The sensible reality between obviousness and uncertainty

Pier Luigi Capucci

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Abstract

Since the acquisition of the symbolic ability humankind has been wandering about reality and its meaning. A common sense idea is that reality falls under the sensorial faculties. But the senses can be tricked and the sensorial deception is at the basis of all media: an increasing part of our reality's knowledge is indirectly acquired and built through the media. Moreover there are entities we can't detect with the senses, directly or in a mediated way, but they supposedly exist, like the dark matter and the dark energy. And there are entities, which only exist in our minds, that despite they can't be detected by the senses they can deeply affect our actions, pervade our lives, and we tend to live increasingly inside these "realities".

Humankind has been wandering about the topic of reality, and around its meaning since the acquisition of the symbolic ability. The status of reality has been in turn a hot topic in magic, religion, philosophy, science, and it has been also hugely discussed in the media. However, it is especially thanks to the advancements in physics' theories and discoveries, that the idea of reality is put into question and becomes confused, uncertain. The arts are also the privileged realm where the "common sense reality" is put into discussion, where the emergent new visions of the universe are presented and challenged. Reality is not what it seems, there are other "parallel realities" beyond or besides the world's appearance. Reality is not unique, but there are plenty of realities in the outer and the inner worlds. Further, thanks to the technologies and the new media it is even possible to create realities which simulate the "real reality".

Reality and the senses

A common sense idea is that reality falls under the sensorial faculties. What we see, smell, hear, taste and touch, directly or mediated through devices which expand the senses' capabilities, is real. The sensorial system can be defined as a whole which helps in detecting what is outside the organism, and the senses should not be considered as separate entities but as subsystems working together in synergy and exchanging abilities in shaping or enacting what is called "the outside world". The senses constitute a unitary sensorial sphere with a great cohesion, and this graph is an attempt to summarize their analogies and differences[1].

Among other things this graph suggests that the sense of touch is the more general one. In fact, according to some scientists, it was the first that appeared in the organisms' evolution[2]. All the other senses evolved from the touch specializing in decoding a variety of more or less distant information, for evident evolutionary benefits: for instance expanding the organism's capabilities in detecting at distance the environment's threats and nourishment.

In our culture the remote and mediated communication has become increasingly relevant. In order to have an idea of the extent of this process, which occurred in less than 200 years, we could compare today's many opportunities – synchronous communications like cellular and old plain telephony, IP based communications like Skype and chats, and asynchronous communications like email, forums and so on... – which can be very inexpensive, with the communications technologies

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1 I made this graph by the middle of the '90s and I showed to my students while discussing the sensory issues in the communication. I consider it as a work in progress and it could be expanded to include other sensorial functions and faculties.

2 Gregory, R.,1989. *Curiose percezioni*. Bologna: il Mulino.

which were available by mid C19th. Additionally it could be of some interest that this process caused a reorganization, and maybe even a decadence of the material senses. For instance the olfactory information can not be transferred – digitized and independently managed – in today's remote and mediated communication: it can only be indirectly and synaesthetically evoked through the visual and acoustic channels. Hence we must admit we accepted to communicate more rapidly, over greater distance, in an increasingly affordable and economic way, but in exchange for an impoverished communication. Moreover it should be noted that, despite the hegemony of the senses of distance (sight and hearing, the so called "superior" senses) in the western culture, the senses of proximity and contact (smell and touch) are considered more relevant in relation to reality. "Touching is believing" instead of "seeing is believing": like S. Thomas, who touched the wounds of Jesus to be sure he was real, we trust more in the information we get with touch. And, as a corollary, the direct interactive communication is more effective than the mediated and passive ones.

Smell pertains the body's reality and status in such a strict and powerful way that humans invented the perfumes and the deodorants in order to divert, expand or remove the body's odour and to enhance its symbolic dimension, so escaping that limiting and immediate condition. And, finally, smell and touch are the main senses in intimacy and love, relying both on direct and short distance, or contact communication.

