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Returning “Home”? Or Dwelling in the Pixel Age: On Invader’s Intermedial Space Invasion

Julie Gaillard

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Résumé de l'article

Depuis 1998, l'artiste français Invader envahit l'espace urbain avec des mosaïques représentant de petits extraterrestres de pixels, initialement importés du jeu d'arcade *Space Invaders* (1978). Élevant le rétrogaming à l'échelle d'un projet artistique global par le jeu des hybridations et des références intermédiaires, Invader rassemble une multitude de formes et traditions artistiques (mosaïque, graffiti, pixel art, jeux d'arcade et une application de géocaching) qui chacune engagent des inscriptions techniques et affectives propres aux humains dans l'espace et le temps. Cet article montre que la nostalgie mobilisée à travers ces diverses strates médiales et à travers leur hybridation n'est pas adoptée seulement de manière restauratrice mais aussi réflexive (Boym, 2001). La nostalgie devient le véhicule d'un voyage à travers l'histoire de l'habitation occidentale, de l'Antiquité à la mégapole technocapitaliste, voyage à travers lequel l'artiste cherche à redéfinir ce qu'« habiter » veut dire à l'ère post-numérique.

Returning “Home”? or Dwelling in the Pixel Age: On Invader’s Intermedial Space Invasion

JULIE GAILLARD

Turning retrogaming into a global artistic project, Parisian artist Invader has invaded urban space since 1998 with ceramic mosaics of pixelated aliens taken from the videogame *Space Invaders*,¹ transforming the streets into a playground, and suggesting that reality is always already “augmented.”² The goal of the original arcade videogame, created by Tomohiro Nishikado and published by Taito for Atari in April 1978, was to prevent aliens from invading the Earth (the bottom of the screen).³ Invader, on the contrary, has been disseminating his mosaic effigies around the world—over the years, his initial repertoire has been enriched with other pop-cultural icons of the late twentieth century, such as Chewbacca, Mario, or Astro Boy.⁴ The invasion process has proliferated exponentially, with to date over 4,000 mosaics scattered in 80 cities on five continents, to the delight of mosaic hunters

1. *Space Invaders*, Tomohiro Nishikado, Taito, 1978.

2. I would like to thank Rob Rushing and Hugo Bujon for their critical readings of this article at different stages of its development, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their input.

3. *Space Invaders* is considered one of the most influential videogames of all time. The cultural impact of Nishikado’s creation, emblematic of the golden age of videogames, has been such that its iconic pixelated aliens are used to this day as a shorthand (or more recently as an emoji) for videogames or computing as a whole.

4. If the iconographic inspirations for Invader’s figures have diversified over the decades, his artistic process has followed the same videogame-inspired rules since the beginning. The artist plans each (wave of) city invasion carefully, targeting strategic spots. Each of the 4058 mosaics existing to date presents a unique combination of shape and color and is documented in a database. The geographic scope of the invasion and the diversity of his mosaics is attested by the online world invasion map accessible on the artist’s website, which provides users with a view of the cities invaded, marked by a red space invader. The world map is searchable, with each icon giving access to a selection of images of space invaders in context, as well as the information on the number of invasion waves, space invaders present, and points scored for each city. Invader, “World Invasion,” *Space Invaders*, 2014, <https://space-invaders.com/world/> (accessed 6 July 2022). On his Instagram profile, Invader posts more varied images related to his current projects (his city/world invasions but also his work in galleries), offering a glimpse of his creative process. Invader, “invaderwashere,” Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/invaderwashere/> (accessed 6 July 2022).

around the world who are also able to “catch” them via the smartphone application *FlashInvaders* since July 2014.⁵

Emanating from the childhood of a generation, born at the end of the 1960s, who spent their teens in the arcade during the Golden Age of videogames and the boom of science-fiction,⁶ Invader’s figurines mobilize the affective resource of nostalgia to symbolize “a turning point in our history: the massive access to computers and the related technologies,”⁷ and the ensuing upheaval of how humans build, dwell, and think. Of course, the multifarious ways in which information and communication technologies have transformed human lives and societies are well known, and the political, cultural, socio-economic, cognitive, and environmental implications of network culture and datafication are widely documented.⁸ Today’s global technocapitalist panorama has further removed humans from Edenic fantasies of rootedness associated with the notions of “home” and “nature”—originary fantasies also reactivated in nostalgic investments in another mythical figure of *native* belonging: that of the nation. In the so-called “post-digital” era, the boundaries of the “real”

5. Invader, “Flash Invaders: A Free App for Smartphones,” official website of Invader, <https://space-invaders.com/world/> (accessed 15 October 2021). This app formalizes and centralizes pre-existing fan-led tracking and collecting practices, sometimes shared via platforms such as Flickr.

6. Invader, who was born in 1969, belongs to this age group that grew up playing the first generation of 8-bit video games in the late 1970s, when this new form of entertainment became available in North America and Western Europe. This generation’s situation is unique: as Maria B. Garda points out, the retro trend in contemporary videogame design cites games that they were playing during their childhood, therefore activating a nostalgia based on personal lived experience (as opposed to a collective and detached cultural memory). “Nostalgia in Retro Game Design,” *DiGRA ’13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*, vol. 7, August 2014, p. 2 and p. 6–7, <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/> (accessed 11 May 2022).

7. Invader, interviewed by Connor Sheets, “See You, Banksy. Hello Invader,” *Newsweek Magazine*, 31 October 2013, para. 12, <https://www.newsweek.com/2013/11/01/see-you-banksy-hello-invader-243870.html> (accessed 15 October 2021).

