
**IN-GAME PHOTOGRAPHY.
ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTES AND VISUAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE
IMAGINATION OF *THE OPEN WORLDS***

Marina Berardi, *Ph.D. candidate, University of Basilicata, Italy*

ABSTRACT

This photo-essay is a reflection on in-game photography, which is a particular visual practice widespread in the video game world, that helps us to re-read, and to then reconsider, our relationships with new forms of visual representation in the increasingly porous contexts of online and offline life, of digital and analog environments, of authenticity and inauthenticity. The images created in virtual and imagistic worlds force us to reconsider the notion of body, of the presence of light in the scenarios, marked by new contingencies and contexts in which the paradigm of truthfulness is definitively unhinged, leaving ample space for emotional experiences as discourse and reflective narration.

KEYWORDS

In-game photography; virtual photography; open worlds; digital environments; digital ethnography.

BIO

Marina Berardi is an anthropologist and a photographer. She is a Ph.D. candidate in *Cities and Landscapes: architecture, archaeology, cultural heritage, history and resources*, at the University of Basilicata, with an anthropological research project on politics, rhetoric and abandonment processes in small towns of Basilicata, Italy. She graduated at the School of Specialisation in Beni Demotnoantropologici, after graduating from the University of Rome, La Sapienza. She works as a visual anthropologist in intangible and material heritage, depopulation, material culture, and vernacular imagery. Some of her photographic works have received national and international mentions and awards, including *Nikon Talents 2013*, *Sony World Award*, and *Metropolis 2017*. In 2019, she was among the winners of the *MAVI Photography Competition* (Museo Antropologico Visivo Irpino). Since 2019 she has been the Photo Essay Editor of *Visual Ethnography*, a peer-reviewed journal, Classe A, Macrosettore 11/A5.

<https://www.marinaberardi.net>
marinaberardi@gmail.com

“This is not a struggle between truth and lie, reality and copy. Rather this is a space hosting experiences that can be conceptualized and lived differently by different viewers depending on their own choices, contexts and viewing positions. Parallel worlds. This ongoing pendulum between positions can perhaps be addressed in terms of agency versus ownership” (Favero 2018: 1518 position kindle Edition)

Among the recent visual practises in which it is possible to reconsider the relationship between real and virtual, digital environment (Pink 2017: 9) and analogue environment, online and offline life - going in the direction of a reading that definitively undermines the paradigm of truthfulness and objectivity of the visual world and welcoming a radical dialectical transformation of the ways in which we are used to talking about representation - it comes from a context that anthropology rarely deals with, represented by the world of videogames, and by the diffusion of some practises of visual representation that take the name of *in-game photography*.

As with the advent of cinema, we are witnessing profound and radical transformations in terms of the use of experience and perception. Fontcuberta, for example, looks at the digital revolution and the fluidity of the works that overflow the existing channels, assigning the name of the *post-photographic culture paradigm* (Fontcuberta 2018: 22).

The applications borrowed from the video game industry can find important uses in the cultural and social industry in general, just think of the immersive experience of virtual reality (Favero 2018), which can also generate a new appeal with respect to the imagination of present and future scenarios, as Favero suggests

that emerging immersive images should not be addressed solely through a focus on novelty and on the future, but rather within a conceptual space capable of highlighting the extent to which immersion has constituted an important way through which human beings in different times and places have engaged with the visual world (Favero 2018: 1048 position Kindle edition).

The universes and meta-verses present us with challenges that also concern the body experience; as such, an example comes from the recent statements about the development of the AI Research SuperCluster (RSC), the super computer for Artificial Intelligence of Meta (formerly Facebook), which is implementing computer vision models, natural language processing and new tools for augmented reality.

In 1934, Marcel Mauss defined the body is "is man's first and most natural instrument. [...] technical object, and at the same time technical means" (1973 :75) which takes on completely new connotations, and which we can read through the inner curvature of the gaze that takes on a new horizon. Through *in-game photography*, the player actively participates in the construction of his or her own imaginary; the player has the ability to choose, frame, compose, select, and create images - within the confines of the game space, often *open world*, a virtual world in which to move, and freely explore - that forces us to question the meaning of looking and seeing.

This is possible, both from in-game modes, such as *photo-mode*, which emulate digital post-production software, and offer additional features, such as the change of framing within the 3D space, or the pose of the character. Through an aesthetic that in some cases recalls the aesthetics of documentary photography, the representation of reality in *in-game photography* creates a form of suspension between universes, which is made possible due to the realism of video game production.

Vision, which is historically situated and culturally determined, confronts us with the dilemma of what it means to see, and whether, as for Arnheim, "seeing something means assigning it a place in the whole," (Arnheim 2002: 30) that *whole* assumes boundaries that go beyond the reach of our gaze, where it is possible to generate new itineraries and new ways of passing through space; just think of the new forms of digital tourism also conveyed through images in the game worlds.

"Through the eye - writes Francesco Faeta - the process of distinction takes place, an initiation into the mystery of otherness," (Faeta 2003: 109)¹ and it is vision, the eye of the player, that shares their emic vision. It is the player's own point of view that takes one inside the sublimation of otherness where the boundary between real and non-real becomes another space in which the narration of the imaginary is placed, a mediation between the self and the game world.

An 'open-air' visual archive of the game universes is shown on the social network, Instagram, where it is possible to grasp in the hashtags, #inagamephotography #photomodephotography, #virtualphotography, the breadth of shared images, in which some, so-called, triple-A titles are reminiscent of blockbuster film productions, in terms of investments and scope, where the photo mode is integrated into the features of the game, such as in *The Last of Us Part II*, *Spider-Man*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *God of War*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and *Death Stranding*.

