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Interactive cinema

INTERACTIVE CINEMA: A CONVERSATION WITH MARINA HASSAPOPOULOU

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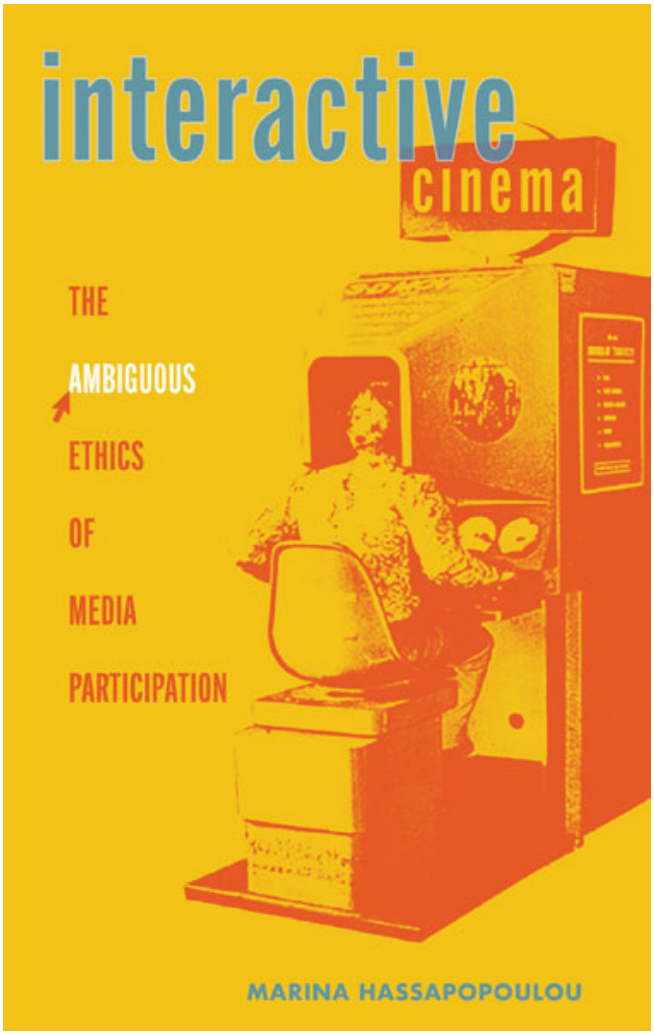
"Buried or cremated?" This question—about how I would like my upcoming experience to end—was posed to me at the 2017 New York Film Festival's Convergence program, a showcase for interactive storytelling. I was adjusting a headset in preparation to experiencing the virtual-reality film *Mule* (Guy Shelmerdine, 2017). As described in the program, the film narrates the final moments of a man's life. That man, it turns out, would be me—at least for its six-minute duration.

The film opens and I am naked, but in a body I do not recognize. I can look around the room and even spot another character, but I cannot move or say anything. Soon enough I have an overdose and then I'm in the hospital and eventually, in the crematory (since I picked the second option). I sense a kind of warmth enveloping my body as the body of the character I was visually and aurally inhabiting bursts up into flames. (I also have developed a migraine that I know will be hard to shake.)

Perhaps it was the film's short length, or my inability to affect its outcome beyond that initial decision, but I was left with a lackluster feeling of having interacted too little, having felt too little, and having paid the high price of an enduring headache. Once "inside" the narrative, it felt as though there was little to be done aside from orienting my gaze to explore the surroundings. In other words, it felt like any other film. But both the film and the program point to the promise of convergence, where media and subjectivity come together, each reacting to the other, becoming, in some sense, one.

If part of me did die that night in 2017—the part that was once curious and perhaps even excited about virtual-reality and interactive media—it rose back from the ashes while reading Marina Hassapopoulou's new book, *Interactive Cinema: The Ambiguous Ethics of Media Participation*. In what is sure to become a work of reference in digital-media scholarship, Hassapopoulou takes on the important task of both theorizing and historicizing interactivity in cinema while assessing the ethics of such practices. Her guiding impulse is to disrupt binary understandings of interactive cinema as either utopian or dystopian, liberating or controlling, pedagogical or manipulative, democratizing or tyrannical.