Two examples of sensory related reality

It seems that humans like, or even need, creating and inhabiting new worlds and realities. In our culture the topic of a "fake" reality indistinguishable from the "real" reality has been often discussed. Cinema and television proposed some ideas in a popular, although interesting way. This paper considers two examples.

The *Star Trek* Holodeck

Star Trek is a modern mythology invented by Gene Roddenberry, and is totally built upon the existence of new worlds. It is a fiction which lasted more than thirty five years through TV series, movies, cartoons, videogames, books, magazines, comics and gadgets. *Star Trek* became popular not only inside a mass media audience, but also among academics, scientists, scholars working in many disciplines. And among technologists, novelists and journalists, who dedicated to *Star Trek* books, essays, lectures and articles. In his book *Star Trek: Technologies of Disappearance*[3], Alan Shapiro claims that the peculiarity of *Star Trek* and the reason for its success reside in the creation of a reality-shaping science fiction capable of formatively influencing culture, ideas, technologies, and even "hard sciences" like physics. *Star Trek*'s technologies, and the cultural, moral, aesthetic, and philosophical imagination that pervades them, are our own twenty-first century technologies in development[4]. To use Roland Barthes' phrase they belong to our anthropological *desiderata* (anthropological desires).

Moreover, as a nested reality, in the Enterprise, the *Star Trek* spaceship, there is the Holodeck, a sort of computer-driven *wunderkammer* which can create whatever environment one wishes and make it absolutely real from a sensorial viewpoint. This world can perform situations, people and events taken from history, literature and even from one person's imagination, and share them among the participants. In these invented or re-created worlds the Enterprise crew members can make their dreams come true, can fulfil their wishes, cultivate their hobbies, relax after the ordeals, participate

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3   Shapiro, A.N., 2004. *Star Trek: Technologies of Disappearance*. Berlin: Avinus.
4   See my review of Shapiro's book published online in *Noema*: http://is.gd/dg7DC.

individually or in groups. These worlds are so plausible and well simulated that the crew members can come to the point of forgetting their tasks in the spaceship, or they can injure themselves during their adventures there, and even they can fall in love with the human-like artificial intelligences who are created inside these worlds (and who are aware they are not "real"!).

There is no sensorial difference between the reality created by the Holodeck and the everyday reality... Although it may seem potentially infinite, the Holodeck reality is spatially confined behind that door, this human desire and computer-driven world is all enclosed in that space. Hence, since the senses are unable to distinguish the "real reality" from the Holodeck reality, it seems the only difference is in its topography (in its location in the Enterprise), in the fact that it can be switched on and off at will, and in the awareness of the people who enjoy it.

We have no idea on how many people of the Enterprise crew permanently abandoned the "real world" settling in some artificial dreamland inside the Holodeck. But I think they could have been many.

eXistenZ

eXistenZ is a movie directed by David Cronenberg in 1999[5]. It is deeply inspired by Philip K. Dick's work, who considers the issues of reality's perception, ambiguity and control as nodal topics. *eXistenZ* presents an indefinable future where gaming is the most compelling activity and the games have a central role in everyday life. Everybody plays games at any ages, because games allow changing life, make people free, and are neither only audio- and visual-based nor they are digital. They are by far more complex and can involve all the senses with a body-driven technology, and the world the players enter into and share is sensorially indistinguishable from the real world.

In *eXistenZ* reality is a cage which can be opened by the games, and is the "most pathetic outer level of reality"[6]. The reality of the games is by far superior to the "real reality" and everyone wants to live in the games because there they cannot die, fall ill or really hurt, they can restart their lives from scratch and play them repetitively, and they can act as heroes[7]. A player states that remaining in the game for a lifetime would mean living roughly five hundred years.

