and put them on Instagram and Facebook and shared them with friends. It generated quite a bit of interest"* (John, 51). This practice was also observed at

<sup>46</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*.

the venue and in diverse social media feeds. The combination of social media marketing activities encouraged engagement and the co-production of content, contributing to the fan-driven ABBA narrative.

Fans often described the concert as a culmination of their dedication to the group. As friends Lea and Emily (25) explained, “*We’ve listened to ABBA through our parents, and now we’re here, experiencing this with a whole community of fans*”. There are numerous examples in the data demonstrating how ABBA fandom transcends generations, bridging different age groups. We encountered several families visiting the show together. “*I grew up with the ABBA music because my parents listened to it since I was little. I became a fan too*” (Anna, 19). Respondents referenced the past in various ways, sharing memories of how they became fans, practiced their fandom, and with whom. Lea and Emily (25) said, “*We have been connecting with ABBA for a very long time. We wanted to meet; we are from Montreal and France and met in school. [...] We listened to ABBA through our parents, and we decided on ABBA Voyage. [...] We have dressed up as we want an incentive for participating during the show*”.

The historical references highlight how the audience engages with elements within the ABBA transmedia universe. This connection is a fundamental aspect of fandom, allowing fans to bring shared history, personal experiences, and their own memories into the immersive experience<sup>47</sup>. These historical and nostalgic elements deepen audiences’ engagement, bridging prior knowledge and emotions to the current immersive environment, both physically and digitally by “speaking” to fans across generations and building expectations that resonate with both older and newer audiences, making the ABBA transmedia universe relevant today.

## 6. PHYGITAL AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

The ABBA Voyage Arena stands out in its surroundings with its irregular shape and big letters stating “ABBA” lit up on the facade. It was specifically developed for ABBA Voyage, including the surrounding space. The open space in front of the arena allows for social interaction among visitors sharing their fandom and experiences on-site, both before and after the concert. Carefully designed photo opportunities, such as posing with the iconic ABBA letters or using the arena as a backdrop, offered moments to solidify memories and share them across digital platforms. On the one hand, these activities established fan practices. On the other hand, the architecture and open spaces were curated to promote these practices. Inside the arena, there were further photo opportunities, as well as bars and shops selling ABBA merchandise or branded items specific to this event (such as water bottles). The nearby temporary-built hotel provides a themed bar and ABBA dance floor, which forms a hub for fans to meet and refresh while celebrating and practicing their fandom. The shared digital experiences heighten the sense of community, reinforcing the connection to the brand through the physical venue<sup>48</sup>. These phygital experiences were built into the customer journey, blending fan practices with economic value at the specific site.

The phygital customer journey extends beyond the concert when audiences engage in pre- and post-event activities, calling to audiences’ emotional value and amplifying

<sup>47</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*.

<sup>48</sup> Mele *et al.*, “The Millennial Customer Journey”.

the sense of community. Fans described listening to ABBA playlists at work, dressing in themed costumes, and participating in group celebrations: “*We even have a playlist at work, and some colleagues scream at us to ‘turn it off’ because we play ABBA so much*” (group interview with four women from the same workplace, 35-50). These activities – both physical and digital – allow fans to immerse themselves in the ABBA experience and the broader fan community. Maria and Aleksandra (mother and daughter, 55 and 25) exemplify the phygital customer journey through their use of digital tools to enable their physical experience. “*One woman in the [Facebook] group helped us book tickets and gave us information before today. People on Facebook also share photos and other things, which makes expectations higher*”. These interactions demonstrate how digital platforms extend the customer journey, where the fan base becomes a resource that enables collective planning and anticipation.

These phygital spaces blend fan practices and economic value associated with the ABBA brand. It is a physical place but highly dependent on the audience’s imaginaries of ABBA. The place has no previous relation with the ABBA universe, but by calling to and incorporating the collective imaginaries of ABBA, the space has been given meaning to the visiting audience. As Reijnders<sup>49</sup> suggested, such places of imagination bridge the real and imagined worlds through cultural and social practices; however, these are deeply entangled with economic value exchange. Phygital experiences ensure economic gain through interactions, relationships, and emotional relations with the brand<sup>50</sup>.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The findings show that ABBA Voyage was deeply entangled with ABBA’s history, additional narratives within the transmedia world building of ABBA, and the visitors’ own fandom practices<sup>51</sup>. The experience of immersion relied on a tacit agreement among the audience that ABBA’s performance was a live performance, accepting the conditions as plausible<sup>52</sup>, thus participating in the event as it unfolded. Active participation promoted interactivity among visitors, and the performance was mostly seamless. However, when a glitch in the interactivity occurred, the audience adapted their reaction to the performance’s pace<sup>53</sup>. The audience felt immersed or “enveloped” by the arena and the staged performance, blurring the boundaries between reality and simulation<sup>54</sup>. Here, immersion was created for a greater audience; however, it was highly dependent on transmedia narratives and the spatial construction.

At the core of the immersive experience was the audience’s co-created collective engagement utilizing their fandom in a carefully curated common space and live show. The physical place – the ABBA Arena and its surroundings – gathered fans around ABBA many years after the group had left the stage. ABBA Voyage merged the past with the present by creating a common fandom space interconnecting a site with the web of

<sup>49</sup> S. Reijnders, *Places of the Imagination: Media, Tourism, Culture*, London: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Mele et al., “The Millennial Customer Journey”.

<sup>51</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*.

<sup>52</sup> M. Slater, “Place Illusion and Plausibility Can Lead to Realistic Behaviour in Immersive Virtual Environments”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364 (2009): 549-357.

<sup>53</sup> E. Parker, M. Saker, “Art Museums and the Incorporation of Virtual Reality: Examining the Impact of VR on Spatial and Social Norms”, *Convergence*, 266, 5-6 (2020): 1159-1173.

<sup>54</sup> Bailenson, *Experience on Demand: What Virtual Reality Is, How it Works, and what it Can Do*.

transmedia narratives<sup>55</sup> that forms the ABBA universe. Audience testimonials revealed how phygital experiences fostered deep emotional connections and bridged generations, enduring ABBA's legacy and brand. The site framed the staged performance, enabling phygital experiences entangled with emotional attachment, memories, and togetherness but also utilizing monetary exchange. Due to the digital nature of the ABBAatars, there is also a built-in ability to perform multiple shows per week, which underscores the scalability<sup>56</sup> and economic drives of phygital experiences. The combination of state-of-the-art holographic technology with live music and a custom-built physical venue engaged<sup>57</sup> the audience on site as well as beyond the immediate setting (e.g on streaming platforms and on social media platforms).

Recent work within the transmedia literature highlights how liveness is created through live broadcasting in conjunction with digital platforms to create temporally defined audience engagement. In addition, our find that the concept of phygital allows researchers to address the intersection of spatial and digital aspects liveness in contemporary media. By blending the tangible aspects of a live concert, such as the energy of a shared space and the resonance of live performance, with the visual and narrative possibilities of digital technology, ABBA Voyage marks a broader trend within event industries, where brands seek their audience through engaging multisensory encounters rather than static goods or services. This will play a role in the commercialization of public and semi-public spaces. Phygital experience as a concept contributes to understanding how the utilization of media technologies, transmedia narratives, and place-specific events bring new ways to commercialize space to the table.

<sup>55</sup> Mohd Hasri, Md Syed, "Enhancing Transmedia Component through World Building: The Case of Ejen Ali Franchise", 1-17.

<sup>56</sup> L. Di Pietro *et al.*, "A Scaling Up Framework for Innovative Service Ecosystems: Lessons from Eat-aly and KidZania", *Journal of Service Management*, 29, 1 (2018): 146-175.

<sup>57</sup> Batat, *Strategies for the Digital Customer Experience: Connecting Customers with Brands in the Phygital Age*.

ANJA BOATO\*

## EARLY VIRTUAL WORLDS Pioneers of Extended Realities Between Creative Efforts and Technical Experimentations

### *Abstract*

Through an approach focused on the industrial history of the medium, this research seeks to reconstruct the genealogy of immersive technologies by conducting an in-depth investigation into the conceptual and technical origins of Extended Realities (XR) in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the last thirty years, efforts have been made to trace the medium's history in order to legitimize its existence, identifying a number of pioneers in immersive realities who helped lay the cultural and technological groundwork for a new immersive market to emerge in the 1980s. The personalities of inventor and filmmaker Morton Heilig, computer scientist Ivan Sutherland, and artist Myron Krueger have been regarded as forerunners of the industrial growth of the media. This article attempts to trace the origins of this process by examining Heilig, Sutherland, and Krueger's contributions with a dual purpose. First, it seeks to recreate the theoretical and conceptual foundations of immersive reality. Second, it looks at the larger cotext in which these pioneering attempts evolved.

### *Keywords*

Media industry; immersive media; extended realities; genealogy of virtuality; social history.

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The industrial history of immersive reality began only in the 1980s when the first companies focused on developing and commercialising hardware and software for Extended Realities (XR) were established. The pioneering company in this field was Virtual Programming Languages Research Inc. (VPL), which was founded by US programmer, artist, and entrepreneur Jaron Lanier. Since then, XR has outgrown its experimental stage and entered the realm of the market.

The origins of VPL are well-known primarily because of Lanier and colleagues' firsthand testimonies<sup>1</sup>. In September 1984, the US-based journal *Scientific American* featured a picture of Mandala, a program created by Lanier. Mandala was identified as belonging to "Jaron Z. Lanier and his colleagues at VPL Research Inc in Palo Alto, California"<sup>2</sup>, even though VPL Research Inc. had not yet been established. The company name was used to justify the author's affiliation with a research institution for the publication. However, it served as a motivator for formalising the work that Lanier and a

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<sup>1</sup> J. Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "The Cover", *Scientific American*, 251, 3 (1984): 6.

small group of colleagues were doing in Silicon Valley, and VPL Research Inc. became a reality at the beginning of 1985. Between then and the first half of the 1990s, several multinational corporations invested in developing and commercialising immersive devices, transforming these technologies into a flourishing hi-tech market.

However, there was a significant experimental period before this. Some pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s have been identified in the public discourse, seeking to construct a genealogy of XR that can culturally legitimise the emergence of ‘new media’. These efforts started in the early 1990s when writers like Howard Rheingold<sup>3</sup>, Frank Biocca and Mark R. Levy<sup>4</sup> analysed the status of immersive media, anticipating a trend that would continue to grow in the second half of the 2000s. Three names that stand out and help identify the prominent trends of the pre-industrial VR era are Morton Leonard Heilig, filmmaker and inventor of Sensorama; Ivan Edward Sutherland, computer scientist and creator of *Sword of Damocles*; and Myron Krueger, master of electronic art, who coined the term ‘artificial reality’ to describe his main project, *Videoplace*. Each of these people is recognised as the creator of a technology that embodies a different aspect of XR as it is understood today.

In this article, we examine the role each of these authors has played in shaping the imaginary of virtuality and evaluates the significance of their contributions. While their impact on technological development is often limited, it is nonetheless considered alongside their more substantial influence on the dominant rhetorical frameworks that define our understanding of what virtual reality is. The objective is therefore twofold. On one hand, the aim is to identify, within each of their inventions and discoveries, the foundational elements of the contemporary concept of virtual reality, rediscovering the origins of the medium beyond its purely technical aspects. On the other hand, the goal is to reconstruct the context in which these inventions emerged, tracing the connections between institutions, historical circumstances, and techno-artistic developments.

To accomplish this, we will explore the role of Heilig, Sutherland, and Krueger in anticipating and shaping contemporary rhetoric about virtual reality through the analysis of several qualitative sources. In Heilig’s case, these will be patents, articles in popular newspapers, journalistic reviews, and promotional flyers kept at the HMH Foundation Moving Image Archive<sup>5</sup>. Conference proceedings, books, art catalogues, and interviews left by Ivan Sutherland and Marion Krueger are accessible through several institutions and databases. Other sources consulted include specialised journals, such as the US-based *Communications of the ACM*.

## 1. IN THE BEGINNING WAS CINEMA: MORTON HEILIG AND THE VISION OF AN IMMERSIVE FUTURE

According to Gutierrez, Virtual Reality (VR) is consistently portrayed in popular discourses through the “rhetoric of futurism”<sup>6</sup>, making it “crucial to understand its collec-

<sup>3</sup> H. Rheingold, *Virtual Reality. The Revolutionary Technology of Computer-Generated Artificial Worlds – and How It Promises and Threatens to Transform Business and Society*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> F. Biocca, M.R. Levy, eds., *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> The material is available in the digital archive <https://hnharchive.com/project/morton-heilig-collection-finding-aid/>.

<sup>6</sup> N. Gutierrez, “The Ballad of Morton Heilig: On VR’s Mythic Past”, *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 62, 3 (2023): 86-16 (95). DOI: 10.1353/cj.2023.0027.

tively reconstructed past”<sup>7</sup>. From Rheingold’s early works to the more recent studies of Bolter, Engberg, and MacIntyre<sup>8</sup>, historical and contemporary essays locate the year zero of VR in the experiments of a filmmaker whose creations are quite different from today’s understanding of the medium. Referring to the technical definition proposed by Fuchs, Moreau and Guitton, VR should be defined as

a scientific and technical domain that uses computer science (1) and behavioural interfaces (2) to simulate in a virtual world (3) the behaviour of 3D entities, which interact in real time (4) with each other and with one or more users in pseudo-natural immersion (5) via sensorimotor channels<sup>9</sup>.

Heilig’s creations do not use computer science or behavioural interfaces to create virtual worlds. Rather, they belong to the sphere of analogue technologies. Heilig’s rhetorical assimilation with a virtual world pioneer was connected to the goals of his prototypes, which were foreshadowed by an article titled *The Cinema of the Future* that appeared in the Mexican magazine *Espacios* and was translated into English over thirty years later for the US journal *Presence*. In this article, the author imagines an immersive cinema screen that will generate an “art of consciousness”<sup>10</sup> with sensory capabilities that can include taste, smell, and touch, enabling one to “feel physically and mentally transported into a new world”<sup>11</sup>. His retroactive mythmaking as a VR prophet was determined by his goal to immerse the viewer in the cinematic image, which is remarkably similar to the modern concept of “pseudo-natural immersion via sensorimotor channels” mentioned by Fuchs et al. This produced several patents and prototypes that, according to Heilig’s vision, would make the ‘Cinema of the Future’ a reality.

In 1960, he patented his Stereoscopic Television Individual Apparatus for Individual Use, informally called the Telesphere Mask. The prototype was a stereoscopic headset with two screens that created the illusion of a 140° peripheral view of the television image. The headset’s cool reception prompted him to move his focus to a more ambitious project, the Sensorama Simulator, whose industrial history and social reception are crucial for understanding the milieu in which immersive media arose. Sensorama, which resembles an arcade video game, was designed to immerse the user in a multimodal cinematic experience. Using “a cinematic technique that for the first time combines three-dimensional motion pictures, peripheral vision, binaural sounds, aromas, and tactile sensations”, the Sensorama was marketed as “an entirely new kind of communication device which creates for its user the illusion of being physically present in a different environment”<sup>12</sup>. In the patent, Heilig emphasises the Sensorama’s multifunctionality, describing it as a tool for training workers in the military services,

<sup>7</sup> Gutierrez, *The Ballad of Morton Heilig*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> J. Bolter, M. Engberg, B. MacIntyre, *Reality Media. Augmented and Virtual Reality*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> P. Fuchs, P. Guitton, “Introduction to Virtual Reality”, in *Virtual Reality: Concepts and Technologies*, edited by P. Fuchs, G. Moreau, P. Guitton, Milton Park: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013: 8.

<sup>10</sup> M. Heilig, “El Cine del Futuro: The Cinema of the Future”, *Presence*, 1, 3 (1992): 279-294 (287). DOI: 10.1162/pres.1992.1.3.279.

<sup>11</sup> Heilig, “El Cine del Futuro”, 284.

<sup>12</sup> Promotional materials, patents and press reviews of Heilig’s inventions can be viewed at the Hugh M. Heffner Foundation Moving Image Archive at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. The quote refers to the first page of the “Introducing the Sensorama Simulator” promo flyer.

mechanised industries, and educational institutions, claiming that the Sensorama could “simulate a desired experience by developing sensations in a plurality of the senses”<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the patent’s intended industrial applications, the publicity material focuses primarily on less technical fields, including public relations, education, psychotherapy, psychological research, and entertainment. While claiming that Sensorama would be ideal for public relations, advertising, and promotional material, not much detail was given. For educational applications, however, it claims that “because the simulator conveys more information in a given period, it dramatically shortens the length of learning and help make complicated ideas clear”<sup>14</sup>, and it could be used by the government or universities as an “automatic teaching machine”. Current interest in the educational field is one of the most compelling and most often explored topics for immersive experience applications. Similarly, Sensorama’s promo flyer claims that it “offers psychologists a unique tool for testing emotional responses, learning processes, sensory perception, etc.”<sup>15</sup>. Recent studies emphasise the benefits of applying VR to these same fields. On the one hand, they are useful tools for experiential learning, with the ability to “mimic the brain model as much as possible”<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, they can technically control the type of experience to which the user is subjected, offering “new ways of structure, augment, and/or replace the experience of the body for clinical goals”<sup>17</sup>. Thus, Sensorama’s optimal applications align with the most recent advancements in VR.

However, Heilig was mainly focused on the entertainment industry, promoting Sensorama as “an experience of incomparable excitement and pleasure”<sup>18</sup> that everyone could enjoy for just 25 cents. In fact, Sensorama was best suited for public areas like malls and theme parks. To achieve this, Heilig created several test films, each lasting roughly three minutes. These include a dune buggy ride (*Dune Buggy*), a date at the beach (*A Date with Sabina*), a belly dancing performance (*Belly Dancer*), a helicopter flight over California (*Helicopter*), and a motorcycle ride through the streets of Brooklyn (*Motorcycle*). According to Rheingold, Heilig said in a private conversation that the biggest problem with the project had been funding<sup>19</sup>. The audiovisual industry appears to have been resistant to Sensorama’s potential, and its production history was marked by both highs and lows. The project began in Mexico, where Heilig was working as a documentary filmmaker. He then sought funding in New York, where he created the first prototype, which he exhibited in a Broadway arcade. Despite successfully arranging mass manufacturing of the hardware, Heilig failed to capture market interest, and the project was abandoned in the early 1970s<sup>20</sup>.

However, the lack of enthusiasm shown by film investors for Sensorama contrasted with the attention the media appeared to give it. In a lengthy piece published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1964, Lewis H. Lapham compared the simulator to the futuristic theatre that Aldous Huxley had imagined in his 1931 novel *Brave New World*. The piece also includes an interview with Heilig, who ended it with a somewhat prophetic question, asking the interviewer, “Do you know what this machine really is?”. Then

<sup>13</sup> M. Heilig, “Sensorama Simulator”, *United States Patent Office*, n. 3,050,870, August 28, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Heilig, “Introducing the Sensorama Simulator”, promo flyer.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> G. Riva, “Virtual Reality in Clinical Psychology”, *Comprehensive Clinical Psychology*, 10 (2022): 91-105 (91). DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-12-818697-8.00006-6.

<sup>17</sup> Riva, *Virtual Reality in Clinical Psychology*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Heilig, “Introducing the Sensorama Simulator”, promo flyer.

<sup>19</sup> Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

he answers himself: “It’s an empathy machine, and if we can develop it right, maybe we can get it to inject feelings of warmth and love”<sup>21</sup>. In 2015, author Chris Milk gave a much-quoted TED Talk titled *How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine*, which paved the way for the modern rhetoric of VR as an ‘empathy machine’<sup>22</sup>. Once again, the imagery of Sensorama anticipates the imagery of virtual reality.

Lapham was not the only author who wrote enthusiastically about Sensorama’s possibilities. Leonard Lipton urged readers of *Popular Photography Magazine* to “watch out for a remarkable new process called Sensorama!”<sup>23</sup>, while Howard Junker wrote in *Film Comment* that Heilig had, literally, “a hot property”<sup>24</sup>, while complaining that the belly dancer ended her performance too soon. Other newspapers, such as the *Hollywood Reporter* and the *New York Times*, returned to the issue in 1969, adopting a tone that Gutierrez subsequently linked to the “speculative, and largely uncritical articles that would be written about VR in the 1980s and 1990s”<sup>25</sup>. However, the Sensorama project was abandoned before it could be fully realized. Heilig patented a third innovation in 1971, the Experience Theatre, which was “a new and improved type of theater designed to completely involve a mass audience into a new and exciting world of experience”<sup>26</sup>. The Experience Theatre was a group version of the Sensorama, probably similar to the modern 4D cinemas seen mainly in amusement parks. Again, its production was unsuccessful.

The idea of Morton Heilig as the genius who foresaw the future before society was ready to accept it was shaped by the ideal synergies between Sensorama and modern VR. According to Gutierrez, this rhetoric represents a posthumous attempt to normalise and legitimate the current state of VR by mythologizing its past. However, it has already been demonstrated that Heilig’s work in the 1960s brought about a number of discursive components that have greatly influenced how the medium is understood today, both in the press and promotional material. Heilig’s contribution to the history of immersive media is thus not technologically significant, and his inventions did not stimulate automatic creative advancements. However, as Rheingold points out:

It appears that technological revolutions don’t happen simply because progress is inevitable; true technological paradigm-shifts require a visionary of two of Heilig’s caliber, access to one or more enabling technologies that would make the visionaries’ gadgets possible and, most important, a person with some power to champion the new idea among the conservative decision-makers who can finance its development<sup>27</sup>.

Above all, this process serves as an opportunity to reinforce two distinct discursive levels. On the one hand, contemporary rhetoric on VR, shaped by specific marketing strategies and subsequent reception<sup>28</sup>, portrays it as a medium constantly projected into the future, because the present is still not ready to integrate it into the standard daily media diet. Similar to Morton Heilig and his Sensorama, VR itself struggles to find a

<sup>21</sup> L.H. Lapham, “The Feely is Here”. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 18 April, 1964: 28-29 (29).

<sup>22</sup> C. Milk, “How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine”, TED, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXHillTPxvA>. Accessed April 24, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> L. Lipton, “Now Step into a Movie. Sensorama”, *Popular Photography Magazine*, July 1964: 114.

<sup>24</sup> H. Junker, “New Perils Awaiting the Serious Drinker”, *Film Comment*, Summer 1965: 36.

<sup>25</sup> Gutierrez, *The Ballad of Morton Heilig*, 95.

<sup>26</sup> M. Heilig, “Experience Theatre”, *United States Patent Office*, n. 3,469,837, September 30, 1969.

<sup>27</sup> Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> J. Nagy, F. Turner, “The Selling of Virtual Reality: Novelty and Continuity in the Cultural Integration of Technology”. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2019.

space. This was true in the 1990s, when Rheingold wrote his book, and in the 2000s, when speculation about the medium's origins resurfaced. On the other hand, this process depicts VR as a misunderstood medium that was not considered worthy of investment when Heilig and other pioneers began work on it. So, VR deserves to be rediscovered now to correct an early ancestral mistake. Sensorama failed from a commercial perspective, but the echo of its experimental aura is still recalled as a motivator for implementing the 'new medium'.

## 2. ANOTHER FACE OF THE COLD WAR ERA: IVAN SUTHERLAND AND THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

The 1960s and 1970s saw the influx of computer scientists, technicians, and researchers into the immersive field. Indeed, the first HMD prototype was created in the laboratories of Harvard University based on the work of Ivan Sutherland, a computer scientist and computer graphics pioneer who was already well-known in the international academic community for his remarkable work before becoming the 'father' of Augmented Reality (AR)<sup>29</sup>. While attending some of the most prestigious American universities and research centres, he developed a digital interface that could react to the user's eye movements. He began his academic life at Harvard University, where he established a research team<sup>30</sup> in 1965 to develop the first head-mounted display (HMD) apparently inspired by the Bell Helicopter Company's experiments to facilitate night landings through a system of infrared cameras. The cameras, which were placed under the helicopter, moved in synchrony with the pilot's gaze<sup>31</sup>. Sutherland decided to use the same technique with computers<sup>32</sup>. The CIA was one of the main sponsors of the research, which – given the prevailing inter-generational friction and societal mistrust of government institutions in the United States during the 1960s – sparked a serious scandal<sup>33</sup>.

A significant public exposition of the project occurred at the sixth International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) conference in 1965, where Sutherland gave a paper titled *The Ultimate Display*, which focused on the concept of a kinaesthetic display: "Machines to sense and interpret eye motion data can and will be built. It remains to be seen if we can use a language made of glances to control a computer. An interesting experiment will be to make the display presentation depend on where we look"<sup>34</sup>.

Sutherland concludes the speech by asserting that the Ultimate Display

<sup>29</sup> Sutherland's experiments followed some inventions comparable to today's HMD concept. Notable is the Headsight system, which was created in 1962 by Charles Cameau and James Bryan, two engineers from the Philco Corporation, and consists of a worn stereo camera for video surveillance.

<sup>30</sup> It is particularly important to mention Sutherland's fellow researchers, Danny Cohen, Quintin Foster, and Bob Sproull.

<sup>31</sup> H. McCracken, "A Talk with Computer Graphics Pioneer Ivan Sutherland", *Time*, April 12, 2013. Accessed March 31, 2024. <https://techland.time.com/2013/04/12/a-talk-with-computer-graphics-pioneer-ivan-sutherland>.

<sup>32</sup> SIGGRAPH Conference Editors, "VR at 50: Ivan Sutherland's 1968 Head-Mounted 3D Display System". ACM Siggraph, 14 August, 2018. Accessed 31 March, 2024. <https://blog.siggraph.org/2018/08/vr-at-50-celebrating-ivan-sutherland.html>.

<sup>33</sup> W. Aspray, "Oral History Interview with Ivan Sutherland". *Charles Babbage Institute*, 1 May 1989. Accessed March 31, 2024. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/cbca2b79-c748-4c30-a0ba-e2a7c85242fa>.

<sup>34</sup> I. Sutherland, "The Ultimate Display", in *Proceedings of IFIP Congress 65*, edited by W.A. Kalenich, London: Macmillan and Co, 1965: 506-508 (507).

would, of course, be a room within which the computer can control the existence of matter. A chair displayed in such a room would be good enough to sit in. Handcuffs displayed in such a room would be confining; and a bullet displayed in such a room would be fatal. With appropriate programming such a display could literally be the Wonderland into which Alice walked<sup>35</sup>.

Frederick Brooks, who would become one of the most significant VR researchers in the next ten years, most likely attended the talk<sup>36</sup>. However, the Ultimate Display had to wait a few years before taking shape. Indeed, HMD's earliest prototype dates back to 1968. Similar to more recent AR systems, the HMD could track gaze movements and overlay computer-generated images, but it had to be hung from the ceiling due to the weight of the hardware. This is why it became known as the Sword of Damocles, in allusion to the heavy support hanging over the user's shoulders. The project was first presented at the 1968 Joint Computer Conference and documented in subsequent conference proceedings that highlighted Harvard University's collaboration with a number of federal government institutions, including the Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and the Office of Naval Research<sup>37</sup>.

Like Heilig, Sutherland also anticipates key elements of the contemporary concept of VR, contributing to the shaping of its current imagery. Much like Sensorama, the HMD's unofficial name – Sword of Damocles – evokes an epic atmosphere. Whereas Heilig was a misunderstood prophet<sup>38</sup>, just like a visionary lacking the opportunity to develop his own ideas, Sutherland is an enlightened technician deeply embedded in, and rewarded by, the system. His extremely heavy HMD was the result of years of experimentation financed by some of the most prominent organisations in the United States. The outcome of his efforts was observable and effective. The Sword of Damocles is a computer that creates images by responding to the movements of the human eye, whereas Sensorama was a futuristic and underrated fantasy that would have revolutionised filmmaking.

However, other notable researchers continued Sutherland's work, which led to significant technical advances in a few specialised fields, especially the military and aerospace. The press tended to focus on the sensational aspects related to the CIA funding controversy at Harvard University, which was reported in New York's *Daily World* ("Harvard's Link to CIA Exposed"<sup>39</sup>) and London's *Black Dwarf* ("Spy Networks Uncovered"<sup>40</sup>). Nevertheless, its creation provides the first serious look into immersive realities, foreshadowing subsequent industrial advancements in the medium and influencing, among others, Jaron Lanier himself. This is further demonstrated by the continuation of experiments in the search for a kinaesthetic computer, which led U.S. universities to spearhead research until the industrialization of the sector in the 1980s.

<sup>35</sup> Sutherland, *The Ultimate Display*, 508.

<sup>36</sup> K. Bye, "Fred Brooks on Ivan Sutherland's 1965 "Ultimate Display" Speech", *Voices of VR*, 2016. Accessed by March 31, 2024. <https://voicesofvr.com/359-fred-brooks-on-sutherlands-1965-ultimate-display-speech>.

<sup>37</sup> I. Sutherland, "A Head-Mounted Three Dimensional Display", *Proceedings of the AFIPS '68 Fall Joint Computer Conference*, 1968: 757-764. DOI: 10.1145/1476589.1476686.

<sup>38</sup> Gutierrez, *The Ballad of Morton*.

<sup>39</sup> E. Bert, "Harvard's Link to CIA Exposed", *Daily World*, New York, April 17, 1969: 1.

<sup>40</sup> "Cambridge, Sussex. Spy Networks Uncovered", *Black Dwarf*, London, May 16, 1969: 2.

### 3. ART DOESN'T PAY, BUT SCIENCE DOES: MYRON KRUEGER'S VIDEOPLACE

In examining key developments in the conceptualisation of virtuality in the 1990s, Howard Rheingold brings into focus the role of a third important player: Myron Krueger. Krueger is frequently quoted in leading industry publications, including the specialist Italian magazine *Virtual. Mensile di realtà virtuale e immagini di sintesi* (1993-1998), which published interviews with him and excerpts of his work. His theoretical contributions were particularly influential, especially following the publication of his pioneering work *Artificial Reality* (1982), which anticipated many of the foundational concepts that would later define what came to be known as Virtual Reality. Krueger's work is central for its exploration of the relationship between the user and the virtual environment. His artworks introduced the notion of being part of a virtual reality through a computerized presence, laying the groundwork for his theoretical publications regarding the role of art as a pivotal force in the development of a new media – which he refers to as Artificial Reality.

Krueger began participating in a project curated by Dan Sandin, Jerry Erdman, and Richard Venezky shortly after the premiere of *Sword of Damocles* in 1969. Sandin is a master of electronic art and one of the first authors to work in the field of computer graphics. He is a co-director of the Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE) and a co-founder of the Electronic Visualisation Laboratory (EVL) at the University of Illinois, which is one of the leading centres of experimentation on the relationship between art and computer science. Sandin, in collaboration with sculptor Erdman and computer scientist Venezky, launched a project called *Glowflow*, which Krueger later referred to as “a computer-controlled light-sound environment”<sup>41</sup>. Krueger continued to create more electronic artworks based on human-computer interaction after working with Sandin, and debuted his first artwork, *Metaplay*, at the University of Wisconsin Memorial Union Gallery in 1970. It was a flat-screen experience that created a perfectly synchronised viewer-medium-artist triangulation by allowing gallery visitors to interact with an artist, typically Krueger himself, who was in a different room<sup>42</sup>. The subsequent year, Memorial Union Gallery also hosted Krueger's electronic work *Psychic Space*, which was based on the unique interaction between individual users and the automated environment<sup>43</sup>. The experience was based on a system of sensors scattered across the floor that triggered specific sound or musical reactions to the user's movements in the room.

*Metaplay* and *Psychic Space* foreshadow Krueger's most ambitious project, both in terms of expressive intent and technological research. *Videoplace*, which debuted in 1975 at the Milwaukee Art Center and was considered to be a laboratory in progress, underwent significant modifications during the 1980s and 1990s. The first version of the work featured at least two participants interacting with a synthetic body replica that was projected onto a screen. The participants' movements were captured in real-time by a video camera, which sent the data to a computer system, which then mixed it with computer-generated graphics. Even though they were in separate rooms, the two users felt as if they were sharing the same virtual world, with the silhouettes of both their

<sup>41</sup> M.W. Krueger, *Artificial Reality II*, Boston: Addison-Wesley Professional, 1991: 12.

<sup>42</sup> “Metaplay 1970”, About Myron Krueger, Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://aboutmyronkrueger.weebly.com/metaplay.html>.

<sup>43</sup> “Psychic Space 1971”, About Myron Krueger, Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://aboutmyronkrueger.weebly.com/psychic-space.html>.

bodies projected onto the screen. This sophisticated mechanism foreshadows Slater et al.'s research on the 'virtual arm illusion', which consists of three experiments intended to demonstrate how the perception of the physical body can be transferred within virtual environments, regardless of the photorealism of computer-generated elements or artificial space<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, Videoplace shows that "people feel that their images are extensions of their identity. What happens to the images happens to them. What touches the images they feel. They immediately accept the reality of any image that includes their own"<sup>45</sup>.

Krueger thus reflects on embodiment within virtual spaces, long before they had become immersive environments in the way we perceive them today. In later versions of Videoplace, the artist introduces new forms of computer autonomy, such as the ability to change the colour, size, and position in virtual space of the body, and digital elements that react to the user's presence<sup>46</sup>. Because of the Videoplace's limitless potential, Krueger presents it as 'a new medium' – a digital setting that can be used to create a variety of experiences through various forms of interaction. The artist continued to work on the project in his Artificial Reality Lab to develop this ideal new medium. *Metaplay*, *Psychic Space*, and *Videoplace* depict the development of what Krueger refers to as a 'responsive environment', namely an environment "in which a single participant's movements are perceived by a computer that in turn responds through visual and auditory displays"<sup>47</sup>. The key component of the new medium is this responsiveness, which is exemplified by *Videoplace* but that can be broadly defined as Artificial Reality, or what would eventually be known as Virtual Reality. Krueger claims that Artificial Reality lends itself to becoming an autonomous form of artistic expression, based on the crucial principle of interactivity.

Like Sutherland, Krueger was able to create his art inside the exclusive borders of American research institutions and universities. He started working as an adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin in 1974, where he exhibited both *Metaplay* and *Psychic Space*. He continued to work on *Videoplace* until 1978 within the Space Science and Engineering Center, which is also affiliated with the University of Wisconsin. He was able to do so with the financial assistance of the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal organisation in the United States that funds the most promising works of art, and two other significant organizations – the Wisconsin Arts Board, which supports the arts and creative endeavours, and the Brittingham Wisconsin Trust Grant, which funds university projects. In 1979, Krueger moved – with *Videoplace* – to the computer science department of the University of Connecticut, where he remained until 1985. Only after ten years of academic affiliation did *Videoplace* become an autonomous initiative, but it retained close links with the University of Connecticut, which continued to sponsor ancillary projects<sup>48</sup>.

Because of his institutional role, Krueger was at the epicentre of some of the trends that accompanied the growth of XR in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Sutherland, his academic background and *Videoplace*'s official affiliation are rooted in the computer sci-

<sup>44</sup> M. Slater, D. Pérez-Marcos, H.H. Ehrsson, M.V. Sanchez-Vives, "Towards a Digital Body: The Virtual Arm Illusion", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 2, 6, 2008: 1-8. DOI: 10.3389/neuro.09.006.2008.

<sup>45</sup> M.W. Krueger, "Videoplace: A Report from the Artificial Reality Laboratory", *Leonardo*, 18, 3 (1985): 145-151 (148).

<sup>46</sup> M.W. Krueger, T. Gionfriddo, K. Hinrichsen, "Videoplace – an Artificial Reality", *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference of Human Factors in Computing System*, 1985: 35-40. DOI: 10.1145/1165385.317463.

<sup>47</sup> Krueger, "Videoplace: A Report from the Artificial Reality Laboratory": 147.

<sup>48</sup> Krueger, *Artificial Reality II*.

ence environment. Krueger began his career as a programmer, which led to his first collaboration with Sandin on Glowflow. He then pursued a personal creative path, but always in environments primarily focused on scientific research. At the same time, *computer art* emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s<sup>49</sup>. While Krueger was working on Videoplace, the art journals were rife with debate over the aesthetics of algorithms, the linguistic and technological elements, and the ontological specificities of the new medium. In 1979, Frank Malina published *Visual Art, Mathematics, and Computers*, a collection of articles originally featured in the *Leonardo* journal between 1969 and 1977. At the same time, artists and computer scientists were cooperating through events such as *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, in which ten artists collaborated closely with approximately 30 engineers to create multimedia performances that were exhibited in 1966 at the Brooklyn Museum in New York<sup>50</sup>, culminating in the founding of Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT). London followed soon after with the 1967 launch of the first exhibition focusing on the relationship between art and computers, titled *Cybernetic Serendipity*<sup>51</sup>. It was also shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and the Exploratorium, a museum of art, technology, and science in San Francisco. Opportunities for exchange increased during the 1970s, both because of the establishment of media centres like Bell Labs and EAT itself, which brought together professionals and creatives, and because of the creation of international events, like the *Ars Electronica* in Linz.

Krueger created and developed Videoplace by bridging these two trends – the first wave of scientific interest in producing hardware capable of developing immersion in the virtual environment, and a vibrant artistic community rethinking computers in creative ways, thereby stimulating new technical innovations. Krueger aligns primarily with the artistic field, despite his liminal position between the two poles. In a 1993 SIGGRAPH paper, the artist criticised the tendency to marginalise the driving efforts of the new medium’s development to technical organisations like NASA and to associate the development of VR with purely academic and scientific research. In contrast, Krueger emphasises the role of the arts, connecting its roots back to Heilig’s Sensorama and, thus, to cinema. During his closing remarks, he states that

virtual reality is more than just a technology – it is a culture-defining medium like film or television. Its use will be judged by aesthetic as well as technical criteria, whether it is used for artistic expression or practical application [...] the new artistic medium will lead to new markets that dwarf the so-called practical applications<sup>52</sup>.

Immersive technologies developed straddling two forces before the creation of a market in the 1980s. On the one hand, the technical-scientific drive of research centres, mostly in the United States, received substantial government support. On the other hand, artistic exploration stimulated research for its own sake, but often without enjoying the same financial security as the academic institutions. This dichotomy shaped

<sup>49</sup> M. Mancuso, *Arte, tecnologia e scienza. Le art industries e i nuovi paradigmi di produzione nella new media art contemporanea*, Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> D. Garwood, “The Future of an Idea. 9 Evenings – Forty Years Later”, *Journal of Performance and Art*, 29, 1 (2007): 36-48.

<sup>51</sup> J. Reichardt, “Cybernetic Serendipity: The Computer and the Arts”, *Studio International*, special issue, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> M. Krueger, “The Artistic Origins of Virtual Reality”, *Siggraph 93: Machine Culture*, 1993: 148-149 (149).

the evolution of the medium throughout the 1980s and 1990s when key concepts of virtuality, which emerged during the pre-industrial phase of the medium, were re-examined and redefined.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Before the immersive media market developed, its industrial origins were rooted in a few early attempts to create technologies that could enable sensory immersion in computer-simulated environments. Reconstructing its historical foundations serves to identify the elements that connect contemporary conceptualisations of VR to the medium's earliest developments in the pre-industrial era, but also to examine the broader historical and technological context in which these advancements occurred. Regarding the first goal, each of the three significant inventions discussed here represents a different part of the modern concept of VR. Heilig's patented Sensorama, which is frequently cited in industry publications and specialised platforms as a pioneering example of immersive cinema<sup>53</sup>, exemplifies the concept of narrative immersion through simulated realities designed to elicit empathy – an aspect that is explicitly emphasised in both its promotional materials and Heilig's public statements. Although the technology itself does not entirely correspond to the definition of virtual reality as established in the introduction, many of its conceptual roots are crucial to the eventual development of VR as a medium.

On the other hand, Sutherland's Sword of Damocles, which introduced the digital simulation of virtual objects that react to human eye movements, represents a significant turning point in the technological development of VR. The Sword of Damocles, often considered as the first head-mounted display (HMD)<sup>54</sup>, sparked controversy at the time, particularly because government agencies such as the CIA were involved in its research and development. However, its significance stems primarily from its impact on the network of computer scientists who built on Sutherland's innovations to advance the field of VR.

While VR can be understood as a scientific domain concerned with simulating virtual environments, its medial dimension emerges from the technology's communicative and expressive affordances. Krueger anticipates this aspect in his Videoplace, which not only introduces digital environment simulation into artistic practice but also serves as a foundation for his later theoretical contributions regarding the role of art in shaping emergent media, as depicted in *Artificial Reality*.

Regarding the historical conditions that shaped the early development of VR, this study also examines the challenges associated with projects driven primarily by artistic and expressive issues. In *Blueprint for a New Hollywood*, Heilig critiques the reluctance of the U.S. film industry to adopt alternative technologies that might have enhanced its competitiveness<sup>55</sup>. His attempts to incorporate the Sensorama into cinematic and entertainment contexts were partially hampered by an industrial landscape that remained

<sup>53</sup> J. Di Bon, "Where Did Virtual Reality Come From? And Where Is It Going?", *Huffpost*, 24 October 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jeannie-di-bon/where-did-virtual-reality\\_b\\_12615646.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jeannie-di-bon/where-did-virtual-reality_b_12615646.html).

<sup>54</sup> P. James, "Watch the 'Godfather of VR' Ivan Sutherland Speak at the 2015 Proto Awards", *Road to VR*, 23 September 2015. <https://www.roadtovr.com/watch-the-godfather-of-vr-ivan-sutherland-speak-at-the-2015-proto-awards/>.

<sup>55</sup> M. Heilig, *Blueprint for a New Hollywood*, 1971, [https://web.opendrive.com/api/v1/download/file.json/Ml8xNTA4ODMzMjdF?temp\\_key=%04%B5%04%3D%12Om%059%1D%B4%03m%11m%B4%1C%E2%CBac%8E%0E%97\\_&inline=1](https://web.opendrive.com/api/v1/download/file.json/Ml8xNTA4ODMzMjdF?temp_key=%04%B5%04%3D%12Om%059%1D%B4%03m%11m%B4%1C%E2%CBac%8E%0E%97_&inline=1).

resistant to such breakthroughs, despite the mainstream press's good acceptance of the immersive screen concept. Moreover, the Sensorama itself suffered from substantial technical constraints, further limiting its wider adoption.

Second, early experiments with immersive technologies were founded on a scientific curiosity that grew primarily in the United States, in a context marked by the Cold War – and hence major federal investment – as well as a genuine interest in the possibilities of computer science. This scenario gave birth to the Sword of Damocles. The device's significance stems from how Sutherland's early discoveries were deployed within research environments. Between Heilig's industrial failure and Sutherland's technological success stands Krueger's Videoplace. The artistic community's enthusiasm for computer art's expressive possibilities swept through the 1960s and 1970s, a trend that would ultimately be crucial to the subsequent creative application of VR. In this environment, Krueger created an artistic project that mirrored his time's creative climate while receiving funds from American institutions that recognized its substantial technical advancements, similar to the Sword of Damocles.

Heilig and Krueger are symbolically close to the notion of the artist as 'the antennae of the race', a rhetorical figure employed by McLuhan based on Ezra Pound's proposal to demonstrate the power of the arts to anticipate and stimulate technological and social advancements<sup>56</sup>. Heilig gained nothing in terms of economic or commercial success, as his projects remained outside the support of organizations capable of sustaining them. Working in the exclusive settings of universities, Krueger was able to run his own business effectively and react to an inspiring creative atmosphere. Sutherland, on the other hand, abandoned his interest in head-mounted displays early on, but only after leaving computer scientists with an effective Sword of Damocles. The prototypes created by all three authors are comparable to key elements of modern XR, contributing to a larger discussion on the history of immersive technologies.

<sup>56</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

NICOLETTA VITTADINI\*

## IMAGINING IMMERSION IN THE METAVERSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL REALITY NARRATIVES

### *Abstract*

After many years since the first attempts to offer an immersive experience beyond the computer screen, it was in 2021 that the term Virtual Reality came back into the limelight when at the *Connect!* conference, Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company (renamed Meta) would invest precisely in the development of new immersive experiences. The re-launch of Virtual Reality is of particular interest for two reasons. Firstly, the Metaverse is accompanied by a vision of the future, which, as Hoffman summarises, serves to stabilise the meaning and potential uses of the technology. Secondly, these visions exhibit both similarities and differences to those that were proposed in previous scenarios. The central argument of this study is that the contemporary 'new narrative' of digital immersiveness can be characterized as a 'narrative without history'. This narrative presents the Metaverse as a radical innovation, while paradoxically echoing the archetypal conceptions of augmented or virtualized reality of earlier eras. The objective of this essay is to undertake a comparative analysis of significant narratives presented by technology founders of companies that have driven the different evolutionary stages of Virtual Reality from the 1990s to the present. Through comparing distinctive phases in the imagination of immersive Virtual Reality, the aim of this research is twofold. Firstly, a historical framework will be provided, which will illuminate our understanding of contemporary technological proposals. Secondly, the ahistorical nature of the current Metaverse discourse will be challenged.

### *Keywords*

Virtual reality; imaginary; metaverse; immersive technologies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The recent wave of discourse on the Metaverse has brought immersion to the forefront of the contemporary imagination. This renewed focus on experiences within digitally generated three-dimensional environments was catalyzed in 2021 when Mark Zuckerberg rebranded Facebook to Meta at the *Connect!* conference announcing investments in developing new immersive experiences.

Despite Virtual Reality's long history, dating back to the 1960s, it had been overlooked by the media for a considerable period before this resurgence. The re-launch of Virtual Reality as an entrepreneurial and communicative phenomenon is notable be-

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cause, like other new technologies, the Metaverse launch is accompanied by visions that ‘stabilize the meaning and potential uses of the technology’<sup>1</sup> while exhibiting both similarities and differences to previous scenarios.

This essay provides a critical analysis of Virtual Reality narratives’ evolution, focusing on continuities and discontinuities between historical periods. The central argument is that the contemporary ‘new narrative’ of digital immersiveness can be characterized as a ‘narrative without history’ – presenting the Metaverse as radical innovation, while echoing the archetypal conceptions of earlier eras.

