

***Carne y Arena*. Agency and Displacement of the Interactor in a Border Crossing VR Documentary Experience**

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Abstract

Upon applying the idea of “border as a method” (Mezzadra and Nielsen, 2013) as an epistemic viewpoint, to the VR project of migrants’ border crossing *Carne y Arena*, which was created by award winning director Alejandro Iñárritu in 2018, I would like to critically discuss the idea of positioning and of “displacement” of the “interactor” (Gaudenzi, 2019) within this experience. Shifting from subjective to objective displacement within the experience itself, working within the “syncretic space” of VR and on the ambiguity of sensory immersion and dissociation, *Carne y Arena* activates a series of reflections on “subjectivation and displacement” (Revel, 2013) connected to the positioning of the “inter-actor” and the extent to which the agency offered can actually be fully performed within this hybrid experience, situated on the verge between documentary, interactive storytelling and installation art. What I would like to discuss here is what kind of freedom and power to make decisions is actually allowed to the user and what is the appropriate framework we need to employ in order to discuss it.

Nell’applicare l’idea di “confine come metodo” (Mezzadra e Nielsen, 2013) dal punto di vista epistemico al progetto di realtà virtuale sul passaggio di frontiera dei migranti *Carne y Arena* (2018), intendiamo discutere criticamente l’idea di “spostamento” dell’“inter-attore” all’interno della esperienza stessa e mettere in discussione le condizioni di possibilità di un’etnografia dei media per esperienze altamente individualizzate. Attraverso lo spostamento soggettivo a quello oggettivo della posizione del partecipante, lo “spazio sincretico” della realtà virtuale e l’ambiguità dell’immersione sensoriale e della dissociazione, l’opera attiva riflessioni sulla questione della “soggettivazione e spostamento” (Revel, 2013), collegate al posizionamento dell’“inter-attore” e della sua capacità di compiere scelte autonome all’interno di una esperienza ibrida, sul crinale tra documentario e installazione.

Keywords: border; inter-actor; virtual reality

Parole chiave: confine; inter-attore; realtà virtuale

Carne y Arena (2018), is a 6 minutes-long immersive virtual reality experience using emerging technologies – such as 360° footage and MOCA digital reconstruction – to create a large multi-narrative space. Within this multi-narrative hybrid space, the creator employs participation, immersion, embodiment

techniques, together with fictional and documentary elements involving the user in a complex – and at times contradictory – interaction with the environment and the story. These elements of participation typical to interactive media, mixed together with a level of embodiment typical to LBE experiences, a level of immersion typical to VR-based projects, a research process typical to documentary and elements of re-enactment, created in collaboration with contributors, expose the users to an experience which places them in a position of “insider/outsider”. They are involved and immersed in the main interaction but also, to a degree, constantly aware of the framework. What degree of participation and interaction is therefore left to the user in this position? What level of freedom of movement and choice is allowed to them within this structure, within and beyond the intentions of the piece? What is the actual function of this liminal position of the user, left on the verge between participation and observation?

The project reconstructs the tribulations lived by migrants crossing the Sonora desert, in Mexico, while trying to reach the United States. As a multi-narrative VR-based installation, the piece is based on the account of more than 120 immigrants Iñárritu worked with for several months. These contributors helped the director reconstruct the experience of border crossing in detail. The director, who worked in collaboration with the director of photography Emmanuel Lubetzki, the composer Alva Noto and the ILMxLAB, stated that his intention «was to experiment with VR technology to explore the human condition and overcome the dictatorship of the frame, through which things can only be observed, in order to reclaim the space necessary for the visitor to live a direct experience as immigrants, under their skin and in their hearts» (Iñárritu, 2018).

