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Virtualizing Memory

Editor's Introduction

How digital communities interact with the past and memory via images, augmented reality (AR) apps/games, virtual reality (VR) documentaries, and shareable content is becoming increasingly relevant to media scholars. Between the 2018 Japanese high-school students' production of a virtual reality experience of the Hiroshima bombing, the new smartphone augmented reality application launched by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., and the success of the 2015 Gabo Arora's *Clouds Over Sidra* about the Syrian refugee crisis, we have witnessed a rapid growth in the scope and educational ambition of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies. Similarly, the emergence of mixed reality (MR) games, like Pokémon Go!, and last year's introduction of iPhone X with augmented reality capability are already impacting the way media-generated virtualities fill places of commemoration and remembrance. In other words, we have entered a stage in memory production that comprises of constant exchanges between virtual and material contexts, as well as online and offline archival regimes.

This issue of *Spectator* critically examines notions of digital augmentation and virtualization of memory within the context of media and memory studies, as well as contemporary pedagogical practices. It explores how the interactive experience of augmented reality and the "empathy machine" of virtual reality affect our attitudes towards the past, how they reshape historical narratives, as well as our relationship with physical, real-world environments of memorialization. This issue is also interested in the spatio-temporal politics of augmented and virtual reality as investigated through the lens of the exhibition spaces and contemporary art world. Finally, the articles presented in this collection not only interrogate different aesthetic strategies through which AR and VR give expression to politics of time and space but also seek to map the current state and speculative futures of a contemporary boom in AR and VR production, distribution, and consumption.

The overarching goal of this issue of *Spectator* is to expand the growing field of 'media memory' that has emerged in the past decades as a new field of study. As a distinct field, it is a descendant of both media research and memory scholarship – two interdisciplinary fields in their own right. The term 'media memory' was coined in 2005 by Carolyn Kitsch and the 2011 anthology *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* edited by Neiger, M., O. Meyers, and E. Zandberd[1] has brought 'media memory' to the forefront of new media and memory research. Despite the volume's comprehensive discussion of information and communication technologies and new media, the anthology falls short on broader issues of virtual and augmented reality media and their relationship to memory curation, production, and consumption. This issue of *Spectator* has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the expanding field of media memory by providing a space for new media scholars deeply invested in developing discussions on how we remember in the age of digital wayfaring.

One of the catalysts for devoting this issue of *Spectator* to research on AR, VR, and MR was the 26th international Visible Evidence documentary media conference organized in July 2019 at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. The conference brought together over four hundred scholars from around the world to discuss the history, theory, and practice of documentary and nonfiction media. While the scope of Visible Evidence conferences has traditionally been broad, VE26 marked the first time in the conference's history when entire panels consisted of research dedicated to virtual and augmented reality. Indeed, some of the most compelling and timely work on nonfiction media and technology gestures towards rethinking subject-object relations and reconceptualization of the process of remembrance. Hinting at this move towards the emerging theoretical construct of 'virtualized

Maria Zalewska, editor, Spectator 40:2 (Fall 2020): 5-7.

memory', articles in this volume originated from either presentations or critical discussion that emerged at Visible Evidence XXVI. Drawing from Pink and Hjorth's notion of digital wayfaring that conceptualizes our contemporary entanglements between on- and offline practices[2], this issue of *Spectator* invited contributions on the new encounters between virtual reality technologies, spaces of memory, and places of commemoration.

The issue begins with three experimental pieces by Michael LaRocco, Jake Bohrod, and co-authors Aggie Ebrahimi Bazaz and Liz Miller which theorize the study and creation of documentary and nonfiction media through the lens of virtual reality. In *From Kino-Eye to Kino-Computer: Theorizing the VR Camera,* Mike LaRocco—whose work bridges production studies and practice-based theory—investigates the virtual reality camera, as well as the camera operator, as the points of passage between physical reality and its virtualized, immersive representation. LaRocco argues that "the operation of VR cameras is governed by an experiential logic defined not just by the lens-based practices of cinema and photography, but by the data gathering and processing increasingly seen in digital video production as cameras have become computerized. As such, the phenomenology of VR camera practice exists as a seemingly oxymoronic tension between the optical traditions of cinema and the data manipulation of modern computing."[3]

Jake Bohrod's critical essay *Mediating Presence: Virtual Reality and Other Caves* examines the overlapping truth claims of virtual reality and nonfiction media with a special focus on the interchangeable perceptual metaphors of VR and 'the cave'. By anchoring his essay in Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), Bohrod illuminates how virtual reconstructions of decaying monuments "digitally preserve and mediate with unrivaled accuracy proto-cinematic visual archives and monumental sites of memorialization. The virtual architectures of presence they establish serve in part the empirical nostalgia of the Western imagination."[4]

