The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

Beyond the Real: Hyperreality, Spectacle and Simulated Worlds in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and Samit Basu's *The City Inside*

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.37

Abstract:
In the twenty-first century, an unprecedented confluence of digital technology, media saturation, surveillance systems and global capitalism has transformed reality into a domain increasingly ruled by simulations. This paper offers a comparative study of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Samit Basu's *The City Inside* (2022) in the light of the theory of hyperreality, drawing mainly on Jean Baudrillard's account of simulacra and simulation, with reference to Guy Debord, Marshall McLuhan, Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson.

The study investigates how the two novels represent worlds in which mediated representation has replaced lived experience. While *Cosmopolis* surveys the hyperreal conditions through financial abstraction and digital capitalism in contemporary America, *The City Inside* portrays a technologically saturated India in which reality is curated through algorithmic entertainment and surveillance. The paper argues that the two novels, though set in different cultural and geographical contexts, reveal hyperreality as a transcultural condition of late global capitalism, in which screens, data and spectacle matter more than material reality itself, while showing that each setting shapes this condition in culturally specific ways.

Keywords: Hyperreality, Simulation, Baudrillard, Don DeLillo, Samit Basu, Surveillance, Capitalism, Spectacle, Postmodernism.

Article History: Submitted-30/09/2026, Revised-09/10/2026, Accepted-16/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.
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Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly changed how humans perceive reality. Today we live in a world increasingly mediated by screens, algorithms, data flow and virtual representation, often before we meet them directly. This is what Jean Baudrillard calls hyperreality: a state in which simulations no longer imitate reality, but have replaced it. Hyperreal societies are those where people have less to do with material reality and more to do with media, technology and the representations that capital produces.

This phenomenon is fertile ground for probing in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Samit Basu's *The City Inside* (2022). Although separated by two decades and different cultural contexts, both novels depict societies in which reality is mediated through technological systems. In *Cosmopolis*, billionaire asset manager Eric Packer travels across Manhattan in a high-tech limousine that is a self- contained digital universe. *The City Inside* presents a near-future Delhi where social life is ruled by live-streaming platforms, surveillance systems, and manufactured celebrity culture.

While *Cosmopolis* has attracted significant critical attention from postmodern and Baudrillardian viewpoints, with scholars examining its rogue capitalism, mediated selfhood and financial abstraction (Varsava 78-107; Laist 257-75; Osteen 291-304; Leps 305-27; Panta 97-108), scholarship on *The City Inside* and its Indian addition*, Chosen Spirits*, remains comparatively limited. Existing work on Basu has treated the novel through pandemic governance and datafication (Kuldiva 167-82), influencer advertising, and hyperreality (Shajith and Bhuvaneswari), caste and religious hierarchy (Jain 183-92), and surveillance capitalism and labour (Singh; Louis and Chattopadhyay), while reviews have introduced its anti-dystopian Delhi to general readers (Bonca; Harris). No study, however, has yet brought the two novels together through the combined postmodern framework of Baudrillard, Debord, McLuhan, Lyotard and Jameson. This study therefore seeks to address an important gap in current literary scholarship by bringing these two texts into dialogue.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse the construction of hyperreality in the limousine space of *Cosmopolis* and the Flow platform of *The City Inside*.
2. To compare the role of screens, data and surveillance in blurring the lines between reality and simulation.
3. To investigate the collapse of history, identity and truth under late capitalism.
4. To analyse commodified attention and spectacle as mechanisms of social control.
5. To assess if hyperreality operates differently in American and Indian Contexts, or if it is a global condition.

The central thesis of this study is that both novels dramatise a movement from representation to simulation, in which financial data in *Cosmopolis* and algorithmic surveillance in *The City Inside* progressively replace material reality. The study further argues that the two novels reveal both the shared logic of hyperreality and its culturally distinct forms, which emerge from American financial capitalism in one case and from Indian platform culture, caste-conscious surveillance and majoritarian political spectacle in the other.

