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Part 4. Critical Views on Immersive Journalism

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6. Promises, Pitfalls, and Potentials of Immersive Journalism

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Abstract
When moving the discussion from VR-based interactive fiction to non-fiction genres such as immersive journalism, several issues of critical concern come to the fore: 1) How can the informants (or, indeed, the objects) of the immersive experiences implied by 360-degree journalism be adequately protected and how can they be properly included in the projects realized in their life worlds? 2) Which implicit understandings of realism are underlying the wide-spread presumption of VR-promoters to be able to offer unmitigated access to the lives of others? 3) Is the triggering of emotional reactions really a task for journalists, and if yes, what are the wider implications of this for the journalistic profession? And finally, 4) how can audiences be sufficiently made aware of the manipulative nature, constructed frames, and potentially disturbing effects of the simulations they are immersed in? This chapter will unpack these questions, which continue to haunt current attempts to realize the potentials of immersive journalism. The chapter proposes how a genuinely ethical immersive journalism might look like, and how the identified severe ethical and epistemological problems can be addressed in a productive and progressive manner

Keywords: ethics of immersive journalism, audience protection, audience manipulation, virtual reality, critique, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal

Introduction

In a review of the VR-application *The Circle*, Aron Souppouris (2016) asserts the potentials of immersive technologies. He states that “VR helped me grasp the life of a transgender wheelchair user” and attests to the emotional access VR allegedly offered him into the life worlds of others. At the same time, Lisa Nakamura (2020) takes a critical stance towards these applications. Stating that “pathos is VR’s proof of concept”, she alerts to the danger of emotional manipulation as an important feature of this technology. These two positions illustrative of what is at stake in this chapter. While the first sums up much of what is presented as the promises of new immersive VR, the second invites more critical perspectives on this technology’s inherent pitfalls. Realistically assessing its genuine potentials, I will argue in this chapter, means to carefully take heed of the latter to enable a responsible realisation of the former.

Dependent on the context of reception and the person reading it, the first quote by Aron Souppouris might be understood in three different ways: 1) as a genuine appreciation of a deeply felt vicarious experience of being someone else that was made possible by new immersive technologies, 2) as a naïve expression of a self-centred belief in the empathic powers of new commercial tech gadgets, or 3) as an intended pun where the author ironically combines politically correct identity markers to denounce uncritical appraisals of the largely

assumed ethical effects of the latest technological hype. In the following, I will try to navigate such tensions and interrogate the often-false promises, the largely unacknowledged pitfalls, and the usually difficult-to-realize potentials of immersive technology-use in non-fiction film making and journalism.

When reading the full article from which the quote in the title was taken (Souppouris 2016), it becomes clear rather quickly that the rendered experience is of the first kind. The author reflects upon the "transformative" insights he gained from engaging the VR-driven interactive simulation *The Circle* designed by Manos Agianniotakis.[1] According to Souppouris, the Oculus Rift-based application enabled him co-presence in the body of a transgender person who became tied to a wheelchair after a traumatizing transphobic attack. Tapping into a discourse of 360-degree video and VR as "empathy machines" – a term originally coined in a much-cited Ted Talk by tech guru Chris Milk (2015) – Souppouris claims that *The Circle* allowed him to enter an artificial world and "embody the character Alex, and understand her frustrations and feelings" offering him a profound "educational experience" (n.p.).

The Circle is a game. It has an artificial setting, fictitious characters, and a scripted storyline and it allows players to navigate the game-space in a manner that is deliberately designed to replicate a disadvantaged person's relation to the world and to other people. As such, it opens for important insights, but in principle also enables voyeuristic forms of engagement. Thereby, the example points to a series of aporia in much writing about the ethical potentials of empathy-inducing immersive technologies that, in essence, might be more about pathos and profit than about genuinely improving the lives of the many.

I see the following issues in need of further interrogation before any conclusions regarding the possible pro-social effects of VR can be reached: 1) making someone feel something does not necessarily imply understanding or political conscientization and mobilization, 2) if feelings are pre-rationally induced by means of technology, the subject is not convinced into reacting in a certain manner, but simply manipulated into doing so, 3) empathy-inducing VR is focused on the isolated individual and built on the presumption that politics is mainly about changing individual behaviour, and finally, 4) if the emotion of empathy can be technologically induced in a long-term attitude and behaviour-changing manner, so can other less progressive emotions such as hate or despair.

When moving the discussion from VR-based interactive fiction to non-fiction genres such as immersive journalism, other issues of critical concern come to the fore that need to be taken seriously before jumping on the bandwagon of the next big-tech driven 'revolution': 1) How can the informants (or, indeed, the objects) of the immersive experiences implied by 360-degree journalism be adequately protected and how can they be properly included in the projects realized in their life worlds? 2) Which implicit understandings of realism are underlying the wide-spread presumption of VR-promoters to be able to offer unmitigated access to the lives of others? 3) Is the triggering of emotional reactions really a task for journalists, and if yes, what are the wider implications of this for the journalistic profession? Finally, 4) how can audiences be sufficiently made aware of the manipulative nature, constructed frames, and potentially disturbing effects of the simulations they are immersed in?

