

Athanasios Beroutsos

The game of the “matryoshka dolls” as a means of appropriating and applying a mediated reality.

Supervising Professor:

Georgios Harvalias

Academic Associates:

Konstantinos Bovilas

Ioannis Tsaknakis

Athens School of Fine Arts

Postgraduate Programme:

“Digital Forms of Art”

Athens 2003

The game of the “matryoshka dolls” as a means of appropriating and applying a mediated reality.

“In most modern literatures, every elaborate piece of writing counts among its techniques the one that consists in taking passages, fragments, moments from another’s style and making them come alive again in some way, by quoting them.”¹

¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini. Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Louis Comolli. In: P. P. Pasolini, Thessaloniki Film Festival 1997, p. 30.

Contents

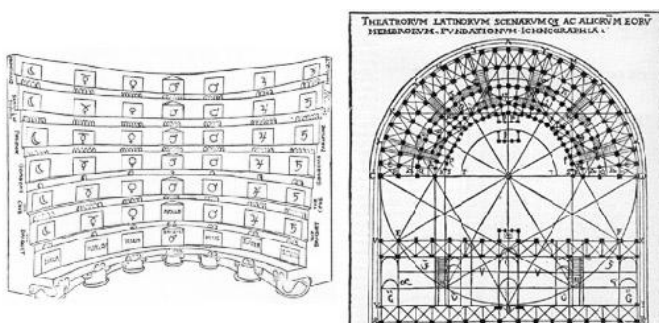
A. The Theatre of Memory	6
B. Description and analysis of the structure of the work	10
C. Issues raised by this work	12
1. The question of reconfiguration	12
2. The origins and handling of mediated representations	14
3. The question of the script	20
4. The influence of computer games on the way an artist's works are presented	22
D. Bibliography	25

The Theatre of Memory

The work I present takes the form of a multimedia application. Consequently, the tool used to build it (the computer) has played a decisive role in shaping the structure of my work. The way a computer works is based on spatial, location-based mnemonic techniques. It is this same spatial technique that shapes the presentation system I use.



We find the same spatial technique in the work of Giulio Camillo Delmino². In today's terms, in 1550 Camillo created an installation in space which he called the "Theatre of Memory". In essence, this installation is nothing other than an attempt to realise all the applications that were later put into operation to create the computer environment, as the structural logic we meet in computer games and interactive presentations.



Camillo, a typical man of the Middle Ages whose work heralds the coming of the Renaissance, is deeply influenced by ancient Greek

² Giulio Camillo Delmino (1480–1544). A philosopher with humanist training, active in Padua, Venice and Paris.

thought and mythology. Thus the myth of the poet Simonides³ concerning the “Art of Memory” becomes the starting point for the construction of a wooden theatre⁴, which could be entered by at most two people at a time. There, a multitude of small boxes, arranged in various ways and categories, contained inscriptions linked to a multitude of images, figures and symbols. The boxes were arranged like an amphitheatre in seven zones and as many tiers. The viewer stood at the centre of the theatre’s stage and could in this way “read” its rows of seats. A kind of associative connection and philosophical–ideological conception grouped these boxes together. The whole construction rests on the complex way our memory works. And if we take into account the possibility of viewing all these boxed representations at once, we realise that we are dealing with nothing other than a three-dimensional realisation of the “window” logic applied to a computer desktop.

Influenced by Camillo, Lull⁵ and Giordano Bruno⁶ built their own memory systems, which closely resemble the Aristotelian telescope of Father Emanuel described by Umberto Eco in his book “The Island of the Day Before”⁷, except that there the world is classified according to the Aristotelian categories. Our whole world is divided into ten categories: Substance, Quantity, Quality, Relation, Action, Passion, Position, Place, Time and Possession. The subdivisions of all the categories, which are

3 After a legendary incident, the poet Simonides of Ceos realised that memory works spatially, combining images and shapes with information and symbols.

