THE SPINNING OF THE SYMBOLIC MIND

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Introduction

The great triumph of the human race, in its simplest and simultaneously most complex form, is our ability to symbolically communicate: to imagine a reality beyond our objective reality. Through this unique system of interaction, humans have developed an overarching realm of shared narratives. Under shared narratives, or logos, the individual can efficiently operate within and contribute to a collective society. The cooperation of expansive masses of individuals, under a shared narrative, allows for human innovation and development, particularly in the form of technology.

As technology becomes increasingly realized through human cooperation, so too does technology perpetuate the very narratives that formed it. Technology extends the natural human reach and projects symbolic communication over previously impossible barriers. Through the perpetual sharing of narratives by technology, technology itself evolves through increased collaboration. This cycle of communication and innovation spins more quickly as it gains momentum: communication increases, technology evolves due to increased communication, and communication further increases.

The communication-innovation wheel or, alternatively, the narrative-technology wheel, has spun ever since the rise of human cooperation. Furthermore, the exponentially increasing momentum of the wheel has produced an almost entropic body of narrative. Our shared symbols, words, have been wildly dispersed to touch a seemingly infinite amount of individuals. Through this progression, the very root of the narrative, the symbol, has been so irrevocably reproduced that it has detached from its very origin or, in a post-modern sense, the signified has been removed from the signifier. This detachment, or deconstruction, has led to both seemingly divine

technological innovation and tragic human decay. The interconnectivity of technology, the medium, has begun to challenge the very content of its narrative, its message.

Although structurally aligned with the enlightened Buddhist concept of interconnectivity, the reality of technological interconnectivity appears to be only the simulation of connection; a tragic state of loneliness and isolation challenges a once collective race. In order to prevent the ultimate alienation of the individual, real connection must be reestablished. If true connection can never be replicated virtually, then we must revert to the actual.

Collective and cooperative societies function through the participation of the individual, if the individual no longer feels included in the collective, due to a hyper-dispersed shared narrative, then the entirety of the system fails. The following essay traces the emergence of human consciousness from symbolic communication, the perpetuation of symbolic communication through interconnected human consciousnesses and, ultimately, the effects of our state of symbolic communication on human consciousness. Symbolic communication, though the birth of human consciousness, now threatens the disintegration of human consciousness; in order to live a wholly realized life, we must monitor the spin of our narrative-technology wheel and reevaluate our balance between the virtual and the actual.

The Origin of the Symbolic Mind

The relationship between human consciousness and symbolic communication, though complex, is indisputable. Theorists, like Steven Mithen, argue that symbolic communication led to human consciousness. Alternatively, theorists, like Susan Blackmore, argue that, instead, human consciousness produced symbolic communication. Despite variations in sequence, human

consciousness and symbolic communication are commonly agreed upon as relationally codependent and symbiotic.

Symbolic Communication Produces Human Consciousness

According to archaeologist Steven Mithen, symbolic communication both prompted and fostered human consciousness. The birth of symbolic communication, and thus human consciousness, occurred during the Middle/Upper Paleolithic period. During this period, Mithen claims that the human mind began to connect disparate domains of intelligence — a process he calls cognitive fluidity.[1] Mithen defines this model as the assembling of "independent cognitive domains to one."[2] The various independent cognitive domains, or intelligences, are outlined as technical, linguistic, social, natural history, and general intelligence.[3] Although the impetus for cognitive fluidity is unknown, Mithen suggests that results produced the behaviorally modern human mind; a mind capable of both metaphor and analogy.[4] As the overall mind grew increasingly fluid, each intellectual domain expanded and became more complex.

Mithen continues that the cognitive fluidity of the mind also changed social interaction. The social domain, once limited to the literal realm, opened to the symbolic realm. Humans, unlike animals, could communicate imaginatively and creatively.[5] The act of non-literal or symbolic communication produced a "reflexive consciousness;"[6] humans began to realize their individual, complex form. Cognitive fluidity freed the domains of thinking and allowed the

[1] Steven Mithen, The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 76.
[2] Mithen, 154.
[3] Mithen, 72.
[4] Mithen, 77.
[5] Mithen, 217.
[6] Mithen, 218.

human to narrate the self — to be self-conscious. Symbolic communication, the product of cognitive fluidity, therefore, produced a "change in the nature of consciousness."[7]

