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UNFRAMING/REFRAMING THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE**

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1. INTO THE VELDT

In 1950, *The Saturday Evening Post* published Ray Bradbury's short story entitled "The Veldt"; the protagonists of the story are George and Lydia Hadley, a wealthy couple with two children, proud of their new home "HappyLife", a fully automated living device that constantly takes care of the family, looking after their every daily need. The children, Peter and Wendy (and at these names, the reader begins to feel a shiver of anxiety) have at their disposal a technological nursery that can perfectly simulate any physical environment, automatically tuning in to the wishes of the two kids. At the beginning of the story, the parents, concerned about abnormal behaviour of the device, enter the nursery unbeknownst to their children:

The nursery was silent. It was empty as a jungle glade at hot high noon. The walls were blank and two dimensional. Now, as George and Lydia Hadley stood in the center of the room, the walls began to purr and recede into crystalline distance, it seemed, and presently an African veldt appeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to the final pebble and bit of straw. The ceiling above them became a deep sky with a hot yellow sun.

Today we would call it an immersive, three-dimensional, multisensory, interactive environment; hyper-realistic in its ability to simulate and reproduce reality:

George Hadley felt the perspiration start on his brow. "Let's get out of this sun", he said. "This is a little too real. But I don't see anything wrong?". "Wait a moment, you'll see", said his wife. Now the hidden odorophonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor at the two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rusty smell of animals, the smell of dust like a red paprika in the hot air. And now the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on grassy sod,

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the papery rustling of vultures. A shadow passed through the sky. The shadow flickered on George Hadley's upturned, sweating face. "Filthy creatures", he heard his wife say. "The vultures".

The reader's disquiet grows throughout the story in parallel with that of the protagonists; a visit to the nursery by a psychologist friend of theirs confirms their suspicions: the device now responds only to the commands of Peter and Wendy who, having lost all interest in the fairy-tale environments of their childhood, have fixated on the vision of the bush, populating it with ferocious lions and projecting onto it thoughts of death anomalous for their age. Spoiler alert: George and Lydia's decision to prohibit their children from using the nursery will trigger their testy reaction, and the immersive playroom will become a trap destined to phagocyte (in the literal sense of the word) the improvident parents.

So far, Bradbury's story: for today's reader an excellent example of unintentional literary Retrofuturism, for the 1950s reader a metaphor for the entry of television into the single-family homes of US citizens; and thus, a text littered with clues about the expectations and fears that accompanied the early years of the new medium and its domestication process.

Placed, as an exergue, at the introduction of this special issue, the narrative tells us, first of all, of the historical tension of media technologies to saturate the sensory experience of their spectators/users, constantly increasing their own artificiality in order to make the reproduction of the physical world more and more realistic. As will be seen in the following pages, this tension finds concrete evidence in the often fleeting appearance of technological devices that today are the object of a media-archaeological approach, such as the *Sensorama*, but also configures the, more or less, recent expectations of Virtual Reality (VR) and the Metaverse. At the same time, the narrative warns against the illusion that technological development constitutes a simple and neutral quest for perfection in the simulation of human experience, capable of expanding the knowledge of its users, without coming to terms with the – equally human – tangles of their bonds, their passions, their desires, their fears.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF IMMERSION

The development of perceptual and narrative environments enabled by immersive digital technologies – such as videomapping and extended realities (virtual, augmented and mixed) associated with increasingly high-performance artificial intelligence systems – has long been the basis for new media experiences in various fields: from entertainment (cinema, video games, theme parks, live events, etc.) to education and training; from cultural and scientific dissemination (documentaries, exhibitions, etc.) to experimentation in the visual and performing arts or advertising and retail.

These environments go beyond and transfigure the traditional *framed* vision of classical art works and media screens, moving towards a synesthetic, participatory and total user experience, characterised by immediacy and presence: real environments that can be explored by users, according to the different degrees of interactivity envisaged, which can both enable the user to "immerse" himself in another world (although in a continuum with the perceptual dimensions of physical reality) and allow the digital contents to *emerge* within the physical space, integrating it with new meanings and new narratives.

