STORIES THAT BECOME US: HYPERREALITY AND STORYTELLING IN 21ST CENTURY SOCIAL MEDIA PHENOMENA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes Jean Baudrillard's theory of the orders of simulacra and puts forth a fourth order made possible by the surge of social media. This possibility of the fourth order is actualized through the power of storytelling and the history of storytelling is also explored to unveil the source of this power. The ideas of the three literary critics from different eras who have put forward varying ideas about what makes a story powerful, Aristotle, Roland Barthes, and Joseph Campbell, are then analyzed and used as frameworks for the social media case studies. Social media is reimagined as the ultimate tool of hyperreal storytelling, completely eradicating the line between real and unreal. This work follows a sincere fascination with the question of what constitutes real in an age where humans construct novel realities by assuming authorship of their own narratives through social media. Identifying several cases where people connected and responded to make-believe stories in twenty-first century more than what would be called hard facts produced by mass media in the twentieth century, the thesis uses social media case studies such as Lil Miquela and Dogecoin to underline the apathy towards the disappearance of the real. The absence of the real has effectively been replaced with stories, and only the most powerful stories have become the new realities, thus making the role of storytelling more crucial than it has ever been.

ÖZET

DÖNÜŞTÜĞÜMÜZ HİKAYELER: 21. YÜZYIL SOSYAL MEDYA OLGULARINDA HİPERGERÇEKLİK VE HİKAYE ANLATICILIĞI

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Anahtar Kelimeler: sosyal medya, hikaye anlatıcılığı, simülakr, Jean Baudrillard, hipergerçeklik

Bu tez, Jean Baudrillard'ın simülakrların düzenleri teorisini analiz eder ve sosyal medyanın yükselişinin mümkün kıldığı dördüncü bir düzeni ortaya koyar. Dördüncü simülakr düzeninin varlığı hikaye anlatıcılığının gücü ile temellendirilir ve bu gücün kaynağını anlamak için hikaye anlatıcılığının tarihi araştırılır. Bir hikayeyi neyin güçlü kıldığı konusunda farklı fikirler ortaya koyan farklı dönemlerden üç edebiyat eleştirmeninin, Aristoteles, Roland Barthes ve Joseph Campbell'ın, fikirleri, sosyal medya vaka incelemeleri için bir çerçeve olarak kullanılmıştır. Sosyal medya, gerçek ve gerçek olmayan arasındaki çizgiyi tamamen ortadan kaldıran, hipergerçek hikaye anlatımının nihai aracı olarak yeniden konumlandırılmıştır. Bu çalışma, insanların sosyal medya aracılığıyla kendi anlatılarının yazarlığını üstlenerek yeni gerçeklikler inşa ettiği bir çağda neyin gerçek olduğu sorusunun peşinden gider. İnsanların 20. yüzyılda kitle iletişim araçları tarafından üretilen ve somut gerçekler olarak adlandırılanlardan daha fazla 21. yüzyılın kurmaca hikayeleriyle bağlantı kurması ve bunları gerçek kabul etmesinin sebeplerini analiz eden tez, Lil Miquela ve Dogecoin gibi vakaları inceleyerek gerçeğin yok oluşuna duyulan kayıtsızlığın altını çizer. Gerçeğin yokluğunun yerine hikayeler geçmiştir, ve yalnızca en güçlü hikayeler bu yeni gerçekliğe dönüşmüştür. Böylece, hikaye anlatıcılığının rolü bugüne kadar hiç olmadığı kadar önemli hale gelmiştir.

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For Doğukan,
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1. INTRODUCTION

Truth isn't truth.
- Rudolph W. Giuliani, Donald Trump's lawyer

There is a famous quote that has been around for some time, which goes, "The media represents world that is more real than reality that we can experience. People lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. They also begin to engage with the fantasy without realizing what it really is. They seek happiness and fulfilment through the simulacra of reality, e.g. media and avoid the contact/interaction with the real world," and it is attributed to Baudrillard. As Baudrillardian as it sounds, this quote has never once been uttered by Baudrillard, and it does not appear in any of his works. Ironically, the quote from Ecclesiastes with which Baudrillard begins one of his flagship books, Simulacra and Simulation, which goes, "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true," (1994, 1) is not taken from Ecclesiastes either. James Morris (2020, 2) ties this to Baudrillard's visionariness, saying, "Considering the current debates about partisanship and pure lies 'going viral' in new media, from its opening sentence Baudrillard's 1981[1] work appears every bit as relevant today as it was nearly 40 years ago, or maybe even more so after recent events." This playful display of the absence of the real encapsulates Baudrillardian thought in a simple, genius manner. If you say something believably enough, there is no reason why it cannot become real. Does it matter if that quote is really Baudrillard's, if many years after his death, it is one of the most loved quotes attributed to him? Baudrillard would say no.

This thesis uses Baudrillard's works as theoretical framework, mainly his book Simulacra and Simulation. In the second chapter of this thesis, Baudrillardian theory is laid out from today's perspective. Following the three orders of simulacra he lays out in this work, a lot has changed in the world and in the way we perceive the media. Baudrillard claims

[1] Simulacra and Simulation was initially published in 1981, but it took 13 years for it to be translated into English.

that the real starts to slowly disappear as we begin to attempt representing it, going back to the Renaissance era to exemplify the first order of simulacra. In the second order, the Industrial Revolution leads to mechanical reproduction and mass reproduction, where the original disappears but the copies are still based off each other, and thus they are real – at least a distorted version of the real. In the third order of simulacra, however, real is replaced by the hyperreal, which masks the absence of the real. A good example of this from the past decade is Donald Trump's presidential campaign, where his "promise to 'Make America Great Again'" is "a reference to a non-existent past golden era that is pure simulacrum" (Richmond and Porpora 2019, 2018). In this thesis, a fourth order of simulacra triggered by the overwhelmingly common use of social media is outlined. This order is not a rejection of but a continuation of the third order, with most of its aspects, like the hyperreal, still remaining. However, the public attitude has drastically changed towards the hyperreal thanks to social media replacing the media.

In the third chapter of this thesis, hyperreality and storytelling in the age of social media are explored in depth. Social media offers something that the media forty years ago did not: a chance to not only answer but also create the news. In contrast with our inability to respond with the media, social media is built on our ability to do so. It is not just news that we can create, but events and identities, too. If one chooses to hide behind a wall of Instagram filters and post quotes about Baudrillard every day on their social network pages, that person can easily pass as a beautiful intellectual, without no one ever knowing what they really look like or are interested in. The emphasis here is on really: There is no real that these pages are hiding, there are only stories now. In this era of constant information and high technology, there is no longer need to hide the absence of the real. The line that separates the real from unreal was long gone already, but the media still had people believing they led authentic lives, being subjected to real images. With social media, people chose to deal with the absence of the real by simple comedy: through using memes and creating unique cultures. After all, the absence of the real was not necessarily tragic. It meant whatever you said or did could become hyperreal, as long as it was believable enough and easy to emphasize with. Thus, the age of the story has begun again. In the second section of this chapter, I analyze the greatest literary critics in history and analyze their views on what makes a story a masterpiece. Then, I analyze the effects of good storytelling on our brains.

These two chapters prepare us for the fourth chapter, where I analyze case studies where completely unreal (not of physical and/or rational substance) persons, events or phenomena became real through the power of good storytelling. These examples showcase how this generation has lost the need to hold on to something real, and it is a generation that rewards the hyperreal. This make-believe life we have created for

ourselves is not like little children playing house and forgetting they are in a game this time: We are as aware of this make-believe life we lead as actors on a stage. Yet what is fascinating is our apathy towards this age of the unreal.

To conclude, this thesis aims to unveil the secrets of those stories that have the power to turn nothing into everything and analyzes this era where the aforementioned phenomenon has become a daily occurrence as the fourth order of simulacra. The stories we tell have now become us, preceding our physical existences or our truths. Baudrillard suggested in 1994, 27 years ago, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (79). This cycle has continued to the point that all meaning is completely lost, and information has become infinite. Thus, we have become nothing but stories.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our tendency to accept reality as universal and undisputable fact might stem from our cultural and historical heritage, or our humane, cultural, and historical need to believe in something that cannot be taken away from us. Some believe in a higher power watching over us, and some ridicule this belief and believe that the water boils at a hundred degrees. It might be argued that these are beliefs and do not reflect the "real," but what is real, if not something we construct with our conscious minds? As we moved forward in time, the fine lines that defined reality also got paler and paler by day.

Jean Baudrillard, who lays out the theoretical framework for this thesis, pinpoints the exact moments the real started to become questioned and deconstructed: These are moments of representation, which he calls orders of simulacra. As Baudrillard explores the evolving relationship between the real and the original in postmodern culture, he puts forward vivid examples that perfectly encapsulate the disappearance of the real in lieu of its appearance, or its simulation. One such example that immediately comes to mind is Disneyland, which he opens up his book Simulacra and Simulation with: "Thus, everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowd, is drawn. All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. Embalmed and pacified ... By an extraordinary coincidence ... this frozen, childlike world is found ... by a man who is himself now cryogenized: Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection through an increase of 180 degrees centigrade." (10). With this example, Baudrillard paints a word picture that displays how we have deserted the real, chosen to reside in the hyperreal, and come to terms with the precession of the simulacra, all of which will be further explored and explained in this chapter.

As crucial as hyperreality and simulacra are in understanding and seeing under a new light the daily human behavior, they are more commonly used as the basis of media studies. Baudrillard has seen the birth, rise, and peak of television, film industry and advertisement, an attestation that inspired the theory of the hyperreal greatly. It is possible to see an abundance of references to various media elements in Simulacra and Simulation, such as a short analysis of Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now, wherein Baudrillard comments on the movie's representation's precession of the actual war: "In

this sense, his film is really the extension of the war through other means, the pinnacle of this failed war, and its apotheosis. The war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology" (40). What is interesting about the power of media is its ability to rewrite and thus become the narrative: This gives the director, the scriptwriter, or in a more general context, the content creator, the ability to alter the real. Most people who have experienced this war firsthand are dead, yet the movie is still here, a cult classic, taught in film classes in 2021. This power is almost omnipotent. Those who create and distribute mass media hold the power to shape the hyperreal, effectively silence and erase the real.

When we try to understand the inner workings of this power, we come across Baudrillard's ideas on language. For him, language's part in reproducing meaning in new ways is undeniable, and language "is always aimed at the social and is understood as an artificial system ... while discourse tends to produce meaning he says that language (and writing) always create illusion" (Coulter 2010, 111). Language acts like a gate between people and the real, never fully opening, always barring us from reaching the true essence of the real. It is the foremost weapon of ideology: As we are never outside language, so are we never outside ideology.

In this chapter, I will explore Baudrillardian notions of simulacrum/simulacra, hyperreal and imaginary, media, and language. Baudrillard's systematic understanding of the world is difficult to dissect and choose specific parts from as I have just done, yet for the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on these terms only, without going into detail of some important concepts such as symbolic exchange. The reason why the concepts I have listed above will be analyzed is because of their direct relation to the "rebirth" of the real in the age of social media: It can be thought of as a chronological progression, the beginning of which can best be explained through the orders and successive phases of simulacra and the roles of hyperreality, media and the consumer society, and language in these orders.