8. See (to name but a few) Jean-François Lyotard’s groundbreaking analysis of the transformation of knowledge induced by the emergence of new communication and information technologies after WWII in his 1979 *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1979, or Deleuze’s famous “Postscript” describing the advent of “Control Societies” induced by those same technologies. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October*, vol. 59, Winter 1992, p. 3–7. More recently, see Tiziana Terranova’s investigation of the political implications of Network Culture (2004): *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, London, Ann Arbor, Pluto Press, 2004; Yann Moulier-Boutang’s notion of Cognitive Capitalism (2011): *Cognitive Capitalism* [2008], trans. by Ed Emery, Cambridge, Malden, Polity Press, 2011; Kenneth Cukier and Viktor Mayer-Schönberger’s description of how big data transforms “how we live, work, and think” (2013): *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform*

and the “digital” are blurred, and digital interfaces have long become second nature.⁹ Invader’s figurines invite passers-by to reflect upon this blurring and the ways in which this global digital upheaval has impacted human inscription in space and time over the scale of a lifetime.

Unlike most location-based augmented reality games, which layer playfulness onto public space through a digital interface,¹⁰ Invader’s (video)gamification of the streets largely predates the introduction of mobile digital platforms and uniquely situates his project at the crossroads of a variety of artforms and cultural practices that each involve specific and often antithetical relationships to space.¹¹ Far from being a mere case of medial transposition (understood as the adaptation of a media product into a new medium), Invader’s adaptation of a videogame to urban space involves complex and ever-evolving processes of media combination and intermedial references—to borrow the typology of intermedial phenomena developed by Irina Rajewsky.¹² What in fact sets this playful invasion project apart is the combination of

How We Live, Work, and Think, Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013; Yves Citton’s study of the impact of information overflow in *The Ecology of Attention* (2017): *The Ecology of Attention*, Cambridge, Malden, Polity Press, 2017; Bernard Stiegler’s analysis of the impact of algorithmic rationality on human meaning-making (2019): Bernard Stiegler, Daniel Ross, Alain Jugnon & Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism* [2016], trans. by Daniel Ross, Cambridge, Medford, Polity Press, 2019; or Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias’ contention that data mining amounts to a form of colonialization of human subjectivity, paving the way for a capitalization of life without limit (2019): *The Costs of Connexion: How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019.

9. On the term “post-digital,” see Justin Hodgson, *Post-Digital Rhetoric and the New Aesthetic*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2019; David M. Berry & Michael Dieter (eds.), *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation, and Design*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Ryan Bishop, Kristoffer Gansing, Jussi Parikka & Elvia Wilk (eds.), *Across and Beyond: A Transmediale Reader on Post-Digital Practices, Concepts, and Institutions*, Berlin, Sternberg, Transmediale e.V., 2016.

10. Orlando Woods, “Gamifying Place, Reimagining Publicness: The Heterotopic Inscriptions of Pokémon Go,” *Media, Culture, Society*, vol. 42, no. 6, 2020, p. 1004.

11. When asked whether he would describe his work as contemporary art, game, graffiti, or street art, the artist answered: “all of the above, and much more.” Invader, “About,” *Space Invaders*, 2014, <https://space-invaders.com/about/> (accessed 15 October 2021). On the kinship of this project with abstract and conceptual art as well as situationist practices, see for instance Michelle Kuo, “Arcade Project: Michelle Kuo on Space Invader,” *Artforum International*, vol. 45, no. 5, January 2007; Paul Ardenne, “Refigurer Paris,” Invader & Jo Cohen-Skali (eds.), *L’Invasion de Paris 2.0: Prolifération*, 1st edition, Paris, Control P, 2012, p. 7–8, Invader, “Refiguring Paris,” *Space Invaders*, 2012, http://space-invaders.com/post/text_ardenne/ (accessed 15 October 2021); Jean-Marc Avrilla, “Untitled,” *space-invaders.com*, 2005, http://space-invaders.com/post/text_avrilla/ (accessed 15 October 2021).

12. Irina O. Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,” *Intermediality/Intermedialités*, Philippe Despoix & Yvonne Spielmann (ed.), no. 6 “Remédier/Remediation,” Fall 2005, p. 43–64, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/im/2005-n6-im1814727/1005505ar/> (accessed 15 October 2021).

mosaic—an ancestral art of the home—and graffiti—a practice usually less perceived as an art of living than as an art of ruins—into a hybrid media-product imitating the design of pixels and referring, through this symbol, to ubiquitous digital technologies yet perceived as immaterial. By situating his work at this paradoxical intersection of digital technologies, mosaics, graffiti, and games, Invader seems to ask the following question: what does it mean to “dwell” after the digital turn?

In this article, I hope to demonstrate how this intermedial artistic project mobilizes diverse modalities of nostalgia to reflect critically on what “home” can mean at a time when social and spatio-temporal relations have been profoundly transformed by digitization. I am relying here on Svetlana Boym’s notion of “reflective nostalgia.”¹³ As opposed to a “restorative nostalgia,” which finds in the monuments of the past (and their reconstruction) the authentic expression of a univocal, intangible, mythical identity, “reflective nostalgia” is not retrospective but prospective: lingering in ruins, it questions individual and collective belonging and invites a meditation on history through distance and irony. Through the entanglement of medial strata characteristic of Invader’s project, nostalgia acquires an active, prospective value, and becomes a reflective tool to embrace critically the history of Western dwelling and reclaim a sense of “home” for a present where “home” is obfuscated by the workings of the megalopolis or appropriated by reactionary narratives.

Using the descriptive tools of art history and critical theory, I will start by showing how Invader engages with the spatial and affective implications of each of these medial strata, only to shift their meaning through their hybridization. As I will then show through the analysis of one of his *New Mosaics of Ravenna* (2014–2015), his works can indeed be read as multilayered time-capsules that can be unfolded to tell the story of the West as a progressive disconnection from “nature.” But far from (only) lamenting the loss of a supposed golden age of humanity or regretting the loss of an enchanted childhood, Invader’s medial adaptation of an arcade game and its re-remediation via the geocaching application “*FlashInvaders*” suggest, as I will show by turning to Winnicottian psychoanalysis and its applications to digital media, that digitality has become humans’ true “home,” replacing “nature” as an affectively loaded *locus* of connection—a connection always re-actualized through the process of the game.

13. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001.

A VOYAGE BACK TO THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN DWELLING: SNAPSHOTS

MOSAIC: A FANTASIZED GOLDEN AGE

Invader’s low-fi and low-brow global invasion process dialogues explicitly with the ancient and distinguished tradition of mosaic art. When asked, “Why mosaic?”, the artist quotes Renaissance ceramist Domenico Ghirlandaio, who claimed: “True painting for the ages is mosaic.”¹⁴ In October 2014 and September 2015, he invaded Ravenna, world capital of mosaic and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Ceramic tiles have a practical advantage: as opposed to other materials more commonly used in urban art (such as wheat paste, spray paint, or magic markers), they resist inclement weather and the passage of time. But mosaic is also, first and foremost, an art of dwelling. From Rhodes to Pompeii via Carthage, mosaics were used for the interior decoration of sacred temples as well as secular mansions. Covering walls and floors with geometric patterns, with scenes from the natural realm, or mythological motifs evocative of civilization’s control over the wildest elements of nature, they embedded the human dwelling into the natural rhythms and the hierarchies of the universe, glorifying their divine order.¹⁵ Ancient mosaic pertains to a way of inhabiting space that is radically foreign to the contemporary landscape. Mosaic would be an art alluding to what Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Inhuman*, called the “*domus*”: i.e., “[a] mode of space, time and body under the regime (of) nature.”¹⁶ The *domus* designates the “common time, common sense, common place”¹⁷ of a community living in harmony with nature, obeying its rhythms, and blessed with its fruits. Of course, this picture of a blissful natural harmony is an illusion, a facade.¹⁸ The *domus* only exists as a retrospective fantasy, as a primal scene constituted *après-coup* in a time-space where nostalgic humans no longer serve nature, and where time, measured by clocks, has to be gained. There, the *domus* is represented as the (inevitable) illusion of an ante-

14. “*La vera pittura per l’eternità essere il mosaico.*” Domenico Ghirlandaio, quoted in Invader & Jo Cohen-Skali, *L’Invasion de Paris 1.2: la Genèse*, 3rd edition, Paris Control P, 2009, p. 31. (our translation).

15. See, for instance, Hallie M. Franks, *The World Underfoot. Mosaics and Metaphor in the Greek Symposium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018; on the decorative usage of mosaics, see François Baratte & Manon Potvin, *L’Image fragmentée. La mosaïque depuis l’Antiquité romaine*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Service culturel, action éducative, 1994.

16. Jean-François Lyotard, “*Domus and the Megalopolis*,” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* [1988], trans. by Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p. 191–192.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

18. It may indeed just as well be a place of unleashed violence (*Ibid.*, p. 193).

civilizational origin to be recovered.¹⁹ The “political city, imperial or republican, then the city of economic affairs, today the megalopolis spread out over what used to be the countryside,”²⁰ looks back at the *domus* as this “bucolic tableau,” of which mosaic might well be the epitome. With its mythological scenes and depictions of activities of ploughing or hunting, its figurations of the seasons, mosaic is a representation that binds the human habitat to “nature,” always already lost, mythical, but recollected in the fragmented image that lays a common grounding for human existences. Accordingly, mosaic would transform the house into a home by alluding to an impossible origin, articulating human dwelling with the larger, sacred order of life and nature, anchoring domesticity under the aegis of the *domus*.

Invader’s artistic project is foreign to any reference (other than citational) to a divine or natural origin. And if an increasing number of his mosaics allude to nature, it is only to bear witness to the fact that western societies have lost their connection with it, and echo growing environmental concerns.²¹ His characters, rather, allude to the childhood of a generation at home in the arcade, connected to digital entertainment devices rather than nature—we shall return later to the stakes of this shift. Drawn mostly from the popular culture of the seventies, his icons seem to stand as the characters of new mythologies of the present. Yet, in dialoguing expressly with this five-thousand-years-old artistic tradition, Invader’s project also bears witness to the memory of the forever inaccessible *domus*. It is all the more surprising that mosaic, an art of dwelling, should be combined with graffiti, an art of ruins.

GRAFFITI: DWELLING IN RUINS?

Art historians generally date the origin of modern graffiti (defined as the association of a pseudonym and a singular graphic identity) back to “Kilroy was here,” the big-nosed doodle-effigy spread by the GIs amongst the rubble of bombed European cities during

19. *Ibid.*, p. 194–195.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

21. See, for instance, Invader’s recent promotion of a vegetarian lifestyle on the cover of *Alternatives végétariennes 130* (Winter 2017–2018), accompanied by an interview (“Invader investit VeggieTown”). Around the same time, Invader placed a series of space invaders featuring fruits and vegetables in Paris. See the documentation of this series by Lionel Belluteau on his blog *Un Oeil qui traîne*, “VeggieTown, ou le Paris végétarien d’Invader,” 9 February 2018, <https://www.unoeilquitraîne.fr/?p=13671> (accessed 6 July 2022).

World War II.²² Graffiti is also, traditionally, an art of those who live nowhere: drifters and hobos, whose code—scribbled in chalk or carved with a knife point by travelers near possible shelters to inform their fellow vagrants of the kind of hospitality to be expected—is also considered an ancestor of graffiti. As for the practice of “name writing,” developed in the 1950s and 1960s by adolescent graffiti artists on the American East Coast, it originated in the margins, in the ghetto.²³ Spread in city centers and middle-class suburbs, tags are generally considered a scarification of common public space and associated with urban decay. Associated with ruins, vagrancy, and decay, the aesthetics of graffiti are eminently nostalgic, as the practice suggests the resistance of humans within the interstices of an inhuman system where rootedness, fullness, and harmony seem out of reach.