In the public debate, however, the diffusion of such technologies is often associated with both forms of hype and moral panic, both often animated by technocentric and solutionist perspectives. One can think, emblematically, of the public discourse on the Metaverse and its interpretative instability, in which different visions of its operating model (centralised and closed or interoperable and open) and its desirable future coexist in an often-incompatible manner, in an attempt to establish a dominant definition. These are controversial visions held, from time to time, by different relevant social groups: on the one hand, the utopian imaginaries – fuelled by big technology companies, game producers, and economic investors – focused on the advent of the new immersive frontier of social media, gaming and the mediatisation of many other domains of social life (work, public services, etc.), and on the benefits brought by the improvement of “closeness at a distance”; on the other hand, critical discourses by users, civil society, and governments on the social and psychological implications, such as the detachment from physical reality, the amplification of anti-social tendencies (harassment, hate speech, disinformation) and the loss of control over data and privacy.

Instead, there is a need to offer solid knowledge and reflection around the concept and experience of immersivity, reconstructing the roots and the cultural, social and economic paradigms that are driving the development of these new media and environments, in order to also fully grasp their potential for communication and other applications or, conversely, their limitations.

This reflection can be promoted starting from the adoption of a multidisciplinary and systemic approach, able to put into historical perspective the recent technological development of the digital media immersivity paradigm, in order to overcome both the rhetoric and ideology of revolutionary technological novelty, and to put at the centre of the reflection on immersive technologies the question of their transformative potential of experience. The aim is to trace the cultural, anthropological, narrative, artistic and media origins of the ‘total’ experience based on the interaction and physical, multi-sensorial and emotional involvement of the spectator, as well as the commercial and industrial drives.

In contemporary media culture, the experience of immersion is increasingly considered as a hallmark of innovation – whether in VR environments, 360° video, multi-sensory installations, live augmented performances, or interactive journalism. Likely because it is deeply rooted in the origins of human perceptual and cognitive experience, the pursuit of immersion reflects a desire for centrality and contact, one that is now fuelled by the momentum of digital media and takes shape through modes of media engagement that are enveloping, engaging, and surrounding. Combined with – or at times more problematically opposed to – the concepts of presence, empathy, and embodiment, immersion does not merely denote a condition of experience, but above all a form of more immediate and direct (and apparently passive) comprehension of the world. Such an “immersive episteme” consists in a way of producing knowledge that is grounded in experiential immersion, rather than in rational distance or mere abstract representation.

Indeed, the immersion enabled by technologies such as VR, 360° video, but also spatial computing and Mixed Reality, by creating the illusion of an inclusive and vivid reality from which it is difficult to distance oneself, increases the possibility for users to feel spatially and psychologically present within the represented reality and to foster knowledge and understanding of it. This is a subjective sense of presence, the sensation of being in an environment despite being physically located elsewhere, which reduces the cognitive effort required, for example, to imagine the situation and conditions of the other, thanks to “immersive witnessing” (the experience of being there with the other) or

the “immersive first-person experience” (being the other), nourishing forms of empathy or even compassion, not comparable to those aroused by viewing on a screen or reading.

It is precisely the shift from traditional forms of “storytelling” to immersive forms of “storyliving” that generates enthusiasm for the ability of these technological systems to induce empathic responses (hence the appellation “empathy machines”); the recognition of the prosocial potential enabled by cognitive and emotional embodiment is especially relevant in relation to members of outgroups who are victims of discrimination or exclusion (ethnic minorities, refugees and migrants, prisoners, etc.). Naturally, there is debate about the effectiveness of the empathy induced by these technologies: on the one hand, there is the risk that empathy may be reduced to a “narrative placebo” rather than a true driver of social change; on the other hand, there is the overestimation of the technology itself as the cause of the prosocial effect and the underestimation of other factors, such as design choices and formal and content variables of the proposed narrative.

3. FRAMELESS? UNFRAMING/REFRAMING THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE

In any case, the conditions for such a form of knowledge to take root involve an oxymoronic tendency to break free from the constraints of ordinary perception, while at the same time seeking a new, broader framework in which to exercise this novel form of agency.

On the one hand, this ‘liberation’ consists in the dismantling of the *frame*. The escape from the “cage” of reality and the entry into alternative virtual worlds – as happens in VR – is nothing more than the most contemporary expression of the human drive toward *illusion*. Thanks to their ability to (re)create realistic and plausible virtual environments, digital media serve as the key to unlock the bars of reality and to “escape”.

