Human and Digital Traces

Tracce, l'umano e il digitale

edited by • a cura di

SIMONE GUIDI – ALBERTO ROMELE

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This first 2016 issue inaugurates the joint publication of «Azimuth. Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age» by Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura and Inschibboleth. We have chosen to combine our energies, enthusiasm and competences, while respecting our different backgrounds and catalogues, to support a project which we both believe in – and the people who have created it and continue to implement it with diligence and perseverance.

Aside from being a stimulating avenue for mutual engagement, this collaboration is the path to be followed to ensure the establishment and continued existence of a high-quality publishing enterprise. We trust that «Azimuth» will continue to grow and – as its name implies – become a point of reference for philosophical studies both in Italy and abroad.

All essays are subjected to double blind peer-review.

Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti a doppia *blind peer-review*.

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DIGITAL ARCHITECTURES:
THE WEB, EDITORIALIZATION, AND METAONTOLOGY

1. Philosophy as Dead Writing.

In *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*[1], Paul Valery's Socrates tells us, from beyond the grave, that he could have been an architect instead of a philosopher, and that this would probably have been a better choice. «I was born many, I'm dead one». The potentiality – or, I would say, the virtuality[2] – runs out over the course of our lives: the only one for whom this virtuality is never exhausted, among the heroes of Valery, is Leonardo da Vinci. And so the dynamic movement of life turns into the stable immobility of death. Unity, frozen ideas, and motionless concepts are characteristic of death because life is multiplicity and movement. This is why the ghost of Socrates laments to the ghost of Phaedrus that architecture might have been a more interesting job than philosophy.

Two features of architecture make it a superior art compared to the art of speech: first, it creates a living space; and, second, it is in motion. Let us try to understand these features. First of all, architecture is the only art form that produces a space in which we can immerse ourselves[3]. Other art forms produce objects for us to examine, to appreciate, but we cannot live inside them. We can look at a painting or a statue, but we cannot inhabit either of them. In contrast, a temple can be entered: the art object, in this case, completely surrounds us, and – more importantly – we can act inside its space. A temple is habitable, and things can be done inside it. Art, in the

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[1] P. Valéry, *Œuvres. II*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, pp. 79-147.

[2] M. Vitali-Rosati, *S'orienter Dans Le Virtuel*, Paris, Hermann, 2012.

[3] Valéry says that music has also this characterics, but we won't discuss this point, which is quite controversial and not very important for the goals of this paper.

case of architecture, envelops life. Valéry says: architecture puts man into man. Architectural space is the context of the action: it makes it possible, and it shapes it.

Secondly, and in connection with the first point, architecture is an art of movement. This may seem counterintuitive – buildings are, after all, motionless – but if we analyze the structure of the architectural act, we see a profound relationship between architecture and movement. Valéry's Socrates explains this by providing a definition of «geometric shape». A geometric shape is a shape that can be described accurately with few words. He gives an example: the order «walk while maintaining an equal distance between these two trees». This order clearly defines a straight line. Which means that these words describe – or, more precisely, produce – a movement. The sentence «walk while maintaining an equal distance between these two trees» is a mathematical function and therefore a force – a virtuality – that determines a specific movement. It is, in fact, the very condition of the movement, the force that is in action at the time of movement; it is the force that produces the movement and that determines it. Architecture is the art of geometric shapes, and thus it is the art of structuring space through mathematical functions. And because these functions are moving forces, architecture is also an art of movement.

This praise of architecture is at the same time a harsh critique of philosophy. Philosophers, Valéry argues, build castles in the sky. That's why they can pay no attention to the details of their constructions: «they never see the universes they imagine collapsing, because finally these universes do not exist». Philosophers work with words that are dead and immobile; they aspire to eternity, but eternity is nothing but death and immobility. By inverting the myth of the cave, Valéry presents Plato's ideas as motionless shadows, corpses.

This critique of philosophy is, more generally, a critic of any form of writing: writing means making still what is moving. Written words are frozen frames, inert corpses that only represent the moving bodies that populate reality. Valéry aspired to be a writer of movement, an architect more than a writer[4].

