IMMERSIVITY

By Francesca Perotto

(First published May 31, 2023)

It. *Immersività*; Fr. *Immersivité*; Germ. *Immersivität*; Span. *Inmersividad*. Although quite widespread in the contemporary technological and artistic debate, the concept of immersivity has often been decried as vague and contradictory (Grau 2003; Tavinor 2021). Symptomatic of such opaqueness is the confusion around its definition. Etymologically, the term comes from the Latin verb *immergo* (to plunge, dip, or sink into liquid) and, in its metaphorical and broad use, it refers to the condition of being completely involved in or taken up by an object or an activity. In this sense, immersivity is treated as a synonym for immersion.

Nonetheless, Alessandro D'Aloia (2012) and Maurizio Forte (2012), among others, have claimed that the concept would specifically indicate the ability to produce a feeling of immersion, referring to the characteristics of the objective pole of the immersive condition. In this perspective, when talking about the immersivity of a medium or an activity, the focus would go on what makes them capable of creating immersion, leaving the psychological state aside.

Focusing on the medial dimension of immersion, however, cannot completely disregard the subjective side of that experience, and neatly separating the objective and the subjective pole has sometimes contributed to obscuring the meaning of the term.

Furthermore, while the contemporary debate on immersivity binds the concept almost exclusively to the issues raised by new media (immersion is present in the definition of Virtual Reality of both Michael Heim, David Chalmers, and Massimo Bergamasco), several scholars have reconstructed for it a wider history. The art historian Oliver Grau (2003), for example, traces the first quest for immersivity in Western art in the Roman Villa dei Misteri (Pompeii) from 60 BC, while Erkki Huhtamo (1995) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) speak of immersivity as a cultural topos that runs through the entire Western tradition, with periods of rise and fall. In this perspective, examples of emblematic moments in the history of immersivity can be found in the invention of the Cinerama and the theme parks in the 1950s or the artistic current of pictorial realism in the 20th century. The extent of the notion and the discontinuous and intermittent nature of its application, however, makes it very challenging to provide a linear and comprehensive history of the

concept. For this reason, rather than trying to conceive the debate as unitary, several scholars (among the others, Ryan 2001; Calleja 2011; Roginska, Geluso 2018) have preferred to isolate the history of its use to the domain of a specific discipline, fragmenting its study.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Being so transversal and not yet precisely defined, the concept of immersivity is at the centre of many different debates, ranging from aesthetics to politics, that have re-flourished with the digital revolution. The main issues of the aesthetic debate are: (a) the problem of distinguishing between a reception-oriented definition of immersivity and an object-oriented one; (b) the plurality of the fields of application, its interdisciplinarity, and transmediality; (c) its relationship with the theme of illusion; and (d) its moral suspects.

a) One of the main reasons for the vagueness hovering around the concept of immersivity is the difficulty of distinguishing between the subjective experience of being immersed into something (as a state of mind) and the objective capacity of creating a feeling of immersion. As we have seen, different scholars claim that the concept of immersivity specifically refers to the object-oriented perspective of immersion, and others have proposed talking about a dialectic of presence and distance (Bob Witmer and Michael Singer 1998) or absorption (Calleja 2011) when referring to the psychological state of being immersed into something, to distinguish the two experiential poles.
Scholars who accept this division claim that immersivity specifically relates to synaesthesia and multisensoriality (Grau 2003), interactivity (Calleja 2011), time factors (Freitag, Molter, et al. 2020), and the concealing of the medium (Grau 2003). Media and activities sharing these proprieties are potentially capable of producing a feeling of immersion.

Despite many efforts dedicated to tracing this distinction, with some philosophers of the technique of the 20th century (Gilbert Simondon in particular), it can be argued that the very presupposition of a sharp distinction between a subjective and an objective pole of immersive experiences contributes to confusing the concept. Only a few scholars support a sharp division between a subjective and an objective pole of immersive experiences, agreeing that immersivity should be thought of as the result of a complex interaction between subjective predispositions and objective characteristics (Freitag, Molter, et al. 2020).

b) Other issues of the contemporary debate on immersivity are linked to the plurality of the fields of application, its interdisciplinarity, and transmediality. Immersivity is applied to a wide range of fields, sometimes very distant from each other, so that it is difficult to have a univocal definition of the phenomenon. In addition to visual arts (Liptay, Dogramaci, eds. 2016, Mc Robert 2007), immersivity is used in the studies of video games (Calleja 2011), virtual reality (Tavinor 2021), immersive journalism (Moser, MacLeod 1996), immersive sound (Roginska, Geluso 2018), literature (Ryan 2001), theme parks (Liptay, Dogramaci, eds. 2016), and many other domains that only have few traits in common.

To deal with this ambiguity, some scholars have proposed specific names to define the immersivity belonging to each different field of application. For example, Calleja (2011) has proposed resorting to incorporation when referring to the immersive experience of video games. Nonetheless, the proliferation of terms has not solved the issue, as immersivity is not only applied to a plurality of different areas but also is an interdisciplinary concept that needs an interdisciplinary approach to be fully understood (Freitag, Molter, et al. 2020).