[1] More information on *The Circle* can be accessed here: https://igf.com/circle

The current chapter will unpack these questions, which continue to haunt current attempts to realize the potentials of immersive journalism. In this endeavour, I will take recourse to earlier critical approaches to witnessing and the representation of a suffering other. First and foremost, my sources of inspiration are critical approaches to the emerging practice of immersive journalism (Schlembach and Clewer 2021, Nakamura 2020, Nash 2018, Rose 2018, and Sánchez Laws 2020a). In addition to this, I offer a historical perspective and flesh out parallels to earlier discussions about the political valence of representing a suffering other. In this endeavour, Susan Sontag's (2003) critique of photography as a form of witnessing, Elisabeth Dauphinée's (2007) cautioning against an instrumentalization of images of plight, and Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) attention to the salience of images for justifications of war and military interventionism become crucial. Drawing upon a Levinasian ethics borrowed from Butler (2004, 2009), I finally turn to the theories of the stage of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal to develop ideas about how a genuinely ethical immersive journalism might look like and how the identified severe ethical and epistemological problems can be addressed in a productive and progressive manner.

Promises, premises, and pretensions: Immersive journalism and its discontents

In their study on *Governing Affects* Otto Penz and Birgit Sauer (2020: 1) assert that, today, in politics, culture, society, and even the economy "affect, emotion, and feeling flourish like never before". In line with this development, the authors argue, affective regulation and amplification of individuals and populations by means of new technologies and procedures of management become key elements of contemporary apparatuses of power. Jodi Dean (2009) argues in a similar direction when she connects current neoliberal forms of governance with technology and an elicitation of feelings for political purposes. According to her, communicative capitalism brings together consumerism, excessive individualism, and an embrace of victimization and combines these elements with new technologies of mediation and exchange. This constellation, Dean continues, has grave implications for politics and society as it tends to reduce political engagement to a self-centred registration of opinions and an exhibitionist expression of feeling that leads to a privileging of emotionality over a rational exchange of arguments. Drawing upon the work of Jacques Lacan, she concludes that "[i]deological formations, then, work as economies of enjoyment [i.e., affective intensities] to forbid, permit, direct, and command" (50). It is my contention in this chapter that VR-based immersive technologies constitute powerful tools for governing through affects under conditions of communicative capitalism. Therefore, these tools merit our critical attention.

Ana Luisa Sánchez Laws (2020a) opens her investigation of theory, practices, and challenges of immersive journalism by reiterating "the promise" of this new technology of news production in terms of affective engagement. VR-based reporting, she writes, enables viewers to be "virtually at the location" and "feel present with the subjects of the news" (2), a setting that induces empathy and thereby "increase[s] our understanding of a situation in ways traditional formats cannot" (2). As she acknowledges a few pages later, however, this approach "poses profound ethical challenges" (6) and, as I would like to add, epistemological and political ones as well. To be able to critically interrogate the promise of immersive journalism and the challenges this technique implies, I will have to take a closer look at some of the most salient premises underpinning a contemporary discourse of innovation, disruption,

and affective amplification that currently emanates from the higher echelons of a technology-focused business world.

The idea of using immersive technologies such as VR or 360-degree video to induce emotions and thereby move media experiences 'to the next level' have been common in environments working with game development and experimental film making since the 1980s (Rose 2018; Sánchez Laws 2020a; Nakamura 2020). Head-mounted displays, sensor-covered suits or gloves, as well as specially designed rooms (e.g., CAVE) should enable a spatial presence somewhere else, and often as someone else, that was meant to be so immersing that it could elicit responses-as-if-real (Laws 2020a: 24-5). These ideas of tech-induced real experiences in virtual worlds were readily disseminated through advertising and popular sales events aimed at gathering venture capital for the development of 'the next big thing' in entertainment technologies – with Zuckerberg's metaverse as the so far latest addition to this commercialized and surveillance-driven media 'ecology'.

The transfer from the field of fictional media to uses in factual news reporting gradually started already in the 1990s (see for instance Boczkowski 2005) but gained momentum with an important study conducted by Nonny de la Peña and colleagues (2010) who used the term "immersive journalism" in conjunction with their experiments about news dissemination in and through navigable 3-D virtual environments. Developer Chris Milk (2015) later branded the high-tech tools behind immersive journalism and other VR-based non-fiction formats as an "empathy machine". According to his postulates, this new technology enabled co-presence and therefore emotional engagement with the otherwise inaccessible other thus facilitating compassionate and therefore progressive real-world responses. As among others Ruberg (2020) and Andrejevic and Volcic (2020) have pointed out, in such claims about technologies' potentials to incite pro-social effects, the term "empathy" often remains undefined, thus, making it difficult to criticize sweeping assertions and test hypotheses (see also Sánchez Laws 2020b).

The discussion about possibilities and pitfalls of immersive journalism is essentially a debate about media specificity, i.e., the question of how exactly 360-degree videos or VR-environments can be seen to impact upon audiences and how different this is compared to traditional media such as television news casts or documentary films. De la Peña et al. (2010), for instance, argue that three factors distinguish immersive technologies from other forms of mediation: "plausibility", "place illusion", and "body ownership". The authors claim that these three aspects, when brought together in the right manner, can elicit responses-as-if-real that have the capacity "to transform not only people's sensation of place and reality but also themselves" (295). They allege further that, because of this, immersive technologies hold considerable ethical potentials (see also Reis, Vasconcelos and Coelho 2018). However, the connection made by de la Peña and colleagues between a technologically induced *potential* for specific media effects and a contingent actualization of these potentials in concrete contexts of reception remains rather weak. Ultimately, the authors base their conclusions on a dataset that is limited to a small number of participants who self-report certain effects of VR-based experiences that are interpreted as being pro-social by the authors of the study.

