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Ambience and Immersion

Presented at *Alien Sound: Ambient Music and the Limits of the Human*, Tate Liverpool, 9th February 2019.

In this talk I'll mainly discuss issues to do with the *idea* of immersion, as this is a subject that I've written about and dealt with as an artist through installations.

I say the *idea* of immersion as immersion itself, as a phenomena, can be beautiful but also banal from an artistic standpoint: a bath is immersive, our everyday experience is that of immersion in the materiality of the world around us, its smells, sounds, the wind and rain, etc. The *idea* of immersion is something else; in this *idea* the aesthetic qualities of immersion are elevated to a kind logic, a structure for thought, a way of thinking about or rethinking the world, a way of setting priorities both aesthetic, political.

In this sense this talk is more about the idea of immersion and discourse, in academic literature but also curatorial statements, promotional literature, gallery texts and wall panels, etc., as it is about what happens when we engage in a so-called 'sonic thought' that extends to qualities of immersion to a logic or ethics.

Linking this to today's theme, there is a close relationship between immersion and ambience. Ambience often creates a sonic space or atmosphere more than a temporally linear and metrically structured composition, an atmosphere to inhabit as much as or more than a piece that we witness unfolding and developing in time towards some end point.

The aesthetics of ambience can be understood as a specific case of a more general immersive experience in which the listener is enveloped in sound. The experience of ambient music is often more spatial than temporal, structured through repetitions and sustained sounds the duration of which makes it difficult to detect beginning and end and therefore to accurately gauge a linear passage of time (Bergsonian duration). We can identify two poles of ambience: the therapeutic and the 'visceral,' in both the presence of the listener is emphasised through an affective primacy, through the idea that the immediacy and intensity of the experience is of primary importance ahead of any narrative of conceptual content, should it be present at all.

In the rest of this talk I want to discuss some of the aesthetic, philosophical and political consequences arising from this assertion of presence and enveloped immediacy that is common to ambience and immersion. Relating this to today's theme I'd say that some of these consequences force us to consider that, while the aesthetics of an 'alien sound' present in some ambient music might suggest a radical otherness or exteriority, a sufficient aesthetics of immersion places limitations on conceptual and political thought, keeping us constrained within 'the limits of the human'.

Spatio-temporal immersion

To be immersed is to be surrounded, to be within, to experience something from the inside rather than as an external observer. A typical example of this distinction is the experience of a sound installation in contrast to that of a wall-mounted visual artwork; the wall-mounted work is seen across a void that separates us, the viewer, from the work displayed at a distance; in immersive works we are within the work and accordingly there is no distance between us and the work which both surrounds and often penetrates us. This experience of immersion is often considered something particular to the sonic. To be immersed is, in the most powerful of immersive experiences, to not only be surrounded or enveloped but to be penetrated by the work.

Here might think of the work of Mark Bain or more generally sub-bass which finds resonances in the fleshy cavities of the body. Or, further up the spectrum, the work of Maryanne Amacher whose use of difference tones and distortion products create a penetrative experience wherein sounds seems to originate at once from the loudspeakers 'over there' and simultaneously from within the head of the listener, creating a confusion of interiority and exteriority.

PLAY AMACHER, DENSE BOOGIE 1

It is the intensive intimacy arising from the combination of envelopment and penetration, at both ends of the spectrum of human hearing, that supports claims for sound's privilege regarding immersion in much literature on the subject.

In immersion the distinction between (listening) subject and (art) object begins to collapse as the distance between the two becomes imperceptible, confused (the aforementioned confusion of interiority and exteriority). This confusion or merging of subject and object results in a centring of the viewer/audient; in immersive experiences we find ourselves centred, not always *the* centre but occupying a position within the work which appears unique due to both our position and the assertion of the agency of perception that often accompanies the indeterminacy of some immersive works. What I mean by this is the sense that in an immersive work it is often the experience of the viewer/listener that determines the meaning and significance of the work, this being placed on an equal footing, or even elevated above authorial intent.

This merging of subject and object results in a correlation of the sensed and the self, a collapse of distance and strict distinctions that yields a sense of immediacy. The perception of the work appears immediate, as much a product of subjective auto-affection as the perception of external objects and events. In immersion the frames, lenses and screens that might mediate our experience of a work disappear or become imperceptible.

These spatial aspects of immersion are complemented by a temporal correlation wherein the artwork unfolds or is completed in the moment of its perception. Immersion thereby describes a spatio-temporal unity of subject and artwork.

Ambience and Intensity

Immersion describes the generic conditions of an aesthetic experience characterised by omni-directionality, sensorial immediacy, etc., yet within these broad conditions there is great variation. There is a therapeutic vein within immersive practices which is coupled with a concept of ambience. In this context the presence of drones and sustained tones, for example, may soothe the listening subject; the absence of rapid changes, discrete rhythms or events presents a calming experience free from shocks or distractions that demand attention. This is the calming bath of immersion in which the listening subject can lie back and relax. Distinct from the ambient or therapeutic vein of immersive practice is a more intensely visceral experience associated with intense volumes, noise music performances and an aesthetic that elicits affective resonance from the listener via more shocking and generally abrasive means. Far from being a immersive ‘bathing ceremony’¹ putting the audience at ease, these more ‘intense’ experiences (which are perhaps more closely related to the idea of ‘alien sound’ guiding today’s discussions) nonetheless equally attend to the primary function of the immersive work: an affirmation of presence, often the self-presence of the audience and their correlation with the artwork or composition. This affirmation of presence is achieved though an assertion of the primacy of sensation, an affective immediacy unspoilt by punctual representations and references that might lead the listener out of the bubble of interiority.

