



## Visual perception: digital imagination and sensitive experience of the social world

Fabio La Rocca

### Abstract

With every historical epoch comes a different way of thinking, a different way of seeing, capable of identifying the fundamental elements of a change of paradigm. Any discussion of 'paradigm' in relation to the contemporary world must include the development of the digital realm and its technological apparatus, which transform vision and influence how we perceive the world. Central to this development has been the emergence of myriad new forms of communication and a culture of sharing life, which characterize the process of seeing. Technology opens up new horizons in terms of how we expose our presence in the world: via digital photography and video, in every instant of everyday life we are in a position to expose our social world, the fragments of our existence. This cultural effect is not merely a consequence of ways of structuring existence, but also constitutes a change in the way we think about our relationship with the world. Every cultural and technical change brings together a variation of thought and perception, and this represents a basis on which to understand and interrogate the continual mutation of our social imaginary and the process of building, producing and transforming the Real.

### Key Words

Visual culture / media / perception / images / technology

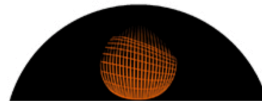
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Number 6 - Year IV / December 2015 pp. 50-65  
DOI: 10.7413/22818138046  
ISSN: 2281-8138

[imagojournal.it](http://imagojournal.it)





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*Fortis imaginatio generat casum*

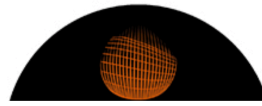
## I. Prelude

In contemporary society, technology is one of the most sensitive characteristics of our relationship with the world. Following a paradigmatic trajectory allows us to grasp how the digital imagination and technological effects are expressions of a mutation which has a profound influence on how we communicate and our cultural expressions, and which renovates individual perception and the way in which we visualize the world. In this process, technology should be understood as a key to comprehending the essence of the human being, or, better still, as a way of suggesting a reflection on a particular way of being in the world: to use a term dear to Martin Heidegger, an expression of the *dasein*: “presence”, “existence”, a particular way of “being there”.

Naturally, this process acquires new forms with the advent of the digital imaginary, where the modality of presence changes as a consequence of other modalities by which we express ourselves and perceive and make sense of the world. This also implies changes in the categories whereby we comprehend our relationship with the social world; the paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn shows us in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), must be adapted to a new configuration of the social world syntonic with the character of the period in which we live. The paradigm, as a system of ideas, thus relates to the imaginary which structures social life and characterises culture. From a phenomenological and epistemological point of view, the rise of the digital imagination will therefore without doubt have a substantial impact on the way in which we organise knowledge, our relationship to technology being an existential form, an interface which conditions social communication and relationships in everyday life.

## 2. The power of the imaginary

The imaginary plays a crucial role in this new context, both from a paradigmatic point of view and also as a trajectory of the cultural scene in the technological landscape. The proliferation of technological devices and the various platforms that form media culture can be seen as representing, firstly, an extension of the possibilities of knowledge, and



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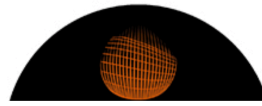


secondly, a universe of cultural existence combined with a powerful elaboration of the characteristics of the imagination. The imaginary, via media space, thus plays a vital role in activating new dynamics of relation, proliferation of particular cultural content, and, above all, new forms of narration. The imaginary, via the impact of technology, participates in the structuring of the social world through a kind of a continuous movement of knowledge and culture.

Media must be understood here almost as a physical environment, an inhabited place, and also as a cognitive environment where our perception of space and time are in a process of constant redefinition. Media and the imaginary come together to play their part in redefining categories of knowledge, perception, and experience of social life, and must be seen as theoretical instruments for exploring, in both a methodological and practical sense, the complexity of the world. This complexity opens up possibilities for upgrading the methods and theoretical models for an explorative form of comprehension of social practices, the digital environment, and also the production of the imaginary world.

For a long time, the imaginary was consigned to the periphery of scientific knowledge; viewed merely as the realm of fantasy and delusion, a breeding ground for chimeras. From here arises the opposition between reality and imaginary, the philosophical dichotomy of imagination vs. reason, virtual vs. actual. However, while modernity, with its emphasis on the importance of rationalism, excluded the imaginary from scientific thought, it behoves us now (finally?) to recognise the force of the imaginary both as methodology and as a disciplinary field. Looking at the world around us we can say that a theoretical “revolution” has led to a new conception in which the imaginary is considered a vibrant place where the individual is in contact with the world, and where the individual creates himself through social experience. We are therefore experiencing a revalorisation of the imaginary, which henceforth permeates all spheres of thought and culture. After a long period being seen as something separate from “the real”, associated merely with imagination, dreams, and myths, the imaginary, in the contemporary socio-technological world, becomes something that invites us to think about this real and how to act upon it.

