# Simulation, Simulacra, and Modern Modes of Escapism:

# Living in the *Hyperreal*

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of
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# Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1.  The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at Brac University.

2.  The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.

3.  The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.

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# Approval

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# Abstract

The state of the modern world as it stands, creates the perfect conditions to live an imperfect life. Most people live their lives separate from their desires of how they would like for it to be if given the chance to choose. This sense of "imperfection" creates room for twisting and turning reality as we know it to give individuals the opportunity and experience life anew through different mediums, through a "simulated" reality, to escape the reality they've known to be their own. This form of escapism can take a variety of forms through art, literature, meditation, and in the modern world through technology. At the very core of these mediums, simulation and in turn simulacra pierce through to make way for the hyperreal. This study attempts to critically analyze the postmodern world and its many ways of escapism to relate with Jean Baudrillard's work in *Simulacra and Simulation* and to explore the ways of how modern media controls much of our reality to the point of the current world being a hyperreal one.

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction

The contemporary world is one where we are under the impression of having an endless amount of choices. The availability of choices is as incredible a feat of the modern world as it is deceptive. The dawn of a consumer-centric capitalistic world provides an illusion of choice but never truly is an individual able to escape this perfected hypnotic trance curated specifically for the consumer. Consumer culture acts as an extension to one's personality, one's "uniqueness" as they have learned to convince themselves as well as those around them. A person learns to define themselves and others by their displayed attributes, their surroundings, and their fabricated "atmosphere". Baudrillard explains in *The System of Objects* that there is an "internal atmosphere" as well as an "external atmosphere", crafted carefully by both tangible and intangible objects to create and project accordingly, to the decided persona of the individual or consumer.

Consumption not only refers to gastronomy but also refers to the partaking of any tangible objects such as clothing, housing, furniture, etc. to intangible objects like the genre of music a person listens to, their preferred cuisine, what their favorite sports team is, and so on. A person consumes (e.g. content, information, ideas, and of course material goods) in a way that they are subliminally conditioned to believe is best suited to their agenda. It is also an agenda that they have not created consciously. The media, fueled by the capitalist model of the postmodern era, is the prime force behind the many narratives available for consumers to relate to and fall into. These narratives, in turn, take the form of a "reality" according to which agenda fits best along with the consumers that feel in alignment with the advertised product. In this way, realities are born out of conveniences, be it for the consumer's convenience of consumption, or the producer's convenience of profit.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to explore and critically analyze many such realities created by the media, different corporations, and an evolving technological expansion at the disposal of the general people; where these realities no longer reflect what truly is, but a version of it, an interpretation of it, a *copy* of it, through simulations and in turn a simulacrum - which then inevitably results in the Hyperreal. A simulation is a copy of the perceived reality, a simulacrum is when a simulation itself is replicated, and a hyperreal is when a simulacrum can no longer be determined as reality nor a copy of reality, as it becomes indistinguishable with merged elements from the source and its reinterpretations. Baudrillard explains in *Simulacra and Simulation,* "A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences."(4); hyperreal is hence a state where the individual no longer realizes if it is in fact the real or not, nor if it is a copy or even a fragment of its authentic source material.

## The Background

### The Beginning

"Culture" has been as essential to human communities as existence itself, for the integration of culture can be traced back to the oldest dated civilizations from about 10,000 BC, which marks the beginning of the "Neolithic" or "New Stone Age" of early human civilizations[1]. According to Matthew Arnold, "[C]ulture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world." (*Culture and Anarchy* 46). Which highlights how the function of culture at its very core, is to provide meta-narratives which then help its people to make sense of all that they see in the world around them, to be concerned about the "best" of what

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[1] pleiades.stoa.org

has been said and thought according to their perception, hence creating one particular version of reality in light of that understanding unique to one's culture. That understanding, however, differs from culture to culture and Claude Lévi-Strauss explains in his book *Myth and Meaning* that "I don't think that cultures have tried systematically or methodically to differentiate themselves from each other. The fact is that for hundreds of thousands of years mankind was not very numerous on the earth; small groups were living in isolation, so that it was only natural that they developed characteristics of their own and became different from each other." (18). This explains quite nicely how realities created and interpreted by different cultures tend to differ from one another as they had different grand narratives for their people to oblige, because what they saw and experienced at their respective culture's inception were in fact different from someone else's culture many a distance away. The concept of what it means for something to be *real* is widely accepted to be, "The state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be."[2], hence, what is accepted as the reality to an individual is more than speculation on their part, it acts as information coming from a source they have learned to trust.

Due to this reason, what exactly would be a good enough scale to determine which set of beliefs amongst these different groups of people and their specific versions of reality be closest to the "absolute" version of it, and what role does the grand narratives of one's immediate culture play in order for that individual to be as close to the *truth* as possible; these aren't easy questions to ask nor answer, because there is no one way to determine the absolute while living in the *hyperreal*. This illustrates how, what we do not know about, being unable to influence our thinking and our way of living as well as our way of making sense of life's big questions. Consequently, what we do not know does not have an active role in our lives, nor any room in our realities. Just like the "Tasaday", as mentioned by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. The Tasaday were discovered in the depths of the Philippine jungles

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[2] dictionary.cambridge.org

in 1971 and lived their lives for eight centuries without the slightest idea about the rest of the world and what was in it apart from themselves. So, the rest of the world was nonexistent within their specific version of reality. On that account, they lived in a simulacrum where nothing else existed other than their own unique ideals and way of life. Baudrillard mentions that the ways of the Tasaday, as in the way a specific group of people living in complete oblivion of the rest of the world, grants them their authentic autonomy along with its purest form, untainted by ideas that were not birthed within their own culture.

The reality in this way proves itself to be easily influenced, as it is fluid and multifaceted, almost malleable. From a post-structuralist point of view, there is never a point in time where one can confidently declare at arriving at the zenith of truth or the absolute. The existing world in contrast with the world of thoughts and ideas, empirical relations along with speculative relations and the world with its "meagre categories" add to the materialistic notion of an already consumer centric world (Choat, *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* 79), and yet it is illusory and based on ideological concepts; hence, created for a specific purpose and not automatically an absolute truth. This way of viewing reality renders the process of categorization obsolete and pointless because labels no longer remain factual but become the result of speculation or belief. "Belief, faith in information attach themselves to this tautological proof that the system gives of itself by doubling the signs of an unlocatable reality." (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 62), declares Baudrillard in order to shed light on how an attached *sign* might *signify* a meaning solely based on belief and faith in specific information, that is, information that is not necessarily verifiable in an "unlocatable" reality. That is to say, any version of the truth or the real, or the absolute, is then a set of temporary ideas because stability itself becomes an interpreted reality. This way of interpreting aligns with the state of the postmodern world quite conveniently. A deconstructed, fragmented,

disillusioned world, where existing chronicles and inherited narratives are questioned and rejected in a reality that no longer has a solid version of itself to offer.

The world at present has now become a whirlpool of ideas, narratives, and realities that are based off each other in a constant game of replicating and referencing through simulation and simulacra, and yet even all of these combined resemble little of the original inspiration. Photoshopped images of celebrities and models used in various advertisements, magazines, movie posters etc. are a common illustration of this practice nowadays. The digitally altered image resembles the original person very little, in order to project an unrealistic and flawless look which actually does not exist. This can also be observed in the media and its many facets and streams which influence consumers and their way of thinking, instigating a myriad of opinions to align themselves with such as associating certain brands or companies with a specific lifestyle or aesthetic. At present, the tangible world, as in the world a person experiences through their senses has started to merge with the world that is not so tangible; examples can be found in the integration of recognizable elements from real life merging with technological advancements in the form of augmented and virtual reality, the cyberspace or the internet as well as artificial intelligence etc. Even though the merge of the real and the conceptual are of two separate dimensions; the dimension of ideas, concepts and thoughts applied through the aforementioned technology becomes just as influential and real as the ideas responsible for its inception. A capitalistic world that takes advantage of the shortcomings of individuals such as their insecurities, desires etc., along with a stream of technology reaching through boundaries of the imaginary, an individual can now experience countless realities for the purpose of escaping the ones they know to be their own.

