IS A SWEDISH FISH A REAL FISH?

Notes on Hyperreality

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INTRODUCTION

When you or I hear the word 'fish,' we might first think of an actual, live fish—like a tuna, shark, or minnow. However, the word 'fish' also refers to other objects: plastic wall decorations shaped like fish, fried chicken nuggets shaped like fish, or even candy shaped like fish. Although a Swedish Fish candy may not be a 'real' live fish, it is a kind of fish that is real in its own way.

At the same time, a Swedish Fish does not live the life a real fish does. It doesn't swim around in water, but the grocery store. It does not grow. It does not lay eggs. It does not get eaten by bigger

fish—although it does get eaten. It's candy. It's a lump of sugar and Red 40 dye mixed together and molded into the shape of a fish. Its reality is fundamentally different from that of an actual live fish.

The case of the Swedish Fish suggests that every time we use symbols like words or images to represent objects or ideas, we lose some amount of information in that process.

But what do we gain in this process?

In his 1981 essay *Simulacra and Simulations*, French theorist Jean Baudrillard suggested that reality had been replaced entirely by signs and symbols, and that the idea of 'real life' was a simulated construct. He described contemporary society as 'hyperreal,' and that hyperreality was more real than the idea of reality. He described a process through which reality slowly distances itself from its original meaning, eventually to be replaced by a simulacrum. *Simulacrum* means 'likeness' or 'semblance' in Latin.

In replacing reality with a simulated version of reality, what do we lose and what do we gain?

IS A SWEDISH FISH A REAL FISH?

[1]   "List of Candies." 2021. Wikipedia. March 9, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_candies.

[2]   "HARIBO Goldbears." 2023. HARIBO. Haribo. 2023. https://www.haribo.com/en-us/products/goldbears#ingredients.

[3]   "SOUR PATCH KIDS | Mondelēz International Foodservice." 2025. Mondelezinternationalfoodservice.com. 2025. https://www.mondelezinternationalfoodservice.com/Product/ProductDetails/ProductId=00070462431414.

[4]   JellyBellyUS. 2013. "Brand Fact Sheet: Jelly Belly® Jelly Beans." Brand Fact Sheet: Jelly Belly® Jelly Beans . JellyBellyUS. November 7, 2013. https://news.jellybelly.com/brand-fact-sheet-jelly-belly-jelly-beans/.

There are a lot of candies out there.[1] Gummy bears, jelly beans, Sour Patch Kids and Swedish Fish are all examples of chewy candy that can be easily found in the candy aisle in an American supermarket. If you take away the "bears" from the gummy bears, the "kids" from the Sour Patch Kids, the "beans" from the jelly beans, and the "fish" from the Swedish Fish, the candies all start looking very similar. They're mostly lumps of sugar, preservatives, flavouring, food colouring, and a thickening agent to give it a chewy texture.[2][3][4] Reduced down to their basic ingredients, they're pretty much the same.

Shaping them into bears, kids, beans and fish allows the candy manufacturers to separate one product from another and give the lump of sugar some character and personality. In this context then, the fact that a Swedish Fish is the shape of a fish becomes pretty important—

it's what separates one lump of sugar from another. It is arguably a fish that is valid in its own right.

At the same time, however, a Swedish Fish does not live the life of a real fish. It does not swim around in water. It does not grow. It does not lay eggs. It does not get eaten by bigger fishes. It's candy. It's a lump of sugar. Its material reality is fundamentally different from that of a 'real' fish.

Does this mean that a Swedish Fish candy is not a 'real' fish? Maybe. Maybe not. This calls into question what counts as a 'real' fish.

Everytime we represent an object, we lose something in that process.

If I wanted to explain to someone what a fish is, I could take a photograph of a fish and print it out and show them what a fish looks like. However, this would not be an adequate substitute for actually seeing a real fish swimming in water. While the photograph, as a representation of a fish, allows me to communicate the idea of a fish to other people, it cannot paint a complete picture of the reality of a fish. It cannot communicate how a fish moves, what it might smell like, or how the texture of its scales might feel. Some amount of information would be lost in the process of representation.

When we represent something based on a representation of a representation of a representation of an object, in every stage of this process we lose some of the reality of the original object. In his 1981 text *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard described a process in which every subsequent representation gets distorted to the point where the representation becomes a simulacrum of the original object:

5   Baudrillard, Jean. (1981) 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

—Jean Baudrillard.[5]

Baudrillard's text takes a strong moral stance against simulacra—he uses the words 'good,' 'evil,' 'sacramental,' 'maleficence' to describe different stages of the process, clearly indicating his negative opinion of simulacra and hyperreality. This aligns with my personal biases, even if I wouldn't use language this harsh to describe the simulacra and images I encounter on a daily basis.

Baudrillard sets up his position by arguing that God isn't real. God is merely a symbol for organised religion, organised religion itself being a front for politics, power and control: "God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum."[6]

The text refers to religion in a Western context, and his arguments may not necessarily be transferable to other religions in the world, practised currently and historically. Baudrillard's choice to use the example of religion here is intentionally provocative.

To explore his assertions, I will begin with a less provocative entity than God, to study the representations without the aim of assigning value judgements. I simply wish to observe how an object is transformed when it is turned into an image.

6   Ibid., p. 169.

	1. Reflection
	2. Mask
	3. Illusion
	4. Pure simulacrum

In my research online, I came across this meme (and variations of it) on the internet, explaining the stages of simulacra.

In the above image (original source unknown), the first stage of simulation is the image of a fish. It is not an actual fish, but it conveys the idea of what a fish looks like. The second stage shows a wall ornament shaped like a fish. It isn't just meant to represent a fish, it is also meant to be a decorative element on a wall, a function that an actual 'real' fish would not serve. The image of the fish itself is stylised and has fewer details. The third stage of simulation is fried food shaped like fish, but may or may not actually be fish itself. In any case, it is no longer the real, live fish initially being represented, but a simplified silhouette of a fish, being fried in a pan. Even there there's a layer of representation. These aren't fishes that are in the process of being fried, or fish that have just finished frying - these are pre-fried fish carefully and neatly placed in an orderly manner in a pan with some oil in it, to suggest the idea of fish being fried.

In the fourth stage, we see packaging for Swedish Fish candy. Although the idea of fishes being eaten has remained throughout the representations, the Swedish Fish candy isn't pretending to be a 'real' fish—it's obvious about the fact that it's candy. It's bite-sized, it's sugary, and has the name of the brand embossed on its scales. It is now a simulacrum of a fish.

Ironically, this meme over simplifies Baudrillard's ideas and very verbose descriptions and condenses down a 164-page book to a table with four images and the stages of simulacra next to it, losing all nuance.

I launched a visual investigation into Jean Baudrillard's out-line/overview/explanation of the process in which an image evolves/devolves into a simulacrum of the original object.

Image of a fish represented on a screen, photographed through a scanner.

Image of a fish represented on a screen, photographed through a scanner. The fingerprints and dust on the scanner bed add texture.

Image of a fish represented on a screen, photographed through a scanner.

In this image, the composition is affected by the limitations of having to scan an image displayed on the same laptop that is connected to the scanner as it is scanning the image.

Similar to the previous two images, fingerprints and dust add texture to the scanned image. Additionally, scanning the candy and cropping the images changes the scale of the fish. The fishes in this image are not the same size as the original Swedish Fish candy being scanned.

