

L'ATALANTE

REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS CINEMATOGRAFICOS

Notebook

Immersive Cinema

Devices, Stories, and
Virtual Worlds

Dialogue

Tom Gunning

(Dis)agreements

**Past and Present of
Virtual Worlds. Illusion
and Immersion in
Early Cinema**

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IMMERSION AND INTERACTIVITY: A DREAM THAT BEGAN WITH EARLY CINEMA*

ÀNGEL QUINTANA
DANIEL PÉREZ PAMIES

For years, film theorists have been trying to answer the question posed by André Bazin in his collection of articles titled *What Is Cinema?* (1990). Initially, the answer seemed clear and had to do with the foundations of the photographic process: the image as analogy; the image as trace. A photograph was the emanation of its referent, as Roland Barthes (1989) had argued in his day. Today, computer generated imagery (or CGI) has introduced algorithmic functions. Analogy still exists as a result of spatial recognition, but the image has lost an essential part of its moorings as a trace of the world. Thanks to the new digital arts, many visual representations today are, as David N. Rodowick (2007) has demonstrated, based on virtuality. Computer, television and film images are the product of mathematical expressions that transform all signs into something equivalent to their original form. The new media created using digital images “are neither visual, nor textual, nor musical—they are simulations” (Rodowick, 2007: 103).

Despite this process, photographic realism continues to be the holy grail of the digital image. However, this realism, which is celebrated in much of the discourse on the new media, has nothing to do with the need to capture and document events; instead, it is associated with the possibility of building new worlds with the same guarantees once offered by the analogue image. In other words, the digital image, using mathematical algorithms, explores the possibility of creating a multi-layered three-dimensional space with a high degree of simulation. As a result, in the process of image capture, the real world gives way to the virtual world. To understand this process, it is important to consider the concept of “cultural series” proposed by André Gaudreault (2008), when he explores how the new technologies related to digital imaging today effectively continue or extend certain pre-existing cultural subsystems. In view of this debate about the persistence of pre-existing cultural series, we need to question

how new this photographic realism of the digital age really is. From a theoretical perspective, we should be able to identify its essence in the “Frankensteinian” dream of creating living beings or in old myths such as the notion of a “total cinema” capable of creating other possible worlds, posited by René Barjavel (1944) back in the 1940s. To understand where we are and where we are going, we need to investigate the origins of the virtual image.

As Pierre Lévy (1995: 9) suggests, we are witnessing a

general movement of virtualization [that] has begun to affect not only the fields of information and communication but also our physical presence and economic activities, as well as the collective framework of sensibility and the exercise of intelligence. The process of virtualization has even affected our modalities of being together, the constitution of a collective “we” in the form of virtual communities, virtual corporations, virtual democracy [...].

In this process of collective virtualisation, images play a decisive role. As noted above, the digitalisation of cinema has positioned the medium in a new context of creation of virtual worlds that need to be defined, studied and analysed. However, to be able to identify where this virtualisation process has come from, we must always go back to the origins, to return to that moment described by Lev Manovich (2001: 19-26), when photography and analytical computing began exploring new possibilities.

There is a theoretical problem related to the concepts of virtual reality, augmented reality and (especially) *photorealism*. All these variations on the concept of reality raise a question that will be a key focus of the research process: why has the dream of the animated image turned into a desire to simulate a world whose traces were already captured by the analogue image? To be able to answer this question, we need first to recognise that the longing for cybernetic realism has never contradicted the ideal of classical cinema, based

on the association of the filmic image with the illusory figurative realism that has marked the history of representation in the Western world. The desire to make fiction realistic transformed the story into a double of the world that operated in accordance with its own diegetic laws and that ultimately became a completely autonomous entity whose specific importance resided in its referential value.

In essence, the aim is not a realism of what is represented but a realism of representation, in which the components of the real world function as signs, as elements located inside the space, based on what they represent for the construction of certain reality effects (Quintana, 2011: 106). This realism of representation also sets the boundaries defining the dream of simulation of new images. The objective of this kind of realism is to conquer an imaginary: it is not to imitate the coordinates of the real world, but to bring dreams to life, to create a world without limits that possesses its own plausible coherence. The photorealism of synthetic images is a way of locating the image of cyberspace, an image characterised by its instantaneous nature and its lack of physicality.

David N. Rodowick reminds us that digitally captured images do not create causality or photographic contingency; they only create an illusion. From the idea of image as trace or index, we have moved onto the idea of image as simulacrum. The captured image is immediately transcoded and converted into discrete, modular units (Rodowick, 2007: 10-11). This notion of image as simulacrum points directly to the conception of the image discussed above, as a creator of virtual worlds. How-

THE DIGITALISATION OF CINEMA HAS POSITIONED THE MEDIUM IN A NEW CONTEXT OF CREATION OF VIRTUAL WORLDS THAT NEED TO BE DEFINED, STUDIED AND ANALYSED

IN RECENT YEARS, DIGITALISATION HAS EXTENDED INTO EVERY SPHERE OF INFORMATION. WE NO LONGER KNOW WHETHER VIRTUALITY IS LIMITED TO THE MOST FANTASTICAL VIDEO GAMES OR WHETHER IT ALSO EXISTS IN THE WORLDS SHOWN TO US ON THE TELEVISION NEWS, WHICH CLAIM TO BE A REPRESENTATION OF REALITY BUT INVARIABLY AROUSE OUR SUSPICION

ever, to understand what these virtual worlds are, we first need to reflect theoretically on the concept of virtuality, and to trace a genealogy based on clear evidence to show that the virtual is not merely a contemporary notion but something with precedents in the past. This approach can be contextualised in the cinematic modernity described by Tom Gunning, which generates continuous cycles of construction and destruction.

To better understand the configuration of virtual worlds, it is essential to establish a precise definition for the term “virtual”, together with the idea of virtual reality. The popular meanings of both terms differ from their definitions in the field of philosophy and their subsequent adoption in computer science.

The word “virtual” is derived from the Latin *virtus*, which means “force”, “value” or “virtue”. In common parlance, virtuality is understood to refer to something illusory and imaginary. However, its etymology reflects a meaning closer to the notion of the possible. In philosophical terms, virtuality refers to potential existence, like the idea of a tree that can be recognised in a seed. But unlike potential, which points to something that will exist in the future, the virtual is present now in a real (albeit concealed, underground and inconspicuous) form. As Pierre Lévy (1995: 11) points out, “the virtual is not opposed to the real, but to the actual, as two ways of being different.” Lévy

finds his assertion on an idea posited by Gilles Deleuze (1968: 169-176) in *Différence et Répétition*, when he defines the virtual as a latent phantasmagorical reality. The possible is identical to the real, except that it lacks existence.

In the field of computer science, the idea of virtual reality is envisioned as the existence of a particular digital system that generates controlled, simulated worlds, such as video games, which provide contexts for exchange and communication between users in real time. Real or imaginary environments are simulated in three dimensions^¾width, height and depth^¾and executed by an individual controlling an interface for the simulated environment or through the use of a keyboard and mouse. The interaction with the virtual image offers the viewer the experience of feeling immersed in a space that is not physical but simulated. The user has the sensation of being in the virtual environment, being able to move around inside it and to handle all the objects present within it.

In recent years, digitalisation has extended into every sphere of information. We no longer know whether virtuality is limited to the most fantastical video games or whether it also exists in the worlds shown to us on the television news, which claim to be a representation of reality but invariably arouse our suspicion. The concept of post-truth is key to the definition of the relationship that audiences have with information in an era characterised by populism and manipulation in the political sphere. The complexity of the issues associated with the concept of “reality” in a world where the importance of truth has become blurred has led some authors, such as Paul Virilio (1988) and Jean Baudrillard (1995), to extend the concept of the “virtual” to include other realms of daily life, raising the question of the extent to which the idea of reality has been altered in the contemporary world.

Jean Baudrillard suggested that virtuality had transcended the relationship established with the

computer environment and taken root in society, and that this was beginning to affect human relations. In the mid-1990s, the French philosopher declared that reality had been examined through the execution of a perfect crime that paved the way for the rise of the virtual. For Baudrillard (1995), reality is a permanently staged world in which the proliferation of meaning has only served to create genuine illusions or *trompe-l'œil*, generating new experiences understood as the manifestation of a hyperreality that has supplanted sensory processes. As Josep Maria Català observes, although over the course of the 20th century the arts attempted to eradicate the myth of the mimetic image, with the development of anti-mimetic movements the scientific technological culture of images (film, television and video)

has been characterised by an increasing realism that has resulted in the consolidation of a virtual reality in which traditional realism reached its culmination, while at the same time initiating an inevitable decline that would give rise to new creative possibilities of a didactic nature. The image ceases to be mimetic and instead becomes profoundly pedagogical (Català, 2005: 73).

In the late 19th and early 20th century the specific term “virtual” did not exist; however, immersive images gave rise to the idea of creating images that could overcome death by creating parallel living systems, an idea that implied the resurgence of the mimetic. Over the course of history, the idea of substituting life has gone hand in hand with the creation of virtual spaces in which the viewer does not actually overcome death but travels to other possible worlds, different from our own. These immersive spaces have been developing with various degrees of success since the 19th century, but they have been essential to the emergence of a notion of travelling to other cognitive spheres marked by the different relationship that individuals have with today’s world.

From its inception, cinema was destined to expand beyond its own limits because in essence the

concept of virtuality was already present in many viewing devices created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To study how the virtual worlds of early cinema were created, it is therefore essential to consider the devices that created them and the places where they were produced. At the same time, it is also important to identify the aesthetic challenges that cinema took on, beyond the simple act of projecting moving images on a screen. In the early years of the medium, there were spectacles like Hale’s Tours, which simulated the movement of a mode of transport while projecting images of a journey, and the Mareorama, which offered a kind of immersive experience of travelling on a ship. All these innovations proposed aesthetic elements similar to those of cinema and that reflected a desire to virtualise experience. But they also created a particular type of audience: one that managed to find a correlation between the virtual experience offered by the spectacles and the new perceptual experiences created in real life, at a time when modernity was giving rise to major changes. The introduction of new modes of transport also gave rise to a new relationship with time and space, which was reflected in early films and their attempts to create new kinds of viewing attractions.

Identifying the connection between the virtual worlds³of both sight and sound⁴created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the technologies of today should not be limited merely to compiling a list of devices that reveal the precedents of virtuality; it should also involve a consideration of how technologies are being reused in contemporary society.

This issue of *L’Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* is subtitled *Immersive Cinema: Devices, Stories and Virtual Worlds* because the general theme of the issue reflects an obvious debate between the current application of the concepts of immersion and interaction³both of which are key to understanding the development of the emotional responses to the new diegetic worlds

formed by the images³ and the idea of rethinking the present of immersive images from a perspective far removed from the attitude of technological euphoria that views the innovations of the present as discoveries with no connection to the past. In Daniel Pitarch's interview with Tom Gunning, titled "The Changing Face of the Past", the film historian from the University of Chicago points out that the idea of finding "a kind of distant mirror" in the technological advances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is important because essentially it "involves that sense of wanting to be able to define an era."

On the other hand, Marcos Jiménez González uses one of the most familiar notions of Tom Gunning's theoretical work, the concept of the "cinema of attractions", to demonstrate the parallels between a film model of the past that eschewed storytelling in favour of generating an emotional impact and the approaches of the present day. In the article titled "Non-narrative Typologies: The Hermetic-Metaphoric Model and the Cinema of Attractions United by the Aesthetic Experience", Jiménez González shows how the phenomenon of the viewing attraction has manifested in different eras right up to the present, where "the absence of a narrative and the sensationalism of the images is the shared experience." If we want to understand immersive cinema, it seems obvious that we need to pay attention to this idea of attraction.

When taking a historiographic approach to immersive cinema it is important to analyse certain experimental and visionary practices located in what could be called the "pre-digital" era, when the immersion was the product of an analogue image and of experimentation with other forms that could enhance the experience of watching a film in a traditional cinema. In the 1920s, in the Weimar Republic, Erwin Piscator experimented with immersive systems through the integration of cinema with theatre. Ramón Girona and Carolina Martínez-López's article, titled "Erwin Pisca-

WHEN TAKING A HISTORIOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO IMMERSIVE CINEMA IT IS IMPORTANT TO ANALYSE CERTAIN EXPERIMENTAL AND VISIONARY PRACTICES LOCATED IN WHAT COULD BE CALLED THE "PRE-DIGITAL" ERA, WHEN THE IMMERSION WAS THE PRODUCT OF AN ANALOGUE IMAGE AND OF EXPERIMENTATION WITH OTHER FORMS THAT COULD ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE OF WATCHING A FILM IN A TRADITIONAL CINEMA

tor's Total Theatre as a Revolutionary Immersive Audiovisual Tool: The Paradigm of *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* (1927)", reveals how Piscator systematised the use of the film as a cohesive element, based on an ideal of total theatre that was profoundly linked to historical avant-garde movements and placed at the service of Marxist ideology. The evolution towards the "pre-digital" is also present in Alan Salvadó Romero's study of the age of electronic imaging, when video was the predominant technology. In his article, "Virtual Entry into a Landscape in the Pre-digital Age: From the Picturesque Journeys of the 19th Century to the Immersive Journey in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990)", Salvadó Romero considers Vincent van Gogh's paintings and Akira Kurosawa's filmmaking in an analysis of an episode from his film *Dreams* (1990) to explore the role played by virtuality in landscape historiography.

One of the big questions common to all the articles included here is how contemporary film and television facilitates forms of interaction between the audience and the narrative worlds of the story. To explore this issue, the authors of the various articles consider very different examples, ranging from the blockbusters of contemporary cinema to current series and cinematic virtual reality (CVR) (Bonilla & Galán Fajardo, 2020). In

all cases, the question of the role of the body and the problem of the emotional impact constitute key points for reflection. Marta Lopera-Mármol, Iván Pintor and Manel Jiménez analyse an interactive experience in a television series in the article “Choose Your Own Adventure: Immersive Audiences, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* as a Case Study.” The Netflix platform released an episode of the series *Black Mirror* that depends on a series of decisions to be made by the viewer in response to the story, altering the construction of the series by opening it up to non-linear narratives. On the other hand, in his article “Fiction as a Skylight: Self-Reference, Irony and Distance in *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021)”, José Antonio Palao analyses the final instalment in the *Matrix* saga after the original trilogy, based on the idea that *The Matrix* constitutes a key point of reference for reconsidering the evolution of film fiction towards the virtual and towards a redefinition of the filmic in the nascent digital culture. Through a textual analysis, the article examines how this latest instalment, released many years after the first three films, distances itself from its predecessors.

ONE OF THE BIG QUESTIONS COMMON TO ALL THE ARTICLES INCLUDED HERE IS HOW CONTEMPORARY FILM AND TELEVISION FACILITATES FORMS OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE AND THE NARRATIVE WORLDS OF THE STORY

Some years ago, the position of the film spectator was viewed as being halfway between the sleeping and waking worlds, trapped by the darkness of the movie theatre. Javier Luri explores other ways of viewing, contrasting the cinematic magic of the all-encompassing models already present in the 19th century in the form of panora-

mas and dioramas against contemporary immersive forms in 360-degree environments. His article, titled “The Spectator’s Seat: Movement and Body in Immersive Cinema”, reconsiders the position of the body and the impact that virtual environments generated by images have on it. Luri’s analysis shares some points in common with Cristina Ruiz-Poveda and Julia Sabina Gutiérrez’s article, titled “The Blurred Lines between Spectator and Character: Narrative Integration of the User in Cinematic Virtual Reality”, although rather than immersive sensations, this article focuses on Cinematic Virtual Reality (CVR) with the aim of studying the systems it uses to achieve narrative integration. The authors consider various examples of virtual reality models to draw some conclusions, as Javier Luri does in his article, about the place the spectator’s body occupies in relation to the images.

The articles featured in this issue of *L’Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos* foster a dialogue between past and present, while also establishing a connection with the research conducted by the Origins of Cinema Research Group (GROC) at Universitat de Girona, in a research project sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, titled “Virtual Worlds in Early Cinema: Aesthetics and Audiences” (PGC2018-096633-B-I00). This project was launched three years ago based on the idea that to understand the emergence of virtual worlds in our digital culture, we need to examine why and how some of the spectacles of the 19th century were already proposing certain forms of immersion, and that to understand how new three-dimensional forms of depth of field are created, it is also necessary to consider the emergence of stereoscopic pictures in parallel with the birth of photography, as well as the existence of 3D cinema in the 1910s. This research project has sought to demonstrate in various academic forums that from the outset cinema was destined to expand beyond its own limits. This issue complements the research with explorations

of immersive models of analogue culture, offering a full view and analysis of the pre-existence in past eras of the contemporary idea of immersive cinema and virtual reality. ■

NOTES

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IMMERSION AND INTERACTIVITY, A DREAM THAT BEGAN WITH EARLY CINEMA

Abstract

The present article explores the relationship between cinema and the production of virtual worlds. Following a historiographical analysis, which takes as a starting point the concepts of “virtuality” and “cultural series”, the following text proposes to analyze the current immersive strategies of the cinematographic medium in relation to the past ones. So that, this historiographical approach leads us to point out the existence of certain pre-digital practices which are based on the search for immersive experiences. The starting hypothesis is that the creation of virtual worlds was already present in the origins of cinema, which was born to expand beyond itself. In this sense, the advance of digital technology has served to promote the development and the creation of these virtual worlds, while it has turned them more complex by altering the relation among the image and its referent. The main goal of this text is to demonstrate that, beyond the technological revolution enabled by the digital's development, it is essential to understand the implications and the functioning of virtual worlds from the past in order to get to understand the immersive strategies of the virtual worlds from the present.

Key words

Early Cinema; Digital; Immersion; Virtual Worlds; Simulation.

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INMERSIÓN E INTERACTIVIDAD, UN SUEÑO QUE EMPIEZA CON EL CINE DE LOS ORÍGENES

Resumen

El presente artículo explora la relación entre el medio cinematográfico y la producción de mundos virtuales. A través de un análisis historiográfico, que toma como punto de partida los conceptos de «virtualidad» y de «series culturales», el siguiente texto propone analizar las estrategias inmersivas actuales del medio cinematográfico en vinculación con las del pasado. Así pues, esta perspectiva historiográfica nos lleva a señalar la presencia de determinadas prácticas pre-digitales que se fundamentan en la búsqueda de experiencias inmersivas. La hipótesis de partida es que la creación de mundos virtuales ya estaba presente en los orígenes del cine, que nació para expandirse más allá de sí mismo. En este sentido, el avance de la tecnología digital ha servido para impulsar el desarrollo y la creación de estos mundos virtuales, a la vez que los ha vuelto más complejos al alterar la relación entre la imagen y su referente. El principal objetivo del texto es demostrar que, más allá de la revolución tecnológica habilitada por el avance del digital, resulta fundamental entender las implicaciones y el funcionamiento de los mundos virtuales del pasado para poder llegar a comprender las estrategias inmersivas de los mundos virtuales del presente.

Palabras clave

Cine de los orígenes; Digital; Inmersión; Mundos virtuales; Simulación.

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INTRODUCTION

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NOTEBOOK

IMMERSIVE CINEMA: DEVICES, STORIES AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

IMMERSION AND INTERACTIVITY, A DREAM THAT BEGINS WITH EARLY CINEMA

Ángel Quintana, Daniel Pérez Pamies

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NON-NARRATIVE TYPOLOGIES: THE HERMETIC-METAPHORICAL MODE AND THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS UNITED BY AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE¹

MARCOS JIMÉNEZ GONZÁLEZ

TYPES OF (NON-)NARRATION

Cinema, now widely recognised as the most popular art form of the 20th century (López Iglesias, 2016), underwent major changes in the first years of its history (Gubern, 2016). The new medium introduced a language of moving images, which for some filmmakers was also the language of modernity, in the sense that it established a cosmopolitan means of communication (Lang, 1995) with a universal quality (Aumont *et al.*, 1985: 176; Truffaut, 2010: 39). It is necessary to return to this early period of cinema in order to investigate the origins of certain narrative techniques characteristic of those first years that have continued to be used in subsequent eras. Because many of these techniques were basically tests and experiments with the camera with none of the narrative logic of contemporary filmmaking, they warrant attention in the interests of analysing and assessing their influence on the present.

This early period covers the span of time from the birth of the medium (1895) to 1915, when the application of a narrative system became a common feature (Gaudreault, 2007). Noël Burch (1987) refers to these years as the period of primitive cinema, establishing a distinction between the non-narrative and narrative eras of filmmaking, reflected above all in the use of editing and the language of images. Various terms have traditionally been used to describe more or less the same period: what Burch calls primitive cinema, Gaudreault (2007) refers to as early cinema, avoiding the potentially negative connotations of Burch's term, although both terms refer to the same time range, from the creation of the medium in 1895 to the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). However, the evolution towards narrative film in these years was not simple or direct, nor did non-narrative elements merely disappear after 1915. Both this period and (especially) the decades that followed it are characterised by an

extraordinary degree of complexity, with an intermingling of the elements associated with each period, giving rise to movements and ideas that strongly influenced films produced in later years.

During this period, experimentation played a key role, especially in avant-garde cinema. And although the distinction between narrative and non-narrative cinema is quite clear, there are cases where the two approaches often converge (Aumont *et al.*, 1985), resulting in hybrids that combine continuity editing with experimental elements traditionally associated with those early years. We thus find that features of non-narrative cinema may sometimes appear in institutional productions (Gaudreault, 2007) and that rather than defining the two approaches as operating independently, they need to be understood as systems that converge and complement one another. This is probably the case because cinema by its very nature combines features of the visual arts with those of the narrative arts (Gubern, 2005), thereby establishing a constant dialogue between the two.

Burch's theory of modes of representation (1987) sheds substantial light on the distinctions between the two categories. However, as will be discussed here, Burch's model has also been criticised for ignoring the points of convergence mentioned above. The debate stems from the fact that the two different modes defined by Burch often overlap, and although the narrative mode predominates, it is always mixed with non-narrative elements that enrich the film's style.

The above reflects the fact that different cinematic modes are used today, irrespective of the historical periods they are normally associated with. This is equally true in the specific case of narrative: while Burch speaks of cinematic modes of representation, which he divides into the Primitive Mode of Representation (PMR) and the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR), Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault identify an opposition between the cinema of attractions and the cinema of narrative integration. However, the pa-

rallels between these concepts need to be analysed closely, as while the IMR is associated almost exclusively with narrative integration (both concepts refer to the classical narrative model consolidated during Hollywood's Golden Age, which adheres to the narrative logic that most viewers today are still used to), the PMR is not exactly synonymous with the cinema of attractions (Gunning, 2006), because the two models are often used to refer to different aspects of cinema. While modes of representation allude to the language of images, i.e., the formal and visual dimensions of the shot, the cinema of attractions is also associated with the transition from silent film to sound cinema and from black and white to colour, as well as the popularization of 3D cinema and the use of special effects.

ALTHOUGH THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN NARRATIVE AND NON-NARRATIVE CINEMA IS QUITE CLEAR, THERE ARE CASES WHERE THE TWO APPROACHES OFTEN CONVERGE [...]

It is therefore important to bear in mind that although the different modes are associated with a particular time and context, some of the phenomena characteristic of early cinema have also re-emerged in later years. For example, movements with experimental tendencies (such as the French New Wave or Dogma 95 in Denmark) invariably make use of non-narrative elements, as formal experimentation and the adoption of certain techniques constitute a kind of nostalgia for their use in primitive or avant-garde cinema. This is also the case more specifically of the cinema of attractions and its sporadic re-emergence in the form of new innovations, especially in relation to special effects (Marzal Felici, 1999).

This article explores certain elements that offer viewers an experience of narrative sus-

pension, which, although they involve different cinematographic techniques, may be similar in terms of their aesthetic effect or the fascination they elicit.² To this end, the article analyses the points of convergence between the cinema of attractions and modes of representation notable for their non-narrative features, in order to evaluate the possibility that the inclusion of non-narrative elements in a film may have a similar effect in the two cases. This analysis must necessarily begin with a description of the modes of representation themselves.

MODES OF REPRESENTATION

A good starting point for this analysis is Vicente Sánchez-Biosca's study of the avant-garde films made in Germany during the Weimar Republic. Based on his research, Sánchez-Biosca concluded that these films are marked by a complexity that effectively dissolves the barriers between what until then had been understood as two opposing modes of narration. This author thus identifies the existence of what he calls "fracture points" (Sánchez-Biosca, 1990: 33), where, as I have suggested above, the different modes converge.³ Contrary to the conclusions of other authors (Eisner, 1988; Kurtz, 2016), Sánchez-Biosca sees something positive in this ambiguity that makes the avant-garde cinema of the Weimar Republic one of the richest movements in film history (Sánchez-Biosca, 1985a). In addition to acknowledging the many different styles that were created in this context, notably including filmed theatre (*Kammerspielfilm*), the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), the culture film (*Kulturfilm*) and the mountain film (*Bergfilm*), he also posits three additional modes of representation that can be identified in the avant-garde cinema of this period, all of which are located in this intermediate position between the PMR and the IMR: hermetic-metaphorical mode, the narrative-transparent mode and the analytical-constructive mode.

The hermetic-metaphorical mode covers films whose plot and storyline are overshadowed by the setting, architecture or *mise-en-scène*, as the set design and other visual elements are given central importance at the expense of the narrative or story. This category includes films that took their inspiration from Expressionism or from the landmark film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920). In such films, the set and props are the main features, along with a few striking characters, which eclipse everything else (narration, editing, and story). One of the characteristic qualities of this mode is that each frame can be viewed metaphorically like a painting, i.e., it is meaningful on its own and takes attention away from the film's continuity. The narrative-transparent mode has much in common with the classical narrative model (the IMR) that ultimately came to dominate cinematographic language. Its essential features are cinematographic continuity, immersion in the story and other elements common to contemporary films that can be located within the parameters of the visual language familiar to most viewers. The analytical-constructive mode is another rarity in contemporary contexts, as it is characteristic of abstract or pure cinema and is based on the representation of fragmented shots, images and objects that come together to construct the composition. Both the hermetic-metaphorical and analytical-constructive modes are notable for their strictly non-narrative nature, although they are inevitably brought into dialogue with the narrative-transparent mode both in the films of the Weimar avant-garde and in contemporary films.

It is important to stress at this point that these distinctions between modes are theoretical categorisations being applied to practical phenomena, which means that while the categories established (including the PMR, the IMR and Sánchez-Biosca's alternative modes) may be described in "pure" terms, they will never be found on their own in real examples of films. Rather, there will always be



Above. Image 1. Still-frame from *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, Fritz Lang, 1921)

Below. Image 2. Painting: *The Monk by the Sea* (Caspar David Friedrich, 1808-1810)

a degree of the overlapping mentioned above, as even films representative of the golden age of the IMR contain features characteristic of the PMR.⁴ It is therefore more appropriate to speak of dominant modes, those that predominate in a given film, even when there are hints of other modes present. It is here that Sánchez-Biosca identifies the aforementioned “fracture points”, as although *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is one of the archetypal examples of the hermetic-metaphorical mode (Sánchez-Biosca,

1990), it tells a story that is coherent enough to be understood by viewers as a narrative. This film is particularly useful for explaining certain aspects of early cinema that would reappear from time to time in later years. Its importance can hardly be understated, as it came to be considered the first work of art on the big screen due to its extensive use of artistic elements, ranging from a script inspired by 19th-century Romantic literature to sets evocative of Expressionist painting. It is the striking set designs that constitute the film’s truly distinguishing feature, with bizarre shapes that fall somewhere between abstract and figurative art. These are unquestionably the heart of the film, as they offer metaphorical connotations that reflect the psychological processes of the characters. These kinds of sets are essential elements of the hermetic-metaphorical mode, as are the details in each shot, which Sánchez-Biosca (1990) describes as “minimal signifiers”, the use of self-contained shots and direct references to famous paintings. And although it was considered an Expressionist mode,⁵ largely due to the fact that Expressionism was a common feature of German cinema in the 1920s, such elements are in fact still observable in contemporary films.

Examples of self-contained shots and references to paintings that suspend the narrative dimension can be found in numerous films made during the Weimar period (Sánchez-Biosca, 1990), and in many films being made today. The best-known cases are in the films *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, Fritz Lang, 1921) and *Faust – A German Folktale* (*Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage*, F. W. Murnau, 1926), both of which are filled with references to the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Similar albeit less obvious allusions can also be found in *Die Nibelungen* (Fritz Lang, 1924).

Destiny includes a direct visual reference to *The Monk by the Sea* (Caspar David Friedrich, 1808-1810) [Images 1 and 2], while *Faust – A German Folktale* contains one to *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (Caspar David Friedrich, 1819-1820)

[Images 3 and 4]. The key aspect of shots of this kind is their self-contained nature as they reference a painting, and therefore the viewer's comprehension of them does not depend on the next or previous shot but solely and exclusively on the image shown at that moment. The metaphorical hermeticism described by Sánchez-Biosca is clearly evident in the Weimar period, but evidence of it can be identified in later eras, whenever the reference being made is clear and intentional.

Although it is an avant-garde approach associated with the early years of cinema, hermetic-metaphorical references would continue to form part of filmmaking practices and would have a big influence on the development of the medium. In the specific case of pictorial allusions and self-contained shots, one highly representative example can be found in a scene from *Viridiana* (Luis Buñuel, 1961) where the beggars are sitting at the dinner table in a faithful recreation of the painting *The Last Supper* (Leonardo da Vinci, 1495–1498) [Images 5 and 6]. The reference in this case is so obvious that the narrative continuity is inevitably suspended for two quite different reasons: first, through the explicit recreation of one of the most famous paintings in the history of art, resulting in an automatic break in the continuity similar to those described above; and second, through the introduction a break in the story itself because in the shot the characters are posing for a photograph. In other words, the image is not only a reference to a painting, but also a picture being taken in the story. The visual suspension is thus the result of both the pictorial reference and the narrative, as the characters stop the action to pose. The hermetic nature of this image is therefore iconic *and* narrative, as both the shot and the story refer to media whose codes for framing, construction and orientation of space are different from those of cinema.⁶

A similar case can be found in *The House That Jack Built* (Lars von Trier, 2018), where metaphorical hermeticism is used more extensively, and is



Above. Image 3. Still-frame from *Faust – A German Folktale* (*Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage*, F.W. Murnau, 1926)

Below. Image 4. Painting: *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (Caspar David Friedrich, 1819–1820)

perhaps also more surprising because it is a recent film, yet one that displays repeated narrative suspensions for the purpose of making metaphorical references to paintings mainly from the 19th century. Throughout the film, the traditional narrative mode is constantly interwoven with the hermetic-metaphorical mode. What makes this even

more anomalous is the fact that in contemporary films the most common way of suspending the narrative is through the use of special effects. The convergence of the two modes is evident in the dialogue between Jack and Virgil, in a direct reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, when they describe the murders committed by the protagonist, while static shots are alternated with images of recognisable paintings. Many of the works shown are by William Blake, such as *Nebuchadnezzar* (1795-1805) and some of the illustrations from *The Book of Urizen* (1794); others are *The Birth of Venus* (Sandro Botticelli, 1485-1486), *Head of a Woman* (Juan Gris, 1912) and *The Kiss* (Gustav Klimt, 1907-1908). The difference here from the image in *Viridiana* is that von Trier shows us the paintings themselves rather than depicting a recreation of them. However, the most powerful moment in terms of narrative suspension comes at the end of the film, when the director recreates *The Barque of Dante* (Eugène Delacroix, 1822), but this time using the protagonists with the same method as that of the other images (Images 7 and 8). This time it is not an image of the painting itself but a recreation of it, independent of the rest of the shots, lasting for just over thirty seconds and accompanied by music that begins and ends with the shot. This is an explicit representation in the hermetic-metaphorical mode because it not only refers to a painting but also extends over time and is totally independent of the rest of the narrative: a perfect example of the self-contained shot. In this sense, the constituent elements of the hermetic-metaphorical

mode are those that break with the transparent mode of narration (continuity editing), because their most inherent features are those shared with other art forms, such as painting in the case of the examples discussed here.

In addition to references to paintings, there are other strategies characteristic of avant-garde cinema that are still used in contemporary films. These are also worth highlighting for their capacity to convey ideas by means of the expressive force of images, offering extraordinary moments for the aesthetic experience by eliciting a particular response or sensation. These include the experimentation with shapes and lighting characteristic of Impressionist and Expressionist avant-garde

Above. Image 5. Still-frame from *Viridiana* (Luis Buñuel, 1961)
 Below. Image 6. Painting: *The Last Supper* (Leonardo da Vinci, 1495-1498)



cinema,⁷ which is an important feature of much contemporary film production.

Although many examples could be cited, the point of reference here will continue to be the innovations introduced in Germany during the period of the Weimar Republic, which, as reflected in the aesthetics of the set design for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* discussed above, sought to elicit a disturbing sensation resembling something like a hallucination or a nightmare. In addition to gloomy settings, certain camera techniques were also used to trigger this psychological effect. The types of shots employed also undermine the spectator's immersion in the story and distance the style from classical narration, as they introduce unusual iconic elements at given moments to produce a particular effect. This approach would give rise to the "flicker film" (see note 4) because although the shots have narrative connotations, they disrupt the spectator's experience of the images shown. These shots can be described as dynamic-distorted shots, as they are based on constant, convulsive movement of the distorted, superimposed figures displayed (Jiménez González, 2022). They are generally POV shots (Mitry, 1986) that depict a character's traumatic experience, and they can be found in numerous Weimar films, such as *Raskolnikow* (Robert Wiene, 1923), *The Last Laugh* (Der letzte Mann, F.W. Murnau, 1924), *Secrets of a Soul* (Geheimnisse einer Seele, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1926) and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). These types of shots are worth analysing because while they emerged out of the experimental period, as features of the "fracture points" that characterised the avant-garde era, they can still be found in contemporary cinema, albeit only in certain techniques and genres.

Throughout film history, shots like these have been used as a strategy to underscore a character's anguish or despair; in other words, they are still used to convey the same idea, but only at particular moments, much less often than in avant-garde films.⁸ In the case of the horror gen-



Above. Image 7. Still-frame from *The House That Jack Built* (Lars von Trier, 2018)

Below. Image 8. Painting: *The Barque of Dante* (Eugène Delacroix, 1822)

re, this strategy is still widely used and often in ways comparable to certain shots in avant-garde films. In the final scene of *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), for example, it is used in a similar way to its use in *Metropolis*, to depict hallucinations and nightmares. In both genres, it is used to reflect the anguish of characters who are haunted by faces in constant movement, superimposed over the scene [Images 9 and 10].

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE WITH THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

Like the narrative modes of the early years of cinema, elements of the cinema of attractions have re-emerged repeatedly in different periods of film history, for the purposes of narrative suspension.



Above. Image 9. Still-frame from *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976)
 Below. Image 10. Still-frame from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927)

A concept developed by Tom Gunning inspired by Einstein's notion of the montage of attractions (2004), the cinema of attractions refers to an essentially spectacular type of cinematic experience based on the astonishment that can be elicited by certain effects or images. It is a mode of cinematic experience that characterised the early years of cinema, the period that Gaudreault labels "early cinema" and that effectively coincides with Burch's "primitive" period, which can therefore be associated with the PMR. This mode of cinema depends on captivating the spectator, and its exhibitionist quality means that the elements displayed are not linked together by continuity editing. Gunning (2006) argues that this mode dominated the cinematic experience until at least 1907, at which point it began being combined with the first attempts at narrative cinema. Subsequently,

it would come to be associated with underground or avant-garde approaches. Nevertheless, although the cinema of attractions was certainly characteristic of the first years of the medium, it is a recurring phenomenon with multiple examples identifiable in different periods of film history (Elsaesser, 2011: 7), much like the convergence of different modes of representation.

It is fair to say that in those first years all film production could have been described as "cinema of attractions", as it was a new medium and the mere idea of watching moving images itself constituted a spectacle. This was enough in those early days because cinema had not yet been institutionalised and the spectator was still easily impressed, making any film a potential attraction.⁹ But the classification can be extended to include innovations that were similarly considered attractions at other particular points in time. In the transition from silent films to talkies, for example, the possibility of listening to dialogue in a film would have been viewed by spectators as an attraction, and the same would have been true of the first colour films and the introduction of 3D cinema. New film technologies have all enjoyed an initial period when the focus is on the use of the innovation itself rather than on questions related to immersion in the story being told. It is thus possible to speak of a period of attraction associated with each new innovation. An example of this is the relationship of action films with the cinema of attractions in relation to innovative special effects that have astonished and captivated viewers. *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) is one such case (Gaudreault, 2007: 25); another is *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999), whose special effects marked a turning point for productions of this kind, turning it into a clear benchmark for the action films of the new millennium (Strauven, 2006). From this perspective, the introduction of a new technology already constitutes a "cinema of attractions" period. Consider, for example, the use of 3D after the release of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), when

many filmmakers began embracing this technology, which was not new (Barnier, Kitsopanidou, 2015) but has experienced a resurgence and evolution since 2009 (Quiñones Triana, 2013).

The use of 3D is another phenomenon unrelated to narrative elements that temporarily dominated productions when it became popular, relegating other important features, such as continuity editing and storyline, to the background. In other words, certain innovations reintroduce a “cinema of attractions” period that lasts a few years before the innovation is abandoned or ceases to be predominate, as has already happened in the case of 3D. This also points to a connection with the non-narrative modes of representation analysed here, insofar as they offer viewers a similar experience. One of the characteristics that Sánchez-Biosca associates with the hermetic-metaphorical mode is that in addition to giving extraordinary prominence to individual images, it portrays characters who are so aesthetically absorbing that they undermine narrative continuity and immersion in the story (Sánchez-Biosca, 1985b). Sánchez-Biosca also refers to this phenomenon of attraction based on Eisenstein’s montage of attractions, which is associated with the circus spectacle (Sánchez-Biosca, 1991), although he makes no explicit reference to cinema of attractions as this is a new concept introduced more recently by other authors.

There are various elements that Eisenstein’s montage of attractions—or what is now referred to as the cinema of attractions in a broad sense (in terms of style and context)—shares with the avant-garde hermetic-metaphorical mode of re-

presentation discussed here. The most salient commonality is the effect of narrative suspension produced in both cases, based on the emphasis placed on minimum units, to paraphrase Sánchez-Biosca, who discusses the importance of these units in relation to both the hermetic-metaphorical mode (1990) and the montage of attractions (1991). These units are the minute, isolated signifiers that make up the shot. In the hermetic-metaphorical mode, they include set design, lighting, superimposed dynamic-distorted images, references to paintings, etc. In the cinema of attractions, they will also include visual and special effects. And although all these elements are very different, their composition as minimum units is similar: an outlandish set design is as much of an isolated element in the shot as a specific visual or digital effect.

Another important element that the two modes share is the use of self-contained shots. Directors working in both the cinema of attractions (Méliès) and the avant-garde (Wiene) used a type of static wide shot in which the important elements were not positioned in the middle of the shot but spread all around it. Sánchez-Biosca identifies this feature as essential for the hermetic-metaphorical mode and some theorists also attribute it to the cinema of attractions (Lacasa, 2010), suggesting that the avant-garde mode described by Sánchez-Biosca shares features with cinema of attractions. This means that the period associated with this mode, which has also been referred to as the avant-garde or Expressionist mode, was in a sense a cinema of attractions period.¹⁰ An illustration of this can be found in the

popularity of the outlandish set designs first used in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which after 1920 were used again in several films, giving rise to a *Caligarist* style. In these films, the sets appeared to take on the same meanings as in Wiene’s film but with a different effect. Wiene him-

AND ALTHOUGH ALL THESE ELEMENTS ARE VERY DIFFERENT, THEIR COMPOSITION AS MINIMUM UNITS IS SIMILAR: AN OUTLANDISH SET DESIGN IS AS MUCH OF AN ISOLATED ELEMENT IN THE SHOT AS A SPECIFIC VISUAL OR DIGITAL EFFECT

self attempted to do something similar in his next film, *Genuine* (1920), which was a commercial failure due its extremely poor execution (Eisner, 1988). Rudolf Kurtz, a critic in Weimar Germany, suggested that Wiene had adopted an Expressionist¹⁴ approach in *Genuine* due to the success of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, but that the sets, instead of constituting a compositional element, ended up becoming the content (Kurtz, 2016), thus turning the appeal of the set design into the film's central feature. Kurtz also argued that the film's failure signalled that the popularity of this set design aesthetic began and ended with *Caligari*. Nevertheless, the style would continue to be used until 1924, suggesting that the films that adopted it were capitalising on a success that gradually faded over time.

The intention behind studying this phenomenon is to assess the possibility that a stylistic feature that is essentially hermetic-metaphorical and therefore non-narrative may have constituted a moment of resurgence of the cinema of attractions, in the sense that the shock effect caused by the set designs initiated a period in film history characterised precisely by astonishing sets, contrasts of light and shadow, etc. Because they were so visually striking, these stylistic features were able to attract the viewer and elicit a response similar to that provoked by the cinema of attractions. In this way, the term “cinema of attractions” is assigned a broader meaning, to refer to cases when a new medium or a new cinematographic technology can produce an experience similar to that of watching sensational visual effects, given that both are characterised by the absence of narrative and the dramatic effect of the images. In this sense, the *Caligarist* period (1920-1924) constituted a resurgence of the cinema of attractions phase of primitive cinema (1895-1907), although this was only one of many occasions when this phenomenon has manifested itself over the course of film history in the 20th and early 21st century.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this comparative analysis has been to identify the presence of some non-narrative elements and to consider their similarities and differences in an effort to show that various features of the early or avant-garde period of cinema have continued down to the present day, re-emerging from time to time over the course of film history. This is an idea that is also suggested by Gómez Tarín (2004) in his discussion of the crises of the institutional mode.

This article thus highlights the idea that the categories discussed here, although normally placed in opposition to one another (narrative cinema/non-narrative cinema, hermetic-metaphorical mode/narrative-transparent mode, cinema of attractions/cinema of narrative integration), are not mutually exclusive but interconnected by what is described here as points of convergence. The films described in this article will thus always oscillate between one mode and the other, and contemporary cases identified as “cinema of attractions” will in fact exhibit isolated moments of this phenomenon, always with a basic narrative approach.

The cyclical nature of the cinema of attractions has been considered in a number of previous studies (Marzal Felici, 1999), mainly in relation to action films that feature innovative and captivating special effects whose impact on viewers is so powerful that they undermine their ability to keep their attention focused on the narrative continuity. Much less common are studies that explore the features of the hermetic-metaphorical mode posited by Sánchez-Biosca, who identifies this mode with the narrative films of the Weimar Republic. However, as shown in this article, certain features of this mode—such as its use of pictorial references and its centripetal dynamics—can also be found in more recent and even contemporary experimental films, such as *The House that Jack Built*. These features can be found by obser-

ving specific non-narrative moments that create an experience in which aesthetic sensations (like the sublime) take the foreground at the expense of the storyline.¹² To paraphrase Kant, this produces a confusion between reason and imagination, where reason refers to the film's narrative continuity and confusion to the isolated elements that suspend that narrative continuity and elicit an aesthetic response that is far from common in the institutional narrative system. This is precisely the connection that this analysis has sought to establish between the hermetic-metaphorical mode and the cinema of attractions: the presence of non-narrative elements in both these cinematic modes and the similar experience of spectators when they are confronted with something captivating on the screen, whether it is a special effect or a stunning set design. ■

NOTES

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- 2 This assertion is founded on the fact that the different parts that comprise a film can elicit similar aesthetic responses in the viewer, who can experience the sublime or the beautiful due to a special (technological) effect or an element of the shot related more directly to the style.
- 3 This is one of the criticisms that Sánchez-Biosca makes of Burch, as he understands Burch's definition of the two modes (the PMR and the IMR) as antithetical, when in reality they are in constant dialogue, especially in an avant-garde era such as the 1920s.
- 4 An example of this is the so-called "flicker film", which can be defined as an essentially narrative film with occasional moments of narrative suspension (Aumont *et al.*, 1985).
- 5 André Bazin (1967: 31) refers to silent films based on "the plastics of the image and the artifices of montage" as "expressionistic" or "symbolistic" films. Along the same lines, he uses the term "expressionism of montage" for films that gave special importance to images and effects, before the full development of the narrative transparency that sound films would achieve and that would reach its peak during the 1940s in the United States and France (1967: 26).
- 6 In relation to the difference between these art forms, it is worth recalling André Bazin's (1967: 166) assertion that "the picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal." Similarly, Sánchez-Biosca attributes a "centripetal" tendency to the hermetic-metaphorical system (1990: 62), suggesting that the essence of this mode leans away from cinema and towards painting.
- 7 Some camera effects, such as the superimposition of images to create fantasy atmospheres, for example, were used equally in both types of filmmaking (what was referred to as "subjective cinema"). As was the case in painting, the difference may lie in the sensations elicited. In French Impressionist cinema, superimposition was used to inspire a sensation of illusion and fantasy, while in German Expressionist cinema it was employed to enhance depictions of hallucinations and nightmares.
- 8 Although this article examines avant-garde techniques still being used in contemporary cinema, it is important to note that these represent only a very small proportion of the techniques used in the avant-garde era; what remains of the avant-garde are minimal vestiges, because cinematic techniques are very different in our era.

- 9 This was a period of crisis, when cinema underwent multiple transformations over the course of just a few years. Altman (1996), whose analysis of the period characterises these changes as substantial, posits crisis models (the nickelodeon crisis and the sound crisis) as starting points for an analysis of the concept of cinema, arguing that these models can effectively explain film history. He draws analogies with a river (in constant crisis) and a pond (stable), to stress that film history is better understood if we begin with the idea of cinema as a river, i.e., if its full breadth and capacity for constant transformation are taken into account.
- 10 In the blog *Historia del cine*, García (2013) mentions that a characteristic of the hermetic-metaphorical mode is that “as was the case with Meliès, the aim is to have an impact on the spectator.”
- 11 In Kurtz’s use of the terms, Expressionist is synonymous with *Caligari*st.
- 12 It is important to consider this aesthetic category because it is typical of many of the moments of action in films that could be placed in the category of the cinema of attractions. The sensation of the sublime would be the predominant response to most of the images of explosions found in this type of cinema, as well as in other special effects, if we define the sublime as a feeling that undermines the instantaneous experience, shocking the individual who experiences it and producing what Kant called “a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination’s inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason” (Kant, 1987: 114-115).

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NON-NARRATIVE TYPOLOGIES: THE HERMETIC-METAPHORICAL MODE AND THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS UNITED BY AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Since its inception, cinema has clearly had a language of its own, which has changed with the development of new technologies and artistic movements. It is thus a medium in constant evolution, both in terms of its narrative pacing and the meaning inherent in its images. From this perspective, this article attempts to identify the main differences between cinematic modes of representation, beginning with the classical distinction between narrative and non-narrative cinema, to highlight the elements shared by certain filmmaking techniques involving the suspension of the narration. Specifically, an analysis is offered of the hermetic-metaphorical mode developed by Sánchez-Biosca to describe the Expressionist-*Caligari* mode, relating it to the concept of the cinema of attractions proposed by Tom Gunning. While taking into account that these concepts are different in form and context, the analysis reveals certain points of convergence between them, suggesting a potential commonality between hermetic-metaphorical shot compositions and the cinema of attractions in terms of the aesthetic experience they provide, where the shock caused by a new technological special effect is similar to that caused by a visual stylistic element, such as repeated references to famous paintings or the use of eerie set designs.

Key words

Film theory; Cinema aesthetics; History of cinema; cinematographic language; representation models; Cinema of attractions; Hermetic-metaphorical model.

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TIPOLOGÍAS NO NARRATIVAS: EL MODELO HERMÉTICO-METAFÓRICO Y LA CINEMATOGRAFÍA DE ATRACCIONES UNIDOS POR LA EXPERIENCIA ESTÉTICA

Resumen

Desde su nacimiento, el medio cinematográfico ha demostrado tener un lenguaje propio que ha cambiado mediante el desarrollo de nuevas técnicas y corrientes artísticas. Está, por eso, en constante evolución, tanto en el ritmo narrativo como en el propio significado de las imágenes. Bajo esta perspectiva, el presente artículo pretende vislumbrar las principales diferencias entre los modos de representación, partiendo de la clásica distinción entre cine narrativo y no narrativo, para subrayar los elementos compartidos por algunos fenómenos audiovisuales que suspenden la narración. Así, se analiza el modelo hermético-metafórico, desarrollado por Sánchez-Biosca para describir el modelo expresionista-caligari, relacionándolo con el considerado cine de atracciones, término acuñado por Tom Gunning. Teniendo en cuenta que se trata de fenómenos diferentes en forma y contexto, se observan algunas confluencias entre ellos, llegando a la conclusión de que los planos hermético-metafóricos pueden confluír con la atracción en la experiencia estética, donde el shock causado por un nuevo efecto técnico y especial coincide con el que provoca un elemento visual y estilístico, como pueden ser las referencias continuas a la pintura o la muestra de decorados siniestros.

Palabras clave

Teoría del cine; estética del cine; historia del cine; lenguaje cinematográfico; modelos de representación; cinematografía de atracciones; modelo hermético-metafórico.

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ERWIN PISCATOR'S TOTAL THEATRE AS A REVOLUTIONARY IMMERSIVE AUDIOVISUAL TOOL: THE PARADIGM OF HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

CAROLINA MARTÍNEZ-LÓPEZ

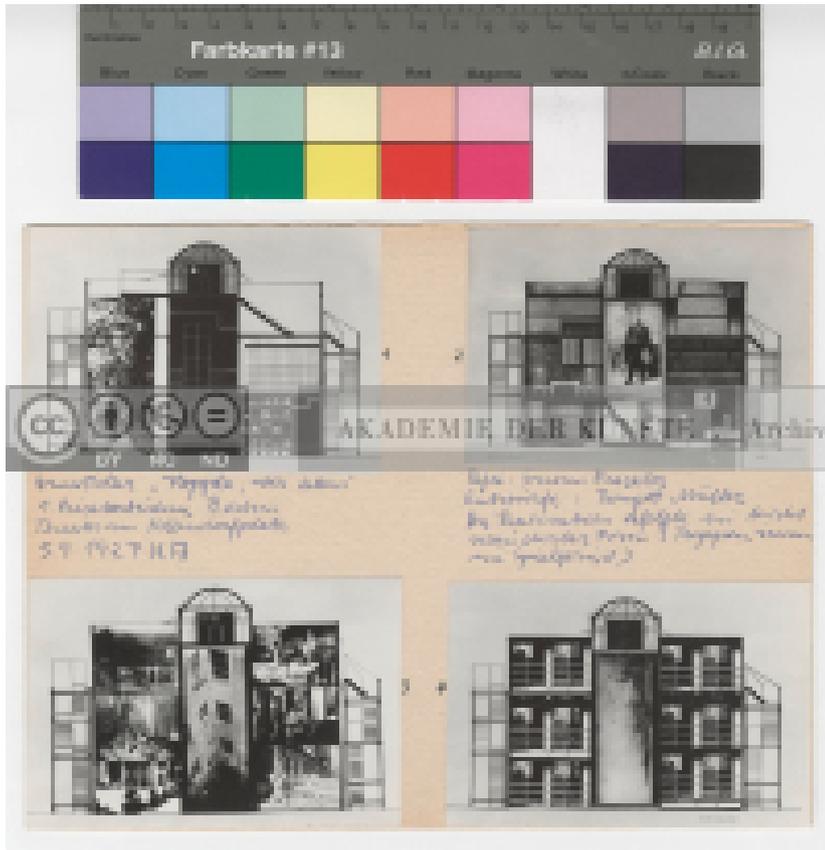
RAMON GIRONA

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEATRE AND FILM

This article explores the immersive dimension of the increasingly fashionable dialogue between theatre and film.¹ Contrary to common assumptions, this dialogue is not a new phenomenon, but one that can be traced back to the very origins of cinema, when the real world of the stage and the magical world of film began to collide in projects such as the road movie *Le Raid Paris-Monte Carlo en Deux Heures* [From Paris to Monte Carlo in Two Hours] (1904), which Georges Méliès made for the Folies-Bergère cabaret to insert into one of its shows, creating an almost alchemical chemistry between the action on screen and what was happening on stage (Gieseckam, 2007). This dialogue has continued right down to the present day in the form of all kinds of experiments incorporating the techniques and technologies of each era, including video and contemporary multimedia art,

not only in experimental productions but also in mainstream and institutional theatre.

