VISUALITY BEYOND VIRALITY: SITUATING THE OCULARCENTRIC
INTERNET IN THE REGIME OF ENTHRALMENT

by

JESSICA MADDOX

(Under the Direction of Carolina Acosta-Alzuru)

ABSTRACT

Presently, content “going viral” is almost synonymous with the contemporary internet. This virality results in content becoming extremely popular and having a substantial, albeit fleeting, cultural impact. Most often, when content “goes viral,” we are speaking of and dealing with specifically visual content. This dissertation interrogates the connections between and social modalities of types of images that have been spread online in order to analyze how digitally visual content can be understood through an ideologically-constructed lens of near-constant captivation and entertainment.

This study bridges the fields of image studies, digital media studies, and internet studies to understand the unique and pervasive presence of the visual in digital cultures. Following the work of John Tagg, this research is situated in historically-specific cultural analysis of the visual and a particular technology in question – herein, that is the internet. I call the phenomenon-object dialectic that imbricates culture and technology “the ocularcentric internet,” and I use this technological position to ground my analysis of the types of images that are posted and published. What emerges is a particular coherence of realized signification, in which hegemony and discourse construct the dominant visuality
of our time – the regime of enthrallment. The regime of enthrallment is a structure of feeling in which a particular type of cultural work is commonplace, and such work privileges near-constant entertainment.

Initial chapters of this study offer rational, theoretical, and methodological positioning of visuality and understanding the visual nature of digital cultures. Following chapters analyze types of images found online, and I situate these visual occurrences within their social, cultural, and historical trajectories to use micro-level “viral images” to paint a macro-level tapestry of our current cultural landscape. This dissertation concludes positing that enthrallment is a type of cultural work and a zeitgeist and therefore pervasive. However, it is not eternal, and in addition to being a site of beneficial practices it can also be a terrain of social injustices. The conclusion looks to the future with hopes this study has laid groundwork for understanding the deeply visual nature of the internet and pervasiveness of such practice in broader culture.

INDEX WORDS: Digital culture, social media, selfies, memes, Instagram, screenshots, celebrity, visual studies, internet studies, cultural studies, John Tagg, Antonio Gramsci
VISUALITY BEYOND VIRALITY: SITUATING THE OCULARCENTRIC
INTERNET IN A REGIME OF ENTHRALLMENT

by

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VISUALITY BEYOND VIRALITY: SITUATING THE INTERNET’S OCULARCENTRISM IN A CULTURE OF ENTERTAINMENT

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DEDICATION

To Sean, who never signed up for this journey, but who held my hand and supported me through it every step of the way.

And to Samson, the best editorial assistant a human could ever ask for. 13/10.
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INTRODUCTION

INSTAGRAMMABLE AF

Once upon a time, in a culture not so far away, a unicorn was unleashed.

Like a blue moon, or a four-leaf-clover, or a child’s whimsical hope to see Santa on Christmas Eve night, we knew the unicorn would not grace us with its presence for long. We knew glimpses of its majestic pink, blue, and purple coloring were highly sought after. Individuals who were fortunate enough to stake a claim on the unicorn photographed it for all to see, for without proof, one’s journey was rendered moot. After all, if one finds a unicorn and did not take a picture of it, did they ever really have the encounter in the first place?

This story befuddles for many reasons, chief among them, the fact unicorns do not exist. However, Unicorn Frappuccinos, as created by Starbucks, do – and for one week in April 2017, the specialty drink was the hot pop culture item du jour. It was not worth it to simply get a tall, grande, or venti version of Starbucks’s blended crème Frappuccino and try it for its unique taste. No, one had to order their drink, take a picture of it, and post that photo to social media.

Was the drink that good? Not quite. The opposite, actually. Starbucks’s press release for the drink reads as follows:

The elusive unicorn from medieval legend had been making a comeback. Once found in enchanted forests, unicorns have been popping up in social media with shimmering unicorn-themed food and drinks. Now, Starbucks is taking the trend
to a new level with its first Unicorn Frappuccino blended beverage…The Unicorn Frappuccino blended crème is made with a sweet dusting of pink power, blending into a crème frappuccino with mango syrup and layered with a pleasantly sour blue drizzle. It is finished with vanilla whipped cream and a sprinkle of pink and sour blue power topping.¹

That combination of flavors sounds disgusting, and reviewers were not kind to the drink. One columnist commented the drink tasted like “sour birthday cake and Instagram likes” and had a “long-lasting, tongue-coating Robitussin aftertaste.”² One particularly crotchety writer declared “the Starbucks Unicorn Frappuccino [represented] everything that is wrong with America” and said the drink tasted like “topical fluoride used by dental hygienists and metallic sludge.”³ But none of that mattered. The Unicorn Frappuccino and its associated social media presence made a ripple that extended out in all directions, for even if one was not able to track down the elusive, mythical drink, they still posted about it online and created myriad memes and selfies. For instance, it was not just enough to purchase a Unicorn Frappuccino. One also had to take a selfie with it, as seen in the example below.
In addition to the selfies, many memes were created by individuals to reply to the drink. Such a response indicated the drink had moved simply from Starbucks’s hot ticket drink to a pop culture event in its own right. Even if one did not actually get the drink, they could still participate in the event in the form of memes, as seen below.

Figure i.2: Unicorn Frappuccino "Diabeetus" Meme

Figure i.1: Unicorn Frappuccino Selfie
These two memes are examples of many that followed the Unicorn Frappuccino’s release, and both made references to other famous popular culture items – Wilfred Brimley, the infamous “Diabeetus” man from medical commercials, and the plot arc in the *Harry Potter* series that discussed to drink a unicorn’s blood meant one would live forever but have a cursed life. Therefore, the memes individuals created in response to the drink showed “culture is not something people ‘have’ but something they ‘do’.” The Unicorn Frappuccino emerged not just as a cultural object, but a cultural practice in which individuals actively made choices to consume or respond to the drink in particular ways that highlighted values and issues at stake in contemporary culture.

