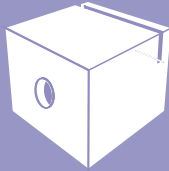


Published by:



EARLY VISUAL MEDIA LAB

C I C A N T

Ívar Erik Yeoman is an Icelandic PhD student and a filmmaker in Media Arts through CICANT at Lusófona University of Lisbon, Portugal. He earned his bachelor's in Philosophy through the University of Iceland, studied film directing at FAMU International and finished his master's degree in filmmaking through Kino Eyes Masters Consortium in Portugal, Scotland and Estonia.

Orcid Number: 0009-0004-4298-8106

ivarerik@gmail.com

**THE AESTHETIC
ILLUSION
OF *DOGVILLE***

ÍVAR ERIK YEOMAN

Lusófona University of Lisbon - CICANT

ABSTRACT:

Werner Wolf (2013) defines the concept of *aesthetic illusion* as describing a certain pleasurable state of mind that takes place when a user is engaged or immersed in media work(s). He points out that even though the user is in a state of engagement, it is nevertheless aware, in one way or another, of the medium it engages with. Wolf lists and describes certain principles necessary to media work for that state of mind to happen, one of them being the principle of *celare artem* which proposes that engaging with a work of media conceals its medium. Here, the principle is challenged by applying it to the film *Dogville* by Lars von Trier, whose author uses Brechtian *distancing-effect* methods to experiment with the relationship between audience engagement and distancing. Finally, the conclusions of the research are used to propose a further discussion on the criteria of a closely related concept from new media studies, *presence*, and how it concerns the immersive possibilities of new media, such as virtual reality (VR).

Keywords: *Aesthetic illusion, presence, celare artem, Lars von Trier, Dogville.*

Introduction

Media technologies are simulators for the mind. They are Plato's cave, casting shadows of things outside by pressing on our senses and firing up our imagination for the forms out of reach. In this press of imagery our bodies have the illusion of being transported to a place beyond the cave, a sense of things and others just outside our reach. But we might feel as if we can see, hear, and touch them. (Lombard, 2013, p. 2)

In the field of media arts and new media, the concepts of *aesthetic illusion* and *presence* are important to understand the fundamental aspects and dynamics at work in the user's experience of media artifacts of various mediums of media arts.¹

Werner Wolf (2013) defines the phenomenon of *aesthetic illusion* as a concept he uses to describe a certain pleasurable state of mind that takes place when a user is engaged in or immersed by media work(s). When a reader is engaged in a novel or a spectator of a detective film, as they have an emotional response to it, Wolf calls that experience an *aesthetic illusion*. Wolf describes certain principles that are necessary for this state of mind to happen, but importantly for this discussion, he points out that the viewer is always in one way or another aware of the medium he engages with.

Presence is another closely connected term in visual media. Along with being used to describe a certain phenomenological state which has to do with the immersive qualities at play in the user's experience, *presence* is also used as a criterion for ideas that have to do with the rather utopian, immersive possibilities of new media, such as VR.

There exists a willingness to create a medium or work of media that is capable of completely immersing its user to such an extent that the user becomes unaware of the medium at play – that *fully immerses* its users or has the capability of creating a *total presence* of, for example, simulated environments or virtual realities. In Matthew Lombard's article, 'Immersed in Media', he suggests that possibility, however, doesn't take into account the duration of the effect on its user.²

Even though Wolf's and Lombard's definitions have much in common, there are also differences. When Wolf determines that during the aesthetic illusion, the audience is always aware of the medium engaged with, he points out the importance of the concept of *celare artem*, an idea that suggests that art always conceals its medium, which might at first seem to contradict his emphasis about the user's awareness of the medium regarding the *aesthetic illusion*. Lombard seems less concerned with this aspect of the *presence* concept and seems positive that new media such as VR will have

-
1. Werner Wolf generally uses the term 'user' but I will not stick strictly to the technicality of the term and sometimes refer to a user as, for example, a 'viewer' and 'spectator' (of audiovisual media), or a 'reader' (of anything in written media, e.g. a novel.) Additionally, I will use different terms for the broad and general one of 'media artifact' which Wolf prefers, such as 'work', 'novel', 'song', 'film' and so on.
 2. There won't be space to go in-depth into the concept of *presence* so I will mostly refrain from mentioning it until the closing words. But when I refer to Lombard and the concept of *presence*, this is what I have in mind: the idea of complete immersion in relation to the immersive possibilities of new media.

the capability of capturing users in a state of *total immersion*, where virtual realities will be experienced like reality.

