

Alternative Beginnings: Towards other Histories of Immersive Arts and Technologies

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss three alternative approaches to the dominant histories of techniques of illusion and interaction that emerged in the context of the panel “Alternative Beginnings: Towards an-Other history of immersive arts and technologies” sponsored by the New Media Caucus presented at the 2018 College Art Association Conference. Bringing together recent insights by media archaeologists (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, Parikka 2012), decolonial thinkers (Mignolo 2011a, b), feminist and indigenous media scholars (Zylinska 2014, Todd 1996, Todd 2015) we invited papers that gave visibility to diverse genealogies of immersion, outside the dominant western art historical canon, to contextualize our current interest for embodied and multi-sensorial experiences. Focusing on the Latin American context – both geographically and epistemologically—the three critical approaches proposed include a discussion on the decolonizing potential of immersion as it moves away from a purely ocular regime towards an embodied one, an exploration of strategies that delink the development of immersive technologies from the military and for-profit game industry, and an emphasis on how localized sites can highlight the decolonizing potential of the local/global relationship in our possible rethinking of immersive technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Immersive technologies have a long history. As Oliver Grau has argued, our current desire for immersive experiences did not make its first appearance with the invention of computer-aided virtual realities (2003). Following Grau’s seminal study on virtual art, significant advances in the history of immersive technology have led to a broader understanding of our current fascination with techniques and practices of illusion. Currently, the critical history of immersive technology tends to focus on genealogies of increasingly sophisticated systems of display that impact the affective senses of the individual viewer and on the recasting of the Eurocentric art historical canon as providing instances of immersive experience, thereby extending the definition of what counts as immersive and interactive technologies (Grau 2003, Kwastek 2013, Daniels 2008, Huhtamo 2013, Kluszczyński 2010). While the above are interesting approaches, in the spirit of a decolonial

approach to media archaeology we want to expand further the field of study to decenter dominant narratives of what counts as immersive technologies. Our objective is to give visibility to diverse genealogies, outside the dominant western art historical canon, that speaks to our current interest for embodied and multisensorial experiences. Bringing together recent insights by media archaeologists, decolonial thinkers, feminist and indigenous media scholars, in this paper we introduce some pathways for such alternative histories that emerged from a panel organized at the 2018 College of Arts Association Conference and sponsored by the New Media Caucus in 2018.

Our interest in organizing a panel on other approaches to the histories of immersive art and technologies was twofold. On the one hand, it emerged from our experiences as teachers of new media art in a western Canadian context. In this context, despite the diversity of the student population and the critical spaces that first nations scholars and artists have opened up (Todd 1996, Todd 2015), there is still a lack of non-Eurocentric art historical literature on engagements and cosmologies of immersive experiences and technologies. On the other hand, as female settlers, first-generation non-white migrants, scholars and new media artists, we are committed to decentering the dominant historical narratives and practices of new media art that have historically labelled as derivative or marginal any practice outside the European and North American canon and have also erased, most prominently, the participation of women and indigenous artists. We are interested in bringing to the forefront non-western practices that incorporate old and new immersive technologies to understand how they enable engagement with other cosmologies that continue to co-exist and co-evolve in our global context of accelerated capitalism. Therefore, in framing our discussions on other histories of immersive art practices, we acknowledge that the categories of western and non-western art are increasingly hybridized and not fixed.

Immersion refers to a state of complete absorption. It is a process that signals a passage from one embodied state into another. To some extent, the history of western art can be viewed as a narrative that describes how artists have long engaged with techniques of illusion to overwhelm the senses of the observer with the objective of immersing her into another reality. These techniques have ranged from early pictorial strategies to fuse the distance between the observer and image, to the blurring of the boundaries between inside/outside, object/ subject, artist/viewer through the adoption of diverse and increasingly computer aided-interactive techniques. In tracing the histories of immersive media art, scholars have debated over the existence of diverse levels of immersion that have to do with the type of media used, all of which responded to the particular advances of technology of their era (Grau 2003, Kwastek 2013, Daniels 2008, Huhtamo 2013, Kluszczynski 2010) . In short, as Oliver Grau puts it, “immersive media art projects are characterized by diminishing a critical distance to what is shown and increasing an emotional involvement in what is happening” (Grau 2003, 13). However, while immersion unequivocally signals towards an embodied experience, dominant narratives of western art are ocular-centric. They are characterized by progressive and linear stories that, while accounting for ruptures and discontinuities, center on mapping a genesis of immersive experiences through the development of technologies of vision, effectively excluding performative, oral or written forms of immersion (Grau 2003, Kwastek 2013, Huhtamo 2013). This ocular-centric focus has not only erased other strategies of immersion but is inextricably linked with the production of the rational and modern subject: the subject that is mirrored in the Eurocentric art canon and its definitions of what counts as technology.

