From the Posthuman Consumer to the *Ontobranding* Dimension: Geolocalization, Augmented Reality and Emotional Ontology as a Radical Redefinition of What Is Real

Nello Barile
IULM University of Milan

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to underline how *ontobranding* (Barile, 2009a, 2009b) is the final stage of an evolution from an old ideal of interaction between human and machines to a new kind of interaction where the machines become softer and immaterial, emotions become contents, and places become media. In this endeavor, this paper first offers an overview of how branding and consumer culture evolved. It then highlights the close link between technologies and emotions by introducing how the main metaphor (from monster, robot, to cyborg) has shifted with the development of society. With the metaphors and societal/technological transformation in mind, the next section explicates the notion of *ontobranding*. Finally, the paper provides some case analyses applying the *ontobranding* perspective, suggesting that the analyses of contemporary technological innovations require a new perspective that is able to understand and unify the dynamic interaction between what were once separated as the ontological distinction between reality and virtuality.

KEY WORDS: emotional ontology, selfbranding, digital dualism, geolocalization, augmented reality, Supranet, posthuman consumer, ingress (Google)

INTRODUCTION

The process of progressive integration between the three circuits of technology, consumption and communication (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peute, 2003) has brought us today to rediscover the hidden value and the strategic importance of the Real, the place, and the concrete human experience. Although the branding used to be a marketing tool to empower the visibility and the activity of companies, it has become more diffused in the social scene from the second half of the nineties. In other words, it has been adopted by users/consumers that wanted to reconstruct their identities and communicate them in a larger scale. The development of the web 2.0 empowered this idea and extended the possibility of existential branding to a larger amount of people. At the same time, there is the possibility of even greater progress in the development of technologies that tell us, in the future, real objects and places will be smarter and permanently connected with the immaterial world. At this moment the logic of branding could be the common language spoken by companies, people and artificial entities although it will be much different from the simple way of communication based on traditional advertising. It will be a new way to reshape the surface of reality through a complex system of experiences, emotions and relations (Barile, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the *ontobranding* (Barile, 2009a, 2009b) dimension as the point of intersection between two processes of transformation: the process in which the brand logic and the consuming culture develop from an anterior, mass dimension to a micronized distillation in the everyday life, and the process in which the technological system evolves from a hard and utilitarian conception to a softer ideal based on the emotional value of new devices. The topic of an emotional status of technologies is not just referable to the digital development but it also involves the uses of oldest media (Fortunati, 2009). The same happens if we want to discover the origin of the so called "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 1997), which is not just a technological production but it has more to do with development of a scientific industrial organization and the dynamic relationship between production and consumption.

The evolution of this new form of capital works as a circular process of modification where the reification of human emotions through consumption and digital innovation (as in the dynamic of social networking) corresponds to the specular process of emotional transformation of technologies (as in the radical case of Turkle's emotional robots). The reification of emotion and its transformation in a resource of the late capitalism is just a way to implement a new dimension where the virtual and the real, the map and the territory become a unique communicative entity. In other words, *ontobranding* (Barile, 2009a, 2009b) indicates the process of a progressive and radical integration of knowledge, emotions, publicity and the being through the new technological environment. In this paper I will try to underline how *ontobranding* is the final stage of an evolution from an old ideal of interaction between human and machines to a new kind of interaction where the machines become softer and immaterial, emotions become contents, and places become media. In this endeavor, this paper first offers an overview of how branding and consumer culture evolved. It then highlights the close link between technologies and emotions by introducing how the main metaphor (from monster, robot, to cyborg) has shifted with the development of society. With the metaphors and societal/technological transformation in mind, the next section explicates the notion of *ontobranding*. Finally, the paper provides some case analyses applying the *ontobranding* perspective. The methodology of case studies is a fruitful approach because it allows me to explore the lines of conjunctions across heterogeneous objects such as applications, commercial devices and academic experiments, with the aim to define a meaningful scenario where new technological trends are developing.

EVOLUTION OF BRANDING AND CONSUMING CULTURE

In my previous work (Barile, 2009a, 2009b), I analyzed the development of our contemporary consuming society as a mix of technological, organizational and communicational innovations that modified the "spontaneous" practices of everyday life from the second half of the XIX century to the present. Those four main stages of development are: a) Welcoming, b) Diffusion, c) Profusion, and d) Dilution. The first stage is very old and concerns the birth of the consuming system. The main metaphor of this time is the Universal Exhibition, a huge container of the main industrial innovations. This can be considered the real generative point of the contemporary cultural industry under the "media archeology" perspective (Abruzzese, 1993). "Welcoming" means that the everyday life prepares itself to host the new goods made for a new lifestyle and installs several frames in the body of the urban space where people can confront their local experience with something made somewhere else, in far laboratories with new tools of production.

The second stage, the "Diffusion" is governed by the metaphor of the machine and the factory, especially the Fordism that transforms the Protestant value of "thrift" (Rifkin, 1994; Ewen, 1998) in a new moral legitimation of opulence. Since the mechanical idealization of society had a strong impact on the communication research, the experts of the communication research have studied even a post-mechanical medium such as the TV as a mass production system.