The very intention of the director was, thus, that of creating an experience which could sensorially place the visitors within a storyworld and could stimulate them to act and make choices as though they would actually be crossing the Sonora desert. *Carne and Arena* implies the full performative participation of the body of the “inter-actor”, on the one hand, while keeping alive a sense of awareness of the experience in a way that may have

exceeded the director's expectations, on the other. The body of the "inter-actor" is involved on a sensorial and tactile level in the form multisensory engagement through bodily hyper-stress techniques, in a context, however, to a degree still classically "spectatorial", where his/her position seems to be characterised by a fundamental ambiguity and where a certain degree of observation is still included. One of the accounts received from the participants was that, upon living the experience, the body felt like that of a "ghost" – material and immaterial at the same time – involved and, at the same time, observing.

Upon entering the exhibition space, users are asked to leave their mobile phones, their bags and shoes and are invited into a big warehouse space where they will be experiencing the piece one by one. The second thing users are invited to do is to sign an indemnity in which they declare they are aware the experience «may involve risks of a certain severity: physical damage, mental and health (such as nausea, a sense of disorientation, dizziness, vertigo, convulsions, motion sickness, physical discomfort, headache or anxiety), pain, suffering, temporary or permanent disability and/or emotional blockage». The solicitation of the spectator's vestibular system, which may lead to these kinds of consequences, is a clear indication of the perceptive, cognitive and emotional immersion the virtual reality installation is attempting to achieve. The goal was also partially reached in some cases as, according to some accounts, people fainted, left the installation in the middle of the experiences and took their headset off in order to shake of a sense of discomfort which had invested them. Upon putting the headset on, users begin to take part into the experience of walking in the Sonora desert with the migrants attempting to cross the borders. While walking in the sand within the VR space, their feet are immersed in real sand. This is element is introduced to engage and enhance the feeling of immersion, embodiment and participation in order to make the encounter with the piece as immersive as possible. While immersed within the virtual reality dimension through a VR headset, users will be participating as part of a group crossing the border, but at the same time they will be alone in the warehouse. Only followed by stewards who will help them set up at the beginning of the experience and who will carry the

wires for them, being at arms' length in case something went wrong, users will only be surrounded by the huge space of the industrial building.

Adriano D'Aloia (2018) analyses the paratexts used to promote the experience in the public sphere, since its first public presentation at Cannes Film Festival 2018. From the trailer and the press release, to Iñarritu's public appearances on TV, in public events etc... the promotional apparatus surrounding the installation relies on the rhetoric of empathy and on the encounter between a variety of different degrees of empathies: from «the passage from mere observation (implicitly attributed to the filmic vision) to the lived and direct experience of things»; from the experience of «being in the shoes of the characters on stage, sharing the same space with them and establishing a deep intersubjective relationship that allows them to explore their human condition, to the stimulation and involvement of the body» (D'Aloia, 2018). In the paratexts used, "empathy" is considered to be a weapon against «the dictatorship of the frame» (Iñarritu, 2018), able to transcend the creative constraints and the perceptual limits imposed by the film regime and to provide the "inter-actor" with a highly individualised experience which, in its nature, and, according to Iñarritu's account, is created to contest the obsession with the act of taking pictures, sharing and communicating experiences with online communities, to rather re-establish the mystery of a unique experience, which will never be the same to someone else and which is, its very nature, irreproducible.

We are immersed in a scenario pushing the 'post-cinematic' experience to the limit, in which the audiovisual experience becomes disjointed from that of the collective, geographically situated, temporally linear, self-contained, passive experience of the cinema-related screening room, to rather be of a mobile, multiple, nonlinear, embodied, active and agent nature. In this experience, the articulation of the individual and collective elements of the audience's position, follows an entirely new intersubjective dimension, which, in this very case, goes even beyond the logic of the 'network', as opposed to that of the 'assembly'. And yet, the questions that the experience seems to

be carrying, in relation to the ambiguity of the position of the “inter-actor” in the VR dimension – *Who am I, am I a ghost? Am I really part of it?* – leave us with questions related to the nature of particular media object and the kind of agency it activated.