Besides the ocular-centric focus of immersive media art histories, another essential characteristic of the western art canon revolves around discussions on the political implications of diminishing the critical distance between the observer and the experience, thus resulting in a dialectical relation

between interaction and immersion that renders observers as passive or active. However, as Grau argues “there is no simple relationship of either or between critical distance and immersion; the relations are multifaceted, closely intertwined, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer”(Grau 2003, 13). While this is undoubtedly the case, Grau's assertion is also intertwined with a particular understanding of what counts as immersive art located within the western art canon. Hence considering these two central aspects of the western art canon, we asked our panelists to think about alternatives to the ocular-centric narratives and the passive/active dialectic following three possible lines of inquiry. The first line of inquiry involved a consideration of the complex interaction between performer, participant, object, and environment in non-western rituals. The second line of inquiry asked to consider an exploration of the manner in which oral traditions, storytelling, and generic narrative tropes intersect with the different genealogies of immersive technologies. And finally, another related line of inquiry requested an engagement with a critique to the notion of authorship concerning whether and how the Other (audience/machine/observer) is conceived as co-creator of immersive/interactive experiences.

We received more than fifteen proposals which either adopted a media archeological focus by centering on forgotten or failed immersive technologies or approached immersive strategies of digital games and immersive installations as a critique to the ocular-centric strategies of cinema and western art. To provide some geographical cohesion to the panel, we decided to focus on proposals that addressed the Latin American context both geographically and epistemologically through a decolonial framework which, besides media archaeology, was one the frameworks we were interested in exploring. We were interested in how a decolonial strategy, broadly defined as a turn to understanding other ways of being in the world that do not adhere to an ocular-centric and cartesian rational subject, would potentially open up conceptions of immersion that question the newness of immersive technologies and thus decenter prevalent epistemologies of passive/active subjects. Concurrently, we were also interested in papers that acknowledged the entanglements of modernity/coloniality: the politics of location and the co-existence of multiple and contradictory spatial and temporal structures that recognize the geopolitics of knowledge as intrinsically linked to the coloniality of power.

The concept of decolonization originates in the Bandung Conference in 1956; as Walter D. Mignolo describes, the conference signaled a “departure, a delinking and the initiation of a long process of decolonization and decoloniality as a set of global, interrelated projects without a center which includes the work of Asian, African, Latin American and indigenous scholars” (2011a). In Latin America, what is now known as the decolonial turn gained attention in English-speaking academia in the early 1990s most prominently through the work of Anibal Quijano (2007), Arturo Escobar (2007), Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), Ramon Grosfoguel (2014), and Mignolo (2011a, b). While there are certainly different theoretical and political approaches amongst all these thinkers, in a broad sense, they all argue that to decolonize the economic, political and cultural system that sustains modernity it is necessary to engage with other worlds and knowledges. The decolonial project of these authors recognizes “non-Occidental epistemologies that diverge from the Western emphasis on the rational subject inaugurated by Descartes, which they suggest is the basis for the thought that made early modern coloniality possible”(Gentile 2015, 415). Furthermore, they conceive of colonialism as the undergird of European modernity and trace the continuation of colonial structures of power or, in Quijano's terms, the coloniality of power (2007). These

structures of power are reproduced in our current global capitalist context that permeates subjectivity, knowledge, power, and economy. For Latin American decolonial scholars, there is no break between colonialism and modernity: European modernism is not to be localized in the Enlightenment but in the colonial era, and modernism, as a philosophical school of thought, is seen as the legitimization for the colonial project.