4 First set up in Venice and later in Paris.

5 Lull’s main aim was to help people know reality fully. He therefore classified the basic ideas or categories of the mind together with the various ways of combining them, so that, with these data in mind, one could carry out even the most complex logical process that would reveal some aspect of reality. The result was three concentric circles, each divided into nine sections, in which he wrote the letters expressing the basic concepts. Of these circles, the outer one was fixed while the others rotated around their common centre. In this way various combinations of the letters representing the basic concepts were obtained. Through these combinations, according to Lull, the structure of reality is depicted.

6 Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). The art of memory proposed by Bruno rests on the two basic elements of the ancient tradition inaugurated by Simonides: first, reference to images, and second, the arrangement of those images in a particular order. The system consists of seven concentric circles divided into thirty sections, containing the whole world of the senses, the arts and the sciences. The circles move and correspond to other elements, creating dozens of combinations through which the person using it remembers and recalls events, actions and words.

7 Umberto Eco. *The Island of the Day Before*. Gnosi Publications, p. 95 ff.

hundreds if not thousands, are written on small slips of paper. These slips are in turn placed in drawers set on cylinders turned by a crank. Nine cylinders with nine drawers each make 81 drawers which, with one turn of the crank, begin to rotate on the cylinders independently of each other; when they stopped, one could read triads of words in random combinations, which nevertheless made sense and recalled images of memory. This, after all, was the purpose of the Aristotelian telescope: through linguistic combinations, to call up ideas and knowledge that were new (in relation to what had already been thought) to the person using it.

Camillo's "installation" corresponds to the one realised by Peter Greenaway⁸ under the title "One Hundred Objects to Represent the World"⁹. As Greenaway himself says, his intention was to make a "list" of things which, through a logic of classification and archiving, would leave nothing out: it would contain every material, every technique, every science, every art, every construction and so on¹⁰. This whole obsession with classification has to do with the affinities and references of one thing to another, which are nevertheless set out and presented in a spatial arrangement that brings them all to the same level.

There are many indications of the universe of files as a tableau: "After the computer there is not only a horizon of the world, but also a horizon of representation. Representation was, because of the different storage materials, fragmented, multiple, an array. The tableau is now information, [...] the uniformity of information. [...] The world is realised only on the surface of representation."¹¹ There is, however, also the "laid table" in Brecht and Eisenstein, as understood by Roland Barthes, who, starting from Diderot's "Aesthetics", dominated by the aesthetics of the theatre stage and of the painted picture (tableau), writes: "The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out, with clear edges, irreversible, incorruptible, which pushes everything around it into non-existence, unnamed, and promotes into the light,

⁸ English film director and visual artist.

⁹ A work set up in Vienna in 1999.

¹⁰ Peter Greenaway. *The Stairs*. Geneva: The Location. Merrell Holberton, London 1994, pp. 14–15.

¹¹ Holger van den Boom, "Künstliche Intelligenz und Fiktion", in Rötzer and Weibel: *Strategien des Scheins. Kunst.Computer.Medien*. 1991, p. 107.

into view, everything it brings into its field.”¹² Even so, the tableau here is still very geometric and stable, and far removed from the dynamic and unstable tableau of the digital screen. For this reason Barthes implies that there is also another notion of the work and of politics, “characterised by the dispersal of the tableau, the fragmentation of the composition, the wandering of the ‘partial organs of form’”, thus approaching the “ruptured surface” and the “partial objects” of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.¹³

Such stylistic elements, like starting points and nodal points, can be found in works and genres belonging to a poetics of the “open work of art”. As structural models – interfaces – for such arrangements, spatial formations work best, since they allow non-synchronous connections between different materials, media and practices. Thus, for example, maps, like the imaginary plan of a city or a house in classical mnemotechnics, are elements that function as cultural spaces of memory, and one can meet them in many ways in literature too: for instance in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which projects the entirely random day of 16 June 1904 onto the map of Dublin; or in the cross-section of a Parisian apartment building, which can serve as the “home page”¹⁴ of a novel, where the technique of *mise en abyme* makes a topographical reading possible; or – to go deeper into the details (and so connect with the founding myth of the “Art of Memory”) – on a table on which various objects are spread out; or, finally, on a “desktop”¹⁵ as the starting point for an artistic topography of occasional images.

