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Introduction: the image between presence and absence

by Giancarlo Grossi and Andrea Pinotti

Altered states
Dream
Hallucination
Filmic representation
Immersive media

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→ Altered states

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A visual history of alteration

Dream images, anticipations of the future, memories of the past, perceptual distortions, delusional hallucinations, cognitions intoxicated by alcohol and drugs have always inhabited the visual representations of paintings, comics, films, television series, videogames and, more recently, virtual reality installations. We call them "altered states of consciousness", meaning any perceptual state other than ordinary human perception.[2]

When they are expressed in a visual form, we see a material picture which represents a mental image.[3] While a picture is completely experienced by the senses, mental imagery is ordinarily conceived of as a quasi-perceptual

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2 For a rigorous psychological definition of the concept of "altered state of consciousness", embracing mental states occurring in sleep, meditation, hypnosis or while using drugs, see Ch.T. Tart, *Altered States of Consciousness* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1972).

3 The distinction between the materiality, objectivity and prevalent visual character of the image intended as picture and the immateriality, subjectivity and multisensorial aspect of the mental image is perfectly explained by W.J.T. Mitchell in "What is an Image?", *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (1984): 503-537.

experience that occurs in the absence of external stimuli.[4] What makes these pictures recognizable to us as such? We cannot, in fact, compare them with the reality of the mental image, which we know only in the first person, trapped in the secret of individual experience. And yet, it seems that the visual has always elaborated strategies, codes, and arrangements to ensure that, within a visual narrative, an image is interpreted as absent, because it is present in a mental space or as a perception of an altered state of consciousness.

These representations are historically and culturally determined, depending on the way a mental image is conceived in each era and geographical context. The French historian Yannick Ripa, for example, has distinguished an "ancien régime du rêve", in which the dream is thought of as an external and metaphysical entity from the modern conception that leads it back to the universe of an inner subjectivity.[5]

At the same time, the medium that delivers these mental visions also contributes to differentiating cultural codes and shared representations that shape them. In Füssli's *The Nightmare* (1781) or in Goya's *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (1797), the oneiric emerges from a juxtaposition of the sleeping body with its nightmares, co-present in the same visual box. Differently, comics such as Winsor McCay's *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend* (1904-1913) and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1927), represent altered states and especially dreaming in a visual regime that combines simultaneity and succession.[6] The result is a progressive escalation of bizarreness that can only be interrupted by the last vignette, when the dreamer usually falls off the bed.

Cinema, ever since Méliès, has used particular fades such as cross-dissolves to signal the passage from physical to mental presence, be it in memory, imagination,

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4 A. Richardson, *Mental Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1969).
5 Y. Ripa, *Histoire du rêve. Regards sur l'imaginaire des Français au 19e siècle* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1988).
6 T. Gunning, "The art of succession: reading, writing, and watching comics", *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014): 36-51.

or dream. Another peculiar case is given by the extreme instability of the camera with which the alterations caused by indigestion, drunkenness, and drug consumption are rendered since early movies. Jean Epstein's comparison between alcohol and cinema is thus significant to define the multiform, fluid, and malleable perception of the universe introduced by the medium.[7]

However, none of these codes is fixed: cultural contexts and historical fractures introduce radical differences within each mediascape, and the same happens if we consider processes such as hybridization, convergence, and remediation of the different media. Nevertheless, a dreamlike or hallucinatory image remains immediately recognizable to many viewers. It is a representation that indicates its absence rather than its presence.

The altered states of film theory

The way in which cinema not only records objective reality but also visualizes mental processes has always been one of the most hotly-debated questions in film theory. In 1916, Hugo Münsterberg's important essay *The Photoplay. A Psychological Study* laid the foundations of the question: the cinematic image is never merely objective, since the movement and depth that the spectator perceives in the film do not exist in themselves, but are the product of the cooperation of the images with the spectator's mental activity.[8] Moreover, in the film a series of techniques externalizes and makes materially visible on the screen certain mental processes: attention is recreated by the zoom and the close-up; memory is expressed through the use of flashbacks; imagination, conceived as the capacity to anticipate future events, is portrayed through what contemporary film grammar would call flashforwards. The relationship between film and mind thus appears analogical, based

