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Holography and Illusion

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore a challenging and increasingly popular means of creating illusion: the hologram. Far from merely evoking an age of progress in visual approaches to the real, holograms speak of unexplored modes and possibilities of being, both vividly present and implacably absent at one and the same time. My contention is that they also posit new means of making visual meaning, involving a re-thinking of the relationship between subject and space. In our analysis, we consider both scientific and philosophical approaches to the theme, and do so by contextualizing the uncanny sense of encountering the double by means of visual representation, particularly focusing on the *trompe l'oeil*. Of the theories the study builds on Adolfo Bioy Casares's novella, *The Invention of Morel* has played a significant part in our interpretation.

KEYWORDS

Hologram; Simulacra; Visual representation; The double; Trompe-l'œil; Adolfo Bioy Casares; *The Invention of Morel*.

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Argument

Having the new technologies described by Jean Françoise Lyotard as „material extensions of our capacity to remember”, we immediately understand their contribution to enriching and, at times, redimensioning our perception upon means of reading and interpreting both real and fictional worlds. In other words, the ever intriguing technological applications to visual and literary paradigms involve new ways of reflecting upon time, space and, ultimately, the major dialectical relationship between the absence and the presence, which is often announced as standing at the very core of postmodern thought.

The present article explores a challenging and increasingly popular mean of creating illusion in fantastic literature and cinema: the hologram. More than merely evoking an age of progress in visual approaches of the real, holograms reveal unexplored possibilities of being, at the same time, vividly present and implacable not there. They also posit new means of creating representation and involve re-thinking the hypostases of relationship between subject and space. At the same time, the hologram challenges notions such as perspective, depth and versimilarity. But, as



Paula Dawson notices, these images are hardly manageable when debated outside technological realms, that in spite of their becoming familiar elements, often supplementing a sense of the uncanny in the visual narratives of late modernism and postmodernism. It is mainly difficult to find the adequate language to explain their purpose in creating meaning and stating a point regarding the edges of their own tautology. Dawson claims that theorists of postmodernism such as Umberto Eco or Jean Baudrillard „do not describe the specifics of holographic representational space”. Instead, „they describe the effect as a simulacra or a part of a kitsch trend towards the hyperreal”. Indeed, considering, for example, those holographic characters introduced by modern fantastic literature and, at a further explicit level, by cinematography, one may easily notice their inherent unreliability due to their predetermined incapacity of reacting to *real* (verisimilar) stimuli. They cannot be analyzed as adequate instances of the text, nor can they be seen as genuine butaffory elements. No accurate narratological discourse being entirely suitable when it comes to conceptualizing these so-called fictional entities, they are rarely interpreted in terms other than those applied to creatures that merely belong to mythology: ghosts, spectres, Döpplegangers. Holograms do, however, add to the texts in which they emerge a critical dimension that, in the case of otherworldly creatures introduced by the fantasy genre, is neither that poignant, nor that multi-layered and, thus, problematic. In order to understand the double-dimensioned world constructed around instances of the real and aspects of a second degree reality, one must truly adapt to their language and capacity of translating the simulated interaction between the two regimes at stake.

1. Holography and Other Means of Creating Sameness by Visual Means

Dictionaries define holograms as three-dimensional images created by a photographic projection. They differentiate themselves from virtual reality images or 3D images by the state of actually being mere experiences in spatial depth. Dennis Gabor is to be held responsible for creating the concept of hologram in 1947. If we take into consideration Jules Verne's contribution to the nuances of holography in fiction, it was before 1947, though, that the possibility of holography exercised both fear and fascination due to its alien, yet undeniably present status. This mean of creating image is often debated as re-viewing, re-reading, re-configuring the signs of the double, approaching its traditional signifiers and adapting it to technologized possibilities of making use of this category.

