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# Television Art, Ubiquity and Immersion A Dialogue of Translation with Joseph Nechvatal

Yves Citton

In his extremely suggestive essay entitled “Towards an Immersive Intelligence”, artist and theorist Joseph Nechvatal defines immersive virtual reality art as “an art that has a continuous, coherent quality and strives to ambiently include everything of perceptual worth within its domain in an overall, enveloping totality that is concerted and without an evident frame or border”<sup>1</sup>. Television, on the face of it, is *not* a medium capable of providing any form of sensory immersion: compared to the Imax or to a trip through virtual reality goggles, its screen (even in its “giant” sizes) remains ridiculously small. More importantly, whereas immersion requires the intense capture of our full attention in the enveloping totality it artificially creates, our viewing of television is generally distracted and superficial.

Immersion, however, can be understood in a rather different manner: even if TV screens are tiny, and getting tinier as we will increasingly watch programs on our I-phones and I-pads, the TV of the future will be *everywhere* (or *everyware*, as Adam Greenfield puts it<sup>2</sup>). It may therefore be an exciting challenge—for theorists, but mostly for artists—to *translate* Nechvatal’s analysis, from sensory immersion through virtual reality devices, towards *communicational immersion through ubiquitous TV*. The following pages propose a (fictional) dialogue between Nechvatal’s quotes and an impersonal rhetorical procedure which attempts to translate his theorization of the *viractua*<sup>3</sup> into possible ways for artists to experiment with ubiquitous TV.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nechvatal, *Towards an Immersive Intelligence. Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality (1993-2006)*, New York, Edgewise, 2009, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Greenfield, *Everyware. The Dawning Age of Ubiquitous Computing*, Berkeley, New Riders, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Nechvatal defines the *viractua* as “the merging of the virtual with the corporeal (the actual)” (op. cit., p. 86). All further quotes by Nechvatal (heavily re-edited) come from pages 27-38 and 81-88 of his book.

**Joseph Nechvatal** – The entire benefit of addressing the ideal inherent in immersive omni-perception consists in the attempt to adhere to an exciting, transmissible hyper-state that exceeds, transcends and overwhelms our former territory. This transmissible hyper-state is only probable when the two fundamental grades of immersive sensibility, which I distinguish as cocooning and expanding, are in dialectical cooperation.

**Ubiquitranslator** – As television multiplies its specialized channels, as people can download millions of bits of reality captured by digital cameras and made accessible through YouTube, the tiny screens we carry around everywhere do provide us with a machinery of omni-perception. Of course, we can *not* watch all these millions of available programs. This omni-perception remains purely “virtual”: a potential which can never be actualized. My feeling, however, is that it does nevertheless create very strong *feeling of excess*. By the very possibility of watching all these programs we cannot actually watch, we are put in an exciting (and frustrating) *hyper-state* which, indeed, “exceeds, transcends and overwhelms” our subjectivity. From this point of view, the overwhelming nature of television may be reaching a crossroad. Greenfield’s *everyware* does provide us some form of “cocoon”. As it is increasingly easy to “see things that are far from us” (accomplishing the etymology of *tele-vision*), my level of protection and comfort increases: my garden’s surveillance camera can show me that the flowers need water, and I can activate the sprinkler from afar before everything dries up. As my bourgeois life is more efficiently cocooned, however, it also feels increasingly threatened by all the worrying things I can see fermenting all over the world, on the many (outer and inner) borders of my cocoon. Here too, the expansion of my visual and informational field is in a dialectical opposition-cooperation with my need of cocooning, even if, so far, *everyware*’s cocooning gadgets seem to trail far behind the overwhelming anxieties provided by TV’s images.

**Joseph Nechvatal** – In the sensory experience of immersion, when these two directions of sensibility—cocooning and expanding—connect and cooperate within a vast, synthetic, aesthetic, immersive topophilia, we sense that our being becomes subliminal. It is this sense of latent excess within immensity that draws the eye and mind in, and conceptually sublimates our being in the construction of an ontological state of hyper-being.