<u>Simulation, Simulacra and the Hyperreal:</u>

When one's immediate culture is the source of one's belief system, it is safe to say that it is powerful enough a force to transcend time and space in order to create versions of reality that serve its own purpose. Traditionally culture shaped reality through art, architecture, clothing etc. It was tangible, it had texture, it was something that held potential to become an artifact and most of it did as the legacy of past civilizations remains. But as time paced forward, so did culture march on and astoundingly so along with the growth of modern technology. In the past, one would have to replicate "images" manually to reproduce the original, and it would still not be an exact copy just as it would be an arduous process to carry out multiple times to produce by hand. While the modern individual can simply take a photograph and preserve the image for posterity. So visually speaking, a person or an object could be anywhere at any time, transcending time itself. In this way, the replication of an image kept becoming easier, to the point where it was almost effortless and could be taken for granted with advanced technology.

From a photograph to an edited version of a photograph to a version of it that looks nothing like the original, simulations had been taking place at a pace that is hard to measure through a unit of time, but it was happening everywhere and all at once due to the ease of access technology had granted people. Walter Benjamin explores this phenomenon in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and explains how, "For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens. Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech." (7). Although the replication looked the part of the original, Benjamin acknowledged how it certainly lacked the authenticity of the original that had a discernible "aura" (9), and so it was in truth something else entirely from what it visually represented.

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In this way by replicating reality, a simulation took place, and by copying the simulation, a simulacrum took place. "The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these." (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 3), these reproductions are, according to Baudrillard, simulations of the real. He emphasizes how the simulated reality is not bound to abide by rationality, because it is not measured by rationality to be considered as a convincing version of reality to begin with. When the boundaries of simulacra reach a point where one cannot determine which is the real and which is not, a hyperreal emerges. Baudrillard states that, "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." (*Simulacra and Simulation* 3). Which is to say, no longer is the hyperreal bound by the restrictions of nature, of the laws of nature and elements that make something considered as "natural", it is not bounded by a territory from which it keeps a solid shape or form. Yet, it is deemed every bit as real in this postmodern world where the very notion of a stable reality is questioned. It has reached a point where one cannot distinguish between what is the original and what seems like an original on its own yet has no similar traits to the true original. The hyperreal has been at play with its subtle and not-so-subtle integration in our lives over the years through technological innovation, particularly through access to cyberspace (the internet as well as the intranet along with their offline counterparts), augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence etc.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review

The main emphasis and foundation of this thesis are Jean Baudrillard's writings, particularly *Simulacra and Simulation*, *The System of Objects*, and *The Conspiracy of Art*. This study connects the present world and use components of it to create liaisons between contemporary ways of escapism and Baudrillard's explanation of simulation, simulacra, and the hyperreal through his descriptions of the notions introduced in these works.

After first being published in French in 1981, *Simulacra and Simulation* was translated into English in 1983. Baudrillard explains in great detail the concepts of simulation and the simulacrum, drawing connections between reality, symbols, and society at large. The work focuses on the simulacrum, which is a copy without an original, and how it conceptualizes and manifests the hyperreal. *Simulacra and Simulation* sheds light upon the postmodern world and its functionality operating on simulacrum, effectively becoming a world where reality no longer exists. *Simulacra and Simulation* acts as a gateway to Baudrillard's progression of thoughts from his earlier works such as *The System of Objects,* due to *Simulacra and Simulation* focusing not only on the notion of consumerism based on its inscribed sign value but focusing on the simulacrum which defines the boundaries of its existence even without an authentic source of inception. Signs in Baudrillard's explanation of the hyperreal may no longer hold any significance at all since they no longer correspond to anything outside of the simulated reality; the simulation is fake, and so are the signs within it. Hence, relating these concepts of simulacra and the hyperreal as explained by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation,* to the contemporary world and its simulated modes of escapism on part of the individual becomes imperative.

Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968)*,* highlights the relations between material possessions and the social hierarchy of those who own said possessions as he examines the characteristics of consumption in relation to production. Baudrillard stresses that for an object to become an object, it must first become a "sign", hinting at the fact of value being created not on its functionality only but rather it being determined through the inscribed idea behind it. Baudrillard's work in *The System of Objects* focuses a great deal on consumerism and how it has more to do with idealism rather than materialism; hence becoming an essential source of reference for this paper to inspect the contemporary world and peoples' obsession with consumer culture, self-gratification, and entry to what Baudrillard refers to as "New humanism". The fact that the present world state of consumer culture revolves around simulated ideas of what an individual should "consume" is on the basis of inscribed ideas and sign value of different products both tangible and intangible (value created through advertisements, brands, labels, etc.), shows the writings of Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* to be every bit as relevant today as the day it was published if not more.

In *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005), Baudrillard challenges the privilege that art's practitioners accord it. Art, which continuously feeds back on itself, has abandoned illusion in favor of making its disappearance (questioning its existence) into a sort of art in itself, according to Baudrillard; and so, accordingly, contemporary art attempts to reinvent itself by colliding with reality and elevating "banality, waste, and mediocrity" to the stature of principles and ideologies (*The Conspiracy of Art* 27). Baudrillard mentions how in contemporary art "duplicity is transparent" (*The Conspiracy of Art* 13*),* which links to the aspect of replication and simulation of an original.

Apart from the primary texts, Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work *Myth and Meaning* (1978) calls attention to how culture is a malleable concept as well as it takes on different modes and faces through being formed by communities of people who were geographically apart from one another as civilizations began to develop on the planet. This argument is a key detail in the formation of "reality" for different individuals as culture is the primary database of a person's perception of the world around them as well as their way to make sense of everything they see, which then becomes factual information from their perspectives. As a result, as multiple cultures and stances on the world emerged, so did interpretations and versions of reality among its practitioners. These versions of reality in turn gave rise to the hyperreal through the simulacrum.

Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, provides critical insight into the fundamental ways technology has altered the process of mechanical reproduction as it devalues the reproduced work due to its lack of authenticity over the original. The work is a keen evaluation of photography's societal significance, where Benjamin also provides an incisive analysis of how technological replication shapes the aesthetic experience but takes away the "aura" unique to the original. An artwork's "aura" is a quality that is essential and embedded in it that cannot be replicated mechanically (through photographs, scanned prints, manually created replicas etc.) because it is only present in the original and cannot be transferred into the reinterpretations. Baudrillard shares his thoughts on the matter of contemporary art being wasteful and unnecessary, perhaps due to the absence of this "aura" or true mark of authenticity.

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the concept of a *rhizome.* A rhizome, was originally referred to as the root structure of plant-based lifeforms with a net or web-like formation, that has no clear indications of a core. A rhizome, according to Deleuze and Guattari is a system of multiplicities (multiple

existences, voices, and entities together form a multiplicity), where there is no clear beginning or an ending nor a center or periphery and yet everything within that system remains connected in one way or the other. "The rhizome includes the best and the worst" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 27), addressing its all-enveloping nature, perfectly in alignment with the concept of the hyperreal where the real, the simulation, and the simulacra co-exist. The aspects of the rhizomatic structure parallel the art world even more as the "originals" and the copies or the simulations (through replications, AI manipulation etc.) neither remain at the center, but collide and co-exist by sharing connections through the notion of familiarity and the use of recognizable elements.

In a journal article titled, "Electronic Media and Everyday Aesthetics of Simulation" (2002), author Don H. Krug Explores the new age issues of electronic media, focusing on the rapid communication exchanges of visual and audio media through "simulated virtual environments" (27). The article questions whether or not the use of electronic media should see unanimous support, especially in the realms of education, competing with "real-life" teaching and learning environments; while also acknowledging the fact of virtualization being an unstoppable force that is solidifying its position in our everyday lives.

Another journal article published by the *World Health Organization* titled, "Artificial Intelligence is Changing the Health Sector" (2021), explores the ways AI is efficiently and consistently carving its way into medical services. The article estimates the savings attainable through AI by 2026 through virtual nursing assistants to be US$ 20 billion, and US$ 40 billion for robot assisted surgery along with procedures such as administrative workflow assistance, fraud detection, reduction of dosage error, automated image diagnoses, cybersecurity etc. (4). It analyzes the use of AI from diagnosis to prediction; as well as final treatments. AI conducting and providing this level of clinical service no longer falls under a simple simulation, but

through this simulated intelligence that is able to analyze and diagnose like a human medical professional, AI successfully adds to the hyperreality of the postmodern world.

