



# The Practical Use of Other Realities: Taking Berger and Luckmann into the Wild

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## Abstract

The sociology of knowledge that followed *The Social Construction of Reality* shifted from the study of rarified ideas to practical activity, focusing on the stabilization of a sense of shared reality. The opposite side of this shift in emphasis has received much less attention – activities that place reality into a state of play and, in so doing, call attention to its ephemerality. I discuss three empirical areas where the *practical use of other realities* is central to the sociology of knowledge. First, I document cases in which skilled practitioners, such as airline pilots, safety engineers, and athletes, use simulation to prepare for events that are understood as highly uncertain and risky. Next, I describe how other realities are mobilized epistemologically, such as through experimentation in technoscience and experimentalism in unrealized or ‘unbuilt’ art and architecture. Finally, I consider autotelic and transcendent social experiences through fantasy and technological mediations like augmented realities.

## Keywords

Berger, Luckmann, knowledge, sociology of knowledge, reality, realities, other realities, augmented realities, multiple realities, ontology, ontologies, social construction, simulation, technoscience, architecture

## Introduction

Perhaps the single most important achievement in the sociology of knowledge in the last five decades has been to problematize the notion that human progress is the result of great ideas written by great thinkers. Ironically, we owe a debt for this achievement to the great ideas contained within a very little book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (hereafter, *SCOR*) (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The central methodological critique of *SCOR* translated Alfred Schütz’s phenomenology into a research program that shifted the

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sociology of knowledge away from rarified ideas and toward the practical activities of the proverbial man or woman on the street. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) state:

To exaggerate the importance of theoretical thought in society and history is a natural failing of theorists ... The sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. (1966: 15)

This move has yielded much scholarly fruit. It provided a key catalyst for transitioning the sociology of knowledge from a fairly esoteric domain within German sociology and philosophy to a more widely dispersed, if still niche, sociological subfield. More importantly, what Berger and Luckmann refer to as 'processes by which any body of "knowledge" comes to be socially established as "reality" ... regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity' (1966: 3), has become a common methodological orientation across several of the most productive subfields of the last several decades, including cultural sociology, the sociology of religion, organizational studies, social psychology, and science and technology studies.

Much less attention has been paid to the flipside of *SCOR*'s methodological summons: how do members of groups play with reality while enacting 'other realities'? There are ample tools within *SCOR* to develop a more explicit emphasis on the playful and ephemeral aspects of reality enactment. For example, *SCOR* developed Schütz's (1945) concepts of 'multiple realities' and 'other realities' by considering dreams, fantasy, and other realities that blur the sense of what is real and what is not. In this way, *SCOR* provides a decidedly non-reflectionist ontology in the sense that there is no single Reality out there awaiting discovery. Instead, reality is established through social processes that pit competing perspectives against one another. However, as science studies scholar Annemarie Mol (2002) points out in her study of multiple versions of atherosclerosis at a single hospital, this type of social constructivism multiplies perspectives while leaving ontology rooted in the singular. In contrast, Mol and other STS scholars have developed a framework known as multiple or empirical ontology, or what Bruno Latour has referred to as a 'practical metaphysics', to demonstrate how objects and artifacts themselves – comprising the 'thingness' of social life – are made multiple in practical action (see the November 2013 issue of *Social Studies of Science*, as well as Hoffman, 2015; Sismondo, 2015).

Reality can be treated as empirically multiple by focusing on how day-to-day 'ontic work' oscillates between the attempt to temporarily stabilize a paramount reality within an ongoing performance of multiple other realities. As Goffman's (1974) work on frames points out, once we begin to look, this kind of ontological bracketing is extremely mundane (see also Bateson, 2000 [1972]). Other realities can be understood as immanent rather than marginal. In paying careful attention to the practical ways that actors keep reality in play, I am suggesting a deliberate analytic strategy for 'hindering reification' (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2015: 466). The payoff for this performative move can be demonstrated with empirical illustration, of which I offer three types. First, I discuss the practical use of other realities when skilled practitioners, such as athletes, soldiers, and safety engineers, use simulation to prepare for uncertain, risky, or high consequence tasks. Next, I discuss how other realities are mobilized for epistemic knowledge, with experimentation

in technoscience being the most obvious example, but I also discuss here experimentalism in the form of unrealized art and unbuilt architecture. Finally, I consider transcendent and/or autotelic social experience, primarily through modalities of fantasy and technological mediations such as augmented realities. In the conclusion, I turn to a few of the methodological and theoretical implications that are raised by a move away from fixed ontological categories.

