

# **Cinematic Immersion at the Turn of a Millenium. Postmediality, Cybertribes and Hypericonography**

## **Absztrakt**

The most vital characteristic of cinema is probably its persuasive force, to withdraw its viewers from their everyday experience and envelop them in an audiovisual stream. On top of this, technological evolutions and developments in the visual language of cinema always seem to focus on finding new ways to submerge the experienced audience in a new cinematographic experience, through which a different world of living images, space, light, words, music or movement reveals itself. But if immersion is the thriving force behind the cinematographic experience, what are the new immersive challenges in our contemporary post-cinematic era? This paper explores three contemporary immersive strategies in terms of postmediality, cybertribalism and hypericonography

## **Szerző**

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# **Cinematic Immersion at the Turn of a Millenium. Postmediality, Cybertribes and Hypericonography**

## **Introduction**

The most vital characteristic of cinema is probably its persuasive force, to withdraw its viewers from their everyday experience and envelop them in an audiovisual stream. On top of this, technological evolutions and developments in the visual language of cinema always seem to focus on finding new ways to submerge the experienced audience in a new cinematographic experience, through which a different world of living images, space, light, words, music or movement reveals itself. But if immersion is the thriving force behind the cinematographic experience, what are the new immersive challenges in our contemporary post-cinematic era?

This paper explores three contemporary immersive strategies in terms of postmediality, cybertribalism and hypericonography.

## **Part 1: A multitude of Immersion**

### **Immersion: the art of the true illusion**

Art has always been an experiment with technique and method, to enchant the spectator. Instruments were and are sought out in order to impinge upon reason or emotion, taking people along through a sea of images, or letting them float on an ocean of sound. Irrespective of the significance of the narrative and semantic information which might be communicated, and not taking into account the visual or auditory authenticity which might be expressed in a work, the individual spectator will either be appealed, or not. Varying from a 'total absorption' in a film, 'getting carried away by the story', to the complete opposite, the unmoved spectator who is thrown upon his own resources. It isn't until the moment of involvement that what is referred to as 'immersion' comes about.

Essentially this turns immersion into a psychological phenomenon, specifically an imaginative experience, initiated and controlled through our senses. The spectator, the listener or the reader,( in one word: the immersant), should not merely succeed in holding on his or her attention to a

work. (S)he should also be able to live the fictitious aspect of the work. Even in the case of a purely visual story, the immersant should at least be able to experience the abstract game with shape and color or the image syntax, and thus the artificiality of the work. The central immersive challenge, therefore, is the creation of a convincing and authentic illusion. Even though an illusion is sometimes put on a par with a trick of the eye, a dream image or a fantasy, these rather negative connotations do not necessarily apply here, as the definition of the term 'illusion' related to immersion is limited to the man-made and 'artificial' aspect evoked by an artwork. In order to sharpen the distinction, recall the difference between a hallucination and an illusion. The first is a phantasmagoric invention in absence of external stimuli. An illusion, on the other hand, might well be a genuine, intersubjective fact. This means that it can be completely void of any delusion or imagining.

If immersion is art aiming at a 'genuine' illusion, the subsequent question is how it tries to realize this. How does it manipulate the dissonance between what our senses suggest to our imagination and what each of us usually takes for real? This is the starting-point for any immersive strategy. A general and quite rudimentary distinction in strategies purports to the way the medium is applied. In cinema, for instance, there might be a choice for digital software and special effects in order to come to a representation which is as truthful as possible, in which the medium seems to escape our notice. Another option is a depiction which fully stresses the singularity of a medium. Like film animation, for instance, which stimulates the imagination indirectly through an effect of alienation.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **A Brief History of Immersion**

Immersion, being the art of the true illusion, is not a recent phenomenon that appeared together with the development of digital CAVES, Second Life avatars, virtual holograms, augmented reality and other new audiovisual technology. Its history goes back to the chalk drawings of Lascaux, at least 13 centuries before Christ. These cave-drawings might be seen as an exemplary case of an ancient attempt to present reality in a captivating manner. More 'recent' examples of immersion are to be found in the grand plays in the Greek amphitheater or the exuberant spectacles in the Roman arenas.<sup>[2]</sup>

