

**FRIDAY, APRIL 12**  
**SESSION 4**  
**12:15 - 13:15**

ROOM C - SALA DE VIDEOCONFERENCIAS

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**On the Ambiguity between  
3D visualizations and  
Physical Spaces**

## On the Ambiguity between 3D visualizations and Physical Spaces

My research aims to examine how realistic creative digital visualizations of non-humans (e.g. architectural visualizations) may affect people's perception of physical sites and public spaces which might have a bearing on public decision-making. It focuses on studying the social, aesthetic, and political implications that may derive from this perception.

The quality, access, and proliferation of digital visualization and simulation tools have advanced rapidly. Creative digital visualizations have become commonplace in the public sphere. The public's unmediated and head-on relationship with CGI is in itself quite new. On social media, for example, one might find incredibly realistic videos of a crowd flabbergasted by whales swimming in the skies of Dubai; Large popcorns exploding out of the canvas of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup paintings at the MOMA; and several vehicles shaped as giant designer-bags driving around Paris. These popular short videos often confuse the public into thinking these images are real.

Recent studies have analysed the implications to society of realistic digitally-generated images such as Deepfakes. Up until now, these critical and interdisciplinary studies have predominantly focused their attention on images that simulate human figures. In contrast, there have been less critical takes on other types of realistic visualizations. Their approach is premised on the fact that only 'human' visualizations may present threats to individual sovereignty. However, non-human digital visualizations may actually present risks of a collective nature.

In 2021, a video of a surreal light and fireworks show at Seattle's Space Needle Tower went viral. The roughly 10-minute spectacle depicted the monument wrapped around "holograms", light animations, and fireworks that resembled a science fiction piece<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the video was a digital visualization that mixed CGI with real footage of the existing site. In a creative effort to salvage the annual fireworks show which was inaccessible during COVID-19 restrictions, the organizers of the event hired a team of creative technologists to produce a virtual light show experience that would be streamed online. The digital light show was surprisingly given the same credibility and publicity as its prior physical counterparts. Although there were attempts by the event organizers to describe the digital contents of the production, in the end, many viewers were left confused and believed the effects "were actually happening in real life"<sup>2</sup>.

The sci-fi fireworks spectacle was perceived and disseminated by many on social media as a physical occurrence. It soon gained traction abroad but without the proper context. In a post by blogTo, a Toronto-based media company with over 700 thousand followers on social media, the Space Needle event was used as a means to demand reform and denounce Toronto's lack of investment in public infrastructure. The article, entitled "Seattle's Space Needle Puts CN Tower to Shame after New Year's Eve's Light Show", cited several posts from local citizens that compared the digital Space Needle footage with Toronto's similar but physical event. One of the quoted citizens had posted on X a clip of the digital event alongside their remarks: "Hey, Toronto, the CN Tower's gotta step it up"<sup>3</sup>.

What is interesting about this artistic visualization is how quickly it shaped into a political tool. The digital footage reached people in other countries without context, and soon enough it was interpreted as a "the grass is greener on the other side" situation, aggravating their dismay towards their public sphere. While this case did not escalate to more than civic criticism and fault-finding, it illustrates the potential that creative realistic visualizations with benign intentions may spin out of control.

A similar episode occurred with respect to the Marble Arch Mound. I am referring to the architectural project in London by MVRDV in which rendering visualizations were influential in its approval and reception. The rendering's realistic and seductive imagery was central to the project's promotion. The delivered project, however, looked nothing like the proposed renderings and was a fiasco that culminated in refunds, closures/reschedules, and resignations<sup>4</sup>.

While the Marble Arch Mound's unsatisfactory delivery may be attributed to several factors associated with its construction, its poor reception was directly linked to its digital representation: "Within two days of its opening, the faux knoll(...)was forced to temporarily close due to complaints that it failed to live up to what promotional design renderings had promised", wrote The Architect's Newspaper<sup>5</sup>. The comparison with the seductive renderings was ubiquitous among journals. The

Guardian commented that "(...)The trees were looking skinnier and less luxuriant than the computer-generated promotional images had suggested"<sup>6</sup>, and Frieze magazine even published a satire piece which underscored that: "We all saw the first architectural renders(...)a place of sublime natural beauty in the midst of the modern city"<sup>7</sup>.

The public's disappointment was linked to a failure to live up to the renderings. The renderings were taken at face value, no longer an approximation or illustration of a product - but a facsimile. How likely was it then that the rendering was acting as a surrogate of the physical site, in the public's understanding? To what extent are digital visualizations crossing a threshold in which the degree of simulation is such that it may be interpreted as fact? Baudrillard once posed the question: what happens when the distance "between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the model?"<sup>8</sup>

When thinking about the impact of experiments with digital media on people's perception of public spaces, we commonly imagine physical structures that incorporate digital technologies. However, digital media may transform public spaces without tangibility and by imaging alone. Bruno Latour wrote that "we are no longer physically adjusted to our imaging technology" and that this has contributed to a "general atmosphere of fakery"<sup>9</sup>. In my research, I seek to investigate the social, ethical, and political implications of the use of digital realistic visualizations in the context of public spaces, considering the following dualities: the assimilation of and ambiguity between digital and physical spaces; and how this phenomenon may be linked to perceptions of authenticity and sovereignty.

## References

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## Reflection on the Role of Experimentation

Experimentation implies, with it, a connotation of risk in one's approach to research and practice—that of stepping out of one's comfort zone. This "nonconformity" never stems from action alone but from reflexivity towards action/practice. My project originates from such a notion of reflexivity in my practice in the field of 3D visualization and creative technologies. It draws on the difficulties I have encountered to define a critical lineage of inquiry and methods related to the field. How can such an influential creative practice be so uncritical and unaware? In this sense, my project is driven by the absence of experimentation and critical social research in the field, and the desire to fill that gap.