According to Andrew Stern’s definition of the participation of the user/player to interactive experiences “agency” is «the ability for players to have persistent, meaningful effects on the events of the experience» (Stern, 2008), in a context where «the implicit promise to the player (is) to be able to directly affect the plot of the story, taking it in whatever direction they wish» (Stern, 2008). Stern makes a further distinction between “storytelling” and “storymaking” within interactive experiences – the “telling” implying a conceptual framework which is «antithetical to the notion of giving primary control to players to direct the interactive story» and the making signifying the active participation to the viewer to the development of the storyline. Within this context, “storymaking” becomes therefore the primary mode of the viewer/user/player, who is given a certain ability to control the storyline and can apply it within the storyworld of their own accord.

The concept of “agency” described above, despite its apparent relevance to the project in question, can only partially be applied to *Carne y Arena*. First of all, the storyworld of this particular piece is created within two different dimensions. They function in conjunction, but separately – the 360° footage-based project dimension, experienced by the viewer through a VR headset, and the real space of the installation which is created in the warehouse the viewer enters into. The dual dimension of the storyworld questions the extent to which the viewer/user/player can take on an active role, insofar as this dual position in itself influences the very ability of the player to choose and act within it.

On the one hand, as an installation, *Carne y Arena* presupposes, in fact, the presence of an “embodied viewer”, whose bodily sensations are as heightened as their sense of vision (Bishop, 2005). As soon as they enter the installation space, users become aware of how the space is organised and they can, therefore, to

a certain extent, pre-empt their bodily responses to it (Bishop, 2005). This is an element that is coupled with the awareness of the “singular totality” of the piece and it is counteracted – or rather completed – by the physical presence of the body of the user in the space. As part of their participation of the installation, «spectator(s) are in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work» (Reiss, 1999). This awareness of the construction, and yet the embodied adherence to the piece, are, therefore, characteristics belonging essentially to installation art itself. On the other hand, this ambiguity of the player’s position is also enhanced by the “syncretic space” introduced by the VR dimension. The syncretic space of VR – the awareness of being immersed inside the world of the 360° footage and, at the same time, the awareness of the body still being present and moving outside of it – carries similar questions related to the ability of the viewers to fully adhere to the storyworld they are supposed to intervene into. These elements are all contributing to a level of viewer’s awareness that detracts from the immersion.

In order to understand to explore the complexity of the concept of “agency” within *Carne y Arena*, we will use the concept of “border” as a heuristic tool that can help us identify the “demarcation” (Balibar, 2002) strategies that are at play in this piece from the point of view of the user. Drawing upon a book published by Brett Neilson in 2013, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*, in his 2016 article «What’s at stake in the Mobility of Labour? Borders, Migration, Contemporary Capitalism», sociologist Sandro Mezzadra discusses the significance of “border” as not merely a research object but also as an epistemic viewpoint describing the tensions and struggles characterising contemporary capitalist transitions at the global level. Upon reading the book written by Salvadorian journalist Óscar Martínez, *La bestia* (2014), Mezzadra underlined the idea of ‘structural violence’ which shapes the trail of migrants from central America across the ‘vertical border’ (Aquino, Varela and Decosse, 2013) – the border connecting Southern and Northern part of the American continent. As murders and kidnappings, exploitation, rape, and enslavement are daily expressions of this structural violence (Mezzadra, 2016), «borders in modernity have played a constitutive role in the modes of

