

[Diego Rossi came from the University of Naples (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, founded in 1224) to Redondo Beach, California, to spend the four weeks of July 2012 conducting extended interviews about topics surrounding virtual reality. Diego Rossi is the translator of the Italian edition of *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. What follows is Part One of the text based on notes made during the weeks of July 2012. The text was later edited by Michael Heim. The second half of the interview will follow.]

### **Virtuality and Dreams [Interview Part One]**

Diego Rossi Talking with Michael Heim

**Diego Rossi:** You are one of the first philosophers to have written about Virtual Reality (maybe the very first?), and you were known as the “philosopher of cyberspace” thanks to your presentation at the *First Conference on Cyberspace* (1990) and your book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (1993). It seems that you have studied VR in the broadest scope from logic to ontology to aesthetics: You analyzed informational logic in *Electric Language* (1987), before the “ontological shift”; then ontology in *The Metaphysics*; and finally the aesthetics with *Virtual Realism*. In the meantime, technology continued to develop. Do VR and Information Technologies still hold your interest? What are currently some questions that hold your attention?

**Michael Heim:** Nowadays it is difficult to keep a distance from the technologies that we use every day. Our collective culture has pushed everything into the digital. Twenty or thirty years ago, we could sit back and play with virtuality, entertain it as an idea or fantasy. We could be

philosophical about the potential of VR for making life more virtual, more fantastic, more magical. That distance – our ability to “sit back” and contemplate the magic of computing – is now closed. Philosophy needs a certain distance to observe phenomena in a holistic perspective and to formulate a clear notion of what is happening and to intuit the future direction our society is taking. Regrettably, everyday activities today – from “friendship” to “education” to “business” – are necessarily pressed into the service of the computerized formats, so we can no longer freely choose to reflect on computing as one activity among others. We begin already immersed in technology. That’s why we tend to speak today of “virtuality” rather than of “Virtual Reality.” The latter refers to a very specific historical model of immersive technology. That was the era of the 1980s and 90s. The term “virtuality” is now much broader and covers the manifold ways we are immersed. As we are constantly immersed in technology it’s hard to find the right questions, to specify which phenomena are worth analyzing, to focus on what to consider (what Heidegger called “*die Sache des Denkens*”). What do we refer to nowadays when we speak of virtuality? Does the term refer to the Internet? To “new media” productions that shape the current cultural world? Should virtuality include smartphones? This year, Oxford University Press is publishing a volume of over seventy essays that attempt to re-define virtuality; this *Handbook of Virtuality*, edited by Mark Grimshaw, gathers the perspectives from the many disciplines involved in VR research. The *Handbook* is appearing in online selections [\[link\]](#).

The ubiquity of virtuality envelopes our imagination and provides digitized content for thoughts and discussions. One result is the gradual deterioration of hidden parts of the psyche, such as dreams, fantasies, and somatic self-understanding (awareness of subtle body energy). People don’t cultivate their

dream lives. They don't even remember their dreams. They find their dream fantasies artificially activated by media phantasms and well managed by media producers. The media industry offer images and fantasies that tend to replace personal imaginative content and hijack personal mythologies. Formerly, a reader could immerse herself in the world of a book, take a break from it to meditate, thereby cultivating the individual art of internal visualization.

Mainstream media productions create a more inert relationship to fantasy. We need to counter inertia by exploring fresh ways to active inner imagination – through interiority rather than screen-based stimulation. Here some of the older classics of the Human Potential Movement can be helpful, such as the book by Piero Ferrucci *What We May Be*, which continues the work of psychotherapist Roberto Assagioli. The discipline I mostly involve myself in is the Humanities, a broad interdisciplinary enterprise that is taught to freshmen at the University of California at Irvine and to graduate students at Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles. The Humanities is historically grounded in the Renaissance when the Roman (Cicero) *studia humanitatis* served as a model for education. We have still not exhausted the treasures mined by those families in Florence and Milan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, led by the Medici family. They fostered several Neo-Platonic visionary activities like active dream work, Tarot, alchemy, several Hermetic skills, and the personal re-visioning of tradition (Michelangelo, Botticelli).

