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a cura di Massimo Leone

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Technology, the Imaginary, and the Transfer of Experience: Between the Market and Social Networks

KRISTIAN BANKOV*

Italian title: *Tecnologia, immaginario e trasferimento di esperienza: tra il mercato e i social networks*.

Abstract: In this paper first I examine a tendency in the design of the screens — their dematerialization and extraordinary proliferation — with important semiotic implications. The inquiry in the first part is mostly concerned with the driving forces of this process coming from the market and the advent of the so called 'experience economy'. The conclusions of the first part are that most probably the evolution of the screen will bring new media to provide the possibility of transfer the whole perceptual picture and, thus, getting closer and closer to the transfer of the integral experience. To illustrate this reflection, unusual for the semiotic inquiry, I use some examples from sci–fi movies such as *Total Recall* (1990), *Strange Days* (1995), *Open Your Eyes* (1997), *Matrix* (1999), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), *Avatar* (2009), *Surrogates* (2009), and *Inception* (2010). Semiotics at the present state of the art is efficient with communication, realized through 'lazy texts', i.e., texts as lazy machines (Eco), which require enunciative strategies for the simulation of the reality effect and an active interpreter with a system of expectations, shaped by his/her textual competence. But when communication starts to be dominated by transfers of 'slices' of experienced or imagined reality, then most likely the mechanisms of signification and interpretation will also change, and even the paradigms that have placed signification and interpretation at the core of the semiotic inquiry will also mutate. The conclusions of the paper foresee the necessity for semiotic training to be more open to other disciplines, fieldwork, and laboratories — from the great schools of anthropology (Mauss, Lévi–Strauss), ethnography, and qualitative research to the laboratories of cognitive sciences and the last advancements in 'clickstream' measurements of internet users' behavior.

Key–words: semiotics of experience; experience economy; transfer of experience; visual and audio technology; sci–fi.

The ideas I present here include contributions from two different projects. The first entailed my participation in the colloquium on 'I

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territori della previsione' ['The Territories of Prevision'], organized by CIRCe in December 2009. The second involved my participation in another symposium organized by CIRCe [Inter–departmental Center of Research on Communication, University of Torino] in December 2010: 'Immaginari. Prospettive disciplinari' ['Imaginaries: Disciplinaries perspectives']. The most important part of this paper — the conclusions about future challenges for semiotics and the evolution of its methods — are a synthesis of the two presentations, which have never been published thus far.

1. The future of the screen.

At the colloquium on prevision, my hypothesis was related to the future of the screen. I was reflecting on the intensive technological advancement in means of communication and the central role that the screen was assuming. In fact, the original idea was not mine, but Ugo Volli's, outlined in his essay "The Screen: 'General Equivalent' of Contemporary Art" (Volli 2008). This great insight by Professor Volli inspired both my presentations. The Italian philosopher's main idea is that the screen, as a neutral semiotic mechanism, gradually, over the course of the last century, started to dominate all forms of communication and even social interaction in general. This process makes the screen, as a 'meta–means of communication', far more representative of contemporary art (its general equivalent) than some commonplace definitions of it as 'the laboratory of language experimentation' or 'the predominance of the signifier'. The screen is seen more as a function rather than as an object, and the author very convincingly shows how this function has turned out to be the gravitational force for major technological innovations in communication instruments — when originally invented, the screen was a white cloth or any white surface, then it improved with color cinema, then television and x–rays visualization technology were invented, then the computer screen, flat screens, touch screens, etc. Nothing so relevant for artistic expression could possibly be found inside the art environment, nothing so crucially related to the main trends in the development of social interaction as the evolution of the screen.

One of Ugo Volli's major arguments about the success of the screen during the whole twentieth century concerns its role in the representation of movement. Before the invention of cinema, this was

precisely the major problem for art — the representation of movement. Here Volli refers to the fundamental work by Ruggero Pierantoni, *Forma Fluens* (Pierantoni 1986). The history of art (but not only) could be seen as a struggle and an ingenious attempt to overcome the representative limitation of traditional expressive forms:

> The screen deeply modifies those limits. It is as isochronous as music, but is situated in space and above all allows the constitution of a virtual narrative of abstract spaces through all the techniques of representation accumulated during the millennia of figurative culture. Moreover, the screen allows new techniques thanks to its own characteristics and the technology of devices for projection (for instance, all the editing techniques).
>
> (Volli 2008: p. 266)

The screen, after all, becomes the key to a new, revolutionary phase in the representation of narrative, as its *reality effect* is beyond comparison. Already at its first public projection, the cinema screen provoked an astonishing credibility effect. The subsequent phases of the development of screen technology increased the reality effect with 'real time' transmissions of television, with the interactivity of the computer screen, and with the immediate visual manipulation of the touch screen.

My contribution to the colloquium on 'prevision' started where Volli's article concluded. In line with his thoughts, I tried to outline the future of the screen. It is obvious that the screen's role in representation and communication is growing and that new technological solutions only increase the efficacy of its semiotic function. My purpose was to complete the picture with some observations on *the role of the market* in the spectacular success of the screen during the last century. Although mentioned, this aspect was left in the background of Volli's essay and I have found at least three important points to add about it.

