

EDITORIAL

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The *Gartner Hype Cycle* describes the typical trajectory of emerging technologies and predicts that, after the Peak of Inflated Expectations, when interest and excitement for a technology are at their highest levels, a phase of disillusionment will follow, when expectations are not met and interest in the technology decreases. Although at this moment the Metaverse-related technologies are at the point where they are ready to roll down, the intention of this issue of the journal is not supporting the defeatist thesis that technologies related to metaverse and to virtual and mixed realities have already reached the apex of their creative potential. However, it is true that in the very last few years—compared to the ‘hype’ of even just three years ago—the overall interest >

(both academic and cultural industry investment) has shifted decisively toward artificial intelligence and its many areas of application.

Then again, this is typical about the diffusion phase of any fledgling technology: at the moment of its creation and large-scale adoption, there is a generalized confidence in it, the hope that the new medium can contribute to the improvement of human life on this planet or amplify its capabilities. So, it was with television technology (Marshall McLuhan in 1960s and 1970s), so it has been in more recent times with Internet (Manuel Castells in 1990s). Same fate, we might say, concerned the technology of the metaverse. Moreover, the demise of utopian dimension always coincides, in each of these examples, with the advent of multinational capital that imposes its rules on the new invention in order to convert it exclusively into profit and in instrument of social control.

The critical thinking offered in this issue of the journal is intended to shake off the triumphalist naiveté that the metaverse expressed, in order to offer a more effective vision of the phenomenon and its experimental implications in creative languages. Often art is able to perceive not only the aesthetic and expressive opportunities, but above all the problematic implications and paradoxes concerning the relationship between technology and society. The metaverse spread widely among the various expressive sectors, both in arts and in entertainment and cultural industries. Even in these areas, the initial enthusiasm generated paradoxes as well as profound disappointments due to the disruption in the field of creative research.

With the advent of the fledgling technology of the metaverse, the artist was tasked with probing the changes it would and was making in everyday life and in the various dimensions of human experience. In fact, only the artist, according to McLuhan's theory, is able to consciously apprehend the change, the effects that run underground in the individual and collective dimensions. Art becomes 'anti-environment' because it embraces the technological and cultural challenge before it transforms men and society. 'Anti' precisely because art questions the present world, problematizes it, with a view to future change. Its prophetic capacity makes the artist the man of 'integral awareness' the only one who grasps the implications of his time. This is the reason why are included in this issue two 'artist's contributions' as first-person accounts of whom adopted the metaverse as an expressive strategy some years ago, before it became 'mainstream' through the imposition of digital capitalism. If the breaking point in the process of renewal of the artistic form is always determined by the advent of a new medium (artistic or non-artistic), precisely with the spread of metaverse we can argue that it becomes even more evident that 'the medium is the message': the specific content is nothing more than a kind of 'meatball for the watchdog' (watchdog is represented by our subconscious mind). An element that serves to distract the viewer by convincing him or her that the important part is the one that is revealed to his or her vision and consciousness, when in fact something much deeper and decisive is acting or has already acted by redefining his or her sensibility.

The relationship between medium and message is re-proposed by McLuhan in the dichotomy of 'figure' and 'ground': the figure is the content on which Western culture has always fixed its attention, perceived as the essential protagonist, while the ground is the environment on which the figures are placed. In the perpetuated dominance of the left hemisphere, the background has always been subordinate to happenings and content. The background is at once both that which acts decisively in the rearrangement of the anthropological horizon and the concrete and tangible emanation of the upheavals due to the advent of a new technology.

When a given ground becomes content and figure, becoming clear to rational analysis, then we are witnessing the entrenchment of a new ground, but configurations and characterizations still elude us: this is exactly what happened in recent times through the rhetoric about metaverse, an enthusiasm that has swelled out of all proportion in a 'bubble' of expectations and ambitions that then, however, soon deflated. This is precisely because, even with the metaverse, the focus was on the 'figure' and not on the 'ground': the entertainment, commercial, playfulness principle and not the anthropological implications that such technology expresses and that the artists involved know well. Understanding the world and the way it is transformed by media dynamics is possible only focusing precisely on the ground by bringing it to level of awareness, thus coming to perceive our own modes of perception. In this process, the only one able to intuit and understand a ground before it becomes a figure is precisely

the artist as creative spirit: in fact, when an old ground is displaced by the content, it finally appears in our eyes as a figure. At the same time, a new nostalgia is born, and the artist's task is to report on the nature of the background by analyzing the forms of sensibility triggered by each new ground, or cultural mode, long before man has the suspicion that anything has changed. Even when grappling with media revolutions such as the spread of the metaverse and 'extended reality' formulas, art must renew itself to redefine its status and reestablish its value as a manifestation of sensibility, a way of 'feeling,' a reflection on how one is and how one experiences the world.