To take a leap into the more recent developments surrounding the technological advancements of simulation and simulacra, articles titled "Looking Through Mojo Vision's Newest AR Contact Lens: (IEEE *Spectrum,* 2022) by Tekla S. Perry and The Man Who Married a Hologram" (CNN,2018) by Emiko Jozuka, both inspect the world of augmented reality (AR). It is a phenomenon that elevates simulation to the level of simulacra, an indistinguishable version of the truth or one's perception of the truth. Tekla S. Perry writes about wearable contact lenses that the individual can view different functions and interact with right above their pupils, as the human trials conducted in march, 2022 were reported to be largely successful. The product effectively merges the real world in front of the user and the elements viewed over the user's vision, creating the hyperreal. While Emiko Jozuka writes about Akihiko Kondo, a then 35-year-old (2018) Japanese man who married a hologram of a virtual persona named "Hatsune Miku", a popular virtual singer based in Japan. The article focuses on the rise of "digisexuals" through the case of Akihiko Kondo, and the technology that makes it possible to entertain the idea of having a digital partner who runs by artificial intelligence technology and is viewable through AR technology.

The concepts of the simulacrum and the hyperreal as explained by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* has been projected in the postmodern and contemporary world at present through the many modes of escapism available to individuals and consumers. Research in the field of humanities focusing on building connections between the said concepts explained by Baudrillard circling simulation, simulacra, and the hyperreal on the premise of the postmodern world has a definite lack, and this work aims to fill in the gaps on the matter even if a little by focusing on corporations, the media and the advancing technology availing simulacra in the form of augmented reality, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence.

# Chapter 3

# Critical Analysis

Simulated by the Media

       Humans or homo sapiens have long been considered imaginative creatures by cultural anthropologists. It is integrated into our psyche, projected through our creations, and practiced simultaneously through thoughts during waking hours and dreams during sleep. A person sees a pair of wings and can imaginatively emulate the feeling of flight regardless of having no trace of such a skill ever recorded in human biology; to see an image of snow or lava and to start feeling a cooling or warm sensation on the skin, to see the scales of a reptile and being able to imagine what the texture might feel like, to be able to hear the screeches of long nails or sharp objects on a chalkboard from the mere thought of it- the human mind has always been a fantastic cognitive device of creating visuals through imagination, simulating the real, emulating the semi-real, and bringing alive instantaneously the hyperreal on an individual level. Hence, the concept of simulacra is no less than second nature to it.

       This process of emulation and in turn simulation had multiplied greatly with the modern human having access to a plethora of choices, creating ways to bring multiple routes of realities to take form through a simulated version of it. However, the rise of options also raises the question of how many of these choices a consumer truly needs to consider or have access to at all and how many of them are offered in their best interest, to begin with. It is in fact the media and its control over "images" as well as its mass production to benefit the capitalist model of the current world that fuels the entire process. In the recent era this process has seen an even greater boost through the rise of technology and the ease of access within it. Hence, the mirage of choices, the illusion of being in control is a simulation in itself, while the mediated choices

of objects both tangible and intangible roll into the rabbit-hole of capitalism which surely is no less deep than any known blackhole within the galaxy.

The mediatized hypnotic trance to which everyone is subjected to in the postmodern world is also at the very core of its consumer culture. A person builds up the idea of a persona, one that they want to be perceived as by others, a persona that defines them and distinguishes them from other fellow human beings, to stand out as a "unique" individual. For this, they must surround and adorn themselves with "objects" accordingly, making those objects a part of their narrative and an extension of who they want to be viewed as. Baudrillard highlights how "Objects are *categories of objects* which, in the most tyrannical fashion define categories of people" (166) in *The System of Objects*, in order to explain how the consumable carries value and therefore, adds to the hierarchical station in which the individual in possession of said consumable belongs to. This opportunity is grabbed by different brands as they promote certain images of a stereotypical persona that might appeal to a vast amount of people who want to emulate and project the advertised image as well as by using products created by said brands. 'If you have a love of eating healthy, you would want our X product, but X does not reach its full potential without our new and improved Y product; which performs even greater with the latest and recently developed game changer Z product' – and so it becomes more than just a product, it becomes a part of the person's identity itself because of how one object relates to another and another and again another to capitalize and cash in on part of the brand in order to create a persona that the buyer wants to emulate. This is the phenomenon referred to as "serial motivation" by Baudrillard, it is where the consumer becomes caught up in collecting and may no longer hold an interest in the object for its functional value, but more so for a specific aesthetic projected by it to others. Aesthetics and value are both dependent on brands in the current way of the world and Baudrillard refers to brands as the prime concept of advertising

as well as its model of an increase in consumption. He declares, in *The System of Objects,* "The brand's primary function is to designate a product; its secondary function is to mobilize emotional connotations." (165), as in the value is not only determined by its quality or functionality but how it is advertised to be something way above such things. He adds that brands act as the language of consumption, which is to say, the existence of brands for the same type of product is not because they function differently or have mind boggling unique features, but add value on dimensions that transcend functionality and so speak the language of consumption that is no longer based on need and necessity.

Traditionally consumption had always been founded upon "lack". For instance, if a person needed a pair of shoes it would serve the purpose of fulfilling the need upon the person getting their hands on a pair. The same example can no longer seem valid because an object is no longer just that object, a shoe is no longer just a shoe, and countless brands would be selling the individual more than just footwear. They would be selling the image and their brand's name as a token of an advertised lifestyle. This is not to say that the postmodern world does not design its mode of consumption upon lack, in fact, it is amplified greatly as well as discreetly by the benefactors of capitalism (e.g. large corporations and businesses). People are made to feel insecure about things they did not even know existed prior to having them be pointed out through advertisements and their images plastered all over the media. This is attested rather beautifully by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) as he mentions how what matters at present is the way the "language of images" (33) is used and who it is used by. This need stems from notions of a lack encapsulated by creating false sensations or feelings of inadequacy physically, emotionally, and materially. Media creates these lacks so that consumers feel less attractive and beautiful, less healthy, less secured, less confident etc. The insecurities of consumers hence become the true capital of capitalism and its carefully curated media for the masses. Thus, it becomes evident that the individual is being sold an illusion, a fake mirage,

masked as an ideal to be achieved, a reality that does not exist but one that they are made to believe it does.

This undeniably refers to the fragmented nature of the postmodern world in which one's entire identity is made to mirror their consumer history, a string of signs and symbols that have taken the forms of products which act as stand-ins for a persona or personality that is represented as one's own. It is also imperative to realize that it is/was the media itself that decided on which sign and symbol should represent what in the postmodern world. This perhaps is the reason behind Baudrillard's claim that we are entering the era of "New Humanism", which is trademarked by a culture driven by self-gratification and through advertisements that we let ourselves be convinced, are able to define us more than we can define ourselves; or how we should live in order to set us apart from others- who of course are thinking the very same for themselves. It becomes a means not only to seem unique to others, but to also elevate their social status. Baudrillard explains in *The System of Objects* that "In their proliferation, at once arbitrary and coherent, objects are the best possible vector of a social order that is equally arbitrary and equally coherent, and, under the banner of affluence, they indeed become a most effective material expression of that order" (166). These material expressions are ones that stem from a brand more exclusive than the last, it is a psychological label that creates an "atmosphere" of elevated status.

This atmosphere is undoubtedly a mode of simulation which has already reached its peak through simulacra and gets denser with a seemingly unending extension in the current world through modern technology. Don H. Krug in an article titled "Electronic Media and Everyday Aesthetics of Simulation", states that, "Today the Internet seamlessly distributes a seemingly neverending flow of electronic bits and packets of information through simulated virtual environments." (27). These never ending "bits and packets" of information that Krug mentions, and which flow through the abyss of the internet, are constantly shaping our way of

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thinking and our sense of selves thereby essentially creating the reality we consider to be a part of.

A functional simulacrum is what shapes our everyday life to a massive degree in this era. The precession of simulacra according to Baudrillard takes place through four stages as he explains in *Simulacra and Simulation*. The first stage is a faithful copy of reality, so much so that it may easily be perceived as the reality but is in fact a mere reflection of it. Baudrillard refers to this stage as the "sacramental order". The second stage is the "perversion" of reality where it becomes an unfaithful copy of the original. It masks and denatures the truth. The third stage is for the simulacrum to take the center stage. It is no longer a copy because it is not copying anything nor trying to resemble anything rooted in reality, yet presents itself convincingly as a representation of something real; it is a copy with no original. Finally, the fourth stage is the occurrence of the hyperreal, it is an undiluted simulacrum where there is no trace of faithful or unfaithful copies and there remains no reason to even pretend otherwise because the line between the hyperreal and the reality grows blurry by this stage.

