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# Political and social potentialities of tele-immersive media: critique and tipologies of the 'virtual'

## *Potencialidades políticas y sociales de los medios teleinmersivos: crítica y tipologías de lo 'virtual'*

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***Abstract***

This paper uses a critical interdisciplinary method to explore the process of redefinition of presence within the discourses of the metaverse and VR, particularly by Big Tech or *platform capitalism* companies marketing of virtual travel media. For this end, critical discourse analysis is applied in the context of qualitative platform studies. The paper examines the use of digital means to subvert scale and transcend the dimensions at which human contact, social and political action and events typically occur. This raises the question: what exactly is being mediated and which aspects of place are being re-mediated? Alongside a widespread belief that a media culture of distance and passive reception has ended, the promises and perils of the virtual are linked to the hopes of redefining and continuing community, both local and global, and (dis)ordering the social. Lastly, the paper identifies, through a speculative critique method, two parallel trends in the process of virtualizing places and spaces designing a typology for virtualization or tele-immersiveness: an ontological/epistemological mode (representational or correlational) and a periled sociopolitical mode, and oposes them to the concept and pratices of operational materialism.

**Keywords:** virtual, presence, immersion, online community, operative images.

***Resumen***

Este artículo utiliza un método crítico interdisciplinario para explorar el proceso de redefinición de la presencia dentro de los discursos sobre el metaverso y la realidad virtual (VR), particularmente en el marketing de los medios de viaje virtual por parte de las empresas de Big Tech o del capitalismo de plataformas. Para ello, se aplica el análisis crítico del discurso en el contexto de estudios cualitativos sobre plataformas. El artículo examina el uso de medios digitales para subvertir la escala y trascender las dimensiones en las que normalmente ocurren el contacto humano, la acción social y política, y los eventos. Esto plantea la pregunta: ¿qué es exactamente lo que se está mediando y qué aspectos del lugar están siendo re-mediados? Junto a una creencia generalizada de que ha terminado una cultura mediática basada en la distancia y la recepción pasiva, las promesas y los peligros de lo virtual se vinculan con las esperanzas de redefinir y continuar la comunidad, tanto local como global, y de (des)ordenar lo social. Finalmente, el artículo identifica, mediante un método de crítica especulativa, dos tendencias paralelas en el proceso de virtualización de lugares y espacios, diseñando una tipología para la virtualización o la teleinmersión: un modo ontológico/epistemológico (representacional o correlacional) y un modo sociopolítico en riesgo, y los contrapone al concepto y a las prácticas del materialismo operacional.

**Palabras clave:** virtual, presencia, inmersión, comunidad en línea, imágenes operativas.

**Summary**



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## 1. Introduction: Virtual, presence and community

This paper started from a survey of the processes of redefinition of 'presence' within the discourses of the metaverse and VR, particularly by Big Tech or *platform capitalism* (Srnicek, 2017) companies marketing of virtual travel media. It examines the use of digital means to subvert scale and transcend the dimensions at which human contact, social and political action and communication are typically said occur. And from this a question arises: what exactly is being mediated and which aspects of place and presence are being re-mediated?

To answer this problem and develop an analysis of a crisis of presence, this paper employs a critical interdisciplinary method. The problematic of virtual travel and the critique of presence are predominantly addressed through critical theory, media theory, and philosophy; this includes a literature review conducing to a theoretical speculative critique. The mediatic dimensions of these technologies find their analytical framework in media studies, for instance, while the objects under examination circulate between treatments of image-theoretical approaches, analysis of production and usage contexts and discourse analysis methodologies. More specifically, a critical discourse analysis and image analysis is applied to marketing of XR by platforms, in the context of qualitative platform studies. Finally, a speculative critique produces a new typology for virtualization or tele-immersiveness.

There is a widespread belief that a media culture of distance and passive reception has ended, that the promises and perils of the virtual are linked to the hopes of redefining and continuing community, both local and global, and (dis)ordering the social. At the same time, everyone has heard or engaged in the pop critique that the aestheticization of place in virtual tourism often commodifies the experience of location, reducing it to a superficial phenomenon, based on data and non-corporeal optical perceptions, devoid of bodily movement, observer agency, and the political and social dimensions of present or community-situated encounters. Thus, in contemporary culture, the concept of virtual is often thought, as we know, to apply to false experiences or unreal things, while ignoring the materialities and carnality at play.

It can be argued that this is a repetition of an old and at this point mostly useless discussion of what Derrida (2005, pp. 73, 190, 289, 354) called the metaphysics of presence, which oppose real and non-real, presence and absence, and one can follow this argument while maintaining the opposition between factual or material and imaginary as still valid, and not belonging to the list of obsolete oppositions maintained in the metaphysics of presence. These are seen as hurtful attempts to address the great challenges posed by these technological and marketing shifts. One of my main points is that the *virtual* is *actual* in this context.

Another strand of the critique of the virtual as isolation is the question of community. Virilio aligns with thinkers like Avital Ronell (1996) or Sherry Turkle (1996), who have approached the virtual from its Greek roots—closer to notions of virtue or virility—thus associating the idea of the virtual with a utopia of the ego or identity. Both authors associate digital virtuality culture with a rejection of the social and real body: "virtual reality, artificial reality, dataspace, or cyberspace are inscriptions of a desire whose principal symptom can be seen as the absence of community" (Ronell, 1996, p. 118).

Ronell's text highlights how the virtual reality project was even championed by its own programmers as a weapon of the ego against passivity—"in the name of action and control" (Lanier apud Ronell, 1996, pp. 120, 127).

As an update to a debate initiated decades ago, it must be noted that the *walled gardens* of identity roleplay—which defined the cyber-utopia of the 1990s, as described by Sherry Turkle—ultimately did not become the norm for socialisation in so-called virtual space. While internet access was democratised (or commodified into affordability), a dynamic emerged between forms of psychosocial moratorium and online spaces that increasingly mirrored factual, local communities in the so-called *Web 3.0*—later remixed by algorithmic feeds that further complicate the issue. This has led to what we might call a *callow radicalisation* of online interpersonal communication, disconnected from embodied reality yet deeply entangled with the social challenges of late capitalism: the parasocialisation of bonds, the atomisation of subjects, and the media-driven explosion of virtually all *places of speech*—at a time when estimates suggest around two-thirds of the global population now has internet access (Papacharissi, 2020). Žižek, addressing this, speaks of an *'ideological fantasy'*, of a body linked to a bodiless mind—yet one that remains stubbornly phenomenological (Žižek, 1996, p. 2).