Turning to our second framework, what is known as media archaeology also emerges out of a discontent with the canonized narratives of media culture and history (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, 3). As an approach to the study of media, media archaeology proposes to look for “histories of alternate, suppressed, neglected and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their ‘perfection’” (3). As Geert Lovnik put it, media archaeology is a hermeneutics of reading the new against the grain of the past rather than telling the histories of technologies from past to present (2011, 3). In the words of Parikka and Huhtamo, this move has pushed media archeologists back centuries and beyond the Western world (2011, 3). While their approach seems at times to equate the past with a fixed category of the non-West in a manner that replicates Eurocentric teleological narratives and does not explicitly critique modernity, we believe that combining media archaeology’s focus on materiality and disruption with the goals of decolonial thinking opens up new historical trajectories of immersion that contribute to a practice of “re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and altermodern internal critiques” (Mignolo 2011a). Our objective for adopting this dual framework is to acknowledge the coexistence of epistemic diversity - including western thought as one lens among many – and to embrace a critique of modernity and Eurocentrism.

In what follows we discuss how our four panelists, Matt Bernico, Debora Faccion, Claudia Pederson and Sarah Shamash engaged with a decolonial and media archaeology framework to propose and make visible other practices and cosmologies of immersion.

From the ocular to the embodied as decolonizing potential

From early cartography and cinematic syntax to the illusionistic mimesis and self-sufficiency of the art object that dominates western visual culture beginning in the early modern period, all four authors identify the transition from an isolated emphasis on vision to the inclusion of other senses, bodies and phenomenon as containing the potential to decolonize thought.

In “A Varietology of Immersive Media,” Matt Bernico draws on Walter Mignolo’s argument that the objective, disembodied Western subject, positioned outside of the world with visual mastery over it, is a colonial construct. Through reference to early renaissance maps and other optical technologies, Bernico argues that this colonial point of view, “the hubris of the zero point” (2018) that privileges the detached eye and mind over the body has crystallized into a conventional formula that persists in contemporary media culture. In his analysis of Adolfo Bioy Casares’ magical realist novel *The Invention of Morel*, Bernico suggests that looking at imaginary immersive technologies that include the body and all the senses can offer a different starting point for thinking about the future of immersive technology.

In a similar vein, Claudia Pederson’s article, “Imitation, Fear, and Conviviality, Towards on-Other History of Immersive Arts and Technologies,” describes the way in which mimesis —“the normative aesthetic criteria in western art” (Pederson 2018) is used by military and industry video

games to present a monolithic, purportedly objective truth and is too often the default aesthetic used by contemporary digital media artists. Against this dominant paradigm, Pederson discusses the work of contemporary Latin American artists whose projects disrupt the presumption of a mimetic, closed reality through games which make explicit reference to real political and social issues, have open structures, and put forward views of reality that are inherently complicated, partial and unresolved. The player is immersed in this complex social space and called upon to enact change both in the context of the game itself as well as in the context of the actual political events envisioned through participation. Here we see one resolution to the dialectic immersion/interaction.

The idea of a cultural object that is not “fixed and immutable” (Faccion 2018) — complete and ready to be consumed by the eye — but instead designed to be completed through the experience of the participating subject, is also an important theme in Debora Faccion’s article. “In Brazilian Avant Garde’s Legacy of Exploring the Virtual,” she locates the movement’s emphasis on body-based work and interactive elements in the cultural paradigm of Anthropophagy created by Oswald de Andrade in 1928. Andrade used the Tupi ritual of devouring the desired aspect of the other to develop a metaphor for how to absorb and transform European, colonial legacies. Faccion argues that the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s posited visual art as an object that needed to be absorbed by the body (immersed within the subject) and transformed into subjective meaning, to have a transformative effect on both individuals and culture as a whole. Importantly, the coexistence of different epistemologies of the immersive are present in both Andrade’s original formulation and Faccion’s discussion.

