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Immersion and Expanded Spectatorships: Notes on a Reinvented Field

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ABSTRACT The special section "Immersion and expanded spectatorships" discusses how moving images have been intensely reinvented in recent virtual environments, promoting renewed forms of viewing that change and broaden the spectator's experience. Engaging with the fact that the history of immersive media is often difficult to reconstruct and categorize clearly, the four essays here gathered reflect precisely such plurality of research lines. Simultaneously, they further demonstrate how this field has for long been shaped — and continues to be so — in a hybrid manner, through fruitful dialogues and mutual contamination.

KEYWORDS Immersion, perception, Virtual Reality, old media, agency, attention.

> We are in a dimension of contemporary experience that requires that we effectively cancel out or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment.
>
> Jonathan Crary (2001, 1)

Immersion can be described as a far-advanced mode of cancelling out or excluding ourselves from our immediate environment. Although classical thinkers coined it as a dangerous kind of 'alienation', this disengagement from a much larger and more complex reality has become crucial to today's experience and media industry. The growing

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need for a 'suspension of perception', as Jonathan Crary put it, reminds us of the joy felt by a child isolated in her room while playing endlessly and obliviously with her toys. As crucial as it was back in the 19th century for productive labour, education and spectacular culture, this suspension is a key asset for future societies, offering the possibility of an interruption or escape to our immediate environment. In addition to feeding the escapist fantasies repeatedly promised by science fiction spaces such as the *Holodeck* (Dolgoff, 1970s), the *Metaverse* (Stephenson, 1992) and, among many others, the *Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999), this virtual 'escape' through digitally rendered spaces is also an extraordinary opportunity for experimenting with new media and finding new means of communication and aesthetic expression.

Immersion is a long-sought experience and a deep-seated desire in image worlds. It is part of the historical quest for a perfect image, for the ultimate reproduction of reality led by total image utopias. However, its imaginary has always been futuristic, promising us a very sophisticated and forthcoming techno-reality that will eventually transport us to different worlds. Produced by still or moving images, and engaging both static and mobile spectators, immersion is often described as a "sense of being there", a "flow state" or an "experience of a nonmediated space". Recurrent synonyms such as 'involvement', 'participation', and 'absorption' have been used to outline this embodied mode of spectatorship and distinguish it from 2D or flat traditional media.

While immersive modes of spectatorship have been crucial to modern experiences in planetariums, museums, panoramas, cosmoramas, peepshows, magic lantern lectures and cinema, the currently widespread availability of Virtual Reality (VR) technology and 360º interactive moving images both resumes and reshapes earlier expectations viewers had in watching pictures. This high-tech renewed sensual state of involvement is now dependent on photorealistic 3D graphics and real-time rendering and interaction with virtual objects. The new immersion specs rely on a much more dynamic and haptic interaction with narratives. Today, immersion has become a key and stable feature in the gaming industry, one of the most innovative sectors in technology. Expressions such as "immersive natives" (Steinicke 2016) reveal a new generation of fluent explorers of virtual environments, no longer constrained by physical reality and used to seeing images as "worlds and environments, places and spaces that need portals and escape hatches

and are driven by problem-solving and viewer/ participant control over characters and their stories" (Burnett 2013, 201).

After being extensively tested in modern theatrical shows, optical media, time-based media art, and video games, immersion is now challenging moving images in virtual environments and designing new codes to film interactive and non-interactive stories. While a non-interactive immersion (known as 360° video or cine-VR) designs the story around the viewer, keeping his stationary position as a content observer, interactive immersive films are based on the user's diegetic protagonism in the virtual space, on his actions, movements, and decisions. The concept of *agency* reflects this impression of control that interactive immersive spaces offer, producing a deeper engagement with the story. Also defined as an aesthetic pleasure, *agency* ensures the user a coherent, dynamic, and responsive virtual world to explore (Murray 1998).