Here I will examine and test the concepts at play by applying the concept of *aesthetic illusion* and specifically the principle of *celare artem* to Lars von Trier's 2003 feature film *Dogville*, about a woman named Grace who enters a small town community situated in a rural mountainous area of the USA. Lars von Trier is known for his innovative and experimental approach to cinema and gives much attention to the immersive or distancing qualities of the film medium. *Dogville* is shot in a sound studio that resembles a theatre stage instead of the expected life-like setting of a standard location that would usually give a film a realistic texture. In doing this, Lars von Trier intentionally strips layers away from the conventional life-like reality of cinema and makes his audience aware of the cinematic apparatus, as if to create a certain distance between the audience and the representational reality of the story. In the end, I will again lead the discussion back to the key concepts and see if the results of the analysis might have something to contribute to the discussion of ideas in the vein of *presence* as *total immersion*.

Werner Wolf and the Aesthetic Illusion

Werner Wolf uses the term *aesthetic illusion* to describe a phenomenological state of mind that is one of the biggest attractions when it comes to the usage of media artifacts. *Aesthetic illusion* is, for example, experiencing a sense of pleasure when engaged in a piece of artwork. It is the state of mind that happens with the engagement and can both be on an intellectual level but is more often associated with the emotional one.

When a reader is emotionally invested in the plot of a soap opera or when the mind subconsciously starts guessing who the killer is in a thriller, that is the state of an *aesthetic illusion*, the magic that happens when the user experiences works of media as they unfold, almost like they are witnessing the events happening right before their eyes rather than through a medium. Wolf's description of the phenomenon is grounded and he applies precise analytical thought to covering different aspects of it.

What is of uttermost importance to him is the fact that, even though he names the phenomenon *illusion*, the user is always aware of the medium or media he engages with. Filmmakers, for example, can experience the *aesthetic illusion* of cinema as three-dimensional reality, even though they are fully aware that what they are watching is a man-made construction, a series of two-dimensional, still, images played at 24 frames per second and synched with externally recorded sound. This state of awareness shows that this *aesthetic illusion*, which is sometimes described as a dreamlike state of being, is still essentially and phenomenologically different from the experience of a hallucination or dreaming (even though a dream always eventually reveals itself as a dream). Because of the existing awareness of the user to see media as artifacts and the relationship between the user, the work, and the context, where the user is aware of the medium itself, the user might forget partly or momentarily that they are interacting with media, but never so fully. Before the user enters into engagement with the media, they make some kind of a contract with the media artifact, that has to do with the concept of a *willing suspension of disbelief*. The user enters an interaction with a work in a certain context of construction:

In short, aesthetic illusion, while being predominantly a state of imaginary immersion and re-centering – and thus the state of an experiencing or ‘participating ego’ –, always also involves our meta-awareness that we are witnessing a representation or a medial construct only [...] is it a conceptual error, as the commonsensical meaning of ‘illusion’ might induce one to think. Rather, aesthetic illusion is – to a certain extent – similar to the participation in a game (of make-believe, as Walton puts it, see 1990), as the etymology of ‘illusion’ as ‘in-lusio’ (from Lt. *ludere*, ‘to play’) [which] implies a game in which one knows that it is ‘only’ a game (Werner Wolf, 2013, p. 16)

Werner Wolf lists down the necessary aspects of a media artifact for the aesthetic illusion to take on its user and divides them into six categories of principles which are as follows:

- (1) The principle of access-facilitating, detailed world-making
- (2) The principle of consistency of the represented world
- (3) The principle of life-like perspectivity in the representation
- (4) The principle of respecting and exploiting the potentials of the representational macro-frames, media and genres employed