However, certain prosocial effects of 360-degree video have recently been confirmed in (among others) a study by Pimentel and colleagues (2021) who empirically connect a certain

increase in the exhibited willingness to give donations with exposure to an empathy-enhancing non-fictional immersive experience (for applications in conflict resolution, see Hasler et al 2021). It is important to note, however, that studies confirming pro-social effects of immersive technologies usually do so with reference to VR-based scenarios where the content that is exhibited was designed to precisely support such effects from the outset. In other words, in most of these studies the supreme importance of technological immersion for the elicited pro-social effects remains an assumption.

In his study on VR-based immersive technologies, McRoberts (2018) introduces four aspects that according to him are crucial for a realization of a sense of presence and "being there" (114). The key factors he identifies are 1) immersion, 2) positionality (or situatedness) of the user, 3) a degree of interactivity, and 4) narrative agency. In his article, McRoberts creates a check list of elements for both design and critical evaluation of immersive film making based on both technical aspects and storytelling devices. It is in this case interesting to note that he merely explains how an increased sense of presence can be invited but refrains from assuming a success of such attempts with every audience. Neither does he premise a necessarily pro-social impact of the induced emotions. Arguing in a similar direction as McRoberts, Jones (2017) has shown the significance of actual interactivity and, thus, real audience influence on what to focus on and which perspective to adopt for a truly immersive experience without connecting her findings to presumed ethical effects. According to her, techniques such as VR-based journalism in essence serve to renew news production with the aim of reaching "a disengaged audience" (182). In the cases referred here, ethical effects are not simply assumed, but treated as contingent upon form, content, and reception of each specific journalistic product.

Discourses about allegedly unharnessed potentials of the most recent technological hype often emanate from marketing and are aimed at increasing sales or attracting investments (see for instance Boczkowski 2005). Statements about the unrealized ethical possibilities of immersive journalism are no exception to this rule. As Rose (2018: 147) notes,

[a]t a time when the dark potential of digital has been brought into view, it is remarkable to see the same techno-utopianism that was pervasive in relation to the development of the internet at play around a new generation of technology […] that carries significant risks of harm.

Nakamura (2020: 48-49) makes a similar point in her scathing criticism of immersive non-fiction when she asserts that "the idea of VR as an empathy machine […] is part and parcel of Big Tech's attempt to rebrand". Virtuous VR, she continues in implicit agreement with Dean (2009), "is a cultural alibi for a digital media culture that has taken a wrong turn, towards distraction, detachment, and misinformation". Mind that both Rose and Nakamura wrote these lines prior to Zuckerberg announcing his newest, and for me rather dystopic, vision of his metaverse.

Today, the question is not any longer if VR-based immersive technologies enable experiences of presence, embodiment, and agency (de la Pena 2010, Reis, Vasconcelos and Coelho 2018). Several empirical studies have attested to the fact that such experiences are indeed generated in encounters with immersive technologies (Pimentel et al. 2021, Hasler et al. 2021). The question that remains unanswered, however, pertains to the implications of these experiences

in wider political and societal contexts and to the new ethical obligations for journalists and spectators these imply (Sánchez Laws and Utne 2019). And here serious doubts regarding often-alleged pro-social effects abound.

Forced empathy, toxic embodiment, and the power to manipulate: The unavoidable politics of immersive journalism

The claim to be able to elicit emotional responses in audiences in a manner apparently unfettered by mediation is crucial for the postulate of pro-social political effects of factual immersive media. Nakamura (2020) summarizes the most central epistemological premises held in what she terms "the co-presence for good movement" (56) by showing how claims to truth are directly connected with claims to elicit true feelings. "Virtuous VR", she writes, "fills a very special niche: as the medium that not only needs to be felt to be believed, but cannot be doubted once it is felt" (53). Pathos, she concludes "is VR's proof of concept". Eliciting emotions seems to help us avoid messy detours through representation. Rather than arguing about the politics and ideologies of mediation we seem empowered to directly access the truth itself that reveals itself in our unquestionable emotional and bodily experiences.

The evocation of affective responses for political purposes by means of powerful media technologies should indeed be a cause of concern (Penz and Sauer 2021, Dean 2009). Audiences are not convinced by ways of rational arguments that balance different perspectives and include backgrounds and contexts of what is shown. Instead, they are meant to bodily experience without filters or frames a suffering other and build political positions and actions based on these allegedly pre-cognitive and pre-ideological sensations (Schlembach and Clewer 2021). This, of course, does not really sound like a description of the function of journalism in contemporary democracies, but reminds more of insidious subliminal practices familiar from fields such as advertising, PR, and propaganda (Bernays & Co.).

And, indeed, one of the most cited examples of the use of immersive factual VR for good, Emblematic Group's *Project Syria* (2014), was commissioned for presentation at the World Economic Forum in Davos by Klaus Schwab with the explicit purpose of making world leaders act. However, the nature of the induced action, the context of the presented events, and their possible causes remained beyond the scope of the presentation that merely aimed at making the horrors of Aleppo[2] experienced by a little girl vicariously tangible to world leaders in an embodied manner who were then assumed to retain a willingness *to act* in an unspecified way using unspecified means. According to Laws (2020a: 84-85), this approach "poses ethical concerns" and reveals that, rather than a tool for political enlightenment,

[2] Given the political bent of the producers and intended audience of *Project Syria*, the girl must be assumed to live in Eastern Aleppo that was besieged by the Syrian Arab Army at the given time. The political bias implied in this piece of immersive 'journalism' becomes palpable here once again, as the sufferings of the population of Western Aleppo caused by US-, Turkish-, and Saudi-backed militant groups taking place around the same time, apparently are not worthwhile similar emotionally engaging endeavors. This implicit political positioning also raises serious doubts concerning the 'actions' to be incited by the emotions evoked in the world leaders. At the time of the screening, these might just as well have been realized as a major bombing campaign against Syria causing much more of the suffering now vicariously experienced by world leader to push them into action. The affective value of little girls is apparently a variable dependent upon the political factions causing their sufferings. *Project Syria* is a plain example for the insidious instrumentalization of the suffering of others for partisan political purposes.