Jean Baudrillard: Hyperreality and Simulation

The theory of hyperreality developed by Jean Baudrillard constitutes the main theoretical basis of this study. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard argues that modern society has moved beyond representation and entered a stage in which simulations no longer refer to an original reality: “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 2). Signs, images and models create their own reality, producing what he calls hyperreality, a state in which the real and the simulated merge together, so that “the map that engenders the territory” now precedes the territory itself (Baudrillard 1).

Baudrillard describes four successive phases of the image: “it is the reflection of a profound reality”; “it masks and denatures a profound reality”; “it masks the absence of a profound reality”; and “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). Only the first two phases still refer to a reality that exists. In the third phase, the image hides the fact that there is no reality behind it, and in the fourth, it becomes a pure simulacrum, a copy without an original. In the hyperreal world, people communicate with signs and symbols rather than with reality itself, and reality becomes even more mediated through screens and digital technologies.

The concept is directly relevant to both works. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer interacts with the world almost entirely through screens and data. Sitting in the club chair at the rear of his limousine, he looks into “the array of visual display units. There were medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing” (DeLillo 4). For him, “data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process” (DeLillo 10), hence the currency market and information flows becomes more real than the physical city outside. Packer names the principle himself: “The interaction between technology and capital. “The inseparability” (DeLillo 23), his limousine functions as a sealed simulation box in which everything is mediated by data, a fourth-phase, simulacrum of a city Street. The same can be said of *The City Inside,* where the Flow becomes a platform for the construction of pseudo-realities offered as entertainment, with life experienced as “a montage of randomly selected algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips” (Basu, Chosen Spirits 3).

Baudrillard’s theory therefore, frames both novels as accounts of technology replacing unmediated experience with mediated simulations. It also connects directly to McLuhan‘s claim that the medium itself, rather than its content, produces social effects, since for Packer the vehicle, and for Basu’s characters the Flow, are the very media that generate the hyperreal; to Debord’s spectacle, since a society of images is one in which image has passed beyond reflection and achieved autonomy; and to Jameson, whose depthless culture of simulacra is the cultural

logic of Baudrillard's hyperreality.

Guy Debord: Society of the Spectacle

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord provides an invaluable tool for understanding the commodification of experience in both novels. Debord notes how capitalist societies have turned social relationships into spectacles, images and representations that consume people's lives. "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 12). He also ties the spectacle directly to capital: "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (Debord 24).

In a society based on spectacles, direct human dealing is replaced by the passive consumption of images. As people become accustomed to seeing the world through images, their real involvement in the world diminishes; politics, culture, identity and personal relationships are all commodified and experienced as a spectacle.

This theory is clearly illustrated in *Cosmopolis*. Packer's immense fortune is a spectacle in itself, and driving a cork-lined stretch limousine through Manhattan becomes a demonstration of economic might. Even the anti-capitalist protest outside his car loses its real meaning and turns into spectacle, since the protesters "are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven" (DeLillo 41), and the electronic ticker tower delivers the protest itself as market information, inverting Marx into "A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD/ THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM" (DeLillo 96). Packer does not confront social suffering; he watches it from the distance of the car and the screen.

In The *City Inside*, the notion of spectacle is even more central, because spectacle is no longer only watched; it is manufactured, ranked and monetised as an everyday activity. The Flow turns daily life into continuous performance: celebrities, personal experiences, political discourse, and relationships all become commodities, and Joey's work as a Reality Controller consists precisely

in staging Indi's life as an endless show for its audience. Indi is not simply a person but a spectacle produced for mass attention, and Joey experiences her own life as a "montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips" (Basu, Chosen Spirits 3).

Debord's theory helps to understand how both novels depict capitalism as the social order that turns reality into entertainment, with people becoming spectators of their own lives and authenticity subordinated to visibility and performance. Debord's spectacle still presupposed a mass audience watching unified images; however, Basu shows a later stage in which the spectacle is personalised by algorithms in which watching is itself labour. Where Packer's spectacle of wealth remains an elite spectacle inside the market, the Flow makes spectacle the entire social infrastructure of Delhi.

Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message

Marshall McLuhan's well- known statement that "that medium is the message" provides an essential viewpoint for the appreciating technological mediation in the novels. In *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan explains that the medium's form has a more significant impact on society than the content it transmits: "in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" (McLuhan 7). Human perception, understanding and the social organisation change through the modification of the means people have for interacting with the world, since "any extension, whether of skin, hand or foot affects the whole psychic and social complex" (McLuhan 4).

For McLuhan, any medium serves as an extension of human capabilities: technologies enhance the senses but reorganise consciousness. In *Cosmopolis*, the limousine is treated as a medium rather than an automobile. Its screens, communication systems, and digital interfaces create an isolated information environment, so that Packer's way of looking at the world is determined by the technologies surrounding him. The limousine is not just a means of acquiring information; it teaches him how to perceive time and space, insulating him against street noise and street reality

alike.

Similarly, in *The City Inside,* the Flow serves as an immersive medium that reshapes social reality. It shapes how people build their identities, communicate, and acquire information. Users do not simply employ the platform; their minds are increasingly filled with the logic of its technologies, from the rankings that measure social worth to the feeds that structure attention.

The framework of McLuhan demonstrates that the major significance of the technology in both novels lies not in the information transmitted but in the consequences generated by the very media systems. The novels imply that digital technologies transform perception, so deeply that people begin to experience reality through the media imposed on them, a claim that dovetails with Baudrillard's simulation: for McLuhan the medium restructures perception, and for Baudrillard that restructuring culminates in a reality wholly replaced by its models. What distinguishes the two novels is the scale of medium: Packer's limousine is an extension of one wealthy individual, while the Flow is an extension of an entire society.

Jean-François Lyotard: The Collapse of Grand Narratives

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) offers a key basis for understanding the dispersal of truth in both novels. Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as "incredulity to metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Grand narratives such as religion, nationalism, scientific progress and the story of history used to provide people with a coherent explanation of life.

Nowadays, however, these narratives have lost their authority, and confidence in them has dissolved. In postmodern societies there are instead multiple competing language games, and knowledge becomes fragmented operational and dependent on technology.

In *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer no longer believes in political ideas, moral systems, or social institutions; his trust lies in financial data, which acts as the only source of convictions, since he is convinced that "there was something no one had detected, a pattern latent in nature itself" behind the market's movements (DeLillo 29). Nevertheless these systems fail him. His theory of

the Yen's rise collapses in a single day, and the failure of his predictions marks the collapse of grand narratives of market rationality itself. Even the protest movement, he passes is absorbed into the logic it opposes, its slogan delivered as market information on the ticker (DeLillo 96).

The City Inside reflects the same condition. Truth is fragmented by digital media: the Flow creates multiple competing versions of reality, and news and stories are created and altered according to algorithms. Political life itself becomes a sequence of distractive spectacles, with the state's actual power holders hidden behind "the dumbfucks on the hoardings" (Basu, Chosen Spirits 106), so that no unified public narrative of the nation remains available.

Lyotard's theory elucidates how both novels present a scenario in which people struggle to derive consistent meaning from divergent truths. Technological advancement exacerbates this disintegration, producing a state in which there is no authoritative means of establishing what is real. Where Baudrillard diagnoses the replacement of the real, Lyotard diagnoses the loss of legitimating narratives; the novels show these as two faces of one process, since a society of simulations cannot sustain shared grand narratives, and a society without them relies all the more on simulated images.

Fredric Jameson: Late Capitalism and Depthlessness

The theory of postmodernism presented by Fredric Jameson gives this study its economic dimension. Jameson argues that contemporary culture is shaped by late capitalism, leading to a situation of fragmentation, superficiality, and historical amnesia. He lists among the constitutive features of the postmodern, "a new depthlessness" and "a consequent weakening of historicity" (Jameson 6), and identifies "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" as it supreme formal feature (Jameson 9). Economic systems become so abstract that people can no longer perceive the structures that regulate their lives.