The imaginary is a vast territory where we talk about imagination as, for example, individuals’ capacity to formulate their spirit through various mental images, the importance of myths, the impact of reverie in the ordinary, and so on. Occidental thought has consistently been suspicious of such things, sceptical of imagination and the imaginary, regarding them as part of another reality, unrelated to the “real”. Let us not forget the popular expression *folle du logis* (attributed to Nicolas Malebranche by Voltaire), which implies that imagination risks derailing human reason and setting it adrift in the world of absence and fantasy. The imaginary and imagination (often closely linked), being opposed to the “real” knowledge, were thus a diversion from the “search for truth” which, in Malebranche’s thought, is associated more with a rational and rationalised relationship between things and ideas. The imagination is therefore a danger in the materialist vision of



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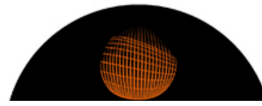


the world because can implicate a “wrong” idea, as suggested by Plato in the allegory of the cave, where he talks of images as being deceptive (Pascal, too, in his assertion that imagination is opposite to reason), an illusion, a simulacra that obfuscates truth and reality. The history of philosophy is of course too long to discuss all of the various branches of knowledge here, but it seems important to emphasize – following the advent of Romanticism and its restoration of the imaginary, and also the processes of understanding proposed by Carl Gustav Jung, Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, Cornelius Castoriadis and others – the re-affirmation of the imaginary in current thought. The imaginary is recognised as playing a role in the construction of knowledge, with images understood as vectors of ideas. In fact, the twentieth century saw the development of the notion of imagination into an organisational dynamic whereby a system of images, as shows Valentina Grassi (2005:12), makes sense of interactional relationships. This bespeaks a new sensitivity that enables us to understand that imagination, and all of the myriad systems of images (including the imaginary, myths, icons), are not a barrier to comprehension, but rather a complement to other forms of knowledge. In a paradigmatic and epistemological sense, the role of comprehension is in part to build possibilities, and to this end the imaginary is linked to the infinite dimension of knowledge since it constitutes the foundation of perceptions, concepts and visions regarding social reality, forms the schema of the spirit, and contributes to the presentation of the world via, for example, the proliferation of images.

Images, according to the theory of Durand, represent ideas, and this association can help to reveal that which is hidden. In this sense, we can affirm that images inhabit our everyday life, where technology permits, in Heidegger’s theory, a kind of “revealing” or “clearing”, a way, we could say, for the individual to be ‘present in the world’. And in this world, imagination exists in all social situations, and can be examined as a subset of our everyday life.

### 3. The paradigmatic viewpoint and the spirit of the times

Following this line of thought, a perspective based on the notion of the ‘epochal’ evolution of knowledge must consider the impact of a different way of seeing the world; we must come around to a “new” vision of the social scene where technology, through its own evolution, participates in changes in the construction of vision and how we organize a theoretical framework to analyze the way we live in contemporary society. We are not here in a restricted historical field, but confronted rather with an infinite sphere of horizons of thought and knowledge linked to the drivers of mutations, influenced by individual experience, the comprehension of which requires multiple perspectives. The technological universe contributes to the generation of new “versions” of social



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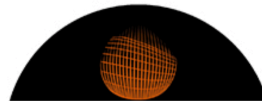
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behaviour, forms of communication and relationships, as well as its cultural and theoretical ramifications. Every mutation of technology brings a variation of thought and particular ways of visualizing the world, as well as particular forms of interaction and understanding as an adaptation of the individual according to the climate of that particular historical period. In our view, this represents an avenue for interrogating and understanding the changes our social world is constantly undergoing, for comprehending how knowledge is re-formed in the process of actualization and how forms of communication and the characteristics of the digital scene have evolved.

