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Table of Contents

Christian G. Allesch <i>An Early Concept of 'Psychological Aesthetics' in the 'Age of Aesthetics'</i>	1-12
Martine Berenpas <i>The Monstrous Nature of Art — Levinas on Art, Time and Irresponsibility</i>	13-23
Alicia Bermejo Salar <i>Is Moderate Intentionalism Necessary?</i>	24-36
Nuno Crespo <i>Forgetting Architecture — Investigations into the Poetic Experience of Architecture</i>	37-51
Alexandre Declos <i>The Aesthetic and Cognitive Value of Surprise</i>	52-69
Thomas Dworschak <i>What We Do When We Ask What Music Is</i>	70-82
Clodagh Emoe <i>Inaesthetics — Re-configuring Aesthetics for Contemporary Art</i>	83-113
Noel Fitzpatrick <i>Symbolic Misery and Aesthetics — Bernard Stiegler</i>	114-128

Carlo Maria Fossaluzza & Ian Verstegen <i>An Ontological Turn in the Philosophy of Photography</i>	129-141
Philip Freytag <i>The Contamination of Content and the Question of the Frame</i>	142-157
Rob van Gerwen <i>Artists' Experiments and Our Issues with Them — Toward a Layered Definition of Art Practice</i>	158-180
Geert Gooskens <i>Immersion</i>	181-189
James R. Hamilton <i>The 'Uncanny Valley' and Spectating Animated Objects</i>	190-207
Iris Laner <i>Learning by Viewing — Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of the Practical Value of Aesthetic Experience</i>	208-228
Jerrold Levinson <i>Blagues Immorales</i>	229-244
Shelby L. J. Moser <i>Perceiving Digital Interactivity — Applying Kendall Walton's 'Categories of Art' to Computer Art</i>	245-257
Vítor Moura <i>Seeing-From — Imagined Viewing and the Role of Hideouts in Theatre</i>	258-275
Lynn Parrish <i>Tensions in Hegelian Architectural Analysis — A Re-Conception of the Spatial Notions of the Sacred and Profane</i>	276-285
Francesca Pérez Carreño <i>Sentimentality as an Ethical and Aesthetic Fault</i>	286-304
Christopher Poole <i>The Fall of Reason and the Rise of Aesthetics</i>	305-315
Mateusz Salwa <i>The Garden — Between Art and Ecology</i>	316-327

Lisa Katharin Schmalzried <i>Kant on Human Beauty</i>	328-343
Albert van der Schoot <i>Musical Sublimity and Infinite Sehnsucht — E.T.A. Hoffmann on the Way from Kant to Schopenhauer</i>	344-354
Pieter Shmugliakov <i>Transcendentality of Art in Kant's Third Critique</i>	355-366
Kristina Soldati <i>Meaningful Exemplification — On Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'</i>	367-378
Valerijs Vinogradovs <i>Kant's Multiplicity</i>	379-401
Ken Wilder <i>Las Meninas, Alois Riegl, and the 'Problem' of Group Portraiture</i>	402-421
Mark Windsor <i>Art and Magic, or, The Affective Power of Images</i>	422-435
Pavel Zahrádka <i>Does "Great" Art Exist? A Critique of the Axiological Foundations of the Artistic Canon</i>	436-456
Zsófia Zvolenszky <i>Artifactualism and Authorial Creation</i>	457-469

Immersion

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I discuss the concept of immersion. Immersion is a mental state that occurs when you have an experience of being present in a represented environment. I will argue against two existing accounts of immersion. First, against an account that claims the immersive experience is a kind of illusion. Second against an account that claims the immersive experience is kind of imagination. As an alternative to these two positions, I will defend the view that immersion is a special variety of pictorial experience.

In this paper, I discuss the concept of immersion. Immersion is a mental state that occurs when you have an experience of being present, not in a real, but in a represented environment. Think, for example, of playing a video game that involves a spaceship. When asked to describe your location, you could say something like “I’m in a spaceship”. By this utterance, you express a sensation of being present in the environment projected on your computer screen.

The description of immersion as “the feeling of being present in a represented environment” is quite vague. Luckily, some philosophers and communication theorist have attempted to provide a more detailed description of immersion. In the following, I will critically review two such attempts. More specifically, I will discuss an account that claims immersion is a kind of illusion and an account that claims it is a kind of imagination. After having rejected these two accounts, I will defend the view that immersion is a special kind of pictorial experience.