The first significant moment in this relationship (Picon-Vallin, 1998) would take place in the 1920s in the newly established Soviet Union and in the Weimar Republic, two specific socio-political contexts that reflected a new world, whereby the use of the cinematic image in theatre and its immersive potential took on a revolutionary dimension. Before Erwin Piscator's use of the technique in Germany, it had already been experimented with in the USSR in Sergei Tretyakov's adaptation of *На всякого мудреца довольно простоты* [Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man] (Aleksandr Ostrovsky, 1868), directed by Sergei Eisenstein—who included his first short film, *Дневник Глумова* [Glumov's Diary] (1923), in the production—and *Земля дыбом* [The Turbulent Earth] (Tretyakov, 1923), directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold. A couple of years later, with *Trotz alledem!* [Despite All That!] (Felix Gasbarra and



Piscator's work plan for *Hoppla, We're Alive!* (1927), based on Traugott Müller's stage design. Original in Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Online: <https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/1820727>. Creative Commons

Piscator, 1925), the German director would begin introducing moving pictures into his work. However, while Meyerhold (2008) would defend totality, the active participation of spectators and the extension of the performative space against Soviet socialist realism to the very end, it was Piscator who would systematise the use of film as a cohesive element in an ideal of total theatre that was immersive (before the concept as such existed), profoundly connected to historical avant-garde movements and placed at the service of Marxist ideology. This would make him an important link in the chain running from the birth of cinema right down to contemporary work by creators of political and documentary theatre, such as Brazil's Christiane Jatahy or Switzerland's Milo Rau, who continue to use video and

cinema in their productions with the aim of promoting political transformation. In his ambitious project, Piscator would have the support of the architect Walter Gropius, who would design a Total Theatre (1927) for him in accordance with his expectations. Although the project would never actually be completed due to budgetary, technical and political obstacles, the director would implement many of its elements, which would go onto become key components of modern and contemporary theatre, in his Piscator-Bühne² (Piscator Theatre). His first production to include such elements was *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* [*Hoppla, We're Alive!*]³ (Ernst Toller, 1927), which is analysed here as a paradigm of the Piscatorian dispositive.⁴

TO BUILD WITH LIGHT: GROPIUS'S UTOPIAN PROJECT FOR PISCATOR

The interwar period was a productive time for the proposal of stage designs that sought to meet the needs of a new approach to theatre that reflected the socio-political reality of the 20th century, an approach that could overcome the great crisis of late-19th-century bourgeois drama (Szondi, 2011) and compete with the nascent film industry, but without eschewing cinema. Most of these proposals were associated with the various historical avant-garde movements that viewed theatre as the ideal catalyst for the new artistic techniques and trends, but also as a tool of ideological dissemination.⁵ Models and plans for these designs were displayed at the first international theatre exhibitions—such as the International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques in Vienna (1924)—reflecting this questioning of the techniques, art and politics of theatre.

These utopian experiences could be described as the product of a collective investigation conducted across Europe, as they all shared a desire to overcome the physical and psychological limitations of the human being, representing a new, global way of relating to the world (Prieto, 2021). The terminology of totality that would ultimately be developed to define these experiences would be provided by László Moholy-Nagy with his notion of “*Theater der Totalität*” [Theatre of Totality]⁶ and “*Gesamtbühnenaktion*” [Total Stage Action] (1924: 48, 52), which he saw as an active combination of technology, machinery and socialism. Despite the fact that none of these projects would come to fruition,⁷ they would have a decisive influence on the introduction of technical innovations to the stage, given the vital importance of the new uses of lighting, time and movement—constituent elements of cinema—that gave rise to a new theatrical architecture.

Gropius’s proposal of a Total Theatre (1927)⁸ for Piscator is paradigmatic because it combined the earlier conceptions of this idea and would be built upon in innovative projects such as those of Barkhin and Vakhtangov (1930-1932) for Meyerhold’s Sohn Theatre in the Soviet Union, or Gaetano Ciocca’s projects in Italy for a Fascist theatre for the masses. Although Piscator’s notion of total theatre was not consolidated until he began working with Gropius and founded the Piscator-Bühne, the seeds of the idea had already been present since his work with the Proletarian Theatre on *Russlands Tag* [Russia’s Day] (Lajos Barta, 1920). He dreamed of scaffolds, mechanical devices, rotating platforms and multiple levels that would allow him to show different scenes simultaneously, and the use of film projections that could be combined with still photos, newspaper cuttings and other information to expand the historical and documentary narrative, enriching or subverting the action in a dialectical approach. Everything would be functional, neutral and industrial and would be triggered by the projec-

PISCATOR SYSTEMATISED THE USE OF FILM AS A COHESIVE ELEMENT IN AN IDEAL OF TOTAL THEATRE THAT WAS IMMERSIVE (BEFORE THE CONCEPT AS SUCH EXISTED), PROFOUNDLY CONNECTED TO HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENTS AND PLACED AT THE SERVICE OF MARXIST IDEOLOGY

tions (on multiple changing surfaces), facilitating a fluid relationship between audience and stage. His idea was to create “an apparatus that would incorporate the latest lighting, the latest sliding and revolving scenery, both vertical and horizontal, numerous projection boxes, loudspeakers everywhere, etc. For this reason I really needed a new building” (Piscator, 1978: 179). Following his instructions, Gropius designed a building that would represent the synthesis of stage art and technology to perfection, with the aim of mobilising the masses. It was an oval-shaped theatre with twelve columns (Gropius quoted in Piscator, 1978: 181-183), architecturally based on the figures of the ellipse and the circumference, so that the stage could be adapted to three basic theatre models (the proscenium stage, the arena stage and the thrust stage), and so that the entire audience (around 2,000 spectators), positioned concentrically around the ellipse (which could rotate like a moving panorama), would be able to enjoy the same acoustic and visual conditions, ensuring the spectator’s immersion in the action and preventing any separation between the real and fictitious worlds. The architect proposed projections all over the space, including the walls and ceiling,⁹ with the installation of screens and projectors just as Piscator had envisioned, in order to “build with light” (Gropius, qtd. in Piscator, 1978: 183). To this end, in a second stage of the project the architect Stefan Sebök would add a latticed metal dome (inspired by the first planetarium, designed

by Walther Bauersfeld, in 1922) that would allow overhead and perimeter projections using a cyclorama in the form of roll-up screens between the pillars supporting the dome, “so that the spectator can find himself in the middle of a raging sea or at the center of converging crowds” (Gropius qtd. in Piscator, 1978: 183). In this way, the flat surface of the film projection would be “superseded by the projection space.” And as a result, the real space of the spectator, neutralised by the removal of the light, “filled with illusions created by the projectors, itself becomes the scene of events” (ibid.), abandoning the one-way view of cinema and theatre of the era. To complete the idea of totality and the organic relationship between the stage action inside and society in the street outside, the façade of the theatre would be made of glass.

PISCATOR’S CINEMATIC THEATRE, A NEW THEATRE FOR A NEW HUMAN BEING

Although Gropius’s design could not be built, with his Piscator-Bühne the director was able to put many of the ideas of total theatre into practice at the service of revolutionary ideology, which he had already been testing since his time with the Proletarian Theatre (1920- 1921), and especially since the production of *Fahnen* [Flags] (Alfons Paquet, 1924), at the Volksbühne in Berlin.

From the outset, Piscator (1978) became aware that a theatre was not political merely because of the topic addressed. As Lehmann (2016) would point out a century later, and “in contrast to the dictatorial principles of the normal run of theatres” (Piscator, 1978: 195), a horizontal approach to production, creation and reception was also needed. The transformation therefore involved a change to the space, but also to the ways of doing plays (in conjunction with film) to break the boundaries of the stage and reach the masses, altering reality and the human being’s role in it. This required the development of a new theatre art, which in addition to being created collec-

tively,¹⁰ needed to express the Marxist mission and turn the auditorium into a “party meeting hall” (Piscator, 1978: 343) where the audience, in a communal experience, would see their reality reflected and react to it. The First World War and the various revolutions of the period had changed humankind, and so the new theatre art had to change its perspective and address a new collective self: the masses, driven by new laws yet to be formulated. Individuals would be transformed into types, and heroes depicted in their social role, in contrast to bourgeois theatre. This was the birth of what would be known as “epic theatre”, later consolidated by Brecht, in which this new human being had to be represented (in a non-cathartic way) by a combination of professional and amateur actors—generally proletarian workers—who shared the ideology of the play and effectively merged with it. The scripts became multiple dialogues of materials, to which the film and sound effects were added, in a staging style that advocated a new “expanded” concept (Sánchez, 2011) of theatre that would really begin to gain currency in the 1960s, and that would become standard practice in so-called “documentary theatre” (Weiss, 2017).

In this revolutionary theatre—where the director is merely another member of the team behind the dispositive—all the elements will be interrelated dialectically in order “to take reality as its point of departure and to magnify the social discrepancy, making it an element of our indictment, our revolt, our new order” (Piscator, 1978: 188), with film as its organic unifier. Kra-

ALTHOUGH GROPIUS’S DESIGN COULD NOT BE BUILT, WITH HIS PISCATOR-BÜHNE THE DIRECTOR WAS ABLE TO PUT MANY OF THE IDEAS OF TOTAL THEATRE INTO PRACTICE AT THE SERVICE OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY

nich (1929/1933) explains that in the first decade of the 20th century the Hamburg and Stuttgart opera houses already had projection systems, as did some comedy and variety theatres, and by the 1920s, around 15 theatres in Germany had them, although they were used mainly as a spectacle. Piscator would be the first director to systematise the use of film in theatre, justifying it on the basis of his plays' content and objective (both of which were always revolutionary). Although he himself explained that in his theatre period in Königsberg (1919-1920) he had already conceived of the transformation of the stage through film in general terms (Piscator, 1978: 97), it would not be until *Despite All That!* that he would fully incorporate it into his work.

HOPPLA, WE'RE ALIVE! AS AN IMMERSIVE DISPOSITIVE FOR THE MASSES

In search of a new venue where he would be able to make his political theatre a reality, Piscator and his team moved to the Neues Schauspielhaus theatre on Nollendorfplatz, to which they added a new projection box in order to project films from behind the stage with four projectors simultaneously, turning it into Piscator-Bühne's first home. The venue's inaugural play, on 3 September 1927, would be *Hoppla, We're Alive!* by Ernst Toller. This piece was chosen by Piscator after he failed in his efforts to get another author, Wilhelm Herzog, to provide him with an original script that was to be written specifically for their debut in the new building. In both Herzog's unrealised proposal and in Toller's play, what the director was looking for was material that would allow him to analyse the essence of Germany's November Revolution, "to show all the factors involved in its rise and fall" (Piscator, 1978: 206).

Toller's play begins in a prison, after the failure of the German revolution, were the protagonist, Karl Thomas, shares a large cell with a group of revolutionaries: Eva Berg, Albert Kroll, Frau Meller

and Wilhelm Kilmann, all of whom, like Thomas himself, are condemned to death. However, they are all pardoned at the last moment by the new government of the Weimar Republic. The tension of this experience results in a mental breakdown for Karl, who is committed to an insane asylum where he will remain for the following eight years, from 1919 to 1927. When he is released he visits Kilmann, now the finance minister in the Weimar government. In his new position of power Kilmann treats Karl dismissively, telling him that times have changed and the revolution is a thing of the past. He also meets up with Eva Berg, Albert Kroll and Frau Meller, who still believe in the revolutionary cause. The flame of revolution has not gone out, Eva tells Karl in response to his defeatist attitude; it is merely burning in a different way. When Frau Meller gets him a job as a bellboy at the Grand Hotel, Karl is confronted with the changing world, symbolised by the radio tower on top of the hotel. For Karl, the tower is an unfathomable sight, as he has spent the past eight years cut off from the world and its many changes. Now he can bear witness as the radio station segues from the flawless transmission of an orchestra playing jazz live from the Hotel Mena House in Cairo to a news report on the flooding of the banks of the Mississippi. While working in the hotel, Karl bumps again into Kilmann, who on meeting him in public pretends not to know him. Karl then decides to kill him, but just when he is about to shoot, a student protester beats him to it. He chases the killer and fires his gun at him, but the student manages to escape. Finally, Karl is captured by the police and charged with Kilmann's murder. Unable to prove his innocence, he ends up in prison, where once again he meets up with Eva Berg, Albert Kroll and Frau Meller, this time all in separate cells. Still firm in their convictions, they try to convince Karl of the worthiness of their cause, but Karl, now desperate, unable to make sense of this new world and lacking the revolutionary spirit of his prison mates, decides to hang himself.

Toller's play has several points in common with his own life. He also participated actively in the revolutionary uprisings of 1919 and was sentenced by the Bavarian government, in his case to five years in prison. And upon his release he no doubt felt much of the same disillusionment experienced by Karl Thomas upon his discharge from the asylum. However, unlike the protagonist in his play, Toller made use of his time in prison to build a reputation as a playwright (Benson, 1984). The similarities between Toller and the character he created would have a dramatic coda, as Toller would end up committing suicide after settling in the United States. In acknowledgement of his passing, Piscator would dedicate the play to "My friend Toller" (Piscator, 1978: 334).

This personal dimension of the play is what Piscator seemed to detect and criticise as contrary to his purposes: "the documentary material was overlaid with poetic lyricism, as was always the case in Toller's work" (1978: 207). Between Herzog's proposal—a mere succession of documentary data with no drama or plot, according to Piscator—and Toller's excessively personal play, the director seemed to be looking for a middle ground that would reconcile the two extremes, a formula that would support his aim "to derive the fate of the individual from general historical factors" (1978: 211). The age of the self was over, Piscator argued, and this was as true for a play's authorship—the end of the lone, omnipotent creator—as it was for a play's storyline. "His [Toller's] formative years lay within the period of Expressionism," observed Piscator (1978: 210). As Lorang (1987) points out, beyond the personal elements he detected in *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, Piscator was critical of both naturalism and Expressionism. Naturalist plays, Piscator believed, "are no more than clichés [...] poor photographs taken by bourgeois amateurs," while in Expressions he identified "above all a lack of symbolic precision, the manifestation of a repressed psyche in people still clinging to the coattails of capitalism" (Lorang, 1987: 154).

Nevertheless, as noted above, in *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* Piscator saw the possibility of representing the social character of an era, if the storyline, excessively focused on the self of the protagonist, could be restructured. Thus, rejecting both naturalism and Expressionism and aspiring to turn theatre (the art form) into a tool to educate the proletariat,¹¹ Piscator—together with the stage designers Traugott Müller and Julius Richter—proposed various stage design solutions that would preserve the plot of Toller's play but position it in a context that could transcend the protagonist's particular experience. These strategies included the use of film—which was already hinted at in Toller's script, as will be discussed below—but also an arrangement of the stage that broke with traditional theatre.

The staging for *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* reflects the *Zweckbau* principle of stage design, the aforementioned purpose-built construction that he had previously attempted with Gropius, in opposition to traditional set construction (Loup, 1972: 70). Piscator wrote that for *Hoppla, We Are Alive!* he wanted the construction of the set to reflect the construction of the plot: "Toller had managed to hint at a cross-section of society in the choice and grouping of the settings. We had come up with a stage-set that would display this cross section and lend it precision" (1978: 210). The result was an arrangement of scaffolds with various levels, resembling the cross-section of a building still under construction. A central room with a high ceiling, similar to an elevator shaft, was connected on each side to three units that represented other rectangular spaces, resulting in a total of seven areas that could be present seven scenes performed simultaneously or in an alternating, juxtaposed way. The central room was crowned with a dome, where the radio station in the Grand Hotel scene was located (Loup, 1972).

The aim to transcend the traditional proscenium stage thus found one of its structural, expressive, and even ideological solutions in this



Hoppla, We're Alive! (1927). Act V, scene I (prison). Photo: Sasha Stone. Original in Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der FU Berlin. Online: <https://wikis.fu-berlin.de/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=719885707>. Creative Commons

architecture; however, as noted above, this aim also involved the use of film images and sound as essential components.

Piscator (1978: 236-240) defined the functions of cinema very precisely in *Rasputin, die Romanovs, der Krieg und das Volke, das gegen sie aufstand* [Rasputin, the Romanovs, the War and the People Who Rose Against Them] (Aleksey Tolstoy and P. Schtschezolev, 1927), the theatrical production he directed immediately after *Hoppla, We're Alive!* However, even in *Hoppla*, moving pictures served the function of transporting the protagonists—and with them, the audience—beyond the rectangle of the stage. And just as he did in *Rasputin*, in *Hoppla* Piscator attempted to transport the

audience by means of three types of film footage, each of which served a specific function.¹²

The first function involved filming a series of scenes specifically for the play. Thus, “the forecourt, the open-air storage area, even the street in front of the Theater am Nollendorfplatz were the scene of shooting for two whole weeks” (Piscator, 1978: 212). The aim of this footage was to provide a physical extension to what was happening on the stage, like a kind of continuity editing—in the sense of the purpose that this type of editing is given in classical cinema. This interplay between stage performance and film was intended to break the boundaries of the theatrical rectangle, to transport the actor playing the role, and

the audience with him, literally beyond the limits of the space established by traditional theatre. An example of this practice can be found in the moment when Karl, now cured, is about to leave the asylum. On the stage, Karl is interviewed by Dr. Lüdin, before being discharged. The theatre critic Paul Fechter, who attended the play's première, describes how the interview ends, establishing the connection between the live performance on the stage and the filmed segment: "Karl puts his hat on and leaves. The frontal screen comes down quickly [occupying the stage] and Karl appears in the film [projected onto the screen] walking down winding streets" (Loup, 1972: 198-199). In Toller's script, this cinematic interlude following Karl's departure from the asylum, which needed to illustrate the protagonist's shock at the sight of the big city and its technological advances, was supposed to be expressed in a series of images: "Big city in 1927/Trams/Motorcars/Metro/Aeroplanes" (Toller, 2019: 28). In Piscator's notebook, next to these references there is a handwritten note, "Postdamer Platz" (Piscator, 1927), one of the most emblematic public squares in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s, an icon of modernity that leaves Karl in shock.¹³

The second function of film in the play involved the production of a series of abstract film sequences: "in place of music in sound there was to be 'music in movement.' At the point where Thomas is talking about the conception of time represented by eight years, a black surface was to dissolve in rapid succession into lines and then into squares (ciphers for days, hours and minutes), thus expressing his conceptions." However, according to Piscator himself, lack of time prevented him from putting this film interlude together (1978: 212).

The third function was to turn film into the essential means of connecting the human being—Karl, in this specific example—to history and its evolution. According to Piscator: "There is one particular point where the film has an even greater

measure of dramatic and functional significance: this comes at the dramatic fulcrum of the play, and touches on the central idea: the impact of today's world on a man who has spent eight years isolated behind bars. Nine years have to be shown with all their terror, stupidity and triviality. Some conception of the enormities of the period has to be given. The impact will not register with its full force unless the audience sees the yawning chasm. No medium other than film is in a position to let eight interminable years roll by in the course of seven minutes" (1978: 211-212). In the cinematic segment included at this moment, the following film excerpts were shown:

On screen, scenes from the years 1919-1927, intercut with shots of Karl Thomas in his hospital gown, walking up and down in an asylum cell. / 1919 – Treaty of Versailles/ 1920– Wall Street bombing in New York. Men go mad. / 1921 – Fascism in Italy / 1922 – Famine in Vienna. Men go mad. / 1923 – Inflation in Germany. Men go mad. / 1924 – Death of Lenin in Russia. Intercut with the newspaper headline: "Frau Luise Thomas died tonight." / 1925 – Gandhi in India / 1926 – Conflicts in China. Conference of European heads of state. / 1927 – A clock face. The hands turn. First slowly... then more and more quickly. / Noise: clock (Toller, 2019: 23).

Based on these three ways of using film footage in Toller's play, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the objective of totality that underpinned Piscator's theatre project clearly entailed a subversion of the traditional space of the stage, with the erasure of its boundaries. Film would become a key element of this endeavour. Karl's discharge from the asylum offers a good illustration of this objective, as described above. But breaking through the physical boundaries of the theatrical space was not enough. Piscator also tried (using a technique that was surprisingly close to the Expressionism that he expressed such a critical view of)¹⁴ to express the characters' feelings, their inner selves, without having to resort to the clas-

sical convention of the inner monologue. To this end, he proposed to use abstract film footage, as noted above.

But once again, these two facets of the human being—which could be characterised as the outer self and the inner self—were not enough to understand the full complexity of human existence. To do this, it was ultimately necessary to connect both *selves* to broader historical factors that would help the audience to understand the character's outer behaviour and inner feelings, but also the historical moment being represented.

In Piscator's approach, the human being was embedded in the historical timeline, absorbing the legacy of the past, acting in the present and projecting into the future, shifting seamlessly from the personal or individual to the general (historical, political and social) context, and from the general to the individual context. In 1924, for example, Lenin died, but so did Karl's mother, Frau Luise Thomas; and the depiction of Karl's madness while locked up in the asylum is intercut with major historical events—from the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 to the conflicts in China and the conference of European heads of state in 1926—that suggest that “men went mad,” as we are told in the caption repeated several times in this film sequence.

The complexity of human experience and of human society drives Karl to take his own life, but as Piscator makes clear, “Thomas is anything but a class-conscious proletarian,” and although the play's plot focuses on him, the whole play is an *argumentum e contrario*, demonstrating the collapse of the bourgeois world order (Piscator, 1978: 209). In other words, Karl's attitude is not important, or it is only important as a depiction of the attitude towards life and politics that the proletariat should not take. What matters is an understanding of the economic, political and social context, the Weimar Republic's betrayal with its siren songs invoking democracy (Kilmann) and the recognition that the failure of the November Revolution was merely one chapter in the proletariat's

ongoing struggle for freedom. The working class must be able to adapt to the changing times and to new media technologies, to the new propaganda, and to continue the fight like Eva Berg, Frau Meller and Albert Kroll, the class-conscious proletarians (Piscator, 1978: 209).

AN INTERMEDIATE GENRE BREAKING BOUNDARIES AT THE SERVICE OF THE REVOLUTION

It could be argued that Piscator's oeuvre constituted a new genre straddling the borderline between theatre and cinema, in which the motion picture began being used in a different way. This is hinted at in Balász's (2010) review of *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, in his description of the fluidity between the images and what was happening onstage, or in the review by the critic writing for the newspaper *Germania* (quoted by Braun, 1982: 155), who suggests that the German director expanded the scope of the theatrical experience by showing time and space with “a telescopic vision”. In addition to being the product of the need to *tell the story* of a new global situation in a new way, this new use of moving images in theatre was the consequence of changes resulting from the birth of cinema itself. On the one hand, stage directors realised that theatre could no longer challenge the realism of the cinematographic image, and on the other, as Deleuze (1984) points out, drawing on Bergson, this new technology had forever changed our perception of the world and of ourselves in that world, creating a movement-image and a time-image in human consciousness that would leave an indelible mark on our conception of theatre as well.

In Piscator's productions, and specifically in *Hoppla, We're Alive!*, it is possible to identify a set of features that have since become common to the theatre-film relationship, related mainly to how the combination of recorded media and live performances multiplies the focus and enriches the

interactions and meaning of the plays. The most significant of these are: the creation of a new space out of a mixture of different spaces and of a new timeframe combining past, present and future in a break with the classical narrative structure; the transformation of “representation” into “presentation”; the movement of the performers from the world on the screen to the world on the stage (and vice versa) via an indeterminate middle ground, thereby acquiring new qualities of presence (Lehmann, 2016; Picon-Vallin, 1998; Fuchs, 1985); and the multiplication of ways of seeing/perceiving/reading the work. In this sense, Piscator anticipated Bourriaud’s notions of relational aesthetics (2006), and Rancière’s (2010) idea of an emancipated spectator, as well as theories of spectatorial agency (Klaver, 1995).

Finally, in terms of their spatial dimension, Piscator’s immersive strategies could be traced back even to the pre-cinematic era, and its influence would extend to the “expanded cinema” of the 1960s,¹⁵ and all the way to contemporary multimedia practices that constitute a continuation of Wagner’s total artwork (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) (Jordan & Packer, 2003). These practices evade any possibility of a frame analysis (Goffman, 1986) because they weave together a complex network, in keeping with contemporary notions of heterogeneity, which (like the human in history and in the world) encompasses the spectator, and because their objective is to break boundaries and, in Piscator’s case, to transform reality. As shown throughout this article, there could only be one objective of the revolutionary theatre to which Piscator dedicated his work: “ultimately, [revolutionary theatre] has no mission other than to make people [the proletariat] aware of what is vague and incoherent in their unconscious” (Piscator, 1978: 133). ■

NOTES

- 1 Although the many elements that film took from theatre in its initial quest for its own language are obvious (see Romaguera & Alsina, 2007), in this article the focus is on influences in the opposite direction, i.e., what theatre took from film.
- 2 This was the name given to the various theatre companies operated by Piscator in Berlin from 1927 to 1931, where he would present his total theatre stage productions.
- 3 The English translation used for the title of the play in this article is a literal rendering of the German original, as the title used in the English translation of Piscator’s *Political Theatre* (1978) (*Hoppla, Such Is Life!*) does not reflect the meaning of the original.
- 4 The term *dispositive* is not used here in its Foucauldian sense (*dispositif*), but in the sense applied to the term by Albera and Tortajada (2015: 44) as “a schema, a dynamic play of relations which articulates discourses and practices with one another,” and which can be described based on the three concepts that must be “understood in their reciprocal relations: the spectator, the machinery, the representation.”
- 5 A precursor to these movements can be found in Romain Rolland’s *Le théâtre du Peuple. Essai d’esthétique d’un théâtre nouveau*, published in 1903 (Prieto, 2021).
- 6 All translations of titles and quotes in German, Spanish and French are the authors’.
- 7 One precursor that did see the light of day was the Beyruth Festpielhaus. Designed by the architect Gottfried Semper and by Wagner himself for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1862), it would end up being developed by Otto Brückwald (Prieto, 2021).
- 8 Walter Gropius Archive (Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University) and Bauhaus Archiv (Berlin). An animated video made by Javier Navarro de Zuvillaga and Javier Núñez for the exhibition *Arquitecturas Ausentes del siglo XX* (Madrid, Ministry of Development, 2004), can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/59497126>.
- 9 A modern version of this would Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome* (1965).

- 10 Piscator's usual co-workers in this "dramaturgical office" would be Bertolt Brecht, Leo Lania, Walter Mehring and Ernst Toller.
- 11 "I also now clearly understood the extent to which art is merely a means to an end. A political, propagandistic, educating means" (Piscator, 2001: 61).
- 12 The published script indicates a prologue and four cinematic interludes (Toller, 1983 and 2019).
- 13 The nature and authorship of the film footage used by Piscator in the play constitute another line of research beyond the scope of this article, particularly in relation to the archive footage. In the same year that Piscator premiered *Hoppla!*, Walter Ruttmann released his film *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt, 1927). In his director's notebook, a handwritten note about the play's technical crew mentions Kurt Oertel, whom Piscator identifies as the director of the film work for the play (the fiction footage) (1978: 202), but Ruttmann's name also appears (1927), although he is not mentioned in Piscator's book. Did Piscator use excerpts from *Berlin* to illustrate Karl's shock upon seeing the modern city? Or does the fact that the play and the film premiered around the same time rule out that possibility? One thing that both productions definitely shared was the same music composer, Edmund Meisel (1927).
- 14 Lorang (1987: 154) once again points out that Piscator subsequently reconsidered his "excessively harsh view" of Expressionism.
- 15 Documented by Mekas (2017) and conceptualised by Youngblood (1970). For more information on this question from a post-cinematic perspective, see Martínez (2021).

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ERWIN PISCATOR'S TOTAL THEATER AS A REVOLUTIONARY IMMERSIVE AUDIOVISUAL TOOL. THE PARADIGM OF HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

Abstract

This article explores the immersive dimension of the increasingly fashionable dialogue between theatre and film. It is a dialogue that can in fact be traced back to the very origins of cinema, and that has continued right down to the present day in the form of all kinds of experiments incorporating the techniques and technologies of each era. A key turning point in this relationship would take place in Germany's Weimar Republic, a very specific socio-political context in which the use of the cinematic image on stage and its immersive potential would be vested with revolutionary overtones. It was the director Erwin Piscator who systematised the use of film as a cohesive element in an ideal of total theatre profoundly connected to historical avant-garde movements and placed at the service of Marxist ideology. This would make of him an important link in the chain running from the pre-cinematic era right down to contemporary political and documentary theatre, as his work would begin to exhibit a set of characteristics—starting in particular with the production *Hoppla, We're Alive!* [*Hoppla, Wir Leben!*] (Ernst Toller, 1927)—that would leave an indelible mark on the interaction between the stage and the screens.

Key words

Theatre-Cinema; Immersiveness; Piscator; Political Theatre; Revolutionary Theatre; Dispositive; Masses; Proletariat.

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EL TEATRO TOTAL DE ERWIN PISCATOR COMO HERRAMIENTA AUDIOVISUAL INMERSIVA REVOLUCIONARIA. EL PARADIGMA DE HOPPLA, WIR LEBEN! (1927)

Resumen

Este artículo se encuadra en la dimensión inmersiva del, cada vez más en boga, diálogo entre teatro y cine; un diálogo que, en realidad, se remonta a los inicios del medio cinematográfico y que se ha prolongado hasta nuestros días en forma de todo tipo de experimentos que han ido incorporando las técnicas y tecnologías de cada época. Un punto de inflexión clave en esta relación tendrá lugar en la alemana República de Weimar, un contexto sociopolítico muy concreto que hará que el uso de la imagen cinematográfica en la escena y su vocación inmersiva adquieran tintes revolucionarios, siendo el director Erwin Piscator quien sistematice el uso de la película como elemento cohesionador en un ideal de teatro total profundamente ligado a las vanguardias históricas, y al servicio del ideario marxista. Esto hará de él un eslabón clave en la cadena que iría desde la precinematografía hasta las propuestas actuales de teatro documental y político, en el que se empezarán a vislumbrar una serie de características —especialmente a partir del montaje *Hoppla, Wir Leben!* [¡Alehop, estamos vivos!] (Ernst Toller, 1927)— que marcarán indefectiblemente la interacción entre la escena y las pantallas.

Palabras clave

Teatro-Cine; inmersividad; Piscator; teatro político; teatro revolucionario; dispositivo; masas; proletariado.

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VIRTUAL ENTRY INTO A LANDSCAPE IN THE PRE-DIGITAL AGE: FROM THE PICTURESQUE JOURNEYS OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE IN AKIRA KUROSAWA'S *DREAMS* (1990)

ALAN SALVADÓ-ROMERO

INTRODUCTION

To illustrate the fact that virtual worlds are not a contemporary novelty but have in fact formed part of our visual culture for centuries, Román Gubern cites a beautiful ancient legend about a “Chinese painter held captive in the palace by the emperor, who to escape painted an extraordinarily accurate landscape of his home province, stepped into it and disappeared into the distance” (1996: 63). In the 18th century, Denis Diderot occasionally used the idea of physically entering a painting as a literary device to describe the excitement he felt when looking at certain landscape paintings discussed in *Salons* (Fried, 1988: 130). He uses this trope, for example, in relation to Philippe-Jacques de Loucherbourg’s *Landscape with Figures and Animals* (1763): “Ah, my friend, how beautiful nature is in this little spot! Let us stop there. The heat of the day is beginning to be felt; let us lie down next to these animals. While we admire the work

of the Creator, the conversation of this shepherd and this peasant woman will divert us. Our ears will not disdain the rustic sounds of the cowherd [...]. And when the weight of the light has diminished we will go our way again, and at some remote time we will still remember this enchanted place and the delicious hour we spent there”¹ (qtd. in Fried, 1988: 119). Both the Chinese legend and Diderot’s literary trope presage the possibility of immersion in virtual worlds, using the motif of the landscape painting as the point of entry.

From the perspective of visual studies, landscape painting has played a key role throughout history as a laboratory for experimenting with the gaze (Arasse, 2008) and especially with our way of looking at the world. Examples include the explicit influence of cartography on 17th-century Dutch painting (Alpers, 1987) and realist painting’s prefiguration of photography in the 19th century (Galassi, 1981). In both these cases, visual possibilities were identified in the representation of the

ONE OF THE KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE MOTIF TO VIRTUAL CULTURE IS THE ILLUSION OF MOBILITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF ENTERING A PLACE (WHETHER PAINTED, IMAGINED OR DREAMED)

landscape (in painting, in this case) that would be realised with the emergence of new technologies, transforming our way of observing reality (Crary, 2008). In this sense, between the premonitions of immersion in the landscape in the pre-digital age and the contemporary proliferation of virtual landscapes in film genres such as fantasy and science fiction (López-Silvestre, 2004), there was a transitional period of profound experimentation in which the dream of stepping into a virtual landscape became increasingly plausible with the development of new technological devices. These emergent ways of seeing transformed the visual culture of this intermediate period and gave rise to a branch of landscape historiography that shifted away from the realist canon (Milani, 2001; Roger, 1997) to propose that virtualisation, although it poses dangers such as deterritorialisation (Levy, 1999: 15), is nevertheless another facet of the phenomenon of landscape art (Jakob, 2004: 42). This raises a number of questions in relation to visual culture related to the role of the landscape-virtuality binary in the pre-digital age and what the depiction of the landscape has contributed to the historiography of virtuality.

The hypothesis of this article, which presents an overview of some of the results of the research project titled “Virtual Worlds in Early Cinema: Devices, Aesthetics and Audiences” (reference PGC2018-096633-B-I00), is that one of the key contributions of the landscape motif to virtual culture is the illusion of mobility: the experience of entering a place (whether painted, imagined or dreamed), immersing ourselves in it and explo-

ring it. Beyond the visual dimension, the depiction of the landscape opens up the possibility of the viewer’s imaginary journey, thereby hinting at an architectural dimension. To support its argument, this article posits an archaeology of the gaze on the landscape based on two phenomena considered representative of the connection between mobility and architecture: the rise of the picturesque and its consequences in visual culture; and the development of cinematographic techniques whose use of superimposition foreshadowed digital technology. To avoid generalisations, these paradigm shifts are analysed with reference to two specific case studies that serve to structure the article: the use of the Claude glass for viewing landscapes in the 18th and 19th centuries, along with formal derivatives like Hale’s Tours; and the specific use of the cinematographic technique of superimposition in the film *Dreams* (Yume, Akira Kurosawa, 1990). Although they involve different contexts and technologies at very different moments in time, these two cases share a formal approach associated with the virtual experience of stepping inside the depiction of a landscape. Based on the above, this article has the following aims: to analyse the contribution of certain 19th-century depictions of landscapes to the visual culture of virtuality; to identify how such depictions presaged virtual immersion in landscapes in the pre-digital age; and finally, to extend the history of landscape art through an exploration of the virtual perspective.

THE VIRTUAL PICTURESQUE: IDEAL LANDSCAPES, THE CLAUDE GLASS AND HALE’S TOURS

In terms of visual culture associated with virtualisation (Levy, 1999: 12), landscape painting qua a school of the gaze was of vital importance to the development of a “variable eye” (Aumont, 1997: 31) that could wander inside the painting from

the static position of the viewer. On this point, Daniel Arasse suggests that “the landscape painting is a privileged place for the use of a gaze that temporarily adapts to the surface of the painting in order to journey around it. The word ‘journey’ partly explains this privilege: the journey of the gaze around the painting replicates the physical trajectory that the fictitious horizon of the image proposes to the spectator” (2008: 242). Such reveries of a faraway place would inform painting’s first virtual journeys, establishing a direct correspondence with the experience of travellers who watch the world unfold around them as they continue on their way. This mobile gaze, defined as a gradual discovery of the territory, is intimately related both to the origins of Western landscape art and one of its foundational dialectics, i.e., the city-country binary (Maderuelo, 2005: 131), and to the subsequent development of the picturesque (Peucker, 1995: 113). To understand the contribution of the picturesque vision to the notion of virtual mobility, it is necessary first of all to consider the so-called ideal landscapes of the 17th

century (Lamblin, 1983), and secondly to explore the viewing mechanism associated with the Claude glass.

The ideal landscapes of painters such as Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Salvator Rosa establish the mobility of the gaze as one of the central themes of their paintings, as is evident in compositions like *Landscape with Tobias and Raphael* (Claude Lorrain, 1639-1640) (Image 1), *Landscape with Diogenes* (Nicolas Poussin, 1647) (Image 2) and *Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl* (Salvator Rosa, 1661). All of these paintings depict nature as *geometricised*, where the spectator’s gaze moves inside the painting, following the (compositional) path traced by the artist in question. The gaze never wanders erratically, as the perspective dictates the direction it is to follow. To the viewer, the visual trajectory into the distance becomes a succession of various planes that are left behind as we move further into the painting, following the course of a river or a winding road, two very common motifs in landscapes of this kind (Salvadó, 2013: 224). As can be observed by comparing the

Left. Image 1. *Landscape with Tobias and Raphael* (Claude Lorrain, 1639-1640)

Right. Image 2. *Landscape with Diogenes* (Nicolas Poussin, 1647)



paintings, the ideal landscapes of the 17th century adhere to very similar schematic patterns that are repeated again and again to reproduce a virtual journey towards the horizon inside the painting (Lamblin, 1983: 391). The perspectivist paradigm adopted by Poussin, Lorrain and Rosa would add a depth and density that until then had not existed in Western landscape art, which would facilitate these movements of the gaze, while also contributing to the construction of a tourist imaginary of travel to far-off lands.

The discovery of the countryside by the urban masses over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, along with the proliferation and enhancement of communication systems around Europe and the popularisation of new forms of land transportation, transformed our way of viewing the world and introduced a new form of perceiving the landscape (Desportes, 2007: 73). The foundational city-country dialectic gradually collapsed as nature ceased to be the unknown *Other* that was yet to be discovered, becoming instead a *familiar* sight fit for contemplation. Playing an important role in this process was the aesthetic revolution that began with the new category of the picturesque created by the English theorists Uvedale Price, Richard Payne and William Gilpin, who adopted the empiricist model of nature as an aesthetic canon. "This meant that nature and architecture were purely visual materials upon which a well-structured and highly 'technified' knowledge was deployed, aimed at the creation of a visual composition which, depending on different combinations, would produce a kind of harmony based on the smoothness of the surface, the depth and variety of colours and the creation of psychological effects and sensations associated with certain presentations or 'views'" (Ábalos, 2008: 17). The pictorial standard was imposed as a way of viewing that revitalised the imaginary of the popular ideal landscapes of the previous century. The first waves of tourists in England in the late 18th century explored nature with the aim of

rediscovering the Arcadian aura that the schematic paintings of Poussin, Lorrain and Rosa exuded. "As both a new mode of aesthetic experience and a means of defining what constituted a proper landscape, the picturesque not only served as a guide to creating and viewing painting, it also directed the gaze of tourist and inspired the ground plans of gardeners" (Gunning, 2010: 34).

The concept of the picturesque, which became the 19th-century way of viewing (Hussey, 2013: 26), involves a mutation of the static-mobile dialectic inherited from painting: from the static viewer subjected to the perspective of the gaze of ideal landscapes to the dynamic viewer who moves around a natural landscape in search of the view or series of views that could evoke the paintings of Lorrain, Poussin or Rosa. In the quest for the picturesque, the excitement arises from the spectacle of (re-)experiencing the aesthetic pleasure associated with the contemplation of those paintings in the real world (Bruno, 2003: 212). However, the creation of this aesthetic experience poses the difficult question of how this series of ideal views of nature can be captured in the real world. The task of establishing cohesion between reality and imagination, between the moving and static landscape, would be achieved using the Claude glass, a device that exemplifies "the process of turning nature into landscape through a technology of vision" (Gunning, 2010: 35).

The operation of the Claude glass is very simple: using a small, dark-tinted convex mirror, the viewer observes a landscape motif that is literally framed like a kind of ephemeral photograph. The uniform tonality that the landscape acquires in the mirror simulates the luminous atmosphere characteristic of Claude Lorrain's paintings, which is why the device was given his name (Roger, 1997: 39). Using this little contraption, tourists would try to capture the different natural scenes that constitute the visual journey inscribed in ideal landscapes in a real environment, as if the connection of each image projected in the Clau-

de glass could replicate the perspectivist journey of the gaze inside the paintings. The successive images produced by the device reproduce the changes that a landscape undergoes as the spectator progresses around it through the adoption of different points of view and different distances. In those days, William Gilpin summed up the essence of this viewing device as “a succession of high-coloured pictures [that] is continually gliding before the eye. They are like visions of the imagination, or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Forms, and colours, in brightest array, fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should give any price to fix, and appropriate the scene” (qtd. in Andrews, 1999: 116).

Despite the apparent artificiality of the process of perceiving a natural scene offered by the Claude glass, it raises a whole range of formal questions that are worth considering for their contemporary relevance and their revolutionary impact on the visual culture of the landscape. First of all, it presaged the way many of us today view landscapes, as an experience mediated by all kinds of frames (Andrews, 1999: 127): the viewfinder of a camera, the movie screen, and of course, the screen of a mobile phone. Secondly, the use of this viewing apparatus is rather unique, as the landscape is literally viewed with one’s back to it, in a backward projection of the gaze that constitutes a novel way of contemplating the landscape. And thirdly (and most importantly for the purpose of this study), the image shown in the mirror constituted one of the first experiences of mobile virtuality. On the one hand, the superimposition of the image reflected with the *atmospheric* tint of the mirror produces a landscape that is anchored in reality but that at the same time appeals to the viewer’s imagination. It is in the gap between the real and the imagined (or even the dreamed) where the Claude glass emerges as a technological precursor to today’s virtual landscapes, taking the imaginary journeys through ideal landscapes of

THE ARTICULATION OF THE VIEWING-MOVING BINARY TRANSFORMS THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL IDEAL LANDSCAPES INTO THE THREE DIMENSIONS THAT CHARACTERISE ARCHITECTURE

the 17th century a step further. On the other hand, while the process of observing the landscape inherent in the Claude glass anticipates film editing (in the succession of *shots* from different points of view), the articulation of the viewing-moving binary transforms the two-dimensional ideal landscapes into the three dimensions that characterise architecture. The Claude glass would also have a huge influence on the nascent art of gardening, with its efforts to design nature in accordance with pictorial images and the pleasure of contemplating a landscape and savouring the variety of different views in a manner resembling a film sequence (Bruno, 2003: 277). In this sense, the landscaped garden was another of the visual devices of the 19th century to facilitate virtual access to the painted landscape (Peucker, 1995: 108).

The mobile gaze associated with ideal landscapes applied to reality both through the Claude glass and the emerging practice of landscaping predisposed viewers to appreciate variation as an intrinsic quality of the landscape. Tourists became familiar with the pleasure of change, cultivating an aesthetic taste for *moving landscapes*. It is thus no mere coincidence that new viewing devices that extended the virtual journey into the picturesque based on the representation of the landscape should have appeared over the course of the 19th century. Most of these, labelled with the suffix “-orama”, offer simulations of travel experiences where, like the paintings of Lorrain, Poussin or Rosa, the journey towards the horizon became the central theme of the composition. The panorama, the diorama, the kineorama, the georama

and the cosmorama “have their origins in the discovery and experience of the horizon and the idea that journeys serve to expand our horizons” (Bruno, 2003: 220). Offering a kind of visual spectacle that could pique their geographic curiosity about the world, these devices gave 19th-century spectators the chance to be transported in grand virtual tours (Oettermann, 1997: 32). For example, the cosmorama—a room with small windows and lenses through which to observe panoramic and dioramic views of landscapes—was publicised as a “picturesque journey” (Bruno, 2003: 223), reinforcing the continuation of the picturesque imaginary in the new technological inventions.

With the aim of radicalising the connection with movement in the picturesque viewing model, early cinema hybridised the cinematographic device with the gaze associated with modes of transport, especially the train. A dialogue was established with the ideal landscape tradition and the dream of journeying to the horizon in its paintings. Early cinema genres such as railroad views and phantom rides (Musser, 1990: 123), where the camera was placed on the front of a locomotive, brought the pictorial journeys embarked on in previous centuries to life. “As opposed to the carefully framed, distanced and static picture offered by Claudean Ideal Landscape, early landscape films actually moved into the landscape via technology. [...] In doing so these films make explicit a fantasy of penetration and visual voyage implied in the Claudean model” (Gunning, 2010: 36).

The inherent virtuality of these train journeys was taken to the extreme in Hale’s Tours. Evolving out of the railroad views and phantom rides, this attraction involved the projection of filmed images inside a train carriage literally converted into a movie theatre, taking the connection between the two viewing devices of train and cinema to the limit (Kirby, 1997). The projection of moving images was combined with a range of sensory-motor sensations aimed at making the body feel as if it were travelling while in a statio-

nary train carriage, similar to other attractions that first appeared in amusement parks around the same time (Quintana, 2011: 29). Although they were popular for only a very short time (1904-1907), Hale’s Tours were uniquely meaningful for their capacity to articulate better than any other device the affinity between the *railroad gaze* and the *mobile gaze* characteristic of cinema. Or to put it another way, it was a technological invention that encapsulated the spatio-visual revolution of the picturesque, turning travellers into film spectators and film spectators into travellers in a dual movement that defined the turn of the century.

SUPERIMPOSITIONS: FROM BACK PROJECTIONS TO AKIRA KUROSAWA’S IMMERSIVE DREAM

Both imaginary of the picturesque and its articulation in viewing devices like the Claude glass used the superimposition of two visual layers: the imaginary layer (derived from the paintings) and the real layer, as a mechanism for observing the landscape. This operation, which anticipated the process of integrating real and synthetic images that characterises many of the digital landscapes of the 21st century, was repeated in early cinema. A good example of the persistence of these visual approaches can be found in the experiences of filming in William K. L. Dickson’s Black Maria studio for Thomas Edison’s factory. In his discussion of these experiences, Àngel Quintana points out that “the act of putting the filmed subject inside a room painted black, a precursor to the blue chrome of today’s film studios, made it clear that the motivation behind early cinema was simply to create the conditions for superimpositions and magical effects” (2011: 29).

The virtual nature of superimposition is also present in the technique of back projections popularised by classical Hollywood cinema in the late 1920s, particularly after the introduction of sound. Recorded in the studio, this technique in-



Images 3 and 4. *Sunrise* (1927)

involved combining actors with backgrounds filmed at different times and locations into a single shot. The characters would perform in front of a screen onto which a specific moving landscape was projected, thereby creating the illusion of being in an outdoor setting without the audibility issues normally associated with filming on location (Mulvey, 2012: 208). It was also often used to represent exotic settings in adventure films (Castro, 2015: 140), superimposing the protagonists in a scene shot in the studio over documentary images of remote locations that thus served as backgrounds. However,

it was the filmmaker F. W. Murnau who would establish an especially innovative model for the use of this cinematographic technique, in terms of both depiction of a landscape and the imaginary of virtuality. His film *Sunrise* (1927) tells the story of a married couple living in the country and the husband's adulterous relationship with a vampish city woman. The city-country dialogue is not only embedded in the narrative but also appears in the scene that articulates the landscape-virtuality binary. In this scene, we see the couple coming out of a city church, where they have just experienced an amorous epiphany that has resulted in their reconciliation. At this moment, to express how the couple's inner feelings transform their external reality, the back projection of the bustling city street they are walking across turns into a bucolic landscape of a field of flowers lined with willow trees (Images 3-4). As the couple, who are filmed from behind, walk away from the viewer, the shift between urban and rural settings on the screen produces an effect of immersion in nature in the heart of the city.

Murnau's formal and technical innovation combines the excitement of movement derived from the progress of the two characters as they walk on together with the pleasure elicited by the visual transformation of the setting through which they are walking. The articulation of the viewing-moving binary characteristic of the Claude glass is reinterpreted in this system of representation that explores the architectural dimension of the virtual landscape: the protagonists are immersed in the dream of love that they themselves have created. The scene ends with the couple kissing in the romantic natural landscape, when suddenly *reality* is imposed and the back projection returns us to the city street where the lovers have just caused a catastrophic traffic jam. Murnau's use of a back projection of a landscape to create an association between the setting and the characters' feelings extended the influence of the picturesque dream and its connection to vir-

tuality throughout the 20th century, as the idea would spread to other films with markedly urban settings, such as *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) with its famous scene of the protagonist running through the Kasbah quarter of Algiers to the port. But how has the introduction of new filmmaking technologies and the transformations of landscape art affected visual culture? What impact have they had on the culture of virtuality?

With respect to technology, the emergence of video and the systematisation of electronic imaging in the last quarter of the 20th century opened up new possibilities for superimposing two (or more) visual layers. As Raymond Bellour suggests, “video is, above all, a propagator of passages. [...] Passages, corollaries, that traverse without exactly encompassing these ‘universals’ of the image: thus, between photography, film and video, a multiplicity of superimpositions, of highly unpredictable configurations, is produced” (2009: 14). These passages in the artistic practice of video facilitate dialogue between the reality of the world and the reality of the image, directing the filmic reflection towards painting (Bellour, 2009: 16) or, in the case of the depiction of a landscape, towards the landscape-image.

In terms of the landscape imaginary, this period saw experimentation with the first manifestations of what the landscape theorist Michael Jakob refers to as *omnipaysage* (2008: 7-15), which could be described as the post-modern condition of landscape based on two aspects: the integration of the landscape into all kinds of fields of knowledge (often completely unrelated to its origins); and the extraordinary proliferation of landscape-images of all styles and conditions, resulting both in visual oversaturation and in desensitisation to the experience of the landscape. While the 19th-cen-

tury picturesque was based on imagining landscape-images to mediate in our relationship with nature, the *omnipaysage* of the late 20th century reflected the fact that nature itself had been replaced with landscape-images, a situation that is not strictly related to landscapes but that forms part of the visual culture of this period and the progressive usurpation of reality by images (Baudrillard, 2005: 35).

In this context of changes to technology and to our understanding of the landscape, in 1990, the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa made what would be his second-last film, *Dreams*, shot with high-definition video cameras (provided by the Japanese television network NHK) and with special effects directed by George Lucas’s company Industrial Light & Magic. It is a film made up of eight independent episodes that have the filmmaker’s dreams as a common theme. Although it is not intended as a biopic, the film begins with his childhood dreams and ends with the darkest nightmares of his adult years. It is in the fifth dream, titled “Crows”, where we find a paradigmatic example of what electronic imaging could contribute to our conceptions of landscape and virtuality. This ten-minute dream begins in a museum where the protagonist (the director’s alter ego), a middle-aged man who is a combination of

Image 5. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)





Images 6 and 7. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)

tourist and amateur painter (he carries a number of archetypal tools of the trade with him), is looking at a series of reproductions of iconic works of Vincent Van Gogh, including *Wheatfield with Crows*—the painting that gives this section of the film its name, and which for many years was considered the artist’s last work—and *The Langlois Bridge at Arles*. While he is examining the latter painting, a cut takes us out of the museum and to a real bridge replicating the one in the painting (Image 5). Wearing the same clothes he had on in the museum, the protagonist enters this scene with striking colours that give it a dreamlike tone, and he approaches the washerwomen in the painting to ask them where he can find Van Gogh. They tell him where to find the artist, and he crosses a series of bright yellow wheatfields with houses that are also painted in colours typical of Van Gogh’s palette. Finally, in the middle of a harvested field, he encounters Van Gogh himself, standing alone, sketching on a canvas. The two engage in a conversation in English in which the painter talks about his creative process, saying he loses himself in the “natural beauty” of the landscape in order to “devour it completely” and then express it in a painting. Then suddenly the painter hurries away, and the protagonist tries to follow him under an oppressively bright sun. As he wanders on in search of the artist, the real-life

setting is replaced with details and re-framings of different parts of landscape paintings and sketches by Van Gogh (Images 6-7). Finally, after walking along the paths of nine of his paintings, the backgrounds become real again and in the middle of a field resembling the initial painting, *Wheatfield with Crows*, we glimpse the distant figure of Van Gogh walking away on a path and disappearing over the horizon. A murder of crows is then superimposed over the shot, and finally the scene cuts to the reproduction of the aforementioned Van Gogh painting without any frame of reference until the camera zooms out to reveal that we are back in the museum where the protagonist is contemplating the painting (Image 8).

As the above description shows, “Crows” is structured around three movements reflecting three ways of viewing that progressively recount the trajectory from the traditional gaze on the landscape painting to the experience of immersion in painted landscapes. The first movement is in the museum, where a distance is established between the viewer’s position and the paintings framed on the wall of the gallery. The second movement is in a hybrid space where painting and reality coexist, where the paintings resemble real landscapes and the real landscapes are painted as if they were works of art. The third movement is the immersion inside the painted landscapes,



Image 8. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)

where the two-dimensional space of the canvas is experienced as if it were three-dimensional. Finally, as a coda, we return once again to the space of the museum. It is in the third movement that we can visualise both the legacy of the landscape depictions of previous centuries and the new possibilities that the electronic image offers the landscape-virtuality binary.

From the outset, this third movement is structured around a superimposition technique, where the protagonist's actions are filmed in the studio in front of a blue screen to create a hybrid between cinematic and pictorial media. On the one hand, the montage of the nine enlarged Van Gogh paintings used as backgrounds for the sequence reveal the brushstrokes and the thickness of the painted surface, thereby rendering visible both the tech-

CROWS IS STRUCTURED AROUND THREE MOVEMENTS REFLECTING THREE WAYS OF VIEWING THAT PROGRESSIVELY RECOUNT THE TRAJECTORY FROM THE TRADITIONAL GAZE ON THE LANDSCAPE PAINTING TO THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMERSION IN PAINTED LANDSCAPES

nique and the temporal nature of the moment of their creation. Kurosawa turns the paintings into objects in their own right, stripping them of their traditional status as windows into imaginary scenes to use them as a space for formal experimentation (Ng, 2021: 27). On the other hand, the protagonist moving through the nine paintings functions as an avatar for viewers, enabling us to *inhabit* Van Gogh's landscapes. Unlike the film genre of the *tableau-vivant*, which

generally explores the idea of inhabiting a painting through the static logic of the wax museum, in "Crows" the protagonist's movement along the paths depicted animates the landscapes, breaking them out of their two-dimensional nature. He moves up and down and across the paintings, sometimes walking towards the camera and sometimes away from it. These movements give depth to the image—a sensation that is reinforced when he disappears behind a painted tree, for example, thereby creating an impression of volume—while at the same time introducing a sense of temporality. It is precisely the incorporation of time and movement, in a combination of views of Van Gogh's landscapes, that gives Kurosawa's approach here an explicitly picturesque dimension. The juxtaposition of cinematic and pictorial images expands the boundaries and specificities of film and painting; it is a visual construction that presaged the virtual landscapes created using the digital palette, while at the same time appealing to an architectural dimension of the painted landscape that is also characteristic of the picturesque gaze.