The article compares significant narratives presented by technology founders across three seminal periods: the 1980-90s, the 2000s, and the 2010s-2020s.

This historical perspective reveals how the imaginary of immersive technologies has transformed over three decades, encompassing evolving expectations, values and dystopian elements. The analysis encompasses the discourses of the pioneers who established the companies leading the various phases of the Immersive Virtual Reality initiative (VPL, Second Life and Metaverse) and who significantly contributed to its social imagination.

By “social imagination”, we are referring to the set of symbols and values that people utilize when imagining their social existence in both a descriptive and aspirational manner<sup>2</sup>. This concept particularly explores the way digital technologies and associated socio-technical practices are imagined, not without the influence of corporate policies<sup>3</sup>.

This comparative historical analysis serves as a critical lens to examine current claims about technology’s future, acknowledging cyclical concepts while enabling a more nuanced and culturally informed approach to technological advancements in immersive media. This perspective enables us to contextualize and critically evaluate the promise and potential implications of contemporary Metaverse proposals, transcending the ‘narrative without story’ paradigm to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural trajectory of immersive technologies.

However, it is first essential to recall some crucial aspects of the relationship between technologies and imaginary construction.

## 2. THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARY AND THE ELITE DISCOURSE ABOUT THE METAVERSE

Following the 2021 announcement, different studies examined how the Metaverse concept was communicated (or re-communicated) as part of Meta’s business strategy, focusing on Meta’s role (as big-tech company) in constructing technological future imaginations including Metaverse and the expectations of it. Meta has been credited with establishing an ‘elite discourse’ on technology, raising “pressing questions [...]

<sup>1</sup> A.L. Hoffmann, N. Proferes, M. Zimmer, “‘Making the World More Open and Connected’: Mark Zuckerberg and the Discursive Construction of Facebook and Its Users”, *New Media & Society*, 20, 1 (2016): 200. DOI: 10.1177/1461444816660784. See also B.T. Lucia, M.A. Vetter, I.K. Adubofour, “Behold the Metaverse: Facebook’s Meta Imaginary and the Circulation of Elite Discourse”, *New Media & Society*, 27, 2 (2023): 790-807. DOI: 10.1177/14614448231184249;

<sup>2</sup> C. Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries”, *Public Culture*, 14, 1 (2002): 91–124. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-14-1-91.

<sup>3</sup> S. Jasanoff, S.H. Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

concerning the corporate narratives that drive the current development of metaverse platforms”<sup>4</sup>.

The company has been recognized as having contributed to the first formulation (alongside venture capitalists and journalists) of how the Metaverse “and related socio-technical practices will be developed and spread, and how changes in social life can be achieved”<sup>5</sup>. Zuckerberg’s speech at Meta’s 2021 launch exemplifies pronouncements from “developers, industry leaders and journalists claiming that VR is just the beginning of a revolution”<sup>6</sup>.

This activation of social imaginary has been described as a vertical process, with big tech’s ‘elite discourse’ acquiring “political value and exerts a gatekeeping function”<sup>7</sup> against which popular discourses position themselves<sup>8</sup>.

This framework is particularly relevant for Metaverse discourses as they concern not-yet-fully-developed technology, giving statements a predictive character. As noted by Katchie and Kessler, “the construction and dissemination of an imagined future, imbued with narratives of possibility and even inevitability, has social and political consequences”, particularly in shaping a shared horizon of expectations<sup>9</sup>.

Meta’s revival of a 30-year-old technology justifies this approach. This is not a myopic approach, however, as it takes into account that these elite discourses are often attuned to their contemporary socio-technical imaginaries, i.e. the collective imagination of a social life largely dependent on digital technologies<sup>10</sup>.

We can therefore say that Meta’s revival of immersive Virtual Reality has been accompanied by the proactive construction of a narrative of the future in which this technology has legitimacy and contributes to meeting contemporary needs<sup>11</sup>.

The ‘elite discourse’ proposed by Meta (and the social actors behind it) is based on a vision (aimed at influencing the social imaginary<sup>12</sup>) that is woven into the Metaverse project and underpins its business proposition. This contributes to constructing the ‘socio-technical imaginary’ of Virtual Reality<sup>13</sup>, oriented towards desirable future narratives and expressing political and economic interests.

The analysis will focus on identifying how elite discourses contribute to an imaginary around emerging technologies, recognizing that social adoption of technology

<sup>4</sup> C. Hesselbein, P. Bory, S. Canali, “Metaverse Datafication: Technologies, Definitions, and Futures”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 2024: 1-15 (3). DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2024.2443082.

<sup>5</sup> T. Gorichanaz, “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”, *AI and Ethics*, 3, 2 (2023): 650. DOI: 10.1007/s43681-022-00198-w.

<sup>6</sup> D. Harley, “‘This Would Be Sweet in VR’: On the Discursive Newness of Virtual Reality”, *New Media & Society*, 26, 4 (2022): 2151. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221084

<sup>7</sup> Gorichanaz, “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”: 648.

<sup>8</sup> B. Creech, “Fake News and the Discursive Construction of Technology Companies’ Social Power”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 42, 6 (2020): 952-968. DOI: 10.1177/0163443719899801; T.A. Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*, London: Sage, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> S. Katchie, A. Kessler, “Imagining Identity in Meta’s Metaverse: A Genealogy of Imagined Future Realms in Computer Culture”, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 17, 4 (2024): 326-335 (326). DOI: 10.1093/ccc/tcae015. The author cite also: C. Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries”, *Public Culture*, 14, 1 (2002): 91-124. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-14-1-91; J. Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; A. Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, *Public Culture*, 2, 2 (1990): 1-24. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-2-2-1.

<sup>10</sup> Jasanoff, Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity*.

<sup>11</sup> Lucia, Vetter, Adubofour, “Behold the Metaverse: Facebook’s Meta Imaginary and the Circulation of Elite Discourse”.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries”.

<sup>13</sup> Jasanoff, Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity*.

integrates this discourse with other social discourses, marketing activities, and audience expectations and practices<sup>14</sup>.

### 3. THE METAVERSE'S PREDICTIVE NARRATIVE

In this section we present recurring elements in the Metaverse narrative proposed by Meta<sup>15</sup>. During the *Connect!* Conference in 2021, Zuckerberg presented the Metaverse as the successor to mobile internet – an immersive, embodied experience where people are present together in shared digital spaces. He highlighted applications, based on deep sense of immersion and realistic, expressive avatars, predicting that the Metaverse will transform social connection and communication.

Our analysis focuses on themes related to the immersive dimension of technology, the subject of this essay. We consider concepts of connection and presence, as crucial elements of the Metaverse's utopian narrative.

The Metaverse is presented primarily as developing connection potential: “we are a company that builds technology to connect people. And the metaverse is the next frontier”<sup>16</sup>.

Virtual reality is linked to a positive value (the connection between people) while representing discontinuity from social networks (“we’re enabling a global community”<sup>17</sup>), identified as a new frontier.

The connectivity value links Metaverse imagery to the Facebook's story. As Haupt<sup>18</sup> describes, between 2012 and 2015 Facebook global connectivity's social imaginary to describe a better future world, disseminated through various social discourses and corporate communication.

The discontinuity with social networks is narrated through expressions such as “global community” or “worlds”. These connected worlds are sometimes virtual worlds that are connected to the reality, sometimes different seamlessly traversable worlds within the Metaverse.

The “global community” imagery isn't new in the Meta's self-narratives. By 2017, Meta's mission statement<sup>19</sup> included this phrase aiming to “empower people to build community and bring the world closer together”<sup>20</sup>.

Immersion in Metaverse's digital worlds is presented as an advance in global human connection – presented as Meta's fundamental mission. These advance enables connecting real and virtual worlds through immersive technologies, allowing users to seamlessly traverse virtual worlds hosted on different platforms by erasing their boundaries.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the study by M. Dolata, G. Schwabe, “What Is the Metaverse and Who Seeks to Define It? Mapping the Site of Social Construction”, *Journal of Information Technology*, 38, 3 (2023): 239-266. DOI: 10.1177/02683962231159927 analyses the contribution of media discourses to the construction of the metaverse imaginary.

<sup>15</sup> The reconstruction of the futuristic narrative of the Metaverse proposed by Meta was carried out through direct analysis of the speeches given by Mark Zuckerberg on the occasion of the launch of the Metaverse, in particular his speech at the *Connect!* conference in 2021.

<sup>16</sup> M. Zuckerberg, “The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together”, *Connect!*, October 28, 2021. Retrievable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8>. Accessed, April 29, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> J. Haupt, “Facebook Futures: Mark Zuckerberg's Discursive Construction of a Better World”, *New Media & Society*, 23, 2 (2021): 237-257. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820929315.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Meta, *Mission Statement*, 2017. Accessed, April 29, 2025.

Immersion will create better social space through features Zuckerberg describes as “embodied internet” and “presence”: “the next platform and medium will be even more immersive, an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it, and we call this the metaverse”<sup>21</sup>.

“Embodied” refers to bodily proprioception beyond the screen<sup>22</sup>. It can be described as a relationship with digital worlds mediated through spatial movements rather than encoded input (such as linguistic code). The embodied Internet offers interaction with virtual objects in a ‘natural’ way.

The embodied Internet is also presented as characterized by a renewed centrality of the person and his or her identity<sup>23</sup>.

The ability to perceive oneself present beyond the screen (the essence of immersivity) is presented as enabling fuller presence in relationships with others and in digital social spaces. The utopian narrative of overcoming physical distance is taken up. Zuckerberg speaks of “close physical distance”, i.e. the ability to move from one virtual place to another without travel constraints and experiencing co-presence despite physical separation<sup>24</sup>.

The term “person-centricity” used by Zuckerberg refers to the “promise that individuals will gain much greater power and control over their own identities”<sup>25</sup> and optimized content access. This imaginary depicts a future where one’s digital identity – an avatar linked to a single identification process – provides access to all Metaverse content and enables free movement across virtual space. Interestingly, in this utopia, separate identification processes across applications are portrayed as obstacles to the seamless movement between worlds.

Digital identity and avatars, through which one perceives a sense of presence in virtual space, exhibit both continuity and discontinuity with social networks<sup>26</sup>. Continuity comes from using existing Meta-platform identities; discontinuity from configuring avatars to traverse different platforms<sup>27</sup>.

It is worth considering that there is another object on which Meta has built a strongly future-oriented ‘promissory discourse’ on Virtual Reality: Oculus. Meta has built around this technology what Egliston and Carter call an “Oculus Imaginary”, in which Virtual Reality connects with social software and offers it a new frontier<sup>28</sup>.

Indeed, Oculus (and the immersive experience it offers) has been presented as a tool to enhance the experience of connection and content production typical of social software. A connection enhanced by the possibility of feeling closer to one’s network,

<sup>21</sup> Zuckerberg, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together”.

<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, this phrase is borrowed from social discourses on Virtual Reality systems in the 1990s, but there is no explicit reference to the past of VR systems in the narratives surrounding the launch of the Metaverse.

<sup>23</sup> Lucia, Vetter, Adubofour, “Behold the Metaverse: Facebook’s Meta Imaginary and the Circulation of Elite Discourse”: 790-807; Gorichanaz, “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”.

<sup>24</sup> Zuckerberg, “The Metaverse and How We’ll Build It Together”.

<sup>25</sup> Katchie, Kessler, “Imagining Identity in Meta’s Metaverse: A Genealogy of Imagined Future Realms in Computer Culture”: 326.

<sup>26</sup> The entire narrative of the Metaverse is characterized by references to how much more the new technology can offer than the Meta company has offered its customer-users so far. Thus, the reference to the past is always focused on social networks and their affordances.

<sup>27</sup> Lucia, Vetter, Adubofour, “Behold the Metaverse: Facebook’s Meta Imaginary and the Circulation of Elite Discourse”.

<sup>28</sup> B. Egliston, M. Carter, “Oculus Imaginaries: The Promises and Perils of Facebook’s Virtual Reality”, *New Media & Society*, 24 (2020): 70-89. DOI: 10.1177/1461444820960411

of being able to share experiences at a distance. A content production enhanced by the possibility of connecting users and content producers in a new way. In this imaginary, the immersive experience offered by Oculus is linked to intimacy and affectivity in virtual presence<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, it is important to note two other aspects.

The utopian future described in the narratives that offer a possible imaginary of the Metaverse is also accompanied by a description of an expansion of the micro-entrepreneurial opportunities offered to its users. Zuckerberg explicitly speaks of an entire economy of digital goods, sustained precisely by the creation of new tradable goods.

The Metaverse is presented as “an inevitable, industry-wide evolution characterized by presence and closeness, designed in a person-centric way that will enable a new economy”<sup>30</sup>. Increased bandwidth power is seen as a prerequisite for an inevitable evolution towards the creation of digital modes of communication, no longer based on text or images, but on the creation of immersive virtual environments. This imaginary is thus also underpinned by a deterministic component, which we could summarize in the following expression: technological evolution opens potentials that inevitably change the conditions of communication between people.

This imaginary features a strong projective dimension, with Zuckerberg projecting major transformations five to seven years ahead<sup>31</sup>. The widespread experience of the Metaverse is shifted to the near future, which is why the imagery described is more about a new utopian space, a new frontier<sup>32</sup>. The immersive experience foreshadowed in this utopian narrative is characterized by entry into networked and social virtual spaces, by the absence of boundaries (those of physical space, but also those of digital space), in which the naturalness of interaction increases the perception of presence, but also the expression of affectivity. Immersion in virtual space also provides an economic dimension to social life, focused on a new economy characterized by micro-entrepreneurship and the centrality of the creative dimension.

#### 4. AN IMAGINARY WITHOUT HISTORY

The Metaverse’s imaginary, or the future in/with the Metaverse, can be summarized as: connection and global community; immersion and presence; avatar and personal identity.

Meta’s social discourses rarely mention the Metaverse’s forty-year history of technologies and imaginaries. Instead, it’s presented as a discontinuity, a new frontier of platform-supported sociality. “We might say that we are presented with a ‘grand narrative’ that ‘heralds a transformation in the fundamental blocks of life: space and time’ bringing back old fantasies such as the ‘myth of immersivity’”<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore, one can speak of a narrative without a history. However, this narrative has a history.

<sup>29</sup> Egliston, Carter, “Oculus Imaginaries: The Promises and Perils of Facebook’s Virtual Reality”.

<sup>30</sup> Gorichanaz, “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”.

<sup>31</sup> Lucia, Vetter, Adubofour, “Behold the Metaverse: Facebook’s Meta Imaginary and the Circulation of Elite Discourse”: 790-807.

<sup>32</sup> Gorichanaz, “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”.

<sup>33</sup> Hesselbein, Bory, Canali, “Metaverse Datafication: Technologies, Definitions, and Futures”: 3

As Gorichanaz<sup>34</sup>, among others, points out, the term Metaverse originates from Neal Stephenson's 1990s novel *Snow Crash*, describing an "open source" counter-reality not owned by corporations, offering an alternative to an unbearable world.

While the metaverse concept has origins in cyberpunk literature, there exists no direct connection between *Snow Crash*'s fictional universe and Zuckerberg's described utopia, merely a naming identity. Zuckerberg's narrative instead represents a recombination of themes already present in immersive Virtual Reality's imaginary, making it valuable to examine cyberpunk's characteristic archetypes to determine if these, along with the terminology, also emerge in social metaverse discussions.

This recombination, as Katachie and Kessler<sup>35</sup> point out, is the result of the genealogy of imaginaries that has accompanied the institutionalization of the Internet, in which different imaginaries shape and evolve each other, creating ever new sets of notions, narratives and symbols by recombining common elements.

The literature identifies three macro-themes in Net social imaginary: forms of collective life; group identity; and experience conditions.

Within these three areas, immersivity, the specific object of attention in this essay, is described as a:

- characteristic of a unique, interconnected and fully immersive space imagined supporting alternative and desired versions of collective life in which the inadequacies of the real world can be transcended<sup>36</sup>;
- a condition for experiencing an identity (re)constructed as novelty "primed to become – through the (techno)cultural elevations the future is imagined offering – something more, something better", including an empowerment of "individuals with greater control over their positioning"<sup>37</sup> and a greater flexibility in self-expression through newly created identities that transcend the constraints and limitations of real identities<sup>38</sup>.
- a condition for "outer-corporeal" experiences within a kind of informational self-sufficiency<sup>39</sup>.

In the following paragraphs we will try to follow this genealogical reconstruction of the imaginary in relation to immersiveness in Virtual Reality systems, to identify similarities and differences with respect to the imaginary of the Metaverse.

## 5. THE EVOLUTION OF VIRTUAL REALITY

The reconstruction of the imaginary associated with immersion in the virtual world must necessarily consider the fact that the history of Virtual Reality systems has gone through at least three evolutionary phases, in which technologies and applications have changed

<sup>34</sup> Gorichanaz, "Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary".

<sup>35</sup> Katachie, Kessler, "Imagining Identity in Meta's Metaverse: A Genealogy of Imagined Future Realms in Computer Culture": 326-335. The Concept of the Genealogy of Imaginaries Is Taken from R. Mansell, *Imagining the Internet: Communication, Innovation and Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>38</sup> U. Schultze, "Performing Embodied Identity in Virtual Worlds", *European Journal of Information Systems*, 23, 1 (2014): 84-95. DOI: 10.1057/ejis.2012.52.

<sup>39</sup> T. Streeter, "The Romantic Self and the Politics of Internet Commercialization", *Cultural Studies*, 17, 5 (2003): 648-668. DOI: 10.1080/0950238032000126865.

profoundly<sup>40</sup>. “VR has a long history of remaking the real, and it has many possible beginnings” to quote Daniel Harley<sup>41</sup>.

The initial phase (1960-1980) laid the conceptual and technological foundations of Virtual Reality. Morton Heilig’s Sensorama (1962) introduced the first attempt at an immersive multi-sensory experience, while Ivan Sutherland’s “Ultimate Display” concept (1965) outlined the vision of a fully interactive virtual environment. These developments, with military flight simulators and MIT’s Aspen Movie Map (1978), established principles of immersive human-computer interaction.

The 1980s marked the emergence of VR as a commercially relevant technology. The contribution of Jaron Lanier and VPL Research (1985) was instrumental in introducing the term ‘Virtual Reality’ and developing the first commercial Virtual Reality systems. NASA’s Virtual Environment Workstation Project demonstrated the professional potential of the technology, while Sega and Nintendo’s attempts to bring Virtual Reality to the consumer market highlighted democratization challenges.

The period 1990-2000 revealed the limitations of the initial ambitions. The technological restrictions of the time – from low-resolution displays to high latency – created a significant gap between societal expectations and the actual capabilities of VR systems. This period of disillusionment relegated the technology to niche markets, mainly in professional and research environments.

The period 2000-2010 represented a key transition phase for the development of immersive technologies. On the one hand, we have the emergence of virtual worlds accessible via desktops, and on the other, we have major hardware developments.

The launch of *Second Life* by Linden Lab in 2003 marks a pivotal moment. The platform, which reached its peak of popularity around 2006-2007, introduces an innovative paradigm of persistent virtual social space. *Second Life* stands out for its ability to offer users not only an environment for social interaction, but also a real economic ecosystem based on the virtual currency Linden Dollars. This innovation attracts the attention of many multinational companies, which set up their virtual presence on the platform.

The hardware sector is undergoing a phase of technological development that is less visible to the public, but no less significant. The introduction of Sony’s EyeToy for the PlayStation 2 and, later, Nintendo’s Wiimote in 2006 represent the first steps towards three-dimensional spatial interaction accessible to the consumer market. These developments, although not directly related to immersive Virtual Reality, contribute significantly to the development of natural interfaces and motion tracking.

In this context, the University of Southern California’s StarCAVE system is an important example of a 360-degree immersive virtual environment that anticipates many of the features that will characterise subsequent developments in the field.

The ‘Virtual Reality Renaissance’ (2010-present) marks a major turning point. The launch of the Oculus Rift in 2012 catalysed renewed social and industrial interest, culminating in its acquisition by Facebook in 2014. The emergence of platforms such as HTC Vive, PlayStation VR and Oculus Quest democratised access to Virtual Reality, transforming it from a specialised technology to a consumer medium.

<sup>40</sup> The three-phase subdivision of the history of Virtual Reality was developed by the author based on a review of the literature. In particular: J.N. Bailenson, *Experience On Demand: What Virtual Reality Is, How It Works, and What It Can Do*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018; M. Ball, *The Metaverse Primer*, 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.matthewball.vc>. Accessed, April 29, 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Harley, “‘This Would Be Sweet in VR’: On the Discursive Newness of Virtual Reality”: 2151.

## 6. THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGINARY

In this section, as with the Metaverse, the objective is to identify which utopian imaginaries related to Virtual Reality were proposed by the founders of the tech-companies that were at the center of the systems' evolution.

We will examine the descriptions of the future impact of Virtual Reality proposed between the 1980s and 1990s, with particular attention (in addition to the extant literature) to the interventions of Jaron Lanier, and to the descriptions of the transformative impact of *Second Life* proposed by Philip Rosedale<sup>42</sup>.

The selection of these two periods and technology pioneers is attributed to the fact that the companies established by them embodied two significant evolutionary phases of immersive technologies that are distinctly different, and both incorporated in the conceptualization of the Metaverse.

It is further noteworthy to acknowledge that the immersive nature of Virtual Reality systems is such a characterizing aspect that when the expression Augmented Reality began to be coined in the early 1990s<sup>43</sup>, technologies that allow for the superimposition of digital elements on the perception of reality (such as Google Glass) were distinguished from Virtual Reality systems precisely because they are not immersive, they do not completely immerse the user in a simulated environment.

It is precisely this action of immersing oneself in another, digitally created world and performing experiences within it that has been presented as valuable at different levels and stages of its evolution.

Until the 2000s, the immersive experience offered by Virtual Reality systems was valued at two levels: cognitive and proprioceptive.

At the cognitive level, immersion is defined as the possibility of experiencing the sensation of presence in a space other than the real one. This level primarily engages the cognitive aspect, the experience of being surrounded by another space, an elsewhere. As asserted by Jaron Lanier, Virtual Reality "is not even a means of communication, it is a new reality"<sup>44</sup>.

This elsewhere, as Chesher<sup>45</sup> observes, is described as "a new continent", "a frontier", "an additional reality" and "as present as the physical world". Chesher emphasizes the importance of space in positioning Virtual Reality systems within the North American imaginary, highlighting the continent as the birthplace of immersive technological systems. Consequently, we can conceptualize an immersion and exploration of an elsewhere, engaging users primarily on a cognitive level, as previously mentioned.

At the proprioceptive level, immersion is presented as the possibility of experiencing action on virtual objects, the manipulation of objects that exist outside material reality, and beyond the screen in a digital elsewhere. This level is characterized by the

<sup>42</sup> The decision to start from the imaginary of the 1980s and 1990s is linked to the fact that those years saw the development of the first forms of virtual reality, which are no longer pioneering, but linked to the development of digital technologies that have strong technological and usage analogies with those of today.

<sup>43</sup> T.P. Caudell, D.W. Mizell, "Augmented Reality: An Application of Heads-Up Display Technology to Manual Manufacturing Processes", *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, vol. 2, Kauai, HI, USA, 1992: 659-669 v; P. Milgram, F. Kishino, "A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays", *IEICE Transactions on Information and Systems*, 77, 12 (1994): 1321-1329.

<sup>44</sup> J. Lanier, "Using Virtual Reality as a Tool to Study the Relationship between Human Beings and Physical Reality", in *Human Machine Interfaces for Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, NASA Conference Publication, 1990: 10071 (69-74); J. Lanier, "Life in the Data Cloud", *Mondo 2000*, 2 (1990): 44-51.

<sup>45</sup> C. Chesher, "Colonizing Virtual Reality: Construction of the Discourse of Virtual Reality", *Cultronix*, 1, 1 (1994): 1-27.

ability to perceive the sensation of contact with three-dimensional objects, even if digital, and to experience space cognitively and perceptually, including the psycho-motor aspect<sup>46</sup>. This can be considered as a remote manipulation that constructs a learning and experience plan, which is presented as more comprehensive than that linked to codified and mediated knowledge.

Since the late 1990s and particularly in the 2000s, with the advent of multi-user virtual social worlds accessible via computer (e.g. *Second Life*), the concept of immersion in an alternate reality has been valorized as the possibility of experiencing social interaction environments that differ from real ones. As Philip Rosedale, the founder of *Second Life*, articulated in a 2006 speech at The Long Now Foundation: “more is different” and “to get the emergent properties that make *Second Life* so enthralling, it must be one contiguous world with everyone in it”<sup>47</sup>.

The distinction between this virtual environment and real-world social interactions is characterized by the transcendence of geographical boundaries, the facilitation of social interactions governed by different sets of norms than those that prevail in physical spaces, and the evolution of the expressive possibilities of one’s identity.

With respect to the transcendence of distance, *Second Life* was conceptualized as a platform that enabled individuals to interact with people from diverse geographical locations, fostering the development of meaningful relationships despite geographical and social barriers.

However, the description of the utopian future made possible by *Second Life* is more complex regarding the possibilities of social life characterized by rules different from those that apply in real space.

The concept of virtual immersion is proposed not only as an experience that transcends the physical limitations of corporeality from a spatial and proprioceptive perspective (i.e. perceiving oneself elsewhere, acting elsewhere beyond the constraints imposed by physicality), but also as an experience of social life that surpasses the boundaries of conventional rules of coexistence. As Rosedale asserts, “It will certainly be very different from what it is here. It will be so different from what we see here on earth that anything will seem possible”<sup>48</sup>. The focus is not on imagining a transgression of rules, but rather on the conception of new rules or new axes of social life. A recurring expression Rosedale uses to describe *Second Life* is “build or create”. In this regard, Rosedale’s reference to the *Burning Man* event<sup>49</sup> is also noteworthy. The *Burning Man* event is an annual art event in which an urban community is reconstructed in the California desert. It is a community based on creative exchange, on the suspension of certain social conventions, such as the money value of objects or the relevance of social status in the construction of relationships.

*Second Life* presents itself as a world in which interaction is governed by a distinct set of rules and values, deviating from those that prevail in contemporary American society, where creativity and planning occupy a central role. Consequently, parallel economic systems are also conceptualized, including those founded on creative micro-en-

<sup>46</sup> W. Bricken, “Learning in Virtual Reality”, in *HITL paper*; Human Interface Technology Lab: Seattle, 1990; R. Walsler, “Elements of a Cyberspace Playhouse”, in *Virtual Reality: Theory, Practice, and Promise*, edited by S. Helsel, J. Roth, Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991: 51-64.

<sup>47</sup> P. Rosedale, “Second Life: What Do We Learn if We Digitize Everything?”, *The Long Now Foundation*, 2006. Retrieval at <https://longnow.org/seminars/02006/nov/30/second-life-what-do-we-learn-if-we-digitize-everything>. Accessed, April 29, 2025.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> W.J. Au, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World*, New York, NY: Collins, 2008.

preneurship. Within these systems, individuals possess ownership rights over their creative virtual productions and may sell and be paid for them in Linden Dollars. This theoretical framework is often termed “creationist capitalism”, a concept explored by Boellstorff<sup>50</sup>. A notable aspect of *Second Life*’s virtual economy is its strong connection to the real economy. This is facilitated by the convertibility of Linden Dollars into real dollars, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between the virtual and the tangible worlds. Consequently, *Second Life* can be regarded as a parallel reality rather than a fully alternative one.

Beyond the opportunity for social interaction and community building beyond the screen, *Second Life* is also presented as a medium for experimenting with new forms of self-expression. It is emphasized that in these environments, it is possible to manipulate one’s physicality and appearance by assuming a virtual identity with which to be present and act in virtual space. The platform’s founder, Philip Rosedale, underscores the ability to entirely reinvent one’s identity through avatars, stating that it facilitates “the creation of a new identity and the projection of ourselves into a world where anything is possible”<sup>51</sup>.

As instruments of immersion in the new type of Virtual Reality proposed by *Second Life* and as instruments of immersion in the Metaverse, it is important to emphasise what characteristics are attributed to avatars at the launch and public discourses on *Second Life*. Immersion in virtual spaces is mediated by an extension of one’s identity, which is presented as a digital embodiment characterized by a strong creative component.

Indeed, *Second Life* avatars are spoken of as a “chosen embodied appearance to other people in a virtual world”<sup>52</sup>, emphasizing the combination of personal choice and embodiment of the performance of one’s identity in an active and social world. As mentioned above, this embodiment has a strong creative component that Rosedale describes as follows: “enable a dramatic leap forward in the self-expression possible in a 3D online world”<sup>53</sup>.

Rosedale further suggests that due to the specific form of presence made possible by avatars, interactions between avatars, as opposed to mere usernames and static photographs, will be more human. Rosedale further posits that avatars offer a medium for interpersonal interaction that is more akin to real-world human interactions, suggesting that the Metaverse has the potential to mitigate the relational barriers that have been erected by the Internet. This assertion suggests a future where the experiences in the Metaverse may have a tangible influence on real-world interactions. Rosedale further notes that individuals often report a profound impact of the avatar on their experience, emphasizing its role in shaping perceptions. The ease with which avatars can embody and externalize intentions leads to a heightened expectation for real-world physical experiences to match or exceed those experienced in the Metaverse. Individuals who have transitioned back to reality often express a sense of disorientation, stating that they require the ability to perform the same actions in the physical world.

<sup>50</sup> T. Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Rosedale, “Second Life: What Do We Learn if We Digitize Everything?”.

<sup>52</sup> R. Shinohara, “Avatars and Derivative Works: Harmonizing the Interests of Creators and Consumers”, *Hastings Law Journal*, 73 (2022): 919-946.

<sup>53</sup> P. Rosedale, “Linden Lab Announces Name of New Online World ‘Second Life (TM)’ and Availability of Beta Program”, *PR Newswire*, October 30, 1 (2002). Available from: <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/linden-lab-announces-name-new-online-world-second/docview/448918287/se-2>. Accessed, April 29, 2025.

A comparison of the imagery associated with Virtual Reality in the 1990s and that of the 2000s clearly demonstrates a shift from a focus on the extension of the individual's capabilities of action, understood as proprioceptive and active dimensions, to the extension of relational activity and community building beyond the screen. The transition can be characterized by a shift from the initial astonishment of perceiving a three-dimensional object beneath one's fingers, manipulating it, and acting at a distance, to the emancipation of expressive creativity (creating a personal avatar) intertwined with one's own identity and human sociality (having a complex and structured social life within the virtual space).

## 7. THE STORY OF AN IMAGINARY WITHOUT HISTORY

The imaginary of the Metaverse that we described at the beginning of this essay, while presenting itself as a break from the experiences of individuals made possible by previous technologies, has elements in common with the descriptions of the technologies that preceded it, but also differences that are worth emphasizing.

In its most recent version, virtual worlds offer a form of immersion that facilitates access to a global community through bodily embodiment in an avatar that fosters a sense of presence in virtual space. Thus, it is an imagery that borrows many aspects from the new world promised by *Second Life*, and to a lesser extent from that typical of the 1990s, even though the concept of embodiment and sensory immersion clearly returns.

However, several significant distinctions emerge between the imagery of *Second Life* and that of the Metaverse.

Primarily, a divergent narrative is presented regarding the analogy and difference between the virtual world and the real world. *Second Life* offers access to a realm constructed beyond the screen, characterized by creativity, where space is allocated to freedom of expression, creation, and entrepreneurship, which are not sufficiently represented in the real world. With the promise that this experience will then enhance offline life.

In the case of the Metaverse, the world built beyond the screen promises to multiply and augment the experience already possible in the real world, with the aim of increasing connections and building a global community. These are proposed extensions and not alternatives.

Another salient difference pertains to the depiction of the avatar's potential. In the context of *Second Life*, the avatar's construction is portrayed as a conduit for creative empowerment. Conversely, within the Metaverse, it is envisaged to wield enhanced control over one's identity, while concurrently unifying access to a myriad of virtual environments and platforms.

The most evident evolutionary trajectory that can be discerned is from the promise of radical innovation and transformation of the social sphere to the promise of virtualization of the existing social world, a promise of empowerment and expansion of existing possibilities. This trajectory is more conservative than transformative, although it is presented with the contours of innovation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the possibility of transcending the screen and experiencing things in a virtual space is the subject of an ongoing narrative, and that it is an opportunity to imagine utopian futures in which boundaries are crossed.

The initial genealogy of the imaginary of immersion, the first phase of construction of elite discourses, which has been proposed here, suggests that we are certainly faced

with the recombination of archetypal and recurrent themes. These recombinations are affected by changing contexts, economies and policies related to digital technologies.

The path proposed in this essay has focused on the contribution made by some of the subjects that contribute to the construction of the collective imagination. The contribution made by the founders of companies that have introduced significant innovations in virtual reality systems to elite discourse.

The actual process of constructing the imaginary also includes many other contextual elements and the reception that popular culture reserves for such elements.

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## IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING IN JOURNALISM How Newsgames Are Changing the News Landscape\*\*

### *Abstract*

Journalism is constantly undergoing profound transformations, and now it is also intersecting and colliding with the gamification of digital spaces. Driven by interactivity, multimedia, and global access to information, these changes are contextualized within the broader discourse on immersive digital technologies, including virtual and augmented reality, which have transformed storytelling into a participatory and multisensory experience. Among these innovations, newsgames have emerged as a groundbreaking format that combines game mechanics with journalistic storytelling. This article explores how newsgames challenge traditional reporting by integrating interactive simulations, branching narratives, and procedural rhetoric, allowing users to navigate diverse perspectives and develop empathy while engaging with real-world issues. Through international case studies – such as *September 12th*, which critiques the “war on terror”, *Syrian Journey* by BBC News, and *The Waiting Game* by ProPublica, as well as examples from recent wars (such as *The Flashback*) – this paper demonstrates how newsgames deepen public awareness of global conflicts and humanitarian crises. By examining these examples, this article seeks to contribute to the expanding discourse on gamified storytelling, highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary approaches in addressing the cultural, ethical, and cognitive implications of this evolving medium.

### *Keywords*

Newsgames; immersive storytelling; gamification; digital journalism; immersive journalism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of newsgames was first introduced by Gonzalo Frasca, who described them as the intersection of simulation and political cartoons<sup>1</sup>. This innovative form of digital media was designed to merge the interactive dynamics of gaming with critical commentary traditionally found in editorial cartoons. By blending the mechanics, the narrative

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<sup>1</sup> I. Bogost, S. Ferrari, B. Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at play*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010.

structure and the engagement of video games with the factual rigor and the objectives of journalism, newsgames offer audiences an immersive and participatory way to explore complex news topics. They aim to foster deeper understanding and critical engagement by allowing players to experience scenarios firsthand, rather than passively consuming information<sup>2</sup>. In the already complex information scenario, newsgames represent a unique convergence of journalism, digital simulation, and interactive storytelling, challenging conventional media narratives by offering an immersive platform for public engagement, critical reflection, and active participation in contemporary socio-political discourse. The phenomenon gained prominence during the 2010s and may already be in decline, but it remains a valuable experience to learn from.

Newsgames emerged as an offshoot of serious games, sharing similarities but serving distinct purposes within the digital media landscape<sup>3</sup>. Although both aim to go beyond entertainment, their core functions and approaches differ. Newsgames are a specific subset of serious games designed to engage with current events or social issues, often acting as interactive simulations that mirror the role of political cartoons in journalism. Their primary goals are to provoke thought, stimulate public debate, and offer perspectives on real-world situations through interactive storytelling. In contrast, serious games encompass a broader category, focusing on educational or training objectives across diverse fields, such as healthcare, corporate training, and social impact initiatives. They are typically designed to facilitate learning, behavioral change, or skill development through immersive and goal-oriented experiences. Serious games often prioritize structured learning outcomes, integrating game mechanics to enhance engagement and retention, whereas newsgames emphasize contextual understanding and critical discourse. Additionally, serious games may not always address immediate real-world events but instead aim for long-term educational value, using simulations to replicate complex systems or processes. On the other hand, newsgames are often time-sensitive and responsive, designed to engage audiences with pressing issues in the public sphere. While both types of games utilize interactivity for purposes beyond entertainment, newsgames focus on civic awareness and critical engagement with contemporary events, whereas serious games aim to educate and train users through structured, often long-term experiences. The key role of journalism in democracy and society is essential here.

According to scholars such as Plewe and Fürsich<sup>4</sup> and Grace<sup>5</sup>, a definition of newsgames must remain fluid and be continuously renegotiated, as the phenomenon continues to evolve. And any attempt to establish a clear, scientific definition must also consider the concept of *boundary work*, which involves drawing distinctions between newsgame and other digital games – such as those focused on entertainment, education, or specific interests – as well as differentiating them from other digital journalistic genres like multimedia reports, web documentaries, and data journalism<sup>6</sup>. This process of defining boundaries highlights a broader issue: the challenge of delineating the limits

<sup>2</sup> Bogost, Ferrari, Schweizer, *Newsgames*; K. Meier, “Journalism Meets Games: Newsgames as a New Digital Genre. Theory, Boundaries, Utilization”, *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 7 (2018): 429-444.

<sup>3</sup> S. Deterding *et al.*, “From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining ‘Gamification’”, in *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, 1 (2011): 9-15.

<sup>4</sup> C. Plewe, E. Fürsich, “Are Newsgames Better Journalism? Empathy, Information and Representation in Games on Refugees and Migrants”, *Journalism Studies*, 19 (2018): 2470-2487.

<sup>5</sup> L. Grace, *Doing Things with Games: Social Impact through Play*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> K. Meier, “Journalism Meets Games: Newsgames as a New Digital Genre. Theory, Boundaries, Utilization”, *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 7 (2018): 429-444.

of journalism in the digital age, where different forms of communication continuously evolve and overlap.

The thematic diversity within newsgames reflects the broad scope of contemporary socio-political issues, with these games tackling everything from war, migration and refugee crises (*Against All Odds*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR, 2007) to human and labor rights (*Play our Game... Wheelchair User*, BuzzFeed News, 2017; *The Uber Game*, The Guardian, 2017), including economic and healthcare inequality (*Cutthroat Capitalism*, Wired, 2009; *HeartSaver*, ProPublica, 2013), political systems (*President Evil*, ZDF, 2017), and environmental issues (*Pirate Fishing*, Al Jazeera, 2014; *Catchment Detox*, ABC, 2008)<sup>7</sup>.

In this paper, we aim to explore the phenomenon of newsgames related to refugees and the human experience of war through the lens of immersive journalism, examining their role in reshaping contemporary news consumption. While still a niche practice, newsgames are gradually influencing the way news is produced, disseminated, and experienced, offering interactive and participatory storytelling methods that differ from traditional journalism. By analyzing some representative cases, we seek to understand how newsgames are contributing to the evolving news landscape and the extent to which they enhance audience engagement, critical thinking, and emotional involvement in news narratives.

## 2. IMMERSIVE JOURNALISM, GLANCE AND “PRESENCE”

Immersivity represents a transformative dimension in digital media, redefining user engagement through deeply interactive and multisensory experiences<sup>8</sup>. It enables a sense of ‘presence’, a psychological state where individuals feel situated within an alternate environment<sup>9</sup>. This presence is achieved by integrating narrative, sensory input, and interactivity, fostering a holistic engagement that transcends visual and auditory dimensions alone<sup>10</sup>.

Immersive storytelling represents a paradigm shift in contemporary journalism, with newsgames emerging as a transformative medium at the intersection of interactive technology and narrative depth. And also as an effort to find some operational answers to the search for innovative ways of providing information. In this regard, we intend to start from a snapshot of the state of the art, and the problems, of today’s panorama of legacy media’s journalism.

The conception of this theoretical category and the first significant experiences of immersive journalism are unanimously attributed to Nonny de la Peña<sup>11</sup>, a former corre-

<sup>7</sup> For a commendable compilation of newsgames, as well as toys, serious games and immersive journalism reportage, we refer to the significant work of L. Grace, K. Huang, and M. Shah, on the website: <https://journalismgames.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hutson, P. Hutson, “Immersive Technologies”, in *Inclusive Smart Museums: Engaging Neurodiverse Audiences and Enhancing Cultural Heritage*, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024: 153-228.

<sup>9</sup> Starting from the classic, for instance: M. Slater, S. Wilbur, “A framework for immersive virtual environments (FIVE): Speculations on the role of presence in virtual environments”, *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, 6, 6 (1997): 603-616. But also more recently, especially in works on media semiotics, see for instance: R. Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell’esperienza*, Roma: Carocci, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> P.J. Murray, “Using Virtual Focus Groups in Qualitative Research”, *Qualitative Health Research*, 7, 4 (1997): 542-549. See also: G. Lindemann, D. Schünemann, “Presence in Digital Spaces: A Phenomenological Concept of Presence in Mediatized Communication”, *Human Studies*, 43 (2020): 627-651.

<sup>11</sup> N. De la Peña *et al.*, “Immersive Journalism: Immersive Virtual Reality for the First-Person Experience of News”, *Presence: Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, 19, 4 (2010): 291-301.

spondent for *Newsweek* who has transformed herself into “the Godmother of Virtual Reality”, starting from her first immersive VR story *Hunger in Los Angeles*, which debuted in 2012 at Sundance Film Festival. This de la Peña’s project represented one of the first mainstream journalistic implementations of VR technology<sup>12</sup>. In the original and primordial definition of de la Peña et al., “the production of news in a form in which people can gain first- person experiences of the events or situation described in news stories”<sup>13</sup>. According to scholars such as Zinovieva, “immersive journalism is a type of journalism in which, with the help of high simulation technologies (3D technologies, virtual reality, video game mechanics, interactive and Kinect technologies, artificial intelligence, etc.), the effect of presence or immersion in a specific place described in news reports, on-location events, or documentaries is created. Just like video games, immersive journalism creates a personal experience of engaging with simulated events, which is defined as a “news experience” or “media experience”<sup>14</sup>. Some examples can be given on the video game side, from the famous immersive video game, related to 9/11, *8:46* (2015), which required the use of Oculus Rift. Or, from the side of immersive journalistic reports, some examples of war reports or military actions, such as those from a U.S. aircraft carrier, or some recent ones from the war in Ukraine. In a sense, the collective journalistic investigations<sup>15</sup> that led to the discovery and reporting of the Bucha massacre in Ukraine also possessing some characteristics of immersiveness, with the possibility of “navigating” and “entering” inside the images and visual materials.

This definition highlights key aspects of immersive journalism that are worth unpacking to better understand its relationship to newsgaming. First, there is the simulation dimension: immersive journalism relies on technologies capable of recreating environments, events, or scenarios with a high degree of realism or interactivity. This allows audiences to feel as though they are physically present within the events being reported, transcending traditional passive consumption of news. Second, there is the narrative dimension: immersive journalism frames its simulations within stories that aspire to convey some form of truth. Unlike fictional video games, the narratives in immersive journalism are grounded in real-world events, aiming to inform or educate the audience while offering a deeper emotional and intellectual connection to the news. Third, we find the play dimension, which intersects closely with simulation. Drawing from video game mechanics, immersive journalism often incorporates elements of choice, interaction, and exploration, encouraging the audience to actively participate in shaping their experience of the story. This gamified approach not only enhances engagement but also transforms the user from a passive observer into an active participant, blurring the lines between storytelling and gameplay.

Another critical aspect to be considered is the role of emotions in immersive journalism. As Zinovieva observes, “Immersive journalism is also often called an ‘empathy machine’ because its audiovisual narratives effectively evoke strong emotions among its users”<sup>16</sup>. The ability to evoke empathy or other intense emotions stems from the im-

<sup>12</sup> <https://docbase.mit.edu/project/hunger-in-los-angeles/>.

<sup>13</sup> De la Peña et al., “Immersive Journalism”.

<sup>14</sup> T. Zinovieva, “Immersive Journalism: Trust Issues in the Post-Truth Era and War”, *Rhetoric and Communications*, 60 (2024): 87-117 (92). See also: J. T. Hassan et al., “Journalism and Social-Political Conflict in Contemporary Society”, *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, 2, 1 (2024): 46-58.

<sup>15</sup> See also: <https://www.primevideo.com/-/it/detail/Crime-Scene-Bucha/0RAE8VDDV9XX6HJ34LWKC3TEG9>.

<sup>16</sup> Zinovieva, “Immersive Journalism”. See also: Hassan et al., “Journalism and Social-Political Conflict in Contemporary Society”; A. Gynnild et al., “What Is Immersive Journalism?”, in *Immersive Journalism as Storytelling: Ethics, Production, and Design*, edited by T. Uskali, A. Gynnild, S. Jones, E. Sirkkunen, 2020: 1-10.

mersive nature of the medium, which places users directly into the perspectives of others, such as those affected by war, displacement, or systemic injustice. This emotional resonance can foster a deeper connection to the subject matter, making the audience not just informed, but emotionally invested in the stories being told. However, this emotional impact has sparked debate about the ethical implications of immersive journalism. Zinovieva warns that this medium's reliance on emotional engagement has led some to equate immersive journalism with "emotional journalism" or "impact journalism," terms often associated with sensationalism or bias. Critics argue that this convergence risks reducing immersive journalism to a tool of propaganda or "yellow journalism," particularly when strong emotional responses overshadow the presentation of factual or balanced information. While such critiques are valid, they overlook the potential for immersive journalism to serve as a powerful vehicle for raising awareness and fostering empathy in ways traditional media cannot achieve.

In this light, the link between immersive journalism and newsgaming becomes clearer: both rely on simulation, narrative, and interactivity to create a unique and personal "news experience". However, while newsgaming often emphasizes the 'play' and strategic aspects, immersive journalism leans more heavily into the emotional and experiential dimensions, aiming to inform and evoke reflection. Together, they represent evolving forms of media that challenge the boundaries of traditional journalism, offering opportunities – and risks – in how stories are told, understood, and felt.