In their conversational essay, *An Emerging Rhetoric for Critical Reflexivity in Co-Creative Documentary VR,* Aggie Ebrahimi Bazaz and Liz Miller share their experience and work process behind their documentary virtual reality projects: *How to Tell a True Immigrant Story* and *SwampScapes* respectively. The dialogue between these two documentary research-practitioners maps the growing field of VR documentary and illuminates its untapped potential. They explain the overarching framework of their filmmaking practice based on critical reflexivity that informs their ethical, aesthetic and production concerns. Aggie Ebrahimi Bazaz's work tackles issues of ethics and identity, as well as problems relating to VR production and distribution; Liz Miller's work expands the ethical considerations pertaining to VR, focusing our attention on relational practices and the ethics of access in VR. This conversation signals the subversive power of VR that can alter problematic documentary power structures.

The second, theoretical part of this volume illuminates virtual reality's affordances and tackles its political and ethical dimensions. In *Negative Hauntology and the Nuclear Sublime: On VR and Catastrophe*, Katherine Guinness—whose work focuses on memory and space—explores how artwork about radiation and nuclear disasters challenge the primacy of vision and haptic/optic binaries. She explores the simultaneous hope, fear, and destruction of the nuclear specter, and the nuclear sublime as it is captured in several contemporary virtual reality artworks, including artist collective Chim↑Pom's "Don't Follow the Wind" and Lynette Wallworth's "Collisions". Utilizing Jean-Luc Nancy's *After Fukushima* to link her theorization of "negative hauntology" with VR and the nuclear, Guinness sees the temporality of nuclear disaster as "one in which we are always simultaneously "after" a disaster that has yet to come, in which there is "no future" because apocalyptic trauma has already occurred."[5]

Sonia Misra's research focuses on contemporary queer cinematic production to explore how queerness becomes reoriented around the shifting relationships that define our digital age. In *Queer Futures and VR Aesthetics in Jacolby Satterwhite's 'Domestika'*, Misra examines different aesthetic strategies through which VR gives expression to speculative queer and black politics of temporality. Providing a close analysis of Satterwhite's *Domestika*, Misra focuses on how the piece not only reflects or captures reality, but also pushes the audience towards "other ways of knowing and being that rupture not only political common senses, but also the common senses adhering

around what virtual reality is capable of, giving rise to speculative queer of color politics that exceeds the limits of mainstream representation and identity."[6]

The volume concludes with Maria Zalewska's '*The Last Goodbye' (2017): Virtualizing Witness Testimonies of the Holocaust*. Zalewska interrogates the evolution of witness testimonies from the first testimonies recorded after the liberation of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps in 1945 to the recently produced first Holocaust survivor testimony in room scale VR, *The Last Goodbye* (2017). By framing *The Last Goodbye* within a broader historical context, Zalewska argues that the current paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize of witness testimonies is marked by a move to processual and interactive networks of memory. In her article, Zalewska gestures toward the potentials and limitations of this project which not only seeks to document and memorialize witness testimony through the technological spectacle of VR but also (re)shapes our attitudes towards physical, real-world environments of memorialization.

Some of the driving questions that brought these authors together were: Can we look beyond the futuristic rhetoric surrounding VR and its utopian/dystopian limits and potentialities? Can its production and exhibition rupture prevailing ways of knowing and modes of participation and creation? In what ways does VR anchor itself in or make use of the past, pushing against the logics of teleology? All the articles in this volume seek to push these and other questions of virtualizing time, space, and memory in further directions. They explore these conceptual problems by focusing attention on varied examples of virtual reality as a prophesied medium capable of changing the way we look at and experience the world.

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Notes

1 See: Neiger, M., O. Meyers, E. Zandberd, eds. *On Media Memory* (Springer: 2011).

2 See: L. Hjorth and S. Pink, "New Visualities and the Digital Wayfarer: Reconceptualizing Camera Phone Photography and Locative Media," *Mobile Media & Communication*, *2*(1), (2014): 40–57.

3 See: Michael LaRocco, *From Kino-Eye to Kino-Computer: Theorizing the VR Camera.*

4 See: Jake Bohrod, *Mediating Presence: Virtual Reality and Other Caves*

5 See: Katherine Guiness, *Negative Hauntology and the Nuclear Sublime: On VR and Catastrophe*.

6 See: Sonia Misra, Queer VR: Orientation and Temporality in Jacolby Satterwhite's *Domestika*