With the transformation of cultures (ideologically as well as technically) different approaches to the creation of a signifying and authentic illusion can be found. During the Christian middle ages, for instance, immersive strategies are abundantly present in the religious rituals in churches and cathedrals: the imposing clerical architecture, devotional artifacts, liturgical ceremonies and costumes, the iconography in paintings and sculptures, incense, candles, the large and colorful window-frames figuring saints and angels. It would be blasphemous, for sure, to draw a parallel with contemporary dance raves or CAVE-installations, but the resemblance is striking.

With the rise of industrial technology, new strategies to create a convincing illusion emerge: the

panopticon, the kaleidoscope, the phantasmagoria from early cinematic experiments and eventually the rise of cinema, which created an ultimate device for immersion. In its early days, cinema aims at enclosing its audience in a dark room, with the noise of an old projector initiating a sequence of what we can call the pulse of an 'early virtual reality' in black-and-white, silent movies, often accompanied by piano, special effect-sounds and real-time situational noises.

Later on, with the appearance of television, the effect of sensuous captivation of an audience in a dark room decreases, but at the same time there is an increase in presence, frequency, diversity of types of information that is communicated, and of course, an increase of manipulation. As television became more and more ubiquitous, it indirectly triggered the understanding of the virtual character of what we normally take to be as real, as our reality. With television the philosophical idea of 'simulacra' or a depiction of 'hyperreality' takes central stage. Television functions as an eye-opener with respect to our naive perception of reality as a clear cut domain. It overturns the strict divisions between fact and fiction.

Since more than a decade, we have a new generation of technology. Projector, internet and electronic CAVE-technology freed the audiovisual experiment from the screen of the television and cinema. The pioneering work of media artists has created a spatial and interactive image, which triggered a spin-off of audiovisual evolutions in other arts, like video art, fine art and performance art. In media art, realizing the experience of immersion became a principal goal of artistic inquiry that lead to the development of virtual worlds, that either are autonomous or aim at invading our public and private lives. Media art mingles the virtual with the real. The creation of the virtual is driven by a passion for the real. But at the same time, the passion for the real coincides with a passion for the virtual: a man-made reality.

This means that today we are surrounded by the art of true illusion. Immersive strategies are becoming omnipresent, almost unnoticed. The effect is like audiovisual quicksand – as we sink in deeper and deeper we cannot recall what shifted us from the former to the next. Now we can ask ourselves, if immersive strategies are becoming ubiquitous and at the same time discreet, so 'real', can we still call it an illusion?

## **Part 2: Contemporary Immersive Challenges**

### **Post-Medium Exploration**

A brief historical excursion makes clear that various cultural expressions, often with an explicit religious or political agenda, are penetrated by the immersive challenge. This holds true just as much for the contemporary arts. In all its variety this challenge turns up in most art forms: music concerts, theatre productions, dance performances, visual art installations and, of course, cinema.

Media art is particular because new techniques are often used to realize this immersion quite

literally. In order to maximize the impact, we become an immersant in a virtual environment with a reality of its own, closing off our senses. The virtual environment is not necessarily purely digital. Various transdisciplinary experiments combine audiovisual projections on real settings, which at the same time are wired to a virtual space. This ubiquity results in a layered reality, through which we can navigate, communicate and experiment at will, in space and time. Once we are interactively and audiovisually linked up, we can explore the factuality of the fiction, we can reorient ourselves, undergo, resist and discover. The impact of these seemingly casual experiments should not be underestimated, not if we realize that a human being is always the result of the media (s)he uses.

Media art is a very grateful domain for the exploration of immersion because it does not situate itself within the codes of a single medium. Rather than focusing on a particular medium the attention goes out to the technical possibilities and limitations of various media, and particularly the ways they can be combined or mixed. In the end these new, technological developments are an indispensable prerogative for media art. By drawing attention to the condition of several media, media art initiates a detachment between the artwork and its material medium, or at least the classical media, such as painting, drawing and sculpture.