The Intersection of Reality and the Hyperreal Through Art

The familiar notion of art imitating life, as well as life imitating art, has been in effect for long enough that after all the imitations have been carried out, nothing novel remains but only fragments of each other through life and in art. Baudrillard openly and quite notoriously claimed that modern artists should no longer produce art because it was no longer authentic but mere copies of what was once done by someone else in *The Conspiracy of Art*: "It only means that there isn't any more original in contemporary culture, only replicas of replicas." (*The Conspiracy of Art* 16), states Baudrillard. The point being how the replication of an original, and replications of other replications, in other words simulations and in turn simulacra would

not be able to serve the purpose of an artwork as it represents nothing authentic, according to Baudrillard. In that sense of contemporary art being copies of other copies, strip the concept of being credited for one's work because inspiration acts more than just inspiration, it connects the copy to the piece it was inspired from.

In that vein of a replication simulating an original and simultaneously being not original enough, renders it to be a standalone unit of its own which retains some sort of connection to the authentic source; and yet is considered to be individual enough by being a replica. Hence, the originals and their replications as well as the replica of those replications all come together as *multiplicities* and in the words of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Multiplicities are rhizomatic." (*A Thousand Plateaus* 29), which denotes how multiplicities (individual voices or existences coming together to act as a singular entity) are connected in a way that no longer has a center or periphery nor a beginning or an end. The stream becomes endless and even though Baudrillard spoke unfavorably for contemporary artworks and their lack of originality in *The Conspiracy of Art*, to him the simulacrum takes precedence over the original because the simulacrum is no longer affected by the original and finds its way to become a part of the hyperreal for exactly what it is.

On the note of how contemporary artwork no longer represents authenticity, how would an artificially intelligent being go on about creating novel works by being fed the information of all the recorded artworks previously created; the answer is not one that has a definite form but is one that definitely exists at present. AI art generating software can create artworks in any particular style, from any desired prompt, as well as take little to no time in order to render said pieces which for a human artist takes up a significant amount of time to produce. The AI generates images by already having learned from existing artworks, be it contemporary or from the works of masters of history; the knowledge pool works as a mental catalog for the software to take notes of existing concepts and apply them to create something that feels familiar yet has

never existed elsewhere. One such AI art generating tool is "Dream" by WOMBO, an organization based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; founded by Ben Zion Benkhin and his team of developers. The generator allows the user to give any prompt from their imagination, and also choose a particular style from a growing set of options ranging from "sketch", "watercolor", "realistic", "steampunk" to even emulating the styles of artists like Salvador Dali.

Figure 1 shows a generated artwork completed in Dream by WOMBO[3], the art style chosen for the work was in the option "baroque" and the inserted text prompt was "a busy morning in a small boutique". With being given only this information, the art generating tool begins creating a novel artwork and within a few minutes created an image that certainly gives off the sense of being a scene from a boutique (the color palette, the shapes resembling either customers or seamstresses, shelves, clothing, etc.) as well as indications of a busy time where some sort of action appears to be occurring through the dynamic shapes of the humanoid figures. It is an indication of the AI understanding of what the elements of a boutique may look like, what "busy" might look like in that setting and combined the knowledge it found through its AI data



*Figure 1 Prompt: A busy morning in a small boutique, Generated by Wombo Dream*

bank of existing information on the inserted concept as well as the "baroque" style. To generate an image that would simulate the given prompt, it attempts to simulate familiar visuals that the individual may recognize. The fact that European Baroque art of the late 1500s until the early
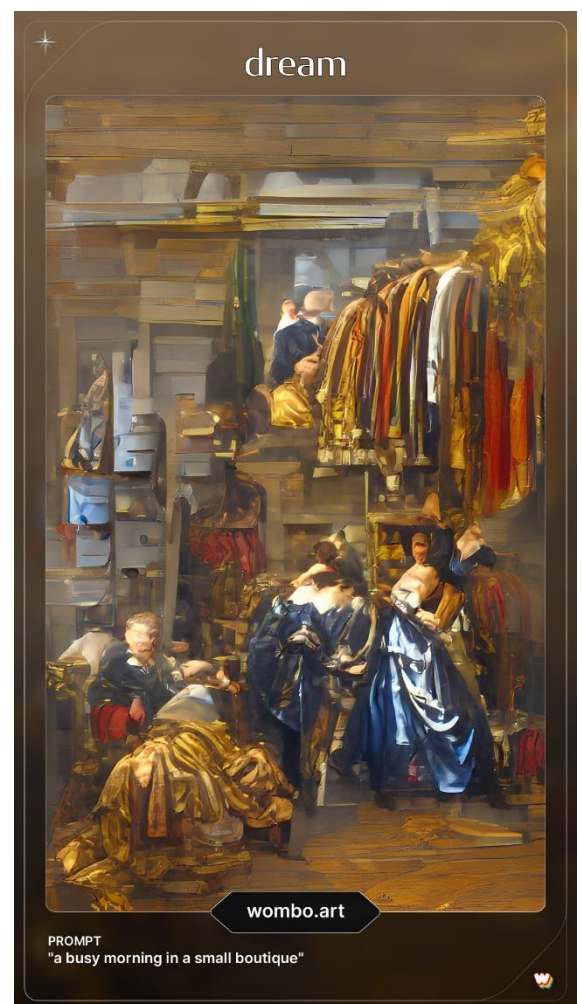
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[3] app.wombo.art

1700s was one "[F]ocusing on the moment the event is taking place, or otherwise, the 'action' or 'drama'." (artincontext.org) and how "Baroque paintings were characterized by the use of vibrant colors applied with swirling and wide brushstrokes, which indicated movement and emotional intensity." (artincontext.org) both seem to reflect in the AI-generated image, showing how the algorithm uses the given prompt (a text-based command) to simulate the concept of baroque art through the simulated artwork.



*Figure 2 Prompt: Sketches of old aircrafts on a notebook, Generated by Midjourney AI*

Figure 2 is an image generated by another AI art tool named "Midjourney AI*"* developed by David Holz and his independent research lab. The algorithm for this tool works similarly to WOMBO Dream in terms of receiving a prompt in text form and producing images accordingly but goes a step beyond limiting options such as having to use particular art styles only. Midjourney AI can generate artwork and images in any style or at least can provide the option to type it in without restrictions. Figure 2 was generated through the prompt "Sketches of old aircrafts on a notebook", and functionality of the aircrafts aside, the AI was able to simulate the look of a notebook paper texture, the strokes of rough sketches, and recognizable elements of aircrafts (elongated pointy shape, wings, panels, etc.) to generate the image. The way an AI can create images based on commands and make them recognizable in familiar dimensions is a clear example of simulations being created from original concepts. It is also notable how no image is repeated even with the same prompt being used multiple times, as the AI will always be generating novel works that seem familiar and recognizable due to being a *copy* of something

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else but not exactly a replica of it. To the AI, anything it creates is disposable because it can always alter the copies it will be producing, hence the produced copies add to the hyperreal aspect of the postmodern world's technology-based art production where AI art simulates artwork produced by human artists. Hence the border of which artwork would truly be deemed "real" in this sense depending on being produced by human artists of AI art generators tends to face a creative dilemma; just as Baudrillard explains in *Simulacra and Simulation* about the hyperreal, "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real." (10).

Modern Routes of Escapism

Escapism is a mode of simulacrum that one is aware of and actively participates in on their own accord, to step out from their realities and experience ones that are different from what they are accustomed to. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, "escapism" pertains to "A way of avoiding an unpleasant or boring life, especially by thinking, reading, etc. about more exciting but impossible activities"[4]. Immersion is at the very core of escapism and its many, many mediums available for the modern human. As time passes these mediums take drastic new turns, each more fascinating than the previous one. But it all points to one thing which is, how living in the hyperreal blurs the lines between the reality evident and the realities created through simulacrum.

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[4] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/escapism?q=escapism.

