FROM UNDER YOUR SKIN

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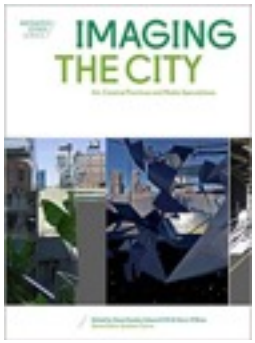

Abstract
Images on various mobile screens, soon to be projected onto our field of vision, are shifting our attention away from the actual world in which we—along with our images—still reside. In this hyper distracted state the distinction between actual vs. virtual urban experience gradually merges into a new hybrid condition, for now quaintly called augmented reality. The three dimensional virtual city in Google Earth and its more grounded offspring Street View, with their three fingered, orientation-specific navigational tools on the screens mobile devices, emerge as ideal parallel worlds for exploring the 'augmented' city.

The article analyzes numerous images, discoveries from recent transgressive explorations of Google Earth and Street View, and discusses the implication of these journeys to our future experience of the mediated city.

Introduction

"***We, the things and their image, are all one***" *T. Lucretius*
"***Technical images are phantoms that can give the world, and us, meaning."***
Vilém Flusser

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Wassily Kandinsky described a fictional city jarred from its foundations to convey the spiritual state of a society whose most basic belief system is suddenly called into question by radical ideas changing their world. He described a city '…built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation.' (Kandinsky…)

What Kandinsky could hardly have anticipated was that today this 'force' that fundamentally alters the way we see, imagine and engage cities, rather than defying all calculation, would be *purely a function of calculation*: the scripts and algorithms that

regulate the assembly of bits into images of cities and enable our navigation through them. Even less foreseeable was that by the beginning of the twenty first century, this image of a city is no longer merely an apt metaphor for a certain spiritual anxiety, but both its source and potential exit strategy from it.

Today we understand that in 'reality', everything that makes up the world is a swarm of particles in a constant state of change and decay because we can 'see' this swirl of particles with the aid of sophisticated apparatuses. In other words, what we call reality, the way we see the world, is, like vision itself, a learned shared illusion. We are not born able to distinguish things, to see the space between things, or to position them in three-dimensional space. These are acquired skills that take years to master and coordinate with our behavior.

Technical Images

Mirroring this world of bits and pieces, images made by cameras and other devices are also an organization and assemblage of bits. For Vilém Flusser, these technical images constitute a radical break from all previous forms of image making because technical images require an apparatus to create them. Technical images are 'an attempt to consolidate particles around us and in our consciousness…to make elements such as photons and electrons, on the one hand, and bits of information on the other hand into images. (Flusser 2011: 16). Flusser described technical images as 'envisioned surfaces', and 'particulate phantoms', which themselves can multiply and interlock into a veil of technical images that surround us.

It is thirty years since Flusser's observation that '[w]e live in an illusory world of technical images, and we increasingly experience, recognize, evaluate and act as a function of these images.' (Flusser 2011: 8). In the media saturated twenty first century, these actions as a function of images have only become more intense.

Like our shared reality, technical images only work if they are seen from a distance. Getting too close to technical images exposes their particulate structure, whatever its scale, and ruins the illusion. Yet it is exactly at the moment when the image fails to simulate another reality, with the collapse of the illusion that we can see 'beyond' the image to its structure, and speculate about the technical image and its relationship to the world.

Kandinsky's apocalyptic metaphoric image, and Flusser's equally radical notion of a technical image world find an apt manifestation in the latest 3D navigable version of Google Earth. Google's stated mission is "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" (www.google.com/about) With Google Earth's visual universe being an integral component of this aspiration, the virtual city becomes the ultimate destination for anything and everything. As the ultimate technical image that

intends to represent the visible world, it is the ideal model for exploring new conceptions of the already highly mediated city.