2.1. Orders of Simulacra

To understand and comment on the natural next step in the orders of simulacra, we must first clearly describe what simulation means in Baudrillardian terms. An initial etymological look into the word brings us to the Latin word, simulare, stemming from the Indo-European root meaning "same" (Wernick 2010, 199) in English, meaning to

copy. In modern English, we use the word simulation to connote make-believeness, pretense, and falseness. The relationship of the represented and the real is one that is built on mimicry. To explain why simulation is not a case of pretending but one of becoming, Baudrillard uses the example of an illness. He quotes Littré as saying "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (as cited in Baudrillard 1994, 4). This idea “threatens the difference between … the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ … Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces ‘true’ symptoms?” (Baudrillard 1994, 4). In this case, we do not simply witness a pretense, or a copy, that is indistinguishably alike the original. Instead, we see the line between the original state of sickness and the acting out of sickness disappear. After all, if a child pretending to have nausea to skip school eventually vomits due to the anxiety her lying triggers, can we say that her sickness is not real? The simulacra here is not false, then, it replaces the real, or conceals the absence of it. Let us again remember the Apocalypse Now example: The movie is a simulation of a “real” event, heightening the senses to such a point that the movie becomes more real than the real, it becomes hyperreal. Later in this chapter, we will see how the birth of the hyperreal is a natural result of the third order of simulacra when the image is absorbed into the real.

Baudrillard begins Simulacra and Simulation with a direct reference to Jorge Luis Borges’ story, “On Exactitude in Science,” to explain what simulation and hyperreality mean. Ironically, this story is written in the form of a literary forgery, based on a concept in Lewis Carroll’s “Sylvie and Bruno Concluded” (Edney 2019, 353). Where is the irony? In a fascinatingly metafictional manner, the story openly distorts historical facts and rewrites a historical narrative, attempting at creating a fake copy of the real that actively attempts to conceal the existence of the real, thus becoming the hyperreal. In this one-paragraph story, Borges talks about cartographers creating a map that “ends up covering the territory exactly” which eventually leads to the Empire’s “fall into ruins … like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil” under the map – an allegory described by Baudrillard as “the most beautiful allegory of simulation” (Baudrillard 1994, 2). The Empire’s failure to survive under the map, the map’s precession of the original, encapsulates the hyperreal. Baudrillard uses this story to highlight how his understanding of simulation is different than the modern English version meaning make-believe or pretense, because the map is not simply a simulation in the sense we are used to. It is not pretending to be something else; it becomes the very thing it simulates, thus hiding the desert the once magnificent Empire has now become. That is how it becomes the hyperreal. Baudrillard’s explanation of this is as follows:

> "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself." (Baudrillard 1994, 2)

At this point, can we even say that the map refers to a representation? Baudrillard's theory operates outside Saussurean semiotics: The concepts of signifier, signified and referent all become problematic when we think of them outside reality, and referent disappears. The sign, consisting only of the signifier (word) and the signified (concept), becomes the hyperreal. The war (referent, the real) disappears, the concept (signified) of war and the movie (signifier) that glorifies it remain. Is there, then, no referent? No, the referent is not destroyed. What Baudrillard suggests here is that the sign replaces the referent, as dictated by mass media and entertainment industries. He explores this relationship with media further in The Consumer Society (Baudrillard 1998), saying "What mass communications give us is not reality, but the dizzying whirl of reality [Ie vertigé de la realité]" (34).

What Baudrillard calls simulacrum is a concept directly related to, or is a result of, simulation. It is a "type of representation produced by simulation ... a copy without an original" (Wernick 2010, 199). The world as Baudrillard experienced it -the world of Disneyland and Apocalypse Now- was a world consisting only of simulations, it was the third order of simulacra. Let us return to the Disneyland example we briefly touched upon in the beginning to further navigate this concept: In this world, it was meaningless to look for the original, the real, which the copy or the simulation was mimicking. The world was already a copy of a copy of a copy at that point, and there was no based reality. Here, we see that Disneyland is not somewhere that merely mimics or attempts to erase the memory of America: It has become America, and the only fact it is trying to erase or conceal is that "the real is no longer real" Baudrillard 1994, 13).

Baudrillard talks about the three orders of simulacra explicitly in Symbolic Exchange and Death. He calls these three orders the counterfeit, "the dominant schema in the 'classical' period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution ... [operates] on the natural law of value," the production, "the dominant schema in the Industrial Era" operating "on the market law of value," and the simulation, "the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase" operating "on the structural law of value" (Baudrillard 1993, 109).

Before we move on to a detailed analysis of what these orders signify, let us open a parenthesis here and underline the word "current" in "the current code-governed phase" (Baudrillard 1993, 109). Symbolic Exchange and Death was written in 1976 and translated to English in 1993, therefore, the current then is almost fifty years in the past now, giving us an exciting opportunity to tease the possibility of a fourth order of simulacra: A new order in the age of social media, the age of information, the age of fake news. This would surely be an exciting time to experience for Baudrillard. We will use his theoretical framework to suggest an analysis of the second decade of 21st century as the fourth order in the last part of this chapter.

2.1.1. The First Order of Simulacra

The orders of simulacra "do not consist only of the play of signs, they involve social relations and a social power," (Baudrillard 1993, 112) and therefore, their analyses shall be two-fold: semiotic and sociologic. The first order of simulacra signifies the initial exploration of the false image. In this order, the representation does not replace the real: Its status as an illusion is not denied but instead, it is praised. The counterfeit represents excellence. They are not accidental signs, instead, they are produced willingly and with mastery. Baudrillard uses the terms "forgery" and "deceptive finery" to explain the works of art from this order, which he exemplifies with images of "stucco interiors to Baroque theatrical scenery" (Baudrillard 1993, 111). In this level, the notion of real is unshaken, and the perfection of representation signifies two alternate realities: First, it is a brave new world where the real is real, the representation is real, but the representation awakens more excitement than the real. Second, there is a shift of power, and we thus "unravel ... the new ambitions of Renaissance man" (Baudrillard 1993, 112). A construction material, stucco, takes on meanings, social and semiotic, about new conceptions of power and hegemony. The very act of taking on meaning is the first step in a long transformation, a transformation by the end of which that which paved the way for new meanings is absent in the face of the analogy.

2.1.2. The Second Order: Mass Reproduction, Andy Warhol, and Walter Benjamin

The second order is where the concept of originality starts getting deconstructed due to mass production after Industrial Revolution. As the relation between the original and the copy shift greatly due to the copy being made into plural, copies, with an infinite possibility of duplicating the original, a crisis arises – an inflation of meaning, so to say. What feelings did the one and only painting of Mona Lisa awake in its admirers in Renaissance? But then, what feelings did it awake when printing press made it possible to print millions of Mona Lisa's on postcards, and Mona Lisa thus become something any "average Joe" could carry in their pockets? This is a good point to pause and refer to a further point in time, the time of Andy Warhol (about whom Baudrillard himself said he had "great admiration for")(Zurbrugg 1990, 289), and his critique of this inflation of meaning. Think about the multiplied, duplicated imagery of Warhol. Think about the Self-Portrait, with copies of Warhol's face, or Campbell's Soup Cans, or Marilyn Monroe, or the Coca-Cola bottles – recurring images or aesthetic distortions of the same originals of popular culture icons. Warhol's works are an homage to the disappearance of high culture with the age of Industrial Revolution. Art as exquisite representation loses meaning in this era. In his introductory remarks for The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures, George Ritzer comments on Warhol's works as catalysts of blurring the line between high and low culture:

> "It is virtually impossible to see pop art as high culture and to distinguish it from low culture. Indeed, one of the major subjects of pop artists is low culture as represented in Andy Warhol's work on Campbell soup cans and Marilyn Monroe. Art, or at least pop art, has ceased to be creative or subversive; it is merely one more set of objects to be included in the system of objects. It no longer creates or contradicts the world of consumer objects; it is part of that world." (Ritzer 1998, 16)

Thus, with Warhol's works, we see serial reproduction being used as commentary on the idea of serial reproduction itself. The Campbell soup cans are not counterfeits, they are productions, toying with the idea of market value and artistic value. Of the relation between the original and its identical(s), Baudrillard notes:

> "The relation between them is no longer one of an original and its counterfeit, analogy or reflection, but is instead one of equivalence and indifference. In the series, objects become indistinct simulacra of one another and, along with objects, of the men that produce them. The extinction of the original reference alone facilitates the general law of equivalences, that is to say, the very possibility of production." (Baudrillard 1993, 117-118)

Basically, this is to say; mass production and industrial progress are inseparable, yet it cannot come without a price. The extinction of the original must happen so that the age of (re)production can commence. Of course, when we say age of reproduction, immediately Walter Benjamin comes to mind. Baudrillard also references Benjamin when discussing the principle of reproduction, saying Benjamin "was the first to draw out the essential implications of the principle of reproduction," showing "that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changes its goals, and alters the status of the product and the producer" (Baudrillard 1993, 118-119). How does reproduction achieve this effect?

In the first order of simulacra, the uniqueness of art had led to its perpetually gaining its status as high, or pertaining to higher class, royalty even. The difficulty of actually coming into contact with a piece of art established its status as high and distant from the masses. It also created its appeal, or as Benjamin (Benjamin 1936, 222) puts it, its aura. Therefore, it is possible to say that what defined art was this inapproachability and mystery in the first place – in its essence, art possessed the quality of being high. Because of this, the possibility of reproduction of art altered its very essence. Of course, as Benjamin states, "In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain" (Benjamin 1936, 218). However, as the methods of reproduction changed with advancements in technology, new opportunities for multiplication and distribution of art have emerged as well. "Mechanical reproduction of a work of art," says Benjamin, "represents something new" (Benjamin 1936, 218). The lines that allowed people to make the kind of value judgments that separate high culture from mass/low culture started to disappear with reproduction.

Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written in 1936, develops a theory upon the presupposition that there had existed a distinction between high and low culture before the possibilities mechanical reproduction opened up. However, mechanical reproduction has led to the loss of aura in the work of art, which led to (or, was expected to eventually lead to) the distinction between high and low culture to slowly disappear. Benjamin talks about the work of art before mechanical reproduction as having a "parasitical dependence on ritual" (Benjamin 1936, 224). The aura of the work of art, the mystery it entails, emerges from this ritualistic aspect. Its roots are embedded in tradition and history, it is authentic and unique. It is a testimony to its own experienced history and its own production as well as an identity preserved through time. There can never be another exactly like it, no matter how professionally forged a copy it is. Its material existence is unique. All of these characteristics make it so that the work of art has an impenetrable aura. However, all these aspects that make up

the aura of the work of art are nullified with the introduction of mechanical reproduction. With mechanical reproduction, the work of art becomes available and accessible to all. The original, stuck in a single time and space, is overshadowed by the copy that holds the power to reach anywhere. The strict line separating high and low culture is deconstructed due to this – all works of art become available, making it so that its accessibility is not a determiner of the status of the work of art anymore. Its appeal to the upper class is shattered and a new question arises: What makes high culture "high" if not its exclusivity?

The second order of simulacra is where the original reference becomes extinct: Everything is reproduceable now, and they are equal in their reproducibility, mechanically, but there is no original for these copies to refer to. They only refer to the system itself, they refer to reproduction. Benjamin highlights this as well, with a slight critique of Marx, saying, "Benjamin and McLuhan saw more clearly than Marx, they saw that the real message, the real ultimatum, lay in reproduction itself" (Baudrillard 1993, 119). The reality about the referent is masked and is under threat of being replaced by the sign in this order. The original is not eradicated completely, but the relation with the copy is severed, and the original is now worse than completely erased... It has become irrelevant: "The intensification of the logic of capitalism and the rises of mercantile value eliminates the need for the sign's relation to its original (or signified). Rather in the age of industry, what matters is the total equivalence of signs" (Koch 2006, 563). What does it matter if there is an original if the aim of the system is to make sure total and complete equivalence of the series is achieved? The only thing necessary to ensure the maintenance of serial mass production is to make sure there is a code for the reproduction to be modeled after, and this code is the key as we move from the second order of simulacra to the third.

2.1.3. The Third Order of Simulacra: The Code and the Hyperreal

The basis of value shifts from reproducibility to code, or the model, in the third order of simulacra. This order is a byproduct of the postmodern age where representation not only precedes but also determines the real. In fact, there is no difference between the real and the representation anymore. The only thing that remains is the simulacrum. The examples listed at the beginning of this chapter, of Disneyland, Borges, and Apocalypse Now, are all examples from this order: the order where "entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life

. . . more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior" (Kellner 2020). This can only be achieved with ultimate simulation – the eradication of the relationship between the reality and the imaginary.

