Meta-artistic immersion in digital exhibitions. History – mobilization – spectatorship

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ABSTRACT

In the recent decade, the works of canonical visual artists have been presented as immersive multimedia attractions in venues worldwide. Performed in all-encompassing screen spaces and put into motion, this otherwise static and spatially confined imagery has been turned into mobilizing and seemingly boundless visual experiences. What are the aesthetic-receptive characteristics of such immersive digital exhibitions (IDE) centered around art history? To give an answer, this article takes a closer look at one of the IDE’s prominent predecessors, the Panorama, in order to identify moments of continuity and difference. Through a comparative analysis, I gain a nuanced understanding of the IDE’s experiential premises: its tactics and techniques of mobilization, its relation to its classical art historical content matter as well as its aesthetic core—a meta-artistic immersion that moves artistic practice and identity into the center of the experience.

KEYWORDS

Immersions; media history; digital cultural heritage; aesthetics; experience society; history of visual culture; the Panorama

Introduction: immersive digital exhibitions

Vincent van Gogh, Gustav Klimt, Leonardo da Vinci, Salvador Dali, Claude Monet—these are just a few of the numerous canonical artists whose works and lives have become re-staged as immersive digital spectacles within the last decade. As part of a multimedia technological setup, Van Gogh’s sunflower paintings and Klimt’s symbolist ornamental creations are presented on monumental screens, set into motion and accompanied by sound and music. The result is a gigantic walkable interface for the visitor to explore, as if the painting(s) engulfed the visitor entirely (Figure 1). The narratives of these experiences—e.g. the classical tale of the heroic artist who struggles against all odds for recognition and success—are largely told through cinematic techniques such as continuity editing, multimedia interplay and dynamic movement, which are employed within multi-screen spaces that the spectator is free to explore.

Venues all around the world, from museums and galleries to old factory buildings, fairs and multipurpose event sites, have lent themselves to exhibit immersive shows about canonical individuals of western art. Some of these venues are specialized in showing technology-based immersive experiences, such as the Lumières venues in Paris, Bordeaux, Les Baux-de-Provence, Jeju, Dubai, Amsterdam and New York, the Kunstkraftwerk Leipzig (Germany) and The Lume in Melbourne (Australia) and Indianapolis (USA). Another common phenomenon is for these immersive attractions to be roadshown in different types of venues across the centers and peripheries of Europe and other continents. The company Exhibition Hub, for example, is currently exhibiting its show Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience in 20 cities on three continents.

Production-wise, the museums and art institutions owning, preserving and exhibiting the original artworks are usually not the first in line to create such high-budget ventures of entertainment. A case in point is Amsterdam’s Van Gogh Museum, which has created a touring immersive show about its artist in 2016 only after several other Van Gogh shows produced by the commercial sector had been engaging audiences on a global scale for some time. International media production companies like Exhibition Hub and Grande Experiences not only produce their own shows; they are often involved in the distribution, exhibition and promotion as well. Other companies may focus on...
developing venues in different cities and leaving production aspects to artistic or design specialists through strategic partnerships. This is the case with Culturespaces, the company behind the different Lumières venues in Europe, North America and Asia, which has been working closely with new media artist Gianfranco Iannuzzi to create shows. The Immersive Van Gogh shows that are currently on display in several US cities represent another example of an artist-produced experience, as they feature Massimiliano Siccardi as Artistic Director of Visioni Eccentriche (as part of a conglomerate of production companies).

The aim of this paper is to gain a nuanced understanding of the aesthetic-receptive features of immersive digital exhibitions (from here on: IDE), as I call them. My use of the term is only partly rooted in the labels used to describe the shows, such as “digital exhibition”, “immersive experience” or “digital art gallery”. More importantly, the term encompasses the three most recognizable features of the IDE: first, its aesthetic is rooted in principles of immersion; second, its technological substrate is primarily composed of digital media; and third, as I will demonstrate, its recognizable relation to notions and practices of art exhibitions and galleries represents a crucial component of its receptive appeal.

In the following, I will locate the IDE’s emergence within the broader contextual horizon of the experience economy and society. Afterwards, I will investigate concepts of immersion in their relation to the IDE and other immersive media. One such immersive medium is the Panorama, which I will then analyze in terms of its technological and receptive premises. This chapter will serve as a preparation for a comparative analysis, in which I will identify moments of continuity and difference between the Panorama and the IDE. Finally, in the conclusion I will summarize the results of the analysis and speculate on the IDE’s potential to revitalize the haunting imagery of art history, as envisioned by Aby Warburg and Georges Didi-Huberman.