Project Syria is first and foremost a "campaigning product for a humanitarian agency" – or, as I would contend, for imperial practices disguised as liberal humanitarian interventionism.

Based on considerations such as the ones presented above, Schlembach and Clewer (2021: 828) propose the term "forced empathy" to grasp the technologically facilitated manufacturing of emotions for specific political or other purposes that, according to the authors, is "highly unethical and manipulative". Again, Schlembach and Clewer do not doubt the capacity of VR to elicit emotions with the aim to support progressive projects but merely show that this "power is not politically unidirectional" (832). They illustrate this position by showing how the fast-food chain McDonalds uses immersive VR in an advertising campaign aimed at emotionally charging the idea of their products as healthy and ecologically sustainable. Pro-social, it seems, can mean very different things to many different people and, as such, can include military interventionism and selling more burgers as well as increased humanitarian aid or genuine de-colonization. An awareness of such contingencies is largely absent among proponents of the pro-social effects of immersive VR.

In his review of the VR-based immersive product *The Verge*, Robertson (2016) alerts to similar problems. *The Verge* allows the user to step into the shoes of young woman trying to reach an abortion clinic passing through an angry mob of pro-life demonstrators. He summarizes his experience of anger with the following words of cautioning: "[The Verge] is an inversion of what empathy VR is supposed to do for the world – a connection that aligns you with one person and makes another a monster. This may be what makes me suspicious of changing the world by provoking emotions: emotions are not inherently good, and they're not inherently helpful. Hate is one of the purest emotions of all" (cited in Laws 2020a: 56-7). It seems that Milk's empathy machine should rather have been termed an emotion machine that can induce both pro-social and toxic affective responses.

But then, maybe emotional VR is not really about politics, the "other", or political action but about *you*? Among others, Penz and Sauer (2021), Dean (2009), Pedwell (2014), Nakamura (2020), and Schlembach and Clewer (2020) have shown that there is an uncanny connection between a rhetoric of emotion, new immersive technologies, and neoliberal subjectification. This focus taps into questions of self-indulgence, pleasure-seeking spectacle, voyeurism, and an instrumentalization as well as cannibalization of the suffering other.

Nakamura (2020: 51), for instance, asserts that VR technologies often give rise to what she terms "toxic embodiment" – a practice that allows people who can afford the latest technological gadgets to temporarily enter and vicariously experience the sufferings of people "who might not even own their own body" while blissfully ignoring the various forms of suffering taking place in their immediate neighbourhood such as homelessness. Rightfully alerting to the severe power imbalances involved in the production and dissemination of immersive VR, she warns against a new form of identity tourism that temporarily opts into the lives of marginalized others and thus "confuse[s] immersive viewing with access to the actual experience" (54). This, she continues, is "not only a profound insult to those who live with challenges that cannot be simulated, but also a clear indication to the limits of VR-based immersion and the artificial empathy it hopes to manufacture" (54).

Attempts to make individuals feel rather than convincing them to engage in rational deliberation carries additional challenges. In recent scholarship the fragmenting and atomizing tendencies of focusing on individual emotional impacts rather than intersubjective understanding and collective action have been amply foregrounded (Dean 2009). According to Schlembach and Clewer (2021: 838), for instance, immersive VR reporting individualizes responses to mediated suffering an "privilege[es] victimhood over historical agency". In Nakamura's (2020: 59) terms, "empathy machines" frame challenges as "problems with head-mounted solutions, rather than as a set of structural relations that require structural solutions". The de-politicizing tendencies of a neoliberal post-democratic moment (Crouch 2004) seem to have found their representational technology of choice.

Much writing about the supposedly beneficial impacts of empathy-inducing VR technologies sets up a false dichotomy between rationality and emotion as a conceptual framework to support their claims. This thinking often starts with a critique of what is seen as a one-sided focus on reason that, as is argued, not least since Kant has dominated Western thinking at the detriment of emotion and embodiment (for an overview, see Laws 2020a, chapter 3). A critique of a certain over-reliance on Kant and rationality in Western philosophy is certainly valid and has productively been pursued by many thinkers. However, in undermining rationality per se, many proponents of non-fiction VR as prime tool to achieve pro-social goals, in essence, throw out the child with the bathwater. As Laws (2020a: 91) concludes, "emotional embodiment can […] be coupled to our rational thinking about the situation we find ourselves in, to thus attain a holistic view of what happened". Apparently, a viable approach to political engagement is not about emotion or not. Rather, the question must be exactly which emotions should be mobilized by which means to achieve precisely which objectives. In such endeavours, emotional engagement needs to be coupled with rational arguments to incite reflected collective political action.

The last issue to be addressed on VR's manipulative potentials as an empathy machine is the idea that immersion in a setting as someone else somehow can successfully go beyond representation, "remove the frame" (Milk, cited in Laws 2020a: 52), and offer direct unmediated access to the event as such. To achieve this, it is argued, technology must aid us with becoming the other, so we can empathize and then make the right choices based on this affective positioning by the socio-technical apparatus of contemporary immersive VR. Mandy Rose (2018: 137) connects this thinking to an ongoing "human fascination with creating mimetic representations of our world" stretching from André Bazin's 'myth of total cinema' (1971; cited in ibid.), via initial expectations connected to the invention of hand-held cameras and up to the most recent brand of techno-utopianism promising a "unique power of VR" in terms of immersion for beneficial goals (Bailenson 2018, cited in Rose 2018: 138).

