Archaeologies of the Virtual.
Attractions, Senses, Narratives

edited by Anna Caterina Dalmasso (University of Milan), Wanda Strauven (Goethe University Frankfurt), Simone Venturini (University of Udine)

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Even though it is often presented as an unprecedented technology, virtual reality (VR) is a new medium as much as it is an old one and an imaginary one. On the one hand, if the first VR experiments date from the 1960s, virtual technologies have been long foreshadowed by intermedia fictional worlds, that still nourish the imaginary texture of VR and even seem to dictate the agenda of its concretisation – as in the case of the Metaverse metaphor originated in the 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. On the other hand, virtual interfaces have been anticipated by the virtualization of visuality, that took shape during the 19th century in dispositifs like the panorama and the diorama (Friedberg 1993), and have been prefigured by the multifarious attempts to realise the immersion of the spectator, which can be traced back to the most ancient forms of human art (Grau 2003, Nechvatal 2009).

This issue aims to investigate the present state of the art of virtual technologies against the background of recent and past cinema and media history and theory, by drawing on a threefold articulation:

– *Attractions and environments*
Immersive interactive environments have come to challenge contemporary spectatorship and audio-visual creation. By triggering our bodies to respond as though the experience they convey were real, VR interfaces offer us intense thrills, awe, and goose bumps. In order to enter CAVEs and to wear head-mounted displays, VR spectators are brought back to fairs and arcades, where they strive to get themselves accustomed to the new medium, as much as moviegoers of the early 20th century crowded into theatres not to watch films, but, rather, to experience cinema. Likewise, nowadays, immersive experiences renovate an emphasis on spectacle and monstration over narrative, since

what becomes most captivating for the audience is the sensorial impact of the medium itself. Featuring rollercoasters, wanderings in outer space, flight simulators, and so forth, many of the contents that are offered to immersive users remediate the exotic fascination raised by *travelogues* and curiosities. Furthermore, virtual creations are also the locus for cinephilia (as they reinterpret classic movie genres, like horror, science fiction, and documentary) and for creative cinematic reuses and archiving practices (*Montegelato* 2021), which thematize the remediations that are afoot (*The Horrifically Real Virtuality* 2018, *Cesare's Dream – In the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 2019).

An account of immersive virtual environments could find in the concept of cinematic "attraction(s)" coined in the mid-1980s by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault (Gaudreault & Gunning 1989, Gunning 1990, Strauven 2006) a decisive theoretical framework to reassess their position within a broader spectrum of moving image culture, but also to critically reframe the spectacularity of present-day virtual contents in the policing of public discourse. What are the differences and discontinuities between early cinema attractions and their current rearticulations, in terms of affective engagement, ideologies and theoretical models underlying our relationship to technology? How does it mean for the creators to design an environment to be experienced (rather than an image), and for the experiencer to become the "centre of attraction" of the image-making process?

– *Materiality and the senses*

VR technologies are commonly presented and understood as a dematerialisation of human experience. This is in contrast with the hypermediation (Bolter, Grusin 1999) of virtual interfaces and in particular with the fact that the gestures and bodily movements of the spectator are precisely the source of the actualisation of the virtual image. Hence, a comprehensive account of virtual environments needs to bring the focus back on the material conditions of the sensory encounter with immersive media.

During the 20th century, movie theatres displayed a tension towards an immersive format – from Polyvision to the geodesic domes – as a propitiatory device able to better ensure the passage from the physical to the virtual space. Today, the experience of the virtual image is delimited by new rituals, like the performative gesture of tracing the so-called guardian, outlining the grid that delimitates the experiencer's operations in virtual environments (Grespi 2021). VR productions come to redesign the collective and individual spaces of reception, through festivals and happenings, but are also reshaping the system of distribution, as well as the material infrastructures and normative protocols of spectatorship, that need to be investigated in the light of a long-range trajectory. Interactive VR interfaces rely on the generation of sensori-motor stimuli that are coherent with the functioning of human perception of space (Slater 2009) as much as on the design of site-specific installations and props to match with haptic feedbacks the visuality of virtual environments. Only through a multisensory approach it is possible to account for the visceral, sensual involvement triggered by immersive interactive environments. In this respect, VR seems to bring into being the way early and classic film theories described the sensorial impact of cinema: by envisioning the prospect of a "total cinema" (Barjavel 1944, Bazin 1946) film theory prefigured the future of cinema as an immersive medium with an eminently multisensory vocation, while the domain of cinematic creation engaged in countless attempts to enhance film experience with tridimensional projection and stereoscopic depth, but also with spatialized sound effects, proprioceptive, haptic, and even gustatory and olfactory stimulations (Eisenstein 1947, Barnier & Kitsopanidou 2015, Spence 2020, Khot & Yi 2020, Barnier 2020, Strauven 2021).

