Between

The Chambers of Geography: Hypotheses on Places Where Other Places are Simulated

Marcello Tanca

Abstract

The present study dovetails with topics previously discussed in my recent book *Geografia e fiction* (Tanca, 2020), with a particular focus on the link existing between geography and simulation. More specifically, I will reflect on places where simulations of the actual world take place. The hypothesis stems from the fascination exerted by simulating machines like magic lanterns, Wunderkammern, peepshows, panoramas, and dioramas, perspective boxes, virtual reality, etc. These 'geographic chambers' are all constructed situations producing an illusionistic *mise en scène*: the space compression occurring inside them enables us to immerse ourselves in places that are geographically very distant from us.

Keywords

Geography; Simulation; Space-time compression; Immersive experience; performance

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> The windows that look down on it are like loges from which one gazes into its interior, but one cannot see out these windows to anything outside. (What is true has no windows; nowhere does the true look out to the universe).
>
> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 532

Geography in a chamber

At first glance, the idea of compressing geography within a very small place may raise perplexity. As a matter of fact, the concept of enclosed spaces is apparently anti-geographic or, at the very least, outside the research interest of a geographer, according to whom the 'truth' does not reside inside a 'room', but rather in the outside world. The word 'Geography' immediately and invariably conjures up images of travelling and the physical and emotional encounter with unconfined spaces such as continents, oceans, deserts, and savannahs. Geography is synonymous with demanding journeys, unbridgeable distances, and most diverse voices, tastes, and time zones – «a geography of the unfurled sails» (*une géographie de plein vent*), to use an interesting expression of Eric Dardel (who, in turn, borrowed it from Lucien Febvre; see Dardel 1952: 112). Geography is also associated with field research carried out outdoors, or *en plein air*. In a book written a few years ago, *De plain-pied dans le monde: écriture et réalisme dans la géographie française au XXe siècle*, Olivier Orain (Orain 2009) highlighted the 'realism' typical of the French approach as

one of the most influential geographic trends of the 20th century, according to which the description of a place (*physionomie*) had to comply with criteria of immediacy, exactness, practicality, and visibility. Geographers were not supposed to work in libraries or archives, and they inevitably had *les pieds crottés*, or mud on their feet (another beautiful expression much-loved by Armand Frémont, who borrowed it from René Musset; see Frémont 2005: 28-29). Geographers cannot conduct their studies indoors, except for the armchair geographers of the 18th century. In such cases, however, geographers –as officials directly serving the king– were actually cartographers, and, not surprisingly, often portrayed at work in their scientific laboratory with a compass in their hands by the iconographers of the time (Tanca 2021). In contrast to these examples, we can clearly mention the portray of Alexander von Humboldt painted by Georg Friedrich Weitsch, dispelling the myth of the geographer seen as a bookworm. Rather than inside a scientific laboratory, Von Humboldt is portrayed in an open space, without maps, globes, and– most of all –compasses around him; in his hand, he is holding –and nearly offering us– fresh flowers of *Meriania Speciosa*, a shrub found in Southern Colombia and typically growing at an altitude of 1800- 2200 m above sea level. With this painting, Weitsch pays a clear homage to the *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*, the journey across the tropical regions of Latin America from which Humbolt had just returned (1806). As an art meant as an "encounter with the world", Geography is an exploratory practice constantly projecting us outside indoor spaces. It is a journey that enables us to meet with new people and experience new things, smells, tastes, and sounds. The idea that Geography can be learned indoors, in silent and neutral spaces is, at least, a nonsense, for it would be deprived of its substantiality.

However, the concept of a 'chamber geography' is not entirely groundless. In his *Voyage autour de ma chambre* Xavier de Maistre applied this logic to the literary field. The book, which was published anonymously in 1795 in Lausanne, is the account of a sedentary journey, since de Maistre wrote it after spending 42 days in a forced confinement (i.e., home arrest). Sarcastically, the author claims that the world is useless for travelling: «After all, is there any person so unhappy, so abandoned, that he doesn't have a little den into which he can withdraw and hide away from everyone? Nothing more elaborate is needed for the journey» (de Maistre 2013: 3).