How different epistemologies can produce different definitions of immersion are also central in Sarah Shamash’s article, “Cosmopolitical technologies and the demarcation of screen space at Cine Kurumin.” In her discussion of Cine Kuramin, an indigenous film festival, Shamash describes how the colonial legacies of film and video in Latin America are being challenged by indigenous cinema that communicates a non-western epistemology. This epistemology conceives the subject as always immersed within the ecosystem of the land, in stark contrast to the mind/body division of the Cartesian subject at the heart of the ocular regime. In this context the camera as technology becomes one aspect or body within an overall ecosystem, as opposed to existing outside it, looking in.

Delinking immersive technologies from the military-industrial complex

The idea of expanding perspectives on immersion through the inclusion of the body presented in these articles differs fundamentally from a purely technological push for greater verisimilitude through the development of multisensory virtual experiences. The latter approach is deeply embedded in the activities and objectives of the military-industrial complex and presents a version of embodied immersion lacking in critical potential, against which it is important to define ourselves.

For Shamash and Faccion, immersion is not solely a technological term/concept but a broader term that describes respectively, a cosmology and a way of integrating the cultural experience. Shamash’s discussion of the immersive is based on the notion of Indigenous sovereignty that views people and the land as inextricably linked and stems from an interconnected worldview which “places the land as central to survival, knowledge and being” (Shamash 2018). This cosmology is radically at odds with western and colonial traditions of thinking about the subject in relation to

government, economy, and environment. Her article describes how this “non-western epistemological modernity”(2018) permeates all elements of the Cine Kurumin festival from curation to individual films to how the technologies of cinema are conceptualized in the context of indigenous cosmologies.

Faccion’s article similarly uses the term immersion to highlight the phenomenological dimension of the Brazilian avant-garde’s increased emphasis on the active participation of the audience in actualizing the work. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the virtual, integrated with the prevalent and deeply visceral metaphor of Anthropophagy, Faccion argues that *immersion* best describes the “logic” of the relationship between cultural objects and the individual developed by the avant-garde, as opposed to the more prevalently used term, *interactivity* - popularized by Simone Osthoff - which only points to the mechanics of this relationship (Faccion 2018).

In Bernico’s and Pederson’s articles, immersion retains its primarily technological association. Morel’s machine, an imaginary technology found in Casares’ novel, does at first glance appear to be “a holy grail of sorts of the digital entertainment industries” (Pederson 2018). It is a machine capable of reproducing life not only in terms of vision and sound but also touch and smell: “a real reconstituted person that only lives as long as the machine is turned on” (Bernico 2018). However, Bernico’s analysis reveals that the machine is importantly tied to a specific geographical location and replicates life that is enmeshed in a particular landscape and therefore contingent upon it as well as upon the technology itself. The latter point stands in contrast to the desired universality/objectivity of perspective preferred by dominant media. Bernico’s paper highlights how the latter is a colonial construct and that the very specificity and particularity of Morel’s machine can provoke us to imagine a potentially decolonized media form.

For Pederson, the immersive may be technologically similar to the products of industry and military; however the content and structure of the games she discusses differ radically regarding how they presuppose a partial subject and an unfinished reality. Her article traces how Latin American digital artists selectively deploy immersive mimesis in the context of games to extend “contemporary cultural and social struggles into virtual environments, thereby creating alternatives to dominant representations of the realities of marginalized perspectives”(Pederson 2018). The inherently participatory nature of games is combined with an open-endedness that complicates the mimetic tradition to elicit political reflection and engagement, in a direct or indirect echo of the participatory theatrical innovations of Berthold Brecht and Augusto Boal.

The positive dimension of acknowledging the interconnectedness, vulnerability, and partiality of the embodied subject is a theme that runs through all these visions of immersion.

Situated sites of immersive experiences

As mentioned previously, Bernico argues that the decolonial potential of the imaginary technology in Casares’ novel is tied to its geographical specificity. This point foregrounds another thread that runs through all these articles: the importance of specific local sites in developing an alternative to the dominant narrative of immersion, and how this grounding in specific sites can engage larger clusters of communities and impact the production of knowledge on a broader scale.

