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AESTHETIC JOURNEYS AND MEDIA  
PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP  
CULTURE AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES  
FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 10 – 2021

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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AESTHETIC JOURNEYS AND MEDIA  
PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP  
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FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

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MUTUAL IMAGES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION – Headquarters  
3 allée de l'avenir, Les chênes entrée 3  
64600 Anglet – France

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# Immersed, yet distant: Notes for an aesthetic theory of immersive travel films

Nicolas BILCHI | Roma Tre University, Italy

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this article is to highlight a few stylistic and aesthetic principles, common to the genre of the travel film (both documentary and fictional), as employed by immersive media and devices from the twentieth century – such as the Hale’s Tours of the World, Todd-AO, and Cinerama – up to today’s digital systems like Virtual Reality and 4D Cinema. I will discuss how the different experiences of simulated travels, proffered by those media, are all related to a broader aesthetic tendency in creating what I label as enveloping tactile images. Such images are programmed to surround the viewer from every side, thus increasing their spectacular dimension, but at the same time they strive to temper and weaken the haptic solicitations aroused in the viewer by the immersive apparatus itself. In this sense I propose that the spectator of immersive travelogue films is ‘immersed, yet distant’: she is tangled in the illusion of traversing an enveloping visual space, but the position she occupies is nonetheless a metaphysical one, not different from that of Renaissance perspective, because even if she can see everything, the possibility to interact with the images is denied, in order to preserve the realistic illusion. By analysing the stylistic techniques employed to foster the viewer’s condition of non-interactive immersion in the enveloping world presented by the medium, I will consequently address the topic of the conflict that such immersive aesthetics establish with traditional forms of audiovisual storytelling.*

## KEYWORDS

Travelogue films; Enveloping images; Hapticity; Ecology of perception; Immersion; Agency; Cinerama; Panoramas.

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## Introduction

In an issue dedicated to the topic of the representations of voyages around the world provided by audiovisual media since the nineteenth century until today, travelogue films and their partial resurfacing in documentary-like sequences of fictional travel films, constitute a subject that ought to be extensively addressed. Therefore, this article will focus on those cinematic technologies and formats which historically have strived to produce simulations of immersive experiences of travels, both in documentary and fictional forms. It will analyse the stylistic and aesthetic principles common to these – in other respects highly heterogeneous – media, and will discuss the specific kind of spectatorial engagement provided by them. Relying on psychology of perception and theories of hapticity, the article

will demonstrate that such form of engagement is based on a paradoxical condition of perceptive immersion of the body in the image-space not matched by a tantamount level of interactivity. This is due to the need to avoid that actual actions exerted by the viewer on the images would shutter the realistic illusion of the experience.

On these premises, it is important to clarify that the distinction between documentary travelogue films and fictional travel film is of little relevance for the scope of this article, which is primarily concerned with immersive devices and the spectatorial experience of travel they convey. Besides, if travelogue films can be defined as ‘nonfiction motion pictures that represent *place* as their primary subject’ (Peterson, 2013: 54), I argue that this prominence accorded to documentary (re)presentation of real places can have a pivotal function also in shots or sequences of fiction films addressing the theme of the travel. Following the approach behind Gurevitch’s claim that stereoscopy should be understood not as a medium but rather as ‘a technique applied to many media across the century and a half since it was discovered [in 1851]’ (2013: 397), I likewise propose to consider the travelogue genre as a set of conventions resurfacing in various audiovisual media and formats.

Travelogues, which have a long history dating back to Victorian educational travel lectures, appeared soon in early cinema, no later than in 1897, especially in the form of the so-called phantom rides<sup>1</sup> and of ethnographic documentaries. In spite of their initial popularity, they suffered an inexorable decline in parallel with the rise of Hollywood narrative cinema (Peterson, 2013: 133). But it would be incorrect to assume that this led to the definitive demise of travelogues, for actually they have survived up to our contemporary mediascape, often absorbed as part of the structure of fiction films. Moreover, travelogues have lived periods of cyclical sudden resurfacing, albeit in technologically and thematically hybrid forms, in apparatuses such as Todd-AO, Cinerama, and today Virtual Reality and 4D Cinema (and precisely some of these forms will be the subject of my discussion).

Why does this happen? I argue that a legitimate answer may be that the aforementioned technologies are constitutively driven to provide a spectatorial

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<sup>1</sup> Phantom rides were films shot from a moving vehicle – usually a train – in order to exalt the kinetic energy of its ride through landscapes and places.

experience which is more attractional than narrative in a traditional sense. The former term can be intended here as synonymous with that of spectacle as discussed, for example, by King: 'spectacle offers a range of pleasures associated with the enjoyment of 'larger than life' representations, more luminous or intense than in daily reality' (King, 2000: 4). The charm of travelogue films likewise lies in an attractional logic, because their spectator had to be fascinated by the thrilling perception of the fast motion of phantom rides no less than by the spectacular exploitation of landscapes and places characterising ethnographic documentaries. The realism of the latter must not be mistaken for a neutral and objective recording of reality; on the contrary, it aims at producing an effect of 'astonishment' (Gunning, 2009: 114) resting on the promise that cinema can make accessible aspects of the world which could hardly be experienced directly by the viewers. By imposing an aesthetic of the 'picturesque' (Peterson, 2013: 175), the travelogue genre 'captures and contains, mocks and reduces' (Gunning, 2006: 40); i.e. it turns reality into a spectacle, and precisely the exotic spectacle of faraway places and people available for visual consumption.

