The New Virtuality:
A Creative Website on Blurred Boundaries Between the Real and Unreal

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Our project, "The New Virtuality" (thenewvirtuality.com), is an online multimedia work which explores the implications of highly realistic images that appear, interact, and socialize with human users, often seemingly "live" in real time. Such realism of and engagement with the image prompt reconsideration of the relationships between reality and visuality. How, then, 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 color contemporary times?

Description of Project

Accessed as a website (see fig. 1), we implemented an interwoven three-pronged approach—academic thesis; image; fiction—to present the project's ideas on this contemporary state of mixed realities. Distinct media and genre features underscore each approach, as tabulated below:

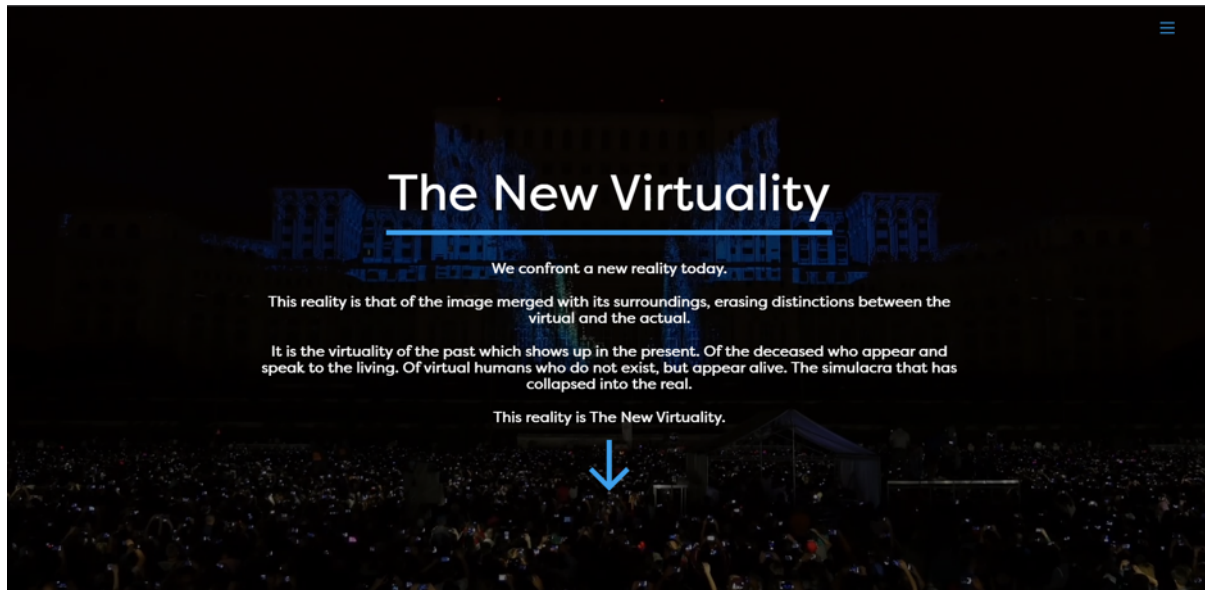| **Academic thesis**	**Multimedia**	**Fiction**
• Textual reading • Theory application • Media archaeology • Historical continuity	• Image arcade • Image galleries • Video essay • Exemplars	• Creative writing • Science fiction • Fragmentation • Interactive story

Fig 1. Screenshot of the project website's landing page.

Academic Thesis

Drawing from readings of film and media theory, archival research (including reviews and paratexts), textual readings and media archaeology (Parikka), we wrote the project's academic thesis across four essays. The first ("Disappearing Boundaries") traces a historical arc of media which feature diminishing boundaries ranging across marketing practices, land art, theatre practices, emerging film genres and contemporary digital art. The second essay ("Disappearing Difference") extrapolates that historical account to argue for the importance of difference as not simply a premise of definition, but a space for moral judgement. The third essay ("Virtual

Humans") explicates the new virtuality via the exemplar of virtual humans: highly realistic computer-generated images of humans or humanoid forms which appear, move, and even engage with actual humans in real time. The final essay ("The Unreal") examines the viewer's discombobulating vacillations between virtual and actual realities in the new virtuality, culminating into their almost heedless gluttony of the virtual. The essays' aim is to collectively present and analyze the distinctive newness and challenges of invasive virtuality in contemporary visuality, while still retaining clear contextualization of the long media history of the virtual.