**Societies and economies of experience**

The rise of digital immersive experiences based on cultural heritage topics must be considered in relation to a couple of broader contexts. Cultural offers labeled as “immersive” have significantly increased and expanded in the last decade, especially in urban areas (a landscape concisely presented in: Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd 2019). Far from being restricted to digital technological means, contemporary immersive experiences encompass immersive theater, digital art, escape rooms, digital playgrounds, immersive museum experiences, immersive dining and other events, VR arcades as well as Imax, stereoscopic and XD cinema. The demand for immersive experiences is further embedded within the broader development and expansion of the experience economy and society. Experiences, seen as a “genre of economic output” (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999, ix), have become a substantial economic factor in societies on a global scale (Miles 2020, chap. 1). Even more encompassing, Gerhard Schulze 1995[1922] sees modern life post-WWII as essentially experience-driven, and Steven Miles (2020) declares experience as “the new ideological terrain of consumer society”.

Figure 1. Installation view of Van Gogh, Starry Night, Atelier des Lumières, Paris, France. © Culturespaces, E. Spiller.
The dynamics of the experience economy have also led to new forms of museum and gallery spaces that deviate significantly from traditional venues for viewing art and museum objects (some early immersive examples given in Griffiths 2008). Prominent among those are experience-based and user-centered “museums” like the Museum of Ice Cream, the Museum of Illusion, Dream Machine and The Egg House. Rather than facilitating the exhibition of cultural heritage objects, these spaces feature installations that aim at immersing the spectator and encouraging her to share the experience on social media. Another trend are galleries specialized in exhibiting contemporary digital immersive art, such as Artechouse in New York, Nxt Museum in Amsterdam and the MORI Building Digital Art Museum in Tokyo (presenting works by the art collective Teamlab). While sharing some common characteristics with the immersive shows about Van Gogh, Klimt and other canonical artists, their programs almost exclusively feature contemporary art projects. Finally, also traditional art institutions continue to attempt to broaden their audiences, become more user-friendly, reach out to online visitors through digital content production and develop the global appeal and outreach and the visual identity of their organizational and artistic brands.

In accordance with those trends driven by the experience economy, the IDE’s designated audiences are recruited from a pool of potential customers that exceeds the limited number of habitual art museum visitors. The IDE aims at audiences that may be interested in travel, blockbuster cinema, concerts, escape rooms, VR and AR as well as traditional museums. When doing a comprehensive search through the marketing materials and strategies employed on Instagram (2015, 2016, 2018; 2021goghnytc; 2021vangogh.experience) by the Van Gogh Alive project, the Van Gogh. The Immersive Experience project, the Immersive Van Gogh project as well as the IDE venues Atelier des Lumières (several venues) and Kunstkraftwerk Leipzig, it becomes clear that these accounts almost exclusively focus on visualizing the image spaces and their visitors. A more superficial sweep through the Instagram and Facebook accounts of numerous other IDE projects resulted in the same observation. According to my analysis of such marketing and promotion materials, a visit to Atelier des Lumières (or any other IDE venue) is not about engaging with the art and artists as topics of scholarly interest; it is about the excitement and novelty of experiencing this technologically enchanted art space. This widened scope of relevant target groups goes hand in hand with the expected economic success and return of investment on the production side, thereby justifying extensive costs regarding technological equipment, content production, venue, distribution, maintenance and marketing.

Immersion

What exactly is immersion or an immersive experience? In its most literal meaning, the term “immersion” is associated with the phenomenon of being entirely submerged in a liquid (see also: Murray 1997, 98). It is plausible how this image easily lends itself to more abstract figurations according to which immersion describes or involves subjective states of deep engagement, absorbing involvement, sensory and emotional fascination and presence (even though presence is seen as both aesthetically distinct from and interchangeable with immersion [e.g. Engberg and Bolter 2020, 82–85; Nilsson, Nordahl, and Serafin 2016; McMahan 2003]). Moreover, immersion is often considered as opposed to conscious acts of reflection, critical distance and (media) awareness (e.g. Grau 2003 [2001], 13; Wilson 2017; Schweinitz 2006; Dadejk 2014). In the context of IDEs, these basic characteristics of immersion are often described by their producers, as for example in the case of Van Gogh Alive, as a promise to “transport visitors to another time and place, immersing them in the artists’ world’, thereby “transcend[ing] traditional installations” (Grande Experiences 2019).

Beyond such a broad characterization, the existing notions of immersion are much more diverse and widespread (as addressed in Thon 2014; Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd 2019, 1–20; Nilsson, Nordahl, and Serafin 2016; Engberg and Bolter, 2020, 82–85; Brown and Cairns 2004). What immersion signifies can differ substantially, whether you regard it as a technological dispositif, a state of mind, a phenomenon of technological enchantment, an illusory encounter with a virtual world, engaging interactivity, being absorbed by a story or a performance, heightened attention, identification with an avatar, a business model or a cultural label. Accordingly, research in various disciplines has been carried out on objects such as video games and other digital technologies like VR and AR, analog games, literature, sports, visual arts, theater and tourism.

Having to choose from such a diverse field, I will in the following present a couple of concepts of immersion that are particularly relevant for my analysis of the IDE.