‘…likenesses or thin shapes
Are sent out from the surfaces of things
Which we must call as it were their films or bark
Because the image bears the look and shape
Of the body from which it came, as it floats in the air’ (Lucretius 1997: 102)

Image 1

Lucretius’ first century notion of vision is a perfect description of the world Google Earth constructs for us to look at and move through. This ultra thin image-world is the result of algorithms and scripted operations that automatically assemble thousands of individual aerial photographs, ‘bits’, into a vast three dimensional mosaic, what Google calls the ‘Universal Texture’, a continuous topographical surface map of all that we can see; the rivers, hills, cliffs, trees with foliage, streets, and buildings onto which the appropriate visual information, culled from various sources, is automatically mapped. It appears as a visual cast of the world, a painted death mask, what we might call a *Surface City*, that corresponds precisely to what Italo Calvino—who believed that the brain begins in the eye—called ‘the inexhaustible surface of things’ (Calvino 2014: xii).

For now, the Universal Texture is placed temporarily on top of its earlier manifestations assembled from satellite images, and distorted from the way the images were texture mapped onto a topographically correct ‘landscape’. The image mapping is not always precise, appearing sometimes more like patchy skin grafts. At times, the various modes of representation from different periods are exposed as redundant and conflicting information by the navigation system that sets no limits on where we can move once we have ‘landed’. If we indulge our impulse for spatial practices in these virtual cities that in

the actual world tend towards the 'exploratory', if not downright transgressive, we make genuine discoveries of enigmatic realms that have been mostly purged from our experience of the homogenized actual city and, if Google Earth has its way, soon even from the virtual city.

Wielding the smart-phone's touch screen with three fingers, like the keeper of the 'subtle knife' who uses it to access parallel worlds by cutting openings into the skin separating them, in Phillip Pullman's book by the same title (Pullman 2002), one can undertake countless such drifts against the grain, hurried explorations under the skin of Google Earth, to record its current state before it disappears forever. Guiding the mobile picture plane freely through the image city, unconstrained by traditional routes of movement, or even Google Earth's attempts at restrictions, one slices effortlessly through the excess layers of imagery that expose its forbidden transparent underside. The encounter on our field of expectations between Google's slicing picture plane and its automated mapping practices is the contemporary version of Lautreamont's definition of the marvelous, '…as the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!' (Lautreamont 1965: 263). The spirit and tripartite structure of this formula was adopted as a guiding principle by the Surrealists in their revolt against the rationality and banality of everyday life**.** This set-up now liberates unprecedented spatial phenomena embedded in Google Earth's representational excess. These appear unexpectedly during our illegitimate unplanned journeys, virtual derives, across the otherwise familiar image city, as phantasmagoric evocations, apocalyptic visions, which transform the surface city into moments of anxiety producing sur[real]face cities. Each image is a like a conduit to a long forgotten dream. Accessing them could occupy a greater part of our waking life in the city.

These new digital fictions that emerge from the constantly updated simulation of our actual changing world, are true science fictions inadvertently created in this case by the science of computation. They announce themselves and claim our attention just like the ones that conform to our expectations of the virtual city. They share the same language, that of **t**he technical image. They confirm technology's ability to show us something new; something that we cannot yet see.

Seeing is believing, at least if we *believe our eyes*. Images talk to us in their own language. How we interpret this language is as much a reflection of who we are as what actually seems to be said. Each image is a gift, but since they are given to us unintentionally, we are allowed to *look into its mouth*, if only to better understand what it is saying. Ultimately each of us would find a different way of seeing these images, of coming to terms with what we believe they can tell us.

