

## Pandemic of the Real Language, Power, and the Hollowing of Meaning



Figure 1 Glitched video still depicting broadcast authority under signal degradation. Author's own image.

### Language as Contagion

A virus, in biological terms, is a parasitic agent that cannot survive alone, it enters a host, hijacks its machinery, and compels the reproduction of the intruder's code, A digital virus behaves much in the same way, slipping into systems, rewriting commands, and spreading silently through networks. Language behaves like a virus too. Words replicate through mouths, headlines, screens, and algorithms, mutating as they travel. They enter us, shape us, and without our conscious consent, they speak through us. In the contemporary media landscape, linguistic contagion circulates at the speed of touch, leaving its influence faint, fleeting, and almost invisible, like breath on glass. By the time language has become visible, it has already passed through us.<sup>1</sup>

The host is neoliberal in guise, for a language virus, the perfect ecosystem for rapid transmission. Deregulating as it privatises, privatises as it individualises, it reduces citizens to human capital while simultaneously subjecting them to crisis after crisis, weakening logic as it hollows the host from within and amplifying susceptibility to viral outrage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts That Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage, 2002).

The Neoliberal language virus can disguise itself in the dressings of mythology via its emptying of language of its historical and political content. It takes many forms, photography, writing, objects, rituals, media formats or whichever medium it wishes to assimilate. In each case, it empties the sign of original meaning and re-infuses it with emotion and morality, a framework as pervasive as it is naturalised.<sup>3</sup>

Left unfettered, this language contagion infects us all, fragmenting and reshaping perception, producing modified realities in service of various institutional, commercial or political gains. Jean Baudrillard names this condition the “desert of the real”<sup>4</sup>, a state in which representation no longer refers to a shared reference of reality but a simulated procession of simulacra. Emerging from these conditions of the neo-liberal landscape, is not a single desert of the real, but multiple, landscapes of conspiracy, half-truths, ideology, and exclusionary imaginaries. These deserts do not converge, yet each is saturated with its own version of “common sense.” Within them, language appears coherent and internally consistent, even as it is emptied of history, hollowed of complexity, and transfigured in meaning. As theorised by Herman and Chomsky in their analysis of structural power, these fragmented realities do not arise spontaneously, but are shaped, twisted, reconfigured and transmogrified to manage consensus towards the converging interests of political institutions and economic elites.<sup>5</sup>

If language spreads invisibly, then critique must learn to see without spectacle. It is here I introduce Flak, not as a cure, but as a speculative anti-virus to the language contagion. A diagnostic system designed to detect, archive and expose systemic patterns of media bias. Flak shall work at a level which critically addresses political and media systems whilst working as an operational system that actively monitors media environments and make the invisible visible. Rather than intervening through counter-speech or representation, Flak seeks to slow circulation, render distortions visible, and return attention to what would ordinarily go unnoticed.

This investigation proceeds from the premise that contemporary propaganda is less a matter of deception than of linguistic conditioning. Before examining how neoliberalism provides the conditions for this spread, and how simulation intensifies it, it is first necessary to understand how propaganda operates at the level of language itself. Chapter One therefore examines the linguistic mechanisms through which consent is manufactured, focusing on framing, myth, and the disciplinary role of flak, to establish how power operates before it is ever explicitly imposed.

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994).

## Chapter 1

### Flak, filters, frames



Figure 2 Single image rendered through multiple preset photographic filters, producing divergent tonal and atmospheric variations from a shared source. Image reproduced from Pixaprints, “How to Use Filters to Get That Perfect Selfie” (2017).<sup>6</sup>

The term Flak itself is an example of how language can be born. In infancy a term can remain fairly benign. Starting its life in Germany, the term Flak originated from the key letters of FlugzeugAbwehrKanone, the German word for anti-aircraft artillery. Flugzeug (Aircraft) Abwehr (Defence) Kanonem (Cannon). Meaning defensive, ground-based, high-calibre weapons used to destroy or damage enemy aircraft. Becoming a commonly used German shorthand for exploding anti-aircraft fire aimed at Allied planes and by the second world war had entered the Allied aircrew’s vocabulary. Over time, *flak* migrated from military jargon into everyday language, coming to signify hostile or concentrated opposition.<sup>7</sup>

As Chomsky and Herman have noted via their propaganda model, over the twentieth century, independent and working-class media became steadily marginalised - displaced by rising production costs, advertising dependency and ownership concentration. This gave way to a united media landscape in which corporate and state interests increasingly shaped what could be reported, shaped or ignored.<sup>8</sup>

A clear illustration of this restructuring appears quite recently following the controversial editing of a documentary featuring President Donald Trump’s January 6<sup>th</sup> speech which resulted in the resignation of top executives at the BBC and threats of

<sup>6</sup> Pixaprints, “How to Use Filters to Get That Perfect Selfie,” 21 June 2017, <https://www.pixaprints.co.uk/blog/2017/06/use-filters-get-perfect-selfie/> [accessed 23 January 2026].

