EUR
EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952)

THE METAVERSE BETWEEN CINEMA AND GAMING: TWO SOCIOCULTURAL INTRUSIONS

IL METAVERSO TRA CINEMA E GAME: DUE INCURSIONI SOCIOCULTURALI

Alfonso Amendola[a][1]

[a] Department of Business Sciences, Management & Innovation System, University of Salerno, Italy

alfamendola@unisa.it

Abstract

The Metaverse is a dimension that represents a great possibility for the rebirth and redefinition of social roles, creative and educational processes, sectorial skills, business logics, institutional contexts and the emergence of new careers. With this short essay, we want to describe this innovative and still in progress dimension particularly according to the two intrusions we want to investigate: cinema and gaming. Two paths of generational consumption and creative productions that increasingly indicate an important space of the digital society to be discovered and analyzed in depth. It is important for us to start from this assumption in order to develop a sociocultural methodology capable of analyzing the Metaverse as a wide space not only of radical change but also as a concrete prospect on research and also on new skills in the field of creative processes and consumption logics.

Il Metaverso è una dimensione che rappresenta una grande possibilità di rinascita e ridefinizione di ruoli sociali, processi creativi, formativi, competenze settoriali, logiche aziendali, contesti istituzionali e nascita di nuove professionalità. Con questo saggio breve vogliamo raccontare questa dimensione innovativa e tutta in divenire in particolare nelle due incursioni che vogliamo indagare: il cinema e il game. Due percorsi di consumo generazionale e produzioni creative che sempre più sono indice di uno spazio importante della digital society tutta da scoprire e analizzare nel profondo. Da questo presupposto per noi è importante partire per sviluppare una metodologia – dal taglio socioculturale - capace di analizzare il Metaverso come ampio spazio non solo di cambiamento radicale ma anche come concreta prospettiva di ricerca e anche prospettiva di nuove competenze nell'ambito dei processi creativi e logiche di consumo.

---

[1] Alfonso Amendola is an associate professor of Sociology of Cultural Processes at the University of Salerno. His research path moves on between digital innovation, mass consumption and avant-garde cultures (themes on which he has published numerous books, monographs and scientific essays). Also delegate of the Rector for the "University Radio". He carries out an intense editorial activity in the academic field by directing various scientific editorial collections. Editor of international magazines and collaborator of "Il Mattino" newspaper. Alongside his university activity, he is a consultant and cultural manager for numerous festivals and exhibitions.

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

Keywords

Creativity; consumption; audiovisual; sociology.
Creatività; consumo; audiovisivi; sociologia.

1. A theoretical premise

In a fragment of his *Passages*, Walter Benjamin writes; "Leaving home as if you were coming from a faraway place; discovering the world in which you already live; starting your day as if you were disembarking from a ship coming from Singapore and had never seen your doormat or your neighbors on the landing; this is what reveals the existing humanity, ignored so far" (Benjamin, 2010, p.12). Reasoning about the Metaverse invites us to think about this dimension of coming from a "distant place". In this dimension/device, in fact, we find the enthusiasm of being always amazed, the desire to discover new things, the fatal lightness of wonder (that one cherished by Plato and Aristotle and also by Gump, Forrest Gump), the energy of feeling yourself navigating towards unusual discoveries, the reflection of the days, the threshold of a knowledge as an alternation of repetition and "novum" (recovering another category of Benjamin). Along this path we can approach the development of the socio-technological facts that our contemporary world is increasingly proposing and showing us, and it is precisely with this gaze that we must look at the Metaverse. A complexity that a certain sociology of culture has been generally investigating for some time. A complexity that looks at creative processes in the technological field, and for some time the choice of this investigation has produced wide spaces for research, creativity, production, consumption and educational innovation. For us it is important to start from this assumption in order to develop a sociocultural methodology capable of analyzing the Metaverse as a wide space not only of radical change but also as a concrete prospect on research and also on new skills in the field of creative processes and consumption logics. All this with the concept of "collective intelligence" that Pierre Levy (1996) spoke of in the late 20th century clearly resonating in our mind. "Paradoxically," wrote Derrick de Kerckhove (2022), "in an age where it seems that everything is destined to pass through the machines or delegated to machines, this depends and will depend, once again, on us. It seems that the digital revolution is giving us a new space to occupy and experience, but it is good to remember that with the Metaverse we are faced with three independent but interconnected spaces: physical space, virtual space (in its various variants: virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality) and mental space (that is also virtual). We have to learn to manage each one of these spaces in its own time". As happened with the emergence of the Digital Society (Castells, 2001), the Metaverse now represents a

