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IMMERSION INTO THE OBJECT ON REALITY AND MATERIALITY

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Abstract

A package cannot be send by email. Even if the information describing it could be digitally transmitted and the object itself could be reproduced by the most advanced 3D printer, the material and the smell and taste would be there, but its aura would be missing, leaving us with the feeling of uncanny; at the very end, it would be an empty signifier.

Nowadays the world is busy with researching Virtual Reality. A vibrant industry aims at representing reality with all the characteristics it can be represented, and all experience it can offer. To no avail. The opportunity virtual reality offers us to come so close to it makes us realize how far we are from it: we cannot live it neither really, nor insightfully. Despite the use of the most advanced means to build „other“real worlds, what we get are fragmented worlds that are void, that lack multiplicity; that are unable to condense time and place, unable to offer any full experience, which can be offered by a true work of art, by the simultaneously one and multiple substantive thing, by the simultaneity of reification and representation.

IMMERSION INTO THE OBJECT

ON REALITY AND MATERIALITY

Reality

Reality arguably consists of whatever exists as opposed to nonexistent, of whatever is actual as opposed to possible or potential.

Nevertheless, it is hard to pinpoint what is real, in other words what exists. Even less reassuring is that «it must still remain a scandal to philosophy and to the general human reason to be obliged to assume, as an article of mere belief, the existence of things external to ourselves (from which, yet, we derive the whole material of cognition for the internal sense), and not to be able to oppose a satisfactory proof to anyone who may call it in question”, as Immanuel Kant put it (Kant 1787, pr.).

Let us be reminded that for Plato reality consists of immutable ideas that exist beyond the realm of sensible world, in the heavens.

Aristotle objected the notion that ideas are self-contained, and that they are the archetypes of sensible things, and maintained that they are dependent on things, which we perceive through our senses.

Probably the simplest definition of reality is that it is the totality of the physical things surrounding us. That said, we would probably expect that the real is something that we are able to touch and feel directly, something material. We cannot dispute the tangible. But also the aura hidden in the material object, the immaterial, and the invisible part of the material object, is real. Real things are not cut off from time, from references, from their environment...

Materiality

Information technology makes its presence increasingly felt in urban environments. Driverless cars roam through the streets, smart homes are common, infrastructure is managed by computer systems, and images of all kind prevail in the cityscape and in city life, from music concerts to sports events to shop windows to museums and art galleries. It is therefore a kind of paradox in

our world that materiality retains its power; and that it emerges (again and again) as one of the most significant issues not just in art, but also in general.

We should keep in mind, though, that it is an issue that has popped up since the first philosophical thought was articulated; in art and art theory it was fully investigated by the fourth century BCE. Whilst the representation of reality in some paintings was lauded in classical texts, it was the masterpieces among the sculptured pieces of marble that were thought to be carriers of life. Statues of exquisite quality, works by acknowledged masters, were thought to be epiphanies of real persons, or of Gods themselves. The tradition wanted Praxiteles to use magic, and particularly magical tools, in order to transform the material statue into the epiphany of the deity represented (Corso 2001, with references to Plato, *Anthologia Graeca* 16. 160; and Ausonius, *Epigrammata* 62 Green).

Some centuries later, Callistratus, a famous art critic, even gave details of the alleged transformation of the statue, from an entirely material work to a kind of 'container' of the god: "the sculptor works as a magician, or as a medium, creating a statue which is appropriate to its deity and worthy of him, where the divine or heroic individual represented can thus go and dwell" (Corso 2001). The statue was thus transformed into the real subject represented...

Walter Benjamin brought materiality into the spotlight in modern times.

Although he favored the mechanical reproduction of artworks, and saw in it an opportunity of art to reach a wider audience, he lamented the loss of aura this kind of reproduction brings by (Benjamin 1968 [1936]). The aura resided mainly, if not solely, in the authenticity of a work of art. Benjamin's authenticity depended heavily on the quality of being made of matter. A lump of matter configured in one and only way had a unique form –and therefore a unique identity- that had to be destroyed if this lump of matter was to be reconfigured in some other way.

Aura is, nevertheless, a double-edged quality, in that it concedes to the artwork a (sometimes undeserved) authority, and a much needed (usually well deserved) originality.