Oliver Grau, in his influential book Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion, defines immersion as an experiential and technological setup that “almost wholly visually seal[s] off the observer hermetically from external visual impressions” and “that, on account of [its] totality, offer[s] a completely alternative reality” (Grau 2003 [2001], 13). Such “closed-off
image space[s] of illusion” (Grau 2003 [2001], 5), which Grau traces back to Ancient fresco paintings, Baroque church ceilings and Panorama paintings of the 19 century, aim at overcoming representation altogether—medium and content become one in the perception of the spectator.

For Grau, immersive techniques further spark experiences of emotional involvement and diminished critical distance. Immersion can thus be seen as an aesthetic category that primarily targets the senses and the emotional and affective involvement of the spectator (in contrast to conceptual, complex and subtle types of aesthetic experiences). At the same time, Grau admits “that there is not a simple relationship of ‘either-or’ between critical distance and immersion; the relations are multifaceted, closely intertwined, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer” (Grau 2003 [2001], 13).

A notion of immersion that is particularly narrowed down to the receptive-technological premises of IDEs is sketched out by Alison Griffiths in her monograph Shivers Down Your Spine. Cinema, Museums and the Immersive View. The immersive experiences she is interested in involve the combination of “embodied modes of encountering visual spectacle” and “audience mobility around the viewing space” (Griffiths 2008, 1). Her definition of immersion is attuned to this specific receptive constellation:

I use the term immersion in this book to explain the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of a more bodily participation in the experience, including allowing the spectator to move freely around in the viewing space […] (Griffiths 2008, 2).

As part of her project to conceive of an “expanded paradigm of spectatorship, beyond the seated spectator in the darkened auditorium” (Griffiths 2008, 1), she discusses a range of media matching the requirements of her definition, such as cathedrals, Panoramas, nineteenth-century-science museums, Planetariums and IMAX screens put to use in museum institutions. IDEs, one may argue, belong to the same lineage. The plan is therefore to take a closer look at one potential predecessor, the Panorama, in order to discover moments of continuity and similarities, but also ruptures and differences. Most importantly, what insights can be gathered from such a comparative perspective in terms of the receptive-technological functioning of IDEs?

However, before this question can be answered, a few remarks regarding the limitations of my comparative approach are called for. The following analysis will highlight general tendencies and characteristics associated with both media and put them in relation in a productive way. At the same time, it must be clear that such an approach cannot achieve to give a complete account that captures the two media in their historical, socio-cultural, economical, technological and anthropological complexities. Neither can one expect to give in-depth visibility to individual artists and the particularities of their specific work. These limitations are to be kept in mind as the analysis unfolds on the following pages.

**Visiting the Panorama**

The Panorama was perhaps invented, and definitely patented, by Robert Barker in 1787 (Hyde and Wilcox, 1988, 17). It was, arguably, the most popular medium of visual spectacle in the nineteenth century, until Panorama rotunda buildings were replaced by cinemas. In its most common and best-known form, a Panorama represents a monumental, frameless and fully circular painting providing a view of 360° (Figure 2)." The curved canvas ensures the integrity of the illusion from any possible viewpoint. Accordingly, Barker advertised his invention as the next evolutionary step within the traditional discipline of landscape painting, as it overcomes the pictorial paradigm of linear perspective (Hyde and Scott 1988, 21, 24 f.). At the same time, the device’s production and reception were based on elaborate scientific and technological measures. The spectator views it from a central platform, which is reached through a darkened staircase. The only source of light is installed in the ceiling close to the bordering canvas and hidden from the audience. This creates the effect that the topography in the picture appears to be glowing by itself, thereby increasing the impression of looking at a landscape from a balcony.

Many of the production practices connected with Panorama enterprises (see Grau 2003 [2001], 65–71) would later become typical for modernity’s cultural industry and the film industry in particular. Panoramas were collectively conceptualized, produced, advertised and exhibited. Their production companies were hierarchically organized, with a clear regulation and division of labor. The respective steps of production, distribution, compiling and exhibition of Panoramas were widely standardized. The high costs resulting from this production model were often borne by international corporations, who considered Panoramas a promising opportunity for investment. It was partly due to such capitalist and industrial practices that Panorama images were usually denied the status of being art. Only few Panorama producers were accepted as artists, such as the landscape painter Anton von Werner who supervised the production of the extremely successful and prestigious Sedan Panorama. In accordance with the Panorama’s exclusion from artistic circles.
and discourses, its audiences represented all social classes, even though its major part consisted of visitors from the middle class. While Barker initially considered a rather high entrance fee, the prices were soon dropped to a level that allowed broader parts of society to visit his visual spectacles (Comment, 1999, 115 f.; Hyde and Scott 1988, 39 f.).