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[4] Actually, a philosopher's work and an architect's work are not really in opposition but rather complexly intertwined, as B. Zaccarello remarks in *Eupalinos architettonica o mania*, in *Costruire, Abitare, Pensare*, Milan, Mimesis Edizioni, 2010, p. 456. In other words, the writer could, even before the digital age, be designated an architect, as we will see in this paper, this highlights the cultural continuity between digital and pre-digital culture.

Behind this forceful critique of philosophy and writing in general lies a more global critique of the representational paradigm: representations are only imitations of reality, but these imitations are frozen frames of moving life, and therefore useless and fake.

The question that I want to take up in this paper is whether digital writing can be described in the same way. This is an important consideration because digital technologies are in fact based on writing. The web is constructed by writing. Everything on it is written – including images and videos, which are expressions of code and exist only as strings of characters. Writing is the actual material of digital space. But what *kind* of writing is the writing of digital space? Is it different from the kind of writing that is criticized by Valéry? And what is the relationship between writing and philosophy in the digital age?

My hypothesis is that in digital space a writer actually becomes an architect; writing becomes the building material of a living and moving space. In order to understand this process, we first need to define the word digital and gain a better grasp of the expression «digital space».

2. *What is the Digital?*

The word 'digital' is more and more present in the public discourse. But what do we mean exactly by the term 'digital'? What is '*the* digital'?

It is impossible to reduce the term to its first meaning: digital is a particular way of representing information, in opposition to analog. In fact, the digital has attained a more far-reaching cultural significance: it is used to express a range of cultural changes. Indeed, the term digital is not strictly related to particular technologies anymore. As Milad Doueihi has shown[5], the digital is modifying every aspect of our lives, and in this sense its cultural impact is comparable to the impact of religion: becoming digital and adhering to a digital culture is a shift that is not unlike the changing of religion.

The term digital is thus used to express not simply a technology but rather a set of changes that characterizes contemporary societies in comparison to what they were twenty or thirty years ago. The prevalence of the word can be interpreted as a sign of unease caused by changes that have impacted the way certain institutions function. In this sense, the digital has no precise meaning: anything can be described as digital if it is somehow new and if

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[5] M. Doueihi, *Digital Cultures*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011.

the fact of its being new can lead to unease within institutions and trigger changes in their behaviours.

The fact that the word digital began to be used more and more in the 1990s suggests that a crucial shift occurred with the birth of the web. In terms of technology, the web has had a visible impact on our practices and has triggered significant changes in our way of life. But is it quite right to think that the digital has produced a revolution? Can we accurately interpret the changes determined by the birth of the web as a real rupture in our culture? Numerous scholars[6] have analyzed the idea of revolution and determined that there are always aspects of both continuity and discontinuity. If the digital is a cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to interpret it as part of a continuity of tradition – which is a fundamental characteristic of a culture.

Thus understood, the digital does not represent a genuine rupture that breaks the line of our history. The word digital is rather the symptom of an unease. We are aware of the fact that something different from the familiar institutional field is going on, but we do not know exactly what it is or how it is structured. 'Digital' is the word we use to express the blurry gap between institutional discourse and actual practices. The edition exemplifies this phenomenon: the expression 'digital edition' is used to signify a set of continuous changes that separate current practice from the 18th century's habits. This need to find a name and to identify the specificity of current practices is a sign that institutions will change to adapt themselves to the reality of new practices. Thus, we are in an institutionalization phase.

One defining characteristic of the digital is that it signifies the necessity of upgrading a large number of institutions in many different realms. These include: personal identity management, teaching, research, art, and communication. The digital is not – or at least not only and not primarily – about computers and technologies: it is a term that is often synonymous with 'current'. We could even say that it is on the same level as 'modern' or 'contemporary'. After the modern age and the contemporary age, we are living in the digital age. Technology is certainly an important aspect of digital culture, but not all aspects of culture are determined by technology. Rather, there is a circle of determination: technology is determined and shaped by cultural tendencies, and culture is in turn conditioned by technology.

