Immersive Experiences as the Condition of Possibility for Affective Spacing

Little has been written about the possibility of artistic immersive experiences to push us out of our habits of perception and into a mode of critical reflection.

The article starts with the space of the body and its phenomenological engagement within immersion. Merleau-Ponty's notion of *pre-reflection* is introduced. This serves as the starting point for accessing and evaluating artistic experiences. I argue that this pre-reflective state is a perception sensitive mode of embodied subjectivity. Accordingly, this is achieved by immersion in twofold; the first is separation, a frame delineating enclosure, whereas the second is an act of connection and re-establishment. Therefore, the encounter between the subject and the art object is laden with affective qualities that possess the ability to create an opening up into a novel phenomenological experience of subjectivity and being in the world. This opening up in elucidated by way of Martin Heidegger's notion of einräumen. This act of einräumen affords the participants strong room for reflection, by simply requiring the participants to accept their experience as an event through which we open up and improve our capacities to feel, reflect, and act.

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Recent advances in technology and their implications on the mediascape have highlighted the relevance of cognitive and neurosciences in unraveling the mysteries of the human brain. Digital media experiences, whether interactive, immersive, or of mixed realities, are both studied and created through sensorial data and strict corporeal feedback. Yet, little has been written in defense of digital media experiences as an encounter where one experiences the 'being of the sensible' (Deleuze 1994, 68).

As many artists are utilizing immersive and interactive media, we are reminded of Deleuze's (2015) proposition that art cannot be recognized through universal concepts, but can only be sensed; in other words, art splits perceptual processing, forbidding the move to conceptual ordering. Additionally, Deleuze suggests that the task of art is to produce signs that will push us out of our habits of perception and into a mode of critical reflection. 'We're after an artwork that produces an effect on the nervous system, not on the brain' (Bacon n.d.; Smith and Protevi 2008).

This article posits immersion as an artistic practice that holds the condition of possibility for affective spacing. According to Heywood, 'sensations and thoughts do not connect subject with object, but rather at the level of [immersive] experiences, sensations, thoughts, and the world are one, the whole is already sensation. In order to reach this position and so be able to produce art, the user must become what he or she experiences' (Heywood 2002, 377). However, an oversaturation of sensual experience is detrimental to artistic expression, as no space is left for contemplation and reflection. I emphasize the word space here, as I use it in the Heideggerian sense. For Heidegger, art creates the conditions for a spacing, *Gestell* (Heidegger 1977).

In what follows, I will elaborate on this notion by examining the bleeding or leaking of immersive media into the body and the implication of such a leaking or porous *thing* in bringing forth a change in the way we are in the world. I will introduce the idea of p*re-*

reflection as the subject's capacity for experience that does not precalculate the experience itself but receives it as sensations. Moreover, I will argue that such immersive experiences are generators of openness or, to be more precise, places where the act of 'powerful identification and projection takes place; the entire bodily and mental constitution of the [user] becomes the site of the work' (Palassmaa 2005, 12–13), an opening up into a novel phenomenological experience of subjectivity.

Immersive Experience as a Space for Reflection

According to Jorinde Seidel (2000), present day digital users have lost all possibility for critical reflection as they are subject to oversaturated sensational experiences. For things to appear as things, they require the vigilance of humans, and 'the first step toward this vigilance is the step back from representational thinking' (Heidegger 2001, 179). In other words, it is only through a compelling experience of co-respondance, a central aspect of critical thinking, that creates the space of reflection and questioning.

Moreover, Christine Ross (2015) coins the term spreadability in reference to the ways the emerging digital technologies and their use in media and Art are technically and culturally encouraging the generation of space (sensorial) and its proliferation (the room for reflection). They abstract space by making its unperceivable intensities manifest. For Ross, this abstractive mechanism inherent to the media and practices is laden with a sense of circulation, not as dissemination but in a way that celebrates the vitality of immersion:

This vitality is inseparable from the notion of unproductive time…a temporality that becomes effective in long duration and in the absence of control: not only the time it takes to allow for the contingency of the human/nonhuman interactions to

take place, but the actual dynamism of these interactions. Vitality lies more precisely in the production of porous situations… (Ross 2015, 182).

A main factor in the emergence of such vitality and therefore of what Ross refers to as unproductive time, a space for reflection, is the production of porous situations. Such situations are the products of and are made room for by the immersive experience itself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty insists that a pre-reflective state is the starting point to accessing and evaluating experience. This pre-reflective state 'is a mysterious and expressive mode of belonging to the world through our perception, gestures, and speech' (Kearney 1994, 73).