Removing the frame of representation, however, has again and again proven to be difficult. Ever more convincing immersive technologies often base their claims to authenticity and unmitigated access on a form of surface realism that mistakes an increase in technologically achieved verisimilitude for an increase in truth-value (Pötzsch 2012). In particular when approaching the limits of representation, as is the case with attempts to make accessible the current or past sufferings of others (Saltzmann 2000, Dauphinée 2007), these ideas lead to two opposing strategies of mediation: either attempts are made to increase the transparency of the medium until a feeling of supposedly total immersion and therefore a direct access to an

presupposed truth is reached, or the viewer can be made aware of the medial apparatus and the with necessity always partial and contingent nature of representation. In such approaches, explicit images can be avoided altogether and techniques such as allusion can be used to incite a re-imagination of what defies outright representation. Both cases are strategies of mediation and even though the former purports to offer direct access to the event as such, also here a medial frame that tacitly predisposes experiences remains in place and needs to be taken seriously (Nash 2018, Rose 2018, Schlembach and Clewer 2021).

Let's consider the previously mentioned *Project Syria* as an example. Even though the user might feel as if present in Aleppo as the child, someone made the decision to place cameras and microphones in such a manner that they can replicate this child's perspective and not another one's. In addition, the decision has been made to follow a girl in Eastern as opposed to Western Aleppo. These two simple facts make clear that claims to a frameless direct access to an event rendered through an empathy-inducing embodiment of the other that supposedly remains outside ideology and therefore politics are mere pretensions. As Judith Butler (2009: 70) writes, "[e]ven the most transparent of documentary image is framed, and framed for a purpose, carrying that purpose within its frame and implementing it through the frame". Even though VR might enable you to embody others and explore their worlds, what you can perceive and experience, remains determined by someone's choices. And these choices are always ideologically inflected and therefore political.

Looking back to the future: The implications of seeing, speaking, and feeling *for*, *as*, or *with* the other in 'old' and 'new' media

The present section will interrogate earlier writings about potentials and pitfalls of mediated witnessing of others' pain. As is often the case in debates about affordances and effects of 'new' media technologies, we will see that what is currently discussed in relation the supposed pro-social effects of VR-based immersive journalism, has already been taken up earlier with reference to other once 'new' technologies (Rose 2018). As such, proponents of the unharnessed powers of empathy-inducing machines such as Chris Milk would have been wise to engage with the works of such scholars as Susan Sontag, Elizabeth Dauphinée, and Judith Butler.

Susan Sontag, for instance, has critically inquired into the ethics of photography for more than three decades. The results are summarized in her seminal book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) – a reflection on the necessary ambivalences and unpredictable discursive and political effects of mediation. Her work, I contend, can productively inform thinking about other media technologies currently coming to the fore. Sontag poses a series of questions to photography that retain their validity, and indeed their urgency, also in relation to the technologies of mediation behind immersive journalism.

Firstly, Sontag warns against uncritical assumptions of pro-social effects through a mediated elicitation of emotions. Mirroring later warnings against manipulation through immersive VR (e.g., Schlembach and Clewer 2021, Robertson cited in Laws 2020), she warns that "[p]hotographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses […] a call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness […] that terrible things happen" (11-12). Again, we see that mediation – of whatever type – is not a politically-speaking unidirectional

process with necessarily progressive outcomes. The inevitable contingencies of reception need to be adequately considered – in photography as much as elsewhere.

Secondly, Sontag also problematizes the alleged truth-value of photography that, through its indexical nature, apparently merely records the world as it is in a quasi-objective mechanical fashion. She shows that photographs can indeed serve as important documentation to prove certain facts. At the same time, however, she acknowledges the limitations of a medium riddled with contingencies. To problematize the truth-value of photography, Sontag initially points to the importance of not only focusing on what is made visible, but also asking "what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown" (12) as such alerting to the necessary blank spots implied in all forms of mediation. Later, she asserts that photographs "always had, necessarily, a point of view […] they are both objective record and personal testimony" (23) thereby highlighting the subjective framing function of the invisible photographer behind every image.

Furthermore, Sontag addresses the problem of voyeurism and desensitization. When repeatedly being exposed to images of others' suffering, shock effects will wear off and fade, or the images might induce passivity, despair, or even a usually disavowed form of perverse pleasure (107). Finally, she directs attention to the interdependences between photography and other media in processes of meaning-making and asserts that "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions" (9). Every image is received in a variety of medial and other contexts and these contexts matter for the meaning taken from them. I contend that all these aspects taken up by Sontag in relation to photography retain their validity also when looking at the ethical prospects and problems of immersive journalism.