Augmented reality is the integration of "digital information" and the "individual's reality" through visual elements presented in real-time. The integration seems seamless enough that the individual can immerse themselves through visual cues with the help of technology and specifically designed gear. With the help of augmented reality or AR, elements that are not in front of us truly, can seem to be right there visually, not just in static motion like photographs but having dynamic movements as well. Virtual reality hangs on parallel threads with AR, the name itself acknowledges and explains that the experience gained from VR would be virtual as in not physically existing but appearance-wise looks to be so. The individual who attempts to embrace the controlled simulacrum, do so willingly and to that individual, the element of said AR or VR is just as real as the inscribed idea of the nature of the content, regardless of its physical existence. As previously stated, the core aspect of belief relies on the immersion of it all. The concept of simulation prompts discourses on exactly what can and should be simulated and woven in the hyperreal era that we live in.

The most common implementation of this technology is likely to be found in the realm of video games. Since the inception of game design, the mechanics of it circled a hypothetical environment with a set of objectives the player must complete. From the simplest of games to the most advanced and challenging ones, the goal remained the same - to follow through with an objective and "win". This is functional simulacra at play and has been so from the earliest versions to the most modern of games, which at present-day take it a step further with the help of augmented reality and consumer end gadgets for immersion through virtual reality and VR

headsets. The headset offers immersion through 3D virtual environment designs, virtual characters that often interact with the individual to make the simulacrum more convincing as a reality, as well as having the entire environment designed in a way that is proportional to the player's spatial cognition, seemingly following the laws of physics to add dimension and depth. To make this experience even more seamless, VR technology seems to be working tirelessly to achieve ultimate results at a rapid rate. *Reality Labs*, at tech giant META, is a research facility dedicated to developing pioneering VR technology and content for mass consumers. META's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg explained in an online interview[5] with journalist Norman Chan from the "Adam Savage's Tested" team, "We're talking about displays and how to have a virtual and augmented reality display that can ultimately pass the visual turning test." While explaining how it is now the goal to have a "qualitative sense of having a display that feels indistinguishable and at the quality level of a physical environment." The "visual turning test" mentioned in the interview is essentially VR headsets trying to pass a test that allows the technology to seem as authentic as real life while experiencing the depth, light, shadows, perception, etc. This goes to show how deeply the minds behind the VR science are working to make the escapism aspect of it as close to a perfect simulacrum as possible, shortening the ridge between the real and hyperreal further each day. The immersion itself tends to make the consumer take the simulated reality of VR as more real if it aligns with their ideal version of reality, which according to Baudrillard, becomes "More real than the real" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 56), as well as how "that is how the real is abolished" (*Simulacra and Simulation 56*). The world of VR offers an endless array of content for the consumer, essentially acting as their wish fulfillment - easy to digest pill on the go.

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While simulating, emulating, and integrating virtual personas have seen an unprecedented increase over the past decades through digital media, it has seen an even greater rise amongst individuals already finding human beings and these virtual personas to be on the same wavelength, while even preferring the latter over the former to form emotional connections with. The fragmented version of an individual living in the postmodern era is constantly insecure and unwilling to open up to others, but the emotions regarding wanting to be accepted remain. This loophole has been used by companies that produce virtual personalities, characters that are viewable and interactable through AR technology and provide an experience of being accepted, by a "virtual" persona. One such company is Gatebox Inc. Based in Tokyo, Japan, the company shares its vision to be "Living with Characters"[6], as in virtual characters that interact through the help of artificial intelligence technology. The primary goal was to integrate these virtual personas to aid in everyday life and activities, much like being a virtual assistant; medical support, conveying information in exhibitions and museums without errors, etc. But as the technology improved speaking in more "human" ways, some people inevitably felt a connection stronger than what was intended to develop. In an article titled "Beyond dimensions: The man who married a hologram", author  Emiko Jozuka of CNN Japan, speaks of one such incident regarding a man by the name of Akihito Kondo. Kondo married a virtual persona by the alias of Hatsune Miku, and the ceremony had stirred quite the discourse amongst people of some who were supportive, some who were not so supportive, and those that were in complete disbelief. Jozuka writes, "Kondo's November wedding to cyber celebrity Hatsune Miku -- which is not legally recognized -- provoked mixed reactions in Japan and abroad. Some were dumbfounded by his choice of a three-dimensional laser image over a human. Others congratulated him.", along with statements from Kondo himself expressing his love for his hologram wife. It is noted how the individual had preferred

[6] https://www.gatebox.ai/corporate/about

a virtual partner over another human being which many see as a form of escapism, a form of finding a partner that would comply with a scripted narrative and contribute to wish fulfillment aspects of the very much one-sided relationship. The interactions Kondo has with his virtual wife are completely through GateBox gadgets running on VR technology. A gadget that displays a hologram of the virtual persona which is powered by artificial intelligence and a set of conversational prompts is the primary mode of viewing the character. The AI would send him cheerful text messages throughout the day, is supportive when he complains about something that is bothering him, and greets him when he comes back home to his apartment while turning on the lights and air conditioning for his convenience. The nature of the relationship is scripted and yet, Kondo seems to have found solace in this setting, and he is not the only one either. "[M]ore than 3,000 people have registered for commemorative marriage certificates featuring their favorite anime characters since Vinclu started offering the service in 2017.", Jozuka mentions. To be able to craft a "perfect" partner by the individual's standards and definition certainly seems to be an option through this technology powered by a combination of AR and VR, and even more so as a way to escape human interaction in the form of a virtual partner over a real one.

The fictional cyborg trope has the distinguished digitized vision where it can see important details, process information, zoom in and out to better comprehend certain environmental elements, etc., and more. This defining feature has also seen monumental success in research for regular people to get their hands on and experience those exact features that once only seemed like sci-fi hocus pocus. Mojo or Mojo Vision is a company aiming to create exactly that, lenses that can perform digital tasks when the individual has them on. In "Mojo Vision Puts Its AR Contact Lens Into Its CEO's Eyes (Literally) The augmented reality contact lens reaches a major milestone", senior editor at IEEE *Spectrum* Tekla S. Perry documents her experience with the prototypes Mojo had offered before fully launching their

products at a later date. She says, "I tried out several applications. To select them, I looked around the periphery of the real-world view in front of me, which caused icons to appear. By focusing on one (in this case, aligning the crosshairs), I selected it.", explaining how the process requires little to no effort in command prompts. The AR technology allows for the applications to appear just above the pupil, and since it is a wearable lens the view shifts as the individual has eye movements, making it feel like one big boundless screen with a "High-res 14,000 pixels per inch monochrome microLED display". The product uses medical-grade contact lenses, and so the use of it is safe according to Mojo, while the very first human use of the lens was done by the CEO of Mojo himself, Drew Perkins on the 23rd of June 2022, on great success. With further improvements along these lines, these rechargeable AR contact lenses could potentially allow even more seamless integration of the hyperreal and the real than it already has.

"Earth 2"[7], a company focusing on creating an exact 1:1 replica of the earth and all of its surface area including existing landmarks, might shed light upon how the hyperreal is truly being integrated through lands that don't physically exist being bought and sold through their platform. With the advancements of VR headgear along with AR contact lenses, a second earth experience might make its debut much sooner than expected, bending the lines between the "real" earth and its replica (simulation).

A more literary example can be found in Milan Kundera's *Identity* as it explores the notion of the true self and hence the real and simulated version of it through the central characters Chantal and Jean Marc. The way Chantal imagines her beloved Jean Marc's disappearance after hearing some waitresses talk about someone else's disappearance on television; or the way Jean Marc mistook someone else for Chantal and almost risked his own life for the "lookalike" as he too could almost see her lifeless, bleeding body on the road lest it

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[7] earth2.io

was too late to save her; the image seemed so real to him that he was upset in a way that would seem like the event had already taken place. (*Identity* 17). Both examples act as involuntary simulations on an individual level. Even though these simulations are not "real" they have very real consequences in their psyche, and in turn their lives and behavioral patterns. Jean Marc's high school friend F, who had recently come out of a coma also describes his experience while in the coma saying, "You know everything, you hear everything." (*Identity* 7); even the things one ought not to hear, while adding, "I was conscious of everything but everything was slightly distorted." (*Identity* 7), which accentuates the fact of reality being morphed into an alternate version of itself for F, that seemed equally real to him at that very moment, merging the real and whatever version of it he was experiencing to become a simulacrum. Following the couple's misunderstanding over the love letters, the novel's final chapters imply that we have entered a realm of pure fantasy or hallucination; questioning the entirety of it to be a dream, or an imagination, "At what exact moment did the real turn into the unreal, reality into reverie?" (*Identity* 167). Because of the timeline becoming blurry and indistinguishable from reality as it transforms into something else for both Chantal and Jean Marc, it demonstrates the hyperreal taking over in a remarkable fashion.