Media art therefore, might be defined as the cultivation of a tension between an artwork and a medium. Specific attention is drawn to the medium, so it might be changed, expanded, and overcome: the transgression. Often this is achieved by investigating specifically the failure, the limitations and disruptions of the medium. Crucial in this respect is the expansive potential of new technology with regards to the existing media. The ultimate goal seems to be a so-called post-medium artistic practice.<sup>[3]</sup> That is, a practice which has freed itself from the immediate conditioning of a specific medium.

Focusing on the immersive challenge, as media art does, paves the way to the post-medium condition of contemporary art because all the available means are deployed in the process. In its turn, this implicates the development of a productive and polyvalent laboratory for the development of new immersive strategies. With regards to cinema, more specifically the cross-over with video art, countless creative extensions might be noted, based on, for instance, remediation (e.g. the drawn videos by William Kentridge), familiar found-footage from news archives (e.g. the zap compilations in D-I-A-L History by Johan Grimonprez), projection experiments with 'augmented reality' (e.g. the installation Under Scan by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer).





*CREW: Double U, 2008. <http://www.crewonline.org/crew.html>*

From the perspective of cinematography the post-medium condition is sometimes defined in terms of extended cinema or video vortex. As a matter of fact the contemporary experiments bring about a whirl of new elements, wiping out the borderlines of disciplines. If we take a closer look at the Belgian work of the media theatre collective CREW, or the artist Lawrence Malstaf it becomes hard to point out precisely to which art form these productions belong. CREW circulates as a theatre company, but they mainly give performances with so-called head-mounted display or immersive cinema in 20/20 vision. Lawrence Malstaf also creates immersive experiments with one-on-one performance-installations. He is more often categorized under the cross-over between theatre and visual art, because he works with architectural and kinetic installations instead of digital and cinematographic equipment.

As a result it can be hard to distinguish between what is art and what isn't. Apparently it is something which is produced with various materials, methods and media, making use of various themes, styles and registers, without necessarily taking them as a subject. This new vagueness might confuse the stereotypical art historian, but for an inquisitive artist it is particularly interesting.



## Technotopia and Cybertribes

Another challenge for the development of immersive strategies, inextricably bound up with the post-medium condition in the arts, is the increasing democratization of new technologies. Because of the digital revolution new media have become functionally indispensable and hence turned into *modi vivendi*, which – and this is remarkable – soon are experienced as obvious in spite of their extraordinary innovating capacities.

In the arts, this has induced a metamorphosis and hybridization of the existing media like cinema, music and photography, as well as a remarkable increase in new applications for exploration, such as telematic installations, live cinema, VJ, CCTV, web 2.0, vlogs.<sup>[4]</sup> These applications are the vehicle of our everyday communication and information procurement and processing, as well as for social commitment and identity experience (blogs, podcasts, wikis, RSS feeds, My Space, hacktivism).

Technology, in whatever shape, rarely takes up a neutral position in our cultural perception. Usually technology is associated with power structures we are not immediately part of, and that often are quite menacing as well: an industrial complex, an economic power, a political or religious ideology, an international market structure targeted towards (degrading) mass production, a military apparatus, an alien or higher power. This explains, among other things, the technonoir attitude in various writings in philosophy of technology and science fiction literature. In technotopian terms the fact that we are surrounded by new media implies a shift from a vertical to a horizontal position: new media are detached from a menacing structure outside ourselves, and they are turning into common, everyday tools. Once democratized new media also stop being the object of our fantasies.