Human Consciousness Produces Symbolic Communication

Susan Blackmore, a psychologist, challenges Mithen's understanding of emergent consciousness through her theory of memes. Blackmore, building off of Richard Dawkins, defines memes as "element[s] of a culture" which are "passed on by non-genetic means" through imitation.[8] In terms of Mithen, Blackmore's memes are the viral interpretation of symbols. For example, consider a wave to say hello. The act of waving is not biologically ingrained in humans, rather, it is a meme; a cultural "thing" that a human has imitated from another human. Blackmore believes memes, like viruses, to be dependent upon, but separate from, the human mind.[9]

Through Blackmore's restructuring of the symbol, she simultaneously challenges the concept of consciousness as an emergent property of symbolic communication. Blackmore, rather, understands symbolic communication as a mechanism of the human consciousness to spread memes. Memes drove the development of the human consciousness which, in turn, transformed the mind and drove symbolic communication.[10] Through this meme-driven model, Blackmore solves Mithen's problem of the "symbolic threshold,"[11] the moment in which the mind became fluid. According to Blackmore, there was no "symbolic threshold" because symbolism did not produce consciousness; consciousness produced symbolism as a mechanism

[7] Mithen, 217.
[8] Susan J. Blackmore, The Meme Machine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43.
[9] Blackmore, 20.
[10] Blackmore, 99.
[11] Blackmore, 97.

to spread memes, to imitate. Blackmore purports that the "only essential step to starting [symbolic communication] was the beginning of imitation."[12] As humans began to imitate one another, "memes and genes coevolved"[13] and the symbolic barrier was crossed. Human consciousness, according to Blackmore, did not emerge from symbolic communication, but, rather, the necessity of imitation drove human consciousness to symbolically communicate.[14]

Although Blackmore executes a convincing argument, the foundation of her argument, the meme theory, is highly debated. Critics often claim meme theory, or memetics, to be an "error of simplification" and, more aggressively, a "social scientists' nightmare."[15] Criticism often stems from the memetic structure's lack of scientific, biological support.[16] Although memetics may be hypothetically sound, there remains a logical leap to the actual, biological implications of memetics. Nevertheless, Blackmore's sequence of human consciousness to symbolic communication remains worthy of recognition as a counter to Mithen's theory.

Needless to say, Mithen and Blackmore fundamentally disagree on the interaction between symbolic language and human consciousness. Mithen conveys that cognitive fluidity allowed for symbolic communication and, thus, the spark of consciousness. Blackmore counters that the human consciousness' need to imitate, to spread memes, and led to symbolic communication. Both theorists, nevertheless, agree that there is an inevitable and formative interaction between symbolic communication and human consciousness. Through this compound interaction, humans rose above their animal natures.

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[12] Blackmore, 107.
[13] Blackmore, 107.
[14] Blackmore, 38.
[15] Robert Aunger, Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84.
[16] Aunger, 3.

The Implications of a Symbolic Mind

Yuval Noah Harari, a philosopher and historian, contextualizes the concepts of human consciousness and symbolic communication within the evolution of human society. Harari describes the period in which anatomically modern humans became behaviorally modern humans as the "Cognitive Revolution."[17] Between 30,000 and 70,000 BCE, humans acquired the unique ability to "speak about fictions"[18] — to weave symbols into narratives. Although the ability to speak fictionally set humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom, the triumph of humanity lay in the ability for humans to speak fictionally in collectives.[19] With the power of shared narratives, humans were able "to cooperate flexibly in large numbers."[20] Societal cooperation under shared narratives rapidly evolved humans past their animal condition. As Harari writes, "the ability to create an imagined reality out of words enabled large numbers of strangers to cooperate effectively."[21] The entirety of human cooperation, and eventually innovation, was built upon these shared imagined realities. As humans flexibly cooperated in large numbers under shared narratives, they both fostered a sense of self and furthered humanity. The physical manifestation and production of this human cooperation was technology.

Although the above outline of human cognition is simplified, it outlines the interactive nature of human consciousness and symbolic language. The original sequence aside, the development of both human consciousness and symbolic language led to the Cognitive Revolution. Inevitably, the Cognitive Revolution also expanded both human consciousness and

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[17] Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015), 26.
[18] Harari, 22.
[19] Harari, 22.
[20] Harari, 22.
[21] Harari, 26.

symbolic language — collectively, the symbolic mind. The symbolic mind thus formed its surroundings through the use of technology.

