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## **Immersion, Immersive Power**

*Rainer Mühlhoff, & Theresa Schütz*

*rainer.muehlhoff@fu-berlin.de*

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Immersion is a specific quality that emerges through dynamics of affecting and being affected, and is characterized by a dense involvement of the subject in an interactive and inter-affective context that entangles thinking, feeling and acting. In this article, we discuss the current use of the term in various domains including arts, experience economy, and the design of work spaces in Human Resource Management. We specifically focus on examples of immersive performance installations and work place designs to present our affect theoretical conceptualization of “immersion”. Finally, we argue that immersion is currently emerging also as a new technique of affect based micro-governance.

### **1. Introduction**

Immersion is a specific quality that emerges through dynamics of affecting and being affected, and is characterized by a dense involvement of the subject in an interactive and inter-affective context that entangles thinking, feeling and acting. Immersion is based on the subject's affective disposition, selected aspects of which are activated in an immersive situation (→ *affective disposition*). Thus while the individual brings a certain potential to be immersed, it is the specific framing of an inter-affective and relational context that unleashes and harnesses this potential in a particular manner. While this happens, any possibility of distancing on the part of the subject is temporarily blocked. The immersed subject is “at the mercy of” the inter-affective context, but also simultaneously contributes to and participates in that context. From the perspective of the immersed subject, the affective quality of immersion is characteristically accompanied by experiences such as absorption or uneasiness with/in the micro-social dynamics of the respective situation.

Examples from two specific domains are paradigmatic for studying the phenomenon of immersion in the context of affect theory. The first domain is part of a current trend called “immersive arts”. This umbrella term gathers a range of artistic formats that “immerse” their recipients into the performance event in different ways: by mobilizing the spectator, through the use of Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (AR) tools, or through par-

ticipatory techniques that involve the audience members in a situation, narration or instruction. Here, we focus on performance installations that create fictional worlds actualized in large-scale site-specific environments. The audience is invited to roam freely and explore the fiction through various modes of interaction with performers, props and other audience members. Specifically, works of the Danish-Austrian performance collective SIGNA are exemplary in provoking situations in which “spect-actors” are involved in inter-affective and interactive micro-situations in which they cannot but act and affect according to their personal dispositions.<sup>1</sup> Immersion in these performance installations is, for the subject, a specific mode of situational (re)enacting of emotions, states, or evaluations. Immersion unfolds as a result of finding oneself embedded in an affective arrangement (→ *affective arrangement*), which can activate the full range of someone’s affective and psychological dispositions. These might include traumata, shame, inferiority complexes and other sensitivities.

The second domain we discuss is modern Human Resource Management (HRM) in post-industrial work cultures. Current corporate governance techniques increasingly tend to create lifestyle environments at work. In these settings, employees engage in a full spectrum of social, affective, psychological and cognitive registers. In intensive and holistic environments, workers are simultaneously stimulated and harnessed at the level of their intrinsic motivational dispositions. As these dispositions are social and affective in nature, their activation during work tends to blur the boundaries between work and leisure. This facilitates a form of micro-governance that modulates people’s behavior for the company’s benefit by stimulating affective dynamics that strategically prevent moments of distancing and critique.

In this article we pursue the claim that these phenomena of immersion reveal a significant structural aspect of contemporary societies at large. Immersion is less a particular phenomenon in art and corporate governance than an increasingly poignant theme in a general cultural diagnosis. A willingness, readiness, or even a manifest desire of subjects to become immersed and to immerse themselves is evident in a range of domains; at the same time, new techniques of post-disciplinary micro-governance and power are based on immersion. Since public debate tends to limit immersion to VR technology, in this article we will counter such techno-centricity by presenting an affect-theoretical approach geared towards understanding immersion as a lived form of intersubjectivity and affectivity in a spectrum of lifeworld settings (Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2017).

1 The term “spect-actors” refers to spectators that are strategically activated to engage in a certain role or function within a performance.