The third stage, the age of "Profusion" (from the second half of the seventies to the end of eighties), is dominated by the TV imagery but is also characterized by the metaphor of the home computer as the new protagonist of everyday life. From the 1982, when it was nominated as the protagonist of the year on the cover of the Times, to the 1984 when the famous Apple's advertising campaign represents a dystopian world where the electronic image of a common Big Brother, speaking to his crowd, is broken from a hammer hurled from an amazing blond athlete.[1] According to J. M. Floch (2000), the semiotic opposition between the world of meanings representing Apple and the world of meanings representing IBM (the soft and multi-chromatic shapes against the gray and straight ones) is the implicit narration of the opposition between the two different logos (p. 41).

	IBM	**APPLE**
Structure	- Complex configuration - Repetition (abab) - Disjoined lines	- Simple configuration - Non-repetition (abba) - Joined lines
Colour	- Monochromatic - Cold	- Polychromatic - Warm
Forms	- Substance (Bold) - Straight	- Outline - Curved

(J. M. Floch, 2000, p. 41)

In both cases of a rationalistic vision of the digital innovation or of a more human one, the age of Profusion communicates technology adopting the semiotic ideal of a powerful branding, while consumer is called to be part of a certain world of meanings, empowering his own identity through the brand ID.

---

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhsWzJo2sN4

The fourth stage that we can call as the "Dilution" lasts from the nineties until today. The main aspects of this stage are represented in the Wim Wender's *Until the End of the World* (1991)*, where the uses of video phones and other devices give us a hilarious sense of anachronism that is prevalent today. This more advanced stage is influenced by new kinds of metaphors (e.g., the virtual reality, the melting pot, the hybrid, the posthuman). A main technology that characterizes the dilution stage is the mobile phone. For the first time the ideal of a dynamic, permanent and customized connection between people becomes true and this process is the real forerunner of the social network phenomena. As J. Katz (1999) underlined, possessing a mobile phone was no longer a mere strategy to accumulate the social power in that period. Since this moment mobile phones has become an aesthetic expression and also a proper fashion trend (Katz & Sugiyama, 2006, p. 65), and the future of this technology is guaranteed by its increasing integration with computers in the negotiation of new uses with the future early adopters.

WHEN TECHNOLOGIES MEET THE WORLD OF EMOTIONS

Nowadays, we are living a new scenario where technology is not just a sector of the productive system, but consumption's main precondition and the first cognitive environment in which consumers experience the brand power. In particular the digital technologies today are far from the utopian/dystopian visions of a future saved/destroyed by the techno-science. In other words they follow a more pragmatic conception where digital life comes down from the screen and becomes a consistent aspect of the real life. The social networking is a clear example of how a new technology – so called Web 2.0 – is not only a digital infrastructure, but rather a whole of links and nodes in which the relationships between members are the real content and the real system of interaction.

By the end of the nineties and the crisis of the new economy, rhetoric shifted on a more pragmatic level. The domestication and appropriation of recent digital devices (from mobile phones to laptops) opens today a new horizon, which is quite far from the discourse about virtuality, and remote global connections were very common during the Nineties. New technologies have a very influential role in the transformation of the contemporary market and also in the process of emancipation of the new post-modern consumer. It does not mean they are an independent variable of the process but they have a very relevant role in the transition from an old paradigm to a new one. Even the most inspiring theory of the period – Pierre Levy's reflection on the "collective intelligence" (1997) that influenced several researchers in communication or in management – is more properly represented by the evanescent process of smart mobs (Rheingold, 2002) and in the management innovation such as in Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) transformation of the tacit knowledge to the explicit one. If Rheingold's Smart Mobs is a sort of collective and dynamic form of knowledge sharing, Nonaka underlines how the innovation in organizations comes from a background of emotions and experiences that must be valorized in the organizational processes. In a certain way the same process of "Dilution" that Levy presented theoretically, is analyzed by Nonaka on the side of the organizational process and by Rheingold on the side of the consuming practices. Both are the forerunners of the contemporary crowdsourcing strategies, based on the externalization of creative processes from the organization to the users. This transformation of being in business is only one side of the coin and it underlines the deep human qualities that are turned into external goods. However, in a more classical way, the development of the industrial society has underlined much more the other side of the coin: the human being mechanized by technologies.

Many things that have changed since the development of the industrial society were communicated through the icon of the robot as a new way to narrate the technological impact on the humanity. The word "robot" is a word that comes from the ancient Latin "robor" to indicate the activity of workers. The idea of robot in the ancient culture is related to a slave, a servant or an entity

that can solve some problems of a community. This is exemplified with the invention of the Golem, the monster that has the task to save the Jewish community from several threats that the community was subjected to in the pre-modernity. With the development of the industrial society, this figure is even more related to the world of work and production. And exactly in this moment, we can see the straight convergence between the disvalue of an increasing automatization of the productive processes and the suggestive hypothesis of an artificial creature becoming alive. This convergence is found in the Fordistic representation of the Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927): human workers getting out from the factory as a homogenous group of robots and the beautiful icon of the artificial life coming alive in the body of a female android. The development of the industrial society from a productive approach to the hegemony of consumption, pulls the figure of the robot from the backstage of the post-Fordistic production to the stage of everyday consumption. Since the fifties it more commonly diffused the idea of a robot as a *Mechanical Bride* (1951), the title of the famous McLuhan's book dedicated to the folklore of the American consumerist culture, or in other words, the robot as the quintessential icon of the modernity.