Likewise, the wide array of image-based immersive technologies born throughout the twentieth century and the first arc of the twenty-first century (*Hale's Tours of the World*, Todd-AO, Cinerama, Virtual Reality systems, and 4D Cinema, to name only the most known) has always been more prone to amaze the spectator by intensifying the stimulation of her sensorium than to produce complex and extensive narratives. Although, as argued by King, spectacle and narrative often tend to coexist, mutually reinforcing each other (2000: 1-15), in the case of immersive media one can recognise a general predominance of attractional stimulation of the senses over storytelling, whose function is reduced to conveying a feeble diegetic framing for the spectacle<sup>2</sup>. The spectacular display of landscapes and people typical of the travelogue well matches the physical, non-narrative experience sought by immersive formats; so that the former has been absorbed by the latter and reconfigured according to their ontology. It is not possible here to analyse in detail all the immersive technologies mentioned, therefore I shall take into account *The Hale's Tours of the World* of early cinema, and contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, such preference for audiovisual spectacle to the detriment of storytelling is not a free aesthetic choice, but rather the consequence of a series of technical constraints which make it almost impossible for immersive media to tell stories as effectively as cinema can do. I will discuss this point in detail later.

4D Cinema, in order to highlight the aesthetic and stylistic common ground reuniting, under the same ontological foundation and expressive goals, media apparently so diverse from a temporal and technical perspective. Plus, I will refer to two media which can be considered as ancestors of cinematic immersive formats, namely *tableau vivant* and panoramas; an analysis of their aesthetics can offer useful insights for my reflection on immersive representations of travels. Finally, I will hint at the problem of narrative in immersive formats with a synthetic discussion of Cinerama, using as a case study the film *How the West Was Won* (1962).

Instead, I have excluded from my discussion travelogues and travel films projected on a conventional bidimensional screen. The reason for that is that the form of spectatorial engagement promoted by traditional theatrical screening is radically inconsistent with that of its immersive counterparts (although both share the same raw theme, the travel itself). The most insurmountable difference lies in the fact that travel films projected on screen emphasise their identity as animated images to look at, while their immersive versions tend to deny that very iconic nature. According to Pinotti, the latter become ‘an-iconic’, that is, images challenging the conventional boundaries of the screen and striving to merge their spatio-temporal domain with that of the viewer (2018). Given such premises, in the following pages I hope to answer two important questions: what precise kind of experience is promoted by the immersive designs of simulated travels? And, overall, what position do these media force the viewer to assume in relation to the representational space of the film?

### **Enveloping tactile images**

At this point, before developing the main points of my discussion, a synthetic description of the technologies I am using as case studies may be useful to the reader, clarifying the theoretical stance I am about to develop. I borrow the analysis of *Hale’s Tours* from Rabinovitz:

*Hale’s Tours* was composed of one, two, or even three theatre cars that each seated seventy-two “passengers.” Using rear screen projection in many cases so that the projector was not seen, the movies shown out the front end of the otherwise closed car generally offered a filmed point of view from the front or rear of a moving train, producing the illusion of movement into or away from a scene while mechanical apparatus and levers simultaneously vibrated, rocked, and tilted the car. Other effects enhanced the sensation of travel: steamwhistles tooted, the sound of clattering wheels was heard. The first travel ride films simulated railroad or auto

travel in order to foreground the body itself as a site for sensory experience. They articulated a seemingly contradictory process for the spectator: they attempted to dematerialize the subject's body through its extension into the cinematic field while they repeatedly emphasised the corporeality of the body and the physical delirium of the senses. (Rabinovitz, 2006: 42)

*Hale's Tours* can be considered as one of the first examples of a purely immersive technology for simulated travels: they were a hybrid system which inscribed a traditional cinematic screening of a phantom ride into a material architectural space simulating the interior of a runaway train. Thus, the very logic of phantom rides was reinvented because space itself was becoming part of the spectacle, while also preserving the distance between spectator and representation. In fact the viewer, who was seeing the landscape through the windows, could not interact with it. Moreover, *Hale's Tours* employed a variety of mechanical tricks in order to increase the level of realism of the experience by, for example, reproducing the sounds of the train or the shakes of the wagons on the rails.

4D Cinema is a technology which hybridises an audiovisual projection on a wide screen and a variety of mechanical gears producing physical effects on the spectator's body. Seats are designed to shake or recline synchronously with a specific fragment of the screening, and atmospheric phenomena – such as air flows, fog, rain, and the like – are simulated in order to produce a synaesthetic experience affecting the body in its entirety. From this point of view, contemporary 4D Cinema does not entail any structural shift from the medial identity of *Hale's Tours*, except for the wider dimensions of the screen which, in 4D Cinema, can truly envelope the spectator from every direction, even from above her head. Moreover 4D Cinema, due to its apparent inability to tell compelling stories (for example, a close-up is simply impossible to project on a circular screen without resulting in a grotesque deformation of the face of the actor), heavily relies on the theme of the journey and its spectacular charge. Therefore, the difference between *Hale's Tours* and 4D Cinema is just quantitative – not qualitative – in nature, and they share the same essential properties as immersive experiences.

What broader theoretical principles can be deduced from an analysis of these media and the spectatorial bodily experience they promote? First of all, I claim that these immersive technologies strive to blur the perceptive distinction between the space of the viewer and the space of the fiction, so that the images of the latter are re-structured

as enveloping environments which solicit the viewer in a haptic way. I borrow the concept of hapticity from Marks' (2000) theory and especially from its recent reformulation made by Ross (2015) in order to adapt the concept to the new high-tech cinematographic formats of the digital age.

