EDITORIAL

Remediating Distances

Matteo Treleani
Université Côte d'Azur
EUR CREATES Arts et Humanité, Sic.Lab
matteo.treleani@univ-cotedazur.fr

Francesco Zucconi
Università Iuav di Venezia
Department of Architecture and Arts
francesco.zucconi@iuav.it

According to Walter Benjamin to "bring things spatially and humanly closer" is a social desire which the technical reproduction of art aims to satisfy (2003, p. 255).
At least starting from *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, media can thus be conceived as technical forms capable of modulating temporal and spatial distance.
Some media propose to bridge the divide between two or more remote subjects, while others underline the gap between here and elsewhere. Finally, others still –such as immersive technologies– promise to cancel distances and mediation itself.

>

The obligation of physical and social distancing imposed over the last few months, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has subjected a large number of social, cultural, working and educational practices to digital remediation.

This condition provides an opportunity to reflect analytically and critically on the very notion of 'distance' and its relationship to media and artistic practices.

By proposing *Remediating distances* as the title of this issue of *IMG journal*, we have borrowed the successful term introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) in the field of media studies, associating it with a notion that concerns our relationship with space and time. This project takes shape from the union of these terms and seeks to reflect on the ways in which physical distances are remediated.

Why should we talk about *remediation* of distances and not simply about their *mediation* linked to emergency contingencies? Behind this choice lies the idea of not conceiving the media as something that comes *a posteriori* or subordinated to a pre-established physical and social reality. As previously noted by Marshall McLuhan (1994), in his extended conception of communication technologies, and subsequently pointed out by Bolter and Grusin, the media do not represent or reproduce something immediate that precedes them, but participate in the continuous processes of remediation that characterize social practices: "just as there is nothing prior to the act of mediation, there is also a sense in which all mediation remediates the real. Mediation is the remediation of reality because media themselves are real and because the experience of media is the subject of remediation" (1999, p. 59).

In this sense, to speak of the remediation of distances means to reflect on the relationship that is established between technological tools and the dispositives of proxemics interaction characterizing the practices of everyday life: the architecture of a school, the seats of a cinema, road signs, behavioral norms of a given environment, etc. This process of remediation not only shapes spatial issues but also deeply affects our perception of time. Devices that punctuate the duration of the day model our understanding of time: the clock, the bells, the alternation of day and night, the lunar cycles, etc. From the invention of writing to digital devices, technology has influenced the perception of space and time (Stiegler, 2018). Remediating distances thus means to consider the technical and formal infrastructures that are necessary to modulate the in-between, approaching distant subjects or objects, manipulating movement, and even allowing oneself the illusion of being able to stop, accelerate or reverse the process of an event. The recent industrialization of traces (Jeanneret, 2020) can therefore be seen as a tendency to compress or decompress spatial as well as temporal distances (Treleani, 2017). The tendency to propose virtual reconstructions of archaeological sites, for example, shows the will to be immersed in the past, thus abolishing temporal distances. Digital time machines (Kaplan, 2015) are devices offering immersive anachronistic experiences that bypass distance in its temporal shape.

Following the further developments of Grusin's thought, we encounter a 'radical' conception of mediation, in which this term concerns more than just technologies. In a radical conception, mediation is always at work, in our encounter with others and, beyond us, as a natural process: "all bodies (whether human or

nonhuman) are fundamentally media and life itself is a form of mediation" (2015, p. 132). According to this perspective, the need for physical distancing during the pandemic derives from a simple observation: in a globalized world that is characterized by the hyperstimulation of sensibilities and intersubjective relations, the medium does not coincide exclusively with a technological instrument of communication: any object or surface can be seen as a medium. We are media ourselves, in our ability to contract and spread the virus.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the theoretical question of immunization, already recurrent in philosophical reflection (Esposito, 2011; Sloterdijk, 2011; 2014; 2016), has therefore manifested its multiple links with the media. On closer inspection, even Giorgio Agamben's (2020) stances against political protocols and digital technologies used in the professional and educational field during the pandemic end up confirming how the biological problem of the spread of the virus intertwines with the social and media circulation of subjects and information. If our own bodies can be considered as the medium of the virus (Maiello, 2020), during the phases of greater spread of the pandemic, digital media have performed a function of community glue as well as biological and social immunization (Zucconi, 2020). In this sense, physical distancing and remote communication technologies have constituted a strategy aimed at limiting the circulation of the virus without completely annihilating intersubjective relationships and social space.

