

Remarks on virtuality I – The metaphor and the mythological bond¹

Dr. JOAQUIM BRAGA
R&D Unit LIF – Language, Interpretation, Philosophy
University of Coimbra
Portugal

Abstract:

This paper presents the thesis that a theoretical analysis of the concept of “virtuality” should start, above all, by a study of the links between the structures of language and what through them is named and described as virtual. Make intelligible such relations favors not only an analytical development of the concept in question, but also brings into play the forms in which language itself constitutes and expresses the reality. One of those forms is the metaphor, which here allows to trace a “mythological bond” between virtuality and discourse.

Keywords: actual; discourse; metaphor; reality; virtual.

From the epistemic regime of a given historical period, and the semantics resulting from it, come upon, in most cases, certain key concepts that help us to identify and characterize it. Ours is no exception to this. On the contrary, the advent of new digital technologies has given rise to an intense theoretical debate on contemporary society, which has the concept of “virtual” as its main touchstone. In fact, the current conceptions on virtuality tend to focus on the description of the changes triggered by technical and digital media (Rötzer 1995/1998), laying, often, on the concept of virtual opposite to the concept of real. From this

¹ This work received financial support from FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) funds through POPH/FSE/EU. To all financing sources the author is greatly indebted.

opposition does not derive only hermeneutical conflicts concerning the use of the term “virtual”, but also a reduction of the concept to phenomena engendered by new technologies, as, for example, the so-called “virtual reality”. How often tends to happen with the humanist critique to technological advances, have similarly arisen several anthropological visions that seek to define a new human condition and an alleged post-ontological status of man. Taking the digital space created by contemporary technology as a paradigm for a *Virtualisierung des Seins*, the media thinker Achim Bühl has traced transition points from the forms of post-industrial sociability to a “virtual society” (Bühl 1997/2000). This supposed radical virtualization of society has led to several contrasting theoretical positions, which, as is usually the case, oscillate between utopian feelings and dystopian feelings. According to the optimistic prognosis of Pierre Lévy, the “virtual worlds” – distinct from the “network worlds” – will enable a deepening of human intelligence (Levy 1997, 100). Quite another perspective is advocated by Jean Baudrillard. In his pessimistic diagnosis, the author defends the thesis that virtuality’s main scope is the annihilation of the real through its own duplication (Baudrillard 1995, 92).

However, this reduction of virtuality to technical-digital phenomena separates us from understanding virtuality in its philosophical sense and, at the same time, obscures the implications that they have for the human perception and communication. No less important is, on the other hand, the conceptual emptying of the term “virtual”, which being indiscriminately associated with the digital world and its constructions, loses its analytical and critical referential basis. Thus, a decentralization of virtuality theoretical horizon is an important factor in understanding the several dynamics of contemporary society as well as to engage a critical reflection on its conceptual spectrum. But this decentralization begins, in our view, with the study of the links between virtuality and discourse.

Despite the immense literature published on virtuality, the thematic analysis have mainly favored a strictly oculo-centric approach, anchored in the transformation of the visual sensory experiences that digital technology imposes on its users. The language domain has been so little investigated, or, at best, is limited to reflections on hypertextuality. Taking into account this line of thought, the main subject that runs through this reflection can be formulated as a question, namely: *What makes virtuality a phenomenon likely to metaphorical descriptions?* In accordance with this, any given answer already brings in itself another question: *What are the fundamental structures of metaphor – and language in general –, that allow it to serve as expression of virtuality?*

The metaphor theory has always privileged the substitute semiotic nature of discursive signs, seeing, particularly, in the metaphorical expression a kind of fictional synonymia of common language. The first translates what, in the second, is considered be part of an inexpressible order, to the point that language, as a whole, could be considered through the differential code “expressible-inexpressible”. If we relate this code with the *binomium* “actual-virtual”, soon we will fall into the temptation to equate the actual with the expressible and the virtual with the inexpressible. That is, in other words, the metaphor would be the exclusive symbolic correlate – discursive and non-discursive – of virtuality. The flow of metaphorical constructions and descriptions of the virtual reveals, however, that this "game of equivalences" is implicitly performed and, in many cases, has as immediate result the misconception of conceiving virtuality as mere denial of reality. In these cases, the use of metaphor serves both to show the alleged deceptive nature of the virtual, and to encourage the illusion of its transcendence over the real – as, for example, in the rhetoric of “virtual reality”. That metaphorical tropes are used for this purpose, is not, at first glance, an entirely misplaced application. Here you can enforce

the rule that the descriptions of a new phenomenon generally tend to be conducive to the inclusion of allegorical and suggestive elements, exhibiting, thus, language structures the novelty effect of the phenomenon, and the lack of specific vocabulary to define it. This brings itself, often, several ideological encodings, insofar as it can promote narratives distorting the true nature of the phenomenon in question and, through them, thicken, even more, the discourse haziness.