To forge new connections to personal imagination– the quiet place that mystics call the “higher self” – we need to unplug ourselves from media. We need down time for solitary stillness. Only stillness can listen for the inner promptings of the imaginative Big Picture that builds within us over time. This is the same Big Picture whose fragments flicker in dreams. The

Picture spans the depth of past and far future, binding us to our own unique life stories and to the larger stories created by collective culture. As Swiss thinkers, Hermann Hesse and Carl Jung noted, our inner stories precede the technologies we create. From high in the European Alps, these thinkers saw how the Big Picture forms and becomes visible, a movement from inner subjective awareness to outer manifestation in technologies. The myth of telepathy preceded radio and television; the mystical communion of saints preceded the Internet.

**D.R.:** Reading books was once similar to travel where everyone takes his or her individual journey: a novel, read by me, is different from the same novel read by someone else, because I imagine a particular character or scene in a very different way than someone else does. A cinematic version of the novel creates a very different relationship to viewers than the novel as the movie audience will view the scenes in ways that the director imagined them, and the movie scene will imprint the imagination differently from the novel.

**M.H.:** Just so. Bookish literacy is assimilating to mass-media, and people become consequently more passive. That's why in the last several years I've become interested in cultivating imagination, specifically dream cultivation and magical practices like reading Tarot cards. Mobilizing the individual imagination can counter passivity and media dominance. Through practice we can return to the roots of imagination and revive inner psychic energies that form the basis of critical attitudes toward current reality. It's necessary to rediscover the play of fantasy and the psychic wellsprings of imagination, to find a new balance with the reality around us and a more active relationship with it. The mainstream media may dominate and channel imagination but traditional skills can re-vive the eccentric appeal of imagination. "Eccentric"

means the freedom of not being programmed by central mainstream narratives. Without imaginative freedom it's impossible to have critical distance so we can interpret and modify the world around us.

**D.R.:** I think the passivity problem is caused by TV. But even the Internet plays a role and, generally speaking, by the fact that we have less will to make an effort to think. Computers are now surely indispensable, and we find everything on the Internet. I work sometimes in schools, and I often notice how lazy we are becoming: What strikes me is that the youngest children have no dreams, don't think about possible alternatives, or about worlds different from the one they inhabit. Often we can't even explain why we like or don't like something. Adults are becoming like those children, posing no more questions, only saying "I like it," or "I don't like it," without asking why we do or do not like a particular thing. This may be a sort of "*Facebook disease*." Hitting a thumbs-up button does not help us dig more deeply into self-understanding.

**M.H.:** "*Facebook disease*" describes very well what is happening. Virtuality once held the promise of envisioning alternate worlds. VR sparked a moment of inspired design. Avatars offered a new way of imagining ourselves and how to project our being into alternate universes. Slowly, however, that initial impulse was swallowed by ready-made commercial designs, game scenarios, and online identity logins. The commercial rush to new technologies, when successful, reduces active participation. Passive consumers are predictable and prediction is a necessary part of any marketplace. That's the reason why it is a challenge to recover the wellsprings of psychic energy. That's why I work on dreams, fantasy literature, and on the archetypal images of the Tarot deck. Even nightmares and horror literature can be useful because they can

serve as antidote to the lethargy of imagination: they can shake us or touch us deeply.

There is a novel by Ursula LeGuin, *The Lathe of Heaven*, in which the protagonist's dreams have the power to change reality. It is a very interesting story that prompts thought, because it invites us to consider the relationship between imagination and reality, to ask what would happen if our dreams could effectively become reality. I think that it is important to recover the skills of examining dreams and asking deep questions. Dream recovery may be a good form of therapy for balancing the flatness of daily life by mining the deep subconscious.

