Visual content	Audio (read by Jenna Ng unless otherwise indicated)
TITLE: ONE: TO BEGIN…	Two scenes.
Footage: Archive clips of the 2015 Madrid 'hologram protest'. The protestors are transparent blue-light figures.	On April 12, 2015, "the world's first hologram protest" took place in Madrid against a controversial Citizens Safety Law that would render it illegal for people to gather in front of government buildings without permission. The "hologram protesters" were projected onto a hidden screen, appearing as dimly illuminated human figures walking before a government building in the style of a conventional protest march.
	[Protestors chanting.]
	The irony is clear: the virtual protesters are there as counter-purpose, because the actual protesters are not *allowed* to be there. These images – as light, as immateriality – are thus not only symbolic. They are a veritable counter to power. A heroic assertion against oppression.
Footage: the climactic scene from *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. Spider-Man confronts Mysterio at the top of Tower Bridge. Mysterio's drones project the illusion of a digital blackout. Spider-Man focusses his senses and navigates the illusion by instinct. **Footage:** From earlier in the film, Mysterio uses special effect superpowers to wow a crowd of onlookers. **Footage:** Back at Tower Bridge, Mysterio tries on final trick on his deathbed, but Spider-Man sees through the illusion and dodges a bullet.	The second scene. This is Mysterio, the villain of the 2019 Spider-Man film, *Spider-Man: Far from Home*. Mysterio's superpower, so to speak, is to create special effects, specifically these large-scale holographic illusions, to fool all the characters in the film, including Spider-Man. The twist here is that *virtuality itself becomes an antagonist*. The real threat in the Spider-Man film is not the usual death and destruction, but the bewilderment and disorientation from Mysterio's illusions. From being unable to distinguish between what is reality and what is virtuality. To defeat Mysterio, Spidey thus has to first break Mysterio's illusions – to discern what is true and what is fake. Only then could he slay the villain and restore order. **Spider-Man:** You can't trick me any more.
VFX: In smooth splitscreen, we see two versions of the same scene, from different points in the film. Spider-Man is giving an instruction to an	Both scenes colour a new era of reality through our images. A reality that is not so much fake or manipulated as with CGI or Photoshop, but wipes out the difference between the real and unreal... .

AI assistant, but the framing of the second version of the scene, obscuring his face, loses the emotional context and looks as if Spidey is ordering an exectution.

Fast-cutting footage: Hologram protest. Cypher from *the Matrix* eating his betrayal steak. Deepfake footage of Donald Trump. Spider-splitscreen. A mother sitting with her virtually reincarnated daughter. Digital refugees in a small boat. Twitter misinformation policy. ABBA: Voyage. From *Ringu*, the girl climbs from the well in grainy video. Meta's VR forest. Mysterio's drones. Fake News about Spider-Man. *Ringu* cosplayers. A bench with an advert for *District 9*. Stock footage of a Zoom meeting. Lil Miquela. Stock markets. Star Wars VR.

Title: THE NEW VIRTUALITY
A Video Essay on the Disappearing Differences between Real and Unreal

Both Spider-Men: Do it! Execute them all!

..and vacillates in a limbic space of not quite one nor the other, off-balanced and uncertain. A reality that breaks down the old semantic values which defined what is true versus what is not; good versus evil; here versus there; fact versus fiction.

A reality that signals a new power of the virtual against the actual. Of how the virtual – as space and as reality – *overwhelms* the actual. And therefore how the virtual *shapes* the actual, and, in so doing, *becomes* the reality that drives society in how it works, lives, pays and plays today.

[Music builds in intensity…]

[...and crescendos!]

Title: TWO: CLEAR BOUNDARIES

A captioned photo of René Magritte with his hat on the wrong way around.

This is set on a lovely deep auburn background.

Picture of: *La Condition Humaine*.

VFX: Animated circles and strikes annotate the described aspects of the painting.

The gap always shows.

[Fade in: Good Time. Jazzy backing music.]

With characteristic wit, Réne Magritte painted this painting, *La Condition Humaine*, to depict a landscape segment as a near-continuous view seen through both a window and on a painted canvas set in front of that window. The keyword is "near-continuous". In the painting, the canvas' depiction of the landscape outside the window very nearly – but does not quite – match the view from the window. With subtlety but clear deliberation, Magritte disrupts the painting's otherwise flawless alignment between canvas and window view. Here are the faint strokes of the canvas outline; here are the canvas edges topped and tailed by clip and stand; here is a clear white strip along the canvas edge studded with pinheads that fix the canvas in place. The continuation of the landscape across representation and reality is just about perfect… but not nearly so. *The gap always shows.*

[Music stops.]

