



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

# Contemporaneity

Vol 10, No 1 (2025) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2025.347  
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

## **Historical Presence and Immersive Technologies**

Between Repair and Rewriting of Visual Memory

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### **About the Author**

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# Historical Presence and Immersive Technologies

## Between Repair and Rewriting of Visual Memory

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The notion of *historical presence* in visual studies has traditionally been constituted through a representational regime based on static media—textual, iconographic, photographic—designed to mediate the temporal distance between observer and event. The emergence of immersive technologies radically reconfigures this paradigm, transforming historical engagement from an act of interpretation into a mediated experience. This epistemological shift raises questions about the extent to which immersion constitutes an extension of historical presence rather than a hypermediated simulation of it.<sup>1</sup>

The emblematic case of digital reconstructions of destroyed archaeological sites, such as the 3D modeling of Palmyra, exemplifies the dialectic between the *repair* and *rewriting* of memory.<sup>2</sup> Here, the notion of historical presence refers to how the past becomes experientially accessible in the present, through technologically mediated forms. Repairing memory in this context does not mean restoring it to an original, unbroken state, but rather creating conditions in which historical continuity can be reestablished despite material loss. Immersive reconstructions allow for the reactivation of collective memory by substituting digitally embodied experience for physical absence. The immersive rendering invites users to *stand within* a lost historical site, fostering a sensory proximity to the past. This spatial and perceptual immediacy does not simply restore a damaged monument; it generates a new kind of historical relationship, one shaped by technological authorship and user engagement. In this approach, conservation is no longer passive preservation but an active, generative engagement with memory—through digital means—that is capable of shaping how the past is visualized and felt. On the other hand, immersive reconstructions inevitably involve curatorial decisions, interpolations, and visual interpretations that reshape what is remembered and how.

The issue of authenticity thus becomes less about truth and more about the parameters by which historical plausibility is constructed. As Lev Manovich notes, digital media operate according to a database logic, privileging modularity, selection, and recombination over fixed narrative structure.<sup>3</sup> This logic further complicates the notion of authenticity by foregrounding the constructed nature of immersive environments.

Another significant example is *CARNE y ARENA*, a mixed-reality installation that immerses the viewer in the experience of crossing the United States–Mexico border. Unlike traditional historical reconstructions, the piece does not depict a specific event but instead composes a sensory landscape drawn from real-life testimonies of migrants.<sup>4</sup> Visitors walk barefoot on sand in a large, empty room while wearing a VR headset; through sound, temperature changes, and spatial immersion, they become part of an unfolding, fragmented narrative. The installation evokes fear, disorientation, and vulnerability, foregrounding the emotional and embodied dimensions of historical engagement. *CARNE y ARENA* thus exemplifies how immersive technologies displace the locus of historical presence from representation to experience. Rather

<sup>1</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>2</sup> "Experience Ancient Palmyra in 360° and in 3D," Pergamon Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, <https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/experience-ancient-palmyra-in-360-and-in-3d/>.


<sup>3</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001), 218.

<sup>4</sup> Alejandro G. Iñárritu, *CARNE y ARENA (Virtually present, Physically invisible)*, 2017, <https://phi.ca/en/carne-y-arena/>.

than conveying factual accuracy, it stages a subjective, affect-driven encounter with memory, one that blurs the lines between historical witnessing and simulated proximity.

It becomes evident that the debate on historical presence in the digital age must go beyond the binary of true versus false. Instead, it should interrogate the new forms of historical subjectivity that immersion enables. Rather than repairing or rewriting memory in any definitive sense, VR transforms it into a space of negotiation, where history, technology, and the body intersect. This intersection demands renewed critical attention to the ethics, authorship, and affective dimensions of how the past is made present.

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