Can the suffering other be experienced in an ethically sustainable manner? Contemplating the representation of violent abuse drawing upon the notorious Abu Ghraib images, Elizabeth Dauphinée (2007) warns against a fetishization of the body of the other in pain. She asks the question whether, the images of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal should be published and concludes that this "produces an irresolvable ethical dilemma" (153). On the one hand, a publication is required to provide documentation of officially sanctioned deeply repulsive practices of the US military in occupied Iraq. On the other hand, Dauphinée is acutely aware of the treacherous ethical terrains an instrumentalizing of deeply traumatic and humiliating experiences of others for political purposes leads to. She warns that such well-meaning and politically progressive media practices quickly can lead to a "double-betrayal" (153) of the victims by their supposed advocates. She writes

> *images do not speak for themselves – they are made to speak for, by and about us. We are asking these bodies to do political work for us that, however 'right', also works to reduce them to representative examples of their plight (153; emphasis in original).*

Cassandra Falke (2019: 80) concludes a text about framing embodiment in violent narratives in a similar manner writing that when the material body becomes the focus, the problem arises that what is seen and experienced are "bodies […] instead of people". The relation between the exposed other and us as producers and consumers of their mediated sufferings interrogated by Dauphinée and Falke remains the same regardless of whether representation in form of still images or in form of an embodying simulation by means of latest immersive technologies are

concerned. Both scholars' conclusions about the severe ethical challenges implied by attempts to represent the suffering other should be heeded carefully by the various proponents of virtuous VR-productions for good such as *Clouds Over Sidra* or *Project Syria*.

In her books *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Judith Butler investigates the institutional infrastructures and cultural frames that condition a scaling of forms of life in public discourses about war and the other. She writes that

> *[t]he public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way […] of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance (2004: xx-xxi).*

Butler traces the scopic regimes behind the reality-constructs that tacitly predispose public opinion and political decision-making in the US-initiated global war on terror. In her works, she investigates how specific "normative schemes of intelligibility" are established by powerful state interests to regulate "what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death" (146). Her studies identify three ways of framing life and the other through mediation in current war culture: 1) idolization as either hero or victim, 2) demonization as less than human and imminent threat, or 3) invisibilization by "providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death" (2004: 146). Taken together, these strategies are realized by means of a powerful medial apparatus that is an integral component of every nation's war effort – including those using immersive VR.

The scopic regimes of war identified by Butler (2004, 2009) oscillate the mediated other between hyper-visibility and invisibility. Either the other becomes a constant object of mediation effort as a mere monster or pure victim, or it is effectively hidden from view and not mediated at all and therefore becomes marginalized and disposable ungrievable life. Drawing upon the ethics of Immanuel Levinas, Butler (2009) argues that both hypervisibility and invisibility constitute a defacing of others that in essence will preclude our ability to ethically respond to their suffering despite a shared condition of precarity and vulnerability. All these strategies of framing others as monsters, victims, or non-life are salient and need to be engaged with in a critical manner regardless of whether the medium under scrutiny photography, television, film, or VR-based empathy-enhancing immersive technologies.

In all cases, a response to the question of how to ethically represent a suffering other and thereby achieve a form of mediation that entails pro-social effects, implies attention to the socio-technical apparatuses and power-laden practices of media production and consumption. It implies that we, in Butler's (2007: 966) words, "rebuff our visual consumerism" and "learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see". After all, she concludes her study, "[t]his 'not seeing' in the midst of seeing, this not-seeing that is the condition of seeing, has become the visual norm" in current war culture. In a similar manner, as I would like to add, *a not-feeling in the midst of feeling, a not-feeling that is the condition of feeling* in current war culture needs to be critically addressed as an implicitly normative frame implied by current attempts to use affective immersive technologies for the sake of advancing human interests and peace.

When discussing Susan Sontag's writings about the Aby Ghraib images, Butler (2007: 966) engages with the politics implied by mediated witnessing. She asserts that what is outrageous about the visual representations of torture published in connection to the scandal is not only their content documenting the systematic harrowing and illegal practices of US occupation forces in Iraq, but also a lack of instruction on "how to transfer […] affect into effective political action". As such, she continues, the torture photograph "enrages without directing the rage, and so excites moral sentiments at the same time that it confirms our political paralysis". A similar disjoint between affective engagement and reflected collective political action becomes palpable when asking if, and how, VR-based journalism can be enlisted for the purpose of a progressive and pro-social politics of nonviolence.

Estrangement and participation: Doing immersive journalism with Brecht and Boal

Sontag, Dauphinée, and Butler are at their strongest when critiquing dominant scopic regimes of war and when throwing light upon the various ambiguities and pitfalls inherent in attempts to represent the suffering of others. Their works are less detailed when concrete instructions about how to create the conditions for ethical practices of mediation and witnessing are concerned. How exactly could a "disobedient act of seeing" (Butler 2009: 72) be invited and which technologies could afford the creation of what Kozol (2014: 166) terms "sceptical documents" that connect emotion, reasoning, and critical self-reflection in a productive and progressive manner to facilitate sustainable collective political mobilization?

I contend that, to achieve reflected long-term political mobilization, emotional immersion must be balanced by rational arguments and deliberation based on accessible facts. Here, a form of mediation is required that raises awareness for the with necessity partial and partisan nature of any form of representation, and that acknowledges the suffering other as more than an object of a cannibalistic or voyeuristic gaze, but as an autonomous agent in charge of determining its own images and fates. This is not easily achieved even under circumstances where one has the latest technologies for immersive VR-based film making at one's disposal. Bertolt Brecht's and Augusto Boal's theories of the stage can give inspiration that might prove useful for facilitating such endeavours.