production and organization of political subjectivity» (Nielsen and Mezzadra, 2013). In an influential essay titled «What Is a Border?» Étienne Balibar, on the other hand, writes about the “polysemy” and “heterogeneity” of borders, noting that their ‘«multiplicity, their hypothetical and fictive nature» does «not make them any less real» (Balibar, 2002). Not only are there different kinds of borders that individuals belonging to different social groups experience in different ways, but borders also simultaneously perform «several functions of demarcation and territorialization between distinct social exchanges or flows, between distinct rights, and so forth» (Balibar, 2002). Moreover, borders are always overdetermined, meaning that «no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states» but is always «sanctioned, reduplicated and relativised by other geopolitical divisions» (Balibar, 2002). «The resulting fracturing of the temporal and spatial coordinates of migration, the diversification of migratory schemes, the proliferation of borders, the increasingly intensive mediation performed within the logistical circuits of the ‘migration infrastructure’ must be understood as crucial aspects of the production of labour power in a global conjuncture in which capitalism has reorganized itself (...) Transnational and transcontinental scales of class formation are particularly relevant» (Mezzadra, 2016).

Can we analyse at all an experience which exists in as many forms as the amount of people who do it? Can we make in any way a media ethnographic analysis of a media object which is very hard to access and that, in any case, exists in its very nature a multiplicity of different versions, according to those who live it and according to the location it is installed in? What can we describe of it, then? Can we maybe describe and attempt to analyse the “position” of the user in relation to the space and the experience, according to a media anthropological perspective? Can we maybe question the “positioning” of the user and his/her ability to own and understand his/her position, according to a post-colonial, subaltern studies perspective? Are we, then, able to analyse the array of possibilities related to the “inter-actions” by using the category of “agency” we are currently preoccupied with? “Border” can be a useful heuristic tool to describe the “spectatorial” nature of this experience and its relation to the time and space of the

bodily presence of the specific “inter-actor” and, at the same time, to the political questions related to the political positioning of the “inter-actor”. How can we apply the concept of “border” in its “polysemy” and “heterogeneity” and «several functions of demarcation and territorialization of social flows» performed by it (Balibar, 2002)?

It is interesting to discuss about the positioning of the user in relation to the imaginary border in *Carne y Arena*. Let’s compare two different accounts. «The piece proceeds in three parts. After viewers leave the detention room, they enter a dark, vast space filled with sand. There, they put on a headset with headphones (plus a backpack unit) that thrusts them into the desert, where they encounter a caravan of migrants being led by a *coyote* to the border, just before they are apprehended by U.S. authorities. It’s night; a helicopter hovers in the distance. What a viewer sees or hears of the caravan depends on where they stand in the desert, with them or apart from them. When border patrol vehicles descend suddenly on the migrants, the experience of the scene that unfolds depends also on where the viewer situates herself: among the refugees or among the officers. The third segment (which follows in the room after the VR space) reflects the accounts of migrants and refugees who fled El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. Portraits of these people – the real-life actors in his film – are accompanied by texts that tell their individual stories. Among them: a boy who fled MS-13 in El Salvador at age 15 only to be robbed in Mexico and locked in a freezing detention center in the U.S. for 10 days, and a U.S. Border Patrol agent who recounts the nightmares he has about finding people dying of heat exhaustion in the desert (...) I was always mindful that I was on a stage, watching a drama play out, until that drama turned on me» (Capps, 2018).

The account from D’Aloia recites: «Barefoot on the sand, I wear a headset and start moving in space. I see some lights on the horizon, all around a meager vegetation, they are in the desert. Among the bushes, a group of people – migrants trying to cross the Mexican-US border – are approaching up a hill. The police hit the scene and a helicopter circling threateningly over the scene. I am hit by a blinding beam of light, by the deafening noise of

