

## The European Topos: An Archaeological Exploration of Decolonial Aesthetics in Immersive Media

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### ABSTRACT

There is an unexplored synergy between the ways media archaeology and decolonial theory handle the notion of modernity. Both consider modernity as happening at different places and at different times: modernity is an event that is larger than Europe or the United States. Using this resonance, this article will make a media archaeological reading of the decolonial theorists, Walter D. Mignolo and Santiago Castro-Gomez's concept, "the zero point." The zero point will be read as a media topos present throughout the immersive media that grounds much western media history and visual culture. Finally, based on these criticisms, this article will offer an alternative starting point based in the imaginary media of Adolfo Bioy Casares' novel, *The Invention of Morel*. The goal of this intervention is to demonstrate the way the western paradigm of technology has imperialized the imaginations of the world and to offer another place for media artists and technologists to begin from.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Comparative Literature scholar, Sarah Ann Wells, notes in her book *Media Laboratories: Late Modernist Authorship in South America* that the imaginary media we might find in fiction could help us ask speculative questions about the contemporary technological paradigm: "what if a medium had developed an alternate trajectory?"<sup>1</sup> I'd like to propose that the imaginary media found in the magical realism of Adolfo Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel* might be one of those alternate trajectories through which to rethink our technological assumptions.<sup>2</sup> Using Casares' imaginary media as a foundation, this essay will build some orienting thoughts that media archaeology can use to engage with colonialism at the intersection of science and art.

Over the last few decades, questions concerning "modernity" have become increasingly relevant. As Walter D. Mignolo explains, the belief in only one modernity has become unsustainable—modernity is not singular, but instead it is plural and multifarious.<sup>3</sup> The relationship of modernity to its post-, alter-, a-, un-, anti- prefixes is being explored by many thinkers. The work of Bruno Latour, for example, offers many interesting insights concerning the grounding of the idea of "modernity" as it relates to science and technology. However, the work of decolonial theorists in parallel with media archaeologists offer a different approach to the question of "modernity": not "what is modernity," but "where is modernity?"

There is an unexplored synergy between the ways media archaeology, especially that of Siegfried Zielinski, Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka and the decolonial theory of Walter D. Mignolo and Santiago Castro-Gomez handle the notion of modernity. Both consider “modernity” as happening at different places and different times—an event that is larger than Europe. Combining these insights provides a new opportunity to rethink political and media histories together. With this pairing, it is no longer, as Zielinski says, only about the intersection of art, science, and culture. De-linking media histories from only Western sources is one step in subverting the larger epistemic hierarchy. Using this confluence of insight between media archaeology and decolonial theory, this project seeks to perform a topological analysis of the technologies of colonialism and their material manifestations, namely what Santiago Castro-Gomez calls the hubris of the zero point. This topological analysis will focus on building a comparative and critical catalog by which alternative starting points for media cultures and artistic praxis.

Adolfo Bioy Casares’ *Invention of Morel* is a short novel told from the perspective of an unnamed fugitive who is on the run. The novel is told in the form of journal entries with each entry unfolding more of the unusual story. Each entry gives a bit more of the story away to readers in increasingly detailed entries noting the daily goings on of a fugitive living out the rest of his days in seclusion on what he assumed was an uninhabited island. Much to his surprise, the Fugitive begins seeing others on the island inhabiting what had been a previously empty Museum. The Fugitive makes a habit of spying on the others inhabiting the island with him. The fugitive fixates specifically on a woman, Faustine, and her partner, Morel. As the journal entries progress, the Fugitive’s scopophilic relationship turns romantic and he falls in love with Faustine from afar. The fugitive never directly engages with Faustine in fear of being identified as a criminal and being sent to prison.

Things get increasingly interesting when the Fugitive notices that one day, the island’s inhabitants, including Morel and Faustine, just vanish. The fugitive comes up with a number of theories, but he inevitably moves to investigate the museum the others on the island were inhabiting. The mystery of the novel comes to a head when Faustine, Morel, and the others suddenly reappear. The Fugitive eavesdrops on a meeting where Morel reveals his endgame. In their time on the island, Morel has been using a machine to record and preserve the group for eternity. It dawns on the Fugitive that his fellow island inhabitants are, in fact, dead and what he is seeing are recordings of their “perfect week” on the island projected and overlaying the island’s natural features exactly.