However, rather than focusing on imaginary travels and armchair

travellers, the aim of the present study[1] is to assess the potential of a possible research area –which I've been considering for a while– based on the idea of a 'chamber' meant, in a paradigmatic sense, as a circumscribed area where all the knowledge pertaining to the outside world is spectacularly summarised: «Before we knew how to circle the earth, how to circumscribe the sphere of human habitation in days and hours, we had brought the globe into our living rooms to be touched by our hands and swirled before our eyes» (Arendt 1998: 251). This is precisely the principle shared by magic lanterns (Mannoni, Pesenti Campagnoni 2009), Wunderkammern (Mauriès 2002), peepshows (Balzer 1998), panoramas and dioramas (Oetermann 1997; Comment 1999; Dohm, Garnier, Le Bond and Ostende 2017), perspective boxes, and the recent virtual reality (Grau 2003). Here, we have a series of elements – *naturalia*, *artificialia*, images, sounds, etc. – gathered into a single place and providing a scale-based, deferred and mediated world experience; *a living hypotyposis*, that is, a machine to represent something not present as though present. It was David Harvey to coin the expression «space-time compression» to define a peculiar feature of post-modernity resulting from globalisation: the reduction-simplification-implosion of distances and travel-times produced by technological and social innovations (phones, fax machines, mass media, Internet, dissemination of cultural models and standardization of lifestyles), mobility (rail, cars, trains, jets and reduction of their costs), and economy (creation of new markets, speed up production, decentralization of fiscal authority, electronic banking) (Harvey 1989). Before being a recent phenomenon, the space-time compression is a distinguishing feature typical of the so called 'chambers' (*theatra mundi*, *cabinets de curiosité*, etc.), namely all those places hosting a miniature world whose function is to provide, with the aid of a simulation process, an experience which would be otherwise impossible to achieve[2]. In other words, the 'chambers' are places where other places are simulated by resorting to the inventory and display of *objets lointains*, distant objects, as Myriam Marrache-Gouraud called them (Marrache-Gouraud 2013). It is important to point out that in the present

[1] In the present study I resume some topics covered in my recent *Geografia e fiction. Opera film canzone fumetto* (Tanca 2020), to which I refer the reader willing to delve into the relationship between geography and simulation. In this work, I make a distinction among: places which are a simulation of other places; places where other places are simulated; and places which are entirely simulated (i.e. fictional places).

[2] On this topic: see Besse 2003; Sohier – Gillet – Staszak 2019.

study the term "simulation" is very specific. Firstly, despite undoubtedly featuring mimetic elements, simulation does not coincide with the concept of a mere imitation. Imitation and simulation are similar, but also immeasurable, and must not be mistaken for each other. When dealing with imitation and simulation I intend to follow, more or less, the different approach that Plato and Aristotle had towards poetry. Whilst the first, Plato, condemns and banishes poets from his ideal Republic due to the merely imitative quality of their art (poetry does not produce the objects of real life, but reproduces their appearances only; as such, is far from the truth; see the book 8 of *The Republic*), the latter, Aristotle, assigns to poetry a different role: the function of the poet is not to tell what has happened, but – in accordance with likelihood and necessity – the sort of things that might happen; see *Poetics*, 1451a 36). Thus, from this perspective, *imitating* is equal to producing a duplicate, or a copy of something, sharing one or more features with that object and merely reproducing its appearance. In this way, we can imitate a style, a voice tone, a gesture. *Simulating*, on the other hand, refers to something that might have happened. The simulation process creates an artificial event sharing one or more features with a similar real event – e.g., we can simulate malaises, mountain erosion phenomena or the experience of flying a plane. From this point of view, the "chamber" is what I call a simulating machine, the device *actively coordinating the elements of the simulation process.* It incorporates different languages, knowledge, techniques, spatial schemes, media, and imaginaries. In the absence of the above-mentioned device, the single elements of the simulation could not be assimilated and assembled together. The performance staged inside is, instead, the "simulated machine", meaning the object, the content, and the actual result of the simulation. In short, the simulation process invariably includes at least two elements: the simulated machine and the simulating machine, or the produced effect and the means used to achieve it. The relationship between such elements can be described in *chronological* (with the simulating machine coming before the simulated machine), *genetic* (the simulating machine is the cause, and the simulated machine the effect) and *ontological* (the simulating machine is potentiality, whilst the simulated machine actuality) terms.