Those issues and values in question were often revealed by the mainstream, traditional press’s coverage of the Unicorn Frappuccino. It was not enough for individuals to find the drink, take a selfie with it, or create memes to respond to the event. The press covered the mythical drink event as well. Their coverage coalesced around the
important role of the visual in our culture, not just online, but offline as well. For instance, CNBC referred to the Unicorn Frappuccino as “the Instagrammable Drink.”

BuzzFeed said “if you have a sweet tooth, this might be the hypercolor sugar vehicle you’re looking for. Plus, it’s Instagrammable AF” (AF is an internet neologism acting as an adverb of praise, denoting “as fuck”). The Washington Post declared, “really, it doesn’t matter what candies and medicines and emotions these colored powders taste like. This drink only exists to be Instagrammed, hashtag unicorn emoji, hashtag magical.”

While these quotes indicate a relationship between the visual and the digital, the financial analysis news source, The Motley Fool, cited Starbucks’s executive chairman, Howard Schultz, and said the Unicorn Frappuccino is “probably the most stunning example of understanding of digital and social media and Instagram.” And NPR summed it up quite succinctly when they wrote the Unicorn Frappuccino is a “digital age drink.” What emerges in this discourse is the relationship between the digital and the visual, and for something to be a success, visually, it often depends on the digital, and vice versa.

Starbucks aimed for visual and digital success, and they did not miss. The Los Angeles Times reported:

The drink dominated social media, with more than 1.3 billion impressions on Twitter…on Instagram, more than 150,000 posts were tagged #unicornfrappuccino. Countless more photos and videos made their way onto Snapchat and Facebook.

But the Unicorn Frappuccino’s cultural impact was not just in the numbers or in memes or selfies. Within days of the drink’s release, beauty bloggers around the web were also
creating Unicorn Frappuccino dyed hair and Unicorn Frappuccino painted nails.\textsuperscript{14} In the case of this mythical, disgusting, confounding, beautiful drink, the visual logic underscoring online spaces seeped into the corporate boardroom and into people’s bodies (literally, through consumption and beauty), thus indicating such visual practices no longer belonged only to the digital realm. While the commonness of such visuality did not begin with the Unicorn Frappuccino, this occurrence does highlight a particularly powerful and important nodal point in our understanding of contemporary socially constructed visual practices: Present visual practices are pervasive, and they are wide- and deep-reaching.

The press also noted this cultural dominance of the visual in conjunction with the digital. For example, \textit{The Guardian} reported “the beauty of releasing twee, social media friendly products is that the marketing is done for you already. Customers will post visually appealing selfies and coffee pics for days. YouTubers will make video reviews and news organisations (hi) will write about it.”\textsuperscript{15} But there is more than self-referential commentary at work in \textit{The Guardian}’s words – these words hint at a cultural-wide, overarching experience of what happens when a pop culture item or event occurs in the digital era. The fact an offline drink was made solely to have a visual online presence demonstrates there is not a clear, distinct ratio between “offline here” and “online there,” and the logics that underscore our ways of seeing online have blurred into the offline. Such collapse boundaries complicate the relationship between the visual and the digital and indicates how they are imbricated into what Martin Jay calls a scopic regime.

Martin Jay defines a scopic regime as “an overarching experience of the gaze, as enacted on an entire culture,”\textsuperscript{16} and \textit{The Guardian}, in writing about the all-encompassing
relationship between the visual and the digital, shows just how a visual-digital relationship manifests when enacted on an entire culture. Scopic regimes are not neutral, but they are historical and therefore contingent upon certain factors in a culture at certain points in time. In this way, scopic regimes are based on the idea of visuality, the idea of “how vision is constructed in various ways”\textsuperscript{17} and “the datum of vision and its discursive determinations.”\textsuperscript{18} It is within these discursive determinations we can analyze our present scopic regime, as discourses are the tools by which such regimes are created, sustained, and maintained. This is because behind an object and cultural event like the Unicorn Frappuccino, there is “a subtle realm of discourses…which function as everyday know-how, the ‘practical ideology,’ norms within and through which people live their relation to the world.”\textsuperscript{19} The Unicorn Frappuccino indicates our current scopic regime, an experience of the gaze that privileges the visual, particularly in conjunction with digital cultures and technologies. But a certain kind of visuality and visual logic of digital cultures occurs here: nearly everything, as the Unicorn Frappuccino and Guardian commentary show, must be bigger, more extravagant, a pop culture event, or even a spectacle, in its own right. Everything, to put it simply, must enthrall.

Towards a Regime of Enthrallment

In his foundational work, \textit{The Burden of Representation}, John Tagg argues the technological development of the camera produced profound social, cultural, and ideological developments that impacted the scopic regime of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{20} This study follows Tagg’s strategy in order to understand how the technologies of digital cultures have profound social, cultural, and ideological developments which shape our current scopic regime. Tagg argued the camera produced a regime of truth because of the
once-popular idiom, “the camera doesn’t lie.” My working assumption of this study is digital cultures have produced not a regime of a truth, but a different kind of regime, one contingent upon the need for cultural occurrences, like the Unicorn Frappuccino, to become gargantuan media events even if they only last for a few days.

This study argues we are now in a regime of enthrallment in which the dominant visual logic of digital cultures has seeped offline, and everything must entertain with the same characteristics of memes, selfies, or other visually-based internet content. By enthrallment and entertainment, I do not mean to make light of media occurrences; I do prefer denotations of the words that refer to captivation, charm, fascination, and absorption. Media events in a regime of enthrallment are all-encompassing but they are not all-controlling. They are pervasive, and individuals create, respond to, and make meaning with these selfies, memes, images, objects, and events through the lenses of grandeur and captivation.

Whereas it used to be understood the camera could not lie, it can now be presupposed the Snapchat filter – or Instagram account, or Facebook livestream, or tweet – must enthrall. My definition of enthrallment follows the verb form in which the word denotes an active sense, a process of being captivated or spellbound. Such a regime of enthrallment is not just the result of technological advances (it would be far too easy to fall into a trap of technological determinism here), but technological advances in conjunction with the cultural, social, and ideological. These kinds of beliefs are a society’s cultural and ideological projections onto technology and its surrounding environments, and these beliefs become the foundation for a regime of enthrallment. I am not saying this current regime is the result of technology; I am saying our current regime
is the result of a swirling amalgamation of culture, ideology, and technological advances. Just as there is no clear-cut relationship between “online there” and “offline here,” there is no simplistic cause-and-effect relationship between technology and culture. A regime of enthrallment occurs because of culture, technology, and ideology, and I could have listed those three things in any order. One is not more important than the other.

