

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

Curatorial text by Sofia Pirandello

Lazy Sunday is an immersive film shot with a 360-degree camera, and designed to be experienced while wearing a virtual reality headset. It is the third work in a series entitled THE ITALIAN JOB, in which, starting from 2014, Emilio Vavarella reflects on the legality, originality and legitimacy of digital art, and more generally on the relationship between the material and the virtual and on the relationship between artists and curators vis a vis new technologies. More specifically, *Lazy Sunday* is a 12-hour window onto the artist's life, in which he transforms an ordinary Sunday into a virtual reality experience. Asked to produce an immersive artwork for the 12° *Atelier*, Vavarella invites us to spend a summer day with him, experiencing his world in the first person on the streets of Boston and Cambridge. He opens up his home, shares his routines and friends. At first sight, *Lazy Sunday* is an immediate artwork, very sincere, open, almost exhibitionistic. Emilio is everywhere, literally. The title of the work, however, should invite us to reflect, playing with the stereotype of the dishonest Italian, expert in robberies and other kinds of shady dealings, With *Lazy Sunday* Vavarella creates a masterpiece of the genre, an 'Italian job' in broad daylight, in a regime of absolute visibility. It is well known, as even Edgar Allan Poe remarks in *The Purloined Letter*, that whoever wants to hide something should display it in plain sight. Thus, in this case, to maximal visibility corresponds maximal opacity, almost exclusion. There is no trace of the artist. Sometimes we can recognize him in a mirror, his head and his body are always present in the observer's field of view, but even after spending twelve hours 'in his robes' we do not have a privileged access to the sensations that he gathers from the world or to the meanings he attributes to them. Despite spying on the artist's space we do not really share that environment: we are somehow there, but we cannot act on the possibilities that we identify around us.

Wearing the VR headset, we have the impression that the artist is carrying us on his shoulders, we are a fly in the room, in a position similar to that of the pilot fish alongside the shark. Like a contemporary version of archetypal figures of Italian mischievous exuberance such as Pierino, Giamburrasca and Pinocchio, Vavarella ushers us along to his leisure spots, humming and mumbling, sometimes sighing, gifting us with a series of everyday adventures, a motorcycle tour through which we can admire the surrounding landscape or a swimming race at the lake. Nothing really dishonest, his 'driving us around' reveals itself as a 'fooling around': "Look how much fun I'm having!" And us? Vavarella seems to suggest that despite being inside the image we are not really present. Whoever wears the helmet is forced to follow the movement of the camera, with only the freedom to look around. Where are we when we enter the film at Casa degli Artisti and we relive the same hours (on a different Sunday) of Emilio's live performance? We are having an immersive experience, but we are not really present, as

would not be present the brain in a vat imagined by Hilary Putnam in 1981 because the body, with the exception of the eyes, does not speak to us. Vavarella, avatar for one day, is the dead skin that Bartholomew the Apostle holds in his hands, a disguise, a costume to wear. Starting from the assumption that being closer means feeling more, virtual reality has often been considered the empathic device par excellence. However, being immersed in a 360-degree environment can result in a form of aggression that induces physical and instinctual reactions (well documented by dozens of online videos) which leave little to the imagination of the individual to interpret the surroundings, or to experiment with alternative points of view. In the case of 360-degree cinema we are in an environment which, albeit self-referred, we cannot control or manipulate, which does not constitute material for dialogue or negotiation. As Andrea Pinotti affirms in his latest book (2021), 360-degree cinema tends to weaken one's awareness of the difference between the perception of the image and perception in general, with the risk of failing to recognize the hyper-mediation determined by the technology necessary to obtain such an experience and also the dimension of the inevitable psychological difference of the other. Despite the fact that in order not to become dysfunctional the imagination needs to be exercised at the "right distance" (Koukouti and Malafouris 2020), the "improper distance" (Nash 2017) determined by VR risks cancelling one's awareness of the existence and importance of alternative points of view. Moreover, the frustration and the powerlessness determined by not being visible (and sensitive) to oneself can discourage the effort of projecting and identifying with the other, because it is not really possible to feel like someone else. Instead, we feel like a nobody, divided between sensations that give to us a world that we do not see and a world that we see but that is not available for interaction.

In 2016 Luca Acquarelli and Matteo Treleani wrote that in 360-degree cinema the position of the spectator is that of an observer who is called upon to bear witness. I believe that one of the questions that Vavarella is prompting us to consider is: Witness what? Maybe he wants the viewers to be aware: there is no magic, it is just a trick. Furthermore: there is a trick, but (often) you cannot see it. The physical installation at Casa degli Artisti required a cumbersome scaffolding and several meters of electric cables. Moreover, a work such as *Lazy Sunday* is very far from being immediate, as it cost the artist a lot of effort: twelve hours of live performance, carrying a camera pressed on his forehead, which Vavarella describes as a wound similar to Harry Potter's scar; and then the never-ending post-production process, in which the same scenes had to be converted and formatted to be viewable in VR, viewed over and over a thousand times. But what do we not do "for the sake of art!", says Vavarella, after shooting for eight hours, talking on the phone with a friend to whom he explains the project. *Lazy Sunday* contains something so stubborn and patient that makes it hard even to those who only experience it virtually. First of all because wearing a helmet, even for just a few minutes, implies bearing its weight and discomfort. How many viewers will watch Emilio's work in its entirety? How complicated is it to (re)live a *Lazy Sunday* like many others?

No human being could simultaneously see this whole space at 360 degrees, let alone for twelve hours: if we lose ourselves in an obsessive study of the details it is probable that we will fail to notice something important that is happening; if we choose to direct our gaze and to focus on one action, we lose the panoramic view provided by the medium. Immersive cinema promises something that it is probably unable to provide in all circumstances, unless we rethink its use in a specific way. Immersive devices have always had a relationship with the entertainment industry, and it is not unusual that they are designed (from the Phantasmagoria, to the Panorama, to the 3D cinema) to attract curiosity while promising sensational experiences. To betray these promises can be a way to focus on the potential (and criticality) of the medium, looking for a way to unveil how it functions and indicating alternative ways of using it which are not pointing towards the performative and which escape the narrative around interactivity. Artworks such as *Lazy Sunday* exploit the digital, and especially the immersiveness of the virtual, to construct an opportunity which leaves time and space for lazy and relaxed reflection, potentially capable of developing a new critical view of reality.

Sofia Pirandello

<http://emiliovavarella.com/italianjob3/>

Bibliography

Acquarelli, Luca and Treleani, Matteo (2016). "Notes on Virtual Reality Cinema: immersion and distance". *MEI : Information et Mediation*, 47. URL : <http://mei-info.com/revue/47/81/>

Koukouti, Maria Danae and Malafouris, Lambros (2020). "Material Imagination: An Anthropological Perspective". *The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, ed. Anna Abraham, 30-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nash, Kate (2017). "Virtual reality witness: exploring the ethics of mediated presence". *Studies in Documentary Film*, Vol. 12, 2, 119-131.

Pinotti, Andrea (2021). *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*. Torino: Einaudi.