In parallel with the above, in this third movement of "Crows" we find another feature of relevance to virtuality: the disappearance of the frames of Van Gogh's paintings, implying the eli-

KUROSAWA'S DREAMS EVOKES VISUAL SPECTACLES OF THE 19TH CENTURY LIKE THE PANORAMA, AMONG OTHERS, WHILE PRESAGING ARCHITECTURAL VIEWING DEVICES SUCH AS THE IMMERSIVE EXHIBITIONS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

mination of the boundary between the physical space that surrounds the viewer and the space of the spectacle presented on the canvas. As Román Gubern points out, this de-framing “constitutes a transgression of the aesthetic legacy of the Renaissance, which gave it to us together with perspective, which in a way was a complementary artifice” (1996: 168). Moreover, the succession and reframing of the different Van Gogh paintings alters their original meaning. Kurosawa breaks with the unitary gaze on the painting that begins and ends the sequence and recreates a new, purely cinematographic space, similar to what Alain Resnais did in his documentary *Van Gogh* (1948). The disappearance of the frames also raises the question of the boundaries of the screen on which the action unfolds, which is turned into a kind of interface that connects different paintings with no narrative logic or spatio-temporal continuity. In a certain sense, it points to what Jenna Ng describes as the concept of the “post-screen” (2021: 20) intrinsic to virtual reality.

One final point that is equally important is the fact that the dreamlike atmosphere of the sequence as a whole reinforces the perceptual effect of immersion. It is no mere coincidence that one of the clearest prefigurations of virtual reality created at the beginning of the digital age used a dream as its starting point, a mental state that opens us up to the possibility of entering new worlds. “Crows” should therefore be understood as a prototype of virtual reality that expresses the immersive experience of art, a visual represen-

tation of the idea of entering a painting used by Denis Diderot in the 18th century with reference to certain landscape paintings. Kurosawa’s work—shot in the same period when filmmakers like Peter Greenaway, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker and Raúl Ruiz were experimenting with the intersection between the cinema and the museum (Bruno, 2003: 475)—uses the electronic image to combine (pre)cinema, painting and architecture. This episode of Kurosawa’s *Dreams* thus evokes visual spectacles of the 19th century like the panorama, among others, while presaging architectural viewing devices such as the immersive exhibitions of the 21st century that use augmented reality to allow visitors literally to step inside a landscape painting. The connection can be made clear by comparing Kurosawa’s film with digital exhibitions dedicated to Van Gogh’s work, such as *Van Gogh: Starry Night* (Atelier des Lumières, Paris, 2019-20), directed by Renato Gatto, where the visitors walk around inside an old 19th-century foundry in which the Dutch painter’s works are projected onto the walls and floors, and in most cases are animated. This architectural device obviously recalls the panorama, although the immersive effect of stepping inside the painted landscape is completely different, as visitors view the paintings in large dimensions, but at the same time they are completely surrounded by them. It is essentially an evolution of the museum in which painting is experienced more as a visual attraction than as a contemplative act. Herein lies the formal premonition of Kurosawa’s “Crows”, which begins in a museum and then transcends it with a kinetic experience of the landscape painting.

CONCLUSIONS

From the journeys of the gaze in the ideal landscapes of the 17th century to the pre-cinematic devices where the landscape is usually the vehicle for experimenting with the illusory effect of reality, and finally to certain intermediate depictions of

landscapes arising from the use of video, the concept of virtuality has always been present. These different episodes of visual culture confirm that the landscape-virtuality binary has had a direct impact on the evolution of our ways of viewing. Conceived of as an *educator* of the gaze since its origins in Western painting, the landscape motif has served as an expression of the longing to journey to other realities or the dream of entering new worlds. The potential of such longings has been realised to a large extent in the depiction of landscapes articulated by means of various viewing devices over the past few centuries. This is why landscape historiography has been marked by the emergence of an approach quite different both from realism and from the static contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment associated with notions such as beauty or the sublime. The move towards the virtualisation of the landscape in the pre-digital age reflects the existence of a significant proportion of landscape depictions associated with artifice, visual spectacle and kinetic experience, all of which are characteristic of the imaginary of the picturesque (Ábalos, 2008: 36). It is the persistence of this aesthetic category since its emergence in the late 18th century right up to the present day that constitutes the common theme among most visual devices that use the landscape as the point of entry into the virtual world.

At a time when a significant part of our relationship with the landscape is associated more with the aesthetic experience of an image than with a real experience of the location (Jakob, 2008: 24), reassessing the genealogy of virtual landscapes helps not only to identify connections between past and present but also to posit new aesthetic tastes that adapt to new ways of viewing and reinterpret our traditional approach to constructing and relating to landscapes. Thus, for example, the landscape theorist Alain Roger argued that there were two ways to turn nature into art, through the landscape *in visu* or the landscape *in situ* (Roger, 1997: 16). The first refers

to the action of turning it into art through an image (as in painting, photography or cinema), and the second involves intervening in the real location (as in gardening or land art). The overview offered in this article, which reveals the intersection between film, painting and architecture to be key to the exploration of virtual landscapes, makes it clear that the distinction proposed by Roger is becoming increasingly problematic and requires a reconsideration, because the dreams of immersion of Diderot and Kurosawa are now a reality.

NOTES

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- 1 “Ah! mon ami, que la nature est belle dans ce petit canton! arrêtons-nous-y; la chaleur du jour commence à se faire sentir, couchons-nous le long de ces animaux. Tandis que nous admirerons l’ouvrage du Créateur, la conversation de ce pâtre et de cette paysanne nous amusera ; nos oreilles ne dédaigneront pas les sons rustiques de ce bouvier [...] Et lorsque le poids du jour sera tombé nous continuerons notre route, et dans un temps plus éloigné, nous nous rappellerons encore cet endroit enchanté et l’heure délicieuse que nous y avons passée.” Author’s translation.

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VIRTUAL ENTRY INTO A LANDSCAPE IN THE PRE-DIGITAL AGE: FROM THE PICTURESQUE JOURNEYS OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE IN AKIRA KUROSAWA'S DREAMS (1990)

Abstract

In the evolution towards virtualisation, numerous visual devices have used the landscape motif as a tool for experimenting with the viewer's gaze. From the landscape paintings of the 17th century to most of the pre-cinematic viewing devices of the 19th century, and finally to the use of superimposition in 20th century cinema prior to the digital age, numerous examples of the prevalence of the landscape-virtuality binary can be found. This raises the questions of what landscape art has contributed to virtual culture and the place virtuality occupies in landscape historiography. In order to answer both these questions, this article takes an archaeological approach to landscape depiction, beginning with a consideration of the influence that the concept of the picturesque had on the visual culture of the late eighteenth century, followed by an analysis of its evolution and impact on devices and approaches to viewing that presaged the act of entering virtual worlds prior to the introduction of digital technology. This exploration reveals the connections between landscape forms of different time periods and, in parallel, studies how these forms are inscribed in an imaginary of the landscape that has traditionally been based on reality.

Key words

Landscape; Immersion; Virtual; Cinema; Painting; Pre-Cinema; Viewing Device; Picturesque.

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ADENTRARSE VIRTUALMENTE EN UN PAISAJE EN LA ERA PRE-DIGITAL: DE LOS VIAJES PINTOESCOS DEL SIGLO XIX AL RECORRIDO INMERSIVO DE LOS SUEÑOS DE AKIRA KUROSAWA (1990)

Resumen

En el camino hacia la virtualización, múltiples dispositivos de visión han utilizado el motivo del paisaje como herramienta para experimentar con la mirada del observador. Desde las pinturas de paisaje del siglo XVII, pasando por gran parte de los aparatos visuales precinematográficos del siglo XIX, hasta llegar a las sobreimpresiones cinematográficas del siglo XX previas al digital, podemos encontrar muestras de la pregnancia del binomio paisaje-virtualidad. Ante este hecho nos preguntamos, por un lado, ¿qué ha aportado el paisaje en el seno de la cultura virtual?, y por otro lado, ¿qué lugar ocupa la virtualidad en la historiografía del paisaje? Para dar respuesta a ambas preguntas, el siguiente artículo realiza una arqueología de la representación paisajística, partiendo de la influencia que tuvo la categoría de lo pintoresco en la cultura visual de finales del siglo XVIII, para posteriormente analizar su evolución e influencia en artilugios y planteamientos visuales que, antes de la llegada de la tecnología digital, prefiguran la acción de adentrarse en mundos virtuales. A través de este recorrido se evidencia el vínculo entre formas paisajísticas distintas y distantes en el tiempo y, en paralelo, se estudia cómo éstas se inscriben en el imaginario paisajístico, tradicionalmente basado en la realidad.

Palabras clave

Paisaje; inmersión; virtual; cine; pintura; precine; dispositivo de visión; pintoresco.

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CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: IMMERSIVE AUDIENCES. BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

MARTA LOPERA-MÁRMOL
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MANEL JIMÉNEZ-MORALES

FROM BORGES TO NETFLIX: THE RECYCLED NARRATIVES

The interactive genre and format of “choose your own adventure” was first introduced by Edward Packard’s novel *Sugarcane Island* (1976) and based on models that, from a conceptual point of view, had been introduced into the literature by Borges with *The Garden of Forking Paths* (*El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, 1942), and Italo Calvino, in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (*Il Castello dei destini incrociati*, 1973) and even *If a winter night a traveller* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979). In 1992, Interfilm produced four interactive films after signing a deal with Sony that allowed audiences to choose the scenes through a remote control installed in the armrests of the theatres, but the films failed for different reasons; film critics and audiences disliked the genre, there was a shift towards the online medium, and there was not enough investment on marketing cam-

paigns (Elnahla, 2020). Hence, “Interfilm, called the “first interactive film studio”, ceased to exist and the experimental theatres were dismantled” (Napoli, 1998). Nonetheless, in “2016, *Late Shift*, a game-movie hybrid created by CtrlMovie, a small studio in Switzerland—became the first successful interactive film produced” (Elnahla, 2020). Echoing this phenomenon in 2017, Netflix released *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*, and two years after, the hyper-narrative interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2019), with an experimental tone directed by David Slade.

Black Mirror (Charlie Brooker, Channel 4, Netflix, 2011-2019) is an award-winning anthological and techno paranoia TV series, clearly inspired by *Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, CBS, 1959–1964), with narratives set in near-future dystopias and sci-fi technology that comment on contemporary social and political issues. Charlie Brooker created the series with heavy involvement by executive producer Annabel Jones, and it was aired on Channel

4 from 2011 to 2013, including a special episode titled *White Christmas* in 2014 that held a Britishness that would be diluted when the series moved to Netflix, where three further series aired in 2016, 2017 and 2019. Nevertheless, it is improbable that TV series will return to Netflix, given complicated legal disputes; Annabel Jones and Charlie Brooker have departed Endemol Shine Group to start their own new company. *Bandersnatch* is the first movie from the *Black Mirror* saga, and the plot is set in 1984, predating the world of apps and downloadable consciousness. The chosen year is very significant, it's Orwell's novel about surveillance and biopolitics further described by Foucault, and an emblematic moment for science fiction in literature. Together with Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) at the film level, both introduced a criticism to scientific and political views in a futuristic and modified present—yet seen feasible—the same way *Black Mirror* does. *Bandersnatch*'s plot, clearly under the *hyper-narrative interactive cinema* framework revolves around a young programmer, Stefan Butler, who starts to question reality when he adapts a mad writer's fantasy novel into a video game with videogame's company help, Tickersoft.

The term *hyper-narrative interactive cinema* was first coined by Shaul (2008). Its function can be defined as “hyper-narrative structures, interaction and audio-visual design [that] should manage the multi-tasking split-attention problems these constructs engender and—most importantly—use this multi-tasking to enhance rather than reduce engagement” (2008: 12). Along those lines, *Bandersnatch* marks a breakthrough for interactive storytelling turning the classic narrative of “choose your adventure” to “what those adventures could be”, that is, it predicts a future of what the television spectrum can become, it presents us with the possibility of making something factual into something real. Through a coding polarity of ones and zeros, Netflix has developed an algorithm to see the alid and down moments of its

AUDIENCES' FORM OF CONSUMPTION HAS CHANGED THROUGHOUT CINEMA HISTORY, SO THE MODES OF PRODUCTION HAVE ALSO BEEN ALTERED, MAINLY WITH THE COMPETITIVENESS OF STREAMING PLATFORMS

series at a narrative level from an audience reception perspective, which can allow them to make all the shifts necessary to avoid failing on the attention span, at the same time its algorithm chooses similar titles and covers of series and films that its particular consumer might be interested. This phenomenon turns the viewer into a TV-user, a notion that has already passed the concept of *prosumer* and makes him/her also the co-creator of the narrative—although not truly—. This active responsibility in the audience follows the US tradition of *uchronia* and counterfactual exploration, both in the field of superhero comic books, with the Marvel series *What If?* (1977-) and in the cinema and popular narrative Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009); Philip K. Dick's *The man in the high castle* (1962) and television fiction *Fringe* (J. J. Abrams, Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci, Fox: 2008-2013), *The man in the high castle* (Frank Spotnitz, Eric Overmyer, Amazon Studios: 2015-2019) or *What If* (A. C. Bradley, Disney +: 2021).

The film guides the viewer/player down a path that is already set to one degree or another—although complex—, but it doesn't stop being a mere illusion of choice. Undeniably, audiences' form of consumption has changed throughout cinema history, so the modes of production have also been altered, mainly with the competitiveness of streaming platforms. Thus, the way of narrating stories has evolved to meet the new needs of a public thirsty to discover the latest innovations. Nonetheless, *Bandersnatch* doesn't give viewers authentic free action, “but one which is strictly confined by the nature of the medium itself and as

much as the praise for it focused on its innovative branching narrative” (McSweeney, Stuart, 2019: 277). Hence, *Bandersnatch* shows that free will is unattainable, and those choices are already given to us by societal rules and control mechanisms in a Foucaultian panoptical manner (Foucault, 2012). Netflix has used a “story control” strategy that Aparici and García Martín (2017:21- 22) have compared with “building a reality of the *ad hoc* world according to the interests of the authority in order to reproduce and preserve the established order”. Moreover, *Bandersnatch* plays between the classical narration and the videogame; in fact, the movie is not only thematically about video games but acts as one. It presents itself as a blend of a video game and a film. Nonetheless, the film lacks free will, autonomy, and independence from the plot for the viewer to enroll fully, and that is precisely the self-parody of *Bandersnatch*. It presents criticism of the loss of individuality over the concept of choice. The film also themes the transformation in which technology affects reality, its main character lacks—as the audience—free will, and its existence depends on the instant but the post-geographical and historical setting.

From the point of view of the interactive design of the story, the display of decisions that do not allow generating alternative routes or creating

other endings fits Netflix’s desire to adapt *Bandersnatch* reception to the most extended smart-tv devices and a level of medium demand on TV-users (Scolari, 2016). Despite its shape and allusion to a mirror-universe like that of the video game, *Bandersnatch* does not exactly fit the autonomous idea of ergodic fiction (Aarseth, 1997; Eichner, 2014; Crisóstomo, 2021), autonomous, self-guided, and exploratory, which has recognized literary exponents such as *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski or *S* (2013) by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. A vital element of the whole immersive experience is *Black Mirror*’s proposal as a comparison with other apps and social media platforms; while *Tik Tok*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, etc., allow an interaction algorithm in real-time and often in a self-learning manner, television series and TV movies have not yet presented that possibility to that extent, which can cause a paradoxical, comparative feeling in the audience, who is now used to getting an immediate response of the algorithm to any of its choices. Nonetheless, it positions itself as an in-between possibility. However, the production of the proposal would be pretty hard to follow in future audio-visual oeuvres—mainly if they do not count on a big budget—. The interactive movie consists of 250 segments with a total duration of 312 minutes. Undoubtedly, questioning how the industry can finance and develop as a format, maybe as they did later on with *Unbreakable Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (2020) with thirteen endings and fewer segments.

There is another relevant question when analyzing the interactive design of *Bandersnatch* concerning the rest of the social media platforms. It is about the user interface and its different mechanics. While in social networks, the interface promotes a type of *distributed browsing* based on algorithmic processing and generally horizontal dissemination of content, the *Bandersnatch* interface is based on a type of *distributive browsing*, which leads the user to options chosen by him/herself but without any wish to create a culture of

WHILE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS, THE INTERFACE PROMOTES A TYPE OF DISTRIBUTED BROWSING BASED ON ALGORITHMIC PROCESSING AND GENERALLY HORIZONTAL DISSEMINATION OF CONTENT, THE BANDERSNATCH INTERFACE IS BASED ON A TYPE OF DISTRIBUTIVE BROWSING, WHICH LEADS THE USER TO OPTIONS CHOSEN BY HIM/HERSELF BUT WITHOUT ANY WISH TO CREATE A CULTURE OF SHARING AND PARTICIPATION

sharing and participation. *Bandersnatch*'s browsing interface ignores the community element that social networks contain and offers a restrictive computational environment in contrast to social network platforms. By neglecting the idea of the *algorithmic community* (Klobucar, 2011), a clash occurs. This mismatch between digital ecosystems, also in their design and aesthetic formulas, directly causes an inconsistency in the expectations of the *Bandersnatch* user. Accustomed to the current inertia to distributive browsing and the creation of algorithmic communities, he/she/they finds here what could be a supposedly anachronistic device, which favors its structure for production reasons, but also because it seeks to bring back a past and more rudimentary interactive experience, as we have pointed out and will see later.

Watching and playing (Papazian & Sommers, 2013; Perron & Arsenault, 2015) are the two extremes of a narrative process of continuous entry and eviction of the story that links contemporary movies, series, and video games. In this link, which generates an imaginary reciprocity capable of engendering an interactive television experiment like *Bandersnatch* at the same time as serialized adaptations of acclaimed video games like *The Last of Us* (Craig Mazin, Neil Druckmann, HBO, 2023), there is a third element that is social networks. Precisely for this reason, the research described below starts from the economic dimension and the business and advertising possibilities of a limited model of interactivity that has its echo in the networks to broaden its hermeneutic scope to two essential nuclei that link cinema, television fiction, video games, audiovisual and social networks in the era of platforms: on the one hand, the nostalgia and the effects of the archive structure provided by the platforms in the form of a repository and, on the other, the importance of the notion of the multiverse and the coexistence of narrative alternatives that this same structure lavishes.

Precisely for this reason, a plural theoretical and methodological approach is necessary, attentive both to a hermeneutics of devices (Pintor, 2021) cultural studies on phenomena such as melancholy (Pintor, 2009), and nostalgia (Boym, 2001), sociology and philosophy of culture (Berardi, 2020, 2021) and cultural studies, to the contributions of video game theory (Pérez, 2021, 2012) and to a history of television and the construction of multiverses and counterfactual fictions whose origin goes back to literature and comics. *Bandersnatch* is, above all, a cultural object whose features are configured as "cultural symptoms" (Cassirer, 1987) at a central crossroads for modes of audiovisual consumption, in which the multiplication of screens and modes of interaction suggests the possibility of different narratives. At its base, however, common themes and structures, universal narrative patterns (Balló, Pérez, 2006) survive as the essential way of dialoguing with the essential narrative forms. As far as audiovisual fictions are always recognition machines of the human, what kind of image of ourselves does *Bandersnatch* give us back?

OPENING A NEW WORLD FOR ADVERTISING: INTERACTIVE ADVERTISING

For the first time, *Black Mirror*'s users find themselves being affected by the same technology and it shows them the worst of themselves by allowing them to control the characters in the film from their privileged position. Netflix announced that it will invest more into interactive narratives—moving into other genres—which positions *Bandersnatch* as the pilot and harbinger for future proposals. In this sense, *Bandersnatch* is a logical step forward from the techno-centered critical plot about "control society" (Deleuze, 1990) of the firsts *Black Mirror* seasons to a new model of techno-environment experience exploring the origins of contemporary immersive experiences. Unsurprisingly, 1984 is the birth year of the Ap-

ple-Macintosh visual environment, the CD-Rom as physical support for interactivity—that went on for decades—and even that of the Metaverse Marc Zuckerberg’s promoter.

Audiences are now using the devices themselves and feeling the automated disaffection that these can cause. *Black Mirror* had already explored the possibilities of subjective vision, of being situated in the character’s eyes, in episodes as significant as *The Entire History of You* (#1x03), *Men Against Fire* (#3x05) or *Nosedive* (#3x01), under a quasi-voyeuristic tradition that takes root in cinematographic works such as *The Lady of the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960). However, *Bandersnatch* exposes also how the user enjoys the characters’ suffering, so much so that even having the possibility of avoiding tragedies, he/she chooses to see what happens.

Bandersnatch breakthrough as a new business model for advertising, coined by Lopera-Mármol *et al.* (2020) as *interactive advertising*, in which the consumer gets targeted via big data through some sort of entertainment media form. The known not-so-free choices act as a way of choosing the narrative and the path of the main character and gather audiences’ data by making them choose products from different brands, asking them whether they would eat *Frosted Flakes* or *Sugar Puffs* for breakfast. In other words, it acts as a former product placement enhancement, but that can be later on micro-segmented by the statistics obtained. Those results can afterwards be applied and marketed within the platform or go further and sell raw data to product companies. As mentioned, Netflix previously studied user engagement with its content. By doing so, they could track real decisions. “The main character is controlled by the interactor, which is limited to binary choices, one of which will be chosen automatically, if they do not decide before a timer runs out” (Roth, Koentiz, 2019: 253). Curiously, while being present and even made evident to audiences, this

type of data collection was not the reason for the rejection of the hyper-narrative *interactive film* but instead was seen as a game. Thus, “*Bandersnatch* enabled Netflix to track real decisions and gather the information that could ascertain user’s musical tastes, genre and product preferences” (Lopera-Mármol *et al.*, 2020: 165).

CURIOSLY, WHILE BEING PRESENT AND EVEN MADE EVIDENT TO AUDIENCES, THIS TYPE OF DATA COLLECTION WAS NOT THE REASON FOR THE REJECTION OF THE HYPER-NARRATIVE INTERACTIVE FILM BUT INSTEAD WAS SEEN AS A GAME

Because of its narrative structure, *Bandersnatch* constitutes an apparatus (Foucault, 1979: 33) attuned to contemporary social surveillance (Dubrofsky, 2011; Jones, 2016, MacIsaac *et al.*, 2018), with which Byung Chul-Han (2015a, 2015b, 2018) has called a society of transparency and exploitation expanding Foucault and Deleuze’s work. Indeed, the kind of data collecting that *Bandersnatch* promotes can be seen as part of the “lateral” (Andrejevic, 2005), “social” (Marwick, 2012) or “horizontal” (Gill, 2017) surveillance logic that characterizes post-social media society or what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls “surveillance capitalism”, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2019, 2020, 2021) “semicapitalism” and Herbert A. Simon (1971) “attention economy”. In the same way that we deliver our data to the smartphone, smart-tv or tablet apps and monitor our own physical patterns, *Bandersnatch* reveals, in a certain way, the possibility of overlapping television fiction and the behavior of social apps. This new way of data mining by Netflix can be used to steer choices in the writer’s room and future projects. Considering that from now it only presents users with two options, they are very tailor-made for data harvesting, and it opens a field for the future for the

streaming platform to present scenarios with a more significant number of choices. *Black Mirror's* interactive movie probably did not get the results people expected. Nonetheless, the creators would undertake a similar project since they observed: “that 94 per cent of viewers were actively making those choices” (Strause, 2019).

THE ETERNAL QUESTION: LACK OF ORIGINALITY OR NOSTALGIA?

Bandersnatch, as mentioned, offers an authentic recreation of the 1980s from cereal packs, clothes, cars, and music to computers, leading to a nostalgia for the era which has been pervasive during the second decade of the 21st century. “Thematically, however, the decision to set the film in the 1980s is primarily connected to the fledgling years of the video games industry” (McSweeney and Stuart, 2018). Like many other postmodern television series of the Netflix stamp, such as *Stranger Things* (Matt & Ross Duffer, Netflix: 2016-), *Everything Sucks!* (Ben York, Michael Mohan, Netflix: 2018-), *TEOTFW* (Jonathan Entwistle, Charles S. Forsman, Channel 4, Netflix, 2017- 2019) has a nostalgic tone. In fact, the *Black Mirror* critique of the transhuman dystopia episode *San Junipero* (#3x04) embodies Svetlana Boym’s ideas in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and is an endorsement of sanitized nostalgia. Almost as if it were a mannerism, this sort of *retromania* phenomenon coined by Reynolds (2011) responds to the success of reruns of analogue era into digital platforms with shows such as *Dawson’s Creek* (Kevin Williamson, WB, 1998-2003) or *Friends* (Marta Kauffman, David Crane, NBC, 1994-2004), reboots such as *Bel-Air* (Andy Borowitz, Susan Borowitz, Peacock, 2022-) from the iconic *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Andy Borowitz, Susan Borowitz, NBC, 1990-1996) and revivals like *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Amy Sherman-Palladino, Netflix, 2016), but also responds to the fact that—due to its DVD rent origin—Netflix’s *raison d’être* is nostalgia, in

other words, “nostalgia is written into its brand identity” (Fradley, 2020: 231).

It is the *depthlessness* concept that Frederic Jameson (1991) assertively coined: newer TV series are falling under a repetitive frame of older styles which in turns becomes a style in itself, and no “originals” or “prototype” are there to be found. Hence, this phenomenon alludes to a limitation within Netflix’s nostalgia that can be understood as politically insipid since it “effectively renders any backward-looking televisual artifact “nostalgic” by default” (Fradley, 2020: 232). Netflix offers a nostalgic component not only because of the particularities of its content. The idea of nostalgia appears imprinted in the concept of a repository, which is, in short, any on-demand platform. As Giulia Taurino (2019: 10) points out, “The metaphor of the library, or of a catalog, containing a collection of audiovisual texts, results particularly effective to describe Netflix’s inner dynamics. When the memory of a movie or a television show is not only stored in an inventory, but also indexed and made available to search, mediated nostalgia can become an intrinsic property for the sustainability of the Netflix archive and its business model in multiple ways”. In that sense, *Bandersnatch* offers a meta-discursive interpretation of the notion of the repository, straightly referring to the archivist condition of Netflix—with multiple options stored in its narrative—and embracing the term *nostalgia* beyond the context of the plot or the re-programming choices of the platform.

Unlike melancholy, whose implantation in post-9/11 television fiction roots the concept in a cultural and even medical tradition (Burton, 1652; Panofsky-Klibansky-Saxl, 1964) that dates back to Greek antiquity (Pintor, 2009), nostalgia—of the Greek νόστος [nóstos], “return”, and ἄλγος [álgos], “pain”—is a relatively modern concept, used to address the soldiers’ longing for home. From the point of view of the study of television fiction, how a series like *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, AMC: 2007-2015), al-

ready the final chapter of its first season, defines the idea of nostalgia from one of the products that the protagonist, Don Draper (John Hamm), sells the Kodak slide carousel: "It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards... it takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel. It's called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved." *Bandersnatch*, in this sense, participates in an exercise in nostalgia that transcends the mood, the subject and the historical period evoked and that concerns the whole of Golden Age television fiction and the current serial expansion of the MCU, the Marvel Cinematic Universe: the idea of the plurality of alternatives, the multiverse.

IF WE UNDERSTAND THAT SCI-FI ALWAYS CONSTITUTES A TESTIMONY OF THE VULNERABILITY OF EACH ERA, AN IMPLICIT REPRESENTATION OF THE IMAGINARY OF THE CATASTROPHE AND THE STORY OF THE PERMANENT POSSIBILITY OF OTHERNESS, THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT THE BANDERSNATCH SCALE OF DECISIONS TRIES TO TRANSFER IN A PIONEERING WAY TO THE SPHERE OF TELEVISION CONSUMPTION.

Indeed, just as J. J. Abrams and David Lindelof nurtured series such as *Alias* (J. J. Abrams, ABC: 2001-2006), *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004-2010), *Fringe* and *Leftovers* (Damon Lindelof, Tom Perrotta, HBO: 2014-2017) with multiverses and alternative dimensions taken directly from the narrative of comic-book series such as *Fantastic 4* and *X-Men*, *Bandersnatch* embraces a diversification of alternatives in which both literary ascendants and

comic-books and video games coincide. When the screenwriter Julius Schwartz resurrected in 1956 a super heroic character like the Flash and corrected issues of narrative continuity with the old Flash thanks to the incorporation of parallel and alternative dimensions, a path was opened that, although paleo television only explored punctually in some episodes of series such as *The Twilight Zone*, breeds contemporary seriality, from Marvel series such as *WandaVision* (Jac Schaeffer, Disney+, 2021), *Moon Knight* (Jeremy Slater, Disney+, 2022) or *S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, ABC-Marvel, 2013-2020) to series like *Stranger Things* or experiments as radical as *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch, Showtime, 2017).

In the rest of the *Black Mirror* episodes, the idea of alternatives appears limited in the same way as the future projected is increasingly closer to the present in a redefinition of the sci-fi genre (Pintor, 2018). Conversely, *Bandersnatch* turns into a past in which plural narrative options seem more plausible and fit the fashion of the aforementioned eighties: choose your own adventure books. Although the elements that shape *Bandersnatch* do not necessarily conform to the codes of that science fiction, the projection into the story's past and the multi-option structural logic do. If we understand that sci-fi always constitutes a testimony of the vulnerability of each era, an implicit representation of the imaginary of the catastrophe and the story of the permanent possibility of otherness, that is precisely what the *Bandersnatch* scale of decisions tries to transfer in a pioneering way to the sphere of television consumption. Also, in this sense, this work can be placed in the context of the thematic guidelines that emerged in the different ages of post-9/11 television seriality: the dialogue with otherness that has allowed sustaining the great discourses of TV fiction from that fundamental date—the terrorist threat, the plot, the vulnerability, the mourning for the loss, the search for safe spaces and, above all,

the counterfactual reversion of dramatic events, from *Fringe* to *Devs* (Alex Garland, Hulu, 2020)—is also the one that *Black Mirror* has identified in its well-known icon, that of the smartphone's broken screen.

For *Bandersnatch*, the real threat is not only that of that broken screen that identifies the logic of video surveillance or the substitution of traditional emotions for vicarious forms in a perfect fit with the Baudrillardian critique of contemporary society (Jiménez-Morales, Lopera-Mármol, 2018)—Is it possible to imagine a more heartbreaking sequence than that of the couple in *The Entire Story of You* making love while playing the first time they did it with their device?—, but an even greater one: the possible futility of the exercise of choice itself. If, as Borges has pointed out when referring precisely to multi-optionality, “all men are the same man”, any individual who lived an eternal time or, at least, a very long time, would tend to accumulate all experiences by elimination of options. The essential question of eligibility in contemporary narrative supports, from television to apps, video games or literature, is the possibility of generating a differential experience, that is, that, eventually, a user manages to create a new option both for himself and, potentially, for others.

Although this would displace the discourse towards participatory fiction, the “fan-made” audiovisual and the “user-generated content” (Cason, 2007; Askwith, 2007; Evans, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Scolari, 2014), what is most relevant is to conceive to what extent a fiction such as the one proposed by *Bandersnatch* can interpenetrate with social networks and openly connected devices.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is a means to be, a question to be made, an invitation to problematization rather than a cinematographic piece based on the construction and arches of the characters, the plot, the cliff-hangers, and the aesthet-

ics (Bernstein, 2019: 496). The film is a paradox, and it sells the idea that audiences are being invited to join an immersive adventure, and while it does, up to a point, it is genuinely a criticism of the lack of choice. The user does not control *Black Mirror*. It is *Black Mirror* that controls the user. It seems to be a new idea that could switch the way television and film fields and spectrums are conceived but aren't yet as successful as the apps they are trying to catch up with, and they try to do so with an archaic yet a compelling form of old literature. In *Bandersnatch's* narrative, decentralization is shaped via existential inquiry, the pressure of choice, the desire of the individual to move out of time and space with the technology and escape to reality with gamification, presenting itself as a diluted form of a videogame. However, the film does not hold onto a center with its narrative structure that moves away from time and space but emphasizes the decentralized structure with its interactive setup, which “granting full agency seems not possible with the current Netflix technology and pre-recorded material. It is, therefore, crucial to identify design strategies for offering the audience meaningful choices that use the limited agency this format provides to the best effect” (Roth & Koenitz, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, *Bandersnatch* didn't get quite the recognition that it would have been expected from a “made in Black Mirror” stamp. Firstly, there was a lack of originality within the proposal, although there were few metanarrative winks to past episodes and even in one of the endings, a website is created—following the original one of the themes—*Tuckersoft*.¹ This meta-narrative aspect allows it to include another “episode” from the film. Secondly, while trying to be in between videogames and film, it had shallow interaction compared to other works, there was a lack of dramatic development, and the options offered to viewers are limited, especially if we consider those familiar with video games. Thirdly, the plot wasn't as developed and jaw-dropping as other *Black Mirror* episodes.

Bandersnatch highlights the main features of interactive fiction cinema today. On the one hand, the connectivity, both devices as users, becomes an active agent in creating the narrative, although a pre-established script is followed, which helps develop the transmedia narrative. On the other hand, virtuality is presented as a space for interaction and data gathering with advertising and search engine optimization tools and the hypermediation of the supports. Interactive fiction films are experiments following a production pattern that, through different strategies, try to involve the viewer and require the users' participation to make sense. By creating *Bandersnatch*, Netflix was able to get more data from its subscribers and potentially for companies (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2019) and stand out among other streaming platforms with an original form of audio-visual from one of their most well-known TV series, becoming the brand's innovation badge.

The essential contribution of *Bandersnatch* is the experience and consolidation of a new mode of interaction with the audience, including the attempt at a new definition of the very notion of audience based on the user and the idea of gameplay (Pérez, 2012). In many ways, and as Berardi (2019, 2020) points out, the gradual substitution of the phenomena of physical conjunction in society by the digital connection has generated a redefinition of the public sphere. Within this redefinition, networks and fragmented consumption foster an emotional turn in which video games (Pérez, 2021), networks (Berardi, 2021) and television series (Pintor, 2015, 2015b, 2017, 2018, 2018b) have become the productive center of the visual, narrative, and relational modes of contemporary society. *Bandersnatch* is a symptomatic product in terms of nostalgia, the idea of the platform as a repository transferred to the narrative itself, and the reprogramming of modes of consumption that also reveals the paradox of the link between the notion of interactivity and verticality that the algorithms print on the commercial model of the platforms. ■

NOTES

- 1 Available at <https://tuckersoft.net/ealing20541/history/>

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CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: IMMERSIVE AUDIENCES. BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

Abstract

In 2019, Netflix, with an intent to seek alternatives to survive, jump on the big data trend and satisfy new audiences, released a hyper-narrative interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* based on non-linear stories and a web of decisions, following a “choose your adventure” literature structure with a solid nostalgic tone characteristic of its *raison d'être* and postmodern TV series. The film proves that free will is actually unattainable and that choices are already given to us in a Foucaultian panoptical manner (Foucault, 2012). Hence, immersive audiences are not as involved in the narrative as it could be perceived at first glance but are instead used as an element of big data and market segmentation. Nonetheless, *Bandersnatch* explores and becomes a breakthrough as another form of perceiving and conceptualizing television and the film spectrum. Beyond its thematic video game approach, the interactive film acts like one. It is a blend between a video game and a film. In conclusion, the experimental film does not hold onto a center with its narrative structure since it moves away from time and space but instead emphasizes the decentralized structure with its interactive setup that wants to become more than a viewing experience for audiences.

Key words

Black Mirror; *Bandersnatch* Interactive; Movie; Videogame; Immersive, TV Series; Audiences.

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ESCOGE TU AVENTURA: AUDIENCIAS INMERSIVAS. EL CASO DE ESTUDIO DE BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH

Resumen

En 2019, Netflix, con la intención de buscar alternativas para sobrevivir, sumarse a la tendencia del *big data* y satisfacer nuevas audiencias, estrenó una película interactiva hipernarrativa *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* basada en una red de decisiones y en historias no lineales, siguiendo una estructura literaria de “Elige tu aventura” con un sólido tono nostálgico característico de su razón de ser y típico de las series de televisión posmodernas. La película demuestra que la voluntad es en realidad inalcanzable y que las opciones ya se nos dan de manera panóptica foucaultiana (Foucault, 2012). Por lo tanto, las audiencias inmersivas no están tan involucradas en la narrativa como podría percibirse a primera vista, sino que se utilizan como un elemento de big data y segmentación de mercado. No obstante, *Bandersnatch* explora y se convierte en un gran avance como otra forma de percibir y conceptualizar la televisión y el espectro cinematográfico. Más allá de su enfoque de videojuego temático, la película interactiva actúa como tal. Es una mezcla entre un videojuego y una película. En conclusión, la película experimental no se aferra a un centro con su estructura narrativa ya que se aleja del tiempo y el espacio, sino que enfatiza la estructura descentralizada con su configuración interactiva que quiere convertirse en algo más que una experiencia visual para el público.

Palabras clave

Black Mirror; *Bandersnatch* interactivo; Película; Videojuego; Inmersivo; Series de televisión; Audiences.

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FICTION AS A SKYLIGHT: SELF-REFERENCE, IRONY AND DISTANCE IN *THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS* (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)*

JOSÉ ANTONIO PALAO ERRANDO**

I. INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL CULTURE AND FILMIC DISCOURSE

The 1990s marked a significant shift in the late-modern episteme, as cybernetics entered popular culture for the first time. IT systems were no longer the exclusive property of big corporations and the State (or of the expert hackers who infiltrated them), and the computer turned into simply another household item. By the 1980s, Apple had already begun marketing the world's first personal computer, the Macintosh, and to make the ad to publicise it they turned to none other than Ridley Scott, whose film *Blade Runner* (1982) was the most acclaimed work of cyberpunk up to that time (Palao Errando, García Catalán, 2014). But what really stabilised the presence of information technology in popular culture was the birth of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, Fischetti, 2000), which brought the internet within reach of the masses.

This first stage digital culture (Web 1.0) introduced two imaginaries that became deeply ingrained in science fiction and in popular culture in general. There was general agreement among the intellectuals in this period, whether they took an apocalyptic or an integrated view of mass culture (Eco, 1985), that the future of humanity would include widespread use of virtual reality. At the same time, the romantic imaginary of the hacker culture—which, as Ridley Scott's Apple ad makes perfectly clear, can be traced back to the 1980s—was established as the realm of cybernetic cowboys and mavericks, labelled with the term *cyberpunk*. Cyberspace was to be the setting for epistemic communism, the battle against the Establishment and the unmasking of government power.

We know, however, that this never happened. The immersive ideal of VR never entered the market as an object of mass consumption, and it was never established as a new mass medium. Instead,

since the beginning of the 21st century, screens have proliferated as interfaces (Català Doménech, 2010; Verhoeff, 2012; Pinotti, 2021), in what has come to be referred to as the visual turn or visual culture (Mitchell, 1994; Mirzoeff, 2003). First came the operating systems for personal computers, in the cases of both Apple and Microsoft, the latter under the explicit name of Windows, with obvious roots in Albertian perspective. Then came the so-called pervasive media (Dovey, Fleuriot, 2012), with structures and a potential reach of increasing complexity, whose features are tactile and interactive but not immersive. As I predicted some years ago (Palao Errando, 2004), Western (and, by extension, global) culture has proven quite incapable of giving up the *anisotropic* framing that is one of its greatest and most expressive achievements.

At the same time, the conception of the internet has changed substantially since the turn of the millennium and the old label of *cyberspace* has been replaced by various terms combined with the adjective “digital”—or directly by the term *cloud*—which in turn gave rise to the term *Internet of Things* (Sendler, 2017). It could be argued that virtual space is no longer conceived of

as an alternative to physical, material space, but has instead been categorised as a privileged gateway to that alternative space. The conception of an experience as a commodity or as a service (Grevtsova, Sibina, 2020) and its gamification still uses the concept of immersion, but now it is an immersion without extraction, an isolation from the environment without actually leaving the environment (Fisher, 2016).

In the area of cinematic discourse, the 1990s were also characterised by spectacle overload, the product of the vast visual potential of digital technology, which seemed to render traditional editing—and with it, the very laws of classical cinematographic syntax—irrelevant to some extent. This led some scholars to speculate about a possible renaissance of the cinema of attractions in post-classical filmmaking (Company, Marzal Felici, 1999; Strauven, 2006). From the second film in the Matrix trilogy Strauven took the adjective *reloaded*, which would prove useful in theoretical and philosophical approaches to this phenomenon. Visual effects based on digital technologies were so much a focus of attraction in this era that they gave rise to an audiovisual product which, like the video clip in the 1980s, would often be broadcast in the spaces between television programming at a time when information had become its core element: the “making-of”. It might be argued that cinema found itself in a position to compete with all the other screens with which it was obliged to coexist by claiming the territory of pleasure, heart-racing experiences and adrenaline rushes, the strongest illusion of immersion and the *reality effect* (Oudart, 1971).

However, what has characterised filmic discourse since the first decade of this century is not just spectacle but disruption of the very texture of the narrative. Filmmakers became aware that merely ratcheting up the spectacle would not be enough to give cinema a competitive edge (as it had given the television screen), that the *ergodic* (Aarseth, 1997; Ryan, 2004) and interactive com-

THE ANTI-ERGODIC VARIETY OF THE MIND GAME FILM COULD BE CONSIDERED THE ONLY POSSIBLE KIND OF FILM NARRATIVE THAT COULD EXPAND TO OTHER SCREENS, MAINLY VIA STREAMING PLATFORMS. A FRACTURED PLOT IS BEYOND THE REACH OF INTERACTIVITY. THE MAIN DIFFERENCE OF THE FILMIC MEDIUM IN DIGITAL CULTURE IS THUS THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF ITS NARRATIVE POWER IN THE AGE OF NARRATIVES. POLITICAL NARRATIVE OR A VIDEO GAME IS NOT NECESSARILY A STORY, BUT A FILM NARRATIVE IS

ponent of digital screens offered an advantage that television lacked. The non-linear narrative is not so much the product of the influence of digital narratives as it is a strategy to outdo their inherent interactivity. The most conspicuous feature of post-classical cinema is the increasing complexity of narrative worlds (Loriguillo-López, 2018), which has led to the introduction of terms such as *puzzle films* and *mind-game films* (Buckland, 2009; Palao Errando, Loriguillo-López, Sorolla-Romero, 2018; Elsaesser, 2021; Sorolla-Romero, 2022). These films sometimes involve shocking twists in the plotlines that push the structures inherited from classical cinema to the limit without actually breaking them down altogether, as they depend on those structures as the only way of connecting with the spectator (Loriguillo-López; Sorolla-Romero, 2014; Palao Errando, 2008). The anti-ergodic variety of the mind game film could be considered the only possible kind of film narrative that could expand to other screens, mainly via streaming platforms. A fractured plot is beyond the reach of interactivity. The main difference of the filmic medium in digital culture is thus the specific nature of its narrative power in the age of narratives. Political narrative or a video game is not necessarily a story, but a film narrative is.

The aim of this article is to offer a comparative analysis of the film *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) against the original trilogy (*The Matrix*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 1999; *The Matrix Reloaded*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 2003; and *The Matrix Revolutions*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 2003). The hypothesis to be tested is that while the basic theme of the first three films was immersion as simulacrum, the fourth opts instead to explore the aesthetic distance represented by the film screen. This distance is sustained by a parodic, self-reflexive approach that covers every aspect of the saga, including the circumstances of its production.

To this end, this article examines the immersive imaginary that informed early digital culture

and explores how it has redefined the filmic in order to show how the film is positioned in favour of that redefinition and against the immersive. The method used is a textual analysis of the sequences in the film that sustain the metafictional and metafilmic discourse and that serve as the cornerstone of Lana Wachowski's production.

2. THE FILMIC DIFFERENTIAL

Why then has cinema chosen to become a screen medium rather than an immersive medium? On the one hand, there is a critical and historiographic consensus (Baudry, 2016; Bazin, 1990; Burch, 1996; Company-Ramón, 2014; Elsaesser, 2016; Oudart, 1971) that identifies three roots of cinema:

Various popular traditions, such as fair-ground attractions.

The integration of elements drawn from typically bourgeois modes of representation, such as the novel, realist painting and theatre, the Romantic tradition, Impressionism, etc.

The influence of the scientific and technological impulse to break down movement for its subsequent analysis, as for the positivist scientist it is necessary to see everything to be able to analyse it scientifically.

The consequence is the Frankensteinian dream of a total reproduction of reality (Burch, 1996). In Bazin's words (2004: 21), cinema was an "idealistic phenomenon" because its invention was inspired by the myth of an integral realism, of "a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."

Once it had failed as a scientific instrument (Deleuze, 1984) and its value as a fairground attraction or simple popular diversion had been exhausted, the cinema turned to the narrative models of literature and theatre in order to become a respectable bourgeois art (Company-Ramón, 2014; Marzal Felici, 1998). But to do so, it also needed to

be faithful to the basic cinematographic apparatus, to use the terminology of Baudry and Oudart. As Mary-Laure Ryan (2004) points out, immersive attractions have always been viewed by academics as somewhat vulgar and could not have been chosen as an art form, although there obviously were approximations with what Thomas Elsaesser calls “Rube films” (Elsaesser, 2016; Jeong, 2012; Ng, 2021; Strauven, 2006) and those brought back in a way by interactive touch technologies (Ng, 2021; Strauven, 2021). Indeed, it could be argued that the fact that of all the different motion picture devices invented it would be the Lumières’ cinematograph that would prove successful confirms the theory that the most suitable artistic choice was the model of projection for viewing by multiple spectators in a darkened room and not the small-scale individualised viewing offered by apparatuses such as Edison’s kinetoscope, for example (Crary, 2001). Bourgeois art is necessarily autonomous (Bürger, 1987) and requires distance (Wolf, Bernhart, Mahler, 2013).

Clearly, this is not solely a bourgeois tradition but also a product of modernity with its roots in the new forms of storytelling and of visual representation that emerged since the Renaissance (Panofsky, 2003; Stoichita, 2000) in what Heidegger called the “age of the world picture” (Heidegger, 1995), whose *telos* was to make the entity (the world) available to the subject through a type of representation. It is thus hardly surprising that for the purposes of commercial distribution, late modern culture¹ would embrace anything that could be framed, shared and distributed on a screen. This seems to be key to explaining the shift towards screen transmediality (Zecca, 2012) rather than towards solipsistic immersion mechanisms. The filmic is always specifically framed on a screen, and contemporary variants of immersive experiences (theme parks, escape rooms, etc.) (Lukas, 2012; Williams, 2020) always end up being partial. It is curious that for neoliberal culture, immersion in an experience always involves

an element of escapism, and that video games, like television fiction or comic books, have had a hard time attracting scholarly attention, just as cinema did in its day.

3. THE MATRIX (LILY & LANA WACHOWSKI, 1999)

Most of the visual and plot references in *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) are to the original film, *The Matrix*.² A few characters are taken from the first two sequels (such as Niobe, Sati, and the Merovingian) and there are references to some of their lines in those films (Rodríguez Torres, 2021). But clearly, this analysis requires a consideration of some of the premises established by the 1999 film.

First of all, after recovering from the shock of seeing Trinity in the first sequence running up the wall, we realise that what we are watching on the screen is an immersive video game experience, but with the sharpness and graininess of live-action footage. In the Darwinian process of media selection, *The Matrix* thus embraces the blockbuster style of the 1990s, spiced up with heavy doses of allusions to film history (Trinity’s escape scene is an obvious nod to the opening sequence to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* [1958], as a way of hinting that what we are watching is a visual trick), film theory (Neo uses a hollowed-out copy of Jean Baudrillard’s book *Simulacra and Simulation* to stash the digital psychotropics he deals), literature (Lewis Carroll’s rabbit) and much more. It clearly sets out to offer viewers a spectacle, and the famous “bullet time” effect is the trademark of the franchise. In fact, *The Matrix* was the first film to be released on VHS in a two-tape pack that included a “making-of” documentary (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005).

The Matrix explicitly strives for an exceptional level of visual sharpness to point towards a digital realism that was not yet possible in 1999. This explains the preference for abandoned run-down

spaces and rubble. Neo and Trinity's attack on the government building offers the best example: a harmonious combination of choreographed acrobatics and material destruction. Equally noteworthy is the obsession in *The Matrix* with ancient sites, far from cybernetic—yet common in the visual virtuosity of video games, for example—where the atmosphere is embodied in more than the perfect geometric definition of the shapes. All of this is combined with the minimalist aesthetic of the empty space and Japanese architecture of the Dojo, where space is insubstantial lines, pure empty geometry.

The film's approach is also based on its capacity to invert the laws of Western framing, the centripetal force posited by Bazin (1990)³ and the aesthetic of essential moments described by Jacques Aumont (1997) with reference to Lessing's *Laocoon*. It is this power, expressed in the defiance of gravity, that provides the foundation for the possibility of Neo being the Chosen One (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005).

In short, *The Matrix* constructs a coherent textuality that conveys the spirit of an age marked by political, narrative and personal disorientation. All the ingredients of the post-Cold War world of the 1990s are there: the proposition of the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), the doubt over self-identity and destiny,⁴ the recourse to various arts of divination, the need to know the future, and the absence of an identifiable enemy who could be blamed for our malaise—at least until 11 September 2001.

And all of this is offered in an aesthetic and intellectual package that manages to combine video games, kung-fu choreography, Socrates, Plato and Baudrillard, to cite but a few examples. The film thus of course attracted a huge cohort of fans as well as a great number of academics, for the most part philosophers, led by Slavoj Žižek. Judeo-Christian theology is interwoven with Orientalism and New Age concepts to glorify a Messiah who is both a hacker and a trained hero, the

product of coaching, Fordist responsibility and the faith of others. A solemn epic cycle is set up in opposition not to relativism but to the absolute absence of effective motivation for moral behaviour, as reflected in the figure of Cypher, the Judas on the crew. The neoliberal episteme has serious difficulties substantiating any choice of freedom if it has to come up against pleasure. This is what Mark Fisher (2016) would classify 15 years later with the paradoxical label “depressive hedonia”, an inevitable correlative of the “reflexive impotence” that his teenage students suffered from.

4. THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

4.1 The two universes

In *The Matrix Resurrections*, life in the virtual world goes on while those living there are completely unaware of the events that occurred 60 chronological years earlier in the physical world. The first inhabitants we meet are the crew members of a hovercraft named the *Mnemosyne*, heir to the legendary *Nebuchadnezzar* captained by Morpheus. As will be discussed below, the name of the ship is highly significant. Neo and Trinity's story is unknown to those inside the Matrix and physical “exile” (there is a virtual exile as well) has preserved it in the form of a legend in an epic cycle. The new rebels are above all adherents to the Neo and Trinity cult.

In the Matrix, things are operating differently. For reasons initially unknown, Neo and Trinity have been resurrected. Under his old name of Thomas Anderson, Neo has acquired the identity of a video game designer acclaimed for a game he designed called the Matrix (obviously). While the old (or rather, young) Thomas Anderson worked for a company called Metacortex, this current version of Mr. Anderson is a partner in the significantly named Deus Machina, but he works on the orders of a so-called “boss”—the friend with whom he founded the company. Anderson's psycholog-



Image 1. Larry and Lana

ical condition is clearly unstable: he has attempted suicide and suffers from bouts of delirium, for which he meets regularly with a therapist. He is also fascinated with a housewife and mother (what in the United States might be described as a “soccer mom”) named Tiffany who frequents the same coffee shop he goes to—fittingly named Simulatte (Partearroyo, 2021)—and whom we can all see is in fact Trinity. Evidently, irony and coarse humour have replaced the solemnity of the original trilogy. The plural form of “resurrection” in the title is also significant, evoking the idea of a legion of zombies more than a Messiah. All of this is perfectly logical if we consider that in 1998, the Wachowskis were a pair of stocky, brainy nerds with existential issues, while in 2021 Lana is a trans woman in her fifties with an extraordinary ability to enjoy and laugh at life. Just take a look at any picture of the brooding Larry of 20 years ago and compare it with a photo of the beaming Lana (Image 1).

The rest of the story tells us how Captain Bugs manages to extract Neo with the help of a “synthient” Morpheus reboot (obviously, in 2021, “machine” is politically incorrect, as Bugs explains: “They are synthients. It’s a word they prefer to ‘machines’”), and how they overcome the opposi-

tion of Niobe, who is now the supreme leader of the new city of Io. The city has prospered in peace with the empire thanks to Neo and Trinity’s sacrifice, and Niobe seeks to protect that peace at all costs.

In short, the film is a self-reflexive exercise depicting the conversion of an emancipatory experience into an epic cycle, and from there into a legend, and finally into a video game and a filmic universe in an extremely ironic approach that navigates its way between action blockbuster and romantic comedy.

4.2 The enunciation

This section examines the film’s textual structure, because it is its narrative and its mise-en-scene that modulates its meaning, over a framework of self-reference and self-deconstruction. The first sign marking the difference from the original trilogy is a subtle paratextual element (Genette, 1989: *passim*). In *The Matrix*, the greenish tone of the Warner and Village Road Show logos match the greenish tone of the Matrix itself, but in *The Matrix Resurrections* the two logos are preceded by a trademark image of Warner Brothers: an aerial view of the studios displaying a lush landscape with saturated colours and the bright blue company logo on the emblematic water tower. In this case or in any other, it would not seem outrageous to interpret a brand logo as a sign suggestive of the *implied author* (Booth, 1974; Kindt, Müller, 2006), considering the importance explicitly given to Warner in the film as a promoter of this fourth film in the franchise, which Neo did not want to know about, given that blue is the symbolic colour of power in the Matrix, representing the *machine-like* coldness of certain characters.