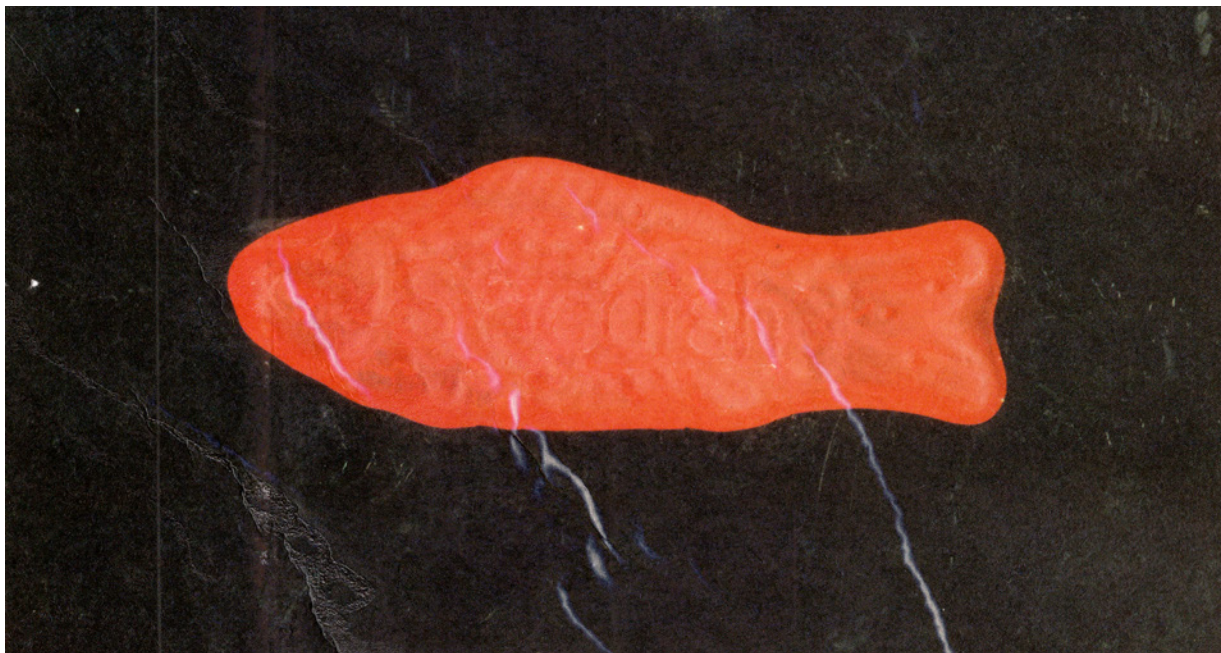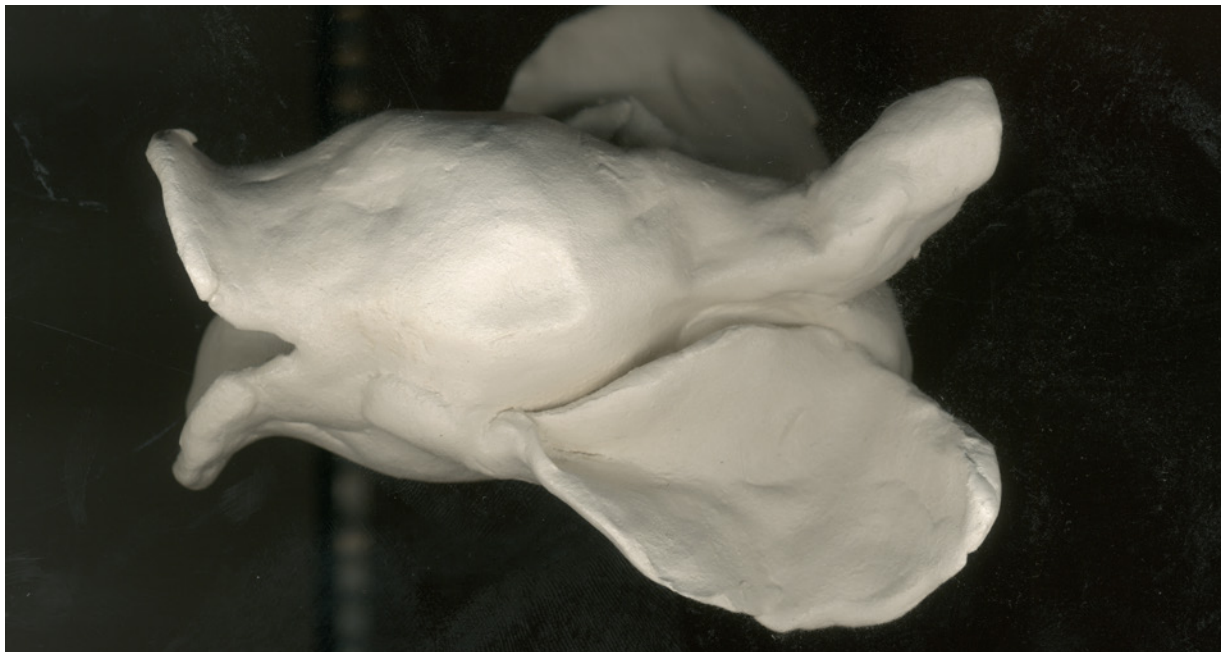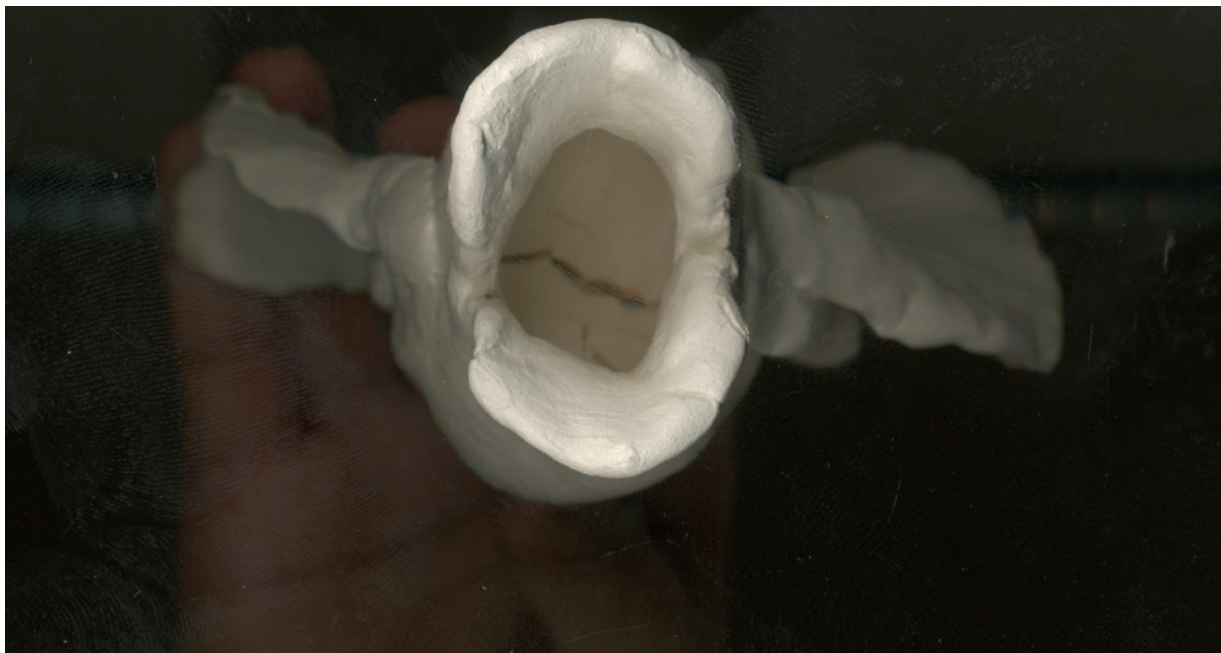