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KIM KARDASHIAN

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SCULPTED

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If you are one of the four billion breathing human creatures on this planet owning a TV or a smart-phone, it is quite likely that you were already blinded by her dazzling presence. She is the ubiquitous face of popular culture, flooding TV shows and tabloid news, along with our Facebook accounts, Instagram feeds and Snapchat stories. She broke the Internet with an image of her rear and she is famous for being famous since more than ten years. Of course, she is Kim Kardashian West, aka KKW.

But in the unlikely case that you belong to the happy few who don't know KKW yet, let me run you through a brief chronology of fame that's worth keeping for posterity. Simply, so that it can be cherished by the next generation of teenagers, analysed by sociologists, envied by D-list celebrities or hated by the intellectual elites of the future.

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SIMON Kim Kardashian West was born in 1980 in Los Angeles, the city of dreams. Between 2003 and 2006 she caught our eyes for the first time as the friend and stylist of Paris Hilton, appearing on various episodes of Hilton's reality TV show *The Simple Life*. Her images floated on the surface of our screen, but faded away quickly. This changed when the sex-tape *Kim Kardashian, Superstar* was leaked in 2007. The soft-porn film showed her goofing around with singer-actor Ray J while on ecstasy, all filmed with a handheld camcorder in mediocre quality. KKW, 22 years old back then, wasn't too concerned about the release and used her first 15 minutes of fame for the promotion of the upcoming reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. And while you wouldn't think that KKW could rise to the heavens of celebritydom by televising scenes of the family's daily life—Kim taking happy selfies while her sister Khloe was

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on her way to jail, or competing for a better vagina smell against her sister Kourtney—this is exactly what happened. Using her new visibility she started to market her body emphatically, setting off an avalanche of images: First, she poses for *Playboy* in 2007, next, she cameos in a couple of movies and sitcoms, before she ventures into several brand endorsement deals promoting fast-food, candles, lollipops, shoes, weight-loss products and even cupcakes (“Va-Va-Va-Nilla—at home”). In 2014, she marries the rapper Kanye West, attracts 1% of US internet traffic after the magazine *Paper* published an image of her rear, while increasing her already massive follower count on various social media platforms. There, she keeps our eyeballs glued to images of her body and various brands, selling cosmetics, interior and shapewear. Today, *Forbes* estimates her wealth at \$780 million.¹ She gets paid more than Nobel Prize winners for public appearances and in the unlikely case that she’s short on money, a sponsored post on Instagram can earn her up to half a million dollars. Lately, her influence reaches beyond the realms of social media and cupcake ads, bringing her visits to the White House (discussing prison reform with former president Trump) and the autocratic president of Uganda (to whom Kanye West brought some white sneakers as a gift). Now, I know, we’re all desperately asking: how on earth is this possible?

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“Kim Kardashian West,” *Forbes Magazine* No. 24, accessed on January 14th, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/kim-kardashian-west/?sh=2397f73341d6>

When I scroll through Kim Kardashian’s Instagram account I cannot help but think of the unnamed official of the George W. Bush administration, who stated in 2004: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities [...]”²

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Ron Suskind, “Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.

The Instagram reality of KKW was studied by more than 192 million followers in 2020. What they can see on her account is an impressively constructed life in real time. Swarms of self-broadcasted images bear witness to a divinely sculpted body made of hyper smooth skin, organically shaped curves, an eccentric rear, voluminous lips and perfect hair. The narrative of her posts suggests that KKW’s beauty seems to be intrinsically linked to her products, her success as a business woman and her happy family life. And of course, we want that perfectly smooth reality too—so we buy her products, get a similar haircut or contact one of

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the high-profile plastic surgeons on Instagram. By doing so, new realities of bodies emerge, novel parts of faces are sculpted and popular lifestyles are performed, imitating KKW's aesthetic language. KKW is an empire now, and when she acts, she creates her own reality.

