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The Price of Immersion

Will Schrimshaw

SPATIO-TEMPORAL IMMERSION

To be immersed is to be surrounded, to be within. When talking of musical and sonic experience, to be immersed – in an installation, a performance, a listening experience, a walk on the beach, etc. – is to perceive from within rather than from without. A typical example of this distinction is the experience of a sound installation in contrast to that of a wall-mounted visual artwork; in the latter we perceive the work across a void that separates us, the viewer, from the work displayed at a distance; in the former we are within the work and accordingly there is no distance between us and the work which both surrounds and often penetrates us. This experience of immersion is often considered a privilege or property of the sonic as sound is often considered “the immersive medium par excellence”¹. To be immersed is, in the most powerful of immersive experiences, to not only be surrounded or enveloped but to be penetrated by the work; it is the intensive intimacy arising from the combination of envelopment and penetration that supports claims for sound’s privilege regarding immersion.

In immersion the distinction between (listening) subject and (art) object begins to collapse as the distance between the two becomes imperceptible, confused. This confusion of subject and object results in a centring of the viewer/audient; in immersive experiences we find ourselves centred, not always *the* centre but occupying a position within the work which appears unique due to both our position and the acknowledged agency of perception that often accompanies the indeterminacy of many immersive works: the role of subjective perception in shaping both the experience and significance of the work in which the listener is enveloped. This confusion of subject and object results in a correlation of the sensed and the self, a collapse of distance and strict distinctions that yields a sense of immediacy. The perception of the work appears immediate, as much a product of subjective auto-affection as the perception of external objects and events. In immersion the frames, lenses and screens that might mediate our experience of the art work disappear.

These spatial aspects of immersion are complemented by a temporal correlation wherein the artwork unfolds or is completed in the contemporaneous perception of it. Immersion thereby describes a spatio-temporal unity of subject and artwork.

AMBIENCE AND INTENSITY

Immersion describes the conditions of an aesthetic experience, yet within these broad conditions there is great variation. For simplicity’s sake we can identify two extremes. There is a therapeutic vein within immersive practices which is coupled with a concept of ambience. In this context the presence of drones and sustained tones, for example, may soothe the listening subject; the absence of rapid changes, discrete rhythms or events presents a calming experience free from shocks or distractions that demand attention. This is the calming bath of immersion in which the listening subject can lie back and relax. Distinct from the ambient or therapeutic vein of immersive practice is a more intensely visceral experience associated with intense volumes, noise music performances and an aesthetic that elicits affective resonance from the listener via more shocking and generally abrasive means. Far from being a immersive “bathing ceremony”² putting the audience at ease, these more ‘intense’ experiences nonetheless equally attend to the primary function of the immersive work: to affirm presence, often the self-presence of the audience and their correlation with the unfolding artwork. This affirmation of presence is achieved through an assertion of the primacy of sensation.

IMMEDIATE SENSATION

In asserting the primacy of sensation, the immersive work makes a claim to a particular radicalism. This radicalism is historically specific and, in contemporary art and art theory, it is ascertained through its proximity to theoretical paradigms such as New Materialism.³ This theoretical paradigm distances itself from the linguistic turn that has dominated theory and philosophy in recent decades, by asserting the primacy of matter as it is directly encountered through immediate and pre-symbolic experience. The matter in new materialism is the phenomenological fabric of lived experience as opposed to the abstract or theoretical entities populating an often mathematically constructed scientific image of reality beyond immediate perception. In stressing the primacy and immediacy of sensation, the immersive artwork claims to bring us closer to this fabric of lived experience that is presented as undergirding the representational and symbolic abstractions of both everyday language and mathematical models. While constituting an apparently radical departure from the strictures of the linguistic turn and the conceptual artistic practices this turn supported, the notion of a sonic

materialism that often accompanies immersive practices is equally a *return* to back towards the primacy of sensation that gets lost or buried beneath linguistic and more broadly symbolic abstractions.⁴

Immersion often brings great pleasure, a level of sensory stimulation that readily excites; it is for this reason that immersion sells. The affective primacy of the immersive artwork gives it an immediate appeal articulated at a universal or generic level: the ability to sense. For this reason immersion is often associated with inclusion in the commissioning of works of art. While immersion sells – as can be seen in the prevalence of this term in promotional materials from galleries, cinemas, theatres and so on – it also comes at a cost.