The painting is gone, and now on a digitally marbled background we see, in quick succession: "DIFFERENCE" Warhol's Marilyn, then the real thing. The Marble Arch Mound, then an actual hill. The digitally de-aged Carrie Fisher from *Rogue One* and the real deal. **Footage:** From *Doctor Who* 'Vincent and the Doctor' the starry night sky transforms into the image of that most famous painting. Back to *La Condition Humaine* **VFX:** <u>The Human Condition</u> **Footage:** *The Matrix*, Morpheus offers Neo two pills, red and blue. Young Will Smith from *Gemini Man*. **VFX:** Robert DeNiro is de-aged in real time. **Footage:** Neo sees himself in the Matrix. **Quick cutting in time with the words:** • Stock footage of a confused man. • A muddy path. • A pile of fudge. • An exaggerated pile of fudge. • The text: *FU**ED* **Footage:** Channel 4's Deep Fake queen. **Split-screen with:** De-aged queen riding her coach from the jubilee. **Image:** Jean Baudrillard. The quote comes on-screen as it is read out.	The gap is more than a witticism. It underscores a crucial idea – difference. Difference between representation and object; artifice and nature; virtual and actual. Difference that is not only about comparison, but definition. Difference to which one can point and say: this is X not only because it *is* X, but also because it is *different from* Y. Difference that, to Magritte, is *La Condition Humaine*, the human condition, because in that gap lies a *moral* question in differentiating between what is true and what is not. To discern that difference is therefore also a redress for truth that redeems ourselves as humans who not only want to know truth, but who also care about it. Magritte makes it clear: losing that space for discernment – that critical gap – is the genuine peril of the human condition. So where difference disappears is also where terms disappear. And where terms disappear is where conditions are set for discombobulation, disorientation and confusion. If differences cannot be discerned, how may terms be ascertained? If terms cannot be ascertained – if they are confused, muddied, fudged, exaggerated, misspoken – how can truth be apprehended? If we do not know truth, how do we evaluate, decide, and judge? **Deepfaked Queen Liz**: But at least I still have my beloved Andrew close by. The disappearance of difference is thus not simply about understanding X against Y. Difference also carries a moral meaning. As Jean 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*

Returning to the deepfake Queen, she glitches apart, and the green-screen set-up behind the illusion is revealed. **Fade to green:**	*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.*
Title: THREE: DISAPPEARING BOUNDARIES **VFX:** A white rectangle draws itself at the centre of the screen, and as each example is listed, an image of that thing appears, neatly squared into the lines of that rectangled frame. **Footage:** Phone-camera video of the enormous pseudo-3D *Wheel of Time* advert from Piccadilly Circus. A monster leans out of that enormous screen. The word 'PANORAMA' appears set-into an actual panorama from the period, and as the panorama scrolls by, the words scroll with it.	There is generally always a clear difference between the image and its surroundings. A painting's frame. A bezel on a screen. The cinema screen. The theatre stage. These spaces all contain boundaries which indicate where is the reality of the illusion, and where is the reality of our actual world. Of course, artists, marketeers and content producers have long muddied these boundaries between actual and virtual reality for novelty and entertainment. One example is the late 18th and 19th century visual attraction of the panorama. *[Music starts: Abyss. Calm electronica.]*
Image: Empty panorama building. **Footage:** from inside one of these panoramas. **Image:** Queen Charlotte. Panorama of the British Navy at sea. This (frankly, beautifully) fades to… **Footage:** *Avatar: The Way of Water* **Footage:** A trailer for *House of Wax*.	The panorama featured large-scale realistic paintings, usually of exotic settings or scenes, housed in specially constructed rotunda buildings. With skilled lighting and realistic paintings which cleverly position the user at their centre, the panorama produced effects of profound belief within the painting's scene. Apocryphal stories abound, such as that of Queen Charlotte being reported feeling sea-sick on viewing a panorama of the British navy at sea. More recently, 3D cinema exploited the effect of 3D objects which seemingly breach the 2D surface of the cinema screen. Here's the trailer for the 1953 *House of Wax* promising things that "come off the screen right at you!" **Trailer voice:** In terovision 3D; House of Wax! The reality of the image thus invades the actual reality of the audience.
Phone-footage: of Skullmapping's	In 2020, the art collective, Skullmapping, knocked right on