The previous assertions should not make us forget the subjective component of the phenomenon, that is, on the one hand, the *simulating subject* as the individual who either stages the simulation (or is its material or ideal maker) or has the control over the production means, and, on the other one, the *final user*, or the addressee of the simulative performance. The *homo simulans* has a relevant role in the above-described machine, since he

is the only one who can unravel the mystery of the simulation, the reason why it is staged. The underlying reasons can indeed be the most diverse: deceit, fraud, fun, art performance, learning, business, and so on. Given his crucial role in the whole process, the importance of the user should not be underestimated either. When using the term "addressee", I mean that the performance is suited to his interests, wishes, expectations and even possible reactions.

Therefore, simulating machine is the stage for a simulative-immersive performance – in this case, a geographic experience allowing the appearance (or which is made possible by the appearance) of a place that, though not present, it is as if it was actually present.

Enter the chamber, be somewhere else

In order to help the reader to better understand the operation of a simulating machine, I will mention the comic strip *Zio Paperone e le vacanze in scatola* (Uncle Scrooge and a Holiday in a Box) written by Giorgio Pezzin and drawn by Giovan Battista Carpi, which was published for the first time in 1977. The two authors did a great job in delivering an extremely useful "making of", with reference to the procedures, stage effects etc. enabling to generate a place which is derived from dioramas, Wunderkammer and the "machine theatre" typical of the 16th and 17th century. The plot is simple. Due to high costs, traffic along the motorway and sold-out hotel rooms, Donald Duck finds himself unable to go on holiday. To solve the problem, he decides to construct a "holiday box", a small, cubic-shaped building inside which a "perfect illusion" comes alive with the help of ingenious stage effects; wallpaper patterns resemble the sky and the sea; the sand on the floor allows for playing games and sandblastings; a tanning lamp as the sun; a tape recorder playing the sound of waves; a fan hidden inside a fake palm produces a light breeze; last but not least, the inevitable beach loungers and beach umbrellas (Fig. 1). Uncle Scrooge immediately seizes the opportunity and decides to commission 200 new projects (!) of as many boxes, tailored to accommodate specific needs – e.g., a sailing holiday box, a mountain holiday box (with tanks diffusing pine essence, helium, and oxygen to reproduce high altitude conditions, and horizontal and vertical conveyor belts) and so on. Unfortunately, Rockerduck, Uncle Scrooge's bitter rival, steals the designs and is the first to launch the project on the market. Holiday boxes turn out to be extremely successful, with a consequent, dramatic impact on Duckburg's tourism industry (owned at 50% by Uncle

Scrooge). People no longer spend their holidays at the seaside or in the mountains since they prefer the cheaper and homely boxes. Consequently, the traditional leisure system becomes obsolete, and tourist resorts, boarding houses, hotels, and inns lose all their appeal and are sadly empty. However, against all odds and by means of skilful stratagems, Uncle Scrooge manages to turn the situation to his advantage, with, of course, a happy ending for the protagonists.