This provides insight into the ways in which we convey vision and communicate our social experience. For this, a multi-perspective approach is necessary, a careful look at how we are living, since everything it is possible for us to know is anchored in every one of the myriad visible aspects of reality. In a re-actualization of thought – and in line with the “climatological perspective”, which ascribes a central role to the influence of the present on the social and cultural scene – every medium or device changes with each new phase of technological evolution, which we can also interpret as a process of exposing individual experience. The perception of this experience is not independent of a technological structure of devices that permit us to enlarge the ‘real’ in daily life; in this regard, we could think of the effects of photography or cinema, which we can consider as symbolic phases of this ‘enlargement’ of the real. Technology builds the real and contributes to the transformation of existence and the social and cultural environment. It is neither a simple medium nor, according to Heidegger in his *Question Concerning Technology*, merely a collection of instruments; rather, it is an understanding of the world and an aspect of Being, through a mechanism such as is expressed in Heidegger’s theory of technological ‘revealing’. This conception can be linked to the Greek term *techne*: a connection with the experience of knowledge, and, in our view, at the same time, the way the people interacts in a cultural way.

We might similarly recall Marshall McLuhan’s idea regarding the modification of the sensorial equilibrium which influences our way of being and seeing as a function of the evolution of the instruments of communication and technology. McLuhan (1964) saw every medium as an extension of human faculties, and held that the influence of media on human beings affected the way they can perceive the world. In our contemporary social experience we are therefore immersed in a situation of social-technological mutation which affects our sensorial sensitivity, and this is visible in the cultural and historical succession of media and technological innovation. For example, we can think of artificial light – and also cinema and photography – as an aspect of the mutation of visual and sensorial experience, and subsequently of the development of knowledge, since the instrument of the visible facilitates information, comprehension, and a particular access to the world. We should also remember Walter Benjamin’s analysis, in *Das Passagen-Werk*, of how the urban environment transforms sensibility and modes of perception through the effects of a generalization of technological phenomena. At the heart of the



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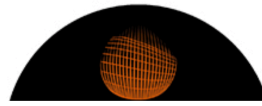


Benjaminian conception is a concern with the effects of a relationship between communication and social experience, or between the medium of thoughts and the instrument of communication.

This perspective also allows us to think about the idea of a new social (and epistemic) 'grammar', considering the transformation of the sensorial dimensions of the eye and its body-technological extensions. We increasingly perceive the world through technologies of communication, and for this reason we can assert that there is a deep immersion of technology in human life. This observation enables us to understand how technology generates knowledge, bodily mutations, ways of seeing and visualization. Cinema, photography and the digital environment can be understood as 'paradigmatic' because of their capacity to structure and habituate our imagination and our sensorial relationship with the world. It is necessary to interrogate, analyze and describe this techno-media evolution in order to comprehend its nature, to understand the changes in the social realm conditioned by the nomadic objects and the immediacy of the transmission of messages and emotions, as well as to understand the relationship we have with digital surfaces and the effect of the 'screenization' of existence, the optical and 'haptic' modifications in the fluidity of info-communicational interactions. These are examples – symptoms perhaps – of the contemporary existential condition which structures the imagination, implemented in the digital situation of the actual world in this 'augmented' society, which determines the different communicative and behavioural forms of this society's inhabitants.

#### 4. The techno-digital condition

The lens of a "trajectory of the imaginary" allows us to illustrate, from a historical, social and cultural point of view, how the evolution of technology corresponds to the evolution of human nature; in other words, the concretization of a process of interaction between technology, the human being and the prevailing environment. With every new phase in the evolution of technology and media comes a specific way of seeing, a particular structure of experience, and, consequently, a panoply of different devices characterising the body, knowledge and info-communicational modalities. The relationship between technology and objects in its anthropological trajectory is therefore an existential condition, a conditioning of our daily life and the way we relate to the world, and consequently to knowledge. Changes of perception and senses are among the results of this epochal trajectory, whereby we may observe, for example, how the birth of a metropolis brings a new visibility of things. We might also note that the technological 'revealing' of photography enables a particular visualization of daily life. The birth of cinema for example saw the emergence not just of a simple instrument for 'showing', but



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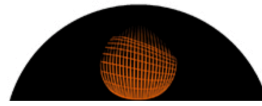
also of a particular way of seeing, feeling and inhabiting the world. The digital realm has thus evolved as a visual flux of experience and language.