Among the various subjects presented in Panoramas were topographies of all kinds, historical and catastrophic events and battles of war which successfully nurtured nationalistic tendencies in society. Especially topographical and historical themes leaned heavily on notions of accuracy and authenticity. Researching as well as sending out photographers to visually record specific sites of interest were common practices, especially for the big investment projects designated for the largest rotundas. Clearly, the aim was to teleport the spectator to a different place and/or time.

At first glance, in terms of the Panorama’s contemporary reception and advertising, the effect of immersion achieved through the medium’s enhanced illusionistic means does indeed seem to be its signature feature. The report of the first Panoramas in Paris, commissioned by the Institut de France, praises their “perfect deception” (Oettermann 1980, 114–116) of the eye. Throughout Europe, both spectators and press applauded the hitherto unparalleled illusionism.

Rumor has it that Queen Charlotte even became seasick when the British Royal court visited Barker’s navy Panorama of Spithead in 1794 (Oettermann 1980, 81). Worth mentioning in this context are also the several legends about dogs and other animals trying to take a bath in the waters of the paintings (Huhtamo 2013, 16). To a certain degree, this type of illusionistic confusion was further nurtured, as the Panorama producers made use of faux terrain in order to smooth out the transition between viewer-space and screen-space and make their landscapes appear even more natural. Even acoustic sensations were included in some productions. The aim was to enable a multi-sensory experience of immersion, which is why the viewing platforms of seascape Panoramas were occasionally made to look like a ship’s deck and even set in motion to create the illusion of heavy swell (Oettermann 1980, 81 f., 125, 168–170, 213 f.). To complete the illusion, the assistants employed on deck were dressed in the uniforms of navy officers.

This first impression does not, however, provide a complete account of the Panorama’s receptive appeal. Contemporary critics, for instance, were not entirely convinced by the medium’s immersive lure. They often noted and occasionally mocked and criticized its immobility (Oettermann 1980, 57). But there are also textual accounts in which the flaw of immobility is considered to provide an aesthetic surplus, as
for instance within Alfred Polgar's description of the Panorama *The Battle at the Isel Mountain in 1809*. The Austrian author claims that,

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There is a certain appeal to Panoramas. It is rooted in the mixture of stillness and indicated movement, of illusionistic vastness and actual narrowness. The silent noise of battle Panoramas in particular has something fairytale-like about it. People talk in hushed voices, as if they are afraid to wake a life which has been paralyzed by a magic spell (Translated from German by the author; orig. qtd. in Oettermann 1980, 239).
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Similarly, in his *Handbuch der Aesthetik* ("Compendium of Aesthetics"), Johann August Eberhard describes the Panorama's aesthetic appeal as a reciprocal movement between illusionism and media reflexive distance, "between nature and non-nature, between truth and appearance" (Eberhard, 1803, cited in Grau 2003 [2001], 63 f.). This oscillation between illusionistic immersion and media reflexive "truth" perhaps explains why so many Panorama rotundas showed the towns in which they were built. This experience is not to be thought of as a simple duplicate of the everyday-life view of one's own hometown but as a strange, affectively intense and aestheticized encounter with the presented topography. Particularly the combination of stillness and boundlessness must be seen as a significant factor of the Panorama’s experiential framework.

In addition, the Panorama's lighting system fosters experiences of spatiotemporal ambiguity. As noted, Panoramas use natural light to illuminate their painted canvases. Since Panorama pictures often presented distinct meteorological conditions and phenomena, their producers sought to achieve a preferably neutral impact from the outside world. However, as the course of the sun and the general weather conditions vary with the seasons, it was not possible to gain control over the elements entirely. Even though the producers had the intention of transforming real light into virtual light, the success of this plan depended on nature's will. One dark cloud could make the fires of Vesuvius in eruption and the light reflections on the snowy peaks of the Alps faint. Hence, the Panorama’s dynamic intertwining of different spatiotemporal dimensions was not just a rare technological dysfunction but a potential scenario within every act of reception, for this spatiotemporal ambiguity is inscribed in the Panorama’s aesthetic repertoire and the organization of the media technology.

I conclude that the Panorama was not simply a virtual travel apparatus that teleported the viewer to distant times and places. It enabled ambiguous experiences of intersecting times, spaces and states of minds. Hybrid experiences as such are not limited to the Panorama alone; they also represent an integral part of the reception of immersive media in general. On the one hand, this can be described as an immersion that becomes unstable, starts flickering, that is weakened or even suspended. On the other hand, such flaws and glitches also facilitate more nuanced and complex experiences with an aesthetic surplus attached to them.

### Comparative analysis

What does the example of the Panorama reveal in terms of the IDE’s production, receptive structures, spatial organization and aesthetic premises?

- **Modern Continuities**

  The capitalist and industrial production model of the Panorama has remained widely intact when it comes to the production side of IDEs. Also, they are collectively produced with a clear division of labor and as part of capitalist enterprises comprised of designers, producers, distributors, investors and sponsors, licensors and exhibitors.