**Ubiquitranslator** – How could artists attempt to reproduce this “subliminal” experience on the basis of the features provided by ubiquitous TV? I believe this sense of *latent excess* describes very precisely our relation to the overload of ubiquitous information, which is both “excessive” and “latent”, since our access to it is only potential (we will never be able *to see* what we are promised to view). I am very much intrigued by the type of “hyper-being” which rises on the horizon of ubiquitous TV. Can you define it more precisely, insofar as sensory immersion is concerned?

**Joseph Nechvatal** – Total immersion challenges distinctive ontological beliefs about the limits of the self. In virtual immersion, conventional optic models may be surpassed. Immersed in a virtual reality simulation, we can “exchange eyes” with another person and see ourselves and the world from their vantage point or, in fact, see ourselves from any

vantage point. With aesthetic immersion's appetite to surpass visual confinements, the human subject is ready to escape and exceed previous limits and take a step towards the infinity implied in our expanding aoristic universe. The immersive, synthetic art model offers an alternative visual regime of and for the self-programming psyche in that mental-visual range is extended (via latent excess) and is counteractive to ontological foreclosure. In total immersion, self-programmable thought takes over the space around the constructed self and the meta-programming ego expands to fill the vastness of immersive excess by transference.

**Ubiquitranslator** – In other words, contrary to common views which lead us to believe that being immersed into something implies that one is controlled, manipulated, blinded, fooled by what immerses us, your analysis suggests that immersion may allow us to gain some distance and claim some control over what we are immersed in. In find this insight extremely striking. It helps us figure out our relation to television: we all know that we are quite literally—"programmed" to see this rather than that. In spite of all its shortcomings, TV did help us to "exchange eyes" with other people and see ourselves from different vantage points. The urge to "be on TV", even if it is in the most debasing circumstances as in many Reality Shows, also illustrates this appetite to see ourselves from the other person's vantage point. Our immersion in ubiquitous TV does contribute very powerfully to generate an appetite to surpass confinements, as many sociologists tell us when they try and understand what pushes migrants to leave their native place in hope of a better life. The appeal of Western TV may rest on an extremely "glamorous" (rather than latent) excess, but it does work as a force which makes people ready to escape and exceed previous limits. Now, what I find really counterintuitive is that this "counteractive force to ontological (and geopolitical) foreclosure" puts viewers in a position to *meta-program* what they are immersed in. It makes a lot of sense, though: not only do we know, when we watch TV, that we are "programmed", but the very ubiquity of television, as it multiplies our vantage points, may allow us to meta-program what programs us. In fact, on a geopolitical level, we could interpret migrating flows towards rich Western countries as a way to meta-program Hollywood's original program, which was to have the whole world admire the US, buy its products, but *stay home*... Migration itself, in such cases, could be an example of meta-programming what programs our behaviour—with the building of walls and the sealing of borders as a consequence of such meta-programming. Of course, your analysis is set on another, ontological, level. Here too, though, our immersion in a world permeated thru and thru by TV does tend to detach us from our original identity. In Spinozist terms, it does push us to experience ourselves as "modes"—with the French connotation of *à la mode*, referring to trends and fashions—rather than as "substances".

**Joseph Nechvatal** – In situations of immersion, the ontological self ceases to think of itself as a substance or thing, and instead perceives itself as a continuously changing process of virtual-actual events in search of ever more well-being. The important apex of this process of immersion is not that of disembodiment, but rather that of disembodiment's generation of a hyper-embodiment where self-referential conscious and unconscious self-perceptions become extended, enhanced, and connected through passion.