As we have argued, in McLuhan's theory the artist is the individual with integral awareness, capable of grounding the anti-environment in the dynamics of renewal of existing world. The question we should be able to ask is what typology of art could serve today to probe and reveal the hidden dimensions of the world dominated by artificial intelligences and algorithms. The answer is electronic image or digital technology, or even art forms such as Net art that exploit Web technology? For McLuhan, the real medium is not the tool used, but the mode of artistic expression, the stylistic technique 'full of theory'. The critical and conceptual significance of the metaverse must be recovered in its meta-textual dimension, in its ability to reflect on the typical dynamics of the current mass media sphere: 'form as medium' means returning to reflect on the medium precisely as message embodied. If the medium is a prosthesis that determines physiological functions and augments as an extension our anatomical characterizations, this means that our attention

to the methodology of analyzing the phenomena must be directed to 'how' a product is made, distributed and disseminated – because by focusing on the 'figure' we are able to grasp and understand the 'ground'.

About metaverse, often device of creation, medium of the work and even conceptual and thematic content coincide: it is a creative horizon that goes far beyond the concept of 'image'. As philosopher Martin Heidegger argued already in the early 20th century, image implies a clear separation between a subject and an object placed before it. Indeed, making 'an image of the world' means to impose control over the world itself. But when the image principle is overcome thanks to immersive environments, then two positions arise: the more progressive one, which frames such an overcoming of the dichotomy between subject and object as a positive emancipation, whereby the subject flows into the object and vice versa (after all, what hermeneutics has always advocated and what evidently happens with architecture and design); the more regressive one, which instead sees in the metaverse nothing more than an absolute entrenchment of the principle of the image of the world, since the viewer represents a rejection of the external world and a radical subjectification of the exteriority itself.

As an expression of the postmodern spirit of algorithmic-digital culture, we are probably going to a new phase of experimentation, where new proposals will be affirmed to recover the original impulse of the *liveness* of exclusivity of the event. The metaverse is in fact a decisive episode of the user's 'active participation' in an environment (not an image) that he himself contributes to

build because it develops in *real time*. As Byung-Chul Han argued, it's a form to neutralize any otherness and to get 'everything and immediately' without waste or expectations. Creating a world outside the subject's reach, so that he can assert his control. Reconstructing the story of *liveness* in an approximate way, we could say that in a primitive and original phase, without the aid of the means of reproduction and reproducing media, the only real and pure *liveness* was the live show, authentic 'event' not replicable. In this first phase, *liveness* is the only condition of possibility of use of performative and musical materials. The purest and absolute form of *liveness* is that of the theatrical *hic et nunc*, which is repeated on the occasion of live sets and concerts that we define, in fact, 'live'.

By the 2000s, there are several surrogates for liveness. It is no coincidence that the principle of *liveness* has moved and updated in contemporary mass media horizon: the same principle characterizes the effectiveness of digital communication of influencers when they adopt tools such as *direct stories*. The metaverse has been configured in recent years as the most effective horizon of the universe of mass culture with excellent results, but it is also true that the experimental value of this technology has been exhausted in a short time, leaving space to a dimension often reduced to the playful field.

In this operating framework, the current critical debate about the Metaverse as a new cultural, expressive, and existential horizon highlights all of the ambitions and concerns that this technology and its developers have for the future.

This issue of the journal focused on the Metaverse aims to offer a broader and different perspective on the topic. The dilemma mentioned in the title is intended to relate different theoretical visions, research experiences and approaches to scientific inquiry that are united by a rejection of the uncritical acceptance of the new technological frontier. Rather than recognizing this frontier as something that can only be 'suffered,' the authors, from their own specific field of expertise, offered their own contribution to understanding its opportunities, but also its limitations. If the metaverse is understood as an aesthetic strategy able to complicate and open the world, and not to solve, facilitate and close it, then in the coming years we could still witness the 'dilemma' referred to here: if the dilemma were to be solved, then it would mean that technology no longer 'makes a problem', it would be either totally assimilated uncritically, or even it would be disappeared and replaced by other inventions.