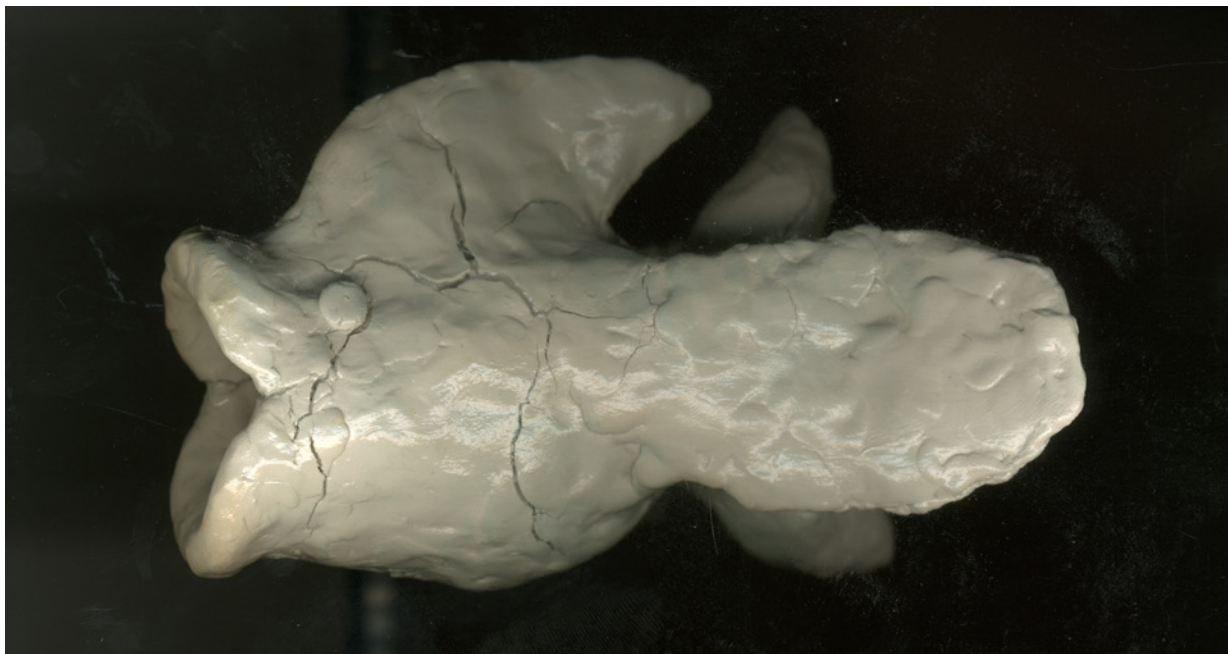Image of a single Swedish Fish candy photographed through a scanner.