The Perpetuation of Symbols Through Technology

Technology is the physical implementation of the human imagination. The symbolic mind can create beyond nature because it can imagine beyond nature. In terms of human development, technology allowed humans to move beyond their animal dwellings and to "settle the Outer World."[22] Cooperation through symbolic communication meant that humans could collectively control their environments with technology; humans could "laboriously [carve] out... artificial human islands... out of the surrounding wilds."[23]

As humans increasingly "carved" out nature with technology, populations grew in numbers and complexity.[24] The changing demographics of human populations demanded new orders and, therefore, demanded new shared narratives. Imaginary concepts such as laws and economies arose as methods of organization.[25] Greater human "cooperation networks – from the cities of ancient Mesopotamia to the Qin and Roman empires – [arose as] 'imagined orders,'"[26] rather than natural realities. These imagined orders, nevertheless, were passed on and ingrained in future generations. The perpetuation of these narratives was, and continues to be, so severe that, in fact, there is "no way out of imagined order[s]."[27] All of modernity is rooted in shared myths that have evolved into unshakable, dominating realities.

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[22] Harari, 41.
[23] Harari, 59.
[24] Harari, 60.
[25] Harari, 63.
[26] Harari, 63.
[27] Harari, 69.

To illustrate the current state of myth, Harari describes the American dollar. Harari explains that if he "alone were to stop believing in the dollar" nothing would change.[28] The dollar exists "in the shared imagination of billions"[29] and is, subsequently, impervious to individual threats. If an individual were to stop believing in the dollar, they would suffer inescapable consequences; the individual could not wholly exist and participate in the United States. Harari continues that the dollar, or any powerful shared myth, can only be changed "with the help of a complex organisation, such as a political party, an ideological movement, or a religious cult."[30] Complex organizations, regardless, only exist because of "shared myth."[31] The very sources of human prosperity become the very sources of human entrapment.

In short, the implementation of the human imagination, technology, expanded human populations. The sudden growth in populations brought about chaos, a state which shared myths effectively ordered. Shared myths, nonetheless, were so successful, that they became entirely inescapable; the social human cannot reject myth. Nevertheless, in the current state of myth, humans continue to prosper and to produce technology. In a cyclical manner, technology persistently upholds and shapes myth. The symbolic mind created myth, perpetuated myth, and, now, cannot escape myth.

The Spin of the Narrative-Technology Wheel

The narrative-technology wheel has spun exponentially faster and faster even since its first push. As technology improves, so too do narratives form; as narratives form, so too does

[28] Harari, 69.
[29] Harari, 69.
[30] Harari, 69.
[31] Harari, 69.

technology improve. From a historical perspective, the exponential "knee" of technological innovation was the Industrial Revolution. Although technology improved before the Industrial Revolution, the rate of technological innovation after the Industrial Revolution was truly unparalleled.[32] Shared narratives, structurally strapped to technological innovation, also grew and spread.

Ian Morris, a historian, measures the growth of civilizations in terms of social development, "a measure of communities' abilities to get things done."[33] Morris does not imply, as Harari does, the reasons for social development; rather, Morris strictly provides "an analytical tool" with which to measure social development.[34] Morris' numerical analysis, however, does align with the exponentially faster spin-rate of the narrative-technology wheel following the Industrial Revolution.

Morris measures social development in terms of four factors: energy capture per person, social organization, war-making capacity, and information technology.[35] All of the factors, translated and combined into "social development points," precisely illustrate the "explosive growth" following the Industrial Revolution.[36] As societies operated under shared narratives, they created technology; as technology, subsequently, reinforced and spread shared narratives, technology itself improved. Morris' analysis of social development reflects the rapidly-increasing spin of the narrative-technology wheel post-Industrial Revolution.

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[32] Kevin Kelly, What Technology Wants (New York, NY: Viking, 2010), 8.
[33] Ian Morris, The Measure of Civilization: How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 5.
[34] Morris, 238.
[35] Morris, 39.
[36] Morris, 143.

Kevin Kelly, a technologist and futurist, continues along a similar path to Morris, but frames Morris' societal development, "ability to get things done," into what society has done, or, rather, has built — technology. Kelly, in agreement with Morris, sets the Industrial Revolution as the great turning point, the exponential knee, of modern technological development.[37] The Industrial Revolution, in Kelly's terms, accelerated a "coevolutionary dance" in which "human minds mastered cheap energy, which expanded food for increasing numbers of human minds, which propelled more technological inventions, which consumed more cheap energy."[38] Reflective of the narrative-technology wheel, Kelly's "coevolutionary dance" illustrates the inherently symbiotic process between the symbolic mind and technology. As humans produced more efficient technologies, human populations increased, and, hence, humans became more innovative and further advanced technology. Collectively, the narrative-technology wheel is "based on immaterial flows of information;"[39] both the symbolic mind and technology advance as they provide one another with information.