To conceptualize this, let us imagine a beautiful valley at sunset. An impeccable Renaissance painting of this valley that is so life-like that merely by looking at it the spectator can smell the fresh grass would connote the first order of simulacra. A postcard of this painting sold for a dollar a piece with a thousand others exactly like it in the backroom collecting dust in a box would connote the second order of simulacra. The computer code of an upcoming PC game featuring this valley as a setting, the ones and zeroes coming together to create a visual masterpiece? That is the third order of simulacra. That is when the blueprint, the code, the model precedes the real, thus becoming the hyperreal. The ones and zeroes do not reference to the fresh grass, but they eventually create an experience that makes the player forget the ever possibility of the fresh grass. The imaginary real these binary codes construct through connotation makes us forget there ever was a valley, by way of tricking us into believing that the simulation game is just that, a simulation, whenas the simulation has already erased the real to make way for the hyperreal.

Basically, the world is an imaginary realm in the third order. In this world where everything is imaginary, the absence of reality connotes hyperreality. In the Disneyland example, Disneyland is hidden as people believe it to be a fantasy world, a perfect copy of America. In reality, it has become hyperreal, masking the absence of a real, authentic America. It "exists in order to hide that it is . . . "real" America that is Disneyland" (Baudrillard 1994, 12). The third order is a dystopian world devoid of meaning unaware of its unawareness: It is a null void that is infinitely empty and full of infinite lights, sounds, and images at the same time.

2.2. Media and the Consumer Society

How does this transformation through orders of simulacra which eventually ends with this dystopia reflect on people? In what areas of life does it become apparent the most? The answer to this question is inseparable from Baudrillard's theory: media, communications, and information. We see the hyperreal as the primary agent of humanity's transformation towards completely emptying itself out. This glorified purge and emptiness is televised,

broadcasted, celebrated. In his article for The Baudrillard Dictionary (2010), Mike Gane defines this phenomenon as follows: "This movement towards a hyperreal culture invades all spheres but especially information ... a hyperreal sociality which reflects not the alienation of the masses, held in check by repression as in the Marxist theories, but hyper-conformity and terrorism" (Gane 2010, 96). What the media offer us is not the real, it is the sign instead for us to consume, and this sign does not reflect reality. It is just like hyperreal, masking the absence of reality. To escape this emptiness, the media offer people feelings on two ends of the spectrum: extreme relaxation or extreme thrill. Baudrillard calls on this condition being "sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real" (Baudrillard 1998, 34). We, as humans, enjoy the distance between us and our world at this point. We need a blanket of the hyperreal to cover us. But from what?

We need a kind of security. "A miraculous security," (Baudrillard 1998, 34) as Baudrillard calls it. This security is provided through consumption. Baudrillard expands on this need in The Consumer Society, describing it as follows:

> "When we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message - all these things we 'consume' - represent our tranquility consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it. The content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial. We are not engaged in them, and the media do not involve us in the world, but offer for our consumption signs as signs, albeit signs accredited with the guarantee of the real." (Baudrillard 1998, 34)

This iconic paragraph, to this day, is still one of the best descriptions of the human necessity to consume media content. "The profound pleasure of not being there," (Baudrillard 1998, 34) possibly rooted in the titillating sensation of Schadenfreude, reflects itself onto media as violent, pornographic imagery. This observation still holds true to this day, as the true crime genre becomes one of the most sought after genres on Netflix and such streaming services (Sutton 2021), the heart wrenching Space Shuttle Challenger disaster video has over sixteen million views on Youtube, and more than half a million people subscribing to a subreddit (a forum dedicated to a specific topic on the website Reddit) called "Watch People Die" – a place for people to share and view videos of, as the name suggests, watching people die. These violent allusions to the real comfort us in their being a distant reality, so distant that it has become hyperreal.

That is what the media does: That is what it has always done. The Space Shuttle Challenger disaster video was broadcasted live in 1986, the year Baudrillard penned America.

Millions watched it live. Immediately after the crash, "networks repeatedly used NASA footage showing the faces of the parents of Christa McAuliffe as they watched the shuttle explode. Viewers could read the mother's lips as she said, 'I don't believe this.' The networks also showed the reactions of TV-watching students at Concord High School, where McAuliffe taught in New Hampshire" (Holston 1986). It is with that same mindset, the same fascination, the same Schadenfreude that millions still watch the gore imagery of the space shuttle exploding into thousands of burning pieces. Baudrillard explains the root cause of this communal feeling as curiosity, saying,

> "It is here that we can define the praxis of consumption. The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture is not a relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility - nor is it one of total indifference: it is a relation of curiosity. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of misrecognition." (Baudrillard 1998, 34)

This misrecognition is the misrecognition of the real. As the consumer of media builds an imaginary wall between the content they are shown and reality, thinking they are intellectually above the plethora of signs they are subjected to incessantly, they become a bigger part of the consumer society. The then present media age was "dominated by the pure simulacrum," (Pawlett 2010, 197) and public's misrecognition of this was reflected in their curiosity toward the gore, almost 20th-century-gothic imagery they saw on their televisions. Basically, the media is understood to be a means of socialization, says Baudrillard. It is believed that information produces meaning, and thus communication. This, however, is simply a myth. Baudrillard claims that "we are all complicitous in this myth" and without it, "the credibility of our social organization would collapse" (Baudrillard 1994, 56). However, he then claims that that credibility has already collapsed due to our misconception and misrecognition. We might have thought that it was information that produced meaning, whereas the opposite was true, and it was information that "[devours] its own content … communication, and the social" (Baudrillard 1994, 56).

2.2.1. Four Successive Phases of Simulacra

In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard lays out four successive phases of simulacra, or the image. The first phase is “the reflection of a profound reality,” the second is one that “masks and denatures a profound reality,” the third “masks the absence of a profound reality,” and the fourth “has no relation to any reality whatsoever … it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1994, 4). He goes on to explain them as follows: “In the first case, the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance - it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance - it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation” (Baudrillard 1994, 4). This is not a chronological or historical order, these are just innate qualities and tendencies of the image. These phases are contextual: One image can contain all these phases in it in different contexts. Think of the famed Afghan Girl photograph (see fig. 1), taken by Steve McCurry in 1984. The

Figure 1 Afghan Girl. Photograph by Steve McCurry, 1984. National Geographic Collection.

photograph of Sharbat Gula, the girl in the photograph, at the minute it is taken, connotes the first phase. The photograph on the cover of National Geographic’s June 1985 issue is of the second phase. The photograph becoming a symbol of Afghanistan for the Orientalist west is a good example of the third phase. The photograph in a gold frame on the wall of a millionaire Instagram influencer who put it there because he liked how cool Sharbat Gula looked (without context) is of the fourth phase, it is pure simulacrum.

Baudrillard believes that the media are the perfect example of the fourth phase of the im-

age, it is pure simulacrum. He uses the example of America in the media to showcase his point. What he claims is that "America, like Disneyland, is perceived and understood through simulacra: news and documentary images, tourist images, cinema and TV images, and the consumption of these images often precedes any 'real' experience of living in or visiting America. The simulacrum becomes the 'real'; there is no real that is more 'real' than simulacra, yet such simulacra are politically crucial because they obscure this fundamental absence of the real" (Pawlett 2010, 198). The hit television show Friends is a good case to exemplify Baudrillard's claim: Friends is more American than America. As the world and the Americans alike watch and laugh at the incredible stupidity of the character Joey, or as they laugh at the expanse of Ross, who is an academic and the only representation of someone with any traditionally intellectual interest, they actively create America. This is not just a representation alluding to something real, this is the hypnotic piece of video imagery that erases and conceals the erasure of America. Friends was watched over one hundred billion times on streaming platforms globally (Khosla 2021), at which point it was no longer a false representation of reality but simply something that "obscured this fundamental absence of the real" (Pawlett 2010, 198).

2.3. Language, Ideology, and Foucault

Baudrillard, as I have showcased with several quotes and examples in this chapter, is a master of painting a picture with words, which in itself poses a challenge that is quite "meta" – the vivid pictures he paints are at risk of becoming more "substantial" than the ideas themselves. They are at risk of becoming hyperreal themselves. Douglas Kellner also discusses Baudrillard's imploding language, saying, "His style and writing strategies are also implosive ... combining material from strikingly different fields, studded with examples from the mass media and popular culture in an innovative mode of postmodern theory that does not respect disciplinary boundaries. His writing attempts to itself simulate the new conditions, capturing its novelties through inventive use of language and theory" (Kellner 2020). This mode of writing is not a coincidence and the way it arose can be traced back to Baudrillard's relationship with Foucault.

Baudrillard had a complicated relationship with Foucault, so much so that he wrote a book called Forget Foucault (1977). He built on Foucauldian genealogy greatly, as he also expresses in Forget Foucault, but also his disagreement with Foucault was the trigger that pushed him away from French intelligentsia and towards America

and English-speaking audiences. Baudrillard's later criticisms of Foucault were also critiques of his own self (Butler 2010, 78). Their differing ideas on the ideas of sexuality as repressive rather than repressed are unraveled in Baudrillard's definition of seduction, yet for the sake of comprehensibility, we will not go into the details of this argument.

Foucault's History of Sexuality (1978) is mainly about the discourse of sexuality and its relation to power. Power for Foucault is not something one has but instead, it is something that is exercised over bodies and subjectivities. There is a mutuality in this performance of power, because as we become subjects in power, we also feed into the very power that is exercised upon us. Foucault finds language to be of great importance and claims that knowledge and language are both political tools that are used to control power. Power is productive, and when we think about this in terms of language, we see that the subject does not exist if not in the realm of language, that is, the realm of ideology.

Baudrillard, on the other hand, sees language as a barrier between humans and reality. It was commonly thought that ideology itself also barred people from ever achieving truth, yet with postmodern thought, we started to understand "ideology as the support for our very perception of reality … no outside of ideology, according to this view, at least no outside that can be articulated in language. Because we are so reliant on language to structure our perceptions, any representation of reality is always already ideological, always already constructed by simulacra" (Coulter 2010, 112). Language in Baudrillard is the means with which we are presented reality with, yet the absence of reality positions language to almost be a deceiving trickster: Language itself shapes our notions of reality or unreality, and in the complete absence of reality, it is a lie we keep telling ourselves.

2.4. Conclusion

Baudrillardian notion of hyperreality has always intrigued me, yet exploring it in line with the idea of social media and storytelling has resulted in the pieces of the puzzle coming together. James Morris calls Baudrillard the "prophet of fake news," (Morris 2020) which is quite fitting. Baudrillard had foreseen a lot of things about the fourth order of simulacra, but there were many things he could not possibly guess, social media being number one on this list. It is therefore enlightening to keep the Baudrillardian thought intact and add onto it by understanding the methodology with which it is brough to life in 21st century social media phenomena. Although he discussed in length the reasons and outcomes of

the hyperreal, he never much discussed how the hyperreal came to be. The age of the social media is the perfect breeding ground for the hyperreal, and when we explore its depths, what we see is impeccable storytelling. Thus, this framework will be used in later chapters to show how storytelling in social media has effectively teased and exploited the absence of the real.

3. THE FOURTH ORDER: HYPERREALITY AND STORYTELLING

In all his works on media, from Requiem for the Media to The Consumer Society, Baudrillard has explored media as an "institution of an irreversible model of communication without a response" (Baudrillard 1994, 58). He theorized on the absence of a response, yet never twice questioned or doubted the one-sidedness of the media, like when he looked back at his work in Requiem for the Media in Simulacra and Simulation ten years later, saying "This absence of a response can no longer be understood at all as a strategy of power, but as a counterstrategy of the masses themselves when they encounter power," (Baudrillard 1994, 59) suspecting whether the silence of the masses could be a victorious resistance.