the engine and by gusts of cold air moved by the blades of the aircraft. It is chaos, soldiers with leveled guns shout orders. A man tries to escape, but is hit. There are women, a boy, a baby in his father's arms. On their faces tiredness and despair. After a second passage of the helicopter, all of a sudden everything is silent. Now the migrants sit around a table; tiny human figures and a sort of ship seem to sink into the liquid table top. Then back to the searches and arrests. I approach some migrants, I bend down to see them better in the face, I stay in the middle of the two fronts. Now I try to distance myself to see the scene as a whole, but someone pulls me behind me: I got too close to the walls of the room and an assistant stops me. I return to the center and all of a sudden, for a fraction of a second, the almost subliminal image of a heart washed in front of my eyes. One of the soldiers yells at me, he seems to have it with me, he points his gun at my chest, he looks me straight in the eye, his gaze follows me even though I move to the right. I almost raise my hands, I'm about to throw myself down, but finally everything is swallowed up by the darkness. If initially the visitor approaches the VR part of *Carne y Arena* with suspicion, he soon tends to move to the center of the situation in order to better appreciate the events and experience the emotions, finding himself in fact in the crossfire (not only figuratively) between the two fronts – the police and migrants, “we” (US) and “them” (THEM), as iconized in the installation poster» (D'Aloia, 2018).

The two accounts point out a fundamental difference in the positioning in space of the “inter-actor” - in one case the first user feels he can choose between being on the side of the refugees and that of the police. In the second case, he feels he is in the crossfire, in between the two sides. The logic of the re-enactment seems to be the most appropriate to describe this mechanism, where the cognitive, emotional, ideological baggage of the “inter-actor” play a fundamental role in the understanding of the experience and in the organisation of the account given. This element seems to also play a role in the perception of the “agency” of the “inter-actor” and in identifying the “moment of truth” in the experience. This goes from a classically “spectatorial” identification process enhanced by bodily sensations, to a more active involvement in the fear of being singled out, caught, hit; from the participation in the group to the realisation that the gun is turned at them.

It is to be noted, and I am not sure whether this is relevant or not, that the two testimonies come from people who experienced the piece in different places, one at the Foundation Prada in Milan, and the other one in Washington. Whether there are variations in the way the piece was installed, in relation to the temperature of the room, the amount of sand of the floor, the timing of the experience or the overall dynamic, I cannot say. We can only presume that, given the installation nature of the piece and the stress on the subjectivity of the experience, the installation cannot and maybe does not aim at being always exactly the same in any given location.

The shift from subjective to objective displacement within the experience of the “inter-actor” is, therefore, connected to two different factors we already mentioned before. On the one hand, to the “syncretic space” of VR, which allows the “inter-actor” to be, at the same time, emotionally and cognitively involved in the storyworld and physically engaged in the physio-physical world. On the other hand, the ambiguity of sensory immersion and dissociation, related to the involvement with the space and time of the physical place the installation is taking place, and therefore, to a certain degree, to an ever-changing environment. The concurrent awareness of the construction and the strong presence in the storyworld vary from player to player and it creates an array of different memories, versions of the storyline, emotional responses and degrees of immersion experienced by all participants.

The difficult step is, therefore, to define whether this hybrid condition allows users to fully perform their agency, or whether these elements are creating a layer of ambiguity which partially impairs the functioning of the “agency” principle altogether. Moreover, the degrees of “subjectivation and displacement” (Revel, 2013) which are connected to the positioning of the “inter-actor” and its agency in *Carne y Arena*, seem to bring to light a fundamental quality inherent to the paradigm of the “border as a method” – the polysemic, multiple nature of the borders, in their “symbolic” nature – «their hypothetical and fictive nature» in Balibar’s terms (2002). This strongly invest the way in which the “inter-actors” will position themselves in the experience, by carrying within the experience and in its

description afterwards the profoundly “situated” nature of their own experience – including, potentially, their prejudices, values, ideological framework. This framework, though, does not seem to be reflected upon by users, who do not seem to be aware given tools to reflect upon their experience or problematise it within the project.

The question is, then, how free is our “agency” – and this could be a critique to the concept of “agency” altogether – if we are not fully aware of the ideological infrastructure which is intervening in our choices? If “agency” is, according to Andrew Stern’s definition, «the ability for players to have persistent, meaningful effects on the events of the experience» (Stern, 2008), in a context where «the implicit promise to the player (is) to be able to directly affect the plot of the story, taking it in whatever direction they wish» (Stern, 2008); what kind of effects can the players have on a storyworld which is supposed to affect them in ways they are completely unaware of? For example, the players are not aware that they can choose their position and they are never drawn to reflect upon it critically. How can the users really choose what to do if they are affected by several factors – material and immaterial – which fully belong to their condition of participants of that particular experience? For example, the awareness of the presence of stewards who can intervene in case of danger; the awareness of the construction of the set up.

