View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

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abstract:

Introduction to the issue on new visual narratives.

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New Visual Narratives

> We humans are story-driven animals. [...] We believe in stories
> we are telling ourselves about the world
> > Ludger Pfanz, New Visual Narratives conference, 2019

Certainly, there is nothing new in the new visual narratives. If, by using this term, we mean the advent of hybrid modes of storytelling, combining different media and methods of presencing the world and ourselves in it (exhibition, installation, publication, projection, immersion), then this has been a long time coming – all the more so if we want to talk about digital culture, which we do. A decade ago, a report about the future of the creative sector in Europe stated that, between 2001 and 2012, "all of Europe's creative sector growth was driven by digital media."[1] It should come as no surprise, then, that 2010 marked the so-called "digital turn" – meaning that more content was published online than in print that year.[2] All the traditional non-digital media were bound to stagnation if they couldn't offset the loss on the analog side with digital transformation, which remains a challenge for the whole creative sector. What is definitely true is that "digital experiences are changing the ways in which audiences consume culture, and are leading to new forms of cultural practices and cultural participation."[3] Changes in cultural production and dissemination technologies are indeed changing the habits – but also the expectations – of audiences, and producers and distributors of cultural content are constantly looking for ways to respond to those expectations – the recent release of and discussion around the *Bandersnatch* interactive episode of Netflix's *Black Mirror* being a case in point.[4] While it is

difficult at this point to predict what exactly the future holds for the production and reception of cultural goods, we can say with a high degree of certainty that it will be digital. These were the opening thoughts of a 2018 grant application that lay the foundations of the Visual Narratives Laboratory, established at Łódź Film School a year later (and co-run by a member of our editorial team), whose aim is to undertake the creative and scientific exploration of narrative-related technologies, such as cinematic VR, stereoscopy, interactive documentary and other interactive visual forms, the film or video essay, and, finally, digital multi-media publishing. It is not without reason that the European Commission christened the period between 2021 and 2030 "Europe's Digital Decade," [5] and so the timing seemed to be right for a mainstream newcomer, or rather – not too late.

Little did they know, when they officially opened the activities of the vnLab in autumn 2019 with the "New Visual Narratives" conference, that, a couple of months later, the COVID-19 pandemic would strike, changing the rules of the game altogether. While between 2017 and 2019, Netflix waged war against the Cannes Film Festival as to what makes a movie and how streaming might fit into that, [6] and that no major festival would even consider streaming films as part of their program, today it has become common practice – to the benefit of viewers, one might add. While in 2017, remote work pioneer IBM decided to recall part of their workforce to their offices to boost innovation, [7] in 2020 the whole world was suddenly thrown into telepresence – cloud providers and video-conferencing companies flourished, creating the new ecosystem of hybrid work that we function in now and which will not be going away, for better or worse. In the backwater of these radical challenges – and innovations – the Virtual Reality sector finally took off after a decade of hopeful predictions. Now, ever more film festivals have their own VR sections, and the Metaverse is on everybody's lips, also signaling a rapprochement between the different media

of film, games, and visual art (principally in digital form, of course). A signal of such a tendency may be the fact that, last year, New York's Tribeca Festival introduced computer games as an autonomous section of their program (they have been presenting games since 2011), the same year they dropped "Film" from their name.

At the pace our visual culture is changing (literally before our very eyes), reflections on questions that a few years ago may have seemed exotic or highly specialized now become pressing, especially when it comes to space-time experiences such as VR, where a "spatial turn" is needed in thinking about storytelling. As opposed to film and other "flat" audiovisual media, where time is the essential factor, in space-time experiences we need to learn how to organize space to produce meaning, to become metaphorical (here, theater can be a great template). Another important question in VR is point-of-view (who am I?) and embodiment. In interactive or participatory storytelling, we must do away with authorial control and think more in terms of storyworlds than stories, and so on. This is a paradigm change, both in the relationship between the creator and her audience, which from a sender-receiver model shifts to a dialogical one, as well as between the creator and her tools, especially today, when AI is serving us new, vastly improved tools literally every week, and the question of what creativity and authorship mean becomes paramount, notwithstanding the questions of privacy, safety, and health this shift engenders.

These are exciting, but also disconcerting times, making us all the more proud to share with you *View*'s "New Visual Narratives" issue, which was initiated around the 2019 vnLab conference. Two papers here stem directly from that meeting of peers. The first, by Sylvia Rothe, aims to tackle the spatial turn by proposing the "spaceline," in lieu of the timeline, as defining the filmic language of Cinematic VR (or omnidirectional video); the second, by Domna Banakou and Christos Hadjipanayi, takes up the