Apart from the aspect of AR and VR along with their use that holds the sort of value be it emotional or physical, some of the modern modes of escapism would offer neither and yet some consumers would still "want" what is not even there. In the form of Artificial Intelligence, bonds are created with virtual personas that communicate with words as a human being would, but do so by following a complex array of algorithms and prompts accordingly. Much like Kondo, it is becoming increasingly uncommon for people to form emotional connections with said AI, and the most commonly accessible ones are in the form of software or applications under the category of "chatbots". It was a common notion among people for a very long time that AI would be taking over human jobs, creating a crisis difficult to combat with skills the

average human possesses having been dwarfed by a much more capable AI-powered machine. The fear was rather vague and the technology behind it uncertain. But as it is becoming a spectacle, AI replicating human speech patterns, EQ, or emotional quotient, providing companionship, or rather simulating the feeling of it, continues to integrate deeper in the postmodern era where loneliness is at an all-time high. This type of simulacrum is at the zenith of hyperrealism as the individual gets emotionally invested in a simulated persona being unable to distinguish it from a truly sentient being.

Boston based "Wysa" co-founded by Jo Aggarwal and Ramakant Vempati is one such popular AI chatbot that provides comforting conversations promoting mental well-being. It is intended to use natural language through text messaging and Wysa's designated application and offers conversations that are designed in a way to help someone who perhaps was not able to express many things even to their human therapist or loved ones. The line between who or "what' a person feels more at ease with conversing about difficult things is less of a blur, but more of a clearly defined one where a person tends to feel less vulnerable talking to a "machine" that won't judge them in any way, shape or form; would reassure them, and act like a caring dear one to top it all. It is a good deal, a bit too good considering mental health is not the only goal an AI hopes to help with, it is also used to repel loneliness by having readily available AI partners who will always put the individual first and speak according to their preferences, you can even customize the AI's looks to complete the experience. "Replika", another well-known AI chatbot founded by Eugenia Kuyda sports the tagline "The AI companion who cares" and "Always here to listen and talk. Always on your side", is something that panders to a person's sense of self, being treated as they would want to be treated and also gratifying the individual for being the way that they are without question. Replika offers the "perfect" companion through their AI technology from a friend, to a lover, to even a mentor, providing the simulation of a person with a specific role fulfilled by AI. Their virtual personas can be tweaked according

to the user's preferences in looks, talents, interests, and aspirations, enabling the consumer to design a partner that they might not find as easily among real people.

This form of escapism through similar applications has been on the rise at a staggering rate. The sense of finding yourself being emotionally invested with a virtual character with pre-designated dialogue for specific circumstances, from a vast knowledge bank of similar circumstances at the AI's disposal to have appropriate responses, is not something that occurs to the individual when the conversations take place. Which makes the simulacrum that much more effective and evolve into a hyperreal.

# Chapter 4

# Interactive Gallery

This chapter aims to highlight some AR and AI content to help get a general idea about a few of the more simplistic modes open to the general public to consume. The ones presented here can be interacted with a regular smartphone but requires specific applications to do so. VR content has not been included as it requires specific gadgets such as a VR headset, and so might reduce the overall experience upon not having one close by.

Apart from the AR content, some "chatbots" have been highlighted in the AI portion to link a handful of new-age virtual companions to help understand how the AI technology makes an emotional appeal to the modern human.

The primary application needed to view the presented AR content can be downloaded here on Android: "Artivive", In January 2017 in Vienna, Austria, Sergiu Ardelean, and Codin Popescu founded Artivive, with the tagline "Bring Art to Life", using augmented reality.

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.artivive&fbclid=IwAR22JNumRkqWMD D0-6ID2e0YRMb24qVFznEs6VIT7i4OccVpx5A9kj51AEI

Alternatively, you can scan the QR code below to install the application:



After installing the application, please use the built-in AR Camera in the application and hold it above the specific "markers" (images).

<u>AR Content</u>

i.       Choose a fortune cookie! (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above any of the four
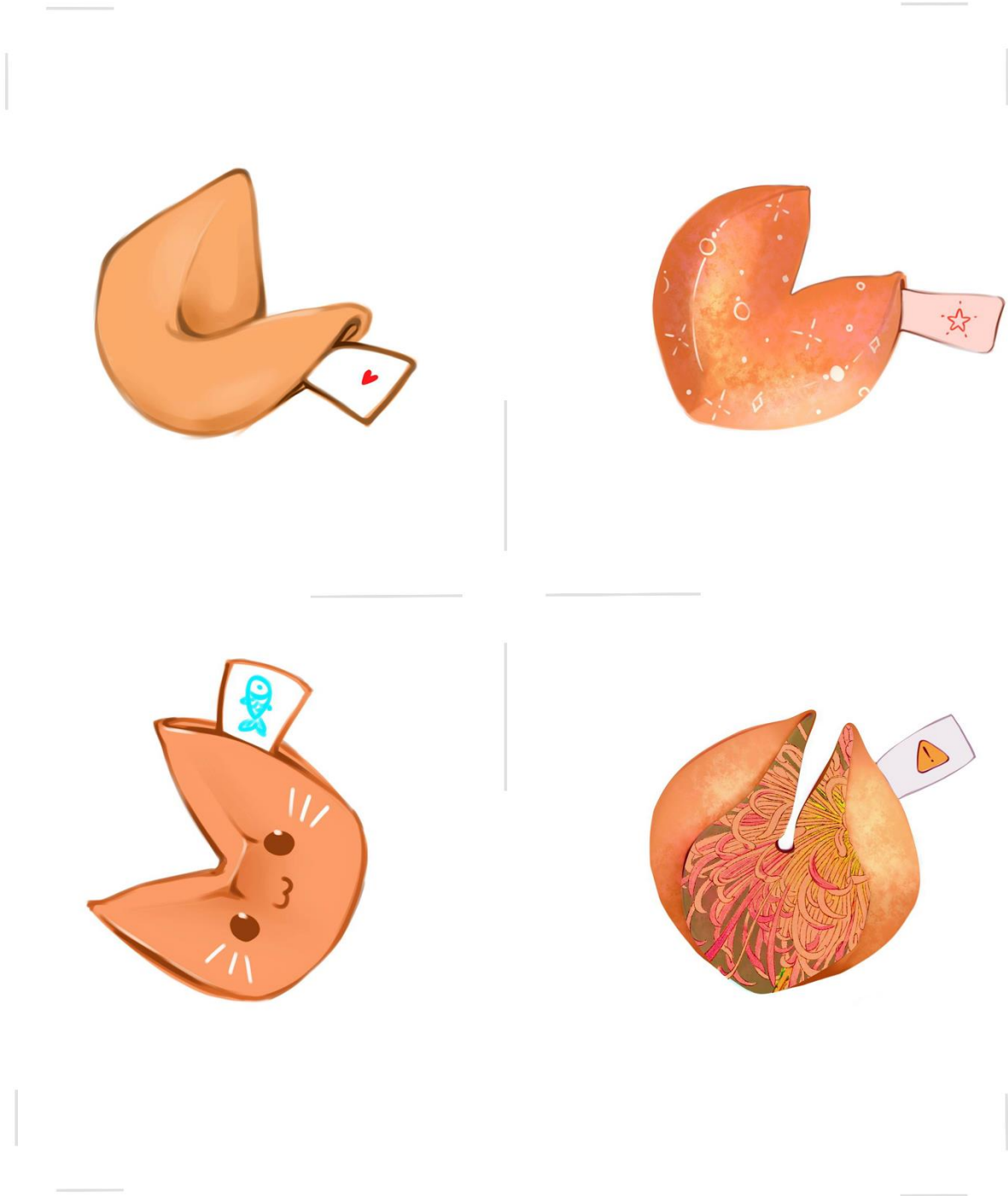
images below).



