In progress 7.0

Notes on an aesthetics for new media

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Abstract: The process of the implementation of new information technologies has so jolted the modern aesthetic experience that it has absorbed it into its own logic of speed, acceleration and disappearance. The hierarchies, not just the social and cultural ones but also the aesthetic ones, are crumbling. Faced with the primacy of what is artistic as an aesthetic theme, the contemporary aesthetic experience is closely linked to the existence of the masses, via the plural, chaotic discourse of the new (mass) media. Television, cinema, video and, finally, the appearance of cyberspace have meant an unprecedented process of intensified communications, characterised by its being turned into spectacle, and the transience and the fragmentation of aesthetic products.

Our age, no longer the age of technical reproduction, is that of electronic simulation, its characteristic trait a new condition of what is visual and of representation dominated by instability. The procedural, multiform nature of the systems brings with it the chance to give open forms of shared authorship their place. In digital environments, the task of authorship often consists no longer of creating a closed series of scenes but of creating a system of narrative possibilities. Users of the system thus participate in a derived authorship in the sense that they determine via their interaction a concrete virtual construction that was previously non-existent as such.

At the same time, the process of virtualising aesthetic production undoes its previous ties to a particular place and begins to define entities that are not linked to fixed coordinates. Virtuality is to be found in a ubiquity that is problematic in its inertias, interactions, origins and receptions which, at the same time, are unique and multiple. It exists without being there. It designates entities that are safe from single revision and admits manifestations in multiple forms and situations thanks to its capacity to become any node of information space provided with connectivity and to find its way there.

1.0. Our age, no longer the age of technical reproduction, is that of electronic simulation

Growing implementation of visual images generated by computers prefigures the implementation and ubiquity of visual constructions created in a radically different fashion from the imitative capacities of film, television and photography. The rapid development, in just two decades, of a wide range of digital graphic techniques is part of an extensive reconfiguration of the relationships between the modern subject and dominant forms of representation.

The new digital model of vision, autonomous in comparison with the mimetic representation traditionally upheld by the documentary photographic image, is a model of synthesis and

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virtualisation in the construction of images. Contemporary vision is thus reformulated from a previous photographic credibility and objectivity towards a new visual order of simulation and virtualisation. Synthetic digital images have singular technical and aesthetic characteristics which no longer allow them to be automatically translated to the traditional physical and chemical conditions of earlier images. What we recognise as an image on a screen consists merely of a graphic simulation. This simulatory nature is thus essential for electronic images; it has neither weight nor size as we had understood them until now.

Terms such as, for example, *depth, volume, lighting* and *texture* now prove to be merely metaphors. Compared with the finished, closed nature of traditional (photo)graphic productions, synthetic images are for both the author and the user a form of infinite work in progress, permanently open to intervention, retouching, reuse and the most radical metamorphoses. In the very programs for producing and treating computer graphics, most of the different tools and filters provided in fact consist of a digital synthesis which simulates the traditional effects that were part of previous visual productions. Immateriality and simulation are interwoven in digital aesthetics.

With the development and implementation of electronic and digital images, the difference between the real-world model and the model communicated is narrowed. Reality now becomes a staged world, dominated by a logic of simulation in which images and communicative signs of all kinds have their place, the product of a dynamic technology which we have all been accustomed to now for some time.

2.0. The digital era proposes a new condition of what is visual and of representation dominated by instability

Digital technology is exponential in facilitating the manipulation of images and thus gives rise to graphic material that is unstable, fragile, undefined and extremely adaptable and transformable. The move from analogue to digital, from physical atoms to bits of information, i.e. the move from a medium of physical composition to an electronic medium without colour, dimensions or weight, has meant access to dematerialised visual work, the result of the transition of its former corporality to a series of electronic signals held in a uniform binary base, with which all possible reference to a single, faithful original imprint has been lost.

The voluntary retouching or manipulation of digital images is carried out via a radical novelty: in the field of synthetic images, there is no difference between the original and the copy. Any copy of a graphic file will prove to be absolutely identical in all its characteristics to the original file. A copy of a digital work, if that term still has any meaning, involves a new (a potentially infinite) original work. The implementation of digital environments makes certainty and verisimilitude the order of the day for all the messages to be found within them.

Digital images destroy the old conviction that (photo)graphic evidence is inseparable from the prior reality they represent and, as a result, the distinction is lost between the truth of the space represented and the falsehood of the space reproduced, whatever they are, and consequently the suspicion of unreality, manipulation and artifice in the making of any image. The contemporary ecstasies of communication alter in a revolutionary fashion our relationship not just with its signs but also with reality itself, given the new model of the vision it promotes.

