

Myriorama: Obsolete Technologies for a Contemporary Scenographic Practice and Thought

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Abstract

This article reflects on some of the conceptual, spatial, and narrative possibilities of the use of the *Myriorama* game, and its pre-cinematic technology, in contemporary artistic and scenographic practices. To this end, it takes under consideration the language of *visual essays*, which has been increasingly explored by artists, photographers, and filmmakers who seem to share a desire to “show things as they are”. More specifically, this analysis will consider the visual essay *Myriorama* n°1 (2021) by scenographer Aurora dos Campos and the historical contextualization of the first *Myriorama* decks. This “card game” was created by Jean-Pierre Brès, in 1824, in France. At the time the game was meant to inspire artists, create stories for children, and entertain a certain European elite. It became popular during the 19th century, with different versions in England, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Greece, for instance, but fell, as it began, quickly into oblivion. It is a game of portable dimensions, composed of hand-colored scenes, with human and animal figures, buildings, country landscapes, and everyday situations, which when combined and recombined create various visual narratives. The study relates the *Myriorama* game with the philosophical concepts of *perspectivism* and *pluralism* enunciated by Friedrich Nietzsche (1997), such as the ideas about the *limits of interpretation* proposed by Umberto Eco (2004), as well as the concept of *visual essay*. It is thus intended to contribute to unveiling tensions between the multiplicity of possible landscape representations and their interpretative limits in contemporary artistic practices.

Keywords: Myriorama, Perspectivism, Visual Essay, Landscape Representation, Scenography

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Introduction

Myriorama: obsolete technologies for a contemporary scenographic practice and thought deeps in on some of the artistic and conceptual possibilities of working with the system of the *Myriorama*, an illustrated card game that was famous in Europe in the 19th century, which is among the pre-cinematic technologies of the time. We have been working on the concept of this portable game, transforming it into a visual essay to reflect on the sense of stability, or rather an instability, of the gaze, how contemporary visuality has changed, and how that change unveils *perspectivism* and *pluralism* when considering the real.

This study is part of the Ph.D. research in Fine Arts at the University of Porto - “Scenography in recombination: a study on the limits between materiality and fiction”- by Aurora dos Campos and was developed together with her supervisors Helder Gomes and Sofia Ponte.¹ The research appears in a domain of practices that establish a dialogue between the artistic experience on stage and outside of the stage, thus exploring artistic and conceptual possibilities in the encounter between fiction and materiality. In this specific case, there is the exploration of the combination system of the *Myriorama* game for the creation of a visual essay about a specific landscape in Portugal.

Initially, we intended to develop the article focusing on a direct relationship between *Myriorama* and contemporary scenography, keeping into consideration that this artistic research starts from scenographic practice and expands to the urban territory while exploring the language of visual essays. During the research, we chose instead to change the focus and deepen the study of the conceptual and operative possibilities that *Myriorama* has to offer. Thus, we related *Myriorama* to the notion of *perspectivism* and analyzed the visual essay *Myriorama n°1 (2021)*² by Aurora dos Campos.

The text is divided into three parts: in the first part we do a brief contextualization of the *Myriorama* game; in the second part we propose some relations between the *Myriorama* game and Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of *perspectivism* (1997) and also the idea of *Limits of interpretation* from Umberto Eco (2004); in the third part, we think how the instability of the gaze still provides predictable interpretations of the real and comment the visual essay *Myriorama n°1 (2021)*.

There are presently several artists creating visual essays that mix various realities in speculative exercises of fiction and fantasy. For instance, photographers and filmmakers such as Zoe Leonard (b. 1961, New York), Tacita Dean (b. 1965, Canterbury), Hito Stereoyl (b. 1966, Munich) and Salomé Lamas (b. 1987, Lisbon) whose work communicates a desire to mix images conceived as an index of reality with some aspects of fiction. For Michel de Montaigne (Edelman, 2022), who introduced the concept of 'essay' back in the 16th century, this form of expression refers to an exploratory process that deals with a theme in a subjective way with no other purpose than to 'test' a theory or some ideas.

1. *Myriorama* contextualization

¹ Aurora dos Campos has been granted the scholarship 2020.05918.BD by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) /Portuguese Ministry for Education and Science to develop her Ph.D. research

² It was on display at the Casa-Museu Abel Salazar from December 2021 to February 2022 at the exhibition "When Activity becomes Art (2) - Dialogues", curated by Vera Carmo, as part of the Ph.D. program in Fine Arts at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto, Portugal.