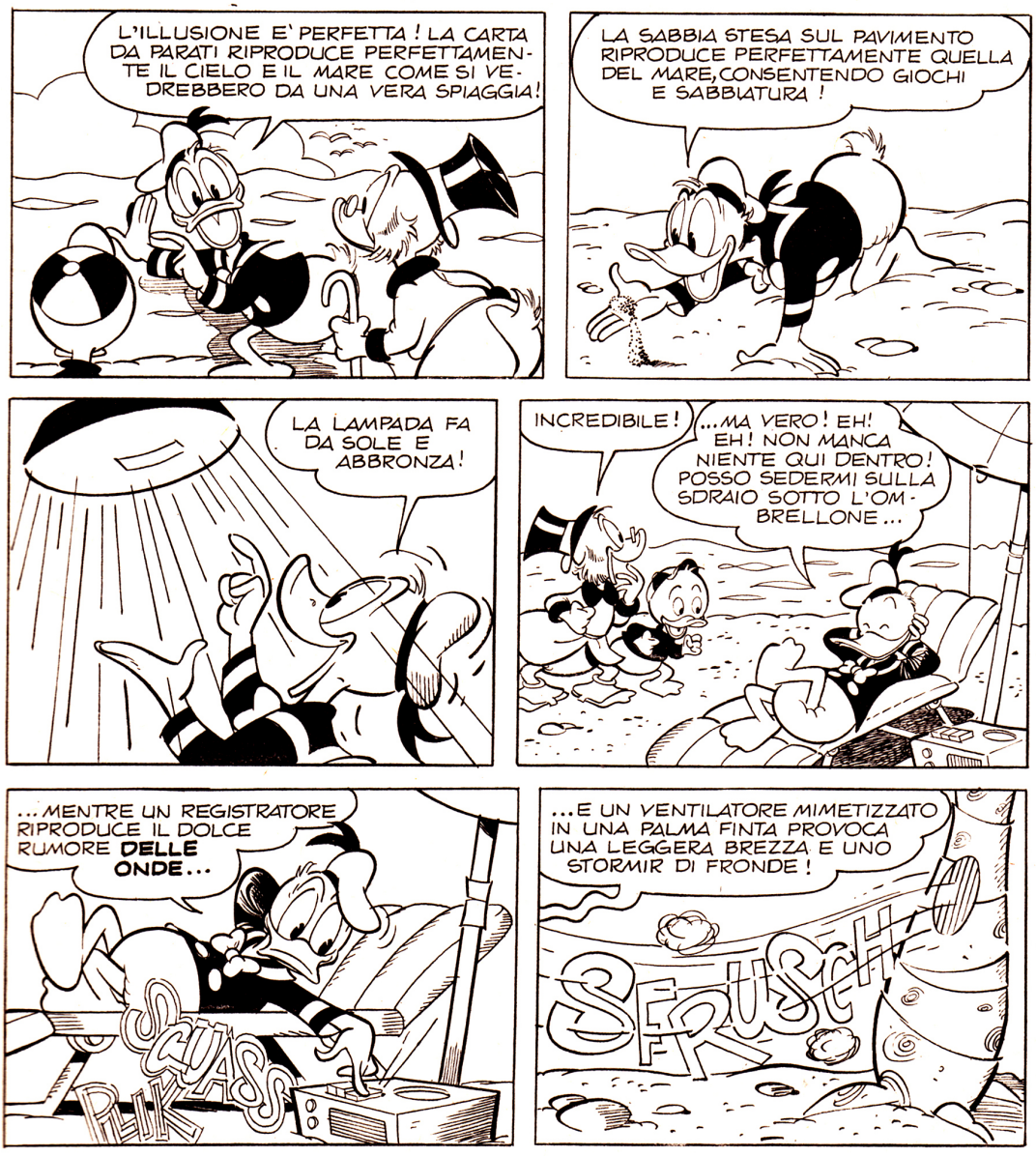

Fig. 1 – A page from the comic story Zio Paperone e le vacanze in scatola *(Uncle Scrooge and a Holiday in a Box) written by Giorgio Pezzin and drawn by Giovan Battista Carpi (1977).*

The story is obviously centred around the production of a simulating machine as a genuine "geographic chamber" where there is a clear distinction between the chamber and the box, or the simulated place (inside) and the place where the simulation takes place (outside). In fact, in this case, the simulation occurs after crossing a *limes*; only by entering and crossing a threshold we can experience the simulation.

