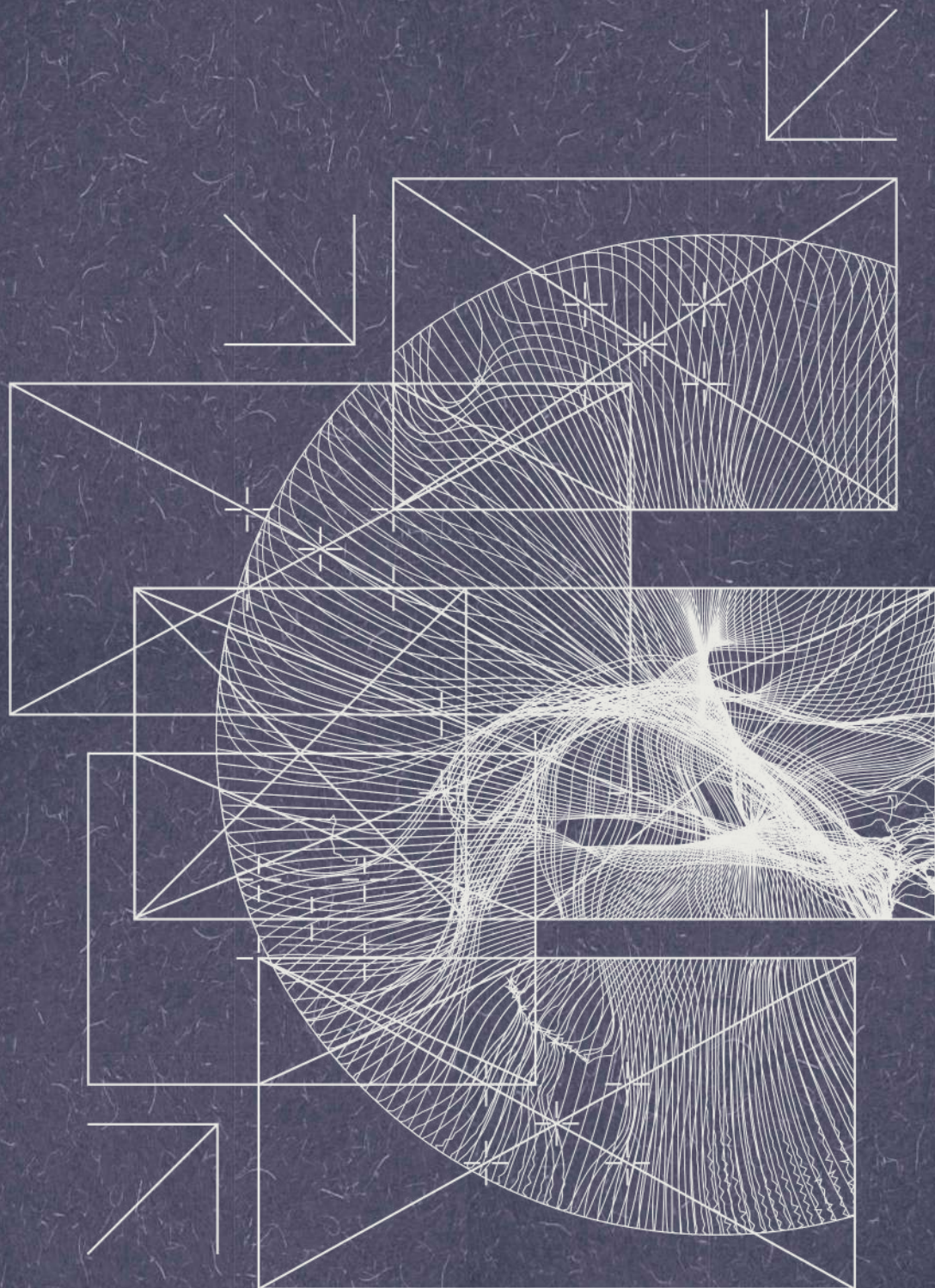


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_Total Cinema: Film and Design



Disegno

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Contents

introduction

- 004** *Ágnes Karolina Bakk, Zsolt Gyenge, and Olivér Horváth: Total Cinema: Film and Design*

research papers

- 012** *Dave Gottwald: Total Cinema, Total Theatre, Total World: From Set as Architecture to Set as Virtual Performer*
- 034** *Pedro Crispim: Kōji Wakamatsu: Alienation and the Womb*
- 054** *Péter Horányi: Wandering Gazes on the Screen: The American Material Environment in James Benning's Films*

essays

- 070** *Marshall Deutelbaum: The Hidden Architecture of CinemaScope Set Design*
- 086** *María Cecilia Reyes: From Screenwriting to Space-Writing*
- 104** *Patrícia Nogueira: Space On and Off Screen: The Détournement of Documentary Film into Video Installation*

reviews

- 120** *Ervin Török: Remanences and Futurities: Jonathan Rozenkrantz: Videographic Cinema*
- 126** *Alexandra Karakas: A New Account of the Relation between Art, Science, and Design: Noam Andrews: The Polyhedrists*

