The New Virtuality

A Creative Website on the Disappearing Differences Between Real and Unreal

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Abstract

Our multimedia website project, "The New Virtuality", explores the implications of highly realistic images that interact and socialise with human users, often seemingly "live" in real-time. Created with imaging technologies such as holographic projection or virtual reality (VR) and usually boosted by AI and machine learning, we argue that these images present

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unprecedented directions in understanding how reality, liveness and presence are discerned and believed. Radically breaking down differences between real and unreal, they point to an era of blurred boundaries, dematerialization and limbic spaces which converges visual media with twenty-first century politics of dis/misinformation, post-truth and deep fakery. In this project, we discuss this era as "the new virtuality."

These developments underpin the project's research questions: how to understand this media that so freely and near-seamlessly mix virtual and actual realities? How to place this phenomenon in media's long history of blurred environments, while still appreciating their distinctive newness and challenges? What are the impacts of the new virtuality on our apprehensions and constructions of realities? How might this mediated reality relate – as code, as language, as consciousness – to the wider contexts of information that colour contemporary times?

In our methodology, we interwove theory, multimedia expression and fiction as multiple voices to articulate the project's arguments across three frameworks of distinct approaches, media elements and genre features. The first framework is a historical context with which to understand the continuities and divergences of virtuality. The second is the connection of theory – particularly from film, screen and media studies – with textual readings drawn across multiple media, including paintings, cinema, performance, VR, apps and architecture. The third is the employment of fiction and multimedia. Inspired by the "scientific fiction" work of Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan (Lee and Chen, 2021), we intertwined a fictional story through the project for greater animation and accessibility – a creative warp to the academic weft. Multimedia via the essays' image margins and a 33-minute video essay function as audiovisual "mood boards" to provide elaboration, illustration, colour and setting for conveying the new virtuality's poetics of fudged and adrift unsettling across this new reality.

The result is a work of multiple voices and hybridity which identifies a new framework of reality through contemporary mixed media. This new virtuality is no longer about the questions of realism or illusion (e.g. Friedberg 2009; Grau 2003) from computer-generated

imagery (CGI) or even deepfakes. They are about new technical codes and information which give rise to revised conceptions of ontology, anthropology, epistemology, literacy, time and space. They are new systems of complex linkages between media, codes, expressions, consciousness, change and history. These ideas not only impact understanding of our world. They also revise orientations of truth values and identifications of moral spaces.

Keywords

creative making, virtuality, unreal, hybridity, screen media

Category

Online Project

Research Creation's URL

https://thenewvirtuality.com/

1. Description

Our multimedia website project, "The New Virtuality", explores the implications of highly realistic images that interact and socialise with human users, often seemingly "live" in real time. Created with imaging technologies such as holographic projection or virtual reality (VR) and usually boosted by AI and machine learning, we argue that these images present unprecedented directions in understanding how reality, liveness and presence are discerned and believed. Radically breaking down differences between real and unreal, they point to an era of blurred boundaries, dematerialization and limbic spaces which converges visual media with twenty-first century politics of dis/misinformation, post-truth and deep fakery. In this project, we discuss this era as "the new virtuality."

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2. Objectives

Our objectives for this project are threefold. The first is to create a work which identifies a new framework of reality through contemporary mixed media. This new virtuality is no longer about the questions of realism or illusion (e.g. Friedberg 2009; Grau 2003) from computer generated imagery (CGI) or even deepfakes. They are about new technical codes and information which give rise to revised conceptions of ontology, anthropology, epistemology, literacy, time and space. They are new systems of complex linkages between media, codes, expressions, consciousness, change and history. These ideas not only impact understanding of our world. They also revise orientations of truth values and identifications of moral spaces.