paintings come-to-life! A cherub climbs from the paint and flies away.	the head the idea of paintings' frames as the boundaries of the painting's reality. With clever modelling and animation, they produced a video to show a cupid "escaping" from Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens's painting, *The Feast of Venus*, "flying" around the room in its newfound freedom.
Text: A few examples: **Footage:** *District 9* humans run a home inspection in a "prawn" slum. **Image:** The D9 bench advert again. VFX circles illustrate the relevant details as described. **Quickly:** A billboard advert and a bus-shelter advert for the film in the same style.	Films similarly manipulate virtual and actual boundaries with inventiveness. Here are a few examples. The publicity campaign for *District 9*, a film about a world shared in tension between humans and aliens who look like prawns, included this bench which featured the silhouette of the film's alien characters in their prawn-like shape, accompanied by an 1-800 number to echo the film's story of policing aliens. The virtual reality of the film thus leaks into the actual space of the city.
Footage: *Blair Witch Project*; grainy hand-held camera footage of the teen characters sleeping in the woods. Titlecard from the opening of the film reading: *In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary.* *A year later their footage was found.*	The entire genre of "found-footage horror," popularised by the late 1990s box-office successes of *The Last Broadcast* and *The Blair Witch Project*, fuses the boundaries of virtual and actual realities with reflexive self-awareness. The genre's key characteristic is that a substantive portion of the film, if not its entirety, is presented to the audience as "found" from cameras "recovered" from the diegetic world and "recorded" by characters who have either "died" or "disappeared." *[People scream!]*
Footage: The teens explore a spooky abandoned house. Heather talks to camera:	The effect is the film presented to the audience as an object from a fictional world that somehow exists in theirs, again dissolving the partition between the audience's actual reality and the virtual reality of the film's world. **Heather Donahue:** … because it was my project… and I insisted.
Footage: *Ringu* again. Sadako climbing from the well. And then climbing out of the TV screen itself.	And here: the climactic scene of Hideo Nakata's horror film, *Ringu* (2001), which features its main malevolent figure, Sadako, *crawling out of a television screen* to terrify another character in the film. In the film's diegetic world, Sadako is its evil, carrying a deadly curse borne out of her

	father's abuse. But she had been an evil previously contained on the *other* side of the TV screen.
Footage: *Doctor Who*, 'Time of Angels' Security camera footage of a stone statue of an angel GLITCHES, and in that moment the footage changes and the statue moves. Then, the statue moves out of the monitor screen, into the real world. **Footage:** A prank-show recreation of that big *Ringu* scare, with actors climbing out of dummy TVs. **Image:** Those cosplay models with TV screens around them. With a glitch effect, these different versions of Sadako merge into one.	Her entry into her victims' world not only disintegrates the boundaries between the actual and the virtual. It also tears apart the apotropaic magic in those boundaries, which had previously kept out her malevolence. This shot of Sadako encroaching the TV screen has become so inseparably and memorably associated with *Ringu* that advertisers re-created the visual trope in promoting Ringu's sequel, *Sadako 3D* (2012), hiring groups of female models to pose on the streets of Tokyo with the theme of that television screen around their shoulders. Such is the resonance of this violation of boundaries, this violent breakdown of demarcations. *[Music fades out...]*
Title: FOUR: THE NEW VIRTUALITY **Footage:** A mother sits with the digital recreation of her late daughter. **Footage:** VR refugee dingy **Footage:** The Facebook *Meta* showcase video. Cartoonish VR avatars sit around in an empty room playing cards.	These disappearing boundaries usher in The New Virtuality: an era where the virtual and the actual merge with increasingly unclear differences between them. By "virtual", we mean "any representation or appearance (whether optically, technologically, or artisanally produced) that appears 'functionally or effectively but not formally' of the same materiality as what it represents." The virtual is a second-order reality. The key to its meaning is its sense of the "almost": the virtual as "almost a particular thing or quality". The virtual as a second-order reality is therefore also about something falling short – being nearly there, but not quite – and therefore in some way diminished, incomplete. It is a representation, a substitute, an *appearance* of an actual reality. And, therefore, the virtual is *not* the actual. But that is no longer quite the case, and The New Virtuality signals the increasing unclear distinction between them.
Title: THE VIRTUAL HUMAN **Fast:** Images of Shudu Gram at "photoshoots" and on magazine covers.	*[Fade in: Universe, relaxing instrumental.]* Nowhere is The New Virtuality more clearly exemplified than the appearance of the virtual human. Meet Shudu Gram. Shudu Gram graces numerous magazine cover pages as a supermodel. The media is