- (5) The principle of generating (in particular an emotional) interest in the represented world
- (6) The principle of ‘*celare artem*’³ (Werner Wolf, 2003, pp. 43–47)

The whole sum of the principles might be thought of as a broad idea about what media artifacts like literature, theatre, and film have in common in the sense of being capable of making the average-user⁴ of the media artifact believe it, accept it, be engaged by it. These principles can be seen as a listing of how engaging media artifacts have progressed (in storytelling conventions, for example) and what the user consciously or subconsciously expects from it in terms of the tradition of the medium at a given time period as the expectations change, progress and develop with the media itself.

If one applies only the titles of the principles to, for example, a film that the reader knows well, they will surely see how the principles match with that film. 1) describes that the media artifact needs to grant access to a detailed inner or outer world; 2) that world needs to be consistently represented, otherwise the viewer might become too distanced and the aesthetic illusion could collapse; 3) it needs to contain the quality of life-likeness or *verisimilitude* to the reality and cultural context of the user; 4) it needs to respect and make use of the context

3. The principles are never listed together like this in Wolf’s text but are collected together here for the purpose of clarification.

4. Werner Wolf says it is generally useful to think about these concepts in that regard, from the point of view of the average-user, who is probably not fully aware of how the media artifact of a piece of work is constructed and is thus generally more prone to the aesthetic illusion, unlike when a filmmaker watches a film, a writer reads a novel or the painter notices the brushes instead of the whole picture when gazing upon a painting. An interesting example of someone who is not the average-user could be Lars von Trier, but in an interview, he said no matter how convincing computer-generated images in Hollywood cinema of the 2000s were (before he made *Dogville*), they would always make him feel distanced; he was never able to feel the representations as in a state of aesthetic illusion, but would rather see right through them and into the room where they were generated, a nerd sitting at the computer.

of that it is constructed into, for example in terms of genre, which has to do with the expectations of the users; 5) it needs to be able to engage its user emotionally and 6) which is the principle that I will discuss further here, it involves that which Wolf calls the principle of *celare artem*.

The principle of *celare artem* is that art conceals itself in the manner of how it is constructed. To take a clear and obvious example of the principle in its simplest terms, the spectator of a film is likely to become distanced if he notices the boom of the sound operator come into frame in the middle of an engaging scene. It breaks the engagement, the *aesthetic illusion*, and 'the magic' reveals itself like when a magician on stage fails to conceal the trickery. But can this not also be called something else? Can it not be called an unconvincingly crafted media artifact? Surely, just like when world-making is inconsistent, bad craft also breaks the *aesthetic illusion*, like when an actor breaks a character⁵ or when a writer publishes a book full of spelling mistakes. In my opinion, discussions about the quality of the craft have to be taken into consideration, in spite of the fact that it is complex to measure in an objective way. As I will discuss further in the chapter about *Dogville*, this aspect comes into play and should not be disregarded.

As a side note, I would like to suggest another function of the principle of *celare artem* in the sense that art (but not all media artifacts) tends to conceal its meaning or message as it is most often not communicated in a total straight-forward manner, as if it were a manifesto or a protest sign, but rather

has the tendency to remain open to interpretation. It invites the viewer to participate with the representation at hand, as in the aforementioned metaphor of the media artifact as a game, which positions its user in a certain context. Even though a work of media artifact like a film or a novel might have a clear message, this message would generally not be stated directly, or at least not early on in its duration. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy needs to travel far away to finally discover the value of the comfort of her home and family, and even though that message is directly stated through dialogue, it only happens at the end of the story, after the user has been given enough space to apply their own insights or interpretations of the work.

The aspect of *celare artem* that Wolf discusses and the one that is of most importance here has to do with pieces of work that seem to be intentionally designed to play around the function of media artifact and its connection to concepts like suspension of disbelief, engagement, *aesthetic illusion* and its connection to immersion and distance with its user. Here, it is important to mention that Werner Wolf places a user who is in a state of *aesthetic illusion* in the middle of a scale with the polar opposites of *complete immersion* and total *rational distance* functionality of the media artifact:

aesthetic illusion

(complete immersion)-----total rational distance)⁶

(Werner Wolf, 2013, p. 18)

5. I would still suggest that the aesthetic illusion can happen with 'bad acting', but then it would have to be consistently bad rather than uneven.