## Multiple Realities in *The Social Construction of Reality*

At the outset of *SCOR*, Berger and Luckmann set out a definition of reality and knowledge rooted in the phenomenological:

It will be enough, for our purposes, to define 'reality' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition ... and to define 'knowledge' as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics. (1966: 1)

From here, Berger and Luckmann distinguish 'different spheres of reality' such as dreams from everyday interaction. This analysis then registers the existence of multiple realities:

I recognize the fellowmen I must deal with in the course of everyday life as pertaining to a reality quite different from the disembodied figures that appear in my dreams ... my consciousness, then, is capable of moving through different spheres of reality. Put differently, I am conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities. (1966: 21)

Berger and Luckmann continually revisit the idea that despite the potential multiplicity of reality, there remains a 'reality par excellence' that holds a 'privileged position' and imposes 'itself upon consciousness in the most massive, urgent, and intense manner' (1966: 21). Everyday life presents itself in a taken-for-granted fashion. One does not typically question its facticity: 'This suspension of doubt is so firm that to abandon it, as I might want to do, say in theoretical or religious contemplation, I have to make an extreme transition' (1966: 23). Berger and Luckmann provide several examples of 'finite provinces of meaning' that depart from 'paramount reality' of everyday interaction: the games of children and adults, fictional performance (e.g. the theater curtain rising or falling marks transitions between realities), and religious ritual. It is these 'finite provinces of meaning', which Berger and Luckmann treat largely in passing, which I expand upon in this paper. I indicate how 'other realities' are put into practical use in everyday situations.

The translation between different provinces or spheres of reality is done through a process that Berger and Luckmann refer to as *transposition*:

Language is capable of transcending the reality of everyday life altogether. It can refer to experiences pertaining to finite provinces of meaning, and it can span discrete spheres of reality. For instance, I can interpret 'the meaning' of a dream by integrating it linguistically within the order of everyday life. Such integration transposes the discrete reality of the dream in to the

reality of everyday life by making it an enclave within the latter. The dream is now meaningful in terms of the reality of everyday life rather than of its own discrete reality. (1966: 40)

Berger and Luckmann focus on how other realities are stabilized and made coherent within the ontology of a taken-for-granted or paramount reality:

This integration of the realities of marginal situations ... constitute[s] the most acute threat to taken-for-granted, routinized existence in society ... the marginal situations constitute a 'night side' that keeps lurking ominously on the periphery of everyday consciousness ... The thought keeps suggesting itself (the 'insane' thought par excellence) that, perhaps, the bright reality of everyday life is but an illusion, to be swallowed up at any moment by the howling nightmares of the other, the night-side of reality. (1966: 98)

The constructivist tradition that followed in the wake of *SCOR* has largely contributed to the taming of this 'night-side of reality' by considering it derivative to the paramount reality of everyday life. That is, there has been a strong tendency to normalize dreams, delusions, and other 'finite provinces of meaning' as marginal to the 'paramount reality' characterized by the attention-absorbing nature of face-to-face interaction. For example, we have studies that focus on faulty evaluation or denial (Perrow, 1999; Pollner and McDonald-Wikler, 1985; Zerubavel, 2006), false consciousness (Greisman and Mayes, 1977), illness, criminality, or other forms of deviant identity (Brown, 1995; Charmaz, 1990; Robbers, 2008), the persistence of curious or false beliefs (Prasad et al., 2009; Zerubavel, 1999), along with studies of parapsychology and other forms of rejected knowledge (Collins and Pinch, 1982; Lamont, 2007; Wallis, 1979). Even where the emphasis in studies of deviance is to champion the underdog, the oppressed, or the deviant in order to call into question the assumed normality of the dominant frame, the analytic emphasis nevertheless assumes that marginal realities threaten and must therefore be kept separate from the worked up paramount reality.