Marks discussed the importance of the sense of touch for many cinematographic practices, advocating a 'tactile epistemology' (2000: 122), namely a model of spectatorship opposed to the rational understanding of the image-frame implied by the detached observer of Renaissance perspective, and based on a pre-rational, sensuous engagement which turns vision into (simulated) touch. This is the core idea behind the notion of haptic visuality, in which 'the eyes themselves function like organs of touch' (ivi: 162), meaning that certain filmic styles can foster mental simulations of physical contact with the textures and surfaces of the bodies and objects presented on the screen. However, Marks' thought was rooted in the analysis of experimental movies made by diasporic directors who needed to develop new, personal forms of expression in order to counter the alienating and stereotyping effects of mainstream cinematographic language on representations of non-western populations and their cultures. These films exalted the material fabric of skins and surfaces (i.e. by means of extreme close-ups) up to the point that the intelligibility of what was shown in the image was seriously threatened. But, obviously, this is not the aesthetics adopted by immersive media; on the contrary, they aim at producing a synaesthetic experience of an environment in which the technology enhances the vividness and intensity of the perceptive stimuli. If the films discussed by Marks demonstrate a collapsing of the intelligibility of what was represented, the images of immersive media denote an excess of intelligibility. Therefore, such images can be considered, I argue, as perfect examples of what Ross defines a hyper-haptic visuality<sup>3</sup>:

If the intercultural cinema that Marks examines plays upon and exploits the uncontrollable, tactile quality of images in the production of haptic visuality, then 3D cinema asserts an uncontrollable, infinite depth in its image, producing a *hyper-haptic* visuality' (2015: 24).

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<sup>3</sup> Though the scholar applies such concept only to contemporary digital 3D cinema, I believe it is actually a useful analytical tool with regards to all immersive media.



But in spite of the respective differences of their accounts, both Marks' and Ross' theories agree on the fact that audiovisual media can charge the optic faculty with tactile values. This is consistent with the aforementioned logic of Pinotti's an-iconology. But it is important to clarify that although any immersive audiovisual technology engages its viewer in tactile ways, not all of them turn the image into an illusive environment. Classic anaglyph 3D of the 1950s, for example, strived to create the impression that the objects in the narrative world and the viewer coexist in the same physical space. In order to do so, anaglyph 3D employed a range of stylistic solutions which work in a monodirectional manner, fostering the illusion that the fictional world exits the screen and 'invades' the real one, but not that the spectator can enter the image, too. Objects thrown towards the viewer threatening to hit her, or characters protruding their limbs outside the threshold of the screen, inviting the spectator to ideally touch them; these are examples of what I label figuratively as an aesthetic of invasion of the viewer's physical space. That means that the latter can be reached and penetrated by the image, whilst the fictional world is out of the spectator's reach. The spectator is not allowed to join the narrative world, and the illusion of tactile interaction is enabled only by the image exiting the boundary of the screen. Moreover, such aesthetic has persisted also in the recent revival of 3D in its new digital identity, in spite of Elsaesser's prediction that D-3D would have been primarily focused on the experimental production of non-mimetic spaces (2013: 235-240); a claim that has turned out to be wrong and too optimistic.

Instead, the immersive formats hosting travel films realise the opposite process, albeit in pursuit of the same aim (that is, establishing a haptic relationship with the spectator). They do not push the representational world outside the screen, but soak the viewer up in the representation. Both these categories of immersive devices belong to Grusin's

aesthetic of the animate, in which spectators or users feel or act as if the inanimate is animate, in which we simultaneously know that the mediated or the programmed are inanimate even while we behave as if they were animate (2006: 72).

Such effect can be achieved (at least in theory) by negating the metaphysically detached observer postulated by the optic model of spectatorial engagement characterising the arts based on the principles of the Renaissance perspective (Marks,

2002: 5). The difference lies in the strategies employed by the immersive technologies I am discussing in this article. Such strategies are smoother and less striking than the invasion of physical space performed by 3D through the illusions of objects thrown against the viewer or creatures attacking her. Rather, they rely on dissolving – instead of breaking – the boundaries of the screen, so that the resulting expanded images can envelope the viewer and address her from every direction, without producing that perceptive shock typical of 3D. These images end up being no longer recognisable as images in a conventional sense; they become environments which solicit the viewer in tactile no less than optical ways.

Therefore, I propose to term this kind of image-environments enveloping tactile images<sup>4</sup> (henceforth, ETIs), and it will be useful to further analyse the two adjectives held together in this expression, because their connection gives birth to the paradoxical and controversial aesthetics of ETIs and, thus, of immersive simulations of travels as well. To explain such claim, let's try, at first, to theoretically define what the turning of an image into an illusive environment means, applying to the task Gibson's ecology of perception. When one is unable to percept the picture frame dividing an image from physical space due to the format envisaged by the former, then the shape of such an image is not conceptually related to the archetype of a painting anymore, but approximates the boundlessness of the three-dimensional environment human beings always inhabit. So, enveloping images successfully replicate in the mediated space the basic perceptive conditions regulating the non-mediated experience of real environments. This means, according to ecology of perception, that the animal, being immersed in an environment, recognises in it what Gibson calls 'affordances', namely possibilities for interaction with the material elements (whether animate or inanimate) constituting that environment (Gibson, 2014 [1979]).