Tags invade a policed space, interfering with a rigorous zoning system that spatially divides existence into various socio-economic functions. By the same token, they make visible the processes of social and racial segregation that such divisions inherently entail. As Michel de Certeau famously shows in *The Practice of Everyday Life* [1980], the functionalist organization of cities implies, on the one hand, managing components or events that can be processed and, on the other hand, eliminating what cannot (“abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.”²⁴). Such division produces what de Certeau calls, after Foucault, a “disciplinary space.”²⁵ On the walls of the panoptic city—planned from an abstract, top-down perspective—graffiti is a bottom-up, underground, embodied practice reclaiming the city for the humans who inhabit it by sketching alternative pathways beyond those designed in view of productivism and surveillance.²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, in his own engagement with the unprecedented wave of graffiti that spread over the walls and trains of New York in the spring of 1972, argued that, while urban riots targeted the city as a place of economic and political power, this then-new type of “insurrection of signs” was attacking the city as the space where

22. Magda Danysz & Mary-Noëlle Dana, *From Style Writing to Art. A Street Art Anthology*, Rome, Drago, 2010, p. 35; Fiona McDonald, *The Popular History of Graffiti from the Ancient World to the Present*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2013, p. 79. Invader’s Instagram profile is named “Invader was here.”

23. Danysz & Dana, 2010, p. 36 and following.

24. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 1* [1980], trans. by Steven F. Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 2011, p. 94.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

dominant culture exerts its power through hegemonic media.²⁷ For Baudrillard and de Certeau, the city contains in its very layout the normative and exclusive behavioral models with which individuals are expected to conform and identify. In line with both thinkers’ interpretation of tags as a mode of resistance, most graffiti and street artists situate their own invasive practices in opposition to the visual pollution and privatization of space by advertising agencies, real estate firms, and tourism developers. In short, graffiti is a gesture of re-appropriation of a space otherwise organized toward the optimization of fluxes of people and commodities, segregated and privatized for profit: i.e., a space *produced* by the capitalist superstructure.²⁸

Similarly, Invader’s urban interventions reclaim the city for its users. Against suggestions that his art might be equated with vandalism, Invader, whose activity is for the most part illegal, states that he works for the common good.²⁹ Appropriating fragments from the monetized space of the metropolis, he offers them back, anonymously and free of charge, to the inhabitants of public space. By targeting key spots of invaded spaces, he also disrupts the workings of urban mechanics. As supernumerary, cryptic markings, his mosaic-tags interrupt the usual reading of functionalist space: his signs no longer refer to a direction, an instruction, a product to be purchased and consumed, and they no longer lend themselves to processes of decoding. Mobilizing nostalgia in a playful, yet multilayered way, his hybrid figurines rather act as affective attractors susceptible to orient the course of a desirous drifting, sketching alternative routes and alternative ways of moving in space and being together.³⁰ As Israel Márquez and Susana Tosca note, “[w]hen invading *space*, [Invader] transforms it into *place*.”³¹ In combining two apparently antithetic media—mosaic and graffiti—into this unique media-product, he intervenes in urban space, revealing its artificial, profit-oriented structure to reclaim it as a space for humans to dwell in.

27. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant, London, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 76–84.

28. Here, I am borrowing the expression coined by Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space* [1974], trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 2009).

29. Invader, interviewed by Jon Reiss, Bomb It The Movie, “Bomb It: Space Invader,” uploaded on YouTube 1 June 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPbIs40rxmQ> (accessed 15 October 2021).

30. Invader’s approach is not unrelated to situationist practices of urban drift. Paul Ardenne coined the expression “psycho-geography” to highlight this kinship (Ardenne 2012).

31. Israel Márquez & Susana Tosca, “Playing With the City: Street Art and Videogames,” *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, p. 109.

Yet this combination of two media is further complicated by an additional intermedial reference, as these anonymous mosaic-tags replicate the aesthetics of the pixel. Invader, whose first artistic projects involved computer viruses and the city,³² hybridizes mosaic and graffiti in a reference to digital technologies and proposes a new proliferating form that spreads far beyond the sole urban setting.

PIXELS: VIRUSSING THE UNINHABITABLE MEGALOPOLIS

As we have seen, these pixel-tags colonizing the streets disrupt for a little while the user's productive processing of urban space and open, if only for a split second, a space of potentialities. But the full scale of Invader's viral invasion can be best observed when the viewer switches from "street-view mode" to the bird's-eye representation provided by the evolutive world invasion map available on Invader's website, where the network of all the space invaders located on earth and beyond becomes apparent: "space invaders" have spread to the Tanzanian savanna, the Himalayan mountains, undersea to the bay of Cancún, and even to outer space aboard the International Space Station.³³ The physical ubiquity of Invader's little pixel creatures materializes the global civilizational upheaval brought about by the acceleration of the speed of information afforded by digital technologies and satellite communications, whose transformative impact on space was analyzed in the 1970s by urbanist Paul Virilio.³⁴ Pixels, the very symbol of the "virtual," invade the "real" world as a metaphor of the increasing digitization of experience begun with the cybernetic turn after World War II.

32. Invader, interviewed by J. D. Beauvallet, "Rencontre avec Invader, le héros du street-art," *Les Inrockuptibles*, 15 June 2011, <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2011/06/15/actualite/societe/rencontre-avec-invader-le-heros-du-street-art-1114087/> (accessed 15 October 2021).

