AR AND THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

By

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The HUMAN takes the podium. His laptop camera on the podium is being streamed live to the projector so there are two of him: one real, life-sized behind the podium, and one huge projected onto the screen behind him. The HUMAN speaks...

HUMAN
I do not normally speak 'live' in these presentations, but my AR performance essay today requires an explanation. I have been performing these self-reflexive essays on Augmented Reality in the form of Augmented Reality for a little more than a year now, first at the Art Institute of Chicago, where I teach, where I talked about AR’s validity as a performance and protest medium, then in Cluj, Romania, where I spoke about the relationship of AR to the Cinema of Attractions and proto-cinema, then just a few months ago in Milwaukee at the Society for Literature Science and the Arts conference on the subject of 'un-human' performance in AR. And now here...

So for this fourth presentation I have curated my past three. We will be moving back and forth through time, in a sort-of Saragosa Manuscript experience. To server as guide-posts: in my first presentation in Chicago I wore a light-blue shirt and a brown spotted tie, at the second, I wore a white shirt and a blue tie and my hair was longer; at my last presentation in Milwaukee I wore a dark blue shirt and a striped tie and my hair was again short. The need for these historical details will be evident shortly. So let’s begin with the introduction to my second AR presentation a year ago...

The HUMAN reveals for the camera CARD#0. CARD#0 appears in the video feed as a MEDIUM SHOT of the HUMAN a year younger and in a white shirt with blue tie. His hair is a little longer.

(CONTINUED)
CARD#0
So... This will be my second presentation on Augmented Reality in the form of Augmented Reality. My first, just a few months ago, focused on new spaces for art and performance created through Augmented Reality. Today, I’m going to take a more historical focus-- but first, let me quote my previous presentation to lay out the territory... so this is me a few months ago:

CARD#0 is discarded. The HUMAN turns over and reveals for the camera another card. CARD#1 displays the HUMAN in light blue shirt and brown tie. His hair is shorter.

CARD#1
(clears his throat)
I’m interested in one newish medium in which the context and circulation of artwork is transformed. Self-evident in the mode of presentation, this is what’s called either Augmented Reality or Mixed Reality. It is where ‘virtual’ content is overlaid on or mixed with ‘actual’ content. Already, just using those two words, I have confounded any critical description of what we are talking about. ‘Actual’ and ‘virtual’ are ontologically and epistemologically loaded-- especially when the actual, as it is now, is presented as live mediation through video, and the virtual, is just pre-recorded video of that same subject earlier. But we can rope things in a bit through some examples.

(gesturing off-card to the Human)
So, a card please.

The HUMAN presents for the camera CARD#2 which shows a video of Jeffrey Shaw’s interactive art work ‘Golden Calf’ installed at Ars Electronica, 1994.

CARD#1
(cont’d)
We can at least go back to 1994 and Jeffrey Shaw’s exhibited work, The (MORE)
CARD#1 (cont’d)
Golden Calf. Quoting a description from the art website Leonardo...

CARD#1 is discarded. A new card is drawn. CARD#3 shows the Leonardo quote and the quote is read out loud.

CARD#3
(O.S.)
In The Golden Calf, an object in real space--an empty plinth--becomes the location and ground for a synthetic sculptural object in electronic space--the Golden Calf.

CARD#3 is discarded. Another card is drawn. CARD#4 displays the HUMAN again in the same costume.

CARD#4
The description then goes on to describe the apparatus--something really essential to the delineation of the medium--and then notes, "The calf has shiny skin, and the viewer can see reflections in it of the actual gallery space around the installation." So it is specific to the site and the screen’s manipulation within that space. The usual apparatus we might diagram like this 1997 diagram by Ronald T. Azuma.

CARD#2, displaying The Golden Calf installation is discarded and another card drawn. CARD#5 displays the mentioned diagram of AR experience by Azuma. While CARD#4 continues to speak, in quick succession CARDS#6-10 are drawn and then discarded illustrating different AR apparati and gear.