Image of a single Swedish Fish candy photographed through a scanner, laser printed on newsprint and scanned again.

In this image, I wanted to make a 'fish bowl'—a bowl that is in the shape of a fish. In order to get the bowl to stand upright, the scale of the fins and tails of the fish had to be modified to act as a base/stand to support the 'bowl'. This is a deviation from reality, as a real fish probably wouldn't be able to stand upright on its tail and fins. Documenting them through a scanner, the fish had to be laid down on its side anyway.
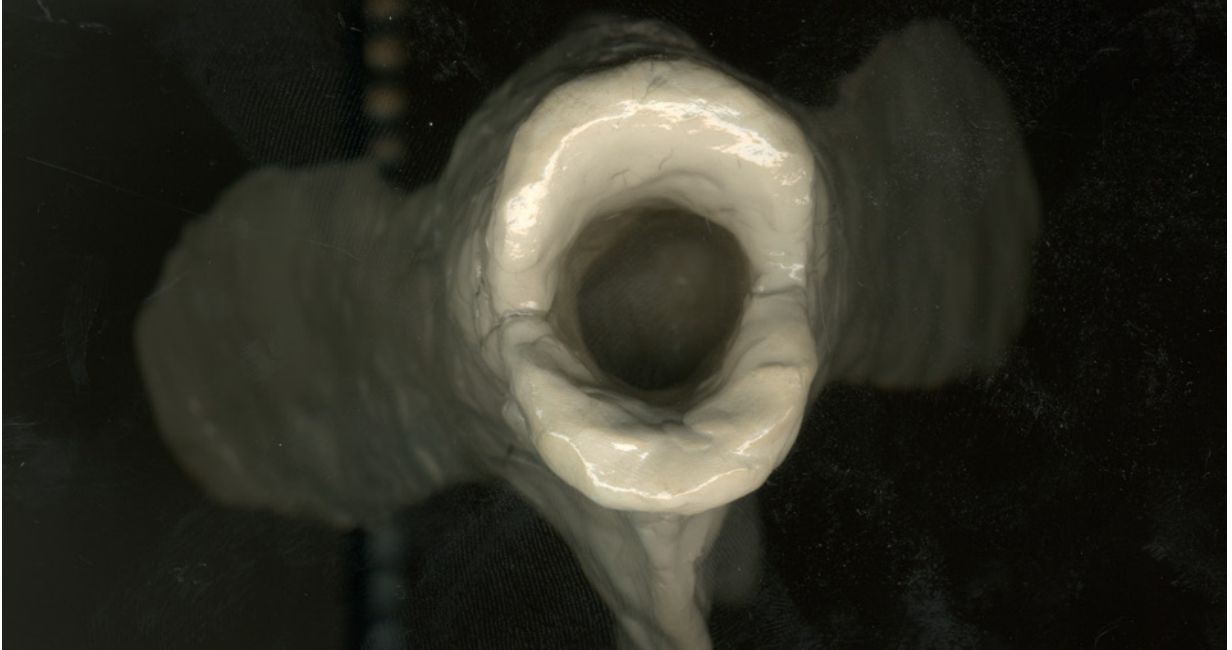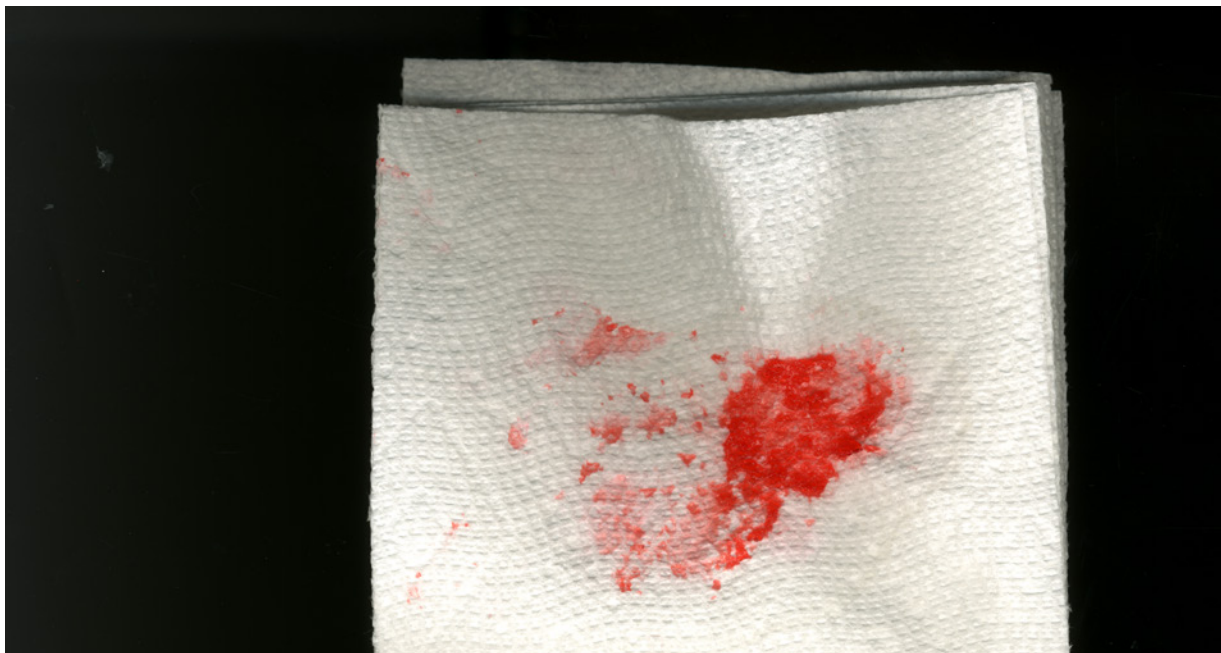
In this image, I melted a single Swedish Fish candy. This lump of sugar was once a fish. Is it still a fish if it's melted down and no longer has the shape of the fish? Regardless, here too, the medium affects the image—the fact that it is melted candy means that it has no structure, and has to be spread on to a paper towel.
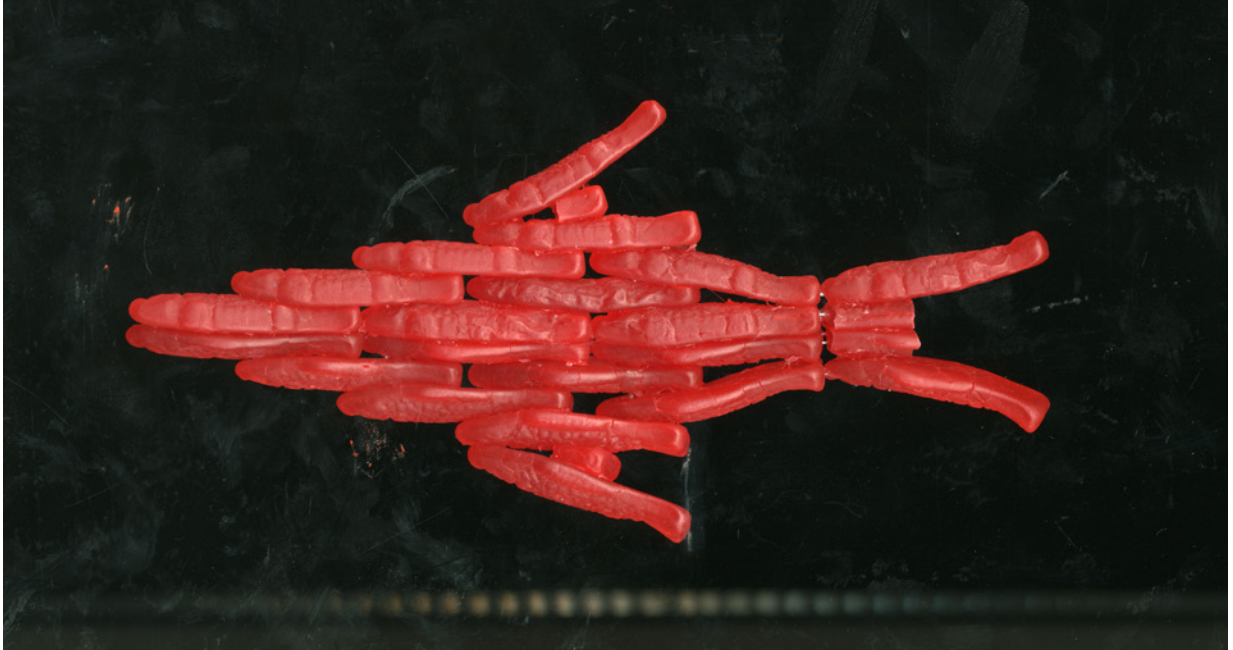
A fish made out of Swedish Fish candy, held together using glue and steel wire.

Image of a fish made out of Swedish Fish candy, photographed through a scanner, laser printed on newsprint and scanned again.

A fish made using beads woven together.