33. See the locations of the different space invaders on the map of his "World Invasion" (<https://space-invaders.com/world/>) as well as his projects "Under the Sea" (Invader, "Under the Sea," *Space Invaders*, 2007, <https://space-invaders.com/post/subinvasion/> (accessed 15 October 2021) and "Space2ISS" (Invader, "Space2ISS," *Space Invaders*, 2015, <https://space-invaders.com/post/Space2ISS/> (accessed 15 October 2021). Most recently, Invader even invaded the virtual world of the videogame *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (see the video posted on his Instagram profile alongside the note "If I can't invade the real world, then I invade the virtual world! #quarantineactivities #lockdown #covid19 #animalcrossing #digitalinvasion #newterritories." Published 26 April 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_dmQ1TJz8o/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link (accessed 15 October 2021).

34. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* [1977], trans. by Mark Polizzotti, New York, Semiotext(e), 1986.

In the wake of Virilio’s notion of “critical space,” Jean-François Lyotard analyzed “the revolution of the spatio-temporal regime of being together”³⁵ induced by this acceleration in techno-scientific development. In *The Inhuman* and his texts dedicated to the “postmodern,” Lyotard argues that the digitization of communications (and, by extension, of social experience) has profoundly altered the metropolitan landscape by drastically shortening spatio-temporal distances: everything happens in “real time,” and the “virtual space” of telecommunications has erased physical distances. Indeed, “telecommunication and teleproduction have no need of well-built cities”³⁶: productive and consuming bodies are now removed from the *loci* of production and consumption. Techno-scientific development has induced phenomena of urban sprawl and transformed the old metropolitan suburbs into one global “zone,” understood as an uninhabitable (and yet inhabited) surface constituted by the passage of messages. In entrusting techno-scientific means with the management of its installation, the West has given birth to spatio-temporal forms that are no longer organized by humans for humans, but by networked machines that compute in view of the most efficient circulation of messages—a circulation where humans are no longer necessary agents but are themselves contingent objects. In this sense, the megalopolis is an inhuman space.

The virus spread by Invader across the globe points to this familiar panorama of contemporary societies in the digital age. More than importing into the physical world a fiction associated with the so-called “virtual” space of digital networks, Invader’s pixel-tags metaphorically reveal the urban fabric as already shaped and governed by these networks. By disseminating this symbol in the streets of cities across the five continents, by spreading them also on every natural surface, from the savannah to the bottom of the ocean, to the stratosphere and beyond, Invader suggests that pixels have taken over the globe, their circulation now shaping the space where humans move and interact.

Invader’s hybridization of mosaic, graffiti, and pixel seems to point to the West’s disconnection from nature as it fulfils its posthuman destiny, a disconnection whose

35. Lyotard, 1991, p. 195. Lyotard explicitly references Virilio’s 1984 *L’Espace critique* in the essay “Something Like: ‘Communication...Without Communication,’” also collected in *The Inhuman*, p. 115.

36. Jean-François Lyotard, “The Zone,” Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* [1993], trans. by George Van Den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 17–32, p. 21–22.

chronology can be reconstructed by unfolding the project’s distinct medial layers and exploring their respective spatial and affective implications. Through the reference to graffiti, an art of urban decay, Invader’s hybrid media-product suggests a longing for a more “authentic” connection of humans with other humans, with nature, with childhood, or with “home”—a connection that is not afforded by the digital forms of connectivity that contribute to shaping contemporary spatio-temporal relations. However, nostalgia is not mobilized to advocate a return to a fantasized past. As we shall see, the very hybridization of media much rather suggests a critical, future-oriented use of nostalgia as an affective tool in the search for a dwelling in the present.

NEW MOSAICS OF RAVENNA (2014–2015): CULTURAL HERITAGE BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE



Fig. 1. Mosaic of Theodora. Mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale (built A.D. 547), Italy. Public domain.

Invader's invasion of Ravenna is a privileged place to observe how his art relates to the past and analyze how his complex processes of media combination and intermedial reference operate in context. The forty *New Mosaics of Ravenna* include numerous space invaders whose geometric patterns and golden backgrounds recall the ornamental motifs of Paleochristian mosaics, as well as several pixelated representations of the iconic imperial mosaics (See Fig. 1, 2 & 3).³⁷



Fig. 2. RA_34. Invader, mosaic, Ravenna, 2015, Screenshot of Invader's website, <https://space-invaders.com/world/ravenna/> (accessed 5 November 2021). © Invader c/o Artists Rights Society.

37. *New Mosaics of Ravenna* is the title of the map published in 2017 (print run of thousand copies) listing the 40 space invaders mounted in 2014 and 2015. The invasion is partially documented on Invader's website, "World Invasion," "Ravenna," <https://space-invaders.com/world/ravenna/> (accessed 15 October 2021).



Fig. 3. RA_09. Invader, mosaic, Ravenna, 2014, Screenshot of Invader’s website, <https://space-invaders.com/world/ravenna/> (accessed 5 November 2021). © Invader c/o Artists Rights Society.

In the imperial city, temporal power is subordinate to divine power, and everything in these Paleochristian mosaics indeed suggests an elevation of humans towards God and beyond the visible.³⁸ What remains, in Invader’s works, of this sacred Otherness that the secular world sought to represent in a movement of mystical adoration? In the *New Mosaics of Ravenna*, only space invaders wear crowns or haloes. They alone reign over the temporal and spiritual realms: pixels have taken over. Of the natural realm, only some animals survive, amongst concrete and pollution, adapting to an urban environment where they are regarded as pests, such as this pigeon of pixels (See Fig. 4) ironically dominating a road turnoff, all too common in the landscape of urban peripheries.

Yet, this desolate pigeon is actually a citation of another bird. The position of its head and wing, its tail stretched out towards the ground, the white color of its plumage, distinct from the usual dark grey feathers of domestic pigeons, allow us to identify it unmistakably with the dove perched on the rim of a fountain in a garden of paradise at the feet of Peter and Paul under the central vault of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia (See Fig. 5 & 6).