McLuhan famously argued that the roots of social and cultural transformation lie in more fundamental, media-induced alterations to individuals' perceptive and cognitive abilities. On this view, in the contemporary, post-organic situation the human being finds itself with technology defining a relationship with the world dominated by a massive irruption of digital technology in the real: a techno-symbolic penetration modifying the myriad sensorial aspects of our social life. We need only look to the smartphone – a veritable remote control – as a transitional object (we can think of it as the “techno-magic comfort object” of the young generation) of a playful techno-communicational experience formed by the existential path in an optic of practice and plural gestures, of multiple identifications and sharing of the vital flow. Hence, in the contemporary technological paradigm, the human being becomes a “being-flow”: we see the passage from a mono-psychic personality to the flow-schizoid personality that decrees the death of the Cartesian subject and the hybrid presence of the symbiotic person.

We could call this hybridism, arising as a function of visual experience, Screen-Presence, Cine-Presence, or Photo-Presence: a perceptive visualization of the ‘being here and now’ in a reality reinforced by diverse visual spheres. Visualization, to “monstrate” and perceive, are the actions of a new instantaneity experienced through the technological devices that have redefined the visibility of the human being and our presence to things. There is an ontophatic<sup>2</sup> sentiment, to use Stéphane Vial's (2013) term, which moderates new modalities of “feeling” in the world. And in this panorama a techno-existential condition emerges, based, in particular, on technological visions that have modified experience and which generate new forms of social presence.

From a phenomenological point of view, “being there” – as in *dasein*, presence – is situated in an optic of modification of the perceptive act and the act of monstration, conditioned by the techno-digital effect. The perceptive digital situation involves not only a new social cultural event, but also, more importantly perhaps, coincides with the revelation of a new phenomenological experience of the world: the modality through which existence is and appears.

By this logic, the “being-in-the-world” is influenced by the power of technology, which influences the visual and perceptive structure and creates a hybrid union where the technological system specifies our forms of seeing and being seen. The epochal process of technological evolution as it coincides in the *zeitgeist* of the digital era is not just a mutation of objects (technological devices), but also a mutation of subjects, and so of the ways through which the being communicates and lives out its everyday nature. We recognize that this everyday nature is formed by the amalgamation of the environments, social practices and interactions that the individual employs to recreate its own significance of social existence. In this regard, the technological landscape is an integral part of our social life, and conditions the development of interactive and experiential



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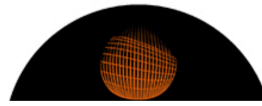
forms. With the digital era we are in a phase where technology benefits from a new aura through which the world opens itself to perception and, at the same time, is shown by the visualization of our existence. This era, via technological symbolic effects, defines and is defined by a dimension where humanity appears “augmented”, in that biological evolution is actualized by cultural and technological evolution. Before McLuhan, Arnold Gehlen, in *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter* (Man in the Age of Technology, 1957), explained how technology is an extension of our senses, and so an extension of our body – a prosthesis, in other words. Thus, we can think of the prosthesis of the smartphone in our hand, or the sensorial extension of the camera (photo and video) in their constitution of what we call a “third eye”<sup>3</sup> – in some sense reminiscent of the kinoglaz of Dziga Vertov – as a particular modality with which to penetrate into the world, and consequently as a possibility to “attain” the world. The proliferation of technological devices in our daily life is the marker of a sensorial and perceptive extension of our eye, that very nature of which is altered by this proliferation. An eye increasingly solicited and stimulated in the capture of everyday moments immortalized through the visual, thanks to the facility of techno-digital access in the visualization process. The multiplication of devices of visualization constitutes a response to the visual needs of the person, this augmented homo technologicus. Here we see a contribution to the aesthetic forms in the connective flow which contribute to stylizing contemporary experience as a process of the transformation of techno-social property. The Cartesian cogito ergo sum has transmuted into the photo ergo sum or video ergo sum: in the dual meaning of to see and to be seen to be able to exist. This is one of the stylistic significations of the contemporary socio-cultural environment which show us a proliferation and circulation of images as an augmented effect of the visual technologies and the existential metamorphoses of the act of perception and monstration.

## 6. Visual sensibility

We are thus witnessing an explosion in the ubiquity of the visual and the mediological in our everyday existence through the proliferation of technological artefacts, with tablets, smartphones and other nomadic objects of vision permeating everyday life. This is also an indication of how the nomadic expression of existence in our increasingly mobile society is relevant in understanding the transformations of the image, the imaginary and social actions in the contemporary context. The universe of artefacts influences in particular our eye and our vision of the world, both from an optical and a tactile point of view; this transmutation creates the effect of a “techno-eye” as a sensible form of the act of perception, of the look, but also of distraction and aesthetic hallucination.