I study the techniques of active dreaming developed by Robert Moss, both in his group work and private practice. Moss's approach allows us to scan the subconscious and to reactivate awareness of the role played by deep patterns that shape the experiences of everyday life. I've taken part in some of his dream-work sessions and I also write a journal of my dreams. At first, it's difficult to remember what you have dreamed. But you must write down notes of everything, even if it's only a fleeting image, a feeling, a fragment, or just a verbal phrase. Over time, conscious memory expands and you become more attentive to dreams and you recall more and more of them. It is a very useful practice because it expands awareness and acknowledges submerged parts of the self. The practice produces a wider awareness of the world around and how the imagination interacts with everyday events. Working with dreams in groups is also interesting: Different people fall into light slumber in the same place, and once awake they tell the story of what they have dreamed. The key is to not try to interpret someone else's dream. Each person knows their own dreams best. More useful is the confrontation with the dream material, and the effort to publicly affirm one's own dream.

**D.R.:** All of this rings a bell with me for the novels of H.P. (Howard Phillips) Lovecraft. Among other works, Lovecraft wrote a cycle of tales in which the protagonist Randolph Carter, evidently an alter ego, enjoys the ability to travel every night in the Realm of Dreams, described as a world apart with its own countries, nations, and different races. In some way, I have always considered Lovecraft as the most Jungian of the horror authors: actually, it seems to me that all of this has to do with the archetypes Jung wrote about.

**M.H.:** Yes, dreams, Tarot, folk tales, all these deal with archetypes, with the wellsprings of imagination. Like the icon of Abraxas, which I've recently contemplated, that ancient deity who comes prior to the distinction between good and evil and who is in a roundabout way the origin of all things. Hermann Hesse refers to this figure in his 1919 novel *Demian*. Abraxas is an ancient figure, a daimon with snakes in the place of legs. Abraxas wields a whip that continually stirs up everything to keep things moving, whether good or bad. Abraxas is the underlying life force behind the good God and the evil Devil. Jung too was fascinated by Abraxas and he speaks of this esoteric deity in his *Red Book*. Probably it symbolizes a deep psychic wellspring that propels life into motion no matter how the conscious ego might judge the direction of movement. There is always change.

Recovering this dimension means to walk back to what Giambattista Vico called the *universali fantastici*. That's why I'm so happy that *The Metaphysics* is translated into Italian, the language of Renaissance. Humanists, such as Vico, who sensed the necessity of renewing culture, freeing imagination, recovering ancient poetic myths and images which had been repressed by the imperial Church and the adherence to dry medieval Scholasticism. The Italian humanistic tradition was championed by my late friend Ernesto Grassi (1902-1991) who

was himself a rhetorical magus, opposing the dominance of arid scientific logic, balancing it with myth and poetry. One problem with this tradition is that, because of its struggle with the cultural dictatorship of the Church, the esoteric humanists often used cryptic, private language, which transmitted its legacy by word of mouth secretly. In this way, many esoteric streams of transmission lost the original public importance of classical knowledge.

**D.R.:** In fact, there are a lot of esoteric schools in Italy, which claim to date to very ancient times. In particular, Naples has a very strong Egyptian, Hermetic tradition, to which Giordano Bruno belonged. Yet, these circles can be dangerous, because they are often, in their own turn, dogmatic, obscurantist, closed, and repressive.

**M.H.:** Sure, that is a problem. To claim absolute control of individual imagination and is a problem. Even ontological or metaphysical claims need to be grounded in personal experience. The notion of an extra-psychic control of archetypal imagination suppresses the free play of experience. Metaphysical assertions are still possible after modernity but only as “metaphysics lite,” that is, assertions based on active personal experience and not on repressive control over the imagination of others. During the Middle Ages, the free play of archetypal images went underground. One could not speak in broad daylight about such matters because of the Church’s ecclesial constraints on imagination. This repression gave rise to a series of subterranean streams, some of which even deviated from common sense and practical non-schizoid experience. In my opinion we should retrieve whatever humanistic wisdom we can, including the gems behind the magic and esoteric streams, in order to share them in the sunlight, analyzing it with more serenity, legitimizing it and even clearing it from the crust of certain fanaticism. The



psychologist Carl Jung in his work on alchemy, astrology, and religious imagination showed how the first steps in such a process might proceed.