Therefore, Pezzin and Carpi's story has a paradigmatic value in that it shows how the combined effect of several "devices" replacing the absent features –the tanning lamp as a substitute for the sun, the tape recording playing the sound of the waves, etc.– *necessarily requires entering a delimited space especially designated for the purpose*. Inside "the box", the presence of the simulating machine is explicitly flaunted, and the reader is aware that this is where a simulation will take place. The intention to reproduce reality is thus apparent and those who buy the box are perfectly aware of what they are about to get, for the box is tailored to their individual requirements (Donald Duck carries out at least 200 projects, one for each specific need). Likewise, the buyers know that what awaits them is a mere simulation of holiday places («I'm going to sit on the beach chair and switch on the ultraviolet-sun», one of them says). Thanks to its visibility, the simulating machine is recognised and accepted as such by the user.

Paperone e le vacanze in scatola is not "just" a comic strip. Let us examine the case of *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, an installation-opera (Lithuanian Pavilion) that won the Venice Biennale in 2019. Hosted in a "room" of the Marina Militare near the Arsenale, the performance was curated by Lucia Pietroiusti and staged by Lina Lapelytė (music), Vaiva Grainytė (libretto) and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (director). I intentionally make use of terms like "installation", "performance" and "opera", but I may also define the project as a *tableau vivant*. In fact, *Sun & Sea* provided the visitors with the opportunity of a unique experience: for nine hours a day, it was possible to view from a balcony the *mise en scène* of a beach, with around 24 performers walking on the sand, lounging on chairs and towels, partaking in beach activities such as eating, playing with frisbee and looking phones, and singing alternatively and in choir (we must not forget that the installation is also, or most of all, an opera)[3]. Drawing on the situationism language (Debord 1957) scholars describe this art form as a "constructed situation" to indicate the production of situations triggering a reflection on the spectacularisation of life and "what we do" by rethinking the limits separating the artwork from the view-

[3] The performance can be viewed online: https://youtu.be/VIfYtNGhrE0.

er (Bishop 2012)[4]. *Sun & Sea* focuses on the awareness of both performance and use, i.e., viewers and actors *are perfectly aware that they are not on holiday on a beach but inside a warehouse of the Venice Arsenale*. What we have here is thus a fictional stage, a simulated machine made of sand, plastic, daily gestures, stage objects and costumes, retired people, mothers, children, teenagers, couples, and animals. Behind all this, one can sense the presence of a complex simulating machine conceived and brought to life by simulating subjects (the authors), so that the audience of the Biennale could enjoy a voyeuristic view of it from a balcony (the users). *Sun & Sea* stages a fictional reality – but the audience is fully aware of the fact that *ceci n'est pas une plage*: the beach that the viewer is watching is not real, and the bathers put on the sunscreen to protect their skin from an absent sun. The seemingly natural reality unfolding in real-time before their eyes is a wisely staged scene, based on a *canovaccio*; a "genuine fake", as David Brown would say (Brown 1996). This scenario gives us clear hints of the performative and experiential quality of the simulation. As a performance, its meaning is activated only when someone establishes a contact with it. As long as this does not happen, the simulation is in a state of inertia and has no meaning in itself.

I would also like to give two more examples of similar "chambers" housing daring simulations of peculiar climatic conditions. The first one is the Ski Dubai, an indoor ski resort inaugurated in 2005 and stretching across over 22,000 square metres. The building can be described as an application, on a large scale, of the same principles inspiring Donald Duck's project. Ski Dubai hosts five snowy slopes, a chairlift, a snow park, a sledding slope and even a typical Alpine hut. Temperatures range between -1° C during the day and -6° C at night. The second one is Tropical Islands, a tropical water park housed in a former airship hangar and located approximately 60 kilometres south of the centre of Berlin. This gigantic geographic chamber is the largest indoor water park – its surface is 66,000 m² – and is home to the biggest indoor rainforest in the world, a beach, many tropical plants and several swimming pools, bars and restaurants. Temperature is 26 °C (78 °F) and air humidity is around 64%.

[4] «When the Lettriste International was superseded by the Situationist International in 1957, a third term came to prevail: the 'constructed situation'. This was defined in the first issue of I.S. as 'a moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation of a unitary ambiance and a game of events. One of the key characteristics of the constructed situation was its participatory structure, devised in deliberate opposition to spectacle's principle of 'nonintervention' and its corollary, alienation» (85-86).

