



Cycling as Reading a Cityscape: A Phenomenological Approach to Interface-Shaped Perception

by Janez Strehovec

Abstract

This essay attempts to assess whether the perceptual issues posed by the contemporary interface culture, and the constant attitude shift demanded by the new media between the “natural” and the “as if” modes, might be considered a significant challenge for phenomenological aesthetics as understood in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. To demonstrate how the use of a particular interface profoundly shapes the form and structure of an activity as well as enabling perception of a particular kind, the author does not focus directly on the state-of-the-art smart interfaces, but describes the experience of cycling in a large city, with the interface in the form of the bicycle upgraded with an imagined ride simulator. While the former enables a very particular entrance into the world of perception, shaped by its moderate speed and detachment from the ground, the latter enables techno-shaped perception in the “as if” screenic mode. The experience described raises questions concerning the kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and motor features contributing to the cyclist’s mobile perception, as well as pointing to issues related to the reading of the city’s network as a particular spatial configuration generated by the cyclist’s real-time activity. This is the space-time-event-ridescape maintained and modified by the corporeal act of cycling. The spatiality of such a ride does not presume the notion of a space that contains the cyclist, but builds on notions of being-in-the-ridescape (as a kind of cityscape), in terms not only of full corporeal and mental engagement, but also of bodily literacy. The reading of the cityscape enabled by the combination of two interfaces, the bicycle and the ride simulator, is discussed in relation to de Certeau’s account of pedestrian (walking) experience in a big city, his distinction between strategies and tactics, and the notion that each cyclist contributes a novel story to ridetext, which is viewed not as an aesthetic object but as the production of puzzles for the rider to solve. The paper concludes by questioning the capacity of phenomenology to accommodate the contemporary phenomenon of a “mixed” or “augmented reality” either in concept or in relation to the demands of the phenomenological reduction and the ends of the epoché.

One of the most talked about advances of digital technologies is their ability to create a displaced sense of place, things and the human, calling into question the individual’s everyday embodiment in physical settings and destabilizing the ways in which s/he connects to the environment and perceives its crucial features. To the extent that they form their spatial and

temporal experiences from a variety of data, users of digital technologies experience a mixed reality in which virtual (screenic) content comes to be integrated with an actual physical environment. There is much to be gained from paying close attention to the intersection of smart technologies and the human user, since it enables novel techno-shaped perceptions

which merit investigation. The novel condition of simultaneous participation in a given reality and an artificial one created by this technology-driven cultural turn, and the issues regarding one's corporeal experience within the mixed reality created by interface extensions, would seem most appropriately approached from a phenomenological perspective.

Investigations into the ontological status of the work of art brought phenomenological aesthetics to the recognition that the nature of an artwork's being is heterogeneous; for, besides real foreground, the work of art also contains a layer of unreal background. Analyzing the intentional world of artworks, phenomenological aesthetics likewise revealed such particular ontological forms as the *unreal*, *quasi-real* and the *as-if-real*. No less significantly, phenomenological investigations also raised the issue of the ontological status of the purely artificial as in the reality of "impossible" entities such as the centaur, the round square, wooden iron, and so forth. The being of these entities – as the so-called impossible objects – is again quite particular in nature; one could say that their ontological status is shifted from that of being towards nothingness. The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, having dedicated his thought precisely to nothingness – which is, in a way, essential to the being – reached farthest into these issues. In his *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre distinguishes intermediate stages between fully positive realities and those whose positive nature of appearance-alike merely conceals the chasm of nothingness. It is this very notion that first highlighted the existence of reality as comprising the non-being.

Phenomenological interest in these plural-mode being structures (that is, objects of art and imagination) is not confined to the theorists generally associated with the field of phenomenological aesthetics (such as, for instance, Roman Ingarden, Moritz Geiger, Eugen Fink, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Nicolai Hartmann), but was demonstrated also by Edmund Husserl – as is evident in the writings from his estate, published in *Husserliana* Vol. XXIII under the title *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung* (1980). Husserl's major concern in this collection of his writings is with the fictional objects of imagination (in German, *Fikta*) in the sense of *as-if-real* objects, and the specificity of unreality.