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Critical of the idea that the digital is *post*-cinema, Hassapopoulou presents a history of continuity from early film experimentations to the convergence of theory and practice in the field of cinema and media studies today. For her, to proclaim the death of cinema is to overlook the historical "ethos of multimedia practice and expanded cinema" that dates back to its origins (13). Thus, interactivity—here, understood in a continuum—offers an expansion of, not a replacement for, the cinematic medium and its scholarship. It begs new considerations of spectatorship, identification, phenomenology, narrative, agency, and ethics, to name a few important theoretical approaches to the field.

Although not the focus of its analysis, *Interactive Cinema* rewrites media history in its diverse and inclusive corpus, addressing texts produced beyond the presumed centers of cultural production (namely, the West) and by a diversity of artists. Throughout the book, Hassapopoulou replicates this democratizing impetus without giving in to the notion that interactivity in cinema necessarily leads to a more liberated subject. In fact, she reminds readers that, as with any medium and any technology, interactive cinema may just as well reproduce and reinforce structural inequalities, and that its history, as it has been told, often neglects such cases by bypassing textual analysis for the benefit of a technological orientation. Yet an account of the ethics and politics of representation in these texts is essential for assessing how interactivity may challenge structures of inequality often reproduced in the cinematic experience.

It is precisely the texts that challenge dominant modes of perception and of media analysis that most interest Hassapopoulou in her exploration of interactive cinema. Throughout the book, she adopts a multisensorial phenomenological approach that reminds readers of the centrality of her subjective experience of and circumstantial access to interactive media in her own analysis.

Fittingly, in the first chapter, she theorizes how and when interactive cinema can engage with all five senses, expanding the affective field of reception well beyond the traditional realms of sight and sound. If cinema has been regarded "as an instrument of realism from its inception" merely for its audiovisual qualities (49), the activation of unlikely senses such as touch, taste, and smell by interactive cinema serves to, instead, subvert bodily participation. For example, in Lynn Hershman Leeson's videodisc installation *Deep Contact* (1984–89), a woman invites viewers to touch her through the screen by selecting which parts of her body to interact with. Each interaction would unfold a different video, creating a unique experience responsive to the viewer's commands. By enabling the viewer to cross the threshold of passivity, *Deep Contact* exposes the voyeuristic qualities and traps of the film/video camera. Here, the moving image turns viewers into agents, eyes into hands, sight into touch, holding spectators accountable for the implications of their own gaze. In short, what Hassapopoulou finds to be most radical in interactive cinema is its potential to challenge the passivity often attributed to media consumption. Moreover, in its ability to compartmentalize and deliberately engage the senses, interactive cinema reveals and challenges the ways people "typically interact with the world" (106).

The interactive spectator is part of the text and its performative strategies. The text in turn can proceed only with and through interactivity. Yet control over the degree, intensity, and range of interactivity afforded to the viewer/user (or—a term Hassapopoulou favors—the "viewser") varies widely. In other words, practices of producing and consuming embedded in interactive media are never evenly distributed between text and user, and often reflect the sociohistorical context in which they are inserted. In the second chapter, Hassapopoulou's so-called hypercontextual approach roots interactive texts in their sociopolitical contexts, challenging technological determinism and transhistorical understandings of interactivity. The central piece of media in this chapter is the interactive Czech film *Kinoautomat: One Man and His House* (Radúz Činčera, 1967), first exhibited at Expo 67 in Montreal. Its screen performances, interrupted by a live mediator so viewers could vote on and decide crucial actions throughout the narrative, turned spectators into active participants.