<sup>7</sup> ‘FLUGZEUGABWEHRKANONE... AKA Flak’, Vintage Wings of Canada <<https://www.vintagewings.ca/stories/flugzeugabwehrkanone>> [accessed 22 January 2026].

<sup>8</sup> Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent.

large-scale legal action.<sup>9</sup> What we are seeing here is a form of discipline upon a media institution which has strayed beyond political or economic boundaries. Primarily elite driven, corporations, well-funded groups and political actors have the resources to sustain extended campaigns that shape long-term editorial policy, keeping the media within acceptable bounds they deem acceptable. Herman & Chomsky's posited propaganda model refers to this form of discipline as Flak, the fourth filter within their five filtered propaganda model.<sup>10</sup> The resulting media terrain - a media class operating with anticipatory self-censorship, a use of phrasing, tone and framing to avoid future accusations of bias and retaliatory discipline.

If flak disciplines media institutions externally, it is through framing that this discipline becomes internalised, shaping how events are described, interpreted, and morally evaluated before any explicit censorship is required. Lakoff defines such frames as mental structures that shape the way we see the world. They shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. Frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policy. To change our frame is to change all of this. To reframe is social change.<sup>11</sup>

We learn frames through language, and language activates these frames. Words trigger a whole system of association, value and judgement. What we define as "common sense", to negate a frame, still activates the original cognitive framework, thus reinforcing the original framework and related associations, imagery, values, and emotional responses. One's common sense differs to another's common sense. To reframe then is to change how the public sees the world, to change common sense.

Thus, new language is required to form new associations within already ingrained frame systems. So even dominant narratives are rationally challenged and even accepted momentarily, but they often reassert themselves through familiar frames to stabilise moral identity, producing a return to the original position.

Lakoff theory shows how frames shape perception from within, structuring thought, judgement and more evaluation before conscious deliberation takes place. Yet frames do not operate in isolation within the individual mind. They require reinforcement and repetition through cultural forms that make them feel obvious and natural in order for them to endure. It is here that Roland Barthes' concept of myth becomes vital, shifting analysis from how meaning is transformed in the mind, to how it becomes naturalised in culture.

"Myth is a type of speech",<sup>12</sup> speech is a kind of message, a message is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows,

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<sup>9</sup> Aikman, Bylan, and Kayla Epstein, 'Why Is Donald Trump Suing the BBC?', BBC News, 9 November 2025 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mx28vlp4wo>> [accessed 22 January 2026].

<sup>10</sup> Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

<sup>11</sup> George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 109.

publicity, objects, all of these can serve as a support to mythical speech. It is through the many representations of mythmaking that stabilises frames as “common sense”. Barthes notes in “Mythologies” that myth converts historically produced conditions into natural facts. Intervening by emptying a an already meaningful sign of its historical and political context and reusing it to make an ideology appear natural and inevitable.

Rather than fading, this structural form of discipline has amplified within the contemporary media landscape, driven by conditions of legal risk, reputational scrutiny, and deepening political pressure.

A clear contemporary example of this mythic operation can be seen in the slogan “Make America Great Again.” In Barthes’ terms, “*Make America Great Again*” operates as myth by taking a completed linguistic sign and repurposing it as a new signifier. At the level of ordinary language, the slogan functions smoothly, America was once “great”, has fallen from “greatness”, and can be restored. Myth intervenes by emptying the sign of historical context, displacing questions which are unasked - When was America great? For whom? And at what cost? -, whilst preserving the emotional impact. The slogan’s meaning is reduced to a simplified form and recycled to support a broader ideological narrative in which decline is unnatural, restoration is necessary, and semantic complexity seen as an obstacle. This process does not rely on pure falsehood, but on distortion. History is transformed into nature, and a political worldview shaped by specific historical conditions is made seem obvious. In this way, Barthes’ central claim in *Mythologies* is illustrated - myth depoliticises language by reshaping how meaning is felt and understood. History does not disappear here; it is folded into form.<sup>13</sup>

