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Dystopic Simulacra, Virtual Identities and Cultural Implosion in Shteyngart's Super Sad True Love Story

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Abstract: *This paper offers a critique of contemporary media culture, virtual identities, and simulacra in the implosion of cultural and human values. The contemporary culture is characterised by media and virtual reality, which reduces the traditional concept of human interaction, language, and culture. The paper interprets Garry Shteyngart's Super Sad True Love Story in the light of Jameson, Baudrillard and Nicol's concepts of simulacra and media culture. Shteyngart's novel takes the dystopic view of a consumer society where human lives are subject to social media feeds, and human subjectivity is nothing more than an algorithm of credit and ranking. In this dystopic situation, Jameson's aesthetic of cognitive mapping can help to make sense of one's subjectivity and orientation in the culture of simulation and implosion. This paper claims that dystopic simulacra produce virtual identities at the cost of human subjectivity and language, which causes cultural and social implosion.*

Key Words: Acronyms, Body, Cognitive Mapping, Consumerism, Cultural Implosion, Depthlessness, Dystopic, Language, Postmodernity, Simulacra, Subjectivity.

Introduction

Every culture needs certain agents to propagate its ideological content in a convincing manner. Contemporary culture accomplishes this through social media and the world wide web. Besides, this culture promotes social media and the use of the internet to perpetuate consumerism and corporatisation through sophisticated modes of identity politics and marketing. Though apparently, social media and the world wide web are marketed as great marvels because they play their role in connecting people and providing access to knowledge, yet humanity is not getting some tangible benefits. These forums have reduced traditional human contact. The screen has become the medium of human interaction, which presents the augmented

interactive experience, thus promoting mobile media devices and the culture of simulation. Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story (Super)* foregrounds a culture where nature is mocked. The concepts of self and personality are considered old-fashioned. The essential human passions such as love, friendship and empathy are considered valueless and impractical. People believe in mathematical values, and pragmatism is the order of the day. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) has introduced an iPhone-like device which he names 'apparat, and which is also a central character in this fictional world. This device has certain special features as it functions as a data collecting as well as sharing device. Shteyngart's fictional world has completely gone digital, where every worthy (financially) individual has a digital self or soul apart from a corporeal body which is typified by his/her

digital contents. Apparatus serves as a medium of introduction. By just pointing its camera toward any individual, one can get the required information related to creditworthiness, nature of work, political mindset, sexual preferences, social likes and dislikes, status about relationships and every other information. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#), in his novel, takes the dystopic view of consumer society to the next level, where human lives are subject to social media feeds, and human subjectivity is nothing more than an algorithm of credit and ranking. The divide between personal and public have been blurred courtesy of social media feeds. The web activity of every individual is stored in data servers, and this data is shared with other corporates which produce different services and products for the endless consumption of their products. Various machine learning neural processing algorithms are deployed by these corporates to process, analyse and classify human data. These algorithms create a matrix of dissatisfaction and social absurdity among the consumers, which is again yet to be duly cured by the strategies offered by the neural networks. In this relatively dangerous and highly successful simulacrum, the human identity, the concept of self, human emotions, language, arts, books, and personal relationships have received serious blows. In this consumerist world, individuals are products as well as consumers. There is this endless charade of consuming at the cost of one's credit and self simultaneously. There is no beauty which is skin deep. The personality is now measured in numbers and through one's likes and dislikes on the global teens (a social media forum like Facebook or Twitter) and the internet. The language which constitutes one's consciousness has been shrunk to acronyms and abbreviations. The culture, which Shteyngart portrays in the novel, has gone completely digital. The relative existence of this culture has been reduced to consumerism, sensuality, simulacra, pragmatism, and materialism. This is the implosion of culture, which is indoctrinated in its subjects. *Super* foregrounds the implosion of culture and human identity in social media obsession and emphasis on body and money.