1) A general trend in all consumer goods during the last decades is the so–called *dematerialization* of demand (Semprini 1995: 13 et seq.). The symbolic meaning of goods is increasing through the growing importance of brands, at the expense of their material dimensions. Looking at the screen as a commercial product, this dematerializing tendency is striking, to the point that for some products even the word 'screen' is already questionable (for instance, the new generation of portable multimedia projectors). This tendency goes hand in hand with the increasing reality effect of the representative function. Ad-

vertising attacks us from all sides with promises of full HD resolution TV sets, with better and better technologies for realistic color reproduction, even with 3D screens on laptops and 'retina view' Smartphones. The dematerialization of the screen and its imagery perfection brings the communication closer to a simulation of direct human perception. And not only is visual perception at stake; the same development can be observed in audio simulation. In my opinion, this turns out to be a tendency in which the myth of 'total cinema' (Bazin) is transforming from full audio–visual representation towards a *perceptual simulation of the integral experience*. This observation leads me to extend Volli and Pierantoni's conclusion that "the movement has been one of the constant problems of work on images and the art in particular, from the Neolithic origins until today" (Volli 2008, p. 265). Once the representation of movement is technologically achieved, the screen's semiotic function with respect to the 'reality effect' does not stop evolving. The driving force in art for millennia might have been the struggle with the representation of movement, but not as an ultimate goal. According to the perspective I am suggesting, this was only the first (or the second, after the discovery of the perspective) stop. *The new 'total cinema' would be the as–of–yet unachieved technology that substitutes the spectator's entire perceptual picture (integral experience).*[1] The screen might disappear as an object, but the semiotic revolution provoked by its function will still drive the evolution of communicative technologies for a long time to come.

2) A second point in support of the perspective I am suggesting comes from a deep analysis of the New Economy. Two of the influential labels I am relying on are 'the experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and 'the age of access' (Rifkin 2000). These two prophetic visions of the economy of the twenty–first century do not directly reflect on the myth of 'total cinema'; however, their interpretations of these trends converge perfectly with the hypothesis in point one above.

[1] Here and from now on I use '"experience"' in the way suggested by Volli (2007, p. 26) after a detailed examination of the history of the notion; namely, it is what the German word '*"Erlebnis*"' refers to — living and lived experience. Eugeni (2010, p. 25), following the same choice, proposes this definition: ""Course of events of consciousness that takes place starting from a concrete and vivid collocation of the subject inside a world"".

Pine and Gilmore elaborate their theory in order to explain what companies must do to gain an advantage in an over–competitive market. Just making goods and delivering services is not enough to satisfy the contemporary consumer's high level of expectation. Even the concept of consumer/customer is obsolete. Of course, the supply of goods and services remains the companies' main activity, but the organization of that supply is metaphorically defined by the authors as "*staging experiences*" (Pine and Gilmore 1998: p. 98). Following the pioneering company in the experience economy — *Disney* —, many leading companies in sectors even far from entertainment have started considering their clients as *guests* (ibidem, p. 99). The well–organized company creates a long–lasting relation with its clients, based on the fact that each occasion of the use of their products and services is organized as a memorable experience. The authors call this design of experience the "next stage of economic value" and give numerous examples of the ongoing transformation even in business–to–business marketing. Coffee was a commodity during the period of its discovery and natural use. After it became first an object of trade and later one of industrial packaging and organized sale, it became a good. After the appearance of special places where the good was elaborated and offered ready–to–drink, coffee became a service. Now vanguard companies such as Lavazza are exploring the next stage of economic value with the creation of special places where guests can find "a unique experience offered by Italian Coffee".[2] *Expression* is a chain of 'stages' where the coffee performance directed by Lavazza is played out in a unique scenography of Italian design, 'a place where consumers can *experience* Lavazza's brand values, where genuine flavours meet creativity and design'.

Pine and Gilmore summarize their notions in a table (ibidem, p. 98) (Fig. 1).

Jeremy Rifkin goes further in his analysis, one of his goals being to reveal the economic principles behind "the new culture of hypercapitalism, where the all of life is a paid–for experience". Here the principles of the 'experience economy' are extended to their deepest socio–cultural consequences. More than any other of the works cited, this one relies on statistical data and reveals the success of this trend. Already in the late nineties "the top fifth of the world's population

[2] www.lavazza.com/corporate/en/news/Espression_Corea.html

Economic offering	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experience
Economy	Agrarian	Industrial	Service	Experience
Economic function	Extract	Make	Deliver	Stage
Nature of offering	Fungible	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable
Key attribute	Natural	Standardized	Customized	Personal
Method of supply	Stored in bulk	Inventoried after production	Delivered on demand	Revealed over a duration
Seller	Trader	Manufacturer	Provider	Stager
Buyer	Market	User	Client	Guest
Factors of demand	Characteristics	Features	Benefits	Sensations

Figure 1. Table of economic distinctions.

spends almost as much of its income accessing cultural experiences as on buying manufactured goods and basic services" (Rifkin 2000, p. 7). The major resource of the 'network economy' is the lived experience of the individuals involved in it; the commercial sphere remains the primary mediator of human life (ibidem, p. 10). But this resource is not subject to commercialization through property transfer. The key notion of Rifkin's vision is *access*, which represents a turning point in understanding the transition from industrial and service–oriented capitalism to hypercapitalism. New communication technologies have provided the infrastructure for the access economy and it goes without saying that the screen and its derivatives play a central role in it — as the most direct means to transfer experience, with the possibility for selling access to it.