Nowadays, ontology can still be explored by referring to the philosophical tradition extending from Parmenides and Plato through to Husserl and Heidegger. However, this ontological movement could be enriched by analyses of the ontological modality of the new-media entities such as the avatar (a visual representation of a participant in a shared virtual community, and as such an interface for the self) and virtual agent. To these, one could also add

investigations into the plurality of spaces and times defining on-line communications and new-media activities that fall within the present social networking (Web 2.0) interactions. All these factors result in the new media¹ generating what we shall term "mixed reality" as a pluriversum – that is, a reality which encompasses both a given reality and a vast field of virtual as well as other artificial or synthetic realities. The components of this reality are objects, which in fact are no longer full and evident entities, but rather fluid and dispersed – that is, often only relations, actions and data arrangement of a quite provisional and instantaneous existence. The key issues here centre around the entities which occur in an instant fashion and last only as long as certain special conditions are being satisfied. The moment that this is no longer the case, the entities in question disappear; alternatively, they can be erased by pressing a delete key on the computer keyboard. New media, defined by both classical and second-order cybernetics, thus generate relational forms of existence whose being is likely to be something between the stable being and pure nothingness.

Towards the Mixed Reality and its Ontological Plurality

Cyberspace and "cybertime" encompassed within mixed reality do not overlap with real space and time. This multidimensional spatio-temporality calls for comprehensive investigation as well as noetic and noematic descriptions of virtual entities as such, with these phenomena thus open to a phenomenological approach. What is crucial here is the fact that phenomenology arises from ontological plurality and is therefore sensitized to entities characterized by their fragile and instant nature. As Herbert Spiegelberg (1960) observes, "What is all-important in phenomenology is that we consider all the data, real or unreal or doubtful, as having equal rights, and investigate them without fear or favour" (p. 892). Facing the specificity of in-the-present cyberspace phenomena, we are now able to discern not only the *as-if-real* and the *unreal*, but, in greater specificity, also the *e-real*, the *cyber-real*, the *virtual* and the *@-real* as artificial modes of digital media generated on-line as would-be realities which have become to a certain extent institutionalized in the 3D virtual world *Second Life*. The present mediascape increasingly blurs the boundaries between the given *real-as-we-know-it* and the *artificial*; the latter even appears to be the more prominent principle in the mainstream

¹ New media include the Internet (today's trendy Web 2.0 on which social networking is based), special effects, virtual reality, hypertext, digital literature, DVD, web sites, computer multimedia, mobile phones, CD-ROMs, computer games, digital music (in MP3 and other file formats).

techno-culture of our media-dominated information society.

One of the virtues of phenomenology is its aim to bring description as close as possible to the specificity of the “thing” in question. By means of the phenomenological reduction, and by considering the plural nature of objects (given as phenomena), phenomenology attempts to disclose with great accuracy the special nature of the object under analysis, whether real or unreal. The German philosopher Eugen Fink, in his investigations into the visual medium, has argued that “objects of the world of images are not objects in real space, nor do they last in real time; they exist merely in the space of the world of images and in the time of the world of images” (Fink, 1966, pp. 74-75). Given its orientation towards disclosing the specific nature of “the thing itself”, a phenomenological approach nevertheless remains pertinent even in the case of new-media objects which derive their existence solely from the existence of cyberspace and cybertime within the multidimensional spatio-temporal context of the so-called “mixed” or “augmented” reality. If we think, for example, of avatars and virtual agents presented in cyberspace (for example, in *Second Life*), we see that they exist only in cyberspace and cybertime, that they have only a cyberpast and a cyberfuture, and that they can only be the objects and subjects of cyberactions in the virtual world.

Vilém Flusser, the theoretician of telematic society, pioneered the analysis of specificity in phenomena established by new media. In his essay “Technik Entwerfen” [Conceiving Technology], in the section dealing with the hologram, he remarks that these “pseudo-objects established by means of technology are no more objects of the kind that can be negated by the subject, but rather they are projections, conceived from within the framework of a project” (Flusser, 1998, p. 144). In the case of the hologram cube, he draws the conclusion that this is no longer an object that stands in space, but rather is immaterial, pure appearance, pure “would-being” (Ger. “Sollen”). Another example of the phenomenological orientation in dealing with the specificity of a particular medium is seen in the theory of the work of art as a stratified formation (that is, a formation constructed of several different layers). This theory was developed by Nicolai Hartmann and Roman Ingarden, taking into account Waldemar Conrad’s seminal essay of 1908 on the aesthetic object. The work of art is thus not a monolithic formation but has a polyphonic character, founded on the many-layered nature of its structure.