Building on Barthes’ account, myth functions to naturalise ideology. What remains to be explained is why certain mythic forms propagate with such force, endure and reassert themselves even when challenged rationally. Anthropologists Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer approach this question not through individual beliefs or persuasions, but through the transmission of ideas. For Sperber, culture is made up of contagious ideas.<sup>14</sup> Taking an epidemiological approach, Sperber argues culture is composed of representations which circulate through populations. Such representations are easy to remember, repeat and refashion, not because they are the more coherent or morally cogent but because they align with already existing mental frames and moral identities. Their persistence is due to their stickiness rather than their authenticity or ethical soundness.

Cultural representations do not pass intact from one person to another, with each act of communication the representation undergoes a ritual of being brutalised, twisted, and distorted. Over time it is not the precision of the content which is stabilised but recurring forms which survive through the repeated transformation. Carlo Severi documents this process in his analysis of a Hasidic prayer. Across generations, details are progressively lost to the prayer whilst the underlying structure of the ritual holds true. The prayer survives because it changes; mutation is its defining condition.<sup>15</sup> Slogans, myths, and ideological narratives persist in the same way - eroded of context,

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<sup>13</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*.

<sup>14</sup> Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, p. 63-66.

<sup>15</sup> Carlo Severi, *The Chimera Principle: An Anthropology of Memory and Imagination*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015). p. 1-4.

reduced to form, and carried forward through repetition rather than truth.

**“Concepts in the mind are constructed as a result of being exposed to other people's behaviours and utterances.” - Pascal Boyer<sup>16</sup>**

Representations which are emotionally charged, morally loaded or that violate expectations are more likely to circulate more effectively as they are easier for the mind to process and remember. Boyer illustrates this via religious concepts which are largely familiar yet contain slight violations of expectation, such as “when people die, their souls sometimes come back in another body” or “we worship this woman because she was the only one ever to conceive a child without having sex”.<sup>17</sup> Such representations persist not due to being rationally convincing but because they are emotionally compelling and cognitively manageable. Fear, outrage, identity and threat demand less cognitive effort than complex explanations and therefore travel faster through populations. Ideas such as the above examples persist not because they are authentic but because they fit already primed mental expectations or evoke strong emotional reactions.

Taken together and applied to digital modernity, these frameworks describe a media environment in which power no longer operates through direct censorship or over propaganda but through subtle coordination of discipline, framing, and transmission. Language is shaped by institutional coercion, internalised through frames, naturalised through myth, and carried through populations, cultural attraction and mutation. Within this configuration, ideology no longer requires the need to be imposed, it circulates and reproduces itself through repetition, emotional effect, and familiarity. Settling world views into common sense whilst marginalising others as unintelligible or extreme.

What emerges is not a single propagandistic message, but a structural influencing through which meanings thrive and endure, while others struggle to survive. The chapter which follows this turns to the environment which allows structural influencing to flourish - the neoliberal host.

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<sup>16</sup> Boyer, Religion Explained, pp.41-42.

<sup>17</sup> Boyer, Religion Explained, pp.58-65.