Bertolt Brecht's (1957) theories and practical guidelines for the stage are characterized by a deep distrust of immersion. According to him, a too seamlessly transparent theatrical apparatus offers pleasurable distraction rather than productive challenges and, therefore, facilitates an escapism into fantasy worlds that pacifies audiences and blinds them to their true political situations and collective interests. Brecht develops his epic theatre in dialogue with and in contrast to Aristotle's then dominating ideas of the stage. He argues that the main problem with an Aristotelian notion of catharsis – the pleasurable release of emotional energies when the main conflict of a play is resolved – is that it is temporally and conceptually limited to the stage. In Aristotelian theory of the drama, catharsis, and the affective engagement it enables, never points beyond the borders of the stage, and thus remains without relevance for audiences' attempts to gain an understanding of the contradictions in their actual lives. It pacifies more than it enlightens. According to Brecht, this, together with anagnorisis, the understanding acquired by a tragic hero at the end of a play that earlier attempts to change a world determined by higher powers always must be in vain,

makes the Aristotelian tragedy a conservative art form bent on stabilizing and reproducing a received status-quo.

In contrast to this, Brecht develops his own theory of an epic theatre based on Marxist thought that retains the emotional and intellectual engagement of audiences also after the play is finished and directs them towards real-world political struggles. This normative directing of drama is achieved by means of both content and form of presentation. In terms of content, Brecht argues that the stage is an arena where political positions, ideas, and insights can be disseminated, explained, and critiqued. A play can 1) convey facts about actual political situations, it can 2) try and test possible individual and collective actions in a safe setting, or it can 3) use allegories where narratives set in different times or places bring universal structures and relationships of oppression to the attention of audiences and contextualize these with reference to current political challenges. By these and other means the audience is treated as a political body that is both correctly informed and emotionally engaged, rather than a group of pleasure-seeking consumers in search for distraction.

In terms of form, Brecht explicitly directs the theatrical apparatus against emotional immersion. Acknowledging the importance of emotion for motivating political engagement, he argues that emotion alone will not lead to self-determination and collective mobilization as it remains without direction and shared understanding of the contexts of a given challenge and possible solutions to it (reflecting some of Butler's arguments introduced above). As a solution, Brecht devises a series of concrete instructions of how audience immersion can be broken throughout the play to re-engage reason and explicitly connect the staged events to collective real-world struggles showing concrete options for action. The so-called *Verfremdungseffekt*, or V-effect, precisely serves this purpose.

On Brecht's stage actors can suddenly turn on spectators and comment their (lack of) reactions. Alternatively, giant posters can be set up without warning that break the illusion and draw explicit connections between diegetic events and real-world issues, or background choirs can be used to alert to inconsistencies and omissions in the staged story. By such means, the V-effect positions audiences as at once immersed in a story-world and its characters, and at the same time at a distance and constantly forced to reflect upon the artificial nature of the staged settings and their connection to actual life-worlds and political struggles. Both content and form of Brecht's theatre, thus, make the stage an instrument of class struggle bent toward facilitating pro-social goals such as more just and less oppressive societies.

The significance of Brecht's thinking for attempts of using VR-based immersion to facilitate progressive political struggles can hardly be overestimated and can serve as inspiration for possible improvements.[3] To fulfil its promise of mobilizing viewers for prosocial goals, VR-based journalism needs to address both rational thought and emotion and must engage spectators both as individuals and as embedded in various collective structures. To achieve this, it needs to oscillate between immersion and emersion – between a direct elicitation of feelings for a certain issue and a rational contemplation about this issue and the tactics and strategies required to collectively mobilize on behalf of identified shared goals. In this, a

[3] For an earlier application of Brecht's theory of estrangement on VR-based technologies, see Dare (2020).

Brechtian V-effect can prove beneficial as it can repeatedly draw viewers out of a merely experiential state and thereby instigate critical reflection about the implied purpose of the evoked feelings, the wider socio-political context of the events these feelings are directed at, and the technical apparatus eliciting these feelings.

Applying Brecht to immersive journalism, enables a breaking of the illusion and a critical contemplation of the politics behind affective engagement for certain causes. In his thinking, however, the audience remains somewhat passive – an entity in need of education and guidance to see through the structures blinding them to their genuine interests. In the next paragraphs, I will turn to ways of thinking about the stage that not only position audiences as political subjects enlightened by conscientious playwrights and directors, but – paralleling VR-based immersive environments – also as active participants in the very same staged settings. Here the thought by Augusto Boal will prove useful.

In Augusto Boal's (1979, 2004) theory of the theatre the audience is central not only as target for politically relevant interventions via a Brechtian V-effect, but also as a co-constitutive component of the play itself and of the theatrical apparatus sustaining it. Boal coins the term *spect-actor* (2002: 243) to grasp this form of active participation by audiences that become simultaneously spectators and actors. He devises the setting of the *forum theatre* (ibid.: 242) to show how such a participatory stage-work can be realized and how it can serve progressive political objectives. In essence, forum theatre and spect-actor recalibrate the relation between playwright, director, stage and audience. Rather than merely taking down the fourth wall in Brechtian move of estrangement that reveals the medial apparatus and its in-built politics offering concrete instructions for activism, Boal dissolves the distinction between a play and its audience entirely. As spect-actors, audiences not only watch but become a constitutive component of the play actively changing its content and the way this content is presented. This way of thinking has relevance for ideas and practices of immersive journalism and film making.

In a forum theatre, the playwright, director, and actors merely initiate a story based on a few rudimentary instructions. Once the scene is set and the play begins, members of the audience can at any moment raise and intervene in the play either by suggesting a different course of action, by questioning performances, or by themselves entering the stage as participants. According to Boal, neither the written play, nor the staged drama, is the most significant element determining the political potentials of theatre. Rather, he deems an active process of participatory reception and the various debates and practices of deliberation these entail as most salient for political conscientization and mobilization. Therefore, the act of collectively staging events and of debating about why and how these should, or should not, be staged in a particular manner becomes formative of political subjectivities. Boal moves thinking about the political nature of theatre from decoding, interpreting, and contextualizing set staged events to a participatory interactive performance and a collective negotiation of acts of staging while these take place. This way politics is transformed from something represented or enacted somewhere else by others to something happening among the audience while collectively engaging with the representation, its apparatus, form, and content.