  A continuous strand is also the discourse around the sociocultural status of the producers of IDEs. As panorama producers were usually denied artistic status in the eye of the public, neither does artistic production play a significant role for IDEs. Occasionally, production companies may emphasize the artistic origin of their experiences, yet this aspect basically plays no part in the public discourse around IDEs online. Clearly, IDEs are about art, but they are not made by artists. Gianfranco Iannuzzi n.d., who lead-produced several IDEs for a number of venues, may call himself a "digital artist" (Iannuzzi), yet this makes no difference to the public’s judgment of the experiences he helped to create. In this regard, the IDE holds stronger ties to the Panorama than to cinema, whose production model achieved the establishment of a sense of artistic authorship in the public and critical discourse (most distinctly in notions of auteur cinema or art film). Despite this lack of artistic origin, IDEs regularly refer to art discourses and their associated values of cultural capital and prestige. Regularly labelled as “exhibitions” and “(digital art) galleries” that “exhibit” "masterpieces" and bring you closer to the “paintings”, the experiences are pitched to the audience as a meaningful activity of high cultural value.

- **Exhibition Space**

  Even though the screen spaces of IDEs aim at surrounding the spectator almost entirely, they do not make an effort to create a seamless illusionistic view, as if the viewer space were a balcony with a view. The latter represents the model of the Panorama. Clearly, the seams are showing in IDEs. There are doors, columns, fire exits and staircases in between the canvases. Their technological substrate, the projectors, are visible as well if one were to look
up to the ceiling. There is no real attempt made to disguise the technological fundament of the experience. In principle, the machinery producing the immersive effects is always visible, even though it becomes widely overshadowed due to the multisensory intensity and dynamic of the experience.

Occasionally, the projected imagery refers to some illusionistic reality or space in alignment with the viewpoint of the spectator and the plain architectural structures of the exhibition spaces. The Gustav Klimt experience at Atelier des Lumières includes for instance the mimicking of cathedral spaces with the artist’s murals on the walls. The projected imagery conveys the impression of an illusionistic view of the cathedral, which in a close-enough manner matches the architectural structures of the exhibition space in terms of proportions, size and perspective. At the same time, it becomes easier for the spectator to challenge such illusionistic attempts, because the often quite large viewer spaces of the IDE allow for viewing the show from a variety of spots, such as from the top of a staircase, through a doorway or from a balustrade. Accordingly, the effect of an architectural illusion may crumble when viewed from a point where the images’ perspectives become askew.

Even though the exhibition spaces of IDEs operate with open seams and glitches, their auditoriums also counteract those anti-immersive tendencies. For they are not clearly defined and demarcated as auditoriums, that is to say, as something ontologically different from the screen-space. Rather, the auditorium is invaded by the screen space, thereby becoming a three-dimensional image world to be explored. This is, however, not always the case. When I visited Van Gogh Alive at Hadeland Glassverk in Norway in 2019, it upheld a clearer distinction between viewer space and screen space. The projection surface was restricted to the walls. One may assume that this immersive reserve was due to the particularities of the venue—restricting factors IDE producers may have to take into consideration when designing experiences to be roadshown in a variety of places. On the other hand, venues specialized in presenting IDEs are naturally better prepared to explore a bigger range of immersive and sensory effects.

There is an important media ontological distinction to be made: The Panorama tried to harmonize screen space and viewer space by staging the latter as a balcony or even a ship deck. However, this does not entirely cover up the ontological cut between the represented topographies and scenarios on the painted canvas and the factuality of the auditorium’s scenography. The same goes for the disparate relation between the represented meteorological conditions on the canvas and the real sunlight falling in through the ceiling. This is quite different in the most distinct forms of the IDE in which the projected imagery takes over nearly the entire space and is even projected onto the visitors (Figure 3). The IDE attempts to diminish the ontological cut between its represented and factual parts by coating nearly the entire space with its projected representations of colorful patterns and brushstrokes. A column, a bench, a spectator, a stair railing—they all become surfaces for projected images. To be clear, this ontological homogenization is merely superficial, an appearance as part of

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Figure 3. Installation view of Leonardo da Vinci—Raffael—Michelangelo. Giganten der Renaissance, Kunstkraftwerk Leipzig, Germany. © Luca Migliore, Kunstkraftwerk Leipzig.
the experience. The ontological border between the represented and the factual remains, but this distinction can be experienced as severely weakened.

In turn, the few objects that elude the grasp of the projections may become even more apparent as utterly distinct from the rest of the space, once they are noticed. Even more so, one could say that the appearance of such trivial elements—a neon sign for a fire exit, projectors on the ceiling, toilet signs—represents a serious thread for the grand, sublime and awe-inspiring atmosphere conveyed by the sheer limitlessness and all-encompassing scale of the image space and its representation of the canon of western art history. Then again, it is possible that this clashing of the grand and monumental with the trivial and ordinary is also part of the appeal and aesthetic of IDEs. While my extensive, yet unsystematic and incomplete investigation of visitor feedback and reviews of several IDEs posted on TripAdvisor, Instagram and Facebook does not immediately suggest such a reading, it should not be ruled out either.