## 2. Different phenomena of immersion

The English term “immersion” derives from the Latin verb *immergere* and offers a constellation of at least three slightly different meanings. First, it can refer to the act of immersing, and second, to the state of being immersed in a surrounding medium, for instance a person in water. In both cases, immersion is used transitively: somebody or something is immersed *into* another substance, in the sense of submersion or “diving in”. Notably, both the immersed object and the medium remain distinct in this connotation of the word. A third meaning of immersion refers to the extensive exposure of a person, for instance, to a foreign culture or language environment for the purpose of learning. In this case, immersion addresses a way of deep bodily and mental involvement up to the point of absorption and amalgamation aimed at transforming the individual. This third facet of meaning derives from the verb “to merge”, which is connected to “immersion” through the Latin verb *immergere*. Immersion in the sense of merging suggests the amalgamation, fusion or coalescence of an immersed individual within something else. Our affect theoretical conceptualization of immersion selects and highlights this third meaning because it provides a way of overcoming a static subject-object divide. Relationality among different individuals and within specific environments is key to the understanding of immersion. The examples we take up below suggest that an immersed individual and the social group or environment into which they are immersed are no longer the same objects. Immersion is therefore not to be understood as a one-directional absorption or submersion of someone into something, in which each entity remains discrete and fixed, but rather as a mutual transformation of both.

Because of its spectrum of connotations, the term immersion has been adopted by a broad range of scientific and cultural discourses. For instance, in film, literature and game studies the term is used to describe a mode of reception. The reader of a piece of literature is considered to be immersed if they are mentally or imaginatively traveling into the represented world. Analogously, this effect of absorption in a mediated world may describe the experience of watching a movie or a realistic play in a theater. Immersion is also a trending keyword in the lively field of gaming, where it refers to a mode of being-in that is not merely a quality of reception but a visual and tactile strategy facilitated by special technological media devices. Research in game studies describes immersion as a special moment of presence, as an impression of sensory and motor involvement in a represented and mediated world. The development of VR and AR technologies and their interfaces aims to increase this effect of presence by systematically connecting the human perceptual apparatus with hardware devices producing an *as-if* effect based on physical stimulation, algorithms and digital data.

In response to this somewhat vague and often metaphorical use of the term immersion in art, media and game studies, Gordon Calleja (2011, pp. 26–27) calls for a differentiation

between *immersion as absorption* and *immersion as transportation* in the context of reception theory. Immersion as transportation addresses the reception of the mediated “possible world”, its environment, the characters, the storyline, and so forth (see also Ryan, 2001, pp. 99–105). Immersion as absorption, however, focuses more on the quality of the medium, that is, on its capabilities of undisturbed mediation. Beside the often vague and heterogeneous usage of the term immersion in art and media studies, the discourse also tends to remain entrenched in a binary mode of thinking, frequently evoking a range of dichotomies such as active versus passive, absorption versus reflection, proximity versus distance, or manipulation versus agency. This binary thinking finds parallels with the rather simplistic way of evaluating the phenomena of immersion in a dichotomous scheme of either optimistic and affirmative or pessimistic and dismissive critiques.

While no systematic history of the concept of immersion exists, Oliver Grau (2003) argues that the history of immersion as a mode of reception is as old as the history of illusionist art. With each new medium of illusion, the relationship between the power of the image (or, the power of the medium mediating the image) and the recipient’s strategies to distance themselves from perceptual or imaginary immersion had to be renegotiated. Raising the question of the subject’s self-positioning towards ongoing perceptual, sensual or affective manipulations in immersive contexts is therefore key to the debate on immersion. This holds not only in the field of art but also within the widespread aesthetic use of immersive techniques in everyday life. The phantasmatic *topos* of “total immersion” combines both the desire for immersing oneself in a pleasurable mode of manipulation and the fear of being immersed without recognizing it. This is why current research in film and theater studies analyzes the moment of experienced immersion as a permanent oscillation between diving in *and* resurfacing (Schweinitz, 2006, p. 147).