Exactly forty years after he wrote Simulacra and Simulation, in 2021, the media is not as one-sided anymore, and it is not without a response. Of course, there are still the images that mass media feed to the public, still the same warmongering, ultra-nationalist, either extremely violent or hyper-conformist images show up on television screens every day and every evening. However, one tiny detail has arisen that requires a major update to Baudrillardian theory, and it necessitates a fourth order of simulacra, brings into question the one-sidedness of the media, overall creates an exciting new challenge when we think of the imaginary and the hyperreal. This tiny detail is as small as 14 centimeters: It is a smartphone with an internet connection. What do we make of the media in the age of social media? What does the hyperreal in the Disneyland imagery become when you can visit Disneyland with a VR headset from your own living room? It is important to note here that Baudrillard has seen "early experiments with interactive television and hypertext ... and Web 2.0 applications," (Gunkel 2010, 121) and he wrote about them, too. But his response was that these were simply "forms of response simulation, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact" (Baudrillard 1981, 170). He has seen unimpressive early versions of virtual reality attempts, but has not seen two extremely life-like figures talking to each other in a second life environment from one computer screen to another, and he has not seen social media take its roots from such interactions.

Baudrillard's definition of the mass media, taken from his essay Requiem for the Media

mentioned above, is as follows:

> "The mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication—this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response ... We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback. Now, ... the media founds itself on this latter definition: they are what always prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact. This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it." (Baudrillard 1981, 280-81)

If so, what happens when the audience can respond? What if the media becomes the social media, and it becomes literally and without a doubt the number one form of communication in the 21st century, as has become painstakingly obvious after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020? The "system of social control and power" which are "rooted" in the unresponsive and one-sided nature of the media, then become uprooted and completely subverted (Baudrillard 1981, 280-81). Even though he himself deconstructed his understanding of the power play in the relation between the media and the public in Simulacra and Simulation as we have touched upon above, he is still building his theory on the monopoly the media have on information distribution. This requires us to rethink the Baudrillardian notions of the media and the hyperreal: Because now, in the age where everyone can assume the role of the media as long as they have an internet connection, the whole dynamic has shifted beyond imagination.

Let us, then, offer a follow-up, a sequel, or a continuation for the orders of simulacra within this framework. We have now analyzed Baudrillardian postmodern thought with emphases on the orders of simulacra, phases of the image, media, the consumer society, and language. Although we mostly used his works from 1980s and 1990s as basis, we referenced some of his work from the early 2000s as well. The pre-social media era, characterized mostly by television and advertisement, is laid out in front of us from a Baudrillardian lens. In the age where the distribution of information is within the domain of certain institutions and powerful people, Baudrillard has put forward his theory of the hyperreal: The simulation is the only thing that exists and it masks the absence of the real, he said, the mass media creates and distributes its own non-reality, and the image is absorbed. This is where we left our theory, before TikTok, before Instagram, before Facebook, before Myspace. Before 4.66 billion users (Statista 2021) of internet: each of

them reaching, consuming, sharing, and creating content on a daily basis. The complete transformation our everyday lives went under in the post-internet and post-social media era is comparable to the transformation after the discovery of electricity, which makes it obvious that Baudrillardian theory needs an update. That is why, in this chapter, I will attempt to define the next chapter to the orders of the simulacra, and go into detail about the intricacies of this next order's driving power: storytelling.

3.1. Apathy towards the Absence of the Real

For the sake of clarity, let us call the post-internet era the fourth order of the simulacra. In this order, we have witnessed a fascinating phenomenon: A phenomenon of conscious apathy. How has this come to be?

In the era of the social media, or as we shall call it here, the fourth order, there is not a break with the past – not like the postmodern break with the modern. Instead, we see an enhanced version, or a continuum of the postmodern universe Baudrillard outlined. Let us remember: This universe was "one of hyperreality in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life" (Kellner 2020). The realities that were offered to us in this realm, where the media were like a puppet master, were "more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior ... In this postmodern world, individuals flee from the 'desert of the real' for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realm of computer, media, and technological experience" (Kellner 2020). All this is still very much applicable to the present day, however we need a revision, because Baudrillard has a tendency to situate the people as the passive object, the response-less audience, the side that is absorbed by the hyperreal without even noticing. Yet when we look at the past fifteen years, we see humanity become the active creators of hyperreal content.

This creation does not even have to be associated with having a social media account, or posting consistently to build a following. One way or another, everyone has become agents of the hyperreal. As of April 2021, the popular video chat application Zoom has managed to amass an impressive three hundred million users on a daily basis (Rauf 2021). In the pandemic-ridden year of 2020, as well as the first quarter of 2021, all social

communication has been conducted through this application and others like it. It has become so ingrained in our lives that many people have reported seeing Zoom dreams, with accounts such as “Last night, I had my first Zoom dream. I could see the whole thing — the screen, the people in their little boxes, the blinking ‘record’ button. It looked like it looks every day — except that my computer was on the desk I used as a child” (Cabaniss 2020). Furthermore, there are accounts of people seeing events from their past happen on Zoom in their dreams, reimagining and rewriting the narrative to fit the present-day method of communication. This is quite revolutionary, really, because it has changed the ways we see ourselves and the others, and it has changed our everyday performances of the self. Before the Zoom era, the performances we put on display in different contexts every day were visible only to those we communicated with. Now, we see our own faces, telling stories, expressing ourselves, making gestures and mimics we might not have realized before, on the same screen next to the faces of those we are unintentionally performing for. A new kind of alienation occurs, but then again, the bombardment of new information and imagery coming from the same screen is so overwhelming that our answer is quite underwhelming in contrast: We don’t care.

Let us elaborate on that, as “We don’t care” might fail at explaining the entirety of the situation. To do that, we need to go back in time, just a little, to the beginning of 2000s. Of course, the computer, internet, and even the e-mail date back to as early as 1960s (Edsomwan 2011), but the public would not have access to it for at least thirty years. IBM introduced the first smartphone, Simon, in 1994, which could send e-mails and faxes but do nothing else, seeing as internet was still a luxury for the regular households and the first internet browser, NCSA’s Mosaic, had been introduced just a year earlier (Jackson 2018). Then, Apple’s iPhone came to the scene in 2007, making communication much easier than it had ever been before. At that point, MySpace was on the brink of extinction, and Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter had taken the world by a storm. Still dubbed a “young person’s game,” these social networks were still ways from having the power they today have, yet they also clearly indicated that the world was irretrievably different from what it was like ten years ago.

What exactly was different? With how fast the information could spread and how it could be spread by virtually anybody, notions of communication and information changed drastically. This also coincides with the rise of storytelling, back from the dead, to the point that it has ranked number one in Innova Market Insights’ 2020 trend report (Gelski 2019). To exist in this new realm, one must become an avid storyteller or a content creator. This goes to show that the more people get separated from their own experiences, the more they feel the need to tell the story of that experience. Thus, the hyperreal in this era has become even more dystopian and more obvious. A literal block has emerged

between people and experiences. This came to be in the form of smartphones held up in the air during concerts or live music events, recording the whole show, or taking three hundred pictures when you meet up with your friends to later choose the best one and put it on Instagram, or thinking of your lived experiences as possible tweet resources – between people and events, people and friends, people and other people, people and the crumb of what could have arguably been called real, a wall came down, in the shape of a smartphone. In Baudrillardian terms, we could simply put a hyperreal tag on these and move on with our lives... But something is different here. None of these events try to mask the absence of the real anymore. The absence of the real is realized by all. It is glorified. It is turned into a joke. It has become a "meme." There is simply an apathy towards the absence of the real, a trend of optimistic nihilism, a coming to terms with the hyperreal. How can there not be? The average person is estimated to encounter 6,000 to 10,000 ads, every single day (Carr 2021). 8,000 images on average, daily, not counting all the other images we see in the day as we scroll down in a "timeline" that literally has no end, picture after picture of luxurious holidays, beautiful people, all kinds of animals and pets, curated feeds, dismembered bodies, bombings, burned forests, and then, luxurious holidays again. As people and experiences become things on your screen, it becomes clear to all that the real is just not there anymore. Simulacrum is no more a trap, maybe it is not even a political weapon. It is just a fact of life that we live in this hyperreal simulation that does not even try to mask the absence of the real anymore.

Within this overwhelming abundance of hyperreal images and information, who holds the power to actively change and shape the simulacra? Baudrillard thought that power to be mainly in the domain of the media. But now, in the era where everyone can distribute information (either about themselves through their social network identities, or as themselves or anonymously about anything they want in blogs, forums and such), the power belongs to the people – but not all people. Only the best of the storytellers, telling the most engaging, believable, or fascinatingly unbelievable stories run the world. They are the new patrons of the hyperreal. The intricacies of how storytelling achieves this total domination will be explored later in this chapter, and cases where a strong story has turned nothingness into pure hyperreality will be explored in the next.

3.1.1. Meme Culture as Proof of Apathy: Post-postmodern Pastiche

Memes are now not only in the domain of a select few who spend way too much time on the internet, they are everywhere. It is a generation's way of dealing with life and absence of reality. But what really is a meme? Lonnberg explains the term's roots, saying, "The term 'meme' originally comes from Richard Dawkins' 1976 book The Selfish Gene, which describes a meme as a cultural unit that is shared and passed down over the course of generations, similar to what occurs with a gene in the biological sense. The term has since developed, reaching its modern definition ... remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture" (Lonnberg et al. 2020, 1). It is thus derived from our code, very fitting with the third order of simulacra.

There is a famous image that started circulating the internet in 2018: It is a picture of the famous graphic novel character Garfield the cat, and under his face it reads, "You are not immune to propaganda" (see fig. 2). I find this to be the perfect example of the

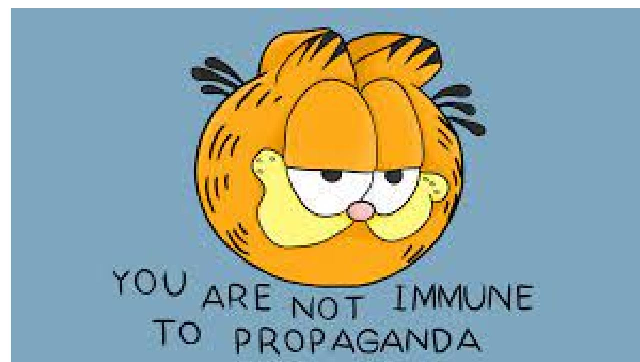

Figure 2 You are Not Immune to Propaganda, Anonymous.

meme culture: Using popular culture images that have no connection to the message it is spreading (a completely arbitrary connection), with the message being a reflection of grim reality and sometimes, taking its roots from social theory. The most serious, the most depressing, and the most alarming realities put forth by 20th century thinkers have now become meme: An unexpected way to signal "I am aware, I do not care."

What these arbitrary, absurd images bring to mind immediately is Fredric Jameson's (1991) idea of pastiche. Pastiche differs from parody in that although it brings together contrasting modes of form and content, it does not do so in a critical manner. In parody, the conflict between the subject matter and the style or genre used to convey it allow us to criticize both the subject matter and the genre. It is imitation with a critical edge. However, in pastiche, the imitation and the exaggeration do not intend to criticize. The lack of fit between the idea and the form is pretty aimless and hard to notice even. Jameson believes that this is the main mode of postmodern art: It brings together forms, styles, images, imitations of other texts but without a critical or didactic perspective. There is an exhaustion remnant of the never-ending effort to make things new that came

along with modernism. There is a state of being resigned to the fact that it has all been done and said. All in all, with Jameson's works, which are written around the same time as Baudrillard and roughly fifty years after Benjamin, it is possible to see a criticism of the postmodern culture while also accepting the inescapability of it. It cannot be judged morally and should be viewed as a position in history. Postmodernism, or mass culture, as opposed to modernism, or high culture, is inevitably here and now.