7 J. Epstein, "Alcool et cinéma" (1949), in S. Keller, J.N. Paul, eds., *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012): 395-404.
8 H. Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (1916) (New York City: Dover Publications, 1970).

on the similarity of the respective cognitive processes.[9] A further peculiarity recognized by Münsterberg is that of visualizing what the characters "see in their own minds",[10] images belonging to memory and dreams whose transition is reported by "soft-focus images, lighting variations, superimpositions".[11]

In the same wake, in his famous essay devoted to *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures* (1934), also Erwin Panofsky remarked that "the movies have the power, entirely denied to the theater, to convey psychological experiences by directly projecting their content to the screen, substituting, as it were, the eye of the beholder for the consciousness of the character".[12]

The metonymic and metaphoric relationship between film and mind – to use Christian Metz's semiological terminology –[13] are the basis of the aesthetic specificity of cinema, which succeeds in materializing mental operations with greater effectiveness than the previous arts. Sergej Eisenstein's intellectual montage, with its adherence to thought faculties such as analogies and oppositions, enhances this hallucinatory and oneiric power of the movie. It is no accident that in his *Non-indifferent Nature* (1945-1947) the Soviet director and theorist analyzes mental visualization techniques such as those used in Loyola's spiritual exercises being interested in the artistic achievement of ecstasy and pathos.[14]

In many theories cinema takes on the characteristics of a mind objectified in material images and sounds: a magical double of the self-produced by processes of

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9 N. Carroll, "Film/mind analogies: The case of Hugo Münsterberg", *Journal for Aesthetics and Criticism* 46, no. 4 (1988): 489-499.
10 J. Moure, "The cinema as art of the mind: Hugo Münsterberg, first theorist of subjectivity in film", in D. Chateau, ed., *Subjectivity: Filmic Representation and the Spectator's Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011): 23-40, 39.
11 Ibid.
12 E. Panofsky, "Style and medium in the motion pictures" (1934), in *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge MA: The Mit Press, 1995): 98.
13 Ch. Metz, "Metaphor/metonymy, or the imaginary referent", *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (1981): 42-65. See also L. Williams, "Dream rhetoric and film rhetoric: metaphor and metonymy in *Un chien andalou*", *Semiotica* 33, no. 1-2 (1981): 87-103.
14 S. Eisenstein, *Non-indifferent Nature* (1945-1947), trans. H. Marshall (Cambridge-New York City: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 171. See also M. Lefebvre, "Eisenstein, rhetoric and imaginicity: towards a revolutionary memoria", *Screen* 41, no. 4 (2000): 349-368.

identification and projection for Edgar Morin among others;[15] a brain endowed with perceptions, actions, and affections according to Gilles Deleuze;[16] a narcissistic regression analogous to dreaming in the perspective of Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz.[17] Metz in particular underlines some radical differences between cinema and that particular form of mental image constituted by the dream: the awareness of being at the cinema versus the unawareness of dreaming; the impression of reality of the film versus the illusion of reality of nocturnal visions; the real exteriority of images and sounds perceived in the cinema versus the interiority of the "hallucinatory psychosis of desire"; the logical consistency of the film versus the bizarre discontinuity of dream images. Yet a profound analogy remains in the halfway states of both cinema and dream: when spectators are so engrossed that they interact with the characters on the screen and gesticulate like sleepwalkers, or when, thanks to the activation of defensive attention, the dream becomes more lucid and conscious.

Returning to the problem of the representation of altered states of consciousness, it is necessary to consider how this has a history that is linked to the evolution of the moving image. In Gilles Deleuze's cine-philosophy, for example, it is clear that the emergence of an image capable of questioning the subjective/objective distinction is linked to the emergence of modern cinema. In this historical context, in fact, a radical disorganization of the action-image takes place, with a prevalence of a pure optic-auditory sensation over its motor extension and narrative actualization. In this way, recollection-images, mental visualizations, hallucinations, and dreams take on a new centrality, in the form of virtualities that remain suspended and non-actualized,

15 E. Morin, *The cinema, or the Imaginary Man* (1956), trans. L. Mortimer (Minneapolis MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
16 G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* (1983), trans. H. Tomlinson, B. Habberjam (Minneapolis MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Id., *Cinema 2. The Time Image* (1985), trans. H. Tomlinson, R. Galeta (Minneapolis MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
17 J.-L. Baudry, "Ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus" (1970), trans. A. Williams, *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): 39-47; Id., "The Apparatus" (1975), trans. B. Augst, *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (1976): 104-126; Ch. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1977), trans. C. Britton *et al.* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).