- 132** ***about the authors***

INTRODUCTION

TOTAL CINEMA: FILM AND DESIGN

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The movie screen is up in flames and the audience flees in panic, thinking an atomic bomb has just been dropped. The director rubs his hands: film and the outside world have blended into one—at least in Joe Dante’s *Matinee* (1993), set in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. May this be the “myth of total cinema” described by André Bazin in 1946, according to which the art of film was never really driven by its accidental technological history but by a desire to grasp reality in its entirety, to reconstruct “a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief”? (Bazin 1967a, 20) Dante’s larger than life director pays homage to B-movie showman William Castle, who shied away from little when it came to engagement, be it narrative, visual, or somatic. Castle appeared on screen offering the audience a (faux) choice between alternative endings, used 3D illusionism, and installed “buzzers” in the seats and skeletons flying over the auditorium—not unlike Eisenstein’s Proletkult theatre which included tightrope-walkers over the viewers’ heads and firecrackers under their bottoms. Is it possible to unite the effects of agitprop theatre, the illusion of agency in American trash films and the immersive formats of our time into a single conceptual framework? And if it is, would that be cinema? Film theorist Andrew Dudley already claimed in 1997 that “[t]he century of cinema offered a fragile period of détente during which the logosphere of the nineteenth century with its grand novels and histories has slowly given way—under the pressure of technology, of the ascendance of the image, and of unfathomable world crises—to the videosphere we are now entering.” (5)

When we published the call for contributions analysing moving images and experiences from the perspective of design culture, we envisaged approaches that try to understand how design actually creates lifeworlds as seamless webs of discursive meanings and sensual experiences in films and interactive digital narratives. Moreover, and taking into account the most recent developments in the technology of making, distributing, and exhibiting films, we considered that a focus on design related issues of film could bring us closer to understanding how the Bazinian myth of total cinema compares to the perceptual experiences created by contemporary filmmakers and designers. If

Bazin was right, and cinema has been and will be always driven by the dream of achieving total realism, that is total representation of reality, than the different versions of VR and XR (extended reality) experiences, 360-degree films should be considered as important new steps towards the realisation of this century-long dream.

It is still an open question whether Bazin would actually consider the latest developments in immersive film technologies a new step towards total cinema, or if he would just consider them “pseudorealism,” a technological illusion created merely to fool the eye (Bazin 1967b, 12). An important aspect that should be taken in consideration is the fact that in VR and 360 degree films the movements of the body and eye are not restricted to the main event and spectacle designed for viewing (Gyenge 2019). One might consider the inherent possibility for distraction of the user as a new step in the total representation of reality, as it recreates an everyday experience.

László Tarnay discusses the Bazinian concept of the realism of the digital moving image through two characteristics: immersion and haptic visuality. He argues that due to the high resolution of the image, its three dimensionality, and its interactive nature, digital simulation produces a kind of immersion that has not been experienced previously. However, such immersion significantly reduces the critical distance between image and user/spectator. In contrast, as it has been shown by theorists such as Jennifer M. Barker or Martine Beugnet, the source of haptic perception is most often reduced, low resolution, and faulty images. Thus, Tarnay reaches the conclusion that these two main experiences of the digital moving image work against each other. The more complex and perfect the graphic simulation, the more intense the immersive effect on the viewer; the more schematic, elliptical the representation, the stronger the haptic effect, and thus the greater the critical distance between the image and the viewing subject. Moreover, in Tarnay's view the real novelty of any (digital) total simulation could be the complete elimination of the existential difference between spectator and artwork. The only limit to this being the fact that bodily presence is not projectable. It remains an open question if VR helmets represent a new level within the technological evolution of digital images, if they can become the crucial step towards crossing the boundary of the unprojectability of embodiment, or if they should be considered just a different expression of embodiment, alongside 3D films, for example. Tarnay's main argument when dismissing immersive and interactive film as cinema is related to the temporal simultaneity between the time of the represented story and the time of its perception: a simultaneity that practically effaces the difference between spectator and character. According to him, this means that these new types of moving images are not intended to create images, but to create experiences in the subject by eliminating the consciousness of mediation. While classical cinema tried to substitute representation for reality, new digital developments try to replace it with the inner experience of the spectator resulting in what Tarnay terms

perceptual realism (18). However, we should not forget the cognitive distancing that users can develop in the process of becoming familiar with the nature of the new medium such as VR helmets (Hartmann and Fox 2021, 722), as cognitive distancing might be considered a type of “(media-) awareness of the difference between representation and reality.” (Wolf 2017, 32)

Broadly speaking, the contributions in this issue approach the design of filmic space from the perspectives of spatiality and immersion. Many of the articles investigate how the design of filmic space is capable of creating meaning, and several articles deal with the question of how to analyse the perception of what in VR is called the experimenter.