Holograms are to be experienced by the sense of sight only. As Richard Leppert puts it, the sense of sight is a fundamental means by which human beings attempt both to explain and to gain control of the reality in which they find themselves. It is, then, not at all surprisingly that "the ability to represent that world mimetically, to match in two dimensions what exists in three, is conflated in some societies with magic or other special power". Moreover, it is this sense that which imposed visual representation as vital and unavoidable to humanity's evolution, be it for better or for worse:

We cannot live or "advance" as human beings without recourse to representation, notably including the visual. Further, sight – the transmitting sensory medium of and for visual representation – was commonly understood to be the crucial vehicle supplying "information" to the brain, together with



hearing (taste, touch, and smell by comparison were ancillary). Sight and representation, in other words, operate in tandem to produce knowledge, and knowledge, as everyone knows, is a requisite of power. But a difficulty remains: Representation is dangerous; by its very nature it misleads to the extent that it never is what it represents; the essence of “real” reality remains outside our grasp, and all the while we may delude ourselves into thinking otherwise. Thus Plato’s concern with representation derived in part from the perceived danger of believing that seeing is believing.

Thus, before pointing to holography’s specific features and contributions in understanding the history of representation, we should focus upon some other means of restoring identical (yet, lacking depth) versions of objects in reality which often served as a guide mark to discussing holograms.

A first manner of questioning the domain of the real and implying it as being corrupted or altered by features of illusion would be, if one takes into account the history of visual representation only, the painting technique known as *trompe-l’œil* (french for „deceiving the eye”). This technique is mainly characterized by the use of extremely realistic imagery that emphasizes abilities to creating the illusion that the depicted objects are three-dimensional. What may be considered defining for *trompe-l’œil*, in terms of its reception, is the viewer’s often repressed attempt to check the reality of what is literally shown on the painted surface. In this respect, a most proverbial reaction is that Charles de Brosses recalls having when seeing one of Antonio Forbera’s famous *trompe-l’œil* works: „Upon entering, I saw an object which so took my fancy that it deserves considerable space in my narrative. At the end of the room

there was an easel upon which had been set a painting, not quite finished, depicting the Empire of Flora, after the original by Poussin. The painter’s palette and his brushes had been left next to the picture. I saw all of this at a distance first and then close by without noting anything out of the ordinary; but upon attempting to pick up the drawing, I was astounded to find that all I have described was in fact one single painting, done entirely with oil colors”. The spell *trompe-l’œil* paintings cast on their viewers is further nurtured by the taboo aspect of experiencing painted images by the tactile sense also. Paintings are not to be touched. Tradition imposes a relationship between the viewer and the art work consisting of the use of the eyes only. As Victor Ieronim Stoichiță pointed out, “when, a little over two centuries ago, Art was consigned to the Museum, its banishment was sealed with a prohibition: Do not touch!”. This, he claims, “was no doubt a way of hindering any attempts to transgress the visual experience – considered the only legitimate way in which to approach a work – and it was also an injunction destined to invalidate any effort to connect Art and Life by any means other than pure contemplation”. Furthermore, The plea „Do not touch!” is considered to be “the consequence of the triumph, in the work of art, of the image over the thing, the continuation of a consecration of its unreal side”. *Trompe-l’œil* bears the mark of this forbidden seduction and the intelligence of image crafting. It also employs a „being-without-actually-existing quality” that invests it with a somewhat spectral dimension. In Baudrillard’s view, it is an „enchanted simulation”, „falsier than false – the secret of appearances”, „neither fable, story or composition, nor theater, scene or action”, forgetting all these values and bypassing them “by the low-level representation of second-rate objects”.



Photography's language, on the other hand, when debated in philosophical terms, fits rather hypothetical approaches. „What if?” questions unavoidably lie underneath every image of this sort, often to the prejudice of its documentary value. Photography seduces the viewer with the mystery it holds around the circumstances of it being taken, developed and exposed for as much as the perisability of paper allows. In spite of its promised immortality, photography lasts just as long as it is subject to proper preservation. It is just as mortal as those it depicts, thus, its power is no longer perceived as malephic. The legend of cameras stealing souls is, traditional myths aside, a way of ironically approaching the phobia around having a bad picture taken. But, for as long as a bad picture may still be redeemed by a better one, taken at even half a second's distance, without having the thereness effect altered or diminished, photography still holds aspects that relate it to painting, or, to be more precise, to *trompe l'œil* techniques.

A hologram may be defined as a projection of something that is both existent and non-existent. It is a type of embodiment which may only be experienced visually, challenging the sensorial perception one has upon the palpable world and mediating the intrusion of the uncanny in the domain of the real.