If a radical network of mediations is a matter of fact in the analysis of social practices, the pandemic made visible what is at stake when digital devices replace other physical and social processes of mediation. Technical, industrial and economic

structures intervene in our social relations and are strongly criticized. But it is precisely the attention paid to these technical devices that can offer us the opportunity to observe, understand and discuss the norms and practices that we have naturalized. In this sense, through the expression 'remediating distances' we intend to reflect on how the new media reconfigure preexisting communication devices already used to connect or disconnect physical environments, geographic spaces near or far. As mentioned above, the reflection goes so far as to investigate the way the interface of *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, *Skype* or other forms of meeting at a distance reshapes but also represents and recalls the arrangement of in-person meetings.

Summing up, the expression 'remediating distances' can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may be tempting to say that any technological device is a 'remedy': the lack of physical contact –that is, the fact of being in the same room– is achieved through audiovisual interaction, through a digital technology. Therefore in order to make contact possible through a media device, the latter will give us a sense of immediacy by hiding itself. Within this vision, both the live encounter and its technological remediation tend to be naturalized. On the other hand, distance is remediated precisely because it is represented by figures and elements that signify it within the media. The spatial and temporal coordinates, as well as the arrangement of the actors of the initial situation are here explicitly reconfigured according to the technical and sensorial characteristics of the new medium. On one side, thus, we could say that the notion of immediacy, the transparency of the medium, is meant to abolish distance, while on the other side, the presence of the medium reminds it in its new configurations.

The process of remediation of distances is therefore charged with environmental implications. The technologies do not simply connect two or more points on the map, they establish and exploit channels of contact, both material and immaterial; they install stations or at least define positions where the user can make their own media experience with variable forms of sensory involvement, and according to different standards of comfort. As expressed in Gilbert Simondon's thought, each technology enters into a relationship with an *associated milieu* that "mediates the relation between technical, fabricated elements and natural elements, at the heart of which the technical being functions" (2016, p. 57). Media and especially digital media reconfigure the public or private environment in which the spectator or user finds himself or herself when meeting others and the world. In this sense, any attempt to remediate distances seems to coincide with a "relocation" of the experience (Casetti, 2015).

But speaking of environment, it becomes necessary to consider the impact on the Planet of any movement in space, the energy required to run the World Wide Web, and all the technological infrastructure through which we communicate remotely. It is no coincidence that some of the most important contemporary scholars highlighted the multiple links between the Covid-19 phenomenon and climate change (Latour, 2020; Mbembe, 2020). From our point of view, to open a reflection on the forms and techniques of distance management means to deal indirectly with the issue of the Anthropocene: to reflect on the forms of geographical dislocation and media aggregation that characterize the long and very long-term presence of man on Earth.

Long before Covid-19, words from biology and microbiology were used to describe and study the functioning of the media. The term 'viral' has been widely and freely employed as a metaphor to describe the dynamics of the dissemination of information and images on a large scale (Nahon & Hemsley, 2012; Mills, 2012; Sampson, 2012). At the same time, other studies have enriched the fields of media studies and visual studies by reconstructing the history of computer viruses (Parikka, 2007) or investigating the transformations of visual culture as biological processes (Mitchell, 2011).

During 2020, numerous books, journal issues and essays were published to reflect on the social and political aspects of the pandemic and, therefore, on its media and visual implications. Given the impossibility of offering an exhaustive survey, we want to mention the supplement of *Critical Inquiry* focusing on the environmental, political, and economic consequences of the spread of the pandemic, with writings by Lorraine Daston, Catherine Malabou, Slavoj Žižek, N. Katherine Hayles and many others (Scotch, 2020). In the same months, some scholars used the lens of philosophy and social sciences to critically reflect on the biological but also aesthetic character of the pandemic (De Gaetano & Maiello, 2020), while a wide range of disciplinary perspectives investigated the complex relationships between face, mask and screen (Carbone, 2020; Leone, 2020; Lorusso, Marrone, & Jacoviello, 2020; Parikka & Soncul, 2020). Other studies examined, from a technological and social point of view, how the media have operated and are becoming a response to the global crisis (Keidl, Hediger, Melamed, & Somaini, 2020; De Luca & Spalletta, 2020), or analyzed the impact of the pandemic on the theories, forms

and practices of cinema (Baer & Hanich 2020; Barra & Noto 2020), and television (Sala & Scaglioni 2020).

