



## AN-ICON ANNUAL WORKSHOP 2021

### “REFRAMING INTERACTIVITY. MYTHS, ANTINOMIES, GENEALOGIES”

#### ERC Advanced project

#### “An-Iconology. History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images (AN-ICON)”

#### RATIONALE

In his influential essay *The Inevitable* (2016), Kevin Kelly holds interactivity among the major forces that will shape the near future. He maintains that “in the coming 30 years, anything that is not intensely interactive will be considered broken.” Touch screens, smart objects and domotics, interactive television series, or adaptive AI-generated video-games, just give us a hint of how our daily experience is going to be transformed.

In the last decades, the concept of interactivity has been investigated in several different fields, in the belief that it is key to the way we inhabit the world in a broad sense. Just to make some examples, one may think about Gibson’s theory of affordances (1979) and its developments; the model of the Extended Mind (Clark & Chalmers 1998) and the Material Engagement Theory (Malafouris 2013); or En-activism, according to which our interactions with our environments, or other organisms, constitute the grounding and the primary expression of cognition itself (Thompson 2007, Gallagher 2020).

The advent of electronic media, though, has made the concept of interactivity even more pervasive. Indeed, since their first appearance, electronic media have been defined as “interactive”, in contrast to analog apparatuses. The concept of interactivity aimed both to describe the ability of electronic interfaces to respond to a user’s input, and the way the user could interact with media and devices, choosing which path to follow, manipulating, or generating new content.

In the field of narratology, scholars have highlighted the advent of new forms of interactive storytelling (Murray 1997) and more recently of “Interactive Digital Narrative” (Koenitz, Ferri, Haahr, Sezen & Sezen, 2015), concerning works by writers, artists and game designers. Compared to the traditional modes of interaction between the reader and the text – even when considered as non-passive (Eco 1979) – video games have been defined as “ergodic” texts, texts that require an effort from the reader/player (Aarseth 1997).

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However, since any reception entails imaginative integrations and performative responses (Montani 2020), some scholars have claimed that interactivity is a myth or, at least, too broad a concept to account for the specificity of digital interfaces and should therefore be discarded (Manovich 2001). Still, one can argue that an encompassing definition of interactivity is misleading, as it includes all sorts of mental and psychological operations regardless of different bodily relations to specific artefacts and media.

To elaborate more circumscribed definitions of interactivity and overcome the antinomies that underpin it, some scholars have used the term to indicate an individual interrelation with objects, as opposed to “participation” as a collective cooperation in the production and consumption of contents (such as open-collaborative encyclopedia and open-source softwares) and of artworks (Bishop 2012), or to the so-called Relational Art (Bourriaud 1998). Starting from the second half of the 90s, artistic forms have been developed that use the potential of the network. They are defined in various ways (net art, new media art, digital art, interactive art, multimedia art, computer art, game art) and they are based on forms of appropriation, collaboration and interaction.

Besides, the relation of reversibility and reciprocal feedback, brought about by electronic media and later by the implementation of artificial intelligence and linked to the concept of interface as well as of “interaction design”, has pushed scholars in different fields to account for the agency of digital images (Hansen 2014), of technologies and media (Farocki 2004, Paglen 2014), and, more broadly, of non-human entities (Grusin 2015), as well as to reframe them in operational terms (Hoel 2018). A lot of attention has been paid to human-computer interaction, so as to develop user-friendly interfaces that give the illusion of no technical mediation (Weiser 1991). Today, digital technologies have become so ubiquitously present in our environment that they almost constitute the condition of possibility of our experience and interaction with the environment (Marras & Mecacci 2015).

Lastly, with the advent of virtual and augmented reality technologies, the notion of interactivity has conquered yet another field of application. In fact, several properties of VR- or AR-based environments may be explored by recurring to the notion of “interactivity”: just to name a few, their ability to offer extremely lifelike sensorimotor affordances; their possibility to involve the users in participatory creative processes, as it happens in “virtual storytelling” (Dooley 2017, Bucher 2018); and their tendency to include interactions with quasi-subjects known as “avatars” (Pinotti 2020), be they proxies of human subjects or AI-assisted characters.

In sum, virtual and augmented reality not only afford new types of interactions with the environment, but they also provide the possibility of an intersubjective interactivity in a shared virtual world (Slater & Usoh 1994; Schroeder 2002), that sometimes results in the creation of new collective subjects, with shared/common perception, intentionality and needs (Liberati 2016). Importantly, both these spheres of interactions are regulated by strictly technical conditions, which inescapably shape and reverberate on the users’ experience. In this regard, the argument of interactivity cuts both ways, inasmuch as virtual interfaces also come to limit and constrain the user’s freedom (Chandrasekera, Fernando, & Puig 2019); or the degree and type of manipulability of a given environment and the objects it contains. This would also lead to question the ideological and political underpinnings related to liberty, creativity, and determinism in so-called VR “open world”.

As it emerges from all the above, the concept of “interactivity” has undergone multiple and continuous translations and even risked to become something of a buzzword, travelling across as many fields of application. Should we definitely discard such a notion, as it demonstrated an ineffective theoretical tool, or rather try to reassess its operational framework?

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Recent developments in image-making techniques have resulted in a drastic blurring of the threshold between the world of the image and the real world. Immersive and interactive virtual environments have enabled the production of pictures that elicit in the perceiver a strong feeling of being incorporated in a quasi-real world. In doing so such pictures conceal their mediateness (their being based on a material support), their referentiality (their pointing to an extra-iconic dimension), and their separateness (normally assured by framing devices), paradoxically challenging their status as images, as icons: they are veritable “an-icons”.

This kind of pictures undermines the mainstream paradigm of Western image theories, shared by major models such as the doctrine of mimesis, the phenomenological account of image-consciousness, the analytic theories of depiction, the semiotic and iconological methods. These approaches miss the key counter-properties regarding an-icons as “environmental” images: their immediateness, unframedness, and presentness. Subjects relating to an-icons are no longer visual observers of images; they are experiencers living in a quasi-real environment that allows multi-sensory affordances and embodied agencies.

AN-ICON aims to develop “an-iconology” as a new methodological approach able to address this challenging iconoscape. Such an approach needs to be articulated in a transdisciplinary and transmedial way:

- 1) HISTORY – a media-archaeological reconstruction will provide a taxonomy of the manifold an-iconic strategies (e.g. illusionistic painting, pre-cinematic dispositifs, 3D films, video games, head mounted displays);
- 2) THEORY – an experiential account (drawing on phenomenology, visual culture and media studies) will identify the an-iconic key concepts;
- 3) PRACTICES – a socio-cultural section will explore the multifaceted impact of an-iconic images, environments and technologies on contemporary professional domains as well as on everyday life.