In *Simulacra And Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard defines the holographic image as the “perfect image and end of the imaginary”. In this respect, holograms are seen as means of „surprising the real in order to immobilize it”, while „suspending the real in the expiration of its double”. Baudrillard is interested in this phenomena as it depicts a mean of creating simulacra in the same way the clones would, by carrying, also, the critical impact of the *trompe l'œil*. „In the hologram, it is the imaginary aura of the

double that is mercilessly tracked, just as it is in the history of clones. Similitude is a dream and must remain one, in order for a modicum of illusion and a stage of the imaginary to exist. One must never pass over to the side of the real, the side of the exact resemblance of the world to itself, of the subject to itself. Because then the image disappears. One must never pass over to the side of the double, because then the dual relation disappears, and with it all seduction. Well, with the hologram, as with the clone, it is the opposite temptation, and the opposite fascination, of the end of illusion, the stage, the secret through the materialized projection of all available information on the subject, through materialized transparency”.

2. Jean Baudrillard's Reading of Holograms

As afore mentioned, Jean Baudrillard saw in holographic means of representation the materialized desire to encounter one's double, following the pattern of Narcissus bent over his spring, fascinated by his reflection. The undisclosed dream of “surprising the real in order to immobilize it” and “suspending the real in the expiration of its double” comes to life in the shape of images passing through walls, through the borders of time and, nonetheless, through ourselves. But, for as long as holograms interrupt the sustained illusion of an ever being ability to experience alterity in love-hate relationship with ourselves, their power of seduction is, according to the simulacra theorist, dramatically diminished, endangered. His first approach to theorizing the simulacra value of holograms refers to the television as projector of images belonging to the holographic category. The *Simulacra and Simulation* further reading of the holographic visual phenomena employs a



dramatic, ultimative character. Baudrillard reclaims that the consequence of one's exposure to the holographic factor is that of gaining an unresolvable unreality of one's own.

Holograms are being held responsible for a sense of total and truly dazzling hallucination that begins to manifest itself once "nothing separates you from it". This type of fascination, Baudrillard claims, is also specific to the *trompe-l'œil*: "instead of a field as a vanishing point for the eye, you are in reversed depth, which transforms you into a vanishing point". He also recognizes in holographic visuals a new type of producing imagery, which's final forms are yet to be discovered. This point of view is justified by a logic that claims hologram's inherent conceptual independence. "The hologram", Baudrillard notes, "is no more destined to produce three-dimensional cinema than cinema was destined to produce theater, or photography was to takeup the contents of painting".

Still, holograms are susceptible of turning the concept of illusion, which stands at the very core of their intentional emergence, into a rather misappropriate one: "In the hologram, it is the imaginary aura of the double that is mercilessly tracked (...). Similitude is a dream and must remain one, in order for a medium of illusion and a stage of the imaginary to exist". Moreover, Baudrillard claims that passing over to the side of the real ("the side of the exact resemblance of the world to itself, of the subject to itself"), the image is at risk of disappearing. On the other hand, passing on the side of the double endangers the dual relation between what is real and what is merely an illusion. Holograms are discourses that address to an opposite fascination than that which lies in the dialectic of the real and the illusory. It is the privileged product of „the end of illusion, the stage, the secret through the materialized projection of all available

information on the subject, through materialized transparency".

Seeing oneself in the mirror and in photographs is no longer satisfactory. Holograms respond to a deeper fantasy, that of „circling around oneself”, of „traversing oneself”, of „passing through one's own spectral body”. Such a development puts into brackets any aesthetic contribution to manipulating one's image. The medium that generates holograms lacks, in Baudrillard's acceptance, the intelligence of *trompe-l'œil*, "which is one of seduction, of always proceeding, according to the rules of appearances, through allusion to and ellipsis of presence". Adhering to Mach's definition of the universe as a place which consists of no double, no mirror equivalent, then, analogically, Baudrillard sees holograms as vehicles to a virtually other universe: here nothing is „but the mirrored equivalent of this one”. The hologram is, then, a facile, lacking spiritual depth solution to all humanity's generating anxiety phantasms: it possesses the capacity of investing one with „the feeling, the vertigo of passing to the other side of our own body, to the side of the double, luminous clone, our dead twin that is never born in our place, and watches over us by anticipation".