The origins of immersive journalism lie at the intersection of evolving digital technologies, media storytelling, and the interactive logic of gaming. Going back to the origin is essential to understanding how immersive journalism has evolved into a distinct form of storytelling that bridges the realms of media, technology, and interactive experience. The early roots of immersive journalism can be traced to the integration of computer-generated imagery (CGI) with efforts to provide audiences a "first-person perspective". This combination allowed for the creation of highly simulated environments that positioned the viewer as an active participant, rather than a detached observer. Unlike traditional journalism, which operates through static mediums such as print, television, or even conventional online articles, immersive journalism strives to place the user inside the story. It constructs a sense of being "inside" the scene or action being reported, offering an embodied experience of events as they unfold. This shift from a third-person viewpoint to a subjective "inside" perspective represents a critical departure in how news and narratives are consumed.

At the core of immersive journalism's technical specificity are technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), interactive 3D environments, and video game mechanics. These tools enable the recreation of events with heightened realism and interactivity, giving users the impression of physical and emotional "presence". VR headsets, for instance, allow viewers to step into digital reconstructions of war zones, natural disasters, or human rights crises, creating an immediate and visceral connection to the subject matter. This simulated proximity to events transforms passive media consumption into a fully immersive, often emotional, encounter. As studied and emphasized by various researches in semiotics and media studies<sup>17</sup>, and as anticipated, the question of "presence" and the relationship between "direct reality" and "mediated"<sup>18</sup> and "in-

<sup>17</sup> Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media*.

<sup>18</sup> For a deepening on a theory of mediation and radical mediation, see R. Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; R. Grusin, "Radical Mediation", *Critical Inquiry*, 42 (2015).

direct” reality is clearly crucial in determining not only the effectiveness of the devices used, but problems related to the statute of truth and authenticity of journalistic and media discourses and representations. In fact, the central issue seems to be here is the question of the relationship between “believing-truth” (also studied by European structural semiotics, with Greimas) and the dimension of simulation and immersive images, and therefore also the spectacular dimension. Paradoxically, the more “immersive” the images and narrated events and news are, the more that dimension of play (and also of supposed simulation) comes into play, which risks falsifying “the truthfulness” of media storytelling and journalism. In a sense, the more “immersive”, “realistic” or first-person images and reports are, the more they can sometimes seem to be the object of simulation.

Immersive journalism’s reliance on simulation brings it into close proximity with the world of gaming – and more specifically, newsgaming. Both immersive journalism and newsgames leverage interactive, game-like mechanics to engage users in stories or information. While newsgames typically introduce challenges, problem-solving, and decision-making to explore current events or social issues, immersive journalism uses similar tools to achieve a different outcome: the creation of an experiential narrative rooted in factual reporting. In essence, while gaming emphasizes “play” and interaction, immersive journalism uses simulation to evoke empathy and understanding, often presenting users with moral or emotional dilemmas as they navigate the recreated environments. This convergence of gaming, simulation, and journalism raises important questions about how stories, and narratives, are constructed and experienced. The simulation aspect, for example, allows users to “see” an event unfold from multiple perspectives, while game mechanics introduce interactivity – choices that shape how the user engages with the story. The socio-semiotic specificity of immersive journalism, therefore, lies in its ability to blend traditional storytelling with technological mediation, creating hybrid experiences that are both informative and effective. Yet this “first-person” immersion also pushes the boundaries of conventional journalism by placing significant emphasis on subjectivity and emotional engagement. Early experiments with immersive journalism often sought not just to report facts but to evoke a visceral understanding of events—an emotional connection that traditional media could not achieve. This approach has earned immersive journalism labels such as an “empathy machine”, underscoring its ability to make distant or abstract events feel immediate and personal. By combining CGI, VR, and first-person perspectives, it transforms news into a dynamic and embodied experience. Its connections to simulation and newsgaming highlight its innovative role in rethinking the way we consume and understand news, creating both opportunities and challenges. Immersive journalism not only shifts the medium of storytelling but also redefines how audiences relate to truth, narratives, and the emotional dimensions of news.

### 3. “PLAYING ACTUALITY SERIOUSLY”: THE NEWSGAMES

The first recognized newsgame, *September 12th*, designed by Frasca in 2003, serves as a key milestone in this genre’s evolution. By offering a satirical critique of the “war on terror” that followed the Twin Tower Attack, allows players to engage in a simulation that exposes the cyclical nature of violence and its broader implications. This dynamic illustrates the powerful synergy between disseminating critical information and fostering meaningful public discourse through interactive gaming mechanics. By engaging players in participatory experiences, newsgames promote a nuanced understanding of

complex societal issues and encourage reflective dialogue. In this particular newsgame, players adopt a first-person perspective, tasked with targeting terrorists using missile strikes. This immersive viewpoint enhances player engagement but also reveals a profound ethical dilemma: terrorists are surrounded by civilians, making it nearly impossible to eliminate threats without inflicting collateral damage. Each civilian death triggers grief and anger among survivors, leading to radicalization and perpetuating the cycle of violence. Players soon recognized that the only true way to avoid these unintended consequences is to abstain from participating in the violent cycle altogether. This design serves as a powerful commentary on the broader implications of military interventions, prompting players to critically evaluate real-world strategies and their often-devastating repercussions. The game's central message is clear and compelling. While players may initially focus on gameplay mechanics, they are soon confronted with an unsettling reality: victory is unattainable through violence alone. The simulation quickly underscores the inevitability of collateral damage and the relentless cycle of suffering and retaliation. This stark portrayal highlights a fundamental truth: violence only breeds more violence, creating an endless spiral of destruction and despair. By immersing players in this grim scenario, the game challenges them to reflect on the futility of such strategies, thereby stimulating critical thoughts about real-world conflicts and moral complexities inherent in modern warfare.

Figure 1 - *The typical aerial view of September 12th (archival image)*



The concept was not entirely new; however, the novelty of *September 12th* lay in its accessibility, being distributed online, and the simplification of its gameplay mechanics, which were groundbreaking for the genre<sup>19</sup>. And since this initial experiment, newsgames have retained defining characteristics that still distinguish them from both traditional journalism and conventional gaming today. Inherently designed to convey news content, they primarily focus on contemporary, high-speed issues, such as war, human-

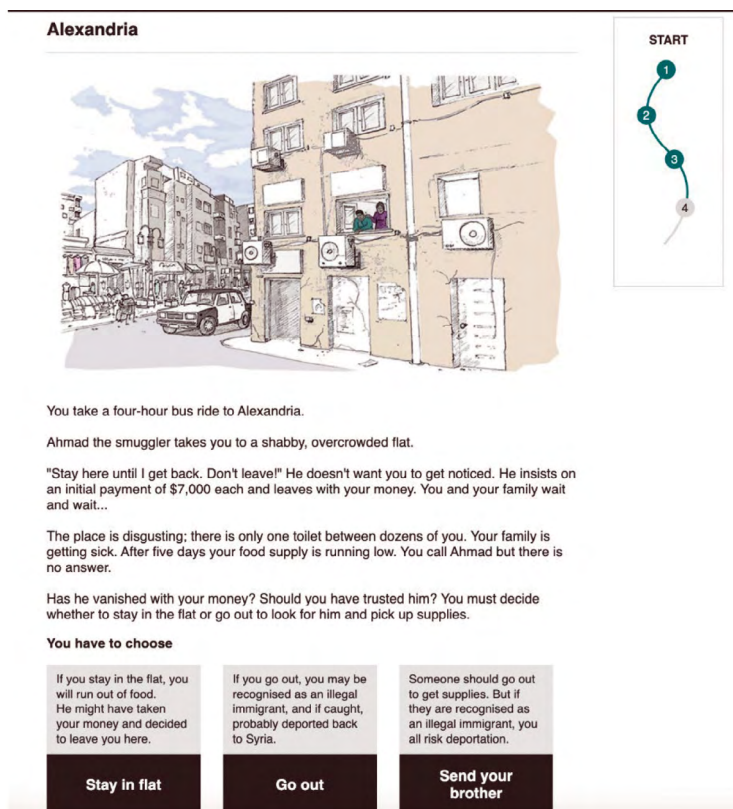
<sup>19</sup> S. Gómez-García, T. de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, "Newsgames: The Use of Digital Games by Mass-Media Outlets to Convey Journalistic Messages", *Games and Culture*, 18, 4 (2023): 449-474.

itarian crises, and global phenomena. Through an interactive, immersive experience, newsgames invite players to engage actively rather than passively consume information, making the informative journey, to some extent, personalized.

#### 4. BETWEEN EMOTION AND ENGAGEMENT

In this framework, *Syrian Journey: Choose Your Own Escape Route*<sup>20</sup> stands as a milestone in the evolution of newsgame genre, demonstrating how interactive media can translate complex socio-political issues into emotionally resonant narratives. Developed by the BBC in 2014, the game places players in the shoes of Syrian refugees, confronting them with a series of high-stakes decisions crucial for survival. These choices – often binary and morally ambiguous – reflect the stark realities faced by individuals fleeing conflict zones. The game’s design offers a compelling blend of immersive storytelling and ethical challenge, facilitating an empathetic connection between players and the refugees’ plight.

Figure 2 - Screenshot from Syrian Journey



<sup>20</sup> *Syrian Journey: Choose Your Own Escape Route* can be played at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32057601>.

One of the core strengths of newsgames such as *Syrian Journey* lies in its non-linear narrative structure, which enables players to explore different scenarios and witness the varied consequences of their actions.

This approach aligns with Jenkins' concept of "narrative architecture"<sup>21</sup>, where the player inhabits a complex environment and interacts with its elements to uncover interconnected outcomes. Such a structure enhances the player's understanding of cause-and-effect relationships within the broader refugee crisis. The simplicity of the game's visual style – characterized by stylized illustrations and neutral tones – serves to amplify its emotional impact, allowing the narrative to take center stage and fostering a deeper engagement with the storyline<sup>22</sup>.

The game's emotional resonance is further intensified by its use of narrative-based gamification. This method effectively translates abstract political and humanitarian issues into personal, relatable experiences. According to Galloway, narrative-based games can facilitate an empathetic exploration of human tragedy by reframing global crises within the context of individual, domestic, and familial choices<sup>23</sup>. In *Syrian Journey*, each decision made by the player reveals the systemic nature of the refugee experience, highlighting patterns of vulnerability, resilience, and consequence. This aligns with Koster's assertion that games are particularly adept at revealing patterns rather than isolated events, offering players a systemic perspective on complex issues<sup>24</sup>.

Moreover, the game incorporates clear progression goals and affordances, which guide the player through the narrative and provide a sense of advancement. These elements are essential for maintaining player engagement and ensuring a nuanced exploration of the game's themes<sup>25</sup>. By structuring the experience around achievable objectives, *Syrian Journey* allows players to gradually piece together a comprehensive understanding of the refugee crisis, fostering critical reflection on both the micro-level human experience and the macro-level socio-political context.

Another fascinating title is *The Waiting Game*<sup>26</sup>. This newsgame, developed by ProPublica in 2018, stands as a compelling and illustrative example of newsgaming, blending journalistic integrity with interactive digital media to highlight the asylum process in the United States. Drawing on real-life narratives from asylum seekers, the game allows players to embody these individuals and experience the systemic challenges they face. Each character's journey reflects authentic asylum cases, meticulously documented through interviews and immigration records, adding a layer of veracity and emotional weight to the experience.

The gameplay is deliberately slow-paced, focusing on the protracted bureaucratic ordeal of seeking asylum. The core mechanic – waiting – mirrors the real-life uncertainty and psychological toll asylum seekers endure. Players navigate long periods of inactivity punctuated by sparse, often inconclusive updates, reinforcing a sense of

<sup>21</sup> H. Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", in N. Wardrip-Fruin, P. Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004: 118-130.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. G. Conti, "I newsgame: tra giornalismo e gioco", *H-ermes*, 27 (2024): 115-130.

<sup>23</sup> A.R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> R. Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press, 2005.

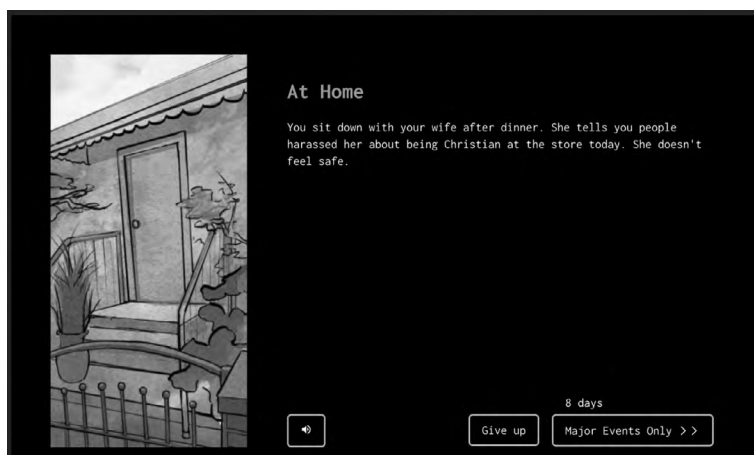
<sup>25</sup> See for instance: L. Grace, *Doing Things with Games: Social Impact through Play*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2020; K. Meier, "Journalism Meets Games: Newsgames as a New Digital Genre. Theory, Boundaries, Utilization", *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 7 (2018): 429-444.

<sup>26</sup> *The Waiting Game* can be played at: <https://projects.propublica.org/asylum/>.

helplessness and frustration. This procedural design embodies what Ian Bogost terms “procedural rhetoric”, using game mechanics to convey complex, systemic messages.

Visually minimalist, the game employs subdued graphics and a somber soundtrack, heightening the atmosphere of anxiety and monotony. These aesthetic choices are integral to the game’s impact, allowing players to focus on the emotional and existential weight of the asylum process rather than traditional gameplay goals. The result is not merely an informative tool but a deeply immersive narrative that challenges players to confront the human dimensions behind policy debates, encouraging a critical re-evaluation of migration systems. *The Waiting Game* exemplifies how these formats can effectively distill and communicate the multifaceted nature of humanitarian crises.

Figura 3 - Screenshot from *The Waiting Game*



Fully centered on the power of individual stories and the banality of everyday life, *The Flashback* (2024)<sup>27</sup> is a recent title developed by HTW Berlin as part of a project called *Its Ukraine Not A Game*. This game explores the experience of war through the lens of a woman’s personal memories, as she relives the last moments of tranquility in her neighborhood before the invasion. Experienced in a subjective perspective, her memories are marked by the devastating impact of the war, but the game does not simply depict the conflict itself; it focuses on the personal stories of her neighbors, showcasing their ordinary lives interrupted by violence and destruction. In *The Flashback*, the emphasis is placed on the intimacy and immediacy of individual experiences, creating a contrast between peaceful life and the tragedy that follows the invasion. The portrayal of a humanity scarred by war, yet still rich in everyday memories, invites a profound reflection on the meaning of memory and loss. The game’s goal is to encourage players to reflect on the value of personal experiences and the importance of understanding the stories behind major historical events.

For instance, Figures 4 and 5 illustrate a compelling example of what the game has to offer: the same family – a mother and daughter – enjoying everyday life, followed by the stark brutality of war. In the box at the bottom of Figure 5, the narrative unfolds

<sup>27</sup> *The Flashback* can be played at: <https://ukrainenotagame.com/>.

further, highlighting a tragedy that is both personal and representative of the entire humanity (with also the journalistic source of the information).

Figura 4 - Screenshot from The Flashback



Figura 5 - Screenshot from The Flashback



## 5. CONCLUSION

Newsgames function as immersive environments that allow users to navigate scenarios and make decisions reflective of real-world events. Through this interaction, players are not merely passive consumers but active participants in the storytelling process. This dynamic format enhances users' cognitive and emotional engagement<sup>28</sup>, contributing

<sup>28</sup> Meier, "Journalism Meets Games".

to providing a more visceral comprehension of global challenges, such as humanitarian crises or political conflicts.

And while the production of newsgames remains a niche phenomenon, with only a few newsrooms experimenting with this format, it has attracted attention for its potential to engage audiences in new and dynamic ways. By incorporating game elements into news delivery, newsgames journalism has the potential to offer a unique and powerful way to inform and raise awareness in the public, while simultaneously contributing to conveying important lessons for the evolution of journalism.

Several essential elements combine to craft a meaningful interactive experience.

*Interactivity and Agency.* Newsgames allow players to make choices and influence the storyline. This active participation may foster a deeper connection with the subject matter, as users feel personally involved in the decision-making process<sup>29</sup>. Galloway's concept of action-based media further underscores this dynamic, highlighting how games (in general) "manifest through action", requiring players' active input to bring the medium to life and emphasizing the performative nature of engagement<sup>30</sup>.

*Realistic Simulation.* Grounded in real events or intricate issues, newsgames create immersive scenarios that simulate real-world contexts, enabling players to grasp the broader implications of their actions<sup>31</sup>.

*Immediate Feedback.* Gameplay offers instant responses to player actions, creating a dynamic and engaging interaction. This feedback system reinforces a sense of presence and responsibility for the decisions made. As noted by Bogost et al, newsgames often employ simulation mechanics that enable users to explore the consequences of their decisions within a structured, game-based environment<sup>32</sup>. This interactive quality transforms the player's role from a mere observer to an active participant in the news narrative.

*Multisensory Experience and Engaging Visuals.* The combination of visual, auditory, and textual elements creates a rich virtual environment that stimulates multiple senses. This multisensory approach enhances the perception of the simulated reality<sup>33</sup>. For instance, music plays a crucial role in experiences like *The Waiting Game* or in *The Flashback*.

*Emotional Narrative.* The stories in newsgames are specifically designed to emotionally engage users, positioning them at the center of the narrative. Branching storylines and multiple perspectives enhance immersion and can foster empathy<sup>34</sup>.

*Immersivity.* In the context of newsgames, immersivity allows users to actively participate in simulated environments, making decisions and experiencing their consequences. This dynamic interaction facilitates experiential learning, offering a deeper understanding of complex socio-political issues by embodying different perspectives<sup>35</sup>. This immersive nature goes beyond spatial representation; it engages cognitive and af-

<sup>29</sup> Bogost, Ferrari, Schweizer, *Newsgames*.

<sup>30</sup> A. R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Meier, "Journalism Meets Games"; D. Ruggiero, "The Effect of a Persuasive Game on Attitude towards the Homeless", in *International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games*, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Bogost, Ferrari, Schweizer, *Newsgames*.

<sup>33</sup> J. V. Pavlik, *Journalism and New Media*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> C. Plewe, E. Fürsich, "Are Newsgames Better Journalism? Empathy, Information and Representation in Games on Refugees and Migrants", *Journalism Studies*, 19 (2018): 2470-2487.

<sup>35</sup> Bogost, Ferrari, Schweizer, *Newsgames*.

fective dimensions, transforming information delivery into a participatory experience. By doing so, it challenges the boundaries of traditional narrative frameworks, positioning the audience as co-narrators within the media landscape. This paradigm shift underscores the potential of immersive technologies to redefine storytelling and information dissemination in contemporary journalism. Such immersive environments also stimulate critical thinking and emotional resonance, essential components for fostering empathy and nuanced comprehension in digital journalism.

By merging the informational goals of journalism with the interactivity and engagement of gaming, newsgames blur, once again, the traditional boundaries between information and entertainment. This approach raises questions about objectivity, commercialization, and the ethical dimensions of immersive media, which merit deeper exploration and investigation. And future research should also focus on assessing the long-term effects of newsgames on users' attitudes and knowledge acquisition, as well as exploring the ethical implications of gamifying serious news content<sup>36</sup>. A more robust body of studies will be essential to determine whether newsgames can truly bridge the gap between journalism and interactive storytelling in a meaningful and lasting way.

In this article, we have provided a snapshot of the phenomenon, highlighting elements of particular interest, such as audience interactivity, the potential for deeper engagement with complex topics, and the use of gamification to enhance storytelling. Although the adoption of newsgames by newsrooms, the lifespan of the phenomenon, the number of examples created, and the scientific research on the phenomenon are still limited, this format could serve as a point of contact with future developments in journalism, especially as the media landscape continues to evolve and incorporate new technologies and audience expectations.

<sup>36</sup> G. Roussos, J.F. Dovidio, "Playing below the Poverty Line: Investigating an Online Game as a Way to Reduce Prejudice toward the Poor", *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 10, 2 (2016).

GIANNI SIBILLA\*

## SPATIAL AUDIO: IMMERSIVE SOUNDSCAPES, SONIC NARRATIVES AND PRODUCTION MODELS IN MUSIC AND MEDIA

### *Abstract*

This paper examines the intersection of sound, popular music, and immersive media, analyzing how sound design shapes narrative engagement and user experience across different platforms. Through a cross-disciplinary approach integrating media studies, production studies, sound studies, and popular music research, the study investigates the role of sound and music in constructing narrative immersive environments, both in traditional and digital media. The first section explores the evolution of soundscapes and sound design, from Schafer's "soundscape" theory to contemporary media environments. The second section focuses on immersive sound production in the music industry, distinguishing between recorded and live music and analyzing the impact of spatial audio technologies such as Dolby Atmos and "spatial" audio formats. The third section examines the role of sound design in digital media, including video games, virtual concerts, and the metaverse, where sound is integral to shaping interactive and participatory experiences. How does sound design contribute to the creation of narrative worlds? What are the implications of immersive audio for the music and media industries? While the audiovisual and gaming industries actively integrate immersive sound, the music industry has yet to fully embrace these technologies on a large scale. The paper also underscores as well as the broader implications of immersive sound for media storytelling, and also the prospects of immersive audio for the music industry.

### *Keywords*

Popular music; sound design; music industry; media production; immersive media.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: SOUND, STORYTELLING, AND IMMERSIVE MEDIA

Music is an integral part of everyday life: according to Tia DeNora, it acts as a "technology of the self"<sup>1</sup> a tool for regulating emotional states and mediating one's relationship with the external world, often employed to create an immersive environment.

It is common to see someone walking down the street while a pair of headphones isolates them from the city's noise, absorbed in sound. At home, "surround" sound systems have gained more and more popularity, used to enhance the experience of watching television, series, and films what is commonly known as the "home theater": this concept seeks to replicate the immersive atmosphere of a cinema within the comfort of

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<sup>1</sup> T. De Nora, *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

one's living room. The quintessential immersive sonic experience, however, is attending a live concert, where musicians' performances are amplified and enhanced by powerful sound systems and increasingly augmented by visual media and technological tools.

Sound and music are fundamental elements of media production, shaping both narrative construction and audience engagement. From traditional media to digital platforms, immersive sound design has evolved as a crucial tool for storytelling, creating sonic environments that envelop the listener and enhance the sense of presence.

This paper examines the intersection of sound, popular music, and both traditional and digital media in shaping immersive experiences. The study is guided by research questions that explore the role of sound and music design in constructing narrative worlds that captivate audiences and the future potential of immersive audio within the music and media industries.

The first section of this study examines the evolution of soundscapes and sound design, tracing their development from early conceptualizations, such as Schafer's "soundscape" theory<sup>2</sup>, to contemporary media environments. The second section explores the role of sound quality and design in the music industry, distinguishing between recorded and live music production and their differing approaches to immersive experiences. Finally, the third section focuses on immersive sound in digital media, including audiovisual productions, video games, and the emerging hybrid spaces of the metaverse, where sound is integral to constructing interactive and participatory experiences.

By adopting a cross-disciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from media studies, production studies, sound studies, and popular music research, this paper aims to provide an overview of the connections between creative industries, media, sound design, and immersiveness. It highlights the evolving role of sound as both a narrative tool and an immersive element, examining how media industries utilize sound to enhance storytelling offers valuable insights into the broader impact of immersive media experiences.

## 2. FROM SOUNDSCAPES TO IMMERSIVE SOUNDS IN MEDIA: FURNITURE MUSIC, MUZAK, AMBIENT MUSIC, SOUND DESIGN

The concept of "immersiveness" relates to the metaphor of water: being surrounded by another element and entering a different world, thereby leaving the "normal" one behind. This idea has become pivotal in various areas of media content production, such as video games<sup>3</sup>. However, if we focus on music, the origins of sound as a tool to immerse a listener in a specific environment or ecosystem can be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century.

The notion of producing "environmental" music emerged alongside the widespread

<sup>2</sup> R.M. Schafer, *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester: Destiny, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> This definition has also been subject to criticism: in the context of video games, Salen and Zimmerman argue that such experiences are always partial, ultimately failing to fulfill their promise. Technologies and narrative forms are designed to surround the user rather than to fully immerse them in an entirely different world. In this essay, the term "immersiveness" will be employed in its broader sense, as defined by Calleja, to mean "incorporation": the way in which music becomes a central element in creating an environment that envelops the listener or spectator. Cfr. K.S. Salen, E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003 and G. Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011.

diffusion of recording technologies, which enabled the creation and dissemination of sounds beyond their original contexts: recorded music began to be produced considering the spaces in which it would be re-played<sup>4</sup>. With the advent of recorded music in the 20th century, music consumption took two distinct but complementary paths: on the one hand, the experience of listening to music played in real time, in front of an audience: live performances in concert halls, theaters, and similar venues; on the other, listening to previously played music through recordings, both at home and in public spaces. This shift marked the beginning of what Toynbee describes as “the short century of popular music”<sup>5</sup>.

During this period, the concept of “background” music emerged: sounds designed to create both physical and symbolic spaces. In the 1920s, the composer Erik Satie introduced the terms *musique d’ameublement* (furniture music) and *musique de tapisserie* (tapestry music) to describe compositions intended not to be actively listened to but to function as part of the surrounding environment, akin to furniture or decor<sup>6</sup>.

In the 1930s, George Owen Squier coined the term “Muzak” for his company, which had been providing prerecorded music via cable for hotels, clubs, shops, and restaurants since the previous decade. Muzak promoted the functional use of music: to create relaxing environments that put customers at ease or to stimulate productivity in workplaces. As Jonathan Sterne observed, in such public spaces, music transformed into a form of architecture: it did not merely fill the space but became an integral part of it<sup>7</sup>.

The concept of a “soundscape,” as defined by R. Murray Schafer in his seminal work, synthesizes these practices by conceptualizing the surrounding world as a “sonic environment”. This environment constitutes an “acoustic field” shaped by both the natural sounds of a given space and the sounds produced, intentionally or otherwise, by humans. Schafer emphasizes that the soundscape should not be seen as a mere by-product of society but as a deliberate construction: a form of sound composition that can and should be studied<sup>8</sup>.

A more recent and common term for this deliberate construction of an acoustic field is “sound design”: humans not only inhabit sound spaces but actively construct them in functional ways. These soundscapes serve as both background elements - sonic furnishings that create a sense of place - and as instruments for storytelling. Central to this concept is the notion of “ambient music,” a term coined by Brian Eno in the 1970s to describe his own work, which later evolved into a widely recognized musical mac-

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the role of recording technologies in creating sound forms that replicate environments, we can refer to the concept of *Musique Concrète*, as theorized and practiced by Pierre Schaeffer. This approach involves composing music “in a concrete way, directly from sound”, where audio elements are assembled, combined, and mixed using technological devices. Cfr. M. Chion, *Musiques, Médias et Technologies*, Paris: Flammarion, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> J. Toynbee, *Making Popular Music. Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*, London: Arnold, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> G. Salvetti, *La nascita del Novecento - Volume 10*, Torino: EDT, 1991, 330. Also during this period, Futurism celebrated environmental noise as a legitimate art form. cfr. L. Russolo, *L’arte dei rumori*, Milano: Edizioni futuriste di Poesia, 1916.

<sup>7</sup> J. Sterne, “Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space”, *Ethnomusicology*, 41, 1 (1997): 22-50. DOI:10.2307/852577.

<sup>8</sup> The term “Muzak” derives from the fusion of “music” and “Kodak”. It refers to functional background music, often described as “mood music” or “environmental music” but later became synonymous with low-quality production: the term is predominantly used in a negative sense to describe music – often, but not exclusively, pop – used as a “soundtrack” in public spaces. Cfr. R. Shuker R., *Popular Music Culture: The Key Concepts*, New York-London: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 397.

ro-genre. In Eno's view, ambient music offers multiple levels of perception and interpretation, blending passive listening with immersive experiences.

Most music chooses its own position in terms of your listening to it. Muzak wants to be back there. Punk wants to be up front. Classical wants to be another place. I wanted to make something you could slip in and out of. You could pay attention or you could choose not to be distracted by it if you wanted to do something while it was on. I can't read with a pop record playing, or with most classical records. They're not intended to leave that part of the mind free – my mind, anyway. Ambient music allows many different types of attention. The other meaning is more pronounced on On Land: creating an ambience, a sense of place that complements and alters your environment. Both meanings are contained in the word “ambient”<sup>9</sup>.

Ambient music is created to tell a story, either consciously or unconsciously, and to shape an acoustic environment: a concept that predates the popularization of the term “sound design,” now often used to describe the creation of functional soundscapes<sup>10</sup>.

According to Karen Collins, the concept of sound design represents an evolution of ambient and functional music production, focusing on the interaction between different levels of sound perception:

We are surrounded by sounds, and most of the time we are in a passive hearing mode [...]. What music we listen to is often just on in the background, a wallpaper of noise. Most of the time, sounds are just there, all around us. We listen with ears half open, not consciously paying attention to sound unless it's something that we are actively focusing on. We hear without listening, just as we see without looking<sup>11</sup>.

In this context, sound design, as described by Collins, operates by creating, recombining, altering, and mixing sounds to construct environments that function either at the level of individual sounds or as part of a broader soundscape, encompassing both physical and symbolic spaces. The principles of sound design and ambient music production, therefore, apply not only to exhibitions, shops, and artistic installations but also to the symbolic spaces crafted by media through their content and narratives.

From this point of view, music and songs associated with films, series, television programs, or video games are not merely “soundtracks”. Collins observes, while the production and consumption of media often subordinate sound and music to visuals, but it is crucial to acknowledge their fundamental role in constructing the storytelling<sup>12</sup>. The concept of “immersive” sound thus integrates musical choices and productions with a

<sup>9</sup> Steven Grant, “Brian Eno Against Interpretation”, Trouser Press, August 1982, [http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian\\_eno/interviews/troup82a.html](http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/troup82a.html).

<sup>10</sup> On the use and abuse of “sound design”, see M. Corbella, “Sound design. Ambiguità e necessità storica di un termine alla moda”, in *Worlds of Audiovision*, 2010, [http://www-5.unipv.it/wav/pdf/WAV\\_Corbella\\_2010\\_ita.pdf](http://www-5.unipv.it/wav/pdf/WAV_Corbella_2010_ita.pdf), and S. Lombardi Vallauri, “Paesaggi sonori, o meglio mondi emotivi. Che cosa fa il sound design”, *Gli spazi della musica*, 6, 1 (2017): 50-64, <http://www.ojs.unito.it/index.php/spazidellamusica>.

<sup>11</sup> K. Collins, *Studying Sound: A Theory and Practice of Sound Design*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bull and David Howes define “intersensoriality” as a narrative world the listener/viewer can inhabit: “Intersensoriality refers to the interrelation and/or transmutation of the senses, which may take many forms, such as: a) cooperation/opposition, b) hierarchy/equality, c) fusion/separation, and d) simultaneity/sequentiality. It helps to think of each of these dyads as describing a continuum. [...] at one pole of the continuum there is the sensory simultaneity (or “multisensoriality”) of everyday life”, M. Bull, D. Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies”, *The Senses and Society*, 11, 1 (2016): 1-2.

broader environment designed to surround and fully engage the audience within a multi-sensory environment.

The sensation of being surrounded by sound or the feeling of being inside a physical space [...]. In film, the sense of envelopment is perhaps the main reason for using surround sound, but when it comes to some other media like games, another really important purpose to spatializing sound emerges: to localize sound (that is, to locate sounds in space)<sup>13</sup>.

### 3. SONIC IMMERSION IN RECORDED MUSIC INDUSTRY

To understand the forms of immersive sound design, it is useful to analyze how listening experiences are conceived and produced within the music industry.

The idea of recording sound in a way that surrounds the listener has long been pervasive in the music industry. However, it should be noted that the industry has a complex relationship with the quality of the sound experience. On one hand, sound design in recorded music is central to defining the identity of an artist, their songs, and albums. The artistic sound design of a song or piece of music is shaped by the production choices made in the recording studio, thus creating a particular listening experience: as Zak observes, music producers – professionals who work in the studio to help artists shape their sound – should be considered artists themselves<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand, musical productions are part of an industrial process, with the goal of reaching the widest possible audience<sup>15</sup>. This often requires the use of the simplest listening equipment, which may fail to reproduce the details and sonic nuances as originally intended and created by artists and producers.

In other words, the music industry often faces the challenge of controlling the final result of sound design, as music is typically listened to through low-quality players. A widely discussed practice in recording studios – sometimes considered more of a legend than a standardized method – is playing music on low-quality systems to approximate how it might sound under less-than-ideal listening conditions. While some engineers advocate for this approach as a way to ensure broad compatibility, others argue that high-quality monitoring and careful mixing provide a more reliable strategy for achieving consistent sound across different playback environments<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, the music production process tends to prioritize quantity – i.e., reaching a larger audience – over the quality of the listening experience. The so-called “high-fidelity” listening equipment and practices are often seen as forms of “privileged” or

<sup>13</sup> Collins, *Studying Sound*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> A. Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Consider, for example, the widely criticized practice known as the “Loudness Wars,” in which recordings are produced to prioritize loudness and compression over dynamic range and nuance. This approach, while sacrificing sound quality, is designed to ensure that music sounds better on low-quality media players, such as radios, car stereos, and low-fi headphones. Cfr. K. Devine “Imperfect Sound Forever: Loudness Wars, Listening Formations and the History of Sound Reproduction”, *Popular Music*, 32, 2 (2013): 159-176.

<sup>16</sup> This practice, however, is confirmed by manuals such as J. Rose, *Producing Great Sound for Film and Video: Expert Tips from Preproduction to Final Mix*, London-New York: Routledge, 2014. See also the music production models discussed in G. Sibilla, *L'industria della canzone*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2024. On music production practices in the studio cfr. Zak, *The Poetics of Rock* and J. Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

niche consumption: it is no coincidence that this world of audiophiles is also referred to as “esoteric listening”<sup>17</sup>.

In other words – and contrary to what happens in the audiovisual media industry, where video quality is a central parameter in the so-called “production values”<sup>18</sup> of a film, series, or platform – sound quality in the strict sense is not a priority for the music industry. For example, Spotify, the leading audio streaming platform, does not offer a “hi-fi” subscription plan for better sound quality. Although such a plan was announced in 2021, as of the first months of 2025 it was not yet launched: it was deemed not sufficiently relevant to its audience and customer base and therefore a service not enough profitable for the platform to be shipped on its own with an additional cost. Nonetheless, hi-fi sound remains an important commodity for certain niches in the music industry: some other platforms, such as Apple Music, Amazon Music and Tidal offer forms of immersive and “high-quality audio” at no additional cost in their subscriptions. In 2021, Apple Music introduced its “Spatial Audio” format, a technique of sound mixing that adapts Dolby Atmos – commonly used in cinemas and home theaters with multiple speakers – to headphones<sup>19</sup>. Spatial Audio requires specific headphones produced by Apple, which means that it is designed not only to enhance the listener’s experience but also to create a closed ecosystem in which the listener must purchase both a service (the platform subscription) and hardware (the device, the headphones) to access the promised sound quality.

#### 4. SONIC IMMERSION IN LIVE MUSIC INDUSTRY

An area where the sound experience is already immersive in itself is live music: concerts are perceived as a “total” musical and personal social experience. Attending a live performance means experiencing the sensation of being immersed in a space, surrounded by the artists’ music, with seemingly no barriers or filters between the audience and the stage. In the music field, liveness is considered the space of an authentic, unfiltered experience. However, as Auslander and Karen Van Es point out, “liveness” is a complex term and a complex media production practice that relies on technological mediation to create an apparently unmediated experience<sup>20</sup>.

While recorded music relies on sound engineering to create immersive sonic experiences, live performances offer a different but equally immersive engagement with sound through different technological and symbolic/means. Unlike recordings, where sound is fixed and carefully crafted in post-production, live music introduces an element of spatial and sensory interaction that cannot be fully replicated through traditional

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. P. Magaudda, *Oggetti da ascoltare. Hifi, iPod e il consumo delle tecnologie musicali*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> The term “production values” has become a widely discussed criterion for evaluating recent audiovisual productions. Cfr. S. Cardwell, “Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement”, edited by J. McCabe, K. Akass, *Quality Tv: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007: 19-34; and D. Cardini, *Long TV. Le serie televisive viste da vicino*, Milano: Unicopli, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> The term “spatial,” when applied to music and sound, according to Collins, “usually refers to the processing of the sound source itself before it reaches the speakers or headphones. It is commonly used in virtual environments, such as VR and video games. The goal of spatial audio is to create a three-dimensional positioning for the sounds”. K. Collins, *Studying Sound*, p.169.

<sup>20</sup> P. Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, New York-London: Routledge, 2023<sup>3</sup>, and K. Van Es, *The Future of Live*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

audio playback. The physicality of sound in a concert setting – where music is amplified through powerful sound systems and often enhanced by visual and technological elements – creates a unique, unfiltered experience that fosters a sense of presence and authenticity, further augmented by the spectacularization of the musical performance on stage through the presence of visuals and special effects.

This distinction between reproduction and live highlights an essential shift in the perception of sound immersion: in recorded music, immersion is largely mediated by production techniques and playback technologies, whereas in live performances, immersion emerges from the physical, narrative and social dynamics of the event. However, the two forms of experience are increasingly converging, as live performances more and more adopt elements of studio production – such as pre-recorded tracks, spatial audio setups, and visual synchronization – to enhance their immersive potential.

Picture this scene: 20,000 people are watching a concert in an arena shaped like a giant sphere. The band is positioned in front of a circular screen nearly 15,000 square meters in size, making the musicians appear as miniature figures. Each spectator hears the music from speakers placed beneath their seats. The “live” performance is augmented by synchronized visuals that surround the viewer/listener from nearly every angle of perception: this is the immersive live music system created at The Sphere, a hyper-technological arena that opened in autumn 2023 in Las Vegas, hosting a series of concerts by U2, specifically produced and designed for the venue.

The Sphere in Las Vegas is a key example of an advanced concert venue designed to push the boundaries of live sound immersion. Here, artists integrate surround sound, synchronized visuals, and spatialized audio to create performances that blend the precision of studio production with the dynamic energy of live events. This suggests that rather than being two separate experiences, recorded and live music are part of a continuum of immersive sound design, where technologies developed for one domain influence and enhance the other.

The Sphere is perhaps the most advanced venue and technological system in the world for live shows. The immersive effect is designed to be totalizing; the spectator enters another world, their senses overstimulated, an example of what Bolter and Grusin define as “hypermediation”, but taken to the nth degree<sup>21</sup>.

While this is certainly a unique example and not a model for all concerts, it demonstrates that the approach to liveness and music is neither completely new nor revolutionary. It is more of an evolution of the immersive spectacularization that has become an increasing part of the concert industry.

As Auslander points out, every musical performance is technologically mediated to some extent in order to create a spectacular effect and allow the audience to get lost in the sound produced on stage<sup>22</sup>.

The paradox of live music lies in its dual nature: on one hand, the mediatization of performances through the extensive use of technology to create an immersive and spectacular environment; on the other hand, as Auslander emphasizes, liveness is promoted and perceived as a space of authenticity, where the performer shows themselves for who they truly are, here and now. Technology in live music serves both to amplify sound and to create visual spectacularization, enhancing the sensory experience through intersensory interaction.

<sup>21</sup> J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 90-99.

## 5. SONIC IMMERSIVE NARRATIVES IN AUDIOVISUAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

In audiovisual and digital media, sound plays a critical role in shaping immersive experiences. Audiovisual and interactive media engage multiple senses: Collins points out that use of immersive sound design in film, television, video games, and digital media in general demonstrates how audio can create environments that envelop the user<sup>23</sup>.

The concept of “sonic immersivity” in these media often revolves around spatial audio technologies, such as the previously mentioned Dolby Atmos, or binaural recordings, which aim to position sound in three-dimensional space. These technologies allow sound designers to create an experience where audio seems to come from specific directions, enveloping the listener and enhancing the sense of presence. This is particularly evident in video games, where sound is not only a narrative tool but also a functional element, guiding players and enhancing their engagement with the virtual world.

Furthermore, soundtracks and sound effects in film and television contribute to building atmospheres that align with and enhance visual storytelling: sound design in audiovisual media functions as an invisible yet crucial layer of narrative construction<sup>24</sup>.

Therefore, the central role of sound and music as storytelling tools is evident across various areas of media production, both musical and non-musical. Collins highlights that what we now refer to as “sound design” was already present in earlier narrative media forms of the 20th century, particularly in “audio stories” like radio dramas – an approach that finds contemporary resonance in the digital era through podcasting<sup>25</sup>.

More broadly, Collins argues that sound design serves as a fundamental narrative tool in every media space. In audiovisual media, the “soundscape” plays a role as crucial as cinematography or visual aesthetic choices in shaping the identity of a TV series. Additionally, musical elements – whether the soundtrack, score, songs, or the so-called “synchronizations”, that is the use of pre-existing and often well-known pieces of music – are instrumental in constructing the narrative world inhabited by the characters and experienced by the audience.

Scholars such as Jonathan Gray emphasize the pivotal role of jingles and music in radio and television, particularly theme songs. These elements not only establish a program’s identity but, as Gray suggests, act as a symbolic threshold: they signal to the audience that they are stepping into a distinct narrative world.

In live theater, it is the dimming of the lights and raising of the curtain. In classical music performances, it is the orchestra’s tuning of their instruments. In a sports game, it is the playing of the national anthem. And in television, it is the opening credit sequence. Opening credits help to transport us from the previous textual universe to a new one, or out of ‘real

<sup>23</sup> K. Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. the previously quoted seminal work of Chion and his concept of “Audio-vision”, but also the vast literature in film studies on the relation between music and images and the role of soundtracks. Cfr M. Chion, *L’audio-vision. Son et image au cinéma*, Paris: Nathan, 1990, but also C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, London: BFI, 1987; D. Goldmark, L. Kramer, R. Lepperts, eds., *Beyond the Soundtrack*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; S. Miceli, *Musica per film. Storia, estetica, analisi*, Milano: Tipologie, Ricordi-LIM, 2009; E. Walker, *Understanding Sound Tracks through Film Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. D. Llinares, N. Fox, R. Berry, *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*, Cham: Springer, 2018; T. Bonini, “Podcasting as a Hybrid Cultural Form between Old and New Media”, edited by M. Lindgren and J. Loviglio, *The Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*, New York-London: Routledge, 2022: 19-29 and T. Bonini, M. Perrotta, *Che cos’è un podcast*, Roma: Carocci, 2023.

life' and into the life of the program (even if a growing number of shows are opting for cold starts to throw the viewer right into the action). Hence the importance of tonal shifts in opening credit sequences, and hence the utility of story-style opening credit<sup>26</sup>.

The intersection between sound, music, storytelling, and immersiveness is particularly evident in digital media, especially in video games, where soundtracks are crucial for constructing narrative worlds and engaging players.

Since the 1990s, the video game industry has collaborated closely with the music industry, initially by involving established musicians as sound designers and composers – such as Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails for *Quake* (GT Interactive, 1996) – and later by adopting synchronization models typical of films and TV series, acquiring rights to popular songs for use in specific game sequences. These musical choices contribute to the identity and branding of video games, but above all, they aim to envelop players in a distinctive sound environment. A notable example is the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar North, 1997–2025), where players can listen to curated radio channels featuring hundreds of contemporary and historical songs while driving in the game.

Music and sound design are central to the participatory and immersive nature of video game experiences, culminating in rhythm-action games that simulate live performances and immerse players in virtual stages. This genre gained prominence in the 2000s with titles like *Guitar Hero* (Activision, 2005) and *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007), where players follow the rhythm of pre-recorded tracks. A standout example is *The Beatles: Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2009), which lets players recreate the band's history by performing 45 songs using instrument replicas.

The immersive potential of sound and music is even more significant in video games that construct expansive digital worlds. Games like *Fortnite*, which hosts virtual concerts by artists such as Travis Scott and Ariana Grande, and *Roblox* exemplify this approach by creating digital spaces where users can freely explore and interact. This trend has its roots in first-person games of the 1980s and 1990s but now offers vastly more elaborate and interactive environments.

Finally, the concept of immersiveness has gained renewed attention with the rise of the “metaverse”, a hybrid environment combining physical and digital dimensions for immersion, interaction, sharing, and participation. In the metaverse, hardware like Virtual Reality headsets allows users to enter three-dimensional spaces for activities such as gaming, socializing, and shopping for digital items like avatar skins and tools. These activities are always accompanied by carefully curated sound design and music<sup>27</sup>.

The connection between the music industry and these digital spaces is evident in the creation of hybrid musical experiences. These include performances by artist avatars that closely mimic the original performers and allow spectators to navigate complex virtual environments. For instance, Jean-Michel Jarre held virtual concerts for New Year's Eve 2021 inside a digitized Notre Dame in Paris and Christmas 2023 at a virtual Versailles, both explorable in mixed reality through specialized headsets.

The role of sound design and music as tools for immersive storytelling extends beyond digital media spaces. It is also a key selling point for hardware designed to consume immersive content. The 2024 launch of Apple's Vision Pro headset exemplifies

<sup>26</sup> J. Gray, *Show Sold Separately. Promos, Spoilers, and other Media Paratexts*, New York: New York University Press, 2010, 75.