As a creative online work, the project's second objective is to set up a little-seen way of presenting and reflecting on academic work. Academic websites tend to be descriptive pages with hosted links to resources. Conversely, our project's connective webpages stand integrally to its argument. Its mosaic of text, fiction and multimedia is itself a meta-reflection of its argument of mixed realities. Its solicitation of the user's piecing together the website's different fragments is our call to their action in similarly constructing realities across the actual and the virtual. In this multi variegated mode, the project revises academic discourse as a media ecology which we imaginatively, even speculatively, create and generate even as we subsist in it via our jobs and labour. Connecting these valences of hyperlinks, texts, voices and genres likewise re structures the usage, conceptualization and description of academic argument. It subverts the notion of the academic outcome, its vocabulary and its genres of knowledge production by re-defining the ways and/or environment in which the academic product is generated, experienced and mediatized.

Finally, the project's third objective is to use its hybridity to present multiple voices along the lines of a para-academic text as identified by Joy and Musciandaro on being "the multivalent sense of something that fulfills and/or frustrates the academic from a position of intimate exteriority" (as quoted in Boshears 2014, 179). Academic channels tend to focus on set methodologies and neutrality of discourse that do not countenance alternative valences. On the other hand, fiction – even science fiction – spring out of imagination, speculation and creative treatment. This project treads a middle path, complementing academic research with colour, vibrancy and multiple valences. It thus speaks to the shifting spaces necessary for transforming attention, particularly on how we know and perceive of our lived realities. Such spaces also enrich the work of understanding media, if not media itself, in re-considering our present social, cultural and political conjunctures, or, the task of "translating ourselves... to ourselves" (Goldberg 2015, 165).

3. Theoretical Framework

The project situates its theoretical framework in terms of where and how visual media have always pushed the boundaries between the virtuality of images against the actuality of the

viewer's environment. Classic assertions on the significance of these boundaries include their being parergon: "neither work (ergon) nor outside the work [hors d'oeuvre] neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, [the boundary] disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work." (Derrida 1987, 9; emphasis added.) To Krauss (1985), the painting's frame "crops or cuts the represented element out of reality-at-large," and "announces that between the part of reality that was cut away and this part there is a difference." (115) For cinema, Friedberg (2009) refers to the "ontological cut," taking the term from Victor Stoichita who used it to refer to the demarcation between the portable panel painting and the wall:

Like the frame of the architectural window and the frame of the painting, the frame of the moving-image screen marks a separation – an 'ontological cut' – between the material surface of the wall and the view contained within [the frame's] aperture. (Friedberg 2009, 5 and repeated at 157)

Applied to other media from paintings and trompe l'oeil to photography and cinema to VR and immersive environments, scholars have extensively discussed the ontology of the image in both its separations and muddying against the referent (e.g. Bazin 1971; Daney 1972; Andrew 1976; Cardinal 1986; Elkins 1996; Baudrillard 2002; Carbone 2016; Peretz 2017). This discourse was renewed at the millennium's turn with the advent of computer-generated imagery (e.g. Mulvey 2006; Rodowick 2007; Prince 2012; Kim 2016). More recently, the virtuality of the image received renewed attention from new angles, such as cinema marketing (Atkinson 2014); posthumanism (Brown 2013; Brown and Fleming 2020); and computational culture (Jones 2020), to name a few examples.

Our project advances this scholarship in two ways. Firstly, it distinguishes a corpus of images that we argue herald different actual/virtual relations from its precedents. Discourse on the virtuality of the image generally focus on dematerialization (e.g. Hayles 1999) or immersiveness (e.g. Grau 2003). Via her study across images from cinema to computers, Friedberg (2009) shifts our understanding of virtuality to that of a "second-order materiality"

(11), where virtuality is about transfer or transformation to another location (see also Gunning 2019), or a separate ontology, or a different plane of meaning. Studying the images of the new virtuality, our essay extends the understanding of virtuality from transfer to vacillation. We identify these images of the new virtuality as beyond representation. Rather, they are a complex dialogue that trades and wheels across the virtual and actual. In this dialogue, virtuality stands on multiple paradoxes: they are believed yet disbelieved; manipulated yet recognisable; realistic yet fake. In turn, an intense discombobulation arises, out of which even more virtuality is sought and consumed.