Compared to such studies, the objective of this volume is not simply to analyze the functioning of the media during the pandemic. With the launch of the *Remediating distances*' Call for Papers in summer 2020, we referred to a vast and multifaceted theoretical and methodological framework, inviting the authors to draw inspiration from the pandemic contingency in order to push their gaze towards the future or towards the past. The response was extraordinary. The result is not a monograph on the pandemic but a relaunch of those research projects that, in recent years, have critically reflected on the forms of "real-time communication with a physically remote location" (Manovich, 2001), on the "logistics of perception" (Virilio, 1989), or on the "war at a distance" (Farocki, 2004).

The monographic session of this issue of Img Journal questions the dialectic between 'distance' and 'proximity' in the configurations and reconfigurations made possible by new media from a long-term historical and theoretical perspective. As Carlo Ginzburg (2019) pointed out, within Western culture the term 'distance' takes on both a concrete and a metaphorical meaning and its social, ethical and political implications need, today more than ever, to be investigated. To do so, we asked the various authors to extend the time horizon of the research beyond the limits of the recent discovery and diffusion of the virus to reflect on the mediatic character of architectural, military, artistic, cinematographic, performative, and educational projects that call into question the issue of distance. What emerges is a constellation of reflections that draw on current experience to analyze the ways in which different

forms of media have stimulated the spectator's imagination, leading him to explore places near and far. The overall result is a reflection on the capacity of media to detach and approach, separate and join, screen and reveal.

As in previous issues of the journal and due to the composite nature of the contributions, the index adopts an alphabetical order that leaves the reader the pleasure of choosing his or her own route, perhaps guided by the keywords that accompany each essay. To conclude this editorial, however, we would like to mention a possible path that winds it way through the monographic contributions of *Remediating distances*.

The essays written by Bruno Bachimont and Pietro Montani set the theme of the issue from a philosophical point of view: the former adopts a phenomenological perspective to observe how the technical device modifies our being in the world; drawing inspiration from a neuroscientific experiment, the latter reflects on the importance of technical distancing for the emergence of a meta-operative agency as a key element of the anthropogenesis. A philosophical approach also characterizes the essay written by Cavallari, who observes how the social uses of digital media show that presence is the effect of the organization of several distances.

Through different disciplinary perspectives, a series of papers bring out the infrastructural character of the mediations through which spatial distances are managed and temporal performances are optimized. From architecture to logistics, the effects of the pandemic make visible the mediations underlying daily practices. The mechanism through which Amazon managed its deliveries to customers in the first phase of the pandemic

is an exemplary case study (Salles). The visual elements used to produce physical distancing in railway stations (Chevalier) and the interior architecture of houses, when the barriers between work and home space are broken by the pandemic, also show the emergence of architectural mediations that modulate physical communication in everyday environments (Charitonidou). The infrastructural processes of digital machines thus have to be questioned: Heiko Schmid looks at them through the lens of magic, arguing that the working structure of digital machines can be embedded within the long history of magic conceptions.