Literature Review

The historical view of the formation of human

subjectivity alludes to the role played by religion, sociopolitical reality, morality, cultural values, and scientific rationality. These factors are unique as they require a physical relation with the physical world to develop a certain consciousness. However, in the contemporary age, virtual social media has altered the process of identity formation. The lived experience of material reality does not play any crucial role in the formation of human consciousness. *Super* by Shteyngart presents a world which displays humans' reliability on mobile devices called 'apparatus' and internet media. [Mittal \(2016\)](#) has highlighted these concerns in her article on Shteyngart's novel. The people in the novel only interact through mobile devices, and their subjectivity and identity are extracted from their media profiles and based on their relative score, they are merited. This dystopic view of human identity gets a severe setback when the state imposes a ban on the use of technology which puts a halt to all virtual social interactions. In the new space of material reality, the people face an identity crisis. Their previous imploded identity of isolation was more welcome to them. [Mittal \(2016\)](#) sees this as an attack by the pervasive nature of multinational capitalism, which has engulfed the private space of the individual subject by making him pliant to the assault of mass cultural content.

[Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) considers this relatively new culture as consumer-based, which relies on a simulated version of reality and nature to indoctrinate a false consciousness of virtual selves, which are relatively considered more real than their material counterparts. Baudrillard (1994) considers this new culture void of spiritual signifies, which stands for transcending the potential of human subjects. Virtual reality does not signify the traditional nature-culture continuum. Rather it signifies the culture-culture continuum. That is why [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) calls it the code whose function is to codify reality as per laws of value. Shteyngart (2010) also introduces a system of scores which measure human subjectivity as per codes and numbers. [Nicol \(2009\)](#) also agrees with [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) that media culture has created virtual subjectivities which are easy to consume as they are fleeting and ephemeral. This rapid productions of digital content and emphasis on sensuality, consumerism and glamour induce an implosion of culture and human subjectivity. [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#)

also warns about the dangers of continuous engagement with virtual representation as it eliminates the natural real by replacing it with virtual reality. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) brings forth this replacement when people in *Super* refuse to accept the material world of experience when virtual networks are disconnected. [Kellner \(1995\)](#) also agrees with Jameson and Baudrillard that identity in contemporary culture is mediated by media culture. This identity formed out of simulacra is unstable and lacks the referent because it consumes itself. Jameson considers this culture postmodern and equates it with the cultural logic of late capitalism. Postmodernism, per [Jameson \(1991\)](#), is the end of the culture-nature binary and the beginning of the culture-economic interrelationship. It is a fully human world where culture is signified by virtual reality, which foregrounds the culmination of technology over nature. It superimposes the sheer commodification of its sphere and blurs the modernist view of reality. This relatively new culture also manifests a break from the structuralists' signifier-signified dictum. The culture has become a signifier, and it unfolds itself through a chain of virtual signifiers. This relatively new system is defined by corporatisation, media simulations, and hegemonic socioeconomic enclosure. [Major \(2011\)](#) explains Jameson's view, "As for nature, Jameson refers to an eclipse, a liberation from its putative fetters, a process whereby nature is no longer culture's other—it is culture" (p. 71). [Major \(2011\)](#) further elucidates that the concept of second nature is the manifestation of the technophilic dream as this relatively new nature is fully integrated by the human agency through technology. So, per [Jameson \(1991\)](#), postmodern culture foregrounds culture as a product, the market as a substitute for itself and its own commodity and finally, postmodernism as a process of the consumption of sheer commodification. Similarly, [Jameson \(1991\)](#) expounds on the main features of postmodernity which include a general depthlessness, culture of simulacrum, the loss of public as well as private historical sense, the loss of signified, waning of effect, and socioeconomic hegemony of public as well as personal space.

Jameson (1991) points out that late capitalism has created a perpetual present where time is dominated by the free-floating rhythms of the new electronic media, which he names the culture of the image or

the simulacrum. According to [Jameson \(1991\)](#), the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalised to the point at which the very memory of use value is obliterated, a society in which image has become the final form of commodity reification (p.17). The reification of image accomplishes the loss of historicity, implosion of culture and stratification of society. Thus, the apprehension of past and future is seriously weakened. Resultantly, the individuals suffer the loss of historical context. The crisis in historicity brings the crisis of the subject or identity, which is related to the language malfunction. The personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and second, such temporal unification is the function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If it is unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, it would be unable to unify the past, present and future of biographical experience or psychic life; resultantly, the cultural productions of such a subject could result in heaps of fragments and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous, schizophrenic (not in clinical terms), fragmentary and the aleatory social and personal experience. That is why history has simply become a matter of styles which can be pastiched in the latest retro clothes or theme pubs or in nostalgic representations of visual arts (p. 25-26). The contemporary picture of cultural aesthetics represents a sense of depthlessness, which is a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.