- Art Histories in Motion -

Polgar's description of the Panorama's “mixture of stillness and indicated movement” becomes inverted in the IDE: the mobilized images used for the show, such as Van Gogh’s paintings, are commonly known to be static. They hence operate with an indicated stillness that is experienced in combination with factual mobilizations. Panorama producers may have wished to set their painted topographies into motion (an effect achieved by other pictorial devices such as the Eidophusikon, the Moving Panorama, the Diorama and the cinema [Huhtamo 2013; Mathias 2020]), whereas the producers of IDEs induce their mobilized imagery with the aura of stillness to emphasize their static origin.

The fact that the IDE’s images move (and the ones of the Panorama do not) sheds light on the cinematic nature of its receptive means. Cinema’s tools of mobilization—the capturing of moving objects, camera movement, the montage, shifts of focus, sound and music—are regularly applied to stage the works and lives of canonical artists in IDEs. More precisely, the ways in which these mobilizations are often presented, namely as magic tricks, as enchanting mobilizations of static imagery, put the IDE’s aesthetic in close proximity to early cinema. When, for example, the Lumière brothers (Auguste and Louis) publically showcased their Cinématographe, the film began with the presentation of a static photographic image that after a short while, as if under a magic spell, started to move (Elsaesser 2002, 56). As the technologies, narrative techniques and receptive practices of cinema became more habitual and refined, these early stagings of cinematography as a magical device ceased to be featured. Thus, when IDEs stage the mobilization of Van Gogh’s sunflowers, the passing of a painted train or the flight of birds as a phenomenon of technological and immersive enchantment, is this merely an anachronistic reenactment?

To reduce the dynamics of the IDE’s visuality (and multi-sensuality) to a dusty anachronism would mean to ignore their distinct aesthetic-receptive functioning. To start with the montage: While it is true that the IDE’s montage often aligns with the cinematic principles of continuity editing in order to explore its content matter along diachronic (the artist in relation to wider contexts) and synchronic (the artist’s biography) temporalities, its editing techniques also make use of the IDE’s composition of multiple screens. The latter enables the simultaneous presentation of parallel montages across several screens, allowing for narrative connections between disparate elements, contexts and materials, such as artworks, documentary photography and text. To use a term closer to the visual art sector, this dynamic collage may liberate the gaze of the viewer, as she is free to decide which content to focus on. On the other hand, the simultaneous and omnipresent appearance of a great diversity of content matter and sensations may as well cause the opposite of freedom, namely a violent and affectively intense agitation of the spectator’s sensory faculties. In such moments of sensory and affective over powering, the sublime side of the IDE comes to the fore, describing, in short, a mixed emotion (pleasure and terror) in response to an aesthetically perceived object of extensive scale and/or force (Mathias 2020, 13–17).

The IDE merges two modes of image alternation: the art gallery’s free movement of the spectator from one picture to the next and the cinematographic alternation between images within one homogeneous image frame. Presumably, the IDE’s latching onto traditional art and museum discourses and values, most importantly thereof its claim of presenting “exhibitions”, is justified only through this hybridity. The combination of the cinema and the art gallery also involves different modes of embodiment: on the one hand, a physical freedom of the body, yet a body that to a high degree is eclipsed during the predominantly visual experience of viewing classical artworks in the gallery space (a body making itself felt only through sensations of tiredness and fatigue [Davey 2005]). On the other hand, the disciplined body of the cinematic spectator, which simultaneously becomes highly mobilized and activated, a target for affects and embodied sensations and experiences. What follows from this combination? Quite possibly a weakening of the sensomotoric bond between the spectator and the mobilizations of the cinematic screen (as conceptualized in Morsch 2011), which have become freed (spectator) and multiplied (screen) in the IDE. However, what may compensate for this loosened bond between spectator and
singular screen is the interplay of bodily freedom and the embodied sensuality of multiple cinematic screens. This should, in principle, enable experiences of intensified immersion and engagement with the presented content. I would argue, though, that this aesthetic surplus is highly dependent on the presented content matter and narratives and whether they are able to relate to the spectator’s freedom of movement in a meaningful way.

Concretely, the visual and auditory content matter of IDEs is often disparate and eclectic. Among other elements, they show paintings, drawings and graphic prints in combination with documentary photographs of places, architecture and persons. While the soundscapes of IDEs most commonly include classical music, they may also feature pop music or more experimental soundscapes. While classical music scores seem to support the high cultural value of the immersive experience, deviations towards pop genres align with the IDE’s general balancing between notions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow in order to cater to the widened visitor groups of the experience society. More generally, the music and sounds used in IDEs are an additional factor of mobilization, as they reinforce the visual dynamic of the screen space and substantially contribute to spark emotion, affective engagement and empathy in the spectator.