Such an escape takes on specific forms of breaking boundaries and reorganizing the perceptual field, which are characteristic of audiovisual media. In the case of VR, for example, if the screen extends in all directions at 360° around the viewer, then the screen as we always know it, seems to disappear entirely. Even the composition of a shot, no longer confined to a rectangular frame, breaks away from the tradition of cinematic syntax and instead comes closer to that of theatre (as live performance) and sculpture (due to its three-dimensional plasticity).

As the essays in this dossier demonstrate, the disappearance of the screen’s edges does not necessarily imply a rejection of all forms of perceptual organization. Rather, by moving beyond the literal meaning of the term *frame*, it points to the need for a broader logical and conceptual expansion: breaking free from the strict logic of the *frame* also means breaking established patterns and structures, transforming the conceptual framework, and redefining the conditions and dynamics of experience.

The notion of *unframing* has gained traction across media studies and cultural theory as a way to describe the transformation of spectatorship and representation in immersive and interactive media. Traditionally associated with the pictorial frame, the boundary that separates image from world, *framing* is not merely a technical or aesthetic device but a cultural and perceptual convention that organizes how media are experienced. In contrast, *unframing* gestures toward the dissolution or reconfiguration of this boundary, typically enabled by technologies such as VR, spatial audio, newsgames, or phigital performances.

In this context, and in relation to the transformation of spectatorship, the collapse of the perceived distance between user and representational space is pivotal. This collapse is achieved by isolating the user, surrounding him/her with three-dimensional images and sounds, and stimulating a sense of immediacy and intimacy with the simulated environ-

ment. VR and 360° videos, for example, produce seemingly autonomous environments in which the user, as an acting subject rather than a spectator, can formally move and with which he or she can sometimes interact, through kinaesthetic and bodily intervention. Such a shift in spectatorship, from a distant position of observation to a proactive, bodily and sensory experience, is crucial to understanding how immersive media potentially challenge traditional Western theorisations about the image and the spectator: although the rise of immersive media experiences has expanded traditional conceptions and perceptions of representation, currently the aesthetic and experiential products of immersive media often remain limited and disappointing in their outcomes for users.

However, as recent scholarship demonstrates, what appears as a loss of the frame often entails its reframing on new terms – via the body, the code, the interface, or the spatial environment. This collection of essays interrogates the tension between *unframing* and *reframing* as a dynamic process that redefines media experience in both conceptual and practical terms.

But what does it mean, precisely, to speak of an *unframed* media experience? Does the disappearance of the visible frame around an image or screen truly imply a loss of mediation, or are we witnessing a shift in the logic of framing itself? This special issue investigates these questions by examining how different media – across formats, technologies, and sensory regimes – dismantle, disguise, or reconfigure their own representational boundaries. The central claim uniting these contributions is that unframing is never a pure absence of mediation, but rather a process of *reframing*, one that redistributes attention, agency, and sensory involvement across users, devices, and environments.

The theoretical and historical lineage of ‘framing’ in visual culture spans from Alberti’s window to Simmel’s aesthetics, from film theory’s *découpage* to Foucauldian discourses of the gaze. In immersive and post-screen media, however, the traditional frame – once easily locatable at the edge of the canvas or screen – is no longer perceptually stable. It may now reside in the software that regulates the user’s interaction, in the spatial boundaries of a VR environment, in the directional logic of binaural sound, or in the proprioceptive rhythms of a body in motion. Rather than negating the frame, immersive media technologies *externalize* or *internalize* it – delegating framing operations to the user’s body, the designer’s algorithms, or the environment itself.

This phenomenon is approached from a variety of disciplinary perspectives in the essays here collected.

Drawing on phenomenology and attention studies, Giulia Andreini’s contribution proposes that immersive experiences in VR are better understood through the Husserlian concept of *Versunkenheit* – a state of absorption akin to phantasy consciousness. Rather than viewing VR immersion as a stable, device-driven condition, Andreini maps it as a fluctuating experiential modality governed by oscillations between immersion and emersion. Importantly, she argues that the body retains a framing function, serving as the site through which presence and detachment are negotiated.