Image

Images permeate the project in three ways. The first is an image gallery which rolls up alongside the text of each essay as the page is scrolled (see fig. 2). Consisting of still images and videos, each image gallery illustrates the essays' textual references. In some cases, we chose the images not so much as a reference but a *coloring* of the text's ideas, providing mood and setting to the argument.
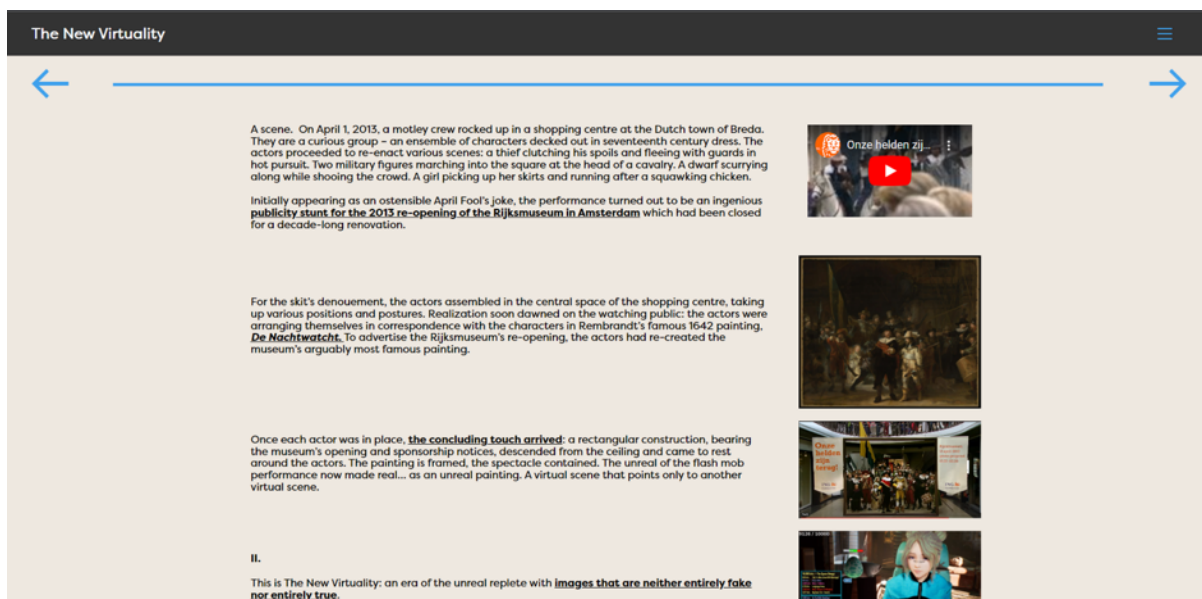

Fig 2. Screenshot of an image gallery alongside an essay.