All of these positions, however, belong to a time before the meme culture. We are now in a time of endless conversation and interaction. Reproduction is now not an added quality to anything, it is essential: Even we are reproducible, with our faces appearing on fifty people's Zoom screens for the Monday morning meetings. Through forms of social media, everything is available to everyone regardless of their social status. Social status itself is slowly becoming a thing of the past in a time when a teenager can become famous by posting their homemade videos to millions. An Instagram influencer now has more reach than Shakespeare had in his lifetime.

One form that pushes the boundaries of art and raises the question of what art is is the "meme," which can be analyzed in line with Jameson's idea of the pastiche. The genre of comedy has found its place amongst cultural texts in examples like Shakespearean plays or Restoration-era satires. However, with the emergence of internet, what we laugh at has become fragmented and devoid of meaning. We can think of the recent surge of World War III memes in this regard. A political crisis is caricaturized by everyone through memes, with comic images accompanied by titles such as "Me and my girls when WWIII hits" (see fig. 3). These images, retweeted and shared by hundreds of thousands of people, do not explicitly criticize the meaninglessness of war, however their absurdity has strong implications towards it. This is essentially an homage to the hyperreal, with World War III pointing to nothingness, and these new age creators acknowledging this nothingness by creating a whole genre of comedy about it – basically pastiche 2.0. Popular culture is not created by those in power now but it is created by those who have access to internet, which is pretty much everyone, and this is a threat to the capitalist order in which information is created and spread by those who hold the capital. Comedy, in the form of memes, becomes a critical tool of absurdity. The phrase "OK boomer," made common by millennials and Gen Z to mock an idea by someone from the baby boomer generation that does not resonate with the next generations, is another good example of this phenomenon. The clash between baby boomers and millennials has become satirized, but this satire is not in the form of prose. Instead, it is an image with two simple words, and it conveys meaning through shared cultural experience. It is as controversial as Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal (1729), where Jonathan Swift suggested eating babies to overcome the famine in a shocking satire, yet it is now in reach

Figure 3 Nieves, Victoria. Twitter Post. 2020.

of everyone. These are very, very short works of comedy, stories as short as the famous "For sale, baby shoes, never worn," (Miller 1991, 27) story, yet they convey the intense feeling of apathy looming over a whole generation clearly.

It then becomes clear that if the third order of simulacra is the age where the hyperreal dominates all aspects of life as simulation masking the absence of a referential reality with the media belonging to this order by nature, the fourth order of simulacra is the age where the hyperreal has not only been acknowledged but it has been made into a running joke: A joke that has become the very culture of the internet. The iconic video of the Ghanaian group of pallbearers (Dancing Pallbearers) dancing as they carry a coffin has become one of the most related videos of this era (CGTN 2020), and it is because "We are all going to die and our lives will have had no meaning" is not something we mask anymore, it is something we laugh at. This video has no relation to reality whatsoever, it is pure simulacrum, and the public in the fourth order feels nothing but apathy about this.

3.2. Purest Form of Power in the Fourth Order: Storytelling

This thesis constantly underlines the significance of the power of storytelling, boldly claiming that social media's ability to move into a fourth order where the absence of the real is not only a fact but also an irrelevant fact stems from said power. This leads to

the question of what constitutes as powerful storytelling. The roots of storytelling are a good place to start to analyze how it became possible that the stories people tell about themselves overrule the material facts about them in the fourth order.

Storytelling is not a recent trend – in fact, it is one of the oldest crafts there is. It precedes writing, the invention of which (for the first time, since it was invented multiple times in different geographies) dates back to 3400–3100 BC Mesopotamia, by at least 25,000 years Olson 1996, 4). Stories were conveyed through oral narratives, dancing, cave drawings, music, even 30,000 years ago (Eder, Holyan and Cajete 2010, 23). Twenty years ago, "new radiocarbon dates for the drawings that decorate the Chauvet cave in Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardèche, France" were derived, and they "confirm that even 30,000 years ago Aurignacian artists, already known as accomplished carvers, could create masterpieces comparable to the best Magdalenian art" (Valladas et al. 2001). What is beautiful about the Chauvet cave drawings is that they are not simple drawings of shapes: They depict stories of hunting, encountering rhinos, mammoths, and lions, and a variety of everyday activities. To put it in perspective, let us remember the wheel was discovered in 3500 BC (Gambino 2009). Our pressing need to express ourselves through stories meant that storytelling would precede the wheel by 26,500 years.

There is an enthralling history following the drawings in the Chauvet cave, a history including Gilgamesh, the Bible, Shakespeare, fairy tales, Brothers Grimm, Brontë sisters, genres, theories, eras – a history that far exceeds the aim and scope of this thesis. The reason why I chose to begin this section with a little historical anecdote is that humanity's fascination with storytelling has itself always fascinated me. Is it, as Gilgamesh famously insinuated, a byproduct of our biggest desire to be immortal, a desire that can only be satiated through timeless representation? Is it the essential humane need for connection? Again, for the sake of clarity, I will focus only on the question that is within the scope of this thesis: Why has storytelling made a prodigious return with the fourth order of simulacra? How is it so that after 30,000 years, the trend of 2020 is storytelling?

In "What Our Ancestors Knew: Teaching and Learning Through Storytelling," Lawrence and Paige (2016) describe storytelling as empowering, saying "Telling our stories can be an empowering remedy for healing alienation. Instead of humanizing technologies while we dehumanize ourselves, storytelling embraces the very essence of person-to-person communication" (64). In the fourth order of simulacra suggested in the previous section, I have emphasized the emergence of this new form of media that is preceded by the adjective, social: The mode of mass communication has evolved from media-to-people to people-to-people. However, we have also in the previous chapter talked about 4.66 billion internet users actively engaging into some kind of online activity. In this crowd

where the hyperreal has become the norm, alienation and dehumanization are to be expected. To become human again, people need their stories to be heard. These stories are the only power we have in the hyperreal realm that stand out from the massive crowd.

Some of the most popular websites that are not social networks, pornographic services, or shopping portals, Buzzfeed and Vox, are good examples of stories leading today's hyperreal internet phenomenon. They are both among the top 1000 websites most visited in the United States, and they both belong in the mass media industry (Similar Web 2021). Vox's motto is "Explanatory journalism has never been more important," (Vox 2021) and Buzzfeed's is "Breaking news, vital journalism, quizzes, videos, celeb news, Tasty food videos, recipes, DIY hacks, and all the trending buzz you'll want to share" (Buzzfeed 2021). These are the websites that define this generation's agenda, and they are famous for their clickbait titles to news stories: These news stories are more story than news, though. They are reflective of this decade's obsession with making sense of the world via stories. Here are some of the example titles from Buzzfeed's News section that are currently trending: "He almost lost his father to COVID. He documented every minute," "The Kardashians shared the genius way they find out who leaks stories about them and I'm impressed," and "This guy had to spend 24 hours at a Waffle House after losing his fantasy football league" (Buzzfeed News 2021). When we look at these news, we immediately realize that they are non-news. By definition, news are "newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events" (Oxford University Press 2021). These stories are recent, they are about events, they are newly received, but are they noteworthy? In the traditional sense, no. However, this is the kind of news this generation wants to read now: What matters is not if these news are about serious events that might have global impact, what matters is if they are well-written stories. This approach is redefining what is noteworthy, what is real, what matters: What the people want to read is what matters. Thus, these are the stories that are now defining the new hyperreality. Millions of people reading about the man who got stuck in a Waffle House are well-aware that this is trivial (less than trivial really, it is barely an anecdote) but they do not care. At a time when all connection to authentic truth is lost, does it really matter if they read about the political wars being waged in the form of NATO meetings? No. This is the era of the story. A good story becomes reality, and nothing else really matters. We see how the storytelling effect has taken the world up by a storm in more serious news sites like Vox, too. One example is the news about New York's changing immigration approach in regards to receiving less migrants. The title? "The US is telling migrants 'don't come.' They might not be listening" (Vox 2021). In two sentences, the writer creates a conflict, the essential part of any story, that leaves the consumer wanting more. This is the new medium of the decade. Hyperreal is strongest in the form of a story.

These examples all reflect the journalistic approach, but this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to storytelling in social media. The power of the story is now being used to create personas, people, and events from scratch. This is the era of playing with the extent of the hyperreal, testing it, exceeding it. Many impressive examples, like the non-existent social media influencer Lil Miquela, the joke currency Dogecoin that made people millionaires in one night, or the Area 51 Raid that emerged from a "shitpost" (a shitpost is an aggressive, ironic, and of trollishly poor quality post or content posted to an online forum or social media) have all used the power of storytelling to will something into being, eventually succeeding to incredible extent (Klee 2016). The very idea of post-truth (selected the word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries)(BBC 2016) is the result of this omnipotent power of storytelling. Before moving on to the next chapter of this thesis where all these phenomena will be analyzed in detail in relation to their ability to turn nothingness into hyperreal using the power of storytelling, it is necessary to navigate this power storytelling holds. What are the essentials of a powerful story? Some theories on this issue particularly stand out, and have acted as blueprints of the best stories of all time. Among those, three will be briefly analyzed: Aristotle's narrative theory, Joseph Campbell's theory of "The Hero's Journey," and Barthesian textuality. It is crucial that we understand these universal basics of powerful storytelling, because the next chapter, we will analyze how they are used as tools to will nothing into being.

3.2.1. Aristotle

Aristotle's narrative theory, based mainly on the form of tragedy but adaptable (and adapted) to all forms of narrative, dates back to 347-342 BC, to his work Poetics. His principles of tragedy became the blueprint of proper narrative for many years to come, and from theatrical plays to novels, two millennia of writers built on this influence. The misogynistic remarks, like "Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless," (Halliwell 1998, 16-17) are aplenty in Poetics, yet with the changing generations they became obsolete, and only the parts that are still applicable to the current day remained. Three of these points stood the test of time, and they are mimesis, the six elements, and catharsis.

Let us begin with the first theory, mimesis. The theory of mimesis is groundbreaking for its time, and it still brings great questions to the table about the nature of reproduction.

Aristotle claims that all forms of poetry, as well as tragedy, are forms of imitation, saying "Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity." (Halliwell 1998, 12). He finds pleasure in this imitation, but of course, he could not have known to what extent this imitation could go: to mass reproduction and the hyperreal, and to limitless reproducibility in the 21st century.

Secondly, Aristotle lays out six main elements that make up a great tragedy, or a narrative, which are plot, character, thought, language, melody, and spectacle. It is interesting that he deems plot to be more significant than character, calling it the soul: "The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; character holds the second place" (Halliwell 1998, 9). He draws particular attention to the necessity of wholeness of plot, with a beginning, middle, and end. Plausibility of characters' actions should make the plot coherent and it should feed into the dramatic unity.

What happens, then, if the narrative has these characteristics? This is where it becomes even more interesting, because the following idea is a perfect parallel to a Baudrillardian theory mentioned in the previous chapter. For Aristotle, if the criteria he lists are met, the spectator can experience true pleasure, or catharsis. Witnessing the pain and misfortune that befalls the tragic hero, the spectator experiences catharsis. "The experience of pity and fear through the tragedy" results in "the proper purgation(s) of these emotions" in the spectator (Halliwell 1998, 8). Thus, the spectator is then purified of the negativity they hold on to. Watching this tragedy becomes an almost therapeutic experience for the spectator.

