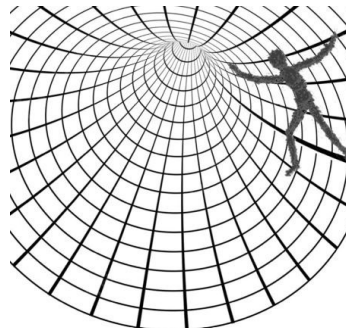# Stelios in the metaverse lattice

How to weave the fabric of our imagination with digital world

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(Preliminary translation of an extract from the original book, reviewed by Y. Lasau)

The genesis of the work

From the idea of extending the concept of "texturgy" to the human being living with digital technology

In 2014, I proposed the concept of "texturgy" to evoke the design of new sensitive materials combining textile textures and high (digital) technologies. Passionate about socio-philosophy, today, I try to broaden this approach to the "human texture" (the human body made of organic tissues) in its co-functioning with digital technologies.

Textiles are familiar to us. They have been part of our daily lives for thousands of years. Beyond the avatars and diversifications of their materials, textiles are appreciated for their flexibility and lightness, their ability to protect, to wrap, to cover, to follow the movement. Characteristics that make us all have a very personal connection with textiles that is anchored from childhood. Textiles convey an imaginary world of their own. We focus on the shine, the colors, the textures, but also on the folds of this flexible material, capable of changing shape, open to metamorphoses. The fabric evokes contact, exchange, crossbreeding, relationships, and in this way it helps to make the social connection visible.

Humanity's long "textile adventure" continues through time. With the proliferation of new fibers and material textures, the relationship traditionally maintained by textiles with space and volume is expressed in a renewed spirit (Browaeys, 2014). One of the particularities of these new "textile systems" is their capacity for integration, communication and adaptation. This allows them to confront digital technologies whose coding is based on a duality, a binary rhythm, like the gestures of weaving.

I first proposed the concept of "texturgy" to evoke the creation of new sensitive materials combining textile textures and high (digital) technologies. Today, I am trying to transpose this concept specific to matter by applying it to humans, that is to say, to compare textile texture and human texture (the human body, composed of organic tissues), in their confrontation with the digital world. Because the metaphor of textile embraces our bodily matter: are we not made up of an interlacing of fibers? Our anatomy consists of an arrangement specific to each tissue, offering textures appropriate to each function (tendons, muscles, membranes, etc.).

Since its origins, Man has tried to adapt to his environment (*Umgebung*), often in a progressive way. Otherwise, he would go towards degeneration, even death. Adaptation is life: it is a new balance to be found between the organic forces of Man and his environment. First, there was the emergence of matter and then the blossoming of life. The emergence of consciousness in Man led him to develop an individual thought. Then humanity moved to a collective thought focused on the survival of the individual (of the species, of nature, etc.). In fact, society is structured by the materialization of an entanglement, a lattice of imaginary meanings produced by human beings, themselves in an information network where these notifications take shape. This interweaving of thoughts forms a fabric of inextricable threads and knots.

Similarly, textiles, by their ubiquitous nature, adapt to their use. So, why not try to apply the concept of "texturgy" to our new "digital" humanity, since, in order to "function" in today's society, we need to adapt, to "trans-form" ourselves, to combine the analog texture of our being with an environment hybridized by digital technologies.

I therefore propose to use the textile metaphor as a gateway to reflect on how experiences in virtual universes fit into the imaginary apprehension of reality, to combine together a common "imaginary fabric".

Jacquard, a textile arrangement with multiple possibilities[1]

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[1] The Jacquard loom was the first machine to automatically produce woven images by following the pattern applied to punched cards. This programming system was later adapted to the first analytical machines.

Introduction

Abstract:
The human environment is resized, even expanded, by digital technologies. We are evolving now in an ordered universe (computer), with the perception of an implemented reality. At the same time, our physical world is the object of an exponential cartography, because we must inventory all things and living beings (fauna, flora) in order to guarantee the sustainability of our planet Earth. Thus, our being is as if "dis-located" by the multiplicity of places, real or virtual, and temporalities in which it evolves. Doesn't the loss of contact with lived reality risk altering our capacity for imagination, constitutive of our (human) being?

The issue

In the digital age, what future for the imagination which, like textile material, is at the confluence of nature and creation?