The underpinnings of understanding a cultural regime come from notions of cultural materiality. Digital images are often not thought of as physical objects since they exist within the nebulous realm of 1s and 0s inside of the computer, but “beneath these operations, like in all media previous, there is a material substrate.”23 My intention here is not to conflate materiality with physicality, but rather to indicate how digital images are just as material, in the physical sense, as the Unicorn Frappuccino, and therefore can be studied vis-à-vis materiality (in the cultural sense). Digital images are material objects with profound implications for cultural and social practice. According to John Storey, “material objects surround us and we interact with them and we use them to interact with others. They accompany us through the shifting narratives of our lives, becoming the material of our emotions and thoughts.”24 Material objects are often the base of cultural practice, but, as the Unicorn Frappuccino indicates, it is not always that straightforward, as culture occurs across more complex circuits.

In the earlier section of this chapter, I discussed the Unicorn Frappuccino and moved forward, analyzing what happened once this drink was released. However, in interrogating cultural materiality of a regime of enthrallment, it is more apt to move backwards. This retrograde approach allows for analysis with hindsight; such a tactic yields understanding of not just what happens when a drink like the Unicorn Frappuccino
was released, but how and why such a drink was created and able to become so popular in the first place. This purview is also in line with John Storey, who argues “sometimes material capacities of an object are such that they transform what we do.”25 This study interrogates what was transformed in culture to allow such a drink like the Unicorn Frappuccino to exist, and become so popular, in the first place. But this is not just a study about the Unicorn Frappuccino – this is an analysis of how the privileged visual nature of the internet and digital cultures have helped usher in a regime of enthrallment, which is a zeitgeist contingent upon a particular type of cultural work. Once again citing John Storey:

> Although material objects are always more than signs, more than symbolic representations of social relations, what they are for us is inconceivable outside a particular culture that entangles meaning, materiality, and social practice. They are never things in themselves, but always objects that are articulated in a relation to a *particular regime of realized signification*, enabling and constraining particular types of social practice.26 (emphasis added)

A regime of enthrallment has implications for a particular type of cultural work that constantly invokes spectacle and grandeur. In privileging near-constant entertainment, individuals make cultural and ideological meanings in conjunction with technology and material objects. A crucial component in understanding how these meanings are made, however, is understanding the cultural implications of the technology that underpins them. In this study, that technology is the internet, and the cultural implications pertain to the visual. Enthrallment thus refers to the zeitgeist, in that what and how we see is
hegemonically slanted towards near-constant entertainment. It also refers to the particular type of cultural work that contributes to cohesive realized signification.

There has always been a relationship between image culture and digital cultures, and Alice Marwick argues “the internet is increasingly a visual medium, and more and more individuals are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express themselves.” Visuality is essential to our ways of seeing in online spaces, a tenet indicated by cultural and technological occurrences. For instance, the front-facing cell phone camera made it easier to take selfies, and then the selfie’s ubiquitous presence gave rise to ancillary technological developments, such as the selfie stick. Mobile applications like Instagram and Snapchat, and sites like Tumblr, Imgur, and Reddit have the capabilities to share texts but are primarily used for the creation and sharing of images. A 2015 breakdown by journalist Alex Knapp in Forbes magazine found as of September of that year, one could realistically estimate 30 billion selfies had been taken so far – on Android phones alone. Though Tim Highfield & Tama Leaver make a crucial point, in which “the contemporary visual social media landscape replete with GIFs, selfies, emoji, and more is the latest iteration of networked communication with a long-running theme: We have always found ways to be visual online.” As such, visuality is essential to not just digital culture, but digital technologies, and visuality works in such a way to influence how we understand culture and technology at any given point in time.

As the earlier Guardian response to the Unicorn Frappuccino shows, there is a tripartite relationship at work in these digitally visually moments – obviously, the visual and the digital, but there is also the press. I cannot ignore the role of the traditional press
in sustaining a regime of enthrallment, particularly since digital cultures are a frequent source of fodder for mainstream media and the 24-hour news cycle.\textsuperscript{31} Additionally, what counts as news and current affairs has “an overwhelming investment in the power of the visual, in the news as an entertaining spectacle.”\textsuperscript{32} The press does not exist outside of a regime of enthrallment, and, in reporting on the ways it manifests in the concrete, reveals how they are also impacted by such an overarching experience of the gaze As such, in this dissertation, press discourse is a crucial angle of inquiry for assessing how a regime of enthrallment persists, and I interrogate the symbiotic relationship between the press and the visual logic of digital cultures.

\textbf{Method of Inquiry}

In analyzing social life, Antonio Gramsci advised we should look in the “ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities…have their place within the general complex of social relations.”\textsuperscript{33} Through analyzing discourses, this dissertation teases apart such an ensemble of relations to reveal the myriad ways a regime of enthrallment operates. To do so, I focus on several types of visual occurrences and content found in digital cultures to show how deep and wide-reaching visuality goes. To understand how these occurrences were produced as objects and events, this study addresses the following questions.

1) What is a regime of enthrallment, and how is it maintained and sustained?
2) How does an ocularcentric internet produce a regime of enthrallment?
3) How do associated practices – such as screenshotting, hashtagging, captions, and comments – emerge from visuality and the tenets of digital culture in a regime of enthrallment?
4) How does the press play a role in maintain and sustaining a regime of enthrallment, and what is the press’s relationship with the visuality logic of digital cultures?

To answer these questions, I use discourse analysis to analyze the images and conversations surrounding the occurrences in question. Discourse analysis allows me to study not just images, but the social, cultural, and technological forces that impact how said images come to be in the first place. Similarly, discourse analysis allows me to understand how these images spread through digital cultures, thus contributing to the zeitgeist. Situating each image within discourses and networks of relationships avoids technological determinism, as well as absolute determinism in pinpointing a single cause.