Reading Rifkin's last major work, *The Empathic Civilization* (2009), we find the hypothesis that it is not the advent of digital technology that caused the culture of hypercapitalism, but on the contrary, the natural fulfillment of a basic human predisposition, empathy, found its optimal environment in it. This view is coextensive with Pierantoni's view on the evolution of the representation of movement. The fulfillment of the representation of movement is a fundamental step towards the possibility for people to share their lives from the in-

side. Art before cinema was a powerful means for that, but it was still conditioned by the mediation of artificial languages and expressive forms. The invention of cinema opened the way for exponential development in communication and almost extinguished the previous, culturally determined boundaries between artistic forms and information media. Our drive for empathy channels all existing expressive forms into global social networks such as Facebook and pushes the market towards better and better technological solutions for the high–fidelity transfer of experience. *Experience design*[3] is becoming complementary to any successful participation in the global market. The drive for empathy is not the motivation for doing business, but it has unleashed an infinite area of demand for paid and unpaid access to the experience of others. Millions of creative people are working day and night to invent new forms of this transfer — infinitely more than the artists today and in any previous epoch. We can only imagine how many people are currently involved in the creation of communication technology and software to fit our habits and lifestyles; in the creation of smartphone applications for any possible occasion and situation; how many invent Facebook applications, providing creative means of self expression; how many work in the virtual reality business, special effects, and new generation of immersive video games; how many work in the infinite varieties of reality TV shows, etc. The relevance of such a variety of businesses within the experience economy and its coming to fruition through paid access is so large that Rifkin speaks of the rise of the *Play ethos*, which has replaced the Work ethos of the industrial age (Rifkin 2000, p. 260). Coming back to the screen, but most of all to its semiotic function in terms of the 'reality effect', we must consider its future in this more generalized context, in which the distinction between direct and indirect worlds (Eugeni 2010: p. 48 et seq.) blurs into a dialectical interdependence. A new notion of reality emerges:

> The quickening connection of the central nervous system of every human being to every other human being on Earth, via the Internet and other new communications technologies, is propelling us into a global space and a new simultaneous field of time.
>
> (Rifkin 2009, p. 537)

[3] Experience design (XD) is the practice of designing products, processes, services, events, and environments with a focus placed on the quality of the user experience and on culturally relevant solutions, with less emphasis placed on increasing and improving the functionality of the design (Diller, Shedroff, and Rhea 2006).

This futuristic vision brings us to the third point.

> LENNY: Look, I want you to know what we're talking about here. This isn't like TV only better. This is life. It's a piece of somebody's life. Pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex. You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it… feeling it.
>
> (Cameron & Cocks 1993)

3) A movie, written in 1993 and made in 1996, is entirely based on the idea that in 1999 there will be a technology that allows the recording and transfer of 30 minutes of someone's integral lived experience to someone else. In the movie, this was an illegal business and people were paying to buy mini–discs with such recordings, while others were paid to sell recordings of their sexual, criminal, and other extreme experiences. When I was reading *The Age of Access* for the first time, I was struck by how the movie was a kind of concrete visualization of the extreme consequences of Rifkin's thesis. Using evidence from a science fiction movie for an academic paper that does not bear on sci–fi movies is usually not a good idea, but in the context of a conference on 'prevision' I found it very useful. In fact, *my third point is that we can observe a tendency, a huge trend in science fiction films, to construct their plots on some variation of the new myth of 'total cinema' — the transfer of integral experience —*, *which is technologically explained and sometimes commercially justified.* This trend converges with my previous points and offers many ideas on how 'the post–screen' age is present in the collective imaginary and what kind of challenges to semiotic theory might derive from it.

To be more exact, we may find many representations in cinema — from its early periods until now — of mind and body exchanges as well as of the whole spectrum of identity paradoxes — someone wakes up and finds out that s/he is someone else, or that s/he has changed gender, body, age, very often species (a cockroach, for example), or has even become John Malkovich. Furthermore, in these cases there is transfer of experience from some point of view — someone lives someone's else life — but usually it is due to miraculous events. The important trend I am referring to has its predecessors in the development of the myth of Virtual Reality (VR). As early as 1935, the young American writer Stanley G. Weinbaum offered a utopian vision of special goggles that allowed the spectator to follow and even participate in a fictional story using the full range of her/his senses. Technologically, the first symptoms of VR appeared in 1929

with the first mechanical flight simulator (Sherman and Craig 2003, p. 24). The real VR visionary was Morton Heilig, who developed the *Sensorama* in the fifties — the first mechanical (!) proposal for a technological solution to the new 'total cinema myth'. The most important predecessor is the famous Star Trek Holodeck. But only in the late eighties and early nineties did three factors converge: 1) screenwriters started introducing VR in a more 'scientific' way; 2) some technological advancements transformed VR from the sphere of experiments to that of industry (Burdea and Coiffet 2003, p. 10 et seq.); 3) digital technologies revolutionized the special effects industry. Virtual reality started to be accessible on the market — at least it was commonly known as such — and in the movies, living someone else's life started to be represented as access to paid–for experience. Computer generated images lent a high level of concreteness and credibility to these new adventures.[4]