<sup>27</sup> S. Arcagni, *La zona oscura. Filosofia del metaverso*, Roma: LUISS University Press, 2023, 16-20.

this, emphasizing its high-quality spatial audio delivered through integrated speakers. Apple further reinforced this immersive experience by offering specially produced concerts by artists like The Weeknd, Rye, Metallica and Bono tailored for the device. Similarly, the enduring popularity of home theater systems reflects the desire to transform living rooms into cinematic experiences, underscoring the value of immersive sound design in modern entertainment.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS: STUDYING SOUND AS IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING

This study has examined the role of sound and music in immersive storytelling across various media, demonstrating how sonic environments shape narrative engagement, audience perception, and technological innovation. By analyzing soundscapes, sound design, and immersive audio in music, audiovisual media, and digital experiences, this essay has highlighted how media industries integrate sound to enhance storytelling.

One of the key findings is the differing priorities of the music and media industries regarding sound immersion. While the audiovisual and gaming sectors actively use spatial and immersive sound to enhance narratives, the music industry has yet to fully embrace these technologies on a large scale, primarily due to market limitations and audience expectations. Despite the availability of high-fidelity formats and spatial audio technologies, mainstream music consumption continues to prioritize accessibility over immersive listening experiences. This suggests a gap between technological potential and industry adoption that warrants further exploration.

At the same time, immersive sound plays a crucial role in emerging digital environments, such as video games and the metaverse. The increasing convergence of music and interactive media, exemplified by virtual concerts and hybrid digital performances, indicates a shift in how audiences engage with music beyond traditional listening formats.

Future research should investigate the long-term implications of these trends: will immersive and interactive audio experiences become a dominant mode of consumption? How will advancements in AI-generated sound and adaptive audio design further alter the relationship between listener and media?

This essay also underscores the importance of approaching the topic from both a linguistic and production-oriented perspective. What are the creative and technical models underpinning immersive sound practices? What objectives do media industries pursue, particularly in relation to the music industry? How do these goals align with – or diverge from – the expectations and habits of audiences?

While the music industry has not yet made immersive sound a priority, the broader media landscape continues to integrate sound as a fundamental narrative tool. In audiovisual productions, sound design helps shape characters, settings, and emotional depth. In digital media, such as video games, soundtracks and spatialized audio contribute to world-building and player engagement. Video games often blur the line between sound design and interactivity, creating participatory experiences that are inherently immersive.

Additionally, the study of immersive sound raises broader interdisciplinary questions. The intersection of sound design, cognitive psychology, and media technology offers fertile ground for research into how auditory perception influences emotional and spatial awareness in digital environments. Understanding these dynamics could provide valuable insights into accessibility in media design.

Ultimately, it is difficult – if not impossible – to understand immersive media and storytelling without reflecting on the role of sound and music. Whether it serves to guide emotion, establish spatial awareness, deepen narrative complexity, or absorb the listener/viewer in another world, sound remains a crucial element of the immersive experience. Future studies should not only explore the technological evolution of immersive audio but also consider its cultural, psychological, and economic implications in an increasingly digital world.

The intersection of sound, music, and media storytelling presents a rich area for further study, with implications that span multiple disciplines. For popular music studies, it offers new avenues to examine the shifting relationships between music production, consumption, and technological innovation. For media studies, it highlights the evolving role of sound as a narrative device in both traditional and emerging storytelling forms.

As media industries continue to explore and push the boundaries of immersion, the study of sound design will remain a vital lens through which to understand these transformations.

## **Miscellaneous section**



GIANPAOLO ALTAMURA\*

L'OSSIMORO COME "TERAPIA"  
Critica della modernità e umiltà nella scrittura giornalistica  
di Franco Cassano

*Abstract*

The main focus of the articles published by Franco Cassano since the second half of the 90s in many national newspapers (and later collected in *Modernizzare stanca*) is the mythology of progress, the idea of an unlimited productivity, the domination of speed and technology in every human sphere, social competition and individualism as a kind of civil religion. These themes seem to be linked to the critique of capitalism made by the late Pasolini, with particular reference to the category of "development without progress". Cassano himself, in *Il pensiero meridiano*, identifies Pasolini's oxymoron as a privileged means to explore the logic of Western modernity, not a simple figure of speech, but a heuristic mode capable to express reality in its complex aspect and make the differences coexist without "closing" them in a synthesis. The sociologist identifies, specifically, in the "measure" – the so-called *dissoi logoi*, the divergent or in-contrast speech – the only possible antidote to the "mythology of modernity" and to the rhetoric of the north-western development model. According to Cassano, the oxymoron is a means of circumventing the unilinear narrative of progress, the "grafting" of a curative and therapeutic countertrend on the trunk of the mainstream narratives: a "et et" model that opposes the apodictic logic of "aut aut". There is something constantly "temporary" in Cassano's research, such as a principle of dissatisfaction with the pre-established models and truths, which refers to a need for a "perennial re-foundation and re-weighting", a continuous recalibration of the gaze and search for the best conditions for "visibility". The "humility" of Cassano lies in the knowledge that – as it is stated in Calvino's *Palomar* – "It is only after you have come to know the surface of things that you can venture to seek what is underneath".

*Key words:* oxymoron; modernisation; progress; Pasolini; Calvino.

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1. INTRODUZIONE

La scrittura di Franco Cassano è caratterizzata da una profondità e un'efficacia argomentativa che rispecchiano fedelmente il valore cardinale della "misura", a cui il sociologo ha fatto riferimento più volte nei suoi scritti specialmente da *Il pensiero meridiano* in poi. Nel celebre saggio del 1996 questo ideale viene metaforizzato nella forma geografica della Grecia classica, intervallo aureo di terra e acqua, sorta di immaginaria

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*borderland*, di confine perenne, in cui è proprio la precarietà dei margini – il continuo incontro tra le differenze, la contiguità con l'Altro e la molteplicità – a impedire ogni assolutizzazione o integralismo.

La misura a cui fa costantemente appello il sociologo non è, in ogni caso, un atteggiamento di calcolata prudenza, di cautela intellettuale, ma si richiama alla necessità inderogabile dei *dissoi logoi*<sup>1</sup>, quei “discorsi divergenti”, in contrasto, in cui Cassano vede un possibile argine alla “mitologia della modernità”, alla retorica “trionfalistica” del modello di sviluppo nord-occidentale che da secoli concepisce unilateralmente i sud e gli est del mondo come proiezioni imperfette, non-ancora del progresso, periferie “senza prospettiva” dell'impero.

Al centro degli articoli pubblicati a partire dalla seconda metà degli anni Novanta sui maggiori quotidiani nazionali (“Repubblica”, “L'avvenire”, “Il Corriere della Sera”, “L'Unità”), molti dei quali confluiti poi in *Modernizzare stanca*, vi sono temi come il dominio crescente della velocità e della tecnica in ogni ambito umano, l'idea di una produttività illimitata – che ambisce anzi a smantellare il concetto stesso di limite, nella logica della più sfrenata *deregulation* neocapitalista –, l'individualismo e la competizione come religione civile, la tendenza a considerare la sfera pubblica come “discarica del privato”<sup>2</sup>. Si tratta di questioni che pongono evidentemente la riflessione di Cassano nel solco della requisitoria pasoliniana, con particolare rimando a temi come l'omologazione culturale e lo “sviluppo senza progresso”<sup>3</sup>.

Non inganni troppo, in ogni caso, la consonanza degli argomenti, giacché la strategia retorica di Cassano è essenzialmente diversa rispetto a quella di un autore come Pasolini. Il sociologo barese non ha, infatti, il razzente polemico del “corsaro”, né il suo fondo “luterano”, radicale e iconoclasta. La sua parola non è mai assertiva o “scandalosa”, semmai è pacata e pensosa, ironica e malinconica: Cassano non parlerebbe mai, ad esempio, di “genocidio”<sup>4</sup>, neanche in funzione simbolica o allegorica. La sua indole riflessiva, oltre che una qualità caratteriale, è una prova del fatto che egli non crede in una comunicazione apodittica o ad “alto volume”, non sopporta i clangori della nicciana “filosofia del martello”. Cassano non ama comunicare *ex cathedra*, né è interessato a instaurare una pedagogia paternalistica o, peggio, “coloniale” con i suoi lettori (si rammenti, in proposito, l'accusa rivolta da un giovane Nanni Moretti a Mario Monicelli in un celebre dibattito televisivo del 1977)<sup>5</sup>, che vuole convincere con la forza delle idee

<sup>1</sup> F. Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. in particolare i saggi *Il pubblico come di discarica* e *Il rumore di fondo e la tragedia dei beni comuni*, in F. Cassano, *Modernizzare stanca. Perdere tempo, guadagnare tempo*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2011, 52-57.

<sup>3</sup> Si tratta di temi che Pier Paolo Pasolini ha trattato in una serie di articoli pubblicati nella prima metà degli anni Settanta, riuniti poi per lo più nei due celebri volumi *Scritti corsari* e *Lettere luterane*. Cfr. P.P. Pasolini, *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, 2 vol., a cura di W. Siti e S. De Laude, Milano: Mondadori, 1999, vol. II, 267-723.

<sup>4</sup> Come è noto, Pasolini ha parlato di “mutazione antropologica” e di “genocidio” – ovvero di quell'epocale processo di “cancellazione” della cultura contadino-rurale avvenuto, complice il potere tecno-industriale, a partire dagli anni del boom economico – soprattutto negli articoli “corsari”. Cfr. Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, vol. II.

<sup>5</sup> Il dibattito tra il giovane cineasta Moretti e l'affermato Monicelli andò in onda nel 1977 durante la trasmissione “Match” di Alberto Arbasino. Il futuro regista di *Ecce bombo* accusò il toscano, tra i celebrati maestri della “commedia all'italiana”, di postulare, nei suoi film, un “rapporto coloniale” con il pubblico, ovvero di imporre sui personaggi e sulle situazioni da essi affrontati tratti distintivi piuttosto marcati e riconoscibili, in grado di predeterminare di volta in volta le condizioni di fruizione e di interpretazione del suo cinema. Cfr. “Match - Domande incrociate. Ecce Nanni”, Raiplay, ultimo accesso 20 aprile 2024, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2016/12/Ecce-Nanni-28c60209-5adc-46ed-9e3c-998d23016d9f.html>.

e delle argomentazioni, senza ricorrere a procedimenti enfaticanti, "sovratoni" retorici e *boutade*. La sua è una "diffidenza sistematica verso le maiuscole", nutrita "dalla convinzione che nessuna identità possa pretendere un rapporto privilegiato con la verità, sentendosi autorizzata a colonizzare le altre"<sup>6</sup>.

Lo stile comunicativo di Cassano è prossimale, se non proprio laterale: è raro che egli assuma una posizione frontale, di giudizio secco e inappellabile, sui fenomeni culturali, sociali e politici che sono sotto la sua lente di osservazione. La sua è una forma di ragionevolezza antica, una saggezza stoica, acuta ma temperata, che non sente mai il bisogno di provocare o *épater le bourgeois*, ma è sempre disposta a "illuminare i due lati della proverbiale medaglia"<sup>7</sup>. Anche per questo motivo, non sembra convincere troppo l'idea, avanzata da Stefano Cristante, secondo cui i titoli dei saggi di Cassano siano finalizzati alla ricerca di uno *shock*, una "scossa emotiva", sia pure in funzione non necessariamente provocatoria<sup>8</sup>. L'umore saggistico di Cassano è, anzi, sempre mite e dialogante (talora caratterizzato da tendenze eufemistiche e persino da venature "epicuree"), come si può evincere da una rapida selezione di titoli tratti da *Modernizzare stanca: Favole, La fragile virtù della verità, La libertà vista di spalle, L'innocenza conservata, Senza ali, Elogio della lentezza*; non si tratta certo, come si vede, di un lessico dinamitardo, che esprima una particolare "volontà di potenza" (è, del resto, lo stesso Cristante a riconoscere: "Non mi stupirebbe sapere che Franco partisse con un titolo forte nella mente, per poi approdare a un altro titolo alla fine delle sue ricerche, magari nato dalle ceneri del primo"<sup>9</sup>).

Se vi è dunque una forza persuasiva nella scrittura di Cassano, questa risiede, a nostro avviso, nella sua "generosità", nella chiarezza attraverso la ricchezza di senso che è in grado di generare, malgrado le esigenze di rapidità e sintesi della prosa giornalistica. Come è stato notato, *Modernizzare stanca* è

un lavoro di grande leggibilità, che ha il merito di amplificare le doti di scrittore dell'autore, ben distante dall'immagine del sociologo incendiario, abile a vendere fumo, o del propagandista del vuoto, usando magari a sproposito parole tecniche o difficili; ma il Nostro, al contrario, non è neanche un personaggio che riesce a far credere che le banalità siano succhi concentrati di sapienza, da vendere al miglior offerente<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. APOCALITTICI INTEGRATI: IL SUPERAMENTO DELLA "TERZA VIA" DI UMBERTO ECO

La tesi di *Modernizzare stanca* è sintetizzata già nel titolo, che, richiamandosi al *Lavorare stanca* pavesiano<sup>11</sup>, enuncia una verità di "buon senso", in sé perfettamente plausibile: l'ideologia della modernizzazione a ogni costo obbliga a ritmi insostenibili, inumani, che alla lunga possono sfiancare anche i suoi più entusiasti adepti. Certamente, riconosce Cassano, la logica del progresso offre

<sup>6</sup> Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> F. Giuliani, "Dal Mediterraneo a Leopardi. Quattro libri di Franco Cassano", *La Capitanata*, XVII (2005), 46.

<sup>8</sup> S. Cristante, "Il pensiero rimuginante. Cassano e i suoi titoli", *Indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali*, 1-2 (2021), 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Giuliani, "Dal Mediterraneo a Leopardi. Quattro libri di Franco Cassano", 45.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. C. Pavese, *Lavorare stanca*, Milano: Einaudi, 2001.

enormi risorse e molte risposte, ma la pretesa di esportarle dappertutto costituisce non la soluzione, bensì il problema: quell'imposizione progressiva di un'unica forma di vita che allarga progressivamente le legioni degli sradicati, moltiplica le forme del risentimento, gli integralismi reattivi. Una dismisura ne produce altre, avvia una reazione a catena che può diventare incontrollabile. Ecco perché modernizzare stanca<sup>12</sup>.

La contrapposizione delineata qui da Cassano genera un campo di tensione semantica i cui poli, "modernità" e "stanchezza" (ma si potrebbe prendere in considerazione anche la coppia "velocità" e "lentezza": il sottotitolo del libro è, non a caso, *Perdere tempo, guadagnare tempo*), sembrano liberamente atteggiarsi sul dualismo proposto da Eco in *Apocalittici e integrati*<sup>13</sup>. Come l'intellettuale piemontese, Cassano ha del resto la capacità di esercitare una critica che evita i toni sentenziosi e aprioristici, operando uno scrutinio serrato e puntuale, *sine ira et studio*, che è animato dall'impegno morale e culturale – perciò anche politico – di mettere in questione, per usare un'immagine pirandelliana, "lo strappo nel cielo di carta"<sup>14</sup> della modernità.

"Noi non amiamo i toni apocalittici, ma vorremmo continuare a guardare tutto, senza rimuovere ciò che è scomodo dal campo visuale", si legge ne *Il pubblico come discarica*, uno dei brani più significativi di questo periodo. Pure, i punti di somiglianza tra Eco e Cassano sembrano finire qui: in *Apocalittici integrati* (senza la "e"), articolo in cui i "retropensieri" echiano del sociologo barese sono esplicitati già nel titolo, viene spiegato come la via mediana prospettata dal semiologo tra "apocalisse" e "integrazione" sia in realtà una soluzione insufficiente e forse fallace, poiché esprime

una sorta di centrismo teorico, che si pone al di là degli opposti estremismi. L'errore, secondo questa prospettiva, è quello di vedere un solo lato delle cose, esattamente lo stesso che contrappone chi vede un bicchiere mezzo pieno e chi lo vede mezzo vuoto. La risposta giusta sarebbe secondo Eco (noi abbiamo qualche dubbio): né apocalittici né integrati<sup>15</sup>.

Il "terzismo" di Eco sembra insomma a Cassano una posizione ontologica, di comodo per così dire, perché tende a semplificare la complessità dei rapporti, non riconosce la loro reciprocità, la loro natura reticolare, frattale. L'identità, il pensiero, la civiltà, invece – suggerisce il sociologo –, non dovrebbero essere delle dimensioni chiuse e "autarchiche", delle monadi, ma luoghi polifonici e ospitali come un Grand Hotel<sup>16</sup>. Come si legge ne *Il noi difficile*, una "società equilibrata è quella che sa muoversi tra l'"io" e il "noi", tra la libertà e le regole, tra i diritti e i doveri, che sa usare la prima persona sia al singolare che al plurale<sup>17</sup>. Cassano è convinto, con Bachtin, che ogni soggetto sia declinabile soltanto al plurale: *pluralia tantum*<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Cassano, *L'equilibrio e la modernità*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della comunicazione di massa*, Milano: Bompiani, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> L. Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Torino: Einaudi, 1993, 185.

<sup>15</sup> Cassano, *Apocalittici integrati*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Cassano, *Grand Hotel*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Cassano, *Il noi difficile*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. M. Bachtin, *L'autore e l'eroe*, Milano: Einaudi, 2000, 328.

## 3. L'OSSIMORO COME "TERAPIA"

Se uno dei concetti cardine de *Il pensiero meridiano* era la misura, la parola chiave di *Modernizzare stanca* è certamente "equilibrio", e non è un caso che l'introduzione di questo libro, edito pochi anni dopo, si intitolò proprio *L'equilibrio e la modernità*, come a richiamare la dialettica esistente tra questi due estremi concettuali, che Cassano discute senza indulgere a riduzionismi e semplificazioni.

Il rifiuto di questo universalismo espansivo e missionario non nasce da una demonizzazione reattiva e simmetrica, ma da un semplice sentimento di equità ed *equilibrio*, dalla repulsione per ogni dismisura, dal valore epistemologico dell'umiltà appreso, tra gli altri, da Montaigne, da un atteggiamento laico rigoroso, che ha ben poco a che fare con l'etnocentrismo supponente di chi oggi si adorna con quell'aggettivo. Le risposte più *equilibrate* alle sfide del futuro non verranno dall'esportazione illimitata e distruttiva dell'Occidente, ma dall'*equilibrio* tra il suo contributo e quello delle culture del sud e dell'est<sup>19</sup>.

Beninteso, Cassano non resta impigliato nelle pastoie del relativismo culturale, ma è ben consapevole della necessità di creare connessioni tra i contrari, gettare ponti tra le opposte rive, "curare" la dismisura attraverso il "valore epistemologico dell'umiltà", appreso, tra gli altri, dal "realista e disincantato Montaigne"<sup>20</sup>. Questo principio educa alla molteplicità, alla diversità, a decostruire il pensiero monolitico, esorcizzando l'oracolarità della società turbocapitalista (*Gli Azande siamo noi*, annuncia Cassano, alludendo alla natura idolatrica della cultura moderna, che paradossalmente la avvicina alla superstizione di certe società tribali<sup>21</sup>) e impedendo che la ragione diventi strumento della *hybris* progressista.

Tutto questo ha a che fare, come specifica Cassano in *Partita doppia*, con il riconoscimento pirandelliano "del doppio lato delle cose, dell'ambivalenza del mondo, dell'impossibilità di ricondurre le azioni e gli atteggiamenti dell'uomo nelle maglie di una contabilità semplice"<sup>22</sup>. Sembra di poter concludere che per il sociologo la ragione classica e la "teoria critica" non siano più strumenti efficaci per

scandagliare le profondità dell'animo umano. Con questa bussola si muove Cassano, dal resoconto della "zona grigia" di Levi da cui emerge l'indecifrabilità dell'umano e in cui lo scrittore torinese è l'esempio dell'intellettuale non conservatore, che non indulge però ad alcuna antropologia consolatoria<sup>23</sup>.

In questa prospettiva, si può forse individuare nell'ossimoro, inteso non come figura retorica ma come strategia linguistico-strutturale, lo strumento più adeguato a esplorare la logica della modernità. Il punto di contatto più solido tra Cassano e uno scrittore come Pasolini dev'essere cercato a ben vedere – al di là dei contenuti della critica – proprio nella comune visione ambivalente, cioè in quella tensione ibrida e bifronte che lo studioso individua nella poetica pasoliniana (il saggio *Pier Paolo Pasolini: ossimoro di una vita*, pubblicato per la prima volta nel 1994 su "Democrazia e diritto", viene poi incluso

<sup>19</sup> Cassano, *L'equilibrio e la modernità*, 8. Corsivo nostro.

<sup>20</sup> C. Bazzocchi, "Alla ricerca di un bene umile: esistenzialismo tragico e umanista o semplice disincanto?", *Indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> Cassano, *Gli Azande siamo noi*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 15-17.

<sup>22</sup> Cassano, *Partita doppia. Appunti per una felicità terrestre*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1993, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Bazzocchi, "Alla ricerca di un bene umile: esistenzialismo tragico e umanista o semplice disincanto?", 122.

come capitolo a sé stante ne *Il pensiero meridiano*<sup>24</sup>). A giudizio di Cassano, l'ossimoro non è in Pasolini una semplice opzione stilistico-espressiva, ma una vera e propria modalità euristica, uno strumento di conoscenza integrale in grado di cogliere la realtà nel suo aspetto proteiforme, facendo coesistere i diversi senza chiuderli in una sintesi. Questo "amor d'ossimoro" fa leva sulla

laica convinzione che gli occhi strabici della contraddizione permettano di vedere molto di più della vista perfetta del conformismo, che la colpa e la contraddizione siano il meccanismo attraverso cui ogni volta rammemoriamo l'altra faccia della luna, quella in quel momento nascosta<sup>25</sup>.

Per Cassano l'ossimoro è una sorta di *transfert* linguistico dell'aspetto reticolare, rapsodico della realtà – che si sottrae alle definizioni univoche e lineari, a dispetto di quanto vorrebbe far credere lo *storytelling* del progresso. È l'innesto di una controtendenza curativa, terapeutica, sul tronco delle narrazioni ufficiali o *mainstream*: un *et et* che si oppone alla logica ricattatoria, oscurantista, dell'*aut aut*. A questo proposito, il sociologo è fortemente attratto dall'intuizione pasoliniana di un utilizzo inattuale del sacro in qualità di "calmieratore" della modernità, quale

luogo di resistenza ai nuovi codici normativi del consumismo e per questa via [...] trasgressione "autentica" opposta a quella di massa e garantita dall'alto dell'oggi. Si afferma qui un altro ossimoro pasoliniano, l'affermazione di un sacro che diventa motivo ispiratore di una critica, che diviene eretico, di un uso della tradizione contro il potere, un uso rivoluzionario della tradizione<sup>26</sup>.

Una funzione analoga a questa svolgono nel discorso di Cassano i "sud" e gli "est" del mondo, che ai suoi occhi rappresentano nicchie di alterità, interpolazioni necessarie e vitali entro il modello di sviluppo nord-occidentale, sorta di vivente *memento* per "coloro che vivono murati nell'ideologia dell'infinita emancipazione senza nessuna domanda 'ecologica'" o preoccupazione circa i "destini generali"<sup>27</sup>. Com'è noto, il sociologo collega questa contrapposizione al discorso leopardiano sulla "differenza tra antichi e moderni", dove i primi "corrispondono ai popoli meridionali, portatori di immaginazione e di armonia con la natura", e i secondi ai "popoli settentrionali, portatori di ragione che si traduce in culto dell'attivismo e del lavoro"<sup>28</sup>. Qui la sua critica "a un modello produttivo unidirezionale, basato sullo sviluppo continuo e incessante, sul mito della ragione autosufficiente, si incontra con la critica leopardiana alle 'magnifiche sorti e progressive'"<sup>29</sup>. Come sintetizza Durante,

Per questa strada, si chiede al Sud "di diventare Nord" [...] se vuole essere parte della modernità, attraverso un rovesciamento che non solo pone il primato del calcolo sulla poesia, ma addirittura determina una colpevolizzazione dell'immaginazione come motore attivo dell'esistenza<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> L. Durante, "L'umano 'oltre il nulla' della modernità", in *Indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Il modello che ha in mente Cassano è, al contrario, quello di una civiltà plurale, in qualche modo "ossimorica", che abbia nella pancia "un deposito di sapienza ecologica, di coscienza del limite", fatto di tradizioni, culture, istanze subalterne, non allineate al "trionfalismo espansivo" della modernità<sup>31</sup> e interagenti in una logica di "supplementazione"<sup>32</sup> per la quale

ogni cultura prova ad attingere alle esperienze condotte da altre culture ciò di cui essa difetta [...]. In questo senso, il meridianismo si oppone all'universalismo, inteso come il riconoscimento di un'unica umanità sotto la pluralità di croste culturali<sup>33</sup>.

Spostandosi lungo questa falsariga su un livello più squisitamente politico, l'intellettuale barese riflette anche sulla suggestione – avanzata da Pasolini a pochi giorni dalla sua morte – per la quale

di fronte a un potere che ha mutato radicalmente natura, la sinistra per rimanere se stessa [possa] recuperare alcune ragioni della destra, non di qualsiasi destra ma solo di quella "sublime" che può insegnare a chi è rimasto prigioniero della Critica la resistenza alla liquefazione del mondo<sup>34</sup>.

#### 4. CERCARE LE MIGLIORI CONDIZIONI DI VISIBILITÀ

Se da Pasolini Cassano mutua l'urgenza "verticale" (nel senso della volontà di intervento diretto nella realtà), da Calvino apprende forse l'importanza di essere scettico e "orizzontale", cultore del dubbio e portato a immaginare "mondi possibili". C'è, del resto, qualcosa di costantemente provvisorio nella ricerca di Cassano, come un principio di insoddisfazione per i modelli e le verità precostituiti, che rinvia a un bisogno di "re-indagine e ri-ponderazione perenne"<sup>35</sup>, alla continua ricalibrazione dello sguardo e alla ricerca delle migliori condizioni di "visibilità".

Questa natura "liquida" e autotelica del pensiero di Cassano rende – proprio come il mare e la riva fanno con gli "integrismi" della terra – "orizzontale un sapere che era verticale, spinge la fessità della terra a confrontarsi con il moto incessante ed infinito delle onde"<sup>36</sup>. D'altronde, l'"umiltà" del sociologo sta nel riconoscere, come il Palomar calviniano, che soltanto "dopo aver conosciuto la superficie delle cose, [...] ci si può spingere a cercare quel che c'è sotto. Ma la superficie delle cose è inesauribile"<sup>37</sup>. Se uno

<sup>31</sup> Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. G.C. Spivak, *Raddrizzare i torti*, in *Troppo umano. La giustizia nell'era della globalizzazione*, a cura di N. Owen, Milano: Mondadori, 2005, 183-285.

<sup>33</sup> O. Romano, "Il pluriversalismo meridiano. Un progetto incompiuto", *Indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali*, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 173. Pasolini ha suggerito la possibilità di una "destra sublime" nell'ultimo periodo della sua vita, soprattutto in opere come *Bestia da stile*, *La nuova gioventù* e durante un incontro tenutosi a Lecce pochi giorni prima della sua morte, nel corso di una conferenza nota come *Volgar'eloquio*. Cfr. Pasolini, *Bestia da stile*, in *Teatro*, a cura di W. Siti e S. De Laude, Milano: Mondadori, 2001, 759-853. Cfr. in particolare Pasolini, *Saluto e augurio*, in *Tutte le poesie*, 2 vol., a cura di W. Siti e S. De Laude, Milano: Mondadori, 2009, vol. II, 513-518 e Pasolini, *Volgar'eloquio*, in *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, 2 vol., Milano: Mondadori, 2008, vol. II, 2826-2862.

<sup>35</sup> Cristante, "Il pensiero rimuginante. Cassano e i suoi titoli", 118. *Ri-orientamenti* è, significativamente, anche il titolo di una sezione di *Modernizzare stanca*.

<sup>36</sup> Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> I. Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 3 vol., a cura di M. Barenghi e B. Falchetto, Milano: Mondadori, 2004, vol. III, 920.

dei tratti distintivi della contemporaneità è l'entropia, la "pulviscolarità" (la liquidità, direbbe forse Bauman), il compito dell'intellettuale dev'essere allora – sulla scorta delle *Lezioni americane* e di *Palomar* – quello di aguzzare la vista, fare pulizia nello sguardo, liberare l'occhio dalle cataratte ideologiche, dalle nebbie del senso comune, per fare spazio a "ciò che inferno non è"<sup>38</sup>.

Come è sottolineato nell'introduzione di *Modernizzare stanca* (con parole che fanno pensare sia allo scrittore ligure sia, ancora, al Pasolini "corsaro"), questa strategia euristica

è intrecciata a una resistenza esistenziale, al rifiuto di un'omologazione culturale sempre più incontrastata e arrogante. Tale resistenza nasce dalla convinzione che esistano forme dell'esperienza preziose, che non solo non vanno cancellate in nome dei diritti della modernizzazione, ma sono da tutelare gelosamente perché consentono di guardare al di là di essa. Lungi dall'essere residui in via d'estinzione, quelle forme d'esperienza sono garanzia di futuro, offrono ossigeno al pensiero, e gli forniscono autonomia e un criterio di giudizio<sup>39</sup>.

L'elemento visivo è, peraltro, molto importante nella scrittura giornalistica di Cassano, di cui è una sorta di correlativo formale, un amplificatore della leggibilità. Lo si nota dall'utilizzo diffuso di citazioni cinematografiche (dagli amati film di Loach, Spielberg, Scott, Jarmusch, su tutti) e dalla frequenza delle raffigurazioni simboliche negli scritti giornalistici dell'autore. In alcuni casi le metafore di Cassano sembrano richiamare direttamente il principio strutturalista e "architetonico" tipico delle *Città invisibili*, come in questo passo di *Antipodi*:

L'identità è come una casa e ha quindi bisogno di fondamenta sulle quali appoggiare il peso della vita di ogni giorno, richiede sicurezze e ripetizione. Ma le case possono essere molto diverse: ci sono quelle in cui non ci sono né porte né finestre e nessuno può entrare o uscire, e ci sono quelle in cui ci sono arrivi e partenze, con vasti cortili per parlare, con grandi finestre sul mondo e sul cielo, con porte che fanno circolare l'aria e le persone<sup>40</sup>.

Non si deve pensare, tuttavia, che Cassano nutra una fiducia incondizionata nella funzione cognitiva della metafora: è lui stesso ad avvertire i lettori che "le metafore non sono innocenti"<sup>41</sup>. Nella nota apologia di Menenio Agrippa, rileva ad esempio il sociologo, si afferma che il funzionamento della società dipende dalla concordia di tutte le classi, come la salute del corpo umano è garantita dall'armonia di tutte le sue membra. Questo accostamento però, osserva Cassano, è improprio e tendenzioso perché sembra insinuare che ogni potenziale rivolta contro l'ingiustizia sociale sia "l'inizio di una malattia, un ammutinamento irragionevole e senza speranza. È questo il momento in cui la metafora diventa pericolosa e falsa"<sup>42</sup>.

La suggestione favolistica si lega spesso e volentieri in Cassano alla dimensione ludica (l'autore ama ogni tanto concedersi *calembour* come "Domenica detta Mimma", "Via dei Pori Imperiali" ecc.) e al registro scientifico-naturalistico, attraverso esempi af-

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 498.

<sup>39</sup> Cassano, *L'equilibrio e la modernità*, 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> Cassano, *Antipodi*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 18. Il "dialogo" implicito tra Cassano e Calvino traspare anche dal titolo – antifrastrico – di uno dei brani di *Modernizzare stanca*, *Le città visibili: esercizi spirituali per viaggiatori*. *Ibid.*, 75-77.

<sup>41</sup> Cassano, *Non scherzate con le metafore*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 111.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

ferenti – alla maniera delle *Cosmicomiche* – al linguaggio dell'astronomia e della fisica classica, come accade in *Luigi degli ossigeni* o ne *Le pillole della dismisura*.

Per descrivere la differenza fondamentale tra la società moderna e quelle tradizionali Tocqueville ha fatto ricorso a una splendida metafora: le società tradizionali erano pentole che contenevano acqua a temperatura ambiente, nelle quali i movimenti delle particelle erano lenti e quasi inavvertibili, mentre noi siamo una pentola in cui l'acqua è in continua ebollizione, in cui tutte le molecole lottano per salire in alto<sup>43</sup>.

L'immaginazione dell'autore sa essere "esopica" (come quella di Eco<sup>44</sup> e di Calvino), concedendosi apologhi e *divertissement* che contengono morali minime. È il caso di *Piccole salvezze*, in cui Cassano gioca a distinguere i modi verbali tra quelli più severi e di ordine – l'indicativo e l'imperativo, per esempio – e quelli più duttili e relativistici – il condizionale e il congiuntivo, su tutti. Le simpatie di Cassano vanno, *ça va sans dire*, all'infinito (modo verbale leopardiano), che

si sottrae alla padronanza, alla tirannia dei soggetti. Esso è il comunismo del verbo, la sua desinenza e libera da ogni assegnazione personale. Com'è più bello e più forte naufragare di naufragai, volare di volo, sognare di ho sognato! L'infinito [...] è l'unica forma capace di rappresentare tutte le altre, al di là delle piccole invidie e gelosie dei pronomi. Ogni volta che incontriamo un verbo all'infinito è come se guardassimo il cielo, librandoci sopra i litigi del nostro condominio terreno<sup>45</sup>.

##### 5. LA SCRITTURA DI CASSANO COME "BENE COMUNE"

L'immagine della casa, del condominio, del Grand Hotel – intesi come "edifici polifonici" che hanno bisogno di continua manutenzione e cura per "stare in piedi" – è un motivo alquanto ricorrente nella scrittura di Cassano. Soprattutto da *Il pensiero meridiano* in poi, uno dei temi cruciali per il sociologo barese è proprio il declino dei "beni comuni", del concetto di "pubblico", favorito dall'esaltazione indiscriminata di tutto ciò che è individuale, privato, nonché dalla tendenza moderna alla "secolarizzazione infinita" e alla sconsecrazione dei luoghi collettivi.

A questo stato di cose ha contribuito in maniera decisiva, a giudizio di Byung-Chul Han, la "scomparsa dei riti"<sup>46</sup> nella nostra società. La ritualizzazione e la simbolizzazione sociale, infatti, creando legami, vincoli, pratiche comuni, spazi di condivisione e di intesa là dove prima non c'erano, non sono che un modo di dare senso e struttura allo spazio altrimenti imprecisato della vita sociale, abitare una casa comune, co-esistere. Si tratta, come sostiene il filosofo, di "tecniche simboliche dell'*accasamento*", che

trasformano l'essere-nel-mondo in un essere-a-casa, fanno del mondo un posto affidabile. Ess[e] sono nel tempo ciò che la casa è nello spazio. Rendono il tempo abitabile, anzi lo rendono calpestabile come una casa. Riordinano il tempo, lo aggiustano. [...] I riti stabilizzano la vita<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Cassano, *Le pillole della dismisura*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 61.

<sup>44</sup> La definizione è di Paolo Fabbri, dal saggio *Eco qui pro quo*, in M. Cogo, *Fenomenologia di Umberto Eco. Indagini sulle origini di un mito intellettuale contemporaneo*, Bologna: Baskerville, 2010, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Cassano, *Piccole salvezze*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. B. Han, *La scomparsa dei riti. Una topologia del presente*, Roma: Nottetempo, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15. Corsivo dell'autore.

La “coazione a produrre”<sup>48</sup> che contraddistingue la mitologia del progresso genera una società in cui il tempo viene scandito fondamentalmente da esigenze economiche, e quindi – come indica Cassano nel sottotitolo di *Modernizzare stanca* – può essere solo “guadagnato” o “perso”, mai vissuto come “durata”. Questa temporalità contingente e puntiforme

distrugge consapevolmente la durata allo scopo di produrre di più, di costringere a un maggior consumo [...]; se le cose vengono solo usate e consumate, ecco che indugiare diventa impossibile. E dal momento che la stessa coazione a produrre destabilizza la vita smontando ciò che dura nella vita, essa distrugge anche la resistenza della vita, sebbene quest’ultima si allunghi<sup>49</sup>.

In proposito, Cassano riflette sull’importanza della lentezza, della saggezza, del consacrare tempi e spazi all’essere, insomma del resistere all’impulso mimetico-sociale dell’“ansia”, della “corsa”, della programmazione continua, come testimoniano molti titoli dell’ultima sezione di *Modernizzare stanca*, denominata per l’appunto *Terapie: Elogio della lentezza, Passeggiare non stanca, Nobiltà del cazzeggiare*<sup>50</sup>. Nella “società del rischio”, tuttavia, il predominio della tecnica e dell’organizzazione è strettamente correlato all’incremento dell’insicurezza e della paranoia.

L’ansia continua e la retorica delle emergenze sono infatti caratteristiche strutturali [...] di quelle società che, non confidando più nell’intervento divino e condannando ogni forma di passività e fatalismo, hanno smesso da tempo di usare quell’antica tecnologia che è la preghiera<sup>51</sup>.

In questo passaggio si ritrova il tema pasoliniano del sacro come “contrappeso” della modernità, oltre che come soluzione “naturale” a ciò che De Martino ha definito “crisi della presenza”<sup>52</sup>, ossia quello stato di angoscia che l’uomo sente davanti ai fenomeni che non è in grado di controllare. Per Cassano sacralità e ragione non sono sfere in competizione o reciprocamente escludenti: sono anzi legate da una relazione inestricabile, di mutua implicazione: anche in questo risiede la complessità dell’umano.

Da questo punto di vista, il continuo appello del sociologo alla “misura” e all’“equilibrio” ha un valore curativo, perché punta a promuovere una logica di relazione e di ri-composizione in una società dominata dall’individualismo e dall’“atomizzazione”, processi che replicano entro i confini della persona le stesse dinamiche “coloniali” – di sistemica egemonizzazione e strumentalizzazione dell’altro, del diverso, del subalterno – che imbarbariscono il mondo: l’io vale più del noi, quel che è mio vale più di quel che è tuo, le mie istanze vengono prima di quelle altrui. In questo senso l’ossimoro – in quanto tecnica dialogica e modo di coabitazione degli “opposti” – è considerabile una sorta di terapia, perché è creativo e includente, educa a com-prendere e sperimentare i “diversi”.

A questo dialogismo è consacrata la stessa scrittura di Cassano, intesa come “istituzione”, modo di rapporto con il lettore. Non è esagerato, a nostro avviso, affermare che

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. Cassano, *Modernizzare stanca*, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Cassano, *La talpa e la modernità*, in *Modernizzare stanca*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Sul concetto della “crisi” o dello “smarrirsi della presenza” cfr. E. De Martino, *La terra del rimorso*, Milano: il Saggiatore, 2013.

l'autore concepisca i propri interventi giornalistici come "bene comune", servizio pubblico, improntato ai valori cardinali della discrezione, della responsabilità, dell'umiltà. Essi sono una lezione di sguardo, una maieutica, una possibilità di insegnare e apprendere senza mai cedere alla tentazione di prendere posizioni comode, adagiarsi nelle zone di *comfort* e nelle retoriche consolatorie, procedendo sempre "a passo d'uomo". Come afferma il sociologo,

Bisogna resistere alla tentazione di sedersi dall'una o dall'altra parte, accettare di rimanere in piedi, anche se si sta scomodi e ci si può stancare<sup>53</sup>.

In definitiva, si può affermare che *Modernizzare stanca* sia un libro affettivo e sottilmente drammatico, che ama ciò che unisce e non ciò che divide, indicando, nel segno di Camus – altro grande punto di riferimento dell'"umanesimo critico" di Cassano<sup>54</sup> –, la strada per una difficile – ma raggiungibile – solidarietà tra gli uomini proprio mentre segnala l'estrema fragilità di ciò che è umano. Citando *La ginestra* leopardiana, l'intellettuale barese avverte che

Solo la nostra capacità di legarci in quella che Giacomo Leopardi chiamava "social catena" potrebbe atturare lo strapotere che la moderna solitudine regala alla morte<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Cassano, cit. in Bazzocchi, "Alla ricerca di un bene umile: esistenzialismo tragico e umanista o semplice disincanto?", *Indiscipline. Rivista di scienze sociali*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> *Albert Camus: necessità del pensiero meridiano* è il titolo del quinto capitolo de *Il pensiero meridiano*. La locuzione "pensiero meridiano" è il titolo di un paragrafo de *L'uomo in rivolta* di Camus, Milano: Bompiani, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Cassano, *Modernizzare stanca*, 63.

GUGLIEMO BOTTIN\*

## SINGING THE SCRIPT: LE FILASTROCCHES IPERDIEGETICHE DI ENNIO MORRICONE

### *Abstract*

In the scholarly literature on film music, hyperdiegetic sounds are those that draw attention to themselves and have a symbolic effect, assigning a particular meaning to objects, characters, actions. Starting from this connotation, I would like to propose the idea of hyperdiegetic song or nursery rhyme, analyzing some peculiar works by Ennio Morricone featuring lyrics have clear references to the film's plot, recounting events that have taken place before or will take place after such music is played. In the films discussed in this paper, hyperdiegetic songs are used as scores or as source music. In all cases, the narrative connection is established by the lyrics which clearly refer back to the story. In this way, hyperdiegetic music brings out something that we cannot simply attribute to the flair of the composer or to a direct diegetic cause, and seems to have been written by the film's authors themselves. These songs are an affront to the canonical functions of music in film: as the lyrics anticipate or recall the events on screen, the 'ontological distance' between the score and the events is denied and an uncanny realism breaks through.

### *Keywords*

Film music; Morricone; nursery rhyme; hyperdiegetic; song lyrics.

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## I. INTRODUZIONE

Nella letteratura accademica sul cinema il termine 'iperdiegetico' è utilizzato con diverse accezioni. La più diffusa è quella riferita alla iperdiegesi così come delineata da Matt Hills, ovvero la creazione di uno spazio narrativo vasto e dettagliato, di cui solo una frazione viene vista o attraversata nell'ambito del testo, ma che nondimeno mostra di operare secondo principi di logica interna e di ampliamento<sup>1</sup>. Massimo Mariani affronta l'annosa questione tra diegetico vs. extradiegetico<sup>2</sup> nel suo manuale di analisi e progettazione del suono e della musica per il cinema, cercando di separare il realismo sonoro da effetti e musiche che sembrano invece godere di vita propria rispetto alle immagini.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hills, *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge, 2001, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Tra gli approcci alternativi alla teoria di Gorbman si vedano B. Winters, "The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space", *Music & Letters*, 91, 2 (2010): 224-244; A. Cecchi, "Diegetico vs. extradiegetico: revisione critica di un'opposizione concettuale in vista di una teoria dell'audiovisione", *WAV: Worlds of AudioVision*, 2010, consultato il 12 luglio 2023, <http://www-5.unipv.it/wav/index.php?view=article&id=71>.

Secondo l'autore, è detta 'iperdiegetica' la deformazione o l'esasperazione iperbolica di quei suoni che "cercano di attirare un'attenzione che non gli [sic] spetterebbe [...] per assegnare un senso preciso a oggetti, personaggi, situazioni"<sup>3</sup>. In questo senso l'iperdiegetico può riguardare qualsiasi tipo di materiale sonoro, sia quando la fonte è in campo sia quando ne rimane fuori. Mariani sembra riferirsi principalmente a effetti, ambienti o riverberi particolarmente marcati, verosimili dal punto di vista della tipologia timbrica ma poco realistici (o addirittura surreali) nel trattamento, nel volume o nella durata.

A partire da questa particolare connotazione del suono cinematografico, vorrei qui proporre il concetto di *canzone o filastrocca iperdiegetica*, in riferimento sia al suono iperdiegetico come descritto da Mariani sia alla più ampia categoria del *diégétique* delineata da Souriau: "Diegetico è tutto ciò che consideriamo come rappresentato dal film e come parte della realtà presupposta dalla significazione del film"<sup>4</sup>. A ogni buon conto, nel mondo professionale della musica per il cinema le espressioni *source music* e *film score* sono certamente più diffuse di 'diegetico' ed 'extradiegetico' e, per questo motivo, anche alcuni studiosi preferiscono utilizzare termini più vicini alla pratica cinematografica che alla teoria narratologica<sup>5</sup>.

Nei prossimi paragrafi presenterò alcuni brani di Morricone il cui testo è più o meno rivelatorio della vicenda narrata nel film in cui sono inseriti. Non si tratta di una semplice attinenza, come potrebbe essere per una canzone romantica che accompagna la nostalgia per un amore perduto, oppure un vecchio brano del passato abbinato a flashback e ricordi, magari presentato con la tecnica della soggettiva psichico-sonora, corrispondente al livello mediato nella teoria di Miceli, ovvero come "una musica che materializza i sentimenti (e in questo caso anche le parole) del personaggio, quasi non appartenesse alla volontà 'descrittiva' del compositore e della contingenza 'realistica' dell'accaduto"<sup>6</sup>. Al contrario della musica metadiegetica, il testo della filastrocca iperdiegetica presenta esplicitamente elementi della sceneggiatura, fatti già avvenuti o che si produrranno in seguito. Non è neppure possibile classificare queste musiche in termini di 'commento diegetico' (brani situati nella diegesi, ma utilizzati per commentare la storia da una prospettiva non localizzabile nella diegesi)<sup>7</sup>, perché la loro fonte sonora non è sempre collocata nella narrazione. Inoltre, la prospettiva che emerge da tali 'commenti cantati' può essere, a seconda dei casi, interna o esterna al racconto.

La collocazione di questi brani musicali nella dicotomia tra 'storia' e 'discorso' (in senso chatmaniano)<sup>8</sup> non è affatto banale: da un lato sono percepiti come discorsi (ossia modi specifici di raccontare una storia), dall'altro intrattengono una relazione anche con la storia in sé, esplicitandone i fatti. Da questo punto di vista, queste canzoncine potrebbero essere qualificate anche come eterodiegetiche<sup>9</sup>. Ricordano, infatti, il narratore

<sup>3</sup> M. Mariani, *Il suono per il cinema*, Torino: Utet, 2020, 65.