Life in the contemporary mixed reality fosters the emergence of new forms of perception to fit the interaction with objects in cyberspace. These objects even call for a new sense to be created, namely *the*

sense of the virtual, much in the same vein as Karl Marx’s notion of the mineralogical sense and the sense of beauty. This means that our consciousness needs to be cultivated so as to be able to handle the objects which we touch and control in virtual and other realities in a very subtle fashion. For instance, the reader of digital text is identified with the cursor in grasping the individual letter of digital text, and can thus be said to be in the textscape, where the cursor is.

Mixed reality – a term in contemporary new media studies which encompasses both the augmented reality and the augmented virtuality – is, as a rule, accessible via interfaces and can even be spoken about in terms of an interface culture (Johnson, 1997). Our contemporary culture first and foremost applies the new media interfaces which generate special matrices, which in turn enable specific access to reality: one interface will run a particular movie in front of our eyes, while another will confront us with “another story”, say, in the form of a computer game.

Furthermore, the use of a particular interface profoundly defines the structure and the form of an activity. By using a word-processor, for example, a text is organized and controlled in a different way than if it were penned or typewritten. Interfaces enable us to apprehend space and time in formerly unknown ways and direct us towards new forms of representation. Think, for example, of interactive representation (typical of video and computer games), which takes us from within the perspective of the perfect tense and places us into the imperfect tense, referring to the pure present, and from the standpoint of an observer to the position of the protagonist, the actor. The game, unlike the story, integrates us into real-time activities, since it demands exercise, subtle hands-on-controls activity, skill and experience. This means that it is most persuasive, as it employs all the senses – while also creating a new one: the sense of the game. Games give us directions as to how to achieve mastery under particular conditions and how to react quickly in risk situations; but, on the other hand, they offer only a limited and – in comparison to the narrative quality within the medium of the story – an impoverished view of the world, since the view has been reduced to the mere goals of the game. Games are unmistakably centred around goals and motivated by results – all of which have nothing to do with the literary story considered as a rich narrative, crowded with plots and non-trivial solutions.

Entering the World of Techno-Shaped Perception

Parallel to mixed reality, therefore, emerges, let us say, mixed perception, which is shaped through advanced interfaces. This means that the perception of the contemporary individual is influenced by

media, which is why s/he looks, listens and touches – metaphorically speaking – in accordance with the principles of film, simulation, clicking and hypertext. Not only film, but also the new media, crucially influence perception, activities and imagination, so that the individual – metaphorically speaking – sees, hears and touches to a certain extent more and in a different fashion than s/he would if s/he did not live in the world of interface and software culture.

Various technical goal-oriented activities, enabled by the advanced smart technologies, generate certain ways of being-in-the-world (even in terms of Heideggerian ontology). Raising questions with regard to technology means to pose both social and cultural questions regarding something essential in our primordial existence. New mobile technologies profoundly shape the way in which people communicate and perceive reality. When we move around in our surroundings armed with mobile screenic devices, we also perceive the data shown on the screen of such a device, meaning that both the visual and aural interfaces are integrated with our experience of the walking environment. Virtual data approaching from a remote context on the screen are related to and co-ordinated with our basic, non-mediated perceptions from the physical here and now. The digital technology “becomes a kinetic surface which is incorporated in the experience and understanding of different places” (Thrift, 2004, p. 585). We are confronted by a novel human condition, in which bodily movement (including walking, riding and stopping), real time, visual (also aural and tactual) perception of the physical environment, and screen-mediated virtual data are integrated.

Such a condition, and the rich experience enabled by it, drives users to deploy novel ways of perceiving by combining both their tactile activity and ways of seeing the world. Referring to one’s ordinary use of mobile screenic devices, Heidi Rae Cooley has introduced the concept of “tactile vision” to denote one’s ability to “see” by virtue of a hand-on-controls activity. What is manifest is thus a condition of material and dynamic seeing that involves eyes as well as hands and the screenic devices as they enter one’s nomadic cockpit. With regard to the use of mobile screenic devices, Cooley distinguishes between “window-ed seeing” (as a practice of looking *through* for instance an aperture or transparent pane) and “screenic seeing” as a more physical manner of seeing insofar as it involves looking *at* an opaque surface and thus “encourages an experience of encounter” (Cooley, 2004, p. 143) by acquiring a sort of tangibility.

In the contemporary techno-culture, seeing has ceased to be a pure act of contemplative vision of a distanced viewer. On the contrary, it interacts with one’s tactile

activities, enabling a dynamic oscillation between visual and tactile feedback. Vision is activated by the movement of hand, seeing (and reading) becomes tactile, and the new generation of word-images called onto the screen by means of navigational devices generate a further circle of tactile and kinaesthetic activity. Activity of this kind stimulates one’s perception and enriches one’s experience as one continues to interact with these smart technologies.