Discourse in this study is broadly defined in order to assess the social explanatory power from a variety of sources. In this, I do not just study press discourse, but also discourse from individuals within participatory cultures themselves, through the creation of individual user content. This is a similar approach to the one undertaken by Anne Burns in her Foucauldian analysis of internet memes as indicative of the discourse surrounding selfie-takers.\textsuperscript{34} In her study, Burns first establishes, then dismantles, the relationship between online commentary, the use and nature of selfies, and gender norms. This discursive analysis reveals the underlying misogyny found in press coverage and user-generated content that construct the idea of selfies and practice of selfie-taking as feminine and therefore “less than.” It is my similar approach to first establish relations between the visual and the digital and then the way it has become pervasive in contemporary culture. Then, I seek to dismantle this relationship vis-à-vis discourse to understand the pervasive and subtle ways in which a regime of enthrallment is
established and maintained through the practices of the visual and the digital. The work of this study is necessarily interpretative and widely encompasses a diverse array of materials, studied less for quantity and more for quality. My intent is not to show a regime of enthrallment is pervasive because I was able to find a set number of texts and images but rather that a regime of enthrallment persists because of a certain type of discourse, one that privileges spectacle and is hegemonic.

**Outline of the Study**

The occurrences chosen for this dissertation indicate the ways image work and image types reflect the tenets of enthrallment. I am not so concerned with merely writing about selfies, or memes, or celebrity Instagram accounts (though this dissertation contains selfies, memes, and celebrity Instagram accounts) as I am with analyzing the relations across these various types of visual content in online spaces. In terms of cultural analysis, I follow Raymond Williams, in that “every element that we analyse will be in this sense active: that it will be seen in certain real relations, at many different levels. In describing these relations, the real cultural process will emerge.

I chase patterns across these instances, as well as within them, to ascertain how the visual is privileged in digital spaces and how this helps in maintaining and sustaining a regime of enthrallment.

This study moves in seven chapters, each explicating types of occurrences and associated issues that work in a regime of enthrallment. Chapter One lays the groundwork for understanding scopic regimes in the internet age by recovering key concepts from visual studies and digital media studies and marries them together to explain the highly visual nature of online spaces. This chapter elucidates the differences between vision and
visuality and privileges a definition of the latter to explain the socially constructed ways vision operates under cultural conditions. It then segues into a discussion of digital cultures and the various affordances and cultural tenets associated with them. Lastly, the chapter takes these distinct fields and runs them perpendicular to each other to examine the heightened role of the visual in digital cultures, resulting in a phenomenon-object dialectic I refer to as the ocularcentric internet, and then how this perpetuates a regime of enthrallment.

Chapter Two details this study’s methodology by discussing further how discursive analysis allows me to gain substantial insight into the relations in question. This chapter grapples with the fact that, at times, the occurrences and their associated discourses may seem arbitrarily selected. It also delves deep into the articulations of press/society, meaning-making/newsworthiness, image/text, discourse/language, and power/knowledge. An in-depth look at the sources involved in this study are discussed as well.

Chapter Three introduces the first occurrence I use to ground analysis of a regime of enthrallment. This chapter discusses selfies, and, more specifically, looks at the trend of “divorce selfies” to discuss the all-encompassing ways enthrallment-as-entertainment-and-captivation works in being digitally visual. Through a discursive analysis of divorce selfies and their spread in digital cultures, enthrallment emerges as a multifaceted type of cultural work that simultaneously upholds certain ideologies while challenging others. Hegemony is largely discussed in this portion.

Chapter Four examines the image, cultural phenomenon, and practice of the internet meme. This chapter deals with memes and associated issues of “viral” and
spreadable media, as well as the processes of variability that move a meme from beyond just an image to a phenomenon. The meme I discuss in this chapter is the case of Harambe, a gorilla who was killed by the Cincinnati Zoo after a toddler fell into his fenced enclosure. The internet rallied around Harambe’s death and gave him eternal life in the form of internet meme. However, in this chapter, I discuss pitfalls of the cultural work of enthrallment, in that when images “go viral,” they can often be decontextualized, and this can lead to social problems, injustices, and inequalities.

Chapter Five is grounded in the occurrence of the Instagram image, and it also interrogates the issue of celebrity in a regime of enthrallment. This chapter specifically focuses on Kim Kardashian West, and her return to Instagram after she was robbed at gunpoint in a Paris hotel room. The stories written by the press did not just specifically talk about Kim’s return to social media; they incorporate the lone photographic post and analyze it, pixel by pixel. Furthermore, there were articles that taught individuals how to mimic Kim Kardashian West’s Instagram aesthetic. Taken together, I argue these types of articles yield a new understanding of cultural materiality and journalism within a regime of enthrallment, specifically in that a new journalistic phenomenon, something I call instajournalism, is a mix of hard news, tabloids, and social media practices.

Chapter Six moves the previously discussed issues one step further to discuss how a regime of enthrallment impacts “hard news” and how a regime of enthrallment has implications for content other than popular culture. The instance to ground this chapter is the case of the President of the United States, Donald Trump, and his frequent, and often dubbed inappropriate, use of Twitter. The president’s use of the platform in rather outlandish ways means his tweets often get “screenshotted” – the text becomes an image,
which, in turn, becomes more fodder for the press. Additionally, individuals frequently screenshot the president’s tweets and edit them for humor, clarity, or to make larger political points. This chapter argues Donald Trump’s tweets are factory and showroom, thus indicating that so-called “hard” news is not exempt from the regime of enthrallment.