<sup>4</sup> É. Souriau, "La structure de l'univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie", *Revue internationale de filmologie*, 7-8 (1951): 231-240, 237 (traduzione mia).

<sup>5</sup> A. Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 42-49.

<sup>6</sup> S. Miceli, "Analizzare la musica per film: Una riproposta della teoria dei livelli", *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 29, 2 (1994): 517-544 (531).

<sup>7</sup> G. Heldt, *Music and Levels of Narration in Film: Steps Across the Border*, Chicago: Intellect, 2013, 84-85.

<sup>8</sup> V. Sbravatti, "Story-Music / Discourse-Music: Analyzing the Relationship between Placement and Function of Music in Films", *Music and the Moving Image*, 9, 3 (2016): 19-37.

<sup>9</sup> Il termine 'musica eterodiegetica' è utilizzato, con diversa accezione, nella recensione di uno sceneggiato televisivo del 1978: "The narrator is not rendered through voiceover, but replaced by heterodiegetic music – in particular one rustic, sympathetic, wistful, ultimately comedic tune", C. Brown, "Review of The

eterodiegetico, tipico del romanzo vittoriano, che racconta la storia rimanendo esterno alla vicenda. Dunque, ‘filastrocche eterodiegetiche’ in quanto agiscono come un’entità onnisciente che ha accesso ed è in grado di riferirsi a qualsiasi elemento della trama. Tuttavia l’aspetto iperdiegetico rimane poiché, anticipando fatti ed eventi che devono ancora essere presentati al pubblico, il testo della filastrocca espande lo spazio diegetico a disposizione dello spettatore<sup>10</sup>.

Queste musiche si collocano agli antipodi rispetto a quelle che Claudia Gorbman chiama *unheard melodies*<sup>11</sup> in riferimento a quelle forme di *underscoring* che, anche se non recepite consapevolmente dallo spettatore, si inseriscono efficacemente nel ritmo visivo delle immagini supportando senza disturbare o interrompere il flusso dell’azione. Già nel 1947, Adorno ed Eisler inseriscono la categoria del ‘non invadente’ nell’elenco di cattive abitudini che ostacolerebbero il progresso artistico nella musica per il cinema. La musica può certamente costituire un disturbo nei casi in cui narrazione e dialogo devono avere la precedenza. Invece, quando l’integrazione tra musica e diegesi si rende necessaria, la scelta di un brano ‘non invadente’ sarebbe invero assai discutibile<sup>12</sup>. Anche se un po’ datata, la posizione di Adorno ed Eisler è a mio avviso curiosa. Gli autori, infatti, descrivono l’effetto provocato dalla *unobtrusive music* servendosi del testo di una filastrocca: “Conosco un bel gioco: mi dipingo la barba e mi nascondo dietro un ventaglio, in modo che nessuno la noti”<sup>13</sup>. Al contrario, le filastrocche iperdiegetiche hanno un effetto fortemente invadente: il loro testo rivela all’improvviso la qualità diegetica di una musica che, nascosta dallo schermo da un ‘ventaglio’ (meno letterariamente: fuori dal campo delle immagini), sarebbe potuta sembrare uno *score* extradiegetico. Questo aspetto sembrerebbe richiamare il concetto miceliano di ‘musica come personaggio’, tuttavia la filastrocca iperdiegetica non assume un ruolo né manifesta una propria agentività: semplicemente evoca o anticipa gli eventi.

Oltre alle *unheard melodies*, Gorbman ha esaminato anche un tipo di vocalità canora spontanea indicata con l’espressione *artless singing*. Un personaggio che canta in quel modo può trasmettere un confidenziale senso di intimità e comunicare una ‘verità’ rimanendo ancorato al registro del realismo. Al tempo stesso, si tratta ben di rado di un momento davvero innocente e privo di significato diegetico. Anche se questo canto ‘senza arte né parte’ non è musica da film, né dialogo, né performance, l’*artless singing* assolve comunque diverse funzioni narrative<sup>14</sup>. Tuttavia nelle cantilene morriconiane la vocalità è sempre ‘artistica’, compiutamente performativa e affidata a professionisti. Quando una filastrocca è cantata da bambini si tratta comunque del coro di voci bianche della Radiotelevisione Italiana diretto da Renata Cortiglioni oppure dei cantori dell’Arcum di Paolo Lucci: voci condotte magistralmente e non certo lasciate in balia della spontaneità.

L’utilizzo di cantilene infantili nel cinema e nella narrativa è in sé piuttosto comune e si ritrova anche nel più celebre romanzo di Agatha Christie, *And then there were none*, meglio conosciuto come *Dieci Piccoli Indiani* (1939), in cui una macabra filastrocca

Mill on the Floss on The BBC in 1978”, *The George Eliot Review*, 42 (2011). <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/593/>.

<sup>10</sup> G. Bottin, “Slashing the Tape. Cuts and Edits in Morricone’s Music for *Who Saw Her Die?*”, *L’Avventura*, 2024, 1 (2024): 29-58. DOI: 10.17397/113917.

<sup>11</sup> C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> T.W. Adorno, H. Eisler, *Composing for the Films* New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> “Ich weiss ein schönes Spiel, Ich mal’ mir einen Bart, und halt mir einen Facher vor, dass niemand ihn gewahrt”, Adorno & Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> C. Gorbman, “Artless Singing”, *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, 5, 2 (2011): 157-172.

viene seguita alla lettera dall'assassino che mette in atto una serie di delitti. L'esempio cinematografico (diegetico) per eccellenza è, invece, in *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (Lang, 1931). In una delle prime scene vediamo (e sentiamo) un gruppo di bambini fare la conta con una filastrocca il cui testo anticipa ciò che sta per accadere: "Scappa, scappa monellaccio, se no viene l'uomo nero, col suo lungo coltellaccio, per tagliare a pezzettini proprio te!". La malignità del canto è peraltro confermata dalla madre di uno dei fanciulli che, sporgendosi da una ringhiera, lo ammonisce: "Ti avevo detto di non cantare più questa maledetta tiritera!". Un altro esempio è la filastrocca in *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963). Si tratta dell'adattamento americano di 'Wee Cooper O'Fife', un testo scozzese tradizionale che, nella versione originale, racconta di un bottaio che picchia la moglie perché questa si rifiuta di cucinare e di pulire la casa<sup>15</sup>. La versione usata nel film è meno violenta e del tutto opposta nella conclusione: anche qui c'è un marito che lamenta la trascuratezza della moglie nelle faccende domestiche ma alla fine è l'uomo ad avere la peggio:

She combed her hair but once a year, risseldy rosseldy, mow mow mow  
 With every stroke, she shed a tear, risseldy rosseldy [...]  
 She swept up the floor but once a year [...] she said that brooms were much too dear [...]  
 She churned the butter in her dad's old boot [...] And for a catch, she used her foot [...]  
 The butter, it came out a grisly grey [...] The cheese took legs and ran away [...]  
 She let the critter get away [...] I asked my wife to wash the floor [...]  
 She gave me my hat and she showed me the door [...]  
 risseldy rosseldy, hey johnny dosselty, nickety nackety, rustical quality, mow mow mow.

La filastrocca conferisce alla scena un sinistro senso di presagio. In primo luogo perché non si tratta di una canzone adatta ai bambini di scuola elementare; in secondo luogo perché sembra indirettamente riferirsi ad alcune dinamiche del film anticipando un quadro familiare inquietante: la soffocante madre del protagonista, un uomo in balia delle donne tra cui la sua ex fiamma, ossia la maestra che dirige il coro di bambini e che presumibilmente ha insegnato loro la canzone. Quando la protagonista esce dall'aula e si siede su una panchina nel giardino della scuola, il canto diventa *off screen* e, in un certo senso, sembra assumere anche la funzione di una musica di commento<sup>16</sup>. La ripetizione della cantilena e l'accumulazione delle parole alla fine di ogni verso della canzone amplificano la suspense creata da un accumulo visivo: quello degli uccelli che si radunano su un traliccio nel parco giochi. Tuttavia, le voci dei bambini restano *source music* anche quando la fonte non è più visibile. La cantilena conferma, quindi, sul piano uditivo quello che vediamo accadere nelle immagini. Si tratta di un tipico meccanismo hitchcockiano: i personaggi sono ancora ignari del pericolo mentre la suspense del pubblico sta già crescendo<sup>17</sup>. A differenza dei casi di seguito esaminati, questa filastrocca, come molte delle nenie infantili usate nel cinema di suspense<sup>18</sup>, è preesistente. Il testo del brano in *The Birds* non è originale e, per questo motivo, non può anticipare dettagli della sceneggiatura. Sul versante opposto, l'ossessionante cantilena 'School at Night' in

<sup>15</sup> J.-P. Aubert, "À propos d'une séquence de *The Birds* (*Les oiseaux*, 1963)", *L'Art du Cinema*, 57 (2008): 191-204.

<sup>16</sup> R. Allen, "The Sound of 'The Birds'", *October*, 146 (2003): 97-120.

<sup>17</sup> M. Corbella, "Cin'Acusmonium: Alfred Hitchcock - Gli Uccelli", presentazione all'Auditorium San Fedele, Milano, 9 novembre, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> D.W. Lennard, "All Fun and Games...: Children's Culture in the Horror Film, from *Deep Red* (1975) to *Child's Play* (1988)", *Continuum*, 26, 1 (2012): 133-142.

*Profondo Rosso* (Argento, 1965) è originale ma priva di testo e rimane un canto verbalmente ‘muto’ rispetto alla vicenda narrata.

Nel cinema, la gerarchia tra suono e visione può essere invertita e la musica può guidare le immagini in diversi modi. Le musiche con testo e, in particolare, le canzoni cantate dagli stessi personaggi tendono a interrompere il flusso narrativo e a catturare l’attenzione. È però necessario distinguere la canzone iperdiegetica anche dai *musical moment* esaminati da Amy Herzog<sup>19</sup>, dove il termine *musical* si riferisce prima di tutto (anche se non solo) a un genere teatrale e cinematografico. Le immagini di questi momenti musicali vengono spesso costruite seguendo le caratteristiche della musica, per esempio quando il ritmo e il tempo di una canzone dettano il ritmo e i tempi del montaggio visivo. Questo di norma non vale per la canzone iperdiegetica.

Rick Altman usa l’espressione *supra-diegetic music* per indicare le situazioni di ‘trascendenza estatica’ in cui razionalità e consequenzialità vengono sospese e l’agentività della musica prende il sopravvento, ingenerando momenti di puro spettacolo (anche qui il riferimento è al musical cinematografico in cui lo spazio diegetico realistico diventa un palcoscenico ideale)<sup>20</sup>. La canzone iperdiegetica sembra invece avere un rapporto con le immagini meno prescrittivo. Può presentarsi come musica extradiegetica e, talvolta, anche come accompagnamento ai titoli di testa (ammetto che in questo caso chiamarla iperdiegetica può risultare inappropriato); altre volte è *source music*, la cui fonte è ben visibile o coincide con gli stessi personaggi. La qualità iperdiegetica è sempre data dal testo cantato, che rimanda inequivocabilmente alla trama. La canzone sembra essere stata scritta dagli stessi autori del film e, per questo motivo, contiene elementi o parole chiave della sceneggiatura.

## 2. GRAZIE ZIA (1968)

Il primo brano da me individuato è la filastrocca che compare già nei titoli di testa in *Grazie Zia* (Samperi, 1968). Il testo è molto breve: “C’è la guerra c’è la pace, c’è il pollo con la brace”. La seconda sillaba di “pace” coincide con il “c’è” della frase successiva; lo stesso avviene con il “ce” di brace. Questo rende il canto più interessante, anche se meno intelligibile.

Figura 1 - Trascrizione delle prime battute di “Guerra e pace, pollo e brace”

c'è la guer-ra la—a pa-c'è il pol-lo con la bra-c'è la guer-ra la—a pa-c'è il pol-lo con la bra-c'è la

guer-ra la—a pa-c'è il pol-lo con la bra-c'è la guer-ra la—a pa-c'è il pol-lo con la bra-c'è la...

<sup>19</sup> A. Herzog, *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same - The Musical Moment in Film*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> R. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 62-85.

A rendere il brano iperdiegetico sono i riferimenti al rapporto, inizialmente conflittuale (la guerra) e poi di intesa (la pace), tra il nipote (Lou Castel) e la zia (Lisa Gastoni). Inoltre, vi è una scena che parla della guerra del Vietnam: una radio trasmette notizie dal fronte mentre il nipote tiene ossessivamente il conto delle vittime del conflitto su una lavagna. Si vedono i modellini di un aeroporto militare statunitense e di un villaggio vietnamita. Il nipote gioca a bruciare le capanne e i soldatini, accusandoli di essere antiamericani<sup>21</sup>.

In una scena successiva, nipote e zia incrociano gli sguardi in modo vagamente sensuale. Qui torna la filastrocca della guerra e del pollo, questa volta senza accompagnamento strumentale e con del testo aggiunto rispetto alla versione usata nei titoli. Il pollo alla brace, che fino a questo momento sembrava messo lì solo per fare rima con pace, diventa ‘protagonista’ di un picnic in giardino. Il barbecue è inquadrato in primo piano mentre, all’interno della casa, il nipote compie un maldestro tentativo di suicidio, cercando di spararsi un colpo di fucile e mancando il bersaglio.

Figura 2 - *Il gioco della guerra e il barbecue anticipati dal testo di “Guerra e pace, pollo e brace”*



### 3. VERGOGNA, SCHIFOSI! (1969)

La seconda canzone corrisponde al tema principale della colonna sonora di *Vergogna, schifosi!* (Severino, 1969). Le parole “caldo, matto, soldi, morto” fanno riferimento al ricatto subito da un gruppo di professionisti, colpevoli dell’occultamento di un cadavere (“morto”), che si vedono recapitare un’anonima richiesta di denaro (“soldi”) per non rendere pubblica la vicenda. La melodia della filastrocca viene utilizzata anche diegeticamente: uno degli attori (Lino Capolicchio, nei panni del presunto ricattatore) la fischieta mentre cerca di sedurre una delle donne del gruppo. Gli amici vanno poi in vacanza al mare (al “caldo”), alloggiando in una casa a pianta circolare e si riuniscono attorno a un avveniristico tavolo rotondo sospeso dal soffitto. Qui la macchina da presa ruota su sé stessa mostrando una carrellata di volti dei commensali in un girotondo di immagini. Alcuni uomini si alzano e iniziano a danzare, volteggiando come ballerini di flamenco.

<sup>21</sup> La canzone che accompagna questa scena è ‘Filastrocca Vietnamita’, interpretata da Sergio Endrigo.

Figura 3 - Il 'girotondo' dei commensali in "Vergogna, schifosi!" (Severino, 1969)



Figura 4 - Trascrizione a orecchio di "Matto, caldo, soldi, morto girotondo"

sol-di gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do mor-to gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do cal-do gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do

mat-to gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do sol-di gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do mor-to gi-ro gi-ro gi-ro ton-do

#### 4. CUORE DI MAMMA (1969)

La terza filastrocca, 'Ricreazione divertita', è tratta da *Cuore di Mamma* (Samperi, 1969). In questo caso il testo parla di un consumo televisivo morboso: "Su guardiamo Settevoci/su guardiamo Settevoci/cordialmente Tv7/cordialmente Tv7/Carosello do-re-mi/più cretini di così non possiamo diventar"<sup>22</sup>. La filastrocca è arrangiata in forma di

<sup>22</sup> La filastrocca di Morricone è stata campionata e inserita in un brano rap statunitense di un certo successo: The Buttriss [Bethany Schmitt] (2016). *Brutus*, New York: Next Records. Tale operazione non sembra essere stata autorizzata a livello editoriale, in quanto il brano risulta firmato solo da Schmitt.

canone, in modo da stratificare progressivamente gruppi di voci che iniziano a cantare ciascuno da un punto diverso del testo. Il film presenta una critica al lassismo educativo e familiare che gli autori presentano come alla base di un'inquietante serie di vicende tra il tragico e il grottesco. Vediamo dei bambini che torturano serenamente la babysitter, incidendo il disegno di un fiore sulle pelle della malcapitata con un ferro arroventato. All'arrivo della madre, che appare del tutto indifferente alla macabra situazione, i figli la salutano senza timore, certi di non essere da lei rimproverati: "Ciao mamma, abbiamo fatto un esperimento *in corpore vivi!*". Poco dopo, madre e figli guardano, senza il minimo coinvolgimento emotivo (Fig. 5), il telegiornale che trasmette una cronaca granguignolesca del terremoto del Belice. In una scena successiva i bambini danno fuoco al gatto di famiglia e commentano: "Brucia come il monte che abbiamo visto alla televisione!". Gli episodi di crudeltà da parte dei fanciulli sembrano trovare spiegazione nella filastrocca che apre e chiude il film, quasi a fornire un antefatto e una conclusione alla 'favola'.

Figura 5 - *Madre e figli imbambolati di fronte al televisore in "Cuore di Mamma" (Samperi, 1969)*



### 5. CHI L'HA VISTA MORIRE? (1972)

Il titolo del brano coincide con quello del giallo diretto da Aldo Lado su sceneggiatura di Francesco Barilli. La filastrocca parla dell'uccisione di piccoli animali, in relazione a un mondo dell'infanzia in bilico tra allegra spensieratezza e pericolo imminente:

Chi piangerà quel morto? Dice la tortorella "Io ch'ero la sua bella, io piangerò quel morto"  
Chi l'ha visto morire? "Io" dice il moscerino "Con quest'occhio piccino, Io l'ho visto morire"

Dice il passero: "Io, con l'arco e il dardo, io", dice il passero: "Io ho ucciso il pettirosso"  
Chi l'ha visto morire? "Io" dice il moscerino "Con quest'occhio piccino, Io l'ho visto morire"

C'era una volta un uomo piccoletto, che aveva un osso piccoletto  
Gli occhi e il mento stretto e la parrucca e gli spacò la zucca  
Chi l'ha visto morire? "Io" dice il moscerino "Con quest'occhio piccino, Io l'ho visto morire"

Il corvo stava in cima al muraglione e dopo un tratto ha fatto un tombolone  
 Qua c'è da fare la cesta di pane e nei pensieri purtroppo mai più.  
 Chi l'ha visto morire? "Io" dice il moscerino "Con quest'occhio piccino, Io l'ho visto morire"

Quand'ecco la moffetta già l'ha fatta, seduta al sole sopra l'erba fina,  
 Con passo d'angioletto si avvicina e la micina scappa, scappa, scappa  
 Chi l'ha visto morire? "Io" dice il moscerino "Con quest'occhio piccino, Io l'ho visto morire"

Il testo menziona elementi che emergeranno solo più avanti nel film e contiene addirittura la soluzione del giallo. Le parole, cantate da un coro di voci bianche accompagnato dal clavicembalo, non sono sempre distinguibili al primo ascolto. Risulta comunque piuttosto chiaro che il pettirosso simboleggia la bambina dai capelli rossi che viene uccisa con un sasso ("un osso piccoletto") da un travestito ("un uomo" con "la parrucca"). La risposta alla domanda "Chi l'ha vista morire?" è fornita dalla scena che precede i titoli di testa, quando si vede lo sguardo della governante incrociare quello dell'assassino: sappiamo dunque sin dall'inizio che la testimone oculare è la donna.

In seguito, la canzone si presenta diegeticamente in un modo che appare assurdo: padre e figlia passeggiano allegramente per la città canticchiando 'Chi l'ha vista morire?' come se il brano fosse una filastrocca innocente<sup>23</sup>. La musica che nei titoli di testa era *off* ritorna pertanto come *source music* compiutamente interna. Il brano viene proposto nuovamente nella sequenza del girotondo che prelude al rapimento della fanciulla, questa volta eseguito 'professionalmente' a cappella da un coro di voci bianche, benché collocato al livello interno di *source music*. La scena può ricordare quella iniziale in *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (Lang, 1931). In entrambi i film c'è una ripresa dall'alto, con degli adulti in una casa soprastante un cortile in cui giocano dei bambini. Tuttavia, a differenza di quanto accade in *M*, nel film di Lado la fanciulla resta ferma, mentre sono i compagni a girarle intorno. Inoltre, vi un'alternanza di punti di vista tra la soggettiva della bambina e quella dell'assassino che si sta avvicinando.

Figura 6 - *I bambini cantano una filastrocca in M (Lang, 1931)*  
 e "*Chi l'ha vista morire?*" (Lado, 1972)



<sup>23</sup> In questo caso si tratta proprio di *artless singing* nell'accezione di Gorbman.

Sentiamo poi un frammento della filastrocca nella scena in cui il padre si interroga su chi possa essere l'assassino della figlia. Qui il livello della musica è quello mediato: si tratta infatti di una vera e propria soggettiva sonora di tipo introspettivo, un ricordo del passato recente di cui vediamo anche alcune immagini<sup>24</sup>. Analizzando le diverse occorrenze della filastrocca, si potrebbe azzardare l'ipotesi che la canzone assuma nel film di Lado un ruolo simile a quello del coro greco. Il coro fornisce talvolta anche degli intermezzi (*embólíma*) sotto forma di canzonette mitologiche e, come nella tragedia greca, anche nel genere cinematografico del thriller e del giallo viene presentata allo spettatore una molteplicità di punti di vista tra loro spesso in contraddizione. La filastrocca iperdiegetica, in modo simile al coro euripideo, si manifesta come un'espressione performativa che può contribuire all'instabilità della prospettiva generale o fornire una lettura degli eventi situata contemporaneamente dentro il film e fuori dalla diegesi<sup>25</sup>. Coro e canzone cinematografica danno entrambi voce a una sorta di testimone esterno alla vicenda ma che è comunque parte del film/dramma, una particolare forma di intermediazione tra lo spettatore e gli avvenimenti in scena. Nel film, quando la canzone iperdiegetica è collocata nel livello esterno come *score* (durante i titoli di testa e durante il momento di riflessione del padre), si pone anche (al pari del coro euripideo) in uno 'spazio' separato da quello dell'azione. Quando invece la filastrocca è posta al livello interno come *source music* (come nel gioco dei bambini in *M*, nella passeggiata di padre e figlia e nel girotondo dei bambini in *Chi l'ha vista morire?*) abbiamo un 'coro' che interagisce con la vicenda solo entro i limiti del contenuto lirico, delle parole cantate. Il coro del teatro e il 'coro' dei bambini nel film condividono con lo spettatore l'impossibilità di agire e la completa impotenza rispetto ai fatti. L'identificazione è facilitata anche da una visione e da una conoscenza degli avvenimenti che nel coro e nel pubblico è più ampia rispetto a quella dei protagonisti.

## 6. IL MIO NOME È NESSUNO (1973)

Benché sia molto diverso dai precedenti, l'adattamento della cantilena 'Oh che bel castello' e il suo utilizzo nel film *Il mio nome è nessuno* (Valerii, 1973) permettono di inserire anche questo caso nella tipologia iperdiegetica. Si vede un pupazzo di legno che ricorda la giostra del saraceno e che viene usato dal protagonista per disorientare e colpire gli avversari. La comicità dell'azione risulta fortemente accentuata da una filastrocca che Morricone affida anche in questo caso a un coro di voci bianche. È peraltro l'unica 'canzone' del film ad avere il testo in italiano. L'esecuzione è molto precisa e il risultato quasi surreale rispetto a come sarebbe stato se a cantare fosse un gruppetto di bambini anziché un coro diretto da un maestro. Il testo della filastrocca è modificato in "Oh che bel pupazzo, marcondiron dironndazzo": ecco dunque il riferimento specifico all'azione che promuove il brano dall'extradiegetico all'iperdiegetico, anche se, tecnicamente, la musica resta fermamente collocata al livello esterno dello *score*.

<sup>24</sup> Per un'analisi delle musiche del film si rinvia a G. Bottin, "Slashing the Tape. Cuts and Edits in Morricone's Music for *Who Saw Her Die?*", *L'Avventura*, 1 (2024): 29-58. DOI: 10.17397/113917.

<sup>25</sup> D.J. Mastrorade, "Knowledge and Authority in the Choral Voice of Euripidean Tragedy", *Syllecta Classica*, 10, 1 (1999): 87-104.

Figura 7 - Scena del pupazzo di legno in “Il mio nome è nessuno” (Valerii, 1973)



### 7. QUANDO L'AMORE È SENSUALITÀ (1973)

In ‘Strano collage da camera’, tratto dal disco di Morricone con le musiche di *Quando l'amore è sensualità* (De Sisti, 1973), vi è una sequenza di parole sussurrate da una voce femminile con scansioni ritmiche regolari. Le sillabe cadono sul primo e secondo tempo di ciascuna misura: “Luce, chiara, entra, stanza, velo, bianco, mani, calde, prendi, forte, dolce, piano, mangia scappa, vai, via” e, nel finale, “Matta, corri, matta, scappa, scappa”. Un testo quasi identico, con una diversa sequenza delle parole e una scansione appena più libera, è contenuto in ‘Luce chiara per vergine curve scure’, altro brano scritto per il film:

Luce, chiara, entra, stanza, dorme, letto, sposa, sola, velo, bianco, figlia, madre, tutta, nuda, vieni, sopra, mani, calde, bacia, braccia, prendi, forte, dolce, piano, balla, canta, calda, vita, dopo, fuoco, corri, corri, matta, sopra, scappi, via, vai, via, via, via.

Benché presenti nel disco pubblicato diversi anni dopo l'uscita del film<sup>26</sup>, questi brani non risultano montati nella colonna sonora. Si tratta quindi di musica iperdiegetica solo in potenza. Con ogni probabilità le scene corrispondenti sarebbero dovute essere quelle in cui la giovane sposa (Agostina Belli), costretta dalla madre (Françoise Prévost) a un matrimonio di convenienza, rifiuta di concedersi al marito (un commerciante di carni interpretato da Gianni Macchia) e scappa via, proprio come nel finale della ‘canzone’. Nella seconda metà del film la madre si invaghisce e diventa amante del marito della figlia. Se il brano fosse stato effettivamente inserito nel film questa svolta narrativa sarebbe stata anticipata dalla parola ‘madre’ presente nel testo. L'assenza di queste musiche può far pensare a un'iniziativa del compositore non condivisa dal regista, oppure a una rinuncia in fase di montaggio. In effetti, a causa del modo un po' ‘manesco’ in cui sono state girate, quelle scene non reggerebbero probabilmente una musica così ‘eterea’.

<sup>26</sup> E. Morricone, *Quando l'amore è sensualità - original soundtrack recording*, Los Angeles: Cerberus, 1982.

## 8. CONCLUSIONI

La canzone iperdiegetica fa emergere qualcosa che non possiamo plausibilmente attribuire né all'estro del compositore né a una causa diegetica diretta. Poiché si tratta di un brano il cui testo anticipa o ribadisce gli eventi del film, l'arbitrarietà tipica del livello esterno viene meno e – senza che il canto passi al livello interno come in un *musical moment* – irrompe un realismo perturbante, un'aderenza ai fatti narrati che rende la filastrocca una sorta di vaticinio. Anche nei casi in cui la sorgente sonora è effettivamente in campo, il contenuto testuale non è comunque quello di una canzone autonoma che potrebbe appartenere al contesto culturale (quantunque fittizio) del film. A livello musicale, alcuni potrebbero vedere nel registro della filastrocca uno stile morriconiano che emerge (seppur in minima parte) anche nel canto “sciòn-sciòn” con cui viene declamato il nome di uno dei protagonisti in *Giù la testa* (Leone, 1971). In realtà il personaggio si chiama John ma Morricone lo apostrofa come Sean dato che nella sceneggiatura è descritto come irlandese.<sup>27</sup> A mio avviso, questa è invece una scelta pseudo-leitmotivica, mentre il testo delle filastrocche iperdiegetiche rivela più di un semplice nome. Inoltre, Morricone si serve spesso di versi monosillabici, per esempio in ‘Il gioco delle vocali’, ‘Il canto della campana stonata’, ‘Come Maddalena’, ‘Il girotondo delle note’ e in ‘Solo grida’ fa cantare al coro i nomi delle note musicali<sup>28</sup>. In questo senso, lo “sciòn-sciòn” in *Giù La Testa*, il “vie-ni” in *Quando l'amore è sensualità* e le ripetizioni di “io ho, tu hai” in *La proprietà non è più un furto* (Petri, 1973) consentono al compositore di usare la voce come uno strumento poiché il suono, cambiando di altezza, mantiene comunque il transitorio di attacco e l'involuppo specifico della sillaba. Considerando l'insieme dei casi portati fino a questo momento, tratti da film di sceneggiatori e registi diversi ma tutti musicati da Morricone, l'idea delle filastrocche iperdiegetiche potrebbe essere dunque attribuita al compositore. Alla SIAE, i brani risultano firmati dal solo Morricone e, nonostante abbiano un testo, sono quasi sempre depositati come strumentali. Fanno eccezione le ‘Matto Caldo Soldi Morto Girotondo’ (1969), il cui testo è attribuito a Morricone, e la prima filastrocca in ordine cronologico, ‘Guerra Pace Pollo Alla Brace’ (1968), le cui parole risultano essere di Audrey Nohra Stainton, già collaboratrice di Orson Welles<sup>29</sup>, prolifica autrice di canzoni e di brani cinematografici<sup>30</sup>. La collaborazione in *Grazie Zia* potrebbe aver suggerito a Morricone l'idea di utilizzare questo tipo di filastrocche anche in lavori successivi. Non si vede invece una relazione con il noto caso dei titoli di testa cantati da Modugno (su musica di Morricone) in *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (Pasolini, 1966) perché quelle parole sono estranee alla diegesi e, rispetto al film, rappresentano al più un paratesto. In ogni caso i testi delle canzoni iperdiegetiche attirano l'attenzione anche come ‘puro discorso’, quasi prescindendo dalle immagini, inducendo lo spettatore verso una ‘lettura’ specifica di scene che, in assenza di questa particolare musica, si presen-

<sup>27</sup> Ringrazio Maurizio Corbella per questo e altri suggerimenti che si sono rivelati utili per la stesura del saggio.

<sup>28</sup> Brani cinematografici pubblicati rispettivamente in: E. Morricone, *Maddalena*, Roma: General Music, 1971 e Id., *Chi l'ha vista morire?*, Roma: Gemelli, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> A. Stainton, “Don Quixote: Orson Welles' Secret”, *Sight & Sound*, 57, 4 (1988): 252-260.

<sup>30</sup> Da una ricerca nei depositi SIAE risultano 177 brani con parole di Stainton, di cui 47 con musica di Morricone. Nello stesso anno di *Grazie Zia*, il 1968, Morricone e Stainton collaborano in ‘Fruscio di foglie verdi’, canzone inizialmente destinata a *Teorema* (Pasolini, 1968) e poi ‘riciclata’ (in versione inglese) nel cortometraggio *La sequenza del fiore di carta* inserito in *Amore e Rabbia* (Bellocchio, Bertolucci, Pasolini, Godard, Lizzani, 1969).

terebbero come ‘neutre’ o ambivalenti<sup>31</sup>. Tutti gli esempi qui presentati costituiscono forme efficaci di *modifying music*: secondo l’approccio funzionalista di Noël Carroll, la musica può comportarsi rispetto alle immagini come un aggettivo rispetto a un nome o come un avverbio accanto a un verbo, conferendo qualità e caratterizzazioni aggiuntive all’azione<sup>32</sup>.

Oltre che di gioco di specchi o di *mise-en-abîme* si potrebbe anche parlare di una forma cantata di ‘enunciazione’ in senso semiotico. Prendendo le mosse – un po’ artatamente – dalle considerazioni di Francesco Casetti sullo sguardo in camera, potremmo sostenere che queste canzoni possono: a) impattare sulla ricezione del film, rivelando qualcosa di nascosto; b) creare un’apertura comunicativa verso uno spazio fuori dallo schermo, ossia lo spazio della sala e in cui sta lo spettatore; c) lacerare il tessuto della finzione, palesando il gioco narrativo e ingenerando una sorta di coscienza metalinguistica (“siamo al cinema!”) che si ripercuote sul patto fiduciario tra autori e pubblico<sup>33</sup>. Le filastrocche iperdiegetiche comportano una violazione narrativa perché annullano una distanza che dovrebbe invece rimanere tale e costituiscono un affronto al normale funzionamento della musica nel cinema, sia essa di livello interno, esterno o mediato<sup>34</sup>. In ragione di questo sconfinamento il brano non si presenta come ‘vera’ musica ma piuttosto come un *divertissement* del compositore in combutta con lo sceneggiatore e il regista. La canzone iperdiegetica manifesta paradossalmente la propria inverosimiglianza proprio perché il suo testo dimostra un’aderenza quasi letterale e, per questo, eccessiva, con la realtà costruita dal racconto cinematografico.

<sup>31</sup> G. Bottin, “Effects of Underscoring on Semantic Appraisal and Interpretation of Ambivalent Film Scenes”, *Music and the Moving Image*, 17, 1 (2024): 48-62.

<sup>32</sup> N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> F. Casetti, *Dentro lo sguardo: Il film e il suo spettatore*, Milano: Bompiani, 1986.

<sup>34</sup> T. Pontara, “Interpretation and Underscoring: Modest Constructivism and the Issue of Nondiegetic versus Intradiegetic Music in Film”, *Music and the Moving Image*, 9, 2 (2016): 39-57.

AURELIO D'AMORE\*

*LUNA NERA, O ESCOLHIDO, JINN*  
Netflix and Narratives of the Supernatural between Local Seriality  
and Global Imaginary

*Abstract*

The fantastic has long been a distinctive feature of Anglo-American popular culture. This narrative mode has a strong religious content due to its specific genre codes. Today, Netflix, through its geographical reach and multi-territorial commissioning strategy, enables the dissemination of the fantastic in numerous popular cultures around the world. Using the framework of the mediatization of religion, this paper focuses on a specific dimension of the fantastic: the supernatural. More specifically, this paper addresses three Netflix 'local' fantastic television series – *Luna Nera*, *O Escolhido* and *Jinn* – that are grounded on the supernatural. All three draw on religious elements from local cultures, but all three transpose them into a universal supernatural storytelling. This paper aims to examine these series in order to understand how Netflix's 'local' fantastic narratives, aimed at both local and global audiences, tend to renegotiate local religious imaginaries in favour of a global mediatized religious imaginary.

*Keywords*

Netflix; global popular culture; supernatural tv series; telefantasy; mediatization of religion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious life is increasingly vibrant on the Internet. The digital realm is full of virtual storefronts for all the world's major faiths as well as online discussion forums for new faiths<sup>1</sup>. Alongside its overtly religious offerings, the web registers the growing presence of worldwide entertainment services that disseminate fictional religious narratives online. Netflix is the most influential of these services, both in terms of geographical reach and multi-territorial production. Netflix narratives reshape religious imaginaries by incorporating the religious traditions of specific cultures into a universal and de-traditionalised supernatural storytelling. This occurs from the traditions of institutional religions, folk religions, ancient religions, or a mixture of these (e.g., *Ghoul*, *Ragnarok*, *Shahmaran*). Such narratives reflect the conflicting impulses that have swept through the religious realm in recent decades. In an increasingly globalised world, religions are once again a major factor of identity, eliciting a resurgence

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<sup>1</sup> H. Campbell, P.H. Cheong, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

of traditional cults and piety movements<sup>2</sup>. Religions have survived secularisation<sup>3</sup> and have returned to the forefront of public debate<sup>4</sup> amidst the constant flow of migration and fierce ethical debates. At the same time, however, the explosion of cultural barriers and the rise of pluralism, culminating in the advent of the new agora of the World Wide Web, have undermined world religions and traditional cults<sup>5</sup>. Both the global North and South have witnessed the spread of de-centralising trends, such as the expansion of Pentecostalism and Salafism, the rise of heterodox spiritualities and New Age movements, and the sacralisation of consumption<sup>6</sup>. Under these processes, those who belonged to institutional churches often developed an individualisation of beliefs<sup>7</sup>. These phenomena coincide with the growing influence of the media, which no longer serve political, cultural, or religious institutions, but produce their own content autonomously. This has led to a process of mediatization of religion<sup>8</sup>. This term refers to the shift of control over religious discourse from religious institutions to the media. The mediatization of religion can take different forms, but the most prominent is that of entertainment, with fictional narratives reworking religions in the most surprising and unexpected ways<sup>9</sup>. Such mediatization originated in Great Britain and matured in the United States. It is therefore specific to Anglo-American popular culture. However, with the advent of global subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services, it is spreading to the most diverse popular cultures around the world<sup>10</sup>. As we will demonstrate, Netflix is the main agent of this spread. By inscribing the themes and motifs of specific religious traditions into a universal supernatural storytelling, the Californian company releases stories with a local flavour and global appeal. In doing so, it sprinkles the codes of Anglo-American religious entertainment in a transnational perspective. This paper examines three original series produced in Italy, Brazil, and Jordan, in order to understand how the Los Gatos-based service reframes distinctive American storytelling on a multinational scale, making it suitable for different audiences and giving rise to a global, mediatized religious imaginary.

<sup>2</sup> A. Wernick, "The Future of Religion", in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, edited by B.S. Turner, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010, 629-648.

<sup>3</sup> J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> J. Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society", *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25, 4 (2008): 17-29.

<sup>5</sup> G. Filoramo, *Che cos'è la religione. Temi, metodi, problemi*, Torino: Einaudi, 2004, 10-36.

<sup>6</sup> M. Wilkinson, "Globalization", in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2nd edn., edited by R. Segal and N. Roubekas, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012, 280; J. Wagemakers, "Salafism", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2016. Accessed 10 March. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.255>; B. Turner, "Religion in a Post Secular Society", in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, edited by B.S. Turner, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010, 649-667.

<sup>7</sup> K. Dobbelaere, "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Process Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization", *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 3 (1999): 229-247.

<sup>8</sup> S. Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change", *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, 6, 1 (2008): 9-26.

<sup>9</sup> S. Hjarvard, "Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion", in *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, edited by S. Hjarvard and M. Lövheim, Göteborg: Nordicom, 2012, 21-44.

<sup>10</sup> Platforms that make TV content available via the Internet are called OTT (over the top). These can be divided into TVOD (transactional video on demand), AVOD (advertising video on demand) and SVOD (subscription video on demand). For more in-depth, see: A. Sánchez, B. Carro, *Digital Services in the 21st Century. A Strategic and Business Perspective*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

## 2. NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL AND GLOBAL TELEVISION

For decades, the history of television has been inextricably linked to that of single nations<sup>11</sup>. It spread the canon of the official language and established a common socio-cultural horizon within the nation-state. From the 1970s, however, this began to change. Market deregulation led to the growth of private broadcasters and the decline of state monopolies. Technological advances, including satellite and cable, led to the emergence of transnational television, with a proliferation of foreign networks alongside national ones. The advent of the Internet then made global television a reality, with services covering almost the entire planet<sup>12</sup>. Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Apple TV+ and Max represent the vanguard of this revolution, with Netflix leading the way. This is the most popular internet TV service in the world, with a presence in almost every country and territory except Crimea, North Korea, Syria, China, and Russia<sup>13</sup>.

Netflix's global reach raises several questions. It seems to herald a new form of cultural *koinè* on the one hand, and a new form of media imperialism on the other. To assess such a conflictuality, it is necessary to examine the direction of television flows and the cosmopolitanisation of audiences. First, it is worth noting that access to the service is not uniform across countries, due to factors such as Internet coverage, pricing policies, availability of subtitles and dubbing. When it comes to TV streams, media scholars, legislators and activists have often blamed the West for the one-way flow to the rest of the world<sup>14</sup>. In the case of Netflix, this phenomenon seems both exacerbated by the global distribution of U.S. content and mitigated by the worldwide distribution of content created in numerous other territories. Indeed, the Californian company commissions original titles not only in the U.S., but in many other regions of the world. Netflix currently has offices in sixteen countries and has produced original shows in twenty-seven. In doing so, it has often relied on local production companies and has sometimes struck deals with national broadcasters<sup>15</sup>. This strategy is based on the idea that the deeper the shows are rooted in local cultures, the more internationally appealing the service becomes<sup>16</sup>. From this perspective, the media imperialism associated with unidirectional flows seems to be diminishing in favour of multipolar flows that produce a cosmopolitanisation of audiences. However, the strategy of content localisation may conceal other mechanisms of media imperialism. To engage in such a reflection, it is

<sup>11</sup> J. Chalaby, *Transnational Television Worldwide: Towards a New Media Order*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, 1.

<sup>12</sup> S. Cunningham, D. Craig, "Global Social Media Entertainment", in *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*, edited by S. Shimpach, New York: Routledge, 2020, 50.

<sup>13</sup> With its abandonment of liveness and linear programming, we might question whether Netflix is actually television. Since the advent of digital media, there has been a wide discussion about the 'end of television' (see: Shimpach, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*). It is indeed true that Netflix can be observed from multiple media perspectives (see: R. Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, New York: New York University Press, 2019); at the same time, Netflix always claims to be TV and is structured as an evolution of previous models of television (see: J. Mareike, *Netflix and the Reinvention of Television*, Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Starting with a UNESCO report (K. Nordenstreng, T. Varis, *Television Traffic - a One-Way Street? A Survey and Analysis of the International Flow of Television Programme Material*, Paris: UNESCO, 1974) to T. Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, London: BFI, 2004, there have been numerous studies highlighting television flows from the West to the rest of the world.

<sup>15</sup> A. Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24, 2 (2021): 195-215.

<sup>16</sup> A. Lotz, *Netflix and Streaming Video: The Business of Subscriber-Funded Video on Demand*, Cambridge-Medford: Polity Press, 2022, 179-183; Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 155-157.

important to consider that if globalising flows do not develop exclusively through a homogenising logic but through the interconnectedness of a *glocal* logic<sup>17</sup>, the latter is often threatened by the imperialistic *grobal* one<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, if popular culture does not constitute a monolithic field, but rather a kaleidoscope of sub-cultures<sup>19</sup> in which audiences actively rework and *glocamalgamate* media streams<sup>20</sup>, media subcultures are frequently co-opted and incorporated in popular culture to reinvigorate the mainstream<sup>21</sup>. These processual ties raise questions about how to conceptualise the overall relationship between the global and the local in Netflix and, in the case of religious narratives, the peculiar correlation between regional traditions and multinational publics. In order to fully explain this, it is necessary to analyse the structures of these narratives, the statutes of the genres from which they originate, and the strategies of content localisation

### 3. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE ANGLO-AMERICAN SUPERNATURAL TV SERIES

The religious does not seem to find much space in Netflix's American series. Indeed, series about specific religious traditions are few on this platform. However, moving away from a narrative pattern tied to the codes of a tradition, a dense religious landscape emerges. Moving along an axis of progressive departure from a specific religion, it is possible to encounter a multitude of stories based on the supernatural, full of monsters and demons, in a mix of elements from folk and institutional religions (e.g., *Stranger Things*, *Wednesday*, *Warrior Nun*). Far from being specific to Netflix, this is a feature of acclaimed Anglo-American series of recent decades (e.g. *Buffy*, *Charmed*, *The X-Files*). But this kind of television storytelling has ancient roots. It is based on the fantastic, a literary mode that emerged in Britain in the late 18th century and spread to continental Europe in the 19th century<sup>22</sup>. At the beginning of the 20th century, the fantastic moved to the United States. While in Europe it continued to proliferate solely under the aegis of the artistic avant-garde or high literature, in the US it became an expression of popular culture<sup>23</sup>. Through pulp magazines and comic books, the United States gave a decisive boost to the development of fantastic genres, namely science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Through mechanisms of hybridisation, sub-genres such as urban fantasy, paranormal romance and science fantasy emerged. These genres and sub-genres were subsequently absorbed into cinema and television through a process of media morphosis. Then, under the influence of American popular culture, they appeared (or reappeared) in other

<sup>17</sup> R. Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity", in *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash, R. Robertson, London: Sage, 1995, 25-44.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of *grobalization* was developed by George Rietzer to better focus on the processes of globalisation. Starting from Robertson's analysis of glocalisation processes, Rietzer highlights how globalisation moves on a double track: on the one hand the glocal that tends to exalt heterogeneity, on the other the grobal, that driven by economic interests, constantly tends to homogenise. For an introduction to the topic, see: V. Roudometof, *Glocalization. A Critical Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2016, 50-54.

<sup>19</sup> J. Lyden, "What Is the Subject Matter of "Religion and Popular Culture"?", in *The Routledge Companion of Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by J. Lyden and E.M. Mazur, New York: Routledge, 2015, 7-20.

<sup>20</sup> F. Darling-Wolf, *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Popular Culture Beyond East and West*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> M. Danesi, *Forever Young: The Teen-aging of Modern Culture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> S. Lazzarin, *Il modo fantastico*, Roma: Laterza, 2000, 22.

<sup>23</sup> V. Nelson, "The Strange History of the American Fantastic", *Agni*, 36 (1992): 281-288.

popular cultures around the world, but failed to take deep root outside Anglo-America<sup>24</sup>. In this centuries-long journey, the fantastic has evolved from different perspectives, but one element has continued to define its operating principle: the supernatural<sup>25</sup>.

Since its earliest literature, the fantastic has been structured through mimetic universes in which the supernatural has appeared as an intruding element, a breach in the coherence of a world from which the impossible has been banished<sup>26</sup>. In this way, the fantastic has dealt with that realm of divine mysteries, symbolic systems, and irrational attitudes that modern rationalism has dismissed and left unexplained. In this sense, the fantastic appears as a site of opposition between natural and supernatural laws<sup>27</sup>. Using themes such as strange and disturbing coincidences, sinister and infernal places, the journey to the afterlife and the return of the dead, and characters such as the devil, the ghost, the vampire, and the revenant, the fantastic expresses a subversive mode that delegitimises the Enlightenment paradigm of reality and establishes an aesthetic based on the uncanny<sup>28</sup>. In this regard, Freud, author of a seminal essay on the subject, asserts that the uncanny arises from the resurgence of magical and animistic beliefs and consent with the realm of ghosts, spirits, and death<sup>29</sup>. Such themes and characters can be traced in the literary fantastic as well as in the fantastic of film and television.