Secondly, the website features a stand-alone image gallery, titled "40 Snapshots of The New Virtuality" (see fig. 3). This gallery presents a revolving arcade of images which reflect myriad examples of the new virtuality in its mixed realities. They further enliven and illustrate our argument.
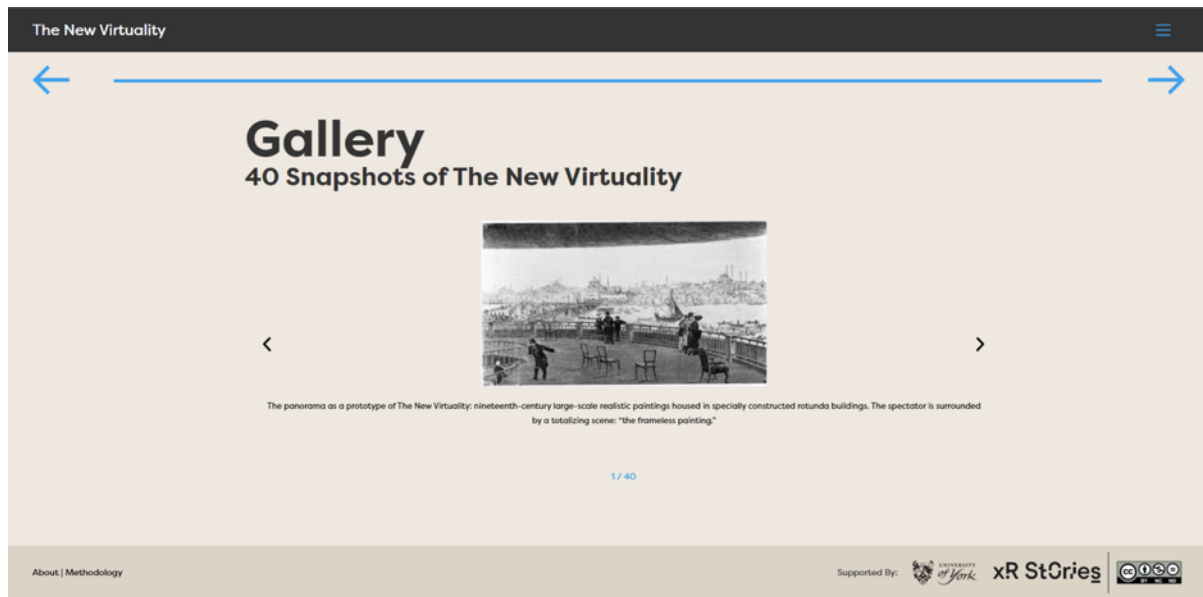

Fig 3. Screenshot of the stand-alone image gallery.

The project's third presentation of images is a 33-minute video essay (see fig. 4). The captioned video presents the argument in a more accessible format as compared to text. At the same time, like the image gallery, it constitutes part of the argument as an audiovisual coloring of the poetics of the new virtuality—namely, the ethos of discombobulation that emanates from the new virtuality's blurred media boundaries. The video thus functions as a self-reflective "mood board" to the argument with its narration written in a conscious rhetoric and meter of pensiveness and elegy, and images and music chosen in similar veins.
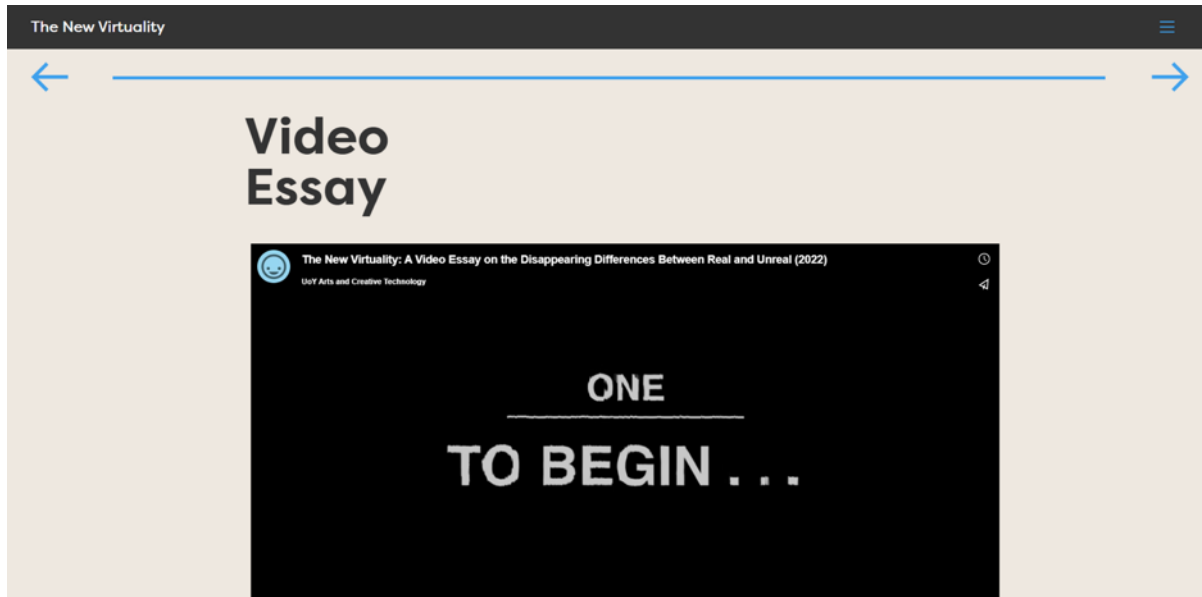
Fig 4. Screenshot of the project's video essay.

