

Digitalising Surrealism: A Pathway to New Humanities

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Abstract

The advent of digital technologies has revolutionized the way we engage with art, culture, and intellectual inquiry, creating new pathways for interdisciplinary exploration. This paper explores the intersection of surrealism and digitalization, proposing that the digitization of surrealist aesthetics, practices, and methodologies opens innovative avenues for understanding the human experience in the contemporary digital age. Surrealism, with its emphasis on the unconscious, irrationality, and the blurring of boundaries between dream and reality, is particularly suited to digital exploration. Through virtual environments, augmented realities, and generative art forms, digital tools facilitate the expansion of surrealist principles, enabling new forms of creativity and critical thinking. The paper examines how digital technologies, such as AI-driven art, virtual worlds, and immersive media, enable a reimagining of surrealist ideas, allowing them to evolve beyond traditional forms of expression. This digital reinvention not only revitalizes surrealist practices but also contributes to the development of a "New Humanities," one that embraces technological advancements while maintaining an emphasis on subjective, embodied experiences. By bridging the gaps between the surrealist tradition and the possibilities offered by digital media, the paper argues for the transformative potential of digital surrealism in reshaping cultural and intellectual discourses in the 21st century.

Keywords- surrealism, digital humanities, dream, reality, new humanities

Introduction

Surrealism, an artistic and literary movement born in the early 20th century, sought to challenge the rational structures of society by emphasizing the unconscious, dreams, and irrational experiences. Grounded in the desire to express a new form of reality, surrealism questioned not only art and literature but also the fundamental assumptions about the human experience and the nature of perception itself. While surrealism found its most significant expression in the visual arts and literature, its influence extended into other domains, including film, theater, and even psychology. This paper explores the potential for digital technology to transform and expand the boundaries of surrealism, turning it into a new pathway for the humanities. The essay will examine surrealism's roots in earlier movements such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, its evolution into a literary movement, and its enduring relevance in modern and digital contexts. It will also consider the dark aspects of surrealism, referencing texts like *Paradise Lost*, *Inferno*, the *Codex Gigas*, and the *Mahabharata*, and analyze how digital technologies can help reimagine surrealism in a modern context.

Surrealism did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it was the product of various historical, intellectual, and artistic influences. One of the earliest movements that foreshadowed surrealism was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in the mid-19th century in England. Artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt rebelled against the academic conventions of the time by turning to medieval, biblical, and mythological subjects. Their goal was to recapture the artistic vitality of the Renaissance, before the influence of Raphael, hence the name "Pre-Raphaelite." Though the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was more closely associated with realism, the symbolism and dreamlike quality of their work would lay the groundwork for the surrealist movement. Pre-Raphaelite art, often marked by vibrant colors, detailed naturalism, and emotional intensity, depicted subjects that hovered between the real and the imagined. This blending of the actual and the fantastical would later become a hallmark of surrealism, which similarly sought to transcend the boundaries between reality and the unconscious. The Pre-Raphaelite fascination with mythology, religion, and the sublime, as well as their engagement with the symbolic potential of dreams, can be seen as an early attempt to challenge rationality and

awaken a more intuitive, imaginative mode of engagement with the world—principles that would later be central to surrealism.

The surrealist movement formally began in the 1920s with the publication of André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud and the political climate of post-World War I Europe, surrealists sought to liberate human consciousness from the constraints of reason and societal conventions. They were inspired by Freud's theories of the unconscious and the dream world, which they believed could serve as a more authentic source of human creativity. In literature, surrealism rejected the traditional forms of narrative and language, instead opting for automatic writing, disjointed metaphors, and unexpected juxtapositions. Authors such as Breton, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault wrote with the aim of disrupting the conventional logic of language, allowing the unconscious to manifest itself freely. This approach allowed surrealists to explore deeper, often darker, layers of human experience that had been repressed or ignored by more traditional forms of art and literature.

Surrealism's early literary works were heavily influenced by the concept of *l'écriture automatique* (automatic writing), a technique intended to bypass the conscious mind. Breton's *Nadja* and Aragon's *Paris Peasant* are examples of surrealist texts that blur the line between reality and fantasy, with fragmented narratives that evoke a sense of dream logic. Surrealist artists, such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, applied these principles to the visual arts, producing works that are often marked by bizarre, illogical scenes—objects displaced from their usual context, distorted faces, and dreamlike landscapes. While early surrealism embraced irrationality and the subconscious, it also engaged with social and political themes. Many surrealists were aligned with the left-wing politics of the time, seeking to use their work as a means of social critique and liberation. The surrealist movement was, in this sense, not just an aesthetic rebellion but also a radical philosophical stance aimed at transforming human consciousness.