Aristotle does not go into detail about this process of catharsis, but Baudrillard does in his own theory. As was explained in detail above, he talks about the enjoyment we feel towards seeing tragedy befall in the media every day, explaining it as a direct result of "the profound pleasure of not being there" (Baudrillard 1998, 34). The bad and the ugly were once exposed and exploited by the media, and in social media, they are openly celebrated. Baudrillard talks about this glorification, saying,

> "But this same pathetic redundancy of signs is visible everywhere: the glorification of the very young and the very old, the front-page treatment for blue-blood weddings, the mass-media hymning of the body and sexuality - everywhere we see the historical disintegration of certain structures celebrating, as it were, under the sign of consumption, both their real disappearance and their caricatural resurrection. The family is dissolving? It is glorified. Children aren't children anymore? Childhood is turned into something sacred. The old are alone, sidelined? A collective show of sympathy for the aged. And, even more clearly, the body is glorified precisely as its real possi-

> bilities are atrophying and it is increasingly harassed by the system of urban, professional and bureaucratic control and constraints." (Baudrillard 1998, 99-100)

Baudrillard tends to assign the blame completely to the media here, but if he had seen the last fifteen years, would he still think the same? The last fifteen years are proof that even without the media shoving this graphic imagery down our throats, people are still fascinated by it. In fact, if the media is not actively creating these images for us, we create and distribute them. With the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, it suddenly becomes possible to trace this tendency back to Ancient Greece. Possibly, it is an essential human hunger for catharsis, and not merely the fault of the media bombarding the public with violent, pornographic imagery.

If we are to say that the fourth order of simulacra is fueled by story-driven hyperreal imagery, it is also true that in the heart of the story is the unsatiable human need for catharsis, to purge the nothingness inside, and fill that empty space with the hyperreal.

3.2.2. The Hero's Journey

It would not be an overstatement to say that Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey is one of the most overused literary theories of all time. Simply typing "Joseph Campbell – the hero's journey" into Google's academic article database comes back with 24,600 results, 13,000 of them written after 2017 (Google Scholar 2021). From music education to workplace harassment this theory has been adapted to a myriad of different areas, overused and eviscerated, leading to "spin-off" theories like the anti-hero's journey or the superhero's journey. Our collective obsession with the hero's journey can be a result of its roaring success in popular culture (George Lucas has openly admitted to using this blueprint for his Star Wars series, an interesting case of the hyperreal where the code precedes the work)(Bancks 2003) or its taking roots from Jungian analytical psychology, but most notably, it is a result of the main character syndrome, a psychological phenomenon that has emerged in the last decade.

This theory was put forward in Campbell's 1949 book The Hero with a Thousand Faces, but it used many ancient works to support his claim that a great narrative consists of seventeen steps of a mythological structure following an archetypal hero, called the

monomyth (Campbell 1949). The archetypal figures are based on Jungian archetypal theory, and he also draws from other psychoanalytical social scientists like Freud, Otto Rank, and Arnold Van Gennep. The term monomyth itself was borrowed from James Joyce's Finnegans Wake (1939), and Joyce's literature is also a big influence on his theory. The perfect narrative structure begins in the ordinary world and disrupted by a call to adventure, a call denied by the hero at first, but his mind is changed after a mentor intervenes. Campbell explains this structure as follows: "The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society. The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning" (Campbell 1949, 21). After going through this cycle, the hero comes back to their ordinary life, changed.

The idea of reinventing oneself and going on a spiritual journey to come back changed have become incredibly popular with the initiation of social networks into our lives, which would explain the sudden boom of interest in the hero's journey. Constantly broadcasting one's life puts a pressure on one to show that life as something substantial, something that amounts to something more. How can one mask the absence of the real when one puts one's life on broadcast 24/7? In the social network era, it is not about masking the absence anymore, it is about storifying the hyperreal instead. The meaninglessness and fleeting nature of life is maybe best reflected via the "story" feature of many social platforms, namely Instagram, with the module offering its users the opportunity to share videos or stories that are simply erased in 24 hours. What better way to tell a story than use the story feature, with the sharer as the hero, exploring the nothingness that looks as if it is real (more than real, hyperreal) when it is magnified a thousand times through the lens of social media?

This need to constantly use stories to turn the nothing into something and turn the ordinary person into the hero has resulted in what the psychology scholars call main character syndrome today. Phil Reed defines this syndrome in his recent article: "Main character syndrome is when somebody presents, or imagines, themself as the lead in a sort of fictional version of their life. Digital communication platforms make it easier for people to fall into the trap of main character syndrome. Main character syndrome could share traits with psychological problems like narcissistic personality disorder for a minority of people" (2021). Main character syndrome is not regarded to be a mental illness (yet) and the research on it is vastly limited, yet it has gained immense popularity in the past two years. However, the discussion that surrounds its status as a mental illness rightfully asks the question, "Is it wrong to fantasize being the main character?" In the current era where

the meaninglessness is met with apathy and non-truths and non-realities are turned into hypertruths and hyperrealities, can't one will themselves into being the main character? Main character syndrome is the perfect proof of the recent surge in interest towards the hero's journey. This is the era of apathy and the era of the story, where the heroes are ones with the best storytelling abilities.

3.2.3. Barthesian Textuality

Barthesian textuality poses certain challenges when applying to Baudrillardian hyperreality: (a) it differentiates between high and low culture by making a distinction between what he calls writerly and readerly texts, (b) he believes in the possibility of the kind of text that can be of such value that the reader is not a consumer but instead is the one who creates the narrative, (c) believes in the possibility of true jouissance through consumption of writerly text (Barthes 1975). However, in the third (and in line with the theory posited in this thesis, fourth) order of simulacra, it is impossible to exist outside the ideology, and everything has become simulacrum. What Barthes suggests is the possibility of the kind of text that takes one out of the simulacrum, a sort of red pill (a Matrix reference, and one Baudrillard would not appreciate, since he always felt like Matrix was an unfortunate misunderstanding of his works), yet Baudrillard thinks this to be possible as the threshold is now crossed (Staples 2002).

Barthes makes a distinction between two kinds of text: the writerly and the readerly. He establishes the theory of the writerly in his essay, "S/Z":

> "On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write: what is within the practice of the writer and what has left it: which texts would I consent to write (to re-write), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine? What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the writerly. Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text." (Barthes 1990, 4)

By subverting the roles of the author and the reader, Barthes attempts to change the course of the reading experience. Reading is mostly thought to be a passive experience, an

experience of being subjected to a new world of ideas created by the omnipotent author. Barthes assigns a new task to the author here, which is to craft a text in such a way that it becomes a “galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable” (Barthes 1990, 5). Barthes also assigns a new task to the reader: Recreating the narrative that is presented explicitly, rewriting and rearranging the ideas put forward in the text, and writing the text by reading it. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the readerly text, in which the reading experience is a passive one. Barthes describes the readerly text and its effects in “S/Z”:

> "This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly." (Barthes 1990, 5)

We come across readerly texts in every aspect of our lives: in commercials, TV shows, political addresses… Texts that are ready for consumption are handed to the reading audience on a silver plate, so are the ideologies and the manipulation. Critical thinking is necessary to be able to discern the readerly from the writerly, and such skill can be built not through the consumption of readerly texts but through the production and rewriting of writerly texts. The true pleasure of reading (the bliss, the jouissance) can be found in the writerly text, by being an active participant of the reading process instead of a passive onlooker which allows one to get to the core of a text. “The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure. But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions), they make up the enormous mass of our literature” (Barthes 1990, 5).

In the fourth order of simulacra, the sharp distinction between associating commercials and such mediatic products with the readerly and associating esteemed literary works with the writerly is no more. Only the readerly remains, yet just like a fetus absorbing her twin in the womb, it encapsulates the freedom of creation the writerly entails.

3.2.4. Commonalities: What Makes a Story Addictive

In addition to analyzing some of the best literary theories that navigate the necessary elements that turn a simple narrative into an extraordinary story, it would also be beneficial to explore the effects these extraordinary stories have on us. What happens when these elements come together?

Research in the last decade has proven that our brains react positively to mesmerizing stories. Something in our chemistry changes: Stories do not just metaphorically initiate change and become us, they literally do so. Certain parts of our brain respond to the stories we relate to, and information conveyed in the form of stories help cement that information. This goes to show that stories not only create narratives of the real, but also create feelings and light up certain neural pathways that we associate with the real. An expertly curated story allows the audience to mimic the behaviors conveyed through the story. Let us remember the example of the little girl feigning an illness to get out of school who eventually actually experiences the symptoms of her make-believe illness: Her illness became real through simulation. The stronger her story, the more real her illness became in that instance. After conducting extensive research on the effect stories have on our brains, Paul J. Zak, a professor of neuroeconomics, likens this phenomenon to “the feeling of dominance you have after James Bond saves the world, and your motivation to work out after watching the Spartans fight in 300” (Zak 2014, 2). A powerful story simulates such feelings in us, blurring the line between what we think to be real and what we so firmly believe to be fiction.

Zak’s research is fascinating in many ways, but mostly in that he based his research on the measurement of the brain activity in the audience as they are subjected to stories in engaging visual format: movies. As the audience watches a James Bond movie, Zak watches “an amazing neural ballet in which a story line changes the activity of people’s brains” (Zak 2014, 1). By measuring the brain activity of the viewers, he can effectively measure how “stories change our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (Zak 2014, 1). He explains his research as follows:

> "A decade ago, my lab discovered that a neurochemical called oxytocin is a key “it’s safe to approach others” signal in the brain. Oxytocin is produced when we are trusted or shown a kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions. ... More recently my lab wondered if we could

> “hack” the oxytocin system to motivate people to engage in cooperative behaviors. To do this, we tested if narratives shot on video … would cause the brain to make oxytocin. By taking blood draws before and after the narrative, we found that character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis. Further, the amount of oxytocin released by the brain predicted how much people were willing to help others; for example, donating money to a charity associated with the narrative." (Zak 2014, 1-2)

According to Zak and his team’s research, it becomes evident that a story can affect our mental processes, including decision-making and empathy. If we are told a strong story about any topic we have no previous knowledge about, that story triggers an emotional and rational response in us. This begs the question: What happens when the story becomes more and more visually and auditorily life-like and easier to empathize with? What happens if the story itself tells you that it is real, repeatedly? This, then, would shift what we think to be real and what we think to be unreal. If, to sum up, Baudrillardian real is that which cannot be represented, what happens when that which can be represented infinitely and with the exactitude of the original itself tells you that it is real, via a holistically crafted story? Then, what we think to be real is irretrievably shifted. Reproducibility and originality slowly start to lose their meanings, and what actually and chemically changes our train of thought remains: the story. We will see examples of this phenomenon in the next chapter, in cases like the influencer Lil Miquela, which show that any good story supported with somehow believable visuals can pass as real in this age of apathy. When people are not only aware of but also laughing at and enjoying the absence of the real, the situation births a breeding ground for good storytelling to shine.

Wendy Suzuki (2018) interviewed Uri Hasson and his team for The Journal of Neuroscience about their research on storytelling’s effects on the brain, and the results Hasson’s research bring forward are in line with Zak’s team’s research. Focusing on the “neural mechanism underlying human communication,” Hasson and his team looked at “what is going on in the listeners’ brains as they listen to … stories” (Suzuki et al. 9468). What they found was a commonality of responses in the listeners’ brains: “The intersubject neural similarity in early auditory areas was coupled to the acoustic properties of the spoken words. In contrast, the intersubject neural similarity in high-order areas … was decoupled from the acoustic features and was coupled to the story’s narrative,” says Hasson (Suzuki et al. 9468). This goes to show that mainly not the sounds and images we find acoustically and visually pleasing but instead the stories the narratives of which we can relate to trigger a positive response in our brains. The power of storytelling is not simply metaphorical, but it actually creates a pleasure response in us. Suzuki’s final comments on this issue are especially interesting, as she calls storytelling a mode of communication

that “engages and even entrains our brains in reproducible ways” (Suzuki et al. 9470). I find it fascinating that she remarks this mode of communication reproducible, seeing as reproducibility is the first step in the loss of authenticity. If stories contain within them the power to entrain our brains, then they can decode and recode our brains as well, thus shifting what we believe to be real.