Such an approach to techno-shaped experience and perception strongly differs from the traditional, more critical attitude to the world of perception framed by advanced media and technologies. Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Storyteller* (1936/1968) argues that “experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at newspapers demonstrates that it has reached a new low ...” (pp. 83-84). According to Benjamin, the very nature of what is conveyed by information media – that “its value does not survive the moment in which it was new” (p. 84) – is strongly opposed to the richness of the experience derived from the telling of a story and the hearing or reading thereof.

Rather than adopting a pessimistic approach to our information society, this essay seeks to broaden our awareness of the novel media-shaped narratives enriching our experience and perceptions.

The Interface Culture Reinvents the Body and Reshapes its Perception

Whereas an early phase of cyberculture privileged the pure mental operations of a cyborg’s terminal identity discussed within the parameters of the *mind vs. “cyber-mind”* problem (for instance, the ideology posed by Gibson’s 1984 proto-cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*), the present Web 2.0 culture, shaped by the bridging of the gap between two cultures, reinvents the *mind/body problem* by positioning it within the interface culture. Rather than being pushed aside or left behind, as it used to be within the cyberpunk ideology, the corporeal features of the nomadic individual armed with a screenic device are becoming more central in terms of reinventing novel tasks and functions. The body, as “our basic organ of having the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1998, p. 146), enters the novel ontological condition of the present mixed reality determined by the hybridization and merging of in-between spaces and times. The very nature of mixed reality demands a techno-shaped perception, which is enabled through the co-operation (and hybridization) of different senses, such as tactile vision, tactile hearing, tactile scanning of surfaces on the move, not-just-seeing, and so forth.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion that “the world of perception is to a great extent unknown territory as

long as we remain in the practical or utilitarian attitude” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 39) makes sense in respect of the shift to a more subtle, let us say artificial and sophisticated, attitude that enables richer perception. I shall attempt to describe phenomenologically, in the form of a first person account, an intimate and personal experience of this kind, by drawing upon my everyday practice of cycling in my home city, Ljubljana – my experience of which is enabled through the combination of two interfaces, namely the bicycle and a (co-imagined) ride simulator (such as can be found in theme parks), and shaped by “shifting gears” both physically and attitudinally. For me, riding a bicycle is more than simply rolling on two wheels. Once my urban ride starts, all that is essential in my life is the moment in front of me, right now.

Thanks to the combination of a ride in real space and a “co-imagined” ride in a simulator on the one hand, and the acquired “clicking” sensitivity of a trendy computer culture on the other, I can perceive the riding space in its complex entirety; which means that, in the perceived space, I can switch smoothly between the spheres of the real and those of the artificial, and, in essence, “enjoy the ride” as such. This kind of ride (as a rich temporal event) is founded in the everyday experience of the author of this essay. In other words, I am going to write about how I view the city and what I see in it, now that cycling complements both my everyday professional work in front of the computer screen and my excursions into the trendy environments of the present-day entertainment industry (simulator races, SF-movies, VR-based games, theme park rides).

I cycle through the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, the city in which I live, in my own way: in the gear which demands rather heavy pushing on the pedals. The latter, offering crude resistance, reminds me of the feedback of the force. I am, myself, uncertain as to why I don’t shift gears so as to make it easier, why I torture myself in this kind of way, and why, in fact, I am so ridiculous; for, pushing the pedals, I keep making unnecessary bows of my head. But that’s how it is: I have simply got used to cycling through the city in my own way. Pushing the pedals of my city-bike brings to my mind mouse-clicking, say, in front of a screen featuring some slow 3-D computer animation into which I gradually penetrate by means of clicking. I have already pointed out that I push my bicycle slowly, so as to feel the feedback of the force to the full; it is for this reason that what I see in front of me does not open up as a traditional movie based on the sensitive chemistry of the film tape. There is no speed and no play of city lights involved; instead the view opens up for me in the sense of step-by-step, even saw-like, penetration within the framework of gradual approaching. What is relevant here is in fact

sequential approaching, progressing to the rhythm beaten by the metronome and/or some other digital device.