On the other hand, there is no longer need to conceal or consort with the occult. We are no longer in the Middle Ages; the Church no longer controls the fantasy of the people, no longer constrains the religious icons and the mythic images. In the place of the ecclesial hegemony, we have the propaganda of television and the Internet, which offer a constant stream of images, taking the control of our fantasies and desires. We can hardly distinguish our own innermost dreams and fantasies from the scattered detritus that carries collective archetypes along with commercial junk food and political agendas. A new Renaissance is needed, to renew the culture and find a balance with technology and to break through the purely technical mentality against its own lethargy and abuse.

**D.R.:** Recently I've been often interested in analyzing and deconstructing advertisements and commercial breaks. In fact, even if a commercial has little efficacy, indeed especially when we view a commercial casually and absent-mindedly, perhaps while we do something else and without paying close attention, the commercial has a great power of penetration, and in some way such commercials can replace our own desires. I think that commercial fantasies have taken the place, in our society, of the ancient fables and legends, with the difference being that they aim to "re-format" you, in some way, to take virally the place of your own desires, your own thoughts, even your dreams. And the less we are aware of them, the more these commercials are effective. We should observe them with attention and thereby gain a critical stance toward them, and in this fashion distance ourselves from them.

**M.H.:** Yes, very interesting. It's true: advertisements enter our own subconscious and influence our desires and dreams.

The problem is also linked to the publishing industry. Literature is weakening. People read computer screens and even books on screens but the long stroll with a deep book diminishes in general. We are in danger of losing that attitude toward reading that characterized bookish literacy: the skill of focusing attention, the kind of long-range attention necessary for absorbing attentively a whole book, following the theses of an author, plunging completely into a text. This kind of literacy formed independent people who could have a critical relation to reality. The Internet and the TV have made us accustomed to a more passive enjoyment and to a more nervous, fast-paced, less attentive, reading. On the other hand, a more widespread access to the publishing has generated much confusion.

**D.R.:** Yes, it seems like everybody wants to write, but nobody wants to read. In this market, one must be already famous for other reasons: books are written by showmen, journalists, maybe even soccer players.

**M.H.:** Frankly, I'm uncertain. I have mixed feelings about writing books that won't be read. Or publishing academic books for a small circle of insiders, books that interest few people. Books should be read, should appear in the stores, and must interest people. Authors need to address the reader's shared experiences, not perpetuate a private monologue.

In my works, I have tried to find a middle way between the German philosophic style and one more typical of Americans. That is to say, I have tried to combine the rigor and acuteness of philosophic analysis with the freshness and ease of the American style of writing.

**D.R.:** It is what you affirmed in your article on *Metaphysics Lite*, isn't it?

**M.H.:** Exactly. I meant "lite", and not "light." I wanted to refer to the digestibility of a text or set of ideas. I used the slang term to reproduce the language of advertisements. It is like food products: they must be nourishing, but they must also be "lite," easy to digest. I would like to find a way in which deep books can talk with people. We must not clam up in the Academy, isolating ourselves, talking only with a circle of colleagues. We must find a way to revive literature. It's useless by itself to critique new technologies: rather we must find a way to renew philosophical writing. This is the task we face as philosophers and literary men. That's why a new Renaissance is needed: We must move forward and find new ways to communicate with people and to create culture.

**D.R.:** There is a nice expression used by Lacan that sounds like "passing through the phantom," or something like that, which designates the good results of therapy. It suggests that one should face a problem, accepting it, rather than avoiding it, and go all the way through it; in order to re-emerge on the other side. "Break on through to the other side!" Perhaps, we need to find ways to use the technologies at their best: taking advantage of the whole potential of the hypertext or of the Net in order to write novels, hyper-novels, or even cyber-novels. Yet the problem is that one needs to acquire the technical competences that a programmer has, which surely distinguishes the new writer from traditional writers.

**[End of Part One]**