My argument is not that this is an inaccurate way to examine the social construction of reality. Indeed, at a superficial level it resonates with the populist appeal of sociological scholarship and teaching (Stinchcombe, 1999). It also nicely captures how the taken-for-granted is painstakingly and very often painfully built up in social interaction through processes of exclusion and marginalization. The approach has effectively demonstrated that the social construction of reality is a matter of power politicking for the definition of the situation, rather than a mere recognition of the world as it must be (for a compatible point made in regards to an multiple ontology versus a general philosophical ontology, see Lynch, 2013). However, the emphasis on the stabilization of a paramount reality, along with the treatment of other realities as derivative, marginal, or of lesser consequence, has reproduced in our analyses a tendency to ignore the constitutive nature of ontic work. In doing this, social constructivist approaches risk devolving into a bland cultural pluralism, rendering social process into a static condition and/or character trait (e.g. a Euro-American ontology versus indigenous ontology). By and large, our empirical focus has concentrated on stabilization rather than playfulness, ephemerality, and transition. Yet once we turn attention to other realities in everyday life, we begin to see how mundane their practical use

actually is. I turn now to three examples of central concern for an empirical sociology of other realities.

## **Mobilizing Other Realities to Constrain Uncertainty and Risk**

A key area in which other realities operate not so much as an 'acute threat to taken-for-granted, routinized existence', but are rather part and parcel of everyday life is in the routine preparations of highly skilled practitioners. Here we find the strikingly mundane usages of simulation techniques and other mock scenarios that relax the potential consequences of engaging in an event or task that is categorized as high uncertainty, high risk, or that seldom occurs. In the language of organizational theorists like James March, simulations are one way that groups cope with problems related to 'stingy' or 'thin' experience (March et al., 1991). That is, simulations are very often designed to approximate those events that seldom occur but are important for actors on the few occasions that they do. The simulation renders the stingy experience legible through a series of simplified 'best guesses', which are then used to construct an interactive, repeatable, and highly portable situation or activity.

Examples of this are not hard to come by once you look. A very common one involves competitive sports where practice is explicitly organized around a series of mock scenarios. The 'real game' only becomes real when an outcome is reified as a recorded win or loss that has a future consequence for comparative rankings. Anyone aware of the effort and patience it takes to teach four year olds how to play baseball should have a good sense of how the mobilization of other realities goes to the very core of orchestrating renditions that observers will recognize as 'baseball' at all. Theatrical performance on the live stage and in the movies has a similar quality, from dress rehearsal to multiple takes of a single scene. Much of the work that goes into the production and choreography of a formal performance, from multiple drafts of a script to panicked last minute changes just before going on stage, are systematically hidden from the audience if the formal execution is to be seen as a success. Even here, however, there is a great deal of tenuousness in the effort to hide the backstage realities, as Goffman (1959) captured so beautifully in his analysis of the hotel staff in the Shetland Islands. The tenuous spatial and interpretive boundaries between public and private performance are kept discrete but may be explicitly transgressed, such as when a stage actor 'breaks the fourth wall' by recognizing her own fictionalization.

An underlying mechanism is that the higher the risk of an activity, and/or the lower the accessibility of it to routine experience, the more elaborate is the mobilization of simulation, mock scenarios, or other means of producing multiple other or alternate realities in preparation for its potentiality. In my own study of simulation techniques at an amateur boxing program, for example, gym life was organized around a series of simulations that became more varied and complex the higher the status of different members in the gym (Hoffman 2006). It was only after several months of working through a hierarchically organized series of simulations, first on air and then on leather punching bags, that boxers eventually gained access to live human flesh during full contact sparring sessions. Even

here, however, coaching staff would choreograph drills and regularly remind boxers, ‘Your sparring partner is your friend’ and ‘this is not a real fight.’ Competitive matches, once completed, were translated back into the omnivorous simulated order of gym life. For example, losses were reframed as a learning experience for better overcoming later obstacles. The head coach might say after a tough loss: ‘Don’t worry about that fight, man. It doesn’t matter that you lost. Next time you get hit like that, you ain’t even gonna blink’.

Other realities can be mobilized as a practical technique for constraining risk, uncertainty, and consequence. Anne Irwin’s (2005) work on military drills, for example, demonstrates the importance of framing some situations as not-quite-real where engagement in the ‘real thing’ is likely to involve grievous injury or death. Thus soldiers practice strategic plans using ‘dummy rounds’, pen and paper battle scenarios, and immersive gaming programs that often combine virtual and physical modalities. The lack of live round ammunition training, of course, can lead to later problems of emotional panic during live round fire fights, which suggests that there can be and often are blowback consequences to using too little reality in the simulated scenario.