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Unfortunately, chasing these realities and their norms of beauty will always be a losing battle. Simply, because the images of KKW's body are constantly shifted towards more and more unreal perfection. The ultimate vehicle for doing this is the so-called Instagram Face, an image that jumps at you from your smartphone screen, creating desires for an appearance that you have never thought of before.

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A regular Instagram Face workflow of KKW goes supposedly something like this. First, her star make-up artist Mario Dedivanovic does his contouring, a technique that was already used in the early days of black-and-white film to dramatize lights, shadows and the contours of the face. *The New Yorker* describes the technique in an article about Dedivanovic as "airbrushed skin, sculpted cheekbones, peachy-pink blush," a "bronzy eye," long false eyelashes, and dewy highlighter, all "baked"—an industry term for setting with loose powder—to a matte finish, like the shell of a cage-free egg.³ Trying to recreate this kind of make-up will take you around one hour, not to mention several adjustments during the day. Sunlight, sweat and tears should be avoided at all cost, since this could create cracks in the thick layers of your newly sculpted Instagram Face. After all, it's made for the screen, and not for daily life.

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Jia Tolentino, "The Age of Instagram Face," in *The New Yorker*, December 2019.

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SIMON SCHWYZER FOCUS

Next, an image of KKW is produced with the help of outrageously expensive cameras, high-end lenses, professional lighting and various reflectors by a personal photographer that knows her signature look exactly. At the end of the procedure, a combination of different digital face filters and post-production tools—powered by humans and artificial intelligence alike—is applied to get the right breast size, nose angle or hip shape. So be warned, if you want to keep up with the Kardashians, failure and the conclusive states of body dissatisfaction and depression are very likely—simply because what you are trying to imitate is beyond reach.⁴

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Marika Tiggemann & Jennifer S. Miller, "Selfie" Harm: Effects on Mood and Body Image in Young Women (Amsterdam: Elsevier Journal, 2018).

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In this day and age, this is possible more than ever, since digital images consist of pixels, code and

language that can be manipulated easily. We could even argue that a digital image of KKW is structurally closer to a painting than to an analogue photograph. This might sound surprising at first but think of it like this: while analogue photographs were directly inscribed on film via photochemical processes, digital images are written (and potentially endlessly rewritten) as files, just as a painting can be drawn (and redrawn) by brushstrokes. KKW's digitally altered images are inevitably pictorialist, more artworks than representations. Thus, we shouldn't call them photographs anymore—but maybe rather digital realist paintings—a term coined by theorist and photographer Joan Fontcuberta.⁵

Most users of Instagram and other social media platforms are aware of this. After all, most of them make use of the ever-growing list of filters and image processing software too. Moreover, we have long understood that the genre of celebrity image is governed by its own rules where everything is illusory and all kinds of magic can be applied to generate the most vivid media dreams. While all of this rings true, it doesn't explain why there are still so many people out there trying so hard to imitate KKW's realist paintings.

The answer to the persuasive power of KKW's images lies on her Instagram account. Obviously, some of the images we can find there are glossy, hyperreal fashion shots. But then there is a mass of others that seem less staged but still show a hyper perfect body. These images pretend to have a commitment to reality for they evoke a documentary language: spontaneous and often taken at home, at parties, or on vacation. They seem to record places and moments that we associate with intimacy and real-life: trying on jeans in a fitting room, playing with the kids, watching TV in bed. These images show private spaces and embrace the formal language of authenticity. Sometimes there is a hard flash, sometimes they are a bit off, not quite perfect, a bit tilted, as if they were saying: it is KKW, but it could be you, it could be me, it could be anybody. However, those who dare to look closer are in for a real Truman Show moment of total construction: KKW's pupils reflect the shining lights of professional video equipment in a "spontaneous home video," old images of family members are steeped in heavy digital nostalgia-filters and shots from the last improvised home party turn out to be staged, taken and edited by her personal photographer.

