

# **Numanities - Arts and Humanities in Progress**

Volume 11

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Joaquim Braga  
Editor

# Conceiving Virtuality: From Art To Technology

 Springer

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# Preface

It can be asserted, with some accuracy, that the technological nature of the new media has been one of the most decisive factors for the discursive increment on virtuality and simultaneously for its philosophical rebirth. As regards philosophy, the main questions about mediation and media tend to converge to the broad question of “reality”; by extension, reality is also philosophically reborn as a thematic object, being directly articulated with the virtualization processes initiated by the new media. From this articulation between real and virtual—through which it is possible to glimpse an increase of communicative operations and contexts—several theses frequently emerge about a supposed dematerialization of the real, thus linking virtuality to a negative ontological foundation. The term “virtualization” appears, in this discursive realm, as synonymous with “derealization”, additionally emphasizing the view that the virtual is the mere suspension of the real.

In Western philosophical thought, there has been, for centuries, a clear primacy of the “actual” over the “virtual”, which greatly contributes to the latter being still beset by a conceptual fog. To put it simply, it is possible to find in the historical-philosophical legacy of the virtual two contrasting dimensions that have prevailed until now: on the one hand, Western metaphysics assigns to it a role of *substance*, largely embodied by the platonic (and neo-platonic) ontological dualism between images and ideas; on the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is thanks to the meaning-making theories that a role of *function* (of the virtual) is truly revealed—notably in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Henri Bergson. In the sense of the latter, the virtual appears more as a relation concept than a mere ontological operator. A dynamic framing of what we mean by reality is largely due to such inclusion of the virtual in the meaning-making processes. In a word, the real opens itself, through the virtual, to the possibilities of its realization. William James’s pluralistic theses on human mind precisely display this dynamic conception of the real imposed by the virtual, since such theses are based upon the seminal idea that the possibilities of meaning, contrary to what determinism and psychological monism claim, are necessary conditions for the existence of selection and actualization psychic processes.

With the appearance of modern media, reality and meaning-making processes can no longer be thought from a strictly logo-centric perspective. Language is not the predominant symbolic form in the life of human beings, but converges with pictures and other modalities of mediation. In fact, the increase of possibilities in the constitution and perception of reality is also connected with the growing articulation between different media. The articulation of the word with the picture not only transforms the space and time of communication, but also the symbolic nature of both. New technological devices precisely expose this convergence of media, this convergence of the word with the picture, of the picture with music, through which they can rebuild communicative and perceptive atmospheres that are no longer identifiable with the traditional characteristics of each medium involved.

Although they come from two opposing semantic spheres, the two roles attributed to the virtual (those of substance and function) still tend to fuse in certain phenomena analyzed under the prism of virtuality and generate the idea that, unlike the concept of the actual, the one of the virtual will always be plunged into a paradoxical logical domain of difficult philosophical inquiry, even more prone, as attested by a significant part of the bibliography on the subject, to mythological subcategories or to utopian and dystopian literary descriptions. The symbolic universe of digital technologies has, up to a certain extent, inspired such fusion and such paradoxicality, to the point that the complex theoretical spectrum of virtuality fades away when faced with the so-called virtual reality. In this specific case, can the simulation of the real undermine the epistemic richness of virtuality? Here, in fact, arises a negative approach to the concept of the virtual, since what animates technological simulation processes are, above all, their ontological effects, that is, the sensible recreation and perception of something that appears to be what it is really not. Such a negative approach is not, as a matter of fact, an exclusive theoretical corollary of simulation devices. In the philosophy of art, the theories of mimesis frequently start by presupposing the duplication of the real to ground and justify the analogical dimensions of fiction and its consequent illusory effects on the aesthetic experience itself. In this sense, the *fictum* is not totally free from its analog reference—the *fictum* is, conversely, a deceptive *factum*.

It is true that the philosophical inclusion of the virtual in the understanding of reality and the processes that explain it tends to bring to expression several theoretical gaps, multiple unclear conceptual fields, often only perceptible through both metaphorical and discursive intuitions. However, philosophical accuracy should not be entirely anchored in logical prejudice, nor should it be circumscribed by an absolute ontological order of reality.

Consequently, virtuality as a philosophical concept displays a broad semantic spectrum that still lacks deep inquiry. Such an inquiry, however, cannot be done without the enlargement of those phenomena that can best express the theoretical dynamics of the virtual. It has been common in our days to circumscribe the analysis of virtuality to technological phenomena, particularly those that operate through digital devices. Nevertheless, such reduction has led to several conceptual misunderstandings and, in some cases, concurs to the philosophical impoverishment of the concept of virtual itself. The main reason for this is that the common

binary logic of technological mechanisms and operations is applied in a generalized way to a purely ontological view of the virtual and to all the phenomena covered by it. Thus understood, technology would be the ultimate expression of virtuality, and the other related theoretical fields would always have to be shaped by its epistemic record.

One of the main purposes of this volume is to broaden and rethink the thematic horizon of virtuality, regarding—as essential—the idea that the explanation of the concept of the virtual always depends on its programmatic extensions. As will be seen over all these chapters, the authors far exceed the theoretical and conceptual limits imposed by a negative approach to the question of virtuality. The contemporary paradigm of “virtual reality” is not, therefore, predominant at the heart of the reflections proposed here, nor is technology assumed as the dominant thematic issue. On the contrary, the themes presented in this volume range from *art*, *perception*, *memory*, *communication* and *therapy* to *technology* and *utopia*. Thus, various conceptions of virtuality are projected and articulated through them, supported either by authors—such as Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Susanne Langer—which formulate it explicitly, or by authors who, although they do not refer to it in a systematic way, somehow presuppose it in the construction of their main theoretical proposals, as it is the case, for example, of the French psychotherapist Pierre Janet.

Coimbra, Portugal  
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Joaquim Braga

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