Viewers' participation also involved engaging in debates about the ethical implications and narrative consequences of their forced intervention. Yet, as Hassapopoulou demonstrates, while audiences had the illusion of controlling the narrative, the film offered them only limited options. What's more, no matter their chosen path to get to the end, the outcomes were always the same. Here is where Hassapopoulou's hypercontextual approach offers a deep and rich analysis of the film as one informed by not just Czech cinema of the time, but also the nation's sociopolitical conditions. More than a technological limitation, the narrow choices offered to its audiences should be read alongside a socialist state suspicious of democratic processes. In that sense, the film's ethical dilemmas and the debates they generated were likely more relevant than audiences' collective decisions throughout the experience. Not only did the film promote social interaction and debates; it also, as Hassapopoulou puts it, trained participants to "think hypertextually and in terms of simultaneity," as a range of possibilities unfolded at each forking of the narrative (135).

While *Kinoautomat*'s structure was contingent on human deliberation and interaction with the text, Hassapopoulou turns, in the third chapter, to nonhuman agents of interactivity. Addressing examples of software-generated cinema, she homes in on the future of cinema, considering its employment of artificial intelligence. Hassapopoulou theorizes the notion of "procedural spectatorship," in which the viewser focuses on *how* the narrative is being told rather than on *what* is being narrated (190). Here Hassapopoulou discusses the generative and procedural nature of the series of software-generated films called Soft Cinema, which, through a process of automation, generate random outcomes from viewsers' interactions. As Hassapopoulou demonstrates, interactivity here has the tendency to gamify cinema, turning viewsers into cocreators of the developing project. The database-like operations of these works produce viewsers who "must sort through the narrative data . . . in order to piece together a coherent story line" (190). With their attention turned to the level of rhetoric, viewsers resist full immersion into the text and thus engage with the film's structural mechanisms—that is, how its database responds to their commands—and with the nature of the apparatus itself. For Hassapopoulou, the Soft Cinema series helps train its viewsers "in new modes of spectatorship and new modes of narrative and of affective subjectivity that correspond to the ways in which we interact with digital technologies" (203).

In her fourth and final chapter, Hassapopoulou addresses the ethical implications of interactivity. From the premise that both cinema and interactivity share a potential for "training and (re)conditioning their subjects" (217), Hassapopoulou explores how interactive media texts beg for a more nuanced approach than the binary of liberation and manipulation suggests, and highlights interactive cinema's potential to offer "a moral training ground" for critical users (227). Yet considerations over the morality of their interaction appear to be inversely proportional to the degree of their interactivity. If interactivity interrupts the comforts of passive spectatorship, it appears that the more a viewser interacts with the text, the less critical their interaction will be. To illustrate this, Hassapopoulou resorts to Stanton Audemars's controversial *Stockholm: An Exploration of True Love* (2009), which, through a point-of-view shot, positions the viewser as a kidnapper committing various forms of abuse and violence against a female hostage. The goal of having the victim fall in love with the unseen perpetrator of violence (embodied by the viewser) can be achieved only through the repetition of sadistic, violent acts such as gassing and raping—eventually producing a case of Stockholm syndrome. Thus, to win the game and see it through, one must presumably suspend one's own moral codes to repeatedly violate the fictional victim instead of choosing the morally righteous command of opening the door to set her free (and be met with a "Game Over" screen). As an extreme case, *Stockholm* helps delineate the ethics of interactivity: faced with such dilemmas, viewsers must recognize that they are already implicated in the violence by interacting with the text—a position starkly different from the traditional passivity of cinematic spectatorship.

As the book's chapters demonstrate, a diverse methodology is necessary to accommodate a diversity in media forms and reception contexts. Hassapopoulou tackles interactivity from a variety of angles with the help of approaches from cultural studies and digital humanities as well as close readings and narrative analysis. But throughout, she also highlights the significant practical challenges involved in the analysis of interactive media from a historical perspective. As with most projects of media archaeology, access to earlier interactive texts is severely curbed by faulty or altogether inexistent interfaces—from hardware to software—once central in the viewser's experience. Often, the archived versions of these texts produce glitches or can be accessed only through a remediated or entirely new interface. In short, not only its content, but many other components of interactive cinema, appear to be ephemeral. Yet Hassapopoulou makes this ephemerality a key part of her analysis by foregrounding the conditions (and limitations) of her own embodied experience of these texts. Each fleeting experience, enabled by specific technological and contextual conditions, becomes generative of a unique analysis.