KKW doesn't show us images that try to document her life; instead she shows us images that use the style of documentary realism to simulate a life, to finally convince the last sceptic about her authentic beauty and its related products. Welcome to the age of fiction capitalism, where everything looks real while everything is fake! According to Spanish author and journalist Vicente Verdú,⁶ images are the main vehicle of this form of capitalism—costly constructed and highly priced commodities. They create the magical illusions of our time that we all want to see, like and follow, and eventually buy and live ourselves.

Vicente Verdú, *El Estilo del Mundo: la Vida en el Capitalism de Ficción* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2003).

Yet it's not only about the quality of the images produced and thrown at us by the KKW industrial complex. It's also about the unbelievable quantity. For the sake of argument, let's have a look at a random sample. When I followed KKW's activities on 25 November 2020 on Instagram I witnessed the dissemination of 42 stories within 16 hours. There were eleven stories about her fitness training, three announcements of a new @skims partnership (her shapewear brand), six crystal perfume launch stories (her fragrance brand), one about the crystallized PR-box, two skim ads, four KKW beauty promotions (her cosmetics brand), 14 stories demanding justice for Julius Jones (who has been on death row in Oklahoma for 21 years) and one final inspirational quote before KKW went to bed. Yet if you thought like me that this was a record, I have to tell you that only two days later she broke it with 68 stories. This frequency of posting theoretically allowed for a maximum of three hours of sleep. If it's true—as stated by KKW herself again and again—that she doesn't have an army of assistants and bots managing her social media accounts, this kind of sleep deprivation would be the only explanation for her answer to a Vogue reporter, who asked her about her daily time on Instagram, when she replied: "Not that much, like 30 minutes."

The restless penetration of social media networks by KKW seems to fit in with our times. Within a globalized consumerist society every hour without self-marketing is a wasted hour. Images have to keep flowing in order to keep the gazes staring and the money coming. American social psychologist Robert Zajonc, who discovered the Mere-Exposure-Effect in 1968,⁷ gives us one of the reasons for that: "people have an increased preference for a stimulus as a consequence of being repeatedly exposed to said stimulus."

In other words: The more often you show us a product or lifestyle, the more probable it is that we'll like it. And digital images are the perfect tool for this, since they can be produced and transmitted easily within social networks to millions of people around the world. Independent of time and space, they can be read, opened and seen by a global audience all at once. Hence, digital images are a currency of exchange or, as Hito Steyerl calls them, "floating texture-surface commodities."⁸ They come and go, arousing our consciousness for a moment before disappearing in the endless void of infinite scroll. KKW's images are not meant to stay, they are ephemeral entities of network communication only intended to keep our phones vibrating, the notifications popping and stories circulating.

7 Robert Zajonc, "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1–27.

8 Hito Steyerl, "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," in *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso, 2017).

KKW has clearly internalized these working principles of today's information economy, where most people earn their living by managing information, including digital images. However, as Michael Goldhaber already wrote in an article for *Wired* back in 1997: "[...] ours is not truly an information economy. By definition, economics is the study of how a society uses its scarce resources. And information is not scarce—especially on the Net, where it is not only abundant, but overflowing. [...] So, a key question arises: Is there something else that flows through cyberspace, something that is scarce and desirable? There is. No one would put anything on the Internet without the hope of obtaining some. It's called attention. And the economy of attention—not information—is the natural economy of cyberspace."⁹

9 Michael Goldhaber, "Attention Shoppers!" in *Wired Magazine*, January, 1997.

Today, KKW blends the raw materials of beauty, family drama and celebrity news ingeniously to become the goddess of attention. In an age where the average attention span is eight seconds (four seconds less than in 2000 and one second less than the attention span of a Goldfish),¹⁰ KKW is a master of utilizing this time. She knows exactly how to construct visibility and gossip through publicity-stunts, the crack of her rear, expectedly unexpected nipples and intimate family scenes—all of which can be transformed into views, followers, likes, and eventually into infinite desires and millions of dollars. This is why KKW posts

nude images of herself for #feminism, performs arguments with her husband while surrounded by paparazzi and imitates poses of the 19th-century black slave Saartjie Baartman that are inevitably connected to the history of racism and colonization.¹¹ Subsequent shitstorms and negative attention are secondary, what matters is attention. Within the saturated markets of our postmaterialist society—where most products can be attained easily and every bit of knowledge is just a Google search away—attention is the most valuable asset because it is the only really scarce resource left. If you get it, you win. How you get it doesn't matter.