On the small screen, the fantastic has found a wide range of representations and has developed genre-specific characteristics<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, fantastic genres on television have often been grouped together under the label of telefantasy. This is a cultural classification that aims to bring together television narratives related to the representation of the otherworldly or unreal worlds<sup>31</sup>. Over the last two decades, these narratives have overcome the stigma of formulaic products that has long accompanied them, and have achieved the status of prestige products. In this way, telefantasy television series have become a flagship of so-called quality television and an emblem of Anglo-American entertainment<sup>32</sup>. In terms of religious content, these series tend to rework world religions and popular beliefs. They also tend to trace new cosmogonies and dimensions of the divine, which nevertheless echo existing traditions. Furthermore, these series tend to depict humans worshipping and serving patron deities of ancient pantheons, consorting with demons and angels, or having romantic affairs with vampires. This is the dominant trend in quality Anglo-American telefantasy (e.g., *True Blood*, *Lucifer*, *American Gods*,

<sup>24</sup> Japan has been the only true exception, as the fantastic has long been a cornerstone of Japanese popular culture. See: K. Bulian, C. Cusack, *Anime, Religion and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan*, Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> While this is true of the fantastic as a mode, the same cannot be said of some of its specific genres. Indeed, science fiction and fantasy unfold through non-mimetic universes in which the supernatural does not exist or is part of fictional reality. Nevertheless, some subgenres, such as urban fantasy and paranormal romance, unfold through the intersection of a mimetic world and a non-mimetic world in which the supernatural appears an intrusive element. See: J. Clute, R. Kaveney, "Contemporary Fantasy", in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, edited by J. Clute and J. Grant, London: Orbit, 1997: 225.

<sup>26</sup> R. Cailliois, *Obliques précédé de Images, images...*, Paris: Stock, 1975.

<sup>27</sup> T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970, 25.

<sup>28</sup> R. Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London-New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, translated by D. Maclintock, London: Penguin Books, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> J. Johnson-Smith, *American Science Fiction TV: Star Trek, Stargate and Beyond*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2005; S. Abbott, L. Jowett, *TV Horror: Investigating the Dark Side of the Small Screen*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> C. Johnson, *Telefantasy*, London: BFI Publishing, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> A. Lynch, *Quality Telefantasy: How US Quality TV Brought Zombies, Dragons and Androids into the Mainstream*, New York: Routledge, 2022.

*Loki*, *The Sandman*, *Kaos*), to which the notion of 'banal religion' applies accordingly<sup>33</sup>. In light of these elements, some scholars argue that the contemporary evolution of the fantastic serves as a vehicle for developing the frameworks of new religious movements<sup>34</sup> or, more globally, that it provides an understanding of religion that surpasses the boundaries of institutional religions<sup>35</sup>. Unsurprisingly, this sometimes elicits condemnation from religious leaders and practitioners, who interpret it as an adulteration of religion<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4. LOCAL RELIGION FOR A GLOBAL SUPERNATURAL

With the proliferation of global SVOD platforms, the audience for Anglo-American supernatural series is growing, both in terms of geographical distribution and penetration. At the same time, by taking advantage of multi-territory commissioning, these platforms are creating supernatural series beyond the Anglo-American region<sup>37</sup>. In this way, they are deploying the fantastic in cultural industries that make little use of it and spreading it to regions that are not frequently exposed to it. Netflix seems to be leading this trend with productions such as *Cidade Invisível* (Brazil), *The Brave Ones* (South Africa), *Ayte* (Turkey) and *Paranormal* (Egypt), to name but a few. These narratives do not reproduce the settings of Anglo-American narratives. On the contrary, they present local settings. From these they draw the primary elements of the stories, so that the construction of the supernatural emerges from local religious traditions. This is even more evident in the series *Luna Nera* (Italy), *O Escolhido* (Brazil) and *Jinn* (Jordan), which serve as case studies. In order to understand the religious discourse of these three titles and the relationship they weave with Anglo-American telefantasy, as well as the imagery they propose to global audiences, the use of local culture in constructing the supernatural storyline will be analysed in the following sections.

##### 4.1. *Luna Nera*

*Luna Nera* (Black Moon) is an Italian original Netflix production released in January 2020. It is a six-episode series, created by Tiziana Triani, Francesca Manieri, and Laura Paolucci, and based on the first volume of the novel trilogy *The Lost Cities* (2019). The title refers to the archetype of the moon as a symbol of the feminine universe. More spe-

<sup>33</sup> Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion", 9-26.

<sup>34</sup> M. Davidsen, "Fiction-Based Religion: Conceptualising a New Category against History-Based Religion and Fandom", *Culture and Religion*, 14, 4 (2013): 378-395; V. Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*, Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> L.N. Petersen, "American Television Fiction Transforming Danish Teenagers' Religious Imaginations", *Communications*, 35, 3 (2010): 229-247; L. Feldt, "Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth and Magic in His Dark Materials and Harry Potter", in *Narrative and Belief: The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction*, edited by M. Davidsen, New York: Routledge, 2018, 62-86.

<sup>36</sup> L. Feldt, "Harry Potter and Contemporary Magic: Fantasy Literature, Popular Culture, and the Representation of Religion", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 31, 1 (2016): 101-114; J. Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012, 8.

<sup>37</sup> S. Abbott, L. Jowett, *Global TV Horror*, Melksham: University of Wales Press, 2021, 4-5.

cifically, the title refers to both the astronomical phenomenon of the black moon<sup>38</sup> and the symbolism of the black moon as an expression of liberation from patriarchal domination<sup>39</sup>. The story temporalises these references in the 17th century, in a village of the Roman countryside. Here lives Ade, a teenage girl accused of witchcraft. To escape the accusation, Ade takes refuge in a secret community of women called the 'Lost Cities'. The Lost Cities are believed to practice black magic and are therefore persecuted by the Catholic Church and the *Benandanti*, a coven of men supported by the Church. The Lost Cities actually possess extraordinary powers that allow them to protect the world and oppose Marzio Oreggi, a bishop secretly bent on evil.

The series is a contemporary fantasy set in a mimetic world that intersects with a non-mimetic secret world. In this configuration, the historical drama of the Inquisition intertwines with the fantasy story of an occult struggle between good and evil. The main theme of the narrative is the witch hunt, a metaphor for the oppression of women under patriarchy. This thematic line has been praised by critics for its social relevance. However, they have also pointed out the series' formal and narrative shortcomings<sup>40</sup>. In terms of visual syntax, the show seems to rest on a didactic polarity, using contrasting lighting in the village shots to inform the viewer that it is an evil place, and diffuse lighting in the Lost Cities to communicate its goodness. In terms of narrative structure, the interweaving of fantasy and history appears as a fragile knot. While emphasising the cogency of the gender issue, it avoids confronting much of the historical context, instead superimposing alternative spiritualities on it. Indeed, the tale not only presents the figure of the witch as a woman unjustly persecuted by an obscurantist religious power and the belief in the devil as the legacy of a superstitious mentality, but it also offers a representation of the witch as the guardian of ancient wisdom handed down through the centuries. This representation derives from Wicca, a movement ascribable to the neo-pagan milieu. According to Wicca, witchcraft represents pagan wisdom preserved over the centuries in small groups or family circles, which has nothing to do with devil worship and which Christian propaganda has transformed into Satanism<sup>41</sup>. In the series, the Lost Cities are in fact a small group dedicated to the protection of humanity, a repository of ancient knowledge handed down through initiation that has survived the persecutions of the Catholic Church.

In this revival of pre-Christian traditions, the story refers to figures of Italian folklore such as the *Benandanti*, a coven belonging to a shamanic peasant cult that protected the fields from the action of witches. The *Benandanti* were actually declared heretics by the Inquisition, but in the fictional story they are supported by the Church and act as another expression of patriarchal oppression<sup>42</sup>. Although the series draws heavily on Wiccan depictions of witchcraft, it doesn't refer to the cults and rituals of this specific

<sup>38</sup> The term 'black moon' indicates the third new moon in a season of four new moons. In each season there are usually three new moons. The little discrepancy between lunar month and solar month means that four moons can occur in the same season. This event takes place every thirty-three months.

<sup>39</sup> E. Neumann, *La psicologia del femminile*, translated by M. Talarico, Roma: Astrolabio, 1975; M.G. Sartori, *Dalla psicologia sociale ai diritti umani: scritti 1985-2009*, Roma: Armando, 2010, 45-80.

<sup>40</sup> A. Grasso, "«Luna nera», la serie naufraga sotto il peso della sua ambizione", *Il Corriere della Sera*, May 25, 2020. Accessed March 11, 2024. [https://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/20\\_maggio\\_25/streghe-luna-nera-serie-ambiziosa-poco-smalto-3e52eed0-9e84-11ea-aa6b-a30e3049a61e.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/20_maggio_25/streghe-luna-nera-serie-ambiziosa-poco-smalto-3e52eed0-9e84-11ea-aa6b-a30e3049a61e.shtml); P. Armelli, "Luna nera è una serie mediocre ma di grandissima importanza", *Wired*, January 31, 2020. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.wired.it/play/televisione/2020/01/31/luna-nera-netflix-recensione/>.

<sup>41</sup> M. Introvigne, *Il Cappello del Mago. I nuovi movimenti magici dallo spiritismo al satanismo*, Milano: Sugarco Edizioni, 2013, 348-350.

<sup>42</sup> *Benandanti* were widespread in the region of Friuli until the seventeenth century. For an in-depth

movement. Instead, it proposes a broader approach to the religious field that finds its matrix in Gnosis, a category that influences a large part of the phenomena inherent to the new religiosity<sup>43</sup>. It is precisely this category that manifests itself in the representation of a mysterious dimension that can only be known through initiation. In the story, the townspeople follow illusory beliefs, while only the initiates of the Lost Cities know the truth. Even Hades, a girl who is considered the Chosen One and who possesses preternatural faculties, must be initiated, and trained in order to understand and make full use of her gifts. Hence the second element of the narrative that can be traced back to Gnosis, namely the primacy of Knowledge. The witches teach Hades that there is nothing more important than wisdom, as it is the only way to get in touch with preternatural faculties and to choose between the world of light and the world of darkness. The choice between these two realities and the clash between the universe of good, ruled by the witches, and that of evil, ruled by Bishop Oreggi, reveals a neo-pagan cosmogony common to Anglo-American telefantasy<sup>44</sup>. Thus, although the narrative is set during the witch hunts in 17th-century Italy, it does not address the relationship between Catholicism and witchcraft. Rather, it illustrates the mythology of the new religiosity. In doing so, it harkens back to that strand of Anglo-American television supernaturalism which, from *Bewitched* (1964-1972) onwards, has reversed the negative portrayal of the witch.

#### 4.2. *O Escolhido*

*O Escolhido* (The Chosen One) is a Brazilian original Netflix production released in June 2019. It is a two-season, twelve-episode series inspired by the Mexican television production *Niño Santo* (2011) and adapted by Raphael Draccon and Carolina Munhóz, two popular fantasy writers<sup>45</sup>. The title refers to the protagonist of the story, a man endowed with the supernatural gift to cure diseases. In Latin America, this figure is known as the *curandero*, a term deriving from the Spanish verb *curar*, meaning ‘to heal’. Curanderos are individuals who are believed to be endowed with a gift of healing. The practice is not only therapeutic but is embedded in a syncretic religious belief system. Scholars have shown that *curanderismo* has six major influences: Judeo-Christian traditions, early Arabic medicine, beliefs associated with European witchcraft, Native American healing practices, beliefs relating to spiritualism, and modern medicine<sup>46</sup>. This traditional healing method is often counterposed to that of allopathic medicine and the series draws on this dualism to articulate the plot. The story tells of three young doctors sent by the government to the Pantanal region. Their mission is to vaccinate the inhabitants of the village of Aguazul against a dangerous virus. But in the village the doctors find a community isolated from the rest of the world, refusing medical care and devoted to the cult of a curandero who is revered as ‘the chosen one’. Frightened, but seduced

study on the theme, see: C. Ginzburg, *I Benandanti: stregoneria e culti agrari tra '500 e '600*, Milano, Adelphi, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> R. Bergeron, *Le cortège des fous de Dieu. Un chrétien scrute les Nouvelles religions*, Montreal-Paris: Editions Paulines & Apostolat des Edition, 1982, 63-64.

<sup>44</sup> M. Introvigne, “Nuove mitologie religiose”, *Enciclopedia Treccani*, 2009. Accessed March 11, 2024. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nuove-mitologie-religiose\\_\(XXI-Secolo\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nuove-mitologie-religiose_(XXI-Secolo)/).

<sup>45</sup> Currently *Niño Santo* is not available in Europe neither in streaming nor in DVD.

<sup>46</sup> S. Loue, “Curanderismo”, in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, edited by D.A. Leeming, New York: Springer, 2014, 436-438.

by the man's gifts, the doctors immerse themselves in village life and take part in the war between the Chosen One and the Serpent, a demonic creature living in the forest.

The series is a thriller with horror and fantasy nuances that relies on the power of the supernatural. It is precisely the supernatural that gradually undermines the certainties of the doctors, who become 'detectives' investigating intangible and prodigious realities. The main theme of the narrative is the contrast between faith and science. The press has taken up this theme in its reviews, highlighting the show's attempt to capture the mystery of the Brazilian inland<sup>47</sup>. Indeed, the series relies on a visual imagery that exalts the impenetrability of the forest, whose wild flora becomes a symbol of an uncanny power that conceals illness and healing. The narrative also grounds on a dichotomous treatment of illness, that of the natural order of the medical personnel and that of the supernatural order of the healer. The latter in fact sees illness as a symptom of spiritual malaise. In this context, the vaccine brought by the doctors not only proves ineffective, but also has a toxic effect on the population. The Chosen One, instead, is able to cure any disease thanks to mysterious powers, that can only be understood through a fideistic attitude. Although the spiritual understanding of illness is part of curanderismo, it is not its only aspect. In curanderismo, illness is recognised as the result of the action of both natural and supernatural agents and is treated according to three different approaches: physical, spiritual, and mental. Curanderismo is a holistic belief system based on maintaining harmony between the physical, emotional, and social spheres. In curanderismo, there is no separation between the body and the mind. For this reason, curanderos also operate on an emotional and psychological level. They interact openly with their patients and establish a relationship of trust. They also seek to rehabilitate the individual within the community and perform a function comparable to that of the Western psychotherapist<sup>48</sup>. This attention to the emotional and psychological element and the importance of trusting relationships is completely absent from the show, which is dominated by very disharmonious relationships. The Chosen One uses his powers to keep the villagers in line. At the same time, his authoritarianism creates discontent and frustration. He keeps the community strictly separate from the rest of the world, which he considers impure and corrupt. This motif pervades the entire narrative, creating a sectarian religious environment. It develops dramaturgically along only two lines, that of anger and that of fear, thus staging schematic and emphatic conflicts, often reinforced by sound effects that didactically underline dramatic turning points.

The origin of this sectarian motif lies in the fictional religious doctrine of the story. According to this doctrine, Aguazul was preserved from original sin and is the spiritual centre of the earth. To protect the village from a demonic force embodied in a serpent hidden in the forest, God the Father sent the Chosen One, the new Christ, to guard and govern it. The Chosen One cares only for the villagers, as people outside the community pose a threat to the sacred order. Although this fictional doctrine may have some assonances with the syncretic dimension of the curander cults, it shows obvious dissonances with regard to the isolation of the community from the rest of the world. Indeed,

<sup>47</sup> F. Schiavon, Fabiana, "Atores de 'O Escolhido', da Netflix, afirmam que 'sentiram energia estranha em certas cenas'". *Folha de Sao Paulo*, July 2, 2019. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://f5.folha.uol.com.br/cinema-e-series/2019/07/atores-de-o-escolhido-da-netflix-afirmam-que-sentiram-energia-estranha-em-certas-cenas.shtml>; I. Moreira, N. Fabro, "'O Escolhido': série mostra conflitos da fé e da ciência nos rincões do Brasil". *Galileu*, July 4, 2019. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://revistagalileu.globo.com/Cultura/Series/noticia/2019/07/o-escolhido-serie-mostra-conflitos-da-fe-e-da-ciencia-nos-rincoes-do-brasil.html>.

<sup>48</sup> R. Maduro, "Curanderismo and Latino Views of Disease and Curing", *Western Journal of Medicine*, 139, 6 (1983): 868-874.

curanderismo is often intertwined with the everyday lives of Latin Americans. This is usually through occasional interactions in therapist-patient relationships. Sometimes it also occurs through stable links with religious cults that are not necessarily closed to the world<sup>49</sup>. In this way, while the series draws heavily on the religious framework of curanderismo, it also reworks it. Focusing on supernatural healing practices and sectarianism, it offers a sensationalist narrative similar to the Anglo-American Gothic, which demonises the religious other while revealing the existence of the divine<sup>50</sup>.

### 4.3. *Jinn*

*Jinn* is Netflix's first Jordanian original production, and Netflix's first Arabic original production. Released in June 2019, it is a five-episode miniseries created by twin brothers Elan and Rajeev Dassani. The title evokes the supernatural and indicates the driving force of the story. The figure of the jinn, popularised in global popular culture by the character of Genie in the Disney film *Aladdin* (1992), is deeply rooted in the Arab world. In pre-Islamic culture, the jinn were believed to be spirits who lived in nature and whose influence, benevolent or malevolent, was continually exercised on human life<sup>51</sup>. In the Qur'an, the jinn are mentioned numerous times and an entire Sura is dedicated to them. The belief in their existence is thus a tenet of the Islamic faith<sup>52</sup>. According to Islamic tradition, jinn are intermediate beings between humans and angels who inhabit caves, deserted places, graveyards. They have the power to assume animal or human form and to move from one place to another almost instantaneously<sup>53</sup>. The story is based on these very powers. It tells of a group of high school students who accidentally awaken a jinn during a school trip to the archaeological site of Petra. This episode triggers a war that pits good jinn and humans against evil jinn, and a mingling of realms through which the jinn possess the students' bodies and engage in romantic affairs with them.

The series mixes different genres such as horror, teen drama and paranormal romance. It uses a typical fantastic mechanism, namely the incursion of the supernatural into a world from which it has been banished. This mechanism is also reflected in the cinematic language, which plays with the constant overlap between the worldly and the otherworldly, resorting to conventional visual codes such as interference with electrical circuits and clouds of smoke to reveal the ghost. The narrative portrays a secularised, modern society in terms of lifestyles, beliefs, and worship practices.

<sup>49</sup> Emblematic is the case of the curandero Niño Fidencio, around whom a widely popular cult was formed that still persists today. About Niño Fidencio, see: A. Zavaleta, "El Niño Fidencio and findeistas", in *Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, edited by W. Zellner and M. Petrowsky, Westport: Praeger, 1998, 95-116. About a more general framework, see: Hendrickson, "Curanderismo in the Americas", in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Medicine, and Health*, edited by D. Lüddeckens, P. Hetmanczyk, P.E. Klassen, J.B. Stein, New York: Routledge, 2022, 41-53.

<sup>50</sup> R.B. Anolik, D.L. Howard, *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> G. Levi Della Vida, "Ginn", *Enclopedia Treccani*, 1933. Accessed March 11, 2024. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ginn\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ginn_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)).

<sup>52</sup> For some data on belief in jinn in the Arab world, see: "The World's Muslim: Unity and Diversity. Chapter Four: Other Other Beliefs and Practices", Pew Research Center, accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-4-other-beliefs-and-practices/>.

<sup>53</sup> G. Hussein Rassool, *Evil Eye, Jinn Possession, and Mental Health Issues. An Islamic Perspective*, New York: Routledge, 2019.

Throughout the story, no reference is made to the Islamic faith. As a result, the two main themes of the series – the struggle between good and evil and the possession by Jinn – are presented outside a religious framework, even though they derive from the Islamic tradition. Consequently, the narrative does not refer to a clear cosmogony indicating the role, function and nature of jinn, nor to eschatological instances about the struggle between humans and evil jinn. According to Islamic theology, evil jinn aim to misguide man into sin and damnation. These jinn are rebellious, since all jinn have free will, are called to believe in Allah, and will be judged at the end of time<sup>54</sup>. Regarding the phenomenon of possession, Islamic tradition generally accepts that both good and evil jinn can possess humans. The main difference is that Muslims welcome possession by good jinn, but fear possession by evil jinn<sup>55</sup>. In the latter case, three religious practices are employed to expel or exorcise the jinn: reciting the Qur'an (*dhikr*), commanding the jinn to leave, and taking refuge in Allah by invoking His name (*ruqyah*)<sup>56</sup>. Again, the narrative does not refer to Islamic practices, but rather plays freely with the supernatural, linking the moment of possession and the moment of liberation either to the arbitrariness of the jinn or to the willingness of the teenagers to unite with the spirits through a kind of psychic union. More broadly, Islamic tradition holds that evil jinn do not afflict humans exclusively through possession, but also through a variety of physical and psychological illnesses caused by magical practices which are condemned as demonic acts.

In the Arab world, the belief in the presence of the jinn in the human world and their power persists at the popular level<sup>57</sup>. The series draws on this heritage, but in the absence of a doctrinal and cultic reference to a deity, magic is portrayed as a form of cratophany, untethered from any religious connotation. The interaction between the students and the jinn occurs playfully through invocations, gestures, practices of protection and defense, and the willingness to use paranormal forces to achieve personal aims. These consist of merging with the jinn to win back a loved one or to escape from complex familial contexts. These actions are often accompanied by emphatic sound carpets designed to emphasise the irruption of the 'extraordinary'. At the same time, the narration of such extraordinary events is interwoven with that of ordinary life, depicting teenagers flirting, swearing, drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. This sparked a strong debate in Jordan, putting the Netflix production under the scrutiny of the judiciary while the Jordanian Cyber Crime Department tried to suspend it. It appears that the producers' aim was precisely to provoke controversy to garner attention, as more than half of the taboo topics are concentrated in the first episode<sup>58</sup>. Thus, although the miniseries draws on Islamic imagery on jinn and the demonic, it stands outside an Islamic framework. As such, it displays a secularised morality and a magical relationship with the supernatural that duplicates the codes of the Anglo-American telefantasy.

<sup>54</sup> L.W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Islam*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2009, 93-95, 107, 133-134.

<sup>55</sup> V. Laughlin, "A Brief Overview of al Jinn within Islamic Cosmology and Religiosity", *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 11, 1 (2015): 67-78

<sup>56</sup> N. Khalifa, T. Hardie, "Possession and Jinn", *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 98, 8 (2005): 351-353.

<sup>57</sup> J. Esposito, "Jinn", in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, edited by J. Esposito, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 160.

<sup>58</sup> N. Abu Ain, I. Darwish, "Foul Language on Arabic Television: A Case Study of the First Jordanian Arabic Netflix Series", *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9, 1 (2020): 83-90.

## 5. THE MEDIATISATION OF TRADITION

The three series examined exemplify the process of globalisation of the mediatisation of religion in entertainment. Long characteristic of Anglo-American popular culture, the proliferation of fictional narratives that autonomously construct their own religious content is becoming a feature of the world's most diverse popular cultures. Netflix is a facilitator of this process through its multi-territorial commissioning strategy. The Californian company commissions telefantasy titles in different regions of the world. These titles appeal to local religious traditions. However, the appeal to these traditions does not follow a logic that aims to represent them, but rather a logic that aims to reformulate them. Such a reformulation inscribes the traditions in question into a universal religious storytelling that makes it possible to address local and global audiences at the same time. This occurs through taking themes and motifs from a specific religious tradition and transplanting them into the framework of a primary or spontaneous religion that uses counterintuitive categories to ascribe magical power to inexplicable events. More broadly, such transplantation takes place within a fiction-based religious framework that winks at alternative religiosities. The three case studies support this claim. *Luna Nera* transposes the historical theme of the relationship between Catholicism and witchcraft into a neo-pagan fantasy theme in which the benevolent magic of the witches is contrasted with the malevolent magic of the bishop. *O Escolhido* transfers the spiritual backdrop of illness and healing in curanderismo into a fictive context in which a man endowed with extraordinary powers is pitted against a mysterious demonic creature. *Jinn*, finally, transports the Islamic imagery of jinn into a completely secularised fictional world in which the manifestation of the supernatural is configured as an expression of magical forces and powers. In this way, the three narratives carry out a 'mediatisation of tradition', that is, a reformulation of the three religious traditions invoked in the stories according to a media logic<sup>59</sup>. This mediatisation is achieved through the fantastic mode, which provides the narratological scaffolding for the construction of a universal religious discourse.

As outlined in the third paragraph, according to Freud the fantastic emanates from the uncanny, signifying the sense of dread that marks the return of beliefs discredited by modernity, such as animism, magic, revenants and ghosts<sup>60</sup>. Although Freud situates his analysis within the modern age, the perturbing charge of these beliefs can be traced across a variety of epochs. The theologian Rudolf Otto, in his seminal essay on the concept of holiness, argues that belief in the dead and their cult, belief in ghosts, magic and demonism, and the uncanny that they engender, constitute the primal source of all human religious attitudes<sup>61</sup>. From this perspective, the fantastic and its genres can function as a transcultural device capable of developing universal religious narrative patterns. In

<sup>59</sup> The theoretical paradigm of the mediatisation of religion usually refers to the processes of mediatisation that affect institutional religions. It is often pointed out that this paradigm does not consider the mediatisation processes of religions without formal organisation. In dealing with curanderismo, the problem returns. Therefore, under the label 'mediatisation of traditions', I would like to extend the analytical spectrum of the mediatisation paradigm to those cultural forms with beliefs and rituals that lack institutionalisation but are shared by a community based on a tradition. See: A. Boutros, "Gods on the Move: The Mediatisation of Vodou", *Culture and Religion*, 12, 2 (2011): 185-201.

<sup>60</sup> S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, translated by D. Maclintock, London: Penguin Books, 2003.

<sup>61</sup> The notion of holiness in 20th century history is inextricably associated with Rudolf Otto's work *Das Heilige*. Here he frames the holy as an a priori category, imposing it as an interpretive paradigm of religious fact in its total autonomy. See: R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, translated by J. Harvey, London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

order to use this device and these patterns from both a local and a global perspective, the series examined take themes and motifs from a specific tradition, dehistoricise them and transplant them into stories that appeal to magic, demons, and spirits.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In the contemporary era, global SVODs are shaping trends and images on a global scale, redrawing the boundaries between cultures. These services are expanding the distribution of Anglo-American supernatural TV series and supporting the production of supernatural TV series in many industries around the world. Netflix is leading this trend because of its geographic reach and value proposition. With its focus on multi-territory commissioning, Netflix has adopted an innovative storytelling strategy. This strategy is based on a focus on local cultures. The idea is that the more the stories are rooted in the customs of a particular territory, the more effective the service will be internationally. After examining three narratives based on the religious imaginary of specific traditions – Catholicism and witchcraft in Italy, curanderismo in Brazil, and Islamic perceptions of jinn in Jordan – it is possible to conclude that Netflix's commissioning strategy reflects the conflicting dynamics of the globalisation process. In particular, it reflects the collision between processes of differentiation and homogenisation. In the encounter between Anglo-American supernatural television storytelling and local religious customs and ideas, processes of narrative localisation take place, drawing on local cultures and religious traditions. At the same time, local cultural and religious customs, subsumed by a storytelling that reworks them outside their tradition, dissolve in the processes of narrative globalisation and the mediatisation of religion. These two instances coexist, but they morph according to an opposition such that the latter hegemonises the former, giving rise to series with a homogenising taste. Indeed, the disruptive reworking of regional religious customs and ideas leads to the erasure of cultural differences and the construction of a decontextualised sacred with universalist traits. The lack of focus on the historical context in *Luna Nera*, on the complexity of curanderismo in *O Escolhido*, and on the Islamic heritage in *Jinn*, shapes the portrait of an ancestral numinous magically framed, and devoid of specific characteristics. Along this path, which combines contemporary religious processes of re-enchantment with commercial interests in creating transnational audiences, local imaginaries are renegotiated in favour of a global, mediatised one.

DANILO PETRASSI\*

## MEMES AS AN ANTIDOTE TO AI HEGEMONY

### *Abstract*

Artificial intelligence (AI) has recently gained great progress in many disciplines, from natural language processing to visual recognition. In all these vast possibilities for computation, however, it seems that AI struggles at reproducing one of the most common human forms of expression: “memes”. Memes happen to be too complex as digital artifacts and too deep in being an expressive part of cultural, personal, or collective experiences for any AI to understand—despite its wide access to data. The failure emanates from the symbolic, cultural, and ironic layers impregnated within memes, which are composed of deep social contexts, nuanced allusions, and quick changes in culture. Even though AI processes massive amounts of information, it has never been taught to recognize or piece together the interplay of these intricate human dynamics. The problem arises from the very nature of ambiguity that humor, cultural reference, and irony possess. In other words, even with millions of examples of memes, AI’s attempts at humor seem to be far from human-like in most cases. In fact, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that memes serve as an effective counterbalance to the growing influence of AI, because they offer a valuable insight into the limitations of AI in comprehending the nuances of human behaviour and emotional contexts. A comparative analysis of human-generated and AI-generated memes has enabled the identification of cognitive and creative limitations that define the boundaries of AI’s meme-making capabilities. Scientific relevance of this research is positioned at the intersection of AI and digital culture because as AI technologies come to mediate online interactions more and more, memes can offer a unique form of resistance against them, emphasizing the irreplaceability of human humor.

### *Keywords*

Artificial intelligence; memes; digital culture; internet studies; cultural semiotics.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In an age increasingly mediated by AI, human creativity and cultural expression face new challenges and transformations. Although AI has achieved remarkable capabilities in fields such as healthcare, finance, and automated content generation, it falls notably short in areas requiring nuanced human sensitivity – particularly in humor, irony, and cultural context. These limitations are especially evident in meme creation, a dynamic cultural phenomenon that resists easy categorization or algorithmic replication. Schol-

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ars in AI and cultural studies as Esposito<sup>1</sup> and Moruzzi<sup>2</sup> have pointed out that these gaps underscore how digital technologies, despite their computational power, lack the intricate contextual awareness central to understanding human expression.

Memes operate as complex symbols and humorous artifacts within internet culture, integrating shared knowledge, values, and emotions into succinct, relatable forms<sup>3</sup>. Beyond mere text-image combinations, they serve as carriers of collective social commentary, often drawing from contemporary events, societal issues, and cultural touchpoints to create resonant humor. These layers of symbolism require a blend of emotional intelligence, cultural literacy, and an appreciation for humor's incongruity – a combination that AI, rooted in pattern recognition and data analysis, is notably ill-equipped to achieve<sup>4</sup>. AI's attempts to replicate this meme-making process reveal a critical shortcoming: while AI can recognize visual patterns or imitate syntax, it struggles with the cultural and symbolic depth that makes memes compelling<sup>5</sup>. According to Moruzzi<sup>6</sup>, this gap stems from AI's lack of creative agency, as machines operate on programmed responses rather than genuine contextual understanding, which is essential in humor and cultural critique.

As AI systems become more deeply embedded in digital and creative spaces, understanding these limitations becomes paramount. The shortcomings of AI in capturing the essence of memes highlight a broader issue in AI creativity: the absence of interpretive flexibility, where humor, irony, and cultural resonance all require more than pattern replication—they require interpretative processes typically beyond machine capabilities<sup>7</sup>. Memes thus represent a unique area of resistance to AI, exposing the boundaries of algorithmic “creativity” and reaffirming the value of human agency and intuition in cultural contexts. As Esposito<sup>8</sup> asserts, AI lacks the embodied cultural knowledge and experiential depth necessary for producing work that resonates authentically with human audiences. This paper explores these tensions by analyzing AI's limitations in meme creation, using frameworks from cultural semiotics and humor theory to demonstrate where and why AI falls short. Through a comparative analysis, this study will illustrate how AI's attempts at humor and social commentary in meme creation underscore its current inability to engage meaningfully with dynamic, context-rich aspects of human creativity.

## 2. THE CULTURAL AND SYMBOLIC COMPLEXITY OF MEMES

Memes are far more than humorous images shared online; they are complex cultural artifacts that embody shared knowledge, societal critiques, and emotional resonance. Memes operate as dynamic symbols, actively shaping and reflecting societal values,

<sup>1</sup> E. Esposito, *Artificial Communication. How Algorithms Produce Social Intelligence*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> C. Moruzzi, “Creative Agents: Rethinking Agency and Creativity in Human and Artificial Systems”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, 9, 2 (2022): 245-268. Accessed September 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20539320.2022.2150470>.

<sup>3</sup> S.J. Eynine, “The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet Memes”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 58, 3(2018): 303-319. Accessed September 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayy021>.

<sup>4</sup> K. Wojtkiewicz, “How Do You Solve a Problem like DALL-E 2?”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 81, 4 (2024): 454-467. Accessed November 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts6040018>.

<sup>5</sup> L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Moruzzi, “Creative Agents: Rethinking Agency and Creativity in Human and Artificial Systems”, 245-268.

<sup>7</sup> M. Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, London: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Esposito, *Artificial Communication*.

norms, and current events<sup>9</sup>. This shift underscores the participatory nature of meme culture, where users engage in collaborative meaning-making, a process that eludes AI's algorithmic interpretations<sup>10</sup>. Unlike structured tasks such as image recognition, meme creation demands an understanding of irony, symbolism, and shared cultural knowledge—areas where AI systems encounter significant limitations. Cannizzaro<sup>11</sup> describes memes as “internet signs” that encapsulate specific social contexts and discourses, conveying meaning through the layering of cultural symbols, humor, and irony. This process makes meme creation inherently semiotic, requiring an interpretive ability to decode signs that AI, currently grounded in data patterns rather than contextual interpretation, struggles to emulate. Memes such as the “Distracted Boyfriend” or “Mocking SpongeBob” rely on intertextuality, where the humor or critique emerges from the connection to specific cultural references and shared knowledge<sup>12</sup>. These formats are designed to evoke humor and social critique simultaneously, often hinging on nuanced visual cues and implicit knowledge that only a culturally immersed audience can fully appreciate. AI's attempt to replicate such humor falls short, as it lacks the necessary experiential and contextual sensitivity to grasp these references, leading to humor or symbolism that often feels flat or misplaced<sup>13</sup>.

Meme creation thus goes beyond the superficial recognition of patterns or image-text combinations; it requires a nuanced engagement with the social and cultural landscape, incorporating shared values, current events, and historical references. Cannizzaro<sup>14</sup> emphasizes that internet memes function as a mode of “collective symbolic creativity”, a form of digital folklore where users co-construct and negotiate meaning. This highlights a key limitation in AI models: their inability to replicate the interpretive depth necessary for symbolically rich and contextually meaningful meme creation. AI's failure to understand these symbolic intricacies underscores its current role as a tool of replication rather than as an agent of creative, meaningful content generation.

The complexity of memes extends beyond their symbolic layers to their adaptability within participatory culture. Memes are not static; they evolve and are continuously reshaped as they circulate online, gaining new meanings with each iteration and recontextualization. This fluidity aligns with Milner's<sup>15</sup> concept of memes as “public conversations”, whereby each new version invites commentary, modification, and reinterpretation, enabling users to engage in real-time cultural discourse. The adaptability and rapid evolution of memes pose unique challenges for AI, which, though effective at producing formulaic outputs, lacks the responsiveness to engage with the dynamic, ever-changing nature of meme culture. AI's approach to meme generation is constrained by its reliance on historical data and established patterns, limiting its capacity to adapt to the constantly shifting social and cultural contexts of internet communities<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, as memes function within a “hyper-contextualized” framework, their

<sup>9</sup> Evnine, “The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet Memes”, 303-319.

<sup>10</sup> W. Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> S. Cannizzaro, “Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Folklore”, *Sign Systems Studies*, 44, 4 (2016): 562-586. Accessed September 2024. <https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2016.44.4.05>.

<sup>12</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtkiewicz, “How Do You Solve a Problem like DALL-E 2?”, 454-467.

<sup>14</sup> Cannizzaro, “Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Folklore”, 562-586.

<sup>15</sup> R. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Esposito, *Artificial Communication*.

meaning often hinges on current social and cultural events that change rapidly<sup>17</sup>. Unlike humans, who can incorporate these shifting contexts almost intuitively, AI systems remain anchored to a static interpretation of patterns without the capacity for contextual flexibility. This inability to respond dynamically highlights the larger issue with AI's data-driven framework, which lacks the adaptive sensitivity required for meme-making in participatory digital cultures<sup>18</sup>. By engaging in "symbolic resistance"<sup>19</sup>, memes thus underscore the fundamental gap between human cultural expression and AI's algorithmic limits, suggesting that meaningful cultural production remains deeply tied to human intuition and experiential understanding.

### 3. AI AND CREATIVITY: CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

The rapid advancements of AI in fields like generative art, automated text production, and music composition have sparked significant debate over AI's creative capabilities. While AI excels in rule-based and pattern-driven tasks, meme creation highlights a distinct gap in AI's creative abilities, particularly due to its limitations in emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and humor. As Floridi<sup>20</sup> notes, AI systems are optimized for tasks that can be broken down into data processing and rule-following, yet lack the interpretive and emotional depth required for complex cultural expressions such as humor and irony. AI operates through pattern recognition, synthesizing vast amounts of data to produce outputs that mimic structured forms of creativity. In the realm of visual art, for instance, AI-generated works can replicate stylistic patterns, often resembling particular aesthetics or styles, but they lack the symbolic depth and intentionality of human-created art<sup>21</sup>. Floridi<sup>22</sup> argues that this kind of simulation reflects AI's ability to reproduce surface-level elements without engaging in genuine meaning-making or moral and ethical considerations that are intrinsic to human creativity. In essence, while AI may produce art that is visually appealing, it falls short of the symbolic and emotional resonance that characterizes human-created works.

The challenges AI faces in meme creation are even more pronounced in the domain of humor. Humor relies heavily on incongruity, timing, and shared cultural knowledge, elements that are difficult to codify algorithmically<sup>23</sup>. AI's literal interpretation of incongruous elements often results in humor that feels forced or uninspired, as it lacks the subtlety and social awareness that make jokes effective. According to Floridi<sup>24</sup>, AI's lack of emotional intelligence and contextual awareness is an ethical limitation as well, especially in areas like humor and satire, where the risk of misinterpretation can lead to offensive or culturally insensitive outcomes.

This limitation is particularly evident in AI-generated memes, where humor and relatability are deeply tied to nuanced cultural references and shared social experiences.

<sup>17</sup> Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Folklore", 562-586.

<sup>18</sup> Moruzzi, "Creative Agents: Rethinking Agency and Creativity in Human and Artificial Systems", 245-268.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*.

<sup>20</sup> L. Floridi, *Intelligenza artificiale: L'uso delle nuove macchine*, Milano: Bompiani, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Wojtkiewicz, "How Do You Solve a Problem like DALL-E 2?", 454-467.

<sup>22</sup> L. Floridi, *Etica dell'intelligenza artificiale*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> S. Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Floridi, *Intelligenza artificiale*.

AI meme generators, trained on extensive datasets, can produce memes that visually mirror human creations but often miss the layered humor, symbolism, and contextual cues that give memes their impact<sup>25</sup>. These shortcomings reflect the computational gap<sup>26</sup> in AI inability to interpret meaning beyond the algorithmic frameworks it is given, making it difficult for AI to engage with the fluid, context-rich environment of meme culture.

AI's approach to creativity, then, reveals fundamental limitations when it comes to cultural production. By focusing solely on pattern replication and data processing, AI misses the interpretive, ethical, and emotional dimensions that are central to human creativity. The inability to grasp humor, irony, and cultural references in meme creation underscores a broader issue with AI's application in creative fields: while it can replicate form, it cannot replicate meaning. This points to a critical divide in AI's potential, as the technology, for now, remains a tool rather than an autonomous agent capable of genuine creative expression.

#### 4. METHOD

The following method outlines the study research design, data collection, and analytical framework used to investigate how AI-generated memes differ from those created by humans in terms of humor, cultural relevance, and emotional resonance. The study is grounded in theoretical frameworks drawn from cultural semiotics and humor theory, providing the tools necessary to analyze both the symbolic and humorous aspects of memes.

##### 4.1. *Study research design and framework*

This study follows a comparative research design to identify and examine cognitive and symbolic differences between human-generated and AI-generated memes. By juxtaposing these two meme sets, the study aims to uncover the specific cultural and humorous elements that AI systems fail to replicate effectively. To achieve this, the analysis draws on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework<sup>27</sup>, which treats memes as layered symbolic texts, and Attardo's<sup>28</sup> incongruity theory of humor, which focuses on the unexpected elements essential to humor. These frameworks provide a dual lens for exploring both the symbolic depth and humor mechanisms within memes, particularly assessing how cultural context and incongruity contribute to the effectiveness of human-generated memes and the limitations observed in AI-generated content. Given the symbolic and participatory nature of meme culture, this framework also incorporates Cannizzaro's view of internet memes as "internet signs"<sup>29</sup>, emphasizing the complexity of shared cultural signs and contexts embedded within meme formats. This framework allows for an exploration of

<sup>25</sup> Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Folklore", 562-586.

<sup>26</sup> F. Bianchi, D. Hovy, "On the gap between adoption and understanding in NLP", *Finding of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 2021: 3895-3901. Accessed November 2024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18653/v1/2021.findings-acl.340>.

<sup>27</sup> R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* [1964], New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

<sup>28</sup> Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

<sup>29</sup> Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Folklore", 562-586.

how memes act as dynamic symbols within digital folk culture, a quality that AI-generated memes often lack due to the algorithms' reliance on static pattern recognition and limited interpretive capacity. Prompt specificity was also an essential variable in this design, as slight adjustments to prompts can dramatically alter AI responses, highlighting the role of human input in shaping AI-generated content.

#### *4.2. Data collection: AI-generated and human-generated memes*

The data set comprises memes generated from the popular platform “Imgflip,” which offers both manual meme creation and AI-assisted meme generation. The same templates were used for both human-generated and AI-generated memes to establish direct comparability. This approach ensures that the analysis can isolate differences based on meme creation processes rather than content variability. The prompts were short and concise to test IA's interpretative flexibility and its ability to navigate between humour and nuanced cultural references. Following the reviewer's comments on prompt crafting, multiple variations of prompts were applied to gauge how effectively AI could engage with different cultural nuances and humor types, recognizing the importance of prompt specificity in shaping AI-generated humor and meaning.

#### *4.3. Analytical tools and procedures*

A structured, mixed-method approach was employed for the analysis of the memes, combining qualitative content investigation, semiotic approach, and humour evaluation.

- **Content investigation:** Codes were assigned to both meme sets based on visual template usage, types of cultural references, and humor mechanisms, including irony, satire, and absurdity. This step identified the recurring visual and textual patterns in each meme, allowing for systematic comparison between human and AI-generated content.

- **Semiotic approach:** Barthes' semiotic approach was employed to dissect the symbolic and mythological layers within memes. Special attention was given to how AI memes handled symbolic depth compared to human-generated memes. Also, the analysis focused on whether and how AI memes conveyed shared cultural knowledge, assessing the presence or absence of intertextual references and symbolic adaptability in response to cultural cues.

- **Humor evaluation:** Attardo's incongruity theory of humor guided the humor evaluation, with a focus on how humor arises from unexpected but contextually resonant elements. AI-generated memes were assessed for their tendency toward literalism and failure to engage with irony and incongruity in ways that elicit humor. Following the reviewer's recommendations, the study carefully examined how differences in prompt specificity impacted AI's humor effectiveness, highlighting instances where AI's humor fell flat due to its lack of contextual awareness.

- **Comparative analysis:** The final step involved a comparative analysis that examined humor quality, cultural relevance, and symbolic resonance across human-generated and AI-generated memes. Specific attention was given to the ways in which prompt specificity affected AI meme coherence, examining recurring patterns and common failures in AI's attempts at humor and cultural commentary. By focusing on AI's inability to generate memes with layered symbolic meaning and situational humor, the comparative

analysis reinforces the hypothesis that meme creation requires a degree of intuitive cultural understanding that AI cannot achieve.

#### 4.4. *Ethical considerations*

All memes were sourced from publicly accessible online platforms, ensuring that the study adheres to ethical standards for digital content analysis. The research did not involve any interaction with human participants, and all data was anonymized, respecting creators' privacy. The analysis was conducted in aggregate to prevent identifying or attributing content to specific individuals, minimizing any ethical risks associated with using user-generated online content.

#### 4.5. *Limitations of the method*

Several limitations characterize this study's method. First, relying on publicly available meme generators may not fully capture the capabilities of more advanced AI technologies under development, which might offer improved humor and contextual processing. Second, the analysis of humor and cultural relevance is inherently interpretive and subjective, as humor perceptions vary widely among individuals and cultural groups. Finally, the study's reliance on prompt crafting as a key variable highlights the inherent dependency of AI-generated content on human input, which could skew results based on prompt specificity. Future studies might address these limitations by employing a broader range of AI meme generators and including a more diverse set of cultural and linguistic contexts to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of AI's creative limitations in meme production.

### 5. HUMAN-GENERATED MEMES VS. AI-GENERATED MEMES

The selected platform was "Imgflip"<sup>30</sup>, which offers two distinct avenues for memes creation. The first is the ability to construct personalized memes through the selection of a template and the manual input of a custom message into designated text boxes. The second is the utilization of an AI-powered feature that, upon the selection of a template and the input of a prompt, enables the generation of a meme by leveraging the capabilities of AI.

<sup>30</sup> Imgflip is an online platform that provides tools for creating and sharing memes, as well as hosting a vast library of user-generated content. Its meme generator allows users to customize popular templates or upload their own images, making it a key resource for meme culture. The site's accessibility and template database contribute to the proliferation of specific meme formats, solidifying their role as shared cultural artifacts that facilitate humor, commentary, and social bonding.