**Ubiquitranslator** – Applied to ubiquitous TV, this contains the nutshell of a major artistic program for the years ahead. How does TV disembody us? How does its increasing ubiquity, in miniature and portable forms, disembody TV itself from its traditional presence in the living room or in the bedroom? How does that exacerbate our perception of being carried in a continuously changing process of virtual-actual events in search of ever more well-being? More exciting even: what kinds of hyper-embodiment can we imagine on the horizon of this increasing ubiquity? And finally: on what kind of "passions" can we start to build up such hyper-embodiment? So far it seems that envy, lust, fear and pity are the main affects mobilized by TV as we know it, generating (or at least fuelling) along the way the hyper-embodiment of the capitalist economy, the global porn industry, the anti-terrorist crusades and the humanitarian network of new missionaries. The question is: how can artistic interventions empower other types of affects? Behind all these questions, raised by your insights, one feels the need to analyse more in depth, and more concretely, the type of images which need to be developed in order to contribute to alternative hyper-embodiments. We need to invent different ways to articulate what we see and what we (can't) comprehend. The situations of immersion and of latent excess which you analyse force us to do so: it is, by definition, impossible to "com-prehend" what I am immersed in; the excess is located precisely in the fact that what immerses me has to be larger than myself, larger than my comprehension, larger than (my) life. How can we "view" without assuming we will ever be in a position to "see" what we look at? I believe this is what you try to understand in the last chapter of your book, where you discuss what "an art of latent excess" could look like. How would you define it?

**Joseph Nechvatal** – It is an art that puts forth an aesthetic *élan* of superabundance which reconceptualises art in terms of simulation so as to grant art an unbridled zone, free of the good manners of simple simulations. Thus, an art of latent excess takes us away from the habitual focus of the picturesque and potentially liberates us inwardly from the infringements stemming from the deluge of mass-media images. In the art of excess, the focal point is never circumscribed. Instead of nicely proceeding towards an expedient comprehension and appraisal, immersive latent excess actually opens up an oppositional anti-mechanistic space of self-adumbration by revealing loose limits of our solipsistic and hedonistic inner circuitry.

**Ubiquitranslator** – A ubiquitous simulation without assignable global focus, haunted by its superabundance and bridled by "good manners" and bad habits of undue focusing: this seems to provide a very good definition of TV as we know it. How can artists transform this deluge of mass-media images, which already creates a situation and a feeling of latent excess, into something like "an art" of latent excess? "Defocusing" has been a rather trendy catchword over the past years, but there must be a good reason for that. Usually, we think of the focus in terms of center, but what you are interested in is not so much to question what is at the center of our gaze, but rather *what cannot be circumscribed on its border*. The dialectics between cocooning and expanding reappears, in more directly visual terms, as a dialectics between the need and

the impossibility to *frame* (a picture, an issue, a narrative). What could TV art look like if it took on your challenge “to open up an oppositional anti-mechanistic space of self-adumbration”? Your take on the “defocus” slogan seems to invite artists to work on nuances, on shades, on adumbration, on fumes. I believe this is linked to your use of the notion of *sfumato*, which you elaborate when, in order to illustrate an art of latent excess, you draw your main example, not from a contemporary artist mobilizing the newest magic of virtual reality, but from the Apse in the Lascaux Caves...

**Joseph Nechvatal** – *Sfumato* composition is a smokey technique used for decreasing the separating dramatic force and physical presence of isolated figures in a work of art, by immersing them in a fumey, semi-imperturbable pose. *Sfumato* is the seductive, subtle, smoothy imperceptible gradation of dark colours which approaches a smoggy unity, useful in the creation of psychological atmospheric effects. With *sfumato* we see the seeds of a visual counter-tradition in opposition to the crisp, detached, geometrical optics of clean simulation. As a result of the seductive *sfumato* excess encountered in Lascaux’s Apse, I had the peculiar feeling of being flooded over by a cloud-like image cesspool of deep meanings I could not decode. The Apse represent a thrusting off of optic and mental boundaries, and thus is a complex mirroring of our own fleeting impressions which constitute the movement of our consciousness; the perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.