In the hypothetical “game of equivalences” prevails, therefore, the principle of a double substitution: metaphor replaces language; virtuality replaces reality. And it is in this narrow sense, that such idea will sustain the phenomenon that I want to designate as *mythological bond* between virtuality and discourse, to the point of the second, in a concrescent way, embraces the suggestive character of the former. Obviously this does not exclude the fact that, in many situations and depending on the pragmatic reading about their linguistic context, the use of metaphor first have an explicit substitution function, as it tends, in fact, happening to a large part of the signs associated with digital communications devices. However, the idea of substitution – whose semiotic nature is based on the classic formulation *aliquid stat pro aliquo* – applied to the phenomenon of virtuality, prevents us from understanding its true implications and, on the other hand, no less important, transforms a elementary sign function – the substitution function – in a denial state of reality.

Now the symbolic representation of the "actual" is not mechanically reducible to the sphere of “expressible”. Quite the contrary. The expression of the “actualized” does not simply obey any order of discursive transparency, established beyond the metaphorical spectrum of language. The intent of excluding the sphere of the virtual of the construction of reality, and, in parallel, taking the actual as a synonym for "real", makes that which is being actualized solely and exclusively conceived within a factual referentiality, perfectly translatable into an

equivalent discursive order. As we define it, the concept of virtuality should be situated inside the meaning structures of psychic and social systems, since both have in the formation and organization of meaning their main operative morphology. The *binomium* “actual-virtual” does not only refer to consciousness's own operations, as it was still present in Husserl's phenomenology. A mono-systemic conception of virtuality can be overcome if we conceive the operations of psychic and social systems anchored in meaning structures. Meaning, being an operation through selection of possibilities, enables the simultaneous occurrence of two contrasting systemic dimensions: that which is actualized leads to a virtualization of the possibilities that are not actualized. This thesis, which can be also found, albeit with other implications, in Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1993) and Yves Barel (Barel 1979 186), is formulated by Niklas Luhmann as follows: «Da Sinn aber nur als Differenz von gerade Aktuellem und Möglichkeitshorizont Sinn sein kann, führt jede Aktualisierung immer auch zu einer Virtualisierung der daraufhin anschließbaren Möglichkeiten» (Luhmann 1984, 100). That is, the constitution of meaning always follows a dual operative referentiality: the actual requires the virtual and *vice versa*. The meaning connections, which occur within a horizon of possibilities, inevitably entail selection's operations. However, the possibilities that are not included by each selection act are not merely eliminated, but rather neutralized, that is, the continuity and stability of selective processes always depend on the world remaining as «Horizont der Verweisung auf andere Möglichkeiten» (Luhmann 1990, 12).

Indeed, what is actualized by language does not, structurally, correspond to what is actualized out of the communication domain. The functional structures of the latter differ from the psychic systems structures. So, as often tends to happen, the actualization of a factual event through communication may involve the use of metaphorical forms of

the language itself. Structurally, the “seen” and the “described” do not band together; and the metaphor tends, among other functions, to mark this cognitive discrepancy. This discrepancy brings into play the articulation “actual-virtual” in the differential nexus (mediated by language) between psychic and communication systems, and as a result of it, it can no longer be located in relation to a *real without virtual*. The metaphorical expression seems here, so to speak, fill the existing structural gaps between perception and communication, contributing, in this way, so that language prevails as a coupling medium of both. Because communication has not direct contact to the sensible data of perception, the metaphorical tropes mitigate this impossibility and generate a kind of suggestive atmosphere of the sensible world. The atmosphere is “suggestive” since, at the core of metaphor, there is an inversion of the elementary sign functions, through which the “signifier” obtains a symbolic primacy over the “signified”. With the symbolic prevalence of the signifier, therefore, language is able to import more sensibility suggestions.

At the technological level, the established discursive relations add huge complexity to symbolic mediation, because technological inventions were always accompanied by reformulations of individual and social imaginaries. The main functions of a new medium are incorporated in the discursive practices, particularly under the form of fanciful, futuristic, utopian and dystopian predicates. It is, at bottom, an ekphrastic discourse, by which the description of a medium is performed by another distinct medium. The following allegorical formulations of Marcos Novak are a good example of that:

«Cyberspace is liquid. Liquid cyberspace, liquid architecture, liquid cities. Liquid architecture is more than kinetic architecture, robotic architecture, an architecture of fixed parts and variable links. Liquid architecture is an architecture that breathes, pulses, leaps as one form and lands as another. Liquid architecture is an architecture whose

form is contingent on the interests of the beholder; it is an architecture that opens to welcome me and closes to defend me; it is an architecture without doors and hallways, where the next room is always where I need it to be and what I need it to be. Liquid architecture makes liquid cities, cities that change at the shift of a value, where visitors with different backgrounds see different landmarks, where neighbourhoods vary with ideas held in common, and evolve as the ideas mature or dissolve.» (Novak 1991, 250)

There is, in these forms of *Ekphrasis*, however, a fancied amplification that does not always keep up a correspondence to the boundaries of the technological medium main functions. Here, the metaphorical approach tends to carry more suggestive content, since technological devices turn, exponentially – as well demonstrated by the descriptions of Novak –, the ways in which our sensibility articulates information from the environment that surrounds it. As asserts Don Ihde in relation to technofantasies, the user of a new device has the propensity to feed the paradoxical desire to overcome the machine itself and the conditions that it imposes; he «wants what the technology gives but does not want the limits, the transformations that a technologically extended body implies. There is a fundamental ambivalence towards the very human creation of our own earthly tools.» (Ihde 1990, 75-76).