For Jean Lacan materiality had an inherent quality that could undermine the all too important symbolical systems created by humans. Lacan wrote extensively on the nature of art, which he regarded as one of the most fundamental human activities. As he put it, the work of art is not just being looked upon, opening new possibilities to the viewer, and allowing him to look at what

cannot be seen, but looks at him/her (Lacan 1977). For something to look at the viewer it has to be there; that it is physically present.

We may believe that we are in control of our glance; however, the feeling of power we supposedly have over the object we are staring at, is always undermined by the fact that “the materiality of existence (the Real) always exceeds and undercuts the meaning structures of the symbolic order” (Felluga 2015).

Materiality and abstraction

The material is a kind of abstraction of reality. Abstraction helps us focus on an issue, so that we are able to see it more clearly. Science isolates some aspect of reality, in order to study it in depth. In art abstraction help us perceive the world around us clearly, to see the essence of things, and doesn't let us be carried out by the abundance of visual stimuli reality offers –that's why art breaks new grounds, often obscured by the huge volume of information we are exposed to. In real artworks representation is in fact employing abstraction, without giving up on its magic; It retains multiplicity.

“Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” maintained Paul Klee (Klee 1920, 118). And Heidegger pointed out that art makes visible the invisible, pulling it out of oblivion, and exposing it to “the light of[its] Being” (Heidegger 2002, 20-21). Looking at a painting by Van Gogh depicting worn-out boots, a story unfolds before our eyes; the boots belong to a farmer who tends the land. The toil and sweat of the peasant are almost tangible –reality is reconstructed, but it is a reality rich in shades, not a poor version thereof.

Anselm Kiefers painting *Lilith am Roten Meer* offers a powerful experience. There is no human presence, it is the children's garments that visualize human beings. Abstraction is at play here, setting phantasy in motion; Phantasy reconstructs reality by introducing transcendental insight, and initiating an ontological process.

Materiality offers an unparalleled insight into the world, philosopher Frank Jackson argued since the 1980's. Jackson conducted a philosophical thought “experiment” or, we might say, he proposed an intellectual scheme (Jackson 1982, Jackson 1986): Mary is a scientist who knows

everything there is to know about the science of color, from chemistry to physics, to art, but has never experienced color. The question that begs an answer is: once Mary experiences color, does she learn anything she didn't know before? Jackson claims that she does, a claim that sparked a very fruitful debate (Ludlow 2004). Although the "experiment" intended to argue against physicalism — the view that the universe, including all that is mental, is entirely physical- it is clear that it is materiality that causes the very personal and intuitive response to it that Jackson wanted to demonstrate; a response he argued was due to qualia, a term coined in the early 20th century to describe the individual instances of subjective, conscious experience.

Materiality and aura

The same holds for materiality in our contemporary world, a world lived in and experienced through the "new media":

Some philosophers and media theorists have already noted that the new media lead to the visitor's "disembodiment". According to this point of view, digital virtuality cuts off the viewer from the tangible, tactile sense of his corporeal integration in the world, absorbs him into the image and removes him from living reality (Mitchell 1999). Any kind of matter is about to vanish in favor of information foreshadow Paul Virilio in early 1990's. The disappearance would affect any kind of materiality. Deterritorialisation, disembodiment and deconstruction (in the literal sense of the word, not as architectural style) would form the new brave world humans occupy (Virillio 1998).

In contrast, others regard that the experience, which virtual reality offers, is more complete since our body is also involved emotionally with the environment. The body continues to be the active participant who determines the image's reference point. Our physical involvement with the new media allows immersion to virtual environments and is the basis of interactive integration in cyberspace (Hansen 2006). "In areas as diverse as virtual reality, video conferencing, MUDs (multi-user domain), newsgroups, electronic discussion lists, telemedicine, web-based education, flight simulation software and computer gaming, a sense of presence is vital for the success of the particular application" pointed out Esther Milne (Milne 2003). In this sense real architectural environments will be no different to "other" environments. Is a conference hall equipped with the latest video conference devises a real or a virtual environment?

In either case the participant can immerse in the environment where he/she is situated, either it is a virtual or a real one. Actually, to get immersed into reality or into the virtual we should be in the mood that let us drift between dream and reality.

We desire the body of the beloved one not just as his/her body, but also as a proof of his/her love, as a sign that we occupy his/her mind and soul. If the beloved one dies, his/her dead body immediately gets us confused; a whole complex of feelings arises, from uncanny to loss, to pain. We aren't attracted to the body as we used to when it was alive; we don't love the tangible matter, which is nevertheless present, probably because any interaction with it ceases. There is no prove that that body loves us back; the aura, the soul, the "reality" is gone, although matter is still there. We may say that materiality is less real than the story built on the material.