Traditional *Myrioramas*, are portable deck-like games composed of paper cards illustrated with landscapes. The word *Myriorama* has its etymological origin in two Greek terms: *myrias*, which means multiple, and *orama*, which means scene, view, or landscape. Also called storytelling card games, the engraved and hand-painted scenes include human and animal figures, nature, and architectural elements. These illustrated cards when combined generate numerous variations of romantic theme landscapes. Another seductive aspect of the *Myriorama* is the scale of the game set. The miniaturization of space establishes an anachronous distance between reality and fiction. A wreck, a road, a plant, a sheep, all experiences become bi-dimensional images and relate to each other in narratives reflecting the values and culture of the players.

Although famous at the time, today, *Myrioramas* are obsolete and are less known than panoramas and dioramas. However, they continue to inspire illustrators and artists.



Figure 1: Jean-Pierre Brès, *Myriorama: Collection de Plusieurs Milliers de Paysages*, 1824

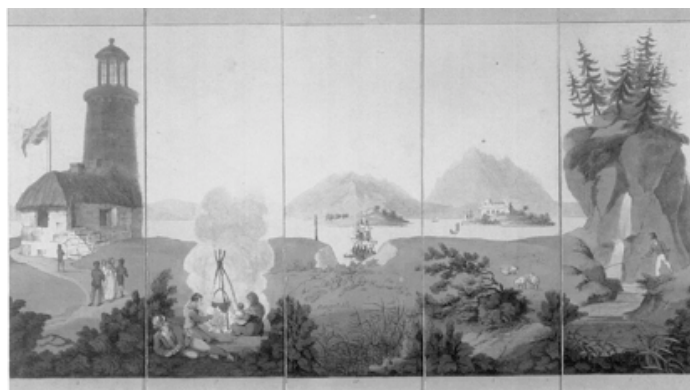


Figure 2: John H. Clark, *Myriorama: A Collection of Many Thousand Landscapes*, 1824
(Both figures are from the collection of Jacqueline and Jonathan Gestetner)

The first *Myriorama* game, according to Ralph Ryde (2004), an expert in the genre of panoramic painting, was created in 1824 by the French Jean-Pierre Brès (Figure 1). At the time the game was meant to inspire artists, create stories for children, and expand the culture of a certain European elite. This first version of the game has 32 cards enclosed in a frame, allowing four parallel pieces to be combined at a time. Brès' illustrations are close to the most common classical landscape painting at the time.

The *Myriorama* game quickly spread across Europe, and new versions appeared with local cultural and territorial specificities. For instance, John Heaviside Clark's version of the game draws a more panoramic view of the landscapes represented (Figure 2). This adjustment was due to the elimination of the lateral edges. Without these limits and with a common horizon the landscapes could be combined continuously allowing a greater number of variations. Considering that the early *Myriorama* game system works by combinatorial strategies, we can safely calculate the probability of combinations of its parts. Thus, by combining 16 cards, a player can create millions of landscapes. All similar, but all different.

When playing the *Myriorama* game, the player may form several different but equally valid landscapes. A player can create various relationships between scenes: peasants around a campfire; a caravel going on a trip; sheep grazing; a stream flowing down a cliff. The order of the cards creates different hierarchies and protagonists among these elements. The illustrations are made in a way that the game set does not force the player to read the narrative from left to right as if it were a book. In this game, all the events and elements of a landscape are previously available at the same time and the player decides how to order or interpret their relationships. There is no right or wrong representation of landscape. Nor a better or worst one.

2. *Myriorama* and *Perspectivism*

Analyzing one of Aurora dos Campos's recent visual essays, we realized that the *Myriorama* system brings Nietzsche's idea of *perspectivism* to life (Nietzsche, 1997). *Perspectivism* and its notion of *pluralism* help to illuminate *Myriorama*'s visual potential to reflect on the possibilities of telling stories and interpreting them. Friedrich Nietzsche's *perspectivism* starts from a questioning of the notion of truth and the notion of reality. He believed that theories - whether about religion, science or philosophy - are not capable of shaping a unifying thought of the real, since, in fact, "reality itself" is a construction of the subjects themselves. It is not a matter of saying that each subject has a different perspective of the real and, in a certain way, incompatible with that of the other subjects, but of sustaining that what is understood as "fact" or "real" is always the result of an interpretation.