- Meta-Artistic Immersion -

To be precise, the IDE’s enchanting approach to setting its imagery into motion does not only relate to the magic tricks of early cinema but also to the ontological characteristics of the medium easel painting, which need to be sufficiently maintained and protected. Arguably, the loss of the indexical relation between the mobilized imagery and its static original source would mean to jeopardize some of the core values of the IDE, which are based on the aura and recognition of the presented artistries. Meanwhile, the presence of the genius artist is not restricted to the dynamic presentation of the most iconic artworks and the presented narratives and contexts. The artist’s hand is also present as part of the IDE’s dynamic visual effects. Often enough, (painted or drawn) images built up on the screens successively, one brushstroke after the other, thereby approximately mimicking the production process of the artwork.

This aspect of using the IDE’s visual techniques of mobilization to stage the presence of the artist at work adds to its aesthetic core function to immerse the spectator into a world of artistic expression and dynamic forms. This core function will be mapped out in detail in the following among several fields of friction.

Illusion vs. Enchantment: Unlike the Panorama’s immersive appeal, which is based on the illusionistic view of a correctly presented scenery, the IDE’s immersion is rooted in the enchanting overcoming of the spatiotemporal boundaries of the easel painting. However, this transgression does not aim at abandoning the representational character of the painted imagery. Neither does the mobilization of the visual content function as a more complete recording device of life itself, as cinematography did in response to photography and other static pictorial media. The IDE is unlikely to produce new myths and narratives reinforcing the medium’s illusionistic appeal, as was the case with the Panorama and other media of illusionistic immersion. The mythological narrative of the IDE is a different one. It tells us about “the gorgeous colors of the paintings [...] flowing around you like a dream”, about “you becom[ing] part of the pictures”, about “hav[ing] the impression of being IN the painting” (as some reviewers of Atelier des Lumières wrote [Trip Advisor 2018]). The aesthetic-receptive foundation of this modern myth is the construction of a totality of paint and the artist’s world.

Producer vs. Artist: The Panorama’s content matter was centered around discourses of representing reality, deceiving perception and accuracy. This content matter was produced by craftsmen who were seldom considered as “artists”. The same can be said about the producers of IDEs, whose artistic or non-artistic backgrounds and intentions do not play a role in the IDE’s public discourse. However, whereas the Panorama (perhaps involuntarily) nearly completely abandoned any relation to artistic discourses, the IDE merely neglects its artistic production in order to reinforce its artistic relevance and aura. This is done by moving aspects of artistic creation from the production into the reception of the IDE. Artistic practice, thinking and living become the thematic core of the experience, a performance of artistry created by the multimedia machinery of the space. This is not an artistic (i.e. artistically-produced) type of immersive experience. Rather, the IDE’s receptive-aesthetic core is best described as a meta-artistic immersion, an immersion into the artist’s world, which is performed by a nameless multimedia framework and its producers.

Proximity vs. Distance: While the Panorama managed to convince its audiences to experience painted reproductions of their own hometowns, the IDE is not interested in representing familiarities. Quite the opposite, its image spaces emphasize their radical difference to everyday life perception. This is underlined by the hermetic nature of its image spaces, which attempt to image-coat nearly every trace of a classical auditorium. Also, Panorama producers camouflaged their viewer spaces as balconies or even shipdecks, yet this was done to familiarize
the experience in order to make the illusion even more convincing.

Physical vs. Virtual: In the Panorama’s lifetime, there was no general discourse around the sizable paintings as objects of high cultural value that deserve to be collected, preserved, re-exhibited and auctioned. This is why nearly all of them are lost today (for a map of existing Panoramas, see Von Plessen and Giersch 1993, 368). Neither did the physicality of the paintings have significance for the experience of the Panorama. After all, they featured boundless views into landscapes, not the up-close study of artistic compositions, styles and brushstrokes presented in framed easel paintings. Similarly, the monumental and mobilized imagery of the IDE removes the notion of the presented artworks as physical and enormously valuable objects from the experiential equation. Artistic quality surely is an important factor for the experience, but it is clear that the absence of the physical originals creates a social sphere quite distinct from the classical art museum visit. Intimidating guards, talking in hushed voices, restrictions against running, picture-taking and playing—none of these museum conventions are to be found in IDE spaces. Accordingly, they are often designed as places to hang out, lay and sit down, run, talk and scream. Arguably, this loosened social and bodily regime is an important part of the IDE’s appeal to its audiences.