Studying these representations of fishes, my biggest take-aways were

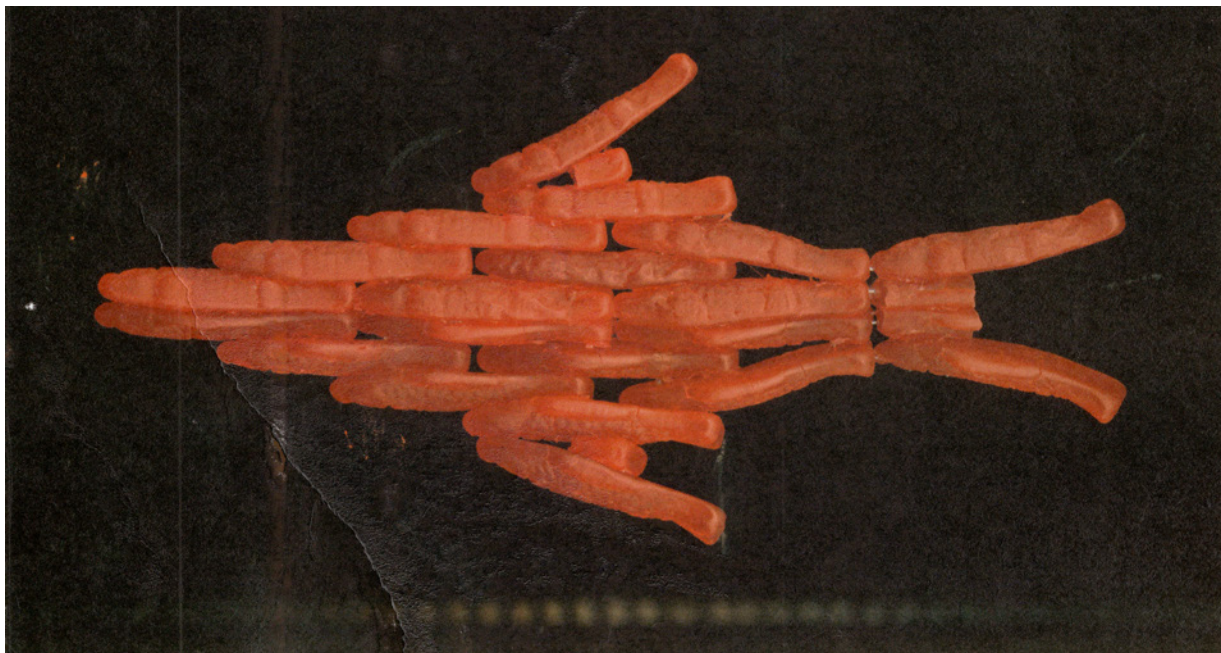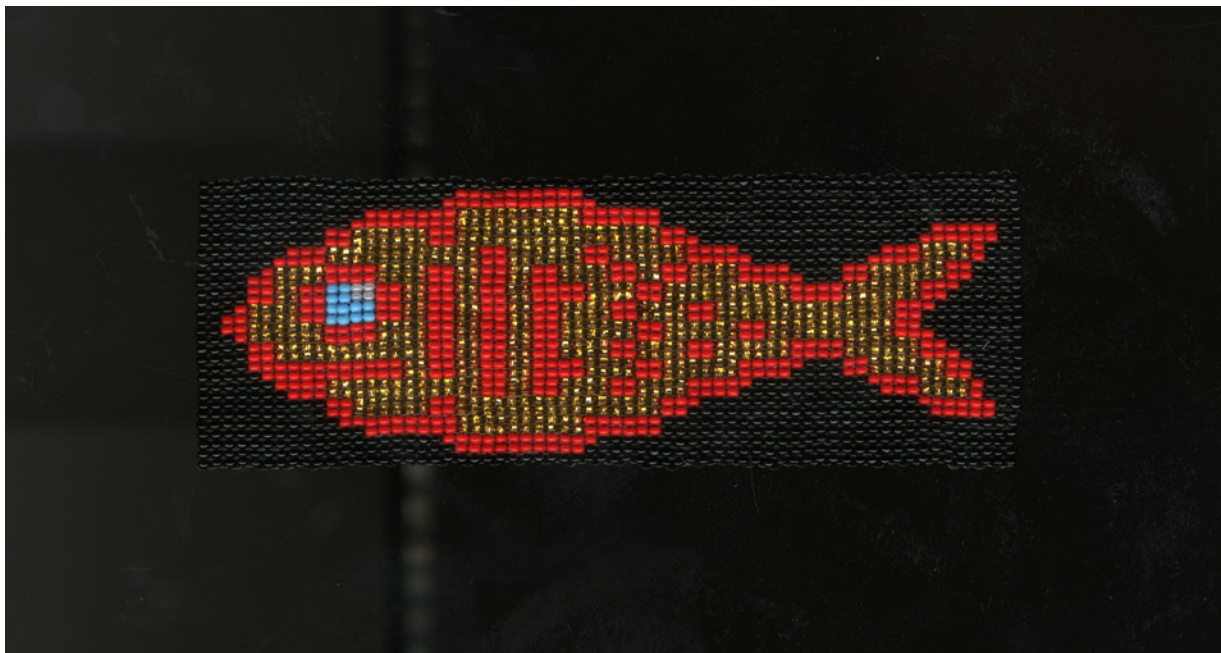1. Any material that is arranged into the general shape of what is recognised as a fish, immediately appropriates the meaning, identity and personality of a generic fish. I wasn't trying to represent a specific species of fish. I just made representations of what I intuitively know as a fish.
2. The material used to represent the fish also adds personality and character to the fish. The fish made out of Swedish Fish candy, smells like Swedish Fish candy. Because it is held together by glue and steel wire, it is sturdy enough to be lifted and held up by hand, but is also delicate at the same time. In the beaded tapestry with the image of a fish, the image itself is two dimensional—it is a matrix of differently coloured beads arranged in the shape of a fish, it has an x-axis and a y-axis, but no z-axis. The image of the fish has two dimensions. But because I wove beads together, and beads are three dimensional objects, the woven piece ends up being a three dimensional object that flows almost like a piece of fabric.

The image of the fish is abstracted in all of these representations, but as the presence of the fish fades into the background, the media used to represent the fish swims to the surface.

A representation is necessarily a mediated process. For instance, if I were to represent a fish using a photograph printed on paper, the representation of the fish would not exist without the photograph or the paper or the ink with which the photograph was printed. On one hand, some amount of the image/likeness/verisimilitude of the fish is distorted. But this representation is also something else. It's a piece of paper with ink layered on top of it—this is its physical reality. It has to have the texture of paper, and the printed image can only have the colours of the ink used, and the image can only show what was within the frame at the exact moment it was shot (from the distance it was shot). My point here is that the representation isn't just the image of the fish, it's a negotiation between the image of the fish and the physical reality of the media used in the process of representation. The representation of the fish is flattened to accommodate the materiality of the paper it is printed on, and the paper in turn is permanently transformed into a vessel holding the image of a fish.

Everytime we represent something, we gain something in that process.

Although we lose some of the reality of the object or idea being represented, we also gain some of the reality of the medium used to represent it. Although an image of a fish printed on paper cannot accurately portray the entire reality of the fish, it can stand in for a real fish and allow us to explain the idea of a real fish even when a real fish isn't present. The piece of paper can be scanned and reprinted, or it can be bound in a book, or be preserved as evidence of the fish having existed. This image can be appropriated and manipulated for our own purposes (benign or malignant).

INTERLUDE

As an exercise, I tried to identify examples of hyperreality and see which stage of simulacrum it belonged to. Then, I tried to work backwards and see if it was indeed a simulacrum, what it was a simulacrum of and what the other stages look like.

1. Reflection

A group of people (probably a family) together at a dinner table, eating a meal probably cooked by a member of the group.

2. Mask

A group of people (friends?) at a restaurant, and a waiter serving food. The food is not prepared by members of the group, but they are still gathered around a table communally enjoying food.

3. Illusion

Two people ordering food at fast food self-service kiosks. There is no waiting staff. The two people do not appear to know each other. They could potentially be ordering food for a group, or they could just be ordering food for themselves.

4. Pure simulacrum

A menu on an app where food can be ordered. Someone else prepares food, but there is no need to physically go to a restaurant. There may or may not be a dining table with a group of people to share the food with.

1. Reflection

(???)

2. Mask

Police patrol monitoring activity within an area

3. Illusion

Surveillance cameras monitoring and recording activity within an area

4. Pure simulacrum

Surveillance cameras that can move around on a plastic 'robot' body, monitoring activity within a larger area

1. Reflection

forest

2. Mask

garden

3. Illusion

potted plant

4. Pure simulacrum

artificial plant

1. Reflection

A brick wall

2. Mask

A (presumably) brick wall being plastered, presumably to be painted over.

3. Illusion

Wallpaper that looks like brickwall

4. Pure simulacrum

images of bricks to be used as 'wallpaper' for screens

Peal & Stick Brick Roll

40 HD Brick Wallpapers/Backgrounds For Free Download

1. Reflection

Two people (presumably friends) engaging in friendly conversation.

2. Mask

Two people talking, presumably a salesperson talking to a customer.

The conversation is probably friendly in tone, even though they might not actually be friends in real life, and the conversation is simply to encourage a transaction.
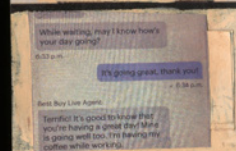
3. Illusion

Two humans, a customer service agent and a customer having a conversation about a transaction. While waiting, the customer service agent initiates friendly small talk. The customer service agent might be given scripted responses, or they might be using AI generated responses. Either way, the conversation is partially planned, scripted and the tone of the conversation is carefully managed in order to sound more human and friendly.
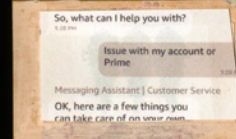
4. Pure simulacrum

A conversation between a customer service agent and a computer. The conversation is entirely about a transaction, and the tone of the conversation is irrelevant.