The first example that comes to mind is the block buster *Total Recall* (1990), adapted from a 1966 short story by Shusett, O'Bannon, Povill, and Goldman, and directed by Paul Verhoeven. The main character, Douglas Quail, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is obsessed with the idea of visiting Mars, which in 2084, when the story is set, is possible, but dangerous. A company, 'Total Recall', is selling tourist experiences to similarly dangerous destinations under the form of memory implants:

QUAIL: – "But how real does it seem?"
SELLER: – "As real as any memory in your head".
– "Don't bullshit me".
– "I'm telling you, your brain will not know the difference. That's guaranteed or your money back".

For 300 more credits, the currency of the time, the client can even take a vacation from himself — "The Ego Trip". His experience might be that of a playboy, a famous jock, or secret agent. Schwarzenegger's choice is obvious. Then the seller describes what the experience will consist of:

[4] About that time, the great film director Robert Zemeckis stated, "Technology raises the level of your work as a director, in that it allows you to do anything. The only limit now is the filmmaker's imagination, because you can literally create any image" ("Polar Express: Production notes"; available at polarexpressmovie.warner bros.com/movie_prodnotes_pop.html; last access June 4, 2011).

> You are a top operative under deep cover on your most important mission. People are trying to kill you. You meet this beautiful, exotic woman… I don't wanna spoil it for you… but by the time the trip is over… you get the girl, kill the bad guys, and save the entire planet. Now, you tell me. Isn't that worth a measly 300 credits?"

This movie was followed by the above–mentioned *Strange Days*. Here the 'total cinema' device is used not with fictionally generated experience as in *Total Recall*, but with experience recorded in real time from other people's lives. The technological explanation is even more articulated: "the technology was developed for the Feds, to replace the body wire" (Cameron and Cocks 1993). Once stolen from the authorities, the device develops an entire black market, similar to that for drugs. The movie shows a huge range of applications of the exchange of lived experiences, even in real time.

What makes us speak of a 'huge trend in cinema' and not just of 'some examples' involving the idea of the transfer of integral experience is nevertheless due to *The Matrix* (1999). It is probably the most influential movie of the last few decades, and it is surely the major point of reference for sci–fi visual effects. Here the transfer device is explained in such detail and 'neurotechnological' credibility that many spectators simply cannot understand it. Fortunately, this fact does not spoil the vision. Also, this very original work refers to previous narratives from the 1970s (Condon 2003: pp. 141–3), but its visionary impact is revealed only thanks to the strongly innovative special effects. The fictional transfer device is an "enormous coaxial plugged and locked into the base of the skull", where the Matrix inputs the simulating signal of the senses. Thus, the real senses of the receiver, coming from his sensory organs, are isolated and he lives in an entirely artificial world, without being aware of it.

The most important fictional exploration of the new total cinema myth can be found in Spielberg's high budget sci–fi movie *Minority Report*, based again on a previous work — a short story from 1956, adapted for the screen as early as 1997 by Jon Cohen, and then further elaborated by Scott Frank and John August. Actually, it might be defined as a movie on the future of the screen! The story is set in a future (2054) oversaturated with live images. Even in the suburbs, the walls of buildings are used as big screens for commercial and political advertising, cornflakes boxes are ultrathin video screens, newspapers and magazines are alive, continually updated video images replace photos, in offices and public services there are ultraflat transparent

screens, etc.; then there is the huge transparent 3D touch screen that Detective Anderton (Tom Cruise) uses to scroll through visions of forthcoming murders recorded from the minds of the precogs. Then we can see the 3D hologram technology, first as a home video, where Anderton watches short recordings from his past happy life with his son and wife; they move and act in front of him as if they were in his room in flesh and blood. Then we see a shopping mall where advertising is projected as 3D holograms, personalized for each visitor and visible only to him. But there is more. We have a scene in the movie that takes place in Dreamweaver Headspa — something similar to a multiplex cinema center, but with paid access to simulated experience with VR technologies. Rufus, the owner of the house, explains what they offer:

> We got it all here. We got guys come in, want to experience sex as a woman. We got women come in, want to get laid by their favorite soap star. We got rape fantasies from both sides. We got sports fantasies. And then we got what I call the 'Look Ma, I can fly' fantasies which encompass everything from bungee jumping to soaring like an eagle over the Grand Canyon.