This is immediately followed by a *meganarratorial* gesture (Gaudreault. Jost, 1995). The differ-

ence from the previous nod is that this one occurs within the text itself, shown on the screen as belonging to the film's diegetic world. Bugs and Seq (an abbreviation of Sequoia, giving the name a computerised touch) are guarding the Matrix when they are surprised to find themselves viewing what is in fact the opening scene to *The Matrix* (the attempt by the police to arrest Trinity) being performed before their eyes. This is not a *déjà vu* but a kind of circuit running in the real version of the Matrix by means of a *modal*, a program that can run old software and turn a film sequence into a loop—an idea that inevitably brings to mind the famous Machinima, whose YouTube rights were acquired by Warner in 2017 (Ng, 2013). We thus begin to realise that effectively there is nothing outside the text (*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*) (Derrida, 1986). And the two characters watching Trinity's escape are not present merely in voice-overs or reverse shots; they are visually inside the frame. The period between the first trilogy and this film, in the *architext* (Genette, 1989) of the Matrix, has been marked not only by the change of gender and writing position of its director, insofar as *gender* is a *locus enuntiationis* (Ribeiro, 2020), but also by the production of *Sense8* (J. Michael Straczynski, Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, 2015–2018) (Rodríguez Torres, 2021), where the different variants of this multi-location editing and pacing procedure were tested out and explored. The fact that many cast members from *Sense8* appear in *The Matrix Resurrections* (for example, the entire crew of the *Mnemosyne* is made up of actors who worked on the series) thus constitutes a clear authorial stamp.

But I classify this effect as *meganarratorial* because it perfectly embodies the classical enunciative structure by marking the pattern of focalisation. It serves to identify Bugs' perspective with that of the fan of the trilogy who knows every detail of the plot, allowing her to be designated as the film's model spectator (enunciator). This is a spectator located in a clear position of superior-

ty over Neo, as she knows what has been erased from his own life story.⁵

What the designers of the Matrix are doing is reformulating history to erase the legend entirely, as in this version Trinity does not manage to escape but is captured by the *bots*. Bugs decides to follow the police, but is discovered and saved at the last minute by an agent who identifies himself as Smith, but who will ultimately be revealed to be Morpheus (the new Morpheus in the video game). Smith quickly identifies himself as one of the rebels and takes Bugs to an abandoned room that is in fact the key shop from *The Matrix Reloaded*. When they flee the scene after discovering the archaeological remains of the first Neo in a cubicle resembling his old desk at Metacortex, they get out through a door of the building that turns out to be the door into a cinema. The film being shown there is *Root of All Evil* starring Lito Rodríguez, the character played by Miguel Ángel Silvestre in *Sense8*. They finally escape by jumping out a window (the space of the Matrix is *Escherian* and multidimensional) and as they fall they turn into green code on a computer screen.

The allusion here is obvious: the escape from oppressive immersion can be found through the door of a cinema. And the Matrix is no longer a simulacrum but a portion of an authorial universe. It could even be described as a (n im)possible world, i.e., a heteronomous universe that is no longer interpretable without reference to the empirical world. It is thus metaphorical and no longer allegorical, self-contained and isolated from the world outside. The referential dimension, the way of alluding to and representing the world, has changed completely.

4.3 Neo's life in the Matrix: irony, parody, malaise

The screen displaying the characters' fall turns into Neo's computer screen. The camera zooms out to reveal Thomas Anderson, besieged by boredom. A pan across the room reveals a trophy

for “Extraordinary Interactive Game Design”. It is soon made clear that in Anderson’s world, the Matrix is a video game that he designed, which earned him huge profits and global recognition. From a high angle, almost an aerial shot, we are shown his work desk with six different computer screens and a large bay window offering a view of the city skyline. He is surrounded by all kinds of video game merchandise, notably including a figurine of Trinity firing two guns, which has fallen onto the floor (Image 2).

Having been called to a meeting by his boss, he decides to go first for a coffee with Jude at Simulatte. The sequences that follow serve to set up the story, but they are also of great discursive importance because they bring Neo up to speed with many details that the spectator is also unaware of. For example, for the first time we will be shown, albeit fleetingly, the reflection of an aged Neo on the table in the coffee shop. It is also here that we see him encounter Tiffany, to whom he reacts with the utmost shyness. Neo’s undefined malaise in *The Matrix* here becomes a sadness whose cause is unconscious but very precisely specified: his nostalgic longing for Trinity. Later, when the new Morpheus takes him to the Dojo to revive him

after his extraction, this point becomes perfectly clear in the words he chooses to challenge Neo to fight: “You gotta fight for your goddamn life if you want to see Trinity again. Come on, Neo! Fight for her!”⁶

The lighting in the coffee shop is explicitly warm, but when he meets his boss at the office, the tones are much colder. We will soon discover that this “boss” is none other than Smith in one of his many guises. This scene clearly and irrevocably introduces parody and irony into the film’s text. When Neo enters, the boss, standing in front of the window, quotes a recognisable line from *The Matrix*, spoken by Smith at the window of his office: “Billions of people just living out their lives... oblivious. I always loved that line. You wrote that one, yeah?”

We are thus made aware that the video game, having become the object of a fandom, has been textualised, converted into a fossilised sequence of signs. The boss has called Neo to tell him of the company’s intentions to bring out a fourth version of the video game. “Things have changed,” he says. “The market’s tough. I’m sure you can understand why our beloved parent company, Warner Bros., has decided to make a sequel to the trilogy.”

Image 2. Trinity as merchandising



Their whole conversation is peppered with little distractions and micro-flashes in Neo's mind that he attributes to his troubled mental condition, but which the spectator knows are flashbacks to his encounter with Smith in the first film. And thus from here we are taken to the office of the Analyst, a character who will end up being of much greater importance than we initially suspect. The establishment shot shows the location of the office on a hill with a very clear view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The sun is setting over San Francisco, the technology capital of the world. The Analyst has a cat named *Déjà vu*, in an obvious reference to a sequence from the first film. To the knowledgeable spectator, it is a clear sign that the code is being manipulated. Neo tells him about the flashes he experienced during the conversation with his boss. The Analyst reminds him that they are merely an invention of his mind and writes him a prescription.

4.4 Neo's extraction: the mirrors

The subsequent sequence is a collage of shots depicting Thomas Anderson's daily life. We see him in a meeting at Deus Machina discussing the MIV marketing strategy, working out at the gym, and standing at his bathroom sink at home with the drugs prescribed by the Analyst reflected in the mirror in a cold light. When he swallows the pill, we see his true aged image in the mirror, although we do not know what it means. There is a curious enunciative split, as the spectator's epistemic superiority over Neo is hinted at from the start, because we know that his memories and perceptions are false and we can see what is being concealed from him.

After this, in a public bathroom, while faced with the threat of attack, he meets Morpheus, who, in a clear parody of the original film, quotes lines from the video game:

Morpheus: At last. Ah. I wasn't too sure about the callback, but, you know, it was hard to resist.

Neo: What?

Morpheus: Morpheus Uno. Reveal at the window. Lightning, thunder and theatre. At last. All these years later, here's me, strolling out of a toilet stall. Tragedy or farce?

Neo: I know you.

Morpheus: Not every day you meet your maker.

Neo: This can't be happening.

Morpheus: Oh, most definitely is.

Neo: You can't be a character I coded.

Although in this first meeting they fail to resurrect Neo, the encounter with Morpheus and Bugs represents the beginning of his awakening and extraction, his ascent on the scale of knowledge and narrative focalisation. At the moment of extraction, Seq guides them out: from the rooftop of the Deus Machina building to a train bound for Tokyo. Neo does not remember this part of the video game. Bugs replies: "We don't have to run to phone booths anymore, either."

4.5 The theatre scene

Next come the three sequences that most explicitly explain the film's high level of self-referentiality. When they go through the door shown to them by Seq, they pass through an opening that resembles a vagina... or the entrance to Plato's Cave. But it is neither one nor the other: it is a curtain that leads onto the stage of a theatre. Foo-

Image 3. In the theatre



tage from *The Matrix* is being projected onto the curtain (Image 3) while the new Morpheus begins to speak:

Morpheus: Set and setting, right?

Neo: Oh, no.

Morpheus: It's all about set and setting.

Bugs: After our first contact went so badly, we thought elements from your past might help ease you into the present.

Morpheus: Nothing comforts anxiety like a little nostalgia.

Bugs: This is footage from your game.

Morpheus: Time is always against us, etcetera, etcetera. No one can be told what the Matrix is, blah, blah, blah. You gotta see it to believe it. Time to fly.

Solemnity has found its degree zero—if not its negative—in parody. The explicit allusion here to cinema and theatre as spectacle is obvious: verisimilitude, belief, identification. This metafictional self-reference to cinema through a theatrical declamation modulates the whole film's verbal and narrative enunciation from that moment on. And at once, all the hypotheses that underpin the story are put forward.

Thomas: Wait. If this is real, if I haven't lost my mind, does that mean this happened? But if it did... then we died.

Bugs: Obviously not. Why the Machines kept you alive and why they went to such lengths to hide you are questions we don't have answers to.

Neo: Hide me? I've been at a company making a game called *The Matrix*. Doesn't seem like they were trying to hide anything.

Bugs: We've been tracking that company for years. We screened every Thomas Anderson we found. What we didn't understand was that they could alter your DSI" (Digital Self-Image).

This is the moment when Neo sees his *real* image in the mirror for the first time, distorted by the Matrix to prevent him from realising that his hallucinations are really memories. The DSI is what others see, which tends to be confused with the true, real image. It seems a powerful algorithmic



Image 4. Perspective

deconstruction of Lacan's "mirror stage". Because it is all about mirrors now.

It has always been common knowledge that perspective framing in reality plays a trick on our eyes. This is why the *mise en abyme* (Palao Errando, 2015), the artifice of the frame itself, was an inherent part of the use of perspective practically from the outset. Like the modern novel and theatre, the basic cinematographic apparatus knowingly lied to us. Or if did not lie to us, it at least tricked us. Since its creation, the basic apparatus, the dispositive that Oudart and Baudry began analysing from this perspective in the 1970s, has itself been a site of artful strategies that open up its internal space. This can be seen in works ranging from *The Arnolfini Portrait* (Jan van Eyck, 1434) to *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* and *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez, 1618, 1656 and 1655-1660, respectively), and including the self-portraits painted by all the big names of Renaissance and Baroque painting in Europe. From Durer to Rembrandt, the mirror was the way that the perspective image revealed itself to be a fiction and not a faithful representation of reality or an autonomous universe. It could be argued that perspective is modern realism and that modern realism has never been the realism of immersion, given that *anisotropic* framing, i.e., distance from the observer, is its unavoidable symbolic requirement. Cinema inherited this quality from mirrors (Company-Ramón, 2014) as a Mannerist feature for staging the artifice and rendering it explicit, a

form of diegetically integrated *ostranenie* (van den Oever, 2010).

From this moment in the film, the duplication of the image and its confinement to the surface of the mirror becomes the main motif of *The Matrix Resurrections*. When Morpheus offers Neo the red pill, we see the same act projected on the curtain, supposedly having occurred 60 years earlier between Neo and the historical Morpheus. But as soon as he tries to swallow the pill, the Analyst appears in a mirror and tries to stop him from crossing this mirror and leaving the Matrix. Moreover, when they try to flee, we know that they can only do so through the surfaces of mirrors. The only mirror that Seq can find is a tiny one in the train lavatory. When the crew complain about the size of their escape route, Seq's response is significant:

Seq: I got a hack in the bathroom. Hurry!

Bugs: Seq, where?

Seq: That mirror.

Bugs: What? We'll never fit.

Seq: You gotta fit, 'cause I don't have another way off this train.

Neo: Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Morpheus: No, no, no.

Seq: Think "perspective". Closer you are, bigger it gets.

Seq: Okay, come on.

As noted above, it is Morpheus who has to respond to Neo's difficulties once he is extracted by challenging him in the Dojo. When he finally wakes up, this is the first conversation he has with the ship's captain:

Neo: If this plug is actually real, that means they took my life... and turned it into a video game. How am I doing? I don't know. I don't even know how to know.

Bugs: That's it, isn't it? If we don't know what's real... we can't resist. They took your story, something that meant so much to people like me, and turned it into something trivial. That's what the Matrix does. It weaponizes every idea. Every dream. Everything that's important to us. Where

better to bury truth than inside something as ordinary as a video game?

4.6. The fight and the Merovingian

Leaping forward to the moment when the crew return to the Matrix to help Neo free Trinity, after an aerial view of San Francisco Bay at dawn, we see Seq looking at her screen, covered in code as usual, when Neo recognises Trinity speeding across the Golden Gate Bridge on her motorbike. They can see that she is pure "blue code", meaning that she has no apparent inclination whatsoever to rebel against her (virtual) reality. From this point, the process depicted in *The Matrix* will unfold in the opposite direction: Trinity is the one who will undergo a process of transformation that leads her to assume her identity and give up Tiffany and her circumstances, thereby ultimately taking possession of her own *agency* (or autonomy). We were already informed that the current status quo is the result of a war between the machines. This conflict led to purges and cleansings in the Matrix, especially among the synthients, who were consequently marginalised and exiled inside the Matrix itself, forced to live in extremely precarious conditions. When Smith calls up "the exiles", we find among them the Merovingian, a key character in the original trilogy. His appearance is a hybrid of a homeless man (San Francisco is, of course, a city with a massive homeless population) and a cave-man, and his peculiar speech is quite entertaining:

Merovingian: You? Oh! It is you! All these years. I can't believe it. Oh, God. You stole my life!

[...]

Smith: What the Merv is trying to say is that their situation is a little bit like mine. To have their lives back, yours has to end. Kill him!

Merovingian: You ruined every suck-my-silky-ass thing! We had grace. We had style! We had conversation! Not this... beep, beep, beep. Art, films, books were all better. Originality mattered! You gave us Face-Zucker-suck and Cock-me-climatey-Wiki-piss-and-shit!

Clearly, for this resentful inhabitant of the old Matrix, there is nothing in Digital Web 2.0 that is worth saving. And when they are forced to flee after the fight, he offers an apocalyptic prophesy: "This is not over yet! Our sequel franchise spinoff!"

4.7. The Analyst and bullet time

The final sequence studied here focuses on the internal plot of *The Matrix*, and specifically on the deaths of Neo and Trinity. Neo goes in search of his partner at the workshop where she engages in her favourite hobby, to convince her to leave the Matrix with him. The lighting is completely warm in the Matrix, now serving to suggest the authenticity of pre-apocalyptic industrial iconography. Trinity is welding with the skill of a trained blacksmith. All of a sudden, we hear a tinkling coming from Déjà vu, the black cat. Trinity then suddenly *fluidifies*, as we previously saw Morpheus do in Io (they call this an exomorphic particle codex) and is reconstituted as the Analyst, who has appeared here to revel in his dominance over Neo. The Analyst controls time and can inflict pain on Neo, who is unable to stop the bullet aimed at Trinity, which ends up hitting an apple: "Bullet time. I know. Kind of ironic, using the power that defined you to control you."

The Analyst's monologue, while he plays with time and with the bullet that will reach Trinity, operates on multiple levels: metafilm, authorial self-reference, and narrative self-reference. Bullet time is an invention of the Wachowskis and a reference to the saga itself (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005). And then we get the story of why and how life was restored to Neo (and to Trinity) with images that presumably illustrate the process. The speech thus shifts into philosophical anthropology, but also a political philosophy.

The Analyst: I was there when you died. I said to myself: "Here is the anomaly of anomalies." What an extraordinary opportunity. First, I had to convince the Suits to let me rebuild the two of you. Why her? Getting there. And don't worry, she can't

hear me. Resurrecting you both was crazy expensive. Like renovating a house. Took twice as long, cost twice as much. I thought you'd be happy to be alive again. So wrong. Did you know hope and despair are nearly identical in code? We worked for years, trying to activate your source code. I was about to give up, when I realized.

Neo: Trinity.

The Analyst: It was never just you. Alone, neither of you is of any particular value. Like acids and bases, you're dangerous when mixed together. Every sim where you two bonded... Let's just say bad things happened.

Trinity: Neo!

The Analyst: However, as long as I managed to keep you close, but not too close, I discovered something incredible. Now, my predecessor loved precision. His Matrix was all fussy facts and equations. He hated the human mind. So he never bothered to realize that you don't give a shit about facts. It's all about fiction. The only world that matters is the one in here. And you people believe the craziest shit. Why? What validates and makes your fictions real? Feelings. [...]. You ever wonder why you have nightmares? Why your own brain tortures you? It's actually us, maximizing your output. It works just like this. Oh, no! Can you stop the bullet? If only you could move faster. Here's the thing about feelings. They're so much easier to control than facts. Turns out, in my Matrix, the worse we treat you, the more we manipulate you, the more energy you produce. It's nuts. I've been setting productivity records every year since I took over. And, the best part, zero resistance. People stay in their pods, happier than pigs in shit. The key to it all? You. And her. Quietly yearning for what you don't have, while dreading losing what you do. For 99.9% of your race, that is the definition of reality. Desire and fear, baby. Just give the people what they want, right? She's the only home you have, Thomas. Come home before something terrible happens.



Images 5, 6 and 7 (from top to bottom). Bullet Time: Trinity and the bullet, the bullet and the apple, the bullet reaches its target

CONCLUSIONS

It is impossible to read the quotation above without considering its political dimension. What the Analyst describes is all of the assumptions that underpin what has come to be known as “populism”, which appears to be the origin of the post-truth era. Human beings, the Analyst asserts, have no interest in facts; they are only interested in fictions and what validates those fictions are “feelings”. And feelings, he says, are much easier to control than facts. Why? Perhaps because they represent a continuum with no barriers or

gaps, a projection of the nervous system that connects to reality without the trouble of having to resort to the symbol, i.e., to lack and *castration* (Lacan, YEAR), *différance* (Derrida, YEAR), or *Parrhesia* (Foucault, YEAR). Could there a better way of depicting *immersion*? It is quite true that *there is nothing outside the text* (Derrida, 1986) but that does not mean that absolutely everything is included in the text, or in any semiotic space. On the contrary, the text is possible only if there is meaning, and for there to be meaning, the articulation of *discrete* units is necessary. There can only be meaning where there is difference, and difference, the hiatus between discrete units, is necessarily an *outside meaning* that a subject has to stitch together. This is why this masterful sequence in which bullet time involves disrupting the continuity of time is so effective. It is Zeno’s paradox of the infinitesimal. Lana Wachowski offers us a sequence where time has been excavated by desire, which is something beyond the body. If *The Matrix Resurrections* is a trans metaphor, this is the sense in which it is.

The Matrix trilogy was a quintessential example of the culture of hybridisation that has governed film production and digital culture over the past few decades, which has given rise to the phenomena of fandom and transmedia storytelling (Bolter, Grusin, 2000; Jenkins, 2008; Scolari, 2013). The problem of immersion is the problem of meaning, and more specifically, the problem of reference. An immersive universe is necessarily asymbolic; it extracts from the world but says nothing about it. *The Matrix Resurrections* is therefore a text: an artistic text whose aim is not to duplicate or replace the world with a fake imitation, but to offer a metaphor for the world. This is what cinema was when it became an art form: a medium of representation whose hegemonic paradigm (the IMR) also became a way of modelling and manipulating, because all art is a *secondary modelling system* (Lotman, 1982). *The Matrix* fuses the post-apocalyptic genre with immersive dig-

ital technology. In that image there is information on its meaning. Its resurrection is therefore constructed as an ironic metafilm, rather than a *reloaded metaverse* whose epic solemnity would have been inevitably trite. ■

NOTES

1. I have been careful to avoid the term “post-modern” as it is a concept that has been severely distorted and would require an explanation of its correlations that is beyond the scope of this article.
2. For a much more detailed exploration, see Palao Errando, Crespo, 2005.
3. I once ventured to reformulate this concept, foregrounding the idea that what the film screen did was to expose the imaginary nature of the two properties of perspective framing, i.e., that the world was not amenable to its representation (Palao Errando, 2004).
4. “Twenty-five years and my life is still / Trying to get up that great big hill / of hope for a destination” sang 4 Non Blondes in 1993. “What’s Up” is a veritable anthem of a generation whose full meaning would be appropriated by the Wachowskis in *Sense8* fifteen years later.
5. It is worth noting that the unreliable narrator and amnesiac hero are two key figures in post-classical cinema (Sorolla-Romero, 2022; Sorolla-Romero, Palao Errando, Marzal Felici, 2020).

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FICTION AS A SKYLIGHT: SELF-REFERENCE, IRONY AND DISTANCE IN THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to offer a comparative analysis of the film *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) and the original trilogy of films that preceded it, with the aim of showing while the basic theme of the first three films was immersion as a simulacrum, in this film Lana Wachowski make use of the aesthetic distance represented by the film screen. This distance is expressed in a parodic and self-reflexive approach that covers all aspects of the saga, including the circumstances of its production process. To this end, this article examines the immersive imaginary that informed early digital culture and explores how it has redefined the filmic in order to show how the film is positioned in favour of that redefinition and against the immersive. The method used is a textual analysis of the sequences in the film that sustain the metafictional and metafilmic discourse and that serve as the cornerstone of Lana Wachowski's production.

Key words

The Matrix Resurrections; Perspective Framing; Immersion; Metacinema; Lana Wachowski; Parody; Self-reference.

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LA FICCIÓN COMO LUCERNA: AUTORREFERENCIA, IRONÍA Y DISTANCIA EN THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar la película *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) en comparación con la trilogía original. La tesis que anima el artículo es que, si bien el tema fundamental de las tres primeras entregas eran la inmersión como simulacro, en esta se opta por apostar por la distancia estética representada por el encuadre fílmico. Esta distancia se sustancia en un abordaje paródico y autorreflexivo que abarca todos los aspectos de la saga, incluidos los avatares de su producción. Con ese fin, el artículo recoge el imaginario inmersivo que auspició la primera cultura digital e indaga en la redefinición de lo fílmico que ésta suscitó para ver cómo el film se posiciona de lado de ese componente frente a él. La metodología empleada es el análisis textual de aquellos pasajes del film que sostienen el discurso metafictional y metafilmico y que son la auténtica piedra angular de la propuesta de Lana Wachowski.

Palabras clave

The Matrix Resurrections; encuadre en perspectiva; inmersión; metacine; Lana Wachowski; parodia; autorreferencia.

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THE SPECTATOR'S SEAT: MOVEMENT AND THE BODY IN IMMERSIVE CINEMA*

JAVIER LURI RODRÍGUEZ

INTRODUCTION

Cinema was born at a time when immersive spectacles, such as dioramas and panoramas, were at the peak of their popularity. But the movie camera offered a new form of illusion, a different way of transporting the spectator that has had a decisive effect on popular visual culture ever since. Yet despite the hegemony of cinema's models of syntax, exposition and reception, the audiovisual medium has also always been present in other kinds of immersive products. In our century, with the various forms of navigability offered by different devices, and especially with the popularisation of virtual reality headsets, immersive audiovisual formats appear to have made some big strides forward. In this context, researchers need to develop models for studying the new forms of narrativity being shaped by immersive media.

This article proposes the spectator and their way of engaging with the story as a starting point

for the analysis of immersive cinematography. By exploring how spectators are integrated into the representative space and how they act in it, we will be able to develop typological frameworks, and above all, to explain and better understand the narrative and expressive strategies of this new cinematic form.

PREMISES AND PERSPECTIVE OF ANALYSIS: IMMERSION, TRAVEL AND THE BODY

For a clearer understanding of the concept of *immersion* in the image, it may be helpful to use the language suggested in the term itself: if the image is immersive, this means that the medium transports the spectator inside it, and once there, the image itself becomes the destination visited by the traveller, who is transported to far-off places on a simulated adventure trip. Cinema is a medium of virtual transportation.

Stationary contemplative experiences, such as viewing a painting, could also be described as a form of travel in a certain sense, but visual spectacles clearly display their nature as a journey when they offer illusory experiences based on an articulation of space and time, such as cinema, the magic lantern of the 17th century, or even the immense, all-encompassing panoramic paintings that became popular in the 19th century. Whether the image itself moves or the spectator moves around in it, the visual journey takes on special significance by articulating a narrative experience, and by creating the impression of visiting a new place, like a tourist wandering the streets of a foreign city.

All cinema is immersive, with its capacity to pull us out of our everyday lives and relocate us in other settings, events and stories, but the label “immersive” has been used for many years now to explore different ways of exploiting and enhancing the sensation of being transported.

There are different conceptual approaches based on different notions of immersion. Some of these can be grouped under the heading of apparently “disembodied” journeys, where the spectator’s physical body “rests” in a place in the dark while the action is presented on a screen with images, sound, and occasionally other effects. Other forms of immersion require the user to move around the scene or interact with the image by means of a navigation system.

Although this general categorisation may be practical for identifying similar analytical approaches, it is important to clarify what separates them and—especially—what does not. In phenomenological terms, the body is immersed in the image in both cases, as the spectators’ lack of movement in front of the screen is only an apparent, external motionlessness, while on their journey around the image their body is in fact fully active, engaged through their senses in the voyage.

Vivian Sobchack explains the corporeal dimension of perception and its vital importance

TO CONSIDER THIS ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR IN THE NARRATIVE JOURNEY, WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE SEAT THE SPECTATOR OCCUPIES IN THE VIRTUAL MODE OF TRANSPORT, AND THAT POSITION WILL DEPEND ON THE PARAMETERS OF EACH MEDIUM

for understanding the spectator, quoting Sergfried Kracauer:

[...] Kracauer located the uniqueness of cinema in the medium’s essential ability to stimulate us physiologically and sensually; thus he understands the spectator as a “corporeal-material being” [...].

Until quite recently, however, contemporary film theory has generally ignored or elided both cinema’s sensual address and the viewer’s “corporeal-material being.” [...] there is very little [...] on the carnal sensuality of the film experience and what—and how—it constitutes meaning. (Sobchack, 2004: 55-56)

The body sitting in the conventional cinema is no further away from the image than the body that uses its own mobility to explore the space of an all-encompassing representation. As Steven Shaviro (1993: 255) has pointed out, the body “is never merely the lost object of a (supposedly disembodied) gaze. The image cannot be opposed to the body [...]” There is therefore no need to search for differences between different systems of immersion based on the degree of proximity or independence between body and image:

The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images: degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and dark. (Shaviro, 1993: 225)

We must begin with the premise that in any kind of cinematic experience the body travels virtually, to then be able to focus on the ways in which the body travels through the image. In this sense, a crucial distinguishing factor for the various technologies of immersion is presence, location and attitude; in short, the body's position in relation to the movement occurring while it is being transported by the audiovisual medium. To consider this role of the spectator in the narrative journey, we need to look at the seat the spectator occupies in the virtual mode of transport, and that position will depend on the parameters of each medium.

BODY AND CAMERA: CINEMATOGRAPHIC IMMERSION

A good starting point for this analysis is the spectator's position in conventional cinema, with reference to certain similarities it bears to the way trains position their passengers. In the darkness of the cinemas, audiences found a way of travelling virtually through the image in a context in which travel was becoming an increasingly widespread social phenomenon. The train had just entered its golden age when cinema made its first appearance in 1895. While the steam engine fulfilled the promise of full mobility and the most ardent explorers' dreams, the projector helped to expand this mythical image of the romantic traveller through the big screen. Lumière's camera operators travelled the world to capture far-off places, and in turn they gave film spectators the opportunity to travel as well.

On the train, as in cinema, the driver, engine and controls are concealed inside the locomotive; for the user, it is just a vehicle full of passengers seated in private cabins, simply watching the landscape whirl past through the windows. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has analysed how this first mode of transport for the masses altered our perception of distance and time, among other

things. Describing the views from train windows, Schivelbusch argues that the depth perception of the pre-industrial gaze was lost with the first glimpse of the landscape through the glass:

The foreground enabled the traveller to relate to the landscape through which he was moving. He saw himself as part of the foreground, and that perception *joined* him to the landscape, included him in it, regardless of all further distant views that the landscape presented. Now velocity dissolved the foreground, and the traveller lost that aspect. (Schivelbusch, 1986: 63)

The space that the passenger sees became a setting, pure image, an area that did not belong to the same space in which the bodies of those contemplating it were seated. This is the same type of immersion in the image fostered by cinema, an immersion of the body but without the body: an immersion of our senses, our skin, but not our conscious presence, our motor functions. It is a dizzying virtualised motion for the seated passenger, or as Noël Burch (2011: 205-231) described it, an "immobile journey" as a "construction of the ubiquitous subject".

With the development in the early 20th century of a more narrative form of cinema articulated using shots and editing, filmmakers began creating experiences with a greater capacity to transport the audience. However, although this narrativity was gradually beginning to be institutionalised, there was already a tradition of using the screen as a simple window through which to watch the act of travelling.

Phantom rides were projections showing views taken from a moving locomotive. These films, which first appeared in 1898, were extremely popular with audiences and constituted one of the first true film genres (Fielding, 1970: 37). This virtualisation of the train would attain a higher level of realism with Hale's Tours, where real train carriages were turned into cinemas in which these films of rail journeys were projected.

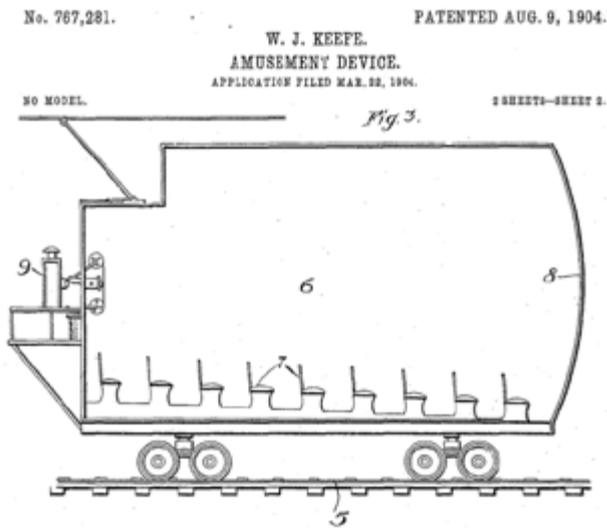


Image 1. Illustration of William J. Keefe's patent for the train carriage as an image projection system (1904). This idea would ultimately be financed by Fred W. Gifford and George Hale, who later bought all the rights and developed the technical and commercial aspects of the product that would subsequently be known as Hale's Tours. Image: Hayes, C. (2009). *Phantom Carriages: Reconstructing Hale's Tours and the Virtual Travel Experience*. *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 7(2), 185-198.

It is significant that in these carriages the screen was positioned opposite the seats and not in the side windows (Image 1). This seems to suggest that the whole exhibition design was no more than a warm-up, a way of setting the scene to prepare the spectator for the real spectacle: the projection of what the cameras had filmed. Looking at these moving landscapes in front of them sacrificed the simulation of the train to some extent, in the interests of exploiting the full potential of the screen and its particular way of transporting the passenger.

Robert Barker patented panoramas and made them famous as an amusement that would become the first visual spectacle for the masses. Preceding the success of cinema, panoramas transported spectators in a very different way, allowing them to steer their own gaze around the landscape that was spread out all around them. The aim was to dissolve the boundaries between the space of the visitors and the depiction, so that their bo-

dies seemed to step inside and physically inhabit the image, even though they were actually standing on a central observation platform.¹

The panorama and the cinema were the most popular visual spectacles of the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. The same traveller's spirit fed the success of both forms, and both offered a completely original illusion, although each of these forms of realism, of immersion in far-off worlds, took different paths:

As one set of approaches for evoking a sense of presence, of immersion in a virtual world, Barker's notions of seamlessness, framing and masking strategies, and motion, found themselves redeployed not only in other media settings, but more importantly, in other relationships to space and time. From the mobile spectator to the mobilized image, from the frozen moment to the exploration of duration, from the distant vista to the penetration of space [...] (Uricchio, 2011: 11).

The kinship between the panorama and the cinema is even evident in the first film listings: *panorama* or *panoramic views* by title constitute the largest entry among films copyrighted in the United States from 1896 to 1912, with the majority of titles referring to films registered prior to 1906 (Uricchio, 2011: 7). However, although the panorama might have constituted the biggest cinematic category in those early years, it is obvious that it referred to a different type of panoramic movement: not an observer moving around inside a simulated landscape, but the movement of a panning camera. This relocation of the panoramic represents a relocation of the perceptual habits of the audience, as the death of one extremely popular medium coincided with the birth of another that very quickly eclipsed it.

By the time the term *panorama* had disappeared from film listings after the first decade of the 20th century, panoramic paintings were already a thing of the past; the mass audiences who had once walked around inside those immersive paintings were now sitting in cinemas. The abrupt di-

sappearance of panoramas in titles marked the moment that cinema embraced fictional stories, abandoning the projection of footage filmed from trains or other moving vehicles, or from high buildings or air balloons. It was in this shift towards fiction that the camera turned away from the panoramic gaze of primitive cinema. The spectator's point of view had taken off from the ground, from the human scale, and had also moved away from snapshots of motion, increasingly free from the railway tracks of the phantom rides:

Continuity and the demand for an encapsulation of the urban experience at the turn of the century reflected in all these films is [...] radically different from what would be defined later, especially as of the 1920s. The train films made before 1910 possess an organic and pictorial conception that would be definitively broken by the expansion of film editing. The visual art and the big urban films of the 1920s would use the constructive and analytic function of editing to explore fragmentation, the mechanisation that formed part of daily life, the surprising multiplicity of perspectives and the wide variety of stimuli that the metropolis offered the senses of those who walked its streets. This edited urban cinema would finally do away with the literary point of view of the *flâneur*, that vision of the person on a stroll who can adopt the most appropriate pace to experience the different sensations of the metropolis: the architecture, the urban perspectives, the laneways, the shops and the people walking through the streets. (Benet, 2008: 84)

The camera transported the gaze on new and fragmented journeys composed of aerial and overhead views, as well as elements so close and dynamic that they



Above. Images 2 and 3. Advertising for the Cinerama in its first projections in Spain (Image 2: Madrid, November 1958; Image 3: Granada, April 1969). This spectacle of multiple projections on a “wrap-around” screen (146 degrees) was publicised with the claim that “in a few seconds you will feel transported in your seat, participating in the action unfolding on the screen.” Although the seats did not move, the wrap-around images generated by its three simultaneous projections gave the audience the sensation of a dramatic land, sea and air journey through the recreation of a range of exciting experiences such as riding a roller coaster, travelling in a Venetian gondola and flying in a small aeroplane over the Grand Canyon. Images: Cinerama (advertisement on ABC) (1958) and Gurpegui (2017). Below. Image 4. Advertising for Kinépolis 4DX Cinema in Madrid (2018). Here, in front of a big screen, spectators are rocked in moving and vibrating seats, splashed with water, and subjected to smells, mist, wind, lighting flashes, bubbles, rain and artificial snow. The term 4D has been used for some time in spectacles at theme parks, and subsequently in certain film theatres, to refer to any addition to the cinematic experience, such as moving seats or watery mist sprayed over the audience, as in the case of the film *Shrek 4D* (Simon J. Smith, 2003). These are often added to 3D films, and thus these extra-filmic elements have come to be referred to as “extra-stereoscopic”. See Zone (2012: 147-148). Image: Kinépolis España (n. d.).

seemed to bowl the viewer over; the editing reconstructed a perception of modern life in keeping with a new conception of urban space that could no longer be expressed in a simple, global *panoramic view*.²

However, the all-encompassing realism of panoramas and the central role of the journey in experiences like Hale's Tours were not abandoned altogether. Similar strategies continued to be adopted, for example, with Cinerama in the 1950s and IMAX as of the 1960s. In these cinematic forms, characterised by the expansion of the projected image, the movement and kinetic impulse that defines travel is explicitly present in the subject matter and the forms of guiding the spectator through the image. For example, in *Time Traveling IMAX Style: Tales from the Giant Screen*, Alison Griffith describes the film *To Fly!* (Greg MacGillivray & Jim Freeman, 1976) as "the ur-IMAX film, since its visual rhetoric is composed of little else than that simulated movement through space" (Griffith, 2006: 241). This kind of immersive format has been diversified with various types of screens commonly referred to as *panoramic*, sometimes with vibrating seats, like the original idea of Hale's Tours, or using other effects on the immobile bodies of the audience. They are dramatic emotional journeys in which shock is the driving force.³

The audiovisual machinery sat audiences down in a wide variety of seats, with views of varying expanses and jolts that were sometimes quite literal, either with a clear narrative destination or as a mere circular journey, but always virtualising the passenger's movement with its machinery of lights and realistic images. This machinery seized control of the panorama to rule it with its cameras.

However, the spectator's mobility has recently undergone new transformations with the support of the interactivity and navigability of new visual environments and devices, with narratives offering the user the autonomous movement that characterised the old panoramas. The contempla-

tive exploration of panoramas in the 19th century and the mobility and narrativity of cinema in the 20th century now seem to be seeking ways of being brought together in the 360-degree cinema of the 21st.

THE BODY AND THE CAMERA: IMMERSIONS IN 360-DEGREE CINEMA

All-encompassing environments are highly illustrative of the traveller dimension of cinema discussed above, as they literally include actions such as walking around the image, or the idea of the image as an exotic space isolated from time for the visitor. Although they are characterised by user participation, these navigable immersive environments not only offer interaction and dynamism but also clearly express two opposing extremes: passive contemplation and exploration; submission to the image that encompasses and dwarfs the spectator, and domination of that same image, conquering every corner of it with the movement of the gaze. When viewing immersive environments, the relative presence of these active and passive components depends on the image and even on the spectator. It is especially interesting to analyse how these elements vary and interact in different productions.

Viewing 360-degree videos has something in common with the perspective of a passenger in the front seat of a car. In these videos, the spectator experiences the visual domination of being able to view different angles, like looking through the various windows of a car, or even like sitting in a convertible that offers a complete view of everything that surrounds you. But it is the movement that is beyond the omnidirectional observer's control that really guides the audiovisual narrative. It is not the observer's free gaze on their surroundings, but the movement of the camera and of the elements it captures that directs the journey on which the traveller is both spectator and passenger. Sitting beside the driver,

close to the controls and with a similar perspective to the person behind the wheel, the front-seat passenger feels like a co-pilot, yet without really co-piloting since the vehicle's operation generally depends entirely on the driver. Similarly, the privileged point of view offered by omnidirectional video, from what seems like a first-person perspective, creates the impression of a subjective, controlled first-hand experience. Based on this quality of 360-degree videos, we can explore how the virtual mobility of a spectator is positioned between the passiveness of a passenger being transported and the activeness of an individual who can steer their gaze from a point of view close to the controls. In this way, we can examine how the spectator moves and is moved.

BASED ON THIS QUALITY OF 360-DEGREE VIDEOS, WE CAN EXPLORE HOW THE VIRTUAL MOBILITY OF A SPECTATOR IS POSITIONED BETWEEN THE PASSIVENESS OF A PASSENGER BEING TRANSPORTED AND THE ACTIVENESS OF AN INDIVIDUAL WHO CAN STEER THEIR GAZE FROM A POINT OF VIEW CLOSE TO THE CONTROLS

The frontal view—like the one offered in phantom rides or in the flights in IMAX—is more effective than a side view in giving travellers the sensation of being the protagonists of their own journey. Yet paradoxically, when the camera is moving in 360-degree videos, this frontal view can end up exposing its programmed nature. It is from this type of perspective that viewers may feel more clearly that they are being directed on a route or through a story of predetermined events, while from the side or rear views it seems easier to escape this sense of directional control. Looking at these lateral spaces offers the sensation of being able to consider details apparently further from the established ac-

tion. This restriction is more literal during frontal camera movements, but it is also evident when a clearly defined frontal action is positioned in front of a stationary omnidirectional camera. Since an individual's focus of attention is limited, the producer of a 360-degree video may choose to locate a main area of action and reserve the rest of the representational space for spectators to explore freely in order to round out their view of the setting by looking at apparently incidental elements. This approach, in which the metaphorical co-pilot has the main scene clearly defined by the single direction of the road ahead, is used widely in the production of 360-degree videos, which are supported to varying degrees on this hierarchical organisation of the space surrounding the viewer.

This is how the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company decided to bring *Hamlet* to 360-degree video in 2019. *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit*⁴ is an attempt to adapt Shakespeare's classic to a format that expands the stage to surround the audience with environmental elements that are always relegated to the scenery, which would be completely unintelligible without the actors who constantly guide the story with their performances in front of the camera. The camera remains practically motionless and the few changes of point of view during the production occur mainly in transitions between acts marked by a fade to black and a caption over the image, which position the spectator in another scene where the performance continues. There are very few moments when viewers actually need to turn their gaze elsewhere to follow the story, and these occasions could be compared to the neck movements that a theatre spectator sitting quite close to the front would normally make to follow the actions of the characters at different points on the stage. This production might therefore be more aptly categorised as *immersive theatre* rather than *immersive cinema*, although it stands as a significant benchmark for comparing the different narrative strategies used in 360-degree videos.



Above. Image 5. *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit* (Steven Maler, 2019). Hamlet and his mother on-stage while the ghost, embodied by the spectator, is reflected in a mirror.
 Below. Image 6. Still frames from the film *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947).

Although it may be too soon to describe 360-degree cinema as a format with a specific syntax of its own, to establish descriptive analogies and contextualise the spectator's relationship with these new types of audiovisual production, it might be interesting to analyse how much cinema there really is in 360-degree cinema, or more specifica-

lly, what cinematographic components can be identified in immersive video productions and what characteristics of the new technology cannot be compared to traditional cinema. In this sense, *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit* seems closer to primitive cinema than to the institutional mode of representation, firstly because of the basically stationary point of view that eschews the identification of the camera as a dynamic vehicle with a ubiquitous perspective, which, together with the mechanisms of continuity editing, forms part of the diegetic process of traditional cinema. It is also an interesting feature of this audiovisual production that it gives viewers a role by using their point of view as that of one of the characters on stage: the ghost of Hamlet's dead father. This ongoing identification with a character replaces the identification of the viewer's gaze with the camera as an invisible dynamic device, anchoring the perspective to a body that is also essentially motionless throughout the story, as it is the body of a dead person.

Immersive images like those of 360-degree cinema are often associated with first-person experience. This determines the way users move around the fictional space: by embodying a character in the story or by being included in the story themselves—in either case, identifying with the point of view of a virtual body inserted into the representation.

This identification, which may be more or less explicit, differs from conventional cinematic strategies, as these are not generally based on identifying the spectator with a specific body or character. Theorists like Christian Metz have explored cinema's primary identification in isolation from what happens to the characters, who are secondary, tertiary, etc., depending on their



Image 7. Still-frame from *Pearl* (Patrick Osborne, 2016)

different levels of importance. The viewer's identification with the movements, shots and editing cuts of the camera directs the viewing experience in conventional cinema, taking precedence over identification with the characters. Consequently, in cinema the viewer is absent from the screen as a perceived individual while at the same time omnipresent as a perceiver: we must leave our conventional way of moving behind to climb into a vehicle capable of driving us through a story articulated in images and stripped of bodily limitations like individual perspective.⁵

The (non-immersive) film *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) was unique in this respect; like *Hamlet 360*, it used the POV shot to anchor the spectator in a single role throughout the story: in this case, the detective who is the film's protagonist. In his review of this film, Noël Burch highlighted how this approach broke out of the *institutionalised* method in which the camera is erased so that it can follow the characters and the action invisibly. Burch even went so far as to suggest that as the observer's invisibility/invulnerability is the secret behind the most effective diegetic process, this continuous POV shot effectively interposed the camera between the audience and the diegetic world (Burch, 2011: 251-253)

Clearly, the spectator's uninterrupted embodiment in a character in both *The Lady in the Lake* and *Hamlet 360* may risk giving an audience familiar with conventional cinematic approaches more of a sensation of restrictive confinement than participation and involvement in the story. This seems to be the consequence of relegating the viewer's role in *Hamlet 360* to a dead, ghostly body, as well as the fact that in *The Lady in the Lake* the spectator may connect best with the screen at the moment when the spectator-protagonist is arrested and handcuffed (Image 6, still-frame 3). In *Hamlet 360*, the viewers' embodiment underscores the immobility of their point of view, while also justifying a key stylistic choice in the film: the abandonment of the mobility typical of cinematographic diegesis in favour of anchoring the viewer to a point of observation and a representation that is basically frontal.

This feeling of immobility, of being driven down a one-way street, could be partly counteracted by exploiting the viewer's capacity for action in a 360-degree video, with the exploration of the side and rear views of the scene. But for this exploration to acquire real meaning within the story and to insert the character fully into it, the hierarchy that prioritises the frontal view over the incidental environment would have to be concealed or rendered less obvious by avoiding an excessively frontal focus that is too independent of the rest of the space represented in the 360-degree image. However, while it might be tempting to assume that articulating a story from a stationary frontal perspective somewhat undermines the acentric nature of the 360-degree format, it would be hasty to draw any conclusions about the nature of such a young and heterogeneous format. Inserting dynamic elements between focal points of the viewers' attention to create a story that really does surround them completely is a way of leveraging the format's ability to encompass the audience with the representation. But this is not the only intrinsic feature of the me-

dium; nor is exploiting any of a medium's characteristics to the fullest a necessary condition for its appropriate use.⁶

The animated short *Pearl* (Patrick Osborne, 2016)⁷ literally uses the point of view of a passenger in the front seat of a car to anchor the spectator in one place throughout the narration of a story about a father-daughter relationship. The main focus of attention in this film is located between the driver's seat and the back seats, but this focus is made intuitively mobile for viewers, who can shift their gaze to what is happening in the different parts of the car as characters appear and move around inside the vehicle. With the car sometimes moving and other times stationary, the various windows and open doors also offer different levels of action, constantly functioning as snippets of reality, like mobile comic strip panels that work together to build the narrative space. Even while being anchored in the front passenger seat, the viewer is offered scenes that move from the foreground of the driver's seat to group shots of characters outside the car, framed in the

windows or open doors. In addition to guiding the viewer through these scenes, the film moves back and forth in time at different moments, using this technique as well to articulate the story. The experiences between father and daughter are depicted as memories of moments that occurred in and around the old car they shared. In this way, the vehicle forms part of the story of the two characters, which is presented without dialogue but with a song that serves as a soundtrack to the touching journey that the spectator is taken on through both space and time.

In this film, the spectator is identified with the camera as a dynamic, invisible device, but the visual ubiquity of shots and editing in conventional cinema is replaced with the movement of the user's view: a free movement, albeit carefully suggested by the action in each scene, which moves the viewer toward different points in the 360-degree space.

In the 360-degree action short *Help* (Justin Lin, 2015), these strategies for guiding spectators are used more clearly to orient our view around

Image 8. Still-frame from *Help* (Justin Lin, 2015).



the surrounding space. Among the strategies are visual signals, such as the characters' gazes and reactions, and the positioning of the sound, as the voices and noises are placed in specific locations using surround sound technology. Our free movement is subtly directed towards the various focal points, which change constantly throughout the film. And even when we are unsure of where to look, our hesitant search conveniently contributes to the construction of a tense atmosphere of uncertainty and vulnerability.

In addition to this capacity for controlling the spectator's freedom of movement with visual and audio elements, this film makes use of constant strategic positioning of the camera with a markedly cinematographic approach, which is also crucial to our immersion in the story. At certain moments, the point of view is positioned above the action, offering expansive long shots to provide some context; at other moments, the camera approaches the characters to focus more on their performances, and this proximity varies constantly in order to capture different actions. The perspective is often low, reaching ground level at times, thereby forcing a low-angle view that makes the viewer feel small.

This film's audience follows the action as invisible, ubiquitous observers in a manner very similar to that of conventional cinema, but with a capacity for movement and a sensation of subjectivity that is inherent to the omnidirectional perspective. 360-degree videos thus seem to experiment with the ways of transporting a *mobile audience* through the *immobile journey* that characterises cinema.

In *Help*, where the hierarchy of the frontal focus is noticeably dissolved with the movement of the camera and of the elements of action throughout the scene, the spectator may feel like the co-pilot of a dynamic vehicle whose side views can provide clues as to the direction that the story will take next. In this way, viewers can feel they are participating in the story with a vigilant gaze

on a journey that could veer off in any direction from one moment to the next. The film thus exploits the acentric conception of the omnidirectional format by expanding the action all over the space around the spectator. At the same time, this dispersed view is directed by suggestions pointing to different focal points and the use of expressive strategies characteristic of cinema, which are transformed in the 360-degree format, as are the shots which, although still functioning as film shots, are no longer enclosed frames.

CONCLUSIONS

The syntactic strategies of the cinematic tradition can offer basic elements for directing the story in a 360-degree video in order to steer the audiovisual storytelling. Other stylistic approaches may make use of the immersive quality of the medium to exploit the sensation of presence inherent to the 360-degree perspective, and to conceive of the viewer as a silent, immobile witness to a story that is much closer to a theatrical performance. However, regardless of these strategies for directing the audience, the 360-degree format is marked by an implicit active component that resists the subordination of the observer's capacity for movement and perception to the staging machinery. To integrate the inherent freedom of this format with the equally inherent directionality of a narrative medium is therefore the big challenge of this new 360-degree storytelling, which needs to guide the gaze while at the same time offering room for the viewer to move.

NOTES

- * This article forms part of the research project *Paradoxical Modernity: Artist and Tourist Experience in Developmentalist Spain (1959-1975)*, reference code: PGC2018-093422-b-i00 (MCI/AEI/FEDER, EU)
- 1 Even the space occupied by the audience was often arranged to merge with the representation. In *Pano-*

rama of the *Battle of Navarino* (Jean Charles Langlois, 1831), the deck of the *Scipion*, a ship that had actually taken part in the conflict depicted, was used as an observation platform.

- 2 The term *panorama* has come to be used today to mean *view of the whole*. Robert Barker himself patented his invention in 1787 as "*La nature à coup d'oeil*" (the nature of a glimpse). The term *panorama* would begin to be used later; the first record found of its use dates from January 1792, in a publication of *The Times*.
- 3 As Walter Benjamin explained, avant-garde art, such as the manifestations of Dadaism, sought to satisfy the need for provocation, for public scandal, and thus the work constituted a guaranteed vehement distraction. This vehemence has also been an essential part of cinema since its early days, with its ability to attract, captivate and direct the viewer with a powerful force:

From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. Let us compare the canvas (screen) on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. Duhamel, who detests the film and knows nothing of its significance, though something of its structure, notes this circumstance as follows: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images." The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. (Benjamin, 1989: 51-52)

As Benjamin points out, in psychoanalytic theory the concept of traumatic shock refers to a breakdown in an individual's natural protection against potentially harmful stimuli, which allows events to be accommodated in the consciousness as lived experiences, based on the coherence of their content. When this protective barrier is broken, the outcome of the reflexive assimilation is cut short, causing terror or distress, whether pleasant or unpleasant. In cinema, Benjamin argues, perception is based on shocks. See Benjamin (2010: 14-17).

- 4 A 60-minute 360-degree film adapted and directed by Steven Maler, available on the company's website, where it is presented as a way of exploring the new dimensions of the 360-degree video, offering the spectator a role in the story as the ghost of Hamlet's father. The viewer thus becomes an "omniscient observer, guide and participant" in the film.
- 5 See Metz (2001: 68-70).
- 6 It is important to stress that these stylistic questions of frontality are not unique to 360-degree video or to immersive images in general: architecture has often considered aesthetic and functional questions of the layout of elements around the user, as has sculpture in the round, although this is more in terms of the *position of the observer* in front of or around the image. However, in 360-degree video the arrangement of elements clearly takes on special relevance to the articulation of a story, requiring the combination of immersion and narrative while also posing the problem of matching the essentially spatial components with others that are basically temporal.
- 7 *Pearl* has won several awards, including an Emmy in 2017. That same year it became the first 360-degree video nominated for an Oscar, for Best Animated Short Film.

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THE SPECTATOR'S SEAT: MOVEMENT AND THE BODY IN IMMERSIVE CINEMA

Abstract

The way that conventional cinema guides the spectator around the image constitutes a very different form of immersion from the interactive immersion of all-encompassing media experiences. By considering such differences when studying immersive media, we can explore the full range of its potential benefits and how they can be combined to create new narrative formulas. Beyond virtualizing scenes, every immersive medium repositions the movement and the body of the spectator in the represented space. How these elements are redefined in each production is central to the viewing experience. This article studies immersive audiovisual storytelling, particularly in 360-degree video, from the perspective of the frictions between conventional cinematography and immersive media. These tensions are expressed through the different ways in which movement is depicted and the different positions of the spectator's body in the image.

Key words

360-degree Cinema; Immersive Cinema; Panorama; Body; Movement; Train; Travel.

