AN-ICON

An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images

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Recent technologies (such as virtual and augmented reality) have given new impetus to a type of image which asks us to adopt a specific cognitive and affective modality in order to enjoy it. The Spectator is transformed into an Experiencer who perceives the image as an autonomous quasi-real world, inhabiting it not only with the imagination but also with the body and senses. The ERC Advanced project *AN-ICON: An-iconology, history, theory, and practices of environmental images* (2019-2024), led by Full Professor Andrea Pinotti, explores the properties of this experience, defining it as an-iconic, that is, characterised by a weak or absent image consciousness. In the virtual worlds, icons deny themselves as such, concealing their mediateness, and ideally freeing themselves of any framing device that traditionally separated images and contexts.

AN-ICON is working on defining and describing the an-iconic experience along three axes: 1) *history*, focusing on the manifold an-iconic strategies and devices employed in the past; 2) *theory*, questioning concepts like presence, interactivity, virtuality; 3) *practices*, exploring the impact of an-iconic environments on contemporary professional domains and everyday life. Research along these axes is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach,

corresponding to the different backgrounds of the senior and junior scholars involved in the project (with a predominance of Aesthetics, followed by Film and Media Studies, Art History, History of Science, Computer Science and Pedagogy).

Initially, the group focused on immersivity and its history in the field of art. The term "immersion" has only appeared since the 1990s, but in the first decades of the 20th century artists already practiced forms of immersivity. Assistant Professor Elisabetta Modena (now at the University of Pavia) and PI Andrea Pinotti focused on the legacy of contemporary art with this historical period in collaboration with HangarBicocca (*Immersed in the work*, 2022). Art-based research curated by Modena and Postdoc researcher Sofia Pirandello led to two VR works: *THE ITALIAN JOB n.3, Lazy Sunday* by Emilio Vavarella, and *Rosetta Mission 2020* by Luca Pozzi, both exhibited in the virtual space *12° Atelier* (Casa degli artisti, Milan). A monograph tracing the history of artistic practices based on the trespassing of the threshold between the real and the virtual, from Narcissus to VR, was conclusively written by Pinotti (Pinotti 2021, English translation forthcoming), while Modena's monograph concentrated on the rise of immersive storytelling in different cultural contexts (journalism, documentaries, cinema,

videogames, museums, and cultural heritage) (Modena 2022).

Along the theoretical axis, several investigations are ongoing. After devising the concept of *environmental image* (Pinotti, 2020) and exploring the consequent rhetoric of empathy, Pinotti is developing a phenomenology and ontology of immersive environments, based on the historical dimension of technologies, image experience, and perception itself. He is focusing especially on the theological background of fundamental concepts of virtual technology such as icon, avatar, incarnation, bilocation, ecstasy. Associate Professor Pietro Conte works around the notions of illusion and deception in the contemporary mediascape and aims at deconstructing the rhetorical and commercial narratives surrounding the idea of presence (Conte and Wiesing 2022). A specific aspect of this techno-aesthetic perspective concerns how immersive media and artificial intelligence are exploited to make the dead present again by endowing them with so-called "digital immortality". In the same vein, Ph.D. student Maria Serafini investigates emerging visual practices and rituals of mourning in digital and virtual environments. She considers the role of images in shaping the ways in which mourning is expressed and experienced, and in constructing new forms of "social presence of the dead".

