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Rediscovering "Wonder" through I-Docs: Reflections on "Immersive" Viewing in the Context of Contemporary Digital/Visual Practices

Paolo Favero

Abstract: *From the invention of geometrical perspective onwards images have, in a Western context, been characterised by a specific politics and epistemological ambition. Solidified by the invention of the camera, "our" images have separated the observer from the observed, the mind from the body, allowing for what has been considered a "neutral" observation. "New images" (i.e. images produced with emerging digital visual technologies) are today posing a challenge to such conventions. Relational, material, haptic and immersive by nature, such images go hand in hand with new image-making practices characterised by nonlinearity, interactivity, participativity and immersivity. The present article explores this emerging terrain in the context of the documentary form. Moving back and forth in space and time, hence comparing image-making practices that belong to different cultures and epochs, the article engages with the key political and epistemological challenges of the documentary image in the contemporary digital habitats.*

In the context of today's cameras, smartphones and computers, images are becoming a variety of different things, that also seem to unfold more clearly than ever beyond the realm of the visible. Images are geographies (think of the incorporation of GPS-driven geolocative information), they are communities and networks (consider the use of symbols such as "#", "@" and textual dialogues on social media's timelines) and they are material items (as per the popularity of 3D printing and of wearable cameras). Often condensed within the same device, contemporary audiovisual technologies offer also a variety of formats playfully stretching and twisting the boundaries of space and time—I am thinking here of panoramas, of 360-degree images, of VR, as well as of time lapses and of the ephemerality of Snapchat, of augmented reality and so forth.

"Present images", as I have opted to call them in a recent book (Favero, *Present*), i.e. the images that circulate in the contemporary digitised habitats of the world, offer many challenges. First of all, they threaten the boundaries that have kept the idea of the real/concrete and of the virtual separate (augmented and/or mixed reality being the best examples of this). Secondly, they blur the distinction between different media and media practices: film, photography and sound merge within the space of the same apparatus (be it a smartphone or a camera). For those of us who started filming in the age of analogue film (and also, to some extent, in the age of digital film) this has been a rather revolutionary change. Making images was, back then, first and foremost a matter of choice of medium, to which a specific sense of identity also corresponded (the photographer vs. the filmmaker, etc.). As an image-making ethnographer, for instance, I had to ask myself at the beginning of each day in the field: Shall I film or shall I photograph today? Shall I conduct interviews or just observe? According to the answer, I would carry the correct apparatus with me. Finally, as is well known, present images

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also challenge the boundary that separate the producer from consumers, hence making a variety of instances of participation feasible and concrete.

Present images are therefore challenging the manifold ways in which humans engage with them. Marshall MacLuhan famously suggested long ago that media would soon become protheses, extensions of our bodies (MacLuhan and Fiore). But if we look at recent developments in the field, especially of wearable technologies (lifelogging and action-cams, smart glasses and lenses, as well as other types of wearables) the situation seems to have inverted. Humans have become necessary extensions of the apparatus rather than the other way around. Technologies are increasingly things that we wear and that, through a series of automated procedures, make choices for us. This is the case of lifelogging and action-cams, which, subverting all principles of image composition and timing, position the body as the actual eye, the viewfinder in the act of making images (Favero, "Analogization"). And we could also push this further and suggest, by looking for instance at drones, that digital visual technologies are today also promoting new instances of sublimation of the body and of shared "hyper-agency" (Garret and McCosker). I suggest that, today, in the act of making images, we are surely sharing agency with technology and, thus, that we should speak of a "shared agency".