On the other hand our -material- body is affected by our feelings. Our heart beats faster when our thought turns to the beloved one. We respond physically to a construct of our mind. Our body reacts to an image, to a piece of music, to a story. The tears caused by a sad scene are a measurable substance.

The Olympian Gods "resided" in a natural setting, on Mount Olympus; in a real, physical environment where people can walk, and experience a fantasy – even in such a construct like a myth the real, physical, world is the setting, in order to make the myth more solid, more real.

Our body is affected by our feelings in some exquisite pieces of architecture, too: Even today, one and a half millennium on, we are dazzled when entering Aghia Sofia. We are unable to categorize the building into its constituent parts, and we are left speechless by admiration. The visitors' comprehension of how the dome is supported is constantly refuted, unlike the Pantheon where the hemispherical dome rests prominently on the underlying wall. The multicolored mosaics make the image that one faces when lifting one's gaze even more complicated. The cupola seems as if it is hovering in the air, causing awe and fear, as the sixth-century CE historian Procopius pointed out (Procopius I.1.34) God is incomprehensible, and so should the buildings be where he can be encountered. Our encounter with him should be debilitating, and so it seems to be.

In the gray zone between abstraction and aura

It is ancient statues that are occupied by divinities. The immaterial -imagination alone- doesn't suffice for people to contact their Gods. Physical, material objects are called upon to bridge the gap. And the temples and various religious buildings are the places where we can come near to the spirit, to God. And when we do, we immerse into both, into reality and into the imaginary.

We find ourselves in the gray zone between reality and virtual reality. Grey zones are a kind of what postmodern scholars named hyperreality; hyperreality is actually defined as the inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality; a condition in which reality and fiction are intertwined so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins (Baudrillard 1988, Tiffin & Terashima 2005).

Grey zones emerge when something doesn't "fit" well, when we start doubting whether we are confronted with reality or with virtual reality. Quite often, simple things we have no doubts they belong to either reality or virtual reality acquire an ambivalent character. We face a real person that imitates an animation character, as Mrs. Valeria Lukianova did when she trimmed herself - with exhaustive diet and dozens of plastic surgeries- to a living Barbie doll. But in fact Mrs. Lukianova is more "plastic" than the Barbie doll, because the doll is an open object where we can at least project the desired; in which we can at least imagine the friend we created with our fantasy; to which we can wear a coat to don't get cold... "It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality" noted in the early 2000's Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2002, 16).

Very many instances of gray zone are poor copies of the original -that's why they create the feeling of uncanny. Mrs. Lukianova reproduces just the image of Barbie, the well-known girls' idol with very pronounced features. The Parthenon may be much more (and, in a sense, much less) than its fame suggests. And spending a day or two in a medieval castle doesn't allow us to extend our lives into the past.

Gray zones have many shades, and materiality is of crucial importance for how these can be experienced. While we can (and people, apparently, could since antiquity) enjoy an inert piece of marble, either as a finely worked piece of marble or by projecting on it a human being or god, a soulless corps is appalling. The material substance doesn't make-up for the deceased person.

Whilst a lifeless statue is still a source of admiration, a lifeless body, being “slightly” different from a living creature, is scary.

Dolls are most interesting in this regard.

The oldest doll was found in Egypt, but possibly this kind of toy was invented earlier. It seems that children played with dolls for thousands of years, whether the doll was a simple tree twig with branches resembling legs or hands, or an anthropomorphic clay figurine, or a piece of cloth tied properly.

Small idols (statues) were perhaps used initially for cult purposes. But it is certain that from some point onwards, if not from the start, they began to be used as toys, i.e. to be dolls. And, at the latest by 600-500 BCE these figurines became joined limbs, i.e. they could depict movement, as did the figurines in the shadow theatre worldwide (Simmen 1975).

In some older as well as newer dolls we can also distinguish a sort of mobility ascribed by facial expressions. If we place these dolls around a table and add objects for them to “play”, then despite their immobility a “relationship” between them will be created, a “motion” will be created, a story. Dolls have been used since remote times as kind of avatars for real persons; they are typically given a soul through our imagination: we give them the role we want, we make them the protagonists in stories created by our minds.