Riding down Miklosiceva Street or Presernova Road, I not only cycle on them, but at the same time – metaphorically speaking – I also click on them to the rhythm of buildings approaching and receding. Whenever I cycle, I take the road as an imaginary zone-tunnel, simulated by my own perception, which ends, say, near Ljubljana’s famous Three Bridges. Thanks to the “clicking” pattern of approaching, structured in levels and steps, such a tunnel is shaped as a telescope tube, offering numerous views across the landscape. Slow cycling also allows looking upwards and sideways, at the facades and pedestrians on the pavements flanking the two rows of buildings; and, of course, above all, it allows looking down. The cyclist must look down, to the pedals, and forward, a little ahead of the handlebar. S/he must also direct an intense gaze on the surface of the road and on the immediate surrounding terrain: both of which, lying at the same level, require looking down.

In my imagination, I complement the ride down a real street with a ride through an unreal, “co-imagined” tunnel, switching to this mode at the very moment I receive a special stimulus. Viewing the surroundings, I notice that acceleration causes the facades to be set in motion as if to create a movie featuring light-dark surfaces with their outlines getting lost. It is at that moment that I switch to the “tunnel-mode”. Suddenly I notice an agreeable change in the environment under observation; this change, caused by my very motion, in turn gives rise to a desire/interest that this object-process-movie-ride should last a long time, so that I could, in a way, possess it, and derive extended pleasure from its changing. This refers primarily to the changes associated with accelerating and stopping, and, consequently, to the facades alternating between being caught in an interval of a movie and re-entering again into the phase of rigidity, re-composed into a stable form. The “movie experience” with the liquid architecture of the street, enabled by the interface of the bicycle, but indirectly – in “co-imagined” analogy – also by the interfaces of the computer and the simulator, has been provoked by what Ingarden (1969) terms “aesthetic original emotion” (Ger. “aesthetische Ursprungsemotion”). By this I intend to denote the stimulus which comes from the environment and manifests itself in a real object as its formal modification. The latter does not inspire indifference, but rather an interest in the particular superstructure that adorns the perception of the real ride through the exploration of an unreal tunnel. This impression, gained in the proximity of attractive qualities which arise from my perception in motion, is in fact only the beginning of the large-scale and complex process of aesthetic and kinaesthetic

experience accompanying the riding experience. In this experience, I combine both modes: a real ride and a ride-supplement process in the world (tunnel) of images. What counts in all of this is not only the pleasure derived from the changes which pave the way to an ever more intense tunnel-movie (depending on the acceleration), but also the interest in changes resulting from stopping, which causes opaque facades on both side of the street to reassemble back into clear architectural outlines.

I do not merely cycle through the city in terms of a simple corporeal activity, because in fact I am cycling-clicking through it in terms of the network established by both spatial and temporal grammar. This means that I do not merely follow an urban street network, but I also draw my own loops between its threads and nodes: across courtyards, along poorly fenced building sites, through narrow passages. I make use of the bicycle to benefit from the quite special experience of the city's nearness: to encounter its underlying structures and configurations, to look across the river and into the canals, to focus on what stimulates my proximate senses of touch and smell. With my bicycle I stick to those parts of the city where the bicycle still belongs, in the sense that there it is not thoroughly out of place. The bicycle is not like the scooter, the skateboard, or roller-skates on which you can speed across the plazas of huge shopping malls and between towering skyscrapers. The bicycle, to be frank, is actually an old device; it does not belong everywhere (like, for instance, LA downtown), it does not suit everybody, and some find the bicycle downright disturbing. However, the bicycle can still function as an interface, and sustaining a particular framework (moderate speed, moderate detachment from the ground, pushing the pedals, the pedals offering sufficient resistance, the cyclist bending over the handlebar) it enables a quite particular kind of perception. Only the posture and the motion of the cyclist provide for the unique experience of a "co-imagined" projection tunnel and the experience of the city's buildings as the scenery in a 3-D digital cinema.

What kind of buildings are of interest to us? How do they outline the tunnel? At this point, I must be more accurate: buildings stand sideways, they delimit the outer border. Buildings stand, buildings are there; as a cyclist, I actually view whatever fills the area between the buildings and my eyes, with this area shaped as a tunnel network. The latter in fact contains not buildings as such, but image-screens softened by motion, and full of light and life, getting stuck on the nodes of the network. These, however, are not momentary stains extended to the point of formlessness – we are not, after all, aboard a high-speed or bullet train (like the French TGV or Spanish AVA); the images in the tunnel therefore preserve the

configurations of doors, windows, ornamental pillars and the like, which linger for an interval only to extend again at an accelerated pace.