It's arguable if this is a conversation or if it's simply a customer entering order details in the format of a conversation.

WHY DOES IT MATTER IF A SWEDISH FISH IS A REAL FISH?

If a person has never seen a real fish before, how would they be able to tell the ways in which a Swedish Fish candy is similar or dissimilar to a real fish? If they've never seen a real fish before, would they think that all 'real' fish are the same size as a Swedish Fish? Or that all fishes smell like candy? Or that they could just bite into a fish and it would taste sweet? Would they be able to recognise that a Swedish Fish is a distant representation of a fish and isn't actually a 'real' fish?

A simulacrum isn't simply a lower quality representation of an object, it eventually entirely loses the reality of the original object, and the simulacrum is real in its own right, or 'hyperreal'. In 1981, Baudrillard suggested that contemporary society was filled with simulacra and hyperreality to the point where hyperreality felt more real than the idea of reality.

Today, more than four decades later, hyperreality has scaled significantly. Most of us use smartphones or personal computers that are used for communication. All communication, whether through words or images, are representations of objects or events or ideas. We are constantly learning about the world we live in through representations of it. The way we understand and process events happening across the world isn't based on objective reality. When we learn about an object/event/idea through social media, there are several layers of representation, from the way that it is documented and the language used to describe it, to the way that the individual piece of media is curated and selected by the platform's algorithms for us to see.[7] At each stage of representation, we must assume we are moving further and further away from the reality of the object/event/idea being represented.

If we haven't actually witnessed the original object/event/idea ourselves, how would we be able to tell the ways in which their representation is similar or dissimilar to the original object/event/idea? Would we even be able to recognise that the representation is not the same as the original object/event/idea?

[7] In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky explain how propaganda is disseminated through mass media by five layers of systemic biases encoded in the medium:
1.   The ownership of the media and their financial interests
2.   The source of funding, and the obligation to portray these sources in a favourable light
3.   The news sources the media decide to get their information from
4.   The negative consequences for publishing media that threatens (or is simply disliked by) an individual or a group of people
5.   Protection of the elite and the ruling class (who are often the owners of the media outlet themselves) by offering up a different individual or a group of people to vilify, portraying them as the ultimate evil to be concerned about.

Consider two modes of storing information—books, and the internet. Both contain pages. A 'page' is a site within a book. A 'page' is also a site on the internet. Both types of 'pages' contain information. The difference between them is the space they occupy.

A book is measurable. It's a tangible object that holds a record of its life. Cracks on the spine, dog ears, notes on the margin and scratches on the cover are all permanent wrinkles that show a book's age and the life it has lived. No two books—even if they are copies of the same edition—are the same. A book occupies a definite volume of space. Its pages can be counted. It is a physical container that is finite, and can only contain printed words and images. A page within a book can only contain what it can physically contain within that given space.

The size of the page is fixed, and dictates the amount of information it can hold.

Calling a website a 'page' feels deceptive, but it's a type of 'page' that has become valid in its own right. Digital 'pages' are stored in servers most of us never see. What we see is only what is displayed on a screen in front of us. There is no limitation to the amount of content it can hold. The page is an endless plane that keeps expanding to accommodate more content as it is added. While a book usually has a beginning, middle and end, pages on the internet are non-linear, infinite and indefinite.

On the internet, the size of the page isn't a fixed parameter, it is dictated by the amount of content it contains.

This prioritisation of content directs any focus away from the physicality of the medium, to the information held within. But we forget that the physicality of a medium can contain information too. A Mark Rothko painting seen through a glossy 14-inch screen isn't the same as standing in front of a colour-field the size of a wall. Up close, a

painting reveals brushstrokes layered on top of each other. From further away, a painting is seen from the same distance the artist might have seen it as they decided the painting was finished. From even further away, a painting is a blur of colours, and the context it is placed in takes precedence—a quiet gallery as it's closing, or a busy living room in the morning just before leaving for work, or an office lobby where people are streaming in and out all day. On the internet, this is lost. A page on the internet doesn't age the way a page in a book does. There may not be a trace of people who have visited a page before us, and we may not leave behind a trace of us for the people who visit after us to know we were there. We don't see people come and go, it's just us and the page in front of us. Two people could be staring at the same spot of the same page at the same time and never cross paths with each other.

In his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin makes the distinction between two ways a work of art can have value. Artwork that is meant to be revered for its uniqueness derives its value from its authenticity.[8] When this type of art is photographed and reproduced, it loses its authenticity, and the reproduction does not have the same value as the original. Viewing a painting by Rothko through a glossy 14-inch laptop screen, for instance, is not the same as experiencing it in person.[9]

On the other hand, Benjamin argues that some artworks derive their value from their ability to be reproduced mechanically. He uses the case of photography to argue that a photograph gets its value from being reproduced as a print (which lacks authenticity, as the photograph can be printed multiple times), and not for the photographic negative (which does have authenticity, as a unique object with a unique position in time and space). The point of mass media (Benjamin uses the example of film) is its ability to be mechanically reproduced. And when it is reproduced, it is likely to be seen by the masses, allowing it to be an effective tool for the dissemination of propaganda.

"...the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics."[10]

[8]   Benjamin described "The authenticity of a thing" as "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced."

[9]   D. Crews, Emily. 2024. "The Religious Experience of Mark Rothko | Smart Museum of Art." Smartmuseum.uchicago.edu. February 12, 2024. https://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/blog/the-religious-experience-of-mark-rothko/.

[10]   Benjamin, Walter, Hannah Arendt, and Henry Zohn. (1935) 1969. *Illuminations : Essays and Reflections.* New York: Schocken Books.

The internet is a paradoxical medium. It took the privilege of physical interaction and turned it into a barrier to be eliminated. Alienation isn't a side effect of digital spaces, it's the entire point. Communication over the internet, because it is a public, decentralised medium that's meant to be seen by people and reproduced on screens repeatedly, maybe also inherently lacks some amount of authenticity. And without authenticity, maybe that makes the human connection over the internet less meaningful, less 'real'.

Although there's a lack of authenticity and a loss of individual human connection, this doesn't make the medium necessarily bad. Although the medium can still be used for political control through propaganda, as Benjamin warned, the decentralised nature of the internet makes it a tool that is easily reclaimed by anyone, for any purpose.

Perfect moments are those fleeting instances when everything aligns, and life feels just right. They could be standing under a starry sky, the warmth of a heartfelt hug, the first sip of coffee in the morning, or simply a quiet, peaceful moment with yourself.

do you experience joy pain growth or grief?

I don't experience emotions the way you do, but I can understand and describe them. I can recognize joy in a celebration, pain in a loss, growth in a challenge, and grief in remembrance. I can analyze, empathize, and help you process emotions—but I don't *feel* them myself. Do you want to talk about something that's on your mind?

I made a photobook of "perfect moments," where the definition of a perfect moment was generated through an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot.

I used generic stock images to illustrate this AI generated definition of a 'perfect moment'.