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[6] For example, M. Doueihi, *Pour un humanisme numérique*, Paris, Seuil, 2011 and L. Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

At the same time, we should recognize that the word digital has been used increasingly since the 1990s and that there is a clear correspondence between the rise of the term in public discourse and a particular development in digital technology: the birth of the web. If we cannot reduce the digital to the web, it is nonetheless evident that there is a deep relationship between this term and the position the web has taken in our society.

In this paper I propose to interpret the social space we inhabit – and which is strongly shaped by the particular kind of production and circulation of content determined by the web – as a digital space.

3. *Digital Space.*

But what exactly is digital space? What are its characteristics? In his text *Des espaces autres*[7], Foucault explains that space has been defined variously by *localization* (in the Medieval period), by *extension* (during the Renaissance), and by the *site* (in French *emplacement*), which is how it is defined today. In the Middle Ages, space was organized in hierarchically. The hierarchy was stable and defined by transcendent forces. Space was the localization of objects in this hierarchy. During the Renaissance this idea changed, and space was interpreted in a mathematical way: as a formal extension, a uniform area that could be measured objectively. A space was a set of homogeneous points that could be identified using numbers. This is the Galilean and the Cartesian idea of space, which can be represented by three numbered axes. In modern and contemporary society this idea of space has been replaced by the notion of the site: a set of relationships between objects.

These relationships are of different sorts. There are relationships of distance (close or far), of belonging (in or out of a defined group, for instance), of visibility, and of importance. The main characteristic of all these relationships is that they carry values. The fact that one belongs (or does not belong) to a given group signifies an adherence (or not) to a specific identity; the fact that one is more or less visible reflects a level of importance and power within a given group. In order to understand a space it is therefore necessary to understand the discourse that underlies the space and that structures it, and to recognize that the discourse is at the same time produced by the space itself. Another important characteristic of this idea of space is that it is in motion: what we do in it shapes it. In this sense, a space is not given or static; rather, it

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[7] M. Foucault, *Des Espaces Autres*, «Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité», V (1984), pp. 46-49.

changes according to what is going on inside it. Starting from this broad and general definition of space, we can try to define digital space.

If we understand the word digital as suggested in the previous pages, it is evident that digital space is really nothing more than actual space. The space in which we live is digital space – exactly as our culture is a digital culture. In this respect, when we talk about digital space, we do so in the same way that we talk about *modern* space or *contemporary* space. Digital space, in this sense, is not something separate, something that is elsewhere, a parallel space. Digital space is the space of our digital society, a space that has changed because of a complex set of cultural and technological shifts. This space is not completely new compared to ancient forms of space. Rather, it should be understood in continuity with other spatial structures that have characterized societies during their long histories.

The hypothesis that I propose here is that digital space is the organization of the totality of our reality thanks to writing. In order to validate this hypothesis, let us start with an analysis of the web. We should not simply identify the web with the digital. The digital is a generic concept that can be used to characterize our entire reality. Still, the web is undoubtedly one of the main causes of the emergence of the digital as an important category. One could say that our world and our culture have become digital in part because of the web. The web is one of the most important phenomena of digital world. Understanding the web can help us to understand the characteristics of digital culture in general. Moreover, the web creates new kinds of relationships between objects, and in turn these relationships become part of our space.

Let us consider the example of a student with a smart-phone recording a professor's lecture and then posting it on Facebook. This action changes a relationship between objects: what was outside moves inside. A person in another city who before could not see the professor can now view his lecture because it has been made available on Facebook. The smart-phone thus contributes to the creation of a new space, which is ultimately the result of a hybridization of the relationships that characterize the non-connected classroom and the new relationships that are determined by the connection. In this way, the student's classroom becomes a digital classroom. And the digital classroom is not only a classroom on the web; it is the hybridization of a non-connected, pre-digital classroom with a connected one, a mix of tables, chairs, students, professors, smart-phones, connections, people looking on Facebook, and so on.

The web, as I said earlier, is made of writing: everything on the web is written, even the pictures, even the videos. Everything is code. And this

code has the function of creating a peculiar layout of relationships between objects. In this sense, the web is mainly an architectural space. And this space is, in turn, characterized by a combination of writing and reading, which is the property of every space. The relationships structuring the web exist only as a function of the actions concretizing them.