Although the icon of the robot raised the question of a technological impact on society, more recently it has been replaced by the softer ideal of the cyborg. In the evolution from the robot to the cyborg, we find not only the progressive integration of technology and the human body but also the even more relevant centrality of experiences and emotions. This is why, more than the famous Wachowsky's movie *Matrix* (1998), I consider another nineties movie as the main narration of this new convergence among virtuality, emotions and experiences: K. Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995).

Several disciplines have focused on the ways in which the emotional worlds, as an essential part of the human being, became an external resource for organizations, media and people. In the evolution of the "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2007), the icon of the robot expresses a fundamental role in the representation of this huge imagery and social change. It indicates a double perspective where humans are turning into machines and, at the same time, machines are getting some human soft skills and feelings. This dynamic of emotional circulation between humans and machines is settled in the cultural sphere and takes us to the crucial point of a specular enforcement. That is, the more we uses communicative tools that turn our emotions in a resource for the social exchange, the more technologies and autoums absorb the wet substance of emotions, from the fetishims of common products to the new zoomorphic and anthropomorphic toys (Turkle, 2011). Furthermore, those technologies are developing themselves with a new competence in expressing much more complex emotions than the mere simulations of the human emotions. Today the social networking is the limit where this process shows its real power. We used to believe that robots were overwhelmed by a new technological evolution based on the immaterial and the virtualization. The old ideal of a robot as a slave and a surrogate of the human activity was obscured first by the development of the so-called cyber-culture, and more recently, by the diffusion of the new participative culture. Moreover, this culture began to cancel the old ideal of the avatar as the projection of the real human identities.

Today the social networks are working on a sort of reconjunction between the copy and the original, and also, between our personal identity and its virtual projection (Lovink, 2010). Authenticity is the keyword of the contemporary market of identities, from the new technologies to the general commercial goods. In this sense as well, the new frontiers of robotics are necessarily following this general trend. They will represent a softer innovation based on personalization and emotions, as the fantastic short movie *I'm Here* directed in the 2010 by Spike Jones tries to describe with its low-tech and thus more human like robots. But the reification of emotions is not just a rhetorical strategy to communicate the impact of the innovation in a softer way. It also defines a new playground where the conception of being must be extended in two directions: the first one is

the way the mediated circulation of emotions redefines new social identities in what we can call "selfbranding" and the second is the way the solipsistic being must be opened to the external environment or, in other words, the way emotions become the general content that re-defines the identity of places.

TOWARDS THE *ONTOBRANDING* PERSPECTIVE

If we consider the integration between new media and the newest brand strategies, we can describe a transformation from a traditional form of branding to the recent and more complex one. This transformation moves through the following stages: branding, selfbranding, biobranding, metabranging, and finally, *ontobranding*. If the traditional branding was just a tool in the hands of companies to build their own image and positioning in the collective mind, as in the cognitive approach to positioning (Ries & Trout 1981), today the selfbranding approach demonstrates how the marketing thought is a state of mind that produces an existential positioning (as in the formula: "be your own brand").

More ambiguous is the idea of biobranding, indicating two main phenomena: the marketing and communication of the biotechnologies (Simon & Kotler, 2003) and the colonization of consumer's everyday life made by global brands (Codeluppi, 2009). If the first one is just dedicated to understand the corporation's strategies of rebranding natural matters and also the DNA codes of specific commodities, the second one considers a more general sense of "bio," closer to the ancient Greek etymology, or to the more recent reflection on the biolife as the point of application of power.

Metabranding is the extension of the branding structure on the external context such as the "competitive identity" systems (Anholt, 2007) for nations, cities and regions. A metabrand has the capability to reconfigure the diversity of contents and references in a solid unity. Something similar to what L. Manovich (2008) means when he considers the computer as something that is not just "a tool, though it can act like many tools. It is the first metamedium, and as such it has degrees of freedom for representation and expression never before encountered and as yet barely investigated" (Manovich, 2008, p. 79). This process is completed by the increasing diffusion of the software across every minimal aspects of our everyday life so that it is becoming not just a tool but the way we operate on the entire surface of reality. Manovich (2008) states:

> I think there are good reasons for supporting this perspective. I think of software as a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies. Therefore, if we want to understand contemporary techniques of control, communication, representation, simulation, analysis, decision making, memory, vision, writing, and interaction, our analysis can't be complete until we consider this software layer. (Manovich, p. 7)

This penetration of the logic of software in every minimal dimension of everyday life, or better this complete redefinition of our reality in the terms of a digital application, means that the boundaries between the artificial, the biological and the psychological are blurred away. But more than a process of "hybridization" as Manovich continues to consider, I would regard this transformation as a de-contextualization and re-contextualization of objects and meanings under the semiotic identity of the brand. In this way we can assimilate metabrands and metamediums as open design processes that are able to modify dynamically their tools and contents.