12 Roland Barthes. *Image – Music – Text*. 1988, p. 84.

13 See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Anti-Oedipus*. Rappa, Athens 1977.

14 Home page

15 Desktop

Description and analysis of the structure of the work

In the introduction, a video presents a short journey through a contemporary American metropolis. The journey ends inside an “exhibition space” bearing the characteristic sign “The World of Edward Hopper”.



All the sections that follow are interactive.

The tour is articulated through transitions from one space to another. These transitions take place one inside the other, as in the game of the “matryoshka dolls”. So in place of each doll, a different painting by the artist appears: the paintings thus act as nodal points.

The first transition to another space happens through a painting depicting the interior of a hotel. The hotel is a fitting space to “receive” each viewer and at the same time a “living” space for presenting the works of Edward Hopper. A person there who disappears, leaving a book behind, lets the visitor realise that this object is an active area, which then leads to the second level of the hotel; there, after a tour of another space where works by the painter are set out, we pass through one of them into another space, which is the space of the painting itself.





Using an element of the painting (a door), the user enters a space that refers to no work by Hopper, apart from the fleeting presence of a figure cut out from one of his paintings.

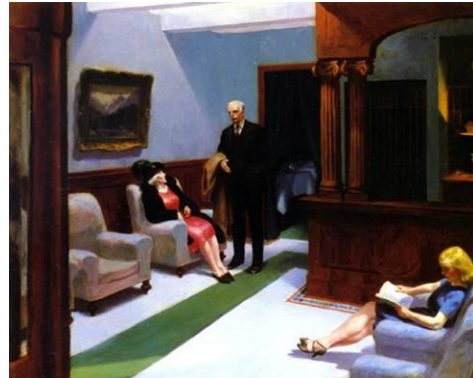
There the “puzzle” of the artist’s self-portrait is also completed: by assembling the pieces of the image collected during the tour, we are led to the last nodal point, a book presenting biographical and other information about the artist, as well as a series of his works. The viewer can thus recognise the works met during the tour and receive information about the painter’s work and life. By leafing through the book, the visitor can return to the space where the tour began.

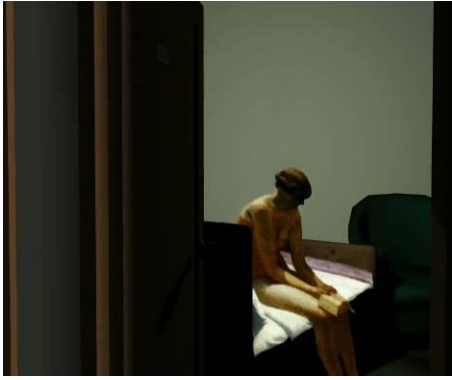
Issues raised by this work

1. The question of reconfiguration

A central question, which I first of all put to myself, is whether, through the appropriation of the work of a painter such as Edward Hopper, it is possible to convey the aesthetics and atmosphere of his works across the whole of my construction. That is, the possibility of applying a mediated reality – mediated by the painter himself.

The application consists of the three-dimensional reconfiguration of three of Hopper's works. It is this intervention in the works that makes the tour come alive, since it is not a simple, cumulative display of paintings. In this sense, the choice of this particular painter was made for “functional” reasons, because I judged that the style and atmosphere of his works are such that they do not look “foreign” when placed in an environment built with three-dimensional graphics.





2. The origins and handling of mediated representations

The prehistory of “re-enactments” and “reconfigurations” of artworks is long, and is due to the following main reasons:

a. The view that regards the whole of Art History as a code to be used: that is, the dialectic that develops within art. Here, besides visual artists, film-makers also treated their works through this prism. The examples are countless: a large part of German Expressionism in cinema; directors such as Luchino Visconti, Andrei Tarkovsky and others.

b. As an answer to problems posed by the body of Art History that concern a particular work or creator. For example, the films of Marguerite Duras and Peter Greenaway.

c. “References” to the works of others, as an indication of the “origins” of the present work and as a key to reading it.

d. The sense of prestige that comes from the superficial use of recognised, established models of aesthetics, and therefore of ideology; for example, the frequent re-enactments of paintings through photography¹⁶ (at least in its early days), so that it would be accepted as a medium of “artistic expression”.