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EL ASIENTO DEL ESPECTADOR. SOBRE MOVIMIENTO Y CUERPO EN EL CINE INMERSIVO

Resumen

En su manera de conducir al espectador a través de la imagen, el cine convencional supone una forma de inmersión muy distinta a la inmersión interactiva de los entornos envolventes. Tener presente tales divergencias a la hora de estudiar el cine envolvente es una manera de atender a sus más dispares potenciales y a cómo estos se hibridan en nuevas fórmulas de narración. Más allá de virtualizar escenas, cada medio inmersivo reubica en el espacio representativo el movimiento y también reposiciona allí el cuerpo del espectador; la manera en la que estos elementos se redefinen en cada producción es determinante en la experiencia del receptor. El presente artículo analiza las narrativas audiovisuales inmersivas, especialmente el cine 360, desde estas fricciones entre lo cinematográfico y lo esférico, expresadas en las distintas formas que adopta el movimiento y las distintas posturas de nuestro cuerpo en la imagen.

Palabras clave

Cine 360; Cine inmersivo; Panorama; Cuerpo; Movimiento; Tren; Viaje.

Autor

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THE BLURRED LINES BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND CHARACTER: NARRATIVE INTEGRATION OF THE USER IN CINEMATIC VIRTUAL REALITY

CRISTINA RUIZ-POVEDA VERA
JULIA SABINA GUTIÉRREZ

INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF IMMERSION

The Baby's Cry (El llanto del bebé, Jorge Blein, 2017) is a live-action narrative virtual reality (VR) piece in which the spectators take on the point of view of a baby. As users, we observe how a grandmother interacts with the baby. She tries to feed the baby, but we cannot taste the food. The baby spits and cries, but we do not. This simple example illustrates the paradox of immersion in VR. Regardless of how believable a piece is, user engagement with the virtual world is always limited. This feature constitutes a major challenge for VR storytellers. How can the story integrate the spectator in the virtual world? And how can it justify their limited ability to interact with the environment? This article explores the overlaps between the character, focalizer, and user in cinematic virtual reality (CVR) and proposes narrative strategies to navigate the paradox of immersion.

First, we draw from traditional narratology, film theory, and scriptwriting. Second, through an analysis of live-action CVR pieces, we propose a typology of user-character, of narrative devices used to integrate spectators in the virtual world, justifying their presence as well as their limited ability to engage with their surroundings.

THE RISE OF CVR

VR can be defined as “the presentation of first-person experiences through the use of a head-mounted display and headphones that enable users to experience a synthetic environment as if they were physically there” (Mateer, 2017: 1) and it includes a variety of techniques ranging from CGI to 360-degree live-action filmmaking or a combination both. Much of the literature about VR emerges from the fields of Psychology and Computer Sciences and responds to its simulative potential, which explains the popular misconception

that VR intrinsically involves virtual spaces only created through CGI (see the popular works of psychologist Mel Slater or of computer scientist Frank A. Biocca). Media scholars and narratologists responded to the birth of VR in 1965 with great expectations. Until the nineties and early two-thousands, scholars privileged CGI-based VR because it could simulate impossible experiences, such as flying, and it could also fulfill limitless narratological fantasies through interactivity (Román Gubern, 1996; Maire-Laure Ryan, 2001).

The potential of an artform in which spectators are not passive observers but actual agents inhabiting the diegetic space led media scholars to focus on the type of VR experiences in which users can move around, interact, and modify the story. As Gubern explains,

Having been able to travel with our gaze with TV's bio-sedentariness, simulation today does not only involve our eyes but the entire body of the spectator, creating a hallucinatory nomadism... The cyberspace does not exist to be inhabited, but to be explored (Gubern, 1996: 166-167).¹

The initial and still influential response to VR epitomized the fascination of scholars with the idea of ending the subjugated relationship between the spectator and the screen. Because of this heavy emphasis on interactivity and simulation, the progressive rise of cinematic VR is relatively recent, both with live-action cameras and with CGI. The notion of CVR refers to traditional narratives with limited interactivity influenced by cinema as its main predecessor medium. These narratives have remained marginal until recently due to what Kath Dooley calls VR's version of the cinema of the attractions, spectacular explorations of the novelty of this technology that highlight its simulative potential (2018: 97). In contrast, CVR forces the user to remain in place, even though they can turn their head and direct their gaze as they please. One of the main challenges for VR filmmaking has been its commercial viability, but a moderate democratization of VR equipment

has taken place in recent years, leading to more low-budget 180 and 360-degree productions. Additionally, some major initiatives have supported the development of narrative pieces in VR, such as the initiative of *The New York Times* called "The Daily 360" or the specialized sections of traditional film festivals like Sundance's New Frontier and the Biennale's Venice VR Expanded.

Above all, CVR consists on "a type of immersive VR experience" within "synthetic worlds" that are created through "pre-rendered picture and sound elements" (Mateer, 2017: 15). Because the virtual world is not generated through graphics processed in real-time, the interactivity of the user is limited as it relies on "predetermined viewpoints" within the virtual space, which in most cases is of 360 degrees (Dooley, 2018: 97). The main difference between traditional VR and CVR is the "inability of users to interact with elements contained within the virtual world" as well as to move around the synthetic space autonomously (Mateer, 2017: 15). This limitation constitutes the main challenge in order to explain the users' presence in the virtual environment because the spectator may feel the illusion of being physically present but will be unable to engage with their surroundings actively. With this in mind, how can CVR stories narratively justify this mismatch without disrupting the immersion of the experience?

After initial experimentation, creatives are defining some basic narrative and aesthetic conventions in VR. Prominent film directors such as Robert Rodríguez and Nacho Vigalondo have explored this technology. Pieces are hardly ever more than 20 minutes long because of the physical discomfort of wearing a headset. Many VR filmmakers privilege simple aesthetic choices to avoid confusing the spectator, such as sticking to a traditional three-act structure (Edwards, 2017), directing the user's gaze effectively to ensure that they do not miss any crucial information, and maintaining the same point of view throughout the entire piece to avoid confusion (Rath-Wiggins,

2016). Back in 1995, Keneth Meyer already foreshadowed this concern and recommended simple narrative threads and limited interactivity in CVR (1995: 233-237).

The underlying concern is the user's limited media literacy regarding VR technology. Scholars and VR filmmakers address the danger of "overwhelming" the user with too much information. Thus, creatives recommend giving the user time to explore the environment at the beginning of the piece, to satisfy their "fear of missing out" (FOMO), and to acclimate to the virtual world (see Dooley, Santesmases, and Rath-Wiggins). In literature about VR it has become commonplace to discuss the need for a new audiovisual "grammar." This discussion revolves around how this new "language" can direct the gaze in a medium that is no longer limited by the frame (see for example Dooley, Mateer, or Edwards). Interestingly, these prescriptions contrast with some traditional dramatic paradigms since, as Meyer affirms in his exploration of dramatic VR, in most storytelling paradigms everything must contribute to the action (Meyer, 1995: 233). In sum, CVR must examine traditional narrative paradigms to articulate its own storytelling conventions.

The persistent concern to guide the user does not only respond to the cognitive side of the literacy gap, but also to a purely physiological aspect of it. Commonly referred to as "VR legs", the user's familiarity with the medium also involves their physical adaptation. Without a proper adjustment, headsets can cause different degrees of dizziness, known as VR sickness or cybersickness (Wolterbeek, 2018; Stanney *et al.*, 2020). For example, recent evidence shows that females tend to experience more motion sickness because VR headsets are designed to fit the interpupillary distance that most males have (Stanney *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, the user's sensory engagement may contradict their perception of the virtual environment, sending the brain contradictory vestibular cues. Ultimately, lack of familiarity

with the medium and cybersickness can hinder the immersive potential of the experience. While VR is associated with immersion, the user may navigate between embodiment and physical dissociation.

PRESENCE AS A NARRATIVE AXIS

The presence of the user in the virtual world is the main element that the story needs to negotiate. In his sound article *Directing for Cinematic Virtual Reality*, Mateer connects VR's idea of presence to transportation theory. For him, the spectator must feel physically immersed as if they were present in the virtual world. Known as the spectator's suspension of disbelief in traditional cinema, transportation is defined by Green and Brock (2000: 701-702) as "absorption into a story (entailing) imagery [...] and attentional focus" and an "integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings" (Mateer, 2017: 17).

The phenomenology of VR immersion has incited great academic interest, with scholars aiming to explore the extent to which the brain processes VR experiences as believable as well as the emotional impact they can have. Presence has become one of the main phenomena studied within this context, especially by psychology scholars. Strongly dependent on immersion, presence "is characterized as a psychological state in which the individual perceives himself or herself to be enveloped by, included in, and interacting with an environment that provides a continuous stream of stimuli" (Blascovich *et al.*, 2002: 105). As Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur describe it, "presence is a state of consciousness, the (psychological) sense of being in the virtual environment" (Slater, Wilbur, 1997: 607). Frank Biocca even defines it as a state in which "our awareness of the medium disappears" and we experience "sensations that approach direct experience" (Biocca, 2002: 102).

Yet the plausibility of the experience should not be overrated as the main way to incite presence. As Janet H. Murray explains, VR requires the same level of commitment from the spectator as cinema. The suspension of disbelief is thus an active creation of spectators, who choose to believe in the story once they wear the headset or they sit at the movie theatre (Murray, J. H., 2020: 24-25). We consider presence as a defining element of the relationship between the viewer and the virtual world because of the impact that physical immersion in the synthetic environment has on the story.

For us, the defining element of VR is how the user enters the virtual world and is thus spatially present within the diegesis, regardless of the credibility of the piece. While we agree with Mateur's claim that presence conditions the immersion, we consider that immersion and suspension of disbelief are not fully equivalent. In cinema the spectator agrees to believe in the diegesis while in CVR the user is placed within it. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain, most traditional film theories consider cinema as a window or as a threshold. Simply put, in the former case, theories such as formalism, constructivism, and Bazanian realism consider the screen as the container of a world (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010: 17). In the latter case, theories like neo-formalism and post-structuralism assume that the screen operates as a door to the diegesis, as a "liminal space" (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010: 38) between reality and the fictional universe. In spite of their differences, both approaches illustrate how the physical and metaphorical distance between the spectator and the diegesis in traditional cinema condition the suspension of disbelief. The spectator chooses to believe in a self-contained fictional world that is physically separate from them, and in which they cannot participate beyond their emotional engagement with the film.

Such distance disappears in VR because the user is placed within the virtual world, the specta-

tor enters the diegesis with their entire body. This ontological difference between the two mediums complicates the relationship between character, focalizer, and spectator. These categories often overlap in film, literature, and especially in videogames. For example, it must be noted that interactive cinema offers a middle ground between these two ways of engaging with the diegesis. Examples such as *Black Mirror* (David Slade, 2018) allow the viewer to have an active role and become an actant and a demiurge of the story without being physically placed within it, as is the case in *butterfly effect* and interactive movie videogames. But in CVR the crossover becomes much more intense VR allows the user to become a character, a focalizer, and to a certain extent an actant. As a result, CVR entices the hybridization of these basic narrative elements and perhaps this is one of the reasons why storytelling in CVR is slow to find its way, since the most basic narrative concepts such as space or character need to be totally reconsidered.

CHARACTER AND USER IN CVR

Not only are CVR users present in the diegesis, they can also become part of the story. Even though the medium offers many other possible articulations of the user's point of view, most pieces still rely on so-called "first person narratives," stories told from a subjective perspective of a character (Santesmases, 2020). The story is then presented through the perspective of said character, a common strategy in videogames, but a more challenging one to deploy in non-interactive narratives. The character's inability to engage with the environment hits the core of a classic narratological discussion: the relationship between character and action. Characters constitute the most complex narrative element in storytelling and thus theorists and narratologists have historically pondered its nature and its function.

VR ALLOWS THE USER TO BECOME A CHARACTER, A FOCALIZER, AND TO A CERTAIN EXTENT AN ACTANT. AS A RESULT, CVR ENTICES THE HYBRIDIZATION OF THESE BASIC NARRATIVE ELEMENTS. AND PERHAPS THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY STORYTELLING IN CVR IS SLOW TO FIND ITS WAY, SINCE THE MOST BASIC NARRATIVE CONCEPTS SUCH AS SPACE OR CHARACTER NEED TO BE TOTALLY RECONSIDERED

In spite of the diverse theoretical approaches to characters, there is certain consensus regarding the importance of their actions in the story. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, action is crucial because it defines the character's nature. His understanding of the interdependence of action and character has informed storytelling conventions throughout history. Although it has not always been considered the hegemonic criterion, it is present in Cicero's writings and in classicist poetics (García Berrio, 1988: 185) and it strongly influences the approaches that resort to the concept of actant.

In CVR, the relationship between character and action emerges in the form of agency, which "refers to the sensation of authorship of actions" (Banakou, Slater, 2014: 1), more specifically of the actions of our body. As a result, agency requires a certain degree of synchronous multisensory interactivity with the virtual world or, at least, some level of interactivity with the piece. In their exploration of film conventions in CVR, Michael Gødde *et al.* conclude that "if the viewer feels part of the scene, his role also needs to be considered in the story" (Gødde *et al.*, 2018: 3). In pieces in which the user embodies a character, their actions cannot really define their nature, as they are often limi-

ted to head movements and do not interfere with the story.

In turn, many scholars consider that CVR users are passive witnesses of the story. For instance, Gødde *et al.* argue that CVR viewers only have two options: they are an active part of the scene and can interact with it ("lean forward") or they are passive observers with low involvement and presence ("lean back") (Gødde *et al.*, 2018: 3). However, other scholars propose a more nuanced approach to user engagement with the virtual world. Durán Fonseca *et al.* argue for a multilayered model. First, they claim that the user's attention divides in three levels by order of importance: the main narrative interest, the secondary narrative context, and the environment. While the user's attention focuses mainly on the primary plot, all the three levels are equally important to incite the user's immersion (2021: 105). Secondly, they also argue that interactivity has different degrees. For them, it unfolds in three levels: space, narrative, and interactivity with the virtual surroundings (2021: 106-109). Each level has different degrees depending on the technical sophistication of the piece. In short, according to their model, the interactivity and agency of the user vary greatly depending on a complex set of variables instead of operating as a passive/active binary. As a result, the user may feel present and engaged with the virtual world even if their interactivity is limited. Instead of feeling like a passive witness to a story, the user can feel part of it even if their ability to impact it is restricted.

With these studies in mind, we can conclude that if the user's presence is not properly integrated in the narrative, the piece will not only lose immersive potential, but it will also lose narrative engagement. As Kate Nash explains in her exploration of interactive documentaries, "the transparency of VR, its disappearance as a medium," and its simulative potential contribute to allow the user to imagine themselves within the diegesis with "a felt sense of reality" (2022: 105). Thus, it is

important to question whether pieces that do not allow the user to interact with the virtual world, as is the case in CVR, risk frustrating the spectator if the user's inability to engage with the environment does not reinforce the overall narrative premise. Otherwise, the transparency of the VR medium may diminish, operating as what in conventional cinema is traditionally called breaking the fourth wall. In any case, we argue that the user's limited agency should not be perceived as a technical failure but rather as a justified feature of the character whose perspective the spectator assumes.

REDEFINING POINT OF VIEW

As narratologist Mieke Bal explains, the relationship between a story and the signs that convey it "can only be established by mediation of an interjacent layer, the "view" of the events" (Bal, Boheemen, 2009: 147). Every narrative has a focalizer whose interpretation of the events becomes accessible for the spectator and gives a particular meaning to the story. Most narratives across mediums rely on what Bal calls "character-bound" focalization or on "external" focalization. On the former, the reader of a text accesses the story through the perspective of a specific character. On the latter, the point of view belongs to "an anonymous agent, situated outside of the fabula" (Bal, Boheemen, 2009: 146-149). Most narratives deploy a combination of both, interlacing the perspective of characters with that of an omniscient narrator.

However, in VR, the notion of a "first person" point of view needs to be examined. The belief that some stories are told in first person while others are told in third person is too simplistic. Bal challenges this assumption explaining that the narrator will always have a focalizing voice, a tone or a perspective that colors the story. The popularity of the simplistic distinction between first and third person narration responds to how invisible the narrator's voice can be in a text. In film, the

ULTIMATELY, THE USER'S LIMITED AGENCY SHOULD NOT BE PERCEIVED AS A TECHNICAL FAILURE BUT RATHER AS A NATURAL FEATURE OF THE CHARACTER WHOSE PERSPECTIVE THE SPECTATOR ASSUMES

suspension of disbelief leads spectators to assume what they witness, accepting the perspective deployed in the film. But VR enhances, and not diminishes, the self-awareness of the spectator over their own existence. As the example of cybersickness shows, the physical experience of the spectator plays a stronger role in CVR than in traditional filmmaking, and therefore adds an extra layer of subjectivity to the meaning of the piece. Secondly, the user may manipulate their own point of view by moving their head. Third, VR allows the spectator to take on the body of a character that exists in the story.

The direct assumption of a character's point of view in VR has incited great enthusiasm regarding its potential for social transformation. Psychologists, activists, journalists, and documentary filmmakers praise VR's potential to enhance the user's empathy for someone else and refer to this type of focalization as perspective taking.² Accordingly, many pieces and simulations use character-bound focalization to raise awareness about social topics, such as *Carne y Arena* (Flesh and Sand, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2018), *1000 Cut Journey* (Courtney Cogburn and Elise Ogle, 2018), and *Eye to Eye* (co-created by PETA, Demodern, and Kolle Rebbe in 2018). What these works share in common is their aim to incite empathy for socially oppressed groups, and most of them are created by non-profit organizations and university labs. As Grant Bollmer explains in his analysis of empathy in VR, "digital media are thus assumed to provoke an empathetic response from an individual while playing games, communica-

ting within virtual worlds, and beyond—if these technologies are properly designed” (2017: 1).

He problematizes this notion by tracing the aesthetic construction of empathy as a culturally situated concept. Specifically, Bollmer claims that the notion of empathy assumes that the user accesses someone else’s experience “without clear mediation” while in reality the user “absorbs the other’s experience into their own experience” (2017: 2). Erick Ramirez also challenges the assumption that VR is an empathy machine. He describes his experience with *1000 Cut Journey* claiming: “I can’t escape my own subjectivity to see or experience things from [the protagonist’s] point of view” (Ramirez, 2018, párrafo 12). In sum, the user can feel with the character, but not for the character, as one cannot rid their own subjectivity. Perspective taking does not necessarily equal empathy for the character, as empathy is a mediated experience that relies on complex devices. As Donghee Shin concludes in his study of empathy in VR, trying to spark empathy through focalization is not enough to create an intense emotional response in the spectator (Shin, 2018: 72).

To return to the previous example, we are the baby but the baby is not us, and far from being a frustrating technical failure, that can be a very engaging exploration of the user’s point of view. We propose a more diverse deployment of focalization in CVR. The following typology is informed by Nash’s classification of interactive VR documentaries according to first-person media. In her approach, she divides the integration of the users in the piece in two main categories, as they can offer the possibility of being in another place or being someone else (2022: 107-112). She further elaborates these two options, explaining that the user can make sense of the VR experience as “being there as a tourist”, “being there as encounter”, “being there as a witness” or “being another.” Our proposed typology is not incompatible with her categorizations, but instead of exploring how the integration of the user “shapes the experien-

ce epistemically and morally” to articulate their implication with the depicted reality (2021: 107), we analyze the overlaps between character, user, and focalizer from a narratological standpoint to propose narrative strategies that navigate them successfully. In turn, the examples in the next section illustrate how the overlapping point of view of user and character can constitute a narrative justification for the user’s inability to interact (as is the case in *The Baby’s Cry*), a political decision to help the users feel part of the protagonists’ community (as in *Hard World for Small Things*, Janicza Bravo 2016) or a way to deconstruct the individual subjectivity of the protagonists (*Travelling While Black*, Roger Ross Williams 2019).

PROPOSED TYPOLOGY AND CASE STUDIES

I. Immobilized protagonist

The forenamed *The Baby’s Cry* is a 360-degree narrative piece in which the user takes the perspective of a baby whose siblings are trying to trick in different ways. This independent six-minute-long piece is made with basic equipment. The story takes place during a family reunion and revolves around the pranks of the baby’s mischievous cousins and siblings. The only thing spectators know about the character whose perspective they take is that the baby never cries. Thus, the children take on the mission to make the baby cry for a change. They prank the baby in ways that allow us to experience impossible positions such as being inside a washing machine or floating on the edge of a window. A similar narrative strategy can be seen in the more commercial piece *Ceremony* (2017), directed by renowned filmmaker Nacho Vigalondo. In this three-minute-long, 360-degree horror story, the user embodies an unidentified person surrounded by other people seated in a circle wearing VR headsets. The immobilization of the user then matches the posture of the character, who is supposed to be wearing a headset in the story too. Progressively, a group of masked men enter the

room and start killing the other guests, a massacre that users can only witness.

Character-bound focalization (*perspective taking*) is very popular in narrative VR. Because the user can only choose where to look, the immobilization of the character is the most successful way to deploy this type of focalization across different genres and production modes. But the user's inability to interact needs to make sense in the story and it often constitutes the main premise: the reasons for the character's lack of interaction serve as the main narrative conflict that triggers the story. In *The Baby's Cry*, the story takes place precisely because the character is a particularly easy-going baby who does not react much. With a very simple narrative premise, the piece successfully reconciles the immersion with the user's limited interactivity. Similarly, in the ironic *Ceremony*, the original story allows the user to experience mystery without questioning their limited agency in the virtual environment. The piece cleverly uses immobilization to reinforce the presence of the user, since, in a way, the character is also a VR user that manages to somehow *transcend* the headset.

Overall, immobilized characters offer a very simple yet creatively engaging way to integrate the user in the story, but they also pose an important challenge. Right from the beginning, the piece needs to be clear about why users cannot move or respond. Along these lines, we propose that the most effective way to design characters in this type of *immobilized character-bound* narratives is to return to Plato's relationship between action and personality. Since the character has limited action, it should not be very defined or have a relevant background story. This ambivalence is actually favorable to enhance the immersion: in order for the user to take the perspective of the character without being alienated, the character needs to feel like a *blank slate* who does not have much information about what is happening, whose past is irrelevant to the story or unknown for

the character, such as a detective interviewing suspects (see Blein and Diego Bezares' 2016 *Being Sherlock Holmes*), or a confused patient waking up after decades in criogenization (see Randal Kleiser's 2019 series *Frozen*).

2. The observing ghost

The beginnings of the first VR pieces are reminiscent of the beginnings of cinema, when the Lumiere brothers sent cameramen to different parts of the world to bring viewers closer to realities that were distant, and therefore exotic, to them. Along these lines, the renowned Canadian VR studio Felix&Paul produced the documentary *Nomads* (Felix Lajeunesse and Paul Raphael 2016), a piece that transports users to different parts of the world to show the everyday life of nomadic cultures such as the Massai and the Sea Gypsies of the Borneo coast. These fragments of CVR are purely descriptive and contemplative, as they do not have a traditional narrative. Instead, the piece takes users through situations such as a canoe trip, the preparation of a meal, and ultimately, daily moments in the subjects' life documented in an attempt to preserve these traditions. The camera is with them, but they do not recognize its presence: spectators are merely voyeurs that do not affect the lives of the depicted subjects. The user takes the role of an observer, a "fly on the wall", a witness whose presence theoretically does not alter the story, evoking traditional observational anthropological documentaries. As such, their presence in the diegesis needs no narrative justification.

A more dramatic use of the observing ghost user can be found in the fictional piece *Kowloon Forest* (Alexey Marfin, 2019), which deploys this technique differently. *Kowloon Forest* is a 360-degree, 8-minute piece showing some private moments in the lives of five strangers in Hong Kong, a premise that serves to reflect about the challenge of finding intimacy in such a densely populated city. The user is totally transparent throughout

the piece to the point that we are placed right in front of the main characters. *Kowloon Forest* starts with some written messages and a voice-over introducing the story. In the first scene, the camera is between the protagonist and her mirror while she removes her makeup. This setup allows spectators to enter her privacy without qualms: they can observe her ritual and visually explore her room, clothes, beauty products, photos, plants... The rest of the piece unfolds with a similar *mise-en-scène*. A man eats while watching a live video about a girl eating food. Again, the camera is between him and his computer and users can look at him, at her, and at his space. In another scene, two Filipino migrants play cards and the camera is placed right between them. To create this experience Alexey Marfin used CGI to make the camera disappear. In *Kowloon Forest*, VR technology takes voyeuristic fantasies to a next level, because the voyeur does not look through the peephole of the door but is in the middle of the action and enjoys the pleasure of being invisible. In the absence of a linear narrative, the piece privileges interesting settings that catch the users' attention during each scene. In this type of piece, the lack of narrative is replaced by voyeuristic pleasure, placing users in underrepresented, inaccessible, or exotic (to them) spaces where they can look at everything without remorse.

3. The companion

Hard World for Small Things (Janicza Bravo, 2016) is a 360-degree narrative piece that denounces police brutality against unarmed African Americans. Its style is realistic and it introduces the user to a slice of the life of a group of friends. In this way, this 6-minute story places spectators in the middle of an action, on a car ride with a group of friends casually chatting. This type of character-user differs from the previous one in that the spectator is made to feel part of the situation, rather than an invisible observer. As such, their presence in the story requires better integration.

In *Hard World for Small Things*, users are seated in the back of the car, the camera is located at eye level, articulating a primary internal ocularization (Gaudreault, Jost, 1990) that makes us feel like just one more crew member in the convertible car driving around LA. Even though users cannot interact with the friends, they can feel a strong sense of presence by listening to their conversation and looking around. The camera placement, along with the casual and relaxed conversation, serve to facilitate the feeling of belonging to the group. Being a passenger in a car effectively justifies the user's inability to move around, which intensifies the sense of immersion.

This scene sets an easy-going mood contrasting with the abrupt outcome of the piece. The car stops at a grocery store, where conflict emerges. Many actions occur simultaneously, and users can observe everything from the back seat: some members of the group run into their friends at the grocery store, one of them picks his grandmother up, and the other passenger is talking on the phone. The first four minutes of the piece introduce the group, but the conflict takes place abruptly only in the last two minutes. A group of plain-clothes police officers approach the car. They accuse the driver of parking in the wrong spot and question whether the car is stolen. Suddenly one of the boys from the group, who had previously entered the grocery store, bumps into one of the officers, who immediately shoots him dead. In this moment, the director surprises the user with a change in perspective: the camera is suddenly placed inside the grocery store. After positioning the user as one of the traveling companions, their presence at the store is not justified. This new camera placement serves to show what happens inside the store and to intensify the abruptness of the event. The ubiquity of the camera, which is one of the advantages of cinematographic language, becomes purposefully abrupt and strange in this CVR piece. The lack of transition disconnects the user from the piece, especially since their pre-

sence to that point had been very well integrated. This way, *Hard World for Small Things* illustrates how making the user feel like a companion can be very impactful to raise awareness about social injustices, in this case racist police brutality. The piece also shows how changing the user's position without a clear justification can constructively break their sense of belonging within the virtual world.

4. Multifaceted user

This last category is in fact a compendium of the previous ones, but it deserves to be analyzed separately because the combination of the aforementioned resources can create a powerful strategy on its own: the deconstruction of the user's sense of subjectivity. Directed by the renowned Roger Ross Williams, *Travelling while Black* (2019) is an award-winning VR documentary often described as an immersive experience about the challenges of African American travelers during the Jim Crow era.³ However, an often-overlooked aspect of the piece is its focus on the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by police officers while he played with a toy gun at a park in 2014, even though it takes up half of the 20 minutes of the piece's duration. Therefore, the piece reflects about racism in the United States in a broader sense, establishing connections between the segregation period and police brutality against blacks in present-day America. The opening of the piece evokes the beginning of a traditional film, in an empty movie theatre. The screen shows documentary footage while a voice-over explains the importance of Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Shortly after, the image on the screen surpasses the frame and a new environment surrounds the viewer. From this point on, the piece takes place in two main locations: the iconic family-owned restaurant Ben's Chili Bowl, in Washington DC, and the inside of an old intercity bus. The first half of the piece consists of a series of tes-

timonies from older African Americans recounting their experiences as black travelers as well as specific memories of racist discrimination. In some cases, the testimonies can be heard through a voice-over along with documentary footage and recreated flashbacks that are screened on the walls of the restaurant or the bus. In these moments, the camera slowly moves throughout the spaces with very subtle trackings and zooms and it feels as if the user is just a ghost observing the scenes. In other cases, the subjects share their stories with others at the restaurant, while the camera takes a seat at the table joining the group. Even though their presence is never acknowledged, users no longer feel like ghosts but rather as companions who are part of the community, sharing stories with the rest of the members. The dynamic montage stops abruptly in the second half of the piece, which consists of a long take in which Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice, tells the story of her son's death. She is seated at one of the restaurant tables with another woman and with us, and the restaurant is full of people listening to her testimony. The conversation is interrupted only by a short scene at the movie theatre showing the footage of her son's shooting.

The focalization in this piece is multifaceted: it combines multiple subjectivities and points of view through the editing of the piece, it relies on oral stories as a valid historical source, it uses archival footage, it integrates recreated flashbacks, and it depicts multiple subjects sharing their experiences. For the purposes of this article, we focus on how the user's ubiquitous perspective contributes to articulate a sense of fragmentation and multiplicity. Instead of using character-bound focalization in a simplistic way to evoke empathy, *Travelling while Black* shows how a combination of perspectives can be greatly impactful to raise awareness as well as to create a compelling narrative. The user's point of view consists of a mixture of some of the typologies listed above: users are ob-

THE MULTIFACETED USER ALLOWS THE PIECE TO INCITE SELF-REFLECTIVE EMPATHY: IT RAISES AWARENESS ABOUT A SOCIAL ISSUE AS WELL AS ABOUT OUR INABILITY TO LIVE DIRECTLY THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF OTHER SUBJECTS IMPACTED BY IT

serving ghosts witnessing the reality with distance, bystanders accompanying the main subjects at the restaurant, and even spectators in the purest sense of the word, movie theatre included. This way, the piece manages to approach the topic in its complexity. First, it avoids presuming that the audience is predominantly white and needs a *first person* narrative to understand how racism feels *first hand*. Secondly, it eschews the naive notion that a 20-minute experience can make non-blacks understand the experience of anti-blackness in America through character-bound focalization. Third, and most importantly, with this fragmentation of subjectivities, the piece honors the experiences of multiple African Americans in their diversity instead of depicting one single unified narrative of racism. Thus the testimonies appear as unique to each of the subjects but also as part of a bigger, systemic, collective issue. *Travelling while Black* creates a simultaneous sense of immersion and of Brechtian distancing: users can feel literally and figuratively close to the subjects sharing their memories but they also become aware of the apparatus mediating in the virtual experience. Ultimately, this narrative strategy serves to convey collective experiences more accurately, as it challenges the notion of a unified individual subject. The multifaceted user allows the piece to incite self-reflective empathy: it raises awareness about a social issue as well as about our inability to live directly through the experiences of other subjects impacted by it.

CONCLUSIONS

This article addresses the main narrative challenge in CVR: the justification of the user's presence considering the paradox of immersion. Rather than understanding limited user interactivity as a technical constraint, we argue that it can be integrated in the story creatively. To that end, we analyzed some of the most popular features of VR, such as presence or agency, in relationship to traditional narratological notions and film theories, such as focalization. Drawing from film and narrative theories allowed us to propose different ways to integrate the user in the narrative without the need for sophisticated interactive technologies, depending on their role and level of implication with the story: the immobilized protagonist, the observing ghost, the companion, and the multifaceted user. With this classification, we attempt to conceptualize the role of the user beyond the simplistic binary active/passive. Even though we focus on live-action pieces, our findings can also apply to CGI-based CVR. In addition, we argue that the most engaging pieces are the ones that explore the ambivalence of subjectivity in VR, stories that consider the impossibility to escape the user's own experience and that experiment with point of view without taking empathy for granted. First, the popular technique of character-bound focalization needs to deploy very simple premises to be effective, as is the case in *The Baby's Cry*. Secondly, more observational pieces based on visual exploration can be powerful in stories that rely more on documentation and space, such as *Nomads*. Third, the user's point of view should only change throughout the story if the narrative justifies it properly, fragmenting the user's focalization when it makes narrative sense, as in *Travelling while Black*. We argue against the notion that the physical point of view automatically involves an emotional point of view. Instead, we propose more complex articulations of focalization that incorporate the paradox of immersion

creatively, harnessing the potential discomfort or self-awareness of the user to create mystery about the character's past, dissociation from the virtual body, or self-reflective distance from the story. ■

NOTES

- 1 The original quote is in Spanish and has been translated by the authors of this article: "Después de que el biosedentarismo televisivo nos había permitido viajar activamente con la mirada, ahora la simulación no solo afecta a la vista, sino a todo el cuerpo, determinando un nomadismo alucinatorio del espectador... El ciberespacio no existe para ser habitado, sino para ser recorrido."
- 2 See The Human-Computer Interaction research cluster (University of Melbourne) and the Virtual Human Interaction Lab (Stanford University).
- 3 The piece is accessible at The New York Times' YouTube channel with the title *What Was It Like to Travel While Black During Jim Crow?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UUFn7iyyimo>

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THE BLURRED LINES BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND CHARACTER: NARRATIVE INTEGRATION OF THE USER IN CINEMATIC VIRTUAL REALITY

Abstract

In spite of the intense sense of immersion that Virtual Reality (VR) can incite, the interactivity of the user is always limited. In traditional narrative VR pieces, also known as cinematic VR (CVR), users can witness a story but can hardly impact it. This limitation creates a paradox in which users feel immersed in a virtual world but cannot interact with it. This article focuses on the narrative strategies used in CVR to integrate spectators within the diegesis. This paradox of immersion behooves scholars and creatives to rethink traditional narrative paradigms to apply them to this new medium. In this sense, the user's limited ability to interact needs to reinforce the overall narrative premise. By analyzing a corpus of live-action CVR pieces, this article proposes a typology of users: different ways in which the spectator can be integrated in the story, navigating the overlaps between user, character, and focalizer successfully.

Key words

Virtual Reality; Immersion; Cinematic Virtual Reality; Focalization; Presence; Agency; Character; User.

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LA DELGADA LÍNEA ENTRE ESPECTADOR Y PERSONAJE: LA INTEGRACIÓN NARRATIVA DEL USUARIO EN LA REALIDAD VIRTUAL CINEMATOGRAFICA

Resumen

Pese a la intensa sensación de inmersión que la realidad virtual (RV) ofrece, la interactividad de los usuarios con el mundo virtual siempre es limitada. En las piezas narrativas tradicionales de RV, también conocidas como RV cinematográfica (RVC), los usuarios pueden presenciar una historia pero apenas pueden influir en ella. Esta limitación crea una paradoja en la que los usuarios se sienten inmersos en un mundo virtual con el que no pueden interactuar. Este artículo se centra en las estrategias narrativas empleadas en la RVC para integrar a los espectadores dentro de la diégesis. La paradoja inmersiva invita a académicos y creadores audiovisuales a repensar paradigmas narrativos tradicionales para poder aplicarlos a este nuevo medio. En este sentido, la limitada capacidad de interacción de los usuarios debe reforzar la premisa narrativa. Mediante un análisis de un corpus de piezas de RVC grabadas en imagen real, este artículo propone una tipología de usuarios, a saber, diferentes formas en las que el espectador puede ser integrado en la historia negociando de un modo creativo las maneras en que el personaje, el focalizador, y el espectador pueden coincidir.

Palabras clave

Realidad virtual; Inmersión; Cine inmersivo; Focalización; Presencia; Agencia; Personaje; Usuario.

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DIALOGUE

**THE CHANGING
FACE OF THE PAST.
IMMERSION,
VIRTUALITY
AND THE LIGHT
BORN(E) IMAGE**

Interview with

TOM GUNNING

TOM GUNNING

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PAST. IMMERSION, VIRTUALITY AND THE LIGHT BORN(E) IMAGE

DANIEL PITARCH

Tom Gunning is one of the most important early cinema scholars. His characterisation of this cinema as a “cinema of attractions”, coined with André Gaudreault, became a major interpretative paradigm. This concept was a counterweight to an understanding of film as eminently narrative, and also contributed to a study of the period on its own instead of as solely a path to later cinema. An object of discussion and critique on its own, the idea of “cinema of attractions” has also been used to establish relations between this cinema and other periods or practices, such as blockbuster or avant-garde aesthetics (an example of the importance of this characterisation and its several uses is the volume of homage and discussion *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* edited by Wanda Strauven). Gunning’s work as a historian,

however, is not only limited to this period: he has also studied 19th century audiovisual technologies and filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, and he maintains a sustained interest in experimental cinema.

In this dialogue we talk with him about the concepts of immersion and virtuality in the history of audiovisual media. Gunning not only navigates through different kinds of spectacles, technologies and motifs—such as panoramas or the film genre of the phantom ride—but also offers more theoretical reflections on the cinematic apparatus and on the meaning of these terms. Our eagerness to establish relations between contemporary and historical technologies, as a kind of recognition of the present in the past, is also proposed as an object of discussion. ■

This issue of *L'Atalante* is devoted to the idea of immersion and virtuality in audiovisual media. These are keywords of contemporary technologies, but they can also be traced back maybe longer than expected by some people. So the first question would be, and I know it's too broad but it can lead to a some sort of overview of the subject, how do you see, as a film historian, the importance of these words in audiovisual media history? Do they have a history and one relevant to our present devices and practices?

It's a big question, yes. And the first answer, the most obvious point is: yes, I think it is relevant and important. Then the question becomes: In what way? What are the specific interactions?

There is the issue of «what an image is» generally; anthropologically we could even say. And that implies, and this is the way it is usually approached, an issue of representation; that the image refers to something else. I think that, for this question, this is less interesting than the idea of the relation, not of the image to the referent, but to the viewer. So the issue is not so much «what does this represent?», but «how does it address me?», «how do I address it?», «what is the shared space between the viewer and the image?» And there are obviously an enormous number of modes for this relationship.

What is interesting to me, and in many ways I see my work as being devoted to, is the question of what is the history of the image. Historically and anthropologically, but also technologically. And therefore, what is the uniqueness of the film image and how does it relate to other types of imagery. And to start just a little bit, I would say that the most obvious point and one that I have constantly tried to emphasize because I think it's taken for granted too quickly, is the idea of the moving image. The fact that the image in cinema, and a few things that kind of lead up to cinema – certain types of what we often call proto-cinema –, tries not simply to create a still image but rather to create one that is moving.

This implies a number of things that are very important to your question. Not simply the idea of realism, which is certainly important –and is addressed by almost all the first viewers of the cinematic image– but that is more on the category of representation. But other ideas which are on the side of the viewer's relationship to the image. The viewer's unique relation to a moving image that it seems to, in some way, propel the viewer not just into a representation, but into a kind of world with duration and transformation. And therefore it has a very different, much more immersive, effect, I would claim, than a still image. I'm not trying to denigrate the still image, which is complicated and glorious. But the moving image has this quality of a kind of immersion, because of the very fact of both the movement and the duration of that movement. So that every moving image not only shoots an action, but takes some time.

When we are dealing with the photographic moving image, which of course is not the only type, we are also dealing with a kind of recording; again a kind of a representation, a capturing of a moment. And that is very important as well. When we are working with the history of cinema, we can kind of generalize schematically and say: «okay, so the image begins to move». And that involves things like the phenakisticope, the zoetrope... devices that do not depend on photography, but nonetheless occasion a moving image. When we add to that photography, we have a very particular series of things that includes not simply «realism» or even «indexicality», but rather the fact that something is recorded.

Here it is very important to think about the moving image in relation to its twin. Edison in his first caveat of the motion picture patent emphasized that it has a strong relationship to its previous invention: the phonograph. The phonograph, before cinema and I think more or less uniquely, recorded a moment. Not only takes time, but actually records time and can repeat it. And so the type of immersion that we are talking about, a tempo-

ral immersion, not only in the movement but in the time it takes, also has a lot to do with the recording of sound. They can be independent, but when we combine them or even when we think about them together, I think there is an enormous issue there that helps us think about what immersion might be.

Now, to pick up another thread of this which is, I think, extremely interesting. If we again think about cinema in various forms, so that it actually would include something like the zoetrope, Edison's kinetoscope –the peepshow where you look at a moving photographic scene—... then the moment of projection –which is to some extent temporarily later than the other moving image but is very close to simultaneous– involves a whole other series of things that I would relate to immersion. And that has to do with the quality of light and darkness, something that I'm sure could be studied in terms of experimental and perceptual psychology.

I love the word «projection». Projection, «throwing in front of one», describes the action of the light-image being carried through space. From its source, a slide or a film, onto a screen and thrown in front of the viewer. But there is also a way, more metaphorical, that the viewer is thrown towards the image and towards the light. This may be related to what happens whenever we look at an image, but I think that with the idea of projecting a light image in darkness something immersive is happening, in which the actual surrounding world, that one is seated in or standing in, is occluded by the darkness and a different world is opened up by the image that is projected in front of one. My claim would be here, and I don't think it's radical, I think it's pretty much what we all experience, that we also are projected towards it. Of course perspective in a still image has already a quality of projecting our presence or our attention into an image. But again, I'm claiming that there is something more with the actual act of projecting.

I use a phrase which I like quite a bit: «light born image». It's a pun because «born» can be two words. «Borne» which means carried, «to be borne», and then also «born» which is, of course, birth. And so my interest here is the idea of an image being both generated, «born by light», but also being «carried by light». And that idea of carrying, transport, it is a very important word to me in terms of thinking about cinema and thinking about immersion, because I think that we as viewers are carried. The sense of movement is not only in the movement of the image, but of our attention, of our absorption. And of some entering into an alien world, a different world.

So that is a lot of stuff that I'm trying to outline, but I think it is kind of the essence of what to me sustains the idea of immersion. And there are many historical, technological and phenomenological details and differences. But these would be the most basic schemata of the phenomenon for me.

Thanks for the effort of addressing such an overview. It is useful in order to establish relations between different technologies and practices. You talked about immersion as an effect of several things. There is this immersion caused by the image having movement, that could have its own history, as for example with these day to night images that you could see in some «boîte d'optique». The immersion of projection –in the both directions that you signal- can go as far as the camera obscura. And there is this kind of temporary immersion of recording technologies, that relate cinema to other devices like the phonograph. As we were talking in a broad sense, I wonder if it could be interesting to address particular or more specific cases about immersive or virtual technologies.

The issue that kind of immediately comes up with immersion would be a kind of creation of an environment. Something that is in a way different from what I just outlined in terms of projection

in the moving image. Not unrelated, but not identical. Creation of an environment not just by the image, but an environment in which the image is presented and received and that invites immersion, almost like a physical absorption. And the most obvious example of this would be the panorama, which is extremely interesting for a number of reasons.

Number one; in the 19th century it was extremely popular and then, if not disappeared, became marginal. There might be some argument that there has been in the 21st century a kind of revival. Certainly there has been an historical interest in the panorama and a kind of preservation and restoration of the ones that have survived. Although what is interesting is that some new ones have emerged in the 21st century or even at the very end of the 20th century.

The panorama what it does, and I think it is very paradoxical, is to eliminate the frame. In almost all cases the image is defined, at least to some degree, by its frame. Its frame separates it from something else, from some other world. And it becomes in that way a kind of portal, a doorway. But what is curious about the Panorama is that the frame is eliminated. Perceptually we see no frame. This is primarily done architecturally by a special kind of construction. Also to some extent by the lighting. And of course, and this is architectural as well, by the whole situation of the viewer, so that the viewer is surrounded, and immersed in that sense, by a 360 degree image. One might say there has to be a frame there, a limit, but it is concealed. The top is usually concealed by some type of indication of a viewing platform that looks like a tent and the bottom is often concealed by a false landscape.

The one that I have spent the most time in is the Mesdag panorama in Den Hague, the Netherlands. It is from the end of the 19th century and it is a seascape of an actual place which is not that far, a dozen miles or so from the place where it is recreated. What has been preserved is the ac-

tual building. So you have the process that is so important for immersion of a gradual movement in. You do not just walk into the room and see the panorama. You walk through a kind of a corridor, it is dark, you climb stairs and you emerge into this immersive environment.

This whole sense of thinking paradoxically of the image not as a framed entity but as an environment, is kind of what we think is the most obvious example of immersion. I would argue that cinema, even with the maintaining of the frame, has these immersive effects thanks to movement and projection. But one would certainly has to claim that if one is dealing with this term in its most complete meaning, in the Panorama you really lose the sense of a frame and therefore lose the sense of an image. Being it replaced by the sense of an environment. That is probably what defines for most people the idea of immersion. I think the Panorama is the strong case and it is very fascinating.

There have been attempts throughout history to combine the moving image with this type of panoramic arrangement. Very early, in fact, like in the unsuccessful Cineorama of 1900 Paris Exhibition, designed as a 360 degree screening of images taken from balloons. It ended up not being realized due to technical problems, but it could have worked. It is curious to me that this has never become. The panorama at the end of the 19th century was quite popular. Almost every major city had a panorama, some of them permanent in a specific building, some of them temporary. But the motion picture panorama is very intermittent. The couple of times I've seen it, it grabbed my attention that there was a 360 degree screen and people were standing in the middle, but almost everybody just looked in front of them. Maybe only two people looked behind. I don't know whether that is just training from the cinema or if in fact it had something to do, which it seemed to me, with the films that were made —because what was most interesting was in front and the rest was just a kind of se-

ting. But I think it also has to do, and I would not claim this theoretically, it is merely an hypothesis, with the fact that when you have the immersive effects of cinema that I already described, adding the effects of the panorama is kind of an overkill. Maybe they work better separately. But I would not claim that as a principle, it is just a kind of observation.

The reason why I bring this up is because, in our previous e-mail exchange, you mentioned the Hale's Tour. This exhibition format in which films that were taken from the front of a train, were projected in a theater that was made up to look like a train car. Also usually with additional elements of sound or even swing –sometimes the cars moved a little bit at the very beginning of the show–, so that you would have these kind of physical associations as well as the environmental ones. This was presumably in the argument of realism, that you really felt that you were in a train looking at a view at the window rather than just simply watching a film.

What is curious to me is that this genre of early cinema known as phantom rides –which are films taken from a vehicle as it moves through space and showing either the train tracks, the street or even occasionally a river, when taken from boats– predates the Hale's tours. Hale's tours begins in 1904 at the St Louis World's Fair, and then begins to be placed in major cities as a form of exhibition. But the phantom rides, the films taken from vehicles, begin in 1896. They begin more or less with the very first films ever taken.

So in other words, that immersive effect of the image did not wait for the environmental context. That was rather kind of a second thought, like «let's do this even further by giving this added quality of being environmental, of designing the exhibition space so that no longer looks just like an exhibition space, but seems to sustain the imagery you're looking at». I find this interesting, although what I also would emphasize is that the films

preexisted. They did not depend or come from the idea of the environmental theater. So again, the immersion, I am kind of claiming, seems to be primary. Is inherent in the cinema, not in the mode of exhibition.

The idea of «concealing the frame» could be also related to Phantasmagoria, a subject that you have also covered in your writings, because one of the innovations of this magic lantern show was to hide the limits of the screen. And this was achieved not only by concealing the actual limits, but also by painting black the background in the slides (and this terminology exceeds the phantasmagoria shows to refer, in some writings, to any slide with a black background).

Also I think it is very interesting what you remarked about the experience of entering the panorama. Because it opens up the discussion from the image itself to other aspects of the dispositive that we may not be considering, but that are of importance for the spectator's experience.

Moving a bit to a slightly different approach; in the field of media archaeology there is a tendency to consider not only technologies that were developed, but also imaginary ones (being actual proposals or pure phantasies). So I wonder if you think that these are worth to explore also, and if there are any particular cases you think about in relation to immersion and virtuality. And not only in the 19th century, a period that we have talked more about, but also maybe in the 20s or 30s of the 20th century, a moment that you approached for instance in your book about Fritz Lang.

To try to isolate what I think is central about what you are asking, I would turn to some of the key terms and what they mean. Like «virtuality». I have an essay in which I try to make the point that our relation to the virtual is complex but also transforming.

Let me just make a particular point here. The term commonly used, at least in English, tends to

mean «something less than real». For instance, if I say «you're the virtual king of Sweden», it would mean you are not the real king. But there are two kinds of claims in it. One is lesser: «you're not the real king». But the other is: «in effect you are as powerful as the real king». So on the one hand virtual takes away reality. On the other hand, it kind of changes its register and makes reality not a simple actuality, but a kind of condition of power.

The word «virtual» comes from the word «virtue», which we can associate primarily with morality. But traditionally, it did not mean that; primarily it meant «strength». And in fact, in a kind of sexist context, it was connected with manhood –«vir» in Latin–. So the whole idea of virtue was the power of something and a power that was potential. To some extent virtual and potential can be distinguished, but in many ways they are synonyms. In other words, when we are talking about a kind of «virtual quality», we are talking about not just what is, what actually exists, but what is potentially there.

We can think about «virtual reality» as meaning precisely this realm of possibility, of potential. So its connection to the imaginary –and not in the sense of the fanciful, the unrealistic, the dreamlike, but exactly the imagined– is very important. Therefore your question about imaginary technologies, literally would be «virtual technologies». Often this gets caught up, and maybe not illegitimately but for me rather limited, in the idea of progress: «you imagine it and then you realize it». That may or may not work in some type of theories of technology. But in what we are talking about it is not the idea of the virtual being the limited, the not quite real, the unrealized, but rather being the powerful, the potential.

In other words, if we think about «virtual reality» in the kind of almost literal sense, what it is doing is kind of short circuiting what I talked about earlier of the usual idea of the image as representation. No longer is the image, the image of something real –the indexical bond in a photogra-

ph or the iconic bond in a painting– but it is actually exceeding that. By being «virtual» it is thinking about doing something that is not real.

As I have indicated often in my writings, thinking about cinema as it was originally received as a super-realistic image –it adds temporality and movement to the still image–... I certainly would not want to deny that. It is very important and it has been the main way that cinema has theoretically and historically been thought about. But I would like to detour around it and think about the cinema image not as realistic, but as «virtual», as creating an alternative. And this is partly what I think is important in the idea of immersion. If on the one hand the panorama or even the Halle's tours can be talked about in terms of realism, I think it is actually a very limited way of thinking about them. Not false maybe, but limited. If we go back to what you were talking about, the journey into the panorama, that you go through the dark corridor, you climb up the stairs and you emerge in a very light filled image that surrounds you... What is important there is not just a sense of it being real, but of it being other. You have entered into another environment.

Going back to the Phantasmagoria, it is a perfect example. Because in the Phantasmagoria theater, where the magic lantern slides were projected –as you know, the Phantasmagoria had several rooms–, there was no attempt to show you something realistic. In fact what they tried to do was to show you something supernatural and yet, at the same time, it was announced «These are not real ghosts». Robertson or Philipsthal said «what you are going to see is illusion. I'm not showing you wonders. I'm showing you things that I can make. But you will feel that they're real». So there is that whole kind of contradiction again. The paradox of the Phantasmagoria is that it convinces you that something «exists, it does not exist».

Phantasmagoria does that partly as you move into an auditorium, you are seated and it is dark. Again the darkness, as I have indicated with pro-

jection, is extremely important (and in contrast somewhat to the panorama where light is abundant). Therefore with these illuminated projected images –backprojected, of course– and the screen that is, as you say, hidden, dark, what one gets is a sense not of an image appearing on a screen, but rather of something appearing out of darkness. There are also the various movements of the lantern, which would allow the images to seem to actually be coming closer or withdrawing. The spatial illusions are very important but they are illusions; acknowledged as such and intended. This is what is important to emphasize, because all too often, partly for political reasons, illusion is thought about as a kind of trick, where we are made to think something that is not real is real. But in the Phantasmagoria there is no such subterfuge. You are rather invited to think of the paradox of what you are seeing. What you are experiencing and what you are perceiving is not what you think it is. And there is both an uncanny experience and a kind of excitement. You are put in a state where you do not know what is real. But for something to be realistic is to be illusionary.

As it is quite usual, and a lot of us find it very interesting, to establish relations between older technologies and new ones –let’s say a kind of 19th-21st connection– maybe we can talk a bit about this idea in itself: why do we establish connections? Are they useful? Are they concealing something? What are the differences? Because, of course, a relation means that there are differences too. Maybe one difference is a matter of frequency? That today are much more common than then, or even that then they were the exception and now are the rule? Or maybe this or other relations we establish are a mistake from our point of view; something that maybe needs a kind of «perspective correction»?

It is an interesting question and hard to resolve. Because there is, I think, a sense of recognition. The turn of the 19th to the 20th century is a period

of enormous technological acceleration. Usually things that had been gestating through the 19th century, but that in the last 20 years or so become accelerated and there are a whole series of transformations. The question we are talking about is: is this last turn from the 20th to 21st parallel? Is it a situation of a similar acceleration? The problem is that all through the 20th century we have a kind of acceleration, so it is not as demarcated. But there is this sense of acceleration and why is this, I think it is something that we will probably not be able to figure out for a long time and that would involve various types of research.

But nonetheless the observation that there is this kind of desire to find an earlier version of what we are going through –one which is both, as you say, similar and different–... I think that is significant. Even if we found that we could deny it on some level in terms of actual historical transformations, the fact that there is that desire to find a kind of distant mirror is important. And what does it involve? It partly involves that sense of wanting to be able to define an era. That there has been some type of transformation just recently and that it has a parallel to the earlier transformation as a way to understand it.