In this scenario, there is little doubt about the fact that images are increasingly emerging as relational, dynamic items producing new relations with the materiality of everyday life and with human bodies. And they are invested by the task of doing more than "just" represent. Images extensively want to do, make and create. As a consequence, users too have changed. More and more individuals seem today to have largely progressed beyond naïve ideas about the image as a "transparent window on the world" (Mitchell 504), and started acknowledging its relationality, reciprocality, performativity and impermanence. We have accepted that images ask those who engage with them to do things to them, to explore them with the help of cursors and fingers, to navigate in them by moving smartphones, to inscribe metadata in them. We have learned to save, morph and resize them and to respect their ephemeral nature as they quickly fade from view in our streams. Yet, how do we incorporate such changes in our practice as scholars and practitioners?

The present article reflects on the implications of this change for what regards the practice of conducting image-based work in the context of i-docs. I will focus in particular on one sub category of i-docs, which I will address here as "immersive". I will investigate the extent to which immersive image-based practices can unlock new ways of reflecting upon the act of exploring the world. Historicising the role of immersive ambitions within Western (though not exclusively) visual culture, I will suggest that present images can open a space for constructive instances of uncertainty and wonder.

I want to start my reflection from anthropology, the discipline within which my practice is contextualised. I will then proceed to describe the context of i-docs and of immersive viewing. In the conclusions I will offer some reflections on what it means to conduct research in the context of present images.

The Visual in Anthropology 2.0

In the early 1990s Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup declared in a well-known essay that images are unfit for the study of culture and social life. Stuck within visible forms and patterns, they can only portray the surface of things, she said, not their deeply embedded

meanings. Words, on the other hand, can move beyond that, offering us a capacity to convey explanations. In the build-up to her argument, Hastrup invoked the notion of "thin" description, a concept that in anthropology is often used almost as an insult:

> The visual is to the written mode as "thin description" (giving us a record of the form of behaviour) is to "thick description" (giving us an account of its meaning) and as map (giving us an overall overview of a landscape) is to itinerary (giving us one route through a network of possible routes). (Hastrup 15)

With these words Hastrup referred back to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's well-known distinction. It is the duty of the anthropologist, Geertz said, to explain rather than "just" describe; to provide "thick" rather than "thin" descriptions. Hastrup's words struck down on the community of visual anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers like a lightning in a gasoline tank firing off a vast number of reactions. Hers was in fact an attack right at the heart of the mission of visual anthropology, a subdiscipline of mainstream anthropology that in those years was attempting to consolidate its scientific status. Even though this may sound somewhat paradoxical, I want to suggest that Hastrup was actually right. The visual is, in fact, a producer of thin descriptions; and yet, right here lies its unique potential for offering a near-experiential access to the world. Anthropologists have devoted a lot of attention to the various passages that transform their first observations into analysis. They have devoted much less attention to that very moment in which they immerse themselves (bodies and minds) into the world—the moment, to paraphrase Paul Stoller, in which we not only attempt to penetrate the world, but also let the world penetrate us.

As we conduct fieldwork, we quickly subjugate our sensory experiences, with the help of written notes, to concepts, narratives and explanations. This is what we have been taught to do. We subjugate the "thin" to the "thick". Yet, this process is far from neutral. The textualisation (to use Paul Ricœur) that conventionally accompanies the act of writing generates a set of unavoidable reductions. It reduces the unknown to the known (Taussig viii). In this article, I want to suggest that the visual can offer us a precious opportunity for clinging onto the moment when the world penetrates us, for achieving that "epistemological openness" (Jackson 184) that is fundamental to grasp the practical, pretheoretical and embodied nature of knowledge. Images, and the visual at large, can help us go more in depth with the multisensory (and, hence, polyphonic and, perhaps, disorderly) nature of our experiences, of our observations and perceptions, before they get subjugated to the linear narrativisation that accompanies interpretation and explanation. Such approach, I suggest, also repristinates the phenomenological sense of being at one with the world which, according to scholars such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was at the very core of our experience.