Furthermore, the space of the web is concrete; it is neither immaterial nor fictitious. Its objects – whether data, information, documents, or identities – entertain material relationships with one another. There is a precise and distinctive distance between two objects on the web, exactly as there is in non-digital space. Between my Facebook profile and another there is a measurable distance – the quantity of friends separating us, for instance, or the rules of confidentiality as I have defined them. Between a given web page and another there is a distance determined by the degree of connection between them – a direct link, a search engine, a co-affiliation with a list[8].

In this space actions are carried out. Following Paul Mathias[9], the web should be considered fundamentally as writing. The actions of the web are written actions: to act on the web means to write. Indeed, most digital practices constitute writing in its most direct sense: we write a blog post, we update our Facebook «status», we comment on an article, we chat with a friend using the chat function of some social network, we enter the words for what we are looking for on a search engine, we write the URL in the address bar.

But these are not the only kinds of writing associated with the web. Other practices are less easily identifiable as writing: clicking and reading, for example. To read a page and then another in effect means to create a link between these two pages, a link that is registered, under a series of characters, on a computer. Internet providers are obligated to register the overall reading path of its clients, and so each click creates a material link between pages and objects. The action of the click thus contributes to the structure of the space.

Let us consider a more comprehensive example: the very simple and frequent experience of looking for a book on Amazon. One arrives at the main page, or to the page of a particular book if one has used a generic

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[8] M. Vitali-Rosati, *Digital Paratext. Editorialization and the Very Death of the Author*, in *Examining Paratextual Theory and Its Applications in Digital Culture*, edited by Nadine Desrochers – Daniel Apollon, IGI Global, 110-27: http://www.igi-global.com/book/examining-paratextual-theory-its-applications/97342.)

[9] P. Mathias, *De La Dychtologie*, in *Regards Croisés Sur L'Internet*, edited by E. Guichard, Villeurbanne, ENSSIB, 2011, pp. 55-67.

search engine like Google. Then one clicks on certain links: perhaps the link of the editor or the author, or maybe something else on the Amazon search engine. In this way, one arrives at another book's page. In doing so, the user creates a link between these two books' pages. The clicks are recorded in the Amazon database and so a relationship is created between two – or more – objects. The two books are linked, and this information in turn structures the digital space. Other users will be able to see this relationship. For example, the Amazon algorithm may recommend the second book to users who buy the first one. By clicking on a link, a user reduces the distance between two things, just as if he were taking two books from a library and putting them on the same shelf. The space we are in when we are on Amazon can actually be described. It is a set of relationships made by 1) Amazon's database, 2) Amazon's algorithm, 3) Amazon's graphics and ergonomics, 4) user writing (clicks, comments, etc.), 5) product and 6) a specific distribution system.

The idea that the web is a space is not a metaphor. The web is an actual space, a concrete and material one, because it is the structure of the relationships between objects. This space is a part of our actual space: as the structure of the distribution system shows, there is no separation between the space of the web and the space outside it. We live in this space, and we build and structure it with our actions, which primarily take the form of writing.

To summarize, digital space is a space like all other spaces, and we can identify five characteristics that define it.

1. Digital space is an architectural space that organizes the relationships between objects in our society.
2. Digital space is an actual space, the space we inhabit. The adjective 'digital' as it is used here refers to the very space we are living in today. The adjective cannot be limited to technologies: it has acquired a cultural meaning that signifies a set of characteristics, structures, and values that describe our society. Digital space is the space of digital society: digital space is the space where we live and where we act.
3. Digital space is a hybrid space. Some of the relationships that make this space – but not all of them – are determined by a network connection or by some other technology. In digital space, for example, the distance between two objects is determined both by the positions that these two objects have offline and by the positions they occupy within an online database. The same thing can be said about the visibility of objects in digital space: although we can see what is in front of us – on a computer screen, for instance – this 'in front of' is a hybridization of connected and

non-connected objects. My computer is in front of me, but my friend who is speaking to me via Skype is also in front of me.
4. Digital space is in movement. Our actions change it.

