Tactility of the visual and digital worlds

In this issue, we invite visual semiotics to assess our current knowledge of "tactility in images" and to demonstrate how they evoke the sense of touch in order to deal with the challenges raised by digital images and virtual worlds.

Since the late 1980s, digital technologies have allowed the creation of virtual worlds (video games, metaverses, augmented reality, virtual reality) that can be defined as environments composed of still or moving images in which users can have the illusion of being in motion and acting through an avatar, or not (Boellstorff 2008). In such illusory spaces of simulation, the images are not only (or necessarily) intended to resemble the real thing but to affect the body and enable a response (inter-action). Indeed, these digital spaces are no longer designed to be contemplated but to be explored. Similarly, both augmented and virtual reality devices enhance the expression of the natural world by superimposing or intertwining it with their interface's plasticity. As a result, linking images together creates sensory, affective and cognitive experiences thus producing a so-called "immersive" dimension based on *effects of presence* and *meaning* (Cairn, Cox & Nordin 2014, Geniusas 2022).

How does the visual evokes the sense of touch and, by extension, affects the body to create immersive effects?

This question encourages semiotics to (re)consider the tactility of the visual, in other words, the capacity of images to suggest the sense of touch, or even to double the sensorial modalisation through the production of effects affecting the body of the observer-actor.
Semiotics has been interested in the tactility of the visual when it sought to describe the production of effects of meaning in images. When studying photography, Barthes (1979) first suggested that the gaze is subject to the sensory quality of the photographed object or subject, i.e. its plastic presence (being there), thus creating a link between optical and tactual. In this respect, photographic images (but not only…) construct bodies capable of displaying some *thickness*, and therefore evoking touch, through their plastic properties expressed by image's features (Beyaert-Geslin 2017). The tactual dimension of images seems to be mainly based on texture, either defined as matter perception (including distance) or granularity.
Introduced as a component of visual semiotics by Floch (1985) and later the Groupe μ (1992), texture appears as both a visual and tactile property, acting as a synesthetic operator between these two sensory dimensions. It has led semiotics to reassess the phenomenological anchoring of meaning (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 1960) and to question the performativity of images (Gell 1998, Mitchell 2004, Alloa 2010, 2015, 2017) when semiosis is based on the actualisation of sensory memory, experience and imaginary affecting the sensible body.
As Massimo Leone's (2021, 2022) recent research demonstrated, sensorial components are key to understand the semiosis of fake digital images, which seek to produce reality effects by modalising our experience in terms of *make-believing* (*faire-croire*) and *make-doing (fairefaire)*. On the one hand, "realistic" images now produced by AIs use textures that emulate the natural perception of a body or an environment. On the other hand, virtual environments call into question the very modality of meaning production through images, insofar as they are no longer simply planes (2D), like painting or photography, but "imaged sculptures" (3D). They challenge us to broaden our scope towards a transversal tactility across different visual objects, a perspective that seems to be lacking in semiotic theory.

In this context, the aim of this issue is to update semiotics' tools to describe and explain the new modes in which digital and virtual objects produce meaning. More particularly, we will seek to explore the implications of a "tactility in images" in the efficacy of virtual worlds that manage to engage and affect the body of the subject-operator. Beyond texture alone, we want to examine the ways in which these images produce a sense of touch and/or haptics (Parret 2018). How do these images construct worlds to be touched? Finally, how does the tactile dimension of these images add meaning and generate an 'immersion' effect often discussed in videogame approaches?

Submission procedure:

Submissions in the form of a **detailed abstract** including title, arguments and bibliography should be sent to Ludovic Châtenet <ludovic.chatenet@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr> and Audrey Moutat <audrey.moutat@unilim.fr> before **Friday 25 February 2024**.

Provisional publication schedule

13 december 2023: opening date for abstract submission
25 february 2024: closing date for abstract submission
15 april 2024: committee's response to authors
15 september 2024: Full articles submission deadline
15 october 2024: Peer review feedback
15 november 2024: deadline for receiving the final version of articles
15 december 2024: online publication of the issue