This article is, in other words, in praise of the "thin", of that suspended moment in which the world comes to us in a fairly direct fashion, not yet filtered by our thoughts and their inevitable anchorage in the past. This is the moment, to use the words of Russian theologian and art historian Pavel Floresnkij, of "wonder", of doubt and of endless questioning. I want to suggest that the images that inhabit contemporary digital habitats are precious viewfinders for this. New, yet at the same time old, they can, to use William J. Mitchells's words, "disturb and disorient" our conventional ways of dealing with visual (or visible) knowledge (*Reconfigured* 222); they ask us new-yet-old questions, functioning as an antidote to our anxious needs to fixate meaning.

Making and Studying Images in the World of I-Docs

As mentioned, in order to explore the contribution that new images can make to our explorations of the world I have chosen to focus on one particular aspect of i-docs, their "immersive" viewing quality. In view of discussing this quality, I must accompany the reader through my ways of defining the field of i-docs and the notion of "immersive viewing".

There is no need, in the space of this particular special issue, to define the field of i-docs. Let me however stress that, like many other scholars and practitioners involved in this field, I too believe that, rather than defining it through the two core terms that originally composed it ("interactive" and "documentary", which as we know also generate a certain friction),[1] today we need to look at the term "i-doc" as the label of an independent visual form. Recently, during a panel on i-docs that we organised for the 15th RAI film festival in Bristol, Judith Aston and I further consolidated the idea that i-docs should actually be tackled as an independent brand where the "i" may take on a multiplicity of significations. Rather than standing for "interactivity", "i" could also stand for the personal pronoun "I" (hence foregrounding the personalisation that is part of the world of i-docs and digital media at large), or for "intelligent", or even for "eye" (thus foregrounding the visual and sensory stimulation embedded in these practices).

In recent years, expanding upon the work of Kate Nash and of Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, I have attempted to draft a typology to define the field of i-docs (Favero, "Defence"). Pushing their categorisations a little further, and merging them with established genre distinctions in documentary film (Nichols), I have suggested that we can probably create today a typology based on the triad "active", "participatory" and "immersive". Before I further qualify my typology by offering more detail and also some examples let me clarify that I do not consider these categories to be self-contained, stable and clear-cut. The space of i-docs is better understood as a continuum where each product may contain more or less of each of these tendencies/ambitions.