In everyday life, vision is enlarged, augmented, and experience in visu condenses





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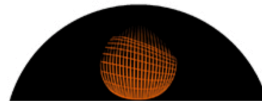
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perception by way of a techno-digital mediatisation. According to the analysis of William J. Mitchell (1994<sup>4</sup>), the digitization of images places us in a “reconfiguration of the eye” where the digital image, easily distributed, copied, transformed, changes the way we explore ideas (1994:223). The importance of Mitchell’s analysis lies in its theorization of the consequences of the digitalisation process we are currently experiencing. Mitchell denounces the passage from analogical continuity to digital discontinuity that influences aesthetics and medial consequences and reshapes the production and distribution of images. Lev Manovich (1996) similarly discusses the difference between analogue and digital photography, speaking of a new relationship with images where we see a continuation of their functionality. In this context we can talk about a new kind of visualization of technological waves, starting out from a digital sensor to transform our mental space, our field of vision and our emotions in a trans-immersion of human sensitivity which ultimately contributes to a reorganization of the contemporary imaginary.

This process is a distinctive feature of the contemporary world, where the intensity of visual fascination with the image plays a role in maintaining the integrity of the social realm. At the same time, there is a new kind of social construction of the look, or the idea of a visual construction of the world. Here, inspired by the analysis of Durand, we can refer to a general “arch typology”, that is, a mundus of imagination surrounding every possible thought. This mundus can express itself in the visual seduction through which our eye seems to become habituated; we can also consider this a phenomenological sensibility whereby the image places our consciousness into a relationship with things, linking the individual with the world and at the same time leading us in an ocularcentric atmosphere: in other words, as shows Gillian Rose (2012) a centrality of the visual in contemporary life, a tendency that represents knowledge through the images in circulation and also the tendency to interact with visual experiences. In the visualization of the world through the simultaneous use of different media, the presence of the image is not just a mirror of the world, but also a kind of edification of it. As a result, the image and the imaginary constitute a way of comprehending our relationship with the world from the viewpoint of everyday experience.

This knowledge must be considered an experiment in images, where images have become, as Benjamin’s theory shows, the space where this experiment takes place. Should we adopt an approach to inquiry in which we place ourselves in a position of proximity with the social world, we can see how the force of images informs us about this world and our *Erlebnis*. We are living in an era, as Gianni Vattimo (1989) says, distinguished by a pluralisation of images of the world, and thus an age of the constitution of the world as image. Following visual studies theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999), such a society represents a tendency to visualize existence, with a centrality of visual experience and visualization of the world. If we turn our attention to the actual social situation we see the exponential growth of the circulation of images (“the sheer quantity of images



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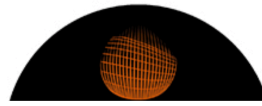


produced on the internet today has no parallels”, says Mirzoeff, 2015), testifying to a modality of everyday social experience where images define our lives.

The most relevant aspect of this intensification of visual culture is the relational use that people make of these ubiquitous images. We can think for example of the everyday photographic and video action that fills our spaces (urban and digital) via the smartphone, allowing us to accumulate images of everyday life and living moments, and to share and exchange them instantaneously in an emotive manner through permanent connection to the rhizomatic system of the internet. To photograph and film everyday life and share it, with the intention of creating techno-symbolic liaisons, is an ordinary process for capturing the world in images: from a phenomenological viewpoint, this world, in the eyes of the group gaze, is intercepted through the immersive forms of the contemporary technological ambiance.

We live in a period of hyper-stimulation by the visual which generates a hyper-visibility, where the social body is in a permanent action of showing itself. Every day we produce, consume and disseminate a profusion of elements of our lives via image-based communication. We are in a new paradigm, which Fred Ritchin (2008:141) calls “hyperphotography”. This means that we communicate aspects of our selves to others through the use of a kind of ‘face-to-face’ via the screen, and a particular bodily posture, looking down, our eyes concentrated on the screen, to visualize the social scene via digital reproducibility. This emphasis on communication through images, a transformation of the intensity of perception, presents an iconography of everyday experience, conveying information about feelings and emotions, ambiances and spatial situations: all of the ordinary details of social experience. In this context, the advent of the digital produces the immediacy of the images that have become a signifier of the instantaneity of experience. There is a predisposition to show and to be visible, as illustrated by the phenomenon of the selfie, which can be considered precisely in this way rather than, as many scientists and journalists would have it, simply in terms of narcissistic pathology. The selfie is an interesting object through which to understand the mutations of communicative forms in the age of the internet and social networking, and we might concur with Nancy Baym and Theresa Senft’s description of the selfie as “a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of relationship (...) a gesture that can send different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences” (2015:1589). In its everyday banality, this practice can also be understood as a way of forming and consolidating liaisons, connections between individuals, and as an instrument with which to express emotional situations and a socio-spatial presence.