The remediation of distances is loaded with geographical and political implications. Nicola Perugini shows how the notion of the human shield is a way to modulate the distance between different actors in war and to legitimize the use of violence. In particular, studying the human shield as a "human screen", it becomes possible to understand how what is usually called a human shield functions simultaneously as a human weapon and a media technology. According to Iain Chambers, distance is an eminently geographical and political fact. The bodies in motion of the migrants highlight the role of the Mediterranean as a medium that can be conceived both as a form of connection and as a barrier. Through a confrontation with artistic production and post-colonial theoretical debate, he invites us to reflect critically on pre-established and presumptively unchangeable cartographies and chronologies. Even the urban spaces of our cities are subject to practices of remediation. In this regard, Paola Puma investigates social distance through the notion of "non-place", proposed by Marc Augé, and reconceives it in an original form in reference to the spaces and times of city life. In her essay,

Karen Pinkus observes some spaces in New York City during Covid-19 and reflects on the pandemic as a form of anticipation of the effects of climate change. The investigation of urban spaces thus becomes a reflection on time; our present tends to coincide with a countdown of which we are impassive spectators. What emerges is the point of view of a media ecology capable of identifying the links between space and time management technologies and the sensitive topic of climate change. Francesco Casetti studies the specific media environments in which we have spent and are still spending these final months of 2020. The mask and the screen are therefore conceived as theoretical objects for a reflection on the mechanisms of creating "existential bubbles" that limit our actions and interactions with others but, at the same time, make us feel safe. Ways of constructing digital environments in which it is possible to meet or, in any case, to arouse and experience effects at a distance is central in a number of essays. Several authors test the distance/proximity dichotomy through a variety of case studies. We encounter an archaeological perspective aimed at describing the formal dispositives through which, in Western culture, distance and proximity have been produced as visual effects (Acquarelli). Emanuele Arielli focuses on a very specific aspect of digital remediation practices and remote interaction: the relationship between exposure and control of one's own image; the possibility of establishing how the other will see me, along with seeing myself being seen by the other; the redetermination of performative affordances of the spaces of communication. The functioning of immersive environments, where distances seem to be denied or reconfigured in the name of immediacy, is analysed using the tools of semiotics (Biggio).

The social and media practice of travel selfies is questioned by Kris Belden-Adams who argues that these photographs are driven by a different relational impulse than traditional travel images. Elena Moskatova reconceives the construction and functioning of media environments in relation to the philosophical question of immunization to which we made explicit reference in the first part of this editorial.

The phenomenological experience of time, the problem of chronologies, and the countdown mechanism are at the center of many articles. Indeed, the remediation of time distances is the explicit focus of two contributions to the volume. Ferdinando Gizzi develops a history and archaeology of the technical representations of the divine. Pietro Conte analyzes the experiences in virtual reality that promise reunions with the dead. The remediation of distance arises here as a continuous desire to use increasingly advanced technologies to approach or cancel the threshold with the hereafter.

Distance learning technologies and practices are expressly analyzed in the essay of Veronesi, Chizzoni, Raineri, Schmalz and Taferner. If the software and interfaces of remote interaction constitute the most explicit case study to investigate the relationship between media and pandemic, the understanding of these forms of communication is further enriched by the different historical and theoretical perspectives that characterize the volume. The archaeological investigation of the technical and formal dispositive through which people have interacted at a distance over time, allows us to reflect on the quality of mediations in contemporary educational and professional practices.

For this issue, we are also pleased to welcome two artistic projects. Farah Saleh approaches physical distance with an interactive dance video project featuring eleven Palestinian performers, some living in the diaspora, others in Palestine. This project underlines that distance is always a political issue. The performance re-conceives and re-appropriates the digital device as a tool for inclusion that challenges military and political barriers. Elsa Gomis interprets the topic of distance with a video installation that compares two anachronistic temporalities: through the reuse of family footage, she illustrates the feeling of grief and attempts to remediate the distance between present and past, the living and the dead. With the aim of elaborating this distance, she films herself watching images of her grandmother shot at the beginning of the 1960s. While watching these images, she mimics a connection that no longer exists, and creates a new relationship that can only be found now through fiction. The papers published in the following pages identify a theoretical and practical legacy of the terrible historical phase that we are facing in the problematic management of distances. The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary character of the contributions, as well as the ethical and political positions that emerge in the essays, do nothing but restore the abstract and concrete, in a certain sense binding, character of the issue. The territories, temporalities and experiences investigated by the authors show how physical and social distances are linked to a series of practices, devices and norms capable of structuring spaces, times and forms of life. Our impression is that this kind of approach is the most suitable to continue to reflect on distances as mediation and therefore on the forms of remediating distances.

References

Agamben, G. (2020). *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*. Macerata, IT: Quodlibet.