However, this user satisfaction comes with a price. Narrative dispersals and misunderstandings can be much more frequent. Again, attention resurfaces as an enduring historical problem. Deprived of the classical codes to direct the story and keep the narrative in a linear format, VR filmmakers are struggling with new strategies to combat distraction and to direct the viewer's attention in the virtual space. Once the frame is removed, decisions such as what to look at, from which angle, when and for how long, need to be mediated and foreseen by the director. This shift from the *storytelling* to the *storyliving* paradigm is requiring the reinvention of diegetic codes (such as cuts between different sites or sound and lighting techniques) and motivating new intermedia dialogues. Virtual Reality is not the first 'chair travelling 'medium. As argued by Engberg and Bolter (2020), the exploration of VR's technical affordances requires both experimentation and reliance on earlier media forms. The similarities are impressive and telling:

VR experiences are like movies but with interactivity; they are like paintings but with navigable spaces; they are like plays but with computer-controlled characters; they are like theme park rides, but with simulated motion; they are like games but with VR headsets and controllers. (Murray 2020, 23)

If we look closely at today's most available hardware for this disconnection from the real world, we will be easily taken to Victorian times. VR headsets are easily comparable to 19th-century Holmes-type stereoscopes, kinoras and mutoscopes, as well as to Edison's kinetoscope, the precursor of film moving images. They all had in common a hood in the viewer that obstructed peripheral vision. A more sophisticated peep design to preclude the eyes from looking sideways was later tested in the Sensorama (Heilig 1957). While ensuring attentive individuals, these devices forced immersion as a solitary experience, a common feature of the most common VR single-user applications.

Additionally, other earlier immersive media, such as the Panorama, need to be reconsidered not just for their 'watching in the round 'experiences but as immersive narratives with captivating topics that engulfed the viewer as much as today's cinematic VR. These early media taught us the importance of choosing the right topics, the right compositions, and the best standpoints. On the other hand, it is also fascinating to see how the layout of the historical Panoramas is being resumed in virtual production techniques such as *Volume*, the virtual production stage used for filming the Netflix serial *1899*. In *Volume*, while the painted canvas gives way to a high-resolution screen synched with camera tracking, the *faux terrain* is staged with several props and the central platform is replaced by a turntable to allow for different angles. This is one of the best recent remediations in the moving image industry. These examples also let us know that not all topics or narratives are suitable for immersive environments and that flat films will continue to be the most realistic form of representation for most stories.

Future research will need to rethink immersion in its long media history to have a critical understanding of its cultural imagination. On the other hand, media history will need to be combined with artistic research and with psychology studies, the three main pillars for VR's future development. This multidisciplinarity will contribute to the creation of new technical affordances and connect with audiences in new ways.

In this setting, the current special section of *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image*, timely dedicated to 'Immersion and expanded spectatorships' reflects on how moving images are being reinvented to expand the viewer's experience in virtual environments. In the opening article, "Where to Look? Sustaining presence while directing attention in virtual reality stories", Michael Walter examines the tension between

narrative, directing attention and interactivity in virtual reality environments. Starting with the distinction between the notions of presence (the sense of 'feeling' and 'being' in a mediated space) and immersion (strategies of 'transporting' users to a virtual environment), the author further investigates the challenges and difficulties in directing VR stories, at a time when the medium is still evolving, and there are still no clear established conventions on how to control attention in these contexts. Walter's work analyzes different case studies comprising contemporary VR videogames, VR films, and works that complicate the line between videogames and interactive film. Using a compelling intermedial approach, Walter further inspects the difference, in VR, between technology and language. Focusing on issues of scale, presence inducement and narrativity, this article poignantly investigates how specific techniques and immersive strategies commonly employed in VR videogames are being successfully reshaped into VR films and storytelling, thereby expanding and enriching both fields.

Questions of circulation and media contamination are similarly present in Francisco Merino's article "Realidade Virtual Cinematográfica: Contar ou viver histórias em ambientes virtuais" [Cinematic Virtual Reality: Telling or Living Stories in Virtual Environments]. Considering how cinema has historically been prone to radical experimentation in forms of perception and expanded spectatorships, this article focuses on recent hybrid formats, which often combine RV and cinema modalities of storytelling and representation. More concretely, the author proposes to examine 'cinematic virtual reality', that is, 360º films created to be viewed through RV devices, but also easily accessible on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo. After proposing an operative definition of such cinematic/virtual works, Merino discusses the differences and similarities between storytelling and storyliving in virtual worlds, offering a comparative approach to examine both VR and classic cinema stories. To do so, he resorts to the theoretical frameworks of narratology and film studies to investigate recent cinematic VR works according to three relevant categories: space-time, subjective shot, and reception uncertainty. While acknowledging the affinities between cinematic virtual reality and cinema, Merino demonstrates that, in various respects, the two are fundamentally different. Finally, the article argues that cinematic virtual reality is more indebted to VR than film. It should not be read as a mere reconfiguration of cinema, for many of its features — either in form or expression — often contest the most frequent forms

of film enunciation, thereby opening up a new, vivid and autonomous (even if transient) media modality.