Kelly defines the collective processes of technological growth as the "technium."[40] Kelly's technium exists and flourishes through the interaction between the symbolic mind and technology. The symbolic mind imagines and produces technology: "technology is... the extended body for ideas."[41] Inversely, technology shapes the symbolic mind as it allows the mind to "transcend the constraints of nature."[42] After the Industrial Revolution, the technium, the

[37] Kelly, 8.
[38] Kelly, 99.
[39] Kelly, 10.
[40] Kelly, 12.
[41] Kelly, 44.
[42] Kelly, 37.

interaction between the symbolic mind and technology, exploded. Innovation exponentially increased, as evident in both Morris' and Kelly's work.

Given that the technium is, inherently, the structure in which information is shared, Kelly arranges the "major transitions in technology according to the level at which information is organized."[43] Pre-Industrial Revolution, Kelly sequentially presents language, writing, printing, the scientific method, and artisan production as the primary forms of technology that reorganized information.[44] After the Industrial Revolution, Kelly extends the list into mass production, industrial culture, and ubiquitous global communication, particularly in the form of "microscopic chips."[45] In the modern day, microscopic computer chips remain the "greatest (but not final) ordering of information;"[46] they transcend geographical bounds and transmit information almost instantly.

Kelly measures the rate at which the technium advances in terms of computers because, in modern times, "all technology follows computer technology."[47] In his research, Kelly agrees with and adheres to Moore's Law. Moore's Law "predicts that computing chips will shrink by half in size and cost every 18 to 24 months."[48] In other words, that our most advanced and influential technology will improve at an exponential rate. The "improvement" of computer chips is the increase in the rate at which computers can transmit greater amounts of information.

The Modern Entropy of Narrative

[43] Kelly, 47.
[44] Kelly, 47.
[45] Kelly, 47.
[46] Kelly, 48.
[47] Kelly, 159.
[48] Kelly, 159.

As computer chips share more information at an exponentially faster rates, so too does narrative decay into entropy. Moore's law, for the most part, has held true since the inception of computer chips. In line with the trajectory of Moore's law, the quantity of information produced and immediately accessible has also exponentially increased. With this overwhelming abundance of information, the reproduction and distortion of narratives gradually renders them meaninglessness. The seemingly-infinite nature of information has not bestowed increased meaning upon the symbol, but it has detached the symbol from any actual source.

Although written in 1935 on the subject of art, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,* insightfully analyzes the technological reproduction of art and the art's corresponding meaning. Firstly, Benjamin explains that "the work of art has always been reproducible;"[49] a tenant of human production is the ability to recreate what other humans have created. In light of Blackmore, the symbolic mind was founded upon and grew threw imitation. Despite the potential for reproducibility, however, Benjamin claims that the reproduction of artwork in the technological age is fundamentally different from the reproduction of artwork by manual processes — "the technological reproduction of artworks is something new."[50] Technology, specifically the lithograph and the photograph, reproduce artworks in vastly different mediums at unparalleled rates.[51] The reproduction of art no longer remains tied to the medium in which the original art was constructed.

[49] Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 20.
[50] Benjamin, 20.
[51] Benjamin, 20.

Through this change in form and quantity, Benjamin reveals that technologically reproduced art "enables the original [artwork] to meet the recipient halfway."[52] Artwork, in reproduced forms, becomes accessible to considerable masses. The new, egalitarian nature of artwork, nonetheless, simultaneously leads to the dislocation and identity loss of the original pieces. A reproduction alters "the here and now of the work of art — its unique existence in a particular place."[53] For example, a photo of a "cathedral [can be] in the studio of an art lover,"[54] while the cathedral cannot be in the art lover's studio; both the physical nature and the context of the chapel change. This newly disjointed relationship between artwork, form, and context confronts "the concept of [the artwork's] authenticity."[55] Technological advancement breaks the barriers of the original artwork, but by doing so, "certainly [devalues] the here and now of the artwork."[56] Although Benjamin amends the devaluation of artwork by promoting its new, equally-accessible nature,[57] he does not claim to ever recapture the original artwork. The modern state of artwork is both sculpted by and subject to endless reproduction.