Fiction

The third prong of the project is our employment of fiction as a warp to the weft of the academic text. Inspired by the "scientific fiction" work of Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan per their book *AI 2041*, we similarly wanted to use the dramatic elements of fiction, such as character and plot, to color and deliver additional life to the academic argument.

We thus intertwined a science fiction story into the project by first anchoring the story across two project elements. The first element is an interactive story written in the open-source Twine tool that sets the reader at a pivotal moment of choice between characters related to the protagonist. The second is an epilogue which explains the story's premise of a physically ailing protagonist traversing virtual space with his futuristic carer.

Specifically leveraging the connected spaces of a website, we further constructed the fictional story through fragmented snippets interspersed amidst the academic text, signaled by red "portal" icons (see fig. 5a). When clicked, the portals raise text describing fictional scenes

between the protagonist and his carer (see fig. 5b). Each scene presents an issue of the

protagonist's being in his virtual world, thus furnishing a fictional canvas on which to further

interrogate and explore the question of mixed actual and virtual realities.
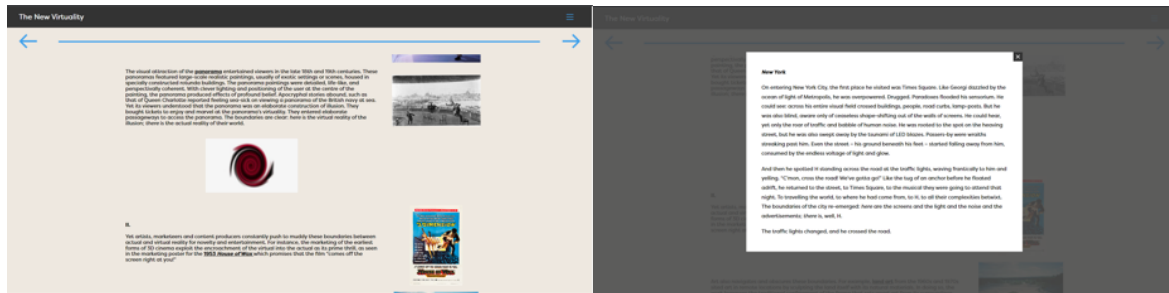

Fig 5a and 5b. The "red portal" icon (left) to bring up the fiction text (right).

Project Aim and Design

The aim of this project is to examine the phenomenon of mixed realities as an environment of

media that stands as codes for the larger entwinements or *blurs* between the anthropology of new

beings.