6. A similar illustration is found in Wolf Werner's text, here seen as adapted for this essay.



Fig. 1 Still from *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998). Example of the naturalism of *Dogme*.

This is certainly the case with most works of media artifacts. However, there are also conventions within most mediums to resist that functionality intentionally, by within the work, pointing out the fact to the user that it is engaging with

artwork as a human fabrication, be it a film, a novel, a painting, and so on, as a reminder to the audience of their position towards the work, thus creating distance or awareness between the work and its user.



Fig. 2 Still from *Europa* (Lars von Trier, 1991). Example of Lars von Trier's stylisation and the use of projections.

In cinema, which remains the focus here as an example of media artifacts, this creative technique has a long tradition, dating back to the era of silent cinema. It became more apparent around the rise of modernism, largely due to the influence of playwright, thinker, and director Bertold Brecht who had been experimenting with the methods in theatre from the mid-thirties. Brecht did not invent these techniques but developed them, progressed, and analysed them from pre-existing art and theatre history.

Often Brecht's methods are understood as if they take place completely on the rational end of Wolf's spectrum, but I would

argue that is a misunderstanding. One only needs to read his plays to notice that he was not against creating an emotional engagement for his audiences. However, he positioned himself against the tradition of how naturalism had generally been used at that time. Brecht did not believe in theatre as a tool to mirror society, as that would invite the danger of only supporting the status quo of capitalist society. Rather, he wanted his work to wake his audiences up, so to speak, to the social circumstances they lived within and also, create a will for change. He called his method different names, mostly *verfremdungseffekt*, in German; however, I will refer to it here as *distancing-effect*, as I think it captures his ideas better than

the more used term *alienation effect*. The word 'distance' also aligns closely with how Werner Wolf uses the concept of *rational distance* to explain the *aesthetic illusion*.

The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion. Reality, however, complete, has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such. And this is why we too are inquiring into naturalness: we want to alter the nature of our social life. (1964, Bertold Brecht, p. 218)

I will not go into great detail about the techniques Brecht used for the *distancing-effect* (they were in constant development throughout his career) but they revolved around breaking the fourth wall and included having the actors of his plays engage directly with their audiences, creating abrupt pauses in the middle of an important chain of events, actors crossing the fourth wall of the stage, characters holding up signs with texts that didn't belong to the story world, a new methodology towards acting that refrained from naturalism, and so on.

Instead, the example of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* is useful as a case study to illustrate the ideology behind them, because just like Brecht, Lars von Trier uses the *distancing-effect* precisely as an *effect*, to affect his audiences at certain times of his work with distancing techniques while at other times he welcomes and encourages emotional engagement.

He purposefully takes his audience in and out of the aesthetic illusion, conceals the art until he reveals it, or reveals it until he conceals it.⁷

Lars von Trier and the Example of *Dogville*

Danish director Lars von Trier, born in 1956, is one of Scandinavia's better-known film directors. His work illustrates innovation when it comes to the form, functionality, and foundations of the film medium itself. He was one of the founders of the *Dogme95* movement, which has since been canonised as an integral part of film history texts. The ideology of the movement was presented with the *Dogme95 Manifesto* and an accompanying text, *The Vows of Chastity*, which consists of methodological rules for filmmaking.

The idea was partly initiated to react to the aforementioned feeling of distance that the filmmakers felt when watching over-produced Hollywood films, which generally ruled the mainstream markets. Trier and his colleagues fixed upon rules that would simplify and democratise the filmmaking process. By getting rid of expensive equipment and budget restraints, the aim was to have filmmakers and audiences rethink, deconstruct, and discuss the possibilities of the medium itself by creating and viewing films that followed the previously mentioned set of rules, which included using cheaper and newer digital camera technology, using available light sources

7. I have to mention the fact that today, certain techniques of breaking the fourth wall have become quite popular to use, also in media which are designed to be immersive. In recent popular, western series like *House of Cards* and *Fleabag*, its protagonists regularly break the fourth wall by interacting directly with the camera/audiences, which might further suggest that the principle as *celare artem* is not as important as Wolf Werner proposes, or that certain techniques have progressed to the norms of techniques that create the *aesthetic illusion*.

only when filming and staying away from genre conventions and cliché props such as guns or knives in their storytelling.