38. According to Jutta Dresken-Weiland’s analysis of the imperial mosaics in the basilica of San Vitale, the iconography of the representations of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, for instance, suggests their adoration of and submission to Christ, Jutta Dresken-Weiland, *Mosaics of Ravenna. Image and Meaning*, Regensburg, Schnell & Steiner, 2016, p. 252.



Fig. 4. RA_25. Invader, mosaic, Ravenna, 2015, Screenshot of Invader’s website, <https://space-invaders.com/world/ravenna/> (accessed 5 November 2021). © Invader c/o Artists Rights Society.



Fig. 5. Apostoles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Mosaic, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 5th century. Public domain.



Fig. 6. Apostoles Saint Peter and Saint Paul (detail, doves drinking). Mosaic, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 5th century. Public domain..

Perched on the cement pile of a bridge designed to regulate fluxes and maximize the efficiency of circulation around, to, and from a city center mainly dedicated to cultural tourism, this pixelized pigeon epitomizes the spatial and social transformations induced by communication technologies and questions the commodification of—and access to—cultural heritage. Through his deliberately kitsch tributes to the treasures of Ravenna, such as the pixelated reproduction of empress Theodora seen above, or through this more cryptic intertextual homage of the pigeon/dove, Invader holds together the two facets of nostalgia (restorative and reflective). How do we relate to this past of Western civilization? How does this past shape the present, and for whom, at a time when the museumification of city-centers contributes to massive phenomena of gentrification? How can we turn to the past, not as a rigid foundation for a univocal and fixed identity, but as a productive source of vitality and potentialities? The distance introduced by humor and kitsch, mainly conveyed by the medial hybridity of Invader’s works, invites viewers to reflect on the relationship between past, present, and future.

Isolating and reterritorializing this figure of the dove denotes an in-depth engagement with the iconography of the original mosaic and places the invasion project in a meaningful dialogue with art history. Traditionally, a dove can symbolize the Holy Ghost or the human soul. Represented as drinking from a fountain, it may also symbolize baptism. In the context of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia described above, this dove, within an iconography evoking a garden of paradise, signals to the peace of the soul after death, sanctified by the proximity of God.³⁹ In isolating this dove from its iconographic and architectural context and reterritorializing it on a freeway access bridge under a road sign that points to Ravenna's city center, Invader proceeds to a general translation of its meanings. The dove was a symbol of the Holy Ghost, a link between humans and divine transcendence. Until the twentieth century, the homing pigeon was another kind of messenger, carrying messages for humans in the immanence of the world. The descendants of domesticated pigeons who escaped human control, street pigeons have now colonized the contemporary megalopolis, today their "natural" habitat. They no longer carry anything but diseases. Invader's pixelized pigeon, a mosaic representation of a digital image of an erring bird, disconnected from its original pictorial context as well as from any natural roots, seems to stand as an index of this very disconnection, a corollary of an encoding of the world in the age of digital information. The holy dove stood for a communication with a world exceeding the human; the pigeons wander in an inhuman world made of data and concrete, where the immanent rationality of the code has supplanted the transcendence of symbols.

The ancient mosaic was a façade, an illusory representation of the *domus* that nonetheless bore witness to its impossible memory. In the space and time of the self-referential megalopolis, the reference to the elusive *domus* has disappeared, forgotten amidst machinic encryptions, calculations, and anticipations designed to neutralize its potentially disruptive power. Every artwork is immediately turned into a cultural commodity. At most, one could signal toward an outside of this system of signs encircling the planet, in an attempt to allude to a domesticity now lost in the unlivable megalopolis. Lyotard wrote: "Making media graffiti, ultimate prodigality, the last homage to lost frugality."⁴⁰ Graffiti—a parasitic parietal inscription—and

39. *Ibid.*, p. 54–55; see also Stefano Bottari (ed.), Ravenna: *The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia: Treasures of Christian Art 3*, Bologna, Officine Grafiche Poligrafici il Resto del Carlino, 1966, p. 17.

40. Lyotard, 1991, p. 201.

pigeons—acclimatized to cities where their feces defile buildings—have one thing in common: both are generally perceived as proliferating the pollution of urban space, and both, in turn, designate this space as uninhabitable, while also bearing witness to the persistence of a forgotten, impossible memory of what dwelling once could have meant, a memory that becomes the *locus* of a resistance. With his pixelated pigeon metaphorically alluding to the memory of the holy dove or, beyond it, to that of a wild bird in nature, Invader encapsulates the human soul in graffiti and, at the same time, exhibits the techno-scientific and spatial mechanisms of its desertion.

Invader’s installation in the streets of little pixel invaders, made in a material also pertaining to an ancient art of living, operates an essential reversal. His gesture, illegal, playful, and free, reintegrates the human dwelling into the anonymous and inhuman space that this very gesture denounces as shaped for and by the productive circulation of data. Revealing a lack obfuscated by the workings of techno-scientific capitalism, this gesture disrupts the “real time” of efficient communication with a reference, entailed in the use of mosaic, to a time outside of time, radically other, and perceived as lost—a lost time whose search is not aimed at restoring the past, but, as we shall see, at dwelling in the present. But what time is this?