In all three authors, we see the idea of an escape from the real through the overstimulation of hyper-narcissism. In this regard, one might argue that a certain form of media-driven *identity politics* can also align

with regimes of consumption—or with *de-individuating* and *non-co-individuating* (rather tan *transindividuating*) resignifications, where difference is crystallised and reified instead of overcome. Stiegler, too, speaks to this same theme. To quote him:

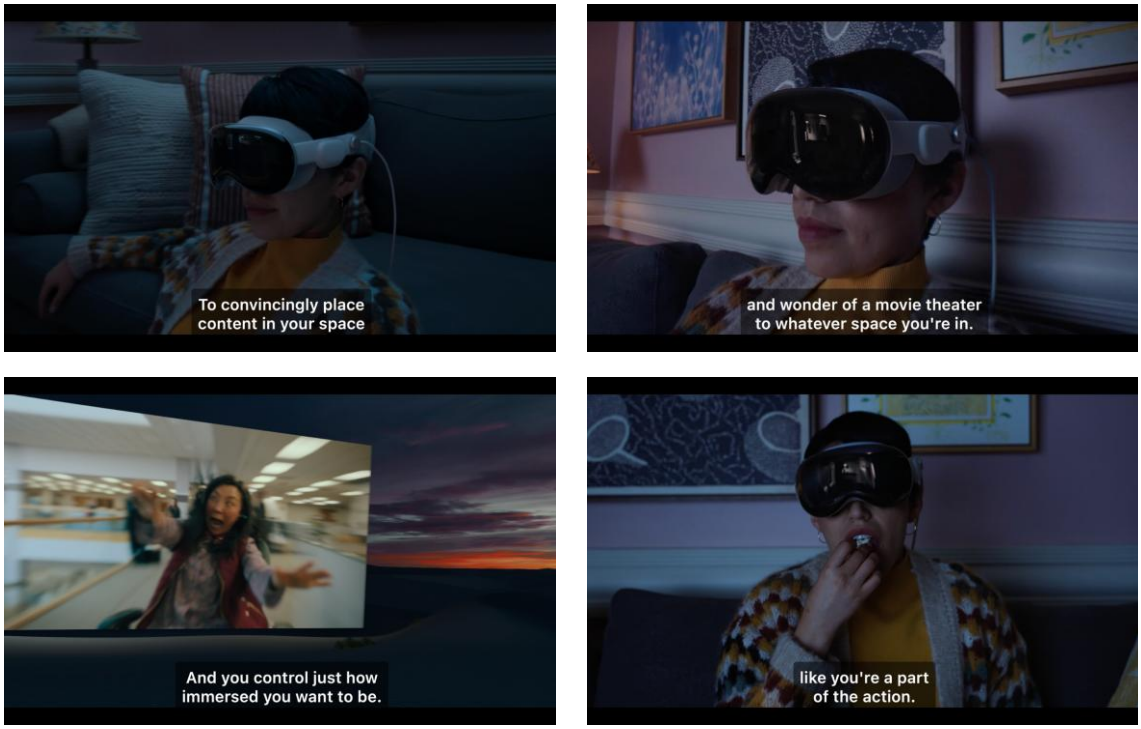
> "the we is seriously ill: the submission of retentional apparatuses, without which there is no psychic and collective individuation, to a criteriology which is totally immanent to the market, to its now hegemonic imperatives, renders the process of projection by which a we constitutes itself by individuating itself practically impossible (...). There is therefore a dis-individuation such that the individual's narcissistic capacity is first of all excited (including in the hyper-narcissism characteristic of certain spheres of work) before collapsing" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 60).

All the elements are present here to conceive certain modes of virtual reality as this fortress where the ego is formed – an interior space that simultaneously heralds a kind of death of the collective (Ver Stiegler, 2014, p. 62). The same relationship between isolation, imaginary spaces, the virtual, and narcissism (or egocentrism) is masterfully analysed by Anthony Vidler—drawing again on Lacan—in *Warped Space* (Vidler, 2000). Vidler observes that a 'stage' is also a place, and that Lacan's mirror stage inherently involves this difficulty in encountering the Other (Kelley, 1996, p. 39).

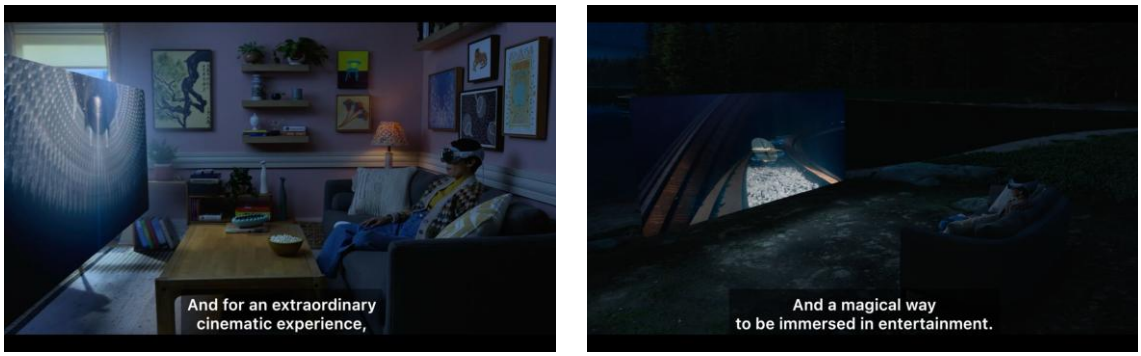
## 2. Contemporary media affordances of virtuality

In recent years, the tech culture and industry around extended, immersive, and virtual realities have made efforts to promote the preservation of both presence and community. The marketing of products like Pokémon Go, Fortnite, Meta Quest or Apple Vision Pro highlights that this effort focuses primarily on two or three key media functions. The first is *storytelling* (Cruz & Miranda, 2022; Murray, 2017; Walter, 2023) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Six screen captures of the video Introducing Apple Vision Pro, 2023



*Continuation Figure 1*




Source. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX9qSaGXFyg

After cultural studies' concerted effort to rehabilitate the concept of narrative —with its tension between central, hegemonic narratives and peripheral, community-based and identity narratives— media studies now regard narrative as the very nature of mediated events in constructing social and historical continuity and immersion (Cannavò *et al.,* 2024; Walter, 2023). Following Couldry (2010, p. 91), when understood in relation to voice, narrative constitutes how people "account for the world in which they act." These narrative dimensions of the self, fundamental to self-understanding, are intersubjectively grounded. Consequently, these questions now extend beyond the problem of sensible experience (see also Couldry, 2000, 2005).

