

Intermediality and New Metaphors for Plastic Pollution in the VR

Project Ripple: The Unintended Life of Plastics in the Sea (2019)

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Abstract

The image of the plastic island—which has been reproduced across different media—has become iconic of plastic pollution as we know it. Scientists, however, argue that the garbage island is a myth that obscures the actual distribution of plastic in the ocean (Eriksen 2017). As a hyperobject (Morton 2013), plastic is distributed at large spatiotemporal scales and in ways that can be difficult to imagine. Taking as a case study the project *Ripple: The Unintended Life of Plastics in the Sea* (2019), this paper explores how virtual reality technology can provide affordances for creating new, science-based metaphors for marine plastic pollution. This virtual reality project is an intermedial work that brings together Mandy Barker’s photography, music, voice-over narrations, and digital technology. My interest is twofold: first, I will examine the intermedial relations between words, images, and music within the digital media product *Ripple*; second, I will employ the theoretical-methodological framework of intermedial ecocriticism (Bruhn 2021; Bruhn and Salmose 2023) to analyse the transfer of scientific knowledge about plastic pollution from scientific media to this artistic digital work. The paper will show that (1) the artistic VR project *Ripple* conveys the spatial distribution of plastic in the ocean in a new, immersive way; (2) the VR experience invites the participant to switch between different scales of plastic pollution. The experience of scale-switching, in turn, produces indeterminacy that provokes multiple metaphorical interpretations: plastic waste may be seen as at once a mist, a new species, and an endless cosmic space.

Keywords

Virtual reality, intermedial ecocriticism, plastic pollution

Bio

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