The other aspect of this relations, that I always emphasize as a historian, is about what changes. If we suddenly have a sense of transformation is partly because we understand something differently. The way I would usually put this is: suddenly the past looks different. I often tell an anecdote I heard about scholars under Ceausescu in Romania, a regime that followed the Stalinist model of constantly rewriting the textbooks of the revolution, the photographs and so on. A scholar said at one point: «our only hope lies in the future because the past is so uncertain; it’s always changing». He was talking about that kind of false certification of the past. But it seems to me to express some principle which as a historian I find really true and really important, which is that the past is not something that is set in concrete and untouchable, but in fact

it is something that we constantly go back to and looks different than it did.

To give an illustration that is very direct. My own work on early cinema, which started around the Brighton Symposium in 1978 when I was just a young graduate student, was partly that there was already a narrative in place about what early cinema was. That it was the gradual accumulation of the techniques of narrative film. And Christian Metz in the sixties was saying that narrative is the railroad, that all films moved towards narrative. Looking at early films under the context of the preparation for the Brighton Symposium in 1977, I said: «No, most of these are not narrative. There are some and they are important and they are interesting. But to kind of see everything of early cinema as a preparation for this kind of “railroad” of telling stories is simply not accurate». And furthermore, to my mind, it distorted what we really find interesting in film. I was roundly criticized by some people for this, because I’m very interested in the avant garde cinema. So for me, when I look at films, I don’t think, «okay, how does this lead to *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) or *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965)?». I look at them and think, «how does it lead to *La regione centrale* (Michael Snow, 1971) or *Dog Star Man* (Stan Brakhage, 1961-1964)?». And some people –Janet Staiger, Charles Musser,...– criticized me; said: «you’re distorting this because you’re looking at it from your perspective». Now, essential to me is that we always look from our perspective. And if we think we do not, this is fooling ourselves and fooling other people. But furthermore, where did they get the assumption that everybody was thinking in terms of narrative? Looking at contemporary comments on films I found something, not like the avant-garde because that’s a very different thing, but much more like what I called the cinema of attractions.

So the point is, I guess, that we have a sense of historical change because suddenly the past does not seem to tell the same story that it always did. Suddenly we notice things in it that we did not

notice before. Why? Not just because they were there –not just the kind of rankian «history as what was»–, but also because suddenly we are in a new kind of hermeneutic relationship. We are asking new questions. We are noticing new things. I think that is true now.

But the thing that is the hardest to figure out for me... Let me just put it this way: the biggest transformation is not any particular technology –technology has changed but not enormously since 1895– but rather the omnipresence of images. And particularly of moving images or projected images. Now we live in an environment of those types of images, partly through advertising and through surveillance cameras. In any urban or technological area one would be hard pressed to avoid seeing images. And it is interesting because already in the 19th century urban areas had this quality. It is very fascinating to me if we think about posters. If you look at photographs of the late 19th century, whether it is Paris or New York or wherever, every surface seems to be covered by advertising images. And there is a difference in and there is not a difference again. In terms of what we were saying before, it is the omnipresence of the image around us now that makes me more sensitive to looking back at the 19th century and seeing all those posters.

It is very interesting how you explain it. And also, to point to a detail, I also find important that you mentioned the whole 20th century as a process of acceleration. Because in all these relations sometimes we tend to forget it (and for a reason in the case of film history, as it has been much talked about –even if, of course, a lot has been neglected too). But this can lead to a misconception; as if all this was something that somehow ended and then appeared again. While it is more a continuous trend that maybe goes up and down, but that is never lost.

In a recent conference you gave at Xcèntric in Barcelona, I think that you mentioned some-

thing about cinema today being a place of attention. I do not remember the exact phrase or context but I remember it because it resonated to me. Because I really think that in our present media landscape and the practices it has imposed to us (this constant attention to our devices) entering a movie theater could be a kind of balm, as you concentrate on just one thing. And of course, if I say so, it is because this is the exact opposite of what cinema represented for a lot of people in the twenties or thirties; this idea that cinema is an embodiment of the experience of everyday modernity with its constant distraction, etc. And I am not saying that any of the two characterizations are false. I rather find interesting that the characterization can go sort of from one pole to the other, and what this says about our present experience.

When I read this, as you mentioned it in our previous e-mail exchange, I thought that it is both very interesting and very hard to respond to. Because it is, in fact, essential to the way that I have been thinking, that cinema as an attraction is partly a kind of distraction. But it is exactly the two things together. What can grab your attention, when you're distracted. In other words, it is not the old model of contemplation; you go before a revered painting and you contemplate it and you lose yourself in it, lose yourself in time... In cinema, although you perhaps become immersed and absorbed, is almost always against the background of distraction. It is complicated because it seems contradictory. I would claim it is dialectical, not just simply a dichotomy. The image itself is multiple. Does not have to be, but if we think particularly of the Lumière or the Mitchell and Kenyon early films of the street, it is exploding all around. It is not the centered, contemplating experience. And yet at the same time, because you are, as I have indicated, transported by both the process of the attention grabbing quality of movement –something moves we tend to pay attention to– and the immersive quality of a projection... we

are taken to some place. And this is to me really important, this idea of transport.

Where are we taken? We are not necessarily taken to a total concentration and a single viewpoint. Not that we can not do that, but I think the nature of the solicitation of film to the viewer is one of multiplicity. Again phantom rides are the perfect illustration. We have the constant forward thrust of the camera down the tracks or down the street. And yet what we are seeing is constantly changing. So there is something hypnotic about the progress into it, but something almost distracting by the multiplicity of things to look at.

To me, ultimately, I would not say either that film is about attention or that it is simply about distraction. It seems to be about the play. And this is a term that I love not only because of the idea of «playful» and «ludic», but also I love how it relates to the engineering term «play», «flexibility», something that vibrates... We move back and forth as we are watching a moving image. And this even goes into things that are important like boredom –which I have written an essay about.

What I would emphasize is, I think you are absolutely on to something in asking this question. But it is hard to answer, because it is not as though with film we simply are channeled into it. Nor are we simply not paying attention. This is an issue of this kind of modern play between attention and distraction, as being kind of the condition of the modern environment. And cinema in some way can not replicate... but has the same quality. And partly that is why we were fascinated by it.

There is also this question that all of us have that kind of both belief and inclination towards total absorption. That classical cinema environment: darkened room, no ambient noise... However, what is interesting to me is that it is more dialectical. That exists only against the background of distraction. In the last two years, because of COVID and because of a variety of things, I have seen relatively few films at a theater and primarily see them on my monitor or on my computer.

And one of the things I notice is how often I check the running time of the film. And I think it is very much like when I am reading. I check to see what page I am on, but that does not mean I am not absorbed in the reading. But it is interesting that I check what page it is and that I check what time it is in the film. Sometimes it is with an analytical interest, kind of «it is at this point in the narrative, how much more time can it take to work this out?» So it is as though there is always some other awareness.

And could this be maybe something that previous historical spectators experienced in a similar but different way too? As a speculation, sometimes when writing about films, let's say in the first decades of the century, people used reels as a kind of measure («that happened in the third reel»). Could this be something that spectators were aware of?

Definitely were in up until about 1916-17, which is often when people say that is the beginning of classical cinema. Silent films very often had an actual title that would say «Act one», «Act two». In other words, the reels became part of the dramaturge, related to theatrical. But then that disappears. And to what extent you could be aware of it in a classical cinema... In fact the projectionist is aware of these little marks that indicate the ending and beginning of reels and one can notice it; but I don't think that most people did.

As we talked a lot about historical practices, I wonder, and this will be the last question, if you can talk about some contemporary work, technology or practice that you think is particularly interesting.

I am friends with Paul Kaiser and Marc Downie, two video-artists that work together under the name of OpenEndedGroup. They work a lot with a variety of things, including 3D. I have learned a great deal from them, and we even taught a course together some years ago about the possibilities

of new media. They did a work called *Ulysses in the Subway* in collaboration with Ken and Flo Jacobs. Ken Jacobs had an audio recording of him, purely sound, taking a trip from Times Square down to his loft in Lower Manhattan primarily on the subway. And they asked them to make something with this, working with the idea of visualize the sound. So Mark and Paul created a kind of abstract image of lines, a little bit like an oscilloscope but much more complicated, that responded to sound. Mark described it as a kind of wire sculpture, only that it is 12 miles long and we are kind of moving through it.

I found this piece, partly because of friendship, partly because of the process, to be extremely exciting. They actually have it in two forms. One is as a 3D film and the other as a VR, with the helmet. So that not only is this line constantly moving, but it comes closer and farther away. And to me, it is just very exciting that there is such an enormous number of technologies available now to interact with each other. This piece is abstract cinema, but at the same time you are hearing a very anecdotally and recognizable face. And if you know New York, you know exactly where you are –where the subway has changed ... There's something very narrative, very indexical even, and yet very abstract and bizarre. So this would be a quick answer and an example of what I am most excited by. I also find very interesting all the work of Jacobs in 3D.

I do not know this work but it seems quite appealing and I am happy that there is another reference to experimental cinema in the interview, as it is a field sometimes forgotten in canonical film histories (of course, less and less, but still...)

I am interested in all kind of films and I am interested in literature, painting, architecture... But why did I choose cinema as my main preoccupation? Undoubtedly they are autobiographical explanations, but one that I would give rationally would be that I love the fact that, whereas in

other media or art forms the classical and the experimental are totally separate, in film these are happening at the same time. In other words, commercial cinema and avant-garde cinema, we are not talking about different centuries. They are not in the same theaters maybe, but they are in the same historical period. ■

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THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PAST. IMMERSION, VIRTUALITY AND THE LIGHT BORN(E) IMAGE. A DIALOGUE WITH TOM GUNNING

Abstract

Dialogue with Tom Gunning about the concepts of immersion and virtuality in the history of audiovisual media. Gunning proposes some theoretical reflections on the cinematographic device and its immersive character, while also emphasising the meaning of the word "virtual" as potential. The dialogue delves into 19th-century technologies and spectacles such as the panorama and the phantasmagoria and genres and exhibition practices of early cinema such as Hale's Tours or the phantom rides. The practice of history and the tendency to recognise the present in the past are also some of the questions addressed. Finally, the contemporary experience of cinema is discussed and some current work in the field of experimental cinema is mentioned.

Key words

Immersion; Virtual; Cinema of attractions; Panorama; Phantasmagoria; Hale's Tours; Media archaeology.

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EL ROSTRO CAMBIANTE DEL PASADO. INMERSIÓN, VIRTUALIDAD Y LA IMAGEN ALUMBRADA. UN DIÁLOGO CON TOM GUNNING

Resumen

Conversación con Tom Gunning sobre los conceptos de inmersión y virtualidad en la historia del audiovisual. Gunning establece algunas reflexiones de carácter teórico acerca del dispositivo cinematográfico y su carácter inmersivo y hace hincapié en el significado concreto de la palabra virtualidad como potencia. Se discuten tecnologías y espectáculos del siglo XIX, como el panorama o la fantasmagoría y géneros y dispositivos propios del cine de los primeros tiempos, como los Tours de Hale o los *phantom ride*. También se reflexiona al respecto de la práctica de la historia y de la tendencia a reconocer el presente en el pasado. En último lugar, se habla de la experiencia del cine en la actualidad y se mencionan algunas obras contemporáneas cercanas al cine experimental.

Palabras clave

Inmersión; Virtual; Cine de atracciones; Panorama; Fantasmagoría; Hale's Tours; Arqueología de los medios.

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Daniel Pitarch Fernández (Barcelona, 1980) es profesor en el grado de Arte y Diseño de la Escola Massana (Barcelona) y miembro del colectivo artístico Estampa, licenciado en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra y doctor en Ciencias Humanas por la Universitat de Girona. En su tesis doctoral, ha estudiado los escritos publicados e inéditos del cineasta Jean Epstein, tema al que ha dedicado distintos artículos en editoriales académicas y especializadas. Ha preparado y prologado una edición de los escritos sobre cine de Walter Benjamin para la editorial ABADA. Sus intereses de investigación, además de esta línea acerca de la teoría cinematográfica de entreguerras, se han centrado en el cine de los primeros tiempos, la animación experimental y la arqueología de los medios. Recientemente ha desarrollado distintas investigaciones sobre la historia de la linterna mágica en España, publicadas en revistas académicas o presentadas en congresos internacionales. Como miembro del colectivo Estampa, trabaja en los campos del audiovisual experimental y los entornos digitales. En los últimos años, este colectivo ha desarrollado una línea de trabajo acerca de los usos e ideologías de la inteligencia artificial, con proyectos en centros como el CCCB o Tabakalera. La práctica de creación en Estampa y la de investigación individual convergen en un interés por la historia de la tecnología y de la cultura visual. Contacto: daniel@tallerestampa.com.

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(DIS)AGREEMENTS

**THE PAST AND PRESENT
OF VIRTUAL WORLDS:
ILLUSION AND IMMERSION
IN EARLY CINEMA**

introduction

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF VIRTUALITY

David Ferragut

Cèlia Cuenca

discussion

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THE VIRTUALISATION OF THE WORLD

Cèlia Cuenca

David Ferragut

introduction

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF VIRTUALITY

DAVID FERRAGUT

CÈLIA CUENCA

We all know the story: virtual worlds are the culmination of a long technological and artistic process that is effectively supplanting nature as a producer of images (or at least aspiring to). As Román Gubern explains it, “new image technologies, such as the hologram or VR, are new answers to a very old question in Western culture: the question of mimesis and referential illusion, and the aspiration to produce perfect perceptual duplicates of the world’s appearances. The seeds of VR were already present in the legend of Zeuxis’s grapes and Parrhasius’s curtain, in the visual trickery of geometric perspective and in the invention of photography and cinema [...]” (Gubern, 1996: 177). The grapes and curtains mentioned by Gubern were paintings that looked so real that they convinced viewers that they would be able

to pick a grape off the bunch or pull the curtain back, but the unsuspecting hand that tried came up against the wall. The anachronistic nature of this hypothesis is obvious: we can turn away from a present that we scarcely understand and look back to a past that provides the key to its interpretation. How can we make sense of virtual worlds? By searching for their starting point, even if it is a cliché. This is what Gubern tells us but a few lines later: these virtual worlds will reproduce the shadows of Plato’s cave.

Whether we accept this cliché or not (technically, our perceptions inside the cave are at odds with our cognition, which is capable of grasping the truth of Ideas, while what VR shows us are not Ideas but merely other appearances, those of the real world), it is founded on the same hypoth-

esis on which this issue of *L'Atalante* is based: was virtuality already present, even if only in some kind of potential state, in early cinema? Is there a connection between today's virtual technologies, the optical devices of the 19th century and the first years of film? From this perspective, the most obvious answer is that early cinema and virtual reality effectively share the same impulse to replicate the real world, and furthermore, that this impulse even predates the invention of the cinematograph. The question then becomes to identify the previous incarnations of this impulse: the devices it gave rise to.

This edition of *(Dis)agreements* is structured around two basic objectives. First of all, we believe an analysis and definition of the basic concepts to be discussed is needed. The *virtual worlds* considered here cannot refer to the same thing as fictional worlds, for example. Novels are works of fiction in general, but intuitively we do not think of them as being virtual. Moreover, there are other problematic terms that are nevertheless in common use, such as illusion, simulation and immersion. Are they distinct categories or can they overlap? Can they exist simultaneously on the same device?

This first objective leads us to the second: if these concepts do occur simultaneously in each medium, it means that the unique quality of each medium lies in the ways that illusion, fiction or immersion occur, in their relative importance. It seems reasonable to suggest that a VR video game is more immersive than a film, and that a film is less immersive than a Mareorama. Yet paradoxically, the effect that a Mareorama aimed for was the feeling of movement on water, of imbalance, while this same imbalance is unintentional in VR video games, which can cause motion sickness.¹ The immersion offered by VR, more sophisticated than that of the Mareorama, can end up exhausting the user. Considered in this way, immersion is like an axis that allows us to move from one medium to another, in a long-distance race to achieve a complete virtualisation; it presents varying images

(static or moving) and involves the viewers to varying degrees, impacting on the reproduced world in different ways or allowing us to intervene in it to varying extents (Krajewski, 2015). With painting, particularly when it makes use of the Renaissance perspective, viewers are located in a given space that anchors their body to a predetermined position in order to achieve the desired effect. It is a perspective that only involves the gaze.² Immersion here is subject to very precise conditions. As cinema evolved, sound was introduced to films, and then surround sound, and panoramic screens (which in fact reuse a 19th-century device), along with multiple-dimension technologies that have enjoyed sporadic moments of success at different points in film history. While cinema created an appearance of reality in its early years, technological innovations have sought to make that appearance more convincing, more immersive. This seems to confirm the hypothesis posited in this issue: that virtuality, the replacement of the real world with its double, needed nothing more than to be unleashed, and that it has been in various ways.

Put simply, what this edition of *(Dis)agreements* presents is both a conceptual analysis and an historical review. These two objectives are pursued in a dialogue with Dr. Guillaume Soulez (Université Paris III – La Sorbonne), a specialist in film theory and aesthetics who in recent years has researched the question of virtuality, its meaning and implications for both cinema and digital technologies, and Dr. Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa (Universitat de les Illes Balears), a specialist in visual studies and sensory studies who has researched the phenomenon of synaesthesia in late 19th-century art and, more recently, the way that optical devices of the 19th century shaped the sensory perception of individuals in the development of capitalist consumer society. This discussion leads to a reformulation of the proposition outlined above: if we can look back to the past to understand today's technology, if we can draw on studies of early cinema to understand virtual worlds, the approach can be inverted

as well, because it is the latest use of a technology that enables us to make sense of it (McLuhan, 1996: 33-34). Ultimately, it is the very obsolescence of a technology—cinema, in our case—that brings its dimensions into better focus. Our analysis of virtual worlds, insofar as they share the same productive impulse as cinema’s various manifestations, will actually enhance our understanding of cinema, just as we can now better understand other optical devices of the 19th century by subjecting them to an archaeological analysis.³ ■

NOTES

- 1 For example, in the video game *Half Life: Alyx* (Valve, 2020), there are two ways to move around: naturally, with whole movements; and artificially, with leaps from one point of the setting to another, like editing cuts in a film. The first makes the user dizzy while the second does not.
- 2 A detailed description of this restriction on the body can be found in Brunelleschi’s commentary on a comparison between a painting and the real image on which it is based, in 1425:

The comparison is not left to the judgement of the experimenter; he does not simply look at the thing, but examines it under strictly determined conditions: he must be positioned in a precisely calculated location, about nine feet inside the cathedral entrance, hold the device at a height of about five feet, look through an aperture in the centre of the image and place the mirror at a precisely calculated distance. In its lower half, the mirror reflects the painted image, and in the upper half the clouds, so that the viewer can see a combination of art and reality. The mirror then moves away, and the impression is that what is seen is not altered, yet now it is ‘reality’ (Feyerabend, 1996: 126).
- 3 We would like to thank Dr. Martin Barnier, lecturer of Film Studies at Université Lumière Lyon 2, for contributing to this section with his patient reading and pertinent comments.

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discussion

PERSPECTIVES

I. In recent years, fields such as media archaeology—we are thinking in particular of Huhtamo’s studies of “peep practice”—have highlighted the variety and complexity of immersive technologies of the past, from peepshows to stereoscopes, and the ways they seem to re-emerge in contemporary technologies (Google Glass, Oculus and VR in general). In order to analyse or understand them, we believe it necessary first to develop clear definitions of those elements that seem most characteristic to you. With this in mind, could you introduce or clarify the concepts of immersion and illusion?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

For this terminological question I usually refer to the definitions established by two theorists of immersive devices. The concept of immersion has been defined by Oliver Grau as “a 360° space of illusion [...] with unity of time and place,” which therefore offers “a completely alternative reality” (Grau, 2003: 13). On the other hand, the media theorist Alison Griffiths introduces a more experiential component into the definition, although she omits the idea of illusion, referring to immersion as “a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of a more bodily participation in the experience, including allowing the viewer to move freely around the viewing space” (Griffiths, 2013: 2). These definitions related to a physical immersion, however, are discussed from the perspective of literary theory, as the experience of reading can itself be considered an act of immersion because it involves placing the reader inside a particular imaginary world—a reader who, through a text, surrenders to that world and is provided with sensory references specific to a particular setting.

Historically, immersive physical environments simulating reality were created using paintings. In the 19th century, the enormous circular galleries known as panoramas, which attracted millions of

people, created simulated settings that over time introduced technological elements in addition to paintings that gave the immersive experience—in the sense provided by Griffiths’ definition—an increasingly physical component, engaging more than just the sense of sight.

The panorama belongs to what the theorist Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls “mimetic immersion”, where “preattentional attractions cannot be blocked by a conscious cognitive process, resulting in a (false) perceptual belief” (Schaeffer, 1999: 286–289). In this sense, immersive devices such as the panorama employed the same logic as the *trompe l’œil* to elicit a suspension of disbelief, preventing the spectator from having to take that first step of accepting the spectacle as a representation. This does not mean to suggest that panoramas were not always conceived of as spectacles whose appeal was the way they tested the limits of their constantly renewed capacity to make people believe the impossible, even in the awareness that it was pure illusion.

The term “illusion”, on the other hand, was already used in the 19th century with reference to panoramas in the sense of their simulation of a real environment. It would therefore be understood as a universal natural phenomenon, distinct from “illusionism” as a cultural practice aimed at creating illusions. Illusionism is thus a practice

limited to a specific environment using cultural elements (Mitchell, 2009: 285). The cultural meaning of “illusionism”, as opposed to the natural and universal dimension of illusion, reflects the constructed dimension implicit in the concept.

Guillaume Soulez

To understand the notion of immersion, in sensory terms, it is necessary to distinguish it from the notion of “normal” behaviour –when we have control over our senses and our actions. We can already see the central problem appearing: it is very difficult to define “normal” behaviour insofar as, for example, when we watch a film or listen to music, we are partly “taken up” by this activity to the detriment of other activities. But is this really immersion? I don’t think so. Some viewers manage to watch a film on their phone while doing something else, and many manage to read while (actually) listening to music, following the melody for example or identifying the style, the musician. This means that they are not completely “immersed”. Even in VR, which is a very all-encompassing device for the senses, moments of “immersion” alternate with moments of “emersion” when one encounters technical difficulties, for example, or when one bumps into a wall! The studies of Huhtamo and others rightly emphasise the scopic impulse, i.e. the motor of our desire for immersion, which makes the problem even more complex, but also the discourses as much as the devices, which allow us to approach this dimension of desire. Other impulses are also at work in video games, such as in *Shoot'em All* video games, which strongly contribute to immersion by compelling the player to cling to the controls so as not to miss an opponent.

We can see from the example of the video game that it is the internal system of the world in which we are immersed that prevails: in addition to an encompassing of the senses that mobilises them in a single direction (whereas we are used to keeping our senses and our attention in

several directions at once), there is a system that envelops us in its system to the point of making us act within it. In some ways, embryonically in other devices such as film or television, and more fully in video games or VR, immersion in an environment is confirmed, validated by what we do in that environment. We validate it not only by our senses and emotions, but also by our actions (and our actions validate our emotions in the process).

Conversely, not every interaction is immersive: we can very well click a mouse to view a video, progress through an article or an interactive documentary without being “immersed”. Everything therefore depends on the reason for the action—what the French researcher Geneviève Jacquinet (1998) called *intransitive interactivity*, the reason why we perform actions in a system (*dispositif*) that asks us to do so, as opposed to *transitive interactivity*, which concerns the technical instrument. This is why my position on this issue is that fiction (which is only one of the possible reasons to justify intransitive interactivity) favours immersion, rather than the opposite, because it “suspends our disbelief”, according to Coleridge’s well-known formula, i.e. we tend to eliminate all that can spoil the pleasure of fiction, whether it be internal problems of the narrative (implausibilities) or problems coming from the technical device. It is noticeable that genres other than fiction do not require us to “immerse” ourselves as much as fictional devices: for example, in the official VR of the Lascaux caves, it is simply a matter of exploring an environment as in a scuba dive.

It is striking to note that the spatial dimension is particularly active in immersion, especially when it comes to linking the material space of the experience with the reconstructed space inside the VR headset. Olivier Asselin (2018) distinguishes very clearly between two strategies: one that aims to propose a “monumental” device (one that goes beyond us) in which we are included inside the image (starting with the panorama), and the other that aims to “bring the image closer” (as in

optical views, or peepshows, video games, etc.). The removal of the screen, from VR to implants, of course favours the inclusion of the viewer inside the performance. But we all have had the experience of being able to “immerse” ourselves in maps by imagining the spaces themselves from names, symbols, colours, representations or previous experiences, not to mention the play between maps and fiction, as in Tolkien. Amusingly but logically (rules of the game), the more coherent the world and the more precise the map, the more the imagination—and therefore the immersion—works.

The last dimension of immersion is the loss of control. This is undoubtedly linked to other impulses, but it should be noted that it is possible to be sensorially immersed, without it being an immersive fiction, when all the senses are mobilised by a sensory vertigo, of whatever nature (proprioception, sound or light saturation, etc.). The inclusion of the viewer in the image of which Asselin speaks is of course a factor that facilitates this loss of control. From this point of view, through its own means of creating vertigo, cinema has a long tradition that links it to the carousel, as Thomas Elsaesser showed. In a related sense, a possible origin of the notion of “experience” in VR might be linked to hippie experiments with psychotropic drugs; in fact, I noted that one VR experience seemed to be directly inspired by them during a VR festival at the Forum des images in Paris (see photo).

The notion of illusion seems even more difficult to grasp, as it can fall into even more disparate domains. To make a heuristic use of it, we can start with the proposal of the research programme “Les arts” (directed by G. Pisano and J-M. Larrue), which, based on the reflexion of the futurologist and writer (and scriptwriter of *2001:*

A Space Odyssey) Arthur C. Clarke (1984), considered three (historical) stages of illusion linked to the cultural incorporation of a viewing technique: the “magic moment” (wonder), the “magic mode” (rhetoric), and “secularisation” (trivialisation). Rather than conceiving of it only from a diachronic point of view, I think that it effectively describes, from a pragmatic point of view, different modes of relations to the viewing techniques (moreover, the shift from the *magic moment* to the *magical mode* already makes this change in a way), different ways in which spectators position themselves within a viewing apparatus (*dispositif*) according to their knowledge and their customs. Thus, to the kaleidoscope, one must, of course, add the “discursive” (Huhtamo, 2014) but also the *perceived kaleidoscope*, which allows for cultural variations, unequal competences and different positioning of spectators. Illusion can therefore be encouraged or even required by a system of intransitive interactivity (for example, one has to believe at least a little that fictional characters “exist” in order to take an interest in them, and in what is going to happen to them, which is perhaps easier than being a “vic-

Image 1. NewImages Festival, Paris, June 23, 2019 © Guillaume Soulez



tim” of an optical illusion when one is aware of the technical device) or, conversely, challenged by it (a Brechtian perspective), without always being able to be certain of the spectatorial reading that will be made by an individual, a group or an era.

One can therefore be immersed (like a diver) without an illusion, and, symmetrically, be fooled by an illusion without a strong immersion in sensory terms (as in a traditional magic trick).

2. To refer to fictional worlds, terms such as virtual, simulation or even fiction are often in fact used interchangeably, but do they always refer to the same thing? What is the difference between them?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

Although authors such as Jean-Marie Schaeffer suggest that “all mental representation is a virtual reality” (1999: 10), strictly speaking virtual reality is not considered to have existed until the development of computer technology. It therefore involves the creation of an illusory, computer-generated environment, and in this sense it was not until 1968 that the first truly virtual experiences took place (Gubern, 1999: 156). Prior to the development of computer technology, there were environments that simulated real settings or situations. Fiction normally requires a narrative component, based on “acting as if”. If we accept Schaeffer’s proposition, we can conclude that for fiction to exist two conditions have to be met: “the existence of a pragmatic framework of shared pretending, and the fact that we access the representation through the specific variant of mimetic immersion that is fictional immersion” (Schaeffer, 1999: 290). Fiction thus requires the involvement of the audience in representational imaginaries, what Walton calls “make-believe” games, which generate worlds where a particular situation must be imagined (Walton, 1990).

Guillaume Soulez

Guillaume Soulez: Yes, there is a great deal of confusion, which is linked to the importing of an English vocabulary when Latin languages like French have a different semantic tradition around *virtù* and the virtual, not to mention the fact that

Deleuze has also proposed a very powerful opposition between the possible and the virtual that opens up other questions, based on the opposition between real/possible and virtual/actual. “Virtual reality” should be translated as “simulated reality” or “quasi-reality”, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* clearly defines it as (thank you to Lisa Zaher who sent me the reference a few months ago): “9. B. That is a computerized or digitized simulation of something; spec. (esp. in earlier use) simulated in virtual reality.” By extension, virtual and digital are almost synonymous, as the rest of the definition indicates: “Also: established or conducted using computer technology rather than more traditional means.” I do not use this second extensive definition, even though it is of anthropological interest (it shows how we transfer actions from the physical world to the digital world, as with remotely piloted killer drones, for example), but I am interested in how Deleuze’s virtual interacts with the virtual as simulation.

The virtual-simulation is related to the question of immersion as inclusion in sensory terms, which makes us feel—especially with the disappearance of the screen and the ability (however limited) to act in the synthesised environment—that we are *almost* in a reconstructed reality (if we move our head, we see another aspect of the landscape; if we move forward, it looks like walking in the real world, etc.). With the exception of some rare experimental productions, from a Deleuzian point of view, as I have tried to show

(Soulez, forthcoming), VR has very little of the “virtual”: rather, it tends to enclose the action within a few possible scenarios. This distinguishes it from interactive documentary, for example, in which inventive or *creative abduction* often plays a role in the investigation, with very interesting back-and-forth between tree structures and actualisations (geolocated concrete places, for example). See, for example, the production of the Raspouteam group on the Paris Commune in 1871 and its re-actualisation in contemporary Parisian space. By definition, indeed, simulation belongs to the realm of the possible, so VR is not virtual-friendly from a Deleuzian point of view (except to try to hack the VR system itself), but it may be interesting to ask, on the one hand, how simulation dismisses the Deleuzian virtual, and on the other hand, whether the Deleuzian virtual, linked to creativity itself (from the biological to the human), can be completely dismissed and how it “comes back”.

Fiction, as we have already seen, is a problem of a different nature, but it may be interesting to study the relationship between fiction and immersion: it is a matter of artificially entering a system (we often say a “world”) in which anthropomorphic entities act (especially from an emotional and moral point of view, as we can quite empathise with neural entities—as in Pixar’s *Vice-Versa*, 2015). Just as we can immerse ourselves in a simple map found in a book, so we can fall into a fictional story with two pieces of wood on a beach as a child. As mentioned above, fiction favours immersion: for example, while playing on the beach, I discover a pebble that reminds me of a promontory that I will integrate into my story, so I increase my immersion in a space that becomes more and more the place of my experience.

In the opposite direction, immersive codes (“Once upon a time”, the three blows in French classical theatre, the establishing shot, etc.) remind us of previous experiences of fiction and favour the passage through affective and cog-

nitive thresholds, leading to the setting up of a fictional reading, or, as Roger Odin puts it more precisely, “fictionalising” reading (Odin, 2001). But it is not the immersion that makes the fiction: if these are codes, it is because they are already associated with a fictionalising function. In fact, as immersed as I am in a fiction film, I can “drop out” and start thinking about a café in St Mark’s Square where I have drunk a delicious espresso (while I am watching Visconti’s *Death in Venice*) during the film sequence. Similarly, the feeling of familiarity (with places in particular) that a “universe” (the *Buffyverse*, for example) can give me, such as those that TV series manage to develop nowadays, is a “fiction effect” produced by the repetition and above all the continuity of the diegetic space (the fact that we find again, but as if approached from another *side*, a space that we already know). It is not an effect of immersion but a fictionalisation of space.

We can also see this dependence of immersion on fictionalisation in the question of genres in cinema: a certain spectacular immersion is expected of a science fiction or superhero film, but we would be very surprised if Rohmer expanded the mechanisms of immersion in his films. In the same way, it was to give a certain sense of *epic* that Abel Gance expanded immersive research to include the spectator in the action, etc.

But isn’t fiction also a simulation? It seems to me that it is not, from an Aristotelian point of view (and in Latin, *ut* - like, which has a logical function - *ut pictura poesis* - is also opposed to *similis* - resembling, which is a simple observation). Mimesis presupposes an actor and therefore an a priori distance and a game (which Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls “*feintise ludique*”). Simulation, which some elaborate immersive devices manage to produce (whether it is learning to fly a plane or playing a game in VR), does not presuppose a logical leap of this kind. Rather, the simulation device is an extension of our own world (the closer the system is, the closer I will be to the actual conditions of flying an aircraft, which is

truly better!) On the other hand, it is quite possible to “plug in” a fictional system to a simulation system (I will then be able to do extraordinary things in VR such as climb mountains like Puss in Boots, while I am just quietly walking around a room). But it is not because I act (the higher stage of immersion), instead of simply watching (and experiencing) as in the cinema, that the boundary between mimesis and simulation disappears: I have to accept that I cannot do everything, for example, but only what is foreseen by the diegetic world (the possible) in which I evolve. As soon as we leave behind what we might call the “double realism” of our habits (photorealism and realist fiction, which are very closely linked historically in cinema and audio-visual media), things become clearer and easier to understand: photorealism is a simulation, whereas realism is fiction, even if one relies on the other (as in the neo-realism that has been so influential for this reason).

It is also necessary to debunk the false idea that the more (immersive) means are deployed,

the stronger and more complete the experience of fiction is (we are completely “caught up” in the story), as the history of optical devices points to a “progress” of fiction that is always more captivating because it is more “complete” (theatre is more captivating than a story told in the evening by the fire, cinema is more captivating than theatre, and VR is more complete than cinema). That cinema is more sensorily “complete” than the novel or comic book (as seen in a so-called “faithful” adaptation) does not mean that the film experience is stronger, as there are many other parameters that make an experience rich. This idea of the immersive “multiplier” is proved false by the fact that one can experience very strong emotions with a very simple and almost abstract device (like the emotions one feels when watching the series *La linea*,¹ for example), while sensory saturation tends to detract from fiction in favour of the spectacular (this has already been studied in relation to the so-called “post-modern” cinema of the 1980s).

3. In view of the discussion so far, did virtuality exist in early cinema? Or when did the notion of virtuality really come into play in the history of media or cinema and its devices?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

As I pointed out above, virtual reality involves the creation of immersive environments using computer technology. What this means, as argued by the man whom many consider to be the founder of the field, Jaron Lanier, is that virtual reality is a direct creation of reality that the spectator interprets without codes. This is what Lanier refers to as “post-symbolic communication” (Lanier, quoted in Ryan, 2001: 59). Along the same lines, the new media specialist Jay Bolter argues that virtual reality is a “medium of percepts rather than signs” (Bolter, quoted in Ryan, 2001: 10). From this perspective, virtuality cannot really exist when analogue media are used, which in turn would mean there is no virtuality in early cinema. In any case,

the genre of the panorama, particularly the multi-sensory panorama, is closer to what could be considered “analogue virtuality” than cinema itself, given its aim to create an alternative immersive universe, with its own understanding of time and space, covering a broad sensory spectrum.

Guillaume Soulez

Yes, of course, especially in the Deleuzian sense: I have shown that Robertson’s phantasmagorias, which pre-date cinema, are also a form of actualisation of a virtuality linked to Parisian history, notably located in the Capucines district where the cinema is said to be born (Soulez, *ibid.*). This also works in contemporary films that take an interest in this power of actualisation: I studied it in the film

La Vierge, les Coptes, et moi (2012) by Namir Abdel Messeeh. In her work, Olga Kobryn finds forms of Deleuzian actualisation in Tarkovsky's films (Kobryn, forthcoming). I think this is a continuous thread to be explored, from the first spectacular optical devices to contemporary "post-cinema". It is particularly present in the form of multiple spectralities in early writings on cinema before the standardisation of the 1920s (including in its "realist" form: cinema is so much a "bioscope" that one thinks one has seen one's neighbour passing in the street on the screen). We could test the hypothesis of an actualisation of the impulses (*Triebe*) in surrealist cinema and writings, even if the Deleuzian model is not very favourable to psychoanalysis, with the idea that creation goes beyond the highlighting of a (latent) impulsive "possible" to produce psychic *figurations* with a certain dimension of novelty. Several critics have noted that there is no dog in *Andalusian Dog*: one might say that this is Bunuel's way of drawing our attention to what is actualised (from the virtual) and not to what can (possibly) be expected (according to the conventional function played by the title). When Dupieux (*Incroyable mais vrai*, 2022) takes up the motif of the hand full of ants (invented by Dali for *Andalusian Dog*), he is undoubtedly playing with the *possible* (an expected cinephilic reference system) but he also designates an actualisation that "comes out" without warning from the body and the image, an erratic actualisation linked to the temporal and psychic disorder studied in the film. It is an "unbelievable" that is obviously different from the performance of superheroes, technological overkill or even narrative implausibility according to rationalistic principles.

If we understand virtuality in the English sense of simulation getting closer and closer to the physical reality experienced by the body, we can say that there is no linear "progress" in the history of cinema and optical and visual media. At various times, and very early on, attempts were made to enrich sensoriality and to include the spectator in the spectacle.

The greatest success is still talking pictures. But all sorts of mobile or encompassing devices try to give us the feeling that we could fly like a bird, feel the rain, smell the sea, etc. Of course, with the elimination of the screen or even implants, we are taking things a step further, but for the moment we can see that despite the increasing sophistication of the machines, we are still essentially consuming a film/ audiovisual document or playing a video game on a screen, even if the screen fits into our hand. It is often said that the theatre has a social function, which is what keeps cinema going; the same could probably be said of the screen: people often gather around a screen, gamers have been known to film their games for others to watch, etc. Even in VR, when you don't put on the headset and wait your turn, you often see on a screen what the immerser is seeing (or experiencing), which helps to socialise the experience by making it shareable (as well as observing how others act). This is obvious in the case of television, which combines networks and screens, but even in the case of cinema, it is clear that the social dimension of the screen must be taken into account: I see on the screen not only what others in the room see at the same time as me, but I see a replica of what other spectators have seen or will see on a screen of the same type. It is likely that two obstacles combine to limit full audio-visual simulation: the physiological issue of having sufficiently stable reference points during the experience to be able to free oneself from the initial physical space (or to encompass it in the experience) and the social issue of which the screen is one of the paradoxical supports (since it is designed to "immerse" us in another environment/world). But one can imagine a party at which immersed friends, sitting cross-legged and forming a circle, pass a headset around, offering each other a powerful "experience" like one passes a joint, or perhaps they all put on headsets at the same time linked to the same content of a fixed duration, and then discuss it together.

4. Watching a film in a darkened theatre, peering through a visor into a new world and walking around a panorama are all classified as immersive experiences, but what characteristics and delimitations should we apply to define a device as immersive? Can we define degrees of immersion? What distinguishes one type of immersion from another?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

I described the concept of immersion above as an environment that provides an alternative reality. This reality may block preattentive attractions, as in the case of the panorama, which aims for an immersive *trompe l'œil* effect, or it may not, as in the case of cinema, where the darkness of the theatre predisposes us to concentrate on what is happening on the screen.

From what I have been able to find in my research on the panorama, the evolution of this genre over the course of the 19th century seems to have been based on the conviction that to create an immersive environment it is not enough to appeal to the sense of sight alone. This was the reasoning behind the multisensory panorama (Hernández, 2017), whose creation coincided with the first years of cinema at the end of the 19th century. The multisensory panorama offered a degree of immersion that was greater than the original version of the spectacle—and greater than cinema as well—through a stricter level of control of the dimensions of time and space into which spectators are inserted, using stimuli targeting all five senses in an effort to situate them in a simulated environment. Cinema, even taking into account that it was conceived of quite differently in its early years from how it is today, offered an experience targeted primarily at our sense of sight.

Regarding the different types of immersive experiences, in digital media we have virtual reality and augmented reality, as well as mixed reality, a combination of the first two. Virtual reality environments allow spectators to immerse themselves in imaginary worlds with no reference to the real physical environment. Augmented reality, on the other hand, enables them to locate digital objects in real environments. An example of

this is Google Glass. As Sergio Martínez Luna puts it, “while in virtual reality the spectator enters the representation to participate in it, in augmented and mixed realities the representation enters the world to act on it,” with mixed reality being defined as “a hybrid reality that combines virtual reality, augmented reality and physical reality in real time” (2021: 150).

Guillaume Soulez

Following on from my answer to the first question, and as I am taking a pragmatic perspective on film studies, I would tend to think that the competence and positioning of the spectator plays a very large role in the *feeling* of immersion: where novices will feel “immersed”, more experienced spectators will only have the feeling of evolving in an environment whose rules and main coordinates they have mastered. Once someone has “gone round and through” a device, immersion is much less effective, including devices based on vertigo (the experienced may keep their cool).

So, we could have a purely technical definition (if it exists) of immersion, allowing us to distinguish between the different technical processes of inclusion (from the place where we stand to the editing system, including the screen or its absence), without always being able to be sure of their effectiveness (the panorama undoubtedly works much less effectively on us than it did on our ancestors). But it also seems interesting to me to “explode” this notion in order to see the different issues it covers and to understand the interactions between the different levels (for example between sensoriality, fiction and environment) without confusing them, studying them case by case, especially as a fiction story can also help us to understand an optical mechanism, and vice

versa of course (like Stendhal's diorama and Georama, which I have studied; see Soulez, 2021).

We could say that there are two main thresholds on a pragmatic level (activation of reading): *mobilisation*, i.e. the moment when the audiovisual activity takes precedence over all the others (corresponding to the opening credits, for example), and *involvement*, i.e. the moment when I find my feet in the new environment proposed by the images (the entry into the story, for example, when we start to take an interest in the characters). Traditionally, it was thought that the focus of attention preceded the switch to the new environment, but we might ask whether the opposite is not true, especially today: I play my usual series on my (small) screen while I'm finishing up writing a message: I connect to it cognitively, but it is only when the action becomes really interesting that I leave behind my other activity (writing a message). This is not necessarily related to new technologies but rather to a larger and deeper audiovisual culture, as evidenced by the pre-credits sequence, which launches into the action straight away to engage a more or less available viewer at home.

Conversely, if I put on a headset, I voluntarily separate myself from my initial environment (it is difficult to do anything else at the same time), but I have *not yet* entered the new environment. Some devices are more demanding in terms of cutting off from the initial environment, but if they are too difficult to use, or if they are boring, they can make it difficult to cross the threshold of involvement.

This is why we can always say that depending on the device, there are "standard" thresholds designed by the inventors according to a given visual culture (a "technical" version of the pragmatic logics mentioned above), but that there is also, in parallel, a lot of individual and socio-historical variation in thresholds, such as the fact that we feel less immersed in a panorama today (it seems to us a "poor" experience) or even in optical views: we are always eager to see what is hidden or distant just like people in previous centuries, but we can also have a disappointing feeling because we find the scene very "static", accustomed as we are to "moving images" when we position ourselves in front of images (moreover, we know how easy it is to animate images with a slideshow).

5. Continuing with the previous examples, we often find stories in news archives about the motion sickness suffered by some spectators when using devices designed to simulate the movement of a train or the rocking of a ship, such as the spectacles presented at the major World Fairs. This reaction is not far from what some of us feel while watching 3D movies at the cinema or while on amusement park rides (even some VR games, such as Half-Life Alyx, include interaction modes that forego certain movements, thereby eliminating the risk of dizziness). In this sense, and based on those theorists who remind us to go beyond the purely visual and consider the corporeality of the gaze, could you reflect on how such devices condition or prepare the spectator's reaction? Which senses do they trigger and which do they switch off in order to present their particular images or spectacle? And when does the immersion fail to happen or the expected response fail to occur?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

The evolution of the panorama reveals how throughout the 19th century it was understood that in addition to the sense of sight, illusion had to

involve corporeality in a broader sense (Hernández, 2017). Thus, the devices of this type that initially appealed to our vision alone gradually gave way to other devices that appealed to our other

senses as well. A prime example is the Mareorama presented at the 1900 Paris Exposition, a device that simulated a ship's voyage on the Mediterranean by stimulating all five senses, according to what I have been able to reconstruct.

In an upcoming publication in the journal *Early Popular Visual Culture*, I argue that in addition to this component of innovation of technological methods that rendered earlier simulation devices obsolete, the experience of simulation combined a series of codes specific to the period, which point to a rhetoric of illusion, and which would have been recognisable to the audience. This rhetoric of illusion meant that the Mareorama mobilised various types of references to the visual culture of the time. The use of these signs constituted an element that distinguished the immersion mechanism of the Mareorama from the immersion of virtual reality, which, as I noted above, involves a form of post-symbolic communication. In the case of the Mareorama, the paintings that represented the different stops on the journey (Naples, Venice, Istanbul) were considered by critics to be lacking in realism. It is important to bear in mind that this

device was contemporaneous with other attractions that integrated filmed moving pictures (cinema), which left the paintings wanting in terms of realistic representation. This would reinforce the idea that the success of simulation attractions is conditioned by the level of public expectations.

Guillaume Soulez

Yes, one of the paradoxes of certain devices is that they play on a certain disorientation (to take advantage of the new sensory potential of these devices compared to the previous ones to which we are "accustomed") but while trying to avoid creating a discomfort that would break the experience (and therefore the immersion-involvement). It is likely that with algorithms, which partly personalise the experience (but following behaviourist standards that escape us; see Urrichio, 2022), devices will be able to manage this question of thresholds better and better: since skills differ greatly from user to user, our way of responding to audiovisual productions will perhaps determine a profile for the machine, an adequate "level of immersion" depending on our bio-cultural data.

6. In relation to the cinematographic device and the introduction of elements that enhance immersion (panoramic screens, 3D) or individuality (for example, the game in the *Bandersnatch* episode of *Black Mirror*), is there any point at which we might consider that it is no longer cinema but something different? Is the collective experience and passive viewing (compared to the active participation involved in a video game) an essential characteristic of the medium, or can we continue to consider it cinema when it appears in other contexts or cultivates other attitudes? In short, do such innovations alter the specificity of cinema?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

Cinema has less of an interactive component than other contemporary visual devices, such as multi-sensory panoramas. This would include the aforementioned Mareorama, in which each member of the audience moved around the "ship's deck" pretending to be one of the "actors" in the show. The experience of the ship's voyage in this attraction included various episodes, such as storms at sea,

or an attack on the ship by a gang of sailors when it docked at Naples. Indeed, the press of the day highlighted the fact that the audience "participated actively" in the action (Malet, 1899: 19). The spectators were thus immersed in a setting and a story with an established timeframe, making them part of the action, although without being assigned specific roles. This implied a certain degree of interactivity between the audience and

the story, where “interaction” would be defined as “an activity that extends an invitation to the spectator to insert their bodies or minds into the activity and affect an outcome” (Griffiths, 2013: 3). The Mareorama thus combined mimetic immersion with another status of representation: the representation of fictional acts.

Nevertheless, we need to bear in mind that what we consider specific to cinema today has not always been considered that way. Cinema was not always an experience of fiction in which the audience acted as basically passive spectators. Primitive cinema entailed a different way of understanding the viewing of a film. As art historian Lynda Nead suggests, the objective was by no means to have audiences “sit in rows in relative silence and regulate their responses and interactions” (Nead, 2007: 25), as the experience of going to the cinema is understood today, but to engage spectators with the spectacle in a freer and more improvised way. This means that the supposed “specificity” of cinema cannot be understood as a fixed category.

Guillaume Soulez

It all depends on how one defines “cinema”, which is a question I addressed recently in the issue *Le cinéma éclaté. Formes et théorie* (Soulez, 2018). In general, we have a certain definition of cinema in terms of what we consider to be the “cinema experience”, which we can try to “find” in other devices than those of traditional film-going (Casetti, 2012) but at a certain point we would rather think in terms of the video game experience or virtual reality, etc., even if there are “cinematic” sequences, or “cinema moments” within that experience. For a researcher, there are two ways of approaching the question: studying the way

spectators use *the notion of cinema* to speak and/or elaborate about their experience (this varies depending on the spectators and the different types of cinephilia or cinemania); and reflecting on the tools of film analysis and film theory in order to identify the extent to which these tools and theoretical frameworks manage to account for certain audio-visual-corporal phenomena. The meeting point between these two approaches is the fact that “cinema” is a cultural construct (articulation between devices, sensations and discourses) that has produced a recognisable “language” even in devices that are not cinema in the traditional sense (starting with television and video, long before VR). The theory, which is not “ungrounded”, can itself be observed as a specific discursive construction that has aimed to account for a shared social experience, but there may also be elements in the theory that can be reused to think about new experiences. I was recently reading a rather amusing text by Pierre Schaeffer (1985) which indicates that there are eight forms of sound (noise, music, speech, etc.) and eight forms of image (photo, writing, drawing, etc.), including sound without image and image without sound, making a total of 63 combinations (8x8 minus one: the absence of both sound and image) between sound and image, but he points out that not all audio-visual combinations are used, which is a very interesting way of looking at audiovisual balances and standards. This approach can be used to understand *what combinations are used* in immersive devices (and why some are used rather than others, as in cinema) and one can add the part of corporality, which should also be split into various actions (picking up, pressing, walking, etc.), and therefore analyse the real combinations between sound, image and action.

7. In recent years we have seen an individualisation both of the visual experience through the devices we view content on (tablets, smartphones) and of the content itself, which is being increasingly personalised by the platforms we use. How can we speak of a shared visual culture if experiences tend increasingly towards the individual? Was the collective practice of cinema paradoxically idealised, as although it was social in appearance it isolated spectators in the darkness of the film theatre?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

To answer this question, I would like to start by talking about the historical objects I have worked on. I can say that in their early years, cinema and panoramas, as collective experiences, shared the stage with other optical devices for use inside people's homes that allowed a more intimate relationship between the individual and the object (such as thaumatropes, kaleidoscopes, phenakistoscopes and stereoscopes). The private use of these objects facilitated interaction and experimentation with them, turning bourgeois households into veritable schools for the senses, where people would learn, for example, how to operate different types of optical devices that required good hand-eye coordination for their effective use (Hernández, 2022). The simplest of these objects would have been the thaumatrope, which consisted of a disk that bore a different but complementary image on either side and had two little strings attached to each side that would be used to make it twirl. When focusing on the twirling movement of the disk at a certain speed, the user's retina would superimpose one picture over the other to generate a third image existing only in the mind. The correct operation of the thaumatrope required twirling the disk at the right speed so that the two images on each side effectively merged.

Interactive devices for individual use are therefore not exclusive to our contemporary world but began being marketed in the very first years of modernity. Despite their individual use,

the popularisation of these objects in the 19th century contributed to a shared visual culture. On the other hand, the supposed incompatibility of interactivity with the collective nature of visual experiences has been radically questioned in our times by the group video game experience. Similarly, the alternative virtual reality offered by the metaverse would include this possibility of interaction between members of a whole community.

Guillaume Soulez

Yes, I mentioned algorithms above. Indeed, the shared culture of cinema has individual limits, as we say in French, "*on se fait son cinéma*", i.e. we all make our own cinema (in our mind). But in the opposite direction, we talk a lot about the cinema, about the films we have seen or would like to see, and the way we look at them calls for words (to put into words what we have seen, understood and felt) and sometimes for other images (in particular, photographs of spectators during a screening to capture their emotions). It will be the same for the new devices; a novel that has just come out in France, *Chien 51* (2022) by Laurent Gaudé, includes parts where the narrative recounts the immersion sessions of a character (halfway between taking drugs and Marker's *La Jetée*). Between the discourses of 'immersion-philes' and the reworking of these experiences in other media (novels, films, video games, etc.), a visual culture is being formed.

8. The use of 3D in both film and photography has seemed to return in cycles over the course of media history (the first 3D film was *Bwana Devil* in 1952). What does it tell us about the eras when it makes a comeback? What does it tell us about society (the public, the industry) when it tries to bring 3D films back again? Is 3D doomed to come and go repeatedly?

Guillaume Soulez

I don't forecast the future... but one can imagine, indeed, that this cycle will continue, unless, as the dream of television that has inhabited

cinema since its beginnings has been realised in a new, stabilised and popular device, the immersion industry somehow fulfils this desire for 3D by giving it a privileged medium.

9. In relation to the previous question, what elements or what characteristics can you identify in emerging technologies that had already been explored in pre-cinematic media? Conversely, what devices of the past that have been abandoned (the Kaiserpanorama, holographs, the Mutoscope, the Kinetoscope, etc.) might be able to satisfy contemporary demands?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

As I mentioned before, ever since their origins visual technologies have always included the component of interaction with the device. I pointed out that panoramas contained a certain element of interactivity that today might seem specific to video games or virtual reality. Even a device as simple as the thaumatrope establishes a relationship between the object and the individual. Despite their simplicity, which might suggest that their operation was obvious, some of these devices came with instructions on one of their faces indicating how they should be used. The operation of the device was thus essential to its correct use, to make the third image appear. This required proper hand-eye coordination and a certain degree of learned skill. Interaction with the object is one of the elements that have always been present in optical devices, even in the simplest ones.

In relation to the second part of the question, I tend to think that computer technology has marked a before and an after in optical simulation media. The devices that offer the creation of immersive universes today mainly involve virtuality, so the new features they introduce have to do with digital innovations.

Guillaume Soulez

It all depends on how you define virtual, immersion, etc., as we have seen above. Technology is nothing without its use. One of my doctoral students (PhD in creation-based research), Rémi Sagot-Duvaroux, recently reinvented a virtual phenakistiscope with two other young researchers.¹ It is the desire to see (peep) that makes the link between the old technology and the new, with the same didactic dimension that we find in phenakistiscope.