Interactive Cinema is not only a valiant effort to expand the history and theory of cinema through the inclusion of its interactive dimensions, but also a plea for further attunement between scholarship and practices of (new) media preservation and remediation. More than documenting the existence of these diverse texts, Hassapopoulou offers in her analysis a reconsideration of film theory that disrupts its traditional ocularcentrism, and a recentering of a multisensorial viewser vacillating between different modes of interactivity, showing, after all, that "cinema has always been interactive" (15).

Bruno Guaraná: How did this project begin?

Marina Hassapopoulou: It began with a fascination with nontraditional and underdocumented forms of interactive cinema and participatory art. During my graduate studies, I took several courses in experimental media, new cinematic waves, and avant-garde art that enabled me to think

of cinema as an interconnected media landscape rather than a cohesive set of finite practices and technologies. My research often resembled a scavenger hunt for all these scattered interactive media, ranging from gallery and museum contexts to ephemeral expanded cinema, that, surprisingly, frequently used very similar rhetoric and techniques to challenge the alleged passivity of the mainstream viewer. I became inspired by pioneering multimedia artists who also published compelling practice-informed theoretical studies about interactivity—for example, Lynn Hershman Leeson and Toni Dove—and these theorist-practitioners served as a strong foundation for my own multimodal ways of writing. In fact, when I began writing my dissertation over a decade ago, it was originally in the form of a hypertextual blog because my research was so rhizomatic that it felt more organic to convey it in a form that was not hierarchical or teleological.

Guaraná: How do you define interactivity, and how does that definition inform your corpus?

Hassapopoulou: There is no singular definition of interactivity; that's why it is such a generative concept. My work approaches interactivity and, by extension, cinema through various lenses and specificities, including the technological, ecological, cultural, psychological, phenomenological, sociopolitical, ideological, and ethical. An expanded and plural understanding of cinema via the various possible definitions of interactivity provides the framework for studying different modes of human behavior, meaning making, community building, beyond-human ecologies, and citizenship formation across different contexts and cultures.

Guaraná: And what is cinematic about the interactive texts you analyze throughout the book?

Hassapopoulou: While my book begins with audiovisual time-based media as an initial criterion, the "cinematic" definition becomes more and more slippery and open-ended as Cartesian and Western normative sensory hierarchies get progressively dismantled. The cinematic definition—or rather, to use [Francesco] Casetti's term, *diffusion*—becomes even more complex when one considers cinema's various materialities; for instance, there is a focus in the book on CD-ROM cinema and early computer films, which expand not only how we think of cinema, but also how we think of digital cinema(s) in particular—that is, as multiphasic rather than monophasic. The multiple sensory, material, historical, and sociocultural lenses through which I approach interactive cinema ultimately demonstrate that, beyond its institutional presence, cinema was never a consistent or cohesive entity. Of course, I tried not to make the cinematic—and consequently, the interactive—vague to the point of obscurity; suffice it to say that every chapter offers new insights into what cinema, and interactivity, could be and what they do. In other words, the cinematic is reconfigured and diversified both ontologically and epistemologically as disciplinary boundaries collapse—for example, those between film studies, art history, sociology, and neuroscience.

Guaraná: What are the challenges in accessing and studying these ephemeral texts often dependent on similarly ephemeral platforms?

Hassapopoulou: Media ephemerality was often regarded by interactive artists as an inevitable and even welcome by-product of site-specific happenings—for example, in the 1950s; expanded cinema; and even early disc- and net-based interactive media art, from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Retrospectively, this ephemerality has had historiographic consequences because the scarcity in documentation, archiving, and conservation has created significant deficits in media archeology and the scholarly study of these innovative works. Therefore, a central preoccupation in the book is the issue of how to study and teach these ephemeral complex media when opportunities to (re)experience them are limited.

