

Embodied transculturation and the subversive potential of virtual empathy in the interactive art project *The Machine to be Another* (2014)

This article proposes to study how embodied aesthetic experiences could subvert discursively produced social categories at a non-verbal, somatic and affective level via the analysis of the interactive art project 'The Machine to Be Another' by BeAnotherLab. The originality of this research lies in suggesting a paradigmatic shift from representation and discursive formation of cultural identities towards embodied transculturation via media re-enactment of 'becoming' the (cultural) Other. 'The Machine to Be Another' (ongoing since 2014) offers several scenarios of interaction – Gender Swap, empathy towards immigrants, and sensory understanding of impairment – that generate virtual empathy on the basis of neuroscience protocols, elements of telepresence and performance, and Oculus Rift technology. Similarly to Kathryn Bigelow's cyberpunk film *Strange Days* (1995), *The Machine* employs subjective camera and first-person footage as an empathic tool. Moreover, the artwork provides a multiplicity of self-reflexive perspectives that functions as a form of disruptive montage subverting regular modes of perception. As Suhr and Willerslev (2013) have argued, montage offers a tool to break the mimetic dogma and make invisible social realities visible, so that the destabilization of common-sense perception could transcend cultural boundaries. The analysis reveals that the subversive potential of the Machine emerges in the somaesthetic fusion between subjective camera (as an empathic perspective) and sensorimotor destabilization, which provokes imaginary extension of one's self in multiple versions. Conceptually these experiential dimensions resemble Mikhail Epstein's understanding of transculturality as the freedom to be different from others, as well as from one's own self (1995). *The Machine* also plays a subversive role by transgressing ideological boundaries and hierarchical dichotomies such as self/other, mind/body, organism/machine, male/female, which Donna Haraway has conceptualised via the metaphor of the 'cyborg' (1984). Thus, the article establishes interconnections between Haraway's cyborg manifesto and the transcultural paradigm, since both entail overcoming of essentialism and discursively produced binary oppositions.

Key words: virtual empathy; transculturality; somaesthetics; *The Machine to be Another*; cyborg manifesto

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