Cycling on roads and paths and sandy trails, I am able to watch-in-motion the images within the tunnel network. I perceive this network as a particular spatial configuration, with the ridescape generated by my own activity. This is the space-time-event-ridescape maintained and modified by my own cycling. It is one space-derivative out of an abundant set. The spatiality of such a ride does not presume the notion of a space that contains the cyclist, but builds on notions of being-in-the-ridescape (as a particular kind of cityscape) in terms of full corporeal and mental engagement and orientation. It should be stressed here that the preposition "in" in the notion of being-in-the-ridescape does not suggest rough containment; instead, its use connotes the sense of "in" as in involvement, and should thus be associated with *being in love* and so forth. Moreover, due to its mobile narrative structure, which presupposes a textual sequence or network of relations, not only can I see images and motion – that is, not only do I merely follow/read visualized nouns and verbs – but, rather, my gaze, enabled by the interface of the resisting pedals, also touches, metaphorically speaking, the conjunctions and prepositions between them. As I cross a section of the cityscape as an artificial *textwork* of relations, I cycle *into*, and I watch *to*, *over*, *towards*, *in the direction of*, *from the direction of*. Furthermore, I cycle *between* and *into*, *for*, in a sense, I also *dive*. The space-time-action of cycling and/as clicking falls primarily under the domain of verbs, conjunctions and prepositions (including the temporal *before*, *not-yet* and *anymore*).

Is the virtual space of the tunnel constructed in relation to the perception of a cyclist the only feasible form in which imagination can enhance cycling through the city? Does the augmented gaze emerge only via the configuration of the tunnel? Can pedalling-as-clicking also be seen from a different perspective? It can be. There are areas and spots where the city exposes its bowels, or at least its wounds, in terms of its dissonant, disquieting "uncanny"; that is, where it falls apart and where it is being built. Upon such areas I also cast – metaphorically speaking – the blanket of the satellite orbital gaze needed for the readability of the cityscape. What do I mean by that? In this case, the whole thing looks as follows: I cycle, and at the same time, by virtue of my perspective modified with the optics of a satellite camera, I am – above. Cycling (say, around building sites, amid ruins, or past the sites of fires) I look down as if from a spacecraft slowly cruising over an unknown planet, stopping-clicking each time I push on the pedal, to catch a close-up image of some striking configuration on the

planet's surface, say, a crater. My cycling-clicking corresponds to a point-by-point crossing of space. And it seems that the cycling also brings something "more" – an aura, perhaps, or new meaning or function – to the city wounds.

The cyclist's ride in the cityscape can be discussed also in terms of de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics and his account of the pedestrian (walking) experience in the big city (De Certeau, 1974/1984). Cyclists are the ones who will visit the city wounds (such as the site of a fire) and make them function as hidden spots of the city, because the understanding of the cityscape is enriched by the reading and re-reading of its dark voids and spots of indeterminacy. Cycling is riding and, as such, as sequential movement, a kind of sophisticated narrative, and thus open to being read and discussed in terms of the concepts applied within the phenomenology of literature (for instance, Ingarden's and Iser's notions of spots of indeterminacy and voids). Each cyclist brings a novel story to the urban narrative. A city is rendered both shapeless and senseless without pedestrians, cyclists and car drivers. It cannot exist in more than name: because it takes people moving and riding through it to turn cityspace into a fluid network of places.

The above description of cycling through a city is intended as an illustration of how a means of transport as traditional as the bicycle enables a particular kind of experience and perception, from the very moment we start using it as an interface in order to experience the environment in a special way. Also, the issue of (new) media in general is the issue of technologically shaped and accelerated perception; that is, perception which is enabled via a particular matrix – or, better, through what Heidegger (1954/1977, p. 302) terms "enframing" – and which, in the case of the bicycle, is fairly specific. It differs distinctly from perception pertaining to, say, the fashionable skateboard. The defining feature of the latter – reiterating the mouse metaphor – is clicking by pushing against the ground in a vibrating ride.

It is typical of state-of-the-art interfaces that they are increasingly departing from separate, isolated functioning; instead, they are being linked up and enhanced to form systems. Perception enabled by a particular interface thus also becomes intertwined, linked, combined with perception enabled by another interface. The city as a 3-D digital cinema in the cyclist's experience is cycled-through and viewed/constructed through both interfaces, namely the bicycle and the screen, and/or their peripheral devices, such as the pedals and the mouse. My cycling into the city as a 3-D digital cinema is also based on the everyday experience shaped in front of the computer screen. Without any clicking, watching

SF movies with special effects and those employing trendy 3-D technology (e.g. the movie, *Avatar*), and without theme-park simulated rides, I would view things differently while I cycle, and I would see – in a certain sense – less; the cityscape would be the poorer for the loss of that tunnel derivative of space which is shaped precisely by my ride and which can only exist in the spatio-temporally specific event of this same ride.