Running parallel to this desire for encounter and community is another auxiliary function: that of gesture and physical movement (Bicacro, 2016). Through devices like Meta Quest and the Supernatural app (a spin-off from Chris Milk's Within, now under Meta), along with Kinect systems, these technologies combine various geolocation techniques and motion sensors (pedometers, accelerometers, gyroscopes, etc.) to measure, assess, and reward physical movement. They strategically position themselves as fitness and health apps.

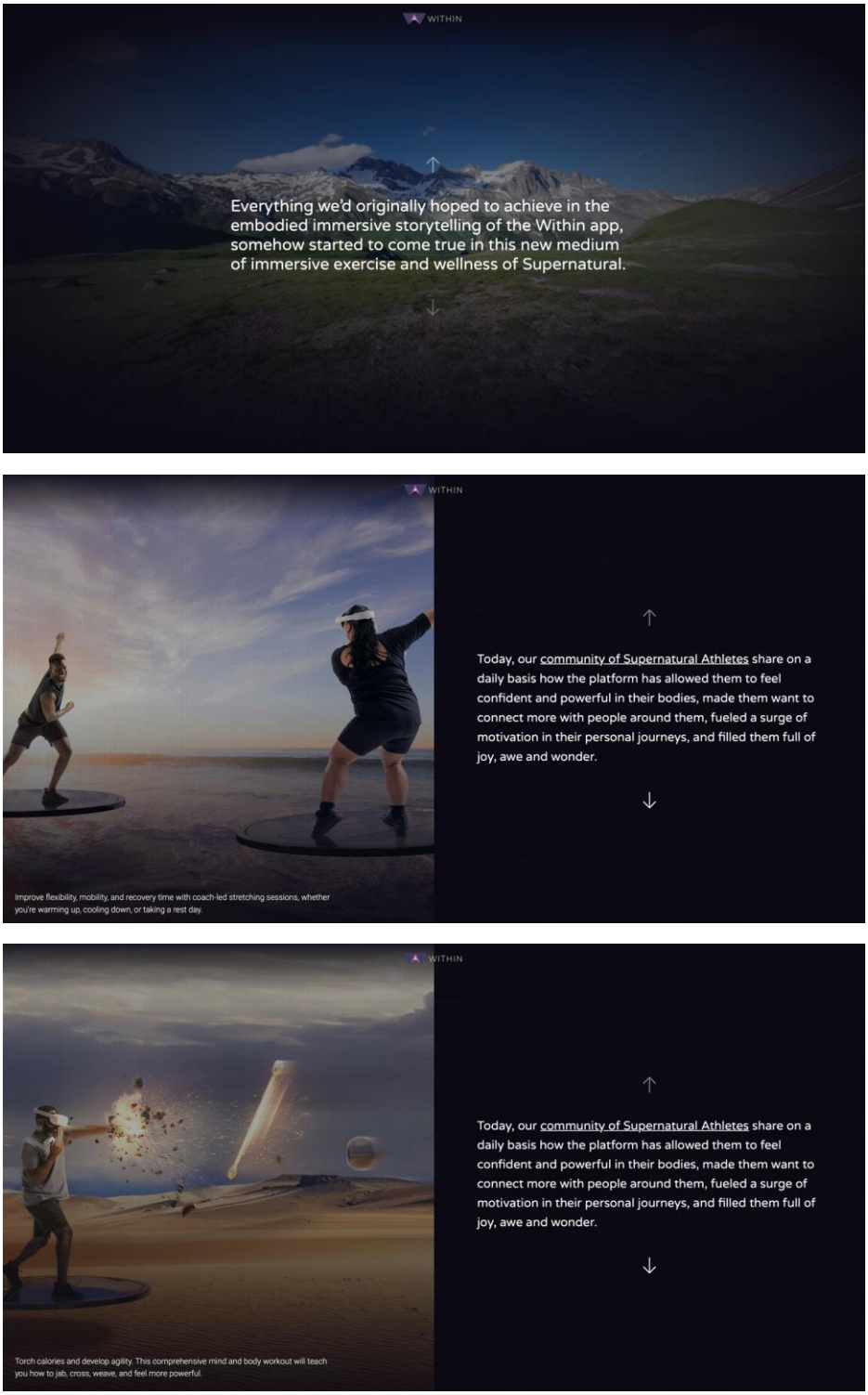
The third key affordance is interactivity, meaning the user can influence the story's outcome (Sykownik *et al.,* 2023). Another feature is multiplayer capability, allowing users in an immersive or virtual environment to interact with others, make decisions together, and collaboratively create shared narratives. These three key elements work together to ensure that tele-immersive or virtual media also serve as social spaces, fostering community and interaction (Figures 2 and 3).

The criterion of interactivity is occasionally proposed as a modality for distinguishing between different modes of virtuality regarding their political and global transformative dimensions. As Grant Tavinor observes: "the use of the egocentric and interactive pictures of VR largely follows the use of traditional pictures, though with variations associated with their egocentric and interactive form" (Tavinor, 2022, Section 5.1). Yet, as he notes, virtual reality industries claim that VR transcends the representational and figurative modes of previous visual media. However, he cautions, there is no guarantee this constitutes a genuinely relational mode of interaction.

Rob Cover examines how interactivity has become a pivotal category in contemporary media – both an ideal against which mediated experience is judged and a misconception regarding new media's uses and implications (Cover, 2006). In fact, Cover argues these media are neither particularly new, nor does interactivity meaningfully differentiate most of our engagements with them. Nevertheless, the concept functions as a powerful cultural driver: popular culture craves interactive media. Far surpassing simple receiver feedback (like pause buttons or other modes of address), interactivity has emerged as a cultural form of spectatorship where participants focus on controlling and deploying narratives in unsolicited, unexpected ways.