Generally, it is assumed that technology is the ultimate factor in determining social values and cultural identities. It is obvious that the technology of our times lacks the capacity for representation as computer or TV and media has no emblematic or visual power. Such machines are indeed machines of reproduction rather than of production, and they make very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representations because there is only the thematic representation of content with the aid of the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum. These visual representations convey the message of authenticity, which is itself quite paradoxical. That is why [Jameson \(1991\)](#) warns that technology is not the ultimately determining instance. Though, it is absorbing and enthralling because it offers some privileged

representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for minds and imaginations to grasp (p. 36-37). However, [Jameson \(1991\)](#) does not take the moralistic stance by just describing the negative impact of postmodern culture. He urges us to think of the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress altogether, to define postmodern space and develop a genuine political culture. In this regard, he raises questions about the fate of culture generally and the function of culture, particularly in the postmodern era. He points out that in postmodernism, the sphere of culture in the world of late capitalism has undergone a momentous modification of its social function as the semi-autonomy of the cultural jurisdiction has undergone a prodigious expansion of culture in every nook and corner of the social realm. Resultantly, the culture has been consumed and commoditised by culture itself, like the transformation of the real into pseudo-events and the society of the simulacrum, in postmodern space. Even the time-tested strategy of critical distance from cultural manifestation and production has been abolished in this new space because it is impossible to come out of it (p. 44-47). [Jameson's \(1991\)](#) solution to handle these distractions and disorientation is the aesthetic of cognitive mapping. The city, with its massive structure, intimidates people and makes them unable to map either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves, resulting in alienation. The disalienation can be achieved by the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction as well as reconstruction of the articulated ensemble, which can be retained in memory by the individual subject to map and remap the alternative trajectories. The aesthetic of cognitive mapping, a pedagogical, political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some heightened sense of its place in the global system, helps to grasp the positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralised by the spatial as well as social confusion (p. 52-53).

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in its nature and scope, and it follows the methods of theoretical research. The theoretical precepts of simulacra, virtual media

culture and implosion penned down by Jameson, Baudrillard, and Nicol have been applied to the primary data of this research study. The primary data has been collected from Shteyngart's novel *Super* which has been further interpreted in the light of secondary data inferred from the above-mentioned theorists. The primary data and secondary data have been studied by the application of close reading and exhaustive and critical analysis to answer the research questions of this paper. How do simulacra and media culture implode human subjectivity and cultural values? How does virtual subjectivity inculcate a reductionism in language? How does Jameson's strategy of cognitive mapping add meaning to human subjectivity in this relapsing media culture?

Data Analysis

Postmodern culture encompasses the lifestyle of a consumer society in a technology-ridden world where body, image and money are considered superior virtues. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) adds mobile phones and the social media craze to the lifestyle of postmodern culture. He points out how general human experiences have been altered in the age of social media, where language has lost its appeal, and the image with its endless filters and photoshop editing has become a new medium of expression and identity. Human emotions have been replaced by general depthless intensities which are absurd as well as void of any serious intent or motif. Love has been replaced by sensual sexuality, which is more public than private. People tape their sexual ventures and post them online to increase their rating, personality and fuckability. Even modes of conversation have changed. In this new age, instead of talking to each other, people chat on social media forums and use acronyms and abbreviations. These conversations are not kept secret, thus removing the divide between the personal and the public. The world has become more public, open, and absurd. Resultantly, restlessness and meaninglessness can be felt in individuals. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) has composed *Super* in the format of diary-writing and text messages. This format provides enough flexibility for the writer to include the lived experience of social reality in a realistic manner. The novel is the chronicle of Lenny and Eunice's account of life in a dystopic world. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) keeps it more relevant as the