Dave Gottwald is interested in the historical process of the theatre stage becoming a set, and how the set subsequently became architecture as more and more complex environments were built for films. What makes this article theoretically intriguing is that Gottwald uses Bazin’s seminal concept of Total Cinema to link the spatial environments (i.e. sets) designed for various popular twentieth century spectacles, from theatre and early film to the most recent video game engines. Based on this he then proposes a “spatial regime” for the description and classification of sets, a system that seems to be capable of categorising all types of sets from the most traditional ones to the inhabitable spaces of theme parks, the playable sets of video games, and to the virtual sets used in recent movies.

Pedro Crispim’s paper analyses four films of one of Japan’s most subversive filmmakers, Kōji Wakamatsu. The “womb tetralogy,” as Crispim calls these works, is analysed in terms of its single diegetic space, a spatial tightness that allows the viewer to focus on the constraints and possibilities offered by such a radical spatial organisation. Moreover and according to Crispim, this spatial tightness eventually becomes symbiotic with the womb: “the context of unity of places becomes a way to operationalise it, turning it into a tangible, set-bound way to materialise the womb’s airtightness induction.” What makes the paper even more relevant from the perspective of cultural studies is that it never contends with an aesthetic analysis that points out the constant presence of “womb-like inscriptions,” instead it repeatedly emphasises the rebellious political stance that accompanies every frame of Wakamatsu’s cinema, by using, for example, the tactics of an overtly escapist entertainment (erotic pictures) to problematise sociopolitical anxieties. The claustrophobic single locations used by the Japanese filmmaker are interpreted by Crispim as womb spaces, ones that are in essence spaces of loneliness. It seems that this spatial isolationism is capable of providing a “dark [...] portrait of Japanese society as a disintegrated, fragile social unit.”

In his article on the experimental filmmaker James Benning, Péter Horányi points to the crucial role of long takes and wide shots in Benning’s work, a formal decision for presenting the spatial organisation of buildings, objects, and people within the frame. The article argues that

Benning's cinema "provides a perceptual experience into the realities of American material environments" through the detailed observation of landscapes and the uncanny use of off-screen space.

It is important to remind ourselves that VR was not the first radical break with the established space of the cinematic experience. For several decades now, moving image installations have become central to contemporary art museums, galleries and shows, proving in many instances how crucial the design of the projection environment can be in regard to the understanding and interpretation of films. The essay by film studies scholar and documentary filmmaker Patricia Nogueira presents the planned intermedial migration of her own film *Displacement* (2021) from the film theatre to the exhibition space. The article re-interprets Guy Debord's term *détournement* to describe the process and argues that the exhibition subverts the original footage and narrative to the point that "the installation 'hijacks' the pre-existing images and sounds of the documentary, re-mixing them in a novel interpretation." Furthermore, the spatial display of the projection in the installation where the gallery works as a "transitional space," instead of passive contemplation, demands agency from the audience. While "self-*détournement*" may amount to a paradox—the *détournement* of *détournement* itself—Nogueira stays true to Debord, who claimed that "[t]he function of the cinema, whether dramatic or documentary, is to present a false and isolated coherence as a substitute for a communication and activity that are absent. To demystify documentary cinema it is necessary to dissolve its 'subject matter.'" (Knabb 2003)

The quasi-architectural spaces constructed by set designers for shooting movies are also explored in this issue. Film historian and theorist Marshall Deutelbaum contends that critics and scholars usually find it difficult to understand film as something shaped by its process of production and suggests that the relationship of set design and the visual composition of the picture frame in widescreen movies is worth in-depth analysis. Based on the formal analyses of nearly two hundred widescreen films, he aims to uncover the principles that guided their visual construction and concludes that "the fundamental rules defining widescreen aesthetics were embodied in the set design."

In her essay, Maria Cecilia Reyes also points out the crucial role of space in VR filmmaking. She argues that if we agree that the central goal of the practice of screenwriting for immersive screens is to achieve immersion, then we should recognise that these screens are designed to not be noticed during the viewer/user experience. This is why she proposes that XR screenwriting should be named space-writing: these spatial narratives all have as starting points the location of the human perception at the centre of the immersive experience, and they all intend to construct a fictional space with narrative content. In her view, one of the key tasks of VR designers is to overcome the effects of the disappearing picture frame by finding alternative methods and perceptual cues to frame sections of the space and direct the users' attention. Based on all this,

Reyes asserts that space-writing describes much better what happens during XR writing, because in contrast to cinema, human perception is no longer located outside the scenic space but right at the centre of it.