But what is important for our purposes is that this completeness of the picture of the future, the attention to minute detail in great verisimilitude is not there by chance:

> […] that the film succeeds is as much a credit to Spielberg's direction and Cruise's sturdy performance as it is to Alex McDowell's inspired production design. Helping McDowell achieve the look and ideas of the film were a coterie of self–styled futurists assembled by Spielberg prior to filming. This 'think tank summit' (as it's been widely dubbed) hosted a cross section of philosophers, scientists and artists.
>
> (Rothkerch 2002)

This forecast of the dematerialization of the screen was not a pure play of fantasy, but the result of systematic work by experts. The narrative strategy of the movie was to represent the future as realistically as possible, in order to situate an incredible story in it and not vice versa. And what we can glean from this is the 'think tank summit' format, which we need for the future of semiotics. But I shall come back to this later.

To conclude this section, I have to mention another four titles of more recent major productions in which the transfer of integral experience is at the core of the story: *Open Your Eyes* (1997, remade as

Vanilla Sky in 2001) and *Inception* (2010), both using dream as a device for access to artificially induced integral experience. The scene towards the end of *Vanilla Sky*, in which the whole commercial aspect of the transfer device is revealed in the well–marketed company Life Extensions, should be noted. Another pair of movies exploring a similar principle as variations on the transfer are *Surrogates* and *Avatar*, both from 2009. Both scripts foresee that in some future there will be technology that will allow a wireless transfer of the entire perceptual picture so that people will be able to live in a different body — a surrogate and an avatar, respectively.

2. Between real and imaginary experience.

Until now I have not made explicit the distinction between real and imaginary experience, although the whole panorama of technologies for transfer of experience moves between these two extremes. The occasion to expand my reflection on the future of the screen to the problems of the imaginary came from another symposium organized by CIRCe, "Immaginari. Prospettive disciplinari" ["Imaginaries. Disciplinary Perspectives"], held in Turin in December 2010.[5]

The first insight that emerged from the symposium was how vague and undefined the notion of the imaginary is, as well as the whole group of notions around this semantic core. At the same time, an infinite bibliography arose from the multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives. In some of the interpretations, the imaginary was coextensive with the semiotic phenomena concerning everything that is not 'here and now' with the subject. I also adhere to such a general outline of the notion of the imaginary; my major theoretic reference is the doctrine of Henry Bergson on the role of the memory in perception (Bergson 1896).

Bergson was the first philosopher to refer to metaphysics as the science of *integral experience* (Bergson 1903). However, he reached this definition only after a meticulous examination of the role of memory and temporality for the constitution of the mind. According to his guiding idea in *Matter and Memory*, "perception is always al-

[5] It was a natural continuation of the topic of prevision from the previous year and in fact, many of the other participants were developing their ideas from the previous symposium.

ready a recollection" (ibidem, p. 74), except in the rare and unusual cases of pure perception. The mind is always extended in time, it has a duration, provided by the simultaneous involvement of past (as memory) and future (as project). Bergson's deep phenomenological insight (cfr Ronchi 1991, 2011; Bankov 2000) prevents us from accepting any simplified and clear–cut distinction of real and imaginary experience and helps us to focus our inquiry on the uses and effects of technological devices for transfer.

What is also important in Bergson's analysis is the distinction between pure and motor memory (episodic, semantic, and procedural memory in Ansel–Paerson 2010, p. 62). The first represents our ability to remember our past as a sequence of datable episodes, while the second is our past in the form of habits, of motor schemes that we enact automatically, without interpretation and consciousness. Our usual everyday experience is determined by the involvement of both types of memory, with the dominance of the first type when we are in a more reflective (contemplative) state of mind, and with the dominance of the second when we act.

Even without going very deeply into memory phenomena, it is clear that similar dialectics between motor and pure memory determine the perception of a fictional narrative.[6] And the advent of the screen was a big jump towards involving the reader/spectator in the narrative in a more corporeal way. Studies in the phenomenology of film experience rely entirely on this assumption (Sobchack 1992, p. 3 et seq.). The 'reality effect' of narrative enters a new qualitative level and this very logically directs interest towards reception and efficacy.

My assumption is that the distinction between real and imaginary experience in the trends examined here may be relevant for the level of production, but at the level of reception, all artificially provided experience is made to be as realistic as possible. In other words, both the market for access to paid–for experience and the market for technological devices for the transfer of experience are developing towards more realistic representation. The quality of the artificially provided experience is to be experienced as if it were real. My second assumption is that the 'reality effect' is achieved with the intermediation of the motor memory of the experiencer rather than with the purely episodic one. In other words, what is called 'voluntary suspension of

[6] Deleuze (1985, p. 44 et seq.) is exploring exactly this aspect of Bergson''s philosophy in regard to cinema.