Just as the *Myriorama* allows thousands of possible combinations without the notion of right or wrong, Nietzsche's *perspectivism* affirms the plurality of points of view and interpretations that build multiple realities. The relationship proposed here between the *Myriorama* and Nietzsche's *perspectivism* works as a visual metaphor, offering us images for a visual understanding of the philosopher's concept. It is important to point out that Nietzsche's *perspectivism* does not coincide with the painterly *Perspectivism* of the Renaissance. On the contrary, Nietzsche uses *perspectivism* as a relativizer and multiplier of points of view, while in the *linear perspective* of the Renaissance the point of view is unique.

The horizon line is usually a paradigm of orientation, its representation has contributed to situating subjects and objects in time and space. And yet, despite having a common horizon,

traditional *Myrioramas* do not necessarily have a single point of view. Unlike *linear perspective*, *Myriorama's* illusory model is not centered on just one vanishing point, on the contrary, its landscapes allow for multiple escapes.

The fact that *Myriorama* does not require a linear interpretation, but rather suggests attempts to speculate on the possibilities of creating relationships, brings another dimension of subjectivity and pluralism to the game. It provides different combinations between the order of the scenes, but also opportunities to create numerous narratives in each landscape.

However, there are two interesting conditioning aspects to be observed in the *Myriorama* game: the first aspect concerns the line of the horizon and the common foreground - this aspect, provides a sense of continuity between the parts but also creates a stable gaze that provides a certain conceptual and visual unification between each set of landscapes constructed; the second aspect concerns the illustrations per se, although they build thousands of landscapes, they are all within a specific aesthetic realm.



Figure 3: Campos, A. *Montage: Myriorama of Italian Scenery 1824+Pineapple, 2022*

Umberto Eco in his essay “The Limits of Interpretation” (Eco, 2004) reflects the multiplicity of interpretations a semiotic visual message carries. Eco argues that no matter how many possibilities there are for interpreting a visual message, these possibilities are finite. This limit, according to Eco, is found mainly in the “cultural framework” in which the visual message exists. For Eco, some meanings can be so deviant from a visual message communication process that their interpretation can be considered wrong or impossible. For instance, in a traditional *Myriorama*, a playing card with a color reproduction of a pineapple, such as this one, would be immediately considered “wrong”.

This is a set of principles that are still part of the way any society works as a group. People relate to what they know and experience, and that comes from a social and cultural construct inherited. Reading Umberto Eco is also very helpful to understand why so many great contemporary artworks are still so misunderstood by the public.

3. Rethinking *Myriorama*

“He dreamed that a road would cut through this field
A river of asphalt would tear through the landscape
The house would become an island
Around him, a tide of cars”.
(Campos, 2021)

In the set of possibilities offered by *Myriorama*'s system of combinations, scenographer Aurora dos Campos has been working on the other hand, experimenting with these types of uncanniness and disruptions elements. She does that because the landscape concept changed, not only interfering of men in nature is more abrupt, and the cleft between rural and urban has extremely, but also because today the experience of space and its possibilities of representation also greatly changed. French philosopher Anne Cauquelain (Cauquelain, 2008) points out that for many decades, in the West, the landscape was linked to the Renaissance representation of nature, already with the illusion and artificiality of *linear perspective*, and that this perception of time and space must be "denaturalized". These pictorial representations model, argues Cauquelain, shaped our perception of the world and a common idea around the notion of landscape.

Artist Hito Steyerl (Steyerl, 2011) also points out that one's sense of spatial and temporal orientation has dramatically changed in recent years due to the technologies of surveillance and tracking for consumer purposes. One of the symptoms of this change is the growth of aerial views enabled by drones and satellites but also by the infinite vertical scroll movement that has been massively spread with smartphone technology. Steyerl highlights how a single, stable point of view is being replaced by multiple perspectives, overlapping windows on screens, distorted lines, and diverging vanishing points. In Steyerl's reflection about the fragmentation of the Horizon and the seconding of the *linear perspective* paradigm, today, the sense of continuity, illusion, and stability provided by the traditional *Myriorama* card game is unrealistic.