Since its original formulation in 1979, the notion of affordance has been discussed, criticised (Turvey, 1992; Scarantino, 2003; Withagen *et al.*, 2012), even contested (Oliver, 2005). Such debate is beyond the scope of this article, but what is important is

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware that these images are not actually tactile. However, I argue that the use of this term is fitting, because it points to that inconsistency – pivotal for the aesthetics of immersive technologies – between enhancement of a hyper-haptic engagement and stylistic strategies developed in order to hinder any potential actual interaction with the image. I will further discuss these aspects in the following paragraphs.

that the majority of scholars who have addressed this issue (Warren, 1984; Chemero, 2003; Heft, 2003; Michaels, 2003; Stoffregen, 2003; Penny, 2017) agrees that affordances are not unchanging properties of things, but dynamic qualities born from the relationship between a specific animal and a specific environment forming an 'animal-environment system' (Stoffregen, 2003). By accepting to define affordances as 'the actions permitted an animal by environmental objects, events, places, surfaces, people, and so forth' (Michaels, 2003: 146) and 'relations between particular aspects of animals and particular aspects of situations' (Chemero, 2003: 184), I want to stress the pivotal role played by action, and thus by the body, in experiencing an environment. Ecological psychology does not conceive its subject as the disembodied subjectivity of western culture, detached from the world of objects and exercising control upon it mainly by virtue of its gaze; more realistically, the subject is an embodied creature, a material being inhabiting a material world from no privileged position, able to exercise an agency but also to suffer the effects of the agencies of other creatures. My suggestion is that ETIs reproduce these perceptive conditions, thus promoting an aesthetic model and a form of engagement based on the recognition of affordances and the primacy of action. In other words, the perceptive asset enabled by the enveloping image invites the viewer to interact with the objects which surround her, stimulating her sense of agency. Here lies the link with Marks' and Ross' theories: the ecological validity of an enveloping image enhances the perception of affordances and thus the tactile charge of the experience and the hyper-haptic involvement suggested.

But why did I claim earlier that the aesthetics of ETIs is paradoxical and controversial? Because the arousal of the sense of agency due to the tactile stimuli provided by the image-environment is exactly what ETIs strive to hamper. This is the main point of my discussion: that albeit ETIs offer themselves as environments rather than as conventional images, nevertheless they are precisely images, meaning that they are pre-recorded artefacts which could not react in real-time and appropriately to the viewer's actions. By stating this I do not presuppose some kind of metaphysical naive spectator, 'captured in the process of being "seduced" by spectacle' (Gurevitch, 2015: 5), unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, and driven by irresistible impulses like the characters of early films such as *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901) and *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902).

Bottomore has offered an answer to reports of panicking audiences during projections of early films. Relying on psychological studies (Regan and Beverly, 1978), he has argued that basic uncontrollable responses to certain situations (i.e., of danger) can be suppressed by the development of higher competences related to cultural and social factors (2010: 190). So, spectators coming from country areas may have lacked the competences of sophisticated urban audience, and this could have resulted in actual reactions of panic in front of the images of the cinematograph. But in the case of ETIs, we already possess those competences allowing us to master the stimuli produced by immersive technologies, which are part of a visual culture of the moving image to whom we are accustomed. Therefore, the viewer is always aware of the mediated nature of these experiences, and if not, the latter would cease to be fun and entertaining (for instance, when the theme of the images is frightening or dangerous<sup>5</sup>).

The arousal of a sense of agency is, rather, a matter of quantity and balance: the more ETIs are detailed and realistic, the higher the hyper-haptic engagement and the call to interact with the environment. That means that, in the paroxysmal case that the sense of agency elicited by the enveloping format would be so high that the spectator would actually try to act on the image, then the mimetic illusion and the pleasure of the spectacle would be shattered. This would be caused by the lack of an adequate response by the images, thus revealing that mediation that the spectator pretends to not see, and that the text must keep hidden. ETIs have to play a very risky game of balancing: the more they increase their spectacular and attractional value, the more fragile and easily destroyable their illusion becomes.

To clarify this statement, it is important to stress that the recognition of affordances can happen in any audiovisual medium. If scholars have demonstrated the role played by affordances in interactive virtual environments (Regia-Corte *et al.*, 2013; Grabarczyk and Pokropski, 2016; Meyer, Draheim and von Luck, 2019), one must highlight that they can be detected also in non-interactive media such as cinema

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<sup>5</sup> Also, in the case of immersive horror experiences – which seem to derive their charm precisely by the blurring of fiction and reality – their thrills and shocks can be entertaining only if at a basic level the user remains aware of the mediation. Horror experiences can momentarily provoke physical reactions by virtue of the stylistic solutions employed, but their effects are rapidly mitigated by the resurfacing of the awareness of the fabricated essence of the images. This prevents the experience from exceeding a peak of stimulation beyond which the former would result too intense, and thus unpleasant.

(Gallese and Guerra, 2015). The difference lies in the fact that, while watching a movie, affordances are perceived through mechanisms of embodied simulation with the characters on screen (Gallese and Guerra, 2015); moreover, 'we find ourselves situated at a *safe distance* from what is being narrated on the screen' (Gallese and Guerra, 2012: 196) by virtue of the clear separation between the space of the narrative and the space of existence of the viewer. So, such a specific form of spectatorial experience does not invite actual interactions with the images. On the contrary, ETIs envelop the viewer and conceal their nature behind their appearance as environments; therefore, they develop a much stronger invitation to actual interaction, which is further enhanced accordingly with the level of believability of the images and of the intensity of the sensorial stimulation. As suggested by Grabarczyk and Pokropski, 'highly realistic images may easily lead to high expectations of an environment's affordances' (2016: 35). But the point is that ETIs are not truly interactive (nor even tactile), and thus they must be able to balance between spectacular dimension and control of potential impulses to interaction. If the realism or the intensity of the experience is too high, the spectator may be pushed to satisfy the possibility for action suggested by one of the affordances perceived, and this would immediately shutter the illusion, because the images would be incapable of producing, in real time, a reaction consistent with the spectator's action.