dynamic dimension in which knowledge, skills and tasks are integrated all together giving rise to the contemporary work world that is uprooting itself from the traditional idea of the company and relying more and more on the principle of collaboration. Companies and professionals are aware that in order to be competitive, they must also think (or rethink) themselves in the Metaverse. At the same time, while traditional jobs take the digital route to adapt themselves to this new transformation and if not possible they just disappear, new professionalisms and creative processes that could not exist outside it are emerging within the Metaverse. This integration is giving rise to professions that are increasingly cross-cutting and hybrid and for this very reason gain an enormous value. Inevitable starting point is the concept of "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006) for its accurate ability to describe the current media landscape as a place «where old and new media intersect, where grassroots and corporate media collide, where the power of the media producer and the media user interact in un-predictable ways», highlighting a "horizontality" of the communication process that places different actors on the same level. Jenkins is referring to the digital medium, which among its characteristics has multimedia, convergence, interactivity, hyper-textuality, distribution, mobility and sociality; we can polyphonically find all these characteristics in the Metaverse. Such characteristics are the necessary prerequisites to understand how all cultural processes enter into the great digital innovation especially in the generational view of the "networked publics" in a changed condition of the audience, by virtue of the techno-socio-cultural practices that have redefined its status. These are audiences that, in fact, no longer simply enjoy cultural content but participate in the construction of meaning and narratives that start from below. These are, in essence, practices and devices that "participate in productive and distributive forms elaborated and guided by the cultural convergence between mainstream media and conversations from below" (Boccia Artieri, 2004, p.30), combining the media languages with the everyday languages and "using the communicative opportunities that digital media in particular have opened up" (ibidem). Hence the need to focus our study toward a series of the new developments within the Metaverse, through which observe how creative companies, media producers, social researchers and end users approach an innovative cultural processuality. A new processual canon for contemporary culture.

2. The Metaverse may be virtual, but the impact will be real

In 2021, the Metaverse concept entered the collective imagination according to a lucid strategy; the turning point is when Mark Zuckerberg announces that he will invest in the Metaverse and starts calling all of his products "Meta". And so the future pushes more and more toward the Metaverse but, even if Zuckerberg deserves credit

for bringing the attention of the mass audience on a new virtual space, many major generational consumer products such as gaming and cinema (the main topics of our study) had already begun a sort of transition, acquiring skills and investing resources to conquer the new Metaverse spaces. The Meta slogan turns out to be very accurate: "The Metaverse may be virtual, but the impact will be real". A rethinking of creative planning indeed, with a more accessible approach to daily and social phenomena. An innovative digital space within which activities, professions, social life and education are gradually converging (Amendola, Camargo Molano, 2022). A universal definition that manages to reach every generational target in an unambiguous and vivid way, giving the idea to listeners and viewers that the Metaverse is something that everyone, regardless of age, can deal with.

3. At the beginning there was the non-place

If for years the web has been considered an indistinct *place-non-place* (Augè, 1992) without well-defined boundaries, today the Metaverse digital world seems to possess precise paths that are clearly visible to anyone who approaches them. If the non-place, then, is opposed to anthropological places characterized by their own identity and a relational and historical essence, it is instead clear how today the Metaverse represents a real place. Anyway, it is perhaps possible to trace precisely in the Metaverse the point of maximum development of the place-nonplace concept strongly discussed in the past. As a non-place, in fact the Metaverse has no boundaries, can host an infinite number of people and spaces and it is still difficult to entrap within a tangible definition. However, Metaverse potentially represents in full what is instead meant by the concept of anthropological place. Perhaps we will have to wait until we are fully aware of it to reveal its real and concrete nature. In a mix of relationships, identity paths and professions, it is interesting to trace one of the most physical aspects affecting the access to the Metaverse; the relationship between gaming and the end users and how the educational process could be regenerated within it.