In *eXistenZ* the power of the medium is shown at its mere working level[8]. The participants choose to live in the world of the game because it is by far more exciting than the "real world", which is simply a layer of reality confused among the layers of simulation. They want to live inside the game regardless the game's contents and goals to achieve: in fact in *eXistenZ* there is no clear goal to achieve: the real goal is simply to play, in order to live inside the game's reality. In these equivalent realities which are intertwined, the "real world" is only one of the possible worlds, a residual scenario among plenty of scenarios.

In *eXistenZ*, like in the *Star Trek*'s Holodeck, the "real reality" is indistinguishable from, and

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5   *eXistenZ,* 1999. [Film] Directed by David Cronenberg. Canada/UK: Alliance Atlantis Communications.
6   It is the sentence that Gas, the gas station clerk in the movie, says when he meets Allegra Geller, the maker of the game.
7   See in particular the survey Castronova, E., 2001. *Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier*. [Online] Social Science Research Network. Available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=294828 [Accessed 13 June 2010]. Essay also published in *Noema*, http://www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/castronova_virtual_worlds.html [Accessed 20 June 2010]. Also Castronova, E., 2005. *Synthetic Worlds. The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
8   This is clearly a mcluhanian approach, and takes the topic of *Videodrome*, a former Cronenberg's movie (1983) to new heights. Cronenberg is Canadian, like McLuhan.

confused with, the reality built by the device. In the end, there is no proof, and maybe even no necessity, of its existence. Neither the content nor the body or the senses are useful for discerning and recognizing among realities. What is considered as the "real reality" is topologically external to the reality performed by the device: people know or believe that they are in the *eXistenZ*'s or in the Holodeck's realities only because in the former they deliberately connect to the organic interface – the Pod, which is wired to and powered by the body – and in the latter they deliberately cross the Holodeck's door. And, of course, the realities built by the devices can be switched on and off.

Since the difference between realities sensorially vanishes, it cannot be based on the content but on something external: so everything shifts to moral, philosophical, social, political, juridical or simply topological and conventional issues (I/we agree reality is this!). Just like in the digital information, where there is no difference between the original and the copy – as well as among the copies themselves – so they can only be externally (contextually) separated: conventionally, by means of the date of creation (the "original" was created *before* the "copy") and/or administratively or juridically, for example through some kind of "security label" sticked onto the packaging.

Beyond the senses

Anyway founding reality only on the senses is simplistic. The senses can be tricked and altered, reality seems more complex, elusive, illusory. We know this topic pretty well because the sensorial deception is at the basis of all media, both from a mere technological viewpoint, for instance in the frame per seconds rate in cinema and video, which gives the idea of movement, and more evidently in the techniques for simulating the perception of reality[9]: the Renaissance perspective, photography, cinema and video, acoustic recording and diffusion, 3D computer simulations, Virtual Reality, holography. The media work creeping into the biological and cultural constraints of the human perception and cognition.

Indeed an increasing part of reality is acquired and built through the media, knowledge and awareness are more and more media based. There are entities we are sure they are real and influence our actions and lives despite we never get directly in touch with them. For instance we think the actors and the politicians exist because they actually decline our fun and work with shows and laws (that sometimes tend to merge), but we only meet them in the media.

Moreover there are entities we cannot detect with the senses, neither directly nor in a mediated way through any devices, but we know they supposedly exist and they heavily influence the universe we live in: for instance the dark matter and the dark energy. And finally there are entities which only exist in our minds. We call them dreams, thoughts, ideas, impressions, projects, memories, expectations, or they are more complex like awareness and consciousness. Despite they can't be detected by the senses they are real because they can deeply affect and define our lives and actions. We put them at the top of our lives, and we tend to live increasingly inside these worlds and dimensions.

So reality escapes...

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9 I have been working on this topic for many years. The most recent paper: Capucci, P.L., 2010. *Simulation as a Global Resource*. [Online] Noema. Available at http://www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/capucci_simulation_global_resource.html [Accessed 20 June 2010].