The conclusion, Chapter Seven, offers a summary of preceding chapters and a rationale for the study. It offers directions for future studies and discusses limitations of the work herein. What begins with the Unicorn Frappuccino concludes with more recent occurrences of enthrallment and the dominant visuality, thus indicating that in present culture, they all lived visually ever after.
Notes on the Introduction


CHAPTER 1

HEGEMONIC VISUALITY AND THE OCULARCENTRIC INTERNET

This study argues that we are now in a regime of enthrallment, a cultural moment in which what, and how, we see is through an ideologically constructed lens of near-constant captivation and entertainment. To understand such a regime, we have to consider vision and seeing as cultural and not neutral, which is antithetical to the dominant idea that there is a direct, one-to-one ratio between what we see and what we know. The idea of a culturally constructed experience of vision can also be understood as visuality, which is “the datum of vision and its discursive determinations.” Visuality can best be understood through the ideologies and material practices of a culture and, therefore, constitutes an ensemble of relations, not merely a biological fact. This chapter moves in three parts to elaborate on what I mean by visuality and the discursive determinations that comprise it in our present moment. Additionally, this chapter demonstrates the role new media technologies and digital cultures have played in the production of this zeitgeist. First, I briefly discuss visuality, scopic regimes, and ocularcentrism to lay a theoretical foundation, and then I move into analyses of how these concepts currently manifest. Second, I present enthrallment as a theoretical concept, and how it functions as a scopic regime and performs a hegemonic function. Third, I discuss how new media technologies and digital cultures have contributed to perpetuating a regime of enthrallment through
analyzing their affordances. These affordances assist in understanding enthrallment as cultural work that is done in and across concrete practices. Finally, I discuss the role of the press in sustaining a regime of enthrallment through their distributed discourses.

**Visuality and Scopic Regimes of Modernity**

Martin Jay defines a scopic regime as “an overarching experience of the gaze, as enacted on an entire culture.” In unpacking his words, I prefer to pull out two phrases: “overarching experience” and “entire culture.” Without slipping into reductionism of Jay’s argument (I am still talking about the visual), the ideas of “overarching experience” and “entire culture” indicate something collective. A scopic regime is a comprehensive, all-embracing phenomenon that individuals willingly submit to when seeing and making sense of their world. Jay argues that the dominant idea of Cartesian Perspectivalism, the idea that vision is truth, and to see the world means to learn the truth, has its loopholes. For instance, how many times have you, or someone you’ve known, walked into a room and not seen anyone you recognize? You may then fumble around on your phone, check your email, check Facebook, etc. A friend may come up and tap you on your shoulder, to which you probably exclaim something along the lines of, “Oh! I didn’t see you there.” Overlooking the friend was presumably not malicious. Maybe you couldn’t directly spot them. Maybe an important email was on your mind. This brief anecdote shows there is often not a direct, one-to-one ratio between what we see and what we know, and that there are often things happening “behind the scenes” in culture that impact our visual experience. The scopic regime elevates this to the level of an entire culture, in which what happens within and around us in culture impacts visual experiences on the individual level.
It is possible for Jay to bring such a visual experience to a larger scale because of the phenomenon of ocularcentrism. Ocularcentrism is “a perceptual and epistemological bias [that ranks] vision over other senses in Western culture.”\(^3\) Regardless of whether it is vision or visuality, scopic regimes or Cartesian Perspectivalism, the human eyes are the organs for vision, regarded historically as “the noblest of the senses.”\(^4\) Sight and the visual experience dominate Western culture, and this study examines how the specific visual phenomenon of visuality and scopic regimes are perpetuated through such ocularcentrism. Specifically, I analyze how ocularcentrism underscores our contemporary imbrication of culture and technology, and through the lack of a clear online/offline distinction, creates a terrain for a specific type of cultural work to take place in almost all aspects of present-day society. I call this type of cultural work enthrallment.

For the purposes of this study, I begin by conceptualizing enthrallment as a type of scopic regime and argue we are now in a regime of enthrallment. After this starting point, I grapple with the idea that scopic regimes perform a specific type of cultural work, and, according to Hal Foster, that work, “with its own rhetoric and representations...seeks to close out these differences: to make of its many social visualities one essential vision.”\(^5\) Therefore, the specific kind of cultural work that a regime of enthrallment performs ushers all visual experiences in under the umbrella of near-constant entertainment.

My use of the word regime is purposeful, and it is three-fold. The first reason comes from the work of Martin Jay, who adopted Christian Metz’s term scopic regime to describe the shifting ground of visual subcultures.\(^6\) As previously discussed, Jay defines the scopic regime as “an overarching experience of the gaze, as enacted upon an entire
culture.” While it seems harmonious, this term is filled with unease, since scopic regimes seek to quash out differences and unify the visual experience under one large umbrella. I adopt the word “regime” from “scopic regime” to discuss the ways in which the cultural work of enthrallment is unifying work. Enthrallment “fights to the top” of all possible visualities, so to speak, and it ushers the collective cultural experience of visuality under its wings of near-constant entertainment. A regime of enthrallment could also be called a scopic regime of enthrallment, but I divest from this phrase to indicate that a regime of enthrallment is a specific occurrence of scopic regimes and not the end all, be all of visuality. There will be different scopic regimes in the future dominated by something other than enthrallment.

My second reason for choosing the word regime parallels Michel Foucault’s famous use of the phrase “regime of truth.” Herein, I expand on Foucault’s foundational work, as well as the more contemporary works of scholars who seek to understand the historically specific mechanisms that produce discourse, which in turn function as the common sense of a given period. I follow John Tagg’s approach in The Burden of Representation in which he historically located and culturally embedded the camera and practice of photography within the rise of mass society and one specific type of regime of truth. In his view, what society believed the camera could do helped produce the dominant forms of common sense during the nineteenth century. Tagg’s use of regime of truth isn’t quite the same as Foucault’s, but it is invoked in reverence to acknowledge the ways in which images, their modes of their production, and the socially constructed beliefs that surround them also serves to make certain things true in a society at a given point in time. In Tagg’s time of writing, the culturally, ideologically-constructed truth
was that the camera, and the images associated with it, could not lie. My study
historically locates and culturally embeds current types of images and their modes of
production, sharing, and consumption within a regime of enthrallment. Within these
current images and their modalities, we can come to understand the common sense that
dominates a regime of enthrallment. The regime of enthrallment, in a way, is also a type
of regime of truth (in Foucault’s sense), since under the cultural work of enthrallment, we
come to accept certain discourses and determinations as true. However, it is also a regime
in Tagg’s sense, in that what we believe images and their associated technologies can do
at a particular point in time come to function as taken-for-granted cultural fact.