10. It could be argued that there are media that demand a particular cognitive approach, and vice versa, ways of thinking that are explained by the type of media concerned. In relation to the impact of new technologies on our way of conceiving, describing, thinking about and conceptualising the world, what changes or trends can you identify running through the course of media and film history? How have they altered or shaped our way of looking at and understanding the world?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

Ever since they first appeared, visual technologies have always constituted a way of transforming the imaginaries that human beings use to project themselves into the world. Some 19th-century panoramas constituted material formulations of imaginary situations similar to those that Jules Verne created in his novels: trips to the moon, journeys to the centre of the earth or around the world. In our times, the settings designed for video games are giving rise to interesting phenomena. For example, while the cities depicted in video games reflect the most futuristic versions of existing architectural buildings, their architectural designs are serving as inspiration for architecture in the real world (Pérez Indaverea, 2022).

In the case of trends in audiovisual consumption, I can see changes in recent decades that point to a more fragmented and simultaneous approach to audiovisual production. For example, it seems that the “single-sitting” viewing that characterises cinema is being replaced by the consumption of series on streaming platforms, resulting in a more spontaneous, fragmentary and individual viewing approach. Moreover, new generations are getting used to the interactivity of screens (which involves the coordinated use of the senses of sight, touch, hearing and movement) at increasingly younger ages, resulting in video game consumption starting earlier on and, at the same time, continuing until older than in the past. It is also possible to identify transformations in the

very conception of the audiovisual, where cinema for the masses tends towards a faster rhythm, with sequence shots abandoned in favour of short shots that increase the pacing of the film.

Guillaume Soulez

Painting is a good example of how the other media shape our way of thinking. The exhibition *Enfin le cinéma ! Arts, spectacles et image en France (1833-1907)*, at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris in 2021-22, effectively showed (among other things) how cinema, through its effects of diving, framing, sequential cutting, addressing the audience, etc., had a certain effect on painting. In a chapter already mentioned above (Soulez, 2021), I proposed thinking about this issue by distinguishing between “imagineering” (*imagéniérie*) and “rediscovery” (*retrouvaille*, based on *trouvaille*, which means something ingenious, either verbal or technical, that someone has discovered by a mix of chance and perseverance, based also on the ancient notion of *trouvère* or “troubadour”, the poet): “imagineering” is the way in which a new device express a new “paradigm” (pertaining to both perception and intelligibility of the world), which is the role played by the Georama for Stendhal, while “rediscovery” is the way in which one medium will try to rediscover the sensations of another medium in its own language (I give the example of a Boris Vian song about cinema where anaphora and prosody aim to “rediscover” the hectic alternate editing of the Western).

II. With the combination of opera and cinema (Wagner, Canudo), some emphatic statements were made about the absolute dimension of the artwork. Can immersive devices be included in this trend where all artforms, but also all human senses, can be integrated? What room does this leave for products that deny this absolute approach, favouring minimalism, austerity, distance from the image?

Sonsoles Hernández Barbosa

Over the course of history it is possible to identify two basic approaches to inter-artistic relations, both in the form of the artworks themselves and in theories about the arts. On the one hand is the “integrationist” approach, which tends to advocate a convergence of the arts or the senses. The Wagnerian concept of the “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) is a paradigmatic example of this approach. The explorations of synaesthesia in the art of the late 19th century sought this same kind of convergence of the senses, although with nuances that distinguished them from the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is the approach that immersive devices fit into. In fact, the multisensory panorama known as the Mareorama was conceived by its creator, Hugo d’Alési, as a “total work of art” for the masses. In the 20th century, explorations of ways to integrate the arts even gave rise to the appearance of new artistic genres, such as performance art or installations. On the theoretical level, in visual studies, vision is understood as a phenomenon that is always embodied. This is a point where we find common ground among many contemporary visual theorists (such as W. J. T. Mitchell, Mieke Bal and Elisabeth Edwards, to name just a few of the most influential). Even historians with a more Warburgian perspective, such as Georges Didi-Huberman, tend to reject the division posited by Lessing between artforms of time and space, pointing to the temporal dimension implicit in the image.

On the other hand are the propositions that could be described as “isolationist”, which assert the specific nature of each artform. This was the view taken by Leonardo da Vinci when he highlighted the specific differences between the visual

arts and poetry in his treatise on painting, and also by Lessing when he distinguished between arts of time and space. In both cases, the intention behind the distinction was to vindicate the art of painting, which in the early modern era sought to shake off the stigma of its labelling as a craft. By the 20th century, this perspective was taken up by authors who argued for “pure opticality”, such as Clement Greenberg, who drew on Lessing’s ideas in an effort to identify the specific qualities of painting, or, more recently, Michael Fried. Propositions that stress the specific nature of vision compared to the other senses would also be included in this approach.

Guillaume Soulez

In part, no doubt, when mobilising all the senses is at stake, and therefore all the previous media that have worked on these senses (painting, theatre, photography, recorded music, moving images, etc.): in such a case the construction of “worlds” (metaverse) lends itself well to this. But the opposite quest is possible (the quest for a specificity, a “pure” art), which would be based on what the new devices manage to develop in a particular way. In this case, the greater difficulty will be to develop forms and sensations that do not resemble (or no longer remind us of) theatre, radio, cinema... or even video games! In 360° cinema, for example, filmmakers start from the body of the viewer (*egocentration*) to lead them, as the audiovisual narrative progresses, towards a form of splitting and separation from the initial anchorage.¹ I think that this is a whole space for experimentation, particularly in the relationship between touch and vision, which is an immense field of new experiences. ■

NOTES

- 1 Cavandoli, O. (direction) (1971). *La linea*. Italia: Rai. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1inwk>
- 2 Ensalab. (2022). «Participation de Loup Vuarnesson, Dionysis Zamplaras et Rémi Sagot-Duvaouroux à l'exposition Laval virtuel Recto verso». Retrieved from <https://www.ensadlab.fr/fr/francais-participation-de-loup-vuarnesson-dionysis-zamplaras-et-remi-sagot-duvaouroux-a-lexposition-laval-virtuel-recto-verso/>
- 3 Katharina Fuchs (PhD student at Paris 8) recently analysed Jan Kounen's *7 Lives* (2019) in that perspective at the Afeccav's doctoral conference (Association française des chercheurs en cinéma et audiovisuel), September 5, 2022, Université Paris Cité: <http://www.afeccav.org/v3/5-septembre-2022-journee-doctorale-de-lafeccav/>

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conclusion

THE VIRTUALISATION OF THE WORLD

CÈLIA CUENCA

DAVID FERRAGUT

Virtuality and its immersive worlds appear today bathed in an aura of originality and future promise that effectively obscures the great debt that the new devices owe to the technologies of the past. In this respect, media archaeology has been able to question the linear, teleological perspective that has traditionally characterised media history, rejecting any idea of technological progress as a starting point. Instead, it takes the view expressed by Siegfried Zielinski, that “the history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus,” and that therefore “the current state of the art does not necessarily represent the best possible state” (2006: 7). This points to a need to rethink the idea of technological innovation, to redefine

the relationship between old and new media, and to abandon presuppositions. This conversation with Guillaume Soulez and Sonsoles Hernández about the concepts of immersion, illusion, simulation and virtuality has highlighted the connections that many contemporary devices (video games, Google Glass, VR) share with media and technologies of the past, and especially the scope of the notion of virtual reality in relation to early cinema.

To underscore these reflections, it is worth bringing the concepts of immediacy, hypermediacy and remediation developed by David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) into the equation. These concepts shed some light on the ways that both our contemporary devices and the technolo-

gies and spectacles of the past evolve and perpetuate the ideas discussed here. The notion of immediacy refers to the desire for transparency in the representation of reality, i.e., the desire to erase, ignore or even deny the presence of the medium and all traces of the act of mediation in the interests of creating the illusion of being in direct contact with (the represented) reality. This idea could explain our tendency to embrace the devices discussed and their immersive capacity, suspending our external perceptions to take the opportunity to step almost physically into virtual worlds, augmented realities or parallel stories. The concept of hypermediacy, which acts as a complement to the notion of immediacy, refers to our fascination with the mediating devices themselves and to the multiplication, accumulation and diversion of their tools of representation. It has to do with the seduction and visibility that the device acquires in certain cases and the possibility of revelling in the act of mediation and the technology that sustains it. A clear contemporary example of this would be Instagram filters and the possibilities they offer to nuance reality by rendering the act of mediating and sharing it visible, wherein lies their appeal. But we also find this fascination in pictorialism and its exploration of the aesthetic and expressive possibilities of the photographic medium. Finally, the concept of remediation involves an understanding of the processes by which new media absorb, adapt and reshape certain characteristics, practices, themes or content of previous media, and vice versa. One medium is always the content of another medium, as McLuhan (1996) points out. For example, the GIFs of today cannot be explained without the popularity of sitcoms since the 1990s, while contemporary cinema has absorbed the instability and mobility of the cameras on our mobile devices, while also being influenced by the aesthetics of video games.

These notions can help us to understand the recurring desire for the illusion of reality as well as the fascination with new technologies that

has characterised our society since the dawn of modernity. It is only by placing ourselves in the coordinates that governed the desire for immediacy and the fascination for hypermediacy that we can fully understand the appeal that panoramas, dioramas and georamas had for spectators in their day, as in the case of Stendhal mentioned by Soulez or the Mareorama discussed by Hernández. Moreover, what is interesting about Bolter and Grusin's concepts is that the notion of immediacy is constructed not on the basis of reality, but on its reproduction. Each medium, they explain, constitutes a promise to enhance the relationship with the reality being represented. Of course, we had no idea that our experience of that reality was incomplete or imperfect until the introduction of the new medium effectively raised the level of our expectations. Optical views thus offered the possibility of immersion in wide perspectives and European monuments when they were viewed through zograscope or optical toys. Spectators in the 18th century frequently remarked on the device's ability to transport them to the place depicted. When stereoscopic photography burst into bourgeois salons of the mid-19th century, its success resulted from its presentation as a new tool for virtual tourism that could reformulate the illusion of reality by adding the richness of all three dimensions. Similarly, our VR devices attempt to exceed our expectations established by films or video games. Paradoxically, new technologies, trying to reformulate—remediate—the old ones at the same time ensure that the old devices continue serving, at least for a time, as a benchmark against which the illusion of reality is measured.

Meta recently launched a new advertising campaign with the slogan: "the metaverse may be virtual, but the impact will be real" (Meta, 2022). This may perhaps be one of the simplest and yet most illuminating definitions of the significance of virtual worlds, and of the importance of analysing, conceptualising and historicising them. This campaign reignites the desire to reproduce

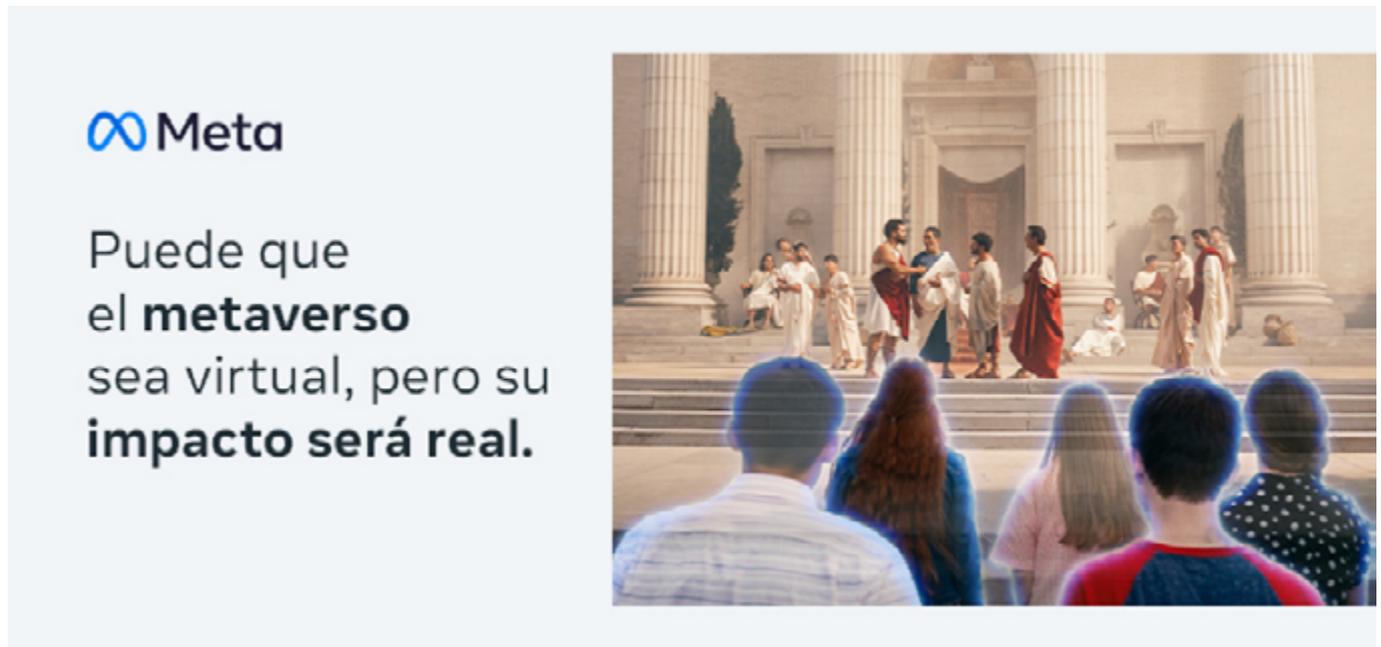


Image 2

reality in alternative spaces and also keeps alive all those virtual worlds of the past created by panoramas, cinema, optical devices and video games, whose impact was equally real.

To conclude, we would like to thank Sonsoles Hernandez and Guillaume Soulez for so generously sharing their reflections. We also recommend reading Sonsoles Hernández's *Vidas excitadas. Sensorialidad y capitalismo en la cultura moderna* (2022) and the journal issues coordinated by Guillaume Soulez, "Le cinéma éclaté. Formes et théorie" (*Cinémas*, vol. 29, no. 1, Autumn 2018) and, together with Kira Kitsopanidou, *Le levain des médias. Forme, format, média* (2015), for further exploration of the questions discussed here. ■

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THE PAST AND PRESENT OF VIRTUAL WORLDS: ILLUSION AND IMMERSION IN EARLY CINEMA

Abstract

This (Dis)Agreements section aims to explore the different ways in which we can understand the notion of virtual in Early Cinema. The dialogue between Guillaume Soulez (Paris III University – The Sorbonne) and Sonsoles Hernández (University of the Balearic Islands) is a developing process reflection and definition of the key concepts involved in the construction of virtual worlds (immersion, simulation, fiction, illusion, as the notion of virtuality itself). On the other hand, it has been an opportunity to draw meeting points, recognize strategies and establish affiliations between Early Cinema, current technologies (VR, AR, videogames) and the optical shows of the past (panoramas, mareorama, optical views).

Key words

Early Cinema; Virtual Reality; Immersion; Illusion; Media Archaeology; Visual Culture.

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PASADO Y PRESENTE DE LOS MUNDOS VIRTUALES. ILUSIÓN E INMERSIÓN EN EL CINE DE LOS ORÍGENES

Resumen

La presente sección de (Des)encuentros tiene como objetivo explorar el modo en que podemos entender lo virtual en (y desde) el cine de los orígenes. El diálogo que hemos mantenido con Guillaume Soulez (Universidad París III – La Sorbona) y Sonsoles Hernández (Universitat de les Illes Balears) nos ha permitido, por una parte, desarrollar un trabajo de reflexión y definición de los conceptos fundamentales que permiten entender la construcción de los mundos virtuales (inmersión, simulación, ficción, ilusión, así como lo propiamente virtual) y, por otra parte, trazar puntos de encuentro, reconocer sus estrategias y establecer filiaciones entre el cine de los orígenes, las tecnologías actuales (la realidad virtual, la realidad aumentada, los videojuegos) y los dispositivos ópticos del pasado (los panoramas, el Mareorama, las vistas ópticas).

Palabras clave

Cine de los orígenes; Realidad virtual; Inmersión; Ilusión; Arqueología de los medios; Cultura visual.

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VANISHING POINTS

**THE GLOWING FACE: A REDEFINITION OF
THE CONCEPT OF PHOTOGÉNIE FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA**

Josep Lambies

**SUBVERSION OF SCREEN VIOLENCE:
AESTHETICS AND DISCOURSE IN GASPAR
NOÉ'S *I STAND ALONE***

Fernando Luque Gutiérrez

**DE LA ADAPTACIÓN INFIEL A LA
EXPANSIÓN TRANSMEDIA: APUNTES
PARA UN DEBATE SOBRE (PER)VERSIONES
CINEMATOGRÁFICAS**

Fran Mateu

THE GLOWING FACE: A REDEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF *PHOTOGÉNIE* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

JOSEP LAMBIES

ON THE NOTION OF GLOWING

From a historical perspective, the idea of the glowing face explored in this article cannot be dissociated from the early years of cinema. The connection between the two is reflected in the writings of Jean Epstein, where we can find various references to the experience of those first spectators who, in the solitude of the dark theatre, were the first to see a gigantic face appear on the screen in a close-up. That face seemed like a spectre made of supernatural light, a light that could only belong to the cinematic medium. In one of his best-known books, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, Epstein writes: “Inside the well of the eye’s pupil, a spirit crafts its oracles. This immense gaze, one would like to touch it—if it weren’t so laden with a possibly dangerous power. Nor does it appear to be a fable that light has a tangible mass” (2015: 65). In relation to this immense face, Epstein introduces a concept which, as Francesco

Casetti (2005: 17) points out, has become irrevocably associated with the early days of film theory: *photogénie*.

While it is true that in Epstein’s work the meaning of the word *photogénie* is broad and variable, it is clear that in most cases it refers to a fantastical or even phantasmagorical quality of filmed faces. Epstein argues that cinema has the power to transform the human face or to draw out something of its beauty and weirdness. It is a power rather like Sigmund Freud’s notion *unheimlich*, which affects things that look familiar and yet at the same time seem strange, as if unknown to us. In a later essay, Epstein would write: “In the expressions of a face that filled the whole screen, a world was revealed with a much finer movement. It was still a physical movement, but one that meticulously translated the movement of the soul” (2021: 417). With their oversized dimensions on the big screen, the actors’ and actresses’ faces

were endowed with microscopic movements never before perceived by the human eye.

This subtle movements of the photogenic event described by Epstein is evocative of the world of moving images in Marcel Proust's work. For example, it recalls the series of dreamlike visions around Albertine Simonet's face in the last part of *Within a Budding Grove* (1918). When the protagonist meets Albertine and looks closely at her face, he notices a mole on her chin that occupies a very specific place in the topography of her features. However, when he tries to conjure up the image of Albertine in his mind, he sees this same mole that he believed to be perfectly positioned moving from one side of her face to the other, making an invisible journey across her skin. The mole is thus transformed into what the ancient Greeks called a *phantasia*, a point of contact with a concealed dimension characterised by its volatile nature and its fragility, like the insects in flames to which the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman dedicated the two books comprising his *Essais sur l'apparition: Phasmes* (2015a) and *Phalènes* (2015b).

Like the gigantic face described by Epstein in *The Intelligence of a Machine*, Albertine's face glows. This happens at the moment that the protagonist leans forward to kiss her and sees her close up:

In the state of exaltation in which I was, Albertine's round face, lit by an inner flame as a night-light, stood out in such relief that, imitating the rotation of a glowing sphere, it seemed to me to be turning, like those Michelangelo figures which are being swept away in a stationary and vertiginous whirlwind (Proust, 2010: 594).

In his article "The Image of Proust", included in the first volume of *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin writes that "the free-floating forms of the *mémoire involontaire* are still in large part isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images" (1968: 214). From Benjamin's perspective, the glow radiating from Albertine's face in the passage of the kiss could be described as suggestive of an image that

penetrates the memory. What is particularly interesting is that it very clearly possesses the same qualities as the huge face on the film screen.

For Epstein, the question of *photogénie* has to do with the unfathomable. Epstein argues that cinema teaches us to be taken aback by "a reality of which perhaps nothing has yet been comprehended, of which perhaps nothing is comprehensible" (2021: 410). Years later, in *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*, Edgar Morin would revisit the idea of *photogénie*, suggesting that "ethereal spirits" and "ghostly doubles" are incarnated in cinema in proportion to "the visible limit of their invisibility" (2005: 65). Following in Epstein's wake, Morin seems to be saying that like the face of Albertine Simonet, cinematic faces possess a secret life. This article proposes an interpretation of this unfathomable or invisible movement that defines *photogénie* as the set of signs of a mnemonic dimension of the image that points towards a historical kind of knowledge.

In methodological terms, the notion of "glow" used here is related to Benjamin's reflections on dialectical images that can bring unrelated timeframes into contact and conflict with each other. For Benjamin, dialectical images are living, luminous images: images that glow. In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, he writes: "The dialectical image is a flashing image. Thus, the image of the past is to be held fast as an image that flashes in the 'now' of recognition" (quoted in Wolin, 1994: 126). In Benjamin's work, the flashing image has a regressive quality; it returns to and invokes the atavistic. This is a point of view he would repeat not long after writing his work on Bau-

THE NOTION OF GLOW IS RELATED TO BENJAMIN'S REFLECTIONS ON DIALECTICAL IMAGES THAT CAN BRING UNRELATED TIMEFRAMES INTO CONTACT AND CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER

delaire, in the paraliomena to his *Theses on the Concept of History*, where he suggests that “the dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning [Kugelblitz] that runs across the whole horizon of the past” (1998: 403).

Drawing on Benjamin’s theories, and especially on the temporal formula that gives rise to the ball lightning that flashes across the horizon of history, this article examines the survival of the glowing face motif in a contemporary context shaped by the discourses that digital images have inspired. In this sense, this study is aligned the perspective of Christophe Wall-Romana, who suggests that Epstein’s work seems “much closer to our new yet unsettled digital regime” than it is to classical cinema (2015: 13). My study begins with the analysis of a selection of glowing faces featured in recent films, which, despite being mutually distinct, all share a common denominator: they are all presented in a luminous atmosphere that makes an ephemeral connection to early 20th-century writings on the question of *photogénie*. In these faces, we can glimpse the possibility of a return to the experience of the

first cinematic images, as if that glowing light that exposes them were a manifestation of the light of primitive cinema.

GRETCHEN THROUGH THE LIGHTNING

There is a scene in *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011) that revolves around the glow of a face. It is the moment when Gretchen’s eyes meet Faust’s and suddenly, as if by a spell, a shaft of light of unknown origin shines into the bedroom and envelops the two characters (played by Isolda Dychauk and Johannes Zeiler). All falls silent, and time slows down almost to the point of stopping. Faust’s gaze grows larger on the screen, while in the reverse shot, Gretchen’s face appears bathed in radiant light, as if floating in the ether. Her features fade to the point of invisibility, immersed in light and gradually dissolving until at last they are no more than a vague outline: a trace. In his book *Image et mémoire*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben defines the trace as that which “evokes an origin at the very moment of its disappearance” (1998: 60). From this perspective, Gretchen’s

Figure 1. *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011)





Figure 2. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (La chute de la maison Usher, Jean Epstein, 1928)

face vanishing in the light has a quality of reminiscence.

In 1927, while making his film *Napoléon* (*Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*), French filmmaker Abel Gance, a friend of Epstein's, wrote an essay titled "Has the Age of the Image Arrived?", in which he discusses the power of such overlit faces—literally "inflamed by their own luminosity"—that fill up the frame in close-up. At the end of his essay, Gance expresses a dream of using cinema one day to "conjure up the great bonfire from which all beings come" (quoted in Romaguera i Ramió & Alsina Thevenet, 1989: 455). These words clearly take on new meaning in the image of Gretchen's face in *Faust*, the numinous image that does not conceal its digital plasticity, touched by a contemporary light, a light that belongs to "now" yet at the same time possesses a timeless quality. It is a light that contains a foundational memory that speaks to us of the place from which the first images came. Sokurov might be said to lose himself in Gretchen's face as if in hope of rediscovering in it the first faces of cinematic history.

It is no mere coincidence that the meeting of gazes in *Faust* bears marked similarities to a scene in one of Epstein's most acclaimed films, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*La chute de la maison Usher*, 1928). In the scene where Roderick (Jean Debucourt) is painting Madeleine's portrait (Marguerite Gance), his gaze appears enlarged in the shot; he lunges forward, as if wanting to engulf the screen, just like Faust. In the next shot, Madeleine's body, constrained in a position of agony, begins to droop like a wilting flower. It is a body suspended between restlessness and stillness, between life and death. Her face flickers, like the flame of one of the candles that illuminates it in the scene. There follows a montage of shots from different angles, very typical of 1920s avant-garde cinema, in which the image of a marble bust suddenly appears superimposed over the blurred image of Madeleine. Finally, we see it in a negative exposure, as if to indicate the place of a vacuum; a shot containing little more than a glowing light marking the outline of her face, as if it were an image of both her ghost and her death mask.

From Benjamin's theoretical perspective, there is a secret connection between the two faces shown in Epstein's and Sokurov's films. Both combine the absent and the illuminated, the trace that vanishes and the lightning flash that crystallises it. The parameters of these two elements determine how they relate to each other and, consequently, how they relate to time. The dialogue between these two images of faces is encompassed in the rich methodological framework of anachronism that underpins much of Didi-Huberman's work. The underlying premise of his essay *Devant le temps* (2006) is that Benjamin's dialectical image possesses an anachronistic dimension. According to Didi-Huberman, the dialectical image should be understood as the result of a series of overlapping presents, heterogeneous timeframes that meet and clash in the image, thereby charting a constellation. From the perspective of anachronism, Didi-Huberman recasts the idea of lightning in the following terms:

Lightning power, as if the glow produced by the clash were the only light possible to render visible the true historicity of things. There is a fragility in this fleeting appearance, as the very moment they are made visible, these things are doomed to being immersed again almost immediately in the darkness of their disappearance, at least in virtuality (2006: 151).¹

Gretchen's shining face in Sokurov's film is the lightning apparition which, just before being extinguished completely, is charged with time, as if this were the power that her luminous aura grants her. The idea of charging images with time can also be found in the work of Didi-Huberman (2006) and Agamben (2010). Both authors express a desire to study the history of images from a phantasmagorical perspective, in terms that continue the model established by Aby Warburg in close to fifty panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. This is a model that seeks in every image the memory of its past lives, the record of the successive inscriptions in time; a model that sheds light on the

A FACE LIKE GRETCHEN'S IN FAUST IS THE RESURGENCE OF CINEMA'S FIRST FACES

eternal return of those secret spectres that lurk in the subconscious of images and their history. Following Warburg, the glowing face could be said to exhibit a spectral quality. As early as 1921, in his acclaimed publication *Bonjour Cinéma*, Epstein wrote: "I find all the faces I have ever seen in [the cinematic face], a ghost of memories" (2021: 72).

The glowing faces are shapes emerging out of the memory. In this sense, a face like Gretchen's in *Faust* is the resurgence of cinema's first faces. Like Sokurov, many filmmakers in recent years have shown an interest in placing the human face once again in the throes of a luminous trance, as if they were trying to recall the experience of those first spectators described by Epstein in *The Intelligence of a Machine*. This is the common theme that connects three very different films: *Despite the Night* (Malgré la nuit, Philippe Grandrieux, 2015), *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019) and *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), whose respective depictions of glowing faces contain the memory of a primitive gesture expressed in contemporary terms. In filming these faces, these directors reveal a longing to descend to ground zero, the origin point of all images, and perhaps also the place to which they all must one day return.

A RETURN TO CINEMA'S INFANCY

Despite the Night begins with the face of Lola, a dancer who dances, shimmers and vanishes into an amnesiac darkness as it passes through the visions of the protagonist's subconscious. This film is essentially a ghost story imagined by a sleepwalker or a dying man, which could be interpreted as a kind of Proustian nightmare. It even ends with a Proustian reference to a mother's kiss, although in this case it is not a child wanting to be

tucked in at bedtime but an adult corpse beginning to decompose who wishes to be bid farewell with a final gesture of affection. In this descent into hell, Grandrieux speaks to us of the nature of the cinematic image. The face of the dancer, Lola (Lola Norda), right at the beginning of the film, explodes like the projector lights in the opening frames of *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) before the faded image of Bibi Andersson’s face begins to take shape on the white wall of the morgue. Like that scene, the beginning of *Despite the Night* is an allusion to the first gasps of cinematography.

Lola’s face possesses a blazing quality. Grandrieux seems to find in it the same flammable vibration of Loïe Fuller’s serpentine dance that so fascinated the Lumière brothers and that was described by Didi-Huberman in his *Essais sur l'apparition* as the trajectory of a moth in flames, who before being consumed by the fire offers its most magnificent flight (2015b: 36). To this vision of the flaming moth we could add the words of

Jacques Rancière, who in an essay titled “Le moment de la danse” argues that Loïe Fuller’s whirling performance is not the expression of a type of universal movement of life but an image that generates other images (2018: 77). In this sense, Fuller’s serpentine dance is like the primordial bonfire referred to by Abel Gance. It could thus be argued that what Grandrieux is seeking to do with the dancer’s glowing face in *Despite the Night* is to confront us with the luminous energy that radiated from cinema’s first images.

The above confirms Robert Stam’s suggestion in his book *Film Theory* that “[p]re-cinema and post-cinema have come to resemble each other” (2000: 318). This idea has been taken up by many of the authors who, in an effort to make sense of the idiosyncrasies of digital filmmaking, have recognised in it a return to the beginning. In *Hacia una imagen no-tiempo*, Sergi Sánchez asserts that the digital image “looks back without anger and sees itself in the mirror of cinema’s origins” (2013:

Figure 3. *Despite the Night* (Malgré la nuit, Philippe Grandrieux, 2015)

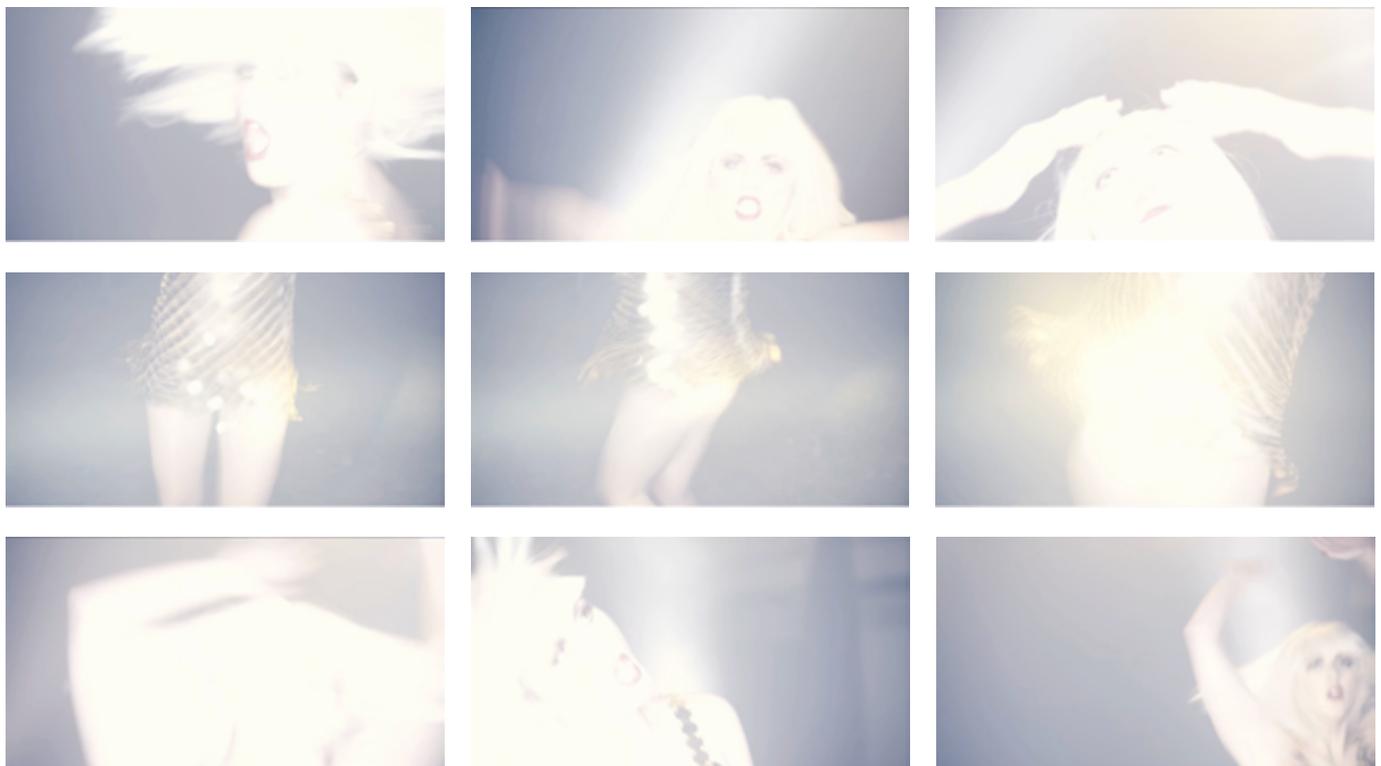




Figure 4. *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019)

136). It is curious that Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse*, a film shot on celluloid but subsequently processed and enhanced using digital technology, should be one of the recent films that has represented this idea most effectively. In the film's final sequence, Howard (Robert Pattinson) climbs madly up the stairs of the lighthouse, like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, determined to make the power of the light his own. He reaches the lantern, takes it between the palms of his hands and electrocutes himself with it. His face is then transformed by a colossal scream. Beneath his electrified grimace, what we see is the power of an archaic image.

It is here that *The Lighthouse* offers a particularly interesting reading. On the one hand, it is an old sailor's tale, close to the world of Herman Melville, set on a small island off the coast of New England around 1890. On the other, it is also a story about cinema, a fact made explicit in the cinematography, in the use of a high-contrast black and white, and in the grainy texture of the

images. The light of the lighthouse itself hints at a metaphor for the cinematographic apparatus. That the story should be set at the end of the 19th century, in the decade of the invention of the cinematograph, suggests a return to the infancy of the art form that Jean-Luc Godard discusses in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998): an infancy characterised by experiments with chronophotography and optical toys. The lantern room of the lighthouse, with its glass mechanism revolving in the centre, is like the inside of a praxinoscope, the successor to the zoetrope, with its pyramid of mirrors on an axis that put the images in motion and gave them a kind of luminosity.

Robert Pattinson's scream also bears a dialectical resemblance to the first moving portrait of which there is a record, taken by Étienne-Jules Marey's student Georges Demenÿ in 1891, with a device he himself had designed, which he called the phonoscope. The portrait consisted of 18 images showing the face of a man (Demenÿ himself) over the course of one second, while he



Figure 5. *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

AT THE END OF *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, THE SCREEN IS ENGULFED IN A CLOUD OF SMOKE ONTO WHICH ARE PROJECTED THE HAZY FEATURES OF SHOSANNA'S GHOST

spoke three words: “*Je vous aime.*” In his book *Du visage au cinéma*, Jacques Aumont explains that to ensure sufficient exposure, Demenÿ inserted two mirrors to redirect the sunlight into his eyes. His efforts were so aggressive that the light ended up blinding him (1998: 36-37). Thus, while he tried to utter his declaration of love, his face was constrained in a grimace of discomfort, with his eyes shut tightly, while the blinding sunlight hit him full in the face. Pattinson’s pained expression when he becomes possessed by the light offers an amplified replica of the effect of this pre-cinematic incident.

There is another, perhaps less obvious precursor to Pattinson’s face in *The Lighthouse*, which offers a new perspective on its relationship to cinema’s origins: *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941), a film articulated entirely by the voice-over of a man whose melancholy tone leads us through the landscape of his childhood memories, confirming that cinema speaks a language very similar to the language of memory, with its murky terrain and its dark corners. It is significant that the furthest depths of this memory should be found in the shadowy recesses of a mine, rather like Plato’s Cave, where a boy with a coal-blackened face (like Pattinson’s face in *The Lighthouse*) pushes a cart with a burning oil lamp hanging on the front. The oil lamp swings from side to side, casting its light on the boy’s face. This image seems to hint at the very memory of cinema itself, a memory made of flickers and shadows. We might even interpret the protagonist’s childhood memories as a kind of allegory for the infancy of the medium.

Quentin Tarantino evokes the giant face of cinema's first years at the end of *Inglourious Basterds*. After Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) is gunned down by Frederick (Daniel Brühl), her lifeless body is shown sprawled on the floor of the projection room in a puddle of blood. Meanwhile, the projector, where the film reels are rolling, emits a flickering light that once again alludes to the cinematic apparatus. Suddenly, a close-up of Shosanna's face appears projected on the movie screen, looking down on all the Nazis sitting in the audience. A short time later, the screen catches fire, and the vision presented to the spectators is the black-and-white image of Shosanna's vengeful ghost, laughing behind the flames. The glowing face here quite literally becomes a burning face. At the end of the scene, the screen is engulfed in a cloud of smoke onto which are projected the hazy and all but extinguished features of Shosanna's ghost, which dissolve while the echo or her infernal laughter resounds from beyond.

In a manner so graphic that it perhaps verges on the ironic, Tarantino expresses Didi-Huberman's idea that the glowing image is destined to disappear in order to enter the virtuality of time. For Didi-Huberman, that time is complex. On the one hand, it is a retrospective time, a time remembered. But on the other, it makes a promise for the future. This idea appears in *Essais sur l'apparition*, when he establishes that every image contains within it "the past retold and the memory of the future" (2015a: 142). From this perspective, very close to Erich Auerbach's notion of the figure (1998), these luminous faces charged with memory would also be expected to prompt reflection on the future of the cinematographic image. This is the context in which we find Robin Wright's glowing face in *The Congress* (Ari Folman, 2012), a prophetic fable with dystopian pretensions, based on Stanislaw Lem's *The Futurological Congress* (1971), reconstructed around the mirages and illusions of digital culture.

ROBIN'S FACE LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Ari Folman conceived *The Congress* as a story about the future of the cinematographic image. It is the story of an actress (Robin Wright, playing an alter ego of herself) who is offered a large sum of money by a studio in exchange for full rights to her digitized image: a timeless image that will never age, and that can be multiplied, reproduced *ad infinitum* and exploited for commercial purposes. Pressured by difficult circumstances, Robin ends up taking the offer. In the next scene, we see Robin waiting in a hallway. She is welcomed by a man whom she recognises at once as a former cinematographer, who explains to her that he has had to adapt to the changing times, the transformation of the industry, and thus he has reinvented himself as the official scanner of the stars. Robin gapes at him in surprise. "You were such a great cinematographer," she blurts out. He replies: "Come on, don't feel sorry. The other guys are at home, doing nothing. [...] At least I get to work with the actors, and... light." These last words hint at the encounter between faces and light in cinema's early days.

In *The Congress*, the memory of cinema's origins comes to the surface when Robin steps inside a sphere-shaped structure fitted with countless photographic cameras. The device looks rather like a sophisticated version of the contraptions that Muybridge and Marey used to capture the very first moving pictures. From the control room, Robin's agent (played by Harvey Keitel) begins telling her a moving story with touches of humour and a dramatic ending. Every detail of his story is reflected in Robin's expressions, beginning with a smile that quickly turns into a laugh, then a look of concern, worry, and finally a grimace of terror. The scene's composition is evocative of the beginnings of classical Hollywood cinema. The nature of the relationship established between the two characters stirs up the ghosts of directors and actresses of the silent period: Keitel could easily be

a contemporary version of D. W. Griffith giving instructions while the camera moves in on the trembling, tear-streaked face of Lillian Gish.

While the agent continues with his story, the cameras flash all around Robin, who remains standing in the middle of the structure with her arms extended, like a prisoner in front of a firing squad. This image recalls Baudrillard (2006) description of the culture of the simulacrum as a perfect crime. The contract that Robin has signed includes a clause that stipulates that she can never act in a film again, or appear on television or even on the stage. She can never again show herself in public. Folman depicts a time when actors are no longer necessary, when cinema no longer requires a pre-existing reality because morphing, CGI and digital animation can invent new faces, new landscapes, new galaxies and new bodies out of nothing (De Felipe & Gómez, 2014). These illusions are severing the relationship between the image and the physical, tangible world. In this sense, when Robin enters the scanner a rupture takes place: on the one hand, the scanner will produce a multiplicity of similar images, like the scientist's machine in Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *The Invention of Morel* (1940); on the other, Robin knows that she is being consigned to a life in the shadows, i.e., she must disappear.

The Congress consolidates what Paul Virilio called the aesthetics of disappearance, a concept described in his book of the same name. The book contains stories like that of Howard Hughes, the business magnate who locked himself away in a vault and projected a kind of omnipresent shadow around the world, in a manner similar to Dr. Mabuse: a shadow that Virilio describes as a "ubiquitous absence" (1988: 27). Hughes's vault is not very different from Robin Wright's scanner in *The Congress*: in both cases something is multiplied, and at the same time something is extinguished. At the same time, these two architectural devices both bear a resemblance to the hall of mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), where Orson Welles shows us the huge round face of Rita Hayworth, distorting it and fragmenting it in a series of close-ups that the actor Everett Sloane limps through again and again, pulling himself along on his crutches. The sequence ends with a shoot-out, the mirrors crack and the gigantic face breaks apart until it finally collapses, leaving the space of the frame empty.

At the end of *The Lady from Shanghai*, Welles breaks classical Hollywood cinema's codes of transparency and clarity to take it to its conclusion. Folman tilts in the opposite direction, but the effect is analogous. The camera pans around Ro-

Figure 6. *The Congress* (Ari Folman, 2013)

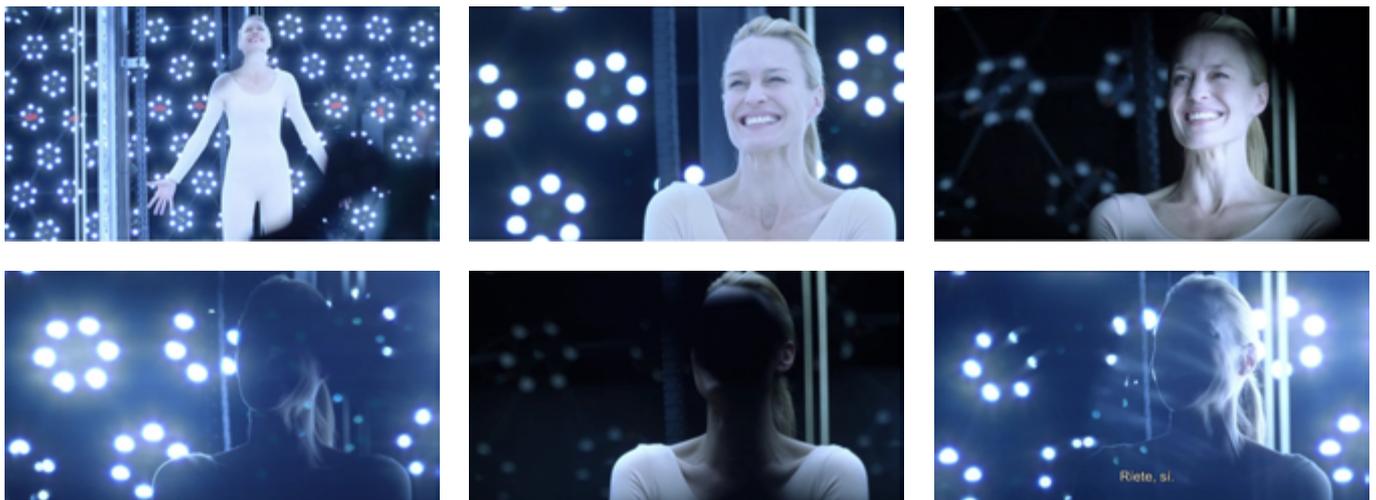




Figure 7. *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947)

bin's luminous face, and in her terrified stare, her anxious eyes, there appears a foreboding abyss. It is the sign of the dawning of a new age of the image. The second part of the film thus takes place almost entirely in a psychedelic animated world that has totally replaced the real world; a neo-Baroque universe (Calabrese, 1990) that all mortals have fled to, under the influence of a drug, to escape a devastated planet whose atmosphere has become unbreathable. Folman makes Robin's face a myth for this new era, interpreting myth here literally as a narrative that seeks to explain our origins, or at least to explain the mysteries of an age that preceded our own. Inside the luminous sphere, glittering with camera flashes, Robin's face becomes the primordial image that burned in Gance's bonfire; the image that has disappeared, that will always be missing, and to which all other images hereinafter will owe a debt.

THE CONTEMPORARY GAZE

Over the last twenty years, various authors have been arguing that the technological changes resulting from the rise of digital imaging require us to rethink the very nature of cinema. Some, such

as Paolo Cherchi Usai in his book *The Death of Cinema* (2005), have suggested these changes may represent the end of the medium. Others, including several cited here, such as Robert Stam and Christophe Wall-Romana, see the digital transformation as a chance for a new start, or at least for a return to an embryonic stage of images that will echo the beginnings of film history and its capacity for experimentation. Based on this idea, in each of the faces analysed in this article it may be possible to glimpse the expression of a discontinuous, non-linear time in line with Walter Benjamin's view of history as a dynamic temporal vortex that is constantly regenerating and reformulating itself. Influenced by Benjamin, Didi-Huberman takes a similar position in the opening pages of *The Surviving Image* when he asserts that "historical discourse is never 'born'. It always recommences" (2018: 1).

Out of this chorus of voices emerges a specific, complex definition of the concept of the contemporary. In his talk "What Is the Contemporary?" delivered at the University of Venice's Faculty of Art and Design, Giorgio Agamben clarified this definition with an eloquent metaphor when he suggested that identifying the contemporary is

like looking at the night sky and trying to find the light of the stars that are moving away from us. “To perceive, in the darkness of the present, that light that tries to reach us but cannot, that is what it means to be contemporary” (2008), he argues. This unearthly light speaks to us of the invisible trajectories and constellations that demarcate the ages. This is the idea that conveyed in the fable Ari Folman composes in *The Congress*: around Robin Wright’s face converge the vanishing lines of a series of infinite pasts that flash for an instant in the present and signal the point where the historical narrative must open up to the uncertainty of the future.

Epstein developed his theory of *photogénie* at a time when cinema was consolidating its own language of thought. To understand today that the term *photogénie* could be used to connect the faces of recent films with those of cinema’s early years is to assign it a function that is not only obviously aesthetic but also ambitiously historical. The concept of the glowing face discussed in this article speaks to us of how the image relates to time, how it is positioned in relation to it and interrogates it, all of which points to the notion of anachronism as described by Didi-Huberman in his essay *Devant le temps*. The glowing face today possesses a contemporary dimension that directs its gaze across film history. The concept of *photogénie* thus ceases to be of value solely to classical theory and gives rise to a visual formula capable of articulating or even containing a history of images. It thus becomes an operational concept that enables us to integrate the past and to continue explaining cinema in the future. ■

NOTES

- * This article summarises one of the lines of research explored in the doctoral thesis “*El rostro y su ausencia. La supervivencia de la fotogenia en el cine contemporáneo* (“The Face and Its Absence: The Survival of *Photogénie* in Contemporary Cinema” completed in the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, which at the time of writing has yet to be published.
1. Translated from the Spanish: “Poder de *relampagueo*, como si la fulguración producida por el choque fuera la única luz posible para hacer visible la auténtica historicidad de las cosas. Hay una fragilidad que conlleva esta aparición fulgurante, puesto que, una vez hechas visibles, las cosas son condenadas a sumergirse de nuevo casi inmediatamente en la oscuridad de su desaparición, al menos de su virtualidad.”

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THE GLOWING FACE: A REDEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF PHOTOGÉNIE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Abstract

As Francesco Casetti (2005) suggests, there was an initial period in film theory, up to around the 1940s, that was defined by what has come to be known as classical theory. During this period, a series of discourses were developed that sought to provide the cinematographic image with its own language of thought. Those discourses included the first reflections on the question of the human face on screen. This paper draws on the work of certain pioneering authors—especially Jean Epstein's concept of *photogénie*—to analyse the motif of the human face and how it is being revived in contemporary cinema in the context of the digital image. Taking the perspective of the dialectical method developed by Walter Benjamin, which offers a rich array of concepts such as the *lightning flash* and *glow*, the aim of this article is to identify connections between certain images of contemporary faces and those of early cinema.

Key words

Face; *Photogénie*; Anachronism; Origins of Cinema; Dialectical Image; Jean Epstein.

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EL ROSTRO QUE FULGURA. UNA REDEFINICIÓN DEL CONCEPTO DE FOTOGENIA DESDE EL CINE CONTEMPORÁNEO

Resumen

Según indica Francesco Casetti (2005), existe un primer período de las teorías del cine, el de las así llamadas teorías clásicas, que llega aproximadamente hasta la década de los cuarenta del siglo XX, durante el cual se desarrollan una serie de discursos que tratan de proporcionar a la imagen cinematográfica una forma de pensamiento que le sea propia. Entre ellos, se encuentran las primeras reflexiones sobre el tema del rostro en el plano. El presente artículo toma como referencia los escritos de algunos de estos autores —en especial, los textos de Jean Epstein sobre la *fotogenia*— para empezar a analizar la cuestión del rostro humano tal y como se reaviva en el cine contemporáneo, en el contexto de la imagen digital. Al amparo del pensamiento dialéctico de Walter Benjamin, que ofrece conceptos tan exuberantes como *relampagueo* y *fulgor*, las páginas de este texto pretenden trazar líneas que conecten los rostros de la contemporaneidad con el cine de los orígenes.

Palabras clave

Rostro; Fotogenia; Anacronismo; Cine digital; Cine de los orígenes; Imagen dialéctica; Jean Epstein.

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FROM NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY TO THE SUBVERSION OF SCREEN VIOLENCE: AESTHETICS AND DISCOURSE IN GASPAR NOÉ'S *I STAND ALONE*

FERNANDO LUQUE GUTIÉRREZ

INTRODUCTION

In January 1903, the Luna Park amusement park on Coney Island in New York City served as the setting for the slaughter of Topsy the elephant, who was electrocuted in front of an audience that included the film crew that immortalised the event. The spectacle of *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1903) is thus not the product of a simulation or trick photography, but a document of a real death resulting from an act of extreme violence. When the animal collapses and falls partially out of the camera's field of vision, the camera operator corrects the angle to capture the full view of her lifeless bulk lying on the makeshift platform. This simple camera movement reveals that although contemporary cinema is often criticised for its fascination with violence, such fascination is in fact a trait that can be traced all the way back to the origins of the medium.

With the consolidation of the dominant model of narrative integration, the referential violence that characterised the cinema of attractions would be transformed into a staged form, domesticated for its assimilation into the story. Since then, film production has been marked by a constant tension between exhibition and censorship, monetised by commercial studios and distributors seeking to exploit the scopic lust of spectators who have become increasingly accustomed to screen violence. As a result, the question that conditioned classical cinema's relationship with censorship, i.e., the question of how much was allowed to be shown, would be replaced with its correlate: how much the spectator was prepared to watch. This inversion of the question marked the end of the classical style, which had been defined by a "poetics of substitution" (Prince, 2003) where the violent act was kept off-screen or only depicted in muted form. In its place emerged a new, explicit and provocative violence, *dignified* commercially

by *auteurs* like Peckinpah, Kubrick and Scorsese, which ultimately consolidated the hypervisibility of violence present in the diversity of styles that characterise cinema today.

Much like the depiction of sex, the spectrum of violence in cinema has expanded exponentially since the limits of what could be shown on screen effectively dissolved. This is the context in which we find *I Stand Alone* (Seul contre tous, 1998), Gaspar Noé's first feature film and a precursor to a production that would have a major international impact, *Irreversible* (2002), particularly due to the brutal rape scene involving its female protagonist, Monica Bellucci. The latter film would subsequently result in Noé's inclusion in the heterogeneous list of filmmakers of the "New French Extremity" as defined by James Quandt (2004): "New French Extremity [...] a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement."

The hyperrealism involving the body and its fluids, combined with the transgression of all manner of ethical and moral boundaries, effectively links Noé's films to this extremist trend, which includes representatives of the most visceral horror and gore, such as Alexandre Aja, Alexandre Bustillo, Julien Maury, Xavier Gens and Pascal Laugier, along with other filmmakers who, while not included in the group, share a similar interest in exploring the limits of what can be depicted on screen, such as Bruno Dumont (*La vie de Jesus*, 1997), Virginie Despentes (*Baise-moi*, 2000), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*, 2001), and Noé himself, with *I Stand Alone* and *Irreversible*.

Far from attempting to simplify Noé's oeuvre based on the possibility of his inclusion in this vague movement, this article explores his role in the European contribution to the revitalisation of what could be described as "cinemas of violence", referring to filmmaking that positions violence at

the very heart of its discourse. More specifically, the films of Gaspar Noé are identified here with an established trend in cinema that has historically been concerned with taking a metadiscursive approach to violence, whose depiction is never an end but a means of questioning the act of representation itself and the relationship created with the spectator, who is a necessary accomplice in the process. To this end, it is necessary to return to what could be described as the true foundation of the creative approach that underpins his filmmaking, *I Stand Alone*, a prime example of the filmmaker's subversive deconstruction of the traditional cinematic spectacle enshrined in the binary of sex and violence.