dystopic view is the result of a consumerist lifestyle, political misadventures, and decadent culture where body, simulacra, and money rule. Lenny writes his diary to record his experience of life and particularly his love story. In contrast, Eunice chats on GlobalTeens. There is no concept of writing or reading in Eunice's world. Lenny is also described as the last reader because a reading book is considered old fashioned and futile activity. Reading has been overtaken by scanning as writing has been transformed into chatting. Eunice's chats and messages explicate the scattered experience of contemporary youth. The subject matter of the first chat from Eunice's account at Globalteens is the different sexual and social relationships which Eunice is having in her life. Eunice writes to her friend to seek some advice about a guy whom she is dating. She describes him to her friend,

His name is Ben, which is pretty gay, but he was SO NICE and so smart. He took me to look at some Caravaggios, and then he kind of like touched my butt a little and then we went to one of Giovanna's parties and made out. ([Shteyngart, 2010, p.25](#)).

The conversation between the two young girls describes the lifestyle of contemporary youth and emphasises body and sensuality. GRILLBITCH is the username of Eunice's friend, whom she wrote for some advice about his relationship with Ben. However, Eunice got patent advice from her friend, which she advised her to play her sexuality pragmatically with Ben to keep him confused and attached.

Go with him to Lucca, where is that exactly?, treat him like shit during the first day, let him fuck you HARD the first night, then leave him completely confused the rest of the time. He'll fall for you pronto, especially after you let him plunder your MAGIC PUSSY!!! And on the way back to Rome, be all nice so that he's left with a good impression but still not sure of himself. ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 26](#))

Further, Grillbitch related her sexual experiences to Eunice and wrote about a particular event of Wendy Snatch, which sums up the contemporary depthlessness and craze about media culture. Wendy was there at a party, and she was hitting a guy named Gopher. Not getting any response from him, she joined another guy named

Pat Alvarez, where they had a foursome. The description of the sexual act is so bizarre:

In the bathtub getting ass-reamed and face-pissed by Pat Alvarez and three of his friends, who taped everything and then put it on GlobalTeens the next day. GUESS how high her ratings went up? Personality 764 and Fuckability 800+. What is WRONG with people? ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 27](#)).

Apart from *Apparat*, Shteyngart (2010) has also introduced the credit poles, which scan the individuals for their respective credit ranking. As the identity of humans has been reduced to consumers, therefore, it is incumbent to rank a person according to his/her credit worthiness. Lenny relates the lifestyle of people in his vicinity on Manhattan Island. The unique features of this general social experience are the general aimlessness in consuming, socialising and use of language. Lenny relishes the children's use of language, their overblown verbs, explosive nouns, and beautifully spoiled prepositions. He muses, "Language, not data. How long would it be before these kids retreated into the dense clickety-clack apparat world of their absorbed mothers and missing fathers?" ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 51](#)). Similarly, he observed the commercial use of language on top of the credit poles where the American Restoration Authority has billowed several catchy slogans in diverse languages. For instance, "America Celebrates Its Spenders" and at another pole, "The Boat Is Full/ Avoid Deportation/ Latinos Save/ Chinese Spend/ALWAYS Keep Your Credit Ranking Within Limits/ AMERICAN RESTORATION AUTHORITY/TOGETHER WE'LL SURPRISE THE WORLD!" ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 52](#)). The people, who have low credit rankings, remain in the anxiety and fear of being deported or flagged. Lenny observed a Chinese woman who was buying desperately whatever came in her grasp and running over to a credit pole to update her credit worthiness. The commercial use of language with catchy tag lines and credit poles continuously scanning people for their credit ranking point out a reduction of human value as a social being. Lenny describes this situation, I felt the perfunctory chill at seeing entire races of human beings so summarily reduced and stereotyped but was also voyeuristically interested in seeing people's Credit Rankings. ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 52](#)).