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Michael Brenner, "Thanks Social Media—Our Average Attention Span Is Now Shorter Than Goldfish," accessed December 14, 2020, <https://marketinginsidergroup.com/content-marketing/thanks-social-media-average-attention-span-now-shorter-goldfish>

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Confusingly, KKW uses even seemingly altruistic actions as attention-grabbers, creating a maximum of antagonistic feelings. For example, after she lobbied 64-year old Alice Marie Johnson out of a life-long prison sentence, Johnson appeared in an emotional marketing campaign for her shapewear. And when she called for help for the victims of the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Instagram, she used an image that showed her with red hair and a skin-tight yellow outfit, kneeling lasciviously on the floor. The caption started with: "If only I had a bright blue color on I would be the Armenian Flag."

However, it isn't only extreme beauty, nakedness, drama and sensation that grabs our attention. The key also lies in her reality TV formula of sheer immediacy and the illusion of being close to us. We are fascinatingly entertained and curiously stimulated by watching her daily life in real-time. On social media we bear witness to the most intimate scenes through layers of lenses, screens and interfaces and feel like part of her family. We join her digital community, share some gossip and use it to shape parts of our own identity. It feels like KKW is continuously drawing closer to us by self-broadcasting on reality TV, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. It's a 24/7 stream from kitchens, playgrounds and bedrooms that intermingles with stories, tweets and posts from real friends and gives us the impression that KKW is just one of them. And naturally, we pay attention to our friends.

Unfortunately, the feelings of proximity and friendship only turn out to be, once again, empty simulations. It's one-way traffic. KKW keeps talking to us—keeps us showing her kids, nipples and Christmas cookies—but we cannot talk back. Let's admit it, she also doesn't want to hear us, simply because she isn't looking for friends (and on top of that, keeping in touch with 192 million people would be quite stressful). Nevertheless, it's a lucrative strategy to exploit our most basic needs for companionship and belonging by staging a conversation. Social psychologists call it parasocial interaction and describe it as a form of illusory connection that is specifically one-sided

and exploitative.¹² This means, that ultimately, our only chance to contribute to this relationship is to follow, like and buy.¹³

12 Jennifer Anette Lueck, "Friend-zone With Benefits: The Parasocial Advertising of Kim Kardashian," in *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 21:2, 91–109.

13 Another chance to get a real conversation going would be to try to talk to KKW's like-minded followers in the comment section. But watch out, apparently 48% of them are bots. Conversations with them tend to be rather fruitless since they mostly talk about porn-websites or products they want you to look at.

As we see, KKW's feel for real-time network communication and its potential to produce devoted followers is unmatched to date. She is capable of commanding the gazes of millions by elaborately modulating the amplitudes of her continuous live-stream. This seems to be supernatural intuition, which might be the result of growing up while real-time entertainment and live broadcasting were on the rise. The starting gun fires in the early 1980s, when KKW discovered TV with *Real People*—a pioneering reality TV show that uses videotape to present the eccentric lives of naked skydivers and amputated cross-country runners. Only ten years later, a war is televised live 24/7 for the first time in history as the Persian Gulf war unfolds on CNN. At 13, KKW witnesses the seminal moment in reality TV history, when US TV networks interrupt their regular programme for a live broadcast of the police pursuit of O.J. Simpson. And only two years later, KKW's father, Rob Kardashian, gains recognition as attorney of the very same O.J. Simpson and the trial is followed live by millions of people. And finally, as we all know, sharing a life in real-time is democratized by the rise of the Internet, smartphones and social media platforms during the 2000s. Now, everybody can watch real people in real-time, because, as McLuhan put it, every extension of humans through media allows the audience to grow closer by seeing further and hearing better.¹⁴ Obviously, KKW likes to situate herself at the very top end of that extension, because she likes being close to us.