I mention the *Dogme* movement as it is important to point out that the filmography of Lars von Trier is particularly rich in regards to the development of how he has chosen to use the possibilities of the medium at different stages of his career. In the early stages, his films were highly stylised, with every shot firmly controlled by the director's hand. He used experimental methods in his audiovisual approach, making the most use of the technological advancements at hand. In *Europa* from 1991, a highly stylised piece of work, he made use of film projections, a mix of black and white and colour images, static shots, and tracking shots (techniques connected more to *distance* and less to *verisimilitude* or life-likeness, according to Werner Wolf), film projections that characters would interact with, analogue sound and a voice-over narrator who addresses the audience in the second person.

With every film until his only *Dogme* film, *The Idiots* from 1996, his work would become less and less stylised with a general movement from static, controlled shots to a freer flow of handheld cinematography with natural lighting. Each film after *The Idiots* has then gradually moved again in the direction of increased stylisation; thus, it can be considered as a mid-point to Lars von Trier as a stylist of cinema. In all of his films since the 2010 *Antichrist*, he has made use of computer-generated image techniques which he previously referred to as distancing him as a viewer, but usually with different purposes than to engage – sometimes, to disrupt the otherwise natural flow of his narratives.

Dogville was his second film after *The Idiots*, with *Breaking the Waves* coming out before, but the two along with *Manderlay* make up his trilogy of films that is sometimes referred to as *The United States Trilogy*. Lars von Trier's drastic choices in terms of form are apparent in all of them. But at the same time, they also stay true to the naturalism of *The Idiots* in terms of the use of handheld cinematography and naturalistic acting. In spite of setting the story in the fictional mountain-side town of *Dogville* in The United States in the 1930s and instead of choosing a location that resembled a mountainside town, the film was entirely shot on a soundstage in Sweden, which was designed to look like a spacious theatre stage.

Not only that, but the set was devoid of much of the usual set design which generally brings the life-likeness to settings. Instead, to illustrate the houses, they are mostly only painted and marked with white lines on the floor, most of the time devoid of walls or roofs. Nature is also described along the same lines, a bush of trees is marked with a white box and letters, just like the town's guard dog, but its spot and figure are merely drawn on the floor. Characters consistently refer to their surroundings through dialogue and describe the change of light, the lightness of the air, and the beauty of the mountains.

Some props are in place, like a seemingly random wall of a house, or the floor of one of the cabins. Actors wear appropriate costumes for the era of the 1930s and when a car enters the town it is of the story's era. But other aspects of the design appear at first as if they were simply left undone, for no apparent reason.



Fig. 4 Still from *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). Title/chapter card at the opening of the film.

Sound design plays an important role, both in engaging and distancing. The focus is mostly on the dialogues but ambiences are used for immersion and life-likeness; the singing of birds in the morning, owls in the night, and on a stormy and snowy night, the wind is heard and the dog barks if a stranger enters the town. Perhaps the most noticeable *distancing-effect* of the sound design is when characters open and close the invisible doors in the houses. It is illustrated with sounds of creaking and closing doors, completely revealing the use of sound to the audience as a part of the audiovisual medium.

The narrative is divided into six chapters and a prologue (see Figure 4), illustrated by title cards and it is narrated with a voice-over by an omniscient narrator which expresses the

character's thoughts, feelings, and motivations, even when the focus of the story is somewhere else. The descriptions of the chapters along with the narrator's description lead the spectator through the story by giving him hints about the upcoming progressions and the title cards do the same with the naming of the story titles.

When the film begins, the spectator is placed in a distant position from the events of the story, as so much is missing from what generally makes up the life-likeness of the construction of films. It places the audience further towards the rational distance side of Wolf's spectrum, towards the cinematic apparatus itself, as the art or the craft is only partly concealed, which matches with what Wolf writes about the *celare artem* principle.