Jean Baudrillard compares the laser-created image that produces holograms to a scalpel whose function is that of poerating on the human subject in order „to remove the double as one would operate to remove a tumor”. This very double „that hid in the depths of you (...) and whose secret form fed precisely your imaginary (...) is extracted by laser, is synthesized and materialized before you”. The once sacred notion of the double becomes trite. It is vulgarized to the point of representing a form of commodity, a collectible. The simulacrum, seen from the three-dimensional approach holograms provide, is lesser real than the one imposed as



such at a two-dimensional layer. This happens because of the paradoxical postulate that „the closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum (...) the more evident it becomes (...) how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance”. The real is, in this respect, an abolished category, an anachronically designed concept. Similitude has turned into exactitude over night. Truth became a matter of producing and generating forms both loyal to and unaware of their original models. The reproductive value that defined the relationship between originals and copies is canceled by the simulation value attributed to holograms. They testify against their models by means of a symbolic murder of the original. Proliferating representation to the limits of its own meaning, hypersimilitude promoted by the holographic art of creating otherness is a way of denouncing meaning as nothing but an absurd category which, as well as truth or the real, “cannot appear except locally, in a restricted horizon” since “all doubling, all generalization, all passage to the limit (...) makes them surface in their mockery”. The real is, thus, conceived on the naive basis of a genuine “pact of the similitude of things to themselves”. Moreover, “the real object is supposed to be equal to itself, it is supposed to resemble itself like a face in a mirror”, this similitude being, in Baudrillard’s view, the only definition of the real still to hold legitimacy. Consequently, holographic attempts that rest on such resemblances are inevitably missing their object and, thus, disconnected from any source of staying in touch with the dying breed of the original.

These ideas that, however, betray Baudrillard’s doubts regarding the power holograms may invest in suspending the real according to a map swallowing and canceling the territory’s desire, may be used as a starting point in analyzing two fictional works

whose plots prefigure the communicational collapse this type of visual language facilitates.

3. Passing Into Image

Holograms have been part of the science-fiction literature ever since Jules Verne’s *The Carpathian Castle* introducing a photographic projection mistaken for a dangerous poltergeist. Science-fiction movies also make use of this image-generating mode in order to mark the futuristic setting of their plots. However, the literary text we intend to debate from this perspective is a novel that does not have many traits in common with the specificities of the Sci-Fi imaginary. The famous Adolfo Bioy Casares novel, *The Invention of Morel* is built around the story of a fugitive that searches for a place to hide on a stranded island and it attempts to depict what Maurice Blanchot qualified as a double sense of ending a text: one still anchored in values of the fantastic, another, hauntingly questioning the modern sensibility that finds itself in the difficult position of integrating mechanically created images as intruders of everyday reality, and the manner in which they come to be accepted as second degree realities, posing their own, fascinating, yet alienating shapings of the truth.

Once arrived on the island he had sought for in order to escape an unbearable punishment, the main character finds himself surrounded by a type of environment he does not find suitable in sustaining his vanishing intentions. He first notices that the abandoned buildings that were creating this place’s setting had been used as: a hotel, a church and a museum. Their presence as such, completed by the unexplainable phenomena of having two suns and two moons begin to raise a series of questions he then attempts finding answers to. The myth of a



fatal disease having stranded the place aside, the anxiety of experiencing a dangerous solitude, intensified by insecurities linked to discovering the island inhabited, in fact, by people whose lifestyle is highly inadequate to the given circumstances of decay the former resort finds itself into, become the main motifs the novel explores in order to uncover the mysteries its plot revolves around. Despite his determination of not interacting with the unexplainably merry group that contradicts the nature of the surroundings, the character becomes interested in captivating the attention of a woman other inhabitants call by the name of Faustine (name relating to the unavoidably devilish contract signed by art as opposed to reality). Her persistent unawareness of his attempts to make contact leaves him intrigued and further attracts him into finally interacting with the community of eccentrics she belongs to.