*Christa Sommerer, Laurent Mignonneau and Robert Lopez-Gulliver: The Living Web, 2002.*

Contemporary utopian or dystopian fantasies mainly focus on promising developments which are still far ahead.<sup>[5]</sup> New media, on the contrary, are operational here and now. Artists experiment with them in order to incorporate them into the registers of the arts, and make them more human in the process. Because of the horizontal position new media now take, they are gradually allocated a major, new psycho-cultural function. This process might be defined in terms of cybertribalism. The term tribalism isn't not so much a reference to eccentric internet communities, orthodox Mac-users or a gang of avatars, but to each and every one of us, going through our lives as netizens, equipped with iPod, mobile phone and a gps-device. We are tribe members and new media function like contemporary totems. Sociologist Emiel Durkheim<sup>[6]</sup> already described totems as an eclectic collection of objects, with both an edifying and a protective function. A group can use it to symbolize its living environment as well as for personal identification. Sigmund Freud<sup>[7]</sup> accentuates that these processes of symbolization and identification are used in order to control our deepest desires. Take into account, for instance, the way in which fears and desires are symbolized and channeled in computer games or how they are, sometimes unashamedly, vented in Second Life. As far as identification goes, there is a striking resemblance between contemporary experiments with avatars or with cyborgs and a shaman, who imitates an eagle, for instance, by dressing up and acting as one. In both cases we see creative mechanisms at work to sublimate the fascination for and also the fear of the totem (being fauna,

technology).



*Marnix De Nijs: The Beijing Accelerator, 2006. <http://www.marnixdenijs.nl>*

If new media are contemporary totems, their importance can hardly be underestimated. As a result, when it comes to cultural impact, it isn't odd that the new cluster of digital applications with their new immersive strategies are the canvassing successors of television. The latter is forced to hand on the torch after having taken it over from cinema during the 1960s. Which, by the way, in its turn had overcome the visual arts around the 1920s. This succession, one would think, implies that the visual arts, in as far as media art and its digital experiments fall under them, have returned straight to the heart of our center of attention. Finally, if new media are totems, is the immersive, audiovisual experiment in media art the contemporary rain dance?

## Hypericonography

A third and last immersive challenge is independent of the creative crossing and dispersing of media in the arts. It is to be found in the event of visual language itself. The Cremaster Cycle by Matthew Barney makes clear how the sign language of the image has developed into an entangled and self-referential visual account, which is able to catch our attention in a very particular way, directing it back to a purely visual event.<sup>[8]</sup> This phenomenon can be referred to as hypericonography because it calls upon an excess of hermetic signs and subjective symbols without any direct and systematic references to an encompassing narrative storyline. They are

used to create a different world, without immediate access points. In this way a visual account becomes fascinating, something to be discovered and decoded, but in the end it stays unmanageable. The shown events are impossible to situate, even though they evoke several meanings. The Cremaster Cycle presents us with men, women and other creatures which seem to depend largely on themselves, merely 'doing something or other', which doesn't seem useful. Nevertheless it seems to be important somehow. Interaction takes place mostly without words: copulating people, hugging, mutilations and murders, fights, gambling, sports. We are also guided through environments which absorb our attention and places breathing history and culture.

The Empire State Building, a rodeo arena, the horse tracks, race circuits, uninhabited islands, fuel stations. Countless undefined objects pass through the screen. They resonate a multitude of emotional and cognitive references, giving them a ritual character. We see ambiguous gender symbols, typical and meaningful consumption goods, sportswear, cars and machines, vague political and religious attributes, mysterious objects surrounded by smoke curtains, insinuating the presence of freemasonry, shamanism, or occult brotherhoods.

The enigmatic nature, typical of hypericonography, provides an efficient method to evoke immersive experiences. The audiovisual dream balances precisely between familiar and unfamiliar, it toys around with displacing and condensing and it also leaves us sufficient time to take in the ontological weirdness into our sensuous experience. At set times new and surprising elements are added to the baroque spectacle, so we stay alert, curious about the revelations promised by the undertone. The purpose of hypericonography is stupor, rather than pleasure, which is realized through provocation, misguidance and enchantment.

Hypericonography is typical of our time. Because of television and cinema we, as experienced spectators, are highly refined when it comes to the dismantling of, and puzzling with images. Semiotics provide us with numerous ranges of referential frameworks, offering a clear explanation of the visual language. Often they are so compelling that the multiple layers of the image are reduced to codes. As a result we read images rather than look at them. The hypericonographic artist, in his turn, tries to deviate our visual literacy, by confronting us with fascinating delusional worlds, which don't allow for easy decoding. If the purpose of iconography in its original, Medieval-religious sense, was to instruct illiterates on Biblical stories through images, contemporary hypericonography is an undertaking to confuse visual literates and semioticians in a veritable tower of Babel, thus getting them involved in looking at a pure game of colors, spaces, shapes and casually resonating symbols.