disbelief" is better achieved only when we 'forget' who, where, and when we are — all inputs from the episodic memory. *To live someone else's real or imaginary experience is a matter of senso–motorial verisimilitude*. A literary narrative may encourage the reader to imagine the experience of the author, the efficacy of the communicative exchange might be great, but the intermediation is just a text — a lazy machine that requires an active work of cooperation (Eco), i.e., the author borrows the reader's imaginative efforts for the creation of a narrative world, with varying probabilities for success, depending on the latter's cultural competences. With the advent of the screen and its evolution into a variety of devices for better and better transfer of experience, the communicative intermediation is not lazy at all. The projection of the movement and the sound requires energy — energy that provides the reader with sensomotorial input, transferring him/her much more easily into the narrative world. *Virtual reality is a 'hard–working machine', it allows the reader/spectator to become the lazy machine*. Or at least, 'culturally lazy', insofar as images and sound are created following the laws of nature, which every human being experiences, independently of their cultural background.[7] Put in different terms, today technology struggles with the reader/spectator's disbelief on a more sensomotorial level than before. If the '*effet du réel*' in literary texts is the structurally unjustified description of apparently useless details (Barthes 1986), in visual and audio representation, it is achieved with 'high fidelity' simulation of the laws of movement and perspective. Bodies and objects make shadows, reflect the environment and move according to the laws of gravity. Sound comes from the emitting object and if the latter moves, the position of the sound also moves. If I am experiencing an imaginary invasion of extraterrestrial beings and they are represented as superimposed 2D graphics similar to the videogames from the 1980s, my disbelief will hardly be suspended, independently from the plot. But if the representation is made with cutting–edge high–resolution graphics technology and the 'beings' are in front of me as if they were real, I might even forget

[7] Perhaps a good illustration of the difference between a lazy and and a non–lazy machine/text is the famous scene from *Clockwork Orange* (1971), where during the 'Ludovico cure' Alex is exposed to filmed scenes of violence. By keeping his eyes open, the unwanted vision of violence (unwanted after the fifth rape) provoked, after some time, a sensomotorial aversion to violence. But if we imagine the same treatment with a forceful exposure to a truly lazy text, requiring real cooperation — a written narrative of the same scenes — very unlikely the cure would have worked.

about the plot.[8] To be 'culturally lazy' as a spectator would mean that the reality effect is created on a pre–cultural level of perception, with expressive solutions that we need not be consciously aware of, but that act qualitatively on our 'real life' perceptual habits. Playing with the ambiguity of the word 'disbelief', Sobchack defines this point very clearly:

> The major visual impulse of all SF films is to pictorialize the unfamiliar, the nonexistent, the strange and the totally alien — and to do so with a verisimilitude which is at times, documentary in flavor and style. While we are invited to wonder at what we see, the films strive primarily for our belief, not our suspension of disbelief […].
>
> (Sobchack 1980: p. 88)

If these examples are of an imaginary experience made real, it is not difficult to find examples of a 'real experience made real' again in order to transform it into a commercial product with paid access. Think of the *Google Art Project – 3D Virtual Tour of Museums in the World*. Here we have the same ambition of verisimilitude, i.e., a transfer of an experience that is as real as possible, and the project is led by the same logic of communicative evolution. This evolution is seen by some authors as the passage from 'participative' to 'immersive' experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999 p. 30) and studies show that the new generation's pleasure in the text has a lot to do with it and its main feature — interactivity (Huiberts 2010, p. 159 et seq.) — rather than with the old fashioned 'scriptible' excellence of the authors.[9]

The last observation concerns the *obsolescence* of the means for the transfer of real and imaginary experience. This problem, although present, was never an important issue during the long period of communicative forms that were heavily dependent on the cultural conventions. With the advent of cinema and the leap of the reality effect, the direction of development changed. The spectators at the Lumière brothers historical projection were terrified by the train's arrival (Ryu 2007: p. 52 et seq.), but this effect disappeared gradually with the spread of the cinematograph. Since then we have a continuous technological improvement of the visual and later the sound representation.

[8] This is the basic idea of Ryu 2007: the visual effects were always the main concern in the evolution of cinema rather than its narrative aspect.

[9] Here the allusion is to Roland Barthes' idea of the pleasure of the text (Barthes 1973).

After achieving its maturity during the 1930s, we cannot observe any undisputable progress in screenwriting, acting, and directing; we have only greater differentiation. The only element that makes movies seem really obsolete is the quality of the images and sound and their maximum expression in special effects technology. It seems that our system of expectations in terms of what constitutes narrative, acting, and directing has not changed dramatically, contrary to our system of expectations with respect to the 'reality effect' of sound and visuals. The quest for verisimilitude and the integral transfer of experience seems quite fitting with the interests of the entertainment industry, which is spreading on a global market: the more movies are dominated by special effects and sonsomotorial immersion, the more they are 'culturally neutral' and subject to obsolescence and eventually being remade with new technology. Through new technologies, big companies explore fictional worlds created initially as movies through video games, TV series, cartoons, thematic parks, etc., providing in this way a large variety of paid–for immersion in those worlds.