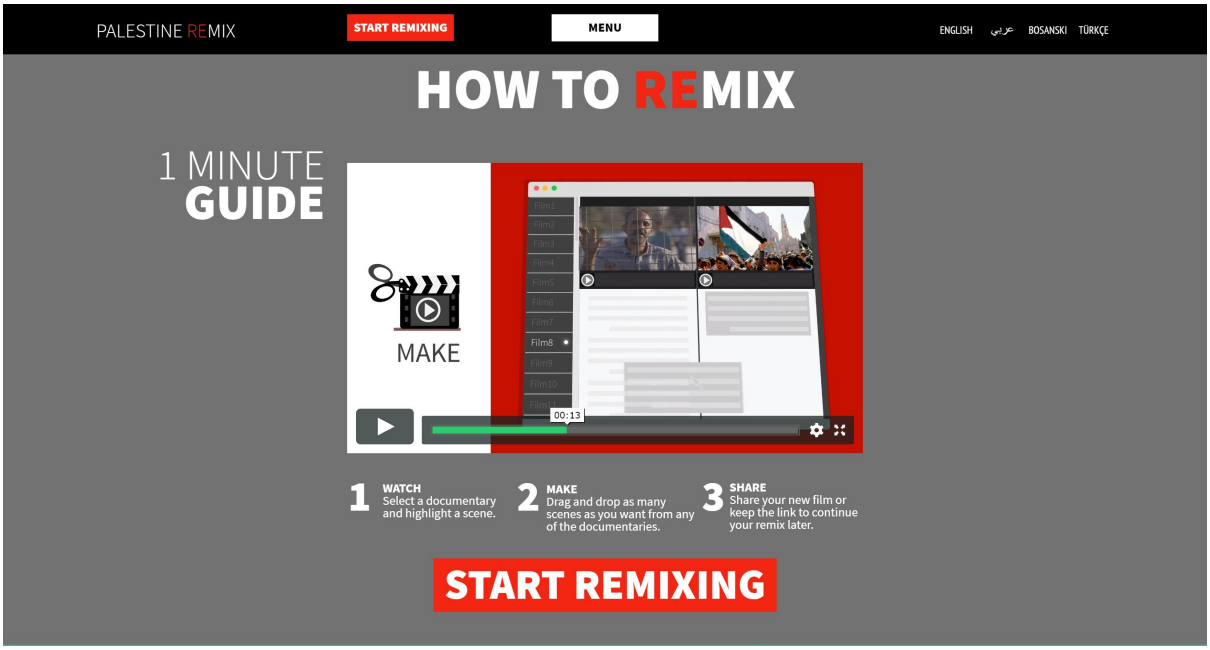
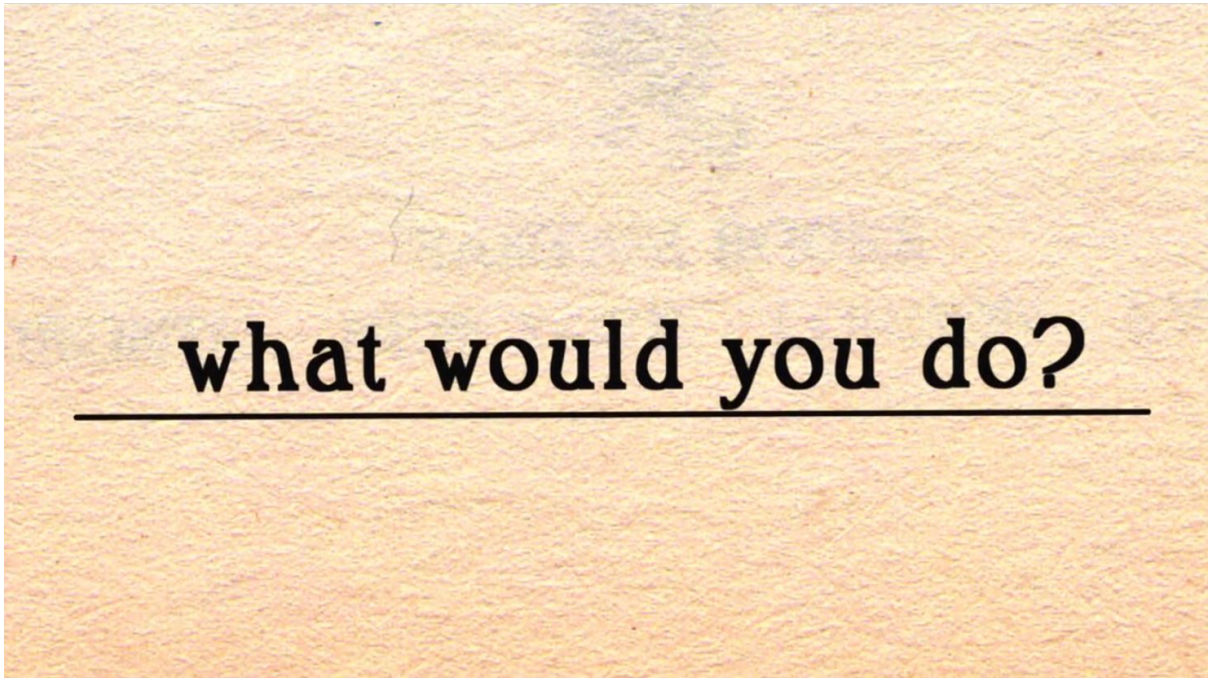


Figure 1: *Palestine Remix* (Al Jazeera, 2015). Screenshot.