Spectacle vs. Education: The Panorama’s obsession with topographical and historical accuracy is not a constituent of the IDE’s aesthetic. Surely, their producers want to get the stories they are telling right, yet they hardly go into detail or make contestable claims about their subjects as part of their multimedia shows. However, just like Panoramas provided pamphlets with contextual information, the IDE also regularly features information-rich parts which are separated from the immediacy of the multimedia experience. The production company Culturespaces, for instance, offers a mobile app named Immersive Art Experience, which provides textual information on the artists and works featured in their IDEs; and the show Van Gogh Alive features in one corner of the space a more traditional, that is, static, analogue and information-based display. In terms of these add-ons, accuracy and authenticity become important factors; and similarly to Panoramas, which attempted to raise their cultural status by emphasizing their quasi-scientific production approach and the accuracy of their content, the IDE’s interest in educating audiences through additional assets can also be seen as means to raise the cultural status of their shows. Both the Panorama and the IDE wish to demonstrate that there is more to them than mere spectacle—a notion quite typical of media associated with visual attractions, entertainment and immersion.\(^\text{10}\)

Conclusion

Through comparing the IDE with the Panorama, I have gained a nuanced understanding of its aesthetic-receptive and technological premises. Among the most important aspects are the IDE’s tactics and techniques of mobilization, which seek to agitate the spectator’s sensory, emotional and affective faculties through cinematic means and the all-encompassing format of the screen-space. At the same time, these mobilizations indicate a kinship to the classical art historical content matter presented on the screens. Their immersive motion is essentially based on the technological enchantment of the static medium easel painting. The IDE’s intertwining of factual mobilization and indicated stillness relates closely to its meta-artistic effects of immersion. The static imagery being mobilized constitutes a closed-off world of artistic creation and expression. While the question whether IDEs are artistically produced or crafted has very little relevance in their critical and public discourse, artistic practice, thinking and living represent their thematic and receptive core. Simply put, the IDE may not be considered a work of art, but it provides art experiences through and through.

I will conclude this article by speculating on the IDE’s principles of mobilization and meta-artistic immersion in their potential functioning as art historical expressions that approximate an affect-driven, haunting and vitalist approach to historiography. This notion of art history as a history of haunting images was initially conceived of by one of the discipline’s modern founding fathers, Aby Warburg. In recent decades, especially Georges Didi-Huberman (2005; 2010; 2016) has revitalized Warburg’s ideas and challenged art historical conventions rooted in logocentrism and linear narratives of influence and continuity.

Simply put, Warburg viewed the return of ancient imagery during the Renaissance as a resurfacing of images packed with affective force. His pathos formulae are visual containers of affective energy that was unleashed upon medieval society (Warburg 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d). The image culture of the Renaissance is thus not to be seen as a primarily intellectual practice, in which the images of Antiquity were (re)produced for and studied by connoisseurs. Rather, the revival of antiquity in the fifteenth century must be understood as exactly that: a revitalization through ancient pathos formulae, as they were broadly applied in cultural forms such as public processions and festivals (Warburg, 1895).
What does this have to do with the IDE? Philippe-Alain Michaud (2007) views Warburg’s take on art history in the light of emerging cinematic technologies and practices of his time. Especially Warburg’s last project, the Bilderalatlas Mnemosyne, which comprises various tableaux with images associated with the Renaissance in diachronic and synchronic perspectives, can be regarded as an alternative art historical practice rooted in cinematic techniques of movement and the montage (Warburg, 2020). Is it provocative to ask whether the IDE, with its principles of affective, pictorial and multimedia mobilization and its collaging and montage of art historical imagery, represents a successor to the Warburgian tradition? Is the IDE a tool to interrogate and trace the affective travel of images through space and time, similar to Warburg’s atlas? Furthermore, could the establishment of the IDE mean a cultural revitalization sparked by the resurfacing of art history’s iconography in the form of immersive multimedia spectacles? What speaks against this is the fact that the narrative frameworks in which this imagery is embedded, may appear too homogeneous, too banal, too linear and too tame to provoke the pathos formulae of art history coming to life in the experience world. What is the experience of immersive digital exhibitions? To be haunted by powerful images from the past, or to be bombarded with superficialities?

6. While being exhibited in Berlin and depicting the Prussian army fighting back the French troops on 1 September 1870, the Sedan Panorama was an enterprise commissioned and financed by Belgian investors (Grau 2003 [2001], 91–93).

7. For some general thoughts on the relation between the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the ridiculous, see: Mathias 2020, 302–11.

8. Indeed, cinematic movement is more than merely “technological”, for its effect of viewing one moving image (and not a succession of several images) is very much dependent on our physiological (high enough frequency of images) and cognitive (similarity and difference of images) response to it (Paech 2006, 98 f).

9. For example, the Atelier des Lumières’ Van Gogh, Starry Night experience features the Janis Joplin song “Kozmic Blues”.

10. This tendency must be seen as going hand in hand with democratization and popularization processes of pictorial media, which made themselves significantly felt for the first time in the 19 century (Mathias 2020, 38).

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