In contemporary neoliberal capitalism, immersive techniques have become increasingly ubiquitous phenomena (Curtis, 2008, p. 79). Several strategies of binding subjects (in)to a specific and intense surrounding in consumer capitalism, experience industry and affective computing could also be described as techniques of immersion. Retail and trade corporations in different fields increasingly rely on elements of scenography and scent design in order to transform their stores into exceptional “places to be”. Their idea is to create an environment with a pleasant atmosphere in order to capture the multi-sensorial attention of the consumer. Architecture and city marketing, which increasingly utilize immersive techniques or so-called “scripted spaces” (Klein, 2004), like small model versions of Venice, are another example of an attempt to immerse consumers into constructed everyday worlds. Dark restaurants and immersive fitness centers are only a stone’s throw from entertainment sector events like “secret cinema” venues, transgressive nightclub formats, “escape room games” or popular “immersive theater” performances. All of these forms work with the marketing promise of an extraordinary experience and a unique, un-

forgettable event. In addition to normalizing escapism in a way, these sectors work on temporally and spatially embedding the subject in a designed but real space. In this context, processes of gamification can also be analyzed as governance techniques producing a subject's motivation and desire to take part in these forms and events.

At this point, it becomes clear that immersion is used as a metaphor to describe vastly diverse phenomena. In contrast, the examples we use below facilitate an analysis of the (affective) impact of social-relational arrangements that embed subjects in a specifically affective way. It is therefore important to distinguish between two different senses of immersion. First, as a broader understanding of processes that emphasize a subject's embeddedness in the world, that is, the state of being immersed in a language, an environment, or within culturally and socially constructed feeling rules (→ **feeling rules**) or behavioral patterns. Second, it is a mode of experiencing situations as immersive due to a specific affective intensity or impact.

Returning to our first example, the work of SIGNA offers a striking case study to elaborate our affect theoretical conception of immersion. Unlike in the case of film, VR, or AR, the specific mediality and materiality of theater in SIGNA's performance installations do not use technological devices to stimulate or facilitate the spectators' "plunge" into fiction. Rather, the spect-actors' state of immersion is the result of direct face-to-face involvement and inter-affective relations with the performers within the performance space. The artistically designed environments in SIGNA's performance installations work as hyper-realistic simulations of closed milieus. For instance, spect-actors are invited to experience themselves as patients in a psychiatric hospital (*Ventestedet/Waiting Room*, Copenhagen 2014), as employees in a tightly hierarchically structured corporation (*Söhne und Söhne/Sons and Sons*, Hamburg 2015), or as potential members of a mysterious sect (*Das Heuvolk/Peoples of Hay*, Mannheim 2017). Although audience members are mostly aware of being spectators within a theatrical scenario, the installation consistently creates situations that lead them to neglect this frame by crystallizing the bare immediacy of acting and reacting in an intense affective dynamic. Characteristic of SIGNA's installations is a rigid power structure of the represented (fictional) world that involuntarily implicates and binds audience members. At the immediate level of embodied interaction, the often dystopian narrative of SIGNA's fictions is supplemented by transgressions such as exposing spect-actors to performers' intense gazes or to instructions given in a commanding tone. The multi-sensory perception of the closed space often involves purposefully instigated disgust (for instance, through exposure to vomit or bodily fluids) and unease (for instance, through being questioned on intimate topics or being approached in a sexually explicit manner). This turns SIGNA's installations into a very specific affective arrangement (→ **affective arrangement**) in which each individual enters into an immersive interplay of affecting and

being affected *in situ*, which produces a degree of immediacy beyond fictionality and technical mediation.

Another remarkable aspect of SIGNA's dramaturgy is the staging of scenes of violence. Spect-actors see performers become victims of physical or psychological violence in their immediate proximity. Such acts are part of the fiction but enacted in a real, material scenario of face-to-face interaction. This exposure forces spect-actors to react and take a possibly moral or political stance towards what they see. In these situations, individuals might find themselves immersed into a dense affective struggle based on their own ethical and political values and normative rules of behavior and feeling. SIGNA's dramaturgy catalyzes such struggles and the potential re-actions and interventions by audience members by purposefully stimulated group dynamics and politics of gazes between the audience members.