The intentionality of connecting to and engaging with the world shapes most encounters. This brings us to the body, the modulator of such encounters and experiences.

The Space of the Body as a Phenomenological Frame

According to Kearney (1994), Merleau-Ponty places an emphasis on the lived body as the site, or the space, that allows a folding of both subject and the world. In order to illustrate this, Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of optic chiasm, which is the area where the optical nerves plug into the base of the brain. The optic chiasm affords the possibility of vision; in parallel, the superimposition of subject and world embodied is circumstantial for the conditions of perception. For the purposes of my argument, the body is akin to a frame delineating border in space yet simultaneously creating a spatial composition which can never be completely closed because of the way it defines the out of frame, which is the world (Deleuze 1996, 22). This space of the body is both virtual in its capacity to think and to imagine and actual in its carnal thickness and physical relationship to the world. While the subject may distance herself reflectively from the world, the body seems to ground the

subject in a proprioceptive manner, and therefore the subject is always already thrown into the world. For Heidegger, however, we are able to throw that *throwness* into the world (Inwood 1999, 218–19), which means that we can project a strong sense of activity or movement that allows for the liberation of the subject through the (virtual) body from the world. The body then becomes a site that enables the self to open to the world and opens the world itself. This strong sense of movement is the premise of Bernard Cache's reading of Deleuze.

Points of Inflection and Sensational Leaking

In *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, Cache (1995) proposes the term 'frame images' when referring to compositions that constitute the in space as well as the off space in film. However, Cache's reading is not of a literal frame that limits or encloses a specific area. He posits two directions that this frame sort of points to: one being inward in the sense of framing (or more precisely, movement that is occurring within an area), and the other being inflection, which is the movement occurring outside of the bounded area. Interestingly, in the preface to Cache's book, the translator mentions how there is no environment that can be completely controlled, and therefore there will always be the possibility of new movement being *thrown* into or out of a frame. Cache writes:

> The point of inflection, however, designates a pure event of curvature where the tangent crosses the curve; yet this event does not depend in any way on the orientation of the axes, which is why it can be said that inflection is an intrinsic singularity. On either side of the inflection, we know that there will be a highest point and a lowest point, but we cannot designate them as long as the curve has not been related to the orientation of a vector. Points of inflection are singularities in and of themselves, while they confer an indeterminacy to the rest of the curve. Preceding the vector, inflection makes of each of the points a possible extremum in relation to its inverse: virtual maxima and minima. In this way, inflection

represents a totality of possibilities, as well as an openness, a receptiveness, or an anticipation (Cache 1995, 16).

As a mathematical concept, a singularity consists of multiple points that form a curve. Cache ascribes to the point of inflection, the singularity, a vital variability that renders it in movement both literally in tracing the curve, and in its openness to (re)present an array of possibilities, or pre-reflective states. Cache presents the term framing, then, as the art or artifact that opens up the inflection of multiple probabilities. This is achieved in two ways. The first is separation, or the frame as a delineation of limit and enclosure; the second is an act of connection and re-establishment. In this regard, the body in its virtual capacity to immerse into the mediascape allows for leaking of sensations into the frame, or what constitutes an embodied subjectivity.

Reflection and the Embodied Subject

Artist Lucy McRae refers to herself as a body architect. Based on her website, she describes her work as speculative explorations of the limits of the body, beauty, biotechnology, and the self in attempts to question the future of humanity. Art for her is a mechanism that allows her to provoke and question who we are and where we are headed. In *Biometric Mirror*, she sets up an A.I. mirror that analyses an individual's facial traits and composition. Users glance at the mirror, a common human activity. The A.I. then searches a database of faces selected according to fourteen assigned characteristics. It then responds to the individual's reflection with an analysis of how attractive they are and their present emotional state. According to McRae, 'in theory, the algorithm is correct, but it's likely the information isn't – because how can it be if it's based on subjective information?' (McRae n.d.). As an immersive experience, *Biometric Mirror* raises more issues than it seemingly tries to solve. The entire setup is

intentional; the artist's blending of a harmless mundane physical activity reveals the shortcomings inherent in emerging technologies. The A.I. cannot recognize emotional states, nor can it quantify or determine subjective givens. What is even more interesting is that McRae does not stop here; for the sake of performance and presentation, she involves her own body in this experiment. Rather than a reflection to be 'assessed' by the A.I., she turns her own face into a reflection of the A.I.'s reading, enabling the mirror image to leak into her own body. She prints out the biometric outcome of her emotional state and the perceived level of attractiveness and merges them with her own face.