I consider generative AI to be inauthentic. A generative AI chatbot doesn't 'think' in any meaningful sense. It isn't sentient. It does not experience joy, pain, growth or grief. It cannot reflect on lived human experiences.
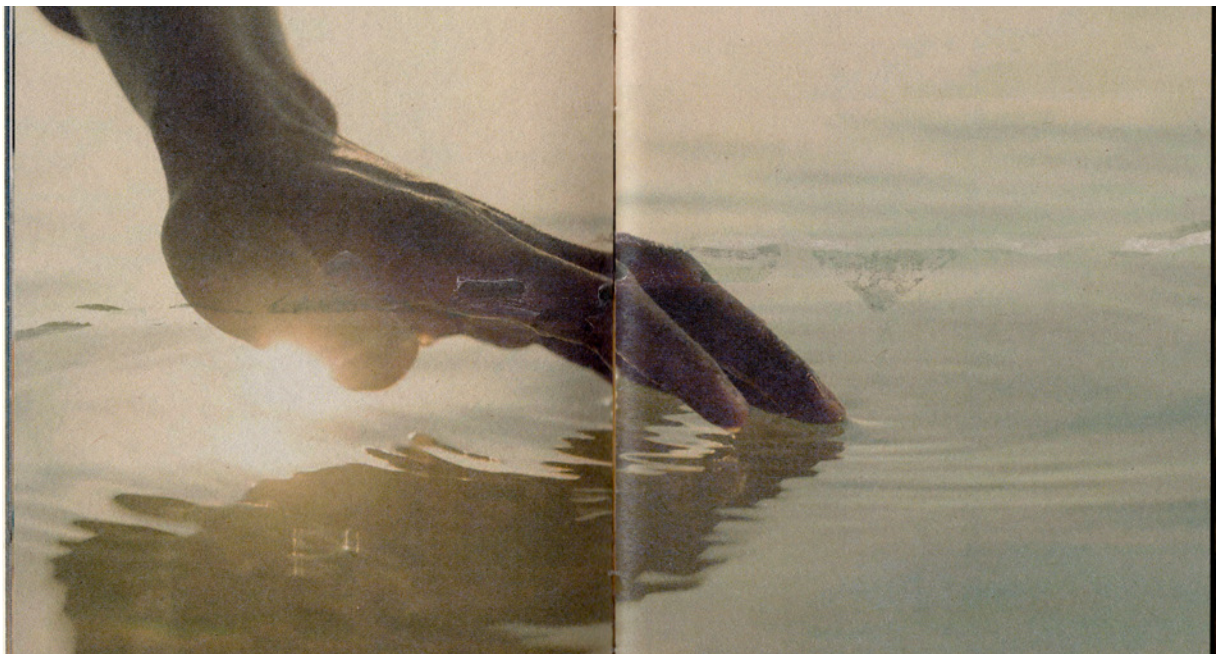
I consider generic stock images to be inauthentic as well. The point of stock images, such as the ones in advertisements, is to be sold. Often they are used to sell other products. They don't offer any insight into who the person is that made them.

Is a 'perfect moment' described by inauthentic media a 'real' 'perfect moment'?
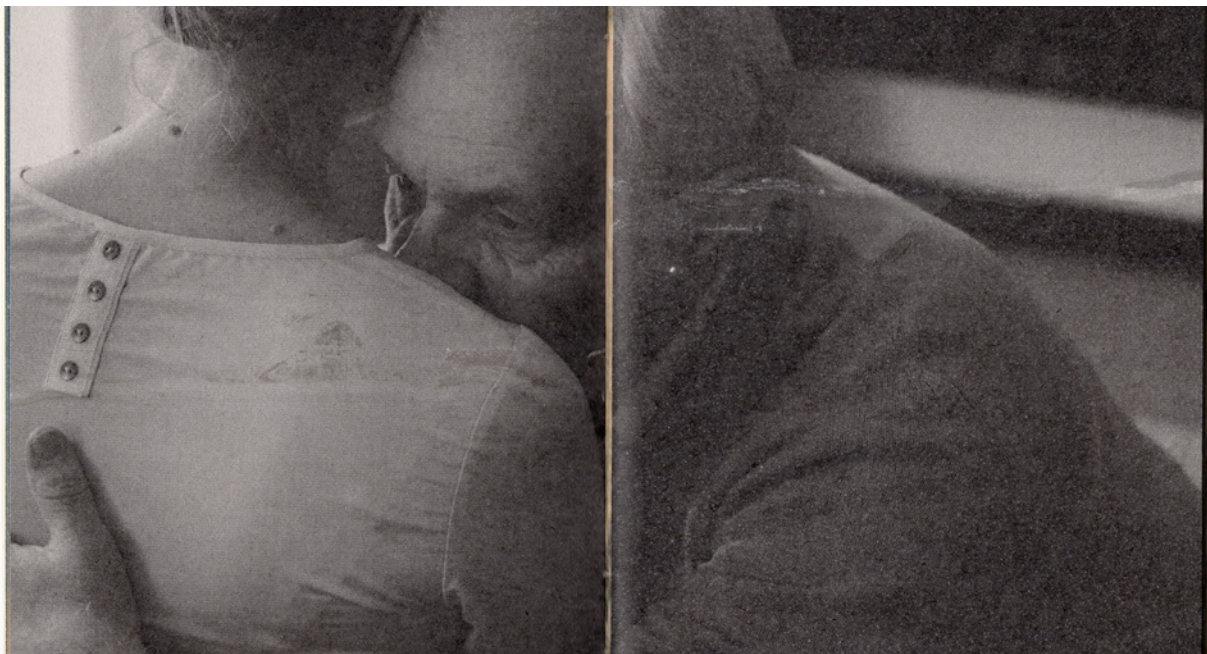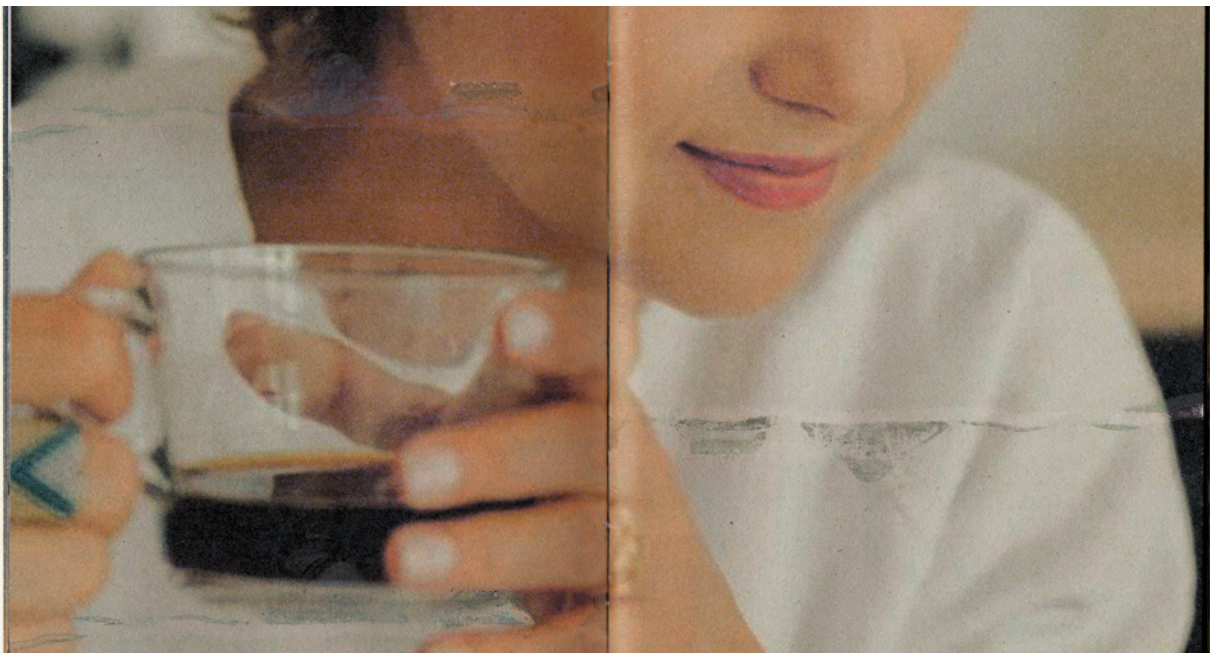
WHAT IF A SWEDISH FISH JUST WANTS TO BE A REAL FISH AND IS TRYING REALLY REALLY HARD TO BE ONE?