question of embodiment as a possible future for narrative storytelling. An additional point of view is given by Grzegorz Pochwatko, who, having undertaken psychophysiological perception research on the VR works produced within the vnLab, argues why such research can be productive in studying the "language" of these younger media. To conclude this issue's thematic **Close-Up** section, we offer two translations into Polish: the first, of an essay by William Uricchio, who tries to look at the possible futures of documentary storytelling, taking into account the abovementioned shifts in authorship, agency, and participation while displacing the modern notion of the subject altogether; the second, by Ilya Shilak, who attempts to add the body to the calculus of the digital sphere, and looks at the relationship between body and algorithm, human and technology: "With the flattening of information in a database" – Shilak writes – "the interface itself imparts certain kinds of momentum, sight lines, and trajectories to the traversal of that territory [the world as database]. Artists then are the ones who create not new content per se, but new forms and ways of processing the information contained in that database. They are the ones who produce the rules or lack thereof for the game."[8] Talking of databases, multimedia artist Filip Gabriel Pudło develops this thread in the **Panorama** section, delving into the history and practice of generative art in the context of film, starting with the tradition of the Workshop of the Film Form at Łódź Film School, and finishing with contemporary database-based generative films. Further, Małorzata Sugiera focuses on David Cronenberg's novel *Consumed*, bringing forth the recognition that the new digital technologies produce immersions entangled with our corporeal experiences to such an extent that a new understanding and definition of the traditional, theatrical way of perceiving and knowing the world is required. Piotr Fortuna puts this very question to the test by exploring the impact and implication of virtual influencers – algorithmic entities

experienced by their audiences as real characters, asking the Mitchellian question: what do these influencers want? Sylvia Papier recasts this question in relation to witnessing, looking at the USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony project launched in 2012, as part of which holographic representations of Holocaust survivors were produced to become the agents of this traumatic memory. Finally, this issue's editor, Krzysztof Pijarski, opens the question of digital publications and webdocs as autonomous or supplementary works of art, trying to envisage a new ecosystem of ambitious work on the web that would participate in the visual public sphere as political gesture and poetic world-making.

This issue's **Viewpoint** section is dedicated to *Control Negative*, a powerful and imaginative VR work by Monika Masłoń circling around issues of loss – of control, of one's environment, one's body, one's cognitive faculties, of somebody close, and of oneself. Commentary on the work is provided by Anna Ptak, who casts it as "meta-VR, critical or self-reflective VR, which paves the way to welcome thoughts about the decentralized self," while at the same time seeing it as confronting a crucial existential topic: expressing a community in dying from a new perspective, that of "the living person who makes room for the possibility of nonliving."[9]

In the **Snapshots** section, readers will find three reviews: Michał Matuszewski proposes a critical take on Jeremy Bailenson's book on Virtual Reality and his idea of the medium as an "empathy machine"; Natalia Judzińska looks at *Hideouts. The Architecture of Survival*, an exhibition centering on and reconstructing the hiding places of Jews during the Holocaust; and Agnieszka Jakimiak focuses on two recent films by Julia Ducournau, deconstructing the term "New French Extremity," coined by James Quandt to pigeonhole this wave of body horror

in contemporary French cinema.

Have a great read!
Editorial Team

1   Thomas Künstner, Matthew Le Merle, Dr. Hannes Gmelin, and Christian Dietsche, *Cyfrowa Przyszłość Kreatywnej Polski. Ekonomiczny wpływ Internetu na sektor kreatywny w Polsce i w Europie*, Booz & Company, 2013, report prepared by consultants Booz & Company and financed by Google Inc., 7 , http://www.nck.pl/badania/raporty/cyfrowa-przyszlosc-kreatywnej-polski-ekonomiczny-wplyw-internetu-na-sektor-kreatywny- (accessed October 2, 2022).

2   Whether it's possible to quantify this is another matter. The claim is made by Carola Zwick in *The Digital Turn: Design in the Era of Interactive Technologies*, eds. Barbara Junge, Zane Berzina, Walter Scheiffele, Wim Westerveld, and Carola Zwick (Berlin: eLab, Weißensee Academy of Art, 2012).

3   *Culture is Digital*, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, March 2018, 9, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital (accessed October 2, 2022).

4   See: https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/2/18165182/black-mirror-bandersnatch-netflix-interactive-strategy-marketing (accessed October 2, 2022).

5   See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en (accessed October 2, 2022).

6   Mark Allison, "Netflix vs. Cannes is one front in a bigger battle for the future of the movie industry," May 14, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/14/netflix-vs-cannes-battle-for-the-future-of-the-movie-industry.html (accessed October 2, 2022).

7   Sarah Kessler, "IBM, remote-work pioneer, is calling thousands of employees back to the office," March 21, 2017, https://qz.com/924167/ibm-remote-work-pioneer-is-calling-thousands-of-employees-back-to-the-office/ (accessed October 2, 2022).

8   Illya Shilak, "Do Cyborgs Dream of iPhone Apps? The Body and Storytelling in the Digital Imaginary," in: *The Digital Imaginary: Literature and Cinema of the Database*, ed. Roderick Coover (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 157.

9   Anna Ptak, *"This is Major Tom to Ground Control,"* in this issue.