Baer, N., & Hanich, J. (Eds.) (2020). Coronavirus and Cinematic Experience. In *Media Res: A Media Commons Project*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/coronavirus-and-cinematic-experience.

Barra L., & Noto, P. (2020). Schermi difficili. Industria ed esperienza cinematografica durante e dopo il lockdown. *Rivista "il Mulino"*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS_ITEM:5312.

Benjamin, W. (2003). *Selected Writings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bolter, J.-D., & Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Carbone, M. (2020). Vi facciamo vedere noi (chi siamo). Gli schermi nella pandemia. In R. De De Gaetano, R., & Maiello, A. (Eds.) *Virale. Il presente al tempo della pandemia*, Cosenza, IT: Pellegrini.

De Luca, V., & Spalletta, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Pandemie mediali. Narrazioni, socializzazioni e contaminazioni del mediavirus*. Roma, IT: Aracne.

Esposito, R. (2011). *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life*. Cambridge and London, UK: Polity.

Farocki, H. (2004). Phantom images. *Public*, 29, 12-22

Ginzburg, C. (2019). *Occhiacci di legno. Dieci riflessioni sulla distanza*. Macerata, IT: Quodlibet.

Grusin, R. (2015). Radical mediation. *Critical Inquiry*, 42(1), 124-148.

Jeanneret, Y. (2020). *The Trace Factory*. London, UK: Wiley.

Keidl, P.D., Hediger, V., Melamed, L., Somaini, A. (Eds.) (2020). *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*. Lüneburg, DE: Meson Press.

Kaplan, F. (2015). The Venice Time Machine. In *Proceedings of the 2015 ACM Symposium on Document Engineering* (pp. 1-73). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery.

Lorusso, A.M., Marrone, G., Jacoviello, S. (Eds.) (2020), Diario semiotico sul Coronavirus. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from http://www.ec-aiss.it/includes/tng/pub/tNG_download4.php?KT_download1=497b31a7b7d55cc76e90c869ef23defc

Latour, B. (2020). Is This a Dress Rehearsal? The University of Chicago Press Journals. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/711428.

Leone, M.(Ed.). (2020). *Volti virali*. Turin, IT: Facets Digital Press.

Maiello, A. (2020) Viralità postmediale. Quando il medium (del virus) siamo noi. In R. De Gaetano, & A. Maiello (Eds.). *Virale. Il presente al tempo della pandemia*, Cosenza, IT: Pellegrini.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Mbembe, A. (2020). The Universal Right to Breathe. *The University of Chicago Press Journals*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/711437.

McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Mills, A. J. (2012). Virality in social media: the SPIN framework. *Journal of public affairs*, *12*(2), 162-169.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2011). *Cloning terror: The war of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nahon, K., & Hemsley, J. (2013). *Going viral*. Cambridge and London, UK: Polity.

Parikka, J. (2007). *Digital contagions: A media archaeology of computer viruses*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Parikka, J., & Soncul, Y. (2020). *Masks: The Face Between Bodies and Networks*. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from https://www.c21uwm.com/2020/05/14/masks-the-face-between-bodies-and-networks/

Sala, M., & Scaglioni, M. (2020). *L'altro virus. Comunicazione e disinformazione al tempo del Covid-19*. Milan, IT: Vita & Pensiero.

Sampson, T. D. (2012). *Virality: Contagion theory in the age of networks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Scotch, H. (Ed.). (2020). Posts from the Pandemics. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ci/2021/47/S2.

Simondon, G. (2016). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.

Sloterdijk, P. (2011). *Bubbles. Spheres I: Microspherology*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *Globe. Spheres II: Macrospherology*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Sloterdijk, P. (2016). *Foams. Spheres III: Plural Sphereology*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext (e).

Stiegler, B. (2018). *La technique et le temps*. Paris, FR: Fayard.

Treleani, M. (2014). *Mémoires audiovisuelles*. Montréal, CA: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Virilio, P. (1989). *War and cinema: The logistics of perception*. New York, NY: Verso.

Zucconi, F. (2020). Mediazione e immunizzazione. *Studi culturali*, *17*(2), 221–232.