Liquid Switching between Various Modes of Perception

The issue which needs to be addressed is how best to approach this sort of hybrid experience and perception from a phenomenological perspective. Could it be that my exploration of the city in the form of a cycling-clicking experience refers primarily to the mode of perception within the mainstream interface culture – and, as such, a mode unfamiliar to the world of perception which preoccupied Husserl and his successors? Does Husserl provide us, in any way, with a phenomenological approach to issues of this kind?

Our answer to the latter question is affirmative. Not only the texts gathered in Vol. XXIII of *Husserliana*, but also Husserl's analyses of space and time (temporal structures of kinaesthetic sequences in *Ding und Raum*) and of perception are of value in the techno-cultural context. Switching to the "as if" mode and, consequently, the particular derealization of objects and processes, has also been described by Husserl himself; even better, they have been described in a form which calls for modifications, such as I myself have proposed in my account of a ride through an unreal tunnel. Husserl not only asserts that "Reality can be observed as if it were an 'image'", but that, "In a way, any thing can be viewed as an 'image'" (Husserl, 1980, pp. 591, 593). In the context of phenomenology, seeing something as if it were an image paves the way to the procedure of derealization, and, consequently, to the "as if" mode – which ultimately means that the given real becomes infected by the "as if" mode. Viewing the world as if it were an image, as Husserl explains in his *Ideas*, requires a neutrality-modification of consciousness, implying that, in the image, we intend to a reality within the mode of "quasi". Of particular significance in the context of this essay is Husserl's fundamental claim that every thing (and therefore not only a thing of artistic imagination) can be observed as an image, in that it means that every thing can be included among the objects of derealization.

If I now return to the description of what I perceive while cycling through my home city, I can note again that I perceive the streets within a real (or what Husserl terms "natural") attitude, and, at the same

time, I also see them as an image. Not, however, as a static image in the Husserlian sense, but rather as a “movement-image” (Deleuze, 1983), as in film. And, in a technoculturally-shaped sense, not only in that way, but also as on a theme park simulator’s screen.

The contemporary individual, confronted with the mediascapes of interface culture, is clearly urged on to observe this reality’s components and processes as if they were images, movies, simulator rides or computer games. Perceiving the mixed reality, s/he is driven to switch to what could be termed the de-realized image mode.

The question that is raised at this point concerns the nature of this switching, as in the changing of attitudes, when the user of the reality mode that is characteristic for actions in everyday life switches to an image mode. We have already mentioned Ingarden’s notion of aesthetic original emotion as a starting point for the process of aesthetic experiencing that leads to reality in a quasi mode. Such a process, and implied change of attitude, in the context of Ingarden’s phenomenology is understood as something very demanding and sophisticated. In this regard, he writes in *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*: “The appearance of the original emotion in a person’s stream of consciousness produces, above all, a certain check in the preceding ‘normal’ course of experiences and modes of behaviour in regard to the objects surrounding him in the real world” (Ingarden, 1937/1973, pp. 191-192). The break of the practical orientation with this check is very demanding, in that it leads us away from the conditions in which we normally find ourselves, with the return to the normal conditions similarly demanding. Ingarden describes this in the following way: “The return to the concerns of earlier life is often accompanied by discomfort, by a feeling of the pressing weight of life, from which the original aesthetic emotion had, to a certain extent, freed us” (ibid., p. 193). In this light, Ingarden’s concluding thought about the nature of such switching is not surprising: “The transition from the practical to the aesthetic attitude is perhaps the most thoroughgoing change in man’s psychological attitude” (ibid., p. 196).

At first glance, Ingarden’s notions can be considered of merely historical significance, being embedded in a period preceding that in which the (new media based) interface culture became part of the mainstream, when only rare situations, connected to art environments, made the switching off from everyday reality possible based on contact with the original aesthetic emotion. In contrast, the readiness to work in different generations of reality, different worlds and different times belongs to the condition of the contemporary individual living in the mixed reality of

the present. Switching among these experiential dimensions requires constant reorientation towards very particular conscious acts, but it flows fluently, without imposing problematically on the individual’s psychological life. It would seem as if the contemporary individual’s horizon of expectations has adapted to the demands of participating in ontologically differently founded realities, and that s/he is therefore able psychologically to accommodate the demands of entering the synthetic spaces and times. What we are actually witnessing is a learned, routine readiness for such switching, since the contemporary individual spends ever-increasingly more time in the mode which, to a certain extent, resembles the “as if” or the derealized image mode.