BACK TO THE FUTURE: DWELLING, NONETHELESS

Far from tracing a declinist narrative that would only lament the loss of a supposed golden age of humanity, Invader’s artistic project suggests that digitality has become humans’ true “home,” replacing “nature” as an affectively loaded *locus* of connection—a connection always re-actualized through the process of the game. In *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2012), Elissa Marder has noted how notions such as “origin,” “certainty,” “nature,” “home,” or “place” all partake of a symbolic nexus of which “the mother” is the grounding incarnation.⁴¹ As she argues, the technological drive aims at preserving the “fantasy of full presence, life, and unending connection.”⁴² If technology can constitute a fantastical link with the maternal function, then videogames, and their adaptation into urban reality in Invader’s project, would allow us to maintain an uninterrupted connection with a

41. Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 4–5; p. 116–117.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

“full presence,” with a fantastical totality that would precede any splitting of the subject and the world—any spacing. Departing from Elissa Marder’s insight, I would like to briefly pause and consider how the implications of digital technologies as a continuation of maternal presence can relate to the question of dwelling, in ways that will again involve the question of nostalgia.

In the wake of the psychoanalytic tradition, the opening of space has often been associated with children’s play. Following Freud’s famous analysis of the *fort-da* game, both Lyotard and de Certeau locate the opening of phenomenological space in the absence of the mother, constituted (as external object distinct from the self) and lost in the same movement and represented on the stage of a fantasy.⁴³ But beyond this Freudian model and its corollary of absence and disconnection, theorists engaging with digital technologies have rather turned to a Winnicottian model of play.⁴⁴ In his famous hypothesis formulated in 1951 in *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott postulated the existence of an intermediary space between external reality and psychic reality, a “potential space”⁴⁵ tied to the experience of transitional objects. Taking the place of the illusion, afforded by the good-enough mother, that external reality corresponds to the infant’s own capacity to create or “magically”⁴⁶ summon something that fulfills their present need, the transitional object is the first “not-me” possession of the child but is not yet an external “object” in its own right.⁴⁷ Providing the child with a neutral zone of experimentation where the nature of objects remains indistinct, it allows for the gradual opening of the space where subject and object become separated. Transitional phenomena thus delimit a “potential space” between mother and child,

43. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud famously describes how his 18-month-old grandson, during his mother’s absences, used to play a game of his own invention, which consisted in throwing a wooden reel over the edge of his cradle and making it reappear by pulling it by its string; the repeated dis- and re-appearances of the object were greeted with the sounds “o-o-o-o” (“*fort*,” “gone” according to the child’s caretakers) and “da.” For Freud, the child channeled the distress felt at the mother’s absence and regained fantasmatically, through play, the control over her comings and goings, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], New York, Dover Publications, Dover Thrift Edition, 2015. For de Certeau and Lyotard’s readings, see de Certeau, 2011, p. 110, and Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Anthony Hudek & Mary Lydon, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 124–125.

44. Already in *The Second Self*, Sherry Turkle suggested that computers, integral to the experience of the self, might operate in ways similar to transitional objects. *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit* [1984], Cambridge, MIT Press, 2005, p. 114.

45. Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* [1951], London, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 144.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

creatively filled with play, which gradually pervades the entire territory separating internal psychic reality from shared external reality, and eventually spreads to the entire cultural realm as individuals grow into adults.⁴⁸ For Annette Kuhn, the broad notion of "home" best describes this potential space where the individual's negotiation with the new and unfamiliar can safely take place.⁴⁹ In establishing a continuity between transitional phenomena and the adult space of cultural experience, this model sheds new light on what "home" and "nature" can mean. Indeed, as Sherry Turkle remarked in a note of *Life on the Screen*, building on Winnicott:

The experience [of transitional objects] is diffused in the intense experiencing in later life of a highly charged intermediate space between the self and certain objects. This experience has traditionally been associated with religion, spirituality, notions of beauty, sexual intimacy, and the sense of connection with nature. Now it is associated with computers.⁵⁰

The "virtual" world of computers and video games would connect directly to this potential space opened by transitional phenomena, where the relationship between inner and outer world is negotiated.⁵¹ More recently, Victor Burgin also identified potential space as "the location of virtual experience."⁵² These remarks suggest that humans have delegated the management of potential space to digital interfaces. Like transitional objects, electronic devices are at the same time "not-me" possessions and extensions of the self. They belong to an indistinct zone of illusion where the world can be magically summoned at the tips of one's fingers, opening potential (virtual?) spaces of infinite connection where humans are now at home. This detour through psychoanalysis allows for an original articulation of past and present. Here, nostalgia does not mark the distance of a presence that is forever lost: on the contrary, this past is always continued and re-actualized in the present, a source of vitality, creativity,

48. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

49. Annette Kuhn, "Spaces and Frames: An Introduction," Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Little Mad-nesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2013, p. 16.

50. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995, p. 273 (note 1).

51. See also Jon Dovey & Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*, Maidenhead, Berkshire, Open University Press, MacGraw-Hill, 2006, p. 32.

52. Victor Burgin, "The Location of Virtual Experience," Annette Kuhn (ed.) *Little Mad-nesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2013, p. 24.

and potentiality for the future. The feeling of being at home is no longer expressed through longing and associated with a real or fantasized past but can be realized in the present.

The unexpected encounter of a space invader in urban space reconnects passers-by, users of the functionalist city, with this most intimate, singular, archaic potential space of transitional phenomena, reminding them of what *home* feels like and what cities could and should be: a free space of human connection. Undoubtedly, space invaders allude to the childhood of a generation born with the first videogames who continues to feel the thrill of points won or lost, prolonging a time when it was acceptable to spend one's time suspended in the time of the game—in the arcade, in the family living room connected to the console hooked up to the TV, or later online. As Annick Rivoire has noted, for this generation that grew up with Pong, Pacman, and Rubik's Cubes, such reappearance of the past in the present is integral to Invader's artistic project, which functions in a way similar to Proust's Madeleine: creating or encountering a space invader in the street would amount to travelling in time.⁵³ However, as Maria B. Garda notes in her discussion of nostalgia in retro game design, one needn't have first-hand recollections of the arcade to experience this feeling. The "8-bitness" that she identifies as the stylistic trigger of nostalgia refers more generally to "a communal memory of the recent past":⁵⁴ it does not aim at restoring or conserving the past as such, but gestures to the past in order to reflect on the present. In the case of Invader, the nostalgia elicited by the encounter of these figures opens a complex nexus of affects and meanings as it interacts with the multiple dimensions of a hybrid media-product. The pixel, symbol of the cybernetic ideology that has transformed urban space into a zone of passage organized by and for data, designates this space as uninhabitable in the same way. Yet, at the core of the uninhabitable city, the rigidity of mosaics materializes the passage of data and brings it to a halt. It alludes to a space and time where life was not separated into different objective functions, let alone subject to criteria of efficiency—where space and time, gradually opened and differentiated out of an original illusion, were in their infancy. The time of play, opening a transitional space between the self and reality, is constantly re-actualized