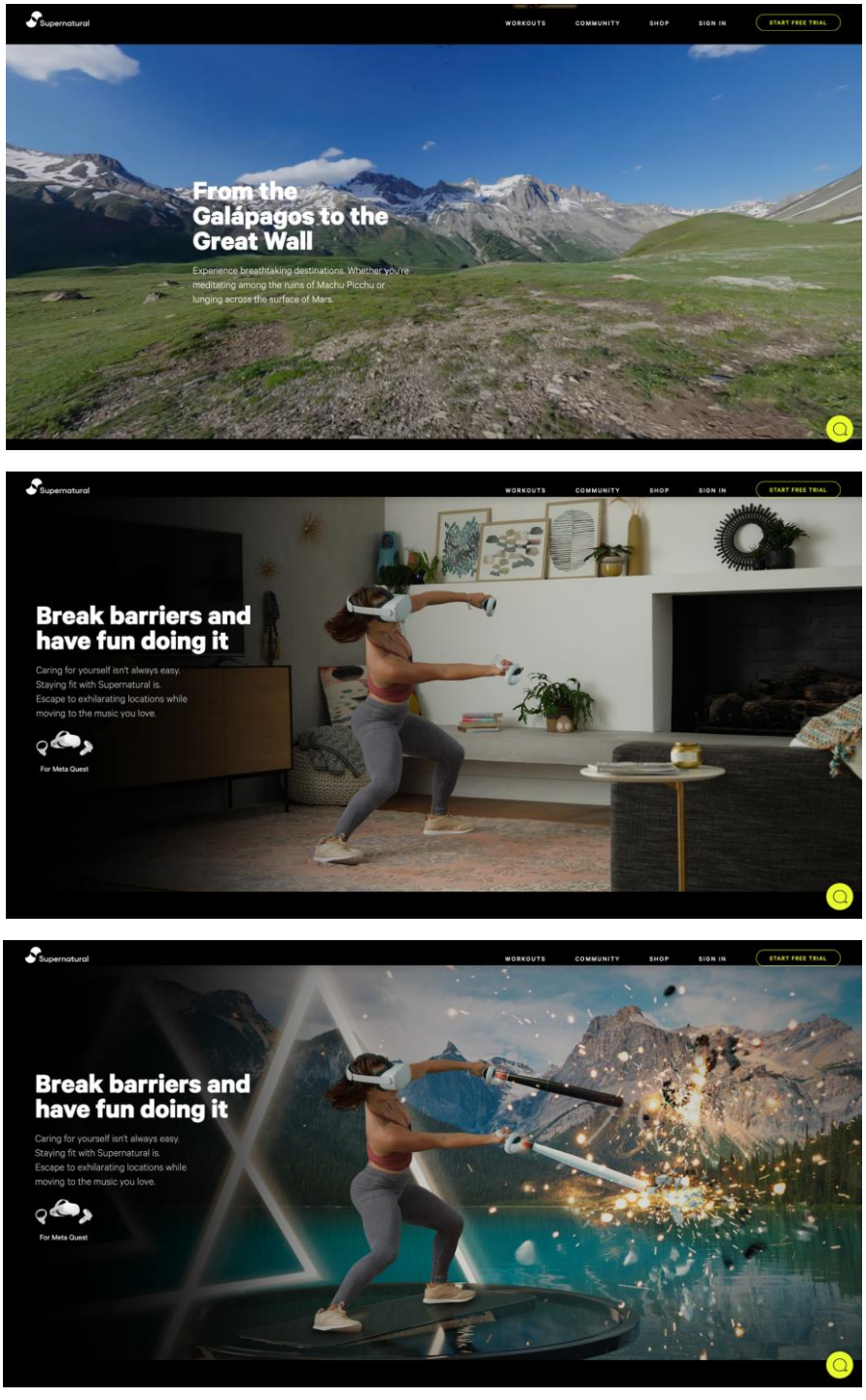
Control remains a foundational theme in technology and media studies, lying at the heart of our technological culture. From Aristotle onwards, production and technique have been linked to controlling what appears. As a control mechanism, feedback has become pivotal to the informational turn and cybernetics. Real-time or temporally flexible relations with technology and narratives – when transparent, procedural, multidirectional, responsive, purposive and open – are typically deemed more interactive than others (Downes & McMillan, 2000; McMillan, 2002).

Figure 2. Three screen captures of the landing page on the website of Within Project




Source. https://with.in/

Figure 3. Three screen captures of the landing page on the website of Supernatural: VR Fitness App on Meta Quest. "Supernatural: VR Fitness App on Meta Quest"




Source. https://www.getsupernatural.com

Thus, this theory belongs to the communication-centred approach to interactivity (concerned with messages and interpersonal communication acts, linked to practices as ancient as print) – often difficult to distinguish from mere interaction or participation. This stands in contrast to 'mediated environment' approaches, focused on

media experience and immersive sensory environments (Kim & Sawhney, 2002). This distinction becomes particularly evident when proponents of this broad notion of interactivity equate its highest forms with face-to-face communication (see Kim & Sawhney, 2002).

Cover's eminently cultural conception of interactivity manifests as basic textual retelling, resequencing and personalisation. His crucial innovation lies perhaps in reducing interactivity to a narrative concern. Narrative itself remains a problematic and divisive concept. Analysing recent interactivity theories, Cover observes how most bifurcate between two dominant perspectives: either as 'technologically or author-determined' (Cover, 2006, p. 141), through medium programming (McMillan, 2002), or – his preferred view – as fundamentally centred on audience desires and actions (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 2006).

In fact, numerous studies operate on the assumption that the very concept of interactivity implies a radical distinction between technology/object and user/receiver – an idea developed from mathematical information theory and later cybernetics. This framework establishes an opposition between technological determinism and cultural processes as entirely separate forces, each pertaining to one side of the interactive relationship. Several problems plague this hegemonic understanding. The rigid separation between culture and technology warrants substantial critique. Firstly, Cover appears to conflate technological and authorial agencies, as if focusing on intentions of authors and proprietors necessarily means adhering to the technological aspects. Secondly, what rarely gets acknowledged is that technology constitutes a fundamental part of the very culture that generates the impulse for interactive experiences. As a cultural phenomenon, interactivity stems not only but also from contemporary understandings of media forms and apparatuses. User choices (a notion that is itself highly problematic) are neither separate from current technological formations nor independent of them.

