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Just an illusion? Between simulation, emulation, and hyper-realism

Edited by Pietro Conte and Lambert Wiesing

Deadline for full articles **15 November 2021**



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Recent technologies (like virtual and augmented reality) have given new impulse to a type of images that negate themselves as such and that can therefore be named "an-icons". Traditional images are grounded in a material medium; they are separated from their context by framing devices; and they refer to something in the real world. By contrast, an-icons conceal their mediateness, ideally getting rid of any framing devices, and aim at constituting autonomous quasi-real worlds. The result is a radical "environmentalization" of images that ask to be inhabited and experienced more than viewed and observed.

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Recent years have witnessed increasing debate on the notion of illusion in the contemporary mediascape and on its role within digital environments, in particular with respect to virtual-, augmented-, and mixed-reality technologies. Immersive environments can elicit in the user an intense feeling of being incorporated into quasi-real worlds. Consequently, and despite being traditionally given a negative value, the word “illusion” is more and more accorded a *positive* meaning as a key aspect of the phenomenon of immersion; as such, it is regarded as an important goal to be pursued by the creators of hyper-realistic and virtual environments.

However, the concept of illusion is in itself plagued by ambiguities and even contradictions, and therefore in need of clarification. Does it imply an unconscious deception accomplished through a false perception, or is it rather a lusory attitude adopted in a peculiar kind of make-believe relation? What is the difference between illusion, deception, and hallucination? How does illusion turn into deception? How does deception become illusion?

In simulated virtual environments, people experience a strong feeling of presence (*place illusion*) and react to what they perceive as if it were real (*plausibility illusion*) (Slater 2009; Hofer et al. 2020). At the same time, they remain perfectly aware that they are not “really” there, and that the events are not “actually” occurring. How is such conflict between knowing and perceiving to be explained, and is it to be regarded as a new form of aesthetic illusion (Koblížek 2017)?

Moreover, virtual reality has the power to make the users feel as if they own and control a body (*body-ownership illusion*) that can look very different from their biological one. This can result into a transformation of self-representation, which in turn may cause a change in our attitudes towards ourselves or towards other people, thus helping reduce implicit racial and gender bias or mitigate health problems and mental disorders (Peck et al. 2013; Scarpina et al. 2019). Yet, what are the limits of virtual reality and of the possibilities it offers to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, promoting virtuous and socially adaptive processes of emulation? How to debunk the rhetoric (which has an ethic, social, and political meaning) behind the celebration of virtual reality as “the ultimate empathy machine” (Milk 2015)?

Furthermore, “environmental” images often imply a variable degree of interaction with the observers; but is interactivity necessary to elicit illusion?

Does the multisensory quality of the interaction affect the overall illusion effect? Given that immersive virtual environments are frequently inhabited by the users’ proxies, do avatars in their vast phenomenology enhance or rather diminish the degree of illusion? What is the relation between illusion and the “style” of the image? More specifically, is hyper-realism a necessary element of illusion or, as Gordon Calleja (2011) maintains, only one viable alternative among many others? What about the so-called “immersive fallacy” and the idea that, when plunged into digital environments, the user’s mind accepts what it perceives as reality (Salen & Zimmerman 2003)?

In line with the research directions listed above, and instead of focussing on more traditional topics like optical illusions, this issue encourages contributions specifically addressing the following topics:

- The relation between traditional and contemporary accounts of illusion;
- The distinction between illusion, deception, and hallucination;
- Illusion in the arts and media: painting, sculpture, theatre, cinema and pre-cinematic devices (panoramas, phantasmagorias, cinerama, circarama, totalrama...), videogames and other digital media;
- The notion of illusion as related to virtual, augment, and mixed-reality technologies;
- The different kinds of illusion (place illusion, plausibility illusion, body illusion) in immersive virtual environments;
- The role of illusion in generating an immersive effect and, vice versa, the role of immersion in producing illusion;
- Strategies to elicit (full) body ownership illusion within virtual environments;
- How illusion transforms our bodily-self, and how this reverberates on the possibility of overcoming social, racial, and gender biases;
- The role of (real-time) interaction and sensory-motor synchrony in immersive environments;
- The relevance of the classical concepts of Edmund Husserl’s contradiction (*Widerstreit*) and Richard Wollheim’s twofoldness in the very specific research field of virtual, augmented, and mixed-reality technologies.

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