Starting from these assumptions, the contributions gathered from the call for papers explore various emerging perspectives.

In the first keynote essay, the An-Icon Team, headed by Andrea Pinotti, outlines some of their key research directions. It explores a variety of topics that blend archaeological, historical, cultural, architectural, educational, and therapeutic viewpoints to delve into immersive and emersive technologies such as VR and AR. The discussion extends to a media-archaeological examination of VR, the interaction between VR and urban space design, the new capabilities of technological telepresence for studying

digital memory, and the use of immersive technologies in therapeutic and educational settings.

The keynote by Simone Arcagni is an excerpt from his book entitled *La zona oscura, filosofia del metaverso: la logica culturale della società algoritmica*. It provides a comprehensive retrospective on the technological conditions that have shaped the metaverse as we know it today, or more precisely, the multiverse—a situation in which multiple proprietary metaverses coexist, each with its own rules and specifications. From a sociocultural perspective, he emphasizes how the metaverse emerges as an ideological framework developed within immersive technologies, placing individuals in a communication space primarily defined by elements such as immersion, engagement, collaboration, and interaction.

Cultural heritage is the focal point for Fabrizio Banfi, Davide Mezzino, Nicola Dell’Aquila, and Federico Taverni. They specifically investigate how virtual reality, whether image-based or model-based, can facilitate new methods of interaction and immersion, offering a deeper understanding of cultural contexts. Their research assesses the potential of these technologies to enhance visitor experiences and promote knowledge sharing.

In her essay, Pia Davico describes the use of videomapping to enhance cultural events by blending reality and imagination. Two parallel events, an exhibition on grotesques and a magic festival, were interconnected and enriched through videomapping, creating a spectacle that merges the architecture of the place with imaginary worlds. This approach transformed the perception of the spaces,

providing an immersive experience that transcends the boundaries of reality to venture into a space suspended between reality and fiction.

Romano Fistola and Ida Zingariello, noting the growing interest from the business sector in the metaverse, highlight its increasing importance and the potential impact it could have on society, with a particular focus on urban planning. They explore whether technology simply replicates cities or transcends them, advocating for technology that enriches human spaces instead of merely duplicating them.

Margherita Fontana establishes a connection between the architectural form of bunkers and the evolving narratives of the metaverse. This study investigates various bunkers and subterranean homes within both institutional frameworks and subversive cultural settings, highlighting the bunkers' innate virtual qualities as symbols of possibility and endurance. She also explores how the concealed spaces of bunkers and the conceptual sphere of the metaverse share a common theme of escapism, offering a viable means of survival amidst global threats, be they nuclear, martial, or ecological.

Marco Proietti and Fabio Zollo explore the perception of space in the Metaverse, highlighting the importance of 'presence' and applying Marc Augé's concepts of 'places' and 'non-places' to virtual architecture. They critique the creation of virtual 'non-places' that erode the sense of community and advocate against 'skeuomorphism,' proposing new graphic codes for meaningful virtual environments.

Maurizio Unali and Giovanni Caffio present a study that features an interactive atlas of the metaverse in architecture

and design, spanning from 1980 to 2023. Designed as an online conceptual map, this atlas catalogs the main ideas of 'virtual living' along with key conceptual and visual references. It explores the evolution of the metaverse through applications in social media, virtual worlds, video games, and beyond, including the use of artificial intelligence and NFTs.

In conclusion, as mentioned above, two contributions are deliberately written in the first person to emphasize the authorial work of two artists who have conducted experiments from within their own perspective. Specifically, Marco Cadioli, through his avatar, introduces us to in-game photography as an artistic and cognitive tool to document the birth and development of the metaverse, starting from its most primitive forms such as Second Life. Chiara Passa, also speaking in the first person, presents some of her latest works, reminding us how her artistic research has consistently evolved through virtual platforms and immersive technologies, disregarding conceptual obsolescence and temporary hype.