### **Ancestors of immersive media: *tableau vivant***

At this point, it could be useful to provide a clarifying example of such a circumstance in which direct actions on the image were executed. It is taken from Bredekamp's reflections on a medium I consider a legitimate ancestor of immersive technologies: *tableau vivant*. Bredekamp recalls the *tableaux vivants* realised for the religious parade dedicated to John the Baptist in Florence, in 1453, and especially one representing emperor Augustus. Bredekamp says that a German man, recognising in the actor, who was playing Augustus, the personification of Alphonse the V King of Aragon too, reached the chariot of the *tableau vivant* in order to attack the actor (2015 [2010]: 80). The scholar interprets this event as epitome of human beings' natural tendency to often confer value of reality and existence to images, not as the delusion of a madman. Without trying to dismiss Bredekamp's reading, which instead fits in his overall theory of the 'image act' (2015 [2010]: 36), I want to suggest an alternative explanation, which

accounts for the haptic configuration of the experience produced, maybe unintentionally, by the medium *tableau vivant*.

By erasing the distance separating the existential space of the spectator from that of the images, *tableaux vivants* create a tactile proximity with the human subject which generates intense stimuli inviting to physical interaction. Therefore, this aesthetic identity poses the logical conditions legitimating the attack by the German man, because the embodied image presents itself as installed in the same physical space shared by the viewer. From an ecological perspective, it becomes part of the environment (ceasing to be an image) and thus its components elicit affordances for interaction.

Obviously, this is a side-effect of *tableaux vivants* (and of immersive media in general), whose charm is based on the constant oscillation between annihilation and preservation of the identity of the image as such: in a *tableau vivant*, actual interaction between the image and the viewer is not supposed to happen, and if it does, the very essence of *tableaux vivants* as embodied replications of the composition of pre-existing works of art breaks down. In fact, the actions performed by the German, provoked by an irrational fury (indeed fuelled by the perception of the image as a living image), can be seen as a transgression of the implicit rules regulating the model of engagement presupposed by the medium.

So, the case of this transgressive attack testifies to the misunderstanding one could face when experiencing image-environments. As argued above, such apparently boundless images impose a system of relationships with the spectator which is founded on detecting the possibilities for interaction provided by them. But an unexpected external factor (i.e., the man's hatred for king Alphonse) could cause a temporary loosening of the consciousness of the norms which, despite the uncommon charge of tactile stimuli of the work of art, forbid any direct intervention on the latter. In this case, then, operations not allowed by the text under normal circumstances may occur. And, since non-interactive images are unable to react to the viewer's agency, the realistic illusion would be shattered and the artifice would be revealed.

Such a concise digression concerning an ancient medium like *tableau vivant* has been important for the subject of this article, because it has described a model of

spectatorial experience similar to that promoted by ETIs<sup>6</sup>. Such model presents traits which correspond to crucial shortcomings affecting the aesthetics of immersive formats and media. But it has also stressed that in spite of such shortcomings, these technologies do precisely strive for an enhancement of the viewer's hyper-haptic faculty, with the purpose of making her feel immersed into a tangible situation not limited to the frontal observation of a representation, and which asks for an active engagement of one's own body in order to be fully enjoyed. So, it is necessary to address now the topic of the strategies employed by immersive media in order to maintain a stable balancing between attractational power of physical immersion in the enveloping image and avoidance of its degenerating into performed actions whose outcome would be the destruction of the illusive and fascinating effects of the images.

### **Immersed, yet distant**

First of all, a recurring method to reduce the tactile stimulation and the sense of agency to implicit allusions while preserving the psychological and perceptive condition of immersion in the image-environment is that the elements of the latter do not directly address the spectator. Thereby, she feels herself as present in the virtual space of ETIs, but as an invisible entity rather than as an actual actor. This stylistic choice can take two forms, one smoother and the other more radical in their effects on the viewer's self-perception, with good examples of both coming from the old medium of panoramas. In the case of the former, let's consider landscape panoramas: here, the absence of living beings crystallises the scene in a dimension beyond time, so that the viewer is immersed in the environment but at the same time occupies a position of supremacy over it. Since in this typology of panoramas there are no living beings depicted, it is difficult for the spectator to recognise affordances in the representation. Plus, she is not addressed as an embodied subject whose body could suffer the effects of the agency exerted by others. The spectator is reduced to a detached and contemplative eye, and, thus, her being physically installed in the apparatus becomes superfluous.

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Bredekamp discusses *tableaux vivants* as direct ancestors of immersive technologies, due to the fact that the forms of experience fostered by both are based on the blurring of the threshold between space of the viewer and space of the fiction (2015 [2010]: 91).

The latter, more radical solution is related to those circumstances in which the characters do not see and recognise the viewer, or in which her body seems to possess a ghost-like consistency, making her unable to touch or interact with the environment. A recent example of this is the VR experience *Carne y Arena*, directed by Alejandro Iñárritu in 2017: the spectator witnesses the tragic experience of Mexican men and women crossing the border with the United States, chased and threatened by the American police. The spectator can explore the virtual environment, but cannot intervene in the events in order to help the Mexicans. However, in *Carne y Arena* (whose subtitle is, not by chance, *virtually present, physically invisible*) such intangibility of the body serves a precise expressive purpose, that is, to make the viewer feel what Montani has brilliantly defined as a sense of ‘interpassivity’ (2017: 136). Namely, being there but as a subjectivity forcefully devoid of any agency, therefore as a passive victim of a cruel situation, just like the Mexican people.

So, in *Carne y Arena* the disembodied spectator is a sign of authorship, but usually in immersive media it is just a necessary and unjustified precondition to disrupt any potential interaction with the image. Returning to panoramas, an example of this latter case is provided by the narrative panorama *The Battle of Sedan*, realised by Anton von Werner in 1883, which depicts the homonymous battle that took place during the Franco-Prussian War. Considering that this work promises to immerse the viewer in the event in order to make her relive it in all its spectacular and dramatic charge, it would be legitimate to expect the spectator to be somehow involved in the narrative. Instead, the characters never address her position, and this is even more relevant if one focuses the attention on the realistic features presented by *The Battle of Sedan*, discussed by Oliver Grau:

Abandoned fieldwork tools, weapons, knapsacks, and coats, a broken-down baggage wagon, deep ruts running through the clay soil of the ‘terrain’, grasses, shrubs, branches and stones, as well as the cap made of cloth and patent leather, lost by a Chasseur—all these properties were plastic and [...] ‘natural enough to touch’ (2003: 106).