Photography – we might even say the image in general – is always linked to emotion, the circulation of affects and memory. In contemporary communicative practices the selfie is part of this affective sanctification, a way of expressing the state of souls traversing the landscapes of digital space-time. It is a sensation proper to an aesthetic sensory interface which allows the diffusion and circulation of emotions. With the visual practice of digital



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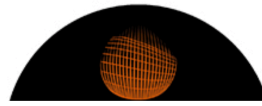


photography and the universe of selfie and Instagram, we visualize existence and externalize it in an immediate flow, thus rendering eternal the present moment of our identity manifestation. We can think of this condition as being like a new kind of family photo album, giving us a glimpse of the way we inhabit the world through digital experience. There is a dilatation of the world and the social body which should be understood as one of the contemporary communicational forms where an ecstasy of sharing is in play, and consequently new social attitudes formed, on the basis of our multiple relationships with sensory interfaces. For example, according with Eric Sadin (2011), we might call attention to the capacity of the “digital-tactile” form that we can see via the smartphone’s allowing us to zoom in on reality, enlarge the visualization and represent an indicator of a kind maniacal relation with tactility.

If every epoch has its own stylistic conventions, we can understand how the technologies of vision are the result of an augmented perceptive action, and also, following Joshua Meyrowitz, the modification of the social situation structure, which in turn leads to the alteration of the role played by the individual, and how the technological devices of communication and visualization change the mode of inhabiting and being present in a place. What Meyrowitz (1985) defines as a condition of “sentimental geography” can be read in our lived dimension as a way of inhabiting the techno-digital condition that redefines perception and redraws the borders of ‘being there’. If the human is mobile by nature (this was the maxim of Martin Cooper, inventor of mobile phone in 1973), the effect of contemporary connective nomadism represents the landscape of human nature with a space-time in constant motion, augmented by the technologies of vision. To be available every moment and the act of seeing and showing all are indicators of an ontology of contemporary Being and the technological devices which, as outlined above, modify our existential and perceptive traces. Once again, if we think about the phenomenology of technology, we see that the digital interfaces represent new ontophatic matrices: that is, for Vial, a new form where our perception flows (2012:185). And so it is possible to understand this modality, if we think in particular to the effects of the immediacy conditioning the experience of social life in a context where digital tools structure forms of Being.

## 7. Expressive narration

The appearance of individuals via digital communication reveals a landscape in the “wireless existence” as a metaphor for life in the online realm where we continually try to be in contact with and open to the other. The social link is impossible without connection and communication, and the opening to alterity is conceived in the weaving of this link, in resonance with others. This is what the analysis of Michel de Certeau (1994) shows:



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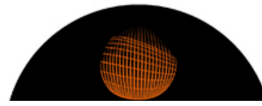
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openness to alterity. It also represents the production of occasions of sharing and meeting that enable us to speak of a present lived in the click of our keyboards as a consequence of a particular excitement of sharing, so as to find an attunement to others. Through the digital communication of shared emotions and moments of life experience we see digital identity building a larger ensemble of shared emotion. Most social analysis sees digital identity and digital communication merely as forces of isolation and destructive of social relations, but we should also ascribe importance to this movement of sharing as a sign of our time, to this condensation of experience in the digital network that has become a kind of “narration” of everyday life through visualization and the screen. The real finds multiple declinations in the socio-digital world, and the penetration of the screen into all areas of our lives also signifies a contamination of the real whereby we see the real through the images on our screens.

In this new environment the screen plays a vital role in revealing the world and changing our perceptive categories. In the contemporary communication structure, the screen has become a parable of another kind of language via the emotional symbols that invade our lives through mobile interaction – emoji for example, developed by teenagers in Japan, which structure fast-paced communicational exchanges. It’s like a new myth based on the phenomenality of quick conversation via sms, chat, forums, instant messages, all of which integrate the classic language of words with an aesthetic touch that represents the emotion we want to circulate and share, and doing so in an amusing way, as is characteristic of the playful spirit that permeates our society. Emoticons and emoji are a visual mark, a different kind of symbolic alphabet representing an expressive form of visual narration, which also serves to illuminate the power of the symbol in the process of identity construction in our society.