The project's second advancement is to connect the new virtuality to the wider politics of post truth, mis/disinformation and deepfakes. This politics, too, rests on the notion of disappearing difference without positive terms – between scene and reality; event and representation; record and referent. Our argument of the new virtuality's play between real and unreal thus also reads virtuality as a critical signal fire that demonstrates post-truth's pliable subjectivity and its concomitant challenges to frameworks of disbelief, reliability and certainty. In this sense, media – and its new virtualities – also continue important ideas of how orality, literacy and linearity (e.g. Ong [1982] 2002; Flusser [1986] 2015) tie into history and historical consciousness. We thus argue for the virtuality of the image as the new battleground for understanding the politics of current and future realities and histories. Key terms for this battleground are how virtuality is built, constructed and believed; the spaces and structures in which it operates; the aims and ambitions as driven by its creators; the consequences of its power. "The New Virtuality" thus highlights new areas and questions for the meanings of our realities: not by way of content or constitution, but the assertion (and diminishment) of boundaries and difference.

4. Methodology

In an approach described by South African transmedia storyteller Damien Tomaselli as "new age narrative" (2022), we interwove theory, multimedia expression and fiction as multiple voices to articulate the project's arguments across three frameworks of distinct approaches, media elements and genre features (Fig. 1).

Framework 1: Historical Context	Framework 2: Textual Reading and Theory	Framework 3: Fiction and Multimedia
• Image arcade • Media archaeology • Exemplars • Historical continuity	• Close readings • Theory application • Written essays	• Creative writing • Interactive story • Image galleries • Video essay

Fig. 1: The three frameworks of "The New Virtuality" project

The first framework is a historical context with which to understand the continuities and divergences of virtuality. Visual media have always pushed boundaries between the virtuality of images and the actuality of the viewer's environment. Through archival research and media archaeology (Parikka 2012), we traced a visual arc of media history through an image arcade as an archive of exemplars and a journey through virtuality's wider ecology.

The second is the connection of theory – particularly from film, screen and media studies – with textual readings drawn across multiple media, including paintings, cinema, performance, VR, apps and architecture. Stitching together these accounts across four essays as a mosaic of theory, readings, screen grabs, video clips and digital objects, we argue the new virtuality as an inter/cross-medial environment with potent socio-cultural-political consequences. In this vein, too, the metaverse beckons, with its own capital and power structures for reckoning.

The third is the employment of fiction and multimedia. Inspired by the "scientific fiction" work of Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan (Lee and Chen, 2021), we intertwined a fictional story through the project for greater animation and accessibility – a creative warp to the academic weft. Multimedia via the essays' image margins and a 33 minute video essay function as audiovisual "mood boards" to provide elaboration, illustration, colour and setting for conveying the new virtuality's poetics of fudged and adrift unsettling across this new reality.

5. Research-Creation Relation to Conference's Themes

The project relates to the conference's theme of craft in two ways. Firstly, its ideas of the dominance of the virtual re-invigorate the question of craft in terms of what it means and where it subsists. In Abstracting Craft, Malcolm McCullough (1996) makes a persuasive case for the role of craft in digital tools: as play, as visual thinking, in terms of software construction, as generative models. Most of all, virtual craft lies in terms continued from its analogue version – as individual mastery and the making of goods: "in all these regards [of craft], craft is commitment to the worth of personal knowledge." (246). The dominance of virtuality which lies at the center of our project's arguments thus not only showcases the virtuality of reality, but also the making of that reality in contexts not just about images but also knowledge and academic output. What kinds of philosophies underpin the craft of making? What kinds of practice inform them? What kinds of care, but also what kinds of power structures determine that making? To consider the craft of virtual-making is to first identify the platforms and structures of virtuality itself.

Secondly, the project interrogates the inherent meanings of tangibility and corporeality. Where the virtual pushes against the actual in the context of The New Virtuality is also a contestation of the immaterial versus the physical. In turn, that contestation radically questions the integrity of the medium in relation to practice and expression. What are the aesthetics, intention and/or poetics in play with immateriality? If it is clear or obvious how tangibility feeds into craft, how, then, does that equation figure in virtual realities? Where there is no tangibility, what is the meaning of craft and making? The project's showcasing of virtuality in both its theme and methodologies thus throws open these questions as a radical re-thinking of the purposes, objectives and meaningfulness of craft, making and engagement.