We likewise designed different valences and modalities in the project in various ways to

reflect this thematic content of blur and blend. Firstly, the project deliberately reflects mixed

voices across academia and creative work, research and practice, text and image, nonfiction and

imagination, active and interactive readership. These different voices set up the project as an

unusual hybrid work along the lines of being a para-academic text as identified by Eileen Joy and

Nicola Masciandaro in their panel discussion on being "the multivalent sense of something that

fulfills and/or frustrates the academic from a position of intimate exteriority" (quoted in

Boshears 179). Academic channels tend to be narrow, focusing on set methodologies and

neutrality of discourse that do not usually countenance alternative valences. On the other hand,

fiction—even science fiction—springs out of imagination, speculation, and creative treatment. This project deliberately treads multiple paths between academic discourse, creative practice, and science fiction, blurring their distinctions to leverage the resulting disorder for added color, vibrancy and multiple valences from its images, video, and other creative elements. In its para-academic multivalences, the project's platform itself thus reflects our argument of the radical blurring of realities.

Secondly, the project's treatment of blurred realities also resonates in its interface design of connective webpages. Almost all academic websites are depositories of descriptive pages with hosted links to resources such as journal articles. Conversely, the website of "The New Virtuality" stands integrally to its argument. Its stitching together of text, fiction, images, interactive story, and video is itself a meta-reflection of its argument of mixed realities. Its solicitation of the user's puzzling over and piecing together the different fragments of the website across its pages is our call to their action in similarly constructing their realities across the mix of actuality and virtuality. Not just a page of text, the webpage animates, is filled with movement, and promises connections and pathways. It is active between author and reader. It is a key, even almost self-reflective, vehicle of the blurrings at play in the project's methodologies. It serves as an active agent in these convergences, and thereby also partakes in the blur.

Finally, the project's design reflects blurs of different reading modes. Across various methodologies and presentation styles, it muddies the static with the moving, or text and still images with interactive story and video. In this sense, it also blurs passive reading with interactive co-authorship. In turn, the blur in these procedural ways converges two, if related, respective binary modes: practice and research; author and reader. Practice is action that is necessarily in the present: I do X; or I am doing X. On the other hand, research leans to action

from the past: I did X—read; consulted; gathered; interviewed; analyzed—and here are my findings and discussion. In both cases, the viewer or reader is passive as compared to the practitioner or researcher as active authors. In both cases, too, the text as an interface (Hookway) is irrelevant. It is an indifferent intermediary of merely transmitting information from author to reader.

The different modalities in the project blur these binaries. On one hand, we presented research in its past action and as text per convention. But we have also mixed in specific practices of more active readership such as scrolling through the website, shifting from image to text in their parallel spaces, jumping between academic text and fiction, selecting links or media to which the reader wishes to pay attention, and so on. Research and practice—past and present action—thus converge in this extended agency. By partaking in practice, the reader's role also blurs into that of an implicit author whereby they are able to formulate the path through which they navigate this work with a freedom that is otherwise usually very limited (one can only intelligibly read through a journal article in so many ways). Moreover, their agency as co-author in both physical and mental processes merges action and passivity. Their bodies are more actively at work, if only through fingers that type and wrist movements in maneuvering the computer mouse. Their imaginations are solicited in having to piece together the fiction world alongside the academic discourse, and in connecting images with text.

In these ways, the various elements of project design thus constitute part of our argument of discombobulation in the blurring of realities, setting up a different and little-seen, if at all, way of leading and presenting academic research. Through its multi-variegated approach of blurred modalities, it dissipates and discords the ecology and/or environment in which the academic

product is conceptualized, experienced, and mediatized. It calls into question academia's entire setup of knowledge, epistemology and, indeed, reality.

Project Argument

In our project, we argue that this state of reality as so mixed between the virtual and the actual presents an epistemology of new combinations of realities through contemporary images. It calls for revised literacies with which to gain awareness of and reckon with today's most significant cultural, social, and political changes. In addressing visual media of mixed actual and virtual realities, the project's central argument is likewise also about blur.

The project begins this address through tracing a historical overview of virtuality—defined as "'functionally or effectively but not formally' of the same materiality as what [the image] represents" (Friedberg 11)—out of visual media that specifically blur boundaries between the image and its surroundings. This arc ranges from eighteenth-century panoramas to marketing practices to developments of film genre to considerations of contemporary technology such as Virtual Reality (VR).