Other scholars from technological studies have tried to approach the problem by distinguishing between different types of immersivity depending on the peculiarities of different immersive media, rather than focusing on the fields in which they are applied to. Calleja (2011), again, proposed a broad distinction between ergodic and non-ergodic media to underline the pivotal role of interactivity in defining different kinds of immersivity. In this regard, the immersivity of a hypertext or a *trompe l'oeil* has very different traits from the one of virtual reality, even though they still share important features.
Although quite promising in understanding the concrete functioning of immersive media without generalizations, it is important to note how, in most cases, the effect of immersion is obtained thanks to transmediality (Grau 2003), so that the specific characteristics of each immersive media have to be thought in their interaction.

c) Another central aspect of the debate on immersivity is its relationship with illusion (Wolf, Bernhart and Mahler, eds. 2013). The art historian Oliver Grau (2003) links the development of the immersive effect in the Western art tradition with the more ancient quest for illusion already present in the Roman Villas, in the Renaissance, and Baroque trompe l'oeil or in the Cinerama from the 1950s. In most of his examples, illusion, as a precursor of immersivity, is explained by the production of a realistic environment to be immersed in. In this regard, the history of immersivity would be closely tied with the discovery of the linear perspective in the Florence of the 15th century and with pictorial realism of the 20th century and would not be a prerogative of new media.
Remaining on this line of kinship between illusion and immersion, Fabienne Liptay and Burcu Dogramaci (2016) have underlined the importance of distinguishing between an indexical and a non-indexical form of illusion in achieving immersivity, to expand and better define the connection between illusion and realistic representations.
Nonetheless, lifelikeness is not a necessary condition for creating an immersive environment, and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) have introduced the concept of "immersive fallacy" precisely to denounce the confusion and the identification between immersion and realism. Realistic illusion is only one of the possible ways to achieve immersivity, but other important factors can be at stake (for example, as we have referred to before, synaesthesia, interactivity, or temporality).

d) Eventually, a last theoretical knot of the contemporary debate has to do with the moral suspects that weigh on immersivity. As we have seen, immersivity is often associated with illusion but, in its everyday use, it can also be paired negatively with desubjectivization (Ryan 2001), especially when related to new

media such as virtual or augmented realities (Liptay, Dogramaci, eds. 2016). This has not only to do with a technophobic approach to the digital revolution but is anchored in a deeper motif of the Western tradition, that is, the autonomy of the subject (Sloterdijk 1998). For these reasons, scholars belonging to the debate have to deal with distinguishing between this moral prejudice and the effective functioning of immersivity (Tavinor 2021).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

J. Bucher, *Storytelling for Virtual Reality. Methods and Principles for Crafting Immersive Narratives*, New York London, Routledge, 2018.

G. Calleja, *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation*, Cambridge London, The MIT Press, 2011.

M. Carrozzino, M. Bergamasco, *Beyond Virtual Museums: Experiencing immersive virtual reality in real museums*, "Journal of Cultural Heritage", 11 (2010): 452-458.

D. Chalmers, *The Matrix as Metaphysics*, in C. Grau (ed.), *Philosophers Explore the Matrix*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

A. D'Aloia, *Film in Depth. Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience*, "Film and Media Studies", 5 (2012): 87-106.

M. C. T. Dieck et al. (eds.), *Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality. New Trends in Immersive Technologies*, New York, Springer, 2021.

M. Forte, *Immersive 3D Applications*, in N. A. Silberman (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, Vol. 2, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012: 69-72.

F. Freitag, C. Molter et al., *Immersivity. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spaces of Immersion*, "Ambiances", (2020): 1-23.

O. Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge, the MIT Press, 2003.

M. Heim, *Virtual Realism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998.

E. Huhtamo, *Encapsuled Bodies in Motion. Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion*, in S. Penny (ed.), Critical Issues in Electronic Media, New York, SUNY Press, 1995.

S. D. Lipscomb, S. M. Zehnder, *Immersion in the Virtual Environment. The Effect of a Musical Score on the Video Gaming Experience*, "Journal of Physiological Anthropology and Applied Human Science", 23 (2004): 337-334.

F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci (eds.), *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media*, Leiden Boston, Rodopi, 2016.

M.A. Moser, D. MacLeod (eds.), *Immersed in Technology. Art and Virtual Environments*, Cambridge London, The MIT Press, 1996.

L. Mc Robert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*, Toronto-London, University of Toronto Press, 2007.

A. Roginska, P. Geluso (eds.), *Immersive Sound. The Art and Science of Binaural and Multi-Channel Audio*, New York London, Routledge, 2018.

M-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore-London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

K. Salen, E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, MA-London, MIT Press, 2004.

G. Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

J-L. Sinclair, *Principles of Game Audio and Sound Design*, New York-London, Routledge, 2020.

P. Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume I: Bubbles, Microspherology*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 1998 (2011).

C. Sommerer, L. Mignonneau, *Interactive Art Research*, Wien-New York, Springer, 2009.

G. Tavinor, *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality*, London, Routledge, 2021.

B. G. Witmer, M. J. Singer, *Measuring Presence in Virtual Environments. A Presence Questionnaire*, "Presence", 7 (1998): 225-240.

W. Wolf et al., *Immersion and Distance. Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2013.