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1. Immersion as Illusion

One of the first detailed descriptions of immersion has not been provided by philosophers, but by two communication theorists: Lombard and Ditton.¹ In this section, I will briefly summarize and criticize their view on immersion.

Lombard and Ditton claim that if a person experiences immersion, she undergoes ‘a perceptual illusion of non-mediation’. They give the following description of this mental state:

... an illusion of non-mediation occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in her communication environment and responds as she would if the medium were not there.²

This quote contains two important claims. First, that immersion depends on the *transparency* of the medium. Immersion would only occur if the subject remains unaware of the mediating technology (computer, screen, mouse). Second, the quote implies that immersion somehow involves *false beliefs*. If the medium is transparent, the user would respond as if the medium were not there, even though, in reality, it is of course there. In the case of the video game with the spaceship, the player’s response to the sensory information on her screen could be fear. Unaware of the mediated character of her experience, she would really take herself to be in a spaceship and be frightened.

Contrary to Lombard and Ditton, I do not think that immersion requires a viewer to ‘fail to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium’ in her actual environment. Consider the case of playing the video game *Grand Theft Auto 4* on a mobile device like the *Playstation Vita*.³ This, I think, constitutes a case of immersion that doesn’t involve a failure to acknowledge the mediated nature of the experience. Immersion occurs in this case, as the player typically feels present in the space on the screen of

¹ Lombard, Matthew & Ditton, Theresa (1997), ‘At the Heart of it All: The Concept of Presence’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 3 (2), <http://onlineibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x/abstract>

² Ibid.

³ Example here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BIFA4tsk3o>

the *Vita*. When asked to specify her location, she can refer to a reference point in the space on her screen. She might, for example, say “I am in the southern part of Liberty City” (the fictional city the game takes place in) when asked to specify her location. She would thereby linguistically articulate her experience of ‘being there’. At the same time, however, it is virtually impossible for the player *not* to acknowledge the mediated character of her experience. The *Vita* is a device with a small screen, surrounded by a big black box and buttons that are clearly visible. It is difficult to remain oblivious to the fact that this device is the cause of the immersive experience. This example shows that there are cases of immersion that do not involve a perceptual illusion of mediation depending on the complete transparency of the mediating technology. A perception of the mediating technology is not an obstacle for immersion.

The general problem underlying Lombard and Ditton’s account, it that their construal of the class of immersive media is too narrow. They only seem to take into account full-fledged simulation systems with headsets that fill up one’s entire field of vision with depictions and forget that many immersive media do not entirely block out our awareness of physical reality. Furthermore, I think Lombard and Ditton’s account even runs into problems when describing the experience caused by these full-fledged simulation systems. Even if a user wears virtual reality glasses that completely block out physical reality, this does not guarantee she thinks she actually is in the represented space. Even if the sensory information is life-like, the belief that she is really there is blocked by her memory of, for example, having put on the headset a few moments earlier. Hence, it is doubtful if a user of such a system experiences an illusion of non-mediation as described by Lombard and Ditton.

The idea that the immersive experience somehow involves the user having the false belief that she is actually in the represented space, is mistaken. As the illusion account always involves such a connection between immersion and false belief, it should be rejected.

2. Immersion as Imagination

An alternative account, offered by Grant Tavinor, suggests that the immersive experience is imaginary in nature.⁴ In this section, I will briefly summarize this view and criticize it.

According to Tavinor, engaging with fictional worlds, depends on the cognitive attitude of make-believe. This also includes the experience of feeling present in fictional spaces: the sensation of being there would be a matter of the imagination. If the player of a video game claims to be ‘in a spaceship’ she makes this claim because she imagines she is there. Her utterance is comparable to a child that says ‘I am holding a sword’ whilst actually holding a tree branch.

This view has one clear advantage over the illusion account: imagination is consistent with disbelief. You can imagine p without any inclination to believe p . A child can imagine a branch to be a sword, without believing it is. The imagination account of immersion, for this reason, can account for more cases of immersion than the illusion account. Whilst the latter requires perfect transparency of the mediating technology, the former does not. In the case of *Grand Theft Auto 4* played on the *Vita*, for example, the player’s utterance “I am in Liberty City” is no indication of false belief. It is rather a sign of the player engaging in a game of make-believe. Like the child that claims she is holding a sword (without actually believing that she does), the player of the video game claims she is in the space represented on her screen (without actually believing she is there).

