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“From Mimesis to Action. A Change of Paradigm in the Digital Virtuality”

In this paper we would like to address the relationship between virtual and digital technologies, trying to understand in a conceptual sense the evolution of contemporary media.

A fundamental premise for our argumentation is that the main difficulty in thinking of virtuality resides in establishing its relationship with ontology and then with technology. In the history of the Western thought we generally find two different paradigms starting from which to think virtuality. The first one takes its roots in the aristotelian realism (see, for instance, Maldonado), for which reality corresponds to an ever-determined physis; so, virtuality is nothing but a non-actualized dynamis, close to a mimes not able to become actual (this is, meaningfully, the aristotelian definition of mythos too). The second paradigm is Bergson’s one (1896, preempted by G. Tarde), recovered especially by Deleuze (1966, 1968 and, in connection with Serres, by Lèvy, 1997; but implictly also Q. Meillassoux 's speculative realism, 2006): for them, virtuality is a part of a non-pre-determined reality and it has an ontological status.

These two paradigms have consequences on the way in which we think of technology and, from here, of the digital. ‘Aristotelians’ do not think that téchne has a true ontogenetic capability: it essentially is a passive extension of the 'real' that produces a second-level world of artifacts, unable to threaten an ontologically stable nature; ‘bergsonians’ (included Simondon), instead, think of determined reality as a process of production that realizes its products without encompassing the totality of the being, and this allows us to understand technology as an internal modulation of ontogenesis. Following this pattern, the Aristotelian paradigm understands virtuality as always out of the ‘first’ reality, and it links it to the possibility of realize, with technology, a fictional, never-ontological world. Conversely, the 'bergsonian' paradigm (again, Deleuze starts from Simondon, 1958, 1995 too) allows technology and representation (this starting from Bergson itself, 1896) to be considered as ontogenetic.

For many centuries, virtuality has been though within the 'aristotelian' paradigm, understanding it as fictional and theatral (the Morton Heiling`s "Experience Theatre", 1957); the Baroque culture has taken to the extreme this negative reality of illusion, theorizing the coincidence between machine, theatre and reality. The first part of the history of digital virtuality - especially the most of the VR projects from the '60 to the '90s, like Sensorama, Aspen Movie Map, Active Worlds, Second Life - are characterized by this fictional form, and so by the aim of building a virtual-as-fictional reality. Their digital virtuality is, for this reason, essentially interface-based, neglecting the possibility of thinking the digital in a 'bergsonian' way, that is through mimesis as an action.

Starting from the early 2000s, yet, this prominent paradigm started renforcing about videogaming experience, but also collapsing regarding everyday Information Technology, leaving room to the second one as well as to a form of cybernetic digitality in which virtuality has the nature of a non-present agent. The most of the current digital technologies do not create a fictional-technological theatres: they constantly inter-act in actual reality, extending spaces, functions, memory, perceptions, etc. Examples of this tendence are biomedical web-interfaced prostheses, digital maps, the most of social networks, and especially the internet of things. The main activity of these technologies consists in a non-present action that virtually expands the ontology of a physical object, de-actualizing actual things and then virtualizing them in the 'bergsonian' sense.

The reason of this ontological shifting is to be find, for us, in the form of automation based on digital tracking, that makes the fictional paradigm unable to really understand the technological action. Digital traces, indeed, definetely breaks the offline-online / active-passive distinction. For istance, they allow to an algorythm to individuate and follow any physical object in space, being both active and virtually present in a place even if it is not really present. Computer's action is, then, "real and ideal, but not present", as Deleuze defines Bergson's virtual, and, from the perspective of an ontology of action, this leads us to think of physical object as an always-extensible entity, without an actual determinable limit. Digital technology, hence, does not simply enhance the given nature of the object; it rather undefinetly expands its physical actuality depending on infinite variables, replicating and importing the complexity of the external world on the digital and reflecting it on the digitally controlled object. Biological and non-biological things, for istance, can be controlled from distance by an algorhytm that considers any event in a city and then modulates the behaviour of the 'extended' objects. Social networks can dinamically change their communication architecture according to a natural agent, and so on.

The non-passive role of nowadays automation asks us to think of reality following a flexible ontology whose the virtual (through technology) is always a part. As a consequence of this active virtualization, indeed, the actuality of a thing is continuosly extended not by fiction but rather by an absent actor, revealing that its ontology originally was not a static reality but a dynamic network of interactions. This network is, yet, composed by natural and artificial actors on the same level, as Latour (especially 1991) claimed. Starting from the 'bergsonian' perspective it will be evident that automatizing technology's action is converting representative media in apparatuses able to fragment ontology in a swarm of open regional ontologies. This tendence gives to information an ontological status, as Floridi (2011, 2014) recently remarked.