Fig. 5 Still from *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). Closing shot, the dog.

But Lars von Trier's theory is that even though the audience might be baffled by his choices at first, they would become used to it and fall into the narrative like any other. As in the case of the creaking, invisible doors, the choice doesn't seem devoid of absurd humour to begin with, but as the story progresses, it

becomes less and less noticeable to the spectator, even though the effect is continuously and consistently used. Despite the alienating design of the story world, the spectator still falls into the *aesthetic illusion*,⁸ or at least until Lars von Trier sees fit to break the illusion, sometimes abruptly with one more of his

8. Obviously I cannot generalise about this completely but one way to get a general feeling about the audience's reaction is by looking at both critics' and the public's reviews and reactions to the film. What I notice is writing and discussions focused on the story itself and its topics. Writers describe events and plot points of the film in a generally emotional way, suggesting that the aesthetic illusion must have happened.

techniques of *distancing-effects*, or his choices of representing them in a new way. At the very end of the film, after an engaging third act, he playfully breaks the illusion once more to conclude the story, but with a twist on his principles. The film concludes with a zoom shot of the town's dog, which like usual, is only represented with lines on the floor. But this time, with the help of computer-generated image techniques, the director reveals an actual dog over its painted shape:

It is a playful decision by Lars von Trier. At first, the lines of the dogs on the floor, which represented the dog, were what created the *distancing effect* for the viewer. But at the end of the story, when the spectator has become more used to that effect and finally accepts it as the story world in the state of an *aesthetic illusion*, the tables are turned. Lars von Trier distances the spectator again, but this time by raising the life-likeness of the representation to what is generally



Fig. 6 Still from *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). End of the closing shot, the dog appears.



Fig. 7 Still from *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). Nicole Kidman in the role of Grace.

expected as such, by having an actual dog appear, and by doing so, he reverses the *distancing-effect* principles of the work.

What does this tell us about the *celare artem* principle? Is it necessary for the aesthetic illusion to function? Does it perhaps have something to do with the consistency of the representations? It is quite clear that *Dogville*, as well as other

Brechtian art pieces, don't fit with the principle, at least not fully so, as the *aesthetic illusion* does take place in spite of the use of the *distancing effects*. In one way or another, the principle is breached. But before answering that question, it might be useful to first apply the other principles to the film and see if everything falls into place. Is there possibly something else at play, that makes up for the breach of the *celare artem* principle of *Dogville*?

The first principle is the *principle of access-facilitating, detailed world-making*, which fits with the universe of *Dogville*. But the second one, *the principle of consistency of the represented world*, and the third one, *the principle of life-like perspectivity in the representation* make the research more complicated. Generally, the represented world is consistently described in spite of being unusual (except at the end, with the trickery of the dog, where the director intentionally disrupts the consistency), and at least partly, Lars von Trier's approach aims for life-likeness in the representation and successfully so, except with the methods for *distancing effect* as listed above. The naturalistic, handheld camera movement and the naturalism of the exceptional showcase of talent in the acting, along with features such as a well-written, engaging, and thought-provoking story, might work as a counterbalance to what might otherwise distance the spectator completely. The fourth principle is the one of *respecting and exploiting the potentials of representational macro-frames, media, and genres employed* and that is certainly what is done in the film, in very fine detail from the script to the execution. The fifth principle is another one that might make up for some of the other ones, as in the case of *Dogville*; the one of *generating (in particular an emotional) interest in the representational world*, which certainly fits as well and was discussed above in reference to the audience's emotional responses to the film. It is often the case with the reception of Lars von Trier's films, that in spite of his formal approaches and experiments, he is rather accused or criticised for manipulating his audiences emotionally to too high a degree, instead of the opposite, that the spectator experiences the work as too distant. The sixth principle is the

one of *celare artem*. Additionally, it is worth pointing out here that the *celare artem* principle seems to stand or fall in relation to the other principles as well, specifically numbers two, and five.