In the 2002 film *Minority Report*, the protagonist, Anderton, heads a PreCrime unit that relies on three psychics to apprehend potential criminals and deter any criminal act before it happens. In a report, Anderton himself is 'recorded' committing a crime in the future, and therefore encounters an inevitability to come. He is both conflicted and highly determined to reveal the truth behind this, knowing that the psychics never lie and their predictions are imminent. In a very similar manner to *Biometric Mirror*, the information seen by the psychics is mirrored on screens.

Interestingly, Hall (2004) provides an analysis of *Minority Report* by reading it in terms of the Lacanian Mirror Stage. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan defines the mirror stage as the period where the child subject starts to identify herself by identifying with an image of herself. However, a child now apperceives itself as both not-self and in relation to self. Lacan refers to this as the 'fictional direction' (Evans 2003, 117–18), where this external image almost acts like the protagonist of a narrative experienced by the child and eventually the I in relation to the unfolding events that would constitute lived experiences:

> This 'fictional direction,' allied to the anterior register of the construction of the
> subject, is at the heart of my reading of the narrative structure of *Minority*

> *Report*…The subject becomes aware of herself as a form of *gestalt* and experiences joy at the mastery of this image, despite its aforementioned fictionality, falling in love with her own image and taking the whole image of herself as love-object. Also … meaning [is] being created from the clash between the image and the body ... The mirrors present in the film function as sites of meaning and of idealization (Hall 2004).

This process of self-identification is rather phenomenological. A mirror reflection, an image, is simply projected back onto the subject. This phenomenon of returning light that bounces off and back from the mirror affords the subject an evaluation of herself and her body. In other words, this reflection is laden with meaning that eventually becomes embodied. The subject identifies herself as an affective object, a place of reflection and ideation on the I, or what now starts to form and constitutes her viewpoint in experiencing both herself and her place in the world, 'which is to say that it is to be a part of the world, but at the same time apart from the world' (O'Sullivan 2001, 125).

Subjectivity and Affective Objects

In his book *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Deleuze (1983) suggests that the perception-image, or any image that falls under the perception category, is akin to the point of view shot in technical cinematographic language. Additionally, Deleuze believes that this point of view shot, and more importantly the perception-image, goes beyond the subjective viewpoint. Borrowing from Pier Paolo Pasolini's considerations of the point of view, Deleuze proposes that such a viewpoint may be also semi-subjective. In the case of frames devoid of actors or subjects, the point of view shot projects a poetic approach (Powrie and Reader 2002, 77). Deleuze is essentially assigning this point of view shot the status of an affective object, a

'physical object which has the ability to sense emotional data from a person, map that information to an abstract form of expression and communicate that information expressively, either back to the subject herself or to another person' (Scheirer and Picard 1999).

This echoes Andrei Tarkovsky's cinematic concept of sculpting in time. Tarkovksy (2006) suggested stretching out a take, especially those empty frames (semi-subjective point of view). He believed that while long shots provoke boredom, further extending them produces curiosity within the audience. In doing so he is, in essence, providing the audience with time as a poetic frame, which opens up to another world, a world for the audience to inhabit, to experience, and explore (Martin 2011).

Furthermore, along these lines Akoury (2017) suggests that *To Be*, an artwork by Boston-based artist Anne Lilly, presents a physical example of an affective object:

> [Lilly] creates an instrument that substitutes itself for the communication and the conjoining of two different bodies. An intricate performance of an actor machine, equipped with reflective surfaces attached to rotating bases that produce a differentiated and generative new perception through the interplay of its mechanisms. A mechanical language sets itself as a new system that unlinks previously established signifiers, the mirror image, the calculated method of symmetrically plotting, seems to malfunction, and produce an impossible conjoint new body. An unexpected disturbance, what was initially perceived as two distinct unrelated people entering a specific space, and moving randomly, are joined, incorporated within the work which now takes center stage as the actor of impossibility (Akoury 2017).

The work affects both bodies and reframes them within a new space, that of the art object itself, as subject and object are fused. This space, or what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a

'block of space-time' (Deleuze and Guatarri 2004), allows the inflection to occur, whereby a separation from the current situation first takes place, followed by a connection or the gathering of multiplicities within a new frame, the place created and provided by the artwork, which now re-establishes and redefines. In the immersive experience above, the subjects amass interstices of experiential inflection, 'and then proceed to relate them proprioceptively in an act of complication. The idea being explored here is one of folding together or complicating which 'supposes a strange invisible groundless depth from which irrupts something that creates its own space and time' (Rajchman 1998, 15; Akoury 2018).