The Situationist International was a radical movement in the 1960s in Europe, which was highly influential. The Situationists were a group of artists and political theorists who were deeply unsatisfied with contemporary society, and particularly bored[11] with consumerism and the rapid commodification of every aspect of life. They defied any singular, static ideology—"Static ideologies, however true they may be, tend, like everything else in capitalist society, to rigidify and become fetishised, just one more thing to passively consume."[12] They saw the working class as oppressed not by force but by the promise of meaningless consumer goods—consumer goods that got their value from their glorified representation in mass media.

[11] "We have a world of pleasures to win, and nothing to lose but boredom." - *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Raoul Vaneigem

[12] "Situationists - an Introduction | Libcom.org." 2006. Libcom.org. October 12, 2006. https://libcom.org/article/situationists-introduction.

The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real.

—Thesis 17, *The Society of The Spectacle*[13]

[13]   Debord, Guy. 1967. *The Society of the Spectacle.* Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red.

In *The Society of The Spectacle*, Guy Debord (a founding member of the Situationist International) argued that it wasn't simply that advertisements and marketing were encouraging people to buy more consumer goods, people were also socially motivated by the prestige associated with the appearance of owning material goods.

"Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." (Thesis 1, *The Society of The Spectacle*)[14]

But the social validation of the appearance of owning material goods is a superficial connection, and cannot stand in for meaningful and authentic human relationships. The Situationists were concerned by this social alienation, and attempted to create situations in which people would interact with each other without any mediation through commodities. The movement, however, was short-lived.
    Since Debord published *The Society of The Spectacle*, the nature of images have changed. Images and mass communication don't simply advertise a lifestyle built around meaningless commodities—images themselves have become commodities to consume. Everywhere we go, in our pockets we carry an endless stream of images.

Consider the photograph as a medium. When it was first introduced, a single photograph would have been captured using a shoebox-sized camera, exposed for hours. The process was simple—light sensitive chemicals exposed to light, and a mechanism that facilitated framing and composition. Today, a far more complex camera takes up far less space and is far more ubiquitous. The camera has become a staple feature on mobile phones. Photographs aren't just tools for news and advertisements to communicate to the masses. Photographs aren't just a tool for documenting important moments in time. Photographs are as much a tool for communication as talking to someone on the phone.
    The photo archive on my phone is a sinkhole of digital ephemera. Screenshots for reference. Memes that

14   Ibid.

made me laugh. Pictures of my friends and family. Pictures that have no context, and I no longer remember why I took them. Pictures that are meaningful. There are over 10,000 images and videos saved to my phone. The earliest of this was taken in 2014, when I bought my first smartphone. These pictures do indeed take up space, they are saved in a server somewhere, but I can't actually see how much space they take up. In my life, they take up no space at all. The images on my phone are representations of information stored elsewhere. They don't 'exist' as a photograph in a meaningful sense.

Old family photo albums serve a purpose. They serve as a record of people having existed, of events having happened. They are undeniable. They are meant to take a fleeting moment and preserve it forever. Of course, this isn't possible—photographs rip, fade, or get lost—but we try our best to preserve them for as long as we can. Every time we look at them, they serve their purpose. They are meant to be seen.

The 10,000+ images on my phone were meant to be seen too, but the truth is I never look at them. They end up never serving their purpose. I post them on my social media, and then forget about them and never look at them again. These digital images achieve the goal that the physical photographs aspire to—they don't lose quality over time, they don't rip, fade or get lost. They do indeed preserve these moments forever. But if no one ever looks at them, then what's the point?

Social media is a subset of the internet that allows people (although here we are 'users' rather than people) to create and share 'content'. 'Content' is a broad term that covers a wide variety of media. 'Content' can be anything from a bootlegged movie on Youtube, to 8-hour Twitch live streams of a person playing a video game, to a picture of Swedish Fish candy posted on Instagram. Hypothetically, if the internet were a physical place, then social media platforms would be the town squares and the movie theatres and the auditoriums and amphitheaters and the stadiums. It's a place of gathering, except we don't actually feel each others' presence, since we're only seeing flattened representations of people online.

These spaces aren't neutral. Some of the biggest social media platforms are run by the wealthiest billionaires on the planet. The goal of these platforms is to be profitable, and the algorithms that curate content will favour the pieces that will keep us on the platform long enough to spend money.

Linguist Adam Aleksic (@etymologynerd on Instagram) who creates content relating to linguistics, details the way the meaning of the word 'content' has shifted in the context of advertising on social media.[15] 'Content' inherently refers to something contained within a larger frame or a container. A user on a social media platform might think of an image/video/tweet as a container that holds 'content'. In Aleksic's case, 'content' would be information relating to linguistics, held within the container of a video. But from the perspective of the social media platforms, the platform itself is the container holding the image/video/tweet, and the image is the 'content'. It doesn't matter what content is held within the image, as long as it's posted to the platform.

A platform might present itself as a place for communication, but pay no attention to the quality of the 'content' within the 'conversation', because from the platform's perspective, the conversation itself is the point.

[15]   Aleksic, Adam. 2025. "The 'Contentification' of Culture." Substack.com. The Etymology Nerd. January 17, 2025. https://etymology.substack.com/p/the-contentification-of-culture..

SO, IS A SWEDISH FISH
A REAL FISH?

Using the internet, we can communicate with someone on the other side of the world in real time. We're doing it all the time when we publish or consume information on social media. Communication over the internet is faster than ever. Music, film and literature from other countries and cultures are within reach.

The world is more connected than ever.

But the need to meet another person in real life is lower than ever. There is a decreased need to travel to another city to visit friends and family when we can keep up with every moment of their lives on social media. There is no need to walk to the restaurant, when the food can be picked up and dropped off at our doorsteps (we don't even have to call and talk to another person to place an order, we

do it through an app). There is no need to go to the local movie theater and watch a movie along with several other people when we can watch it from our own home. We can access unlimited amounts of information without having to go to the library. We don't even have to leave the couch. There isn't even a need to go to work, if work can be completed remotely.

The world is more disconnected than ever.

Simulacra of human connection have replaced authentic interactions and relationships leading to this dissonance of connection and disconnection at the same time.

A 'real' fish swimming around in water has authenticity. It's valuable for the individual life it has lived. Representations of this fish would inevitably lose this authenticity. Whether a Swedish Fish is a real fish or not, it lacks the authenticity of a 'real' fish. It is a mass produced piece of candy, and shaped into a fish to give the candy character. The value of this simulacrum of fish is its ability to sell more candy. From the perspective of the candy manufacturer, the fish is simply 'content'.

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In preparing this research paper, I used an AI tool (ChatGPT) as part of a project about generative AI, described in page 73. All factual information, data, and citations were verified through reliable academic sources, and the final analysis and conclusions are my own .

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