Surgical training using simulators and even ‘smart mannequins,’ studied nicely by Prentice (2005, 2007) and Johnson (2004), provide empirical examples of the use of hybridized realities. For example, a clinical professor of surgery discussed his motivation for building a surgical simulator as a response to the trauma of being unable to save a victim of an automobile accident:

I’ll never forget that scene ... It really affected me. I thought, if I had had a model to practice that procedure on; if I could learn how to do an operation that poses a high mortality risk, one I may never see until I’m called to do it at 3 p.m. on a Tuesday; if I can find a way to allow people to learn surgery technique quickly and efficiently, it could save lives. (Quoted in Baker, 2002)

A key shortcoming of many virtual surgical simulators has been the challenge of reproducing an appropriate sensitivity to the tactile feel required to distinguish between different forms of live body tissue. For most of the 20th century, this was done by lengthy apprenticeship with master surgeons and vivisection on cadavers (older examples of other realities put to practical use). Surgical simulators designed in the last decade represent an attempt to streamline this process, and close the orchestrated gap between practice and life-saving surgery, with synthetic organs that look, respond and even smell like living tissue.

Industry has heavily invested in simulation over the last few decades. Focusing on an industry that has come to rely on simulation techniques, Paul Leonardi’s (2010) work documents the confluence of economic, policy, and technical factors that have moved the automobile industry to mobilize other realities in safety engineering. Beginning in the 1980s and reaching a fever pitch in the aftermath of the 2009 global financial crisis, automobile manufacturers have sought ways to lower costs. Automobile manufacturers have shifted successively from physical road tests to closed laboratory evaluation, and now toward math-based simulation, commonly referred to in the industry as ‘road to lab to math.’ As one executive stated in Leonardi’s study:

Road to lab to math is basically the idea that you want to be as advanced on the evolutionary scale of engineering as possible ... Math is much more cost effective because you don’t have to

build pre-production vehicles and then waste them ... We have to live and breathe math. When we do that, we can pass the savings on to the consumer. (2010: 244)

This trajectory from 'road to lab to math,' interestingly enough, flips the trajectory from that which I observed at the boxing gym. That is, 'air to leather to flesh' represented a progression toward increasingly complex analog connectivity, whereas automobile engineering represents an opposite trajectory. Surgical simulators are an intermediate case on this dimension, in which digital and computer modality enables greater transposability and low-risk repetitions, yet physical elements remain essential to the production of proper tactile and olfactory knowledge.

## **Mobilizing Other Realities for Epistemic Knowledge**

Now I turn to a related but distinct way that other realities are mobilized in practical action. Other realities are a typical strategy used to gain access to new forms of knowledge. I discuss two empirical cases. First and most obvious is scientific experimentation. The second involves a form of experimentalism in the form of unbuilt architecture and unrealized art.

What sort of work do other realities do within science, the quintessential institution for arriving at the truth of the matter? The answer, especially for the experimental sciences, is just about all of it. That is, the entire institution of the laboratory experiment is based on the principle that methodological design and scientific instrumentation can be mobilized to capture, isolate, and modify the complexity of naturally occurring realities. Bruno Latour's empirical work has documented both the interpretive and material tacking back and forth between an artificial lab made essential to nature, and a world-weary nature that can only be seen with the techniques of the artificial. In this practical metaphysics there is a simultaneous mobilization of natural artifice and constructed nature.

Consider Latour's historical analysis of Louis Pasteur's attempt to cultivate the anthrax bacillus. Pasteur first moves his lab to a farm to identify strains of the bacteria killing cattle. His second move is to take the dormant spores back to his academic lab in Paris in order to coax the bacteria into reproducing at a much higher rate than they could in the forest and on the farms:

At this point Pasteur ... is the master of one technique of farming that no farmer knows, microbe farming. This is enough to do what no farmer could ever have done: grow the bacillus in isolation and in such a large quantity that, although invisible, it becomes visible. Here again we have, because of laboratory practice, a variation of scale: outside in the 'real' world ... anthrax bacilli are mixed with millions of other organisms with which they are in a constant state of competition ... thanks to Pasteur's methods of culture it is freed from all competitors and so grows exponentially ... the invisible micro-organism is made visible; the until now uninteresting scientist in his lab can talk with more authority about the anthrax bacillus than veterinarians ever have before. (Latour, 1999: 260)