Such qualities, combined with the immersive format of panoramas, give birth to an aesthetics of hyper-hapticity and tactile engagement; nevertheless, the work forces its



viewer to take a disembodied position which weakens that aesthetics, once again in order to avoid direct contact with the image.

Moreover, these effects of dis-embodiment are also achieved by virtue of the physical position assigned to the viewer by the medium. As originally designed in 1787 by its inventor, the British painter Robert Barker, panorama was a circular canvas whose dimensions and form were designed in such a way that the spectator could see any element of the image without perspective distortions if – and only if – she stood still on a platform located at the centre of the canvas. Thus, it is true that panoramas installed the viewer inside the image, but they also established an unbridgeable distance between them. The result was that, by imposing norms and prohibiting certain behaviours, panoramas granted the viewer ‘a perfect, commanding view of the painted horizon’ (Grau, 2003: 57).

By now, I hope it is clear why I have titled this article ‘immersed, yet distant’: when experiencing ETIs, the viewer is indeed in a condition of perceptive immersion (namely, she is surrounded by the circular format of the images), but she is also placed at a spatial and logical distance from the events depicted which condemns her body to the inability to be addressed by or to interact with the environment. These considerations on the media analysed thus far allow me to draw the following theoretical conclusion: that in spite of the tactile engagement they carry, ETIs betray their own hyper-haptic aesthetics and ultimately reaffirm that very optic logic of Renaissance perspective they seemed to fight against. In fact the viewer, forced to keep only a certain position and unrecognised by the environment, is reduced to a detached gaze, her bodily presence dissimulated by the style adopted by the work; so that the viewer truly corresponds to Grau’s ‘commanding view’ (2003: 57), and the world of the fiction is nothing but a collection of objects to visually master and consume. According to this interpretation, it is now useful to discuss how the theme of the travel matches the aesthetic requirements of ETIs.

### **Immersive travels**

The theme of the travel represents a great narrative source for immersive media because the experience they reproduce is based precisely on such a condition of ‘immersion from a distance’. When one travels by vehicle, one is surrounded by the environment but also naturally distant from it due to being physically located inside

the vehicle. Schivelbusch, in his insightful study of the railway journey in the nineteenth century, has labelled this experience ‘panoramic perception’:

Panoramic perception, in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belonged to the same space as the perceived objects: the traveler saw the objects, landscapes, etc. *through* the apparatus which moved him through the world. That machine and the motion it created became integrated into his visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion. That mobility of vision — for a traditionally orientated sensorium, [...] an agent for the dissolution of reality — became a prerequisite for the ‘normality’ of panoramic vision. This vision no longer experienced evanescence: evanescent reality had become the new reality (2014 [1977]: 75-76).

Such inherent evanescence of vision represents a specific trait of panoramic perception, whose legitimacy can be extended also to later means of transportation, like automobiles and aeroplanes. Moreover, Schivelbusch’s evanescent reality points out the paradoxical condition of the traveller, who experiences a shocking intensification in perception of the landscape, but is at the same time detached from it. In fact, it was impossible for the traveller to acquire a clear and steady mental representation of the places seen through the window, due to the speed of the moving vehicle reducing them to changing kinetic lines:

Hurling through space in the body of the train (conceived as a projectile), as if being shot through the landscape, travelers experienced the loss of the foreground, and thus the homogeneity of space between them and the view outside of the window. This was experienced as a loss of depth perception (Kirby, 1997: 45).

This experiential configuration has been replicated by genres such as early phantom rides, or later by avant-garde films, which were fascinated precisely by the disruptive perceptive effects of fast motion. Compared to the traditional theatrical screening of these films, immersive cinematographic formats – like the aforementioned *Hale’s Tours* and 4D Cinema – add the implementation of the space of exhibition, which is transformed in a mimetic environment simulating the interior of the vehicle and hosting expanded images which envelop the audience. Since these media reproduce the situation of being placed inside a vehicle, surrounded by the landscape but also spatially separated from it, it is possible for the spectator to be enveloped by the images without also being haptically stimulated to interact with them. Besides, the fact that one can see the environment through the windows of a car or a train, namely not just

from a frontal perspective, but also from lateral ones, legitimates the use of expanded screens, whose enveloping effect is paramount in providing the illusion of being spatially present in a virtual/fictional world, according to Lombard and Ditton's claim that the bigger the dimensions of the image, the more intense the viewer's responses related to the feeling of presence (1997).

I want to point out the specific theoretical importance of *Hale's Tours* and 4D Cinema for this study of the aesthetics of immersive technologies, because they add to the latter a feature that panoramas and *tableaux vivants* did not possess. As explained above, panoramas and *tableaux vivants* constrained the viewer in an undesired condition of dis-embodiment. Instead, *Hale's Tours* and 4D Cinema technically reconfigure the physical space hosting the screening as part of the immersive simulation of travel. Mechanical gears such as seats shaking or reclining, and tricks producing simulations of atmospheric phenomena, affect the body directly, thus arousing in the viewer a strong awareness of the embodied nature of the experience. Therefore, *Hale's Tours* and 4D Cinema strengthen the spectator's sense of ownership of her own body, which represents the counterpart to the sense of agency in human experience of an environment. In fact, the sense of ownership can be defined as the awareness of possessing a physical body, acquired by suffering the effects of the agencies of other beings on such body. As Gregersen and Grodal state, 'we are agents that influence the world, and we may also be patients, that is: objects of other agents' actions or events unfolding around us' (2009: 65).