This latter phenomenon can be illustrated using the terminology of “parlimage”, a term used in psychology to describe a mix of images and words, which gives us a sense of how the communicative exchange has become a combination of words, symbols and images, and thus an emotional visualization. Examples can be found in digital apps like Snapchat, Instagram, and Vine, or simply in consideration of the LOL generation as a result of the advent of digital networking on a massive scale. This is a corollary of a digital universe made possible by the advent of information technology, the proliferation of smartphones and the acceleration of mobility, and a testament to how the younger generations are immersed in an ever more visual language culture as the form and structure of a relationship with the world driven by the sharing of emotion. Image and symbol are conversational methods which invite a reaction, and thereafter an interaction of exchanges via photos, videos, smileys and so on. Visual culture engenders the modality of “Pic speech” (Trinh-Bouvier, 2015) that takes place in our actual society as a new everyday language where emotional exchange (images, symbols, emoticons) represent the creative heart of this communicative modality. Nowadays, exploring the digital territories of this visual communication is easy: an everyday emotional narration forms the substance



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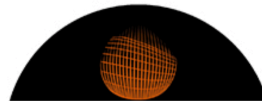


of the continual exchanges of photos and smileys to describe a situation, to comment on an instantaneous situation.

Interaction with the multiple interfaces and the resultant modalities of communication can be seen as an indicator of this persistent exchange between the social body and the technical body. Thus, the interfaces between these two forms of corporeality organise and form, in Milad Douehi's analysis the articulation of digital culture (2013:26). This means that the digital is not a "death substance", but an inhabited space, a lived environment formed through a connective ensemble of spaces. Experience of the world is both influenced and laid out by the digital: hence, in investigation of our contemporary world we cannot ignore the input of the digital and of technological interfaces in the composition of existence and social experience.

## 8. Overtures

In the contemporary zeitgeist we must think of technology and existence as being at the core of a unifying logic where a social sensitivity takes shape and participates in the constitution of the world. We are in a situation where digital-visual-cognitive imprinting creates a sort of "ecology of mind", communication and perception. From technologically-driven production and reception to mass media trans-cultural expansion, we must decode these aspects as a logical consequence of an adaption to the "situational" epoch that affords us insight into the state of contemporary society. The look is projected in a techno-digital symbolic landscape which intensifies the forms of the imaginary through which our existence and vision of the world are organised. The continuous exchange of images and video, visual instant messaging, hypermediatic playfulness, and the nomadic vision via the sensorial tools at our disposal constitute an ensemble of actions which come together to enable the vision and perception of the details and fragments of social experience to flow into the theatre of everyday life. In this process, dominated by the need to create modalities of seeing and thinking, we must consider the historical and social process that McLuhan showed us in analysing the influence of technological inventions on our way of living. Media, in the McLuhanian perspective, are the symptom of a transformation of our societies, and at the same time create a new nature; a new ecosystem. We currently find ourselves confronted by this digital nature which shapes our imaginary, an imaginary that represents the primary issue in digital culture. From this perspective, it is possible to observe how the digital influence is the symptom of a particularly intensive mutation of social situations, actions, connexions and Being. Social life mobilises a series of actions, observable also in the digital space, which play a role in structuring our way of life. It will be necessary to activate a kind of multi-perspective perception, capable of observing the social dimension in its globality and complexity,



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forged between the tangible social space and the digital space.

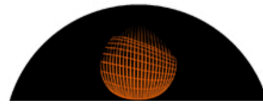
Naturally, we make no apology here for digital life. We recognise many (too many?) criticisms of this social condition, where the ubiquity and acceleration of the rhythms of mobility constitute a *modus vivendi*. Our intention is rather to demonstrate that the conception of the digital universe can suggest ways of understanding the contemporary world. There is no longer any sense in differentiating between real space and the so-called 'virtual', a term that should now be employed in its etymological sense (*virtualis*) as potentiality to express a movement of the Real. Observing the digital universe and our collective imagination is one among the many means at our disposal for comprehending human nature. The digital imagination is a vital substance, circulating within the chains of the real, and it is therefore our contention that a connection between real, imaginary and digital is needed in order to shed light on the myriad and diverse fragments of the world in which we live.

Edited by James Horrox



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