On a different take, Taís de Barros and Roberto Tietzmann's article "Entre Telas Retangulares e Esféricas: Uma exploração metodológica da decupagem de filmes imersivos" [Between Rectangular and Spherical Screens: A methodological exploration of scene blocking in immersive movies] aims to tackle what changes and what remains the same when films move from rectangular displays to immersive spherical ones like those in VR. The text first discusses how pervasive rectangular frames are, or have been, in ways of recording and exhibiting technical images. Drawing on the importance of flat, rectangular windows to create and convey narratives, the authors further propose to investigate what happens when apparently the 'same' film is viewed in different reception frames. To do so, the article examines two animated short films — *Pearl* (2016) and *Rain or Shine* (2016) — that have official versions for both traditional and immersive windows. More concretely, it advances and applies a detailed analytical methodology to the two films, inspecting key sequences according to their framing, scene blocking and editing forms. The results are then discussed comparatively, highlighting some specificities of the immersive film language and, most importantly, suggesting the importance of a new understanding of diegesis in these kinds of frames. The notion of *diegesis of attention* is therefore proposed, considering how the focal narrative elements rely on the voluntary gaze of the immersed spectator.

The special section closes with a phenomenology of reception approach offered by Filipe Martins in the article "Imersividade e Diferença no Cinema e nas Artes" [Immersiveness and Difference in Cinema and the Arts], which evidences how the long-standing debate that places immersion in a disputing position between art and entertainment is far from closed. The text philosophically discusses the role played by the notions of *difference* (in the avant-garde sense of novelty) and *immersiveness* in the aesthetic experience of art. To do so, the author addresses and revisits crucial concepts such as difference, artificiality, immersiveness, alienation, and performativity to argue that critical difference tends to oppose — and this is not without tension — the nature of the immersive experience. For, according to him, immersion seems to lack the "distancing effect" that could potentially awake a higher participative response from the art viewer. By placing this difference against immersiveness in his considerations on subjectivity,

Martins article delivers a concluding and thought-provoking essay, from where one can look at the exciting challenges of the contemporary landscape, where VR immersive experiences and art installations seem to increasingly feed, blur, and expand one another.

In a vibrant and still-growing field of research, we believe that the contributions gathered in this special section not only offer stimulating readings but will also foster discussion and critically enrich the ever-active debate on immersion, art, and expanded spectatorships. We are most thankful for the insightful reflections offered by the contributing authors and would also like to thank José Bértolo for the cover image and all the anonymous referees who kindly devoted their time and expertise to peer-reviewing the manuscripts. We also thank the editorial team of *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image,* in particular Sofia Sampaio, for the constant support along this process. Finally, a grateful word goes to the CURIOSITAS research project team members for providing a fertile intellectual territory, in which ideas, discussions and collaborations on immersion since early modern media times until current VR technologies have developed and will hopefully continue to grow.

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Filmography

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Imersão e Experiências de Receção Expandidas: Notas sobre um campo reinventado

RESUMO O dossier temático "Imersão e experiências de receção expandidas" discute o modo como as imagens em movimento têm vindo a ser fortemente reinventadas em ambientes virtuais recentes, promovendo renovadas formas de visionamento que modificam e alargam a experiência dos seus espectadores. Considerando que a história dos média imersivos é frequentemente complexa de reconstruir e de categorizar de forma inequívoca, os quatro ensaios aqui reunidos procuram espelhar essa pluralidade de investigação, demonstrando como este é um campo que sempre se construiu — e continua a construir-se — hibridamente, através de profícuos diálogos e de contaminações mútuas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Imersão, percepção, Realidade Virtual, média antigos, controlo, atenção.