Nevertheless, reinforcing the myth of shared interactivity surrounding XR technologies, contemporary discourses often point to immersive amphitheatres and chambers as potential vessels for collective dreaming – conceptual bridges towards the long-anticipated non-passive, collective reception of virtuality, purportedly capable of enabling meaningful social dynamics and community participation. Contemporary visual culture, particularly through science fiction in film and television, has nurtured these possibilities with compelling illustrations, such as the holodeck concept popularised by Gene Dolgoff's work in *Star Trek* (Allen, 1987): a device for the total simulation of terrestrial and natural spaces, where multiple participants could experience and interact with any time or place through a contemplative yet unreal mode of engagement. In practice, within it, one would most likely encounter artificial subjectivities and intelligences— entities fundamentally bound to that particular spacetime continuum, incapable of transcending its boundaries. As its name suggests, the holodeck's holographic power demonstrates the theoretical possibility of inscribing (or even revealing) totality itself. Yet this comes at a cost: the technology inevitably raises profound questions about its viability for individual or collective habitation, and the very possibility of communal sharing within such simulated environments.

It is common to think of windows as a way to account for what is being mediated by technical images, and in painting since Alberti—with Microsoft reviving this metaphor to great success, in the concept of the *virtual window* and the *Windows* operating system (Friedberg, 2006). Virilio, however, suggests that the new form being reconfigured by tele-technologies in recent decades is no longer the window but the door (Virilio, 2000, p. 32). He thus points to a profound crisis in the architecture of buildings and homes. He argues that the informational turn installs a surveillance system within private space and that this system, by delimiting or replacing forms of movement, turns the domestic sphere into a prison.

A moderate view of interactivity can help avoid both overly euphoric and disphoric takes on tele-immersive media. However, it's hard to ignore the widespread belief that a culture of distance and passive reception has ended. Art is now called participatory, interactive, projective, relational, and processual. Byung-Chul Han ('The Society of Positivity', 2015) critiques this pure positivity of an entire world rendered impotent yet perpetually at hand.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge the tension between two opposing interpretations of this issue. On one side lies the fear that immersive virtual travel might function as a form of world-avoidance or potent dissociative mechanism – a response to various complexes plaguing contemporary societies (modern neuroses, panics, and phobias). On the other, there's the apologia celebrating the proliferation of imaginary realms where utopias and alternative narratives flourish, enabling new modes of being both present and future. As Marie-Laure Ryan (cited by Poster, 2013, p. 124) emphasises, any assessment of virtuality must centrally consider: the levels and modes of participation in world-building; interactions with fictional characters; and engagements with fellow virtual travellers.

Thus, virtual reality and tele-immersion represent commodified potentialities – though it remains unclear whether openness and difference can truly be subjected to such a process. As Stiegler systematically and extensively demonstrates, this is decidedly not the case, currently. To quote his definitive critique: "for the moment, these tendencies are embodied by search engines which do not formalize and intensify singularities, but rather reduce them by, for example, accentuating mimetic behaviour and generalizing a ratings logic in what claim to be personalized access procedures – as with Google" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 72).

Yet, from the transitional objects of early childhood to hypomnematic objects, Stiegler identifies in all external projections – whether objects or the world itself – variations of the pharmakon: that which cures in equal or unequal measure as it destroys (Derrida, 1981, pp. 94, 97; Stiegler, 2016, pp. 27, 296). This leaves open multiple traces suggesting "we are awaiting another thinking of the *kosmos* as the future of all cosmopolitics understood as the *invention of the world*" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 97).

To begin concluding our critique of the virtual as travel, let us return to the notion of *anarcheologies* (of the end) *of distance* (Bragança de Miranda, 2023, p. 181).

Plato's Cave may be interpreted both as the primordial form of cinema and as the first virtual reality. Crucially, this is not a matter of mirroring – which would imply the representation of objects through their shadows – but rather the autonomisation of these traces within a virtual (i.e., non-representational) media regime, enabled by the technical mechanism's invisibility. For the prisoners, these are not shadows but actual worldly entities. The Cave thus functions as a metaphor of simulacrum.

To my knowledge, no existing reading of the Cave allegory has considered it through the lens of travel, in spite of movement of the cave being the crux of its resolution. Yet, as we shall see (and following this thesis' central argument), contemporary reception of immersive media abundantly employs a travel analogy. Several questions arise: Why weren't the simulacral and virtual immediately associated with travel? What justifies invoking travel when discussing virtuality? Why does Virilio frame virtuality through movement, space and inertia when analysing new regimes of visibility? More precisely: what leads Virilio to conceptualise virtuality and tele-technologies as polarising inertia within generalised movement? And how does the acceleration of images prompt us to consider virtual reality and the simulacral through the paradigm of virtual travel?

Answers are found in Ronell and Turkle's examination of how virtuality relates to the hollowing out of both community and the spaces anchoring tele-technologies. Ultimately, virtuality's promises appear tied to hopes for redefining and sustaining community (whether local or planetary) and the political sphere; its dangers, we're told, may signal community's demise and the evacuation of shared space. Could this connect to that isolation, loneliness, atomisation or alienation Arendt diagnosed (1953, p. 321)?

Once again, everything returns to the question of distance. Following Turkle, Ronell and Virilio, Western living rooms, bedrooms – even caves – stand growingly emptied of gatherings. Little wonder transcendental continental philosophy so readily celebrates optical immersion's supposed solipsism, that virtual regime's narcissism – or rather, that it proves incapable of accounting for its modes of installation in today's media landscape, while placing the Other at a distance, and positioning community beyond reach. That virtuality is fundamentally about distance relates no longer merely to experience's internalisation and pure imaginaries (inevitable for correlationisms declaring isolation insurmountable), but to how experience itself – including affect and embodiment – becomes virtualised. We witness the individualised instrumentalisation of networked information technologies, emerging from both cultural mourning of (metaphysics') presence and media's sacrificial dismantling of the political.