Guaraná: How have you attempted to replicate the interactive experience of historical media texts when their original interfaces have either not survived or evolved into different forms?

Hassapopoulou: Initially, as a graduate student with limited funds and access, I was making my own screen recordings and taking screen shots for my research blog, not knowing that some of those DIY low-quality media would be some of the few remaining digital traces of documentation now—for instance, of some now obsolete Flash and QuickTime interactive movies. Over a decade ago, I launched the Interactive Media Archive, which has grown into a repository of student projects dedicated to ephemeral and site-specific media, as well as Media Archeology projects where my students work with nearly obsolete CD/DVD-ROMs from the 1990s to the early 2000s and their new emulators that my department [the New York University Department of Cinema Studies] has created using low-budget and open-source technology. When I started working at NYU, I was fortunate enough to gain access to more resources and research funding, so I began our interactive multimedia collection, which has now grown into a robust archive of rare media.

This proactive attitude became especially useful during the pandemic era of remote teaching, where my students and I could not have direct access to the media, so remote access to our emulators had to be figured out. Furthermore, I have organized several events over the years featuring pioneering interactive artists and some live restagings of interactive cinema—for example, of some of the first AI interactive documentaries from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. As a means of preserving those tributes to the original ephemeral media, recordings of the events and performances are included on the NYU Cinema Studies Vimeo channel. By the time this interview is published, I will be launching the refurbished version of my original research blog, which is called InterArchive, with new content and submissions from cultural institutions, archives, and artists featured in the book and beyond. The makeshift, open-ended, and low-budget means of collectively creating, documenting, curating, and analyzing ephemeral media is appropriate, given the informal and ad hoc conditions through which many of the projects came to exist in the first place.

Guaraná: How does interactivity reconfigure or expand traditional and sight-centric models of spectatorship?

Hassapopoulou: The broad scope of interactive examples included in the book, particularly in the chapter focused on the senses, is meant to provoke reflection on the pervasiveness of long-standing sensory hierarchies not only in modes of spectatorship and film scholarship, but also as this pervasiveness relates to a broader history of the philosophy and cultural incorporation of the different senses in mainly Cartesian and Western terms. In a way, interactivity works against the implicit regime of vision to reconfigure the human and posthuman/nonhuman sensorium. Through interactivity, I not only reconfigure and/or expand normative and traditional models of spectatorship but also extend the corpus of film and media theory to include the more critically marginalized senses such as smell and taste. The sensory focus proposes new ways of thinking about the screen–spectator relationship as my analysis of interactivity progresses from "external"—outer physical and social—to "internal"—cognitive and psychological—considerations.

Guaraná: Are viewsers emancipated spectators, or is their control mostly a gimmick or an illusion of interactive cinema?

Hassapopoulou: I use the rather reductive portmanteau *viewser—viewer* plus *user*—throughout my work to signal the hybrid and shifting status of the more conventional viewer, while at the same time highlighting the persistence of long-standing Western paradigms of visuality even as the lines between consumers and producers continue to blur. In the book, I provide examples to cover the whole spectrum—from emancipation to manipulation—without easily settling on absolute binaries or polar opposites. On one level, how interactive a viewser is in certain contexts is for the reader to decide, while on another level, I want my readers to question how much agency they—we—actually have in the world.

Guaraná: How central should the embodied experience of the scholar be in their critical assessment of interactive cinema experiences?

Hassapopoulou: The embodied experience of the scholar is crucial, and so is transparency regarding that subjectivity. I use the first person frequently in describing my own interactions with the media featured in the book, and I try to leave my interpretation open-ended enough to accommodate other possible meanings besides my own. I also find it very important for scholars to acknowledge gaps and fragments in their research, and I resist the compulsion to turn those aporias into definitive conclusions. Unfortunately, many subjective early accounts of now obsolete interactive media have become either "facts" or crucial omissions in retrospective historicization due to a lack of primary media access and adequate documentation. Through my own projects, including InterArchive, as well as my collaborative media archeology and preservation work, I hope that my readers will at least be able to experience for themselves some facets of the media covered in the book and not just take my word for it.