Ontobranding is the last and more general category that works as a superior limit of this process of brand extension. The neologism puts together ontology and branding. Ontology is a philosophical concept, which is also used in psychology and sociology. It originally means a general

theory of being as the total reality where our local experience is situated. This totality contains the being of inanimate objects, organisms, and the specific kind of life that is able to give a sense to the world. This idea introduces us to the famous M. Heidegger's "ontological difference" and it can be used to explain the contemporary modification of the relationship between things, organisms and thoughts. The agent of this blurring of boundaries between the diverse kinds of located beings is the technology, or better the specific kind of media that integrates map and territory, thoughts and things, emotions and commercial goods, virtual and real. As we have seen with few examples on locative media and augmented reality, once that the surfaces of the web and of the planet are overwhelmed, the territory becomes a communicative subject. This advanced form of metabranding goes from the smart cities to the local communities, and it can be also applied to monuments, holiday destinations, and so on. Even if we are still not completely in a world of intelligent things, the age of "Dilution" shows us how communication and branding are flexible enough to cover new parts of reality, giving them the opportunity to communicate their existential positioning in the world wide market of identities.

Ontobranding is based on 4 main characteristics:

1) The overturning of the avatar
2) Smartphones or similar devices working as reality search engines or local scanners
3) The possibility to track and re-write the surface of reality with conscious or unconscious contents
4) Products or services profiling and seeking their users

The first point can be illustrated with the English multiplayer game, *Uncle Roy All Around You*[2] (but also in the J. Cameron's movie): the avatar is not just the projection of a real identity in a virtual world, but is the real agent in a realistic action scene, driven by an online player. Regarding the second point, we can see how the locative media can be used as a reality "search engine," as in the banal GPS application, or better as a scanner that reads the services offered by a shop, a building, a station, and so on. This is shown in some recent research on the design of Hybrid Ecologies (Pata & Fuksas, 2009). The third point is probably the most important because it addresses the connection between the selfbranding and the ontospace. Pata (2010) compared this new way of shaping the social environment with her resources on the ontospace, underlining how the digital narratives can be embodied in the surface of places creating a new emotional geography. In her exploration of this topic, Pata refers to my own, aforementioned, studies (Barile, 2009b) to highlight her contrasting views on this point, or better, to extend this concept to the dimension of embedded storytelling.[3]

She states, "ontobrands are story prototypes, which emerge if a person continuously takes closely related perspectives in an ontospace. They serve as attractors for the storyteller himself and for the other storytellers, constraining and guiding their enactment in this ecosystem" (Pata, 2010, para. 20). This example of a hybrid ecology shows the trajectory of the story mapped in the ontospace, moving across different attractor areas. As Pata underlines as an output of her research, "it became evident that individual storytellers would act largely as autonomous agents, aligning their narratives according to story prototypes that they perceive. Swarming actions took place around perceived stories as attractor areas in ontospace. Many storytellers were autonomously contributing

---

[2] http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/mov/mov_uncle_roy.html

[3] For example, Pata states, "(a)s another approach, Nello Barile (2009) has used the term ontobrand to describe the process by which personal places would arise in narrated mediation process in hybrid ecosystem. He assumes that if the traditional branding was just a tool in the hands of companies to build their own image and positioning in the collective mind, the self-branding approach demonstrates how the marketing thought is a state of mind that produces an existential positioning" (2010, para.19).

to the emerging shared stories" (para. 24-25).

Related to the fourth point, we can find another turn about in the users/consumer perspective. Products, services or advertising are not static and passive; that is, they are not waiting to be seen on a billboard or chosen on a bookcase. Instead, they can profile the user walking in the area and communicate him/her their quality or other users' impressions and experiences. We can use them to write or draw explicit messages or tags on a material object, or also to modify the semantic structure of advertising, billboards, logos, and so on, just as in the case of the augmented graffiti, analyzed in several experiments (Ferrari, Tuytelaars, & Van Gool, 2001) and implemented in some Android and iPhone applications such as *ArStreets*. The same idea can also involve proximity marketing strategies, where a product or a shop entrance can be tagged with our judgments, recorded and shared with our friends through a social network. Using the new neuro-scientific methodologies such as bio-feedback and eye-tracking, it is also possible to deposit on products, services and places the spectrum of conscious and unconscious feelings that accompany the consumer experience. In this way, the inanimate matter of goods can absorb and accumulate the wet substance of the living emotions through a digital system, and then communicate it to the world wide web as a proper art installation.

CASE STUDIES

This significant evolution can be summarized in the application of the digital technologies across a new paradigm in the following four main dimensions:

- The end of the opposition between virtual and real
- Social interaction and a radical proximity of technologies and everyday life (smart objects and the Internet of things)
- The global circulation of emotions and the new strategic resource of a sentimental economy
- The laborious work of technologies in the body of the geographic space with the geotagging technologies and the hybrid ecologies

In order to elaborate and illustrate these dimensions, several cases are analyzed in the following section.

Some of the recent new media applications are trying to overturn the classic relation between virtual and real. In the aforementioned case of the English multiplayer game called *Uncle Roy All Around You*, we find a strong integration between the street and the online players, but the most important innovation is that the street player (not allowed to interact with the other real players) is a kind of physical avatar of the persons that are following the game from home in front of a screen.

> Mixed reality mobile games, like online games before them, are often conceived of in terms of entertainment and, more recently, in terms of art. […] The game's production clearly relies on a division of labour consisting of discrete ensembles of activities carried out by particular staff at particular sites, which articulate distinct processes of work that combine to produce a product, namely Uncle Roy: "the game that pitches online players around the world alongside players on the streets of a real city."(Crabtree, 2004, p.1)

Another example is Nike[+]: for the first time this famous sportswear brand does not invest its own energies in the promotion of a specific product (a well-made and better pair of sneakers) but seek to reframe a spontaneous human activity as jogging in a new brand experience mediated by technology.