The concepts of presence and embodied experience (incorporation) are fundamental to all travel experiences, whether physical or virtual. Contemporary shifts are emerging in the sociology of tourism and mobility, linked to travel's mediatic and visual turn. In current mobility studies, scholarship identifies "five interdependent mobilities that form geographies of networks and mobilities in the contemporary world" (Larsen *et al*., 2006, p. 4): "physical travel of people (…); physical movement of objects"; "imaginative travel elsewhere through images and memories seen on texts, TV, computer screens and film"; "virtual travel on the internet" and "communicative travel" (Larsen *et al*., 2006, p. 4). Significantly, marketing trends surrounding virtual travel demonstrate a notable emphasis on inclusive and disability studies within the tourism sector (see Iftikhar *et al*., 2022; on inclusion, disability, and videogames, a field growingly entangled with the themes of virtuality and immersion, see, for instance, Sousa *et al.,* 2022). Policy and market orientations increasingly address mobility inequalities through the commodification of space and surface (both geographical and bodily). This reveals broader tendencies toward transforming all life and terrestrial surfaces (including their folds) into content distributable through tele-technological and algorithmic systems.

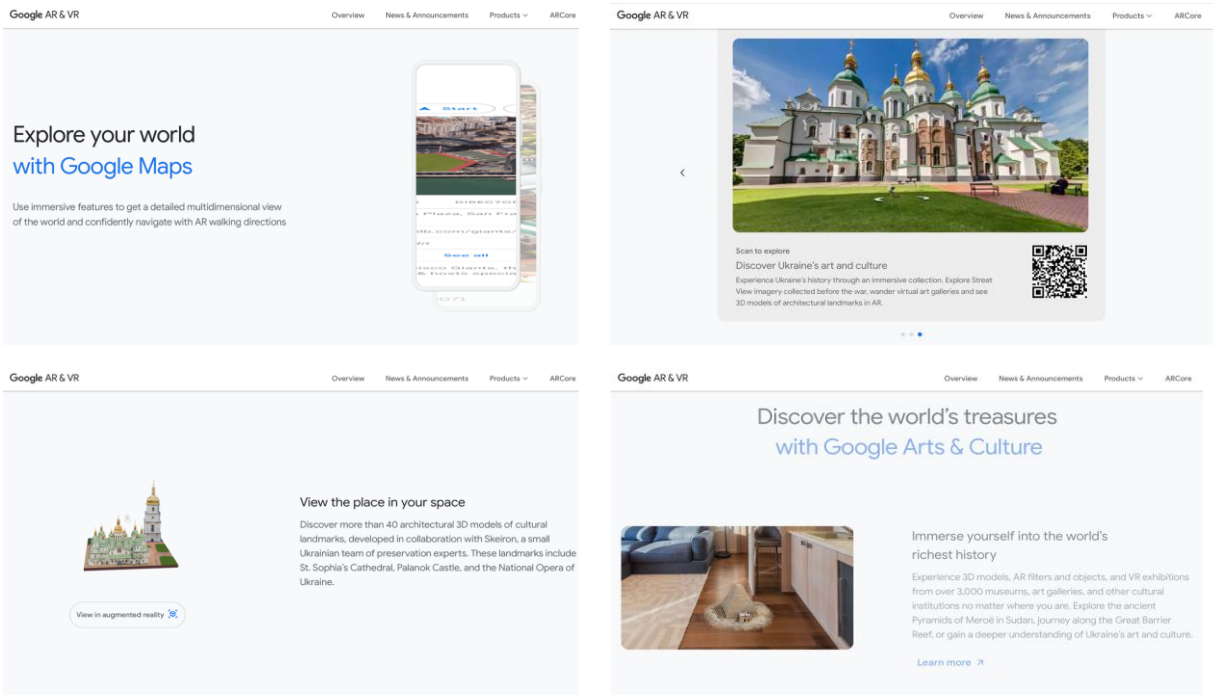
The anti-ableist and democratic promise of virtual reality and gaming – premised on a (perhaps unwarranted) assumption of universal access to these tele-immersive media – frequently implies that those unable to physically travel can nevertheless experience travel virtually. We encounter this notion in Tavinor, as previously discussed; and in Virilio's politically incorrect formulation linking disability to aeronautical tele-technologies: "the 'elite pilot' who has become the perfect example of the disabled person (...). The equipped invalid is thus paradoxically on a par with the overequipped able person" (Virilio, 2000, p. 26).

Ultimately, we must register the tension between two opposing interpretations of this issue. On one hand, there exists the fear that immersive virtual travel may function as a form of world-avoidance or potent dissociative mechanism – a response to various complexes of contemporary societies (modern neuroses, panics and phobias). On the other, there's the celebratory discourse proclaiming the proliferation of imaginary realms where utopias and alternative narratives flourish, enabling new modes of existence both present and future.

### 3. Typologies of Virtuality and Immersion

Having examined these dimensions, we can now articulate a position regarding whether a *principle of virtual travel* exists that causally or correlatively determines and delimits immersive media instances promising distance's annihilation. This requires establishing conceptual oppositions to construct a typology – a task made increasingly urgent by the ongoing redefinition of *presence* and *encounter*within metaverse and VR discourses, particularly through XR marketing and Big Tech's virtual travel platforms (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Four screen captures of the landing page on the website of Google AR & VR. "Google AR & VR | Home"