On another, equally important note, embodied experience becomes particularly important to acknowledge in the parts where I discuss virtual ethics and controversial interactivity from my own gendered perspective as a woman; my transparency about my own bias is not to stereotype or essentialize a particular gendered (or other) position, but to carve out new paths for, let's say, female-produced work that has something to offer beyond feminist expectations.

Guaraná: What kind of technology was employed in the original performances of Radúz Činčera's *Kinoautomat*, and what is the significance of this text in the history of interactive cinema?

Hassapopoulou: The technology employed in the original Expo 67 performances of *Kinoautomat* was quite cutting-edge not just for that era, but for any time. The theater

was equipped with custom electronic voting consoles, and the viewer's color-coded votes—red or green—were displayed along the periphery of the screen and then calculated to determine the majority vote. In more-conventional theaters, including at some late-1960s to early-1970s screenings in Prague, and also at most revived festival screenings in the 2000s, the voting was done manually, using color-coded cards.

Kinoautomat is important not only in the history of interactive cinema, but also in that it provides the backbone for a methodology on rediscovering—or, as I call it, digitally "excavating"—and studying ephemeral interactive media. The fragmentary rediscovery of *Kinoautomat* has enabled me to formulate a hybrid methodology that takes into consideration the instability of a film's reception contexts and its changing materiality, considering how such aspects problematize a retrospective analysis of multimedia as a stable object and field of study. The forward-thinking aspects of early forms of predigital interactive media like *Kinoautomat* have the potential to make significant intellectual contributions to current digital humanities debates on topics such as machinic intelligence, gender and technology, and mediated memory. Predigital and early electronic interactive films such as *Kinoautomat* serve as reminders that the "digital" as a concept and ethos actually consists of multiple phases of so-called evolution and is not limited to a particular software/hardware or (im)materiality.

Guaraná: What is Soft Cinema, and how does it nurture the emergence of what you call procedural spectatorship?

Hassapopoulou: The term *Soft Cinema* basically means software-generated cinema, though that definition can now be expanded to include generative AI and so on. It became popular in the early 2000s when Lev Manovich and Andreas Kratky plus others collaborated on Soft Cinema, a series of algorithmic cinematic experiments as part of the 2002–3 "Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film" exhibition at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. My first introduction to Soft Cinema was when I visited the ZKM a few years later for research, and then purchased the PAL disc version that generates recombinatory films using samples from an audiovisual and textual database. The original Soft Cinema projects are experimental software-generated films that are assembled and reassembled through seemingly random and "live" selections and combinations of discrete audio, visual, and/or textual tracks. During a Soft Cinema experience, the element of unpredictability that is part of cinematic pleasure lies in the recombination of discrete elements—audio, visuals, text, and so on—and the unexpected ways in which the software stitches those elements together; it is essentially a more "posthuman" twist on "suture," adapted to algorithmic aesthetics and database operations while the viewser remains productively unsutured.

Soft Cinema exemplifies the notion of procedural spectatorship, which refers to process-based and beyond-ocular-centric—and also beyond-anthropocentric—spectatorship that more fittingly describes the modes of subjectivity that emerge and are shaped from our interactions with digital code. Some of the Soft Cinema projects I analyze—namely, *Absences*—more resemble what at the turn of the century was envisioned as the new computational avant-garde, while others—particularly my favorite, *Mission to Earth*—have humanistic rather than computational concerns at their core. Just like *Kinoautomat* in the previous chapter, Soft Cinema is important in fleshing out a particular adaptable hybrid methodology. My approach to Soft Cinema in the book suggests that, while the computational layer is significant to interactive-media analysis and now also within the digital humanities, I find it more productive to fuse, rather than replace, long-standing methodologies, such as close readings, narrative analysis, and cultural studies, with newer distant-reading, data-oriented, and macroanalytical approaches to moving images.