Man has evolved over time thanks to his ability to adapt. Each time he has encountered new complex situations, he has changed, he has become "other", complementing his natural dispositions with skills appropriate to his new environment. Until now, human thought therefore seems to have always had a certain "plasticity" which has allowed human beings to interpret the events encountered, often fortuitous, and in diverse contexts. But the essential prerequisite is first to be vigilant during the various situations encountered, like a sentinel with all his senses on alert, because the body contributes to the conjunction of mind with matter. Then imagination is the resource that we call upon when we face something "new", either by its nature or by its context. We can thus see that the functioning of human thought differs from that of artificial intelligence which proceeds by deep learning in closed situations.

In the digital age, how can we combine the analog texture of the human being (body/mind) with its environment, which is now resized, even expanded, by digital technologies? We are evolving now in an ordered universe (computer), a calculated world, with the perception of a reality that would be "implemented". Our being is as if "dis-located" by the multiplicity of places, real or virtual, and temporalities in which it evolves.

Furthermore, our physical world is the subject of exponential mapping, because we need to inventory and perpetuate all things and living beings (fauna, flora) in order to guarantee the sustainability of our planet Earth and its countless inhabitants, threatened by climate change and the alteration of biodiversity. In this alarming context, virtual worlds, such as the metaverse, could then be seen as an escape from a physical world (the Earth) that no longer enchants humans.

But will we also be able to save the human in us? Cyberspace immerses us in a global network of intuitive knowledge, and the virtual leads to a confusion of the senses. We will study how the loss of contact with lived reality, the lack of authentic feelings, alter our capacity for imagination, constitutive of our (human) being, and (by the same token) our ability to weave the fabric of a solid collective imagination. Will we then be able to guarantee the sustainability of our humanity?

In this context of intense complexity, it is clear that network weaving is a symbol that works to try to associate the ordered (the unique) and the diverse (the multiple).

How do we construct meaning when we are immersed in virtual worlds?

The perception of all these new stimuli (visual, auditory, tactile) is nevertheless articulated on a material support, the human body, and mobilizes the "interpretive" filters of our cognitive acuity. In post-modern philosophy, hyperreality characterizes the situation where consciousness interacts with a reality that is improved in a fictional way: consciousness then loses its ability to correctly distinguish reality from the imaginary. The philosopher Jean Baudrillard was an ardent theorist of hyperreality, and in doing so, he introduced the notion of "derealization of the world". This is why it seemed relevant to me to develop the guiding principle of this essay from a critical analysis of Jean Baudrillard's sentence to which virtual reality here gives a singular resonance:

"The real does not disappear in favor of the imaginary, it disappears in favor of that which is more real than the real: the hyperreal[2]" (Baudrillard, 1983).

The approach of the work comprises three parts:
(1)
With his original notion of "derealization of the world", Baudrillard means the loss of contact with reality experienced in the physical world. In this first part, we will study how our relationship to reality is constructed, whether it is contact with our environment, communication with others, and the inscription of our space-time in the universe and the history of humanity. At the same time, we will see how this apprehension of reality (sensations, relationship to time and space) can be disrupted in a world that is co-constructed today with digital technology.
(2)
So that imagination can flourish, it needs to have empty spaces, blank areas so that personal and autonomous representations can be developed at the heart of our being. Throughout our lives, reality feeds our imagination which contributes to nourishing our thinking. However, in the digital age, our society puts reality, the lived experience, in the background to opt for an abstract culture based on intellect and digital data. We will think about the key role of imagination, in connection with space and time. Places welcome our imagination and imaginary worlds also participate in reality. Imagination dispossesses the body of its capacity to respond to the requests of the present time. In a way, we can say that the image is timeless. We will then see the socializing dynamic of the imagination in our relationship with others and life in society.
(3)
The metaverse aims to converge digital technologies to create a virtual, interactive and immersive world. The body, organic and analog, is the envelope of our inner universe. It establishes the boundary of our personal identity. Does its loss of contact with lived reality, its lack of authentic feelings, not lead to the drying up of our imagination (creation)?
And what about our inner universe? Human beings evolve in ordered spaces and times that no longer fit into the unfolding of their own lives. These artificial and heterogeneous universes propel them into fluid and limitless lives.
Imagination is constitutive of our humanity, in the sense that the imaginary allows access to the symbolic universe. It has allowed its capacity for adaptation and it contributes to weaving the freedom of the mind. With our immersion in a world hybridized by virtual universes, is there not a potential risk of fading our imagination, which would have an impact on our capacity to structure a true "critical thinking". Will we still be able to discern what really makes sense in our society?