14 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

The ongoing increase in immediacy is equivalent to the collapse of latency. We no longer have to wait to see an image after it was taken, because the time for production, distribution and consumption of images has shrunk from weeks, to days, to hours, to fractions of a second. Thus, we seem to win time, but lose the act of waiting and its related uncertainties. What will the image look like after development? How will the war unfold after today's evening news? What will KKW do in-between her fashion-shootings? We don't

have to ask these questions anymore, since the ubiquitous flow of images gives us the answer right away. In this scenario, we are passive observers, we have no time to reflect on what we see, we are forced to dive into a never-ending stream of images where all spaces of imagination and contingencies are annihilated. The emotions aroused by the uncertainty of the wait are gone. Roland Barthes' idea of the waiting of a lover for a loved one as an integral prerequisite for love, is dead.¹⁵ Latency is replaced by a never-ending flow of live images. We are not waiting lovers anymore, we are frantic consumers.

KKW is a creature living inside social media networks. Indeed, she was born on reality TV, but now she has moved on to the media-architectures of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. There, her mighty digital realist paintings of beauty, success and happiness take full effect with the friendly assistance of invisible software and global infrastructures: a smartphone captures an image of her, satellites transfer it, server farms store it, fibre optic cables transmit it, algorithms select the most striking one, we see it on Instagram, data centres record our viewing time, and some super-computer close to a tax haven suggests us new images of KKW based on that viewing time. It is here, in the network, where KKW becomes persuasively alive. Needless to say, this network is not neutral, its rules and norms are hardwired into the different social media platforms. It is a complicated mix of judicial, moral, aesthetic, technological and commercial parameters that come into play and KKW is a mastermind when it comes to utilising these hidden rules of the network for her own needs. She knows how to work the algorithms, fire up the feedback-loops, persuade the servers, please the bots and curate, as theorist and architect Liam Young calls it, the most attention-grabbing and popular assemblage of personas in our digital age.¹⁶

Let's look at Instagram for some examples of KKW's sixth sense for the working methods of the platform's top-secret algorithms. First, the feed, which is a kind of overview of all the images and videos that were posted by your friends recently. Instagram doesn't organize your feed chronologically, but has its own sorting logic that should keep you engaged and entertained for

as long as possible. And although its details are a carefully guarded secret, Instagram revealed three main ranking factors that influence what you see first: it prioritizes posts that were liked a lot, that were posted most recently and whose publisher has a connection with you.¹⁷ In other words: The more often you post, the higher the chances that you are liked by a lot of people (remember the Mere-Exposure-Effect), the better chances for multiplying your visibility through Instagram's ranking algorithm. And of course, KKW does exactly that. More images, more followers, more sales.

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Ashley Carman, "This is How Instagram's Algorithm Populates Your Feed," accessed on December 13th, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/1/17418254/instagram-algorithm-how-it-works-posts-downrank>

In economics this dynamic is referred to as network effect. It describes the phenomena by which the value of a good depends on the number of its users. Network effects are mostly positive feedback loops, which means: more users (or followers) bring more value, which brings even more followers, which bring even more value, and so on.¹⁸ These feedback loops tend to create tippy markets, where the rules "the-winner-takes-it-all" and "the-loser-gets-nothing" apply. Clearly, KKW is eager to be on the winning side of this battle.

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Carl Shapiro, *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the Network Economy* (Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

Instagram is also detecting and recording how, when, where and how often you use the app, it checks your search history and phone contacts, as well as your hashtag use and mutual friends so that its algorithms can suggest you new and interesting people to follow.¹⁹ Everything KKW wants, is to become your friend through this back-door. The chances of that happening are higher if her posts are shared more often by others. So, KKW makes sure that this happens a lot, inviting fashion-vloggers to discuss her newest products, cross-referencing and hanging out with make-up artists, stylists, photographers, bloggers, celebrity friends, musicians, and so on.