Perhaps Brechtian art can reveal its medium and still create a user's *aesthetic illusion* if other principles are still in place, if they are consistent, still generate an emotional interest in the user, and if they are, as I would like to suggest, really matters in the discussion about *aesthetic illusion*, exceptionally convincingly crafted, as in the case of *Dogville*.

Conclusions and Further Discussions

Through the examples of Lars von Trier's cinema, specifically the case study of *Dogville* as a case study of other media that are presented in a Brechtian manner, and the idea that breaking the fourth wall has, in a sense, even become a part of conventional storytelling, I suggest that Werner Wolf's *celare artem* principle for the *aesthetic illusion*, might not be as necessary as he suggests, at least if other principles make up for it.

The example of *Dogville* can also be used to bridge to another connected discussion that I do not have the space to analyse in depth here but is important to mention, which not only has to do with how commonplace it has become to break the fourth wall but relates to a topic discussed in media studies/archaeology by Thomas Elsaesser,⁹ among others, that the cinema medium or audiovisual media have today become

9. Elsaesser, Thomas. 2006.

so commonplace and all-encompassing that they have in a sense become invisible, which we might even consider as the necessary conditions for Lars von Trier to perform his trickery and meanwhile maintain the *aesthetic illusion*. Not only are people constant users of audiovisual media in the sense that the average-user is used to various formal and narrative techniques but also, in one way or another, creators of audiovisual media, even though not necessarily cinema, are always equipped with the tools in their hands or pockets and thus with an ever-increasing understanding of the possibilities of the film devices themselves, which contributes to the processes in the shaping of beliefs and disbeliefs, which contribute to maintaining what concepts such as *aesthetic illusion* and *presence* describe. Audiovisual media and devices have perhaps become so all-encompassing and such a mundane part of reality that not only are they somewhat invisible, as Elasseer describes, but also transparent, accessible from all sides, in the way they reveal themselves and their possibilities.

Still, this does not necessarily contradict Wolf's definitions of the mechanism of the *aesthetic illusion*, as perhaps the most important and ever-present aspect of it is the user's relationship and awareness of the medium or media it engages with, be it invisible or transparent. The *celare artem* principle suggests that methods of *distancing effects* break the illusion and this, as a matter of fact, is exactly its purpose as Brecht thought of it. But the audience can be brought back in, and out again, by playing with the principles of the *distancing effect*, disrupting the representational consistency of the work and even turning the consistency of the principles on its head. The Brechtian methods do not necessarily imply complete distance but rather evoke the artists to use them as a tool

for creative purposes, allowing for emotional engagement between the audience and the piece when it so fits, but also to pull them out and create the distance and space for critical reflection. Lars von Trier, just like Brecht, uses the method in such a manner, to create a space within their work for their audience to think, wonder, criticise, and connect the dots between the situations the characters endure within the piece of work to their own circumstances.

Since it can be argued that the *aesthetic illusion* does not necessarily need the principle of *celare artem* but still exists as a concrete description of a phenomenon, I want to suggest that this fact might have something to say about its linked concepts, like Matthew Lombard's *presence* in its connection with new media. In VR and platforms such as the Metaverse, the idea is that users might be able to experience computer-generated environments with a sense of *presence* that feels like actual experiences of our usual non-computer-generated reality. If the users experience a state of *aesthetic illusion* in their engagement with artwork that is intentionally and ever so often self-referential in the way it breaks its fourth wall, it might indeed have something to say about the user's relationships with media in general.

Perhaps it suggests that the utopian concept of *presence* as Lombard describes it in relation to new media, is too out of reach to be discussed as anything but exactly that, a utopia. As Wolf suggests, even though the user experiences the *aesthetic illusion*, the user is always aware of the medium, and if we remove the principle of the *celare artem* (but the media artifact is still convincingly and consistently crafted), it does not seem to matter much how the medium presents or conceals

itself (the representation of a dog can be drawn on the floor, or be an actual dog), the *aesthetic illusion* can nevertheless remain the same. Even if with future technology, reality could be replicated and represented as realistically as imaginably possible, it would still be through a medium. Furthermore, possibly the *aesthetic illusion* and *presence* are not necessarily about this at all, the life-likeness of the representations, but rather about their consistency and the different aspects of quality when it comes to crafting them, with the aim of life-likeness or not.¹⁰ After all, the aesthetic illusion happens through an agreement between the user and the media, while the user is in a state of awareness about their position.