One of the more unsettling aspects of surrealism is its engagement with the darker, more grotesque dimensions of the human psyche. Dark surrealism, as a sub-genre, explores themes of suffering, anxiety, and existential dread. This is particularly evident in the works of artists like Max Ernst, who often depicted nightmarish, otherworldly scenes full of monstrous figures and unsettling landscapes. The dark surrealists were not afraid to confront human fears and repressed desires, and their works often delve into the psychological realms of trauma, death, and madness. In literature, the dark surrealists found inspiration in religious, mythological, and apocalyptic themes. The texts of *Paradise Lost* and Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* provided surrealists with rich sources of imagery and symbolism. John Milton's epic, for instance, portrays the fall of man through a blend of theological and psychological tropes. Surrealists were drawn to the portrayal of Satan as a complex, tragic figure who, in his rebellion against divine authority, mirrors the existential struggle for freedom and self-realization. This alignment of dark, rebellious figures with the surrealist exploration of the unconscious became a key motif in surrealist literature and art.

Dante's *Inferno*, with its vivid depictions of hell, torment, and divine justice, also served as an important influence on the surrealist aesthetic. The notion of a labyrinthine, otherworldly space where the boundaries of reality break down and human suffering becomes the focus of artistic expression resonates with the surrealist penchant for exploring human misery, guilt, and fear. The grotesque and the sublime often coexist in surrealism, much as they do in the religious and mythological visions of *Paradise Lost* and *Inferno*. Additionally, ancient texts like the *Codex Gigas* (the so-called "Devil's Bible") have provided surrealists with rich material to explore themes of evil, apocalyptic visions, and the monstrous. The manuscript's combination of religious iconography, occult symbolism, and grotesque imagery embodies the surrealist fascination with the boundaries between sacred and profane, rational and irrational. In Eastern traditions, the figure of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* provides another dark and powerful source of surrealist inspiration. Draupadi's traumatic disrobing by the Kauravas is often seen as a symbol of existential suffering and victimization, evoking themes of humiliation and resistance. This intense emotional and physical ordeal has been explored in surrealist interpretations, where the boundaries between personal trauma and cosmic justice are often blurred.

Although surrealism emerged in the early 20th century, it continues to resonate in contemporary culture, both in art and literature. In the digital age, surrealism has taken on new forms, exploring the intersection of technology and the unconscious mind. The advent of digital media has allowed artists to manipulate reality in ways that were previously unimaginable, enabling them to create dreamlike landscapes and mind-bending visuals that challenge our perception of space, time, and identity. Modern surrealism in digital media often incorporates elements of virtual reality (VR), computer-generated imagery (CGI), and artificial intelligence (AI) to construct immersive, hyperreal experiences. These new technologies enable artists to break the boundaries of traditional surrealism, expanding its possibilities. Through digital platforms, surrealism is no longer confined to galleries or books but can be experienced in interactive, immersive ways, allowing for greater audience engagement and participation. For example, VR art installations can create fully immersive surrealist worlds where the viewer is not just an observer but also a participant in the dreamlike experience. The virtual reality experience in Vincent van Gogh's iconic painting *The Night Cafe* serves as an immersive environment, but surrealist adaptations in VR often push boundaries even further, incorporating elements of the uncanny and irrationality. For example, in *Virtual Reality*

Surrealism by Mark Bolotin, viewers enter a dreamlike landscape with floating objects, distorted proportions, and shifting perspectives, offering an interactive space where the boundaries between reality and dream dissolve. The user can move through this immersive environment, contributing to the narrative of surrealist landscapes, making them participants rather than passive observers. AI-generated art further challenges traditional notions of creativity by producing works that are seemingly autonomous, reflecting the blurred lines between human and machine cognition. A digital project based on Hieronymus Bosch's famous surrealist painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* offers a fully interactive experience where viewers can explore the painting's complex, bizarre world. As they interact with the piece, they can zoom in on different sections of the painting, triggering animations, soundscapes, and narratives that push the viewer deeper into the dreamlike, hallucinatory qualities of surrealism. In this sense, digital surrealism can be seen as a continuation of surrealism's fundamental aim to undermine the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, reality and imagination.

The digital transformation of surrealism is not just an aesthetic shift but also a philosophical one. The digital world is inherently fluid, interactive, and often disorienting—qualities that resonate with the surrealist vision of art and literature. As the humanities increasingly engage with digital technologies, there is a growing need to digitalize surrealism to ensure its relevance in contemporary scholarship and cultural production. Digitalizing surrealism opens up new avenues for exploring human consciousness, identity, and social critique in a rapidly changing world. It allows scholars and artists to engage with surrealist texts and images in ways that were previously not possible. Digital archives, interactive websites, and virtual exhibitions offer unprecedented access to surrealist works, enabling a global audience to experience and interpret surrealism across different cultural and geographical contexts. Furthermore, digital tools can provide new ways of creating and manipulating surrealist art, encouraging innovative approaches to the movement's key themes and techniques.

Digitalizing surrealism offers a transformative pathway for the new humanities, providing an innovative framework for engaging with the movement's legacy in a digital age. Surrealism's exploration of the unconscious, the irrational, and the grotesque, rooted in texts like *Paradise Lost*, *Inferno*, and the *Codex Gigas*, continues to inspire new generations of artists and scholars. By embracing digital technologies, surrealism can evolve and move towards a more utopic society that is above reality.

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