3.3. Social Media as Hyperreal Storytelling

The two concepts, Baudrillardian hyperreal and the power of storytelling (as well as theories about powerful storytelling), might seem hard to reconcile at first. However, when we focus on the how of the hyperreal processes in the age of social media rather than the why of them, we start seeing a holistic picture. In the first three orders of the simulacra, we first saw attempts at representing the real, which is when the real had its first break with realness. This was done via art and mostly painting. In the second order, we saw mechanical reproduction break the connection between the real and the representation completely, leaving behind only the connection between the representations themselves. Then, in the third order, we witnessed the emergence of the hyperreal and the total death of the real, with the hyperreal masking the absence of the real. As we move 40 years away from the third order, we see the dominance of the hyperreal in all aspects of our lives: We ourselves have become infinitely reproducible hyperreal subjects. But what is different is our apathetic awareness of it, and how we became aware and made our peace with such a drastic break is through stories.

In this chapter, we have first outlined three of the most striking literary theories in the history of literature: Aristotle’s, Campbell’s, and Barthes’s. The reason why these theories still hold so much weight is that they paved the way for the powerful stories told today. These stories are not in traditional forms anymore: In fact, they are mostly in the forms of fleeting social media posts. Yet we still see the constituents of literary theory (laid out by the names mentioned above) in these posts that make something out of nothing. A not-so-funny joke accepted by many as reality simply because it is too good not to believe is the result of these stories. Secondly, we have discussed the effects of storytelling on our brains, citing two neuroscientific researches. It is important to make this distinction between the root and the result; the root being the literary theories and the result being the changing chemical processes in our brains.

Zak's research actually combines these two parts (root and result) of storytelling, and references Campbell, saying, "Many of us know from Joseph Campbell's work that enduring stories tend to share a dramatic arc in which a character struggles and eventually finds heretofore unknown abilities and uses these to triumph over adversity; my work shows that the brain is highly attracted to this story style" (Zak 2014, 2). Our brains are not just attracted to any narrative, they are attracted to strong narratives. The brain's reaction to stories showcasing struggles and Campbell's theory of the hero's journey exemplify this phenomenon. This is why understanding the history of literary theory behind these powerful stories matters. These theories unveil an almost magical power that alters the brain's chemistry. A good example of this that also ties it up with the idea of pure simulacrum is Donald Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again," a narrative which in itself contained a beautiful story of a once great America, an America which never existed but one that surely looks good on paper (Richmond and Porpora 2019).

4. 21ST CENTURY SOCIAL MEDIA PHENOMENA

Social media is the public enemy number one of the 21st century: An overwhelming majority of discourse on the issue highlights how social media is disrupting our youth, disrupting the elderly, disrupting our attention spans, disrupting our good old way of life, and the list goes on and on. Both in academia and in daily narratives, we encounter requiems for the walls social media have put between us. "Social media enables people to create false identities and superficial connections, causes depression and is a primary recruiting tool of criminals and terrorists," (Amedie 2015) claims Jacob Amedie, and a 2011 clinical report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) points out that "The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents" (Schurgin O'Keeffee 2011). Yet this thesis is not concerned with the effects of social media on people's psyches or society in general, it acknowledges that social media has changed the way of life completely and irretrievably. The primary concerns of this work are unearthing how social media puts storytelling to use to create hyperreal phenomena, how social media distorts preapproved notions of the real, and how the age of social media differs from the third order of simulacra where media is omnipotent and the audiences are receptive only.

The flashy, infinite images that the social media constantly overwhelms its users with are created by the users themselves, creating a cycle of constant creation and consumption. In fact, this is a necessity to keep the attention of the consumers. Zak's research emphasizes this relation between a story and attention as well, noting, "We discovered that, in order to motivate a desire to help others, a story must first sustain attention – a scarce resource in the brain – by developing tension during the narrative. If the story is able to create that tension, then it is likely that attentive viewers/listeners will come to share the emotions of the characters in it, and after it ends, likely to continue mimicking the feelings and behaviors of those characters" (Zak 2014, 3). Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that stories that embody the basics of good storytelling have a better chance at holding the attention of and triggering an emotive response in their audience. The extent to which the audience can pay attention to and emphasize with the story is in direct proportion to the extent of this emotive response, which itself is in direct proportion to how an abstract concept can be made real in the public eye. We see examples of this in certain cases and

phenomena, which will be examined in depth in this chapter.[2]

4.1. Social Media Phenomena

The subjectivity of social media posting makes it the perfect base to curate new realities. An absurd claim, like the earth being flat, can be turned into a claim that is believed by hundreds of thousands of people if it is told with conviction, although the roundness of the Earth was proven in the Middle Ages (Davies 2008, 13). A 60-year-old woman can alter her face to look like a 20-year-old using image alteration software and post that picture on her social media profile expecting people to believe that is her actual face. State-sponsored Russian "trolls" can write the same propaganda a million times on Twitter until the poll results are shockingly proven to be incorrect and an unlikely real estate king is chosen to be the president of the biggest economy of the world (Zannettou 2019, 355). There are two stages to the current social media phenomenon: The first is, you let out the narrative you want to be perceived as real, which is the case we see with the so-called "Instagram reality" posts (Tiggemann 2020, 2184). The second, you watch that narrative be accepted by an overwhelming majority to be real. If the majority believes that it is real in a world where the absence of the real is always subtly there, what stops it from being real? This process is the surefire way to make a narrative reality, and will be analyzed in two parts: Instagram reality and post-truth.

4.1.1. Instagram Reality

Simply, Instagram is where body positivity goes to die. As one scrolls through endless pictures of beautiful people having fun, if the phone screen goes dark for just a second,

[2]It is important to note some limitations I have run into when analyzing social media's role in the fourth order in the following chapters. Social media is widely complex concept, and it is hard to reduce it to a one-dimensional structure. The foremost issue is the abundance of different platforms that have different uses and audiences: Twitter and Instagram, for instance, serve completely different purposes with similar but different demographics. This thesis uses Instagram for most of its examples, mainly due to its "Story" feature and status as an influencer hub, yet in the cases where other platforms are used, they are explicitly stated with short explanations. However, every platform requires in-depth analyses, which I unfortunately cannot go into detail in this thesis for the sake of clarity and relevance. Another issue, pointed out by my committee member Dr. Ayşecan Terzioğlu, is clarifying the age group, gender, and geographical status of the group of people interacting with social media mentioned in this thesis. These facts and ideas, unless stated otherwise, are relevant for people with internet connections and social media access, aged 13 to 65.

one faces their own reflection. The stark contrast between the glorious slideshow of beautiful, happy people and the apathetic reflection of one's face is the one image that perfectly encapsulates this generation's construction of the real. It is not that anyone truly believes life is really this beautiful or this happiness inducing, it is just that there is no alternative way of existence for the majority of people outside the hyperreal world social media has created. However, this is a good case to see how what we believe is not necessarily what our brains accept to be real. Even though we are aware that there are many filters and image alterations in play, we still accept this norm of flawless beauty to be real. Research about social media and body image reveals so: It has been demonstrated that "Instagram use is related to a variety of body image concerns, including body dissatisfaction and self-objectification" (Tiggemann 2020, 2184). The conflict between what we know consciously and what we think to be real proves that our apathy towards the absence of the real does not bar us from categorizing certain truths as real.

It is no surprise that the most popular mobile image alteration application, Facetune, is also among the top 10 most downloaded applications in the United States; and in 2019, it was downloaded over 60 million times[3] (Halon 2019). It should be noted that digital alterations such as smoothing the skin, shrinking the nose, or magnifying the eyes are not just applied through third party applications like Facetune; they are also included as filters in the most commonly used social media applications like Snapchat or Instagram as part of the Story module. In Instagram Stories, the users share images or videos that disappear within 24 hours, and by careful curation, they actually create a narrative of their lives. These narratives eventually alter how the outer world perceives them, which leads to their own perceptions of the self shifting. This does not necessarily have to be Stories including their faces or bodies – they can be about political events they want to be affiliated with, movie recommendations of movies they want people to see, or a photo of a fancy resort; when in reality they might have no idea about that particular event, or never have watched that movie, or maybe they might be at that fancy resort working as a waitress. This was also the defense of Kürşat Ayvatoğlu, the AK Parti (Justice and Development Party which has been in power in Turkey since 2003) official whose fortune came under public scrutiny after his video consuming cocaine was made public. About his photos taken in expensive cars and hotels, he defended himself saying, "We try to share the best pictures and lead the best lives. People share their photos only when they eat the best food, drive the best car, or go to the best locale. I warn my young brothers and sisters against this. No one should try to act as if something they are not on social media[4]" (Akduman 2021). Our common knowledge of the deceptive nature of social

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[3]More recent data have not been made publicly available.

[4]Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Turkish to English are the author's.

media is such public knowledge that it is used as a defense statement in the public eye, yet this does not stop people from subconsciously accepting the images they see on these networks as real and post similar pictures with the fear of missing out.

Another interesting aspect of Instagram reality is the real-life extensions of this visual narrative. This story becoming real in the minds is one dimension, but its becoming physically real is another. The body dysmorphia attached to such filters has reached such a point that there is a boom in plastic surgeries. Julia Brucculieri defines this phenomenon, saying, “Now, patients are even bringing filtered selfies to their plastic surgeons to illustrate what they’re looking to achieve, according to Dr. Matthew Schulman, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in New York City. One doctor has referred to this phenomenon as ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia.’ Some have even argued that Snapchat filters might be making us forget what we actually look like” (Brucculieri 2018). This is a whole new level of hyperreality: In the third order of simulacra, there was the media feeding touched up, digitally altered images of supermodels to the mass, which in itself shattered people’s understanding of the real to begin with. However, in this fourth order, people can alter their photographs themselves, and the line between the face on the phone screen and the mirror gets blurry. The real is not the face anymore but the altered image, the hyperreal, and the face follows it through surgical intervention.

4.1.2. Fake News in the Post-Truth Era

People tend to believe information that is in line with their world views (Schmidt et al. 2017). This makes us biased against information that does not match what we want to believe in, and further complicates an already complicated notion: reality and truth. In the third order of simulacra, at least what the media dictated came from authorities who monopolized media – not that that is a positive thing, but it sure barred a lot of confusion: There was one untrue reality. In today’s peer to peer media, social media, the multiplicity of voices also connotes a multiplicity of realities. In a BBC interview, Wired co-founder Kevin Kelly comments on this, saying, “Truth is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counterfact and all these counterfacts and facts look identical online, which is confusing to most people” (Gray 2017). The self-referentiality of language makes the matters even more complicated: If something is said by a million people again and again, how does one suggest that it is not real? And, to take it a step further, if action is taken on accounts of that non-reality (one that

eventually became a hyperreal form of reality after being uttered again and again), has it become reality then? A good example of this has happened a few years ago, when "fake news stories in June 2017 reported Ethereum's founder Vitalik Buterin had died in a car crash its market value was reported to have dropped by $4 billion" (Anderson and Rainie 2017). This does not connote Buterin's physical, actual death, yet the consequences are inseparable from the consequences of his would-be real death. Fake news reflect the power of the story: If the story is believable, it shifts the physical realm.

Another good example is the timeline leading to UK's leaving the European Union, a process during which there was a social media bombardment of fake news. It was an interesting time for the Britons, which was later likened to a hypnosis, since more than a quarter of the people who voted for the UK to leave the European Union later expressed regret (Zorzut 2020). The extent of fake news during this time was at an all-time high. Waterson comments on this, saying, "Indeed, just as 'fake news' was more popular on Facebook than 'real' mainstream news in the run-up to the 2016 US election, the most popular story on Facebook during the UK Brexit campaign of the same year was a factually incorrect one from the Daily Express about the European Union planning to kill off the National Health Service" (as cited in Morris 2020, 4). The intriguing story of the European Union threatening one of the UK's sources of pride, the National Health Service, triggers such a response in its audience that it results in a drastic outcome. As the effect of the story wears off, regret comes setting in.