4. Cinema and Metaverse

Although of literary origins (*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson was published exactly thirty years ago), the Metaverse concept cannot detach itself from its being an integral part of the process of continuous transformation, mutation and hybridization between media that is the fundamental turning point of 20th century visual culture. The main joints of what for several years now has been a real and not only visual revolution are already identifiable in Gene Youngblood's thought who, in his pivotal work *Expanded Cinema* (Youngblood, 1970), analyzes the relationship between technologies, society and bodies, going so far as to specify that the new technologies of

representation (computer, video, virtual reality) "expand cinema". However, it is interesting to highlight that Youngblood's work came out in 1970; what happened, in the meantime? The Metaverse cinema opens up complex and vast scenarios, allowing the medium to dialogue with other and sometimes more synaesthetic forms of representation. Of course the basis of this relationship is the audience, but even more so its more bodily and tactile part, and above all the audio-visual part. If "deception is the Eye", as Leonardo da Vinci highlighted in his *Treatise on Painting*, a necessary premise towards the cinema/audience "trespassing" is in those three-dimensional viewers that were already born in the movie industry early years and that had a sort of "gaming" revival thanks to an extremely (for this study) emblematic title, that is James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). Smart visual exploration of 3D "vision", the movie has only in its title the spark that for some time has accompanied another highly cinematic medium, the videogame (talking about this, *The PlayStation Dreamworld* - a 2017 work by Alfie Brown - is quite interesting,), arriving just three years after the first online appearance of *Second Life*, a crucial platform for the Metaverse issue. In this sense, we have openly seen the exploitation of this platform in the cinematographic field, with productions for and in the Metaverse; in 2021 there was a collective experiment in which several users created their own character and then placed it inside a "virtual environment", modifying the evolution of the narration as they wished, thus creating a real collective movie. Let's also think of the further possibility of not only creating characters as you wish but at the same time, as in *The Sims* (2000), the possibility of having your own "duplicate" who constantly lives a life in the spotlight. But the limit is clear; you can't be inside the experience, you can just look at it and live it from the outside. Other computer systems have worked in this dimension, to the point of creating continuous short-circuits that can be summarized in a few main points; creation of fictitious characters who live in fictitious environments, but starting from a human base (just think of all Motion Capture cinema and all the related movies starting in 2009 with *A Christmas Carol* by Robert Zemeckis where Jim Carrey simultaneously plays four characters in a totally computerized environment), or the usage of glasses/viewers capable of "pushing" our view into the fictitious world, making sure to dominate all the possible movement scenarios of our avatar. Talking about this, it is peculiar that most of these softwares and movies work on the importance of the subjective view. We don't need to see our face, because once we enter the Metaverse we know that that's "us", "our" body, "our" face. From this point of view, an exemplary movie is *Hardcore Henry* (2015) by Il'ja Najšuller; shot entirely with a subjective perspective, this movie surprises for its very strong visual impact but anyway leaves the viewer "tied" to the 3D norm, quickly tiring the viewer's perception who is quickly driven to distraction. It is the immersiveness that makes the difference and, about this, there are two