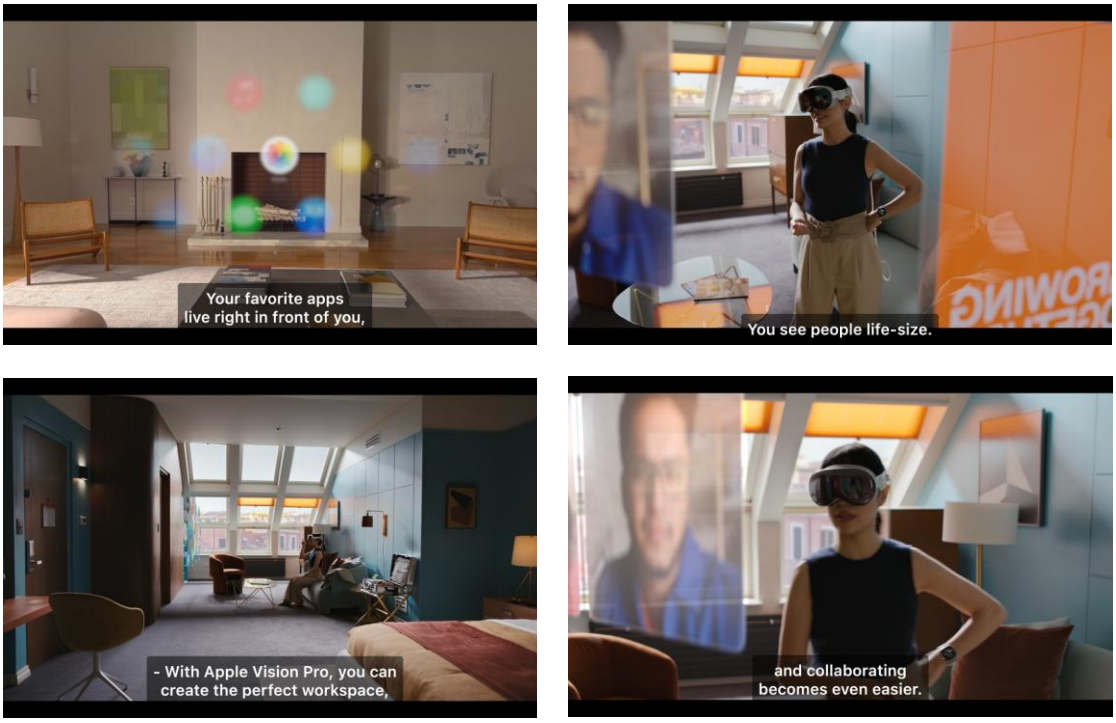

Source. https://arvr.google.com/

In a seminal book on arts and immersion, Oliver Grau contrasts spaces of knowledge or thought (linked to Renaissance combinatory art) with spaces of communal telepresence, differing in both methods and usage (Grau, 2003, p. 231). This perspective is often expressed by players in the teletechnology, XR, and immersion industries, as evident in the marketing of the Apple Vision Pro device (Figures 5 to 7).

Figure 5. Four screen captures of the video Introducing Apple Vision Pro, 2023

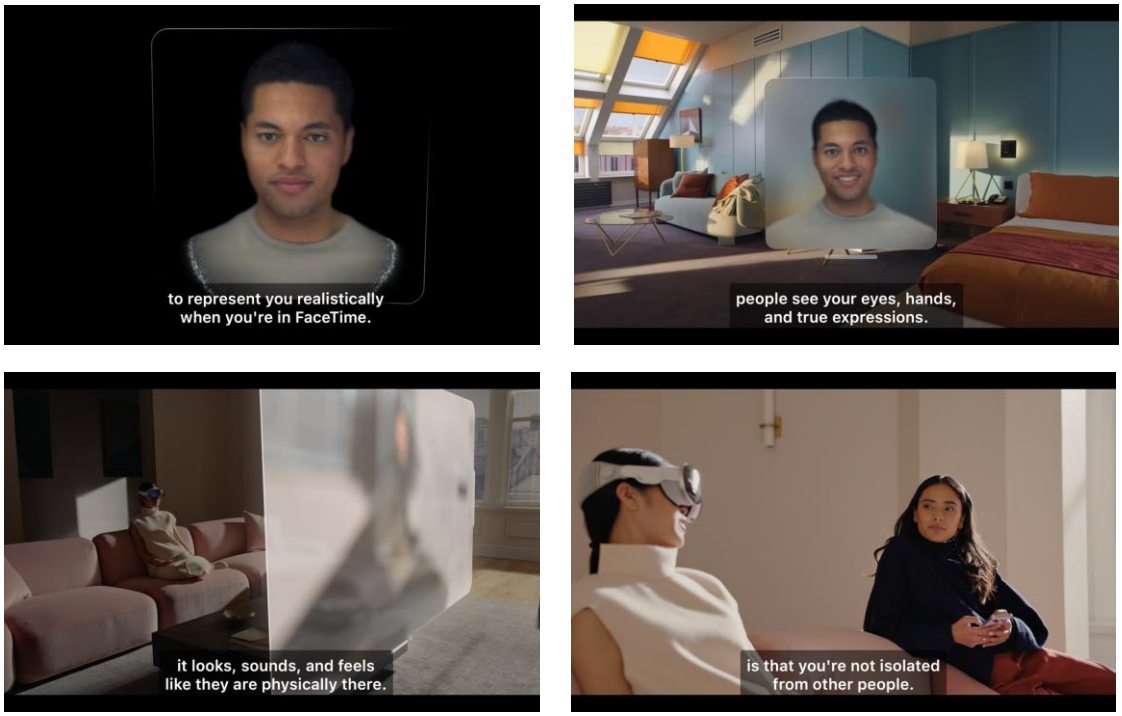

Source. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX9qSaGXFyg

Figure 6. Four screen captures of the video Introducing Apple Vision Pro, 2023.




Source. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX9qSaGXFyg

Figure 7. Four screen captures of the video Introducing Apple Vision Pro, 2023




Source. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX9qSaGXFyg

Considering this, a typology for the virtualization of reality or tele-immersiveness is proposed, reflecting these two modes in virtual and immersive media: an ontological/epistemological space (representational or correlational) and a sociopolitical space.

These are two models, not mutually exclusive, but one is more effective in achieving virtual telepresence. The tension between them is illustrated by the figures. On one hand, there is the idea of an event or experience as a cognitive or informational matter. This cognitive-based understanding of the world, historically tied to representational models, benefits XR as a medium for training, learning, and knowledge-related functions, as well as work and consumption. If a cognitive or informational model of the mind and knowledge is adopted, there are indicators that this dimension is well supported by teletechnologies and virtual reality. This knowledge and consumption mode or type of XR is in a Cartesian territory, abstracted and perpetuated by modern science, GPS mythologies, and space travel; it expands and declines materially in teletechnological epistemes, economies, and politics. This expansion could be argued to be extended through the control of territories via what is termed operational images (Elsaesser, 2017; Ian Dolton-Thornton, 2021; Matoso, 2016; Parikka, 2023), which offer insights into global conflicts, ecological struggles, and general material, political, economic and social divides.

On the other hand, there is another type, mode or aspect of XR experiences – co-presence and the social or community dimension (not entirely unrelated to the types or modes of knowledge and consumption and teaching, it should be noted). And, as we have seen, it appears that XR media and virtual telepresence still struggle to convincingly ensure these social and collective functions. As Turkle, Ronell, and others have suggested –and as our analysis has shown– the collective and social organisational dimensions remain sorely underdeveloped as indicators of telepresence or virtual reality.