Jogging is not the same old thing and becomes a more exciting performance with the help of Nike[+]. As the advertising suggests, the challenge between the people, that until now is only virtual because the result has to be uploaded on the web after the ride, could become totally integrated if we substitute the iPod with an iPhone and create a geolocating software that shows, controls and compares the player's performances on different tracks.

With these few examples we can obtain many important contributions to understand how marketing and digital life are getting closer. The old ideal of a post-human dimension, which dominated the nineties as it was a sort of cultural and "epistemic fracture" (Foucault, 1966), can survive today only as a sub-dimension of the contemporary market space. With the beginning of the new millennium, the ideal of post-human shifted from philosophy, art theory and cyber-culture to the domain of marketing. In a study on Sony's advertising campaign for the launch of a new memory stick, Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger (2002) adopted the expression "post-human consumer" to indicate new relationships between technological brands and new consumers. [4]

The research examines a famous Sony ad of a new generation of memory stick that, in the fictional world of communication, shows an image of a memory stick inserted directly in our brain. This is demonstrative of the point of intersection between organic and inorganic, our mind and the computer memory. Venkatesh et al. point out that the analysis of the Sony ad highlights some implications of "new ways of constructing the consumer, or more precisely the posthuman consumer" (p. 453). The powerful image of this advertising reinforces the identity of Sony as a technologic brand and socializes the post-human dimension in the common field of consumption.

Addressing a similar point of posthuman consumer, but more oriented to the marketing studies, a team of American and Australian researchers defined the U-Space as a relativistic trading space, quite far from the three dimensional common reality we used to know. With their contribution we have to abandon completely the picture of the cyborg as an extraordinary figure, mentally and somatically empowered by technologies. In fact the digitalization of our societies changes the protagonists of the market in the senses of a "U-Space." "U" stands for ubiquitous, universal, unique and unison and it is composed of four main fields: the hyper-real, the post-human, the matrix and the node (Watson, Pitt, Berthon, & Zinkhan, 2002).

According to Watson et al. (2002), the hyper-real includes "guided tours to Mount Everest supported by oxygen tanks and a team of experienced, satellite radio–connected Sherpas; entertainment (e.g., a movie, theatre, concert)" (p. 335), and the post-human is about "information storage and processing enhancement […], the sphere of transformation and marketing currently deals with issues such as marketing body change (e.g., breast enlargement, rhinoplasty)" (p.335). The matrix "consists of the universal, acontextual processes designed to automatically perform processes on behalf of the individual or collective"(p. 336) as in the example of the semantic Web; while the node is the "automated consumption or usage [...] Smart cards and chips containing personal electronic information will automate personal consumption of service staples" (p. 336). U-space is not a static classification of contemporary markets but a dynamic process in which a single activity can shift from a dimension to another. In this way the big innovation is guaranteed not just by the singular ideas of hyper-real (empowered reality), hybridization (post human), virtuality (the matrix), or demassification (the node) but also more by the dynamic cooperation between them. The lowest common denominator between those dimensions is the category of experience that blurs the boundaries between digital and real, global and local. The hegemony of experiential values has simultaneously changed the languages of media in the sense of an "emotional ontology" (Illouz, 2007, p. 36), and also the main contemporary marketing strategies (Schmitt, 1999).

---

[4] See Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger, (2002) for the Sony's advertising image
(http://www.crito.uci.edu/noah/paper/Posthuman8_v2.pdf)

In a recent application, the technology of blue tooth is used to implement on one of the oldest and most famous socio-psychological concept: the "familiar stranger" (Milgram, 1977). This study on routine in the metropolitan life underlines how people "without a name" are supposed to be numbers. S. Milgram defined this social type as "someone who is observed repeatedly for a certain time period and without interaction" (p. 51-53). Instead, under the modern paradigm in which the phenomena are analyzed, the "familiar stranger" shows how urban life is a complex system with specific emergent properties. From the chaotic random encounters comes out a process governed by "strong temporal, spatial and intentional patterns" (Lawrence & Payne, 2005, p. 1) referred to in a recent research study as co-location. There is abundant research about this subject, some of which using the statistical analysis of interactions (Mikias, Gollu, Chan, Saroiu, Gummadi, & de Laura, 2007), but the most interesting question is the way in which a theoretical problem becomes a technical tool. Jabberwocky is a new software available for Bluetooth enabled mobile phones capable of running MIDP 2.0 applications. The application operates even if the other Bluetooth mobile phone is not running the Jabberwocky application and after a while each application accumulates a log of unique entries of persons that have been previously encountered, creating a sort of dynamic borderless community. If the Bluetooth devices create a connection between groups of subjects walking through a certain area, other softwares connect a virtual/global space or community with a material one.

AroundMe is one of the iPhone's first applications that opened to the market of geolocalized services. The software was invented by an Italian developer, Marco Pifferi, working for Tweakersoft, a company that created several applications for Apple's iPhone. The strength of this software is the simplicity in the classification of the research categories and which is very quick and does not require any textual input from the user. Another example is the software commercialized by Nokia for the geolocation tagging.[5] In the original application, when you take a photo in a certain place, the software records the coordinate of your place via GPS, associating them to the file of the picture. The research is underway for other softwares that follow the opposite process: if you point your smart phone on a urban surface it works as a scanner that gets information about that object (a building, a shop, a monument etc.) such as origin, identity, and history, and eventually all the services offered by it.