Super, as a critical dystopia and a satire on contemporary technology-obsessed culture, indict

the emphasis on the body and the depthlessness of the self. The obsession with social media is a contemporary trend among young and old alike, and a lot of emphasis is given to the digital identity in the form of social media profiles and status updates where people keep posting about their daily routine things for meaningless appreciation and following. The dependency on apparat points out the inability to form meaningful communication and relationship in this media-obsessed culture. The novel relates this depthless social experience in an exaggerated, dramatised manner. Lenny's reunion with his friends is a significant example of the social media craze and wonders of new apparat. On his arrival at Cervix, where his friends were gathered, Lenny was welcomed by his friends Vishnu, Grace and Noah Weinberg, who were streaming this reunion live on his show. The first thing which Lenny observed was that his friends were trying to hide their age as they were in their late thirties, and this was the time when bodies started to shrink, decay and slack accordingly. Noah and Vishnu were wearing some spicy deodorant to mask their changing scent. There was a potential tension in their demeanour hinting towards some competition of an unknown nature. Noah was mimicking Lenny's stay in Europe and his sexual adventures to create interest in his show for his viewers. Noah was a novelist, and he had published a novel before the collapse of the publishing industry and the subsequent invasion of media culture. Noah's decline was parallel to the decline of the American state and culture. Nowadays, Noah is hosting a media show which was not of significant popularity. Lenny tried to entertain his friends with the tales of Europe, but his friends were not keen to know about his adventures as their sensibilities were captivated by apparat and its endless updates. The discussion on politics and culture caused Noah to lose some hits on his show as the audience was not interested in this kind of discussion. However, the interest of the audience was reinstated on the arrival of some girls who were wearing sensual and media getups and tactfully simulating and dissimulating their bodies. Vishnu proposes to "FAC", which sounded to Lenny as "Fuck". It was another acronym which stands for "Form A Community". FAC was a way to judge each other reciprocally. It was an application which worked through the camera and the EmotePad, which was attached to the back of the apparat. Lenny

had no idea about it. Vishnu installed the application and told Lenny about its procedure. The EmotePad functioned like a teleporter. By pressing it to the heart or pulse while looking at a girl through a camera, it could share personal information like fuckability, personality, sexual preferences, credit worth and professional background. Shteyngart has ironically exposed the blatant and degenerating use of technology in the postmodern world to highlight the menace of human efforts to form communities based on mutual trust, social harmony, subjectivity, brotherhood, humanity and individual as well as collective social values which safeguard the sanity of a community and its individuals. The culture of the image or simulacrum glorifies the body and depreciates the self. In these simulacra, human beings get to know each other by their digital content. The uncertainty and mystery about human subjectivity have no place in this technology-ridden world. That is why, when Lenny FACed a brunette girl by using apparat and EmotePad, a bunch of figures appeared on Lenny's apparat showing details about her persona: "FUCKABILITY 780/800, PERSONALITY 800/800, ANAL/ORAL/VAGINAL PREFERENCE 1/3/2." ([Shteyngart, 2010, p. 87](#)). Meanwhile, the brunette girl also analysed Lenny's profile, and she ranked his male hotness, which was 120/800. Lenny's personality got 450 points, while his sustainability, as he had decent money in his account, was ranked 630/800. Implicitly, Shteyngart mocks the emphasis on physical aspects of personality, which reduce the essential value of humans to certain products in a mall where the description of the product and brand defines the content of the product. Lenny being depressed by this endless stream of data where human content had been overpowered by the digital content, and he started to recall his first meeting with Eunice Park. In that meeting, they talked to each other and tried to know each other through conversation. They did not use apparats for this purpose. While Noah was streaming it live, it was quite a scene for his audience that someone was actually "verballing and emoting", which was not possible in this dystopic media culture. That is why, instead of showing some interest in Lenny's depressing love story, Noah's audience was interested in knowing if Lenny had sex with that Korean Girl.

