

## NEW MEDIA AND VIRTUAL

New media and technologies have undoubtedly had a revolutionary impact on the way we communicate, and become an indispensable part of our everyday life. Alongside actual reality, we have to acknowledge the existence of a highly interconnected and interactive virtual reality, which gives relevance to aesthetics taken in its etymology – or rather as the theory of sensibility and perception.

The notion of virtual is central to many of the theories considered. Etymologically the term derives from the Latin *virtus*, in the sense of possessing certain virtues, and then it started to indicate something that exists as a representation or abstraction, but not in actuality (Kelly, 2016; Steuer, 1992). Nowadays, virtual indicates something digitally generated to simulate real objects and activities (Brey, 2014). Therefore, virtual reality is an artificial environment accepted as if real (Cavicchi, 2006; Murray, 2000).

The perception and the experience of the virtual give relevance to aesthetics taken in its etymology – or rather as the theory of sensory perception (De Leo, 2015; Di Stefano, 2015; Shusterman, 2012). Aesthetics investigates how we perceive and experience the world, thus it also concerns art (in a broad sense), on which I focus on (Pelowski and Akiba, 2010; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Danto, 1997;). In particular, I refer to the current situation of aesthetics, which is directly or indirectly influenced by new media (Serini and Vero, 2015; Benjamin, 1936; Diodato, 2014; Farago, 2014; Rieland, 2014; Poole, 2011).

Following Lev Manovich, “we are in the middle of a new media revolution – the shift of all of our culture to computer mediated forms of production, distribution and communication”(2001, p43); such revolution affects all kind of media and stages of communication. Old media, like television and recorded music, begin to converge with digital forms as are produced and distributed digitally; examples of new media are websites, social media, mobile apps, virtual worlds, multimedia, computer games and interactive installations. They rely on a convergence of media technologies and digital computing, whereas old media rely on print and analog models (Winston, 1998; Dewdney and Ride, 2006). Old media follow the logic of industrial mass society, whereas new media follow the logic of the post-industrial or globalized society, where “marketing tries to target each individual separately” (Manovich, 1999, p15). New media are defined as culture encoded in a digital form. Databases are cultural objects in themselves, and so influence

how we conceive the data they contain (2003). According to Marshall McLuhan (1964), media extend our ability to perceive, but they also affect how the messages are perceived; thus, we have to focus on the characteristics of the medium itself. Any medium is an extension of human faculties. Artists can recognize the essence of new media and use them to represent society (1953).

Jean Baudrillard challenges a positive idea of new media: "Reality has generated the Virtual", but "the Virtual is the ultimate predator, the plunderer of reality" (2002b). The virtual has become more real to us than reality itself. The virtual has constituted a new realm of hyperreality, which creates a symbolic set of signs without an actual referent (2002a; Rukmini Bhimrao, 2015): "the medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium" which, in a process of implosion, devours its content (Baudrillard, 1981, p82). This has also generated an aesthetics of simulation which dissolves both the traditional aesthetic object - in its circulation through the media - and the traditional aesthetic judgment, which refers exclusively to digital representations of objects (1996; Coppolino Billè, 2012).

By contrast, Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) argue that newer media always preserve characteristics of earlier media, which are refashioned in a process of remediation. For example, computer games remediate cinema. Therefore, new media "function in a constant dialectic with earlier media, precisely as each earlier medium functioned when it was introduced"(p50).

On the other hand, Vin Crosbie (2006) individuates three different kinds of media: interpersonal, mass and new media follows a one to one, one to many and many to many communication model, respectively. Similarly, Vilem Flusser - heavily influenced by Husserl's phenomenology - classifies media in three categories: texts, traditional and technical images (Hanke, 2004; Schwendener, 2016). We create media as useful tools to facilitate our orientation in the world (Leven, 2003). Thus, media do not represent the world, but present it according to their own code and structure. (Flusser, 1985). A code is defined as "a sign system arranged in a regular pattern" which generates information (1983, p83). Every code has its origin in specific gestures. Thus, a change in the structure of the media also affects the perceived reality.

Traditional images are abstractions from reality which result in a non-linear structure, whereas texts are abstractions from images laid out in a linear formation. Therefore, texts

signify images: hence “to decode texts means to discover the images signified by them” (p11). Lastly, technical images (first photography, then digital images) are abstractions from texts and have replaced texts, in a process defined by W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) as iconic or pictorial turn (Purgar, 2017; Bertolini, 2015).

Flusser moves from the idea of the mathematization of nature which, according to Husserl (1936), has separated the scientific knowledge from the life world and eliminated the subject, and he applies it to the post-historical era we live in, called age of media culture, characterized by the end of linear history (Flusser, 1990). This would lead to an alienation of humankind, ruled by mass media and consumerism, or towards a conscious way of communication, in which we tailor the code to our needs.

Also influenced by phenomenology, Don Ihde (2003; 2009) understands technologies as cultural instruments. Technology is “basically cultural articulation of man and not an external adjunct”(Tripathi, 2006, p5) , therefore it leads to a subject embodied in a new technologically enhanced (perceptually and cognitively) body. Technology transforms our experience through different sets of human-technology relations (Ihde, 1990; 2002): embodiment (the world as it is experienced through the tools), hermeneutic (the tools themselves as they present the world), alterity (tools seem to have an autonomous existence) and background relations (tools form the context of experience). As technologies can create meaningful connections, they are not just tools (De Preester, 2010; Verbeek, 2001).