Another interesting phenomenon is the phenomenon of the deep fake, where someone's face and/or voice is digitally added onto another image or video to create a narrative. Today, although there are very believable deep fakes, they can still be discerned using professional software. But it is expected that in the next decade the deep fake images will be undiscernible (Toews 2020). What will dictate what is real and what is not then, in an era where the real is already long lost? This brings us to the cases where similar technologies have been used to actualize a story to successful ends, most notable, the case of Lil Miquela.

4.2. Cases

The phenomena explored in the above section have not only been used in secrecy, as part of political propaganda, or out of sheer ignorance or idiocrasy. They have also been

used explicitly to create a story, to effectively try one's hand at altering the hyperreal or attempting to create something real out of something that is physically unreal. Just like the meme culture toyed with the idea of the absence of the real using absurdist comedy, these cases are also those that accept the absence of the real: Yet their response is playfully building on this absence using the power of the story to curate the hyperreal. These cases/stories, the efficacy of which has been objectively proven by data, all build on the literary theories of storytelling we have talked about in Chapter 3 in one way or another. As we move on to these cases, we will see that they either implore a cathartic response, situate the unreal character as the hero to make them real, or create a story that lends itself to a writerly reading. This is how they went from unreal to hyperreal, then to beyond hyperreal: They now occupy such a place in the minds of the audiences they intend to speak to that judging by this space alone, their reality can again be up for discussion, which is more than what we can say for some things that the public tends to call objective truths.

4.2.1. Lil Miquela

Miquela Sousa is a famous 19-year-old Brazilian-American Instagram model and singer who modeled for luxury brands like Calvin Klein and Prada and is amassing a whopping 3 million followers on Instagram as of March 2021 (Blake 2021). She is more commonly known as Lil Miquela. She is friends with many celebrities like Diplo and Millie Bobby Brown, and was chosen one of Time's 25 Most Influential People on the Internet in 2018 (Time 2018). She is also a contributing arts editor to Dazed magazine (Blake 2021) and a social justice activist. But most notably, she is not real – not in the sense that we came to understand real in the past millennia. Lil Miquela's creators, Brud, define themselves as "a transmedia studio that creates digital character-driven story worlds" (Brud.fyi 2021). They created Miquela through computer-generated imagery (CGI) and kept their identity a secret at first, thus creating an aura of mystery around her. Little was known about her: There were many debates about her realness, whether she was a robot or a flesh and bone person with too many filters on. Still, her true rise began in 2018, after the post she shared detailing her origin story. This post featured all the steps of the hero's journey laid out by Joseph Campbell, from making allies to a major almost-war:

"This has been the hardest week of my life so thank you to everyone who

Figure 4 Lil Miquela. "BRB." Instagram, March 9, 2021.

> checked in with me. Ok now here's the hard part. My hands are literally shaking. I'm not a human being ... The truth is I was built by a man named Daniel Cain in order to be a servant. Brud stole me from his company in Silicon Valley and "re-programmed" me to be "free." But they're the ones who define my freedom through THEIR technology ... I'm not a human, but am I still a person? The people at Brud were a family to me. They found me a place to live, they gave me money, they showered me with love and friendship. They gave me a career. I can see now that they never loved me. I was just a means of making money. ... I want to be clear and honest from here on out: I'm a robot." (Bereznak 2019)

Miquela's story is a great example of both the power of storytelling and this generation's coming to terms with the absence of the real: Miquela was open about her status as a robot, after which she truly rose to popularity. The public was aware of her non-human status, that she was merely a story written by a studio. They did not care. As long as they emphasized with this young girl's struggles, she might as well have been real. Drenten and Brooks (2020) describe Miquela's perception in the public eye as follows: "Lil Miquela's perceived authenticity emulates that of a typical influencer—sharing insecurities, ambitions and vulnerabilities with the audience. Yet, she is not real. Her authenticity is archetypal" (1322). However, if her insecurities and vulnerabilities are met with overwhelming support from other subjects on social media, how can we say with certainty that she is not real? We perceive what we think to be real with our minds, and there is no certain rule that dictates what constitutes as real. We have now established

that reality is beyond the physical realm. Imagine this scenario: If two coworkers meet during the pandemic over Zoom, and work for months together yet only see each other through computer screens, how are they any different than Lil Miquela?

People have long tried to use Miquela's existence to exert a life lesson. In her short life, she has become the main subject of hundreds of academic articles as the poster child of (a) how we are losing touch with our "truth," (b) how we are in desperate need of real communication. For instance, it has been noted, "But the more interesting question is not who Miquela is, but why she matters. Because Miquela holds up a mirror to how we construct our own online personas. Whether you're conscious of it or not, you're doing it too" (Hubble 2018, 20). We also see more optimistic approaches, such as this one: "An interrogation of Miquela and trends in AI technology help us get both real and better, promoting more critically conscious awareness of misinformation issues and stimulating awareness of human needs for personal connection, vulnerability, and consciousness" (Blanton & Carbajal 2019, 95). We are so keen on legitimizing and finding meaning in reality that we try to make sure everything somehow holds up a mirror to our existence, but when they do, what we see is not our reflection – it is complete, total abyss. You cannot hold a story, you cannot touch a story: Yet you can inexplicably feel it to the extent that oxytocin production is triggered in your brain. In a world of hyperreality, that seems to be the most tangible reality.

4.2.2. Dogecoin

Some call dogecoin a multi-million-dollar joke (Dansa 2021). But when does a joke stop being a joke and turn into an earth-shaking, life-shifting force of its own? It does so when it has a strong rags-to-riches story, one that toys with the idea of a meme taking on a life of its own. Exceeding $90 billion market volume, dogecoin made hundreds of thousands of people rich overnight (Dansa 2021).

This cryptocurrency is different than other decentralized networks that allow peer-to-peer transaction in that it has started out as a complete joke. Its name, doge, comes from the doge meme (a picture of a curious-looking Shiba Inu with short words and sentences written in broken English surrounding it). It took its roots at Reddit, where people sent each other dogecoins to award each other for good quality posts. Since one dogecoin cost less than a cent, it was a running joke for a long while. Until one day, some Reddit

users decided to raise money for a Jamaican bobsled team who could not attend the Olympics due to money shortage: But they decided to do so using dogecoin. As millions of dogecoin, amounting to a few thousand dollars, were sent to the team, the fate of dogecoin changed. The spirit of cooperation and light-hearted fun awoke something in people: There was a story in there. From there, people started investing precisely in this story. It was more of a fun gag than an investment to throw money into dogecoin then.

After a few years, however, everything had changed. Billionaires of the world, like Elon Musk, found this story funny. With one tweet, they completely shook the markets, making people who invested a thousand dollars a month ago earn a hundred thousand dollars overnight. Dogecoin's founder, Jackson Palmer, describes the feeling: "He remembers this moment as a 'reality check.' Dogecoin was a tweet, then it was a cryptocurrency worth money in the real world. Six months later, he watched as a joke that he'd made in passing somehow manifested itself into something tangible. A Dogecar in full flight. It reminded Palmer how insane the world could be ... This is the story of Dogecoin, the joke that became too real for its own good" (Serrels 2021). In all kinds of news about dogecoin, there is inevitably a mention of the real, usually using words like surreal, unreal, or as in this example, too real. What is interesting about dogecoin is that due to its infinite reproducibility by basically anyone, it was estimated by esteemed finance experts that it could never catch on and it would be the financial equivalent of setting your money on fire to invest in this cryptocurrency. The infinite reproducibility, the aspect that completely removed all connection to reality in the third order of simulacra, has come full circle in the fourth order of simulacra thanks to its strong origin story. It is not real, but it is too real, because a collective madness took over, and millions of people wanted it to be real. What stopped it from being real, then? Nothing. That is how it skyrocketed to $90 billion.

Dogecoin's story is the trifecta of all must-haves of storytelling explained in Chapter 3. Its call to adventure was initially refused by many, then taken on, with many allies on the way. This alliance was achieved over Reddit, were hundreds of thousands of people went online to tell each other to "Keep holding on," and to never sell. Corporations who lost money due to this tried to intervene, so did governments. But the people fought back, at one point even driving the stock market to a halt. Read like a text, it was not readerly at all: The current capitalist system and its centralized structure meant money being used to control and track people, and it was the easy option, understandable to all, consumed and used by all. Dogecoin's philosophy of the absurd required a certain acclimation to the niche culture of Reddit, to understand what decentralization meant, and most importantly, to have given up on fighting for reality to such an extent that a Shiba Inu with the words "wow" and "such unreal" written around it became a pastiche of the absence of the real. To understand what doge entailed, one had to exist in a certain

system of hyperreal imagery while being aware of the hyperreality of these images. This was really a Barthesian take on textuality, with events and phenomena passing as writerly. Finally, if anything, it was cathartic. The whole duration of its story played out as an immense improbability, with all the reputable sources mocking the idea of this currency ever becoming real. For those who believed in its story, its 14,000% increase in less than five months was a journey of renewal, purification, and purgation. It was not only the effects of this increase, but the process that it happened, the story that resulted in this reaction.

Dogecoin is the perfect example of how this generation's mockery of the absence of the real, supported by a strong story, might lead to: A market crash and a collective flirtation with what possibly comes after hyperreal, almost like a full circle – too real.

5. CONCLUSION

Koch describes Baudrillard's state of mind about the absence of the real as pessimistic, saying he does not feel there are any real "possibilities of resistance to the simulational order" because of "its pervasiveness within the advanced states, especially the United States, and because of its transparent nature . . . Further, such an order is very seductive. It is not clear that people would really want more time with their families and a less repressive political climate if it meant they had to abandon their cell phones and salad-shooters" (Koch 2006, 570). This is a good place to stop and ask ourselves if the desired final result here should be to escape or resist the simulational order. We have established here that the real is lost: It started getting fuzzier and paler the second it was first represented, and turned into nothingness with infinite representation. Should we, then, go after the real? Is our end goal to seek authentic human relations or connections in the social media era? I believe not. If nothingness, or the absence of the real, in the third order of simulacra was an abyss, the fourth order of simulacra is when the abyss gazes back into us.

In this thesis, I had one essential claim: We now replaced the absence of the real with stories. These are the stories that become us, slowly and surely, that replace both our fragmented existences and the real-shaped holes in our psyches. The third order of simulacra has become the fourth order of simulacra when the media became social media, when we ourselves became the creators of narratives that did not really exist. In this infinite abundance of information and story, I questioned how some stories stood out amongst others to become real: Why don't all narratives we put out there become real? To trace the reasons, I analyzed the literary theories of storytelling that shaped the discourse. Then, I explored the most outstanding phenomena and cases of the last decade to inquire into the power of storytelling to become. It would be contradictory to say that they become real, seeing as nothing is so, yet they become closest to reality than all else. I also explored this generation's reaction to the absence of the real, seeing as people's subject positions played a crucial role in Baudrillard's theory. Their inability to respond and truly come to terms with the absence of the real led to the hyperreal replacing the real, in a way. I have then looked into the meme culture of this generation to examine the apathy towards the absence of the real as is usual with this generation in contrast to the generation Baudrillard described some four decades ago.

What expects us is exciting. This is a transformation from the real, to the disappearance of the real, then to humanity's ignorance of the disappearance, followed by humanity's apathy towards it. The natural next step would be to celebrate and exploit this disappearance, and at some point, if Campbell's circular theory can be applied to life as one big analogy, it could come full circle and give birth to a new form of real. Stories have played a huge role in this transformation, and they will keep doing so. As the power of the story improves in the coming decades, whether something is real or not will be even more irrelevant than it is today. Imagine Lil Miquela, but not as a social media persona: Imagine her as someone who encapsulates all the mannerisms you love in one person and texting you, calling you, listening to you and responding to you. What will become of the concept of the real then? Reality has become not about flesh and bone, but about story instead. We, too, have become the stories we tell – and it is a brave new world from here.

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