In a recent novel by Icelandic author Steinar Bragi (2022), he describes a dystopian future, set after a third world war, where people on Earth have different internet connections depending on their status of wealth, and the technology of the devices in some cases becomes literally invisible to the eye, or inside the human bodies. Some people in this universe, such as the protagonist and his wife, have decided to live outside the internet system despite it making them marginalised, their lives close to impossible.¹¹ The cheapest medium to access the internet is through clumsy headsets, while the middle class uses lenses attached to their eyes, and the richest one percent can afford the possibility of having the internet injected into their bodies. Everywhere they go, they experience both virtual or augmented realities simultaneously with

the physical one. While they can feel sensations like weight, taste, touch, and so on through the medium, they seem to have natural instincts about what is real and what is not, even though the areas interact and sometimes blur. Dr Kris Kelvin in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, the protagonist, knows that what he experiences is an illusion and he needs to commit to an act that can be described as a *suspension of disbelief*, both acts which involve certain acts of conscious commitments, to become fully, immersed by illusions it as if it were concrete reality. It might be because, as in the case of *aesthetic illusion*, *willing suspension of disbelief* and perhaps *presence* as well, we are medium-aware in the same sense that we are self-aware. While the medium offers endless possibilities only limited by their own and the collective imagination, along with the fact that they never have a practical need to disconnect from the internet, they still remain aware. How can they not?

I opened this article by quoting Matthew Lombard, referring to the allegory of Plato's cave and its relation to the immersive possibilities of new media. For further thought and discussions, I will conclude this essay with another quotation, this one from media scholar Oliver Grau, that also considers our relationship with the media by referring to Plato's cave, but seeing the other side of the coin:

Even six-year-old children are able to differentiate between reality and 'as-if worlds,' yet in Western art

10. In cinema and other narrative storytelling, I'd like to suggest that the principle of emotional/rational engagement seems particularly important, that the representations relate to the human experience in terms of identification. We do not necessarily identify much with rats in general, for example, except if the rats are given human-like wants and desires, like dreaming about becoming chefs, as in Brad Bird's *Ratatouille*.

11. The title is *Dáin Heimsveldi* (in Icelandic, translated to something like *Dead Empires* in English) and was only recently published. It is not available in foreign languages as of yet.

and media history there is a recurrent movement that seeks to blur, negate, or abolish this differentiation using the latest imaging techniques. It is not possible for any art to reproduce reality in its entirety, and we must remain aware that there is no objective appropriation of reality—Plato’s metaphor of the cave shows that. (Oliver Grau, 2003, pp. 60–61)

Bibliography

Brecht, Bertold. (1964). *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and translated by John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang.

Elsaesser, T. (2016). *Film History as Media Archaeology*. Amsterdam University Press.

Grau, Oliver. (2003). *Virtual Art: from Illusion to Immersion*. Translated by Gloria Custance. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Matthew Lombard and Matthew T. Jones. (2015). ‘Defining Presence’ in Matthew Lombard et al. (eds.) *Immersed in Media. Telepresence Theory, Measurement & Technology*. Springer.

Wolf, Werner. (2013). ‘Aesthetic Illusion’ in *Immersion and Distance, Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi.

Videography

Bird, B., & Pinkava, J, directors. (2007). *Ratatouille*. Buena Vista Pictures.

Steinar Bragi. (2022). *Dáin Heimsveldi*. Forlagið, Reykjavík.

Trier, Lars V., director. (2003). *Dogville*. Zentropa et al.

Trier, Lars V., director. (1992). *Europea*. Zentropa et al.

Trier, Lars V., director. (1996). *The Idiots*. Zentropa et al.

Tarkovsky, Andrei., director. (1972). *Solaris*. Mosfilm Studios.

Vidor, King, director. (1939). *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