The psychologist John Markey observed already in 1928 that children under three years old showed excessive interest for personification and communication with their doll or other inanimate objects and also with imaginary friends (Markey 1928). It is estimated that until about the age of 7 37% of the children take one step further the imaginary game and create an imaginary friend (Nikolaou 2014).

The simulation of the abstraction and aura through representation

Inasmuch dolls depend on their materiality to allow us use them as avatars, their materiality sets the limit to the projection of the desired character on them. Realistic features, human-like facial expressions, and above all mechanical movement or even animation, render them suitable for

impersonations just of certain individuals. By being realistic, and by moving realistically, they limit decisively the scope of individuals they can impersonate.

Probably that's why many animators opt for rudimentary figures: they obviously hold that detailed depiction of characteristics and movement are not completely necessary elements in order for a doll to welcome its attributed role. Although exist marionettes and modern moving and talking dolls and films with characters giving the impression of being real, simple dolls are continued to be made and films with figures that are schematic rather than realistic. Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* tells the story of David, a childlike android uniquely programmed with the ability to love. The extraterrestrial figure's behavior is the one that makes it dear and, mainly, believable, and not its shape, which is quite sketchy.

And, the currently extremely popular with children Peppa Pig television series also features extremely «primitive» and schematic figures.

Acknowledging this fact, a photograph of a doll, if carefully focused on some of its features, leaves a lot to be conjured, and thus liberates its potential. The doll ceases to be an instrument for representing a certain character, and opens up to a whole spectrum of projections. A relatively closed artifact becomes an open one, in that it allows multiple readings, and multiple projections of the desired.

A photo is normally a testimony to life renouncing death. "All young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death" claimed Roland Barthes (Barthes 1982). By photographing a doll, the doll can be perceived as a living creature captured in some instance of its life. The inherent disadvantage of a doll, its frozen facial expression, vanishes, and gives way to our imagination.

The photo of the doll is becoming a fragment of life... the photo is giving life to the doll because it opens up a story in our mind the moment before and after the "click".

As it appears, we cannot be immersed only in places that can offer a full experience, we are effortlessly immersed into the real world, into real objects, into real buildings, where the object, the fantasy it initiates, its story, the material and the immaterial, the body and the soul are all combined together.

Virtual reality increasingly substitutes for reality in urban environments. It isn't that we just chase Pokémons instead of seeking to smell the roses in parks and gardens. In perceiving reality through devices that "augment" reality, we lose the essence of reality, we fail to notice the aura of tangible things, which is replaced by the shallow and poor information about the thing (let's remember F. Jackson's Mary), which contrary to its claim sums-up to a rather impaired than an augmented reality. The physical object, matter, is still there, but its aura, the references it anchors, the memories it recalls, the imagination it nourishes are replaced by another kind of fantasy, poorer, pre-fabricated, and restricted.

It is like being in Santa Maria degli Angeli, and instead of experiencing the aura of an edifice that once served as a focal point of Roman civil life, and was eventually ruined, and given a new identity by no less than Michelangelo, we are focused on the tourist leaflet advertising it as a worthwhile site...

CONCLUSION

Today, when standing before an outstanding monument of human ingenuity or nature –like the Parthenon or a beautiful sunset in the volcano island of Santorini, - people would rather reach for their smartphones and make a selfie in the setting than look unobstructed what unfolds before their own eyes; they would opt for the image and the fantasy surrounding it than the experience of the real thing and the fantasy it can set in motion.

This makes the study of reality in its materiality, its aura, and its connection and its difficult relation to the made-up world of imagination, of virtual reality, and of fantasy a *sine qua non* for design practice, if it is to tackle the growing complexity of an ever-changing world.

Whether a work of art is a conventional physical object or a digital image, it can both nourish our phantasy and stir us up physically; it can move us intellectually and psychologically, and give us goose bumps.

Materiality and non-materiality are intertwined relationally with us, with our schemata of perception and representation.

What we perceive of reality is nevertheless relative; it depends on the level of immersion achieved. A small and shallow church cupola may appear as exalting as real heaven in the eyes of a deep

believer. We see the beloved one much more beautiful than he/she really is when we are in love. We lose as much the sense of scale, as the sense of time.

In this context, materiality, along with non-materiality, make up the all too important, rich, natural, real world with its unique aura.

The crucial issue here is how closely attached is the narrative of the object to the object itself: in other words, how easily can the “story” about the object be changed, how easily can its real spirit be ostracized and replaced by a new one; and how the old ghosts can be expelled from the place we decide to appropriate, the old dreams from the pillow....

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