Benjamin's understanding of artwork in the technological age reflects the state of narratives in the virtual, technological world. As information, in the form of narratives, enters the virtual space, it is so irrevocably shared that it utterly detaches from its original form. On a surface level reproduced narratives can convey meaning, like a photograph of a cathedral can convey meaning, but the context and state of the original narrative are lost. As technology further reproduces original narrative, the gap between the virtual and the actual reality of the narrative

[52] Benjamin, 21.
[53] Benjamin, 21.
[54] Benjamin, 22.
[55] Benjamin, 21.
[56] Benjamin, 22.
[57] Benjamin, 36.

grows. The reproduction of the virtual narrative, the signifier, no longer corresponds with the actual narrative, the signified. Virtually-conveyed narrative, therefore, becomes meaningless as it detaches from actuality; this is the entropic state of narrative.

The Ramifications of Entropic Narrative

Tom Boellstorff, an anthropologist, specifically explores the virtual-actual gap in terms of computer technology. Boellstorff explains that the virtual is the "almost;" it is not exactly the actual world, but an interpretation of it.[58] In the context of Benjamin, the cathedral is the actual and the photograph of the cathedral is the virtual. In terms of the digital world, the actual is the offline and the virtual is the online. The online world, like the photograph, interprets and extracts from the offline world. Although the offline world, unlike the online world, is tangible and precise, both realms are very much real. Humans simultaneously build and exist in both spaces, balancing one in terms of the other. An individual can mentally enter the virtual world as his or her physical body remain grounded in the actual world — the virtual-actual gap.

Within the past year, the epidemic of "fake news" has been emblematic of the virtual-actual interaction. As actual news appeared to be represented in the virtual world, the virtual representation of the actual news spread. Through the chaotic replication of the virtual representation of the actual news, the actual news was lost. This loss, or this devolution into fake news, was unrecognizable by many actual readers. Readers, accordingly, carried this fake news back into the actual world. The virtual replication of the actual news, therefore, had an impact on the actual world.

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[58] Tom Boellstorff, Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 19.

Fake news is a direct representation of broken technological feedback loops. The actual, translated and replicated in the virtual, is not properly communicated back to the actual. In terms of semiotic theory, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, this separation between the virtual and actual can be understood as the separation between the signifier and the signified. The signifier, the virtual, is the "concept and a sound-image"[59] — the representation of a thing. Saussure defines the "sound-image" as "the natural representation of the word."[60] The signified is, respectively, the "whole" that signified "replaces"[61] — the thing itself. Jacques Derrida builds off of Saussure and claims that, in the contemporary structure of the world, the "central signified... is never absolutely present outside a system of differences."[62] In other words, the signifier only reveals itself within a greater web of meaning. Without the structure of language and connections between concepts, the signifier makes "no sense."[63]

As applied to the virtual-actual world, the representation of the actual in the virtual, the signifier, grows exceedingly meaningless as it is immeasurably reproduced. More specifically, the structure of meaning that the signifier relies upon increasingly expands as the signifier is replicated. Within a convoluted and expansive web of meaning, the signifier draws further away from the signified; the virtual draws further away from the actual. In this stage of hyper-mediation, the sign drains of meaning and the consumer descends into numbness.

Derrida promotes the deconstruction of signification as an equalizing force; a sentiment reflective of Benjamin. Derrida claims that the loss of a center "makes [it] possible" for

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[59] Ferdinand De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 66.
[60] Saussure, 66.
[61] Saussure, 66.
[62] Jacques Derrida, Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences(1970).
[63] Derrida, 2.

"freeplay."[64] Freeplay, Derrida explains, "is always an interplay of absence and presence."[65] Without a center of meaning, the sign becomes fluid and liberated, there and not there. Although radically liberal in theory, the actual implementation of Derrida's work is vastly more challenging. As a species, humans operate on and desire a link between the signifier and the signified. The link between the signifier and the signified, allows humans to more accurately communicate and cooperate — to form shared narratives. Without a comprehensive connection between the representation and the thing, shared narratives cannot guide society to prosperity and cohesion. The danger of entropic information, therefore, threatens the dissolution of narrative.