Depthlessness is a key point of the theory. In the postmodern world, depth is replaced by surface, so that appearance becomes more significant than reality. Instead of establishing meaningful social connections, people engage with the world through images, simulations, and their

involvement in consumer culture, while the past survives only as a sequence of glossy, decontextualised images, a symptom of what Jameson calls “the waning of our historicity” (Jameson 21).

The relevance of this theory to *Cosmopolis* is obvious. Packer earns his money through the economic dealings that have nothing to do with the production of goods; money circulates as abstract information rather than as transformed value, since “money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself” (DeLillo 77). His ambition is to become “quantum dust”, living in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin”, as the “master thrust of cyber-capital” extends human experience toward infinity as a medium of corporate growth (DeLillo 206-07). The financial system becomes so complicated and abstract that it appears to function independently, and economic reality becomes a network of hyperreal symbols and algorithms.

The City Inside exemplifies the impact of surveillance capitalism on daily existence. Attention, personal information, emotions, and social connections are transformed into commodities that are valued in the marketplace: what the Flow’s corporations actually trade is the data exhaust of everyday life, in which “every transaction, every observed adherence to or violation of every unwritten rule” and every “expressed emotion” is captured and processed (Basu, Chosen Spirits 64). What it means to be a human being is itself turned into profit as digital platforms monetise experience. People in these narratives reside in a world where capitalism creates not just products but entire realities.

Through Jameson, it is evident that hyperreality is connected to global capitalism. The simulated world presented in both novels are not an unexpected product of advanced technologies alone, but a result of an economic system aimed more at extracting information, visibility and consumption than at producing material value. Jamesons account of late capitalism as superficial, fragmented and historically forgetful (Jameson 6, 9, 21) fits both the financial abstraction of *Cosmopolis* and the attention economy of *The City Inside*: the former shows capital

dematerialising into pure flows of data and the latter shows capital penetrating identity, emotion, and everyday perception.

The five theories are connected and divided in specific ways. Baudrillard, Debord, McLuhan and Jameson describe the same underlying shift from a world of material objects and direct relations to a world of images, screens and models, but they locate its cause and its characteristic form differently: for McLuhan the cause is the medium itself, for Debord it is capital accumulated into images, for Jameson it is late capitalism's cultural logic, and for Baudrillard the shift is total, in which the image no longer even refers to a reality it could mask. Lyotard stands partly apart, since his concern is not images but the collapse of grand narratives that once legitimised knowledge; yet his account explains the political consequences of others' diagnosis, for a society in which simulation replaces reality cannot sustain shared narratives. The novels divide along the same line: *Cosmopolis* dramatises Baudrillard and Jameson, with data and abstract finance as the engine of hyperreality, while *The City Inside* foregrounds McLuhan's medium and Debord's spectacle, since the Flow governs perception and manufactures attention; both novels illustrate Lyotard's fragmentation of truth, though in Delhi this fragmentation is fused with political and religious control in ways Manhattan never experiences.

The theoretical framework established thus provides a multidimensional interpretation of the ways in which both novels depict societies increasingly dominated by screens, data, algorithms and mediated realities. Baudrillard supplies the logic of simulation, McLuhan the primacy of the medium, Debord the social form of the image, Lyotard the collapse of shared narratives and Jameson the economic base of these transformations. Though *Cosmopolis* is rooted in American financial capitalism and *The City Inside* in Indian surveillance capitalism, both novels ultimately depict hyperreality as a key characteristic of the twenty-first century global condition.