	awash with photographs of her sashaying down fashion runways. She appears as a black woman with a closely shaven head, striking lips, and the fashion model's long and sleek body.
Fast cutting: Fast-cutting footage from Lil Miquela's social media, including her hanging out with real people.	Meet Lil Miquela: a "Spanish, Brazilian, American" 19-year-old. Like many teenagers, Miquela has extremely active accounts on major social media platforms, including Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. On the last alone, "she" has amassed over 3.1 million followers to date. Images and videos of Miquela are proliferant with updates on her life and relationships, while, as a social media influencer, she also promotes brands such as Calvin Klein and Prada. Miquela looks, sounds and moves like a real person.
Footage: Lil Miquela talks to camera.	**Lil Miquela:** Do I know what's going on? No. But that's never stopped me before.
More fast-cutting footage.	
Footage: Lil Miquela and Bella Hadid approach each other at a photo shoot and go to kiss.	Her virtual life is sparkling. She has friends and boyfriends, and poses with other famous models such as Bella Hadid.
Footage: BTS on Shudu Gram.	But both Gram and Miquela are completely computer-generated. They are simply digital images, modelled and rendered entirely through computer software, existing or appearing only on users' screens. They do not exist in actual reality, and have no physical counterpart. But they are entirely realistic in appearance, movement and sound, seeming to all intents and purposes to be actual people with actual lives.
(White) digital artists model her modelling.	
Footage: We see, too, Lil Miquela being put together digitally.	
Cutting through social media.	
Images: Stills from *This Person Does Not Exist* show a long string of entirely digital original faces.	Today, the virtual human need not even be made by human creators. The website ThisPersonDoesNotExist.com produces an online gallery of photographs of humans generated entirely by AI and machine learning. While not possessing the virtual existence of Miquela or Shudu Gram as influencers and models, each photograph nonetheless presents a realistic-looking and believable human. But the subject is entirely virtual. They literally Do Not Exist.
	Notably, the virtual human does not just turn up on our

Visuals	Narration
Footage: Hatsune Miku "performs" at a concert. **Fast-cutting images:** Cosplay, fan art, ice-carvings. Stylised images of Hatsune Miku.	screens. They also now appear in live performances. Hatsune Miku is a Japanese chart-topping pop star who sells out concerts around the world and promotes global brands such as Toyota. Her appearance and costumes have inspired myriad designs, fan art, even snow sculptures. The catch? Miku is an entirely virtual performer, and typically appears as a 3D projection of a young girl in the aesthetic of manga, her two long "turquoise blue" twintails being distinctive features. But her manga styling and appearance is precisely the point. She is a virtual human who not only looks like a virtual human, but is popular, feted, admired, acclaimed and, above all, accepted as live entertainment.
Footage: 2060. Virtual contestants "perform" for a panel of real human judges and a real human audience. **Footage:** Gu Xiaoyu "performs" a duet with a real human performer. **Footage:** Miku again. **Footage:** "V-tubers" — animated avatars who upload to YouTube as if ordinary content creators. In fact, they are ordinary content creators, behind a digital mask.	Similarly, in October 2021, China debuted "2060," a variety show which features animated computer-generated characters in a live television studio. The characters compete for audience votes and judges' endorsement with their dance and singing performances. Heavily aestheticised in the style of fantasy manga, the virtual characters perform, interact onstage with each other and with the studio judges in real-time. On June 3, 2022, Zhejiang Satellite TV and Tencent Interactive Entertainment Zhiji debuted the virtual performer, Gu Xiaoyu, onstage in their television studio performing a duet with Taiwanese singer Angela Chang, an actual performer. Created with simulation and motion capture data and rendered on Unreal Engine, Gu Xiaoyu appeared in traditional Song dynasty dress and styling. As with Miku, the point of these characters is to showcase their *virtuality* as characters of manga or historical style, and to celebrate their *vitality* as virtual characters who can meet and interact with actual humans in real-time onstage and in the television studio. Their virtuality – in all their cartoon-ish, manga-style glory – is also The New Virtuality: the acceptance of the virtual performer as a substitute for the actual. The acceptance of another kind of real.
Footage: A *Diet Coke* advert starring Elton John… and a cast of dead celebrities. **Illustration:** of a "Phantasmagoria" show: stage-lit apparitions haunt entertained	The virtual human can also turn up "live" as the ghost of a dead human, "resurrected" to appear before the living with life-like realism. The Phantasmagoria shows of the late 18th and 19th century presented historical dead figures as profitable entertainment in its day. The advent of the