The monopolistic predominance of a model of optical representation since the Renaissance, which had historical avant-gardes in the early twentieth century as its first explicit adversary, has come in for radical questioning in the discourse proposed by current models of digital vision. The old capacity of geometric perspective (pictorial and photographic) to introduce and implement ordered vision, in which visual arts as a whole work both in and from the integration and the systemization of the different elements that make up a scene, such as lighting, colour, tone and saturation, is now directly removed in digital aesthetics.

In the face of modern optical space, the new digital environments hold up a particular tactile,

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fragmented space, in which the objects and elements represented appear detached, superimposed or piled up, static or in motion, without quite organising themselves within a homogeneous, unitary visual space.

3.0. The nature of digital aesthetic productions is procedural

The process of the implementation of new information technologies has jolted the modern aesthetic experience in that it has absorbed it into its own logic of speed, acceleration and disappearance. Nowadays information flows in all directions, is at the disposal of everyone at the same time. With digital channels of communication, the idea of a single centre and director makes less sense. The hierarchies, not just the social and cultural ones but also the aesthetic ones, are crumbling.

Faced with the primacy of what is artistic as an aesthetic theme, the contemporary aesthetic experience is closely linked to the existence of the masses, via the plural, chaotic discourse of the new (mass) media. Television, cinema, video and, finally, the appearance of cyberspace have meant an unprecedented process of intensified communications, characterised by its being turned into spectacle, and the transience and the fragmentation of aesthetic products.

The explosive, chaotic nature of the rapid development of new information technologies, its dynamism and radical interconnection favour an aesthetic production that is changing and mobile, dynamic and interactive, totally heterogeneous and diverse. In short, a form of (cyber)culture that is self-generating from the growth of telematic networks which are the foundations of cyberspace, the distinctive characteristics of which are the potential for a character which is plastic, fluid, calculable and manipulable in real time, and is hypertextual and interactive in the information it contains.

The properties of digital environments eliminate the need for simultaneous presence in time and space. The way it operates is informational rather than material, which thus gives rise to an aesthetic experience that is qualitatively different from what is traditional. Digital environments, for example, are not dominated by the *here* and *now*. In the place of proximity, materiality and synchrony, which dominate traditional aesthetic productions, we are now seeing the birth of an aesthetic experience that is distanced, informational and multisynchronous.

Digital environments effectively bring in navigable spaces. They generate habitual simulation of spaces in which we can move and acquire new forms and definitions from the choices made by the individual user. Rather than consisting of information or content that is static, most digital aesthetic works are based on the carrying out of complex operations, interrelated and interdependent on each other, in a successive chain of dynamic stages, brought about by the choice of a particular sequence of procedures. Its nature is procedural.

4.0. Hypertext systems are characterised by their potential for the creation of open forms

Awareness of the effects new digital environments have on aesthetic production leads to the redefinition of a wide range of concepts and categories used (too) habitually in an uncritical fashion. Reading as navigation, the passing of printed culture, the erosion of disciplinary boundaries and the current pre-eminence of notions such as *network*, *nexus* and *node* are just some of the new places the digital era situates in a central discursive space.

Multimedia hypertextual systems give rise to work that is configured by units that are electronically related in multiple trajectories, structured by the links and relationships between blocks of text, images and sounds on a single operating base. Its nature obeys an extensive set-up formed by a discontinuous structure woven between links of all sorts, both internal and external.

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Hypertext thus proposes an open methodological and productive space, one subject to continuous changes and transformations: a proposition that is not a definitive one, that lacks a conclusion. Rather than a unit, hypertext brings plurality. Rather than the definition of the *work*, hypertext proves to be undefined. Rather than a closed, finished nature, to which nothing can be added and nothing taken away, hypertext leads to an open character, one potentially subject to the most complete alteration and metamorphosis.

In a revolutionary way, the aesthetic production of hypertext spaces is characterised by the possibility of production of non-linear, multiform applications: work that changes, is of uncertain appearance, able to take on new definitions in each of its (infinite) revisions.

These open forms meet their own *alter ego* in the figure of the kaleidoscope: a sort of variable, fragmentary, dynamic mosaic of forms and images that change only on the intervention of a user. A mosaic that can go as far as to define fluid mathematical structures, i.e. dynamic labyrinths in perpetual transformation in which the user will often wander without destination or objective.