This array of questions leads me to consider that the artist as a curator of a space holds a level of emotional, cognitive, technological control over the experience and has full control over the level of “sensory dissociation” the users are going to be subject to, all of which contradicts the ability of the player to fully perform free decisions.

The question of building counternarratives of the State-nation that «continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essential identities» (Bhabha, 1994), which seems to be one of Inarritu’s preoccupations, is directly related to the question of “agency”. How can the articulation between pedagogical and performative

which pushes minorities in a place of fundamental liminality be broken? How to break with the 'homogeneous' and 'horizontal' view of society which doesn't recognise the ethnography of different voices? The problem is here whether «forces of social authority and subversion or subaltern may emerge in displaced, even decentralised strategies of significations» (Bhabha, 1994). And therefore, Bhabha continues, the structured answer by the nation being essentially false, the question is recognising instead that, within the 'occult instability' of the nation's narrative, lies a sense of 'ephemeral temporality' – a space of constituency of the discourse which could represent a space of struggle and resistance.

Appadurai's perspective focuses, instead, on the node subjectivity, new media spectatorship and space (Appadurai, 1996). He mentions that these are increasingly interrelated in the current global social dynamics. He underlines the role of moving images in impacting on de-territorialised spectators, reconfiguring symbolic relationships and imagination of the self as part of a widening process investing the media community. If we go further into Appadurai discourse on "self-imagination as everyday social project", we must also understand the concept of imagination itself, as it is explored by those authors who are embracing a transnational media studies perspective. This is useful in order to understand the role played by this concept in adding an extra layer to the classical social sciences and communication's paradigms of "discourse" and "ideology" (Appadurai, 1996).

This *detour* into the relationship among subjectivity, new media spectatorship and space as framed by post-colonial authors is very useful to help us start our conclusions. First of all, the positioning of the "inter-actor" as exposed by the concept of border in its «functions of demarcation and territorialization between distinct social exchanges or flows, between distinct rights» (Balibar 2002) cannot and shouldn't be denied in a project like *Carne y Arena* which directly questions the inequality inherent to the crossing of the border between Mexico and the United States. The fact that at no point in the experience – not even once out of the headset – users are drawn to reflect

upon their own positioning in the story makes the project unwillingly fall into the «horizontal critical gaze» Bhabha was talking about and reduce the ability of the viewer to put in place «decentralised strategies of signification» (Bhabha, 1994). For all great intentions of Inarritu's amazing ability to put together a highly imaginative and innovative experience, in order to draw a connection between the condition of the migrants and a mainstream privileged audience, the experience seems to expose the positioning of the "inter-actors" without offering them tools for self-reflection.

Secondly, the very concept of "agency" as "the implicit promise to the player (is) to be able to directly affect the plot of the story, taking it in whatever direction they wish" (Stern, 2008) is questioned by the ambiguity of the position of the "inter-actor", who is affected by several factors which fully belong to their condition of participants of that particular infrastructure mixing installation art, VR technology and documentary. The participants' material awareness of the infrastructure and detraction from the immersion, rather than adding elements to enhance the critical awareness, detract from their ability to perform free choices and leave almost full control in the hands of the director/curator.

Lastly, the very nature of the experience, being accessible only to a number of spectators and having to be hosted by big art institutions because of its infrastructure, renders very difficult any attempt at drawing a media ethnography of the piece, leaving open methodological questions in relation to our ability to describe and analyse these kind of media objects. The process of crossing borders – even inside ourselves – is still ongoing.

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