I draw on Jay, Metz, Foucault, and Tagg to form my definition of regime in order
to adequately explain the sweeping role it plays in the construction of everyday
experiences. In turn, understanding how a regime assists in molding average and daily
events and practices allows for an understanding of what a society privileges at any given
point in time. In this study, what is privileged and emerges as a certain kind of social
“truth” is the cultural work of enthrallment, heightened role of the visual, and near-
constant entertainment. I use the word enthrallment to move beyond mere emotion or
psychology to understand the ubiquitous presence of entertainment in culture, and I use it
as a theoretical concept to understand how much of the content, practices, and actions
that occur today have a slant towards omnipresent amusement. Within these relations of
concept, practices, and actions, enthrallment emerges as the overarching experience of
the gaze, as enacted upon our entire culture. And to further ground enthrallment in the
visual, alongside that imbrication of culture and technology, I predominantly focus on
various types of visual content that are found in digital spaces – selfies, Instagram,
memes, and screenshots. By using visual objects as jumping-off points, I can analyze how the conditions of these types of memes, selfies, and screenshots offer insights into the tenets of enthrallment.

In the introduction to this study, I discussed the Unicorn Frappuccino. With this, I started with the digital age drink and moved forward, analyzing what happened once the drink was released. But in understanding the regime of enthrallment and the ocularcentrism that bolsters it, the rest of this study moves backward to ascertain the conditions and relations that allowed such a drink – and selfie, and meme, etc. – to exist in the first place. As discussed previously, the Unicorn Frappuccino could not have existed, and would not have been such a success, without the influence of ocularcentrism on an imbrication of culture and technology. It is such a dialectic of culture and technology that I refer to as the ocularcentric internet. The ocularcentric internet refers to the perceptual bias that privileges the visual experience and a particular overarching experience of the gaze in digital cultures. It is a phenomenon-technological object dialectic, in which the perceptual bias that elevates the visual experience works in tandem with digital cultures and technologies to create an online experience contingent upon heightened visuality. For the purposes of this study, that specific visuality is enthrallment, but I fully acknowledge that in the future, that type of gaze may very well change. I use the idea of the ocularcentric internet partially for clarity but also to acknowledge the important role the visual plays in shaping the creation, production, and reception of online content in digital cultures and technologies.

Moving forward, this chapter dismantles enthrallment as a regime, and it unpacks the ocularcentric internet that assists in sustaining such a cultural moment. I lay the
pieces and processes of enthrallment and the ocularcentric internet out in the open to understand them as contributing factors that contribute to this cultural moment. Together, these conditions function as a perfect storm, in which the axioms I outline work like winds, atmospheric pressure, and temperature to curate a cultural weather event, one which ultimately produces and maintains a regime of enthrallment. Like weather events, the specific facets alone mean little. It is only when taken together, and in understanding the relationships the parts have with each other to produce something bigger than themselves, that new social truth emerges.

**Enthrallment as Visuality and Hegemony**

The idea of a collective, overarching experience that makes up visuality parallels another foundational theoretical concept in cultural studies – hegemony. Through the concept of hegemony, my weather event metaphor is not without just cause. Certain conditions must be made and work in certain ways to produce current visuality. But unlike a weather event produced from above, cultural conditions are made from across and within. Antonio Gramsci approached this concept of hegemony as not a direct relationship between individuals and larger, ideological forces, but as an active, participatory process in which the relationship between individuals and society is interwoven in varying degrees and layers.⁹

In this way, Gramsci conceives culture as a certain way of living in a society and hegemony as the giving and taking of individual agency, social forces, knowledge, and ideology. This amalgamation of varying types of processes and practices instructs individuals on how to live in their society. Hegemony thus produces and maintains the
“common sense” of a culture at any given point in time. Stuart Hall and Allen O’Shea define common sense as:

A form of “everyday thinking” which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily available knowledge which contains no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep though or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection.¹⁰

Common sense becomes the guide on how to participate in society in a certain way, and it is typically taken for granted, as it “just what everybody knows.” In terms of a regime of enthrallment, the common sense is of course we Snapchat this. Of course we Instagram this. Of course we make a Unicorn Frappuccino, that in turn we then Snapchat and Instagram. The regime of enthrallment propagates near-constant entertainment and heightened visual presence as its forms of common sense.

Common sense is everyday thinking, but hegemony, with its dialectic of consent and coercion, is everyday doing, acting, and making. While common sense does manifest in materiality, hegemony is more focused on the compromises and concessions individuals make to live in society in a specific way. Though while I privilege a definition of common sense that pertains to thinking and a definition of hegemony that relates to concrete action, the two are intricately interwoven to create certain social and cultural conditions. Because of this, “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship.”¹¹ In the terrain of cultural hegemonic practices, individuals learn what is “common sense” of their culture and learn what is expected of them as an individual in that culture. However, this common sense is not necessarily imposed from
above, but rather comes from a semi-populist blend of individual demands and desires with larger social forces and instruments of control.

Individuals give and take when making sense of their culture, but the forces of those in power engage in such a negotiation as well. Hegemony is a site of struggle in which the dominant group does not maintain outright control, but rather frequently compromises in order to maintain that control. Such concessions happen because for this type of social leadership to work, “it must genuinely concern itself with the interests of the social groups over which it wishes to exercise hegemony.”12 This can be seen by returning, once again, to the Unicorn Frappuccino. To make a successful product for economic gain, a corporation had to concern itself with what individuals in their society were doing online, as well as how these individuals also privilege the visual in their digital spaces. The Unicorn Frappuccino can best be understood as a cultural terrain and not merely as an object because it was the space where social forces, corporate power, and individuals’ uses of the internet merged. The drink was not imposed from above but brought about from below through the forces above. Additionally, the drink demonstrates the dialectic of consent and coercion that runs through hegemonic processes. Some individuals loved the Unicorn Frappuccino. Some thought it was everything wrong with America. Others jokingly responded to it with memes. Regardless, through the discourse surrounding the drink, it became apparent that the Unicorn Frappuccino was the common sense $du\ jour$, and that even in resisting the drink, individuals were still talking about it.