Super has exposed the sinister impact of this social media ranking and too much dependence on technology (Apparat) in the implosion of human identity and culture. The late capitalistic system of political economics inculcates a reductionism on human identity where humans are supposed to believe in the simulacra as their true identity. The individuals in this dystopic world have been so addicted to this version of their identity that they do not want to wish for something else. In the later part of the novel, ARA, accompanied by Staatling-Wapachung Corporation, conceived an apocalypse for New York to absolve itself from the protestors, rogue national guards, poor people, and foreign debt. The Rupture, as it is called in the novel, was a revamped scenario of endless commercial expansion and rebuilding for international corporates. In order to accomplish this hegemonic closure, they suspended all communication systems in New York. Resultantly, people who were reliant on social media ranking as an assurance of their identity and self were left in the lurch. Even some individuals committed suicide, and they left suicide notes referring to this real world of faces, thoughts, and ideas as inanimate and useless. It does not give them the sense of identity which was offered to them in the system of ranking. *Super* satirises how technology has ripped humans of their human social identity. Technology has deprived humans of contemplating and critically analyse the self, personality, and relationships. After the Rupture, when Lenny used to spend his time reading books to Eunice, he used to feel as an alien and out of time because Eunice had no taste and understanding of the deep meanings of expressions and thoughts which literature offered to its readers. The capacity to critically and intellectually decipher the official narrative to bring forth the Other narrative to understand the constructed realities were all Greek to her. However, it was still redemption for Lenny that he was with Eunice, the love of his life, to make sense in this apocalyptic world. However, it was also slipping away from him as Eunice was secretly in a relationship with Joshie, who was capable enough to help Eunice's family and fulfil the practical demands of the postmodern generation. Eunice, being a representative of postmodern culture, does not need the romantic notion of love, family, and domesticity. The contrast between Lenny's somewhat traditional/modernist mindset

and Eunice's postmodern outlook brings to light two diverse points of view about human identity. The emphasis on money, physical, body, sex and virtual reality is contrasted with family values, love for books, human empathy, culture, and love. That is why Lenny and Eunice's love story ends in separation, as both were not suited for each other.

Findings and Conclusion

Super is an excellent example of contemporary media culture, which is reduced to sensuality, consumerism, social media craze, and simulacra. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) exposes the role of social media culture in imploding human identity and culture. *Super* is an exquisite satire on the social media profiles which serve as substitutes for self and identity. This identity is measured by numbers which are easy to understand for the people of Shteyngart's dystopian America. People in this fictional world do not want to know about the subjective content of a human being. They just want to know the economic worth, sexual orientation, and media rating. All these factors decide one's fuckability in this culture. The GlobalTeens is a social media forum like contemporaneous Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. [Shteyngart \(2010\)](#) emphasises the implosion of language, which has been reduced to acronyms, abbreviations, and slang. The relative degeneration of language points out the process of cultural implosion, which implodes one's lingual existence. Language, which stands for human subjectivity and consciousness, has been ripped off its creative features. Books have been abandoned. Reading has been replaced with scanning of digital content. The people of Shteyngart's fictional world remain engrossed with social media feeds and live broadcasts of every gross event, which includes sexual adventures as well. The divide between personal and public has been blurred as people do not want to keep anything secret as being secretive and personal does affect the personality score. The girls remain fascinated by online sales of lingerie items. The clothing has sexually provocative names, which include TotalSurrender, AssDoctor and JuicyPussy. There is a brand of Onionskin jeans which are worn without inner garments as these are transparent. The girls wear such kinds of dresses to reveal sexual appeal, which increases their personality score and

overall fuckability. Personal relationships are also based on economic value and media appeal. The dependence on social media for orientation of identity gets a serious blow when internet services are disconnected. People were so disoriented that they refused to accept the actual social human interaction. For them, it was a disappointment as they could not make sense of the world. They were very comfortable in the world of scores and numbers because it was an easier way to communicate with

people. They never needed any introspective effort to understand people. This is the cultural implosion, whose main emphasis is the proliferation of consumerism and mass media. The screen has become the new mode of social interaction, which is imploding human sensibilities and conceptions of reality. These new media technologies have applied a reductionism to human identity, where an individual is not an independent subject but a consumer of images and simulations.

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