The question of the sense of immersion, together with the importance of how the audience members experience the environment and their situatedness are tackled in several articles. The sense of immersion can be achieved by applying various design strategies such as offering (illusory) agency to the participants, creating multisensorial spaces and situations; and engaging the experiencers into an encompassing story world. The experiencer—due to their real or imagined agency—can try out various forms of behaviour and can use these situations for practicing or constructing attitudes.

Horányi argues that wide shots and long takes are crucial to James Benning's documentaries because they create an immersive perceptual experience that allows the viewers to forget the narrative and instead observe in detail the material elements of the represented environment.

Nogueira hypothesises how the spectator would become "both a subject of imagination and an embodied subject" in a liminal situation for being immersed: the participants finds themselves in between documentary footage where they can order the sequences, which increases their possibilities for participation. While in some cases the indexical characteristic of reality can be alienating, the author here attempts to create a framework for how the documentary aspect can be circumvented.

Gottwald discusses the development of set design and camera movements, and how game engines such as Unreal and Unity can be used to create "total worlds." The author's main claim is that cinema, together with performative theatricality, came to "subsume our spaces, and thus, our very lives." His concept of immersion has a medium-related approach: he claims that certain novel ways of filmmaking (as in the case of *The Mandalorian*) merge Bazin's concept of cinematic truth (re-enacted life) and the concept of theatre (which presents life in an abstract form). When the audience members step into theme parks or experience the above-mentioned movie crafted carefully by the creators using innovative technologies, what they experience can be considered a precursor to virtual reality. The audience's senses are overwhelmed by the meticulous planning; their illusionary agency is engaged in discovering the story world. The genesis of this is the filmic grammar of sets which become inhabited.

Reyes approaches immersion from the creator's perspective. She draws on lessons in Janet Murray's paradigm changing book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray [1997] 2016). Reyes discusses how design approaches in moving images and immersive experiences that put the audience in the centre can be understood as tools for social transformation. She emphasises that the role of the creator shifts from solitary activity to teamwork in which different types of expertise and approaches combine to ensure an interactive and immersive production.

The book reviewed in this issue by Ervin Török, Jonathan Rozenkrantz's *Videographic Cinema: An Archaeology of Electronic Images and Imagi-*

naries, analyses the technical medium of video turned obsolete by newer media, focusing on the differences between the expressive capacities of electronic and photochemical moving images. The book is also relevant to the problems discussed in this issue because the coming together of the two technologies in theatrical films significantly affects the sense and degree of immersion achievable for the spectators.

All these articles touch upon the crucial question of how the new film design grammar defines the role of the audience in terms of spatiality and a sense of immersion. Several authors underline important points about engaging the audience on various levels (e.g., how to script their role in a way that would offer them a more immersive experience) and in this way they point out crucial design strategies that lead to the sense of a total world where set design and dramatic acts define the experience. On the other hand, while the articles of this issue discuss in detail the sense of immersion from the viewpoint of cinema studies, it is also interesting to note that they often disregard the importance of engaging the experiencers and motivating them to be interactive. The sense of immersion can be maintained only when the possibility of interaction (either on an illusory or real level) is reached: in order to achieve this—besides the sense of spatiality and the sense of presence—a sense of engagement and guiding UX design elements are needed that offer feedback on the experiencer's actions. While these topics do not fall squarely into the scope of film studies, video game studies and interaction design theory can present fruitful ideas and data to further strengthen the relationship of design and film. Future research of the continuously evolving nature of virtual reality should also look closer to the existing XR productions (AR and VR) in order to understand the current possibilities of this medium as well as the limitations that the technology imposes on creative thinking. The importance of design in cinematic-like experiences points towards near-future developments that can further nurture the process of blurring the boundaries between film and everyday experience.

Pondering what may follow “the century of cinema,” Steven Shaviro argued in 2001 that Bazin's myth of total cinema has already been realised but with a final twist: “instead of the movies becoming more like reality, reality has become more like the movies.” With reality losing its charm in the ceaseless audiovisual flow, “one possible cinematic response,” Shaviro claims, “is to summon the invisible and the inaudible: to bring us close to the mysteries of the divine and the demonic, the dark and silent states of the body and soul” by allusion, implication, and indirection. And perhaps this domain is shared with certain kinds of immersive storytelling formats—such as *Bloodless*; *Tearless* (Kim 2017; 2021); *Goliath* (Murphy and Abdalla 2021); *Darkening* (Moravec 2022); *Firewatch* (Moss and Vanavan 2016)—which point towards new ways of invoking what, per Shaviro, “has been left out of Bazin's ‘total and complete representation of reality.’”

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