

Telepresence is action over distance. Telepresence does not invent new worlds; it acts within the existing one. In this way, it is far more powerful than virtual reality.

To manipulate a virtual world is one thing, however total the ramifications. To manipulate reality is another.

Intervening in the fabric of reality, telepresence loosens the weave. A webcast can give the feeling of being present, hundreds or thousands of miles away. You watch your conference table creep through the television screens, mirroring your chamber to exacting effect. Your co-workers enter the mirror, and the *trompe l'oeil* is complete.

Intervening in the fabric of ontology, telepresence raises a doubt: what now, beyond technology, can provide verification of one's presence?

I am telepresent; therefore, I am present. And so, to be present, the world must become more telepresent.

In the Songdo International Business District, we see a model of this process. Land has been conjured in the waters off South Korea to build the first great cosmopolis of the 21st Century, able to be scaled and fit to any willing nation in the world.

Speculatively material and materially speculative, Songdo makes a claim on the future: cities will be wired from the cloud in. The project is less the dream of urbanists and architects than real-estate developers and technology infrastructure companies like Cisco, which is implementing TelePresence services in several of the offices and homes.

Songdo addresses you like a benevolent patriarch, grown wise on information. And indeed, when your dwelling is smarter than you, knows more about your data (and thus possibly you), why shouldn't it take the reins?

If this model becomes the developer's rule, then we will soon move between Songdos as across an ever-flattening abyss: always arriving at the place we have just left. Telepresence, in this light, does more than trouble ontology: it replaces presence wholesale. And as presence sinks beneath new cloudly worlds, so may our commitments to territorial hosts.

Technology is the perpetual promise of our alleviation, however ill-conceived the means. While rending us from a primary category of being, it can also free us from the determinations of that category. We are no longer burdened by presence, yet left with forms of experience inassimilable to telepresence. How can these residual forms be put to use?

I am writing from the 11th floor of a hotel in Songdo, looking out onto Central Park. My consumer-grade Cisco TelePresence camera is documenting the view, feeding video footage into my laptop.

The city is making a self-portrait. I am letting the camera do the work. The unit promises accurate reproduction, though delivers something far different: data indexed through glitch and lapse. But in a place built of steel and tech, these seeming errors may be accuracy manifest.

Here, then, are two portraits—two forms for view. They were made in tandem, they shared time and space, but in other respects, they are worlds apart.