pivotal movies; *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999), where the protagonists enter virtual universes through technological devices. But if in Robert Longo's movie the entrance really takes place through a viewer (surprising us for its ability to predict the times and another similar movie like 2018 *Ready Player One* by Steven Spielberg), in the second movie Neo is obligated to "close his eyes" to enter the Matrix and undergo the forced introduction of a long steel needle. In that instant Neo's body is "transmedialized", liquefying and reconstructing itself in an identical but at the same time completely different way. The two movies merge in the prophecy of *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017) where the protagonist transports her (cyborg) body to "other" places through a viewer (De Ruggieri, 2006, pp. 75-136).Contemporary scenarios are even more stimulating and go beyond cinema. In *Ex Machina* (2014) by Alex Garland the (human, bionic, virtual) body becomes something to reflect on the spatiality crisis in the virtuality cinema (the same thing happens in 2013 *She* by Spike Jonze or in 2002 *S1m0ne* by Andrew Miccol). However, we have to wait until 2019ca for *La mia battaglia* (*My Battle*) and the subsequent *Segnale d'allarme. La mia battaglia VR* (*Alarm Signal. My Battle VR*), first a theatrical show by Elio Germano and Omar Rashid and then a virtual reality movie.

The distinctive trait of this representation is its fruition; audience is given headphones and viewers and is projected into a "different" universe, where everyone can interact with each other, where the actor becomes "many other" characters, while always remaining "physically" himself in the audience and even the last of the spectators will be catapulted to the front row. Then, there is the web that becomes a starting point for greater reflections, amplifying and multiplying the narrations. The 25th of September 2022 marks an important turning point for the audiovisual production impact on the Metaverse; inspired by the revolutionary *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011) and *SF8* (Min Kyu-dong, 2020), the italian comedian Maccio Capatonda releases the first episode of the *Maccioverse* web series; for the first time the premiere took place entirely in the Metaverse and beyond the satirical question dedicated to the brand new video calling consumer society, the product is quite interesting; instead of people there are monitors and apps, and the relocation of the protagonist's body is multiple because thanks to the Metaverse he can be "always and everywhere". Talking about this, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheiner released in October 2022 is even more interesting; probably not only the first but also the most interesting work purely on the Metaverse (even if we can already see something like that in the 2012 *Cloud Atlas* by Wachowski sisters and in the 2022 *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* by Sam Raimi, this one within an even greater possible reflection on the Multi-Meta-verse issue of comics). Without specifying narrative details, after an unstimulating incipit, everything explodes in the bodies

multiplication of the protagonist who is called to save the Metaverse through different self-representations. Therefore, the reflection multiplies bodies and spaces, starting with the title which is extremely self-explanatory. So, at the center of the issue, we still have audience and immersiveness, the Me(taverse) that becomes Multiple, the *nervous multiplication* mentioned by Castells (2001).

At the Cannes Movie Festival in 2022, Italian Rai Cinema presented its entrance into the Metaverse, allowing to take advantage of various cinematic contents for free, to experience events in streaming and/or to interact with posters and iconic objects of cinema through an avatar (for example, to visit the 3D exhibition of 2021 *Diabolik* by Manetti Bros in Turin). Meanwhile *Toraru*, a Japanese startup, is working on a platform to rent an avatar and ask it to act on our behalf, but our double will be a real human being who will move in the real world, perhaps thousands of kilometers away, simply by using a tablet with an app that controls the other person's movements in constant interaction via camera, microphone and loudspeaker. But the real revolution is called *Proto* and allows you to show the 3D hologram of your body in real time miles away (not "already recorded" as happened with the experiment of the live concerts of The Gorillaz band, another interesting real/virtual expression). The Metaverse scenario is therefore not only varied and difficult to catalog, but above all full of stimulating and original ideas, and at the same time a sort of dog chasing its tail; what if this total freedom will then lead to a total lack of structure and originality? Meanwhile, to close the circle, in October 2022 a television series presents itself as a new and interesting piece for the reflection on the cinematic Metaverse, *The Peripheral* by Scott B. Smith. "I thought it was a simulation", says the protagonist as she puts on a headset and enters what she believes to be a (new) virtual reality; it is a peripheral to enter and exit from Reality (or a new parallel Universe), actually.