5.0. In multimedia systems authorship is shared

The tendency of hypertext to fragment texts into separate units makes it possible for users/readers to share in its construction. Readers of hypertext narratives choose their own itineraries and hypothetically can read their own texts, often without perceiving the whole of the original text, but merely the one obtained from their choices and the itinerary that unfolds.

In digital environments, the task of authorship often consists no longer of creating a closed series of scenes but of creating a system of narrative possibilities. In this fashion, users of the system thus participate in a shared authorship in the sense that they determine via their interaction a concrete virtual construction that, as such, was previously non-existent. Multimedia systems of authorship are shared by the designer-author (primary) and the user-reader (derived). The authorship of the designer-author has to make it possible for the decisions on options and itineraries to be delegated to the potential user of the system proposed.

The author in multimedia systems is, therefore, a double figure, shared between designers and users. Given the technological environment and context, in the process of multimedia communication, the user's response and interaction become, in fact, the objective of the system as a whole. Instead of the traditionally passive, linear reception required by aesthetic production predating the development of information technologies, the user now becomes a key co-player for the final appearance of the multilinear scene proposed.

In multimedia aesthetic productions, consideration and study of the user's response have a decisive place and importance in the prior tasks of scripting and conceptualising the work. In graphic interfaces it is necessary to foresee and deal with the different possible responses, as well as the numerous paths navigable and the ways of accessing the content provided. Digital aesthetics produce work structured for active participation by the user in its ultimate implementation and definition. Hypertext requires the proactive intervention of the user: it makes no sense without it.

6.0. Digital aesthetic productions have no place

In the physical world aesthetic production is habitually related to a particular anthropological place, i.e. to a particular point in historical and cultural human space. In contrast to traditional aesthetic production's anchorage to particular symbolic and temporal (and also physical) coordinates, digital aesthetic production is characteristically rootless.

The virtualisation of aesthetic production undoes its previous ties to a particular place and begins to define entities that are not linked to fixed, stable coordinates. Virtuality is to be found

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in a ubiquity that is problematic in its inertias, interactions, origins and receptions which, at the same time, are unique and multiple. Its effective implementation is unstable. The place of virtual work is undefined, transitory and is potentially each and every point of the web, so that it is present in each and every one of its revisions on the graphic interfaces of the users that have accessed it. What is virtual exists without being there. Virtuality designates entities that are safe from single revision and admits manifestations in multiple forms and situations thanks to its capacity to become any node of information space provided with connectivity and to find its way there.

The significance of *potentially anything* which virtuality already had in early philosophical thinking finds singular currency in the aesthetic productions belonging to new information technologies: not tied to a particular place, open to interaction, without a tangible presence and unbound to a single or precise existing moment, permanently potential and open to revision in the process of interaction with each and all of its possible users.

7.0. Virtual environments produce an intermediary aesthetic experience

The interconnectivity of virtual environments generates virtual communities in which it is (potentially) possible to perform simulated actions shared by all the members. Often the experience takes place via a virtual agent that acts as an intermediary. Masks, models of synthesis, clones and virtual aliases substitute for the user's direct experience with the rest of the community; there is thus a profusion of what Plato called *daimons* (literally, *demons*), i.e. intermediaries between two worlds.

The virtual models that take on our identity respond to a dual experience: at the same time one that is sensitive (aesthetic) and intelligible (logico-mathematical). From the point of view merely of the senses, digital graphic representations in a virtual world permit us, in a simulated, metaphorical way, to walk, listen, touch, see... At the same time, in an intelligible sense, these same graphic representations allow us to feel thanks to our understanding of the symbol model (mathematical and computational) that sustains them.

Disguises and the assumption of false or simulated identities of all kinds are common and make possible extraordinary anonymous experiences that are distanced and autonomous from the single identity that dominates in the real, physical world. Virtuality thus provides an intermediary aesthetic experience, in which we interact and feel things from within our own virtual demon. MUDs (multi-user domains) are an example in this sense. With the aid of a simple programming language, users create one or more personas when they begin to participate, specifying what their physical and psychological attributes are, as well as objects, places and environments which from then on can be shared and redefined by the other *inhabitants*.

Immersed in a psychological state of enchantment and realistic proactive creation, the users of virtual environments and communities thus live the experience of feeling themselves transported to an aesthetic environment that is half way between public and private, reality and illusion, verisimilitude and falsehood, present and virtuality, within a negative dialect that can combine the most radical exteriorisation with experiences of the utmost intimacy.

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