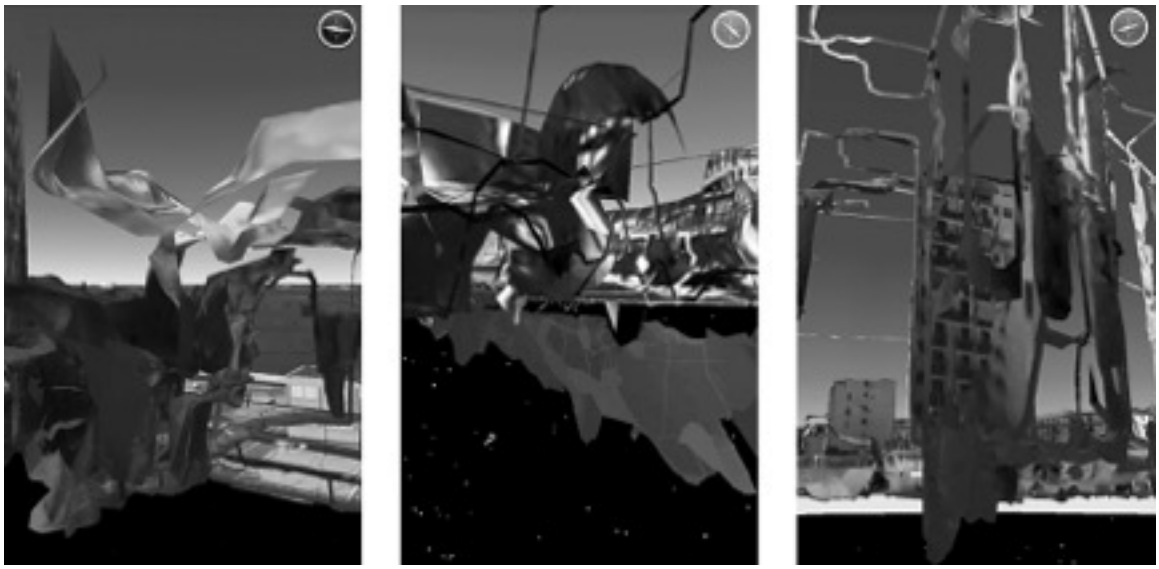

Image 2

But what do we actually see when looking at these images? Some knowledge of how they are made explains why we see what we see, which might be reassuring to some, but does not actually help us see what is actually on our screen. Are we looking at a new world, or is this a new way of seeing our present world, a way of seeing the new in our old world, a look into the future? What I would like to undertake at this point is a brief examination of some of these images.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Let us examine one of these images in a reverse zoom, starting at the top of the image, the furthest point in space and moving backward and down the image toward the viewer. This is also the natural journey of the eye from the familiar towards its counterpart, the strange and unrecognizable, a receding into uncertainty. The fact that one tends to orient the device vertically, partly because it is easier to handle and control the image, creates the illusion of greater distance between foreground and background, while seemingly flattening the ‘view’, similar to Chinese landscape painting.

Underneath a bright blue sky a dense riverfront metropolis stretches from one side of the image to the other. Most will recognize Manhattan’s skyline and those familiar with the city that we are looking east towards the city from the New Jersey shore of the Hudson River. Our vantage point seems to be well over a hundred feet above water level based on the amount of the river we see and on the few glimpses we get of the shore on our side. Moored at the edge of the river, two rows of barges containing some dark matter, possibly coal. Much closer to us, in the foreground, we can make out glimpses of yellow and white traffic markings on a road and running parallel to it, two sets of railroad tracks separated from a paved strip by a scruffy border of shrubbery. This strip’s thin jagged edge marks an emphatic limit. Below spreads a black nothingness dotted by tiny white spots: Google’s version of the night sky.