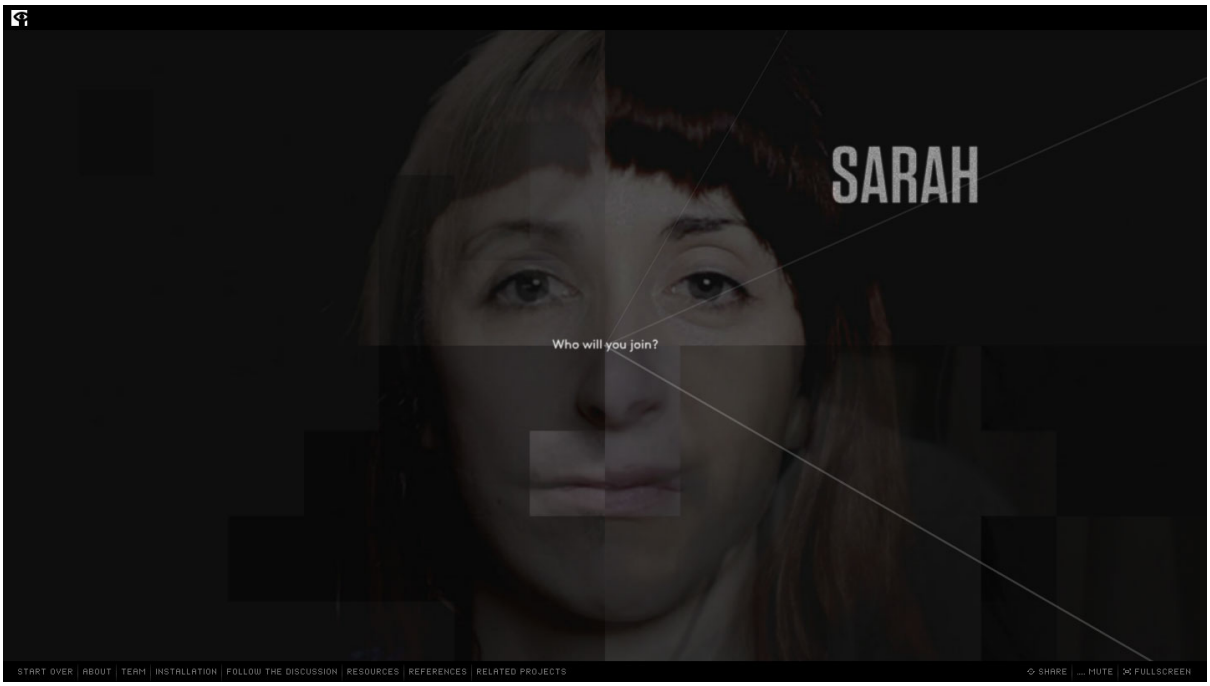


Figure 2 (above): *Choose Your Own Documentary* (CYOD, 2013). Figure 3 (below): *Journal of Insomnia* (National Film Board of Canada, 2012). Screenshots.

With "active", the first of these terms, I refer to those documentaries that offer the viewers a variety of angles from which to explore the materials that have been selected by the author or authors. Conventionally using different media (such as video clips, photographs, sound files, maps etc.), these i-docs constitute a creative archive that does not, however, allow viewers to actively change or expand the materials on display (other than minimally, for instance by inserting comments). Making up the vast majority of i-docs on the market, such products are exemplified by projects such as *I Love Your Work* and *Choose Your Own Documentary*, a live performance where spectators have to choose the narrative path by voting.

"Participatory" i-docs, instead, seem to focus primarily on the creation of new materials. Sharing the very process of editing and production with the viewers, they are exemplified by Al-Jazeera's *Palestine Remix*, where viewers are asked to actively re-edit snippets of materials on Palestine directly from the company's media archives. The new crowd-edited short videos, then, can potentially be incorporated in the archive, hence becoming available for the next viewers. Another example of this type of i-docs is *A Journal of Insomnia* where the materials uploaded can only be viewed upon a nightly appointment and where the visitors are also interviewed on the basis of their experiences of this particular condition. Similar to what happens in *Palestine Remix*, this i-doc too also offers a concrete opportunity for generating materials that future viewers may be able to explore and reflect upon.