It is through a cultural arena like the Unicorn Frappuccino that we can understand how common sense forms, as well as how visuality can be thought of as common sense. Whereas I previously defined my use of common sense as everyday thinking, and
hegemony as everyday acting, visuality can be viewed as everyday seeing. According to Hoare, when it comes to culture and hegemony, “people participate in processes by which a certain cultural environment forms, and through which a certain vision of the world is created, diffused, and reproduced.”¹³ Because of the importance of ocular metaphors in Western thought,¹⁴ it is not accidental that George Hoare uses the word “vision” to describe the functions of culture and hegemony. Visuality is concerned with the discursive determinations of vision, as well as the material and ideological forces that influence said determinations, so it too can be understood as a type of hegemony. Even though I have delineated hegemony, common sense, and visuality as separate through the concepts of everyday doing, everyday thinking, and everyday seeing, their true boundaries are far from neat. Visuality, hegemony, and common sense are imbricated within one another, and one’s everyday seeing often impacts their everyday doing and thinking, and vice versa. As such, even though this is a study primarily concerned with the visual, I use these terms purposefully throughout to describe how they work in tandem to sustain a regime of enthrallment. In sum, visuality is a type of hegemony that focuses the visual experiences and their discursive determinations.

Dominant assumptions of vision and Cartesian Perspectivalism assume vision is understood “from above,” but visuality makes sense of the world from within. Visuality does not separate the individual from society but rather actively places the individual within society to understand how the two are conjoined. For this to happen, according to Norman Bryson, “it is required that [human beings] submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world.”¹⁵ This requirement is akin to the common sense of hegemony, in that visuality becomes a certain way of living and
seeing in a society. But Norman Bryson expands his argument and makes sure that in
describing this process as a requirement we do not view hegemony as oppressive or
ignore hegemonic dissenters. He writes:

Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses that
make up visuality, the cultural construct...between retina and the world is inserted
a *screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built
into the social arena.¹⁶

Like hegemony, visuality produces and maintains society’s common sense, and because
common sense is a cultural construct, it shifts over time. What was common sense two
hundred years ago is not necessarily common sense of today. Furthermore, individuals
never completely submit to visuality, but negotiate with it, resist it, and view the world
with their own interpretations of it.

Visuality shares another characteristic with hegemony – they are both ways of
shaping, constructing, and ordering society.¹⁷ What we see is never simply our own, but it
is our own in conjunction with cultural and ideological discourse. For instance, when it
was believed that the camera couldn’t lie, that iteration of visuality and common sense
was understood to be that whatever the camera produced was the truth. This gave rise to
photographic evidence being accepted outright in courts of law and the incorporation of
headshots on official identification documents. Therefore, visuality, hegemony, and
common sense are all imbricated in one another, and together, are facets of quotidian
cultural practices that form what I have defined as a regime. Visuality, hegemony, and
common sense, when taken together, form a particular overarching experience as enacted
upon an entire culture. As I discuss in this study, that particular overarching experience is
one that privileges near-constant entertainment through the cultural work of enthrallment, and it is one that also privileges a heightened role of the visual to contribute to said enthrallment.

Additionally, it is important to note that like hegemony, visuality is way of making sense of the world, but unlike hegemony, visuality necessarily has a multifaceted, interdependent relationship with technological apparatuses. This relationship does not propagate a technological deterministic position (the reductionist position that says technology determines all aspects of a society), but rather indicates the complex overlapping of culture and technology. Technological and ideological developments often go hand in hand, and since the earliest forms of the camera obscura, these developments have been highly associated with seeing, viewing, capturing, and preserving the world through visual processes. In the next section, I turn to an overview of our current scopic regime and visuality, as well as the technological and ideological developments that go with them. This discussion focuses on enthrallment as visuality and the moments in image and digital cultures that helped lead us here. Whereas the common sense idiom of visuality was “the camera doesn’t lie,” the common sense idiom of our present visuality can be decreed as, “the Snapchat filter enthralls.”

**Enthrallment as Scopic Regime and Common Sense**

Through hegemonic sayings like “the camera doesn’t lie,” and “the Snapchat filter enthralls,” culture and visuality come together in the material practices of everyday life. But it is not just the technology of Snapchat that influences visuality – digital technologies and cultures have assisted in ushering in a new common sense that understands many facets of contemporary society to be slanted towards near-constant
entertainment. But before moving into a comprehensive discussion of these technologies and their associated cultures, I will first lay out the rise of entertainment in Western cultures over the last few decades to recognize the historical trajectory that brought us here.

I define our current scopic regime as one of enthrallment, since the term denotes active processes of mental captivation, which allows for me to understand relations of enthrallment instead of merely the word in its adjectival sense. While there is a strong leaning towards entertainment within enthrallment, entertainment does little to describe the active ways in which people make sense of the world around them. We can, however, examine the role entertainment has played in Western culture to assess how it as social force contributes to a larger regime of enthrallment. Taken together, this entertainment within enthrallment becomes an ideological lens that shapes the way we make, share, create, consume, and respond to the digitally visual content I focus on in this study.

For the last several decades in Western culture – particularly in the United States – entertainment has had a notable prowess. According to Michael Wolf, “In the United States, the entertainment industry is now a $480 billion industry, and consumers spend more on having fun than on clothes or healthcare.”19 Douglas Kellner argues that “entertainment has always been a prime field of the spectacle, but in today’s infotainment society, entertainment and spectacle have entered the domains of the economy, politics, society, and everyday life.”20 This all-encompassing reach of entertainment seeps into myriad aspects of contemporary culture, and in doing so, becomes common sense – everything must entertain. Whereas the regime of truth surrounding the camera used to privilege complete authenticity in photographs, charm, amusement, and captivation are
the driving ideologies behind the consumption, sharing, and creation of content within a regime of enthrallment.