Delving into this media archaeology enables a deeper understanding of media's blurred boundaries through its genealogy of media history and practice. On one level, the blur of realities resulting from disappearing image boundaries is not new. Visual media have always pushed the boundaries between the virtuality of images against the actuality of the viewer's environment. In this regard, there has been much work by film and media scholars on the virtuality of the image as against its actuality (Friedberg; Grau). Applied across various media from paintings and trompe l'œil to photography and cinema to VR and immersive environments, practices which muddied images against their referent are by no means new.

In another sense, the historical tracing also sharpens what *is* different—namely, an emerging coding of reality which requires new literacies. The new virtuality of blurred realities is no longer about questions of realism or illusion which had followed the advent of computer-generated imagery (CGI) or even deepfakes. They are about new technical codes and information which constitute such images, giving rise to revised conceptions of their ontology, anthropology, epistemology, literacy, time, and space. In particular, we extend understanding virtuality from one of representation to that of vacillation. Virtuality is now, rather, a complex dialogue that wheels across the virtual and the actual, signaling for the viewer beliefs and knowledge in realities and a regime of truth values for which there is no longer any conception of difference. Or, to take Saussure's ideas, "without positive terms" (Virno and Campbell). Reality thus has no positivity, but only relativity to the virtual and the actual in continuity and congruousness.

Taking on a contemporary flux point of blurred media boundaries, the project focuses its address of virtuality on virtual humans as the key current exemplar of mixed realities. Neither actual nor virtual, neither real nor unreal, virtual humans present their engagement as a condition of constant, almost volatile, vacillation between those binary poles. In these fluctuations, the difference between actual and virtual humans ultimately disappears. The simulacra collapse into the real, where reality and illusion no longer have their old semantic values as counters or opposites to each other. The user thus confronts a state of virtuality that is not quite virtual nor actual, nor an amalgamation of the two. Rather, it is a limbic space of vacillation.

In turn, that disappearance of difference also heralds the vanishing of moral space. As Baudrillard writes:

What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and auditorium,

between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and its

double. And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that nowhere—in art,

morality, or politics—is there now any possibility of a moral judgement. (176)

Out of this loss of moral being also emerges a radical disorientation from the disappearance of

difference, or the nullification of the act of distinguishing. In this discombobulation, the viewer's

vacillations between virtual and actual realities in the new virtuality culminate with an almost

heedless gluttony of the virtual. The eliding of difference in the new virtuality thus also paves the

way for a black hole of representability that gives rise to a resulting hunger for images and

virtual life. In a sense, this gluttony received an unexpected boost when various parts of the

world largely retreated into virtual life under the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020–21. While these

lockdowns have been mostly lifted, virtual working and living still continue today. With subdued

yet sure determination, the virtual invades the actual as human activities and socializations shift

into the former in rejection of the latter. The appetite for the virtual continues unabated. It

likewise feeds the new virtuality and expands the ecology of the virtual in contemporary

environments.

The new virtuality thus not only manifests as mixed realities. It also heralds intense

discombobulations of definitions and truth values. From these radical shifts, new structures of

power, capital and influence arise which need to be examined and understood. New opportunities

need to be leveraged, and new perils countered. The new virtuality is a media ecology which sets

up increasingly complex linkages between media, codes, expressions, consciousness, change,

and history. These ideas revise the orientation of our truth values, identify potential moral voids,

and ultimately impact how we may understand our world.

Conclusion

The project's central idea is a new state of reality that is blurred between the virtual and the actual. In this treatment, the project also sets out the blur in audiovisual media to be the language of the future—the blur of images and bodies, of actual and virtual spaces, of information and beings. It articulates this theme in terms of both content and approach. Going forward, understanding also needs to give way to practice—how to deal and live with this discombobulation. That is the final blur: the blur between epistemology and practice, between ontology and action, between anthropology and research. We need to merge understanding into action.

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