Thus we have re-enactments of paintings by Vermeer through photography by Richard Polak (1915), and in the same way re-enactments of works by Jacques-Louis David such as “The Oath of the Horatii” and “The Triumph of the Republic” by R. Y. Young (1900), while Gérôme (1885) and Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1918) re-enacted works by the Pre-Raphaelites.



¹⁶ Aaron Scharf. Art and Photography. Penguin, UK 1968.

In cinema, directors' references to artworks are very many¹⁷, but re-enactments – that is, recreating a tableau vivant in front of the lens – are rarer, and usually charged with a special meaning that makes these recreations decisive for the film in question.

As early as 1944, Sergei Eisenstein, in his film “Ivan the Terrible”, borrowed framing and the placing of actors from painters such as Viktor M. Vasnetsov and Ilya Repin. Scenes from the film come close to re-enactment.¹⁸

Three films by Pier Paolo Pasolini contain references to and re-enactments of paintings. In “Mamma Roma” (1962) there are references to the work of Andrea Mantegna¹⁹, while in “The Decameron” (1971) there are re-enactments of Giotto's frescoes in Padua. In “La Ricotta”²⁰ (“The Cheese”, 1962) these re-enactments play the role of a confrontation with an alien aesthetic. As the director himself says: “The pictorial parts of the film are quotations, with a fairly clear function: they are quotations of two Mannerist painters, Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo. I reconstructed their paintings perfectly, not because they represent my own view of things, nor because I love them: it is not a reconstruction in the first person, but simply the representation of the state of mind in which the director, who is the protagonist of La Ricotta, conceives a film on the Passion. A conception that is in perfect contrast with my own when I made the Gospel²¹, and which I found the chance to attribute, with some malice, to the director's character. It is not that I have something against the directors of biblical films: this is not a polemic against bad taste, but against the abuse of good taste.”²²

17 See typical examples in Pier Marco De Santi, Cinema e pittura. Giunti, Art Dossier No 16, Florence 1987.

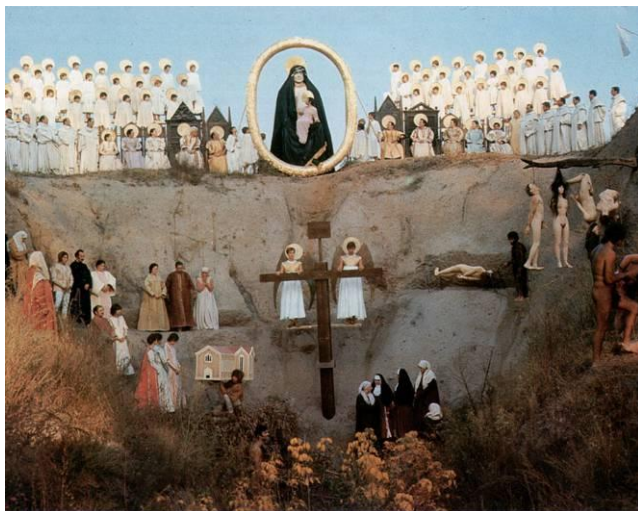
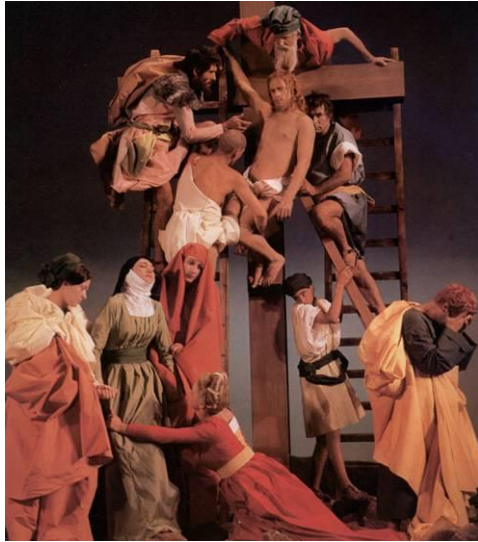
18 A characteristic scene of “re-enactment” is the death of the Tsar's son, taken from Repin's painting “Ivan the Terrible and his Son on 16 November 1581”, a work of 1885.