Chapter 2  
Host

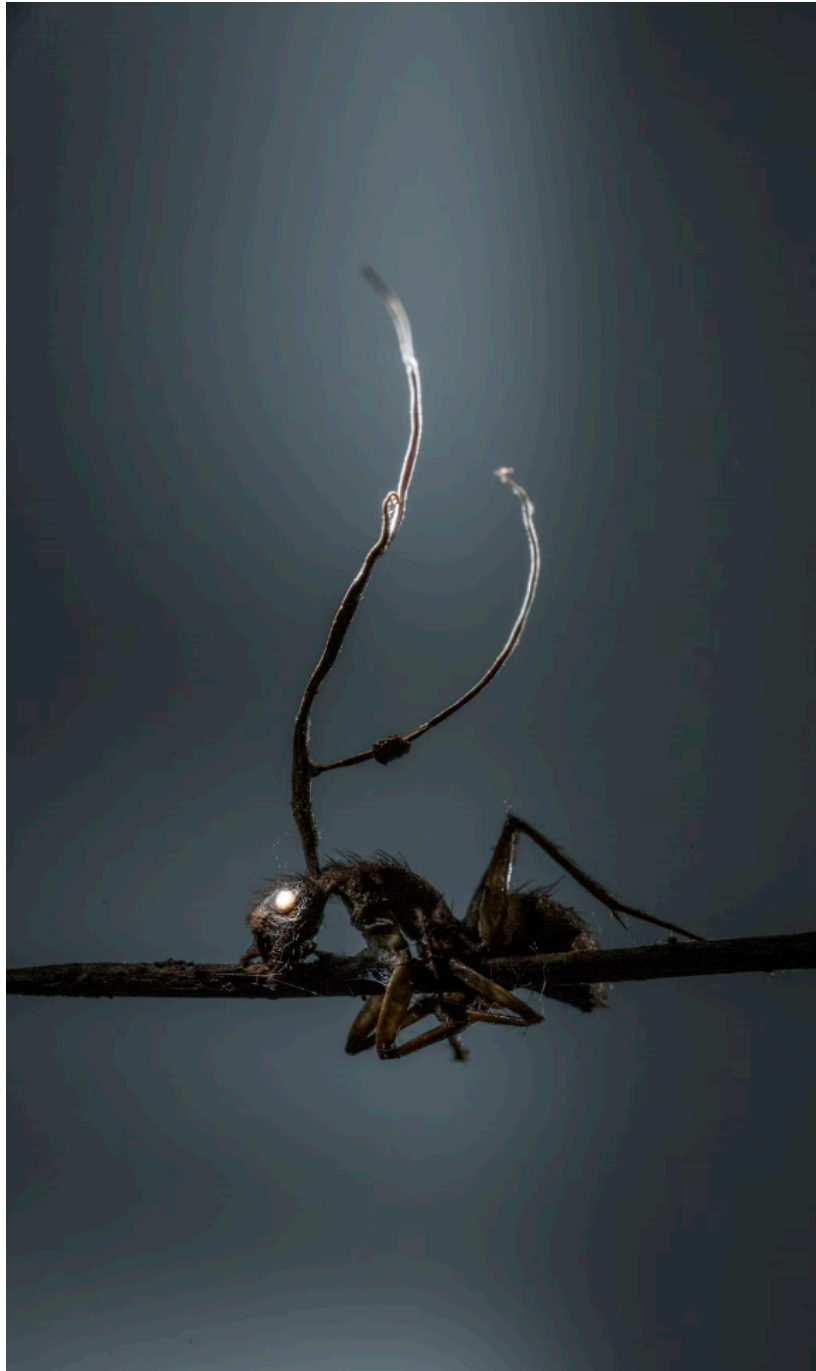


Figure 3 Ant infected with *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* fungus, which alters host behaviour to facilitate fungal reproduction. Photograph by Anand Varma / National Geographic.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Anand Varma, photograph of ant infected with *Ophiocordyeps unilateralis*, in **National Geographic**, 'Cordyceps Zombie Fungus Takes Over Ants', <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/cordyceps-zombie-fungus-takes-over-ants> [accessed 23 January 2026].

Neoliberalism, the perfect host. Described by Wendy Brown as a shifting signifier refusing to be a fixed ideology or coherent economic programme.<sup>19</sup> It is economic policy, a modality of governance and an order of reason, is at once a global phenomenon, and yet inconstant, differentiated, unsystematic, and impure. Neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. Political, social or ethical values become rationalised at the economic level. Democratic ideological terms such as freedom, responsibility and participation become hollowed out and re-signified into terms of competition, efficiency, and self-investment. It is neither uniform nor static, its ability to mutate is a symptom of its own endurance allowing it to remain widespread as it evolves over time.

Neoliberalism mobilises moral language, liberty, autonomy, self-determination whilst systematically dismantling the institutions that make those same values meaningful. When detached from democratic substance, these terms function as instruments of depoliticisation rather than expressions of popular will.

Rather than imagining neoliberalism as an external force imposed upon society, it may be more accurate to understand it as a parasitic system that operates from within its host. Much like the parasitic fungus *Ophiocordyceps*, Neoliberalism infects its host via language and ideology, reprogrammes and reshapes behaviour, and subjectivity and ultimately uses the host's own structures to reproduce and propagate its logic. The democratic body moves but not under its own logic anymore.<sup>20</sup>

Disbelief, distress, fear, outrage, and paralysis are common features of shock. The experience is not only psychological but physiological, a jolt to the nervous system marked by racing heart, shallow breath, and cognitive disorientation. Under such conditions, the capacity for deliberation is reduced and the threshold for compliance is lowered.