CARD#4 (cont’d)
The diagram is full of gear. Gear is essential. Otherwise we start to ask what isn’t augmentation of the real... we both look out a window, I describe the lives of the people walking below--isn’t my voice and language an augmentation. What about Janet Cardiff’s audio walks? So it quickly becomes everything, even the score in a movie--
CARD#4 is interrupted by the drawing of CARD#11 which displays a clip of Sylvester Stalone dramatically turning to the camera as the musical score swells from 'Rambo III' (1988). As CARD#11 is discarded, the HUMAN re-appears in re-appears.

CARD#4 (cont’d)
...so the gear is important. And I don’t think this is totally arbitrary.

CARD#4 is discarded, another drawn. In this one, the HUMAN is wearing a helmet with an articulating arm ducttaped to it at the end of which is a screen which feeds-back the same video image. As they are mentioned, CARDS#13&14 are drawn to show the cover of ‘The Magician and the Cinema’, by Eric Barnouw, and the face of George Méliès.

CARD#12
There is something about the novelty of technology that is part of the particular experience we’re referring to. It evokes, not just for me, pre-cinematic stage illusion performances, where the whole idea of smoke and mirrors--Pepper’s Ghost and automatons--was not knowing exactly where and what the technology was. A certain novelty of wonderment always chasing the technological edge. As Eric Barnouw describes--or as the life of George Méliès describes--a chase that led straight in to the film camera, cinema, and the extinction of the stage magician.

CARD#12 is discarded. Another is drawn; the human now appears in his white shirt and blue tie with longer hair, the same as CARD#0. When mentioned, CARD#16 is drawn which shows a lithograph of the Pepper’s Ghost stage illusion.

CARD#15
Ok... let’s stop there. What was an aside comment in my earlier presentation--the comparison to the Pepper’s Ghost Illusion and early adoption of film technology by stage magicians such as Méliès--is now the subject of discussion. Eric Barnouw’s book, ‘The Magician and the Cinema’, was adapted into a

(MORE)
CARD#15 (cont’d)
quite good short story by Steven Millhauser, which was in turn adapted in to a fairly poor feature film.

A card is drawn. CARD#17 displays the theatrical poster for the film ‘The Illusionist’ (2006). This is then discarded and another card drawn; CARD#18 plays clips from George Méliès’ 'Tchin-Chao, the Chinese Conjuror' (1904) and 'Herrmann, the Great Conjuror’ (1902).

CARD#15 (cont’d)
The gloss of Milhauser’s story, ‘Eisenheim the Illusionist’, is that a turn-of-the-century Viennese stage magician invents the illusion of virtual images, until he, too, becomes an image that disappears. It is the extinction of stage magic Eric Barnouw describes—a "This Killed That" thesis on the sudden turn when magicians using the magic of cinema realized that the one role no longer required was the magician himself.

Chasing the technological edge was not new. Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin used electro-magnets in 1856 to create the illusion of spiritual power in Algeria. In the 1860s, John Henry Pepper used new rolled plate glass techniques for the fabrication of the clean reflective plain required for the Pepper’s Ghost illusion. And the long use of magic lanterns in stage magic led intuitively to the adoption of Lumiere’s new technology at the end of the century. Gunning quotes Méliès naming it, "A trick extraordinaire."

CARD#15 is discarded, another drawn. CARD#19 uses the Méliès-style effect of triple exposure to display the HUMAN with three heads. CARD#20 is drawn, which shows the seminal Méliès clip of a rocket piercing the moon’s eye from ‘A Trip to the Moon’ (1902).
CARD#19
(each head takes a turn speaking)
The camera usurped the role of the magician. Illusion was fundamental to the filmic medium and almost immediately the illusion itself became a stage, enfolding illusions within illusions, establishing diegetic reality and breaching that reality with effects, tricks, the magician resolutely behind the camera, unseen.

CARD#19 is discarded, another drawn. CARD#21 shows the HUMAN, again in his white shirt and blue tie. Six example cards are drawn in succession presenting clips from the popular films: 1954 'Godzilla' and 'On the Waterfront', then 1993, 'Jurassic Park' and 'Schindler’s List', then 2008 'Twilight' and 'The Hurt Locker'.