The general trends I discuss here are already described in the new paradigm that is going to overwhelm the old Internet in the direction of Supranet. This vision comes from the Gartner researchers (Magrassi, Panarella, Deighton, & Johnson, 2001) and focuses on the way in which the new digital life is not so far from the physical one compared to the past. The ubiquity of future computers, the RFID, the wireless connection and other strategic innovation will completely transform our approach to reality. If Lévy (1997) considered intelligence and communication as a human kind's resources, today we can catch the potential of a progressive diffusion of intelligence in what few decades ago was called the "system of objects" (Baudrillard, 1968) that surrounds our physical environment.

One of the newest paradigms working on those presumptions is the Supranet paradigm, anticipated by D. Gelernter (1992) and developed by the Gartner research team. The main aspects of this paradigm are:
- Many physical objects (e.g., products) will be coded and, therefore, will become uniquely identifiable;
- Intelligent devices will be embedded in physical objects of all sorts, such as cars, consumer goods, surgical nanomachines traveling the human body, appliances, clothing, jewelry and livestock;

---

[5] http://www.dailymobile.net/2008/03/03/symbian-application-nokia-location-tagger-updated-to-10-beta2/

- Intelligent devices will increasingly be networked via the (mostly) wireless Internet;
- As a consequence, all physical objects, animals and human beings carrying intelligent devices will also be networked, in addition to being identifiable (Magrassi, Panarella, Deighton, & Johnson, 2001, pp. 2-3).

As many other paradigms, Supranet describes a mix of hypothesis, conjectures and facts. Some predictions are already set up by the contemporary technology as in the case of geotagging information shared via social networks exemplified by Nokia location tagger. One of the most impressive ideas is the way new technologies will have a capacity to code approximately every square meter of the earth's surface, which will be linked to an IP address (Magrassi et al., 2001, p. 3). This suggests that there will be a complete isomorphism between the net and the planet so that every movement in one dimension implies an immediate modification in the other. Every element of our urban and natural environment could be able to interact and dialogue with this integrated system and other system connected with it. In this way the idea of a traditional branding strategy will be overcome by a diffused kind of branding demonstrating the initial stages of transformation toward the *ontobranding*. With Wikipedia we already discover that a simple tool to manage knowledge has created a sort of "ontological democracy." In Wikipedia epic gestures of historic celebrities cohabit with modern pop-star's adventures, common people activities, academic curricula, touristic routes, commercial products, brand identities and so on. Since there is an overlapping of knowledge, reality and promotion strategies in several points, I am not just talking about the way in which devices can "mobilize the brand" (Nysveen, Pedersen, Thorbjørnsen, & Berthon, 2005).

Instead the problem is more the way in which branding becomes a flexible and spread technology. The future smart phone will not be just a device, but it will be a scanner that offers the opportunity to rewrite the reality in a reversible modality, giving sense to a chaotic and meaningless urban experience. The same can happen as well in a natural landscape so that it is easy to imagine walking through an Italian mountain footpath and be surprised by the appearance of an edelweiss flower. Contemporary smartphones are able to catch that magic moment and immediately the photo cam with an integrated GPS will associate the latitude and longitude of its geographic position to the file that we can instantly upload onto our favorite network. If we are interested in botany, we can even send information about that object and create a specific profile, an interest group, a fan club etc. In this way, that specific edelweiss is institutionalized as a collective reality and becomes a reference point for a larger community. And when someone passes nearby without knowing that it is there, the geolocalization system for smartphone can alert him/her about its presence and being. So, finally, after a process of content and experience sharing through the social networks, the edelweiss becomes a product, or better, a brand of itself. The combination of Supranet, narrative ecologies and the Internet of things gives us the traits of a new scenario where branding means more than a mere commercial tool, and it confronts itself with the domains of knowledge and ontology.

CONCLUSION

With my reflection on the new forms of interaction between reality and virtuality, my aim in this paper was to introduce and discuss a trend that started at least six to eight years ago and that continues today, showing even more interesting lines of development. I do not pretend to have made a clear prediction of a future trend by introducing my concept of *ontobranding*, but this paper sought to elaborate how a scenario peopled by several applications, programs or experiments became meaningful considering the strong coherence in the development of several phenomena I

have been analyzing since 2009.[6] As the reader will appreciate, I decided to adopt the case studies as a methodology to explore the category of *ontobranding* because it is much more useful aid to discovering hidden trajectories behind the external surface of a techno-communicative object. This is why I continue to take the same approach as I develop my conclusion to this work.

When we apply the three circuits of technology, consumption and communication, it is possible to understand how the "interactive game experience"(Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peute, 2003, pp. 53-54) in the product of a complex interaction across other sub-dimensions such as programmers, consoles, users for the technological circuit, marketers, commodities and consumers for the consumption circuit, designers, gamers and player for the cultural circuits. From my point of view, the interaction between the three circuits is not just limited to the perception of the game experience. This dynamic interaction works like an engine that will modify deeply our conception of reality, determining a new radical overlapping between what is normally considered real (business, love, everyday life etc.) and what is normally considered virtual (game, entertainment, connectivity etc.).