**Ubiquitranslator** – On the face of it, one could see *sfumato* techniques as the direct opposite of all the technological efforts made to generate a picture in High Definition. The old TV picture was *sfumato*, because of low definition, because of the inherent limitation of the medium. As it is the case in music with a genre like noise, however, the greater definition allowed by new technological developments allows artists to reclaim past “defects” into meaningful gesture: low fi, scratches, sound distortions and Larsen effects gain a charm of their own, as soon as they are chosen rather than imposed. Similarly, an art of latent excess, applied to TV, could use the properties of HD in order to reveal the aesthetic properties of low D. This could be a sensual way to make perceptible the weaving and unweaving of ourselves, through the defocusing and deframing of the fleeting impressions which constitute the movement of our consciousness, as we watch television. This type of artistic gesture may be particularly appropriate for our age of ubiquitous TV: the focusing and framing of our attention was already pretty loose when the TV sets were posted in our living room or in front of our bed; it is bound to become even more unstable when we watch TV programs on our I-Phone or I-Pad, waiting for the bus or sitting in a subway. It may very well be our attention itself which is becoming more *sfumato* and noisy in the age of ubiquity. 17 000 years after Lascaux, 2 500 years after Plato, the planetary cave of ubiquitous TV has become our planetary horizon. While we agitate ourselves ever more frantically within the cave, it may be up to TV artists to project new types of ubiquitous images on this new type of ubiquitous wall.

## **Zukunft des Fernsehens, Fernsehen in Zukunft Immersion, Phantasma, Gemeinschaft**

**Yves Citton**

*Für Yves Citton ist Fernsehen ein großes Phantasma. Ein magisches Dispositiv, das den Präsidenten und Thom Yorke aufs Sofa holt. Dank iPhone und Co. lässt sich inzwischen auch mit ihnen spazieren oder zum Haareschneiden gehen (und man muss sich nicht mehr mit dem Frisör unterhalten). Was kommt danach? Wohin entwickelt sich das TV-Phantasma? Im Zentrum von Cittons Überlegungen dazu steht die Frage, auf welche Art und Weise wir in die Fernsehwelt eintauchen, eintauchen werden.*

*Auf dem Weg zu einer Antwort sind drei Typen von Immersion zu unterscheiden. Die erste ist die allumfassende Immersion. Etwa eine 360°-Projektion im IMAX, eine grenzenlose Phantasiewelt, die uns vollständig umgibt. Die Grenzen jedoch werden jedem bewusst, der im Immersionsrausch dem Sitznachbarn im Kino auf die Füße tritt oder einfach den Saal verlässt. Anders in der ubiquitären Immersion. Wer etwa Avatar auf dem iPhone guckt, kann mit seiner Immersionsblase hingehen wo er will, muss seine Aufmerksamkeit aber stets auf den kleinen Bildschirm konzentrieren. Er muss aktiv eintauchen in seine Wunschwelt und ist stets von Ablenkung bedroht. Schließlich gibt es einen dritten Typus, den man mikrokosmische Immersion nennen könnte und der uns zunehmend als erweiterte Realität bekannt ist. Mit Hilfe einer virtuellen Brille etwa wird unser reales Umfeld um die Elemente „angereichert“, die wir gerne in ihr hätten und um die bereinigt, die uns schon immer genervt haben (das ist die freundliche Variante diese Geschichte zu*

*erzählen). Das tragbare Mikroklima öffnet ein schier unendliches Feld für Phantasmen aller Art. Doch ist das zugleich auch schon die Geschichte des Fernsehens – und ist es überhaupt noch Fernsehen?*

*Was die allumfassende Immersion angeht, so notiert Citton, war das Fernsehen darin schon immer ein bemerkenswert dürftiges Medium. Selbst als Mega-Flachbildschirm ist es doch im Wesentlichen der Kasten geblieben. Zudem hat er nicht unwesentlich an Magie verloren und heutige Sehgewohnheiten sind weit entfernt von den andachtsvollen Fernsehenden in den 1960ern. Wer vom Frühstückstisch auf einem Minibildschirm CNN guckt, mag der These zustimmen, dass das Fernsehen im Laufe seiner Geschichte die Kraft zur allumfassenden Immersion, unbeschadet der technologischen Entwicklung, eher verloren hat.*