If neoliberalism functions as a hospitable environment for linguistic contagion, then crisis operates as its most effective accelerant. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein demonstrates how moments of collective disorientation, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars, and economic collapses, are repeatedly used to impose radical market reforms that would otherwise encounter sustained democratic resistance. During periods of shock, publics are not persuaded so much as overwhelmed. Democratic processes are temporarily sidelined in the name of urgency, whilst structural changes are introduced before collective capacity for critique can reassemble.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> "How *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* Turns Ants into "Zombies"", National Geographic <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/cordyceps-zombie-fungus-takes-over-ants>> [accessed 22 January 2026].

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).

Within this logic, debate is reframed as delay, dissent as irresponsibility, and complexity an obstacle to recovery. Emergency becomes the language of governance, condensing political possibility into simplified moral dichotomies. Shock operates not only as a political strategy but as a linguistic one, reshaping the environment under which its meaning circulates, favouring immediacy, repetition and emotion over historical explanation.

Klein's argument moves beyond the opportunistic exploitation of crisis. Suggesting that crises are often intentionally leveraged and intensified to produce conditions in which consent is rendered inconsequential. Under these circumstances, political legitimacy is no longer depends on public agreement, but on speed, disorientation, and the temporary interruption of resistance. Shock does not persuade; it disorients until resistance loses its capacity to act.<sup>22</sup>

This logic is articulated most clearly in the work of Milton Friedman, who argued that "only a crisis- actual or perceived- produces real change".<sup>23</sup> He argued that crises generate narrow temporal windows where decisive action, in which newly empowered administrations can act swiftly before resistance reassembles.<sup>24</sup> He cautions that if reforms are not implemented rapidly, the opportunity may vanish. Crisis, is therefore, not framed as a disruption of democratic process but as a necessary condition for radical change.

Klein demonstrates this logic in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where the devastation of New Orleans was rapidly accompanied by the swift privatisation of public institutions.<sup>25</sup> With residents displaced and infrastructure in ruin, long-standing public systems, most notably education and housing were systematically dismantled and supplanted with privatised alternatives. These changes were introduced under the language of emergency, framed as unavoidable responses to catastrophe as opposed to political choices open to public debate. The framing of urgency restricting political possibilities, while displacement undermined the ability to collectively resist. For many observers, this restructuring represented a regression of hard-won civil rights-era gains. Katrina, as a result, stands as a clear example of how shock makes possible political opportunity, deliberating of democratic values and allowing of market reforms to occur as common sense necessities rather than contested moral decisions regarding the public.

Shock has direct implications for the spread of propaganda. Crisis language is marked by recurring formulations - *this is not the moment for politics, there is no time for debate, we must act now, delays will cost lives*. Such language privileges immediacy over verification, repetition over reflection, and moral binaries over explanation. Emergency rhetoric becomes the dominant linguistic mode, hollowing out historical context and rendering alternative interpretations illegible. In this way, shock does not merely enable policy change, it reshapes the environment of communication itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Klein, The Shock Doctrine.

<sup>23</sup> Klein, The Shock Doctrine, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> Klein, The Shock Doctrine, p.7.

<sup>25</sup> Klein, The Shock Doctrine, pp.1-7.

Language becomes simpler, sharper, and more emotionally charged, optimised for circulation rather than understanding. Within this crisis-conditioned landscape, propaganda no longer needs to persuade through argument; it merely needs to move fast enough while its host is weakened.

Taken together, neoliberal rationality, crisis governance, and affective exhaustion reshape not only policy and institutions, but the conditions under which meaning itself circulates. Under repeated states of emergency, language is hollowed out and economised, while publics are rendered increasingly reactive, fatigued, and receptive to simplified narratives. In this environment, persuasion no longer depends on coherence or truth, but on rapid repetition, saturation, and emotional charge.

What emerges is a communicative landscape that is endemic and self-reinforcing: host-mediated, ceaselessly self-replicating, and optimised for transmission rather than understanding. Representations detach from their referents, nuance gives way to velocity, and circulation replaces verification. Neoliberalism thus produces not only economic precarity, but an environment increasingly divorced from shared reality - a distorted field of simulation in which propaganda no longer requires authorship or intent, only momentum.

### Chapter 3 Pandemic of Simulation

In contemporary media environments, meaning is becoming increasingly detached from the events it claims to represent. Images, signs, narratives, are no longer in reference primarily to reality on the ground but from rapid repetition and hyper visibility. Transmission overtakes accuracy. Representation ceases to stabilise reality but rather displaces it.