Finally, "immersive" i-docs are, in my view, the ones aiming more explicitly at closing the gap between the image and the everyday lived experiences of the viewers (both physically and metaphorically). Potentially experiential, haptic and/or emphatic, such i-docs move along a continuum that goes from expanded emplaced participation (bordering with augmented reality) to VR documentaries. Examples of this type can be found in *Karen*, a smartphone application bringing a therapist into the life of the user. Building upon the principle of provocation and nuisance, Karen sends out SMS-looking messages asking the users to connect with her. She progressively grabs information about the users' views and habits and forces them to rethink their own lives. Indeed, while *Karen* stretches the definition of i-doc far beyond its conventional boundaries, I believe it also exemplifies the future direction of immersive i-docs. It is my view that i-docs should further exploit the possibility of inserting, especially through the use of smartphones, documentary material amidst the (emplaced) everyday life of its viewers, hence blurring even more the distinction between actual and virtual experiences.

Figure 4: *Karen* (Blast Theory, 2015). Screenshot.

Figure 5: *6x9* (The Guardian, 2016). Screenshots.

On the other end of the immersive continuum we find VR and 360-degrees productions. Ranging from online documentaries to those designed for VR googles or smartphones, such products offer an interactive experience also allowing for what I elsewhere have defined as a form of "disembodied embodiment" (Favero, *Present*; "Swallow"). Among such projects mention can be made, for what regards computer-screen-based films, of Google's 360-degree productions *Beyond the Map*, on Rio's favelas, and the *Hidden World of the National Parks*. With regard to goggle-driven VR documentaries we can mention, among many others, the works of Francesca Panetta such as *6X9*, a VR project on solitary jail confinement, or *Notes on Blindness*, an attempt at using VR to convey the experience of losing the faculty of seeing. Continuing to explore this terrain, we can also mention proper augmented reality experiences such as the India–US collaboration *Priya Shakti* which, among its various strands, engages with the augmented reality app *Blippar* in order to allow viewers to discover extra content while exploring images in physical space.

Immersive Quests

While different from each other in terms of the actions and interactions that they engender, the different types of i-docs described above have in common a desire to close down the distance between the viewer, the image and the world it contains. I suggest that this quest is indeed an ancient one and that present images are bringing it back to our attention. In this section, I will historicise this quest looking also into the politics that underpin the attempt to create immersive images. I will suggest that immersive viewing, moving away from the principles and politics of Renaissance perspective, contributes to decentring the authority of the image-maker (the narrator, the director), hence making instances of participatory and polyphonic work possible.

The two dominating visual languages of modernity, cinema and photography, build on rules and assumptions that they have inherited from previous visual practices and, in particular,

from Renaissance perspective. Inspired by Hasan Ibn Al-Haytham's eleventh-century *Book of Optics* (Sabra), where the act of looking is for the first time visualised as a pyramid with the eye on the one end and the visible field on the other, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries European painters, architects and mathematicians started to develop a mathematical/ geometrical formula capable of converting three-dimensional depth into a flat surface. While being far from uncontested, perspective became quickly recognised as a "natural" model of vision, also materialising Descartes's theorisation of the body-mind distinction (which was roughly born at the same time). A reflection of the West's growing obsession with rationality and lines, perspective had a particular politics to it. Divulgated with the help of a window allowing to "measure" the visual field, it generated a strict separation between the observer and the observed. "Pushing" the viewers out of the image and lifting them up to the level of God, it made the act of looking synonymous with an act of control. According to perspective there is, therefore, no reciprocity. The viewers exercise control upon the image and, hence, upon the world, and no longer need to situate themselves within it.

Geometrical perspective created a space that was simultaneously aesthetic, analytical and political, thus succeeding in taming vision. Inserting itself in the long struggle between the text and the visual icon that characterised medieval Europe, perspective rationalised the image, moving it from the realm of magic into the rational terrain of representation (Metz; McQuire; Flusser; Mirzoeff). As anticipated above, it is from this set of assumptions that, in the West, we inherited our approach to images in the context of both photography and film.

