

Decoding Gaze in Science, Technology and Interactive Media Art

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The underlying gaze on space and presented interaction possibilities in arts, science, and technologies seem to replicate ideas of exploration and annexation of new territories. The interaction with humanoid machines and other social and electronic devices seem to follow certain strategies. The designs of the apparatuses change with time, but the implied perspective on and interaction with the easy-to-dominate other remains similar.

To analyze the question of repetition of perspectives and interaction patterns in media arts I would like to confront recent media art pieces, with the notion of *gaze* as used in cultural studies. *Gaze*, as a term used in cultural and image studies, operates on the distinction between a (supposedly) objective perspective and look, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a culturally informed and selective *gaze*. I employ the term *gaze* in the sense in which it is found in Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* (1973), in which the author attempted to identify the reductive perspective of medical doctors on human subjects as mere bodies, and not persons. The term became current in studies of visual media in the seventies of the last century with Laura Mulvey's essay »Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema«¹, in which she used the term *gaze* for the male perspective on female actors in film. Laura Mulvey described *gaze* as »to-be-looked-at-ness.« She argued that cinema creates sexual difference in the way we look, fostering female passivity and male actors as drivers of the narration.² The distinction between look and *gaze* can be applied to other media. In 2006 Laura Mulvey connects the idea of *gaze* to technological settings in general: »while technology never simply determines, it cannot but effect the context in which ideas are formed.«³ I want to apply her idea of a culturally and by medium determined *gaze* to multi media experiences. In this short presentation I want to show that certain cultural strategies of exploration or hierarchical structures in social interaction are not only reproduced in images, but are also strengthened in technology-based, interactive environments.

The notion of *gaze* is analyzed through observing the pre-codedness of the receptional strategies in *Run*

Motherfucker Run by Marnix de Nijs (2004). Lastly strategies on how we could learn to meet our environment with an un-coded look are illustrated through interactive art projects that differ from the commonly practiced approach to technology and the exploration of abstract outside data, and use the whole sensual capacity of the body to focus on emotion as an embodied experience to set up new hierarchies in the art work – user relationship. An example of this phenomenon is Nicholas Stedman's *Blanket Project* (2000–2004), in which a sensor-based, moving blanket dominates the interaction with the user, who is invited to share the bed with this comforting artwork.

Explorative experience in interactive and immersive arts

Shortly after humans first explore extraterrestrial space in 1965 the scientist and artist Frank Malina created a kinetic mural called *Cosmos* for the Pergamon Press Building in Oxford, England. In *Cosmos* outer space can be experienced and explored as three — dimensional space. Not only since then have visualizations of scientific disciplines like biology, astronomy or space science been used as sources for⁴ technological and virtual art.⁵ In his overview on immersive settings in the visual arts the media-art historian Oliver Grau states, »the desire to be in the picture, in both the metaphorical and nonmetaphorical sense, did not disappear with the panorama but lived on in the twentieth century.«⁶

The desire to access the unknown, to be part of historical settings, or to explore extraterrestrial space or microorganism can be a motivating factor to design immersive environments. The devices to access such environments change with technological progress and Zeitgeist. The idea of immersion in and appropriation of (unknown) territory seems to be repeated.

More current projects like Marnix de Nijs' *Run Motherfucker Run* (2004), a virtual suburban video game environment accessible via treadmill, still focus on the idea of exploration, even though a critical approach

can be observed in the choice of uncomfortable input devices as interfaces and unpleasant scenarios, as in the chosen example.

The player, who should be in good physical condition, has to operate the game, which is projected on an 8x4 meter projection screen from an ego-shooter perspective by running on a treadmill facing the projection screen. The distance the player runs on the 5x2 meter conveyor belt is the same distance that she/he will cover in the virtual city projected in front of him. The faster the player runs, the clearer and brighter the image in front of her/him gets. The unpredictable movements of the conveyor belt make it even more difficult to navigate. Marnix de Nijs art piece plays with the joy of navigating through unknown territory, despite aspects that could be viewed as unpleasant such as, the exhausting physical activity and the unsteady ground, that may trigger negative feelings like anger, frustration or even fear. The user immerses him/herself in the unknown.

Decoding gaze in immersive and interactive media art — perspectives

“When I wake up in the morning and see her face over there, it makes me feel so nice, like somebody is watching over me.”⁷

The brief notion on the behavioral sculpture *THE BLANKET PROJECT* (2001–ongoing, figure 2) by the Canadian artist Nicholas Stedman shall show how artists put the focus on strategies that are not based on the idea of expansion, exploration or appropriation, but foster confrontation that put user and art piece on a par, or even reverse the artwork – user hierarchy.

The electronic blanket gives the users the impression of knowing their needs. Here the interaction focuses not on the exploration of new territories, but on the establishment of emotional and physical comfort of the user. Introducing a new relationship between blanket and user interrupts the usual gaze on a blanket.

The short presentation of the above mentioned projects might show possibilities of »rupture d'évidence«⁸ in the visual and sensoric strategies applied in interactive arts. The artists refuse to reproduce common explorative and appropriative gaze on the interaction devices and in the interaction itself, but open up new audience/user — art piece — relationships. The outcome is neither the typical enhancement of the human body nor the expansion of the users playground, but a respectful acknowledgment of technological possibilities and human limitations.

1 Bolz, Norbert. 2002. “Brother Robot.” In Anna, Susanne (Edit.) *Ex Machina — A History of Robots from 1950 to the Present Day*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz.

2 Foucault, Michel. 1973. *Die Geburt der Klinik. Eine Archäologie des ärztlichen Blicks*. München: Hanser.

3 Grau, Oliver. 2003. *Virtual Art — From Illusion to Immersion*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

4 Lister, Martin; Dovey, Jon; Giddings, Seth; Grant, Ian; Kelly, Kieran. 2003. *New Media: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

5 Mulvey, Laura. 1975. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. In *Screen* 16 (3).

6 Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death 24x a Second*. London: Reaktion Books.

7 Popper, Frank. 2005. *From Technological to Virtual Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

8 Wilson, Stephen. 2002. *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.