typical of a crystal-image in which temporalities are reflected simultaneously.[18] Thus the dream-image assumes a particular centrality. Following Henri Bergson and his famous discussion on dreams, Deleuze refers to the panoramic character of dream-images, which is also typical of near-death experiences in which the whole of life suddenly appears before one's eyes.[19] What is created is a weak link between the optical or auditory sensations and this panoramic view of the whole. There are in fact two procedures common to the dream-image of cinema:

> One proceeds by rich and overloaded means [...] dissolves, superimpositions, deframings, complex camera movements, special effects, manipulations in the laboratory [...]. The other, on the contrary, is very restrained, working by clear cuts or montage-cut, making progress simply through a perpetual unhinging which "looks like" dream, but between objects that remain concrete.[20]

Both recollection-images (flashbacks) and dream-images are virtual, but in different forms. The recollection-images are actualized past events, while the dream-images are rooted in an image that refers itself to another virtual time, thus activating an infinite path of references. The result is a motor process very different from the concreteness of action, which is described by Deleuze following a conceptual apparatus taken from Ludwig Binswanger, as a movement of the world, "the fact of being inhaled by the world".[21] This is a virtuality and immersivity of the image which cinema proposes in its representations, but which the new digital media we know today have the power to realize at a technical level, with the user's perception absorbed and enveloped by the virtual image.

The recollection-image and the flashback have also been the subject of further theoretical investigation

18 A. Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
19 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*: 55-67.
20 Ibid.: 58.
21 Ibid.: 291.

since Deleuze. One example is Maureen Turim's work,[22] in which the flashback is considered as a structural device of film that is fundamental for understanding the non-linear development of film history itself. This process is particularly visible in the comparison between the representation of memories in melodrama and that presented by modernist cinema. At the same time, in the flashback emerges the strategy through which cinema represents the intersection between the individual dimension of memory and the socio-political dimension of history.

More recent approaches to the relationship between cinema and altered states of consciousness see the medium as a technological extension of a mind-body plexus to be rediscovered, above all, starting from the media-archaeological investigation of 19th century sciences of the mind. This is in fact the episteme that witnesses the emergence of the cinematic experience. Along these lines, we can quote the genetic relationship between hypnosis and cinema identified by Ruggero Eugeni,[23] Stefan Andriopoulos,[24] and Raymond Bellour;[25] the investigation into the relationship between cinema and hysteria proposed by Rae Beth Gordon,[26] Emmanuelle André,[27] and Mireille Berton;[28] and the link between the psychological mapping of gesture and the rise of the cinematic apparatus theorized by Pasi Valiaho.[29]

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22 M. Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (London: Routledge, 1989). For a discussion on the relationship between the time of new media devices and the time represented within them, see G. Stewart, *Framed Time. Towards a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
23 R. Eugeni, *La relazione d'incanto. Studi su cinema e ipnosi* (Milan: Vita & Pensiero, 2002).
24 S. Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
25 R. Bellour, *Les corps du cinéma: hypnose, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009).
26 R.B. Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
27 E. André, *Le choc du sujet. De l'hystérie au cinéma (XIXe-XXIe siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011).
28 M. Berton, *Les corps nerveux des spectateurs. Cinéma et sciences du psychisme de 1900* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2015).
29 P. Valiaho, *Mapping the Moving Image. Gesture, Thought, and Cinema circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

From hallucination to virtual realities

In all these theoretical perspectives it becomes evident how cinema, by representing altered states of consciousness, often reflects on its own affinity with dreams and hallucination. More precisely, on its identity as a materialization of mental visualization processes. Ken Russell's film *Altered States* (1980), which also gives the title to this monographic issue of *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images*, can be considered paradigmatic in this regard. In this film, the psychiatrist Edward Jessup (William Hurt), loosely based on the real-life figure of the neuroscientist John Lilly, carries out a series of experiments with the help of an isolation tank and the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms. His aim is to understand at first hand the subjective experience of schizophrenic patients, achieving a hallucinatory and dream-like perception that belongs to primitive mental states. The film echoes a number of ideas related to the redefinition of consciousness typical of 1970s-80s counterculture. Julian Jaynes's essay *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) is an example of these theories.[30] In this book, the subjective perception of schizophrenia is presented as an activation of an evolutionary state prior to the emergence of consciousness, the "bicameral mind", in which the right hemisphere of the brain was allocated the function of communicating through visual and verbal hallucinations, and the left hemisphere had the task of obeying and executing.