3. Semiotics in a dream society.

Dream Society is a book, written in 1999 by the Danish futurologist Rolf Jensen. Although much of the book's message overlaps with those of *The Experience Economy* (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and *The Age of Access* (Rifkin 2000), it opens with an explicitly futurist perspective that suits the conclusive remarks of the present text. If the question is about the future of semiotics, "the point, then, is simply that the material aspect of living will receive less attention, we will cease to define ourselves through physical products, relying instead on stories and feelings" (Jensen 1999, p. 7). Following our previous arguments, "stories and feelings" seem to represent the semiotic components of experience, thus opening a bright future for the semiotics of experience. We have seen converging trends also from sci–fi movies, even including the involvement of a think tank of experts to design the technological transfer of experience in the smallest detail. So the question would be what of the present semiotic apparatus could be used in the future semiotics of experience and what new directions might be useful to sketch it out. I would point out three major lines of interest.

3.1. *The twilight of the text*.

One of the leading ideas of Rifkin's book *The Age of Access* (2000, chapter two) is that the market is gradually transforming from the logic of exchange (property transfer) to the logic of paid access (through networks). An analogy might be projected towards the opposition 'text *versus* experience'. The exchange of texts is as typical for the classical semiotic view of the social as the exchange of goods is for the classical economy and the industrial age. In both cases, the new form is not going to abolish the previous one, but it will represent the most important trends and the largest form of innovation. According to Rifkin, the market of property exchange will always exist, but it will concern the most trivial and emotionally neutral goods (such as toilet paper, cleaning solutions, salt, etc.), whereas everything that matters, culture and human relations included, will assume the paradigm of the market of access to paid experience. Rifkin considers this process as very negative, but also as overwhelming and irreversible. As a more tangible example, we can imagine the twilight of the text as the twilight of paper money: in the first case, text is displaced by the technologically simulated access to experience, whereas in the second, cash is displaced by 'access' to virtual money.

If we consider the most important phenomenon in recent years for the social sciences — social networks — we may identify numerous texts, and the textual paradigm can eventually help us grasp certain principles and invariants. I have seen many such attempts made by students. However, they do not offer an understanding of the phenomena as a whole. FB, Twitter, etc. are the triumph of the technologically provided possibility for people to share their ongoing, living experience. Facebook profiles, for example, might be considered texts, but this hardly helps the semiotician understand the logic of their discourse. Facebook not only offers us the possibility of communicating our ongoing experience, but it encourages its users to live and record their experience in the best possible way for representation. Facebook is not an example of sensomotorial immersive experience, but at the same time its use is very time–consuming and contrary to a text, it is never–ending. At the same time, the interface of FB allows a wide variety of media formats for experience–sharing and the major trend is its integration with mobile devices for 24/7 online availability. The improvement of technology will only increase the immediacy of the transferred experience on the social networks.

In my inquiry on the semiotics of experience, I discovered three major sources. The first one is from the 1980s, in the work of Teresa de Lauretis (1984, 1987), a feminist author and pupil but also critic of Umberto Eco. She introduced the notion of the 'semiotics of experience':

> […] to emphasize the 'practice' in the commonly used term 'signifying practice' to contest the dominance of the linguistic in theories of the subject (e.g. 'the discursively produced subject', 'the subject produced in language'), and to reject the notion of a 'signifying practice' (the term is Kristeva's), or a labour of semiosis (Eco) which looks only at verbal or textual practices (a charge of which, of course, both Eco and Kristeva are guilty).
>
> (Threadgold 1997: pp. 53–4)

Although the purpose of de Lauretis's contribution is very different from the present one, there is convergence in terms of the resizing of the role of culture at the expense of the "body which is physically implicated in the production of meaning" (ibid.) in her case, and the sensomotorial effect of reality in the 'non–lazy machines' in mine.

The second major contribution is the book by Ruggero Eugeni *Semiotica dei media: Le forme dell'esperienza* (2010), in which we find the most systematic effort to provide a semiotic model for the analysis of experience. The author combines both major theoretical currents in semiotics — the interpretative and the structural/generative — in order to encompass as many aspects of this highly complex phenomena as possible. I have been greatly encouraged by this book and at the same time a bit disappointed by the absence of any particular attention to the question of verisimilitude and the technological aspect of experience design. This may be due to the fact that the aim of Eugeni's book is to introduce a maximally efficient model for analysis of the present state of art in media (he has chosen a TV series as major example), whereas my interest is in more futuristic scenarios. In fact, it was in trying to understand Eugeni's lack of interest in the technological aspect of the problem that I came across the idea for the second line of interest for the future of semiotics:

3.2. *The quest for verisimilitude versus the contract of veridiction.*

In both of the semiotic paradigms mentioned, our sociocultural constitution is the playing field for semiotic inquiry. In the case of interpretative semiotics, we have the model of culture as an encyclope-