*The Invention of Morel* concludes with the Fugitive learning the inner workings of Morel’s machine so that he can super-impose his being into Morel’s perfect week snapshot. The Fugitive “hacks” the machine and inserts himself into the narrative that Morel and Faustine inhabit. For example, he poses himself into scenes with Faustine and makes it appear as if they are together and in love. However, his hacking doesn’t quite work the way he wants it to: he becomes trapped in the machine and the book concludes with a plea for someone to fix his mistakes so that he can be with Faustine.

There’s definitely a hellish quality to experimentally preserving your body into a machine and then accidentally stranding yourself from your actual object of desire for eternity. Despite all that goes wrong, there’s an incredibly interesting and uncanny technological imaginary operating out of *The Invention of Morel*. Morel explains that the machine will record and reproduce the group in their entirety with no exceptions.

Until recently science had been able to satisfy only the senses of sight and hearing, to compensate for spatial and temporal absences... With my machine

person or an animal or a thing is like the station that broadcast the concert you hear on the radio. If you turn the dial for the olfactory waves, you will smell the jasmine perfume on Madeleine's throat, without seeing her. By turning the dial of the tactile waves, you will be able to stroke her soft, invisible hair and learn, like the blind, to know things by your hands...but if you turn all the dials at once, Madeleine will be reproduced completely, and she will appear exactly as she is.<sup>4</sup>

In one sense, Morel's machine is a conglomeration of photograph and phonograph for the entire being and the entire landscape. In the novel he notes that the machine records and reproduces the sun, a point which confuses the narrator and reader alike until the reveal at the end of the book. However, what's absolutely essential is the insistence that what is reproduced is a real reconstituted person that only lives as long as the machine is turned on.

This imaginary media expressed in Casares' work strikes a note of the uncanny—Morel's machine does not just reproduce the simulation of the Island's inhabitants, it reproduces them bodily and geographically. The technological imaginary behind Casares' narrative notes technological assumptions departing into an alternative modernity that negotiates the technological presence and reproduction of the body in a place. The reproduction of bodies in their corporeality and contextual uniqueness is quite different when held in contrast to the technological imaginary of the European perspective.

## MAPS & ATLASES

In 2016, at the Art Gallery at the College of Staten Island, I gave a gallery talk for a short piece I wrote in the catalog of an art exhibition called "Can a Line Define?" The exhibition investigated the ways that space is created and given definitive characteristics through the sometimes arbitrarily created borders and maps.

One of the most provoking pieces in this exhibition came from two video artists from Vietnam called Le Brothers. Their video work deals with the ideas of national borders and what it meant to transgress those borders. Their video piece *The Bridge 1* engages playfully with the former borders of north and south Vietnam. *The Bridge 1* features a compilation of shots of the brothers running across a bridge that once separated the country into a definitive north and south. The piece functions on multiple levels, though one interpretation suggests that the video acts as a meditation about the banality of borders: what was impassable can now be ran across and transgressed. After participating in this show and confronting this piece, in particular, I wondered how these lines are made and decided? Who can make a border and through what media do these borders manifest through?

Through investigating decolonial literature and media archaeology, it is apparent that the creation of nomological borders is something characteristic of the epistemology of colonialism. Even more, this colonial logic of borders can crystallize into, what the media archaeologist, Erikki Huhtamo has called a "topos," or a theme that persists throughout the technological imaginations of the West.<sup>5</sup> Briefly, in this section, I will do a media archaeological reading of Walter Mignolo and Santiago Castro-Gomez's decolonial epistemology and what they call "the hubris of the zero point" this analysis will draw out the connections between nomological boarders and the media of early modern Europe.