Figure 1<sup>31</sup> - *The meme on the left, created by the author, is a way to ironize a classic current situation, the other one on the right is created by AI after inputting “rich people”*



Figure 2<sup>32</sup> - *The first meme was created as a reference to the Oasis reunion, while in the second meme I just inserted “Oasis” to AI*



Figure 3<sup>33</sup> - *In the meme on the left I simulated a classic situation that I often encounter when I go to Mcdonald's; in the one on the right I simply wrote “Mcdonald's” to the AI*



<sup>31</sup> “Distracted Boyfriend” features a man turning away from his presumed romantic partner to admire another woman, who represents a tempting alternative. The meme is often used to highlight conflicting priorities, choices, or distractions in a humorous manner. Its communicative value lies in visualizing interpersonal or abstract dilemmas with relatable humor.

<sup>32</sup> “I Bet He’s Thinking About” shows a woman and a man in bed, with the woman assuming the man is thinking about stereotypically masculine or romantic issues, while his actual thought is revealed to be something unexpected, trivial, or humorous. It underscores the gap between assumptions and reality, often with self-deprecating humor.

<sup>33</sup> “Two Buttons” displays a character sweating over two labeled buttons, struggling to make a choice. The meme emphasizes the challenge of decision-making, especially when both options carry negative, humorous, or contradictory implications. It effectively conveys the pressure of choice and cognitive dissonance.

Figure 4<sup>34</sup> - *In this case the distinction between the meme created by myself and the one generated by AI is subtle, despite the straightforward prompt “Memes”*



Figure 5<sup>35</sup> - *As in the previous one, in the latter example the result between my meme and the one proposed by the AI via the input “Mark Zuckerberg” is almost similar*



<sup>34</sup> “Expanding Brain” illustrates a progression of increasingly elaborate or enlightened states of thought, often depicted with glowing and expanding brains. It humorously contrasts shallow, mundane ideas with exaggeratedly “advanced” thinking, often to satirize over-complication or pseudo-intellectualism.

<sup>35</sup> “Trade Offer” features an individual framed in a symmetrical pose offering a deal, typically captioned with what they offer versus what they seek in return. It humorously represents exchanges, whether literal or abstract, and is used to critique or lampoon unbalanced transactions or ironic negotiations.

## 6. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The application of Attardo's incongruity theory of humor<sup>36</sup> reveals why AI-generated memes struggle to achieve the humor and cultural resonance of human-created content. According to Attardo, humor arises from the resolution of incongruity – a cognitive process where unexpected elements are reconciled within a given context. Human-generated memes in this study effectively exploit this mechanism, integrating unexpected juxtapositions and culturally resonant references to evoke humor.

For instance, in Figure 1, the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme leverages cultural familiarity with wealth disparity debates to construct an incongruity that resolves humorously: the boyfriend represents societal distraction by trivial concerns while neglecting critical issues like environmental crises. This juxtaposition, steeped in cultural critique, adheres to Attardo's notion that humor depends on a shared understanding of incongruities within a specific socio-cultural framework. In contrast, the AI-generated meme lacks this layered incongruity. Prompted by "rich people", the output remains superficial, failing to engage with the cultural or emotional dimensions necessary for humor. The AI's literal approach produces a static message devoid of the cognitive resolution required to evoke a humorous response, exemplifying the system's inability to recognize or construct contextually appropriate incongruities. This gap demonstrates AI's limitations in generating humor that resonates with shared socio-political awareness and collective irony in memes, as described by Shifman<sup>37</sup> and Evnine<sup>38</sup>. From a semiotic perspective, the effectiveness of this meme also lies in its layered use of signs. Barthes argues that images function on two levels: the denotative (literal) and the connotative (symbolic)<sup>39</sup>. The "Distracted Boyfriend" template operates as a denotative sign – a humorous depiction of a man distracted by another woman – but gains its full humorous and critical impact through connotative interpretation. Here, the boyfriend symbolizes societal priorities, and his distraction becomes a metaphor for superficial indulgences overshadowing urgent global issues. This semiotic layering allows audiences to decode and resonate with the humor, embedding the meme within a broader cultural critique. In contrast, the AI-generated meme, prompted by "rich people", lacks this semiotic depth. Its literal approach produces a static message confined to the denotative level, failing to engage with the symbolic or cultural dimensions necessary for humor. This deficiency exemplifies Barthes' notion of "mythologies," where cultural symbols acquire deeper meanings through shared social contexts – a process AI struggles to replicate due to its reliance on pattern recognition devoid of interpretive flexibility.

In Figure 2, where the prompt "Oasis" was used, the AI-generated meme again fails to capture the temporal specificity that human creators naturally integrate. The human-generated meme references the recent Oasis reunion, which resonates with audiences attuned to pop culture events, adding immediacy and relevance. Here, the semiotic process of intertextuality, as described by Cannizzaro, becomes crucial. Memes function as "internet signs", drawing meaning from their relationship with other cultural artifacts and contexts. The human-created meme exploits this intertextuality by embedding its humor within a contemporary cultural moment, while the AI's output remains

<sup>36</sup> Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

<sup>37</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

<sup>38</sup> Evnine, "The Anonymity of a Murrmur: Internet Memes", 303-319.

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

detached, reflecting outdated training data that misses cultural shifts and nuances as they occur<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, Figure 3, using the “Two Buttons” template, highlights AI’s limitations in producing humor with a personalized touch. The human-created meme draws on a familiar, humorous dilemma faced by many McDonald’s customers, evoking relatability and shared experience. The AI-generated meme, responding to the keyword “McDonald’s”, produces a generic output without personal or emotional specificity – because AI lacks subjectivity and food taste and relies on collected data – underscoring the importance of contextually rich, relatable humor, as discussed by Gibbs and Colston<sup>41</sup> and Moruzzi<sup>42</sup>. Attardo’s humor model emphasizes the importance of relevance and context in creating effective humor. AI’s dependency on precise prompts highlights its deficiency in constructing humor autonomously. The human-created meme draws on a familiar, humorous dilemma faced by many McDonald’s customers, evoking relatability and shared experience. The humor here relies on what Barthes terms the “readerly text”, where audiences actively decode and reconstruct the signs presented in the meme to align with their own experiences. This participatory decoding process, which is central to meme culture, amplifies the incongruity and humor. By contrast, the AI-generated meme, responding to the keyword “McDonald’s”, produces a generic output that lacks the symbolic and experiential resonance necessary for effective humor. This limitation underscores AI’s inability to navigate the semiotic complexity that defines meme-making, as it relies on static data rather than the dynamic interplay of signs and contexts that human creators intuitively manage.

In Figure 4 and Figure 5 AI produces outputs that mimic structural templates but fail to incorporate the nuanced incongruities necessary for humor. This limitation aligns with Attardo’s view that humor requires a dynamic interplay of context, audience, and incongruity – a process AI cannot independently replicate. Moreover, the inadequacy of AI-generated humor underscores its reliance on data patterns that lack interpretive flexibility. While human meme creators intuitively embed culturally relevant incongruities into their work, AI relies on explicit instructions to achieve even surface-level coherence. This dependency not only diminishes the spontaneity of humor but also reflects the rigidity of AI’s cognitive processing, which operates without the experiential grounding central to humor’s effectiveness. Moreover, Barthes’ semiotic framework helps explain why AI-generated memes often lack the interpretive flexibility that characterizes human creativity. Memes operate within a fluid, hyper-contextualized cultural space where signs continuously evolve and acquire new meanings through collective reinterpretation. While human meme creators navigate and adapt to these shifts intuitively, AI remains anchored to static data sets, unable to respond dynamically to cultural contexts. This rigidity not only diminishes the spontaneity of AI-generated humor but also reflects the broader limitations of algorithmic systems in engaging with participatory, context-rich cultural production.

<sup>40</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*.

<sup>41</sup> R.W. Gibbs, H.L. Colston, eds., *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader*, East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Moruzzi, “Creative Agents: Rethinking Agency and Creativity in Human and Artificial Systems”, 245-268.

### 6.1. *The role of contextual understanding and the relationship between AI-generated memes and AI-generated comics*

The result aligns with the observations of Floridi<sup>43</sup>, who argues that AI’s interpretative capability is strictly limited to predefined data patterns and explicit prompts. In fact, in an article titled *Professional AI whisperers have launched a marketplace for DALL-E prompts*<sup>44</sup>, on prompt crafting, further highlights this dependency, emphasizing how AI output quality is contingent upon prompt specificity, suggesting that AI lacks the adaptive flexibility necessary for spontaneous humor or cultural commentary. Indeed, this participatory quality aligns with Cannizzaro’s concept of memes as “internet signs”, where cultural symbols gain meaning through collective interpretation. AI-generated memes also struggle to evoke emotional resonance and personalization, which are essential to effective meme humor. For instance, Figure 3’s human-generated meme reflects personal experience, drawing humor from relatable situations that McDonald’s customers frequently encounter. This personalized humor requires a familiarity with cultural references and daily experiences, which AI systems cannot replicate without specific input data. The AI version, based on a simple “McDonald’s” prompt, lacks this emotional depth and falls flat, highlighting the limitations of AI in producing content that resonates emotionally with audiences. This finding supports Boden’s<sup>45</sup> view that true creativity requires emotional intelligence and personal engagement, qualities that AI lacks.

Since memes share with comics the challenge of integrating text and images to convey meaning, humor, or critique, it is worth considering AI-generated comics as a related area of inquiry. Both media demand not only technical execution but also nuanced cultural and contextual awareness to resonate with audiences effectively. This commonality makes AI-generated comics a pertinent area of inquiry when evaluating AI’s broader creative limitations. Like memes, comics rely on semiotic complexity, visual storytelling, and an understanding of cultural subtleties. The challenges AI faces in meme creation – such as cultural illiteracy, emotional detachment, and contextual rigidity – are similarly evident in its attempts at comic generation. Recent studies on AI in comic generation<sup>46</sup> demonstrate that while AI systems are capable of reproducing visual styles and constructing rudimentary narratives, they often fail to achieve the symbolic depth and interactive engagement characteristic of human-created comics. Comics rely heavily on sequential art and visual-textual synchronization to tell a story or deliver a punchline, often embedding multiple layers of meaning that depend on shared cultural knowledge, irony, and emotional resonance. AI-generated comics, much like AI memes, struggle to navigate these interpretive layers, producing content that may be technically coherent but lacks the subtle interplay of signs and contexts that captivate human audiences. From a semiotic perspective, comics and memes operate as “systems of signs”, as described by Roland Barthes<sup>47</sup>. Both media involve a dynamic interaction between the denotative and connotative levels of meaning. In comics, the sequential

<sup>43</sup> Floridi, *Intelligenza artificiale*.

<sup>44</sup> A. Robertson, “Professional AI whisperers have launched a marketplace for DALL-E prompts. AI art isn’t just an experiment – it’s a side hustle”. *The Verge*, September 2, 2022. Accessed November 2024. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/9/2/23326868/dalle-midjourney-ai-promptbase-prompt-market-sales-artist-interview>.

<sup>45</sup> Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*.

<sup>46</sup> P.P. Gunasekara, P.M. Perera, C.D. Adhihetty, D.D. Kollure, N. Kodagoda, A. Caldera, “Generate Comic Strips Using AI”, *Proceedings of Conference on Transdisciplinary Research in Engineering*, 1, 1 (2024). Accessed November 2024. <https://doi.org/10.31357/contre.v1i1.7387>.

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

arrangement of panels creates a narrative flow that requires audiences to infer meaning from the juxtaposition of images and text. This inferential process is central to the humor or critique that comics often convey, relying on cultural literacy and an ability to decode subtle visual or textual cues. Similarly, memes depend on intertextuality and cultural references to evoke humor or critique, compressing meaning into a single frame or a concise text-image combination. AI systems, however, are limited in their ability to interpret or produce such semiotic depth. Their outputs often reflect a literal, surface-level understanding of the text or imagery, missing the nuanced interrelations that give comics and memes their impact. For instance, in comics, a visual punchline often relies on timing, context, and the reader's ability to connect disparate elements within the narrative. AI-generated comics struggle with this level of sophistication. Without an intuitive grasp of irony, pacing, or cultural nuances, AI-produced punchlines may appear mechanical or forced, failing to engage audiences on an emotional or intellectual level. This limitation mirrors the shortcomings of AI-generated memes, which lack the symbolic richness and cultural adaptability that characterize human-created memes. Humor and irony are central to both comics and memes, serving as tools for social commentary and cultural critique. Again, Attardo's<sup>48</sup> incongruity theory of humor, which posits that humor arises from the resolution of unexpected juxtapositions, applies equally to these media. In comics, humor often emerges from incongruities within the narrative or visual elements, requiring the audience to reconcile conflicting meanings. Memes, by comparison, compress this process into a single frame, relying on intertextuality and cultural references to deliver a punchline.

Exploring the parallels between AI-generated memes and comics expands the scope of this paper by situating memes within a larger framework of investigation. Both media highlight the irreplaceable role of human intuition and experiential knowledge in creative processes. Future research could investigate whether advances in AI contextual learning – such as incorporating real-time cultural data or improving multimodal interpretive capabilities – might enhance AI's ability to produce meaningful comics and memes. For instance, advancements in natural language processing (NLP) and visual recognition could enable AI systems to better integrate textual and visual elements within a culturally relevant framework.

## 6.2. *Comparison with autism-related humor interpretation*

The result findings indicate a potential correlation between the difficulties AI encounters in comprehending humor and the challenges faced by some individuals on the autism spectrum. These individuals often exhibit difficulties in interpreting language and humor in a nuanced manner, while simultaneously struggling with irony, sarcasm, and other context-dependent forms of expression. This analogy helps illuminate how humor interpretation relies heavily on contextual sensitivity, cultural literacy, and an ability to navigate shared social cues. Though not intended to reduce the diverse cognitive experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum to a single framework, this comparison emphasizes that both AI and individuals with certain neurodivergent traits encounter challenges in engaging with humor that depends on interpretive flexibility and nuanced cultural knowledge. Research on humor in autism has consistently highlighted a prefer-

<sup>48</sup> Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

ence for literal interpretations of language, often at the expense of grasping implied or multi-layered meanings. Attwood<sup>49</sup> describes how individuals on the autism spectrum may excel at logical reasoning but find it challenging to decode the social and contextual subtexts that underpin humor. Similarly, AI operates on rule-based logic and data patterns, which limits its ability to interpret the incongruity and subtlety central to effective humor<sup>50</sup>. Just as neurotypical humor often relies on tacit cultural assumptions and shared knowledge, so too does meme culture demand an understanding of intertextual references, social norms, and implied meanings – domains where both AI and some individuals on the autism spectrum may struggle. For instance, an AI meme generator tasked with producing humor often relies on surface-level data correlations rather than engaging with the dynamic social and cultural cues that inform humor in a given context. This parallels findings from studies like those by Happé<sup>51</sup>, which demonstrate that individuals with autism may require explicit contextual information to fully understand jokes or ironic statements. In both cases, the lack of intuitive access to shared social knowledge limits the effectiveness of humor interpretation.

Humor frequently depends on shared cultural knowledge, which acts as a scaffold for interpreting incongruities and resolving ambiguity. For individuals on the autism spectrum, as well as AI, the absence of this scaffolding can result in humor that is misinterpreted or perceived as nonsensical. Baron-Cohen and Bolton<sup>52</sup> suggest that individuals with autism may find it difficult to infer mental states or intentions, a skill known as “theory of mind”, which plays a crucial role in understanding sarcasm, irony, and other context-dependent humor. In fact, AI seems to operate without an inherent “theory of mind”, relying instead on explicit programming or training data to approximate understanding. This deficiency is evident in AI-generated memes, which often fail to evoke humor because they lack the ability to infer the cultural and emotional contexts necessary for effective joke construction. Humor involves more than the mechanical juxtaposition of elements; it requires an awareness of audience expectations, social norms, and the symbolic resonance of the content—all areas where AI remains deficient. Contextual sensitivity is another critical component of humor that both AI and individuals on the autism spectrum may find challenging. Overall, in neurodivergent individuals, different studies<sup>53</sup> highlight that humor interpretation improves with explicit contextual cues, suggesting that structured scaffolding can enhance understanding. Similarly, advances in AI’s contextual learning could potentially bridge some of its gaps in humor interpretation, though the inherently adaptive and participatory nature of meme culture poses a unique challenge.

Nevertheless, given the limited scope of the sample comparison, it is imperative to exercise caution in interpreting this section, as they may not necessarily reflect a scientific correlation between AI and the interpretation of autism-related humour.

<sup>49</sup> T. Attwood, *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

<sup>51</sup> F.G. Happé, “An Advanced Test of Theory of Mind: Understanding of Story Characters’ Thoughts and Feelings by Able Autistic, Mentally Handicapped, and Normal Children and Adults”, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 24, 2 (1994): 129-154. Accessed November 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02172093>.

<sup>52</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, P. Bolton., *Autism. The Facts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> M.L. Bauman, T.L. Kemper, eds., *The Neurobiology of Autism* [1994], Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from this study suggests that memes, with their layered humor, symbolism, and cultural specificity, can serve as an incisive critique of AI's creative limitations. While AI can replicate structural elements of meme formats, it falls short in conveying the depth, emotional resonance, and contextual awareness that characterize human-generated memes. Memes, therefore, today can act as a form of cultural resistance to AI's growing presence in creative spaces, underscoring the irreplaceable value of human intuition, cultural knowledge, and emotional intelligence in meme production and broader cultural critique. One of the main aspects with this line of reasoning is that AI's capacity to mimic meme formats merely scratches the surface of what memes represent in terms of humor, cultural insight, and shared social experiences. The inherently human qualities of irony, contextual adaptability, and layered meaning remain crucial aspects of meme-making that AI cannot achieve, positioning memes as a vivid testament to the limits of algorithmic culture. The findings reinforce the essential role of prompt crafting in determining AI-generated meme success. AI's humor and contextual relevance often fail without highly specific, carefully structured prompts, underscoring its dependency on explicit human guidance to achieve meaningful output. This dependency reveals a gap between AI's rigid, data-driven processing and the adaptive, contextually rich processes that human creativity requires. AI's lack of interpretive flexibility restricts its application in creative fields that demand nuanced, situational awareness – qualities intrinsic to humor and meme creation. Future research could broaden this exploration by examining similar AI applications in creative domains like AI-generated comics, which share memes' reliance on combining text and imagery to convey humor and narrative. This would provide additional insights into how AI handles multimodal expression and reveal if it faces comparable limitations in producing culturally resonant content. As memes continue to exemplify the intricacies of human cultural expression, they reveal that critical aspects of creativity – such as humor, emotional depth, and participatory engagement – are likely to remain beyond AI's current and foreseeable capabilities. This ongoing dialogue reaffirms the necessity of preserving human expression, interpretive freedom, and cultural sensitivity in an increasingly algorithm-driven digital landscape.

ALBERTO SPADAFORA\*

## CULTURA AUDIOVISIVA E IDENTITÀ DEGLI STATI UNITI D'EUROPA<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

Through the summative recapture of the calls that Wim Wenders has been dedicating and addressing to Europe for over thirty years, my essay aims to explore the paradigm according to which, in Wenders' words, the audiovisual culture awareness can still shape, nurture and forge a sense of unity and integration in the longed-for United States of Europe's aesthetical and political complex perception. Being multifaceted in its approaches, plural in its idioms and eclectic in its styles, it is precisely the European audiovisual culture, Wenders says, that truly expresses and reflects Europe's equally heterogeneous identity. Through the various calls here presented, the master filmmaker from Düsseldorf invites to recognize, preserve, teach, and promote the aesthetical and cultural role that audiovisual media play in the development of a knowledge that becomes consciousness, paving a sustainable way to restore European identity. Eventually, the comparative analysis between Wenders' calls and multidisciplinary considerations on European cultural identity not only substantiates and broadens the issues raised by Wenders, but also fosters a multidimensional discussion in the wake of a deliberately multifaceted approach.

### *Keywords*

Wim Wenders; audiovisual studies; visual culture studies; media studies; media literacy; European culture.

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*I am not a German director.  
I am not an international director.  
I am a European director*

Wim Wenders<sup>2</sup>

Wim Wenders, autentico *maître à penser* contemporaneo, è autore di una moltitudine di appelli con cui da oltre trent'anni suggerisce un orizzonte rigenerativo della cultura – segnatamente visiva e audiovisiva – degli auspicati Stati Uniti d'Europa. Il recupero

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<sup>2</sup> Dall'intervista di N. Roumeliotis, "Wim Wenders presenta *La Cinetek*, il sito con film cult scelti da registi". *La Stampa*, 2 ottobre 2010. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. [https://www.lastampa.it/spettacoli/2019/02/10/video/wim\\_wenders\\_presenta\\_la\\_cinetek\\_il\\_sito\\_con\\_film\\_cult\\_scelti\\_da\\_registi-165921/](https://www.lastampa.it/spettacoli/2019/02/10/video/wim_wenders_presenta_la_cinetek_il_sito_con_film_cult_scelti_da_registi-165921/).

consuntivo e cronologico dei suddetti appelli rivela come il cineasta di Düsseldorf mantenga una perdurante fiducia umanista nei media audiovisivi e riconosca un flagrante credito nel loro potenziale culturale, sociale e politico, al punto da convocarli quali autentici agenti trasformativi in grado di forgiare una percezione consapevole di unità e integrazione nell'esperienza multidimensionale degli Stati Uniti d'Europa. Al tempo stesso, va detto, il riesame di tali interventi – l'ultimo dei quali è datato al 2017 – non ignora la drammatica attualità in cui le condizioni di attuazione dei propositi menzionati da Wenders paiono sempre più remote e complesse. Il riepilogo degli appelli pronunciati dal cineasta intende allora porsi anche come sfida intellettuale e come bussola culturale nel sempre più instabile e discusso futuro dell'Unione Europea.

## 1. IDENTITÀ EUROPEA

Se nel gennaio 1990, conversando con Wolfram Schütte, Wenders dichiara: “Per gli americani sono un regista *tedesco*; ma per me stesso sono indubbiamente e irrevocabilmente un regista *europeo*”<sup>3</sup>, due anni prima, in occasione del convegno “L'identità europea” (Parigi, 13-14 gennaio 1988), il cineasta presenta la relazione *Non siamo soli, in una grande casa*, con la quale per la prima volta solleva questioni cruciali per l'articolazione del nostro discorso:

[Ho] vissuto otto anni negli Stati Uniti. [...] Io sono un cineasta europeo, dicevo in America. E dopo aver deciso [...] di tornare a casa mi sono detto: “Torno in Europa”, non “in Germania” o “in Francia”, bensì “in Europa”. [...] In questo senso, in America ho vissuto realmente una mancanza d'identità: la mia anima non era sufficientemente nutrita [...]. Sotto la giacchetta tedesca indossavo una maglia di ferro europea, [...] composta da un gran numero di lingue, di culture, di confini geografici, paesi vicini, guerre e paci, ovvero proprio il patrimonio che manca agli americani. [...] Esiste un'arte europea e un *linguaggio comune* per eccellenza: il nostro cinema. *L'identità europea* ha trovato espressione soprattutto in quest'arte, più che nelle altre. Posso infatti citare grandi artisti europei come Eisenstein, Dreyer, Lang, Renoir, Rossellini, Buñuel, Truffaut, Tarkovskij o gli odierni Fellini, Antonioni, Godard, Bergman, Angelopoulos, Oliveira, Attenborough... [...] Noi abbiamo qualcosa da opporre: le nostre immagini europee, la nostra arte, il nostro *linguaggio comune* che dobbiamo conservare e proteggere. Non mi interessa affatto definire quest'arte o il concetto di *identità europea*, mi basta che esista. [...] Darei tutto perché *l'identità europea* rimanesse inspiegabile, pur continuando a operare in maniera evidente. Io spero che tutti rimangano francesi, tedeschi, inglesi, irlandesi, polacchi, portoghesi, greci o svedesi, ma che al contempo abbiano qualcosa in comune, arduo da spiegare ma tanto più evidente: il privilegio di poter vivere sotto al tetto di una fortezza chiamata Europa<sup>4</sup>.

In occasione del conferimento del premio Murnau alla carriera, il 17 marzo 1991 a Bielefeld, Wenders ravvisa:

Non esiste più il cattivo, potentissimo cinema americano e in subordine la povera cinematografia prodotta in Germania, Francia, Italia, Spagna, Inghilterra, Polonia, Scandinavia, Unione Sovietica; ormai si va sempre più delineando la *coscienza* di un cinema europeo come sorta di orgoglioso *linguaggio collettivo*, e forse anche qualcosa di più di un linguag-

<sup>3</sup> W. Wenders, *L'atto del vedere* [1992], Milano: Meltemi, 2022, 35 (corsivo dell'autore).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-192 (corsivo mio).

gio comune; forse esiste una 'istituzione cinema' a livello europeo, e un'industria cinematografica che fa da tetto protettivo e garantisce la sopravvivenza alle piccole industrie nazionali<sup>5</sup>.

Intervistato da Marcel Bergmann e Bernhard Beutler, nell'ottobre 1991 Wenders accenna a una iniziativa volta a delineare orizzonti rappresentativi della cultura audiovisiva europea:

Lavoro attualmente in un'istituzione europea [...] composta da cinquantanove registi, produttori, attori e autori europei, che crede all'Europa in un senso molto vasto, ben al di là delle direttive della Comunità europea. Vi sono rappresentati i registi di tutti i paesi, dalla Turchia all'Islanda, dalla Polonia all'Unione sovietica. Attualmente stiamo cercando di trasformare la nostra organizzazione in un'autentica "European Film Academy", sul modello della "Academy of Motion Picture" di Hollywood. Dovrebbe diventare un'istanza rappresentativa [...]; dovrebbe rappresentare la *coscienza* del cinema europeo<sup>6</sup>.

Dopodiché il cineasta, fotografo, scrittore, pittore e produttore tedesco formula una serie di discorsi istituzionali – che divengono nel tempo emblematici – in merito alla cultura dei media audiovisivi europei e al loro potenziale trasformativo nella percezione dell'identità europea. Ripercorrendo le circostanze e la successione dei passaggi argomentativi, si analizzano qui i punti essenziali di tali discorsi.

## 2. ANIMA EUROPEA

Consapevole e preoccupato che l'Unione Europea sia percepita dai suoi cittadini esclusivamente come sovrastruttura governativa e finanziaria, il cineasta di Düsseldorf denuncia innanzitutto l'assenza di uno spirito unitario e invoca la necessità di individuare un'anima identitaria europea.

Con il discorso *Giving Europe a Soul?*, pronunciato all'interno del ciclo di conferenze "A Soul for Europe" (Berlino, 17-19 novembre 2006), Wenders esorta le istituzioni e i cittadini a confidare nel potere trasformativo dell'immagine audiovisiva nel promuovere una coscienza europea<sup>7</sup>. Senza esitazione proclama l'esistenza di un'anima europea, da rintracciare non nella politica o nell'economia bensì nella cultura: "Europe has a soul, indeed. No need to invent or create one for our continent. It is not to be found in its politics or in its economy. It is first and foremost embedded in its culture"<sup>8</sup>. Secondo Wenders, l'anima europea coincide con la cultura europea e, vivendo nell'era dell'immagine *tout court*, nulla può esprimerla più della cultura visuale e dell'audiovisivo: "We live in the age of the image. Today, no other realm of culture displays so much power than that of the image. Words, music, literature, books, newspapers, rock'n roll, theatre... Nothing comes even close to the authority of moving images, in cinema and television"<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 223 (corsivo mio).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 193 (corsivo mio).

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. W. Wenders, "Giving Europe a Soul?". Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. <https://asoulforeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Speech-Wenders-06-11-18.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. In un'intervista rilasciata a Peter W. Jansen nel 1991 Wenders, riflettendo sul (dis)senso contemporaneo di una visualità diffusa ed espansa, insiste sulla resistenza salvifica del cinema: "Siamo a ogni ora del giorno esposti a una tale overdose visiva [...]. In questa inflazione, le immagini vanno via via perdendo

Wenders, nel solco di quel “genio cinematografico americano” menzionato da Bazin<sup>10</sup>, ricorda l’esperienza esemplare degli Stati Uniti d’America che, fin dagli inizi, colgono la potenzialità del cinematografo ed eleggono il medium audiovisivo a veicolo ideale per la costruzione di una coscienza collettiva: “The whole ‘American Dream’ is really an invention of cinema. [...] Who is dreaming the European Dream? Or better: How are we encouraged to dream it?”<sup>11</sup>. In tal senso, dunque, se l’industria culturale statunitense ha contribuito tramite il suo cinema a forgiare il Sogno Americano, il cinema europeo può incoraggiare il Sogno Europeo<sup>12</sup>. La cultura audiovisiva europea può e deve giocare un ruolo cruciale nel processo di affermazione di un immaginario condiviso, sovranazionale e transnazionale<sup>13</sup>.

Partendo da esempi emblematici delle singole cinematografie europee – dalla Spagna di Pedro Almodóvar alla Polonia di Wajda e Polanski, dal Regno Unito di Ken Loach all’Italia di Fellini<sup>14</sup> – Wenders esorta i cineasti europei, veri e propri ambasciatori di un patrimonio culturale, a impegnarsi congiuntamente nella causa europea e a perseverare nel processo di unificazione audiovisiva voluto da Ingmar Bergman<sup>15</sup>. La percezione del continente europeo deriva dalla percezione della cultura europea: cosicché, dichiara Wenders, non ci può essere né una “coscienza europea” né una “identità europea” senza una “proiezione” della cultura europea<sup>16</sup>. Per il Maestro della *Neue Welle*, promuovere, sostenere e divulgare le immagini della “nostra Storia”, ovvero il nostro composito immaginario culturale di “miti, [...] idee ed emozioni”<sup>17</sup>, diviene un’azione flagrantemente e potentemente umanista.

### 3. IMMAGINE EUROPEA

La riflessione di Wenders sull’immagine dell’Europa viene ribadita di fronte al Parlamento europeo l’11 giugno 2007 con il discorso *The Image of Europe. Identification and Representation*, con il quale incoraggia i governi europei a riporre fiducia nelle potenzialità sociali con cui il cinema contribuisce alla costruzione di una coscienza comuni-

ogni contenuto di verità. Tuttavia, proprio il cinema, grazie allo sforzo da cui nasce ogni singola inquadratura, rappresenta ancora un ultimo bastione di questa potenzialità”, Wenders, *L’atto del vedere*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Scrive il teorico francese nel 1957: “La superiorità di Hollywood [...] risiede [...] in ciò che in poche parole potrebbe essere chiamato “il genio cinematografico americano” [...]. Il cinema americano ha saputo tradurre in modo prodigiosamente adeguato l’immagine che la società americana voleva di se stessa. Non passivamente, come semplice attività di piacere ed evasione, ma dinamicamente, vale a dire partecipando con i propri mezzi alla costituzione di questa società”, A. Bazin, “Sulla ‘politique des auteurs’”, in *Il cinema secondo la Nouvelle Vague*, a cura di G. Grignaffini, Trento: Temi Editrice, 2006, 122.

<sup>11</sup> Wenders, “Giving Europe a Soul?”, 4.

<sup>12</sup> La contrapposizione tra sogno europeo e sogno americano è valutata in prospettiva anche economica in J. Rifkin, *Il sogno europeo. Come l’Europa ha creato una nuova visione del futuro che sta lentamente eclissando il sogno americano*, Milano: Mondadori, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Del resto, interpellato sul futuro della politica filmica europea, già nel 1990 Wenders replica: “Il cinema europeo sarà veramente in grado di sopravvivere solo su una base multinazionale”, Wenders, *L’atto del vedere*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Wenders, “Giving Europe a Soul?”, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Ricorda Wenders a proposito di Bergman: “Mi ero molto legato a Bergman durante il suo mandato come presidente della European Film Academy [1988-1996, *N.d.A.*]. Si era dedicato anima e corpo all’idea di una istituzione comune paneuropea ed era stato uno dei padri fondatori”, W. Wenders, *I pixel di Cézanne e altri sguardi su artisti* [2015], Roma: Contrasto, 2017, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Wenders, “Giving Europe a Soul?”, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

taria e alla rivelazione di un'anima autentica dell'Europa<sup>18</sup>. Innanzitutto, però, Wenders esordisce denunciando con dichiarato dolore che

Per la maggior parte degli europei, l'Europa è ormai diventata un'entità astratta, aliena. Non è chiaro se debbano identificarsi con tale immagine oppure dissociarsi, se debbano sentirsi rappresentati oppure repressi. [...] In quanto regista e fotografo, mi propongo di esaminare il problema [...] usando la posizione privilegiata di creatore di immagini. Da dove cominciare? [...] La scorsa settimana ho visitato Heiligendamm, dove si è tenuto il G8. Ho passato cinque giorni in compagnia non di politici, ma di giovani manifestanti accalcati “al di là” della recinzione. Giovani cittadini per i quali l'Europa rappresenta una mera potenza economica, che condivide le colpe per le pietose condizioni del clima, per l'abuso energetico e lo sfruttamento aberrante delle risorse, nonché per la povertà e l'ingiustizia nel mondo. Questa, perlomeno, è l'immagine dell'Europa che circola tra la maggior parte dei giovani. Tutto ciò mi rattrista enormemente. Perché noi sappiamo che l'Europa rappresenta piuttosto il contrario. [...] Mi addolora profondamente vedere che un numero così alto di giovani hanno gettato la spugna, hanno perso fiducia nell'Europa. Da ragazzo ero affascinato dall'idea dell'Europa. O [dal]la visione ancora più utopica di un'Europa Unita [che] ha entusiasmato la mia immaginazione più di ogni altra cosa. [...] Cosa è rimasto del *sogno*?<sup>19</sup>

Senza alcuna soluzione di continuità, Wenders risponde al suo atto di denuncia proponendo una valorizzazione storica ed estetica dell'immagine audiovisiva:

Del resto, il “sogno” era già stato trattato – dal cinema, dal mondo delle immagini in movimento. Sin dall'inizio. [...] Il cinema ha tutto ciò che gli serve per consolidare un'“immagine”, per renderla immensa, gigantesca, “più grande della realtà”. Non produce solo immagini potenti, ma anche trame, racconti, storie e Storie, miti, tradizioni e reputazioni. L'idea dell'Europa cresceva, ma lontano dagli schermi [...] e non si è tradotta in immagini che avrebbero indubbiamente infiammato i cuori [...]. L'Europa non si è manifestata sotto forma di immagini, non si è glorificata e propagata, non ha proiettato la sua luce sugli schermi dei cinematografi<sup>20</sup>.

Fondamentale, nella successiva argomentazione elaborata del cineasta tedesco, è l'assunto che la visione futura dell'Europa dipenda da una dimensione culturale nuova, così come il rinvigorimento del “beneficio di immagine”<sup>21</sup> europea debba essere propagato dai media audiovisivi. L'Europa – nata come comunità economica – deve cedere, in modo naturale ma improrogabile, al governo della comunità culturale. Benché non producano profitti monetizzabili nell'immediato, le arti – soprattutto quelle audiovisive – esercitano una straordinaria e positiva influenza sulle persone e “danno loro un senso di sicurezza e identità, di appartenenza, orgoglio e valore”<sup>22</sup>. A tal fine è cruciale che l'immagine europea rappresenti, conservandole, le diversità, le alterità, le contraddizioni e le specificità insite da sempre nel Vecchio Continente: “Se l'Europa – spiega il cineasta – deve ritrovare se stessa agli occhi degli europei, può farlo solo attraverso la sua qualità più profonda: la diversità meravigliosa, caotica e unica della sua cultura!”<sup>23</sup>.

Rivolgendo il citato discorso ad artisti e istituzioni, Wenders esorta a divulgare

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. W. Wenders, “L'immagine dell'Europa. Identificazione e rappresentazione”, *Duellanti*, 36 (2007): 75-83, proposto nella traduzione di Matteo Bittanti.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77 (corsivo dell'autore).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

l'esistenza di un cinema europeo che sia più della semplice somma delle singole cinematografie nazionali e rimedi al "deficit iconico che il nostro continente ha sofferto per via dell'assenza delle immagini europee sugli schermi cinematografici"<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. ALFABETIZZAZIONE AUDIOVISIVA IN EUROPA

Intervenendo a Bruxelles il 27 ottobre 2010 in veste di presidente della European Film Academy, Wenders presenta la relazione dal titolo *Image and Identity of Europe. The Role of Cinema and of Film Literacy*<sup>25</sup>, con la quale per la prima volta illustra e sollecita una soluzione espressamente progettuale: l'alfabetizzazione audiovisiva, ovvero la promozione della conoscenza e dell'insegnamento del linguaggio audiovisivo come vera e propria disciplina curriculare e formativa<sup>26</sup>.

Trattandosi di una sollecitazione preziosa nel congestionato contesto fruitivo audiovisivo contemporaneo, l'auspicio è che le agenzie educative dell'Unione Europea accolgano una proposta quanto mai strategica per relazionarsi e orientarsi nell'universo espanso delle immagini nell'era della globalizzazione. Nel suo intervento, Wenders rinnova la sua denuncia relativa alla percezione dell'immagine di apparato politico, amministrativo e finanziario che l'Europa proietta di sé ("The ADMINISTRATION of Europe has become THE IMAGE of Europe!"<sup>27</sup>) e indica ancora una volta nel cinema l'antidoto più efficace, capace di veicolare e infondere messaggi sociali e culturali propositivi e rigenerativi:

There simply is no more efficient and popular way to spread and communicate social, moral and cultural messages. Like no other medium film generates identification and establishes emotional and cognitive connection. Film [...] reflects the very picture of our society, with its values, habits, hopes and fears. More than that: film shapes these values, forms these habits and influences trends of hopes and fears<sup>28</sup>.

Per Wenders l'alfabetizzazione iconica e audiovisiva ("Film Literacy" o "Film Education") è dunque una missione educativa e pedagogica imprescindibile per l'acquisizione di un patrimonio culturale condiviso e coesivo, siccome nessun medium riflette, proietta, modella e suscita identificazione e percezione estetica quanto il cinema. Spiega il cineasta:

I am here today as a representative of the European Film Academy, to appeal to those who have the political power and means to assure to the moving image a higher importance in education than granted until today. [...] It is our deep conviction that a major task for pri-

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> W. Wenders, "Image and Identity of Europe. The Role of Cinema and of Film Literacy". Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. [https://ec.europa.eu/archives/information\\_society/avpolicy/docs/reg/cinema/news/ww\\_speech\\_101027.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/archives/information_society/avpolicy/docs/reg/cinema/news/ww_speech_101027.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Nel 2012 Gianni Canova denuncia la drammatica assenza di alfabetizzazione iconica in Italia – e in particolare il diffuso analfabetismo filmico: "Siamo il Paese a più alto tasso di analfabetismo iconico di tutto l'Occidente. Oggi un ragazzo può arrivare alla maturità classica senza che nessuno gli faccia conoscere *2001. Odissea nello spazio* (1968) o *La dolce vita* (1960), o gli faccia apprezzare la bellezza e la potenza di un film di Hitchcock o di Francesco Rosi", G. Canova, "Chiedigli chi era Fellini...", 8 ½. *Numeri, visioni e prospettive del cinema italiano*, 1 (2012): 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Wenders, "Image and Identity of Europe", 1 (maiuscolo dell'autore).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

mary and secondary schools is to teach the decoding and the appreciation of this our very own cinema and its history. [...] We appeal to the EU member states to take the subject of 'film education' or 'cinema literacy' on the agenda of the council of ministers in charge of education and culture, with the aim to allow film, like art and literature, to become a stable, integrative part of the school curricula and not be treated any longer as a complementary programme<sup>29</sup>.

Wenders elabora una vera e propria elegia dell'insegnamento del linguaggio audiovisivo e della storia del cinema, utile a sostenere le giovani generazioni nel coltivare uno spirito analitico e storico-critico. L'insegnamento del linguaggio audiovisivo nelle scuole diviene al tempo stesso una strategia e una prerogativa di cittadinanza condivisa. Nell'articolo *Film Is a Language That Can Be Taught* Wenders ribadisce l'urgenza dell'insegnamento del linguaggio audiovisivo nelle scuole europee dell'obbligo: "Kids are exposed to no other language more frequently than the audiovisual language and it is the only one they are completely unprepared for. It is a language and it can be taught"<sup>30</sup>.

All'interno del dibattito *A Soul for Europe Pre-Conference*, promosso nel 2016 dalla Fondazione berlinese Stiftung Zukunft, Wim Wenders intende le arti come i media ideali di contatto tra culture e popolazioni europee<sup>31</sup>. Il cineasta risolve l'ipotetica incompatibilità tra lingue, culture e tradizioni in Europa a favore dei *millennials*, culturalmente più europei di qualsiasi altra precedente generazione:

Europeans, and especially a great part of contemporary European youth, are already living in a European network – socially, but certainly culturally. They know more about each other's music, movies, literature, comic strips, newspapers, art fairs, exhibitions, festivals, food, cars, bicycles, fashion, regions, drinks, idiosyncrasies, you name it, than ever. [...] Let's have that discourse with those who need to make Europe their home continent in the future: its youth. Their future can only be European<sup>32</sup>.

Alla domanda su quale ruolo rivestano le arti, Wenders ribadisce ancora una volta che la loro prerogativa è quella di cementificare il sentimento europeo, di contrastare il populismo dei risvegli nazionalisti e di unificare non solo gli Stati ma anche e soprattutto i cittadini e le cittadine:

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 e 6.

<sup>30</sup> R. Pogorelis, "Filmmaker Wim Wenders: Film Is a Language That Can Be Taught", *News European Parliament*, 28 ottobre 2010. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20101025STO89950/filmmaker-wim-wenders-film-is-a-language-that-can-be-taught>. In tale felice direzione si posizionerebbe la promulgazione e l'attuazione in Italia della legge 220 del 14 novembre 2016 "Disciplina del cinema e dell'audiovisivo" e del relativo Piano Nazionale "Cinema e Immagini per la Scuola", promossi in sinergia dall'allora MiBACT - Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo e dall'allora MIUR - Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca: la Legge e il Piano intendono promuovere l'insegnamento del cinema e del linguaggio audiovisivo nelle scuole e inserire percorsi di formazione per docenti di istituzioni scolastiche di ogni ordine e grado, cfr. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/11/26/16G00233/sg> e <https://cinemaperlascuola.istruzione.it/>. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. Tra il 2019 e il 2020, ad esempio, sono selezionati 300 operatori di educazione visiva, da impiegare nella formazione di più di 27.600 docenti su nozioni di grammatica cinematografica, narrazione filmica e organizzazione manageriale del sistema degli audiovisivi.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. W. Wenders, "Three Crucial Questions About Europe", in *A Soul for Europe. Online Debate 2016. Documentation of the Major Contributions*, edited by S. Austen and V. Hassemmer, Berlin: Stiftung Zukunft, 2017, 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

If we project ourselves ten years into the future, we can compare the Europe that would be handicapped and reduced by today's nationalists and populists to the Europe that grows in its soul, and deepens its understanding by adhering more and more to a creative and cultural realm, not just to financial and bureaucratic regulations<sup>33</sup>.

Wenders esorta i politici e le organizzazioni governative a farsi da parte e a lasciare che siano le istituzioni locali, i festival, i musei, i concerti, le squadre di calcio e i social network a convogliare i sentimenti. L'unica strada da intraprendere è lasciar interagire i cittadini e finanziare le loro iniziative culturali: "Let's start putting Europe into the hands of its users and not leave it up to politicians or governments! [...] Let politics (and politicians) appear more modestly and not just say that Europe belongs to its citizens but prove it"<sup>34</sup>.

Il cineasta tedesco diviene dunque, in maniera esplicita e tenace, portavoce di una politica culturale che auspica un cinema europeo capace di assurgere a un compiuto cinema degli Stati Uniti d'Europa: un cinema sfaccettato nei suoi idiomi e plurale nei suoi approcci, ma unico nella sua capacità di costruire e restituire l'immagine e l'anima della comunità europea agli occhi degli spettatori-cittadini dell'Unione.