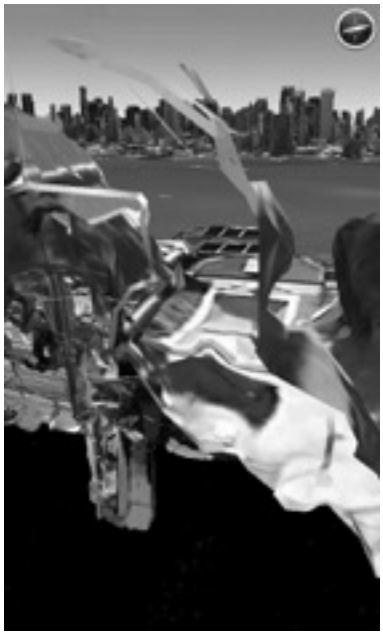

Image 3

The scene unfolding in the foreground nearest to us is less easy to make out partly because its edges and surfaces shift in and out of focus for no discernible reason. It stretches from one side of the frame to the other and we can clearly make out its front edge, which is sharply delineated against the black void and the surface with the tracks below. Its back edge closest to the city is at times less sharp, but still distinct. This floating strip hovers over the void and overlooks the shore below and the river and city beyond. At its center is a roughly horizontal vivid blue concave distorted rectangular volume with a white frame. Its length is perpendicular to the river. Let's call this a pool. On its right a dark mass rises sharply to the edge of the frame. In front of the 'pool', on axis with it, is a reddish rectangle with its furthest corners chamfered, possibly a roof terrace. The back edge of the pool rises sharply at its middle and then drops off steeply into a light grey landscape that recedes towards the bottom of the image, only to end abruptly in an uneven edge silhouetted against the night sky below. From the left side of the pool a blurry green surface slopes up steeply and blends into a gray metallic roof like shape with bright highlights marking its horizontal folds, whose top edge blocks the view of the city beyond. The greenery below the roof folds invisibly and drops back down cascading in densely folded tropical shapes with tall leaves and openings through which we glimpse details of the industrial landscape below. The falling jungle finally coalesces in a vertical geometric volume, part primitive reed column, part concrete, or ruined masonry construction covered by stucco. This lower most structure seems to be the source, the stem of this independent world that hovers dangerously over the night sky with its tiny stars from which it might also draw energy and nourishment.

Finally, closest to us, thin planar shards, some clearly emerging from the landscape of the pool, larger ones entering our field of vision from outside the frame, like early efforts at digitally rendered smoke, reaffirm the thinness and uncertainty of all that we are seeing. Even our position as viewer is called into question. We seem not to be 'standing' on solid ground, or at least to be separated from the scene we are looking at by an unfathomable gap. And how are we to understand that expanse of the night sky below us and possibly extending below the Hudson and Manhattan?

View Street

In its latest version, *Google Earth,* like *Google Maps*, offers us the little yellow human figure to place and follow directly into *Google Street View,* a calculated distraction to discourage us from discovering its limits and flaws by wandering into the part of the image world not meant-to-be-seen from the pedestrian's point of view. Street View's world is assembled from images automatically collected by the 9 cameras radiating outward from a sphere mounted on the *Google car* that roams the roads and streets of cities. If one manages to short circuit the transition from *Google Earth* into the linear restrictive eye-level world of Street View, one is left to roam freely in the twilight zone between the two image worlds.