The film plays on two visual registers: one in the third person, that of the scientific community observing the experiment, and one in the first person, where the subjective hallucinations of the protagonist emerge in fragments. The hallucination is thus presented as a repeatable experiment, through the insertion of the body in a device suitable for the production and reproduction of altered states. But what kind of medium does this device really resemble? The

30 J. Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

body is immersed in water which, being at the same temperature as the body, cancels all sensory perception and, with it, all distinctions between inside and outside, tactile and external input. In this radical absence of the world, the mental image takes full shape, enveloping the person and becoming the only sensory horizon that can be perceived. Not only that: the mental image presents itself as a real space, and the effects of the hallucination seem to modify the user's own body (in the movie, transforming him into an Australopithecus). This hallucination represented in cinema takes us forward to another device, which, like a hallucination, does not allow any escape from the image, but a radical symbiosis with it. This is virtual reality.

In virtual reality, unlike cinema, it is not so easy to distinguish between objective and subjective shots. Firstly, because the virtual frame is always in some way subjective, since its source depends on the movements of the viewer's gaze to which it adheres, saturating the field of vision. Secondly, precisely because of the powerful sense of presence and feeling of being there produced by virtual reality, in immersive digital environments it becomes more difficult to represent the estrangement from actual perception that a previous medium like cinema obtained through cross-dissolves and other visual strategies. Is it therefore possible to portray altered states in immersive media? Can the tyranny of the sense of presence eliminate the images of absence, or do we just have to investigate new strategies of representation?

In fact, some virtual reality installations present themselves, directly, in the form of memories, dreams, hallucinations, mental visions. Examples are virtual reality experiences such as *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* (Arnaud Colinart, Amaury LaBurthe, Peter Middleton, James Spinney, 2016), in which the user can experience the inner perspective of the blind theologian John Hull; *The Key* (Céline Tricart, 2019), which portrays the dreams of an Iraqi migrant; *Porton Down* (Callum Cooper, 2019), in which the user becomes the guinea pig in hallucination tests performed using LSD; *Cosmos within Us* (Tupac Martir, 2019)

dedicated to the temporally and spatially unregulated perception of an Alzheimer's patient; finally, the mystical and lysergic journey of the Amazonian shamanic ritual reproduced in *Ayahuasca - Kosmik Journey* (Jan Kounen, 2019).

The present issue

These are problems that the first issue of *AN-ICON. Studies on Environmental Images* aims to investigate. A peculiar attention is devoted to the comparison between two media systems: an analogue system, dominated by the altered states of cinema, and a virtual one, where new experiential possibilities of virtual, augmented, and mixed reality emerge. The problem that runs through this comparison is essentially whether the possibility of presenting perceptively distorted states belongs more properly to the cinematic image, or whether it is still at the center of the new digital and immersive mediascape.

Barbara Grespi's and Giuseppe Previtali's contributions are directly related in their common purpose to search for a status of the virtual image in cinema in some nodal moments of film theory that interrogate the representation of mental states. Grespi's essay starts from Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991) and from the capability of the imaginary device represented in the movie to exteriorize and prosthesize subjective experiences such as visions and dreams. The fictional medium, halfway between cinema and virtual reality, allows Grespi to reflect on the filmic access to mental states. This issue is investigated through the recovery of the first, but lesser-known, of the two volumes of *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963-1965) by Jean Mitry. This is a pillar of film theory, analyzed by Grespi in its unacknowledged Husserlian roots. Thus, the technical and psychic concept of "projection", understood as a specific form of actualization, "an effect in which the perception of physical image intersects with mental envisioning", becomes especially central to introduce a

possible comparison between the cinematic forms of the visible and those that emerge in virtual experiences.