The Post-postmodern Understanding of Entropic Narrative

Jean Baudrillard, though steeped in the same postmodern thought as Derrida, interprets the ultimate form of deconstruction as the total loss of meaning. Through his pivotal text, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard illustrates the process towards the "divine irreference of images." Baudrillard writes that an image first "reflect[s]" a "profound reality."[66] In terms of Benjamin's cathedral, the image "reflects" the cathedral. The image then "masks and denatures a profound reality." The image obscures the source; the signifier obscures the signified. The image then "masks the absence of a profound reality."[67] The image of the cathedral indicates the distance of the cathedral; the inherent absence of the cathedral. Finally, the image "has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum."[68] The image of the cathedral is

[64] Derrida, 1.
[65] Derrida, 10.
[66] Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), 170.
[67] Baudrillard, 170.
[68] Baudrillard, 170.

the object itself, it is not a reference to the original cathedral. Baudrillard describes this form as the "simulacrum."

Baudrillard's "simulacrum" is the "the real and its concept."[69] The simulacrum is not a representation of a signified, it is the signified itself. The signified and signifier are collapsed, there is no binary separation. Baudrillard suggests that this stage is reached through ceaseless mechanical reproduction. Within reproduction, "the function of the sign is to redouble itself behind the empty allusion of what it designates."[70] The sign becomes the thing itself, it is no longer referential. The image of the cathedral is the image of the cathedral itself, there is no original, actual cathedral. As Baudrillard states, there is "no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept; no more imaginary coextensivity."[71] Baudrillard does not live in the painful duality of Derrida's signification system. The "simulacrum" does not signify, it does not represent; therefore, there is no gap between the sign and the thing, no loss.

In this state of hyper-reproduction, in which the simulacrum arises, Baudrillard believes the world to become meaningless. Baudrillard does not envision destruction, as does Derrida, he envisions the numbness of endless creation. Modernity consists of "impenetrable and meaningless surface[s];" there is nothing behind the "screen."[72] Caught on the surface, Baudrillard predicts the total "absorption into the transparency of computers" — a fate "worse than alienation."[73] Within this purely simulated existence, Baudrillard believes that the products of cyclical replication will "invert then anticipate" the actual world.[74]

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[69] Baudrillard, 167.
[70] Baudrillard, 130.
[71] Baudrillard, 167.
[72] Baudrillard, 214.
[73] Baudrillard, 210.
[74] Baudrillard, 142.

David Foster Wallace echoes Baudrillard's laments through his literary narrative of 9/11.[75] In his essay, Wallace describes watching the planes hit the World Trade Center through his television screen. As Wallace watches the buildings fall, he notes "how closely various shots and scenes... mirror the plots of everything from *Die Hard I-III* to *Air Force One."*[76] The horror of 9/11, Wallace reflects, is exactly what the simulacrum anticipated. No longer did the image reflect the horrors of war, as in Vietnam; within the modern state of inversion, the war reflected the image — the most dangerous postmodern condition.

Virtually Together, Actually Alone

Whether or not Baudrillard's model of the anticipatory image proves accurate, the hyper-production of the image, of the symbol, is undeniable. Symbolic narratives on the internet, whether picture, text, or video, nominally and literally "go viral." A virtually replicated actual thing cycles broadly and endlessly. In a sense, Blackmore's memes fit within Kelly's narrative of exponential growth. The result of this cyclical system is an infinite collection of information accessible to any human with an internet connection.

The irony of this infinite connection, however, is the epidemic of loneliness that it produces.[77] Sherry Turkle, a psychologist with a focus on technological interactions, explains that in the digital age, Americans are "increasingly insecure, isolated, and lonely."[78] Although Turkle does not wholly attribute the cause of this loneliness to technology, she believes that

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[75] David Foster Wallace, Consider the Lobster and Other Essays (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).
[76] Wallace, 130.
[77] Y. Amichai-Hamburger and E. Ben-Artzi, "Loneliness and Internet Use," Computers in Human Behavior 19, no. 1 (2003): , doi:10.1016/s0747-5632(02)00014-6.
[78] Sherry Turkle, Alone Together : Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 5.

technology perpetuates this feeling. In our "vulnerable" states, "technology is seductive" as it gives the illusion of true connection.[79] As we rely on technology, the reality of its vacancies exacerbates our feelings of loneliness. Turkle writes, "our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other."[80] We are virtually connected, yet actually alone. The overwhelm of the virtual "disconnects us from our real struggles."[81]With unlimited information and connection virtually, we draw away from the actual. The virtual, the epitome of human success, also leads to the decline of the human experience. The human cannot function in a strictly surface, symbolic world. Without actual consequences, we grow numb.