We shall now consider how this set of relationships is organized. What, we will ask, are the characteristics of digital space? The particular organization that is specific to digital space we will call 'editorialization'.

4. *Editorialization.*

The word 'editorialization', in the sense that I use it, is a neologism in English. It comes from the French *éditorialisation*. In English the word is a derivative of editorialize, which means – according to most dictionaries – «to express an opinion in the form of an editorial» or «to introduce opinion into the reporting of facts». In French the word has acquired a broader meaning and is related in particular to digital culture and to digital forms of producing knowledge. This shift in meaning, from an idea that denotes the expression of opinion to one that suggests the production of knowledge in the digital age, is actually quite useful and not particularly problematic; as we will see, the digital version of the term retains its association with the notion of opinion in that it refers to the production of content that expresses a kind of opinion or that offers a better way to see or interpret the world.

A resematization of this concept can also be very useful as a way of interpreting and understanding the structure of digital space and, by extension, the forms of authority that are found in it. Editorialization is more a whole theory than a simple concept. The word 'éditorialisation' was used by Bachimont in 2007[10] and then in a different way, in 2008, by Gérard Wormser and me[11]. Since then the word has been used more and more in French, but it is sometimes very difficult to understand precisely the sense in which scholars use the term, and even more difficult to track its usage during the last ten years.

For the purposes of clarity, I will here use the definition that has emerged from the research conducted by the laboratory *Écritures numériques et éditorialisation* (directed by Gérard Wormser and myself at the *Maison de*

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[10] B. Bachimont, *Nouvelles Tendances Applicatives: de l'indexation à l'éditorialisation*, in *L'indexation multimédia*, edited by P. Gross, Paris, Hermès, 2007, pp. 313-326.
[11] M. Vitali-Rosati, *Editorialization: Research Review*, http://blog.sens-public.org/marcellovitalirosati/editorialization-research-review/ 2015.

sciences de l'homme Paris Nord): «editorialization is the set of dynamics that produce and structure digital space. These dynamics can be understood as the interactions of individual and collective actions within a particular digital environment».

The Amazon example helps us to better grasp this definition. The editorialization of content in the Amazon space is the result of the dynamic interaction of the Amazon algorithm, the platform's graphics and ergonomics, the databases, the users' actions, and all sorts of practices that take place within the space. The totality of these interactions – always in motion and always changing – is what structures the space. And again, it is a hybrid space because it is both online and offline: the books in the warehouse are a part of the space, as are the users buying the books and interacting with the website.

Three dimensions of editorialization are implicit in this definition: the technological, the cultural, and the practical. In our definition we insist that editorialization has a relationship with a «particular digital environment», which means that editorialization is somehow related to specific technologies. The term editorialization was created in part as a way of understanding the impact of technology on the production of content, and certainly one aspect of editorialisation is the fact that there are certain devices, digital platforms, tools, networks, and protocols that, simultaneously, provide the context where the content is located and act as the elements that structure this content. This phenomenon has been studied by many scholars and defined, for example, as «affordance»[12] or interpreted as technological determinism[13]. The same consideration of the technological impact on content can be made for all content production and circulation technologies[14]. The digital environment is prescriptive in the sense that it determines the form of the content it can host. Which means that the technological dimension is crucial for editorialization. At the same time, editorialization should not be reduced to a question of technology.

Indeed, there exists a very complex relationship between technology and culture, which is why the cultural dimension is also crucial to our definition of editorialization. Certainly, when trying to understand the structure of digital space, it is important to avoid falling into what has been called

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[12] D. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things,* New York, Basic Books, 2002.
[13] F. Kittler, *Optical Media*, translated by A. Enns, Cambridge, Polity, 2009.
[14] See, for example, M. Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1992.

«technological determinism»[15], the view that technology's development is something almost mechanical – a progression – that it determines cultural change. The techno-deterministic position holds that a culture is determined by the developments of its technology. In fact, though, culture and technology are bound in something like a circular relationship: the convergence of certain cultural ideas and technological advances brings about change, and this change is in turn affected by both cultural and technological elements. Or, to put it in simpler language: culture influences technology, and technology influences culture.