19 “Cristo Morto” (The Dead Christ), c. 1485.

20 The third episode of the portmanteau film Rogopag, or Laviamoci il cervello (Let's Wash Our Brains).

21 P. P. Pasolini's film “Il Vangelo secondo Matteo” (The Gospel According to St Matthew).

22 Pier Paolo Pasolini. Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Louis Comolli. In: P. P. Pasolini, Thessaloniki Film Festival 1997, p. 33.



In most of Akira Kurosawa's films we see stylised shot compositions and arrangements of crowds in space that come directly from his country's pictorial tradition. The way the actors are placed, the movements of their bodies, the absolute "orderliness" of the staging are nothing other than an ingenious "reproduction" of the visual vocabulary we meet mainly in the woodcuts of the Edo period.²³

What relates directly to the attempt at a three-dimensional representation of an artwork is the famous scene in Kurosawa's "Dreams" in which a series of works by Vincent van Gogh "come to life". Here the painting "opens" like a window onto another world, a reality materialised by the artist himself, into which the protagonist dives. So we have the scene of Vincent van Gogh wandering inside his own work, realised with a purely cinematic technique that points ahead to the later modelling of three-dimensional graphics. The relative incompatibility between the "painted set" and the figure of the actor does not trouble the viewer, since the whole undertaking manages to be dreamlike, thanks to the delicate handling of certain details, such as the flapping of the crows' wings together with the sound of their cawing.



More importantly, throughout this part of the film, as in the others, Kurosawa's evident intention is for the scenes to be taken as conventions: so at every filmic moment the viewer is not completely absorbed by the spectacle, since the obvious stage design takes him out of it. This is also the source of a playful and "innocent" feeling that runs through the whole film.

23 Edo: a period of Japanese history (1616–1868), named after the capital Edo, today's Tokyo.

In video art, Bill Viola, in his work “The Greeting”, uses the painting “The Visitation” by the Italian painter Jacopo Pontormo²⁴. In Viola’s work a sequence of images shows the interactions of three women against an industrial urban landscape. Two women begin a conversation and are interrupted by the arrival of a third; the newcomer greets the elder of the two, evidently her friend, while ignoring the other.

The woman who has arrived whispers an urgent message in her friend’s ear. She isolates the other woman, with whom she shyly exchanges simple courtesies.

The projection is extremely slow, thus emphasising a momentary gesture. Through the slowing down it strongly recalls, in the viewer’s mind, the stillness of the painted moment.



Marcelo Ricardo Ortiz²⁵, in the short film “Guernica” (2002), made entirely with a 3D program, uses the logic of the cut-out to detach a figure from Picasso’s painting of the same name, which he then models. This figure “wanders” through three successive spaces, only to end up two-dimensional in its real space, the painting from which it was cut. These three spaces belong to three other

²⁴ Jacopo Carucci Pontormo (1494–1556), Italian Mannerist painter.

²⁵ Marcelo Ricardo Ortiz. Brazilian 3D animator from the Vancouver school; his work can be seen on his personal website at www.mrsolo.com

artists: Van Gogh, Dalí and Escher. The “passage” through these paintings supports the script, which is based on the lyrics of a song heard throughout the tour. The succession of dissimilar pictorial spaces and their use as a “background” creates the feeling of a mini video-clip presentation of the pictorial space. Yet here too we can see that the limits of “using” an artwork are narrow, and that, for reasons unrelated to their style and value, some works are more suitable “for use” than others. So in this film the Escher section proves more “functional” and more compatible with the modelled figure; inevitably, it is also the space that provides the script’s “resolution”.

The juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements in the work of Marcelo Ricardo Ortiz and its non-interactive character are the only points that distinguish it from the work I present. Otherwise, the problems Ortiz faces, as well as the main choices of execution and structure of the work, are the same.