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Anna Middleton, "How Does Instagram Know My Friends and Who to Suggest?," accessed on December 13th, 2020, <https://social.techjunkie.com/how-does-instagram-know-friends>

It is also curious what Instagram's algorithm doesn't want to show you, and how in turn this plays into the hands of KKW. Again, the mechanics of Instagram are a well-kept secret, but as far as we know the platform checks the 95 million images that are uploaded per day for "policy-violating content" via a mix of manual reviewing and artificial intelligence. Reportedly more than 15,000 (mostly underpaid) employees around the

world and advanced image recognition software examine images all day long to block those that show or support terrorism, hate speech, self-injury, graphic violence or nudity (I don't want to know what this kind of work does to your mental health). Experiments have shown that Instagram bans nude images of celebrities and thin white models less often than those of overweight people or women of colour.²⁰ As it seems, human beings and image recognition algorithms are applying their prejudices and stereotypes once again to make marginalized and less advertised bodies disappear, thereby reshaping our notions of beauty on the basis of commercial intent.

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James Vincent, "Instagram Explains How it Uses AI to Choose Content for Your Explore Tab," accessed on December 13th, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/25/20977734/instagram-ai-algorithm-explore-tab-machine-learning-method>

But there is an even more unsettling side to this: apparently, bodies of white women that manufacture a look of exoticism seem to bend Instagram's image policies particularly well. This multi-ethnic look is described by celebrity make-up artist Colby Smith as "an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern."²¹ KKW's images escape Instagram's image bans so well, because she represents exactly this sort of collage-like, frictionless beauty that allows her to foreground certain features chameleon-like, depending on whose gaze she meets.

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Jia Tolentino, "The Age of Instagram Face," in *The New Yorker*, December 2019.

Last but not least, we have to investigate Instagram's infinite scroll function. I'm sure KKW loves this feature, since it provides one more chance to sneak into your field of attention. How does it work? As the name suggests, it's geared to keep you looking at your feed for as long as possible. To make this happen, Instagram's engagement algorithm will suggest you a bunch of new images once you're at the end of your feed. These suggestions are based on trending posts, people you follow, images you liked, your viewing times, location and a bunch of other behavioural data that is constantly recorded and fed into the algorithms. It ensures that once you have seen all the images of your feed, more beautiful and tempting images will seamlessly appear. And if you have seen these too, even more. Before you know it, an hour of random scrolling, tapping, typing and swiping went by and you realize that there is no

such thing as the end of your feed. Infinite scrolls are the contemporary sirens of social media networks—like in Homer’s *Odyssey* they lure passers-by with their enchanting voices. Once you hear them you can barely escape.

This works, because these sirens connect directly to the dopamine-pathways of our brains. In an evolutionary context dopamine is meant to reward us for beneficial behaviour (like a successful social interaction, sex or a nice meal), which should motivate us to repeat that behaviour. Today, Instagram and neighbouring competitors like Snapchat, Twitter or YouTube are exploiting our dopamine-system to turn us into cyberjunkies. They calculate the optimum time and quantity to show us social interaction rewards—like notifications, likes or comments—that will make us keep coming back to our phones as often as possible, unconsciously hoping for the next dopamine kick. This works so well that frequent social media use creates obsessions comparable to gambling addictions: every time when we check our phones we are playing the slot machine, asking ourselves: what did we get?²² When Susan Sontag observed more than 40 years ago that “photography enables an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted,”²³ she couldn’t have imagined this creepy twist that was to follow.

Trevor Haynes, “Dopamine, Smartphones and You,” accessed on December 13th, 2020, <http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time>

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

In the end, KKW and social media platforms share the same interests. Both want you to spend as much time as possible on the platform, simply because it increases revenue. For KKW it’s about selling her fiction, for the platforms it’s about selling ads and your data. American scholar Shoshana Zuboff describes this as surveillance capitalism—a new form of capitalism that turns our human experiences into raw data and “into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. These prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace, the behavioural futures markets.”²⁴ Potential traders are multi-national corporations, political parties, national security agencies, Cambridge Analytica or the troll army of the Russian Internet Research Agency. They all want to know what you’ll be up to tomorrow in order to nudge you into the right products, political parties and behaviours. In the end we have to remember that we are not the users of social media platforms; we are their product.