Hyperreal Space in *Cosmopolis*

The most important symbol of hyperreality in *Cosmopolis* is Eric Packer's limousine. The

limousine is more than a luxury vehicle; it is a self-contained digital environment cut off from physical reality, armoured and cork-lined against street noise. Its cabin is an array of monitors where "medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing" displays the view through the windows (DeLillo 4). Inside this high-tech interior of the car, digital data flows and financial changes that take place at the stock market are prioritised over the normal city setting. Eric's perception of Manhattan is shaped through screens, so that the city stops being a real place and becomes just a set of information flows. He encounters the street itself only as processed data, observing the "endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second" of pedestrians (DeLillo 8) rather than meeting them.

As a hyperreal environment, the limousine operates so that information substitutes bodily presence. Human interaction is transformed: conversation and meetings happen inside a technologically mediated space, whether with his doctor, his theory consultant Vija Kinski or his chief of technology, turning experience once again into another type of mediation. The novel also illustrates Jameson's theory of late capitalism through abstraction in finance. Packer's wealth is not owned through means of production but is produced through speculative currency operations in which "the only thing that matters is the price you pay" (DeLillo 78); economic value becomes separated from physical reality, symbolic rather than material. When the novel describes market frenzy as "driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over" (DeLillo 85), the hyperreal space of the car has already become a model of the world rather than an instrument for moving through it.

Hyperreal Flows in *The City Inside*

While *Cosmopolis* portrays hyperreality as a product of financial abstraction, *The City Inside* captures it through the lens of digital entertainment. The novel follows Joey, who is employed as a Reality Controller. Her job involves managing the multiple live-streamed reality surrounding the celebrity influence Indi, scripting feeds, arranging encounters, and keeping Indi's image

continuously productive; her father experiences his own life as “some kind of totalitarian reality show” without understanding “that managing one is his daughter’s job” (Basu, Chosen Spirits 14).

The term Reality Controller can be directly associated with Baudrillard’s understanding of simulation. Reality is not something that is found; it is constructed. Different realities are created through digital curation that tailors versions of Indi’s life to different audiences, so that the celebrity's public self is a simulacrum that mask the absence of any stable reality behind it. Even Joey’s sense of self dissolves into the system she serves, since her whole life feels like “a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips, mostly of her looking at screens or sitting glazed-eyed at meetings” (Basu, Chosen Spirits 3).

The Flow, as the platform, serves as a hyperreal system that organises social existence. Users experience shaped representations rather than direct experiences; celebrity image is a manufactured commodity, and Debord’s concept of spectacle is embodied in influencer culture where the life of Indi is a never-ending performance that does not allow any difference between true identity and public image, since both become sellable products. Surveillance completes the hyperreal loop. The citizens of Delhi live under constant observation by technologies that gather information, analyse it and predict behaviour, to the point that “it isn’t the government snooping any more, but a peak-traffic cluster of corporations, other governments, religious bodies, cults, gangs, terrorists, hackers, sometimes other algorithms, watching you, measuring you, learning you, marking you down for spam or death” (Basu, Chosen Spirits 16), and even one’s “own house” is “spying on you now” (Basu, Chosen Spirits 16). Basu grounds this surveillance in the specific geography of Indian capital, where “Delhi has always been a city of seven walls” whose boundaries of class “can be mapped and measured” by the new system (Basu, Chosen Spirits 169-70).

Comparative Analysis

Screens as Reality Filters

Both novels illustrate screens as the main mediators of reality. *Cosmopolis* shows screens filtering economic and social information through digital interfaces, from the "array of visual display units" in Packer's car (DeLillo 96) to the electronic ticker that turns prices into an anti-capitalist slogan (DeLillo 96). *The City Inside* shows everyday life is organised by live-streaming technologies, with the Flow as the medium through which citizens are seen, ranked and monetised. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference: Packer's screens serve the hyperreal bubble of one rich individual, while the Flow platform caters to the masses; one denotes a hyperreal personal condition, the other a hyperreal collective one, and only in the second do users perform for the screens rather than merely watch them.