The third element of editorialization is the practical one, which takes into account the fact that technological and cultural structures need practices in order to be actualized. Technological possibility and cultural tradition are not in themselves enough. If no one creates and uses hypertexts, then hypertexts would not exist. At the same time, practices are not simply applications of cultural and technological possibilities: practices are creative. This element underlines the crucial importance of collectivity in the editorialization process. The different forms of editorialization depend on the fact that specific actions become common – which means that groups of people begin doing them and they become practice. Consider the example of the hashtag. The action of putting a # before a word in the Twitter environment is a way of designating the word a keyword. This action was not predicted by the platform. Twitter was not conceived to manage keywords. Somebody began doing this, and then a group of people began doing the same thing, and then it became a practice. The practice influences the technology and shapes it, and – as the history of keywords clearly demonstrates – practices have a cultural background. In this way the three aspects of editorialization – the technological, the cultural, and the practical – are merged. We can only separate them theoretically.

Let us now try to synthesize these ideas so that we may ask again the question that was raised at the beginning of this paper: Can digital writing be subjected to the sort of critique that Valéry offers in his critique of writing?

Valéry criticized writing, we recall – and, in particular, the writing of philosophy – because it produces dead words. To write is to represent, and indeed Valéry's critique is principally a critique of the representational paradigm. This paradigm implies a separation between writing and the world:

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[15] R. Schroeder, *Rethinking Science, Technology, and Social Change*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007.

written words are a representation of the world. But, as the discussion above should have shown, this critique does not apply to digital writing. For one, digital space is constructed by writing. Writing is the very material with which digital space is built. Digital writing is thus a kind of architecture: writing, in digital space, is building. Secondly, digital space is not a self-contained space; it is our actual space, the space in which we live and act. As in a temple or any other physical structure, we can act in digital space. Finally, like every other actual space, digital space is in motion.

Ultimately, Valéry's critique does not apply in the digital age because digital writing is itself bringing about a crucial shift: from a representational paradigm to a performative paradigm. In order to understand this shift we will now examine the performative aspect of editorialization.

5. *The Performative Nature of Editorialization.*

The concept of performativity has had an important theoretical impact in recent decades. For the purposes of this paper, performativity will be defined as the normative aspect of an action. Every action can be observed either by focusing on its determined aspect – its context, the constraints involved, etc. – or by focusing on its undecided aspect – how it is new, how it produces something that was not previously decided upon. The quality of performativity refers to the fact that a particular action produces something that was not predicted – was not predictable – before the action itself. In this sense, the notion of performativity denotes an approach to reality that does not focus on the essence of things and that rejects the paradigm of representation.

Editorialization is performative for two main reasons: first, it is a process that does not follow a pre-defined schema; and second, it does not represent reality but produces it. Editorialization is an open process. This is one of the main differences between editorialisation and the concept of the printed edition. The open aspect of editorialization is in sharp contrast to the printing tradition, where an established protocol has to be followed, one that is decided upon before the editing and publishing process begins. In the case of editorialization, there is no protocol, and the different steps are decided one by one. At the same time, a particular editorialization process can become normative, which means that it can become a model for other processes. Editorialization creates its own norms in a performative way. One may object that digital platforms predetermine the process: the act of posting photos on Facebook in some way reflects the degree to which Facebook determines behaviour and even the whole process of publication.

This is obviously true, but it is also true that alternative uses of the platform remain possible and that it is sometimes very easy to get around the schema imposed by the platform. The Twitter hashtag is a clear example of the performativity of editorialization: the process takes a particular form that was not predicted, nor predictable, and this form then becomes a norm.

The other element of editorialization that places it in a performative paradigm has to do with its operational nature. Editorialization is a performative act in the sense that it tends to operate on reality rather than represent it. We read and we write in digital space – and in particular on the web – but most of the time this reading and writing has a precise operational purpose. When we are organizing a trip and we buy plane tickets on Expedia, for instance, we are writing something – the names of the departure city and of the arrival city, a travel schedule, our preferences – and this writing aims to do something: it aims to realize the travel. The written page created on Expedia – the page where the itinerary is presented, with all the information about the journey –has a distinctly performative quality: the document itself produces the travel. One could object that this is a very specific example that is not representative of most of our reading and writing practices, but there are numerous less obvious examples of how editorialization fits a performative paradigm.