CARD#21
I don’t think cinema ever resolved the two vectors of Lumiere-like mediated simulacrum and Méliès-like mediated illusion. We can look at contemporary pairs of popular films: 1945, Rome Open City and State Fair; 1954, On the Waterfront and Godzilla, 1973, Mean Streets, Enter the Dragon, and another Godzilla. 1993. 2008. It seems to me more a popular tug-of-war, between the mediated-image as real and the mediated-image as "theater of illusions" as Tom Gunning puts it. But there is in the past two decades a certain coming together as digital effects move towards simulacrum. Effects have gone from this... to this.

CARD#28 & 29 are drawn which show King Kong as costumed/rendered in the same-named films of 1933 and 2005.

CARD#21
(cont’d)
It is no longer a representation of fantasy but a simulation of it. Not so much a trick within an illusionistic medium, but a seamless illusion in which you

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CARD#21 (cont’d)
don’t know the boundaries between mediated-actual, and synthetic-virtual. And using similar technology, over the past decade Augmented Reality is bringing about a renaissance of a territory left behind with stage magic: actuality.

All cards are discarded, a new one drawn. CARD#30 shows the same human, but now in a dark blue shirt, striped tie and one year older with short hair.

CARD#30
That was me a year ago. Recorded for a presentation which I performed the next day, with this same set of cards. I will return to my previous talk and let him finish, but I want to first pause and look at the nature of this media phenomenon—the one that I, the person inside the card, has performed and which I, myself in the future, am now performing in a sort-of ‘Oz-behind-the-curtain’ off-stage manner. There are three spreads of time here: me recorded a year ago, me recorded in this moment I am speaking, and me performing here now, live. And that live picture, as the term suggests, is temporally tied to the actual me. Me here in actual flesh.

CARD#30 is discarded; a new card is drawn in which the HUMAN sits in front of a large screen which presents a live feedback loop of the self-same image. As they are mentioned, CARDS#32 & #33 are drawn which show Peter Campus’ 1974 installation ‘Shadow Projection’ and the photo of Roland Barthes’ mother which appears in ‘Camera Lucida’.

CARD#31
That’s not what makes this unique. That’s just the electric image, just as it was explored in the 70s by artists like Peter Campus and Nam Jun Paik, and not far from the folding of time in the mechanical image generally, like Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida falling into the vertigo of his mother’s image.

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CARD#31 is discarded. Three cards are drawn which show a closeup of the HUMAN’s face divided in cubist fashion into an eye, a mouth, a nose... When mentioned, CARD#37 is drawn to display a clip from the documentation video of GARhodes’ 2009 project, ‘52Card Psycho’.

CARD#38
But there is literally another layer here-- and this is the special territory of Augmented Reality. There is a real man teasing an imagistic world from the machine. A sort of backwards-interface man, like the nerd in 90’s television whose sole role is to interface the real players of the narrative into the machine, or like stage magic of the occult-- a ‘medium’ in that sense who is a special servant of a power and can draw on that entity to manifest the hidden... but maybe not so romantic.

CARD#38 is interrupted by the drawing of CARD#39 which shows a short clip from the T.E.D. talk, ‘Marco Tempest: A Magical Tale (with augmented reality).’

CARD#39
(Marco Tempest)
Augmented Reality is the melding of the real world with computer-generated imagery. It seems the perfect medium in which to investigate... MAGIC!

CARD#39 is rudely discarded.
CONTINUED:

CARD#38
(cont’d)
There’s an enrolling of mediation and performance. We’re made aware of a past pressed on to us— but we are also aware that this past imagined this present. That, in fact, the past constructed itself such that it wouldn’t be complete, or even manifest, without this present performance, and this current performer has to function like a machine— a film projector to draw back out the motion there in the medium.

It is a mechanization of performance, and we can’t help but be titillated and disturbed by the touching of a flesh and a virtual— even if just presented to us through live video mediation. He is holding himself in his own real hands, and all the lilliputian humor of that— the accidental conflation of images, textures, perspectives, scales... images ripe for parody and metaphor but also overflowing them, because like the photo’s mechanical denotation, this collage was constructed by machine. It is too much and not made with any knowledge of us.

It can be compared to stage illusion like the photograph can be compared to the painting; the key player has been transformed— the magician leaving behind his secret cabinets and mirrors which continue the show on without him.