Applied to media analysis, this means that in order to make the viewer feel spatially present in the virtual world, it is not enough to provide her with an agency; it is necessary to stimulate the passive aspect of the body enduring others' actions, too. That is, the viewer must recognise herself as able to satisfy the possibilities for action provided by the environment, but also as a subject that, being embodied, can suffer the effects of the actions executed by other beings. As I have argued, non-interactive immersive media must lessen the sense of agency so that actions which would shatter the realistic illusion are prevented. So, immersive travel films compensate for this by directly involving the body as a factor in the mediated experience, although only in its passive dimension, whilst preserving the logical segregation between spectator and images. An example of this is provided by the simulation of a space travel, a common theme for 4D Cinema experiences. The viewer can see the outer space through the

windows of the spaceship, but she is not pushed to interact because the objects and beings she sees are out of her reach. However, her body is passively stimulated by tricks such as the reclining seats, or air flows sprayed towards her, which aim at reproducing and exalting the spectacular thrills of extremely fast motion.

In this way, immersive travel films strive to produce a truly synaesthetic experience, not dissimilar to those designed by a variety of – today largely forgotten – hybrid cinematic systems: it is useful to mention, at least, Morton Heilig's Sensorama (patented in 1957), an archetypal form of Virtual Reality devices; Smell-O-Vision (employed for Jack Cardiff's *Scent of Mystery*, 1960) and Odorama (developed by John Waters for his *Polyester*, 1981), both aiming at enriching film spectatorship with the sense of smell; and Sensurround, used in *Earthquake* (directed by Mark Robson in 1974), which made the seats shake during the scenes representing the earthquake. It is important to stress that all these technologies bear a unilateral model of tactile engagement. Namely they blur the boundaries between physical world and image world and, acting on the material space surrounding the viewer, they figuratively touch her, thus involving the body in the experience but without letting it exercise any haptic agency. So, I suggest that immersive travel films – with their enveloping but not interactive, immersive but distancing aesthetics – must be analysed as perfect examples of an 'optical tactily'. This concept has been proposed by Carrillo Quiroga as explicitly opposed to Marks' hapticity and used as a theoretical tool for the study of stereoscopic formats. According to the scholar, optical tactility describes those immersive experiences which tend to erase that very sense of proximity which was paramount in the theory of the haptic:

tri-dimensional images entail a mode of vision that does not rely on closeness or proximity, qualities intrinsic to the sense of touch. Instead, optical tactility is implicated in the visual display of texture and a precise detail of visual volume (2017: 253).

Optical tactility presupposes a logical and physical distance between viewer and image, and reinforces Ross' hyper-hapticity by directly stating that the specific tactile pleasures derived from the hyper-realist traits of the representation are determined by a calculated subtraction of the viewer's agency (a process not necessarily affecting her sense of ownership of the body, too).

### **Immersive travels and narrative**

The last theme I believe must be discussed is the conflictual relationship between immersive technologies and narrative. From a historical perspective, cinema rapidly dethroned the popular stereoscopic devices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the latter did not disappear altogether. Instead, as argued by Gurevitch, stereoscopy survived as ‘a continual and popularly embraced technique applied to multiple media forms’ (2013: 403), cyclically re-emerging in a variety of formats, including the immersive technologies I am discussing in this article. However, these media never succeeded in regaining a position of dominance in the market of audiovisual entertainment over the rectangular, flat screen of conventional cinematic experience, and the model of detached vision it bears. The formats of the 1950s all disappeared after a brief burst of popularity, the hybrid systems designed to provide a synaesthetic engagement were soon dismissed due to their inaccurate and bizarre outcomes, and today 4D Cinema (in another remarkable similarity with the *Hale’s Tours*) is confined, as a special attraction, to amusement parks. One of the reasons behind this apparently inevitable marginality could be found in the fact that, at the current state of their technical development, immersive media seem unsuitable for accomplishing the duty of which mainstream cinema has been historically invested, namely to tell stories through images. The topic of immersive storytelling is open and complex, and one must not make the mistake of formulating simplistic judgements<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, if one analyses the state-of-the-art of the technologies I am discussing, it would seem that, in the best case scenario, immersive media cannot add any important feature to cinematic storytelling. In the worst one, they diminish the power and scope of cinematic storytelling, because the technical specificities of their material apparatuses make it difficult to develop a complex story through editing and camera movements. Thus, immersive media appear suited to show only brief travel scenes, which are convincing as attractions but inconsistent from a narrative point of view.

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<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is important to differentiate between various forms of immersive technologies. Virtual Reality, for example, has achieved high technical and aesthetic standards, such that VR movies and videogames seem now capable of developing long and compelling narratives. But the same cannot be claimed for a medium like 4D Cinema, whose material infrastructure appears to be at odds with purposes of storytelling.