53. Annick Rivoire, "Paris, en plein dans le 1000," *1000*, catalog of Invader's solo-exhibition *1000* celebrating his thousandth Parisian space invader, La Générale & Galerie Le Feuvre, Paris, 7 June–2 July 2011, Paris, Galerie le Feuvre, 2011, no pagination.

54. Garda, 2013, p. 6–7.

through the infinite process of a permanent invasion that knows no “game over.” The pixel-mosaic becomes a form-meaning. Its very fragmentation suggests that the given is never accessible except as a pre-ordained agglomeration of pixels, as the visual manifestation of the datafication of the world. Yet, it also acts as a factor of cohesion by opening up an emotional space for those who spent their childhood passionately connected to the parallel dimension of the arcade—and, beyond those associations with childhood, reenacting in the present an original “home,” a potential space preceding the strict separation of object and subject, i.e., the opening of reality and the consolidation of consciousness.

The outcome of the interbreeding of mosaic, pixel, graffiti, and game is a manifesto that proclaims that one can settle on the ruins of the system and in its interstices: in encountering these pieces of “childhood” in unexpected places, former children find themselves compelled by a principle greater than them that yet proceeds only from them. By spreading his figurines throughout the world, and now by inviting players around the world to connect through their smartphones with their potential space and with a community of players via the application *Flashinvaders*, Invader offers an alternative use of digital technologies: a use that no longer capitalizes on the control and exploitation of individual data by public or private institutions but opens up a space for the free connection of human singularities across spatial and cultural differences.

CONCLUSION

To the self-referential messages of the productive megalopolis, whose circulation shapes space, the invasion project opposes the mark of a childhood that does not pass, pasted on the walls like the Romans decorated their houses with mythological or animal motifs, rooting their homes in the holy order of “nature.” As for the cyborg children of the megalopolis, “nature” is a grounding that does not lend itself to the growing of roots. Much like the pigeon of pixels cemented by Invader on a freeway access bridge in the outskirts of Ravenna, humans live in the uninhabitable space of the megalopolis where they are, still, somehow, home. They no longer communicate with a holy natural order: they are themselves nodes of communication in networks that encircle the globe and know no transcendence. Invader disseminates this symbol of a techno-scientific revolution which, coupled with the imperative of efficiency, has deprived humans of control of their societies and turned them into a swarming

factory of data to mine for profit and for power. Yet that same symbol is also the sign by which, at the very heart of this inhuman space, the artist opens windows onto what is perhaps most human in humans: this free, potential space associated with "home." In the ruins of the metropolis and its cosmopolitan ideal of a dwelling for all humans, canceled out by the workings of the global megalopolis and its inhuman performativity, Invader's intermedial project occupies a site of resistance. Nestling in the bandwidth that makes up the fabric of Western existence, he makes visible its grain by a nostalgic symbol that also bears witness to a debt of childhood, prospectively opening potential spaces of infinite, human connection.

Returning ‘Home’? or Dwelling in the Pixel Age: On Invader’s Intermedial Space Invasion

JULIE GAILLARD

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA–CHAMPAIGN

ABSTRACT

Since 1998, French artist Invader has invaded urban space with mosaics representing pixelated aliens originally imported from the 1978 arcade game *Space Invaders*. Turning retrogaming into a global artistic project through ever-evolving processes of media combination and intermedial reference, Invader brings together a variety of media and artistic traditions (including mosaics, graffiti, pixel art, arcade games, and a geocaching application) that each involve specific technical and affective inscriptions of humans in space and time. This article shows that the nostalgia mobilized across these distinct medial strata and through their hybridization is not only embraced restoratively but reflectively (Boym, 2001). Nostalgia becomes a vehicle for a voyage across the history of Western dwelling from Antiquity to the techno-capitalist megapolis, a voyage through which the artist seeks to redefine what “dwelling” can mean in a post-digital era.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis 1998, l’artiste français Invader envahit l’espace urbain avec des mosaïques représentant de petits extraterrestres de pixels, initialement importés du jeu d’arcade *Space Invaders* (1978). Élevant le rétrogaming à l’échelle d’un projet artistique global par le jeu des hybridations et des références intermédiaires, Invader rassemble une multitude de formes et traditions artistiques (mosaïque, graffiti, pixel art, jeux d’arcade

et une application de géocaching) qui chacune engagent des inscriptions techniques et affectives propres aux humains dans l'espace et le temps. Cet article montre que la nostalgie mobilisée à travers ces diverses strates médiales et à travers leur hybridation n'est pas adoptée seulement de manière restauratrice mais aussi réflexive (Boym, 2001). La nostalgie devient le véhicule d'un voyage à travers l'histoire de l'habitation occidentale, de l'Antiquité à la mégapole technocapitaliste, voyage à travers lequel l'artiste cherche à redéfinir ce qu'« habiter » veut dire à l'ère post-numérique.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Julie Gaillard is assistant professor of French at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of *Réalités pseudonymes* (2020) and co-editor of *Traversals of Affect: On Jean-François Lyotard* (2016).