It is a ‘This Killed That’ thesis— like Victor Hugo describing the end of architecture and Erik Barnouw describing the end of the magician. In AR, cinema has finally enfolded itself back on to the reality outside the theater from which it hid. In its realization returning the human to the performance, but now, ironically, not as magician (MORE)
CONTINUED:

CARD#38 (cont’d)
but as the machine of illusion...
the mirror.

CARD#40 is drawn which displays the 2012 official demo video of Google Glass.

CARD#38
(cont’d)

It is simultaneously utopian and distopian. Like a perversion of the Allegory of the Cave in which the freed prisoners do not bother to leave, but simply ape more shadows on to the wall, fascinated by their power. Finally we are allowed to play a role in the machine—bring it to our places, our images, our flesh; but the price of entrance is the transformation of the human to the machine. Like this performance happening now... the human given the function to reveal each image to the machine... to be seen.

So what does this mean for art and performance? So what? Who cares? ...Here I return to my previous talk...

All cards are discarded; a new card is drawn. CARD#41 shows the HUMAN, now again in his white shirt and blue tie, longer hair and one-year younger.

CARD#41

For a century of cinema, audience’s bodies were in comfortable theater seats and darkened chambers with luminous screens regularly framed, no conflation of performing bodies with media challenging the viewer to find the border between actual and illusion.

CARDs#42-44 are drawn which show clips from ‘Three Transitions’ (Peter Campus, 1973), ‘WHERE WHERE THERE THERE WHERE’ (Zoe Beloff, 1994), and ‘San Marco Flow’ (David Rokeby, 2005).

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This abandoned arena was adopted in the art gallery. 70s video art, like the tapes and installations of Peter Campus, created mediated stages for performance that had to be puzzled out, confounding the mediated-real and the virtual. In later interactive work, much of which referenced phantasmagoria and magic, artists like Zoe Belof, Toni Dove, and David Rokeby created machines that combined live input with illusion. Live video stands in for the stage—a mediated actual, within which tricks are played with the borders between real and illusion. This type of live media augmentation returns the actual—albeit mediated. It has more in common with Pepper’s Ghost than with The Train Leaving the Station.

As the works are cited, CARDS#45-47 are drawn showing 'The Amazing Cinemagician' and "Who’s Afraid of Bugs?" (Helen Papagiannis, 2011, 2010) and then 'Level Head' (Julian Oliver, 2008).

The AR art & design work of Helen Pappagianis of York University’s Future Cinema Lab takes a direct fascination with the Cinema of Attractions and magic. She created a Toronto science center exhibition, The Amazing Cinemagician, which presents viewers with ghostly images of Méliès films based on their interactions with AR markers on an installed screen. Her more recent Augmented Reality Popup Book creates phantasmagoria-like illusions of virtual bugs crawling across real hands and pages through an iPad viewer. Julian Oliver’s AR object, Level Head, resembles in function more than anything a turn of the century automaton—a real object that simulates life-like behaviors when viewed through your (MORE)

(CONTINUED)
CARD#41 (cont’d)
webcam; it is both a toy to be marketed and an art object. And on stages, illusionistic performance has adopted the new technology, again, like stage magicians, confounding ontological borders between actual, virtual, and mediated. Where, even just this month, the Pepper’s Ghost Illusion makes major headlines in giving life to dead rapper.

CARD#48 is drawn which shows video of the performance by a ‘holographic’ Tupac in 2012. CARD#41 is discarded, another drawn. CARD#49 shows the HUMAN now mediated by a live video stream to an iPAD. CARD#50 is drawn which displays the credits: ‘AR Presentation powered by SNAPDRAGON, developed @ The Future Cinema Lab, York University, Toronto.’

CARD#49
I do not know if the enthrallment of AR is just a temporary fascination with our changing distinctions between objective and virtual. Maybe it is just a way for the audience to work through their changing perceptions of an ever more mediated world. But it makes me think of a question I hold of the Plato’s cave allegory: If a person raised on shadows as reality were given their freedom, would they really run around in the sunshine of Plato’s ideal? Wouldn’t they instead see their own shadow against the wall, take that as reality, and call themselves god? Isn’t that allegory closer to the experience of our contemporary mediated lives?

Inside CARD#49 the HUMAN lowers the iPad screen. The HUMAN, live, behind the podium, discards the final card. The screen displays only him, long standing mute behind the podium, which he then exits.

END