Pasteur's translation of the everyday wilds of naturally occurring phenomena into a world-weary lab, and then diffusion of his lab procedures throughout much of France, creates, in Latour's language, a routine displacement of the real with the once but no

longer artificial. That is, what begins as the controlled and marginal reality of the laboratory is made central and core to the reality of French cattle farms. Latour states,

He can do inside his laboratory what everyone tries to do outside but, where everyone fails because the scale is too large, Pasteur succeeds because he works on a small scale ... The translation is now the following: 'If you wish to understand ... epidemics, you have one place to go, Pasteur's laboratory, and one science to learn that will soon replace yours: microbiology.' (1999: 262)

It is precisely through the experiment's ability to mobilize other realities that have practical effects on bacterial growth that the laboratory procedures displace the once paramount reality of the farm and the forest. Only after this inversion takes place can the ensuing reality of inoculated French farm animals be established across a widening network of practiced articulations.

Much has been written along similar lines about experiment in the field of particle physics (Pickering, 1984; Traweek, 1988). The entire research field hinges on an investment in producing explicitly artificial worlds that smash atoms together at high velocity. Particle accelerators produce other realities in order to better 'intervene', to use the term of Karin Knorr Cetina (1992), into aspects of the physical cosmos. The microcosmos of the collider is simultaneously understood as separate *and* constitutive of this externalized physical reality, much as recent performative studies of finance treat models as engines of economic coordination rather than cameras that reflect and predict economic behavior (MacKenzie, 2006).

The mobilization of other realities through the choreography of experimental conditions is, obviously enough, nothing new. Latour and STS scholars remind us just how central this practice of bracketing one reality in order to rebuild another is to the positivist project of sorting objects into different scientific and ontological categories (see especially Law and Lien, 2013). More contemporary than the experimentalist tradition, simulation science has become a prominent component of contemporary technoscience. Simulation techniques yield access to phenomena that prove difficult or reluctant to enroll in direct observation and experiment (Galison, 1997). The use of simulation procedures have produced new professional cleavages within scientific fields, as seen in the work of both Sundberg (2006, 2007) and Lahsen (2005) on the rift between simulationists and field observers in climate science research fields. Simulations are quite similar to experiment but with a few key differences (for a more elaborate discussion of their epistemological differences, see Winsberg, 2010). Both experiment and simulation compress the external world into an artificial microcosmos amenable to public demonstration (Rosental, 2013). Relevance of the scientific artifact relies on the mobilization of convincing demonstrations of a 'fit' between internalized and externalized realities. Simulations attempt to smuggle external complexity into the representational model by playing with a broader array of other realities than can the experimental idiom. This is typically done in one of two ways. First, simulation systems tend to focus on how processes emerge from system dynamics rather than, as with experiment, by isolating factors amenable to causal explanation. That is, simulations tend to be process-based rather than outcome-based, and as such rely on visual representation of moving parts and flowing processes as much as they

do on conformity to known evidence. They are ‘models in action’. Second, computational simulations ramp up the ability quickly and cheaply to use trial-and-error iteration in order to test out multiple explanatory parameters or theoretical frameworks.

Consider, for example, the following advocacy argument from a bench scientists working at the intersection of experiment and simulation techniques in plasma science:

Simulations, though dealing with imperfect models or solutions, can have near perfect diagnostics and are often cheaper and faster than corresponding experiments. They offer a high degree of flexibility; numerical experiments can be performed by turning particular terms on or off, isolating particular physical effects, or by varying input parameters, boundary or initial conditions. On the other hand, while experiments are performed on a ‘perfect’ model, measurements of that reality are highly incomplete and imperfect. Parameters can be varied only over a limited range and particular physical effects are difficult to isolate. (Greenwald, 2004: 2)

It is from a position of the relative strengths of each methodological idiom (the experiment identifying real world correlates, the simulation in making cheap and easy predictions), that numerous practitioners argue for the ‘co-development’ of computational and physical experimentation.