Fabrizia Bandi complements this phenomenological approach with a media-archeological and aesthetic perspective. Her essay traces a historical genealogy from panoramic paintings and stereoscopic postcards to virtual landscapes generated in contemporary VR. She highlights how the promise of “unframed” experience in VR environments – where the image envelops the viewer – is in fact part of a longer trajectory of technological and aesthetic attempts to immerse the spectator within the image. Far from erasing the frame, VR displaces it: from the canvas to the space, from the picture plane to the body. In doing so, Bandi reframes landscape not only as visual spectacle, but as a

site of operational and aesthetic negotiation, where the user becomes a co-author of the experience.

A media-archeological and sensory perspective is taken up also by Giancarlo Grossi, who foregrounds multisensoriality as a long-standing utopia of immersive media. His study of olfactory media – from Sensorama to VR olfactory interfaces – demonstrates how the sense of smell, long marginalized in media discourse, resists mediatization precisely because of its intimacy and imprecision. Grossi argues that immersive media have historically aimed to overcome this resistance, generating what he calls a utopia of multisensoriality, in which the entire sensorium is absorbed by the media apparatus. Yet this ideal often remains unfulfilled, revealing the persistent tensions between embodiment and abstraction, between technical control and affective immediacy.

Other contributions expand the inquiry into the social, industrial, and narrative dimensions of unframing. In their study of *ABBA Voyage*, Bengtsson, Karlsson, Edlom, and Camén adopt the concept of the “phygital” experience – a hybrid format where physical venues and digital media converge to produce a collectively immersive concert. Here, framing is redefined not as visual delimitation but as spatio-narrative orchestration, combining holography, transmedia storytelling, and fandom practices into an experience where audiences participate in the co-construction of meaning. In contrast, Anja Boato’s historical reconstruction of early immersive experiments by VR pioneers Heilig, Sutherland, and Krueger (*Sensorama*, *Sword of Damocles*, and *Videoplaza*, respectively) challenges the ahistorical discourse of novelty that often accompanies VR. She argues that these prototypes established not just technical precedents, but rhetorical frames that continue to shape how we imagine immersion today.

Nicoletta Vittadini’s essay serves as a critical lens on the imaginaries of immersion. Through a comparative analysis of immersive narratives from the 1980s to the present, she interrogates the so-called ‘newness’ of the Metaverse as articulated by tech companies like Meta. She argues that contemporary promotional discourses construct a “narrative without history” – a rhetorical strategy that obscures the cultural and ideological continuities of immersive media while projecting a vision of seamless, embodied connectivity. Her critique exposes how corporate framing of immersion serves to legitimize specific socio-technical imaginaries while effacing the complexities of historical development and cultural contingency.

The theme of participatory framing is also central to Conti, Montanari, and Panarari’s analysis of newsgames and immersive journalism. Their essay examines how games such as *Syrian Journey* and *The Waiting Game* reconfigure journalism by inviting players to engage with current events through branching narratives and procedural logic. These formats challenge the conventional objectivity of news reportage by offering embodied, interactive entry points into complex issues. In doing so, newsgames instantiate a form of immersive storytelling that reframes news consumption as a reflexive, empathetic encounter, rather than a detached act of reading.

Finally, sound studies and musicology provide a further angle. Gianni Sibilla’s essay explores how spatial audio and immersive sound design contribute to the construction of narrative environments. Situating sound as a framing device in its own right, he examines how technologies like Dolby Atmos and 3D audio formats redefine the listener’s orientation in media space. Sound becomes not just a complement to vision, but a primary vector of immersion, guiding perception, emotion, and movement across platforms ranging from home theatres to virtual concerts. Sound, here, is not simply background but a structuring force that shapes how users inhabit mediated environments.

Collectively, these essays reveal that to *unframe* the media experience is never simply to remove boundaries, but to negotiate new ones – technological, cognitive, affective, and political. *Unframing/reframing* emerge not as opposing poles, but as coexisting operations in the evolving grammar of media experience. Whether in the design of digital environments, the layering of sensory inputs, or the narrative structuring of space and time, immersion always implies a logic of inclusion and exclusion, attention and redirection, construction and illusion. By foregrounding the multiple ways in which media are framed – technologically, perceptually, ideologically – this special issue offers a multifaceted exploration of what it means to experience media today: not from a fixed position, but from within the unstable thresholds where bodies, technologies, and images meet.