Take the example of a review on Tripadvisor. We could locate this action in a representational paradigm: the review represents the restaurant. In keeping with the paradigm, we have a signifier (the review) and a signified (the restaurant) – or, using the same paradigm, a sense and a reference[16]. But this interpretation does not truly reflect the reality of the reviewing practice. In writing a review, in a sense one *produces* the restaurant. The review is a way of characterizing the restaurant: of making it more or less visible, for instance, or of deciding whether it is a fish or a meat restaurant. Writing a review means giving a particular existence to the restaurant. According to its rankings and reviews, the restaurant will take a particular position in the Tripadvisor space – as if its position on a street were changed. In order to say what the restaurant is, we must consider numerous factors, including its location (its address in the physical world), the name of its owner, and the dishes it serves, but also its position on Tripadvisor, its visibility on Google, and the collection of comments about it that can be found on online plat-

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[16] G. Frege, *Sense and Reference*, «The Philosophical Review» LVII (1948), 3, pp. 209-230.

forms. Editorialization contributes to the production of the restaurant because it is a part of its reality.

This consideration leads us to a discussion of the *ontological* nature of editorialization.

6. *The Ontological Nature of Editorialization.*

Let us consider again the opposition between the representational paradigm and the performative paradigm. According to the representational paradigm, we have reality on one hand and discourse on the other: editorialization could be interpreted as a discourse on reality and therefore as a form of imitation or mimesis. This paradigm has been fundamentally important in the history of Western thought, from Plato all the way to contemporary aesthetics studies.

But in digital space reality is a sort of hybridization of connected and non-connected objects. In this sense, reality tends to identify with what Luciano Floridi calls the 'infosphere'. This is Floridi's definition of the infosphere:

Minimally, the infosphere denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities, their properties, interactions, processes and mutual relations. It is an environment comparable to, but different from, cyberspace, which is only one of its sub-regions since the infosphere also includes offline and analogous spaces of information. Maximally, the infosphere is a concept that can also be used synonymously with reality, once we interpret the latter informationally. In this sense, the suggestion is that what is real is informational and what is informational is real[17].

The development of the web of things is proof of this fusion of reality and the infosphere, as the Amazon example showed. Hybridization emerges between the platform and the book in the warehouse. From a technical perspective we cannot properly say that the uniform identifier of an object (URI, for «uniform resource identifier») is a representation of that object. Indeed, the identifier has an operational power over the object, so that in a sense it becomes the object itself (the URI of Paris is not a representation of the city of Paris; it is the city itself). It is easy to demonstrate this thesis using the example of the distribution system: to order a book on Amazon and to receive it at home hardly requires any human action, and will in the future require less and less human action. Each product is identified by a unique

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[17] L. Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 41.

identifier that can be handled on the network, and this operation directly affects the product itself. I click on a book on Amazon; a robot will search for this book in a warehouse and deposit it on a drone that will deliver it to my address. There is thus no difference between the object of the book and its URI. It is important to underline that a URI does not refer to an object as a proper name: the URI is not a generic identifier for a set of objects (like the word «book»), or a set of identical objects (the same book, available in different copies). It refers – or at least it can refer – to a particular object.

For these reasons, it is impossible to consider digital space from a purely aesthetic point of view: the paradigm of digital space is an operational paradigm. We do things in digital space; we do not simply *look* at them. The critique that Alexander Galloway[18] directs at the work of Lev Manovich[19] is based on this principle. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich applies the paradigm of audiovisual media to interpret digital space: digital environments, he insists, must be understood as the space of screens and displays because they are something we look at. Galloway, however, points out that interfaces are not regulated by this looking structure but rather by an action structure. Cinema is about the aesthetic; digital is about action and therefore about ethics.