Many international newspapers, blogs and websites have discusses the recent project called *Ingress*: a new game designed by Google, although the definition of game in this case is probably too narrow. *Ingress*[7] is a dynamic narration that works as a social network and uses the intersection between augmented reality and geolocalization to generate a parallel universe of experiences that is not really parallel but it is completely overlapped with the "authentic" reality.

This new application is quite interesting because, in a certain way, it is the complete implementation of the main topic I presented in this paper as sub-dimensions of the *ontobranding* process. First of all what has been called as the "storytelling imperialism" (Salmon, 2007): an expression of how the contemporary narration of products needs an even stronger emotional style of representation and promotion. The trailer produced to launch the game is quite similar to a movie so that the viewer cannot understand if it is just a spy story, a videogame, a music video or an artistic project. After this, the second main character is the challenge of the users. The multiple-player-modality recreates a sort of hidden community following a real goal behind the masquerades of the common life. This community (opposed in two factions: the rebels and the integrated) looks similar to some antagonist groups as described in some recent movies such as *The Fight Club* and *Matrix*. The hybrid modality of interaction takes something from other projects I discussed before, like the *Uncle Roy*'s "overturning" of the avatar, but here there are no distinctions between the online and the offline players, because everyone is permanently and ubiquitously online. The initial narration is based on the idea that there are "some places on earth able to attract not only people but also events" as the promo says on their website. This is the precondition to implement a kind of digital geomancy where the new communicative power of the places is not completely unrelated from the networks of human interactions and their inner circulation of the emotional capitalism. So, even though, in the real world, places have no sort of power, unless we would say it in a symbolic way, the intersected tools of augmented reality and geolocalization give to the located places the possibility to produce and communicate special events related to the screenplay of the game. Today the grade of implementation and diffusion of this application is still limited (just for early adopters), but in the further future this game will probably turns in to a killer application - notwithstanding the recent Google+ flop – ready to host a new and more sophisticated model of brand and product placement. With the diffusion of a new pair of sunglasses, also projected by Google to conquer and overturn the market of smart phones, this application will be able to express 100% of its potential.

---

[6] The first version of this paper was discussed in a session of the conference "Mobile communication and social policies" organized by Prof. James Katz at Rutgers University in 2009.
[7] See http://www.ingress.com

Pushing a higher number of players to interact and build the global narration of the game may recreate a new social environment where the strategy of sociability, economy and power are totally rewriteable. This concept demonstrates how technology is running faster than science and society. Contemporary innovation can not just be analyzed with the categories of a modern rationality - still living today in the form of the "digital dualism" (Jurgenson 2011)[8] - but it requires a new perspective that is able to understand and unify the dynamic interaction between what were once separated as the ontological distinction between reality and virtuality.

REFERENCES

Abruzzese, A. (1993). *Lo splendore della Tv.* Genova: Costa & Nolan.

Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions.* New York, Palgrave McMillan

Barile, N. (2009a). *Brand new world. Il consumo delle marche come forma di rappresentazione del mondo.* Milano: Lupetti.

Barile, N. (2009b, October). *From post-human consumer to the ontobranding dimension: Mobile phones and other ubiquitous devices as a new way in which reality can promote itself.* Paper presented at mobile communication and social policy conference, New Brunswick, NJ.

Barile, N. (2012). The age of personal web TVs: A cultural analysis of the convergence between web 2.0, branding and everyday life. In A. Abruzzese, N. Barile, J. Gebhardt, J. Vincent, & L. Fortunati (Eds.), *The new television ecosystem* (pp. 41-60). Berlin: Peter Lang.

Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The system of objects.* London and New York: Verso Books.

Breton, P. (1995). *L'utopie de la communication: le mythe du « village planétaire ».* Paris: La Découverte.

Codeluppi, V. (2009). *Biocapitalismo.* Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Crabtree, A. (2004). Understanding the social life of Uncle Roy: Field report. Retrieved from http://www.cs.nott.ac.uk/~axc/work/URAY.pdf

Ewen, S. (1988). *All consuming images: The politics of style in contemporary culture.* New York: Basic Books.

Ferrari, V., Tuytelaars, T., & Van Gool, L. J. (2001). Markerless augmented reality with a real-time affine region tracker. In D. C. Young (Ed.), *Proceedings of ISAR '01: IEEE and ACM international symposium on augmented reality*, 87-96. doi : 10.1109/ISAR.2001.970518

Floch, J. M. (2000). *Visual identities.* London and New York: Continuum.

Fortunati, L. (2009). Old and new media, old emotion. In J. Vincent, & L. Fortunati (Eds.), *Electronic emotion: The mediation of emotion via information and communication technologies* (pp. 35-62). Oxford: Peter Lang.

Foucault, M. (1966). *Les Mots et les Choses. Archéologie des sciences humaines.* Paris: Gallimard, NRF.