Indeed, the "natural" status of perspectival viewing can be easily questioned by travelling in time and space. Different civilisations have created visual depth with the use of other strategies and conventions. Japanese and Chinese scrolls wrapped the viewers in images, both horizontally and vertically. In relation to these images, a viewer could be in one and many places at the same time (rather than occupying one privileged position) and would conventionally also be surrounded by them. Mughal paintings used colour and symbols as a tool for conveying depth (Skeikh). Depth could be symbolised, for instance, by a star-clad blue ceiling and each layer of profundity in a room could simply be marked by a new colour.

In Europe too, Byzantine art made an intensive use of materiality in order to convey profundity. Icons were commonly crafted with the help of materials whose texture would provide the viewer with a simultaneous sense of depth and tactility. The use of metal notably helped detaching the icon from its representational duty while anchoring the image in the lived world of the worshipper. These images were in fact objects of contemplation rather than narration (Argan). They substituted the ideal landscape surrounding the object portrayed with a reflection of the life-world of the viewer. Giving birth to what looks like a decontextualised image, these techniques collapsed the distance between the observer and the observed (in a movement that goes in a radically opposite direction to Renaissance perspective).

The "swallowing" (Favero, *Present*) effect could be even grander in human-built environments. The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches designed under the influence of Byzantium literally devoured the viewer. As in the case of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy (fifth century AD), these churches were filled with visual details on the inside. The use of mosaic with its variety of different materials, capable of diffracting the light in different ways, would have a deceiving and displacing effect on the viewers. It eluded their perception of the dimensions of the space in which they found themselves, leading to a transcendence of physical space altogether (Argan).

Foregrounding presence (Pinney) and contemplation (Argan), rather than realist representation and narration, such visual practices are indeed still very much in use today, in the context of, for instance, Orthodox religion but also in pockets of popular culture connected to Catholicism (see the use of lenticular prints with religious motifs popularly known as 3D images). The Indian context too is a rich provider of such instances. Prioritising questions of effect, Indian devotional practices approach images as "things that matter" (Edwards 28). A matter of reciprocity, the act of looking is, in this context, an act of not only looking but also being looked at, in an ongoing interpenetration between the deity and the viewer.[2]

I could go on giving more examples. However, this brief exploration of the meaning of images across time and space may suffice to reveal the relativity of dominant modern (bourgeois) Western views. And a closer look into modern Western visual culture may also reveal the presence of a variety of attempts to transcend the frame and question the primacy of monocular vision and of the privileged point of observation. This can be exemplified in the urges towards stereo-photography that have characterised the entire history of photography, with the multiple experiments to reproduce panoramas and so forth. It can be detected in the popular use of photography as a tool to create physical arousal in the viewers, as in the manifold experimentations with erotic and pornographic photography (Gilardi), and more.[3] Similar tendencies can also be found in Cubism's, Dadaism's and Futurism's attempts to make multiple angles of observation converge on the same canvas, as well as in 3D cinema and in much video-art. To make a long story short, we could state that mainstream Western visual culture has relied upon a set of assumptions, somewhat acritically inherited from Renaissance perspective and reproduced through the camera and screen apparatuses, which foreground the duty of an image to represent by means of a separation from the world. As I have described through the above examples, such assumptions are however neither "natural" nor "neutral". Rather, they have marginalised a vast variety of modalities that, just like Byzantine or Hindu icons, are more dialogic (polyphonic), experiential and reciprocal in nature. Using the words of Pavel Floreskij, we have simply accepted to be "as monocular as Cyclops", metaphorically and quite literally too (262). "Present images" bring this critical dimension back into our visual culture, and the world of immersive i-docs is a good example of it. The image-based practices and technologies that I have presented during the first part of this article seem to bring, albeit in different forms, such "parallel" or "counter-hegemonic" ways of conceptualising and using the image back to the heart of Western visual culture, promoting a change that is perhaps, as Crary inquiringly wrote in the early 1990s, "a transformation in the nature of visuality probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective" (1). The revolutionary character of this change, however, is not its futuristic nature but, rather, its ancient spirit, its capacity to revive the past. In their quest to overcome the separation between the observer and the observed, the viewer and the viewed, present images awaken in us a new-yet-old sense of wonder.