What should be remarked is that, paradoxically, ETIs strive to provide an impression of realism superior to that of traditional bidimensional screenings by transforming the place of projection itself in an immersive narrative space. But precisely this heightened realism ends up hindering that very storytelling it promises to bring to an all new level of engagement for the spectator. As noted by John Belton in his analysis of expanded cinematic formats of the 1950s, 'the 'greater realism' produced by the new technology was understood, it would seem, as a kind of excess, which was in turn packaged as spectacle' (1992: 202). Such excess pushes the higher sensorial stimulation and sense of co-presence of spectator and image in the same haptic space to the point that they annihilate the rules of classical cinematic grammar, whose logic serves to foster spectatorial identification with the characters. A startling example of that is represented by one of the most advanced forms of immersive cinema of 1950s: Cinerama, a system (inspired by Abel Gance's experimental Polyvision, used for many scenes of the movie *Napoleon*, in 1927) based on three synchronus projections on a curved screen, resulting in extraordinarily large images which provided amazing depictions of landscapes but prevented the cameras from approaching the characters (whose traits would have been distorted by the wide angle of the lenses) too closely. It is telling that *This is Cinerama* (Merian C. Cooper, 1952), the documentary intended as a demonstration of the power of the new technique, is structured as nothing more than a collection of short stand-alone scenes – furthermore, it opens with a rollercoaster ride sequence, thus establishing an explicit line of continuity with phantom rides. Due to its fragmented identity, what *This is Cinerama* was truly already demonstrating was Cinerama's inherent deficiency in storytelling. Producers and directors were surely aware of that, and in fact the majority of the few films shot using Cinerama followed the model of Cooper's film, namely documentaries composed of independent scenes held together by a thin thematic unit. So, the excessive visual spectacle of Cinerama reduced the aesthetic scope of the latter to a primitive *découpage*, therefore dooming it to a premature demise. The high production cost of Cinerama films, combined with their lack of appeal for the spectator who just wished to enjoy a compelling story, made them economically unsustainable, vanishing the cautious hopes of those who, like André Bazin, saw in the early appearance of Cinerama the possibility for a renewal of cinematic language (Andrew, 2014).

However, there were attempts to produce markedly narrative films in Cinerama, the most ambitious of them surely being *How the West Was Won* (1962), directed by the three masters of the western genre Henry Hathaway, John Ford and George Marshall, and conceived as a sort of ultimate epic spectacle aiming at (re)telling the mythical foundation of modern United States by employing the most advanced technology of the time. Sadly, the aesthetic shortcomings discussed above did not spare *How the West Was Won* either, and the film could be judged as a failure from a stylistic standpoint. The impossibility of using cinematic language to set up mechanisms of identification and empathy with the characters, and to invest the latter of a strong psychological background, forced the directors to adopt the same structure of the previous documentaries, so that the epic narrative ended up reversed in its opposite. The result was, in fact, a fragmented, discontinuous and unbalanced story, full of stereotypical characters and composed of unrelated episodes.

But what is most interesting for the purposes of this article, is to note that in order to cope with these narrative flaws, *How the West Was Won* heavily relies on the theme of the journey, presented in an enveloping form and with an attractional rather than narrative function. That means, returning to King's distinction between spectacle and narrative discussed above, that the numerous shots of places and landscapes do not serve a narrative purpose (that is, adding new information to the story); instead, they offer the pure display of remote and picturesque places, magnified by the technology. In *How the West Was Won* the schemes of the western are inscribed between a prologue and an epilogue recalling the aesthetics of travelogue films. The first shot after the overture is an aerial shot over the Rocky Mountains, whose flying point of view is very unusual for the western genre, and which is used to immerse the viewer in the archetypical landscape of the wilderness of the Far West. While the final sequence, still composed of aerial shots, links the past of the Wild West with the present, flying over the symbols of civilization (cultivated fields, highways, bridges, skyscrapers). Moreover, both the starting and ending sequences are accompanied by a voice over conferring epic value to the travelogue images projected, in the attempt to tie them more to a narrative meaning than to a spectacular one. But in spite of this unsuccessful intervention of re-interpretation of the visual contents, it is clear that these scenes are intended to amaze and astonish the spectator, in a purely attractional manner, and to configure the space traversed as an enveloping environment with which she cannot interact.

The case of *How the West Was Won* demonstrates the prominence of the semantics of the travelogue in immersive media even when the movie is primarily conceived as a narrative experience. It is not surprising that travelogues have offered a set of cheap formal cliches for documentaries such as *Cinerama Holiday* (Robert Benedick, Philippe De Lacy, 1955), *Seven Wonders of the World* (Tay Garnett, Paul Mantz, Andrew Marton, Ted Tetzlaff, Walter Thompson, 1956) or *Search for Paradise* (Otto Lang, 1957), which present exotic and folkloristic images of touristic sites or faraway places. Much more remarkable is that storytelling itself is affected and influenced by the attractational power of immersive journeys.

### Conclusion

In this article I have tried to introduce and justify a few theoretical concepts as part of a more general aesthetic theory of immersive media, which are deeply interwoven with the cross-media genre of the travelogue. I have proposed the concept of enveloping tactile images, which strive to conceal their nature as images by presenting themselves as complex environments. Then, I have analysed how they employ a variety of stylistic strategies in order to weaken the sense of agency aroused by the higher realistic illusion that they provide but cannot actually fulfil. I have stated that their spectator is immersed, yet distant, namely she is stimulated in her sense of ownership but not in the active sense of agency, because her body is kept at a safe distance from the objects of the representation and can be touched by them but cannot touch in turn. Finally, I have discussed the fact that their unparalleled mimetic capacity carries on, nevertheless, the inability to develop gratifying narratives, which is the reason why they seem doomed to never earn the status of works of art or expressive forms.

The topics discussed in this article represent just a small part of the problems brought up by immersive media. Further research is needed, especially on complex themes such as the relationship between immersive technologies and storytelling, or the effective role of the body in the mediated experience. My hope is that the concepts developed here may have proposed a new perspective on media forms which constitute an important part of our contemporary mediascape, and that they may be useful for future debate in this field of research.



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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**Nicolas BILCHI** is a PhD graduate of Roma Tre University in “Paesaggi della città contemporanea. Politiche, tecniche e studi visuali”. His research is primarily focused on interactive media such as videogame and Virtual Reality, dealing with the themes of presence and immersion, studied from an ecological perspective. He is author of the book *Cinema e videogame. Narrazioni, estetiche, ibridazioni* (Unicopli, Milano 2019) and has published for the journal *Imago. Studi di cinema e media* and *Cinergie – Il cinema e le altre arti*.