The self-referential sign game of hypericonography might also be interpreted as psychotic iconography. This clinical term is not meant pejoratively but as a way of clarifying the artistic quest. The psychotic experience, in as far as it might be imagined by anyone, is generally accepted in its stereotypical variant as inaccessible, but creative and astonishing. The self-experience is said to be distorted and fragmented. There would be a different, wayward and often far more direct, yet detached experience of the surrounding environment at play. Language is undone of its

normal, communicative function and it comes to life as a dissolved experience of words and letters. In literature, the writings of James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) are sometimes referred to as psychotic language reconstructions. Joyce created text fragments, not so much with a beginning and an ending, but most of all with a duration. The subsequent sentences evoke one another and relate back to one another. They do not develop a classical narrative storyline, but they create, as Joyce puts it, a wayward 'stream of consciousness'. It is no coincidence that Joyce found inspiration in the strange, alluring world of experience of his schizophrenic daughter Lucia.

Like Joyce, hypericonographic image artists pervert our codes of interpretation. They target our semiotic reading codes in order to liberate and safeguard the image of logics and interpretations. An iconoclasm, in some ways, which isn't realized through the destruction of images, but through the creation of fresh, untamable images. This enables a return to the pure, virgin image, which allows us to lose ourselves uninhibitedly once again. Visual pioneers develop a poetic, subjective mythology. The introspective spectator, in his turn, is provoked to distinguish authentic expressions in this mystery of images thrown at us by the screen.

In conclusion, hypericonography is more than a reformatory reaction to the reductive semiotics of art and film studies, it is also a beacon of resistance against the numerous attempts to replace the passive 2-D image as an immersive medium by spatial installations, equipped with generative or interactive extensions. Also in this respect it embodies a return to the image. Albeit an image in which we lose ourselves, because it is so unfamiliar.

The first part of this essay is based on the symposium *Immersion. The Art of The True Illusion*, which took place on 11 October 2007 in Arts Centre Vooruit in Ghent, as an initiative of the academic collaborative platform Interface (<http://www.ugent.interface.be>). Special thanks to Prof. Dr. Christel Stalpaert, and also to Eva De Groote, artistic programmer of Vooruit.

1. This distinction draws upon the division between 'immediacy' and 'hypermediacy', as stipulated in Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin, *Remediation/ Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 1999.
2. For an extensive overview on the history of immersive strategies, see Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. MIT Press, 2001.
3. Rosalind Krauss (1999) coined the term 'post-medium condition' in order to pinpoint the crossovers and intermediality in the fine arts. Krauss, R., 1999, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson.
4. As an example, I refer to two other artists. Marnix De Nijs tries to generate immersive experiences with spatial, kinetic machines equipped with digitally manipulated, audiovisual projections, like his *The Beijing Accelerator*. Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau created a spatial, interactive installation called *The Living Web*, which is used as an immersive internet-CAVE. Both examples represent a paradigm shift with regard to immersion because they offer an interactive 3D alternative to the visual 2D account of cinema.
5. Think of transhumanist scenarios, for instance, starting from technosciences such as nanotechnology and robotics, or biosciences such as stem cell research, DNA therapy and cloning. An interesting documentary

in this respect is Technocalyps (1999) by Frank They's.

6. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York, Free Press, 1948.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and taboo*, 1913. eversion, <http://www.bibliomania.com/1/7/68/>
8. Concerning hypericonography, there is a strong parallel with the contemporary theatre cycle Tragedia Endogonidia of Romeo Castellucci. Hence, this phenomenon does not restrict itself to video art. Other video artists that aim at an immersive experience by means of hypericonography are Shirin Neshat, Jesper Just and Eija- Liisa Ahtila.

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