GASPAR NOÉ AND THE CINEMAS OF VIOLENCE

The concept of violence is a matter of constant debate, and a precise definition of it is extremely problematic for various reasons that range from linguistic and cultural differences to the diversity of fields in which it is studied (Garrido Lora, 2004: 17-25). This article assumes violence to be an intrinsic element of Noé's filmmaking, and given the complex ramifications of this assumption, a theoretical framework is needed to help contextualise the concept of film violence, as well as how it is used in the director's films.

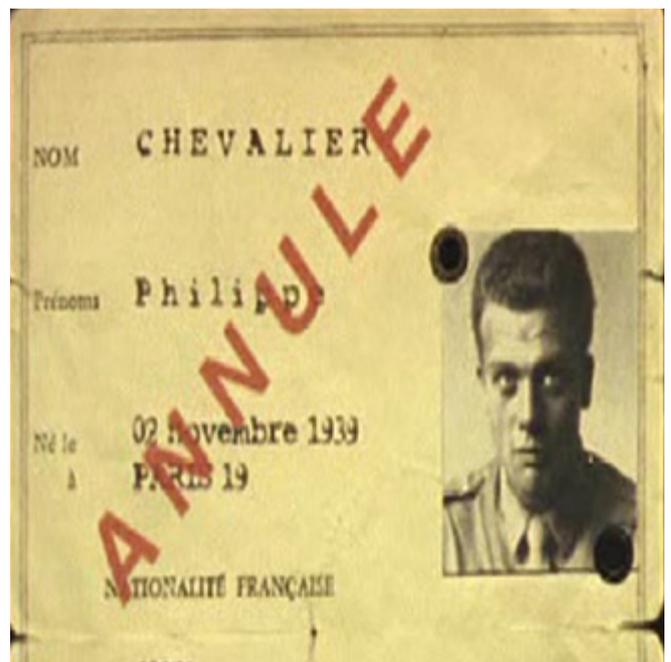
Although film violence could be simplistically described as the display or depiction on screen of acts involving some type of aggression, whether physical, verbal or psychological, the particular characteristics of its treatment in different eras, genres, and filmmaking styles complicate the definition considerably. From this perspective, and with the aim of furnishing an analytical tool that can ensure a more systematic approach, Stephen Prince proposes the concept of "stylistic amplitude" (2003: 35), defined in each film by the correlation between *what*, *how* and *how much*: what action is shown to the spectator; how it is for-

mally represented; and equally importantly, its duration on screen. With this approach, a spectrum can be established with films that make use of minimal or moderate violence at one end, and those in which death, torture and other aggressions are depicted explicitly over an extended period of time at the other. Thus, based on the terminology originally proposed by Prince and further developed by Lauro Zavala (2012: 3-4), Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* would be placed at the maximum end of the spectrum, particularly extreme for a film that does not belong to the gore or trash genre, given that it depicts explicit situations that go beyond any strictly narrative function and transgress the limits of the representable, to such an extent that ethical questions will probably overshadow purely cinematic considerations.

In contrast, classical cinema established limits on violence with storylines that justified the situations in which it was depicted. The appropriate context was thus to be found in genres such as the war film, the Western or the crime thriller, whose narratives (Mongin, 1999: 28; Orellana, 2007: 94) offered a pretext for the violence, establishing the opposing forces and the particular battlefield on which they would meet. It was a dialectic of action-reaction, of hero-villain confrontation, the defence against a threat that would ultimately result in the restoration of the natural order. The positive function of violence thus depended on the differentiation between the agents responsible for it in the story, and particularly on their motivations, which were decisive in the spectator's determination of the extent to which the violence would be tolerated: "All too often, the most violent actions seem to be justified by the factors that provoke them. And thus, many good guys, people with altruistic motives acting for the good of humanity, tend to be more violent than the most violent bad guy. Their fight for peace, justice, the common good, etc., seems to justify their heinous acts" (Sanmartín, 2005: 21).

It is important to note that the storyline for *I Stand Alone* is a direct continuation of the plot to *Carne* (Noé, 1991), a short film that depicts the events that lead to the desperate situation that its protagonist, the Butcher (Phillipe Nahon), finds himself in: his wife's abandonment of him, his solitary life with his autistic teenage daughter, his belief that his daughter was sexually assaulted and the revenge he takes on the supposed perpetrator, his time in prison as a result, and finally, his time in exile, far from his Parisian *banlieue*, with no job or sense of purpose. These events are described in the third person during the film's opening sequence in the character's own voice, while we are shown photographs of the degraded urban landscape recognisable in the first part of the story (image 1). The sound of Thierry Durbet's military march, "Honour", lends an epic quality to this story of a loser's survival. By telling tale of his hard-luck life, the Butcher seeks somehow to justify his acts—those already committed and those yet to come—when he returns to Paris armed with a pistol and three bullets to exact his personal revenge.

Image 1



This externalising of the protagonist’s thoughts through the ongoing voice-over narration will be used to reveal the character’s troubled psychological state, exposing an inner violence that seeps into and contaminates the narrative world: a horrifying monologue of visceral hatred of those moral family values that have traditionally underpinned Western societies. This is the first major crack that appears in the film’s narrative surface, as the heroic aura marking the depiction of the protagonist clashes with the repugnance that the spectator is likely to feel in reaction to his thoughts and deeds. We are thus offered a complex sympathetic identification with a psychopath capable of causing his partner’s miscarriage by beating her, a man guilty of filicidal tendencies and incestuous abuse. These aberrations completely nullify any positive function that could possibly be attributed to the violence depicted, which is always characterised by its destructive nature.

These are the parameters within which *I Stand Alone* operates. The battlefield here is an ordinary suburban setting, filtered through a consciousness affected by alienation and resentment (image 2). The enemy comes to be vaguely defined as society in general, a hostile and dehumanising force that mutates over the course of the story from the castrating woman to the exploitative employer, from unsupportive friends to an immigrant who runs a simple tavern, until finally becoming identified as the enemy within (image 3). This is how the vio-

lence dissected in the film is unleashed, with no positive outcome that could justify or ameliorate its repugnance.

Based on the above description, Noé clearly subscribes to the aim for controversy, or even condemnation, that characterises so many filmmakers seeking to test the limits established for depictions of violence, or more precisely, for what the public will tolerate in such depictions. This raises the question of what distinguishes his work from those filmographies that base their transgressive attitude on the mere accumulation of controversial images and narrative motifs. As Olivier Mongin points out: “Between images that capitalise on violence by ratcheting up its intensity and those that attempt to repurpose it, i.e., to halt and restrain it, there is a yawning gap: while the former accumulate, the latter strive to effect a conversion of the energy they produce. This is why a detailed analysis is needed of any images that can help to identify the point at which there is a danger of crossing the boundary into the pornographic when the flow of images can no longer be resisted” (1999: 16).

Rejecting the strategy of pornographic accumulation of violent images, some filmmakers have sought to develop a self-reflexive approach that involves the conversion or repurposing of such images. This is something that Gérard Imbert points to when he describes the emergence, in parallel with its hypervisibility, of “a metadis-

Image 2

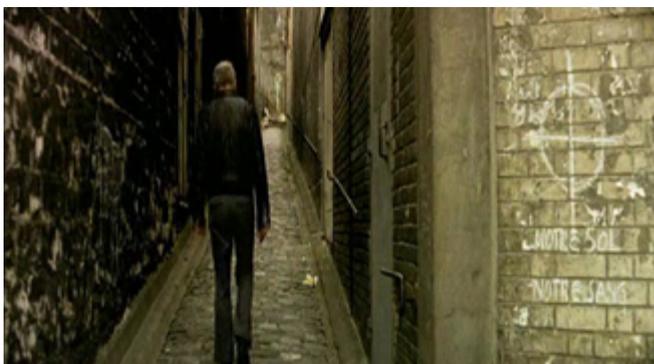


Image 3



ES LA FASCINACIÓN POR LAS IMÁGENES DE UNA VIOLENCIA IRÓNICA, ATRACTIVA Y LÚDICA, ANTE LA QUE EL CINE DE NOÉ SE ERIGE COMO CONTRAPUNTO

course on violence, particularly in European cinema, a critical and partly deconstructive discourse that interrogates what can be done with, in reaction to, and after the violence” (Imbert, 2006: 27).

In simpler terms, this distinction refers to the distance between products like the *Saw* franchise (James Wan, 2004) and other films that aim to address the phenomenon with a critical perspective—although this does not mean they are any less brutal, as was the foundational *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate de Sodoma*, Pasolini, 1975) in its day—reflected in the more controversial works of contemporary filmmakers like Michael Haneke, Lars von Trier, or Gaspar Noé himself.

The particular object of this analysis is thus not the image as a showcase of morbid spectacle, but the signifying and aesthetic discourse that attempts to open up a dialogue about the experience of violence through its cinematic form. In this regard, Vicente Molina-Foix (1995: 164-165) argues that post-modern cinema, faithful to its poetics of excess and its hotchpotch of registers, has inserted extreme violence into a purely aesthetic category, as an ornamental feature with a tendency towards ironic distancing. Although this assertion requires some nuancing, time has proven Molina-Foix correct if we consider how much of the violence in contemporary cinema is hyperbolically aestheticised, emptying it of meaning and transforming it into a choreography as sterile as it is appealing. It is this fascination with images of an ironic, attractive and playful violence that Noé sets his work up in opposition against.

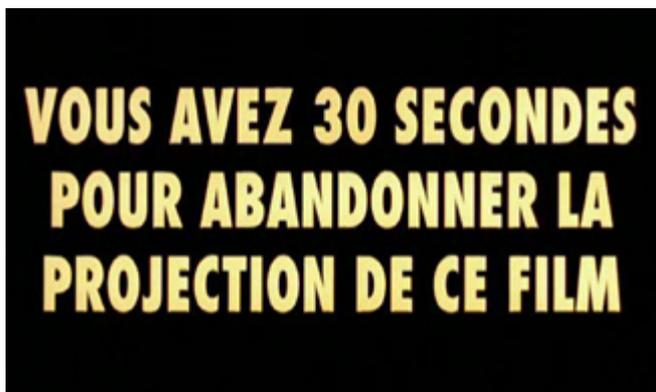
Based on these considerations, the hypothesis to be tested in this article could be described as fo-

llows: that the formal features of *I Stand Alone* are characterised by the activation of mechanisms of sensory and perceptual aggression that articulate a hostile relationship with the spectator. It is a strategy that could be defined as “metaviolent” in the sense that it makes use of the violence of the cinematic form as a discursive exploration of the experience of screen violence itself.

This study attempts to fine-tune this reasoning by means of a methodology based on a textual analysis of Noé’s film. More specifically, the method adopted will draw on the notion of filmic microanalysis proposed by Santos Zunzunegui in his book *La mirada cercana* (1996), which posits and applies the detailed study of certain meticulously selected structures, “small fragments, microsequences that can be observed under the analyst’s microscope, facilitating the study of the basic lines of force that constitute the film they are taken from” (1996: 15). With this in mind, the analysis offered here focuses on the final part of *I Stand Alone* (1h 09’06”–1h 25’35”), as it is this section that offers the most radical expression of the film’s creative approach, bringing together the narrative, aesthetic and discursive features that constitute the very essence of Noé’s formal approach to violence.

THIRTY SECONDS TO LEAVE THE SCREENING

From this perspective, the operation that best exemplifies the film’s approach to violence is without doubt to be found in the transition into the final sequence, when the Butcher’s wanderings in the Parisian suburb have led to defeat and resentment. The three bullets to be used for his revenge have specific targets: himself and his beloved daughter, Cynthia (Blandine Lenoire), who has been living in an asylum since the incident depicted in *Carne*. My microanalysis begins at the point in the film where the Butcher is holed up with his daughter in a squalid room at the Motel L’Avenir, the



Imágenes 4, 5 y 6

same place where the girl was conceived, to close the circle before the final sacrifice. Then, just when the impending horror seems inevitable, the continuity is broken by three intertitles offering an explicit warning message: “CAUTION. YOU HAVE 30 SECOND TO LEAVE THE SCREENING OF THIS FILM. DANGER” (images 4, 5 and 6).

With this unmasking, the film is exposed to the spectator as a mere projected representation, a metadiscursive artifice that is thus associated with many other exponents of cinema of violence

that have taken a clear distance from the suspension of disbelief that sustains the cinematic illusion. One example is the chilling final scene of one of Noé’s favourite films, the aforementioned *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pasolini, 1975), with the *grand puppet show* that ends the series of desecrations with a pictorial reference to Hell as depicted by artists like Bosch. Another example, closer in terms of its metacinematic connotations, is Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997), in the emblematic turning point when Anna manages to snatch a shotgun away from the pair of psychopaths terrorising her family and shoots one of them to death. To prevent the happy ending and the family’s salvation, Haneke has the surviving madman pick up the remote control to a video player and literally rewind the supposed reality we have just watched, thereby making its imaginary nature explicit in a uniquely revealing way.

But while *Funny Games* alienates and frustrates the spectator with this unexpected expulsion from the illusion of reality, *I Stand Alone* posits a necessary relationship of complicity: the countdown starts, offering spectators the chance to stop watching, thereby symbolising the implicit pact that required the spectator’s consent prior to the depiction of extreme violence.

Far from acting as a deterrent, this revealing operation obviously serves as a scopic provocation for a post-modern audience already proven to be “incapable of resisting the spectacle of the forbidden” (Mongin, 1999: 15). This is the territory of the carnival barker, calling us to “come and see” the attraction that will put our courage to the test, as the discourses of film and television horror so often do. It is no mere coincidence that this strategy is an almost identical repetition of one of the greatest carnival barkers of the cinematic spectacle, the director, screenwriter and producer William Castle, whose film *Homicidal* (1961) features a timer superimposed over the closed door that will open onto the final scene of this exploitation film made to cash in on the success of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock,



Imagen 7

1960), while a voice-over goads the spectators during the countdown to the beginning of the scene.

It is the promise of breaking the boundary, watching past the limit even while aware of the danger posed. Thus, when the countdown in *I Stand Alone* is over, whoever has accepted the challenge can watch the much-anticipated conclusion, the spectacle of the forbidden as Mongin calls it, in this case referring to the Butcher's sexual assault and murder of his daughter, and his own suicide. These acts, beyond the limits that gave meaning to the violence in classical cinema, ultimately identify the supposed hero of the story as a monster-executioner who unleashes the horror. It is a trope now firmly established in post-classical discourses, as Gerard Imbert points out: "Horror is no longer associated solely with blood-curdling themes, with its gallery of monstrous characters [...]. It has been incorporated into the everyday world, losing its extraordinary quality and spreading beyond genre cinema [...]. Fascination gives way to terror, a shocked gaze that revels in the spectacle of what cannot be represented and raises the question of limits" (2010: 184).

Thus, given that horror is familiar territory, its appearance as a consequence of the brutal depiction of the events of a story is unsurprising. But the main objective of this study is to identify how the story told becomes a cinematic form dedicated to exhibiting the very essence of the singular aggression operating in Noé's creative approach.



Imagen 8

NOÉ'S CREATIVE APPROACH TO VIOLENCE

A good starting point for the analysis of the formal composition of the violent act is the camera work in the filming of the scene in question. In diametric opposition to Haneke's cold and distanced gaze and his recurring use of sustained shots to signal the inexorably external nature of the expression of the violence depicted, Noé's camera appears to be deliriously attracted to the horror as it unfolds.

After the Butcher suddenly fires the first of his bullets (image 7), the camera moves restlessly around the little room, revelling in the physicality of dying bodies just as Edison's camera had done 100 years earlier with the electrocuted elephant. This is the hypervisibility of the horror identified by Imbert, and viewing it makes the camera tremble, like a visual translation of the shadow of death that has taken over the scene (image 8). In this way, a connection is made between the violence of the content and the formal organisation of the sequence, which, defined by the aggressive treatment of the moving camera and the resulting visual instability, forces the spectator to experience the shock provoked by the narrative violence on a perceptual level.

The soundtrack to this sequence is oriented towards this same objective. First of all, the voice-over that externalises the Butcher's thoughts is definitively disconnected from reality, as his



Imagen 9

monologue is broken up into a disjointed series of statements that overlap, contradict, and turn on one another, with the effect of deconstructing the mental diatribe in which he attempts to justify his deeds. This is the crux of the sequence: the loss of all meaning, the existential collapse that follows the transgression (image 9). The soundtrack expresses this with an overwhelming cacophony that underscores the instability through an accumulation of thoughts, noises and moans that increase the sonic density to the point of rendering its narrative or mimetic subordination impossible.

The noise on both visual and sonic levels is intended to increase the hostility of a cinematic form that is also extended excessively over time as a hallmark of this filmmaker. This technique is also evident in the sequence in *Irreversible* discussed above. The brutal aggression, the main reason for spectators to reject the film due to its tendency toward the pornographic, is realised with a long take that maintains a strict spatiotemporal continuity for just over 13 minutes (41'00"- 54'00"), without a single merciful cut that might omit something superfluous in purely narrative terms.

This approach is a constant in those scenes in Noé's films where the violence is depicted the most radically, as in the scene discussed here, which in a certain way is the scene that establishes it as a

norm in his work. Although the formal solutions differ in each case, the result is always the same: the duration on screen must always exceed commercial standards in order to confront the spectator with the limits of the tolerable. While *Irreversible* is constructed formally on the continuity of the action without external editing, *I Stand Alone* is notable precisely for its excessive use as a means of expression and signification.

The event is scrutinised here in fragmented images, stressing discontinuity through the traditional fet-

ishes of cinematic violence: the blood, the wound, the murder weapon, and the writhing faces and bodies. But the factor that distinguishes Noé from other filmmakers whose analytical abuse of editing tends to increase the narrative rhythm of the spectacle lies in the pacing; specifically, in a repetition of these images that is excessive in terms of narrative economy, wearing out their informative function at the expense of the fluidity of the narration.

One of the scene's most shocking images offers a good example of this: the shot of the daughter on the floor after the first gunshot, when the blood begins to gush out of the open wound in her neck (image 10). This image initially fulfils its function in the development of the causal continuity, but it is then repeated as a kind of leitmotiv, interrupting the natural progress of the action through a deliberately rough treatment of editing cuts and transitions.

The imbalance resulting from this editing strategy, the formal opposite of the transparent continuity demanded by the functional logic of the match cut,¹ exposes the jump between images, once again revealing the filmmaking artifice. The intention here is not, as in the example of *Irreversible*, to capture the event while matching the time of the story to the time of the narration; instead, the priority is discontinuity, breaking the scene

down into expressive units that clash violently in the transitions between shots, abandoning direct spatio-temporal relationships.

This is reflected in the insertion of a series of shots that do not belong to the present of the act being depicted but participate decisively in the sequence through a kind of Eisensteinian cinema-of-attractions editing that juxtaposes the images of violence semantically with certain motifs drawn from other moments in time: the image of dead, filleted meat² (image 11), the sexual act in which the daughter was conceived, and finally, the moment of her birth. Meat, sex, childbirth, life, violence and death are intertwined to express the same impulsive cycle that would later be verbalised in *Irreversible* and its tagline, “*Le temps détruit tout*”, which has since become an axiom of Noé’s filmography.

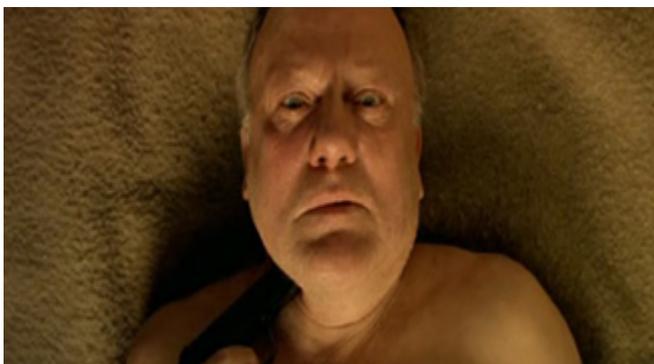
This expressive dimension of the editing contributes to a narrative flow that progresses unevenly in an ascending rhythm towards the devas-



Imagen 10

tating climax of the suicide (image 12), until the analytical deconstruction of the event concludes with the extreme of shots that cut after the minimal unit of a single still frame: a final burst of images indiscernible to the human eye, beginning with the Butcher’s bloodied brain to symbolise the character’s entry into the void of death,³ thus concludes the violent turmoil that has seized control of the creative approach.

Imágenes 11 y 12



THE SPLIT ENDING: THE SEXUAL AND THE PERVERSE

The apparent conclusion is expressed using a long fade to red that engulfs the hyperintensive accumulation of images, resulting in a void, with no further compensation than dead flesh and the sensation of terror. This returns us to one of this article’s initial questions: how Noé distances his film from mere pornographic exploitation to engage in that critical and particularly caustic critique identified by Imbert, where the amplification and/or deconstruction of violence is intended to create productive opportunities for reflection. The key point can be found in the film’s change of direction at the moment when the fade out is revealed in fact to be a slow dissolve that does not constitute the definitive ending that it might at first have seemed to be, but a turning point where the ending is split into two complementary substructures. The linear nature of the narration is



Imagen 13

thus upended as time is turned back to offer the characters a second chance: another ending, the *real one*, where the Butcher finally puts away his gun and hugs his daughter (image 13).

At this point it is worth reconsidering the question raised by Mongin about the possibility of breaking the cycles of violence, as this detour in the Butcher's story seems to associate that possibility with a simple personal choice, apparently as straightforward as replacing the gunshot with a hopeful embrace. However, even in the absence of death, blood or any physical or verbal aggression, the violent form constructed by Noé will soon be shown to be active still in its intimate relationship with the viewer.

Once again, the turning point is marked by an intertitle with a single word blazoned across the screen: "MORAL", an idea that will be interrogated in what follows. After this interruption, the camera moves right in to capture a very specific detail of the bodies locked in embrace, revealing as clearly as possible the Butcher's hand moving up between his daughter's legs (image 14). We thus witness an extraordinarily precise shift, whereby the death drive exhibited in the previous images is replaced with the manifestation of a perverse sexual desire that transforms the bloodstained sensory violence into another equally aggressive form of violence, but one that operates on a strictly ethical level, as a pure signifier.



Imagen 14

The previous instability is now superseded by serenity and balance thanks to the use of frames sustained on the articulation of this second segment. This is also reflected in the minimal editing, limited here to a deliberate, clean and narratively functional transition, and in the soundtrack, as the disturbing cacophony is replaced with a silent calm that progressively fills with the emotive melody of Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major*, redirecting the spectator's sensibility and vesting the images with a powerful sense of redemption. It is, in short, a radical change of formal parameters to conform to the characteristics normally associated with a happy ending, deliberately sidestepping the conclusions arising from the incestuous act.

As stressed above, my aim here is to address the question strictly from a cinematic perspective, and objectively, despite the obvious connotations of sexual abuse present in the situation, Noé seeks to give the scene a formal structure that suggests a positive ending for the characters. But can the spectator leave such ethical connotations aside and positively accept this ending as something satisfying and restorative?

SUBVERSION OF THE SPECTACLE OF VIOLENCE

This study of the treatment of violence in Gaspar Noé's films began with a contextualisation of his

work as part of the extremist trend that emerged in European cinema at the turn of the millennium. Specifically, in chronological terms *I Stand Alone* (1998) and *Irreversible* (2002) belong to the foundation of what Quandt would later classify as the “New French Extremity”, attributed to a group of filmmakers who received a certain degree of media attention in France at this time due to the extremely explicit depiction of violence and/or sex in their films.

The reference to the New French Extremity has been taken here as an initial position that offers more questions than answers, as apart from the supposed aim of transgression that gives the label its meaning, there are obvious thematic, stylistic and discursive differences that distinguish Noé’s work from most of the horror-gore films that would give international attention and generic dominance to the transgressive attitude of this movement, oriented towards pushing at the limits of the narrative and visual codes of the slasher, splatter, torture-porn, body horror and other physical horror subgenres. Films like *High Tension* (*Haute tension*, Alexandre Aja, 2003), *Inside* (*À l’intérieur*, Alexandre Bustillo, Julien Maury, 2007), *Frontière[s]* (Xavier Gens, 2007) and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) were emblematic of the radicalisation of structures previously encoded and exploited by ultra-violent horror in the post-classical era. These films are links in a chain that can be traced back to the defining works of the aforementioned subgenres, which they sought to outdo through the accumulation and exaggeration of the features that make the audiovisual excesses promised to the spectator cinematically and commercially meaningful. This obvious difference from Noé’s work raises the question of which trend the violence in his films really belongs to. With the aim of shedding some light on this question, this study has explored the hypothesis that associates his oeuvre with a reflexive, self-conscious movement in European cinemas of violence. Based on the theoretical framework adopted for this explo-

ration, the initial conclusions drawn from the textual analysis suggest that the discursive function of the excessive depiction of violence in Noé’s *I Stand Alone* owes less to Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) than it does to Pasolini’s *Salò*, which, as Arnau Vilaró (2017: 511-515) points out, is a foundational work for a whole wave of contemporary French cinema that includes Noé, along with Claire Denis, Bertrand Bonello, Catherine Breillat and Jean-Claude Brisseau.

While the codes enacted by Hooper and the filmmakers he influenced among the New French Extremity transform the ferocity of their violence into narrative action articulating a story of survival, the direction taken by Noé pushes beyond generic boundaries to question the cinematic depiction of violence itself, using it as a discursive provocation. Excess, stripped of the pretext of perverse pleasure that underpins the spectacle in the work of Hooper and his disciples, is vested with an attitude of inquiry into the phenomenon that intimately involves the viewer. This simple act of interrogation of personal limits, of what happens during the experience of cinematic violence, is the very metadiscursive mechanism that is ultimately what makes Noé’s work subversive.

In this respect, it is especially noteworthy that Noé does not choose to offer a direct depiction of incestuous sexuality in the final scene analysed here, as do other transgressive films, such as *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*, Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009) and *A Serbian Film* (*Sprski film*, Srđan Spasojević, 2010). In this case, the consummation is only signified through a meticulous strategy of ellipsis that also contradicts the hypervisibility of sexual content also characteristic of Noé’s work.⁴ The elision makes the clash between the two structures even more obvious: on the one hand, the excess of physical violence; and on the other, the chaste invisibility of the act that represents that other violence, not shown but merely signified in the final and definitive act of cruelty that the filmmaker perpetrates against the spectator.

**NOÉ SOBREPASA LA CONTENCIÓN
GENÉRICA PARA CUESTIONAR LA PROPIA
REPRESENTACIÓN CINEMATOGRÁFICA,
INSTRUMENTALIZÁNDOLA COMO
PROVOCACIÓN DISCURSIVA**

The above is an apt description because it is effectively an assault on spectators who up to this moment have been protected by the “symbolic prosthesis” of the cinematic device (Bettetini, 1996), where, according to the psychoanalytic notion of identification (Baudry, 1978; Metz, 1979), they could participate on an illusory and emotional level in the fictional conflict with no danger to themselves, from the safety of their seats. While the classical model sought somehow to ensure that this conflict would be experienced virtually, presenting the characters’ battles and heroic acts that engage the spectator with the story, the post-modern approach disrupts these mechanisms of affective identification, replacing heroism with brutality. On this basis, adapting an idea posited by André Bazin (1977: 12), it could be argued that this new cinema of cruelty represented by Gaspar Noé, Michael Haneke, and Lars von Trier—to cite some of the more recognisable names—has been characterised by going further than exploring the problem of fitting a *negative* character into the identification process, or taking the depiction of violence to the extreme in its narrative development. If it were limited to this, the result would be the same as that of the functional violence of genre films, offering no more than the kind of ghost-train spectacle where the visitor experiences the simulation while knowing that in reality there is no danger. Even when that simulation is taken to the limit, as in the case of

the New French Extremity and other examples of post-modern hyperbole, the symbolic protection, although undermined, is never really threatened because the distance needed for the experience to be transformed into a pleasurable spectacle is still maintained.

Conversely, in Noé’s films, as in the most radical variation of the cinemas of violence, this pleasure is absent from the equation. In its place we find the shocking notion of a universe driven on cruel impulses, a kind of heir to the principles laid down by Bazinian theory. It is a universe which, as foreseen by Erich Von Stroheim and Luis Buñuel (two foundational examples from Bazin’s perspective), is utterly dominated by the impulse-image (Deleuze, 2003: 179-192), whose relentless force is stressed in a way that interweaves it with the discomfort (of either perception or signification) elicited by the cinematic experience.

However, it is important to stress once again that the radical existentialism of its narratives is not what differentiates Noé’s work, even when it achieves its maximum level of formal aggression. The key is the enunciative mark around which the film itself turns, challenging spectator-consumers with an inquisitive metadiscursive questioning of their limits and expectations. In this way, any possibility of spectacle is upended by a critical

Imagen 15



shift towards a space where the screen becomes a mirror reflecting the relationship between our gaze and the artificial experience of the violence we are consuming (image 15).

CONCLUSION

In keeping with the parameters outlined by theorists and historians of cinematic violence such as Olivier Mongin, Gérard Imbert, Stephen Prince, Lauro Zavala and others cited here, the results of this analysis confirm the strategy of subversion in a cinematic context associated with a post-modern gaze that has become desensitised by the transgression and subsequent commercial consolidation of extreme violence since the 1960s. This shift in public attitudes towards screen violence serves as the foundation for the unique formal and signifying system analysed here, which is especially notable for its reaction against aesthetic and narrative sugar-coating of violence, its rejection of the horror genre's guarantee of safe passage, and its exploration of territory where viewing a violent film is conceived of as a violent experience in itself.

The metaviolent nature of Noé's work needs to be defined on the basis of its use and abuse of the resources of cinematic language, which involves the aggressiveness not only of the narrative but also of the formal features that determine its system of aesthetics and signification. As shown in this article, the thematic or narrative violence is thus superseded by a formal violence expressed in the structural and aesthetic parameters resulting from framing strategies, camera movements, editing and soundtrack, to construct a whole in which existentialist cruelty is interwoven with the hypervisibility consolidated by the ultra-violent tendencies of contemporary cinema.

This can be demonstrated by meticulous comparative analysis of the microstructure studied here, which reflects the levels of violence that structure the film and constructs a poetics which,

although with variations, would come to define Noé's filmography in the following years. It is a poetics associated with a metadiscourse on the signification of violence activated by an educated gaze, as a sign of the times in the age of cinemas of excess and exhibitionism. ■

NOTES

- 1 "Match cut" is used here generally to refer to effective transitioning between images that eliminates or at least conceals the inherent discontinuity resulting from film editing.
- 2 This is a clear allusion to both his job as a butcher and the visual connection with the slaughter of the horse in the opening scene to *Carne*.
- 3 This foreshadows some of Noé's future thematic interests that would later be consolidated in *Enter the Void* (2009)
- 4 Evidence of this can be found in the treatment of sexuality in *Irreversible*, in *Love* (2014), and even in *I Stand Alone* itself, which features images from a real porn film in the scene where the protagonist enters an X-rated movie theatre.

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FROM NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY TO THE SUBVERSION OF SCREEN VIOLENCE: AESTHETICS AND DISCOURSE IN GASPAR NOÉ'S *I STAND ALONE*

Abstract

This article explores the discursive and aesthetic aspects of the depiction of violence in the controversial filmography of Gaspar Noé. The main object of study is his first film, *I Stand Alone* (Seul contre tous, 1998), understood here as the true foundation of his creative approach, before *Irreversible* (2002) received international recognition and prompted critics to include him in the so-called "New French Extremity" movement. Drawing on Santos Zunzunegui's concept of "filmic microanalysis", this article examines Noé's aggressive formal approach with the aim of identifying his unique way of subverting the traditional cinematic spectacle enshrined in the binary of sex and violence, as well as the relationship it establishes with the spectator, who is a necessary accomplice in the hypervisibility of extreme violence that has characterised the evolution of contemporary cinema.

Key words

Gaspar Noé; Violence; European cinema, New French Extremity; Metadiscourse; Spectator.

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DEL NUEVO EXTREMISMO FRANCÉS A LA SUBVERSIÓN DEL ESPECTÁCULO DE LA VIOLENCIA: ESTÉTICA Y DISCURSO EN SOLO CONTRA TODOS DE GASPAR NOÉ

Resumen

El presente artículo pone el foco de atención en los aspectos discursivos y estéticos de la representación de la violencia en la controvertida cinematografía de Gaspar Noé, tomando como principal objeto de estudio su primer film, *Solo contra todos* (Seul contre tous, 1998), entendido aquí como el verdadero punto de ignición, antes del reconocimiento internacional por *Irreversible* (2002) y su inclusión por parte de la crítica en el llamado «Nuevo extremismo francés». En línea con la noción de microanálisis fílmico de Santos Zunzunegui, este trabajo abordará la agresiva propuesta formal de Noé con el objetivo de identificar las claves de su particular ejercicio de subversión del tradicional espectáculo cinematográfico dedicado al binomio de sexo y violencia, así como la relación que esta establece con el espectador, cómplice necesario en el proceso hipertrófico que ha caracterizado la evolución de la ultraviolencia en el cine contemporáneo.

Palabras clave

Gaspar Noé; Violencia; Cine europeo; Nuevo extremismo francés; Metadiscursos; Espectador.

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FROM UNFAITHFUL ADAPTATION TO TRANSMEDIA EXPANSION: NOTES FOR A DEBATE ABOUT CINEMATOGRAPHIC (PER)VERSIONS

FRAN MATEU

INTRODUCTION: ADAPTATION AS A STARTING POINT

Although film adaptation is a medium *for* memory, it is also a medium *of* memory because it is the memory of a previous work (Richard, 2021: 162). Through this process, by means of successive transformations to its structure, narrative content and representation in images, a story becomes another, similar story expressed in the form of a filmic text (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 47). Art, however, has always been reproduced or imitated, and the practice has been a technical activity since the production of the first woodcuts (Benjamin, 2003: 39). Such reproduction or imitation includes the process of film adaptation, a field explored by McFarlane (1996: 22) with the aim of identifying what can be transferred to the screen and what key factors, apart from the original work, influence the adaptation.

The process of adaptation is conceived of as an intersemiotic translation, where an interpretation takes place between signs of different semiotic systems. Based on this premise, Jakobson (1959: 233) proposes three possible types of translation. The first is intralingual translation, referring to the interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. Interlingual translation is “translation proper”, i.e., an interpretation of verbal signs using the signs of another language. Finally, intersemiotic translation involves the transmutation or interpretation of verbal signs using the signs of a non-verbal system. Consequently, the process of film adaptation would be placed in this third category.

Adaptation and translation, however, raise questions of fidelity (Frago Pérez, 2005: 66-69). Similarly, interpretation, as a mechanism inherent in any translation process, may be defined various ways due to the potential ambiguity of Jakobson’s classification. Eco (2016) stresses this idea, arguing

that Jakobson does not consider the transmutations between systems that are not verbal. And this classification poses another ambiguity: if all three types of translation are interpretations, they are three types of interpretation, and therefore, translation is a species within the genre of interpretation (Eco, 2016: 805).

Zavala (2009: 49) adds the category of intrasemiotic translation, which involves the adoption of the strategies of intertextuality (quotation, allusion, parody, etc.) in relation to texts (literary, visual, etc.) that refer to other texts. Genette (1989: 10) includes this category in the first group of his transtextual relationships. Moreover, Genette (1989: 14) defines hypertextuality as the relationship that links a text B (hypertext) to a previous text A (hypotext). This type of transformation may be simple or indirect (based on imitation or association), which Genette exemplifies with *Ulysses* and *The Aeneid*, two hypertexts of the hypotext *The Odyssey*. In the case of *Ulysses*, the transformation is direct, transposing the action of Homer's work to the city of Dublin in Joyce's time. However, *The Aeneid* involves a more indirect transformation, since the story is different but formally and thematically inspired by *The Odyssey*, imitating it and producing a mimesis where the imitated text and the imitating text establish a more complex transformation than that of a direct transposition (Genette, 1989: 15-17).

The above example is a transformation within the same medium (literary, of an *intramedial* quality), but hypertextuality can also apply to a process of adaptation between media, involving a case of *intermediality*, which Bolter and Grusin (1999: 21)

IT IS COMMON TO HEAR EXPRESSIONS SUCH AS "THE BOOK IS BETTER THAN THE FILM" IN DISCUSSIONS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEDIA, TIMEFRAMES AND NARRATIVE MECHANISMS

define as *remediation*. This process operates within the cultural parameters of immediacy, hypermediacy, hypertextuality and digital technology. Adaptation can therefore be divided between intramedial and intermedial operations, since not all adaptation is necessarily a remediation (Hutcheon, 2006: 170).

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AS AN EXPANSION PROCESS

When Peter Bogdanovich (1997: 100-101) asked John Ford whether he found it difficult to get good scripts, he replied that there was no such thing as a good script, since they usually overused dialogue and he tried to express himself visually. He also added that he preferred to take a story and *expand* it, rather than condense a novel. Ford's answer highlights the complexity of adapting one language to another, as well as the preeminence of visual expression and the modification of temporal relationships in the cinematic medium (Bordwell, 1985: 82). Indeed, it is common to hear expressions such as "the book is better than the film" in discussions of differences between media, timeframes and narrative mechanisms.

As a precursor to the study of this distinction, Bluestone (1957: 61-62) points out that there is no need to compare a literary work to a film since the literary material should only serve as inspiration for the construction of something new. Along the same lines, Stam (2005) notes that film adaptations are subject to accusatory assessments related to their fidelity to the original work (lacking creativity) and their free recreation of the source material (betraying it). This phenomenon occurs because readers create a plethora of images in their minds to support the ideas in the book and to give them life, leading them to affirm that reading the novel has given them a more enriching experience than the film (Moya Santoyo & Mantecón Martín, 2007: 158), which in turn gives rise to the creation of a hierarchy of prestige that unfair-

ly places one medium above the other (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 48).

In many cases, however, a film adaptation may be on a par with the original work and even surpass it (Cascajosa Virino, 2006: 15). Moreover, the differences between literature and cinema are so numerous that Luhr (1977: 174) argues that they render an ontological comparison impossible; McFarlane (1983: 11) goes so far as to suggest that we should be surprised by the fact that films based on novels even exist. Returning to John Ford, it is worth highlighting his preference for *expanding* a story instead of condensing it so that all the elements he considers necessary from the original work find a place in the film, in addition to all those *infidelities* that the *new author* deems appropriate for his film version to work ontologically. This idea of expansion is also close to the ecosystem of transmedia narratives.

Kinder (1991: 40) first used the term *transmedia* to describe the multiplatform and multimodal expansion of media content. Jenkins (2006: 95-96) defined transmedia storytelling as a process where the elements that make up a narrative expand horizontally and systematically across multiple media (digital and traditional), providing users with a unique entertainment experience where each platform ideally contributes to the development of the story by making best use of its intrinsic characteristics (doing what it does best).

In addition, users participate in this expansion by consuming and creating content (UGC or user generated content) as prosumers (Jenkins, 2006: 166).

Pratten (2011: 1-2) echoes Jenkins’s view that transmedia storytelling consists of telling a story via multiple media and, preferably, with a degree of audience participation, and that the enjoyment of all the media involved must be greater than the sum of their parts. Each medium therefore interacts with the rest while at the same time being capable of standing on its own, allowing users the option of deciding how far into the experience they want to go (Weaver, 2013: 8). Thus, while adaptation theory forms part of a general theory of repetition (Naremore, 2000: 15), transmedia narratives do not tell the same story across different media and platforms but allow the horizontal expansion of the macro-narrative design of an initial work, which Jenkins (2009a) calls the “mother ship”.

This expansion may be strategic, resulting from careful planning, or tactical, which is dictated by the favourable conditions of the media ecosystem reacting to environmental inputs (Scolari, 2014: 74). Examples include the expansion of franchises such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski Sisters, 1999) (strategic) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) (tactical): in both cases, the story is disseminated via different media and platforms, and a more

Image 1. Transmedia expansion of *Resident Evil* franchise. © Capcom & Constantin Films



enriching narrative experience can be achieved by consuming all of them (video games, movies, short films, comics, etc.). Similarly, a transmedia expansion, whether strategic or tactical, can be initiated on any medium: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001) expanded from literature, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) from film, *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004-2010) from television, *Batman* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1966) from comic books, *Pokemon Red Edition and Blue Edition* (Game Freak, 1999) from video games, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (Gary Goddard, 1987) from toys, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Gore Verbinski, 2003) from a theme park, etc. However, strategic expansion, which has been reinforced since the beginning of the global pandemic in 2020, is becoming increasingly common, with content that from the outset is designed, produced and distributed via different media and platforms (Arana Arrieta, 2021).

ADAPTATIONS VS. TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVES

What is the place of adaptations in the context of transmedia narratives, in the sense of expanding the story along with user participation? Jenkins (2011) points out that adaptations, however faithful they may be, always result in changes to character profiles, with new scenarios or situations. New modes of storytelling would therefore require a redefinition of the concept of *adaptation* in cultural studies (Jenkins, 2006: 296). Similarly, although for Jenkins (2011) adaptations form part

BEFORE THE CONSOLIDATION OF TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING, IT WAS COMMON TO VIEW EXPANSION AS A NATURAL PART OF ADAPTATION ITSELF

of transmediality, he also suggests a distinction between *adaptation* and *extension*. While adaptation tells the same story in a different medium, extension adds some new element to the adaptation, but the two processes are inseparable.

It is important to differentiate a simple adaptation that contributes nothing new from the more common adaptations, which usually involve modifications to the original work. Although for Jenkins the second case would not constitute a transmedia phenomenon, there would be a certain degree of transmediality due to the additive or expansive quality that may alter the adaptation to a greater or lesser extent (Jenkins, 2009b). However, Dena (2009) makes a more radical distinction between *adaptation* and *expansion*. According to this author, in addition to the fact that adaptation is never redundant in terms of content, transmediality is not dependent on expansion alone, but on the knowledge and skills necessary to develop a transmedia project. However, before the consolidation of transmedia storytelling, it was common to view expansion as a natural part of adaptation itself. Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis (1999: 238-239), for example, suggested that film adaptations were hypertexts derived from hypotexts that had been transformed through processes of selection, specification, updating and amplification.

Similarly, the fourth of the transmedia principles proposed by Gomez (2007) states that content is unique, adhering to the specific strengths of each platform, and that it is never reused between platforms, which would mean that adaptations do not form part of transmedia storytelling. Aarseth (2006) places adaptation at the core of any franchise, with the qualification that perhaps the term has simply become obsolete. On the other hand, Long (2007: 22) argues that retelling a story in a different medium is an adaptation, while using different media to create a single story is transmedia storytelling, opening up the possibility of user participation. Although this distinction is found

ded on the premise that each medium does what it does best (Jenkins, 2006: 95-96), Long (2007) acknowledges that adaptations are never identical to the original work.

Adding to these various diverging perspectives, Fernando, Vázquez & Salinas (2013: 152) argue that when a work expands it tends to initiate a transmedia system or a *crossmedia* system, although in the second case, rather than an expansion it would be closer to the idea of adaptation in terms of telling the same story. On this point, Renó (2013: 151) points out that *crossmedia* refers to the repetition of the same message, which is adapted to different media, while *transmedia* storytelling produces different messages for different media. However, Piñeiro & Costa (2013: 927) suggest that in *crossmedia*, each medium provides specific information for the construction of the unified story, but the recipient must consume the whole to understand it.

On the other hand, Mittell (2009) believes that transmediality has more to do with deepening than with horizontal expansion, as it should offer fans the ability to delve further into the narrative. The *forensic engagement* of fandom, although it may sometimes involve relatively small communities, encourages them to go deeper into the stories, which may often embrace this verticality, with a focus on deepening the text rather than on spreading it outward. This idea, however, does not imply a hierarchical relationship with Jenkins' horizontal expansion; instead, it constitutes a complementary model (Mittell, 2009).

Regarding the adaptation process, Mittell (2017) also notes that there are techniques that work better in some media than in others. For example, the first-person point of view (POV) produces a different effect when reading the thoughts of a character in a novel, compared to representing them visually in a film, while the user interactivity offered by video games is a facet of storytelling that cannot be transferred directly to television or comics. It is therefore important to be

aware of the possibilities and limitations of each medium (Mittell, 2017: 7-8). This is an approach that emphasises the individual nature of each medium in order to tell the story as effectively as possible, i.e., maximising the potential of each one (Jenkins, 2006: 95-96).

THE CASES OF TINTIN AND READY PLAYER ONE

Scolari (2011) argues that transmedia narratives go beyond the adaptation process as intersemiotic translation, especially in view of the idea of expanding without reusing content. However, he also argues that adaptations should be included in the category of transmedia narratives. An example of this process can be found in *The Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011). Theoretically, this film could be considered an adaptation of a comic book, but the adaptation is in fact based on three Hergé comics: *The Crab with the Golden Claws* (1940), *The Secret of the Unicorn* (1943) and *Red Rackham's Treasure* (1943). In other words, a single story was developed out of three comics, giving rise to transformations in the narrative structure. According to Scolari (2011), there are also transformations at the actantial level. For example, Sakharine is a character depicted in the comics as a harmless antiquarian, while in the film he becomes the main antagonist. In addition, the opera singer Bianca Castafiore, featured in other *Tintin* comics but absent from the three mentioned above, nevertheless appears in the film.

The Adventures of Tintin could be classified as a free adaptation of pre-existing content (Genettian hypotexts), but there is also an expansion, since the film develops new situations that do not appear in the comics, such as the fight between the two cranes or the dizzying motorcycle chase sequence, and certain characters are given different roles, while some supporting characters absent from Hergé's comics are added, such as Mr. Hobbs. Although the film might be a relative fai-



Image 2. Sakharine in the comic book and the film adaptation. © Editorial Juventud & Sony Pictures Entertainment

ture in the transposition of the form and aesthetics of the Belgian cartoonist's comics, its spirit of mainstream family adventure appeals to a transnational audience, thereby extending Hergé's legacy (Revert Gomis, 2013: 25).

With *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018), the same director embarked on another adaptation, this time of the novel of the same name by Ernest Cline, who also wrote the screenplay together with Zak Penn. The participation of Cline in the adaptation of his own novel might be expected to ensure greater fidelity to the original, but this is another case where the film version goes its own way. Both plots depict the virtual world of the OASIS and are structured around a series of challenges (reduced to three in the film) in which the characters must obtain a set of keys in order to inherit James Halliday's legacy. However, while Cline devotes almost the first third of his novel to depicting the depressing situation of the real world in the future it portrays, Spielberg opts to enter the virtual world right from the start, only showing the real world very briefly at the beginning of his film.

This results in the amusement and visual spectacle offered by the OASIS dominating the film version, as well as the temporal condensation of the first part of the story. In addition to this condensation, the narrative is also actantially altered. In the novel, for example, the challenge to get the

copper key takes place on the planet Ludus, where the characters must go to the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* and then face the sorcerer Acererak in a game of *Joust* (John Newcomer, 1982), one of the first two-player cooperative video games (Wolf, 2008: 94). In the film, Spielberg replaces this challenge with a frenetic car race through the streets of a virtual Manhattan peppered with all kinds of pop culture references. Evidently, having two characters playing an old video game unfamiliar to most of the audience and with a relatively static mise-en-scène would have been out of keeping with the fast-paced action and visual spectacle offered by this film adaptation.

In later challenges of the novel, the characters appear in the settings for the films *War Games* (John Badham, 1983) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam & Terry Jones, 1975), where they are required to recreate some of these films' scenes and dialogues. In the film, Spielberg replaces these films with *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), a horror classic familiar to most audiences (whether film buffs or not), and that fits diegetically in the plot due to the well-known fact that it is a film adaptation that greatly displeased Stephen King, author of the original work. King's dislike of Kubrick's adaptation is the key that allows the characters to get into the virtual Overlook Hotel, recreated down to the smallest detail, where they must face a series of grotesque



Image 3. Video game *Joust* and its replacement with the race in the film adaptation of *Ready Player One*. © Williams Electronics & Warner Bros

and frantic situations that do not occur in Cline's book, while also allowing them to explore their internal conflicts. Another example can be found in the case of the main character, Wade Owen Watts (whose avatar goes by the pseudonym of Parzival in the OASIS), who discovers the whereabouts of the copper key in the film, while in the novel it is Art3mis who makes this discovery. On the other hand, Wade is the one who transforms into Ultraman in the final battle of the novel, while in the film it is Daito, who in the novel is killed halfway through the story. There are many other changes that result in the novel and its film version taking different routes to tell what is essentially the same story, to which end Spielberg, as he

did in his adaptation of Hergé's comics, resorts to aesthetic spectacle, frenetic action and the transnationalisation of the audience.

The two cases discussed above are film adaptations on the mainstream circuit that each explicitly exhibit transmediality. Although they are direct transpositions (Genette, 1989), both films depict a multitude of different situations that give greater depth to the story and its characters (Long, 2007; Mittell, 2009), contributing an additive or expansive quality (Jenkins, 2009a) without constantly reusing content (Gomez, 2007; Dena, 2009). Adaptations should therefore be included in the category of transmedia narratives, covering both strategic and tactical transmediality. In this sense,

Image 4. Frames from the challenge involving *The Shining* in the film adaptation of *Ready Player One*, absent from the novel. © Warner Bros



if we establish an excessively restrictive vision of transmedia storytelling, important elements of a narrative universe may be left out, since even the most linear adaptation may include a new perspective on a character or element that can enrich and expand the story (Jenkins, 2009a; Scolari, 2011), as is the case in the two examples outlined above.

CONCLUSION: DIVERSIFICATION AND TERMINOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY

Tintin and *Ready Player One* are two paradigmatic examples of the adaptation, and consequent expansion, of narrative universes to the cinema screen. The adaptation process has also been the subject of a terminological variety that renders the task of making clear distinctions increasingly complicated. Different degrees of proximity to the original work are thus classified using expressions such as translation, adaptation, version, recreation, rewriting, recomposition, transliteration, transposition, remake, reboot, refraction, relocation, transplantation, tradaptation, free adaptation, retranslation, etc., as well as pejorative terms such as copy, manipulation, plagiarism, betrayal, perversion or infidelity. This reflects a lack of clear boundaries, with a terminological maelstrom, as Braga Riera (2011: 61-63) points out, resulting from diverse individual understandings of different terms, and where adaptation is not a functionalist conception of close imitation that faithfully reflects the structure, content or dialogue of an original text.

In conclusion, the lack of consensus makes interpreting the categories of different adaptation and transmediality processes an arduous task. On this ambiguity, Kinder (2021: 3) considers that in the current transmedia and postmedia era we might also question whether it is still productive to speak of specific media or platforms, since they get replaced so quickly that there is hardly time to fully explore their social and aesthetic potential. A future scenario is therefore emerging in which

debates about adaptations or transmedia narratives may become meaningless due to their collateral omnipresence, and we will have to face new post-transmedia challenges: What characteristics will make it possible in the future to distinguish a truly original work from an adapted one? Will it be possible to differentiate a film version from a video game version? How will present and future content be affected by the arrival of new media, platforms, interfaces, etc.? In this fast-approaching future post-media landscape, will it make sense to keep talking about adaptations and transmedia narratives? ■

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FROM UNFAITHFUL ADAPTATION TO TRANSMEDIA EXPANSION: NOTES FOR A DEBATE ABOUT CINEMATOGRAPHIC (PER)VERSIONS

Abstract

Film adaptation is conceived of as an intersemiotic translation in which there is an interpretation between signs of different semiotic systems. This process gives rise to different points of view on whether an adaptation can expand or compress the story it adapts, or whether it should be faithful to its source. If a film adaptation omits certain characters in a novel, panels in a comic strip or levels of a video game, could it really be called an adaptation of that work? If new situations or characters are also added in the adapted work, could it still be described as an adaptation? Considering these questions, this article examines some of the main ideas about film adaptation and its relationship with transmedia storytelling, which is associated with the notion of expanding the story. The differences between the two processes, although obvious, are also often obscured by a certain porosity of borders, giving rise to constant debate. This study adopts a methodology of historical-bibliographic review with a theoretical framework based on the perspectives of different authors, in addition to a brief consideration of the mainstream cases of *Tintin* and *Ready Player One*.

Key words

Adaptation; Transmedia Storytelling; Literature; Cinema; Tintin; Ready Player One.

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DE LA ADAPTACIÓN INFIEL A LA EXPANSIÓN TRANSMEDIA: APUNTES PARA UN DEBATE SOBRE (PER)VERSIONES CINEMATOGRÁFICAS

Resumen

La adaptación cinematográfica se concibe como una traducción intersemiótica en la que existe una interpretación entre signos de distintos sistemas semióticos. Este proceso pone de relieve diferentes puntos de vista respecto a si una adaptación puede expandir o comprimir la historia que adapta, o si debe ser fiel a su fuente. En el caso de que las adaptaciones cinematográficas omitan ciertos personajes de una novela, determinadas viñetas de un cómic o los niveles de un videojuego, ¿estaríamos realmente adaptando esa obra *stricto sensu*? Si, además, añadimos nuevas situaciones o personajes en la obra adaptada, ¿también se podría concebir como una adaptación? Bajo estos aspectos, este artículo examina algunas de las ideas principales en torno a la adaptación cinematográfica y su relación con las narrativas transmedia, que se circunscriben alrededor de la idea de expandir la narración. Las diferencias entre ambos procesos, aunque evidentes, también suelen hallarse permeadas por cierta porosidad entre sus fronteras, lo cual genera un continuo debate. Para ello, se emplea una metodología de revisión histórico-bibliográfica mediante la aportación de un marco teórico en el que se plasman las posturas de diferentes autores, además de citar brevemente los casos *mainstream* de *Tintín* y *Ready Player One*.

Palabras clave

Adaptación; narrativas transmedia; literatura; cine; Tintín; Ready Player One.

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