There are certainly different possible starting points for this project, but one possible suggestion, found in Mignolo's book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, is the Treaty of Tordesillas(1494). This treaty was negotiated by Pope Alexander VI. The goal of these negotiations was to settle a dispute between Spain and Portugal concerning who owned what of

the “new world.” This historical example partially answers the question I posed at the beginning of this section—who can make a border: The Pope! The authority of a Pope to make a defining statement about a continuous imaginary line across the face of the “globe” is, of course, pretty questionable to us because of the secularizing force of modernity, however this authority was, at the time, completely legitimate in European terms in the sense it is an authority that rests on a divine epistemology.<sup>6</sup>

These preliminary answers, however, provoke even deeper and harder to untangle assumptions. Technically speaking, tracing a line across the globe is easy enough—we rely on gridded cartographical system reinforced by satellite imaging in our daily life. Though for the colonizers of Europe, the Treaty of Tordesillas materialized cartographically in Abraham Ortelius’ *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570). Ortelius’ work is what many consider to be one of the first modern atlases.

*Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* or the *Theatre of the World* is notable because it’s an early elaboration of visual globalization. In the atlas, we see one of the first top-down representations of the earth. Mignolo notes that this new representation is relevant because it is an abstraction of the Earth that detaches the observer’s body from place. In Mignolo’s words, the observer is “above” the earth and can map the world with the Atlantic, not the Pacific, at its center. The *new nomos* of the earth comes with a *new observer and a new epistemic foundation*.<sup>7</sup> This “new observer” is characteristic of what both Mignolo and Castro-Gomez call “the hubris of the zero point.”<sup>8</sup> In this formulation “hubris” refers to the arrogance of assuming a zero point — or objective— view of the world.

Elaborating on the imaginary function of cartography a bit more, the contemporary German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk says,

European merchants and heroes set off to ‘take’ distant points on the globe, they could only make their decisions in so far as the globalized local space had already been conceived as homogeneous, open and passable outside.<sup>9</sup>

In these comments, it is clear that the map functions as both a technology of colonialism in so far as it expresses the possibility of colonization and “discovery.” Even more, Sloterdijk’s words resonate with Mignolo and Castro-Gomez’ in that the map operates at the imaginary intersections of science, culture, and politics. A space can only be taken if that space is outside civilization proper and unclaimed. These operations all rely on a perspectival technology by which the world can even be objectively represented as planispheric. “Imperialism is applied planimetry...”<sup>10</sup>

The hubris of the zero point expresses the mythology of the universal, neutral, transparent, western knowing subject.<sup>11</sup> The zero point is an epistemic assumption that puts the United States, Canada, and Europe at the center while subordinating other countries and individuals. This epistemic grounding is an expression of the Cartesian mind-body split running wild throughout western imaginations. It posits that intellect and reason are disembodied and disconnected from local spaces.

## **ZERO POINT AS MEDIA TOPOS**

Castro-Gomez and Mignolo recognize the hubris of the zero point as a discursive hierarchy that reproduces itself in the material reality of colonialism as well in colonizing subjects. Taking these insights a step further, media archaeology, practiced alongside decolonial theory, can be a platform to make some observations about the ways colonial epistemology enters into our imaginations and into material culture. Briefly, before I return to Casares’ alternative starting

point for media, I'd like to make an analysis of the zero point as a media topos. Laying out this topos is helpful so the novelty of what follows can be recognized.

The term "topos" in this usage is a rhetorical tool that notes the thematic transmission of rhetorical form and contents through history. The media theorist, Errki Huhtamo, is responsible for the proliferation of this term in Media Archaeology. Huhtamo explains that topoi are "...stereotypical formula evoked over and over again in different guises and for varying purposes... Cultural desires are expressed by being embedded [within] topoi."<sup>12</sup> One of Huhtamo's best topos analyses focuses on the reoccurrence of "peeping media."

Huhtamo explores the topos of "peeping" throughout 500 years or so of media history noting the particular cultural meanings behind the Nickelodeon, peep show, the *camera obscura*, and many more. Picking up on peeping as topos, I'd like to suggest that the zero point—the objective and neutral technology of looking—is itself a topos that manifests through media cultures and has a great deal in common with peeping. While the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* is probably not the first expression of the zero point in material media culture, it is worth recognizing as embodying the characteristics of the zero point quite well. It is a map made up of an imaginary objective perspective used to administrate the geo- and bio- politics of other countries ranked lower in racial and political hierarchies.