Interestingly, when simulations combine physical and computational techniques, they can enable humans to produce an extra-sensory experience that defies innate biophysical limitations to perception. Consider how Vertesi (2014) describes the embodied cognition necessary for operators of the Mars Rover Program to think, touch, feel, and explore like a rover would on the Martian landscape. They quite literally comport their physical body so that, as one states, ‘my body is always the rover’, while operating the rover from Earth. This example also suggests how epistemic techniques like experiment, simulation, as well as museum collections, databases, and archives, can all serve as ‘trading zones’ (Galison, 1996) or ‘boundary objects’ (Leigh Star, 2010) that coordinate action among different groups without a strong requirement of consensus. That is, they contribute to the coordination of action across heterogeneous and sometimes deeply fragmented fields of practice (Law, 1987). In Star and Griesemer (1989), for example, the various specimens at the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology are enrolled into the activities of amateur collectors, professional researchers, museum administrators, and preservationists, each of whom have totally divergent views on the objects themselves and what ought to be done with them.

In addition to the production of science, other realities can also be mobilized for experimentation in many other fields as well. Take the upturn in popularity of ‘unbuilt architecture.’ The genre was first institutionalized in 1953 when the editors of *Progressive Architecture* magazine established an award for noteworthy, commissioned, but ultimately unbuilt projects. The goal was to highlight up-and-coming designers as well as provide a bellwether for emerging trends in architectural design. More recently, a small cottage industry has produced additional awards at the local and national levels, a number of beautifully illustrated coffee table books, and various exhibitions. While the designs provide beauty for casual browsing, and they are surely used in this way, these collections also get mobilized for more instrumental arrays of social use. Take a collection entitled

*Unbuilt Masterworks of the 21st Century*, which states that ‘this collection of unbuilt masterworks is a library of brilliant and challenging ideas, all of which are totally viable. And so, the question must be why didn’t these projects get built?’ (Jones, 2009: 8). Answers include financial obstacles, a lack of planning, personality clashes, overly restrictive planning dictates, and government intervention. In nearly all cases, the architect is portrayed as the innocent victim of forces beyond his or her control: ‘The architect is the punch bag in the midst of financial, political, and regulatory sparring’ (Jones, 2009: 9). This does, however, produce a teleology in which ‘designers strive to reach greater metaphorical heights on their next competition or commission’ (Jones, 2009: 9). The compendium of unrealized projects thus serves as a kind of resource for a lay sociology of failure, a genre for thinking about the present condition as a strangling of the diverse distribution of the boundless past. It also serves to inspire future experimentation. Similar in tone is *Never Built Los Angeles*, which provides a funeral-themed imaginary of what Los Angeles could have been were it not for

... [a] reluctant city whose institutions, citizens, politics, and infrastructure, not to mention its sheer size, have often undermined inspired urban schemes. The result: an enormous, 100-year backlog of unbuilt proposals ... a few of these, and certainly all of them combined, would have transformed both the reality and the collective perception of the metropolis. Perhaps Los Angeles’s befuddling illegibility would have yielded to a comprehensible, city-like clarity. (Goldin and Lubell, 2013: 20)

The authors then articulate what the collection of unbuilt projects provides for our current state of affairs:

The stories surrounding these projects tell us what it is about Los Angeles that causes bold architectural efforts to founder. They also shed light on the frustrations of building in general, in which turning dreams into reality requires an almost impossible mixture of civic will, financial luck, and boundless perseverance. Rising out of this narrative of thwarted goals is a catalogue of virtuoso drawings and renderings that, on a visceral level, ignite the imagination, painting an unmistakable picture of a city that might have been – and still could be. (p. 22)

The text points to four ways that other realities get mobilized in practical action within architecture. First, unbuilt plans provide the empirical substrate for a kind of lay sociology of failure. Architects and designers play the role of reluctant heroes. Second, they serve as a kind of distributed funeral rite for expressing a sense of shared loss over once obtainable but now unbuilt futures. Third, as discussed above, these collections serve to ‘ignite the imagination’ with renewed hope for possible futures. Finally, and not unlike Pasteur’s bacteria farming, collections and exhibits of unbuilt projects attempt to raise public consciousness around the infrastructure needed to sustain a vibrant design and artistic ecosystem.