Jean Baudrillard defines this condition as simulation, a state in which signs are no longer are anchored in reality but tend to flow in relation to each other. Reality is displaced rather than denied, filtered through layers of mediation that precede lived experience. As previously mentioned, this condition he names “the desert of the real”<sup>26</sup>, an epistemic condition in which shared narratives erode and meaning becomes eclipsed by material detached from historical grounding and embodied experience. Crisis becomes hyperreal, a continuous mediated state sustained through circulation.<sup>27</sup>

If Baudrillard outlines this condition in which representation supplants referent, Hito Steyerl focuses on the circulatory mechanism which enables it. In “In Defense of a Poor Image”, Steyerl describes poor images as degraded, compressed, fast-moving and detached from origin. Its political potential lies in its ability to travel quickly, blur authorship, and move beyond traditional cultural gatekeepers. Steyerl does not romanticise this condition but acknowledges that these same networks also support commodification, propaganda and control.<sup>28</sup>

In modernity however, this digital landscape has mutated not as an anomaly but as a continuation of the neoliberal process of hollowing out substance while amplifying circulation. The poor image no longer operates beneath the flagship economy of visibility but progressively functions as the flagship.<sup>29</sup> Vertically formatted, low resolution, relentlessly replicated, and now saturating attention economies not in spite of degradation but because of it. Platforms once disregarded as fleeting and inconsequential now constitute central infrastructures for news, political discourse, propaganda and cultural conflict.

Platform infrastructures favour speed, affect and ease of circulation over depth. The poor image functions less as a document of reality, and more as a unit of exchange optimised for algorithmic amplification. Its value, not lying in its authenticity but in its efficiency of permeation. Poor images continue to detach from reality, lose context and flow via affected language rather than understanding. What was once a contested digital common has increasingly been assimilated into commercial and nationalistic apparatus of amplification. Circulation persists but does so under regulated terms of spectacle, approval and exposure.

Steyerl identifies circulation as the terrain on which the poor image gains power. The contemporary media environment calls for closer attention to the mechanisms that

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<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

<sup>28</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 31–45; 160–75.

<sup>29</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 160–75.

govern visibility within that space. Circulation does not unfold neutrally. Under platform capitalism, visibility is shaped through hierarchical systems, recommendation, and algorithmic preference. Images and narratives do not circulate due to being shared, they circulate because they are amplified, filtered and ordered according to logics of monetisation, affect and engagement. This marks a significant shift from circulation through a contested commons towards circulation as a managed and engineered process.

Appearing as an organic spread, it increasingly results in infrastructural selection, in which certain *images* become hyper visible whilst other images are suppressed and fade from sight. Understanding this shift is crucial, as it locates the political force of the poor image not only in its form or speed, but in the systems that determine which images persist widely, which deteriorate, and which disappear altogether.

The shift from image to circulation does not end with images but expands into language. In a pandemic of simulation, language begins to operate less as a medium of meaning than as a pathogen. Slogans, words, narratives replicate at a pace quicker than understanding can occur producing emotionally engineered atmospheres rather than shared critical understanding. Individuals as a result experience the world through selectively amplified semiotic signifiers. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safia Noble provides a more material explanation of this epistemic condition. Noble demonstrates how algorithmic systems, notably search engines and content ranking platforms, are hard-wired into existing modalities of power. Apparent popularity and public interest are in fact shaped advertising incentives, commercial obligations and algorithmic control, actively intensifying and reproducing social values.<sup>30</sup>

By prioritising engagement, visibility and revenue generation, these platforms boost emotionally charged and polarising language whilst pushing nuanced, contextual or historically grounded material to marginalised liminal spaces at the edge of the digisphere. Simplified slogans, sensationalistic headlines, and sanitised storylines move more swiftly than a more sustained and sober analysis. So-called ‘viral’ language dominates not because it holds nuance, but because it conforms with platform logic design. Algorithms, consequently, function as petri dishes for language, in which conformed language forms are cultivated, reproduced and intensified.

The result, affective saturation, exhausted attention from deliberate exposure to emotionally charged language. Crisis becomes ambient, increasing present, rarely resolved, narratives proliferating whilst fragmenting perception into entangled simulations.