Immediate Sensation

In asserting the primacy of sensation, the immersive work makes a claim to a particular radicalism. This radicalism is historically specific and, in contemporary art and art theory, it is ascertained through proximity to theoretical paradigms such as New Materialism.² This theoretical paradigm distances itself from the linguistic turn that has dominated theory and philosophy in recent decades, by asserting the primacy of matter as it is directly encountered through apparently immediate and pre-symbolic experience. The matter in new materialism is more the phenomenological fabric of lived experience than the abstract or theoretical entities populating an often mathematically constructed scientific image of reality residing beyond our apparently immediate perceptions. In stressing the primacy and immediacy of sensation, the immersive work claims to bring us closer to this fabric of lived experience that is presented as undergirding the representational and symbolic content of everyday language as well as increasingly abstract mathematical models. While constituting an apparently radical departure from the strictures of the linguistic turn and the conceptual artistic practices this turn supported, the notion of a sonic materialism that often accompanies celebrations of the immersive is equally a *return* to the primacy of sensation that gets lost or

¹Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p.

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²For an introduction to New Materialism see Diana Coole & Samatha Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’ in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010, 1-43. For a discussion of New Materialism, amongst other variants of realism, in the context of contemporary art see Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey & Suhail Malik, *Realism, Materialism, Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.

buried beneath linguistic and more broadly symbolic abstractions.³

Immersion often brings great pleasure, a level of sensory stimulation that readily excites (Kaffe Matthews *Sonic Beds*); it is for this reason that immersion sells. The affective primacy of the immersive artwork gives it an immediate appeal articulated at a universal or generic level: namely the ability to sense or feel. For this reason immersion is often associated with inclusivity in the commissioning of works of art. While immersion sells—as can be seen in the prevalence of this term in promotional materials from galleries, cinemas, theatres and so on—it also comes at a cost. These considerations that apply equally to the more explicitly ambient work that cuts itself adrift from the conceptual and representational.

The Price of Immersion

I'd like to briefly discuss three potential costs that come with the *idea* of immersion.

The first cost can be political. In his history of virtual art Oliver Grau describes a conjunction of art and state wherein immersive panoramas were commissioned to present a glorified victor's history. In a less explicitly political formulation the immersive artwork, through its prioritising of sensation asserts a double interiority: firstly, being in the interior of an artwork and secondly, having one's own interior resonate with that artwork. Being within the artwork, one's horizon is determined by that artwork, a horizon that exercises what Grau describes as the "power of immersion to deprive the human subject of the right of decision"⁴. Furthermore the aesthetics of presence, immediacy and localisation that tend to accompany the immersive impose a series of spatio-temporal constraints that have come under criticism within contemporary political and specifically post-capitalist theory. There is a perceived impediment that aesthetic preferences for immediacy and localisation impose upon the imagination of a progressive politics. A now famous example of this is Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future*⁵ which argues that the tendency towards immediacy and localisation in movements such as Occupy constituted a limitation as much as a catalyst in terms of what the movement was able to achieve. Srnicek and Williams' argument is that the type of planning, strategising and organisation that might have taken the movement beyond the immediacy of protest and direct action was too abstract a conception, involving more mediation than the movement could ethically accommodate (a more sympathetic but, on this point, similar critique is presented by Jodi Dean in *The Communist Horizon*).

The second cost or concern I'd like to raise is that the preference for the immediate in immersive aesthetics supports suspicion of abstraction, which con-

³Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 57–64.

⁴Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 110.

⁵Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future : Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, New York: Verso, 2016. For another critical yet more sympathetic account of the Occupy movement see Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, New York: Verso, 2012. 207-250.

sequently presents mathematical models as less real than immediate experience. From a philosophical perspective the aesthetics of immersion can bind one into the logic of what Quentin Meillassoux has called correlationism,⁶ a consequence of the aforementioned collapse of the distinction between subject and object, a collapse that, Meillassoux argues, problematizes the existence of a reality without the presence of a subject to think it. This extreme of correlationist thought, also an extreme of the *idea* of immersion, engenders an ethically problematic standpoint that limits engagement with the existential threats of our time, the most obvious being climate change, our consideration of which relies upon complex and abstract models.

A third cost is art-historical in nature and plagues the very notion of sound art as a medium-specific discipline. Immersive aesthetics often divest from the conceptual in favour of the immediate. Peter Osborne⁷ proposed a critical concept of contemporary art as a principally post-conceptual and futurally oriented practice; the post-conceptual refers not to a rejection of the conceptual but a critical movement beyond the conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 70s. Post-conceptual or contemporary practice therefore, far from leading towards a ‘new materialism,’ is described as a critical retention and reappraisal of conceptualism. Where conceptualism is jettisoned in favour of immersive immediacy, the ability of immersive practices to participate in such a conception of contemporary art is drawn into question.

The inclusiveness of the immersive has great potential which falls short where it is limited to a totality or sufficiency of the aesthetic. A critical, post-immersive practice requires a punctured immersion, deployed as a vehicle or instrument of abstraction where that abstraction supports thought beyond the immediacy of the auto-affective.

Meyers: ambience but conceptually punctured by a commentary on the precarity of work under contemporary capitalism and its impact upon health, both physical and mental. This is ambient music that escapes the trappings of its immersive conditions in directing thought outside.

Play NPC LOOP 1

Closer to home we might consider the work of notable Mersey Ambient ‘music designer’ Dialect, whose compositions conjure images of a future world without us, still littered with the remnants of a destructive techno-capitalism that has ravaged the planet.

⁶Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum, 2009.

⁷Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, New York: Verso, 2013.