onlookers. **Image:** Diagram of the "Pepper's Ghost" illusion, which uses clever placements of light and screens to project an unreal image of an otherworldly entity. **Footage:** Whitney Houston performs years after her death. **Fast cutting images:** Tupac's hologram. Teresa Teng Michael Jackson Maria Callas Buddy Holly Roy Orbison And finally Whitney Houston again. **Footage:** ABBA Voyage concert, with dazzling effects and perfect digital deaging. **Image:** ABBA now. **Footage:** ABBA Voyage.	Pepper's Ghost projection technique, patented by the two English engineers John Henry Pepper and Henry Dircks in 1863, enabled images of objects or people to appear mid-air onstage and prompted a slew of "ghost shows" across London and Europe. Today, the dead continue to appear "live" before the living, particularly as dead singers "resurrected" for "live" concerts to make more money for agents and concert organisers. Projected onstage with live backup bands, dancers or the occasional star with whom to duet, these "resurrected" dead performers have included Tupac Shakur (1971-1996) at Coachella in 2012; Teresa Teng (1953-1995) at Jay Chou's Taipei concert in 2013; and Michael Jackson (1958-2009) at the BIllboard Music Awards in 2014. Concert tours have also been made of Maria Callas (1923-1977) in 2018; Buddy Holly (1936-1959) and Roy Orbison (1936-1988) in 2019; and Whitney Houston (1963-2012) in 2020. The latest virtual humans appear not as ghosts from the dead, but apparitions from the past. On 27 May 2022, the Swedish pop group, ABBA, launched their long awaited reunion concert, *ABBA Voyage*. But this is not the concert of ABBA as its members are today, all well into their 70s. Rather, the show features highly realistic computer-generated (CG) 3D animations of the ABBA members – dubbed "ABBA-tars" – appearing as they had looked in ABBA's days of super stardom in the 1970s. Animators and visual effects artists from the special effects firm, Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), modelled, animated and rendered the ABBA-tars using negatives, footage and TV appearances of ABBA in the past. They also motion captured body movements and facial expressions of both present-day ABBA members and body doubles, employing the mocap data for increased realism. The "concert" of *ABBA Voyage*, then, consists of the ABBA-tars presented on a huge 65 million-pixel screen which spanned the stage. Backed by a 10-piece live band and enhanced with sophisticated surround sound and lighting effects, the ABBA-tars were much acclaimed for their realism, with convincing close-ups of their faces, eyes, hair and costumes.

Footage: again of the mother and her digitised late daughter. **Footage:** *Gemini Man* **Footage:** The Late Queen Liz meets Paddington. **Footage:** the Queen's coronation in 1952. **Footage:** Digitally de-aged Queen Liz (circa '52) waves to crowds outside Buckingham from her coach window videoscreen. **Fast-cutting:** Diet Coke ad. ABBA. Shudu Gram. Lil Miquela. Hitsune Miku This Person Does Not Exist Elton John Queen Liz. Whitney. That mother and that girl. And the mother sat alone against a greenscreen.	The virtual human thus meets the actual human. Not across the threshold of death, but *in real-time from one's past in one's present*. *[Trumpet fanfare.]* At Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee celebration of her 70 years in reign, the Jubilee's live pageant paraded the Gold State Coach, built in 1762, in which the Queen rode at her coronation in 1952. Significantly, the Queen, still alive at this time, did not ride in the coach. Rather, *her past self* did as a virtual human. Created from archival footage of her coronation, the young and then-freshly crowned Queen appeared once again in 2022 as a 2-dimensional projection at the coach window which "waved" to crowds. And the crowds waved back! The New Virtuality thus points to this plethora and diversity of virtual humans who appear in the midst of actual people, manifest real-time interactions with them, with a virtual existence in full social, audiovisual and animated vitality. They are neither ghosts nor apparitions, neither dead nor alive. They are the beings of The New Virtuality.
Title: SIX: VACILLATION **Footage:** That motion-picture classic *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*. The steam train pulling into its station. **VFX:** The word "REPRESENTATION" literally splits apart on-screen into "RE-PRESENTATION" **Image:** André Bazin in black and white. **Text:** NO MORE CINEMA **Image:** A screen-capture from Bazin's referenced work. **Footage:** Bicycle thieves. The major opening moment wherein the bike is stolen. **Quick cutting:** A digital recreation of	*[Fade in: Universe, atmospherical, cosmic synthesisers.]* Media have always entangled with the notion of difference. As systems of representation, they constantly push the limits of an audience's discernment of difference. This is the heart of the wordplay, where "representation" ruptures itself as "re-presentation", or, the re-presentation of reality. The French film theorist André Bazin foresaw precisely this outcome out of the mediascape ushered by the moving image. He uttered his famous proclamation of "no more cinema" in his 1971 reading of Vittoria De Sica's "perfect aesthetic illusion of reality" as shown in De Sica's 1948 film, *Ladri di Biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves) In "no more cinema", Bazin celebrates the eschewal of spectacle as part of the film's defining neo-realist style. *Bicycle Thieves'* "'integral' of reality" thus presents "pure cinema": "no more

Audrey Hepburn, then a RED X over her face. *Story* by Robert McKee, then a red X. A set picture from *Spider-Man* of a doorway set against a blue-screen, then a red X.