THE PRICE OF IMMERSION

One such cost can be political. In his history of virtual art Oliver Grau describes a coincidence of art and state wherein immersive panoramas were commissioned to present a victor's history and glorify the state. In a less explicitly political formulation the immersive artwork, through its prioritising of sensation, asserts a double sense of interiority: being in the interior of an artwork and having one's own corporeal interior resonate with that artwork – something which sound is particularly good at. Being within the artwork, one's horizon is determined by that artwork and where that horizon is ideologically determined, by the state or other ruling forces, there is an assertion of the "power of immersion to deprive the human subject of the right of decision"⁵. Furthermore the aesthetics of presence, immediacy and localisation that tend to accompany the immersive impose a series of spatio-temporal constraints that have come under criticism within contemporary political and specifically post-capitalist theory. There is a perceived impediment that aesthetic preferences for immediacy and localisation impose upon the imagination of a progressive politics. A notable example of this is Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future*⁶ which argues that the tendency towards immediacy and localisation in movements such as Occupy constituted a limitation as much as a catalyst in terms of what the movement was able to achieve, as the type of planning, strategising and organisation that might have taken the movement beyond the immediacy of protest and direct action was too abstract a conception, involving more mediation than the movement could ethically accommodate.

The preference for the immediate in immersive aesthetics supports suspicion of abstraction, which consequently presents mathematical models as less real than immediate experience. From a philosophical perspective the aesthetics of immersion can bind one to what Quentin Meillassoux has called "correlationism,"⁷ a consequence of the aforementioned collapse of the distance and distinction between subject and object. As a consequence the relation between subject and object becomes irreducible and it is therefore impossible to think the existence of a reality without the presence of a subject to think it. The benefits of a correlational

perspective lie in the sensitivity towards the ways in which images of reality are socially, culturally and epistemologically constructed. But if this view is extended to the point where subjectivity becomes an irreducible condition of reality, as in extreme cases of correlationist thought, it engenders an ethically problematic standpoint that limits engagement with existential threats such as climate change, and problematizes the very conception of existence preceding and following humanity, cannot be envisaged anymore.

In an art-historical context immersive aesthetics often divest from the conceptual in favour of the immediate. Peter Osborne⁸ proposed a critical concept of contemporary art as a principally post-conceptual practice; the term 'post-conceptual' refers not to a rejection of the conceptual but a critical movement beyond the conceptual practices of the 1960s and 70s. Far from leading towards a 'new materialism', post-conceptual or contemporary practice is described as a critical retention and reappraisal of conceptualism, a critical retention and rethinking of conceptualism. Where conceptualism is jettisoned in favour of immersive immediacy, the ability of immersive practices to participate in such a conception of contemporary art is drawn into question.

The critical points above require consideration within areas of music and sound studies that seek to positively assert the immersive power of a medium specific orientation. Yet it should also be acknowledged that the aforementioned inclusiveness of the immersive has a great strength. While this inclusiveness has great potential it falls short where it is limited to a sufficiency of aesthetics. A critical deployment of the immersive, a post-immersive practice, requires a punctuated or vitiated immersion, immersion as an instrument of abstraction where that abstraction supports thought beyond the immediacy of the auto-affective.

- 1 Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media, Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 4.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, New York: Routledge, 2003
- 3 For an introduction to New Materialism see: Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", in: *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, London: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1-43. For a discussion of New Materialism, amongst other variants of realism, in the context of contemporary art, see: Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey, Suhail Malik (Eds.), *Realism, Materialism, Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 57-64.
- 5 Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 110.
- 6 Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, New York: Verso, 2016. For another critical yet more sympathetic account of the Occupy movement, see: Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, New York: Verso, 2012, pp. 207-250.
- 7 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier, New York: Continuum, 2009.
- 8 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, New York: Verso, 2013.