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

Stages and platforms of social exchange were always connected to human hopes for equality and justice. More than 250 years ago, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated for a uniting, republican theatre stage, demanding a festival, where “spectators should become actors themselves, so each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.”²⁵ In a similar vein, techno-utopians of the 1990s have celebrated the Internet, which was glorified as the electronic version of the ancient Greek agora. There, citizens should unite by having equal rights to express themselves freely. The early days of social media promised, again, the democratization of culture and information; the silenced would finally be heard, all bodies would be on display and the authenticity of real-life would rule.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Brief an D’Alembert über das Schauspiel,” in *Schriften* (Munich: Hanser, 1978).

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PALLAVI KESHRI

BLING

As far as we know, most of these utopias have hardly materialized. Sure, some short moments in history presented a flicker of hope when stages and platforms helped to set revolutions on fire and brought some visibility to the marginalized and discriminated. But let’s face it: in the end, the agora was booked for white male citizens of status only, while big parts of the internet turned into a space of surveillance and social media platforms transformed mainly into business opportunities, accelerators of body dissatisfaction, depression, misinformation and political polarization.²⁶ Here, companies like KKW and Instagram can present us the bodies, lives and values worth pursuing, because they are in power of the images, networks and algorithmic procedures. Their inherent and endless positive feedback-loops are reshaping our faces and redefining our lives in merciless fashion until we finally perform the artificial lifestyles of cyborgian Instagram faces. In the end, we might all be a version of KKW in a world full of clones—because in this game, the winner takes it all.

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Sam Harris, “Welcome to the Cult Factory, A Conversation with Tristan Harris,” accessed on December 13th, 2020, <https://samharris.org/podcasts/218-welcome-cult-factory>

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KATHARINA SHAFIEI-NASAB THE GREAT ESCAPE

Of course, we could try to turn off our devices for a while, suppressing our cravings for the next pre-fabricated dopamine rush. Perhaps—although it’s not very likely—the addiction would cease and our mental wounds would heal. But at the same time, we would have to pay the price of being out of touch with our friends and loved-ones, at least to some extent. Do we really want that? Especially today, in a globalized world—and particularly

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during a global pandemic—digital communication offers the possibility to talk to people we are not allowed to see or who are far away. We are social creatures and we need social exchange. But do we want to sacrifice parts of our mental, physical and political health for the opportunity to meet our friends online? And if so, is it possible to find a non-destructive way of existing in these digital environments which are explicitly made to exploit and monetize our vulnerabilities?

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The short answer is: no, not today. I don't think that a healthy use of social media platforms is realistic considering the power structures that are currently in place. Simply, because the inherent logic of the platforms and their KKW-like penetrators is to undermine every grain of human self-determination in order to make their users browse, look, buy and behave the way they want. Autonomy is not welcome because it could limit revenues; instead control and addiction are preferred. Resisting the platforms might work in exceptional cases but it will feel like withdrawing from alcohol or cocaine; the ones who dare will experience vertigo and disorientation, they will suffer, cry and puke. For all others it is a race to the bottom without an emergency exit on an individual level. The only stop-button to this will be hard rules that limit the capabilities of the platforms. We should demand responsible algorithms and extensive regulations that protect the mental health and well-being of users and followers. We need to slow down the deadly speed, reprogram the addictive tools and restrict the bending of bodies through technology. First efforts are underway but, as always, substantial change will take time and an awful amount of lobbying. Until then, we better turn into stoic flaneurs in the midst of a glossy, psycho-technological regime of total attention. Only so might we escape the sirens of the platforms now and then by singing our own songs of human imperfection in the park next-door.

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