Conclusions: Working with Present Images

The assertion that new images contribute to reawaken our capacity to doubt and experience a sense of unexpectedness and wonder in the everyday brings me all the way back to the question with which I started. As I wrote at the beginning of this article, I believe that Kirsten Hastrup was indeed right. Images do in fact offer access to the "thin" rather than the "thick". Yet, this comment is only derogatory insofar as we accept to hierarchise these terms following Geertz's approach. Also, it is only valid if we accept to narrow down our understanding of what images (whether new or old) can actually do to us. "Present images" can

allow us to enter the cracks between the fragments that make up films, making us feel a part of the construction of the world that they aim to portray. In a recent book Tim Ingold states that Geertz's understanding of life is of a movement towards terminal closure (which resonates quite well with my interpretation of the "thick"). Delving deeper into this concept, Ingold says:

> It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents. Life, in short, is a movement of opening, not of closure. (4)

Ingold's vision of life as a flowing continuum inevitably requires us to inhabit the world, to dwell in it rather than observe it at a distance. His words resonate with those of Floresnkji, for whom philosophy and art were much better placed than science to interpret life. While the language of science "prohibits movements and transfer of thought, constricting the observer in an iron headrest and forcing him to wear blinkers" philosophy acknowledges that the lived world, "requires a living observer—moveable—of life and not a rigid and conventional unmoveability" (60; my translation). Allowing the emergence of wonder (which in Francis Bacon's view was the true seed of knowledge) philosophy may nevertheless fail to provide answers, but rather continuously feed new and more refined questions. If we are, therefore, to accept, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty but also by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, that observation is rooted in the body–mind complex of a subject actively involved with the world then we have to acknowledge that "thick descriptions", caught as they are in the politics of separation, may run the risk to solidify what is liquid, to conflate the river for the river banks, the water for the waves. Just as Renaissance perspective did to the viewer, the "thick" kicks the human out of the world. Indeed, we may not need immersive i-docs nor "present images" to teach us this, but they can surely give us a helping hand, urging us to rediscover the preciousness of the "thin", of that moment when the world presents itself to us in all its impermanence, frailty, contradiction and wonder. Foregrounding presence, closeness, reciprocality and polyphony, new images remind us that "[t]he world is not what I think, but what I live through" (Merleau-Ponty xviii).

Notes

[1] The terms "interactive" and "documentary" hardly seem to be coherent with each other. If documentary film's core ambition is to adhere to what is conventionally referred to as pre- or pro-filmic reality and, hence, cling to the "myth of photographic truth" (Sturken and Cartwright 16–21), and if interactivity is about a two-way flow of information (Meadows) building upon the eventual modification of content by the viewer, how can they share the same space without conflict?

[2] As Diana Eck expresses it, "because the image is a form of the Supreme Lord, it is precisely the image that facilitates and enhances the close relationship of the worshiper and God and makes possible the deepest outpouring of emotions in worship" (46). One becomes, as Lawrence Babb suggested, "what one what sees" (297) in an act that could probably be inserted within the logic of contagion of qualities and, hence, of magic.

[3] As Friedrich Kittler has pointed out, there is little to be surprised about this. The duty of visual technologies is to enlarge the human field of perceptions, enriching it by taking individuals

beyond what they could sense before. In Kittler's words: "Technical media are models of the so-called human precisely because they were developed strategically to override the senses" (36).

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