Data and Simulation

In both narratives, data is the principal organising factor. Financial data determines the operations of Packer's lifestyle, in which data itself is experienced as "soulful and glowing" (DeLillo 10); algorithmically formulated data supports the social life of Basu's Delhi, in which "every transaction, every observed adherence to or violation of every unwritten rule" is recorded and ranked (Basu, Chosen Spirits 64). In both instances, the significance of direct experience is diminished and simulation supersedes it. The two regimes nonetheless differ in scale and consequence: Packer's data-world is chosen and paid for, while the Flow's data-world is compulsory, imposed across classes and enforced by state's predictive systems.

Spectacle and Commodification

In both novels, Debord's concept of the spectacle manifests itself in similar yet different ways. Packer's enormous wealth serves as a mode of exhibiting capitalist power, and his white limousine, "identical at a glance" to the fleet of cars behind it (DeLillo 9), is wealth

accumulated to the point where it becomes image (Debord 24). *The City Inside,* by contrast, is focused on the commodity of attention itself: Indi's manufactured celebrity, Joey's professional curation and the audience's endless scrolling turn identity itself into an object of consumption. Both novels reveal that contemporary capitalism transforms visibility, representation and performance into economic value.

Collapse of Truth

Moreover, the postmodern condition described by Lyotard can be observed in both novels. Truths become shaky under technologies that produce conflicting realities. To a great extent, financial data eclipses objective knowledge in *Cosmopolis*, where the failure of Packer's yen prediction exposes the emptiness of market narratives he trusted (DeLillo 29, 77). In *The City Inside,* live broadcast and algorithmically generated media narratives distort the picture of reality, and political truth is displaced by the spectacle of hoardings and managed feeds (Basu, Chosen Spirits 106).

Resistance and Agency

The two novels explore whether resistance is still possible in the age of hyperreality. Packer's failure demonstrates the limit of technological mastery: his attempted self-erasure into "quantum dust" (DeLillo 206-07) is indistinguishable from the logic of cyber-capital he hoped to transcend, and his resistance remains individualistic, ending in death inside the "crystal of his watch" (DeLillo 209). Basu's novel, by contrast, is more political and more specifically Indian. Its resistance is collective and rooted in Delhi's real history of protest: the memory of "Shaheen Bagh…. exists only in memory" after the state rewrites the record (Basu, Chosen Spirits7), and Joey's circle of excluded talk, organise and try to smuggle meaning back into a mediator world, knowing that "talking is all we can do" (Basu, Chosen Spirits 116) and that "the state funds and controls the resistance, so there's no one left or right, everything's a

distraction" (Basu, Chosen Spirits 120). Their efforts show how difficult it is to maintain genuine opposition when resistance itself is captured by the platform, a difficulty DeLillo's Manhattan never has to face, because its protesters, "market-driven" by definition (DeLillo 41), never mounted a politically serious opposition in the first place.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Cosmopolis* and *The City Inside* highlights the relevance of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality in contemporary literature. Although the novels come from different cultural backgrounds, they illustrate similar significant changes in the perception of reality in the age of late capitalism. While in *Cosmopolis* hyperreality is created by financial abstraction and high-tech communication, in *The City Inside* it is a product of surveillance, algorithmic governance and digital entertainment, layered over the specifically Indian realities of caste, majoritarian politics and Delhi's history of protest. Despite the differences, both depictions show societies in which screens, simulations and data are replacing direct experience.

The analysis also shows that hyperreality is not only a national, but a transcultural condition generated by the logic of global capitalism. American financial systems and Indian systems of digital surveillance are two manifestations of the same process of replacing reality with simulation. The comparison qualifies this claim at the same time. The Flow's hyperreality is inseparable from India's particular history of communal politics, surveillance infrastructure and inequality, whereas Packer's hyperreality is self-chosen and self-serving. With the help of their narratives of mediated reality, DeLillo and Basu argue, in their different idioms, for the costs of living in a world where representations no longer reflect reality but instead create it.

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