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[2] Continuation of the excerpt: "Truer than the true: such is the simulation. Presence does not disappear in front of the void, it disappears in front of a redoubling of presence that erases the opposition of presence and absence. The void itself does not disappear before the full, but before repletion and saturation."

Thinking by following the textile metaphor

The reflection follows the textile metaphor, with the symbolism of network weaving, to illustrate how imagination is based on materiality. All human thought is representation, with imagination playing an essential role as a "connector". The dynamics of imagination are analogical. It allows the representation of reality (information) through a proportional and continuous relationship between the initial information and its representation. Could we envisage an imagined world that no longer refers to reality at all?

Within the textile material, the continuum of natural and artificial texture is realized. Whether its fibers are of plant origin (cellulose), animal (keratin), chemical (polymer), inorganic or mineral, or even recycled, it realizes the synthesis of all categories of matter. Today, with the contribution of digital technology, active textiles compose with new parameters such as the immaterial and movement. They implement imperceptible connections between the rational (sciences) and the dreamlike, at the threshold of human thought. The textile material is located at the confluence between nature and human creation, between space and sensitivity: it could almost be seen as a "matter for thinking".

The development of human thought is similar to the preparation of textile work:
- First, there is the preparation of the fibers (spinning, throwing, texturing, etc.) which makes them suitable for assembly (threads). The same is true for the formalization of ideas to make them understandable.
- Then comes the assembly stage (weaving, knitting, braiding, lace, etc.) to give coherence to the material and make it exist in space, which could be compared to the process of constructing reflection.
- Finally, the finishing (dyeing, printing, coating, etc.) gives its personality to the fabric, as when the personalization of thought is developed, by involving imagination and sensitivity.

The process of invention, or creation, is developed through weaving and cross-breeding, in a continuous interaction between technical production and representation of intellectual design. Thus the loom comes and goes. The novelty of our time is recycling. In the case of chemical recycling, the textile material can be completely "deconstructed" to return to virgin fibers, such as those originally isolated during carding. But this process can be thwarted by the various additives introduced to particularize it, as if the "ennobled" fabric refused to be disassembled.

The artist Patrice Hugues has made textiles his mode of expression. For him, textiles are a "ferryman" that thwarts the paradoxes of representation to focus above all on the "in-between". In his works, textiles become a vector of communication: "However, the fabric is never anything more than a thin layer of threads in large numbers, which intertwine in very precise counts [...] where unpredictable and moving folds can form constantly in the moment of our gestures and our breathing (Hugues, 2007)".

The book's reflection falls within the register of phenomenology, that is (to say) the individual in his environment. Faced with the current difficulties encountered in the articulation of public debate, it suggests that an individual free to develop his own images acquires more autonomy of thought. The symbolic models at our disposal must be reexamined in an attempt to stop the "rise of insignificance". This prerequisite appears necessary, insofar as our ability to weave the fabric of a solid collective imagination is an essential issue in ensuring the sustainability of our humanity.

To borrow the expression of the Quebec storyteller Gilles Vignault, the tale allows us to "enlarge" the truth so that we can see it from further away. It consists of taking us through the mirror of meaning, like the allegory of the novel "Through the Looking Glass" by Lewis Caroll. As the argument unfolds, short tales are inserted that echo the analysis developed. The metaphorical, even allegorical, images project us into an imaginary world, thus providing a kind of "impression setting" throughout the text. The tales inserted into the text correspond to five episodes in the life of Stelios[3]:

- Stelios and his five sentinels:
Where Stelios discovers his "sensory equipment"...

- Stella and reversed time:
Where Stella, Stelios' twin sister, has temporarily strayed from the rhythm of family life...

- Stelios the little fisherman:
Where Stelios ventures into mysterious spaces populated by fantastic beings...

- Stelios and the living water:
Where Stelios succeeds in awakening the waterfall of "happy time" which rocks the life of the village...

- Stelios among the angels:
Where Stelios meets his "other self" with whom he leaves for the land of angels...

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[3] Stelios (Ancient Greek: *Στέλιος*) is a variant of the Greek name Stylianos. Saint Stylianos was a monk who lived in the 6th century in Paphlagonia (present-day Turkey). Chosen by God from his mother's womb, he detached himself from the illusions of this world, distributed his goods to the poor and embraced the monastic life.

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