*Mit Blick auf die ubiquitäre Immersion müssen wir zunächst festhalten, dass das Fernsehen tatsächlich überall ist. Citton erinnert in diesem Kontext an Thomas Mathiesens Synopticon-Theorie, derzufolge sich die Blickrichtung seit Benthams/Foucaults Panopticon umkehrt hat und Kontrolle nun dadurch sichergestellt ist, dass alle auf dasselbe und dieselben blicken. The many see the few, das Volk sieht der Elite beim Feiern zu. Doch so einfach ist es nicht, denn die Zunahme der Kanäle brachte eine Atomisierung des Fernsehvolkes mit sich, in der jeder seinen eigenen Hobbies nachgeht. Würde man vom „Eintauchen“ in eine Sprache sprechen, fragt Citton, wenn der Intensivkurs in einem „internationalen Haus“ stattfindet, in dem zahlreiche Sprachen gesprochen werden?*

*Der Ideologiekritiker antwortet: Natürlich, denn eigentlich sprechen dort alle Englisch. Die Idiome sind nur Maske für eine Mediasphäre, die im Grunde*

immer den gleichen Brei serviert. Citton nennt dies das Chamäleon-Modell. Die Alternative im internationalen Haus ist das multipolare Modell, nämlich wenn nur die miteinander kommunizieren, die sich untereinander (gut) verstehen. Kein Einheitsbrei – und zugleich für die Köche keine Gefahr mehr, dass sich die Vielen gegen sie zusammenschließen. Soweit die klassische Debatte zu Fernsehen und Öffentlichkeit.

Was aber – und das wäre nur die Geschichte des dritten, mikrokosmischen, Immersions-Typus in der Geschichte des Fernsehens –, was wäre, wenn ich meinen Sprachaufenthalt in einem Umfeld zubrächte, in dem ich niemanden verstehe? Citton bringt hier den „Portable“ ins Spiel, eine tragbares, multisensorielles Dispositiv, eine Mischung aus TV, PC, VR-Brille und Audioumgebung, die jedem ermöglichen würde, sich in seine ganz persönliche Welt zurückzuziehen. Cittons „Portable“ würde ihm Deleuze auf die Ohren geben und Dardenne auf die Augen. Mit den anderen Bewohnern des internationalen Hauses kommuniziert er über einen Universalübersetzer. Die Anderen, die sich für Mozart, Desperate Housewives oder die SPD interessieren, rücken in immer weitere Ferne. Der Individualismus wird zum völligen Idiotismus.

Die historische Entwicklung aller drei Typen der medialen Immersion mündet also, vielleicht unerwartet, in ein apokalyptisches Phantasma der Auflösung von Gemeinschaft.

Ist nun dieses Phantasma unsere Gegenwart? Wird es unsere Zukunft sein? Citton schließt das nicht aus, treibt es jedoch soweit, bis seine Voraussetzungen (und Grenzen) sichtbar werden. Wir vergessen leicht, dass eine Gemeinschaft nötig ist, um uns zu individualisieren. Ohne die gemeinsame Arbeit (und seien es nur die Serverparks,

die gewartet werden wollen) können wir keinen isolierenden Mikrokosmos aufrechterhalten. Es sind solche Paradoxien, die es zu verstehen und produktiv zu machen gilt. Im Zentrum des Fernsehens stand, das wird vom heutigen „postmedialen“ Standpunkt aus ersichtlich, immer schon die Frage der Gemeinschaft. Fernsehen war eine Makromaschine, die ein Phantasma von Gemeinschaft produziert hat. Dieses synoptische Dispositiv töten wir auf Raten. Die Zukunft dessen, was wir Fernsehen nannten, so schließt Citton, hängt mithin davon ab, ob ein neues Gemeinsames (commun) auf den Ruinen des Synoptismus entstehen wird. Weil der Kunst dabei nicht die geringste Rolle zukommt, hat Multitudes in diesem Heft einen fiktiven Dialog mit dem Theoretiker der Immersions-Kunst, Joseph Nechvatal, geführt.