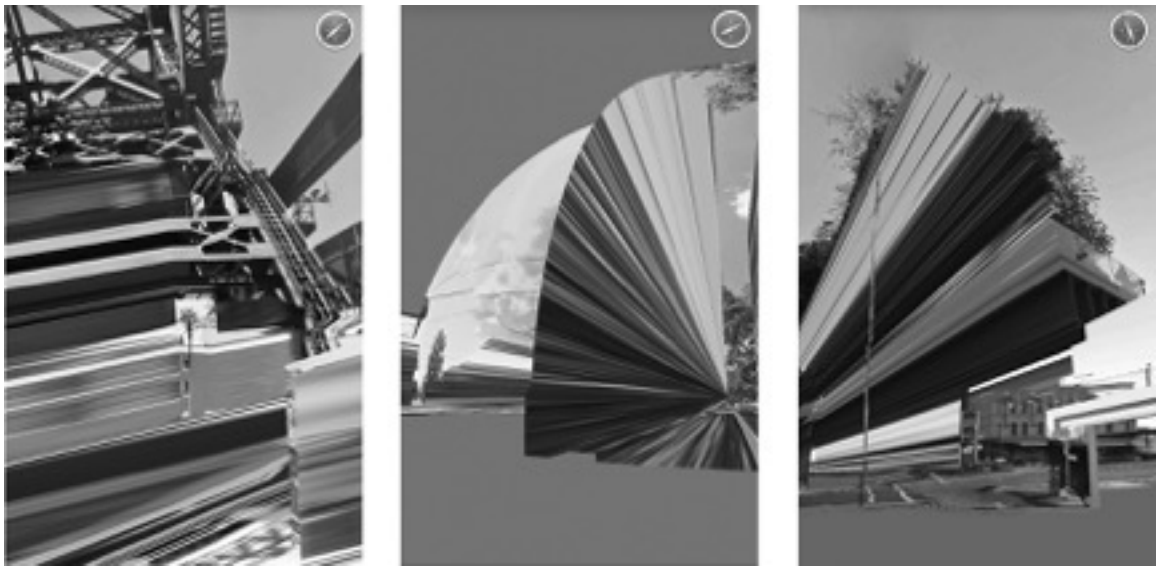

Image 4

While looking for moments that embody the strangeness of this version of the virtual city, one quickly realizes the disconcerting effect of the sudden unexpected distortions of the normative Street Views. This new unfamiliar city, like our actual city, is a dynamic and evolving experience rather than a set of post cards, mementos of a new form of street photography. **EYE FULL** (https://vimeo.com/104940913) is a video captured directly from the screen of a 'smart phone' that comprises of three virtual exploratory eye movements in the thin skin city of images. Except to assemble the three movements and

add the sound and titles, there is virtually no editing. The image appears in the vertical format it was captured from the device, partly a function of the way we hold our smart phones, but also reinforced by a preference for the vertical format for depicting the city, a format that is still unusual in the cinematic medium.

As our fingers touch the screen their movement transforms the image. The virtual navigation of the city has become a gestural experience. The form of the city itself is gestural, 'the surplus of an action' (Barthes 1985: 160), a term used by Roland Barthes to describe Cy Twombly's paintings. The touch, expanded into the groping gesture, activates 'the armature of permutational unfolding' (Barthes 1985: 61). The city unfolds at the touch of our fingertips on the screen in any direction, with almost unlimited possibilities. The touch itself is merely an intermediate phase. Already motion sensors that track the direction of our eyes, can also interpret our hand gestures into commands, a new kind of active sign language for communicating with envisioned surfaces floating in front of our eye like Lucretius' 'thin shapes'.

In this transitional realm, Street View's flat or curved surfaces seem to have acquired the gravitational force normally associated with the ground. They either attract, or repel our gaze, leaving us at the mercy of an unreliable and unpredictable mode of navigation. Each gesture on the glass surface of the screen propels us further into the unprecedented and unfamiliar technical image world. Movement here is neither smooth nor continuous.