5. Gaming and Metaverse

Talking about expanded virtual worlds and avatars created within them, in today's world the Metaverse is progressively prevailing on the previous reference point represented by videogames. In fact we can say that, in a certain sense, some gaming worlds were the precursors of the languages, practices and aesthetics of the Metaverse as we know them today, and that they were the first real and proper metaverses. First of all, the Metaverse is certainly a persistent world, that is a virtual world that "continues to internally exist and develop even when there are no people interacting with it" (Bartle, 2003). A world that evolves and grows even after the gamer has left it. When the gamer will come back, he/she will find modifications and changes made by other gamers who in the meantime have continued to be connected to the virtual world, and obviously by the algorithms that govern it. This definition of a persistent

world has been immediately linked to the gaming world and, specifically, the online videogames that belong to the MMORPG and MMO category. Among the first ones, where the acronym stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, there is *World of Warcraft*, released in 2004, still the most played videogame in the world. The gamer enters the fantasy-themed virtual world using an avatar and can interact with other gamers through a common chat room. There are other activities that the gamer can do that somehow give a sense of everyday life and community: cooking, fishing, forging armors. Also the actual game activities, missions and challenges, can be shared with other gamers. The practices of coexistence, the interaction between gamers and their behaviors, although set in a fantasy theme, mirror those of the real world and this is due to the concept of *digital prosthesis* (Bittanti, 2004), that is the avatar. A process of temporary transfer of the gamer's personality into the virtual gaming world takes place through the avatar, and this process allows interactivity and consequent identification. A concrete example is what happened on *World of Warcraft* in 2005, a case that was also the subject of a scientific study published in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* magazine. The case is known as the *Corrupted Blood incident* and was due to a programming error following a videogame update. *Corrupted Blood* was a negative effect that could only be inflicted on the gamer through a fight with a specific boss and simulated a very contagious disease contracted by proximity. Except that, precisely because of the programming error, the disease got out of control and spread in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* like an epidemic by contact. Infected areas emerged where gamers didn't go trying not to come into contact with other infected gamers. The scientific study mentioned above analyzed and highlighted a parallelism between the behaviors and movements implemented by gamers to protect their avatars and the behaviors of populations in the real world during an epidemic outbreak. Re-reading the case of *Corrupted Blood* it is impossible not to think, unfortunately, of the Covid-19 epidemic that - being still a very recent experience - allows us to understand how interconnected the behaviors between real life and virtual life are. When it comes to avatars, digital prostheses, and behaviors, *Second Life* is another perfect example. Launched in 2003, *Second Life* can be considered as the first Metaverse ever and as a category it founds itself on the border between a videogame and an online social platform, having some characteristics of one and some of the other. *Second Life* does not have gameplay components such as goals or missions, but it is a virtual world where there are interactivity and identification and it also falls into the videogame category of life simulators. These features make it possible to look like a social platform, therefore socializing and participating in the many activities that *Second Life* allows you to do, including creating and/or exchanging goods and services with other users using or not using virtual currency.

The *Linden Dollar* and the possibility of being able to transform it into real dollars and euros, has allowed for the creation of an internal virtual economy and, therefore, real business models. Taking into consideration the life simulation concept, the avatars and the virtual currency, but taking a step back three years, it is possible to find all these things in a videogames series which in a certain way anticipated the *Second Life* characteristics, that is *The Sims*. The creation of your own avatar, placing it in a world in which to simulate a parallel life and the possibility of being able to build and buy objects thanks to a gaming currency have made this series of videogames among the most famous and played. What is missing is the online component present in *Second Life*, an essential element for the creation of a Metaverse. Precisely the online component, combined with the three-dimensionality of the virtual world, the possibility of sharing spaces simultaneously with other gamers and, therefore, socializing through avatars, as well as the creation of a virtual economy, have meant that videogames such as *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* are now considered metaverses. The Metaverse has become the new main space for brand visibility and it is no coincidence that videogames are the ones in which there is the greatest investment. Generation Z is the most present in *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* worlds (Amendola & Martino, 2022; Amendola & Esposito, 2022; Amendola & Guerra & Martino, 2023), because it is the most accustomed to online gaming. The two videogames, as well as others, become the easiest tool for companies to reach a target that is more difficult to intercept with other types of advertising media. For the same reason, that is that Post-Millennials prefer online gaming, the gaming industry itself is moving towards the Metaverse. In fact there are many videogames that are born as metaverses, for example *The Sandbox* in which you have an open and completely modifiable space where the elements created can then be bought and sold, or *Star Atlas* which is set in space. Of course products of this kind can only be connected to the use of devices that allow a greater immersiveness in the Metaverse, devices like virtual reality headsets, which were also initially linked specifically to the videogames world. In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to demonstrate how, already with gaming, human being has always tried to reproduce parallel worlds. Although the aim was not to create a Metaverse, videogames such as *The Sims* or *World of Warcraft* allowed – and still allow today – to immerse yourself in a virtual reality and, in doing so, to drag parts of everyday reality into them. With these bases the two worlds, real and virtual, influence each other more and more, and the Metaverse is the maximum expression of this phenomenon.