When they’re on-line, people constantly pass from one form of social activity to another. For instance, in one session, a Net user could first purchase some clothes from an e-commerce catalogue, then look for information about education services from the local council’s site and then contribute some thoughts to an on-going discussion on a list server for fiction-writers. Without even consciously having to think about it, this person would have successively been a consumer in a market, a citizen of a state and an anarcho-communist within a gift economy. (Barbrooke, 2005, ¶37).

Suddenly, various modes of realities and several forms of activities are at one’s disposal, everything is on the move in a very smooth fashion, and everything is accessible as a standing reserve for possible manipulations, as demonstrated by the present Web 2.0 portals and facilitated by very user-friendly navigational devices.

But does this constant interchanging of attitudes completely coincide with the transition from the natural attitude to the aesthetic attitude discussed in phenomenological terms? Can it validly be said that Husserl’s idea of the “as if” mode infecting reality is being realized in the interface culture of mixed reality? Does the cyclist on the streets of Ljubljana really function as a “virtual phenomenologist”? Is the modern hybrid environment of media-ization and virtualization a kind of “realm” of pure phenomena that follow the radical interruption of the natural attitude that is bound to practical goals?

The answers to these questions are in the negative. Nevertheless, contemporary experience is elucidated by awareness of differences between the current media-ization on the one hand and derealization and neutralization in the context of phenomenology on the other. This trendy media-ization is not a “pure” derealization at all, but is based on mixed experiences

(Ger. “Gemischte Erlebnisse”) of the kind about which Husserl wrote in *Husserliana* Vol. XXIII. The phenomenological device of changing attitudes is also a useful one when researching the specificity of media-based attitudes. However, the reality of the media is not the rigorously pursued reality of the phenomenological reduction, but is a hybrid and synthetic “hyperreality” – the notion of which, extensively developed by Jean Baudrillard from the late 1980s into the 1990s, in essence infers “the death of the real” in the context of postmodern society’s greater connectivity with the “realer than real” or “hyperreal”. It is characteristic of this new media-ized, hybrid and artificial reality that it often tries to be more real than the given reality, and this is especially the case for virtual reality. And such an intention does not fit with the demands of the phenomenological reduction, let alone the ends of the epoché, driven as it is by the desire to bracket the very real – or, let us say, to cleanse the reality to the point, in essence, of pure irreality. The (new) media-generated idea of augmenting and accelerating the

very drive of reality by deploying various special effects is thus at odds with the fundamental aim of phenomenology to focus purely on the real.

Contemporary existence is shaped by the new interactive media as distinct from the traditional media (such as the press, radio, film and television), with the promise that by using devices (for example, a web camera logged onto the Internet) they will come closer to reality-as-we-know-it in a more authentic way than the traditional media could. The upgrade of the cyclist ride in the co-imagined tunnel described in this essay was also prompted by the wish to upgrade the reality experienced in the more complex form of simulated reality.

In conclusion, we could say that, while the reality of phenomenology and the (mixed and hybrid) reality of the (new) media are irreconcilable in various respects, a phenomenological approach nevertheless enables us to raise crucial questions regarding the experiential challenges of the new media.

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About the Author



Janez Strehovec, PhD, is an Associate Professor of New Media and a principal researcher and part-time affiliate of both the University of Ljubljana and the University of Primorska in Slovenia. He is the author of seven books in the field of cultural studies and aesthetics published in Slovenia. His most recent book, *Besedilo in Novi Mediji* [Text and New Media], was published in 2007. Professor Strehovec’s work has also been included in various collections of essays on digital culture and literature (e.g. in *Reading Moving Letters*, 2010), and he has published extensively in journals such as the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *CTheory*, *Afterimage*, *Dichtung Digital*, *Cybertext Yearbook*, *Glimpse*, *Drunken Boat*, *Digital Creativity*, and *Technoetic Arts*. He has presented papers at conferences in Europe, Mexico, Australia, Singapore and the United States. His research interests fall into the fields of phenomenological aesthetics, philosophy of new media art, the technoculture and Internet studies, and the theory of digital literature.

E-mail address: Janez.Strehovec@guest.arnes.si

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