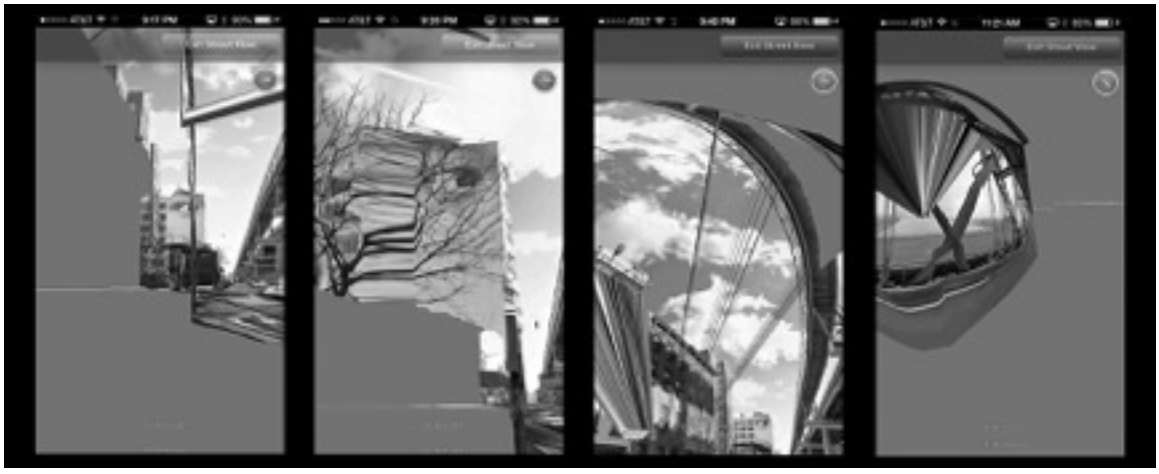

Image 5

As we move further off the path along which the image world was constructed we are left with fewer and fewer opportunities to link ourselves spatially to the actual world. Each new vista results from the interaction of the computational apparatus that created the image and the tool we hijacked to interact with it. The views we encounter appear as linked anamorphic moments, only decipherable if we manage to rotate our position relative to it. One wrong move and we slide past the infra-thin image into another realm. Beyond the edge of the image a generic greyness fills the void, a stand-in for the 'night sky' below the perpetually sunny Google Earth. A multicolored stretch of dense lines

seems to congregate around some imaginary horizon. The grey is clearly a default color, the lack of any desire to simulate a corresponding phenomenon of our normal life. We were never supposed to be here to witness the finite state of this world, its backside, so why would Google bother?

Occasionally the image world itself appears to succumb to the gravitational attractions and repulsions of its various components. Certain layers get distorted into unrecognizably stretched patterns and textures, a new and often exciting 'reality' that we can either appreciate for its own beauty, or ponder for what it reveals about the morphing algorithms, the digital gravity that holds this world together once the shared eye level point of view has been abandoned.

Even a desperate attempt to retreat into familiar terrain is rewarded with hallucinatory and revealing experiences. As we zoom back, it appears we have been occupying a semi spherical realm whose center is linked to the axis of our movement. But the boundary of the sphere is not fixed and planes of images parallel to our movement project beyond its limits. The colorful and carelessly 'drawn' horizon, likely the trace map on which the images are arranged, reappears in the grey beyond just when the notion of horizon should no longer apply. Here, at the unscripted convergence of normally irreconcilable scales and modes of representations like plan views, perspectives with multiple vanishing points, or orthogonal projections, the apparatus propels us beyond the imageable, towards the limit of the imaginable.

The frequent jump-cut like displacements in unexpected directions disrupt the progress of the virtual camera toward its subject, the eye in the city, imparting a cut-up quality and an uneven rhythm or pulse to the whole work. This would seem to recall William Burrough's experimental novels *Naked Lunch* and *The Ticket That Exploded*, or New Wave *auteur* strategies to disrupt the narrative momentum as reminders that we are watching a film, best exemplified by Godard's jump-cuts in *Breathless*. In **EYE VIEW** it is the technology of the medium itself that obstructs the progress of the story, or in this case, the movement of the virtual eye towards its goal, the watchful eye of the city. In that sense, cumulatively, these moving images, or more precisely, image movements, are a 'documentary' about a series of foiled attempts to approach an image in an image world, the repeated failures of our fingers to move the image in the desired direction towards the 'eye of the beholder', or the intertwined mechanics of propulsion and repulsion. The 'story', or at least what these eye movements might be 'about', can only be considered after the fact, or at least after the final "THE END" too disappears from the screen. Could playing the eye movements backward reveal its mystery, like the "turn me on, dead man" message heard when playing backward *Revolution 9* on the Beatles' White Album?