VFX: A white rectangle draws itself on the screen, boxing in the following short clips:
Queen Liz meeting Paddington. Queen Liz breakdancing.
Quick-cutting: Photoshop skin-clearing.
Lil Miquela and her human boyfriend.
Spider-Man fighting drones.
ABBA Voyage lightshow.
Deep-fake Mark Zuckerberg.

Split-screened: *Blair Witch* footage/Lil Miquela's CG model. Then a deep-fake of Al Gore/Queen Liz. Then VR Refugees/Gu Xiaoyu.

Image: a heavily filtered Instagram photo of Daisy Ridley claiming to be unaltered.
Before/after airbrushing example.
Lil Miquela with digitally perfect skin.
Another Snapchat filter.

Footage: *Years and Years*, Lydia West wears a futuristic real life emoji filter.

Footage: Airbrushing tutorial.

Footage: Reporters explore a *Star Wars* location-based VR game.

They suit up with helmets.

Then, the graphics of the game: Stormtroopers linger in a lift.

Text: Quote on-screen, from Jeremy White at *Wired*.

Footage: *Star Wars* VR equipment.

Footage: Mother and digital daughter.

Footage: Zoom call.

Footage: Essential workers stand around during the great British 'clap'.

Footage: Anime V-tuber.

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actors, no more story, no more sets." To Bazin and the theorists of cinematic realism at the time, cinema heralded the effective extinguishing of their difference.

The New Virtuality beckons ever more diminishing boundaries between the real and the virtual: an era of the unreal replete with images that are neither entirely fake nor entirely true. This era of images is distinct from the real of CGI and digital manipulation, whose fakery deceives and tricks. In The New Virtuality, no one is taken in. Yet no one believes either.

The New Virtuality teeters between extreme naturalism and unabashed fakery; recognisability and open alteration; realism and manifest manipulations.

We can see this vacillation in Instagram photographs touched up with the dozens of photo filter apps on every smartphone. The photographs look simultaneously real and unreal – a hybrid whose real is as yet ungraspable and incomprehensible; appearances which are changed and "enhanced", yet remain recognisable; realistic yet unrealistically perfect.

Or vacillation in so-called "location-based Virtual Reality" (LVR), where the user straps on a VR backpack and physically moves through an actual space that corresponds with the virtual. Virtual movements thus match actual movements. As one reviewer describes his experience in the "Star Wars" Location-based Virtual Reality: "When I walk forward in *Secrets of the Empire*, I actually walk forward." The VR headset – indicative of actual/virtual boundaries – is still over the user's eyes. No one believes the virtual scene before them is actually real. Yet it is not unreal either as the synchronicities between the virtual and the actual edge ever closer.

Or vacillation in our appearances on Zoom and other video conferencing platforms as the world went into lockdown over 2020-21 during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this pandemic-driven tectonic heave, the virtuality of webcam images become genuinely viable substitutes for

Image: Example of a filter on Zoom that gives users antlers.
Another which makes them cartoons.

Footage: *Years and Years* again; the emoji-mask flickers out.

Footage: The C4 deep-fake of Queen Liz glitches apart.

Footage: A courthouse Zoomcall in which one of the lawyers has the face of a cat.

Footage: Al Gore again. Mark Zuckerberg. Donald Trump.

Image: An impossible landscape dreamt up by an AI artists. De-aged Carrie Fisher.

Image: Lil Miquela and Bella Hadid.

Footage: Deep-fake footage of Trump, doing a tacky local news review segment in a terrible wig.

Image: Article on *The Conversation* titled: 'Deepfake videos could destroy trust in society — here's how to restore it'

Quick-cuts: The *stream* of a V-tuber. The *scroll* of social media on a smartphone. An AR art mural jumping off of a *wall*, animated as a swirling ball of paint and colour, entirely virtual.

The perfect digital fakery is transported to a white-room, where avatars gawk. And then it is instantly replaced by yet another digitally unreal environment.

Footage: Cypher considers his betrayal steak from *The Matrix*.

Footage: Sadako climbs from the well.

Footage: *Gorn*, an ultra-violent but cartoonishly themed VR arena combat game.

Footage: From *Fight Club*, Edward Norton hits Brad Pitt in the face.

Footage: Social media scrolling.

Footage: That *Wheel of Time* billboard come-to-life.

Footage: *Avatar: The Way of Water*'s digital landscape.

living bodies at work and play. Yet, the real via the webcam manifests as the unreal via video enhancement; simulated backgrounds; "touch up" filters – the actualized cartoonization of the real in actual time – and even deepfake software, with the unreal occupying the real live and simultaneously.