3. The question of the script

There are two basic ways of presenting the life and work of artists. The formal–rational one, which includes all artists’ monographs, regardless of how they are structured – the structure may be analytical–scholarly or may set up a spatio-temporal framework; all these are problems of reading and understanding the works.

By contrast, another way of presenting is the one we first meet in a kind of popular literature called the “fictional biography” and the “historical novel”. In these genres there sometimes appears the phenomenon of going beyond the aim, which is a fuller understanding of and information about the person and work of a creator. Then fiction appears – in the same way that we meet it in “fiction” documentaries.

This fictional element sometimes swells to such a degree that the presentation becomes the occasion for creating a script. In this case the script does not aim at understanding and going deeper into the creator’s work, but becomes an end in itself. This hybrid form of popular literature corresponds fully to my own construction.

Multimedia titles presenting a creator’s work faithfully follow the structural logic of printed monographs. On the contrary, the multimedia application I present takes as its starting point the choice of an American genre painter of the first half of the 20th century. This historical, and by extension aesthetic, condition does not concern me in itself, but it gives me the opportunity to set the spatio-temporal framework within which the viewer’s tour unfolds; it is an element that gives unity to the presentation through the experience of time and space.

So stylistic elements of this period were used to frame this undertaking:

a. I tried to make the lighting in the 3D environment refer to the film noir of the period, which shares the atmosphere of the painter.

b. The environment – set design of the 3D world also faithfully follows the framework of the period, as it is rendered in Hopper’s depictions of interiors and places.

c. For the soundtrack, the big-band jazz that characterises these decades was chosen, with Duke Ellington as its main representative.

d. The dialogues are in English, to make the framework more emphatic.

I considered the interactive character of this construction necessary because it strengthens the sense of storytelling. The viewer is immersed in the impression of moving through the representation of the space; he stops being merely a viewer and becomes a player.

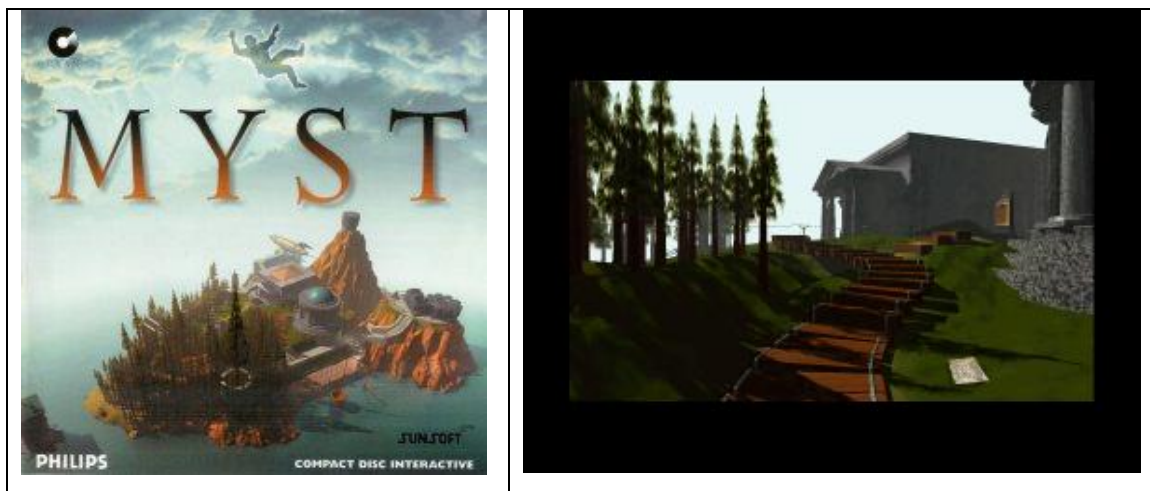
4. The influence of computer games on the way an artist's works are presented

“Toys have an element of true poetry, as well as an element of realistic, and therefore repellent, prose.”²⁶ It is this realistic element that dominates the aesthetics of most computer games, although their aesthetics is not a given, despite the dominant trends that appear in them.

So I tried to make a presentation of the painter's works whose aesthetics would not “suffer” from the element of realism.