As the distorted city, reduced to a tiny globe, slides out of view for the last time on the screen, we accept what we saw as a provisional actuality. In their fragmentary state these moving views suggest contemporary experiences of cities induced by our own current

condition of distracted attention. We are constantly tempted by images on a multitude of screens that compete for our attention with the actual city at every turn. We encounter a city shaped by our intermittent vision disturbances, dislocation hallucinations and an acute sense of a doubling of consciousness. Our movement in this world is an on-going struggle to realign the axis of our estranged vision with the axis of the world. We are confronted by a sentient city that responds to our every move and in turn is made strange by our looking back at it. From 'the city that never sleeps', we have progressed to the city that never even blinks. Are these image movements merely symptoms of our current transitional state, or the premature manifestations of the fantastic that is constantly suppressed and purged from our actual and virtual cities? Have we gone where no eye has ever been before?

I Have New Eyes to See

As the flow of digital images on screens at home, the place of work, or in the streets of our cities are shifting our attention away from the actual world within which we—along with our images—still reside, the distinction between the actual versus the virtual is already rapidly dissolving to the dismay of those who still remember an earlier world. What we are looking at in these images is not just a new way of seeing the world, but one that can transform our world. To think of the world through the subverted structures given to us by Google, the company that is proposing new devices for seeing our world, is to anticipate and exploit the very technologies that we might otherwise either dismiss, or whose influence we are left to lament when it is too late. Whenever we look through our digital cameras we are looking not at the world but at a mediating image of the world. We are already mostly seeing the world as an image on one screen or another. The radical potential of Google Glass and similar devices is not to have invented a camera that sees and can capture whatever we see, whenever we are looking, but for us to be able to see what that camera sees any time we wish, that is, the world as digital image. Our ability to look at the world **through** its digital image, enhanced or transformed by all that **we** can digitally bring to it in real time, any time, alters what and how we see our world, and constitutes the truly radical and magical potential of these new technologies.

Conclusion

'Our veil is not to be torn but rather woven more and more closely together' (Flusser 2011:39). Google Earth and Street View's visual anomalies and gaps mark the breakdown of the image's mirror-of-the-world illusion. These gaps don't merely expose the veil-like qualities of the technical image, but also the nature of its 'construction'. Here we 'see' the space between the 'pixels', the individual images that make up these image worlds, where a new reality breaks through. Since we understand that everything we see is an illusion, alternate illusions could be woven together to close the tears in the veil of illusion, like darning a sock with our own hair. This is a model of our new hybrid reality where the envisioned surface and the actual world occupy the same realm and we move seamlessly in, through and between them…

Imagine Google Earth's and Street View's image worlds as technical images overlaid our actual world as we occupy and move through the two realms simultaneously. With control over the technical image in real time, we can choose how and to what degree our two particle worlds are woven together.

Our image world will recall the dome of the cave to which early man retreated to contemplate the world through drawing. But, like the spherical world in Street View, it will not make the world disappear, or out of reach. It will be transparent and we will be able to manipulate the images on its virtual surface and navigate through it while we move in our world. It will bring back the multi-dimensional world of Meleau-Ponty's formulation where '[e]verything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within the reach of my sight, marked on the [touch-screen] map of the I can.' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 2)

The mingling of the digitally deformed with the digitally realistic version of the city in the current state of Google Earth constitutes a historical moment in which the true origins the future can be found. As we are constantly reminded by daily news of the most recent technological developments in the area of augmented reality visualization, the image world will be similarly integrated into our everyday urban experience, as an added layer over the image of the city on the screen of our mobile viewing communication device, soon permanently mounted in our field of vision. The mediated city is already our reality and it will only become more so. Properly reimagined the hybrid city that intertwines the virtual and the actual should take its place as the ideal site for testing in the collective imagination the possibilities of alternative urbanisms. We could soon be dreaming our cities into existence on site, in real time and with our eyes wide open. What visions for our cities will we conjure up, bring to light and to life as envisioners of alternate hybrid realities, new phantasms? Better yet, what new ways of living with images can we manipulate into existence through our current child-like, though not childish, gropings in the technically sophisticated, though, in their aspiration, infantile simulations of Google Earth and Street View.

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