### 3. An affect theoretical approach to immersion

In our approach based on an affect theoretical framework (→ *affect*; → *affective disposition*), immersion names a certain mode of emotional and affective involvement in a situated or mediated dynamic of affecting and being affected. This mode of involvement is characterized by the inherent entanglement of the individual *contributing to* and *participating in* this dynamic. Simultaneously, the overarching context is subtly modulating the individual's feeling, thinking and acting. This is what constitutes the mutually transformative aspect of immersion, overcoming a static subject-object divide in which the immersed subject and the medium remain distinct. From a subjective perspective, the affective tonality of an immersive mode of involvement may best be described as absorption or coalescence within the local affective arrangement (→ *affective arrangement*) that frames the situation. Importantly, this absorption or coalescence is not solely externally induced, but rather builds on the individual's specific affective disposition (→ *affective disposition*) that shapes their potential to contribute *actively* to an affective dynamic. For an affect theoretical understanding of immersion, we propose the following explication in three steps:

1. First, immersive involvements are characterized by the relationality of affect. That is, immersion is based on reciprocal dynamics of affecting and being affected, of activity and passivity, movement and sensation, action and experience. Immersion does not solely render passive, overwhelm, or overpower the immersed subject. In an entanglement of active and passive involvement, how the subject is affected depends irreducibly on how it affects others within the same dynamic.

2. Reciprocity of affect is a necessary but not sufficient criterion of immersion. The specific and distinguishing criterion of immersion is a reciprocal dynamic of affect accompanied by the experience of absorption by the subject being immersed. By this, we mean constellations in which the relational dynamic seems to cast a spell on the subject, captur-

ing them completely in a specific local frame that functions as a social, affective, discursive, symbolic, and institutional force field. Absorption is the moment where one's own (affective, cognitive, bodily) potential is harnessed in such a way that it turns into an integral part of the ensemble at hand. It is accompanied by emotional involvement that shapes the spectrum of possibilities for the subject to think and act in that situation. In immersion, these possibilities diverge from those the subject has at their disposal outside the immersive framing and with respect to their whole biography. Depending on the situation, this may mean a limitation of the spectrum, so that only part of one's affective disposition is in play. Or, it could have a productive and constitutive effect: the specific experience of immersion might open up surprising new forms of feeling, acting and embodiment that could be transformative for subjectivity.

3. From the perspective of affect theory, it is important that immersion is neither a property only of a certain situated arrangement or ensemble, nor of the immersed subject alone, but rather of the interplay of both. The subject is immersed into an affective dynamic by means of specific aspects of their affective disposition (→ *affective disposition*). In immersion, the reciprocity of affecting and being affected stabilizes into a certain pattern by means of feedback processes between the individual's disposition and the environment's affective stimuli. In such a feedback loop, the subject is already susceptible to this particular mode of being absorbed – it is part of their affective disposition. At the same time, this mode of being absorbed is selectively intensified and possibly deliberately stabilized in the local framing. As a result, changing one's mode of involvement to different patterns of affecting and being affected – for instance, by means of deliberate interventions, volatile behavioral strategies, or reflexive distancing – is possible in principle, but made difficult by the specific design of immersive contexts. This is why immersion typically limits a subject's scope of attention, sensitivity and action to the present context. The immersed subject is thus in a state of absorption in the situation in either a pleasurable or displeasing way. One could get carried away by an immersive dynamic or get framed in a disturbing way; in both cases, one's powers of thinking, feeling and acting would be modulated by that specific mode of involvement.

Because of this mechanism of relational co-constitution, immersion does not overwhelm or overpower the individual from without, nor does it make it passive. Here, our conception moves beyond those approaches that describe immersion as a mode of illusionist reception related to technological or artistic frames that imply mental, imaginary or virtual traveling into a fictional world (Ryan, 2001; Griffiths, 2008; Wolf, Bernhart, & Mahler, 2013), whether in games (Jennett et al., 2008), films (Rose, 2011), multisensory immersive theater environments (Machon, 2013), or everyday settings (Bieger, 2007). Our understanding of immersion, in contrast, focuses on affective dynamics in which deeply rooted psychological and affective dispositions of specific individuals enter into a feed-

back loop with environmental stimuli. In this approach, immersion is not primarily based on being separated or shielded from an outside world. Rather, it starts from inherent and intensive forces of involvement so that closure of the interactive sphere of an immersive situation is not a cause, but an effect of immersion. This understanding facilitates critical analyses in which immersion may be seen as a mechanism of immanent rather than repressive power.