This “ambivalence” also seems to be alluding to the case of the phenomenon of “virtual reality”. With digital devices, the simulation capabilities have increased exponentially, providing, to human beings, new ways of experiencing reality and to access information that otherwise would not be possible. But, in parallel, quickly the effect of simulation was being translated as a virtual state, whose ontological nature would be of a second reality. Simulation, then, comes to the discourse – theoretical and non-theoretical – as an entry point to the desired virtual world. Bearing in mind the language structures, it is therefore crucial to inquire the reasons of such artificial duplication of

the real. This question can lead us to assert that, through the metaphorical utterance of a parallel reality to our day's life, language mimetizes the cognitive effects of simulation technologies and, thus, ultimately generates for itself discursive equivalents of the same effects. This is, strictly speaking, a mythological bond. As in simulation experiences, language, via metaphorical expression, simulates an independent, fictitious referential field. However, since in these experiences tend to occur a greater import (= immersion) of the user's body, the discursive versions of such immersive phenomenon show, by contrast, a "imagination without body", able to draw the suggestiveness of a reality without physical limits, without material foundations, a "liquid" reality, as that formulated by Novak.

We could then say that "virtual reality" is justified, first of all, as a discursive, but never as an ontological phenomenon. The language, in this sense, is faced with the need to duplicate the real – and, because of that, to establish a paradoxical distinction between real and virtual – to weave a referential field for simulation technologies. Of course, in doing so, language permits fanciful descriptions regarding the technology's limitless possibilities, to the point of generating a post-human condition, full of machine-like scenarios and where individuals gradually release their own bodies. What these facts show us, at least at the theoretical level, is that one of the main consequences of the mythological bond lies, precisely, in the illusion of a full concrescence between perception and communication. By reason of discursive suggestiveness, without a structural difference of both, their operative capabilities become uninterruptible transferable, generating, thus, the illusion that perception communicates and communication perceives.

Such ontological reification of the virtual, operated by language, goes against the normative idea of the virtual as an opposite concept of the actual and not, by the contrary, of the

real itself. If one accepts the principle core that virtuality reflects the sphere of the non-actualized meaning possibilities (the possibilities are excluded – but not necessarily eliminated – of the actualization processes), then it is justifiable to find a new relationship between virtuality and metaphorical expression. In many of our everyday communicative acts we use, sometimes, certain metaphorical expressions to refer to anything that is not likely to be fully actualized and, in a way, bears the mark of the inexpressible. From that we can extract a maxim: *The higher the number of virtualized possibilities the greater the metaphorical expression of speech*. What tells us this phenomenon? It tells us, in general, that language is not indifferent to the possibilities of communication, which are not actualized. Language also is shaped by what it excludes of the communication operations; and quickly can become, as implied by Sigmund Freud's *Die Verneinung*, the “said” as symbol of the “unsaid”, the “no” as symbol of the “yes” (Freud 1925).

The assumption that the coupling of perception and simulation – and “immersion” as its immediate effect – gives rise to the so-called “virtual reality” is, therefore, influenced by the substantialist vision of traditional ontologies supported by the Aristotelian logic of the *tertium non datur*. Under this assumption, there are even authors who refer to virtuality making use of a theological semantic, especially those who consider it an immaterial ontological stage, carrying true religious experiences (Dyson 1995, 31). However, what we call “reality” obeys to meaning constructions (psychological, social, cultural etc.) so contingent and complex that are hard to separate and duplicate through artificial mechanisms, even if these are able to mimetize some physiological functions of the human body. The myth of the technological reproduction of reality, so present in the contemporary imaginary, seems to make chorus with some neuroscience claims that, through picture devices and certain measurement techniques, ensure to identify all the neural mechanisms related to the construction

of reality and the *self*. Hypothetically, the existence of a second reality, as a negation of our lived reality, it would be only possible if the actual was removed from the meaning processes. But this is clearly impossible, since neither reality nor virtuality are possible for us without the dynamic inclusion of the actual. However, the immersive effect caused by some digital systems cannot be understood as a full actualization of the virtual, like, so to speak, a perfect osmosis between actual and virtual, vanishing the differences there between. Again, hypothetically, if that was possible, we would not refer to this phenomenon as an autonomous reality form and we would only have access to it through a perpetual dream. Both simulation and immersion are phenomena pertaining to our psychic systems and their cognitive operations – indeed, they are required for their *autopoiesis*. The fact that some digital systems expand these phenomena does not imply, *per se*, an ontological duplication of reality. Despite the deceptive influence of the discursive structures and practices, the reality itself also lays in both simulation as immersion.

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