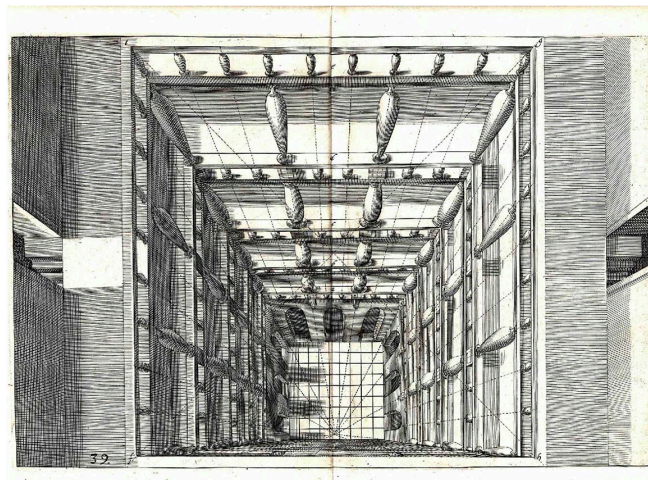


Figure 4: Hans Vredman de Vries, *Plate in Perspective* (God's Eye View), 1604-1605

When bringing together the concept of visual essay, the *myriorama* card game, and her current experience of landscape, Aurora dos Campos's experiment represents space around her through a mixture between *myriorama*'s non-mechanical playing system and technical procedures enabled by digital capture and reproduction of the image. Just as Montaigne sets out to test ideas in essays, the artist has tried to test them on video. For instance, the first visual essay Aurora dos Campos produced in this way, *Myriorama nº1* (2021)³, arises from exploratory walks through the área around the House where scientist Abel Salazar (1889-1946) once lived. The House Museum was once located in a rural area and today has a hybrid

³ *Myriorama nº1* (2021) can be seen at this link: <https://vimeo.com/706072220>

landscape with multiple temporalities and urban scales in superposition. Thus, the visual essay seeks to share a look, a point of view, on his experience in the place. A visual essay can approach Nietzsche's *perspectivism* insofar as it offers a subjective point of view on a subject.

Myriorama nº1 (2021), is inspired by the image combination system of the *Myriorama* game. The work consists of a video with 4 columns of rotating images, each column composed of photograph cards taken in urban-rural environments on the outskirts of the city of Porto. Some images depict details, other broad views of a road, a field, animals, or words on flat color background. The columns display fragments, that together, as well as in Hito Stereol's proposal, never form a stable horizon.



Figures 5 and 6: Aurora dos Campos, *Myriorama nº1* (7'57'') - Visual Essay, 2021

The *Myriorama* game allows viewing multiple images side by side and is capable of creating an opening for reflection on a series of questions. It is not a system of double or even triple, but a system of multiple relationships. The *Myriorama* inspires not only a connection between common threads but between consonant and dissonant ideas. Juxtaposing different images and temporalities; different social contexts; or even images found by chance; they can turn out to be landscapes, not always stable, that provide a series of possible semantic and aesthetic meanings.

The making dimension of the *Myriorama* game, not only of seeing and interpreting, brings with it temporality, action, and reflection in action. Looking at the world, registering it, making it matter, manipulating this matter in various combinations. Offering a look to another person. Offering to another person the opportunity to rearrange. Playing with the world. Playing with the material traces of the world. Playing with representations of the world.

Conclusions

To conclude, some provisional notes and considerations:

The traditional *Myriorama* card game allows simulating reality taking into consideration alike but different perspectives. Differences that a few years ago would appear insignificant or would be simply disregarded by most of us. The potential of visual combinations that this game tolerates and in consequence the narratives it generates, were linked to the philosophical propositions of *perspectivism* and *pluralism* anticipated by Friedrich Nietzsche in a very different cultural context in which we presently live.

The horizon line in the 19th-century *Myriorama* offered a stability of the gaze that encouraged a sense of continuity and order. Today, the possibilities of visual perception are different. However, although there is no clear frame for looking and however plural our subjective world may appear, representing it and communicating about it, has its interpretative limits.

A horse running in a landscape will mostly be linked to the idea of “freedom”, and a pack of cigars on the grass as the concept of “trash”. If bringing to life today some aspects of the *Myriorama* card game what material traces of the world would you link to play with, combine and speculate?

After the presentation of this paper at *The European Conference on Arts, Design & Education* (ECADE2022)⁴, with the interest demonstrated by the colleagues present, we will take in consideration other potentialities through which this study can be developed. In particular, the possibility of using the visual system of *Myriorama* at universities as a methodology to reflect on some cultural contexts and interpretative differences.

Acknowledgments

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⁴ Myriorama: obsolete technologies for a contemporary scenographic practice and thought n° 63351. In Culture & Heritage; Session Chair: Gota Hayashi; Room A _ Sunday, Live-Stream Presentation Session 3, July 10, 2022. The International Academic Forum (IAFOR).

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