Taking their cue from unbuilt architecture, networks of artists have also sought to highlight unrealized artworks as a way to draw attention to the broader infrastructure and unpaid labor that goes into their artistic production. The mission statement of the Agency of Unrealized Projects, which provides a public database of unrealized art projects, states their goal as such:

Unlike unrealized architectural projects, which are frequently exhibited and circulated, unrealized artworks tend to remain unnoticed or little known. But perhaps there is another form of artistic agency in the partial expression, the incomplete idea, the projection of a mere intention? Agency of Unrealized Projects (AUP) seeks to document and display these works. Whether censored, forgotten, postponed, impossible, or rejected, unrealized projects form a unique testament to the speculative power of non-action.<sup>1</sup>

According to founders Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidolke, the agency and its focus on unrealized projects is largely a response to the economic dynamics in the financing of the arts since the global recession of 2009.<sup>2</sup> While the trade in artistic objects has not appreciably declined, general public support for artistic work has. Thus the unrealized arts project is one tactic for drawing attention to the full array of artistic labor that requires support, turning attention away from the consumable art object itself. In this way, then, this casting of attention toward other realities that exist only as plans rather than as consumable items, is oriented to engendering public awareness around what is required to create a prolific arts community.

## **Mobilizing Other Realities for Autotelic and Transcendent Experience**

Finally, I turn to the practical use of other realities in the production of autotelic, pleasurable, and, in some cases at least, transcendent social experience. What holds these practical uses of other realities together are those activities that explicitly bracket a taken-for-granted reality in order to produce alternative pleasurable experiences for their own sake, not for some other end like constraining risk or producing knowledge. The most common empirical examples are immersive play, historical reenactments (Hall 2015), and interactive fantasy games, such as video gaming and other forms of shared fantasy either online or in role-playing games. Since these examples are obvious, I will not describe them at any length here.

Consider also technological mediations of everyday experience. Augmented reality technologies are most widely available as apps on smartphones and other mobile computing devices, but are also packaged as 'smart glasses'. Google announced in early 2014 that they have partnered with the multi-national pharmaceutical giant Novartis to produce 'smart contacts' with the explicit and notably altruistic motive of helping diabetes patients better monitor their glucose levels by monitoring the output of their tear ducts. A patent for the technology was granted in the spring of 2015. A technology like this seeks directly to 'enhance' or 'augment' perceptual experience and is thus deeply bound up in the attempt to infiltrate subjectivity and the senses with advertising and marketing activities. They contribute to this consumerization of experience in a particular sort of way, however, that explicitly plays with oscillations between forms of reality. Augmented realities directly interface with the human perceptual senses via virtual and digital inputs. One can look at a street scene using a phone or eyewear and see both the street (filtered by the onboard camera), along with layered directions to the nearest subway, reviews of nearby restaurants, details about real estate for sale or rent, Flickr or Instagram images recently taken in the area, alerts that people on your Twitter account are nearby, the

location of celestial bodies, and even the coordinates of recent crimes. Ghostly reminders of the recent past, and ephemeral projections of both the present and possible futures, are radically compressed into a virtual/analog re-representation of the current moment.

As these technologies become more widespread, their quality as an 'other reality' bracketed from the paramount reality of everyday interaction will likely become less and less recognized, just as we rarely notice that prescription glasses act as an 'enhancement' to our natural visual field. As Haraway noted three decades ago, we are all already cyborgs (Haraway, 1985). As these mediations become harder to detect, it will become increasingly unclear which of the many possible realities the people around us are engaging in. Professors in tech-enabled college classrooms complain about students being too easily distracted by Facebook now, but just wait until students are wearing imperceptible smart contacts.

Other kinds of technological mediations have a similar effect of blurring fantasy with the taken-for-granted experience of face-to-face interaction in a way that is used to enhance an experiential modality. For example, I studied an artificial intelligence (AI) lab that produced an automated newscast based on the top news stories of the day (Hoffman, 2009, 2014). The system uses a variety of pattern matching, categorization, and AI-based search techniques to match textual content with pictures and video, all compiled in real time. This system, called YourNews, also narrowcast content specifically tailored to an individual viewer by tracking user 'clicks' on news stories over time. One of the more unique ways that the designers sought to hook in an audience to these virtual newscasts was by playfully subverting the conventional structure of traditional and human-embodied newscasts. The host of YourNews was Alex Vance, a popular avatar from the video game *Half-Life*. In some of the programs compiled by YourNews, Vance is distracted from telling the news by invading space zombies, a bit of light-hearted whimsy. Interestingly, in one newscast I watched in real time, this stock scenario followed immediately after the system displayed a grisly image of a genocide victim in Darfur. While this was not a deliberate juxtaposition on the part of the designers (the system itself determines the progression of the images and content displayed in real time), it does demonstrate a kind of callous randomness that is inherent to amoral classification technologies.