Using *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* as a jumping off point, we can start to think through the ways other optical media express perspective in ways that are supposedly neutral. Picking back up on Huhtamo's notes on peeping, optical media that engage the eye first, engaging one's mental faculties and imaginations while severing the rest of the body away may be expressions of the zero point in material culture. Peeping media assumes that the experience of the "I" happens in the mind of the spectator and not in the bodily engagement of situations and stimuli. To demonstrate this point thoroughly, I'd like to draw out three case studies. These case studies will elucidate the connection between the topos of peeping and of the zero point in history and contemporary media culture.

1. **Camera Obscura** - The *Camera Obscura* is a perspective machine that is an artistic and technological linchpin for optical media in Europe. Though the Camera Obscura first emerged in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was based on optical principles already established in ancient China.<sup>13</sup> In Huhtamo's words,

The camera obscura may have been a tool for "disinterested" perspectival imaging or astronomical observation, but it also became associated with surveillance and sexual voyeurism, developing into a hideaway for the unseen peeper.<sup>14</sup>

That the Camera Obscura is associated with the affect of disinterest and surveillance helps round out some of the zero point characteristics. The outward facing lens of the *Camera Obscura* is the definition of a border: on the one side the outside world and on the other the world becomes fragmented, separate, and decontextualized.

It is helpful to think of the *Camera Obscura* as a McLuhanian moment *par excellence* in that it is an example of the self-amputational aspect of media. Relying on the deeper history of Freud's analysis on the technical alteration of the human being's sense perception, McLuhan sees media as extending or amputating the extent of one's sense perception. The *Camera Obscura* demonstrates the amputation of all senses but the visual. Removing one's bodily "thereness" from the equation of seeing makes experience detached and disinterested.

2. *Vue d'optique* - Huhtamo notes the popularity of a particular type of peep show in continental Europe: *Vue d'optique* or The Perspective View.<sup>15</sup> The Perspective View was a lensed apparatus that one would look through to see an etching of a European scene. Many of the etchings in these apparatuses depict depth illusion scenes of cities, churches, palaces, mythological moments, battles and so on.<sup>16</sup> Huhtamo takes special care also to note that the scenes depicted are almost always European in their content. Huhtamo asks “Why were there relatively few *vues d'optique* with non-European subject matter?”<sup>17</sup> One possibility, is that there is “...a certain lameness of imagination, an unwillingness to break out from a rather conventional and restricted geographical mindset.”<sup>18</sup> The Perspective View, in practice, was a cultural device for the public consumption in saloons and touring showmen to give their audiences a “virtual voyaging medium.”<sup>19</sup>

In light of these cultural notes, it seems like peeping media are good places to start the investigation of the zero point topos. For the public consumers of these devices, they gave a “virtual” experience out of time, space, and context. One could have experiences through these devices that categorized optical and mental stimuli above other sensory possibilities. The zero point topos engages users in an immersive media experience, but this immersion makes continues to assume that to know and become immersed in an experience is a primarily ocular experience and in which the user’s body is not necessary.

3. **Playstation VR** - From here, we can draw other observations about contemporary peeping media that engage a similar sensory regime. It would be hard to deny that the perspective designed in oculus rift or Playstation VR share a very similar logic and ergonomic experience with Huhtamo’s peep media, especially the Perspective View. They both engage the user through and optical interface with lenses and depth perception.

Interestingly enough, in popular titles for Playstation’s VR, like *Skyrim VR*, the zero point perspective becomes marginally explicated in the jarring experience of the medium. For example, The map feature in *Skyrim* deploys the zero point perspective that has come to be expected from maps in general.

However, in the VR iteration of the game, the player is put in a peculiar perspective hovering over the map that one may feel vertigo. When the player looks down, it appears that they are suspended over the *Skyrim* map in an extremely Borgesian fashion: the map is both an exact representation of the *Skyrim* world. This perspective paired with the technique of depth perception gives the player an uneasy and overwhelmed feeling. Are you still your character? Are you floating? Falling? The disembodiment that is characteristic of the zero point is explicated from the usual experience by the visceral experience of losing one’s body and being disoriented by the illusions of space. In this example, the zero point topos doubles over on itself. Because, the player actually has a body the player feels just how peculiar the zero point really is!