From these ideas, I believe, genuine benefits can be drawn for the practice of immersive journalism that, so far, has directed too much attention to total immersion aimed at inducing

merely behavioural changes at the level of the isolated individual (Nakamura 2020, Schlembach and Clewer 2021). When seeing immersive empathy-machines in the light of Boal's ideas, the role of the experientially invaded other and their interests and stakes in specific cases of 360-degree VR-filmmaking can productively be addressed.

In a Boal-inspired immersive form of immersive mediation, audiences can be enabled to, firstly, vicariously witness and bodily experience the world of the other to then retract and critically reflect about what they lived through. This reflection can take place in similar virtual settings that, this time, facilitate encounters not with the other but among the spectators. In such a virtual version of a forum theatre ways of engaging and embodying others can be thematized and both emotional appeal and political content of the presentation can be collectively interrogated and questioned including both form, content, and the medial apparatus behind it. This can facilitate a deliberation among audiences about their own position vis-á-vis this apparatus and its inherent relations of power, dangers of instrumentalization, and possibilities for exploitation.

In addition, VR-based immersive experiences should be rendered in a reciprocal fashion by default. This means that for instance 'Westerners' stepping into the shoes of suffering people in the global south must be willing to accept equal vicarious experiencing of their own lives by the witnessed other. To enable an estranging, truly participatory, mutually beneficial, and genuinely inclusive form of immersive journalism and filmmaking that productively activates the ideas of both Brecht and Boal, small-scale experiments need to be conducted over time on a series of preconceived locations that are all both witnessed and witnessing on an equal measure and scale. This would equally distribute the means of representation among the different locations and would enable all participants to become both object and subject of the process of mediation thus empowering them and raising awareness for the contextual and deeply political aspects of vicariously becoming someone else.

In this alternative, the most crucial element is not the relation between the witness and the object of immersive co-presence, but between various subject-objects, or spectators, of the same VR-based simulation – both 'here' and 'there' – deliberating about its conditions, frames, and impacts. Thereby, users cease to be isolated subjects that are made to feel something for a given purpose through manipulative technologies. Instead, they are led to conceive of themselves as both producers and receivers embedded in communal structures that motivate a critical interrogation and possibly change of the very medial frames. The ability to engage in collective deliberation about difficult political questions and about the medial apparatuses predisposing our access to them, thus, moves centre stage and becomes the core of ethical potentials of immersive technologies. This solution would also enforce a radical opening-up of physical technologies and code through which an event or setting is experienced (open access, open data, open code, and open technology). Thereby, an immersive journalism based on Brechtian Verfremdung and Boalian forum theatre would also radically undermine the business models and return-of-investment logics currently structuring much of the field of VR-based film making.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have engaged with the premises, promises, and pitfalls of immersive journalism. Moving from hype and hope to a critique of this new technique of emotion-focused film making and reporting, I have summarized a series of severe reservations and warning against a premature belief in the alleged pro-social powers of an "empathy machine" (Milk 2015) claiming to be able to automate progressive political change. Drawing upon the works by Nakamura (2020), Schlembach and Clewer (2021), Rose (2018), and Nash (2018) among others, I showed that scepticism against emotional manipulation by means of commercial high-tech products is on the rise. Furthermore, by adding a historical dimension, I argued that the ambiguous ethics and varying political stakes of remotely witnessing the suffering of others have been treated in a profound manner earlier by among others Susan Sontag (2003), Elizabeth Dauphinée (2007), and Judith Butler (2004, 2009). Their works on photography, film, and medial as well as discursive frames of war retain much of their validity also for a cautioning against pretensions of the latest 'new' technology for ethical and pro-social vicarious witnessing. Finally, enlisting the theories and practical guidelines for the stage by Bertolt Brecht (1957) and Augusto Boal (1979, 2002), I advanced concrete ideas for how a focus on artistic estrangement (V-effect) and collective participatory engagement of audiences not only with content, but also with the immersive apparatus of mediation as such (forum theatre), might facilitate the development of truly pro-social technologies of reciprocal and truly participatory, remote witnessing.

Unfortunately, Zuckerberg's metaverse is currently promising the exact opposite – a seamless, imposed-from-above, and comprehensively commercialized alternative world that has been less augmented than tacitly tampered with to serve his and his company's particular interests. This chapter is also a rallying cry demanding not only critique, but concrete resistance against Zuckerberg's and other tech-guru's pretensions at being able to save humanity by making ever more money by selling in, ultimately unnecessary, new gadgets and devices.

Discussion questions

For students: after reading this chapter, how would you respond to the following questions? Discuss with your peers:

- How can the informants of supposedly immersive experiences created by 360-degree journalism be adequately protected?
- How can informants be properly included in the projects realized in their life worlds?
- Which implicit understandings of realism are underlying the wide-spread presumption of VR-promoters to be able to offer unmitigated access to the lives of others?
- Is the triggering of emotional reactions a task for journalists? If yes, what are the wider implications of this for the journalistic profession?
- How can audiences be sufficiently made aware of the potential manipulative nature, constructed frames, or disturbing effects of the simulations they are immersed in?
- What are the exact problems that should be solved by new immersive technologies? Who is shouldering the costs and who will reap the economic and political benefits?

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