## Conclusion

My analysis of the practical use of other realities contributes to an anti-essentialist project of documenting the performance of multiple ontologies. Simulation techniques and technologies, scientific experiments, collections, databases, archives, and technological mediations like augmented reality, all belong to the practical uses of other realities. If we push this analysis just a bit further, we might even consider the entire institution of the school classroom as an example of how other realities can come to constitute and reconstitute everyday life. The growing pedagogical emphasis on service learning, for example, serves to highlight the ephemeral in the modern classroom's ontological status. Service learning attempts better to connect classroom curricula with 'real world' experiences. There is a phenomenological reality to classroom interaction and an indexing of a 'really real' strip of interactions that exist just beyond the reach of the classroom reality. Service learning, apprenticeship, and even the infrastructure of internship, so prevalent among college undergraduates and recent graduates over the last decade, all serve to transpose the realities conveyed during classroom education to the wild ontologies that lay just beyond.

If we recognize empirical cases of other realities not as deviations from a paramount reality but as a mundane feature of reality construction itself, then documenting processes of what Berger and Luckmann call 'transposition' moves to the very analytic heart of the social construction of reality. The emphasis on multiple and immanently practical ontic work offers a common locus for reality claiming across seemingly distant social locations. By examining how individuals and groups routinely oscillate between the different levels of reality, we gain a clearer focus on the intricate performances and the material infrastructures mobilized to construct everyday life *as well as* rarified ideas. We are able to see that there is not now, nor was there ever, anything irreducibly substantive in the separation between the rarified ideas of philosophers and the activity of the everyday woman on the street. All social actors frame some situations as more or less real than others, and then derive the behavioral cues that constitute worlds anew. Perhaps we can now come full circle from the methodological summons of *SCOR*, which so impressively and necessarily broke from rarified ideas to everyday practical action. It would seem that we might now recognize how and why the everyday woman on the street must regularly think big while the eminent scholar must routinely think small.

On a few occasions, Berger and Luckmann depart from the fairly pokerfaced prose of *SCOR* to strike a populist note like this. In the section on 'society as objective reality,' for example, they write with passion that:

All social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse. (1966: 103)

This suggests that, in point of fact, the paramount reality that we take for granted is itself lost in the fabricated dream of stability and coherence. Legitimation serves to hide an always-repressed precariousness in our shared realities. And indeed, it is certainly the case that subjective realities can and are the object of coercive manipulation. Zanjoc's (1980) social psychological experiments on preference bias provide clear examples for how unconscious suggestion profoundly shapes product choice without an actor's active inference. Just as *SCOR* was not a libertarian tract arguing for free choice of alternative realities of any individual's making, this paper should not be understood as a latent attempt to minimize the power of consumerism, capitalism, or institutional domination. My argument does imply, however, that we get a bit analytically lazy when we treat these processes as if they are inevitable or simply an expression of false consciousness.

We do not get to reinvent the rules every time we enter the game. It is also easier to go along with the program so long as the program keeps you relatively safe, warm, and well-fed. There is, however, an interstitial zone of realities that we all enter and leave as a matter of course. Formal rites and transition ceremonies, like Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, or funerals, make the beginnings and endings of our reality oscillations readily apparent. As many of the ethnomethodologists have pointed out, daily life consists of an intricate if hidden tapestry of informal rituals that involve parallel openings and closings that we rarely notice. They are present, but only when we look closely. Similarly, our routine oscillations between multiple zones of reality typically go unnoticed and unnoted. They do not induce 'anomic terror'. They rarely make obvious that 'all societies are constructions in the face of chaos'.

What they do, instead, is offer a bit of slack within our pre-programmed lives. Indeed, we live in social situations that are ephemeral, transitory, and playful just as much, if not more, than we do with the full weight of the world pressing down upon our shoulders. Other realities provide an opportunity to incorporate traces of that play, for good and for evil, into our all-too-serious existence.

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### Notes

1. This mission statement is available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/program/a-call-for-unrealized-projects-3/> (accessed 28 October 2015).
2. See their online interview on Art & Parallel Economics, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zI-ZghD8rjw> (accessed 28 October 2015).

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