In most cases, what apparently brings together places simulating other places –showing us the value of their inner geography– is the *educational quality* of the experience they provide. These places *are learning environments that produce behaviours*, where people *get familiar with techniques, skills, and action schemes,* incorporating their automatisms. We know, for example, that to assess their eligibility for space missions, potential astronauts undergo specific tests simulating the absence of gravity[5]. During the training process, apprentices get familiar with this environment aboard an Airbus A-300 – where they experience, at an altitude of about 6,000 m, the hyperbolic flight, making them weightless for about 25 seconds – and in the floating tanks of the Sonny Carter Training Facility (Johnson Space Center, Texas). The whole Johnson Space Center is a huge "holiday box", just like the *Centre d'entraînement aux actions en zone urbaine* of Jeoffrécourt, France, and the *Militärische Übungsstadt* [City of military training] opened in Schnöggersburg in 2015, the largest site of military training in Europe. Upon its completion – most likely in 2021 – the complex will include over 500 (and precisely 520) buildings, a motorway, an artificial river, bridges, an industrial area, residential buildings, skyscrapers, a cemetery, a market, a religious building (for Christians and Muslims), an aerodrome, a prison and a stadium. Furthermore, it will also be equipped with a sewer system. In this urban simulation – the perfect example of what Stephen Graham calls "New Military Urbanism" (Graham 2010: 183-225) – up to 1,500 soldiers will be able to train simultaneously.

This circumstance suggests how these spaces of representation should be regarded as a subgroup where places like Carson City and AstaZero, both in Sweden, will also find place. Here, *simulating is synonymous with testing:* Carson City, in the nearby of Vårgårda and an hour away from Volvo's headquarter, is a ghost city specifically built to test active security systems – i.e., vehicle-installed devices helping us prevent car accidents (like sensors warning on dangers and obstacles on the road, automatic correction of driving errors, wheel lock, etc.). The city's name refers to the model selected by the designers who have invented this simulating machine *en plein air*, where an estimated number of one thousand tests are carried out for BMW, Mercedes, and Audi every year (Atiyeh 2012). AstaZero, near Göteborg, is a "Test Track", or a road safety track, where self-driving vehicles are tested. The facility features 4 different road scenarios simulating

[5] It should be actually referred to as a "microgravity simulation", since small amounts of gravity can be found everywhere.

as many traffic conditions. One of them is a natural size reproduction of Harlem, with pictures of residential buildings' facades printed on canvas hung on steel frames (Dickson 2018).

Conclusions

At the core of the geographic chambers issue is the innate need of human beings to fantasize on places they have never travelled to, thus filling the gap between "near" and "far". The "chambers" are specific environments, constructed situations and compression spaces that exemplify such needs. By eliminating distance, they enable the access to places which are geographically very distant from us. The same applies to dioramas, meant as «windows onto the world, mirroring their age, but also places of mental projection enhancing the extension of the imaginary sphere» (Dohm - Garnier - Le Bon - Ostende 2017: 13).

Denis Cosgrove once defined imagination as «the human capacity to shape mental images, especially of things not directly witnessed or experienced» (Cosgrove 2008: 8). Within this context, what we term *geographic imagination* is a peculiar form of imagination especially addressing places and providing a knowledge and description of the world that, according to philosopher Emilio Garroni, comes to our aid «when knowledge in strict sense is not (or not yet) available » (Garroni 2010: 165). As a simulating machine, the geographic chamber is the material expression of the geographic imagination, compensating for the impossibility to achieve our geography of the unfurled sails with an illusionistic *mise en scène* aimed to produce an immersive experience. The performance reduces distances and compresses the space into a chamber, enabling to establish a contact with what is actually far away from us. However, this raises a series of ethic and simulation policy-related concerns: who owns and controls the production means? What are the aims or objectives of the simulation? How many fields and circumstances of social life can it be applied to? Do we always interact consciously with the simulations, or, in other words, are we able – since we have the proper means to recognise and unmask them – to reject the deceit? And if so, what kind of control (and, consequently, which degree of responsibility) do we have over the effects it produces? I hope I'll soon be able to provide the answers to these questions.

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