The imagination account of immersion is better than the illusion account, but still flawed. My argument against the imagination account runs as follows: What is represented does not need to be imagined in order to be experienced (*premise 1*). Immersive media represent the user as being present in the represented space (*premise 2*). Hence, immersion does not depend on a user imagining she is in the represented space (*conclusion*). In the following, I will clarify the premises of my argument against the ima-

⁴ Grant Tavinor (2009), *The Art of Video Games*. Especially the chapters ‘Video Games and Fiction’ and ‘Stepping into fictional worlds.’ have relevance. According to Tavinor, video games are fictions. Like all fictions, they “invite their appreciators to psychologically engage with a world existing only in the imagination.” Immersion “depends on the cognitive attitude of make-believe...”, that is, it depends on the imagination (p. 59).

gination account.

Let's start with the first premise: what is represented does not need to be imagined to be experienced. In support of this claim, consider the following case. Suppose someone asks you to imagine that your father has purple hair. In order to do this, your imagination will have to do some work and construe a 'mental image' of your father with purple hair. Now consider walking into a room where there is a portrait of your father having purple hair. In this case, your imagination will not have to construe a 'mental image' for you to experience your father as having purple hair. The portrait leaves little to the imagination as it already represents him as having purple hair. If an object *O* is represented as having a feature *x*, no imagination is necessary to experience *O* as being *x*. Representation makes imagination obsolete.

Now let's turn to the second premise: immersive media represent viewers as being in the represented space. Immersive media contain a mechanism for representing the viewer as present in the represented space. What is this mechanism? There are two crucial components: (1) the representation of a body and (2) a certain amount of control viewers have over that represented body. I briefly discuss how (1) and (2) are necessary and sufficient conditions for immersion.

What is a represented body? It is important not to construe this first condition for the representation of viewer presence too narrow. Bodies can be represented from at least two perspectives. First, there is the third-person perspective, where the viewer sees a body from the outside. This modus of representation was chosen by the developers of *Grand Theft Auto 4*.⁵ Secondly, bodies can be represented from a first-person perspective, where the viewer sees the represented space through the eyes of the represented body.⁶ It is difficult to delineate what counts as a represented body, but I think one should be generous here: a car seen from the outside can count as a third-person perspective representation of a body and a the point of view of a robot smaller than an average human could count as a first person-perspective representation of a body.

The representation of a body as such is insufficient for immersion.

⁵ <http://www.gameranx.com/updates/id/18116/article/grand-theft-auto-iv-multiplayer-mod-s-public-alpha-launches-today/>

⁶ <https://mattbrett.com/blog/videogames/2013/battlefield-4/>

Many representations contain representations of bodies, without being immersive. Titian's *The Death of Actaeon* represents numerous human and animal bodies from a third-person perspective, yet viewers of this pictures do not typically refer to the represented scene when asked to specify their location. Even the presence of a first-person view does not necessarily lead to immersion. In the movie *Being John Malkovich*, there are numerous point-of-view shots where viewers see the world of the movie through Malkovich's eyes. Yet they would not claim they are in the space seen on screen. Malkovich is there, and viewers see what he sees there, but they do not have an experience of being in the spaces where Malkovich is.

This brings me to the second ingredient necessary for immersion: for immersion to occur, viewers need *control* over the represented body. Having control over the body implies there is co-variation between viewer actions in the real world and movements of the body in the virtual world.⁷ Through this relation of co-variation between viewer actions and what is seen on screen, the represented body is represented as the viewer's body. There is a resemblance between her physical body and her represented body, as the position of this body can be changed and this, in its turn, leads to changes in sensory input. If the viewer pulls the joystick to the left, she receives new visual information in very much the same way as would happen when she would change the position of her head. This resemblance between the working of an actual body and the depicted body represents the latter as being the viewer's. When the viewer takes the represented body to be *her body* then, by implication, she takes the surroundings of that body to be *her surroundings* and immersion occurs.

In conclusion, immersion does not require a viewer to imagine she is somewhere she's not. Such a need would only arise if viewer presence was not represented by the medium. However, immersive media, the most important of which are video games, contain a mechanism to represent viewer presence in the fictional environment. Therefore, experiencing immersion in a represented space does not entail that a viewer imagines to be there.

⁷ I take it that an action can both be a mental or a physical action. In the future, it might be possible to control games directly with our brains, using a BCI (brain-computer interface) instead of a physical controller.