#### **4. Immersive Power**

As a broader cultural diagnosis, the adaptation of immersive techniques in marketing and consumer spheres can be deciphered as indicating a prevalent readiness or even longing to be immersed. This observation leads to the social theoretical observation that the cultural disposition towards immersion does not only correlate with certain forms of entertainment or modes of aesthetic reception. It is also being discovered and (sometimes furtively) adopted by modern techniques of micro-governance and subjectivation. This is particularly evident in contemporary Human Resource Management, our second exemplary domain: a field in which applied psychology, digitization and micro-economics all interact with each other. For instance, in the current trend of “start-up culture” copied from Silicon Valley companies into many classical branches of knowledge work industries, science, research and even public administration, companies seek to attract employees with the promise of holistic work environments and intense social dynamics in a closed sphere of “amazing” co-workers. These work environments powerfully integrate elements of work and leisure in the workspace, functional and aesthetic considerations in the design of offices and interactions as “lifeworlds”, and work relations with implicitly orchestrated forms of social and affective attachment. All this fits with the “post-industrial” paradigm of production (cf. Liu, 2004) and the subjectivity of the “entrepreneurial self” (Bröckling, 2016). The lines between work and life, duties and pleasures, and company goals and personal goals are thereby increasingly blurred (Mühlhoff & Slaby, 2018).

Melissa Gregg (2011) shows in her workplace ethnographic study that workers’ immersion in modern HRM formations is not only a face-to-face interaction in the presence of co-workers. Due to the proliferation of networked media, work is, in fact, no longer spatially contained. Yet paradoxically, increasing spatial dissolution due to digital connectivity does not mean work is less immersive. In fact, the demand for availability on electronic communication platforms, from real time emailing to chat programs or video telephony, penetrates into the most intimate spheres of life such as bedrooms and evening hours, activating even the most remote portions of a workers’ time and mental capacity as a resource for company benefit. An immersive work environment is thus a complex heterogeneous ensemble of persons, architectural designs, company visions and discourses, and technological infrastructure. These elements interplay to form a dense web of involvement.



The trend of immersive governance at work, which is evident in the design of office spaces as holistic environments and in the ubiquitous connectivity of networked media, is part of a wider *dispositif* of the psychologization of micro-management in the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999/2007). Resulting from intellectual precursors such as cybernetics and group dynamic research in the second half of the 20th century, techniques such as “team work”, “soft skill trainings”, “bonding exercises”, and regular “performance reviews” that also cover personal and social competences build today’s standard repertoire of corporate socialization measures. Seen from a critical point of view, such measures exist to produce suitable affective dispositions in co-workers, which allows for a form of corporate governance that operates almost exclusively by “positive” forces. The older techniques of discipline, internalization of role expectations, and functional assignments are thus replaced by an immersive style of governance that strategically addresses co-workers’ social and interpersonal motivations and needs; in short, their affective attachment patterns.

While work in such environments often feels free and self-organized, which is in fact one of its promises and a result of its specific subjectivation, discourses and modes of reflexivity in such environments are strategically set up in such a way that conscious distancing, critiques of this form of involvement, or temporal withdrawal often come at high psychological and emotional costs. In a sphere where work relations are meant to blend with social relations, duty with pleasure, and company goals with subjective goals, an effort to distance oneself or have upfront conversations on critical points is easily a paradoxical and self-destructive endeavor that goes against one’s own social bonds and motivations (cf. Gregg, 2011). This is why we consider HRM an example of immersion – of the strategic production of absorption and amalgamation based on one’s own affective disposition – on a subtle and everyday scale. The case shows that the design of immersive environments is used as a modern technique of affective governmentality. In this way, our affect theoretical approach to immersion sheds new light on the diagnosis of “societies of control” (Deleuze, 1992), and shows how control is implemented by the implicit stimulation of affective mechanisms. Immersion, then, appears as a certain modality of subjectivation and power that operates in the register of affective relations more than in discourse. A critical analysis of governmentality based on “immersive power” (Mühlhoff, 2018) provides an important contribution towards the as of yet insufficiently developed theory of power and subjectivity in control societies.

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