Cat-faced lawyer: I'm here live. That's not… I'm not a cat.

The New Virtuality thus points to a new discomfort – a scandalous and impossible madness of a black hole of representability between the poles of the real and the unreal, the sense of this limbic space that still does not quite have a name and is completely unhistorical. A new kind of uncanny photorealism. Another creature of mutant hybridity. An endless see-sawing that abandons all the old semantic values of reality and illusion.

With this discomfort also lies a sense of threatened collapse and hidden violence. The New Virtuality is not just the constant streams, scrolls and walls of real-yet-unreal images. It is also a veritable devouring of each other – and of ourselves – to the *disappearance* of ourselves, or at least some level of authenticity of ourselves. The limbic vacillations of The New Virtuality somehow swallow all the fakery in the contemporary plethora of images and spit them out as masticated versions of ourselves in virtuality. We are left at the mercy of this constant gorging.

This force of consumption is not quite coercive as it is mindless, not quite intimidating as a helpless thrall. But it colours the limbic real-yet-unreal space of The New Virtuality with a distinct aggression. The real/unreal of The New Virtuality is thus an all-encompassing absorption that is not the antagonism of the twentieth century's real in its shocks of brutality, disorder and destructiveness for a kind of sought-after clarity. Rather, it is the aggression of the ceaseless ingestion of virtuality which has no material existence. It is the invasive encroachment of the virtual into real-time actuality. It is the wilful oblivion to understanding or realizing our saturation of images as a

Footage: A V-tuber chats with her livestream audience. **Footage:** *Spider-Man Far: From Home*, Spider-Man dodges the bullet by seeing through Mysterio's deathbed illusion. **Footage:** *The Matrix*; Neo splashes down into the cold water of reality after having been woken up. **Footage:** Avatars sit around in *Facebook*'s Meta metaverse, and they open a video-call. The call they open is familiar footage; Sadako climbs from the well in that haunted VHS footage.	surfeit that is inevitably without any kind of satisfaction. The New Virtuality thus signals an entirely different kind of violence. That violence is one of unfulfilled yet uncontrollable gluttony of the virtual. Of unspoken desperation of being lost in the surfeit of virtuality with disappearing boundaries and differences. Which seem beautiful and perfect in every way, yet shredded through with an inexpressible sense of disorientation and bewilderment. Of a certain loss of clarity, and even greater uncertainty as to regaining those bearings.
Title: CONCLUSION **Image:** The *Minority Report* poster. **Footage:** Tom Cruise's John Anderton uses motion-control to swipe through projected, hologram screens surrounding him. **Footage:** Anderton picks out a memory from a selection of tapes and puts it in a machine. Projectors whir to life and a scene jumps to life: A young boy at the beach, translucent and digital, talking to Anderton as if he were actually there. As the conversation goes on, the virtuality becomes clearer as the projection technology stretches and warps Sean's silhouette. Over this footage: **Text:** "Representation" again splits into "Re-presentation". Fade to: **Image:** *La Condition Humaine* Fade to: **Footage:** Mother and digital daughter try	Two final scenes: The first is from Steven Spielberg's 2002 film, *Minority Report*, adapted from a Philip K. Dick short story. The film is set in a science-fiction future world replete with, among other things, touchscreens, holograms and 3D projections. Twenty years on, those cinematic visions are self-evidently prescient. The scene in question shows the protagonist, John Anderton (played by Tom Cruise), playing a 3D projection of his young son, Sean, presumed in the film to be dead. Anderton projects images of Sean recorded in the past at a beach during which father and son exchanged a casual conversation. He re-presents that memory. **John:** Sean! **Sean:** Hi daddy! Can you teach me how to run faster? 'Cos all the kids at my class run faster than me. While steeped in loss and nostalgia, this scene also registers the recognition of difference. John Anderton understands that projection is not his son – it is media, a re-presentation of the past. It is, in short, a moral assertion of difference between the actual and the virtual. It is the continuation of Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* of the virtual landscape to these technological virtual manifestations of the past. It is that acknowledgement of

to embrace, but they simply don't exist in the same world.
POV: We see the mother's perspective; transparent game-controller hands pass through the virtual version of her late daughter.

Footage: The end of that conversation between Sean and John in *Minority Report*.

Then the projection of Sean stalls and sputters out, until he isn't there at all.

Footage: POV footage from the observatory deck of the Burj Khalifa, with Dubai tiny, far below, and the desert stretching far away into the distance.

Footage from the lift, floor numbers accelerating upwards increasingly quickly.

Footage from below, the tower is so enormous as not to even fit in the frame of the footage.