Secondly, there is a critique of virtuality as dissolving collectives, the public and communities. This trend of research is worried with the atomization of subjects in stationary positions, intersected by the fragmentation of the world through increasing compartmentalized mediatization. It raises concerns about corporate platforms commodifying attention and discouraging encounters.

The opposition between these virtual modes corresponds to differences between scientific knowledge and the cultural-sociological experience of space. They shape different ways of seeing, such as virtual tourism,

and are articulated with: 1) transindividuation of knowledge and productivity in the physical world; 2) transindividuation via the grammatology of the sensible and spectral; 3) political transindividuation. At other times, as in Tavinor (2022), what is opposed in terms of virtuality is "representation" (perception and cognition) and "embodied cognition" (sensation and cognition).

In sum, to conclude: certain forms of remediation and virtuality disrupt or cancel the historical correlation between knowledge and power, destabilizing relational or speculative domains of experience. Rather than a distinction between potential and power, what is said to be disturbed is the effective action on the relational world. It is as if virtuality, in recent teletechnological senses, reduces potential. This may happen when, with a programmed telemediated sight or view, the physical effect on the material dimension of co-presence –of objects and living agents– remains unfulfilled.

Within these manifold processes – including symbolic processes of totalisation – all developments converge toward a multiplication of worlds: the virtualization and deterritorialization of aesthetics and experience; the gamification and virtualization of the present; multiverses coexisting within the same historical plane; information bubbles; the domestication and privatisation of time. Both interpretive frameworks acknowledge technology's world-generating capacity. The latter perspective, however, finds value not in the desire to transcend mediation, but rather in critiquing the enclosures and control mechanisms that emerge when world-making possibilities become concentrated within corporations, states, or platforms.

Within this framework, virtuality appears as a symptom of the crisis in the metaphysics of presence – not by overcoming it, but by inhabiting its constitutive oppositions. Mediation and virtuality are not rejected for being presence's antithesis; rather, they promise – both temporally and spatially – to deliver presence or abolish distance, as Bragança de Miranda observes. Turkle (2009, p. xi) suggests simulation doesn't oppose representation but functions as its intensification. To inhabit images isn't to reject representational duality, but to erase all traces of dwelling in a double. It demands forgetting any lack, any leap, any alternative to what images make present – accepting their reality irrespective of our beliefs about their referential status, following Philip K. Dick's idea that "reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (Dick, 1985, p. 1).

Lastly, one needs to consider briefly in what ways these two modalities are not the same as operational materialism previously mentioned. This concept emphasizes a post-epistemic attitude, a media arts and critical practice that transcends representational paradigms and forays into the material and relational realms, even within highly abstract and informational systems like capital. Operational materialism occurs when, beyond representing a distant place and time, technologies can influence it and supersede human presence or experience. It implies a reciprocity not of representation or cognition, but of a material nature. It invites a reconsideration of the opposition between physical realms and mental representations in the context of VR and tele-immersion, proposing a new perspective on community in a post-human and political sense. This idea of functionality is not opposed to dysfunctionality. It can be highly politically or socially dysfunctional, for instance.There is a process underway, as seen in Stiegler, for the possibility of repoliticizing the operational image.

This constitutes an operative or operational materialism rather than realism because, within the aesthetic and visual domain, we risk misapprehending the particular notion of the real at stake here – one that functions not merely as a cognitive or representational category, but as the material effect of networked or tele-technological relations. Bodily sensation and mental representation are typically insignificant in operative materialism. Among the phenomena studied in tele-technologies over recent decades – which might be situated under relational operative materialism's paradigm – we find what may still be termed 'community' (understood in posthuman and relational terms).[1]

## 4. Conclusions: Beyond bad virtual, good virtual

The cases of virtual travel examined in this study reveal diverse celebratory cultures of *presentification*– of triumph over distance and absence. These are instances where mediation is not problematized as a failure of presence, but rather celebrated as distance's overcoming. Being fundamentally about images, this is entirely

[1] The critique of functionalism as critique of instrumental reason – from Husserl and Heidegger to Deleuze and other anti-capitalist thinkers – failed when it didn't grasp that operative or operational materialism is now beyond optionality. One must either learn to work within its logic or resign oneself to total impotence.

expected: images have long been considered modes of *touching at a distance*, at least since Descartes and his metaphor of extended walking sticks.

Thus, the epistemic framework of representation (from Foucault) – which Derrida deconstructs as a *metaphysics of presence* – universally produces these modes of distancing meaning while approximating signifiers as representations or signs (something standing in for an absent referent). Consequently, in disruptions or ruptures of representation – in what we might call post-representational play – the opposition between representation and simulacrum occasionally collapses. Baudrillard, in fact, provides crucial insights for synthesizing this opposition. Self-referentiality, as a crisis in the signifier-signified distance, becomes linked to deconstructing a metaphysics of presence. The conventional opposition between representation (as consciousness of distance) and simulacrum (as illusion of presence) depends entirely on a particular metaphysics of presence. When this collapses, it undermines all suspicions toward the virtual. For if presence was never truly there, what exactly is simulation?

Virtuality thus finds itself doubly opposed: to presence *and* to representation (given that representational modes were already positioned within presence's metaphysics). Derrida's thought appears to simultaneously reject any singular structure for the virtual while exposing the coincidence between totality's will-to-form and a metaphysics of presence. Post-Derrida, we're left with virtuality and forms in the world as multiplicity and difference.

It is time for social sciences, media theory, and communication philosophy to stop assuming that the virtual is not factual or real, or to stop using "virtual" as a synonym for fake, unreal, distant or imaginary. Digital virtuality and digitally edxpanded reality are very real. The idea that these are not real worlds needs to be replaced with a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. This could include evaluating the stability/metastability of networks and connections (following Simondon's framework of technical individuation), discussing politics of access to control of platforms and virtual worlds, etc.

At its minimum, virtual digital is nothing more than global, widespread mediatization. What is at play are realized worlds, though they may be unstable, centralized and isolating. To dismiss these as 'unreal worlds' is to fundamentally misunderstand a media domain demanding urgent, rigorous theoretical analysis.

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