The 6th edition of the Cine Kurumin International Indigenous Film Festival was, according to Shamash, based on the theme contained in the statement: “From my village, I see the world.” Shamash unpacks how this situated viewing through (immersed within) the lens of many locals creates a field of multiplicity and solidarity within the context of the festival that challenges “colonial fantasies of Indigeneity.” The article further describes how a portion of the festival was hosted in an Indigenous Tupinamba village, literally immersing participants into the thematic parameters of the festival by integrating the form of cinema and the format of the festival into the daily life of the village. The blending of two communities – the village and the festival participants – actualizes the “interconnected nature of Indigenous economies and organization arising from a relationship to the land and its ecosystems”(Shamash 2018) and blurs the binary oppositions between nature/culture that run deep in Western colonial systems of knowledge.

Pederson’s analysis of Ivan Abreu Ochoa’s project, *Cross-Coordinates*, also engages the potentially rich relationship between specific sites and the global, “deterritorialized” space of the internet. In the game designed by Ochoa specifically for the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez - historically a single city now separated by the USA/Mexico border - two participants are asked to balance a carpenter’s level at various sites in the two cities. Pederson outlines how the act of cooperation necessary to “win” the game offers an alternative of conviviality to the dominant US rhetoric of fear and divisiveness that permeates the border area. The online, virtual version of the game allows for many more participants and “recasts” a local issue in a global context, where its message of mutual understanding can resonate with multiple sites. The relationship between the local and the global has a parallel with that between the actual and the virtual in Ochoa’s project: the original experience of immersion in a physical game continues to be shared online, and the act of experiencing and sharing it online contributes to the game in a participatory manner.

In her analysis of the Brazilian avant-garde, Faccion builds on Simone Osthoff’s argument, which connected the practice of artists Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica to a then emerging and now canonical vocabulary of interactivity in new media art (2018). Her reworking of the relationship between the Brazilian avant-garde and the discourse of new technologies in art inserts the specific context and history of Brazil back into the discussion through focusing on the centrality of Anthropophagy – a specifically Brazilian cultural paradigm – to their thinking. This gesture expands the dominant/global narrative of new media art by linking it to a Tupi ritual which was both the ultimate marker of the degeneracy of the Other for European colonists and a source of inspiration for postcolonial Brazilian culture.

To conclude, the dialectic relationship between immersion/interaction is grounded in critiquing the power relations that underlie western art as presented by the art historical tradition: namely that the producer of art is speaking from and/or representative of the position of power. The various western avant-gardes have complicated the power assumed to lie with the producer by including the audience in the production of meaning in various ways, also thereby critiquing the autonomy of the Cartesian subject and its ocular emphasis.

The comparative analysis of the panel presentations offers insight into an alternative to the dialectical relationship between interaction and immersion which we sought to explore at the outset. This dialectical relationship, which links interaction to an active viewer and immersion to a passive one, is grounded in critiquing the power relations that underlie western art as presented by the art

historical tradition: namely that the producer of art is speaking from/representative of the position of power. The various western avant-gardes have complicated the power assumed to lie with the producer by including the audience in the production of meaning in various ways, also thereby critiquing the autonomy of the Cartesian subject and its ocular emphasis.

This historical strategy of the western avant-garde tradition is one narrative but, viewing the dialectic through the lens of media archaeology, and decolonial thought presents other approaches to the histories and practices of immersive arts and technologies. Turning to our panel presentations, they evoke two alternative conceptions of the power relations implicated in immersive media. The first alternative narrative retains the logic that equates immersion to the loss of power/passivity but locates it in a postcolonial political context where audience members/consumers have more power than artists from suppressed traditions. In countries which are struggling to come to terms with a colonial legacy, compelling the viewer to relinquish power –to listen– through immersive techniques can give a valuable voice to other perspectives. The second alternative attempts to dislodge the relationship between immersion and loss of power through reference to non-western epistemologies. Different concepts of subjectivity within these epistemologies –such as viewing the subject as inextricably linked to the ecosystem– can produce a narrative of immersion in which the state of relinquishing one’s autonomous identity is valued and indeed presupposed. The immersed viewer is therefore conceived less as passive and more as contingent and interconnected.

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