## ALTERNATE TRAJECTORIES

The zero point as a media topos has an identifiable past of slow sedimentations influenced by epistemological, material, and political factors. The universalizing perspective itself has been universalized technologically, and its detection largely goes unnoticed. However, the power of imaginary media is that it is an open understanding of history—if we find fault or limitations in what we have, we can always go back and look for do-overs.

The technological imaginary at work in Casares’ *The Invention of Morel* is striking because it carries a lot of the latent ideas of VR/AR, but without the detached zero point peep perspective. For example, when Morel reveals the intricacy of the device we see something similar to what the

VR artist, Michael Naimark, calls navigational interactivity.<sup>20</sup> Navigational Interactivity is part of a taxonomizing effort to layout intensities of interactivity in VR/AR. Navigational interactivity denotes the ability to move throughout a VR/AR space freely, but you can't affect anything—like a ghost. Navigational interactivity maps perfectly onto *The Invention of Morel*. The Fugitive even hypothesizes at one point that he's dead and Morel, Faustine, and the rest are all still living.

Contrasting the technological imaginary of the reproduction of life through media in *The Invention of Morel* with the zero point topos characterizes what could be a different starting point for artists, technologists, and inventors working in immersive media fields like VR/AR. The trends emerging from these fields focus heavily on the relationship between “immersion” and the eye whereas *The Invention of Morel* suggests that what it means to reproduce an event is to simulate actual bodies in actual space. Even more, it is worth noting that the reproduction projecting from Morel's machine is linked to the space the machine sits.

While the conclusion of *The Invention of Morel* is not a positive one, it does offer a variant in the conceptualization of immersion: it establishes an immersive paradigm of bodies in space and place, rather than simply eyes peeping through lenses. Casares points us in a direction away from only the field of perception and vision and toward the reproductions of smell, touch, and presence. Even more, Morel's invention records everything—human and non-human alike—so that his reproduced immortal bodies cannot be severed from the environment of the island. Within the fiction of the text, we might even draw the conclusion that it is impossible to move the machine and project it in another location. Doing so would mean to geographies existing one space, which seems impossible. The imaginary media of Adolfo Bioy Casares is an immersive media that is contextualized and materialized with bodily particularity and geographical specificity.

At the end of Siegfried Zielinski's *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as entr'actes in history*, he notes an emerging uniformity in media culture. Zielinski says, “My plea for the arts, pictures, and sounds in the age of advanced audio visions is emphatically to work on the strengths of diversity.”<sup>21</sup> This plea is made to note the possibility of media artistic practice outside of the hegemony of either digital or analog. It seems like the zero point has played a part in that uniformity in so far as it has integrated a political perspective into our media of seeing and hearing. To find experimental routes around the zero point, we will have to look for sources, like Casares' *The Invention of Morel* that can suggest alternative starting points. Engaging with more diverse sources of imaginary media can help us ask more probing questions into the hegemony of our socio-political order and find other strata under the assumed bedrock of media history.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Ann Wells. *Media Laboratories: Late Modernist Authorship in South America*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017. pg. 136

<sup>2</sup> Adolfo Bioy Casares. *The Invention of Morel*. New York: New York Review, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Mignolo. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159-81. doi:10.1177/0263276409349275.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, *The Pleasures of the Peephole: An Archaeological Exploration of Peep Media* in *The Book of imaginary media: excavating the dream of the ultimate communication medium*. Ed. Kluitenberg, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006. Pg. 77

<sup>6</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pg 79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Sloterdijk. *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015. pg. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Walter D. Mignolo. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159-81. doi:10.1177/0263276409349275.

<sup>12</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, *Dismantling The Fairy Engine in Media archaeology: approaches, applications, and implications*. Ed. Huhtamo, Parikka. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. pg. 28

<sup>13</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, *The Pleasures of the Peephole: An Archaeological Exploration of Peep Media*, Pg. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Naimark. "VR Interactivity – Michael Naimark – Medium." Medium. October 17, 2016. Accessed January 31, 2018. <https://medium.com/@michaelnaimark/vr-interactivity-59cd87ef9b6c>.

<sup>21</sup> Siegfried Zielinski. *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr'actes in History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999. pg. 291.