Guaraná: What kinds of ethical dilemmas does a viewser face when engaging with a project like Stanton Audemars's *Stockholm*? What is subversive or even transformative about these controversial works?

Hassapopoulou: *Stockholm* is a gamification of the Stockholm syndrome, where the viewser has to use specific combinations of manipulation tactics in the form of commands to get a kidnapped girl to fall in love with them and thus experience in an embodied way the psychological phenomenon of the Stockholm syndrome. The viewser's dilemma is whether to play the game by its sadomasochistic rules and thus bypass ethical and representational issues, or refuse to interact and thus not view the film at all. *Stockholm* and other controversial interactive films have been banned from websites like Amazon and gaming platforms like Steam, and yet they are no more explicit than, say, the critically acclaimed *Irreversible* [2002], by Gaspar Noé, or Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* [2003]—the difference being that their interactivity controversially turns the viewer/voyeur into an active participant in the on-screen performance of taboos. In other words, by implicating the viewser in the

kidnapping and subsequent molestation of the female victim, the film creates not only a "perverse spectator" (in Janet Staiger's terms) but also a willingly participatory instigator of the spectacle. The strong reactions that *Stockholm* has provoked speak to its mimetic potency. This and other examples in the book illustrate that—despite their unconventional approaches to filmmaking—interactive works are still, to some extent, assessed by mimetic criteria and measured against standards for ethical cinematic representation when it comes to depicting sensitive issues related to sexuality, gender, and violence.

In order to consider their transformative potential, if any, I shift the focus not to what they are about, but to the impact of their interactive mechanisms on viewser psychology and epistemology. This gives me a pretext to introduce to younger readers theorists that were foundational to my own path, such as Janet Murray, and in particular her argument that game playing can help us become aware of hidden parts of ourselves and thus lead to possible transformative breakthroughs. Of course, I had to make it clear in the book that this is not to suggest that in the case of *Stockholm* viewsers can explore the rapist within them; instead, in agreement with Murray's rationale, I'm suggesting that video-game mechanics can epistemologically immerse the viewser so deeply into a specific POV scenario that this change in perspective can stimulate moral and existential questions—though not necessarily a moral *shift*. This final chapter is one that I would particularly like my readers to discuss, debate, and get angry about!

Guaraná: What is your next project about?

Hassapopoulou: The research and practical aspects of the book have helped me branch out into other directions. In a way, I now get to do all the other projects I couldn't quite fit into the scope of a single book. Besides the aforementioned InterArchive project, I have a digital interactive project collaboration with Erik Loyer who, among many other things, has turned Anne Friedberg's book *The Virtual Window* into an interactive version and was one of my inspirations for experimenting with multimedia scholarship even before it was considered a legit and respectable form of academic writing in the humanities. We want to play around with different experimental and subjective ways of remediating some of the ephemeral media featured in the book to propose new ways of accessing obsolete media that will be both creative and practical. I consider the book and its extensions as the beginning of a larger media ecosystem that will eventually include access to more-detailed media documentation and emulators, and a scalable infrastructure that will host multiple collaborative experiments with media preservation and remediation. So as you can imagine, besides the creative and exciting aspects, my next project is about finding sources of funding and writing a bunch of grant applications, which are par for the course.

Another project I am always working on, with the valuable assistance of my PhD advisee, Da Ye Kim, is ExpressiveAI.net, which is a growing resource of cinematic experiments with AI, as well as relevant events, including the aforementioned restaging of early AI documentaries at NYU, together with preservation initiatives and a bibliography. Thanks to ExpressiveAI.net and the first symposium I organized focusing on the forgotten histories of AI interactive cinema, as well as to how "trendy" AI is becoming everywhere including academia, I am involved in some new projects regarding AI ethics and AI creativity. Given the nature of my work, I believe that my postbook projects should be public, open access, and take on multiple forms besides print.

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