Reimagining the Imaginary

In Buddhism, enlightenment is the realization of the self as an interconnected, impermanent consciousness. The enlightened being understands that the body, the actual, physical world, does "not exist inherently [and is] just imputations by thought."[82] The ultimate reality of being is the "interdependence of all things;"[83] a state of fluid consciousness without physically imbued bounds.

Structurally, the virtual world seems to achieve this physically formless, totally interconnected state of being. The virtual world allows individuals to escape their respective bodies and engage in a great network of consciousness. This network, nevertheless, is virtual, it is the simulation of interconnectivity, not the actuality of interconnectivity. The division of the

[79] Turkle, 3.
[80] Turkle, 3.
[81] Turkle, 283.
[82] Ferdinand De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 483.
[83] Robert A.F. Thurman, trans., The Tibetan Book of the Dead (London: Bantam Books, 1994), 36.

virtual and actual only defines and reinforces the actual. The actual can see the reality of the virtual and, therefore, realizes the truly isolated state of the actual.

In order to feel truly connected, we must wholly enter the virtual or renegotiate our relationship with the actual. If the virtual becomes the actual, then there will be no loss; the virtual will be whole. If we reconstruct our relationship to the actual, however, we can attempt to overcome loss and remain in both realms.

Through his novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon imagines this reconstruction. The protagonist, Oedipa, spirals in a postmodern condition in which she "seek[s] hopelessly to fill the void,"[84] to find meaning. Nevertheless, she feels that the world around her is a "printed circuit... of concealed meaning."[85] In terms of Baudrillard, she lives in the simulacrum — an impenetrable existence of meaningless surfaces. The virtual is not representative, it is the thing itself. As Oedipa has a stamp examined, the philatelist explains that the stamp is "obviously a counterfeit. Not just an error."[86] In other words, the stamp is as an intentional reproduction, a thing unto itself. The replicated stamp, yet, in the postmodern world, retains equal value. As the philatelist exclaims, "'You'd be amazed how much you can sell an honest forgery for.'"[87]

Oedipa grows increasingly paranoid and descends into numbness. She resigns that "you could waste your life and never touch the truth."[88] Gliding from surface to surface, she suddenly comes across an old man "huddled, shaking with grief."[89] Oedipa is "fascinated"[90] by him and carries him to his mattress. The mattress holds "vestiges of every nightmare sweat, hopeless

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[84] Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 21.
[85] Pynchon, 24.
[86] Pynchon, 97.
[87] Pynchon, 97.
[88] Pynchon, 80.
[89] Pynchon, 125.
[90] Pynchon, 125.

overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully, consummated wet dream."[91] Oedipa realizes that the mattress, the collection of the human condition, is "like the memory bank to a computer of the lost."[92] Oedipa is suddenly "overcome all at once by a need to touch him."[93] Within this touch, the reclamation of the actual, she "[feels] wetness against her breast." Oedipa finally captures actuality in a "vanishingly small instant."[94]

Conclusion

The human consciousness is exceptional because of its symbolic capacity. The symbolic capacity has thus led humans to far exceed their natural bounds. Humans can collectively produce and innovate through shared narratives. The shared narratives of the symbolic mind have allowed humans to build great technology. Technology, inversely, has grown the human consciousness. Within this narrative-technology wheel, humans have eventually manifested the symbolic world within the virtual world — the world of mechanical replication. Ceaseless replication, however, has destabilized symbolic narratives. The symbols become so widely spread that they detach from the original referent; they become both the symbol and the referent. Within this detached stage, humans grow numb as they cannot access meaning.

As the simulated more precisely replicates the actual, we no longer understand it as simulated and, subsequently, no longer identify the very root of our loss. We marvel at the quality of a virtual reality tour of a cathedral and feel that we have sufficiently experienced the cathedral. We forget what it is like to stand in the nave and feel the aura of the divine — the

[91] Pynchon, 126.
[92] Pynchon, 126.
[93] Pynchon, 126.
[94] Pynchon, 129.

weight of those who stood before us, the feel of sunlight through the stained glass. Like Oedipa, we must remember how to experience unmediated, direct interaction. We must lower our screens and hold each other. We can regain control of the narrative-technology wheel if remember why we spin it, instead of spinning it for the purpose of repetition alone.

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