The desert fades into obscurity and invisibility.

The windows of the observation deck are the full height of the wall.

A digital screen set against the actual window shows a mimic image; the city still in view behind is replicated digitally immediately in front of the landscape itself, in shiny motion graphics.

Image: Jenna Ng poses in front of the window; the skyscrapers beyond dwarfed, by perspective.

Footage: through the window: Handheld, and shaky, it simply looks like we are floating all that way above the ground, suspended at an unreal height.

The city below is *so* distant as to become tacky and uncanny. Zooming in as far as the camera will go, small shiny insects scuttle down what look like miniature motorways.

The needle-point shadow of the tower we are watching from splits the landscape below in half.

difference which enables the grief and the pain, even if the anguish is also laced with some comfort. That heartache of mourning is true, because the dead cannot return. And it is difference – the understanding, the recognition of and the assent to it – which enables that truth.

John: I love you, Sean.

Sean: I love you, daddy!

[Music: You are a Memory, atmospheric alternative folk.]

The second scene. I am at the top of the world. I stand on the observatory deck of Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, at 555 metres towards the sky. The elevator trip alone took three minutes.

At that height, the famous skyscraper-replete vista of the city of Dubai looks like geometrical saplings (remember this is a city which boasts twelve of the world's tallest seventy buildings). In the distance, the Arabian Desert stretches into dusty and dusky shimmers. I look out of each window pane of the observatory deck. At that elevation and out of each large glass pane, my visual reference to the scene before me was not only godlike, but it was virtualized. The view at that height has no spatial or dimensional relation to its reality on the ground. It is an alien view, a virtual view. It is a view which contains its own order of reality.

At the same time, it is also actual: the view was right before me. It constituted my actuality. Here the boundaries have completely disappeared. Difference is neither illusion nor trick of light. Rather, this virtuality is commandeered through a bodily experience of the visual and the affective *which could only make sense of this data as unreal*. This was not an image in the sense of that which tries to capture what is out there. This was an image that was in me. This was not a virtual scene. This was The New Virtuality.

So here, perhaps, is the destination of The New Virtuality, arrived at the giddy heights of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai:

Footage montage: Reporters suit-up for the *Star Wars* VR experience.

A digital Spider-Man watches a News broadcast billboard describe the crimes we've seen him framed for.

The *Blair Witch* crew explore an abandoned building in night-vision black and white.

An interviewee at that hologram protest is incensed and immaterial.

Whitney Houston performs a digital concert.

Both in 1952 and 2022, the digitally maintained image of the young Queen rides to Buckingham in the same coach.

The avatars from *Meta*'s metaverse revel in a fake world.

Stormtroopers load their guns.

A V-tuber laughs.

Lil Miquela sits in front of a cork-board of red string and printed photos, trying to uncover her own digital origins.

VFX: White lines sketch the boarders of the frame.

Skullmapping's cherub escapes the Rubens.

Faces from *This Person Does Not Exist* flick by, set into the website's UI:

Then, in that same digital *Does Not Exist* frame, Audrey Hepburn's reanimated avatar. Lil Miquela. Spain's hologram protestor. *District 9*'s alien "prawns". *Meta*'s avatar. The young queen. Shudu Gram. Robert DeNiro. And Agnetha Fältskog, digitally de-aged and remastered, as per ABBA Voyage.

Title: THE NEW VIRTUALITY

A Video Essay on the Disappearing Differences between Real and Unreal

Produced by Jenna Ng

Directed by Oliver Tomkins

not so much in any technologically new methods of representation, but in profound internalization within my body, my senses, my neural connections, in my brain as a screen.

Where the virtual onscreen had always been on the outside (as in, outside of the spectator) to be captured, The New Virtuality erases the difference between spectator and actor.

In its final form, The New Virtuality is to be neither a second order of the actual nor even simulacra.

Those senses of the virtual maintain a distance between image and the originating referent. Rather, The New Virtuality is to be a virtuality that is internalized.

Or, ingested as triangulation between media, environment and bodies.

[Music builds...]

In turn, that internalization becomes the ultimate extinguishment of boundaries and difference.

An extinguishment that points to new questions of how we exist in virtualities with no difference and no boundaries.

Of the meanings of being human in The New Virtuality.

[Music goes quiet.]

Written & Narrated by Jenna Ng Editing & Sound by Oliver Tomkins <u>Music:</u> Reborn — Schallbauer Good Time — Jass Music Collection Abyss — Rexlambo Universe — Hazy You are a Memory — Message to Bears With thanks to THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK School of Arts and Creative Technologies For more information, go to thenewvirtuality.com	*[Music fades out.]*