Gelernter, D. (1992). *Mirror worlds: Or the day software puts the universe in a shoebox… How it will happen and what it will mean.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1978). *Being and time.* London: Blackwell.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jurgenson, N. (2011). Digital dualism and the fallacy of web objectivity. Retrieved from

---

[8] Jurgenson (2011) states, "Digital dualism is a fallacy, and it seems to be pervasive: from academics like Sherry Turkle operating with the assumption of a digital "second self" to mainstream conceptualizations like the *The Social Network* film arguing that Facebook users are trading "real life" connections for a something digital. While many more examples can be listed (and many have been on this blog by myself and others), what research as well as those who actually use social media tell us is that social media has everything to do with the physical world and our offline lives are increasingly influenced by social media, even when logged off. We need to shed the digital dualist bias because our Facebook pages are indeed "real life" and our offline existence is increasingly "virtual" (Jurgenson, para. 4).

http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/09/13/digital-dualism-and-the-fallacy-of-web-objectivity/ (Last accessed on September 13, 2011)

Katz, J. E. (1999). *Connections: Social and cultural studies of the telephone in American life.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Katz, J. E., & Sugiyama, S. (2006). Mobile phones as fashion statements: Evidence from student surveys in the US and Japan. *New Media & Society, 8*(2), 321-337.

Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing* (2nd ed.). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Lawrence, J., Payne, T., & De Roure, D. (2005, February). *Communities of collocation.* Presented at UK UbiNet Workshop, Bath, UK.

Levy, P. (1997). *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace.* New York: Plenum.

Lovink, G. (2010). Mybrain.net: The colonization of the real-time and other trends in web 2.0. *Eurozine.* Retrieved from http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-03-18-lovink-en.html

Magrassi, P., Panarella, A., Deighton, N., & Johnson, G. (2001, September). Computers to acquire control of the physical world. *Gartner Research Report* T-14-0301.

Manovich, L. (2008). *Software takes command.* Released under CC license.

McLuhan, M. H. (1951). *The mechanical bride: Folklore of industrial man.* NY: Vanguard Press.

Meyorowitz, J. (1986). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miklas, A. G., Gollu, K. K., Chan, K. K. W., Saroiu, S., Gummadi, K. P., & de Lara, E. (2007). *Exploiting social interactions in mobile systems.* In J. Krumm, G. D. Abowd, A. Seneviratne, & T. Strang (Eds.), *Proceedings of UbiComp '07: 9th international conference on ubiquitous computing,* 409-428. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.

Milgram, S. (1977). The familiar stranger: An aspect of urban anonymity. In S. Milgram (Ed.), *The individual in a social world* (pp. 51-53). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Nysveen, H., Pedersen, P. E., Thorbjørnsen, H., & Berthon, P. (2005). Mobilizing the brand: The effects of mobile services on brand relationships and main channel use. *Journal of Services Research, 7*(3), 257-276.

Pata, K., & Fuksas, A. (2009). The ecology of embodied narratives in the age of locative media and social networks: A design experiment. *Cognitive Philology, 2.* Retrieved from http://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/cogphil/index.

Pata, K. (2010, January 12). *Ontobrands as prototypical stories attract stigmergic narrative mediation and swarming.* Retrieved from http://tihane.wordpress.com/2010/01/12/ontobrands-as-prototypical-stories-attract-stigmergic-narrative-mediation-and-swarming/

Rheingold, H. (2002). *Smart mobs: The next social revolution.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Ries, A., & Trout, J. (1981). *Positioning: The battle for your mind.* New York: Warner Books - McGraw-Hill.

Rifkin, J. (1995). *The end of work: The decline of the global labor force and the dawn of the post-market era.* New York, NY: Tarcher/Putnam.

Salmon, C. (2007). *Storytelling. La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits.* Paris: La Découverte.

Schmitt, B. H. (1999). *Experiential marketing: How to get customers to sense, feel, think, act, relate to your company and brands.* New York, NY: The Free Press.

Simon, F., & Kotler, P. (2003). *Building global biobrands: Taking biotechnology to market.* New York: Free Press/Simon & Shuster.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.* New York, NY:

Basic Books.

van Kranenburg, R. (2008). *The Internet of things: A critique of ambient technology and the all seeing network of RFID*. Amsterdam: Network Notebooks.

Venkatesh, A., Karababa, E., & Ger, G. (2002). The emergence of the posthuman consumer and the fusion of the virtual and the real. In S. Broniarczyk, & K. Nakamoto (Eds.), *Advances in consumer research* (pp. 446-452). Valdosta, GA: Association for Consumer Research.

Watson, R., Pitt, L., Berthon, P., & Zinkhan, G. (2002). *U-commerce: Expanding the universe of marketing. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 30*(4), 329-343.

BIOGRAPHY

Nello Barile teaches Media studies and Sociology of cultural processes at IULM University of Milan where also coordinated for 6 years a Master programme in Creativity Management. He holds a PhD in communication sciences, resources management, and formative processes at University of Rome "La Sapienza." He has published numerous books in Italy such as *Sistema moda. Oggetti strategie e simboli dall'iperlusso alla società low cost* (Milano 2011) and *Brand new world. Il consumo delle marche come forma di rappresentazione del mondo* (Milano 2009). He also published articles and short essays in France, Brazil, and USA, such as "A knot to untie. A social History of tie between fetishism, communication and power" in C. Giorcelli & P. Rabinowitz (Eds.), *Habits of being* (vol. 2). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2012. He is also the editor of *The New Television Ecosystem* (Peter Lang 2012) with A. Abruzzese, J. Gebhardt, J. Vincent and L. Fortunati.