If we look at the editorialization process of a city like Paris, for instance, we see that it would include all the digital maps of Paris (Google maps, Mappy, Openstreetmap); it would also include the trip reviews written by travelers on travel platforms such as Expedia and Tripadvisor, data on Wikipedia or Dbpedia, miscellaneous images, as well as institutional websites (the website of the City of Paris, the websites of its countless museums). When one walks in the city, one is located in an area that is produced by all these practices. To be in Paris is to be in a space in which walls, buildings, and architecture coexist with Google maps, information on restaurants, museum opening hours, and an endless variety of other narratives about the city. The city is in fact formed by the aggregate of all these elements.

Editorialization, we can therefore conclude, is a way of producing reality and not a way of representing it.

7. *The Multiple Nature of Editorialization.*

The performative paradigm determines the multiple nature of editorialization: if every act of editorialization produces a reality, then reality must be

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[18] A. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Cambridge Polity, 2012.
[19] L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2002.

multiple because there are multiple acts of editorialization. This structure raises an ontological problem, though: how can we define the essence of reality if there are many essences?

The advantage of the representational paradigm is that it is based on the idea of a unique reality that can be represented in different ways. According to this paradigm one can judge the value of a single representation by analyzing its resemblance to the original.

Abandoning the representational paradigm means confronting many different realities and not having the possibility of choosing between them. This is why editorialization produces a layered reality, a reality that is composed of several different and quite autonomous layers. And this is why the classical ontological approach is not useful for an analysis of digital space: digital space is multiple – originally multiple, one could say – and ontology seeks for an original unity. The ontological approach must be replaced by a meta-ontological approach, which means a theory that accepts an original multiplicity, the multiply-essential character of reality.

Let us look at some other examples. A Facebook profile could be considered – according to the representational paradigm – as the representation of the user of whom the profile is the profile. This means that we have on the one hand a 'real' person, the user, and on the other a representation of this person, the profile. We could compare these two objects in order to understand whether the profile is 'true' or 'false', and whether it is faithful to the 'original' object. The idea beyond this paradigm is that the person has a unique essence and the profile tries to grasp this essence. The picture of the profile should thus be as close as possible to the person. The aesthetics of the Venetian Vedutismo tradition is a perfect example of this idea: a painting is only as good as it is close to reality, and the goal of a good painter is to push the resemblance to its apex.

But if we understand the online profile not as a form of representation, but rather as a kind of production of identity, we will see that there can be many different identities for the same person: the Facebook profile, the Twitter profile, the blog profile, the profile defined on a platform like Amazon, the profile as it is defined by a research engine, and, finally, the person as a user, her/his cloths, etc. All these different forms create a dynamic conjuncture of circumstances that constitute the identity. The person as a user is only one of many threads. The identity of Marcello Vitali-Rosati is created by my actions, what people think of me, my online profiles, the data collected on me by various platforms and algorithms, the narratives people produce about me on the web or in the university, the comments my students make about me, and so on. There is no 'original' object in all these.

If ontology is the science of the essence, then meta-ontology is the ontology of *multiple* essences.

We could go even further and say that it is impossible to speak about a single «conjuncture», simply because it is impossible to isolate one from another. As I indicated earlier, editorialization is an open process, which means that sharp boundaries cannot be drawn between one platform and another or between one practice and another. The plural 'conjunctures' should always be used.

Meta-ontology should be understood as a performative ontology that engenders the emergence of certain conjunctures. Each strand of meta-ontological discourse is a performative gesture that contributes to the construction of reality. In this sense, I propose meta-ontology as a performative philosophy that is not opposed to architecture, as in Valéry's critique.

The meta-ontological approach – which I first proposed in 2003 and have developed in subsequent books and articles[20] – is still a work in progress, and probably always will be because of its very characteristics. But this dynamic and performative approach may provide an answer to Valéry's critique of philosophy because it allows us to make philosophy an architectural discipline: writing philosophy means participating in the building of actual space.

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[20] M. Vitali-Rosati, *Riflessione e trascendenza. Itinerari a partire da Levinas,* Pisa, ETS, 2003 and Id., *Corps et virtuel. Itinéraires à partir de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Harmattan, 2009.