In the work I present, the way of navigating (that is, its interactive part) is clearly influenced by search-and-adventure computer games (Adventure Games), such as *Myst*.

Games like *Myst* are a further development of adventure games, in which the world to be explored is presented in graphics and one travels by pressing a button rather than by typing commands. The game's adventure is not based on hypertext²⁷.



This game uses a practice we have seen many times in cinema: a book opens and the camera zooms through its pages into an imaginary world. Once we enter that world, the page is left behind.

26 G. K. Chesterton: “The Terrible Toy”. From vol. I: *Gleaming Cohorts*, a selection of his writings.

27 In a printed book the text is usually presented in a fixed order. In hypertext there is no single order, no set path the reader must follow. The text exists only in the act of reading. Text and reader are locked in a dynamic state that is born from the very process of reading.

It no longer appears on the screen; it no longer frames the world we are watching. This practice gives the viewer the feeling that the imaginary world of the text exists not on the page but on the stage that the words create in the mind of the actor. Similarly, in “Myst” we dive into a book and suddenly find ourselves spinning in the air. Finally we land on an island, one of the many “worlds” this game offers for exploration.

In the script structure of this game, through the various riddles the player has to solve, he is essentially solving a “puzzle” that leads him to reassemble a book, which is then activated. Allowing for the differences, the basic elements of the script – not of the structure – of “Myst” are also found in “Hopper’s World”.

What characterises movement through space in these games is verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is achieved in two ways: first, the unhindered ability to move in all three dimensions; second, and more importantly, the subjective point-of-view shot of the space, which gives the viewer the illusion of a “virtual space”. These techniques and construction logics derive from cinema and video. This is the source of the fascination of computer games.

Besides these devices for drawing in the viewer, my work contains a rudimentary script, as do all computer games. What I call a script here is essentially a given framework of action, which distinguishes computer games from all the earlier games humanity had created. It is the existence of a script that makes the computer game “stop being a game”. This is because, even in its most rudimentary form, the framework–script determines not only the rules of the game but also its spatio-temporal, that is, its imaginary framework. This is why they are characterised as passive, since they prevent the development of the player’s own imagination.

Computer games are the most widespread form of mediated imagination. Through it one better understands the achievements of technology, which aim to fascinate rather than to inform.

Yet critics such as Neil Randall show that some computer games “demonstrate literary competence”. This approach is based on

Shklovsky's definition of "literary competence", which applies to selected text-based games. I believe, however, that Randall ignores two basic characteristics of games, which are the following:

- a. the influence they have on one another;
- b. the integration of various media, including text – that is, their nature as multimedia, which makes them able to homogenise different kinds of representation.

If we consider, like Marshall McLuhan, that mechanical technologies are extensions of our physical body, then we can read games as extensions of our formal–social body, since they incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image; in this sense they act as means of adapting to the stress of the specialised activities that arise in every social group. Precisely for this reason computer games incorporate kinds of imagination and representation. The various kinds of imagination, representation and media are unified in multimedia games.

I considered that this unifying element makes it a capable tool for receiving, and therefore presenting, a work of visual art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Pier Paolo Pasolini. Thessaloniki Film Festival, 1997.
2. Umberto Eco. Art and Beauty in the Aesthetics of the Middle Ages. Gnosi, 2nd edition 1994.
3. Umberto Eco. The Island of the Day Before. Gnosi.
4. Roland Barthes. Image – Music – Text. Plethron 1997.
5. Collection of texts: Dolls and Toys. G. K. Chesterton: “The Terrible Toy”. Agra 1996.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Anti-Oedipus. Rappa, Athens 1977.
7. Peter Greenaway. The Stairs. Geneva: The Location. Merrell Holberton, London 1994.
8. Nicholas Negroponte. Being Digital. Kastaniotis 1995.
9. Marshall McLuhan. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. Kalvos 1991.
10. Aaron Scharf. Art and Photography. Penguin, England 1968.
11. Pier Marco De Santi. Cinema e Pittura. Art Dossier No 16. Giunti, Italy 1987.
12. Rötzer and Weibel: Strategien des Scheins. Kunst.Computer.Medien. 1991.