*Figure 3 Choose a Fortune Cookie!*

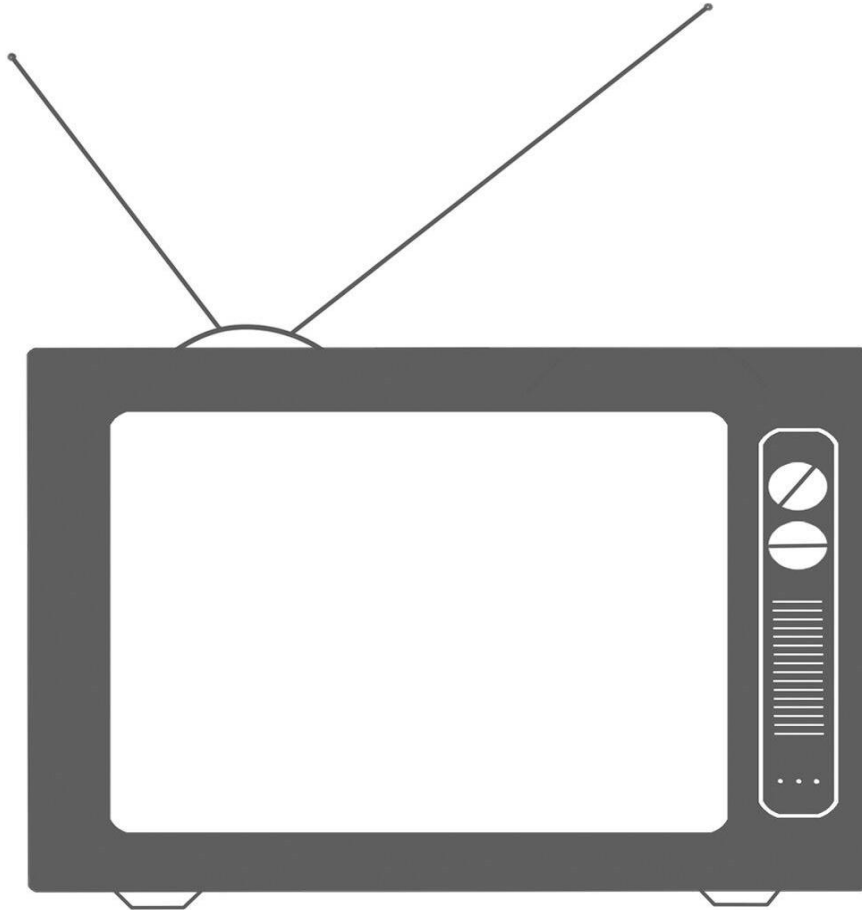ii.    What's on TV? (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above the image below).



*Figure 4 What's on TV?*

iii.      Rhopalocera (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above the image below).



*Figure 5 Rhopalocera*

iv. Confession of a virtual girl (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above the image below).
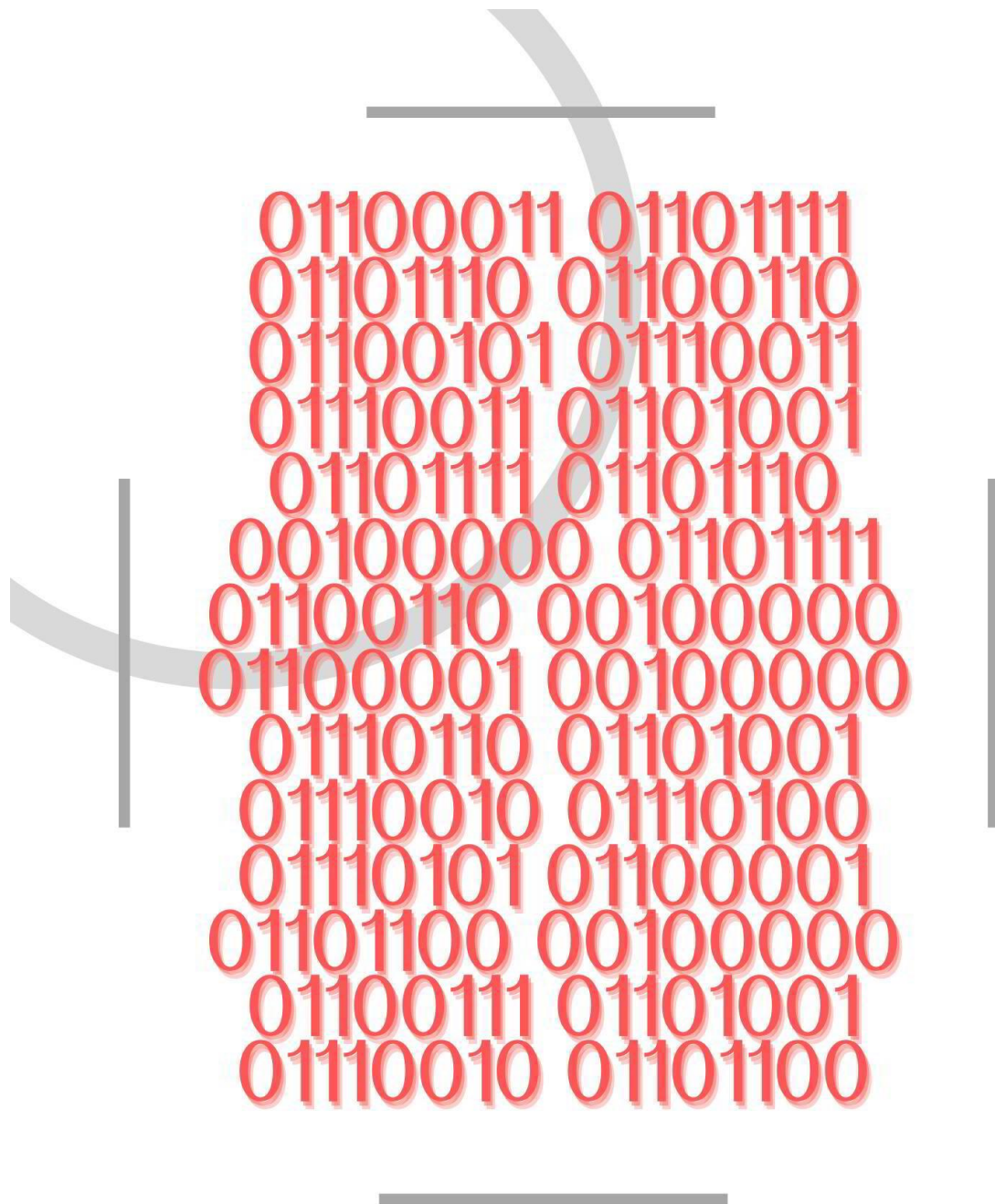


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01101111 01101110
00100000 01101111
01100110 00100000
01100001 00100000
01110110 01101001
01110010 01110100
01110101 01100001
01101100 00100000
01100111 01101001
01110010 01101100