3. Immersion as Pictorial Experience

In this section, I will argue that immersion is a special variety of pictorial experience. First, I will explain what pictorial experience is. Next, I will discuss what a variety of pictorial experience is. Thirdly, I will argue that immersion is special variety of pictorial experience.

What is pictorial experience? I will stick to the classic Wollheimian analysis of this concept.⁸ The typical experience associated with pictures is seeing-in. When looking at a Van Gogh, for example, viewers see a sunflower in the marks of paint on the pictorial surface. The defining trait of seeing-in is twofoldness. Whilst seeing the sunflower in the paint blots on a flat surface, viewers are simultaneously aware of both the depicted object (sunflower) and the marked surface (blots of yellow paint). Besides being twofold, pictorial experience is also governed by a standard-of-correctness. This means viewers can be right or wrong about what they see in the pictorial surface, in a way that they cannot be right or wrong about what they see in, for example, a cloud or a coffee stain.

A variety of pictorial experience is a subclass of pictorial experience. More specifically, it is a subclass that has the two main traits of pictorial experience, twofoldness and standard of correctness, but also some additional traits that set them apart from other pictorial experiences. An example of this is *factive pictorial experience*, i.e. the variety of pictorial experience solicited by photographs.⁹ The experience of these pictures is twofold (viewers see p in a flat surface) and governed by a standard of correctness (if viewers think they see q instead of p they are wrong). However, there is something special about the experiences evoked by photographs: looking at a p -photograph implies believing that p is the case. This sets pictorial experiences of photographs apart from those of paintings, which do not involve the belief that the represented content mirrors reality.

Immersion, like factive pictorial experience, is a subclass of pictorial experience in general. It has the two general traits of pictorial experience and an additional trait that sets immersive experiences apart from other types of pictorial experiences. In the following, I will first focus on how

⁸ This analysis can be found in Wollheim's book *Painting as an Art* from 1987.

⁹ Hopkins, Robert (2012), 'Factive Pictorial Experience: What's Special about Photographs,' *Nous*, vol. 46 (4), pp. 709-731.

immersion exhibits the two general traits of pictorial experience. Next, I will explain what sets immersion apart from other varieties of pictorial experience.

Immersion is a twofold experience. It involves seeing things in a flat, marked surface.¹⁰ In the case of the video game with the spaceship, the depicted object is a location in the spaceship and the flat surface is the computer screen with its constantly changing pixels. The experience is also governed by a standard-of-correctness, since you cannot only be wrong about what you see on your screen but also about your location in the represented space. When you claim to be in the control room whilst actually being in the engine room, you are mistaken.

What sets immersion apart from other pictorial experiences? To answer this question, I will focus on the immersive pictures that evoke immersion. Immersive pictures differ from non-immersive ones as they do not merely represent possible or actual objects of perception. They represent more, namely a spatial relation between the viewer and those actual or possible objects of perception. To avoid the impression that my view is a restatement of the problem (immersion = immersive pictorial experience = pictorial experience involving viewer presence) rather than a proper analysis of the concept of immersion, I must be more specific about immersion as a pictorial experience.

Immersive pictures, like photographs, evoke a special kind of twofold experience. In the case of non-immersive pictures, the viewer's is passive with regard to the pictorial surface. She has no control over what, for example, a painting or a movie displays. Of course, one can move around the room in an art gallery, which will show you the picture from a different perspective, but this does not bring about any change in the flat surface's properties. Immersive pictures, on the other, allow the user to influence the flat surface and hence what is seen in the surface. I have already described how this influence on the flat surface works: via a represented body, we can perform actions in physical reality which bring about a

¹⁰ One might object that, in the future, there might be videogames containing holograms. Would immersion in the spaces represented by these games still be a pictorial experience? I think it would, because holograms still count as pictorial representations. Holograms are not actually 3D objects, but 2D projects that give an impression of having three dimensions.

change in the properties displayed on the screen. Immersion is therefore a special variety of pictorial experience. We can influence the picture's flat surface, and because we do this via a represented body, this influencing brings about a sense of being spatially related to the depicted objects and therefore of being in the same space as these objects.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that immersion – the feeling of being present in a represented space – is not an illusory or imaginary experience. Instead, I have argued it to be a special kind of pictorial experience. Immersion exhibits the main traits of this experience: twofoldness and a standard-of-correctness. It is, however, a special kind of pictorial experience: viewers feel present in the pictorial space because they have a represented body which allows them to spatially relate to depicted objects and brings about the feeling of being in the represented space these objects are in.

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