The result of this is a condition of emotionally charged saturation. Constant exposure to affective language, outrage, fear, grievance, emergency, culminates in semantic exhaustion. Attention is drained, and meaning becomes increasingly difficult to hold in place. Crisis ceases to be experienced as an event with a beginning or end, but drifts

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<sup>30</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

into everyday life as an ambient ominous presence, always urgent and rarely resolved before the next crisis emerges. In this environment, narratives compete and proliferate, no longer converging towards any sense of clarification or shared comprehension, instead fragmenting reality into overlapping simulations, each one struggling for legitimacy and visibility. Urgency becomes ingrained, and intensity replaces explanation. Over time, the constant escalation of emotion dulls the capacity to think otherwise, leaving publics exhausted and disorientated. Repetition replaces reasoning, eroding the discursive depth required for explanation and reflective comprehension. Crisis hardens into everyday atmosphere.

This condition in one sense echoes, but in another departs from Borge's fable of the map that replaces territory. Contemporary digital culture is no longer structured by a single totalising *map*, but by a saturation of partial, competing maps, each aligned for different commercial, institutional, or political interests. These representations manufacture contradiction, confusion and an emotional overload over coherence. In this environment, confusion is not a glitch but a productive condition of power as the absence of a shared reality diminishes collective understanding and responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

Under these conditions the real lingers, but it is submerged. Reality is supplanted by what is the most efficient circulation. Propaganda no longer relies on a centralised author but has become the environment itself, like static or a low frequency hum, shaping perceptions through constant saturation. The problem is no longer an absence of information but a distorted excess of it.

In a media environment defined by excess saturation, the challenge shifts from access to information, to a diagnosis of how meaning is structured, amplified and suppressed within fragmented and hierarchical systems of circulation. It is within this fragmented, accelerated and asymmetrical terrain that intervention must begin.

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<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

## Chapter 4

### Flak



*Figure 4. AI-Rendered view of the Flak installation environment. Author's own image.*

Flak emerged not from abstract theory, but from an exasperated response to lived experiences of media saturation, police protesting, and narrative fatigue. The project grew from a sustained frustration with the disproportionate circulation and speed of divisive or manipulative language and inert pace of institutional accountability, if any accountability at all. Rather than attempting to counter this imbalance through corrective speech or representation, the project took shape as a diagnostic system - silent, relentless, and analytically alert, designed to observe, archive and expose patterns of linguistic harm.

This transition in approach reflects the broader concern which runs throughout this investigation, in that contemporary power seldom operates via explicit censorship or

centralised propaganda nodes, but instead through automated, ambient and repetitive circulatory mechanisms of framing. Within such conditions, critique arrives often too late, usually overtaken by the arrival of another crisis set to overwhelm critical reflection, resetting the cycle.

The title Flak intentionally invokes semantic drift. Once a military term for anti-aircraft fire, flak over time migrated into everyday language as a shorthand for concentrated criticism or hostility. In Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, the term is formalised as a disciplinary device imposed from above as a means of regulating media through legal, reputational and institutional pressure as a means of keeping media within acceptable ideological limits.<sup>32</sup> Here Flak, as a practice, reclaims and inverts this function, not as an enforcement of discipline but as a counter-filter operating from below; interrogating, archiving and exposing media power.

Conceived as a diagnostic system rather than a corrective one, Flak does not claim to determine truth, intent, or replace journalist or public discernment. Instead, it observes media language as it circulates across contemporary news and digital platforms identifying repeated patterns of framing, omission, semantic dilution, and asymmetry in circulation. These patterns are visualised as points of linguistic stress, critical junctures in which language departs from neutrality into ideological function.

Rather, Flak emphasises transparency over automation. Relying on legible rulesets and traceable outputs, rather than opaque, incomprehensible machine learning models. This allows each flagged instance to be examined, contextualised, and contested by a human observer. Functioning less as an authority but as a tool for attention, slowing the velocity of linguistic transmission and making visible what usually passes by unnoticed.

By giving precedence to repetition over isolated statements. Flak shifts the analysis away from instances of individual bias towards systemic patterns of behaviour. Rather than asking whether an article is "true" or "false", it shows how language works over time by shaping perception through repetition, tone and omission.

Flak is designed around a principal of refusal to automate judgment. Although computational systems can identify scale, frequency and pattern, ethical interpretation cannot be delegated to machines. Therefore, human verification remains a central core - the system flags instances and interpretations are left to the observer.