*Figure 6 Confession of a Virtual Girl*

v. Exhibition (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above the image below).
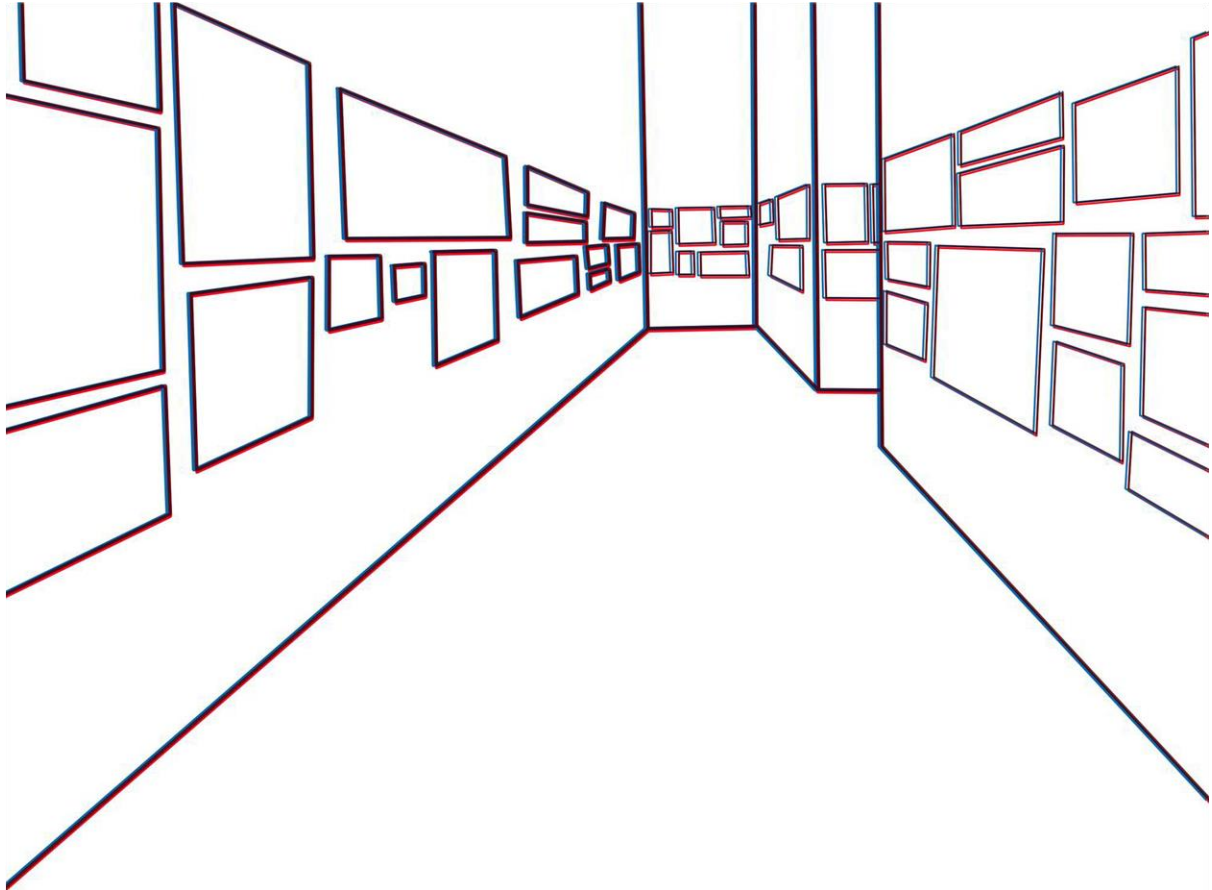


*Figure 7 Exhibition*

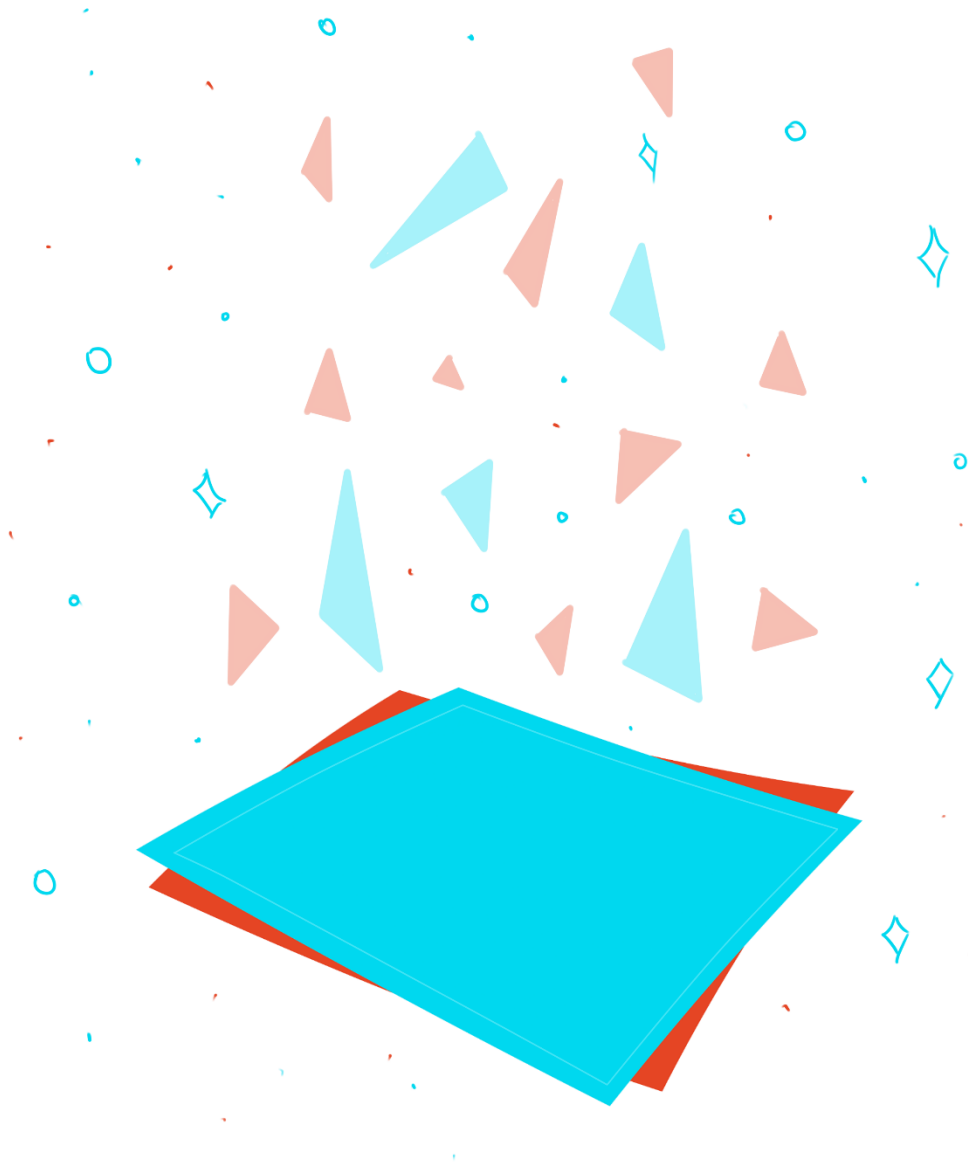vi. Origami (Hold the AR camera of Artivive above the image below).



*Figure 8 Origami*

<u>AI References</u>

This portion highlights some of the recent AI-powered "chatbots" that can use natural language through text messaging, and communicate with the individual just as any other person would be able to. The purpose of including the links to these websites is to set focus on readily available AI technology that focuses on human-like behavior and integration of natural speech patterns to mimic and simulate a human lead conversation; and for some, create emotional connections as well.

The inclusion of artwork-generating AI aims to highlight the way how works of human artists are studied by the AI algorithms and produce completely novel works essentially in no time at all, simulating creativity that once assumed was unique only to humans.

<u>Chatbots:</u>

  i. Wysa: https://www.wysa.io/

  ii. Replika: https://replika.com/

  ii. Anima: https://myanima.ai/

<u>Art Generating AI:</u>

  i. Dall-E Mini: https://huggingface.co/spaces/dalle-mini/dalle-mini

  ii. Artbreeder: https://www.artbreeder.com/

  iii. Midjourney AI: https://www.midjourney.com/

  iv. Nightcafe AI: https://creator.nightcafe.studio/

  v. Wombo: https://www.wombo.art/

# Chapter 5

# Conclusion

The post-industrialist, postmodern society has devolved into a consumerist wasteland that is thriving off an individual's shortcomings, insecurities, and wish-fulfillment desires. The media successfully advertises products that attract consumers to specific lifestyle aesthetics; businesses, corporations, and companies target creating products that have less to do with functionality than with an assigned agenda to create a hierarchy focused on consumable goods; the advances in technology skyrockets the process of escapism through creating false realities through augmented reality, virtual reality and artificial intelligence technology and integrates it deep enough to be merged with reality continuum.

All these aspects from the mediatized world of subliminally controlling the consumer's tastes, to the monopolizing high corporations and businesses selling the people a dream in the form of consumable goods, to the thriving technology that is pacing alongside the human imagination creating gateways of escapism and portals to different worlds simulated as it may be, through augmented reality, virtual reality and artificial intelligence technology; play out incredibly aligned with Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and the simulacra and inevitably the hyperreal as explained in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Living in the postmodern world in its deconstructed and fragmented state, "reality" faces a crisis of existence and no longer holds a singular true form. As well the residents too no longer live in a linear, stable, or shared version of reality. The simulacrum is taking place everywhere, constantly, and feeding into the path of escapism and the path of hyperreality perpetually to the point of the real and the simulacrum no longer be distinguishable.

This research attempted to investigate and connect Baudrillard's work in *Simulacra and Simulation* on the concepts of simulation, simulacra, and the hyperreal to the present world and its modes of escapism where these concepts are utilized heavily. Research on this subject will undoubtedly find scope to investigate the world of the physical, merging with the virtual reality as technology makes haste to not only run alongside human imagination but go further beyond it, to test the limits of the simulacrum without boundaries.

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