dia and the active role of the reader in the construction of possible worlds (fictional and counterfactual) based on individual cultural competence. As I mentioned above, one of the universal assumptions of this approach is that the text is a lazy machine (Eco 1994, p. 214), which requires the reader's active interpretative cooperation in order to produce its sense. The credibility of the text depends on the overlapping of the presupposed reader's competence and the culturally codified systems of expectations.[10] In the case of generative semiotics, we have the centrality of the notions of text, discourse, and enunciation, which enable the functioning of the rest of the Greimasian methodological masterpiece. "Beyond the Text, No Salvation!" the most important slogan of this approach proclaims.[11] According to Gianfranco Marrone, the text is not an already given reality but rather an instrument for decoupage that the semiotician performs on a given slice of reality in order to analyze it.[12] However, any experience — corporeal or not — can be understood only as a narrative (Marrone 2005, p. 8). Since the prototype of all phenomena of signification is language, the instance of enunciation becomes a universal means of mediation, which converts the rules of a system (sociocultural) into discourse (situated and individual, cfr Volli 2003, p. 115 et seq.). In this view, the credibility of the text is never considered as something truth–functional, insofar as the concern for the referent would bring us out of the text, but as something immanent to its structural pertinence and the artificially created effects of reality in the instance of enunciation (ibidem). The interest in the truth is substituted by the interest in truth–saying (in French, '*véridiction*'; Greimas 1979, p. 367) and truth–saying is determined by the establishment of various strategies of discursive simulation (of the enunciator and the enunciatee for instance), in which traces and markers are the subject of analysis.

There is much more to semiotics, but if we take even those important aspects of semiotic theory, we cannot but envisage a restriction on the adequacy of its methods in the future. What I call 'the quest for verisimilitude' is an effort carried on by army of many mil-

[10] Here Todorov's reflections on verisimilitude, genre, and common sense could be also mentioned (Todorov 1981, p. 18–20).

[11] Jean–Marie Floch chose this slogan as a title of the introductory chapter of his book (Floch 1990), stressing the importance that Greimas was attributing to it.

[12] Marrone's book on the notion of text is *L'invenzione del testo: Una nuova critica della cultura* (Bari: Laterza, 2010), but unfortunately I could find only a detailed review of it by Nanta Novello–Paglianti (Novello–Paglianti 2010).

lions of developers, engineers, and marketers, who work day and night to erase any trace of the instance of enunciation in the future means of communication.[13] The same army works to create devices for the transfer of integral experience, thus annihilating the 'cultural' role of the reader, leaving space for sensomotorial immersion in exciting and interactive simulations of real and imaginary worlds. In this sense, one can predict a tendency toward a shift of the pleasure of the text from our generation's bliss in the 'scriptible' text to the next generations' technological achievement of Woody Allen's orgasmatron (*The Sleeper*, 1973), adapted for the internet. Semiotics as we now know is strong when communication is realized through 'lazy texts' that require enunciative strategies for simulation of the reality effect and an active interpreter with a system of expectations, shaped by his/her textual competence. But when communication starts to be dominated by the transfers of 'slices' of experienced or imagined reality (but 'documentary in flavor and style', as Sobchack would say, 1980, p. 88), then most likely the mechanisms of signification and interpretation will also change, and even the paradigms that have placed signification and interpretation at the core of the semiotic inquiry.

The experience economy catalyzes these processes and even if we cannot imagine what an 'outside culture' might be , it is enough to imagine a world where only one globalized culture provides access to an infinite number of experiences through a finite number of standardized devices in order to start thinking about what should change in the training of future semioticians.

Thus we arrive at the third line of interest.

3.3. *Textual analysis* versus *fieldwork*.

The third line of interest is almost literally resolved in the third major source of the 'semiotics of experience'. In the concluding remarks to his essay "É possibile una semiotica dell'esperienza?" ["Is a Semiotics of Experience Possible?"], Volli 2007), Ugo Volli suggests as an answer to the question in the title that "semiotics cannot but turn to the school of the great anthropological tradition (Mauss, Lévi–

[13] As we can read in the *The New Media and Cybercultures Anthology*, ""Our culture wants both to multiply its media and erase all traces of mediation"" (Bolter and Grusin 2010, p. 47). The authors call this process '"remediation"' and quote the movie *Strange Days* (1995) in order to illustrate their point.

Strauss), to that of the history of language (Benveniste) and mentality, instead of pretending to be a psychology without a laboratory and an experimental method" (ibidem, p. 26).

Although some of my conclusions on the necessity of rescaling the role of culture at the expense of the sensomotorial element in new media might contrast with Volli's observations, I nevertheless emphatically stand by them. To the list of the names I would also add Jean–Marie Floch. He crucially exported semiotic methods to the field of market research, and thus opened new horizons for theoretic advancements as well. Of course, his most remarkable impact as a whole was within the textual perspective, but his gesture of theoretic implementation remains a good example also if the case is to change the textual perspective with an experiential one. Another good example is the extension of semiotic theory towards cognitive science, made initially by Eco (1997), as well as the emergence of a few laboratories for cognitive semiotics around the world. The use of cognitive devices such as the eye–tracker will be unavoidable in the future semiotics of experience, although we have to be very careful not to adopt the oversimplified mind models of cognitive scientists. The semiotics of experience will also need a strong ethnographic (qualitative) input, and why not go to the school of market researchers to remain abreast of the last advancements in 'clickstream' measurements of internet users' behavior; without questioning the other direction of influence — from semiotics to market research.

Thus, the profile of the future semiotician starts to resemble more that of a developer rather than that of a guardian of the culture of the critical tradition, but I am sure that precisely this tension will keep the discipline alive in the future.

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