6. Conclusions

In our historical era, talking about Metaverse is certainly a key theme of digital innovation and transformation. It is an amplification of worlds, it is a new way of

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

thinking and producing, it is a linear prospect that can both develop or gradually fade away. But the most significant impact will be certainly represented by our way of thinking and relating to great innovation events. The only awareness to approach the Metaverse dimension with is to read it also as the "natural evolution of a digitization process of the world and of our lives but, before this project incorporates the socio-technological violence resulting from the limits of the 20th century economy, it is necessary to imagine a new form of digital citizenship, and not only an economic one, that manages to control the effects of this telluric displacement represented by the Metaverse" (Bennato, 2022).

References

Amendola, A. & Camargo Molano, J. (2022). *Lavori creativi nella digital society. Analisi e prospettive future*. In: Bennato, D. & Vitale M.P. (a cura di) *Trasformazione digitale e competenze per la network society. contesti, saperi e professioni emergenti nelle scienze umane e sociali*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Amendola, A. & Esposito, A. (2022). *Digital Education. Cultural Heritage and Generation Z* in "Q Times. Journal of Education. Technology and Social Studies", Anno XIV, Numero 4, Roma.

Amendola, A. & Masullo, M. (2022). *Z Generation tra nostalgia e meme. La rimediazione dei movimenti Vaporwave e Aesthetic* in "H-ermes. Journal of Communication", Anno X, n.21, Lecce.

Amendola, A. & Guerra A. & Masullo M. (2023). *La Generazione Z e la (nuova) costruzione dell'identità in epoca pandemica e post pandemica. In* Quaderni di Comunità Persone, Educazione e Welfare nella società 5.0, Anno III, n.3, Roma

Augé, M. (1992). *Nonluoghi. Introduzione a un'antropologia della surmodernità*, Milano: Elèuthera.

Bartle, R. (2003). *Designing Virtual Worlds*, Hoboken: New River.

Benjamin, W. (2010). *I "passages" di Parigi*, Torino: Einaudi.

Bennato, D. (2022). Vivere nel metaverso social: ecco qual è la vera novità (e i rischi) di Meta. https://www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/vivere-nel-metaverso-social-ecco-qual-e-la-vera-novita-e-i-rischi-di-meta/

Boccia Artieri, G. (2004). I media-mondo. Forme e linguaggi dell'esperienza contemporanea, Roma: Meltemi.

de Kerckhove, D. (2022). *Il Metaverso tra Virtual, Augmented e Mixed reality. Ombre e Luci di un nuovo passaggio della trasformazione digitale*. https://www.2duerighe.com/cultura/140507-il-metaverso.html

De Ruggieri, F. (2006). *Matrix and the city. Il corpo ibrido nel cinema e nella cultura visuale*, Pisa: ETS.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University.

Levy, P. (1996). L'intelligenza collettiva. Per un'antropologia del cyberspazio, Milano: Feltrinelli.

Youngblood, G. (2013). *Expanded cinema*, Bologna: CLUEB.