Over the years, the interplay between body and space has proved to be key for the understanding of an-iconic experiences, and the group is now focusing on both. Postdoc researcher Fabrizia Bandi is elaborating a phenomenology of the environment between image and spatial experience (Bandi 2021), but also working on VR and AR as implementation tools for architectural and urban practice, in line with historical techniques of representation. Postdoc researcher Margherita Fontana addresses space from a political and cultural perspective, exploring the American milieu of the emergence of VR as it relates to psychedelic and sci-fi culture, 1960s counterculture and geodesic architecture. She is

also interested in the paleocybernetic fascination with prehistoric caves and their virtual and "in-the-flesh" replicas (Fontana and Pinotti 2022). Assistant Professor Ilaria Ampollini investigates the Planetarium as an ancestor of virtual environments with the methodology of History of Science. Postdoc researcher Sofia Pirandello has studied the extended spaces of Augmented Reality (Pirandello 2020). She interprets AR as a technology of imagination and questions its feedback on human creativity, evaluating its pros and cons from an aesthetical and political point of view. Pirandello addresses AR as a tool used for transforming environmental affordances which then has many material consequences on the concrete world, in whatever field it is used (military, industrial, artistic, activist).

While research on space is predominantly characterized by a philosophical approach, research on the body develops at the intersection of media archaeology, image theory and gender studies. Associate Professor Barbara Grespi has worked on gesture-based interfaces in virtual environments to question the idea of immersive images as unframed and introduce a non-ocularcentric concept of frame, ultimately defined by the user's body and senses (Grespi 2021). She curated art-based research on the same topic (Anna Franceschini's residency, Triennale, 2023, and dancer and choreographer Margherita Landi's residency, La fabbrica del vapore, 2023). Grespi's investigation of the genealogy of the an-iconic image in the astro-photography of the late Nineteenth century, only faintly linked to ocular perception, complemented her study of the decline of the visual in favour of the gestural and bodily. In the same vein, Ph.D. student Rosa Cinelli focuses on the theme of visual evidence and algorithmic images. Her research aims at redefining the documentary evidentiary paradigm, comparing the forensic role of photography to that of virtual reality reconstructions (Cinelli 2023).

Many avenues of media archaeological research are currently open in the AN-ICON

group, including Grespi's exploration of the genealogical role of television and its early technologies, as well as that of the olfactory sense, currently studied by Postdoc researcher Giancarlo Grossi. In previous years, Grossi investigated the relationship between immersive media and altered states of consciousness, such as dreaming and hallucination. He drew on a conception of media as forms of exteriorization and materialization of the mental universe, as his media archaeological monograph on the same topic demonstrates (Grossi 2021). His first article on the olfactory sense is contained in the current monographic issues of "Cinéma & Cie", co-edited by Assistant Professor Anna Caterina Dalmasso. As a member of AN-ICON, Dalmasso is outlining an archaeology of virtuality which draws on the history of the cinematic point-of-view shot as well as on visual devices of ancient divination. In parallel, she is working on a phenomenology of embodied experience in immersive environments (Dalmasso 2022), also curating the residency of artist and filmmaker Sara Tirelli. Ph.D. student Roberto Paolo Malaspina's research explores, with a similar approach, the relationship between immersive technologies and erotic-pornographic material (together with their genealogy in stereoscopic devices), aiming at understanding the impact of virtual reality on the production, consumption, and social agency of contemporary pornography. A second "body genre", as film theory calls it, is addressed by Ph.D. student Rossana Galimi, who re-discusses the cinematic imaginary of the horror movie, in order to develop a "feminist horror theory" updated to the time of immersive media.

Finally, a different focus on the body of the experiencer in practical and professional applications is being developed by Postdoc researchers Federica Cavaletti and Ilaria Terrenghi, together with Ph.D. student Alessandro Costella. Cavaletti is working on the practical applications of virtual reality in professional settings, with a particular focus on physical and mental healthcare, and adopting a methodology that combines theoretical reflection and empirical data (Cavaletti 2021). At the same time, she is studying the experience of shame, and in particular body shame, and how it can be overcome using contemporary interactive technologies. Postdoc researcher Ilaria Terrenghi is approaching the area of education by dealing with the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes and the impact of immersive technologies on the learning path (Terrenghi 2022). Alessandro Costella is combining computer science, disability studies and phenomenology to explore AR interfaces for implementing devices for disabled and physically impaired people (Costella, 2023).

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