Space-Time and Heidegger's Einräumen

I will now elaborate on this created space-time, by introducing the act of 'making room for,' or as Heidegger calls it, *Einräumen*:

> Raum, rum, means a space cleared for free for settlement and lodging a space as something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free namely within a boundary. A boundary is not that at which something stops but [..] the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing [...] space is in essence that from which room has been made that which is let into its bounds [...] accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations not from space (Heidegger 1971, 154).

Making room for is an act of spacing; a clearing out of sorts that eventually involves farness and nearness, a distinct relationship to bounded regions and therefore delineated. Heidegger here emphasizes space as a free area or a free opening that is framed and defined (*Gestell*). The role of the human is central to the achievement of this spacing. Heidegger believes that this very act requiring the human body is the ultimate artistic practice. He uses the term *Ereignis*, an event of being in the now. For Heidegger this 'presencing' event becomes the

site for realization, where what has begun in the domain of affects is actualized or more appropriately embodied. For example, in Olafur Eliasson's spatial collaboration with Chinese Architect Ma Yansong, *Feelings are Facts* (2010), the audience's art experience is subverted, from that of a passive receiver to that of actively experiencing herself becoming a fundamental component of the artwork. The project utilizes a series of artificially produced fog and many fluorescent lights that both set a circulation and shroud the boundaries of the space. The experience of being in and affected by this space forces the audience to re-examine their sensations and experiences of that which is around them and their affective relationship to this surrounding world. Ma Yansong has the following to say apropos of this experience:

> Space and light bring life into existence. There is no space, unless given light and boundary. Space has never existed, but rather exists only in the specific feelings it induces. Space in reality, exists only in sensuality [...] Our feelings and sensibilities are seeing facts in the context of habituated life. Not until shutting our eyes, can we feel the world from within, space and light will touch your soul (Yasong 2010)

Eliasson and Yansong (2010) create an experience that goes beyond the physical boundaries of the artwork itself to reach the depth of the soul. They stress the fact that spaces only exist in the feelings and emotions they provoke in an individual. Yansong's quote reasserts Heidegger's notion of *gestell*, wherein the art frames and makes way for the freeing of the soul. This act of *einräumen* affords the audience strong room for reflection. The work does not want to persuade; it is not pushing forth a specific ideology, nor is it requesting action beyond the basic kinaesthetics. It simply requires the participants to accept their experience

as an event through which 'we can extend, amplify, and enrich our own capacities to think, feel, and act' (Brenda Lorel 2014, 32).

Spacing as a Condition of Possibility for Affective Reframing

In addition to the experiential engagement of the audience as a corollary of interactive and immersive artworks, Jeffrey Shaw (2011) believes that such artistic practices ought to be created in a way that renders them experientially inconclusive. In his view, they should be continuously reset and reinterpreted by the users. Through his work, Shaw attempts to explore this reframing, which accordingly leads to the liberation of the image from its frame. That which is formless and presented in the virtual realm now leaks through to the space outside of the frame, where 'the viewers can let their attention wander into the periphery to discover something that might reframe everything' (Shaw, Kenderdine, and Coover 2011, 223 – 24).

Similarly, Boris and Hansen (2004) propose that the body, when situated within an artistic experience, becomes the generator of images through its original capacity for pre-reflective perception. Accordingly, the body's phenomenological experience of this artificial world (the artwork) allows for it 'to enframe something (digital information) that is originally formless' (Boris & Hansen 2004, 11). This enframing creates a condition of possibility in the Kantian sense (Piché C. 2016), where this frame(work) provides an inflection with the work. The subject leaks into the art object as the art object 'empathically resonates' through an encounter that 'trusts the subject' in its co-creation and expression (Varela & Shear 1999, 10). Therefore, spacing is a necessary condition for the possibility of an 'affective context,' the closest thing to a phenomenal experience of subjectivity. Nowadays, we should not be thought of as the heralds of knowledge or the creators of deterministic things; instead, according to Wolfgang Schirmacher, we have become homo generators, the creators of

worlds in which we engage in the opening of new futures, novel worlds which are created through us. These worlds, or mediascapes, are phenomenological 'in-between[s] which [are] neither subjective nor objective. They fulfill an intentionality, which transforms objective material and subjective goals into a living process' (Schirmacher & Durban 1987), the site of which is the body. After all, 'that is the task of the artist now' (Beckett, quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988, 14).

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