– *Imaginaries and narratives*

By providing the illusion of being in a world other than our physical location, virtual interfaces revive the *topos* of the (supposedly) naïve spectator that characterised early cinema (Elsaesser 1990) – from the myth of the terrified reactions to *L'arrivée du train à*

la gare de la Ciotat up to the different variation of *Uncle Josh*'s credulity – and the manifold attempts to provoke a blurring of the threshold between the physical space and the image world (Pinotti 2021). This was made possible especially by optical immersive devices such as magic lantern, panorama, phantasmagoria, stereoscopic and peep media (Oettermann 1980, Huhtamo 2013, Grespi & Violi 2019, Grossi 2021).

Even before the creation of Morton Heilig's "Stereoscopic-Television Apparatus" and Ivan Sutherland's "Sword of Damocles", the very first head-mounted display systems, the advent of VR technologies had long been foreshadowed by literature (Burton 1860, Bioy-Casares 1940), comics (*Ghost in the Shell* 1989-1991), science fiction films (*The Student of Prague* (1913, 1926), *Tron* (1982), *Brainstorm* (1984), *Total Recall* (1990), *Until the End of the World* (1991), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Strange Days* (1995), *eXistenZ* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999-2021), *The Congress* (2014), *Ready Player One* (2018), to name a few), and television series (from *Star Trek* 1966-1969 to *Roar* 2022), becoming part of the technoculture imaginary (Chan 2014).

More broadly, the possibility to create bridges between the physical world and invisible realities, to overlap spaces and temporalities, inaugurated by virtual environments can be traced back to the human attempts to evoke the supernatural through spiritualism, magical devices (Gunning 2021), and even to some of the most ancient forms of divination (Dalmasso 2019). Providing a historical parallax, media-archaeological investigations could bring into light latent aspects of contemporary virtual media practice, revealing the different layers of a longstanding drive: the desire to transcend the limitations of physical embodiment.

Topics that could be addressed include (but are not limited to):

- genealogies of immersive media in early cinema and cinema of attractions
- prefigurations of virtual reality in film narratives and television series
- forms of multisensory cinema as precursor of virtual immersive environments
- infrastructures and architectural spaces as catalyst of immersive spectatorship
- archaeologies of optical immersive dispositifs (magic lantern, panoramas, phantasmagoria, stereoscopic and peep media, and so on)
- VR cinema production and distribution systems reviving the spaces of cinematic reception (festivals, fairs, arcades)
- theories of cinematic participatory spectatorship and interactive spect-actorship
- early and classic film theories addressing cinema as an immersive and multisensory medium
- film genres and VR cinema (aesthetic strategies, clichés, and debates)
- cinematic reuse and archiving practices in VR
- historical and media-archaeological approach of contemporary VR (*topoi*, survivances, imaginary media)
- the notion of virtual and virtual visuality and the relationship between the virtual and the real in film and media theory

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Submission details

Please send your abstract (from 300 to 500 words, in English or French) and a short biographical note to annacaterina.dalmasso@unimi.it by **September 15th, 2022** — [subject: CfE #40 — C&C + name surname author(s)].
Authors will be notified of abstract proposal acceptance by September 30th, 2022.
If the proposal is accepted, the author(s) will be asked to submit the full article (in English or French) by **November 30th, 2022**.
All article submissions should include: 5 keywords, name of author(s), institutional affiliation, contacts details and a short bio for each author.
The articles must not exceed 5,000/6,000-words.
Submission of a paper will be taken to imply that it is unpublished and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.
Contributions will be submitted to double blind peer review.
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