In-game photography causes one's inner eye to act in a space that goes beyond the ordinary. The game settings can take place on completely extraordinary synchronic and diachronic levels compared to reality outside the game world. We can find ourselves in the dystopian worlds of the future: as happens, for example, in the Night City of *Cyberpunk 2077*, where we play characters with completely different ethics, compared to our own way of being. We can be part of worlds in which the dynamics of power might mirror those of everyday life, as well as interpret roles, genders, and statuses, that do not correspond to us directly in everyday life, or that perhaps we hope will correspond.

The symbolic dynamics are multiple, and all draw on the anthropological experience of playing, which we reserve for future considerations. The aspect that I would like to emphasise here concerns the moment in which we decide to stop the game world, to take a picture because, regardless of who we are, there is a will dictated, on the one hand, by algorithmic parameters, and on the other, by subjectivity that is contributing to generate a new imagination of the world. And, if, as Alberto Sobrero writes

man lives in the world and fills it with images, projects in the kingdom of the mind, the realm of the things, perceives totality, convergences, similarities, and these similarities are transformed into metaphors, they settle into archetypes and the set of archetypes defines the relationship between the human being and his environment. A collective unconscious heritage (*imaginary*) that is hidden in the stories, in the narratives (Sobrero 2009: 117)²

then it is the emotional significance as a discourse (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 2005) that must be observed by going beyond the concept of reality.

The series of images that I propose here, are a starting point for reflecting on visual language in a context in which the boundaries of the gaze transcend truthfulness as an ontological assumption in which, through this gaze, we are witnessing a form of representation of emotions in the one who lives the immersive experience in the game world as well as for the observer. The photographs were taken by me within the open world of *Death Stranding*, a video game conceived by Hideo Kojima, and developed by Kojima Productions with the collaboration of Guerrilla Games, (published in 2019 by Sony Interactive Entertainment for PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5 and Windows). I chose to present images as a sequence of visual suggestions, to reflect on the evocative power of vision, while being aware of the context of their creation. The creative process of in-game photography evokes the creative process of pictorial art; the imaginary, paraphrasing the reflections on Merleau-Ponty's painting, offer the gaze "traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them; it gives vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real" (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 126), putting into practice a kind "of magical theory of vision" (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 127).

Many lives today are inextricably linked to their representation and the complexity of expressive representations (movies, novels, travel reports, virtual experiences) need to be assimilated into our ethnographies, not only as technical and technological devices, but also as devices with which to build and interrogate our own representations and existences. In-game photography brings us closer to some great (and existential) events that are changing the way we look, imagine and represent and exist.

¹ Translated by the author.

² Translated by the author.



PHOTO 1



PHOTO 2



PHOTO 3



PHOTO 4



PHOTO 5



PHOTO 6



PHOTO 7

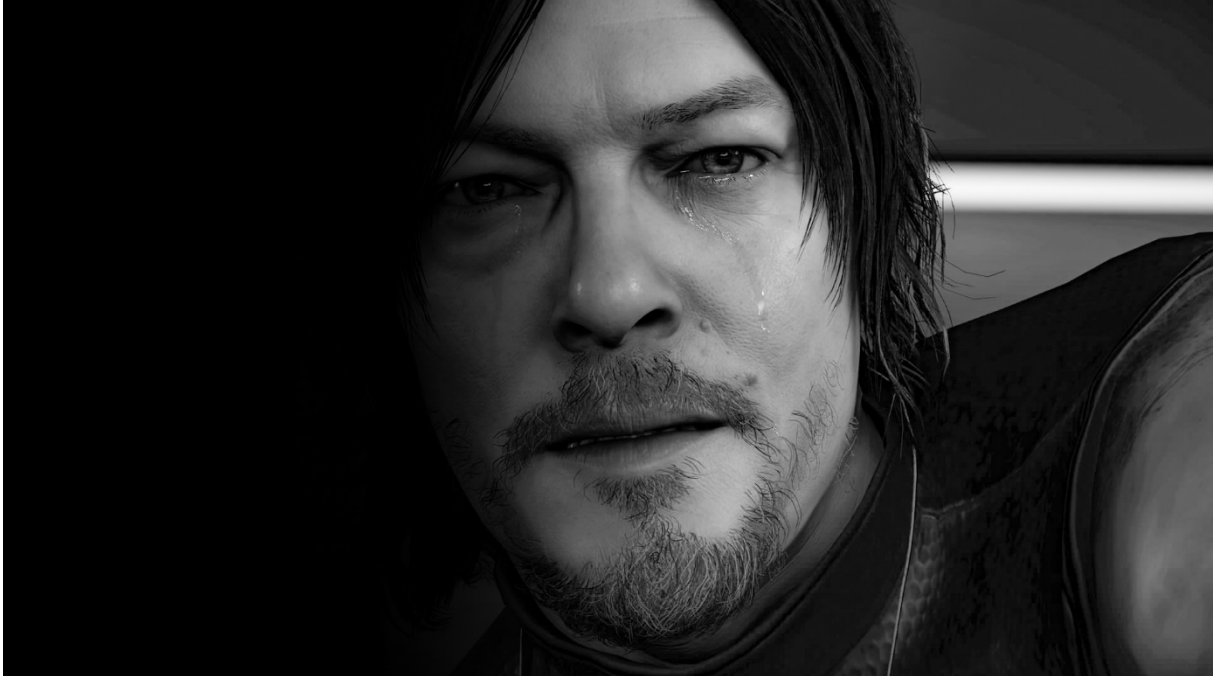


PHOTO 8



PHOTO 9



PHOTO 10



PHOTO 11



PHOTO 12

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