Cinematic altered states, however, undergo radical transformations in history: this is what Previtali's article discusses, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinema and examining the differences between the movement-image of classical cinema, in which dreams and memories are also expressed as physical realities intertwined with the world, and the time-image of modern cinema, capable of adhering to the dynamics of thought. For Previtali, an example of this process is Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), where recollection-images are not real flashbacks, but rather virtual mixtures of memory, imagination, and dream, as evidenced by the fact that the protagonist relives the past moments of his childhood and youth while remaining as old as he actually is in the present.

Still anchored to Bergman's cinema, Luca Acquarelli's investigation into the emergence of hallucination within the cinematic diegesis is grounded in the semiotic analysis of a further incursion: that of the photographic still image within the equidistant flow of the film's moving frames. This can be seen in Bergman's *Persona* (1966), but also in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) and Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), the latter consisting almost entirely of still images. In these moments a new balance is established between dream-states and the testimonial power of the image, seen through André Bazin's conception of photography as "true hallucination".

Enrico Terrone, in a different perspective, considers cinema in terms of a disembodied experience, organized in a space that has our sight but not our body as its own center. Because of this condition, cinema is able to approximate to non-perceptual attitudes such as memories and dreams, but not completely emulate them. On the contrary, this emulation would be a concrete possibility for virtual reality precisely thanks to its adherence to the gaze and body of the spectator coupled with a potential

for manipulation and alteration that it is impossible to find in another embodied experience such as that of theater.

But how are altered states expressed in the new immersive and digital mediascape? Is it possible in virtual reality to make a distinction between the representation of a real state from that of an exclusively mental state? First of all, we need to investigate how the digital radically transforms the very ideas of visual perception and image. This is evident in Antonio Somaini's contribution, devoted to new artificial intelligence technologies such as machine learning and machine vision. In fact, their non-human perceptual functions appear in some cases as altered states that produce dreamlike images, similar to those found in computer programs such as the one called, significantly, Google Deep Dream. Thus, it becomes necessary for Somaini to study the artistic practices that exploit the productive potential of machine learning in a creative and revolutionary way, such as in the artworks of Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, and Grégory Chatonsky.

The perceptual dimension is also at the center of Claudio Paolucci's contribution. From the point of view of cognitive semiotics, Paolucci investigates the hallucinatory character of ordinary perception, always shaped by the intervention of imagination, to analyze the way mental states are represented in virtual and augmented environments. If perception can be defined in terms of a hallucination controlled by the world, what changes in immersive environments is only the simulated character of the world itself. The states of imagination, memory, and hallucination are then reproduced in virtual and augmented reality following two possible strategies: either in a pan-perceptual modality, exploiting the full sense of presence produced by the immersive devices, or following the audiovisual strategies inherited from previous audiovisual languages with which virtual and augmented reality share the same formal apparatus of enunciation. To exemplify this double expressive

possibility, Paolucci analyzes the immersive videogame *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*.

At this point, it becomes necessary to understand what the specifically dreamlike and hallucinatory character of virtual reality consists of and how it differs from other established media. The joint paper written by film theorist Martine Beugnet and new media artist Lily Hibberd focuses on the role played by darkness, which in the new immersive media takes on a completely new potential compared to cinema. In fact, it becomes an intrinsic component of the environmentalized image of the former – coupled with the illusion of depth and the replication of motion. If the darkness of the traditional audiovisual distinguishes states of self and otherness, in virtual reality it envelops the users depriving them of the sense of distance and leading them back to a state of radical loss, in which they are haunted by sporadic sounds and visions, faithful to the dynamics more proper to memory and dream.

Pietro Montani's essay then becomes the effective conclusion and synthesis of all the questions raised by this issue. The dreamlike character of virtual reality consists for Montani in a precise work of oneiric imagination, capable of distancing itself from linguistic thought without getting trapped in a pure hallucination, but finding its proper status in what Freud defines as "Bilderschrift" (pictographic script), a syncretic relationship between images and writing functions, both pre-linguistic and performative, which can also be read in the Kantian terms of a schematization without concept. An expressive condition which resurfaces in early cinema and especially in Eisenstein's film theory of the 1920s and which today finds a specific declination in immersive virtual installations such as *Carne y Arena* (2017) by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu and *VR_I* (2018) by choreographer Gilles Jobin, where different participants can share a collective lucid dream. In fact, new media do not merely represent altered states of consciousness: they take on their performative power.

AN-ICONOLOGY
History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images

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