The sight of her: As if she were posing for an invisible photographer, she surpassed the calm of the sunset. And I did not wish to interrupt that. Speaking to her would be an alarming experience. I did not even know whether I had any voice left. I watched her from my hiding place. I was afraid that she would see me, so I came out, perhaps too abruptly. Even so, her composure was not altered; she ignored me, as if I were invisible. I hesitated no longer. "Please, young lady," I said, "will you please listen to me," but I hoped she would not listen, because I was so excited I had forgotten what I was going to say. The words "young lady" sounded ridiculous on the island. And besides, my sentence was too imperative (combined with my sudden appearance there, the time of day, the solitude). I persisted: "I realize you may not wish-". But I find it impossible now to recall

exactly what I said. I was almost unconscious. I spoke in a slow, subdued voice with a composure that suggested impropriety. (...) After several more minutes of silence, I insisted, I implored, in what was surely a repulsive manner. And finally I became ridiculous. Trembling, almost shouting, I begged her to insult me, to inform against me even, if only she would break the terrible silence. It was not as if she had not heard me, as if she had not seen me; rather it seemed that her ears were not used for hearing, that her eyes could not see.

After further listening to conversations between other members of the odd anachronically dressed group, the fugitive will, in a proleptic sense of his narrative, become obsessed with a recurring phrase: "This is not the proper time for ghost stories". He, furthermore, begins accepting himself as a ghost:

I was horrified by the thought that I was invisible, – horrified that Faustine, who was so close to me, actually might be on another planet (the sound of her name made me sad), – but I am dead, I am out of reach, I thought; and I shall see Faustine, I shall see her go away, but my gestures, my pleas, my efforts will have no effect on her. And I knew that those horrible solutions were nothing but frustrated hopes.

He will, however, be revealed the secret of this mysterious impenetrable place. Morel, the leader of the small group amidst which he had experienced the temporary illusion of invisibility, had invented a device capable of capturing and reproducing three-dimensional images of his friends through their holiday week on the island. Those



images were fully available to sensorial perception as identical and incorruptible double aspects of the original models. The main character had, thus, lived among images and had mistaken them for real human beings. He learns the sinister truth about how the eternity of their one-week happiness had been literally paid with the lives of the originals. Turning oneself into an immortal image eventually had severely damaging effects on the flesh body. The holographic double and its model were unable to coexist. Still, once discovering the key of Faustine's inaccessibility, the main character decides that her hyperreality was a more convenient story to adhere to, a far better narrative to involve himself into, even at a most simulated level, preferable to anything his captive condition allowed him to experience. Succeeding in manouevring Morel's machine, he will register himself for a week as if he were a friend of Faustine. His strategies of placing places himself into her gaze, asking her questions that are somehow answers, simulate a closure that, otherwise, would never have been possible or plausible.

When I was ready, I turned on the receivers of simultaneous action. Seven days have been recorded. I performed well: a casual observer would not suspect that I am not a part of the original scene. That came about naturally as the result of my painstaking preparation: I devoted two weeks to continuous study and experiment. I rehearsed my every action tirelessly. I studied what Faustine says, her questions and answers; I often insert anappropriate sentence, so she appears to be answering me. I do not always follow her; I know her movements so well that I usually walk ahead. I hope that, generally, we give the impression of being inseparable, of

understanding each other so well that we have no need of speaking.

In spite of its tragic outcome, this story of an unusual solution to resemanticize unrequited love by means of simulacra and simulation is, still, the best literary approach to the devilish seduction images are susceptible of. The accelerated ruin of the living body is thought to be compensated by the aesthetical immortality visual representation guarantees. „The real advantage of my situation is that now death becomes the condition and the pawn for my eternal contemplation of Faustine. I am saved from the interminable minutes necessary to prepare for my death in a world without Faustine; I am saved from an interminable death without Faustine”. Framed as a diary, Bioy Casares's novel calls into the reader's attention visions of the ghost-like qualities bodily experiences possess and the mere illusion of placement. *The Invention of Morel* encompasses a narrative substratum that reconfigures values of the unsubstantiality of infernal places and their unstable condition when faced with great categories of the Real (faith, love and hope included).

The thesis beyond this novel's plot may be resumed as an apologetical approach on the behalf of letting go of the authority invested in conventional reality. Its illusion of coherence is suspended in order to observe one's passing into image.

Holography owns resources to outdistance itself from the assumption that its sole functionality is that of replicating original models. However, its consistency in creating illusion is based on this offer it had made through results in experimental research and fictional approaches.

As a conclusion, we may note that we are at the edge of integrating ourselves to what Scott Durham named “phantom communities” and that holographic representations of the world may have a great

contribution to our status as images having internalized “their own repetition”. Even in their position of lacking predetermined narratives and being subjects to our own manners of interpreting the postmodern world.

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