## 5. LA POLITICA CULTURALE DELL'EUROPA

In occasione della trentesima cerimonia di premiazione degli European Film Awards, tenutasi a Berlino il 9 dicembre 2017, Wenders – ancora in qualità di Presidente della European Film Academy<sup>35</sup> – invoca, con urgenza definitiva, la necessità di una cultura audiovisiva consapevole quale via anche politica per il futuro della comunità europea:

I recall the 1980s when making films in a horribly divided Europe often felt like fighting lonely battles. Europe had come a long way since then but I am furious today because of an old monster that we thought we had buried, called nationalism... The oldest and worse European disease. How can it possibly creep back into our present tense? How could these populist politicians with their lies threaten to kill our proudest dreams? Why do they look for its future in its rotten past? Greed and growth. Europe is built on much better walls, more solid ones than money. Europe has more solid and serious foundations, which are not the money and the constant desire to be making revenues – we have cultural traditions and ideas about who we are as people and as social beings... Are we ready to fight for our ideals? Are we fighting enough for these ideals? Did we? Will we? The EFA sometimes feels like a Noah's Ark, a safe haven, and the strength of European film offers great promise for the future of Europe against the simplifiers, the oligarchs, the enemies of freedom. When I look at Europe, I still see a great promise with a touch of utopia. Europe is still a safe haven. Europe is not a problem; Europe is a solution. Let's defend it with all our convictions. Our film family has a huge impact on people and can change the world – we are responsible for it! We have a common responsibility in Europe, for Europe, a responsibility beyond our national borders. Let's be winners by responding to the challenges our society and profession are facing today. And I think that we, the film community, the film family, are in a perfect position to make the difference! With our stories, our imagination, our sounds and images we carry a greater responsibility than ever! I ask young filmmakers to take over the struggle and make it yours,

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Il ruolo di Presidente dell'EFA - European Film Academy è ricoperto da Ingmar Bergman (1988-1996), Wim Wenders (1996-2020), Agnieszka Holland (2020-2024) e, attualmente, da Juliette Binoche.

and push Europe and its common language – cinema – into the future. I ask you to use your art and create a new, forward looking imaginary for the European community. Long live our rich and free European cinema!<sup>36</sup>

In maniera sempre più esplicita Wenders esorta dunque cineasti e operatori culturali a reagire e ad arginare, con una presa di posizione decisa e definitiva, le derive anti-comunitarie, i nazionalismi e i populismi che si propagano nell'Europa del presente. La politica culturale sostenuta dall'autore tedesco reclama la visione di un'Europa che sia laboratorio espressivo e faro delle differenze, custode della Storia e delle storie, che celebri le cinematografie dei singoli Stati membri e al tempo stesso animi un immaginario europeo condiviso e collettivo – unica garanzia di identità da opporre all'impasse dei popoli e dei governanti nei confronti delle Istituzioni centrali. L'appello rivolto durante la cerimonia di premiazione degli EFA richiama in modo evidente i brevi e impressionistici poemi in prosa con cui Wenders correda *Inventare la pace*<sup>37</sup>: in dialogo con la filosofa Mary Zournazi, nel volume il cineasta tedesco riposiziona la centralità della dimensione politica – ma non ideologica – della cultura dell'arte e riflette sull'urgenza sia di reinserire il concetto di pace nel campo dell'immaginazione creativa sia di reinventare un linguaggio visuale che contribuisca a un processo di pace diffusa tra gli esseri umani. In *Inventare la pace* Wenders ricorda quanto il cinema possa rendere percepibile una nuova etica della visione contemporanea ed esorta i cineasti alla responsabilità morale dello sguardo:

Gli artisti non devono mai accettare e tollerare quel che accade. Ma devono insegnare a vedere; affrontare il mondo con serietà. [...] Hanno l'obbligo di [...] trovare alternative etiche. È allora che scatta la risposta dei nostri occhi, della nostra mente. Un film, una fotografia o un quadro possono guarire l'anima spezzata. È, questa, la nostra responsabilità come artisti: non rinunciare mai...<sup>38</sup>

## 6. CONTRIBUTI E RIFLESSIONI

Nell'introduzione al volume *Popular European Cinema*, nel 1992 Richard Dyer e Ginette Vincendeau si interrogano su cosa sia il cinema europeo, convergendo di fatto sulle questioni esposte da Wenders nei suoi discorsi: “Is there a European culture which is more than the sum of the cultures of its nation states? British, French, Hungarian, Portuguese, Swedish cultures are European by virtue of their geographical and historical placement, but what makes them ‘European’?”<sup>39</sup>. I due studiosi avanzano l'ipotesi di un nuovo campo di ricerca che utilizzi il medium audiovisivo per esaltare e celebrare le diversità intrinseche nella cultura europea: “Europe itself is not a unified phenomenon [...]. Open up a new area of study, using the medium of film to focus and celebrate the diversities of [...] European culture”<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> W. Wenders, “Speech at the 30th European Film Awards”, 9 dicembre 2017. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. <https://vimeo.com/246804803>.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. W. Wenders, M. Zournazi, *Inventare la pace. Dialogo sulla percezione* [2013], Milano: Bompiani, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Dall'intervista a Wenders di V. Trione, “Aprite gli occhi: il cinema è la medicina del mondo”, *Corriere della Sera*. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. <https://lettura.corriere.it/aprite-gli-occhi-il-cinema-e-la-medicina-del-mondo/>.

<sup>39</sup> R. Dyer, G. Vincendeau, eds., *Popular European Cinema*, London-New York: Routledge, 1992, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, XI.

Lo storico francese Pierre Sorlin ravvisa che la comunanza di radici storiche non giustifica necessariamente la presenza di un cinema europeo, dal momento che “gli europei hanno vissuto gli stessi cambiamenti economici e culturali, ma i loro bagagli restano divisi”<sup>41</sup>. Piuttosto, l’esistenza del cinema europeo è dimostrata e garantita dalla diversità, ossia dal mantenimento separato di tali “bagagli”:

Se, negli ambiti governativi, si parla di una “unione europea”, basta dare un’occhiata ai prodotti cinematografici per capire che le nazioni europee sono culturalmente lontanissime l’una dall’altra. Ma è anche vero che per gli ottimisti è la diversità la base dell’invenzione artistica e, nonostante gli sforzi fatti per avvicinare i vari Paesi, la diversità è un elemento da difendere e mantenere a tutti i costi<sup>42</sup>.

Gian Piero Brunetta individua nel cinema europeo sia “il luogo privilegiato della memoria collettiva” sia il “ruolo nella costituzione di una identità collettiva”<sup>43</sup>, impiegando temi e terminologie ricorrenti nel pensiero wendersiano.

Altri studiosi sottolineano la funzione strategica della cultura audiovisiva europea. Far conoscere l’immagine europea nel mondo significa di fatto adottare strategie di diplomazia:

European cultural diplomacy stresses the important role of [...] being able to convey cultural messages to publics. And [...] to focus on sharing literature, film, music, heritage to build bridges with publics, as well as to foster best practices, democratization, and mutual understanding<sup>44</sup>.

Barbara Corsi, storicizzando la dimensione finanziaria della questione audiovisiva europea, interpella invece gli industriali del settore,

ai quali occorre, oggi come cinquant’anni fa, una proiezione utopica nella nuova era per immaginare inedite forme di collaborazione sulla base di culture affini o anche completamente diverse, ma con la consapevolezza della necessità, non più rimandabile, sancita dalla storia e dalle esperienze comuni, dell’unione del cinema europeo<sup>45</sup>.

All’interno del ciclo di conferenze *A Europa das Nacionalidades. Discursos modernos e pós-modernos* l’economista portoghese Pedro Barros richiama esplicitamente la mobilitazione esortata da Wenders e individua nel cinema il solo possibile veicolo di integrazione dei Paesi europei: “The movie’s attitude towards European integration is very closely related to Wim Wenders’ call for a mobilization of European cinema that can be

<sup>41</sup> P. Sorlin, *Cinema e identità europea. Percorsi nel secondo Novecento* [1991], Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 2001, 5.

<sup>42</sup> P. Sorlin, “Caratteri del cinema europeo”, in *Storia del cinema mondiale*, a cura di G.P. Brunetta, vol. I, tomo 1, Torino: Einaudi, 1999, 72. Si veda anche P. Sorlin, “Prefazione”, in *Il cinema europeo*, a cura di Mariapia Comand, Roy Menarini, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2006, v-VIII.

<sup>43</sup> G.P. Brunetta, “Identità e radici culturali”, in *Storia del cinema mondiale*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> M.K. Davis Cross, “Transatlantic Cultural Diplomacy”, in *Exporting Culture. Which Role for Europe in a Global World?*, edited by R. Henze and G. Wolfram, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014, 14.

<sup>45</sup> B. Corsi, “L’utopia dell’unione cinematografica europea”, in *Storia del cinema mondiale*, 734-735. Si veda anche Ead., “Eutanasia di un’unione”, in *Identità italiana e identità europea nel cinema italiano dal 1945 al miracolo economico*, a cura di G.P. Brunetta, Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1996, 69-86.

able follow the example of Hollywood, where movies helped to invent and to perpetuate the American Dream”<sup>46</sup>.

Anche Wendy Everett, studiosa dell'Università di Bath, interviene a favore di un cinema degli Stati Uniti d'Europa e, come Wenders, evidenzia i fattori che lo distinguono dal cinema statunitense: “European films do not seek to satisfy audiences, but instead to *challenge* thinking in complex and unpredictable ways. They are less formulaic, and more about exploration of identity, transformation, and journeys”<sup>47</sup>. Everett estende l'invito del cineasta tedesco a comprendere la potenzialità del nostro cinema nel consolidare un'immagine dell'Europa nel mondo.

Laddove Wenders esorta i governi a riporre fiducia nei cittadini europei, Hans Erik Næss, sociologo dell'Università di Oslo, menziona dati statistici secondo cui gli stessi cittadini siano a favore di una promozione culturale tra i Paesi dell'Unione Europea:

This same sense of urgency is shared by European citizens, who defend a greater involvement of the EU in the promotion of culture and intercultural exchange. According to a 2007 Eurobarometer survey, a very large proportion of Europeans – a whopping 89 per cent – perceive a greater need for culture to be promoted at EU level. Similarly, 88 per cent felt that cultural exchanges are important, and they called on the European Union to facilitate cultural exchanges for Europeans and so promote intercultural dialogue<sup>48</sup>.

Il politologo Thomas Risse ricorda che l'Unione Europea dovrebbe configurarsi innanzitutto come “esistenza mentale di una comunità immaginata”, e mantenere e promuovere le varie culture e le varie identità al richiamo di ‘Unity in Diversity’, slogan ufficiale della stessa UE: “The presence of the EU integration leads to the EU’s psychological existence as an ‘imagined community’ [...], not to one unified European identity. In this sense, the EU’s slogan, ‘Unity in Diversity’, actually captures an important truth”<sup>49</sup>.

Indagando il cinema europeo contemporaneo in prospettiva transnazionale e comparatista, Ilaria A. De Pascalis suggerisce invece di non indulgiare su un immaginario identitario collettivo, stabile, codificato, culturalmente e storicamente dato. Piuttosto, invita a cogliere le molteplicità identitarie nelle diverse narrazioni delle varie cinematografie, così da intendere le forme di rappresentazione audiovisiva come una costruzione di identità sempre mobile, mutevole, metamorfica e performativa<sup>50</sup>.

Le molteplici e imprevedibili tradizioni europee sono valorizzate anche dal cineasta ungherese István Szabó, il quale – in occasione del citato dibattito “A Soul for Europe Pre-Conference” – si domanda se l'anima dell'Europa sia quella espressa da artisti come Giotto, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Goethe, Bach, Beethoven, Tolstoj, Picasso, Ejzenštejn, Fellini e Bergman, oppure sia quella rappresentata dai soldati romani dell'infanticidio di Betlemme o dagli iniziatori dell'Inquisizione o di Auschwitz: “The

<sup>46</sup> P. Barros, “Embracing European Cultural Diversity”, Congresso Universidade de Aveiro, 9-11 maggio 2011. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024. <http://estudosculturais.com/congressos/europe-nations/pdf/0160i.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> W. Everett, “Dinosaur, Shipwreck or Museum Piece? The Unstable Identity of European Cinema”, in *The European Puzzle: The Political Structuring of Cultural Identities at a Time of Transition*, edited by M. Demossier, New York: Berghahn Books, 2007, 103 (corsivo dell'autrice).

<sup>48</sup> H.E. Næss, “The Ambiguities of Intercultural Dialogue: Critical Perspectives on the European Union’s New Agenda for Culture”, *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 10, 2 (2010): 2. Dello studioso norvegese segnaliamo anche Id., *A New Agenda? The European Union and Cultural Policy*, London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> T. Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. I.A. De Pascalis, *Il cinema europeo contemporaneo: scenari transnazionali, immaginari globali*, Roma: Bulzoni, 2015.

soul of the European Union – conclude Szabó – will only then be reborn [...] once the European Union can provide a real, achievable future vision which takes differences into consideration”<sup>51</sup>.

Giorgio De Vincenti rafforza la pertinenza degli appelli di Wenders sulla scorta delle posizioni dell’UNESCO e ricorda la “Dichiarazione universale della diversità culturale”, adottata dagli Stati membri dell’organo culturale dell’ONU durante la XXXI Conferenza Generale (Parigi, 2 novembre 2001), “in cui per la prima volta *la diversità culturale è considerata patrimonio comune dell’umanità*”<sup>52</sup>. Tali presupposti spingono De Vincenti ad appellare il cinema europeo come effettivo “cinema della diversità”<sup>53</sup>. Oltretutto, analizzando il discorso tenuto a Bruxelles nel 2007, De Vincenti avvicina le posizioni di Wenders a quelle di Cesare Zavattini, siccome entrambi confidano, seppur in epoche diverse, che nuovi autori e autrici emergano da uno spazio di formazione che insegni e promuova il cinema come pratica e come cultura “di tanti per tanti”<sup>54</sup>.

Nel volume *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood* Thomas Elsaesser riflette su gran parte delle questioni sollevate da Wenders, interrogandosi innanzitutto sulla (non) esistenza del cinema europeo:

Any book about European cinema should start with the statement that there is no such thing as European cinema, and that yes, European cinema exists, and has existed since the beginning of cinema a little more than a hundred years ago. [...] Looked at from the “inside”, however, the conclusion has to be that European cinema does not (yet) exist<sup>55</sup>.

Per una migliore comprensione dell’audiovisivo europeo lo studioso tedesco predilige il concetto di “pertinenza culturale” anziché il concetto di “identità culturale”: “When asking about European cinema and how to define it, it may also be necessary to jettison the concept of identity. In other world, what makes European cinema “European” would be its capacity for cultural competence, rather than its assertion of cultural identity”<sup>56</sup>. Similmente, invece di “diversità culturale” Elsaesser ritiene più opportuno parlare di “double” o “multiple occupancy” quali forme di rappresentazione audiovisiva della differenza e della molteplicità in Europa<sup>57</sup>. Inoltre, come Wenders, anche Elsaesser sostiene che l’“europeizzazione del cinema europeo”<sup>58</sup> debba adottare un ampliamento di prospettiva in senso globale: “Mikhail Gorbachev once spoke about the ‘house’ that was Europe. Maybe we should begin by thinking of it as a ‘room’ and the globe as the

<sup>51</sup> I. Szabó, “A Soul for Europe”, in *A Soul for Europe. Online Debate 2016. Documentation of the Major Contributions*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> G. De Vincenti, *Lo stile moderno. Alla radice del contemporaneo: cinema, video, rete*, Roma: Bulzoni, 2013, 22 (corsivo dell’autore). De Vincenti cita un estratto dell’articolo 1 della Dichiarazione: “Come fonte di scambio, innovazione e creatività, la diversità culturale è necessaria per l’umanità quanto la biodiversità per la natura. In questo senso, è il patrimonio comune dell’umanità e dovrebbe essere riconosciuta e affermata per il bene delle generazioni presenti e future”, *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 29-31 e 97.

<sup>55</sup> T. Elsaesser, *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005, 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 108-111.

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. T. Elsaesser, “European Cinema into the Twenty-First Century: Enlarging the Context?”, in *The Europeanness of European Cinema: Identity, Meaning, Globalization*, edited by M. Harrod, M. Liz, A. Timoshkina, London: I. B. Tauris, 2015, 17-32.

'house' we all have to share: could the new European cinema [...] be the 'bedding' that shows us how to make up this room?'<sup>59</sup>.

Il filosofo Giuseppe Gembillo, dal canto suo, ricorda quanto le distintive radici spirituali dell'Europa contemporanea vadano simultaneamente rintracciate nella cultura greca, nel diritto romano, nell'etica cristiana, nelle scienze evolutive e nel liberalismo d'Europa<sup>60</sup>. La rivista *Complessità*, su cui compare la riflessione di Gembillo, è fondata e curata dal Centro Studi di Filosofia della Complessità "Edgar Morin", e proprio il riferimento a Edgar Morin rappresenta, a nostro avviso, il più esemplare sostegno teorico agli appelli divulgati da Wim Wenders nel corso dei decenni – motivo per cui si sceglie qui di indagare la riflessione moriniana in misura maggiore rispetto ai contributi degli studiosi e delle studiose citati e citate precedentemente.

La proposta culturale intrapresa da Wenders è sorprendentemente assimilabile alla proposta di rigenerazione del pensiero elaborata dal sociologo e filosofo francese. Le esortazioni sollevate dal cineasta tedesco, d'altronde, coinvolgono campi di riflessione, interdisciplinari e transdisciplinari, da sempre privilegiati da Edgar Morin: dalla questione europea all'umanesimo socio-bio-antropologico, dalla politica identitaria all'industria culturale e alla società audiovisiva. Accomunati da un idealismo umanista affatto astratto, ma programmaticamente progettuale, i due intellettuali propongono, pressoché in parallelo, la necessità di una rigenerazione del pensiero che, attraverso anche la valorizzazione della cultura sociale del medium audiovisivo, sorpassi paradigmi cognitivi limitati siccome settoriali e predisponga l'evoluzione di una nuova idea sensibile di Europa.

Nel 1987, in *Penser l'Europe*, il teorico del pensiero complesso sostiene la necessità di elaborare una nuova idea consapevole di Europa<sup>61</sup>, che agisca da antidoto alle chiusure, ai particolarismi, ai dogmatismi e ai totalitarismi nati nel nome di una concezione fraintesa di Europa<sup>62</sup>. Soprattutto, esorta Morin, occorre che l'idea ultima di Europa – condivisa nella proposta wendersiana – includa la sua sistematica "complessità":

Tutto ciò che semplifica l'Europa – idealizzazione, astrazione o riduzione – la mutila. L'Europa è un Complesso (*complexus*: ciò che è tessuto assieme) il cui carattere è di riunire insieme senza confonderle le più grandi diversità e di associare i contrari in maniera non separabile. Per questo ci occorre non solo una giusta modestia, ma anche un pensiero giusto per considerare il nodo gordiano europeo, in cui tante storie politiche, economiche, sociali, culturali, religiose, antireligiose sono intrecciate e costruite una dentro l'altra in modo nello stesso tempo conflittuale e solidale. Ci occorre concepire la complessità di ciò che la parola Europa nasconde. [...] L'Europa è una nozione vaga, che nasce dal caos, i suoi confini sono incerti, a geometria variabile, suscettibili di slittamenti, rotture, metamorfosi. Si tratta dunque di interrogare l'idea di Europa proprio in ciò che essa ha di incerto, di mosso, di contraddittorio, per tentare di estrarne la complessa identità<sup>63</sup>.

Rifuggendo ogni forma di riduzionismo, semplificazione e settorialismo, la nuova idea di Europa, suggerisce Morin, deve manifestare la sua identità complessa, ossia multiforme.

<sup>59</sup> Elsaesser, *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood*, 129. Elsaesser allude al discorso che Mikhail Gorbachev pronuncia a Oslo il 5 giugno 1991 in occasione del conferimento del Premio Nobel per la Pace, cfr. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1990/gorbachev/lecture/>. Ultimo accesso 10 gennaio 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. G. Gembillo, "Il pentagono europeo. L'identità storica e complessa dell'Europa spirituale", *Complessità*, 1 (2007), 83-109.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *Pensare l'Europa* [1987], Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988.

<sup>62</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *Cultura e barbarie europee* [2005], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2006, in particolare 17, 31, 88-89.

<sup>63</sup> Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 22-23 e 29.

me e multidimensionale, dinamica e fluida nella molteplicità di forme ed espressioni di alterità: solo così l'unità, l'integrazione e l'identità europee possono emergere in maniera sensibile e consapevole. Per Morin anche l'Europa (come l'essere umano nelle sue vicendevoli influenze tra dimensione individuale, sociale e di specie) è una "unitas multiplex" [unità molteplice], innervata da uno scambio dialogico tra le pluralità e sospinta da uno spirito incessantemente propulsivo, interrogativo, generativo e rigenerativo<sup>64</sup>. Come ribadito anche da Wenders, l'unicità della complessità del fenomeno europeo è esaltata dal dialogo e dalla contaminazione tra lingue, culture e organizzazioni sociali altrettanto uniche e molteplici. Identità e diversità divengono, nel pensiero wendersiano e moriniano, due paradigmi cognitivi imprescindibili, nella comprensione dei quali risiede il destino stesso dell'Europa: "L'Europa ha bisogno di una politica di civiltà che valorizzi la sua identità molteplice"<sup>65</sup>. Se Wenders, si è visto, auspica che l'Europa ritrovi se stessa agli occhi degli europei attraverso "la sua qualità più profonda, ossia la diversità meravigliosa, caotica e unica della sua cultura", Morin e Anne Brigitte Kern segnalano "la necessità primordiale di disoccultare, di rivelare, nella sua diversità e attraverso la sua diversità, l'unità della specie, l'identità umana [...]. Dobbiamo ritrovarla [...] attraverso il pieno riconoscimento e il pieno sbocciare delle diversità culturali"<sup>66</sup>. E ancora:

Si tratterebbe di andare verso una società universale fondata sul genio della diversità e non sulla mancanza di genio dell'omogeneità, il che ci porta a un doppio imperativo, che ha in sé la propria contraddizione, ma può fecondarsi solo nella contraddizione: 1) ovunque preservare, estendere, coltivare, sviluppare l'unità; 2) ovunque preservare, estendere, coltivare, sviluppare la diversità<sup>67</sup>.

L'allarme derivante dall'analfabetismo iconico e il conseguente appello wendersiano per una missione di alfabetizzazione audiovisiva si inseriscono senza dubbio nella più ampia e ineludibile riforma pedagogica moriniana del pensiero, volta a rafforzare una conoscenza che sappia affrontare consapevolmente le "policrisi" planetarie<sup>68</sup>: l'educazione alla conoscenza, stimolata anche e soprattutto attraverso l'immagine audiovisiva, diviene per entrambi gli intellettuali una questione sia cognitiva sia progettuale, da intraprendere nelle scuole attraverso l'istruzione dei più giovani<sup>69</sup>.

Quando Wenders confida che il concetto di identità europea resti inspiegabile, purché esista e continui a operare in maniera evidente, dal canto suo Morin aggiunge: "L'Europa non deve diventare mai un'idea chiara e distinta delimitata da frontiere

<sup>64</sup> A partire da E. Morin, *Il Metodo 1. La natura della natura* [1977], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2001, il concetto di "unitas multiplex" attraversa l'intera riflessione ontologica e metodologica dell'intellettuale francese. La questione europea sulla scorta della nozione moriniana di "unitas multiplex" è discussa, ad esempio, in G. Bocchi, M. Ceruti, *Una e molteplice. Ripensare l'Europa*, Milano: Marco Tropea Editore, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> E. Morin, M. Ceruti, *La nostra Europa*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2013, 70.

<sup>66</sup> E. Morin, A.B. Kern, *Terra-Patria* [1993], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1994, 52.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *La via. Per l'avvenire dell'umanità* [2011], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2012, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Sulla questione della riforma pedagogica si veda E. Morin, *Insegnare a vivere. Manifesto per cambiare l'educazione* [2014], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2015; Id., *Educare gli educatori. Una riforma del pensiero per la democrazia cognitiva* [1999], Roma: EdUP - Edizioni dell'Università Popolare, 2008; Id., *Educare per l'era planetaria. Il pensiero complesso come metodo per l'apprendimento* [2003], Roma: Armando Editore, 2005; Id., *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro* [2000], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2001; Id., *La testa ben fatta. Riforma dell'insegnamento e riforma del pensiero* [1999], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2000, ma anche Id., *Il metodo 3. La conoscenza della conoscenza* [1986], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2007.

rigide<sup>70</sup>. Anche Morin sostiene che l'Europa sia un "cantiere" che possiede nella diversità la sua intrinseca ricchezza<sup>71</sup>. Oltretutto, in linea con quanto ricordato da Szabó e Gembillo, Morin individua l'originalità europea nella simultanea conflittualità e complementarità tra le eredità greca, romana ed ebraico-cristiana<sup>72</sup>, cosicché adottare il principio cognitivo dell'"unitas multiplex", ossia "dell'unità nella diversità e della diversità nell'unità"<sup>73</sup>, si rivela un'opportunità cruciale per lo sviluppo e il riconoscimento autentico dell'identità europea.

Quando Wenders menziona il composito "immaginario culturale di miti, idee ed emozioni" di cui l'Europa è ricca, dal canto suo Morin sostiene che anche l'industria culturale debba essere compresa nella sua complessità sistemica poiché "costituisce un corpo di simboli, di miti e immagini concernenti la vita pratica e la vita immaginaria"<sup>74</sup>.

La consapevolezza di una nuova e inderogabile "coscienza europea", più volte citata da Wenders, coincide con ciò che Morin qualifica come coscienza di una "comunità di destino"<sup>75</sup>, vale a dire – sintetizza Chiara Simonigh – la consapevolezza negli esseri umani "della comunanza di una medesima origine e ormai soprattutto di una medesima sorte sulla terra"<sup>76</sup>. La cognizione di tale comunità di destino appare il più appropriato ambito, al tempo stesso estetico e progettuale, entro il quale inserire l'intero recupero consuntivo degli appelli formulati da Wenders. D'altronde, sostiene Morin, "dalla consapevolezza della comunità di destino emerge una nuova coscienza di identità europea" che "dovrebbe basarsi sulla tradizione critica e autocritica della ragione e comprendere l'ambivalenza della civiltà nata in Europa, per aprirsi alla pluralità delle culture del mondo"<sup>77</sup>. Oltretutto già nel 1962, in quello che oggi è considerato un testo fondativo degli studi sui media, *Lo spirito del tempo*, Morin esalta l'essenza internazionale e transnazionale dei media e invoca la necessità di sviluppare una politica delle comunicazioni che favorisca il diffondersi di un umanesimo planetario, ossia di una coscienza planetaria che coniughi alcuni degli aspetti migliori del passato Umanesimo con il riconoscimento della diversità quale valore imprescindibile dell'evoluzione umana e della sua "unitas multiplex"<sup>78</sup>. La coscienza di questo nuovo umanesimo – secondo Morin ancora da formare, sviluppare e diffondere – "non contrappone più gli uni agli altri – popoli, nazioni, continenti, culture, religioni, classi sociali, ecc. – ma, al contrario, unisce tutti"<sup>79</sup>.

Per il sociologo francese comunità di destino e pluralità culturale costituiscono dunque i perni estetici ed epistemologici attorno ai quali ruotano l'esperienza umana e lo sviluppo sostenibile del suo stesso destino ("Il significato profondo della comunità di destino europeo [...] è di lottare contro l'annientamento [...] delle sue culture"<sup>80</sup>), così come coscienza, identità e comunità sono, nella costruzione del senso di appartenenza,

<sup>70</sup> E. Morin, *Per uscire dal ventesimo secolo* [1981], Bergamo: Lubrina Editore, 1989, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Cfr. Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>73</sup> Morin, Ceruti, *La nostra Europa*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> E. Morin, *Lo spirito del tempo* [1962], Roma: Meltemi, 2002, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 125. Sul concetto di "comunità di destino" si veda anche E. Morin, G. Bocchi, M. Ceruti, *L'Europa nell'era planetaria*, Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 1991 e il già citato Morin, Kern, *Terra-Patria*.

<sup>76</sup> C. Simonigh, "Prefazione. Le sfide della complessità per un nuovo umanesimo", in *Pensare la complessità per un umanesimo planetario. Saggi critici e dialoghi di Edgar Morin con Gustavo Zagrebelsky e Gianni Vattimo*, a cura di C. Simonigh, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2012, VI.

<sup>77</sup> Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 140 e 142.

<sup>78</sup> Cfr. C. Simonigh, "Edgar Morin e l'unità molteplice della cultura mediale. Una nota introduttiva", *CoSMo. Comparative Studies in Modernism*, 15 (2019): 41-43.

<sup>79</sup> Simonigh, "Prefazione. Le sfide della complessità per un nuovo umanesimo", VII.

<sup>80</sup> Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 134.

i tratti imprescindibili dell'orizzonte culturale ("La coscienza della comunità di destino ha bisogno [...] di un'identità comune [...] perché si compia una comunità umana"<sup>81</sup>).  
Dichiara Morin:

Bisogna quindi rigenerare l'Europa ripartendo dal senso di un destino condiviso [...]. Per l'Europa questa comunità dal destino condiviso, ereditata dagli avi, è fondamentalmente spirituale e culturale. Potremmo dire che sia la realizzazione dell'opera di pensatori come Montaigne, Spinoza, Goethe, Leopardi. L'Europa possiede un tesoro, ricavato dalla sua stessa cultura, [...] deve saper conservare, come se si trattasse di una missione, il proprio tesoro culturale di valenza universale, in modo che questo tesoro sia utile al resto dell'umanità, nel momento opportuno<sup>82</sup>.

E ancora:

"Comunità di destino" è [...] una comunità culturale la cui identità è, attraverso la memoria storica, interiorizzata e perpetuata nel passato, nel presente e nel futuro. Da ciò deriva il destino storico della comunità, anzi, la nozione stessa di comunità si radica e si arricchisce grazie a questo destino che è condiviso tra popolazioni diverse in seno ad una medesima comunità, come è accaduto negli Stati Uniti e in altri stati nazionali<sup>83</sup>.

Al proposito, laddove Wenders allude alla parabola del cinema degli Stati Uniti d'America, analogamente Morin ricorda come l'esperienza statunitense sia stata in grado, diversamente da quella europea, di sollecitare una inedita e innovativa sociologia del cinema da integrare alla filmologia<sup>84</sup>. E se Wenders prende consapevolezza della propria "anima europea" durante gli otto anni trascorsi negli Stati Uniti d'America, similmente Morin rivive il proprio rientro in Europa come un ritorno "a un'humus ricca e diversa, dove ogni cultura ha prodotto una parte di me stesso"<sup>85</sup>.

Se il cineasta di Düsseldorf adotta l'espressione "una grande casa", nel 1993 Morin coniuga il termine "Terra-Patria" nell'omonimo volume scritto insieme ad Anne Brigitte Kern. Dialogando con Gustavo Zagrebelsky il filosofo francese ribadisce:

Nelle società moderne e tardo-moderne sopravvive un mito di fratellanza radicato nella nozione di patria. Patria, infatti, è una parola che rimanda allo stesso tempo alla paternità e alla maternità, perché il suffisso ha la sua origine etimologica nel latino *pater*; mentre la desinenza è femminile; non a caso, diciamo "madre patria" e parliamo dei "figli della patria". Questa natura paterna e materna della nozione di patria, con l'insieme dei suoi significati complementari legati alla fratellanza e alla famiglia, è stata capace di agire storicamente come potente mito di coesione e di determinare un sentimento di comunità dal quale infine è sorta un'etica sociale. Il compimento ultimo dell'etica di comunità potrebbe consistere, secondo me, nella sua amplificazione universale. È in questa prospettiva che ho concepito la nozione di "terra-patria"<sup>86</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> E. Morin, *Il Metodo 5. L'identità umana* [2001], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2002, 56.

<sup>82</sup> Dall'intervista di M. Molinari, "Edgar Morin: la cultura è il destino comune", *Nuova Antologia*, 628, 2301 (2022): 49.

<sup>83</sup> E. Morin, G. Zagrebelsky, "Comunità planetaria e nuovo umanesimo. Dialogo tra Edgar Morin e Gustavo Zagrebelsky", in *Pensare la complessità per un umanesimo planetario*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *Un approccio multiforme e multidimensionale al cinema* [1953] e Id., *Per una sociologia del cinema* [1954], entrambi in Id., *Sul cinema. Un'arte della complessità*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2021, rispettivamente 71-83 e 53-66.

<sup>85</sup> Morin, *Pensare l'Europa*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Morin, Zagrebelsky, "Comunità planetaria e nuovo umanesimo. Dialogo tra Edgar Morin e Gustavo Zagrebelsky", 24.

Quando si proclama cineasta né tedesco, né internazionale, bensì europeo, e quando confida che i cittadini europei percepiscano al tempo stesso la propria nazionalità e la propria cittadinanza comunitaria, Wenders si allinea al concetto di “metanazione” menzionato da Morin, secondo il quale:

dell'Europa non dobbiamo fare una supernazione, ma una metanazione, una confederazione metanazionale. Per fare ciò dobbiamo operare una distinzione fondamentale fra cittadinanza e nazionalità. Dobbiamo creare dei cittadini europei, ma ognuno di essi dovrà restare di nazionalità francese, tedesca o anche basca, fiamminga ecc. Dobbiamo dunque disgiungere e associare nel contempo l'idea di nazionalità e l'idea di cittadinanza<sup>87</sup>.

Wenders, nel momento in cui allude a istanze di identificazione, rappresentazione, proiezione e percezione nel processo europeo culturale e iconico, mobilita i “complessi immaginari” teorizzati da Morin, ossia i processi ricorsivi di proiezione, identificazione e transfert attraverso cui il sistema mediale audiovisivo alimenta la vita immaginaria (come i sogni e le fantasie) e i sistemi immaginari (come le magie e i miti)<sup>88</sup>. Il cinema, secondo Morin, è infatti un medium dalla flagrante dimensione sociale e antropologica, in grado di attivare “inedite dinamiche intersoggettive e collettive” e generare “conseguenze psichiche, sociali, culturali, politiche”<sup>89</sup>. In particolare, Morin considera l'immagine “l'atto costitutivo radicale e simultaneo del reale e dell'immaginario”<sup>90</sup>, capace di nutrire idee e azioni. Se Wenders sostiene che il cinema possiede capacità trasformative che non hanno pari in alcun altro medium, per Morin il cinema è, ricorda Chiara Simonigh, “il medium-matrice, l'originario generatore tecnico, estetico e culturale da quale derivano le numerose tipologie di audiovisivi circolanti nel sistema mediale”<sup>91</sup>. Morin intende il cinema la matrice primaria sia della comprensione dell'alterità sia della rigenerazione del pensiero, ossia il mezzo ideale per la costruzione comune e condivisa della percezione del sé, degli altri e del mondo:

Se viviamo in modo intenso [...] le vite, i sentimenti, gli amori, i desideri, i timori, gli odi dei nostri eroi cinematografici, ciò è dovuto al fatto che una formidabile macchina di proiezione/identificazione si è messa in moto dentro di noi, facendo della nostra partecipazione al film un altrettanto formidabile momento di comprensione degli altri [...]. Probabilmente non vi è momento in cui siamo più in grado di comprendere gli altri come al cinema<sup>92</sup>.

Quando Wenders sostiene che il cinema contribuisce alla costruzione e alla rappresentazione di una “coscienza comunitaria”, dal canto suo Morin dichiara che il cinema “è il riflesso di tutte le molteplicità umane, è uno specchio di umanità, e [...] ‘la totalità’ cinematografica è di una tale portata, di una tale molteplicità e unità, da corrispondere sorprendentemente alla totalità umana”<sup>93</sup>. Si evince che il cinema, teorizza Morin, sia

<sup>87</sup> Morin, *Per uscire dal ventesimo secolo*, 24-25.

<sup>88</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *I complessi immaginari* [1961], in Id., *Sul cinema*, 35-51. Osserva Morin già nel 1957: “È la vita squallida e anonima, fatta di miserie e di necessità, che vorrebbe uscire dalle sue ristrettezze e assumere le dimensioni di quella cinematografica. La vita immaginaria dello schermo è il prodotto di questo bisogno reale [...]. Il cinema rimette in movimento i vecchi processi immaginari di identificazione e di proiezione dai quali nascono gli dèi”, Id., *Le star* [1957], Milano: Edizioni Olivares, 1995, 115.

<sup>89</sup> Simonigh, “Prefazione. Le sfide della complessità per un nuovo umanesimo”, VIII.

<sup>90</sup> E. Morin, *Il cinema o l'uomo immaginario. Saggio di antropologia sociologica* [1956], Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2016, 19.

<sup>91</sup> C. Simonigh, “Il cinema o l'umanità complessa”, in Morin, *Sul cinema*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Morin, *Il metodo 3. La conoscenza della conoscenza*, 160.

<sup>93</sup> Morin, *Per una sociologia del cinema*, 62.

qualcosa di più di un'arte, invero un linguaggio universale in grado di esprimere una sensibilità sociale e collettiva sempre in evoluzione. Se Wenders parla del "nostro cinema" come del "nostro linguaggio comune e collettivo per eccellenza", analogamente Morin intende il cinema "come una koinè globale che determina la condivisione planetaria sia di un linguaggio iconico universale, sorta di 'esperanto naturale', sia di paradigmi al contempo culturali ed estetici, cognitivi e sensibili"<sup>94</sup>. Non sorprende, sostiene Morin ancora nelle parole di Simonigh, che "l'umanità esiste e si evolve anche attraverso e grazie alle immagini, ai media e al cinema"<sup>95</sup> e non solo viceversa. D'altronde, proprio come Wenders, Morin ricorda che l'"immaginario di noi europei è arricchito dal grande cinema del Novecento: quello di Fritz Lang, Pabst, Eisenstein, Tarkovskij, Rossellini, Fellini"<sup>96</sup>.

La strategia retorica con cui Wenders si rivolge alle platee contempla spesso interrogativi che ricorrono anche nelle formulazioni di Edgar Morin, che si domanda: "Come estrarre questa comprensione insita nello spettacolo e radicarla fuori dallo spettacolo, nel mondo? Come trasferire l'esperienza della vita immaginaria [...] nella vita pratica?"<sup>97</sup>. Le arti, e in particolare l'esperienza estetica del medium audiovisivo, interessano la realtà e la proiettano in un mondo diverso e desiderato, nel quale una comunità si riconosce e si unisce. Le arti, suggerisce Morin, contribuiscono a ri-proiettare i nostri sogni nella nostra realtà cosicché

essi ritorneranno nella nostra vita da desti per modellarla, per insegnarci a vivere [...]. Ecco li, ectoplasmi immagazzinati, corpi astrali che si nutrono delle nostre persone e ci nutrono, archivi d'anima... Bisognerà tentare di interrogarli – vale a dire di reintegrare l'immaginario nella realtà dell'uomo<sup>98</sup>.

Se Wenders auspica una via culturale all'integrazione europea che trascenda e sovrasti le strutture sovranazionali e finanziarie, dal canto suo l'intellettuale francese precisa che "la rigenerazione del pensiero è [...] indissociabile da una riforma della politica che sia tale da permettere una percezione non limitata al tecnicismo o all'economia, [...] ai provvedimenti d'urgenza o alla mera amministrazione dell'esistente"<sup>99</sup>. Quando Wenders propone, per il futuro anche politico dell'integrazione europea, l'attuazione urgente di una politica culturale degli audiovisivi, Morin sostiene, in completa assonanza, che "la politica della creatività culturale deve diventare la creatività della cultura politica"<sup>100</sup> e prospetta una rivoluzione culturale necessaria e non più rinviabile che, al richiamo di "una cultura delle culture, [...] non annullerebbe le differenze culturali ma [...] fonderebbe la relazione fra l'uomo e la natura, compresa la propria natura"<sup>101</sup>. Le proposte wendersiane si declinerebbero dunque, in senso moriniano, estendendo anche all'*homo*

<sup>94</sup> Simonigh, "Il cinema o l'umanità complessa", 13.

<sup>95</sup> C. Simonigh, "I media o l'umanità complessa", in *Cento Edgar Morin. 100 firme italiane per i cento anni dell'umanista planetario*, a cura di M. Ceruti, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021, 59.

<sup>96</sup> Morin, Ceruti, *La nostra Europa*, 19. In linea con quanto espresso da István Szabó, i due filosofi aggiungono inoltre: "A tutti gli europei appartengono Molière, Diderot, Rousseau, Goethe, Marx, Nietzsche, Kafka, Freud, Shelley, T.S. Eliot, Dickens, Dostoevskij, Tolstoj, Pushkin, Proust, Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy, Mahler, Rembrandt, Michelangelo". *Ibidem*.

<sup>97</sup> E. Morin, *La cultura delle culture. Media, convergenza, politica e coscienza antropo-planetaria* [1969], *CoSMo. Comparative Studies in Modernism*, 15 (2019): 45.

<sup>98</sup> Morin, *Il cinema o l'uomo immaginario*, 134.

<sup>99</sup> Simonigh, "Prefazione. Le sfide della complessità per un nuovo umanesimo", IV-V.

<sup>100</sup> Morin, *La cultura delle culture*, 48.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

*mithologicus* o *homo imaginarius* o *homo ludicus* il paradigma politico che riduce l'identità umana a *homo faber* o a *homo oeconomicus*<sup>102</sup>.

Edgar Morin affronta questioni culturali, politiche, etiche ed estetiche elaborando propositi, al contempo concettuali e progettuali, che si rivelano alleati radicali e preziosi alle esortazioni di Wim Wenders. Le evidenti sovrapposizioni tra le indicazioni intellettuali di Wenders e di Morin esprimono la misura della fiducia che entrambi ripongono nelle prerogative e nelle potenzialità generative e rigenerative della cultura audiovisiva. Senza dimenticare che il paradigma della complessità, nell'intenzione di Morin, sottintende una sfida aperta e continua e mai una soluzione conclusiva<sup>103</sup>. Per tale motivo il futuro dell'Europa resta un orizzonte aperto, da indicare e rafforzare di continuo, anche attraverso la valorizzazione delle risorse generative, rigenerative e trasformative dei media audiovisivi. Identità, comunità e cultura della conoscenza sono esercizi di realismo da praticare nell'epoca planetaria, globalizzata e interconnessa, per intraprendere, in senso wendersiano e moriniano, la via consapevole al superamento delle crisi della contemporaneità.

## 7. CONCLUSIONI

A distanza di quasi 70 anni dal Trattato di Roma (che ne sancisce l'unione economica) e di oltre 30 anni dal Trattato di Maastricht (che ne sancisce l'unione politica e monetaria), l'Unione Europea fronteggia, oggi come allora, sfide diffuse, complesse e sempre più decisive per il suo futuro<sup>104</sup>.

Pervasa da derive nazionaliste e populiste, ambivalente di fronte a fenomeni globali quali la migrazione e la crisi climatica, idealmente ammirata ma contestata negli interventi decisionali, testimone di guerre al suo interno (la disgregazione dell'ex Jugoslavia) e ai suoi confini (l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina), irresoluta sulla questione mediterranea, minata da governi programmaticamente anticomunitari e orfana di uno dei suoi Stato membri<sup>105</sup>, l'Unione Europea è terreno costante di interrogazione che esige processi di critica e di autocritica. Il ripensamento della comunità europea è dunque una delle sfide della contemporaneità e come tale va affrontata intellettualmente e culturalmente, siccome – sostiene Wim Wenders – non vi può essere né una “coscienza europea” né una “identità europea” senza una “proiezione” della cultura europea. In particolare, la cultura audiovisiva – nei suoi tratti di creazione, produzione, circolazione e comprensione – è la via esclusiva e sostenibile per l'evoluzione e lo sviluppo degli

<sup>102</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *Il paradigma perduto. Che cos'è la natura umana?* [1973], Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2020 e Id., *Il Metodo 5. L'identità umana*.

<sup>103</sup> Cfr. E. Morin, *La sfida della complessità* [2002], Firenze: Le Lettere, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Al Trattato di Roma (25 marzo 1957, che sancisce la nascita della CEE - Comunità Economica Europea) e al Trattato di Maastricht (7 febbraio 1992, che definisce i parametri sovranazionali per la formazione politica, sociale ed economica dell'Unione) menzioniamo, tra i vari processi modificativi di integrazione, anche il Trattato di Lisbona (13 dicembre 2007, che ratifica l'attuale carta costituzionale dell'Unione Europea).

<sup>105</sup> A seguito del referendum consultivo del 23 giugno 2016 sulla permanenza del Regno Unito nell'Unione Europea (durante il quale il 51,9% dei votanti si esprime a favore dell'uscita del Paese dall'UE), nel marzo 2017 il Parlamento britannico approva e presenta al Consiglio europeo la legge “European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017”, dando inizio alla procedura prevista dall'articolo 50 del Trattato di Maastricht. Il conseguente (e complesso) negoziato si protrae per quasi tre anni, sotto la guida di Theresa May prima e di Boris Johnson dopo. Il 31 gennaio 2020 il Regno Unito termina ufficialmente di essere un Paese membro dell'Unione Europea.

Stati Uniti d'Europa, ossia del legame reciproco e vicendevole tra i singoli cittadini e l'Unione Europea.

Lo spazio europeo è contraddistinto da un paesaggio audiovisivo multiforme e diversificato, ricco per tradizioni, eterogeneo per stili, plurale per approcci e idiomi, vivace per stimoli e soluzioni. La trattazione consuntiva e cronologica degli interventi formulati da Wim Wenders nel corso di trent'anni evidenzia la perduranza nonché l'attualità delle riflessioni del Maestro di Düsseldorf sulla valorizzazione di tale paesaggio simbolico e sulla necessità di sviluppare una politica culturale dell'audiovisivo che favorisca il diffondersi di una conoscenza attiva e generativa degli auspicati Stati Uniti d'Europa. La centralità della funzione estetica dei media audiovisivi, così spesso ribadita con enfasi e passione da Wenders, è infatti prerogativa essenziale per lo sviluppo di una conoscenza condivisa che diviene coscienza comunitaria. Non a caso, sostiene Wenders, il sistema dei media audiovisivi è un laboratorio di percezione simbolica nella cultura globale e veicola forme di esperienze sempre inedite, capaci di generare e rigenerare il divenire storico, sociale, culturale e di ridefinire nozioni di comunità, cittadinanza e convivenza.

Scriva Chiara Simonigh, riflettendo sull'azione intellettuale sostenuta nel tempo da Wim Wenders:

La mediazione operata dalle immagini nel rapporto col mondo è divenuta, come sappiamo, un bisogno imprescindibile ma non necessariamente un processo radicato nella sensibilità e nel pensiero. [...] La nostra società delle immagini non è ancora divenuta una società del vedere e dell'osservare. È questa una delle sfide del nostro tempo [...]. Wim Wenders è stato tra gli artisti visuali che, con una coscienza rara di cosa possano essere la visione e l'osservazione, ha raccolto questa sfida, invitandoci a superare il semplice guardare<sup>106</sup>.

In un presente sempre più irrisolto e ancor più complesso di quello temuto dal cineasta tedesco, riproporre oggi le esortazioni di Wenders significa configurare il ripristino di una garanzia culturale e di un vigoroso progetto umanista. La bussola etica ed estetica della cultura audiovisiva condivisa, generativa e rigenerativa, può infatti ancora oggi indicare la via sostenibile da intraprendere per uscire dall'attuale impasse e per fronteggiare la crisi degli Stati Uniti d'Europa.

<sup>106</sup> C. Simonigh, "Guardare, vedere, forse osservare. Wim Wenders e l'atto trasformativo", in Wenders, *L'atto del vedere*, 10-11.

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