This approach reflects the broader claim of this project in that meaning exceeds data. As demonstrated by Barthes' analysis of myth and Sperber and Boyer's research on cultural transmission, language operates through affect as much as it does information. Automating ethical decisions risks repeating the blind spots and abstractions of algorithms already embedded within these systems. Flak therefore acts as augmentative rather than authoritative.

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<sup>32</sup> Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent.

The human verification acts as a conscience within the system, ensuring judgement remains visible and accountable. Flak resists the black box of platform regulation and positions interpretation as a collectively held, contested and explicitly political act.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, flak is described as a disciplinary mechanism imposed upon media institutions from above. Operating through complaints, lawsuits, funding threats, and reputational damage without the need for explicit censorship. Flak, exists as an experiment, an art installation and a prototype, for an open, public digital tool. Rather than enforcing discipline from above, Flak pressures from below, not to silence or punish but to expose. By rendering distorted patterns visible, frame-based agency is restored to fragmented publics otherwise oriented as passive audiences of media narratives. In this sense, Herman and Chomsky's model operates as a filter of propaganda within mass media, Flak here functions as a counter-filter, resisting anticipatory self-censorship and normalised bias via critical analysis. It's effectiveness lying not in spectacle but in silent, sustained, archiving of what would in most instances dissolve into the ambient static of flow of information.

Flak is not a cure, it does not claim neutrality, totality or objectivity. Functioning as a diagnostic system within simulated environments, it is inevitably moulded by the same limitations and bias as the systems it investigates. It does not seek to evade simulation, but to operate critically from within.

Limitations are therefore established within the machine. Flak cannot derive intent, only identify patterns. Its outputs depend on the quality and scope of available input, and its interpretations risk being misunderstood as authoritative if removed from their epistemic context.

Flak's diagnostic orientation also carries the possibility of co-option or misuse. In making patterns visible, its outputs may be appropriated, reframed and instrumentalised for use by those seeking to legitimise their own agendas. If separated from its conceptual context, Flak risks being misread as an authoritative device rather than a tool for interpretation, reinforcing abstractions and depoliticising the effects it aims to resist. This vulnerability is not incidental, but structural, for any tool operating with accelerated circulation remains susceptible to inversion or capture. Acknowledging this vulnerability is not to weaken the project, but to articulate its ethical limitations.

These limitations act as boundaries not failures. By rendering them visible, Flak resists technological solutionism, asserting itself as a tool of investigatory aid rather than moral arbiter. Its values lying in making structures visible, not by replacing political action, journalism, critical thought or democratic deliberation.

## Excavation



*Figure 5. Night roadway partially obscured by glare and darkness, visibility fragmented rather than resolved. Author's own image.*

This investigation has asserted that contemporary propaganda operates less through the means of falsehoods and centralised control than through circulation and ambient saturation. Language spreads as a contagion, shaped by frames, myths, affect and

simulated realities, whilst neoliberalism acts at the perfect host of transmission by the hollowing out of democratic language whilst instrumentalising its signifiers.

Under such conditions, propaganda no longer relies on persuasion through argument or deception. Instead, it circulates, repeats, embeds, taking hold through saturation, emotion and speed over truth and clarity.

Flak emerges within this host environment not as a means of evading simulations, but as a way of attending to it. It makes no promises of clarity or resolution, only relentless vigilance, a commitment to observing how language moves, how meaning is distorted, and how power silently becomes ingrained.

This engagement is intentionally restrained. Flak does not claim neutrality, completeness, or objectivity, it does not seek to replace journalism, political action, democratic deliberation, or outsource critical understanding. Its value lies in diagnosis. Rendering visible mechanisms in which language is normalised, twisted and amplified. In doing so, it attempts to restore responsibility to the interpreter, without allowing judgement to fade into algorithmic automated systems. Resisting, technological solutionism and the false, friction-free comforts of technical solutions.

Flak functions within a narrow and fragile space. To pause, observe, recognise repetition, notice absence, as these faculties increasingly diminish, their necessity becomes more needed than ever. Instead of adding more representation to an already overloaded environment, Flak disrupts the frictionless flow of information, holding a pause in which meaning can be investigated rather than absorbing passively, endlessly. Offering, not answers, but moments in which to stop, take a breath and notice.

In an environment defined by velocity and excess, attention itself becomes a political act. Flak offers no replacement territory, no replacement map, but works as a forensic instrument for tracing how the maps are drawn, produced, and weaponised. If the real has not vanished but lies buried under a series of competing representations, recovery is not the task at hand, but excavation.

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