I consider the regime of enthrallment to pick up where Douglas Kellner’s definition of media spectacle left off. Kellner argues that “media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles.” Spectacle serves a hegemonic function in that it teaches what society privileges at a particular moment in time. Examples of media spectacles from the time preceding Kellner’s writing include the O.J. Simpson trial and the Bill Clinton sex scandal, for these were media events that show how social forces work to educate and form common sense. But not everyone always agreed in these controversies (Who was guilty? Who was being framed? What was the definition of the word “is”?), and these differing opinions just further indicate hegemony at work. Spectacle-as-visuality, in this sense, says we all agree these events are important and should be talked about, even if we don’t necessarily agree on the specific details. What we really learn from these media spectacles is not information about congressional hearings or courtrooms, but rather how and why certain events are elevated to the level of spectacle in the first place. In terms of this study, I seek to understand how this experience of spectacle becomes enacted on an entire culture, beyond extravagant media events, through and within the ocularcentric internet. Kellner’s work on media spectacles is from 2003, but I use it to theoretically ground my approach to a regime of enthrallment, and the ocularcentric internet that sustains it. This is due to Kellner’s brief acknowledgement the importance of the internet in the spread of spectacle – all before the heyday of digital spaces. Kellner’s work helped establish for my present
study that the internet (and its associated digital cultures) has a role in constructing and maintaining contemporary visuality and the grandiose nature of media events.

But Kellner was writing before Mark Zuckerberg made a list of attractive women in his Harvard dorm; before the selfie was named as such; and before Kim Kardashian became an Instagram star. Spectacle and image culture have augmented in the last decade, in conjunction with, and partially due to, the imbrication of digital technologies and cultures. Per Alice Marwick, “Facebook has more than 20 billion photos, and 350 million more are uploaded every day” (emphasis added). The popular statistical news site 538 estimated that 1.2 trillion digital photographs would be taken worldwide in 2017. Kellner had once written that “the internet-based economy deploys spectacle,” but spectacle deploys, and uses, the internet as well to achieve its grandeur and all-encompassing reach on culture. It is important to note that while this study is less concerned with quantity than quality, the number of images created and shared in digital spaces indicates that we adore being visual online. This abundance of digital images helps define the ocularcentric internet, but it is the underscoring relationship between culture and technology that helps produce it. Within this privileging of the visual above all else, we have a regime of enthrallment that slants towards entertainment. The regime of enthrallment thus uses the logic of spectacle to produce a visuality that privileges near-constant entertainment in everyday life – far beyond just the extravagant, rare event.

Though it seems paradoxical to consider spectacle and the everyday in the same thought. There is a tension between these 350 million photographs that are uploaded to Facebook every day and the idea of spectacle as striving to be grander. Daren Brabham writes, “very few social media users use social media tools to coordinate
revolutions…the vast majority of what happens on social media is unremarkable, desperately and dreadfully corporate.”

How can something enthrall but be wholly average? At first glance, the Unicorn Frappuccino doesn’t seem like a spectacle, yet the reaction taps into the logic of what Kellner discusses. The drink is a seemingly normal, but visually appealing beverage – and that’s exactly the point of the regime of enthrallment. The regime of enthrallment is spectacle taken to the next level, in which everything, and not just rarities, extravaganzas, or controversies, is made to mean extraordinary. Media spectacles were conceived of as astonishing events, but a regime of enthrallment involves the ordinary and the everyday, elevated to the level of such spectacle and near-constant entertainment.

**A Brief Note on the Everyday**

The concept of the everyday plays a crucial role in this study, and I define the everyday as those quotidian practices that are often considered mundane, on the daily, or overlooked. Cultural studies has long-since been considered with everyday practices, and this study continues that tradition in that “the everyday is demotic, spectacular, interactive…a space where worlds…coalesce, compete, and constellate.”

The concept of the everyday is a terrain, and “even though the everyday is experienced naturalistically as a universal realm of habit and custom…its routinizations and repetitions are not simply the expression of dominant social relations but the very place where critical thinking and action begins.” For the purposes of this study, I examine these quotidian practices as such a terrain, and I interrogate the often overlooked practices – why would one take a picture of their lunch, edit it with filters, and put it on Instagram? Why would one make a
meme in response to a serious social event? These questions posit everyday practices, things individuals do in going through the motions of their daily lives.

Therefore, the purposes of this study, the everyday is quotidian practices. This tangentially references Michel de Certeau’s problematic, in which the aim was to move everyday practices so the “ways of operating or doing things no longer [appeared] as merely the obscure background of social activity.”28 The everyday and these quotidian practices I refer to in this study aim to do just that: bring often overlooked and seemingly miniscule practices front and center, for it is often the most minute occurrences that offer the most insight into cultural revelations. But as de Certeau warns, “the examination of such practices does not imply a return to individuality…[and] plays no part in this study. Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and no the reverse.”29 This study may be grounded in individual occurrences, but it is more considered with the relations between those individual occurrences and larger cultural patterns and themes.

Gramsci once again offers some insight here. He was most concerned with viewing culture through its quotidian practices, in which the mundane and everyday offered more insight into what a society truly valued than once-in-a-lifetime events. This is the case because individuals participate in the making of their own culture and society, and it, once again, is not imposed from above. In conceiving of visuality as hegemony, we come to understand how active productions of common sense are the lenses through which individuals, quite literally, see the world. And in conceiving of a specific regime of enthrallment as hegemony, we come to understand how those lenses of common sense are tinted with near-constant entertainment.
The affordances of ocularcentric internet play a key role in the regime of enthrallment. According to Highfield and Leaver, “Visual content on social media is not necessarily a set of selfies, food porn, memes, and GIFs…instead, visual social media content can highlight affect, political views, reactions, key information, and scenes of importance.”30 The question here, then, is not why we enjoy being visual online, but how we are visual online. Highfield and Leaver offer up memes, selfies, and food porn as examples, but they also show that the ocularcentric internet is a terrain where we see ideologies, values, and concerns play out, just like spectacles.

Perhaps this regime of enthrallment is partially due to what Whitney Phillips refers to as “the total triumph of the internet.”31 The “total triumph of the internet” is not a technologically deterministic position, but rather, a technologically influential one – the idea that acknowledges the important and omnipresent role the internet plays in shaping public life and conversations. The regime of enthrallment, then, is the total triumph of the ocularcentric internet, in which the visuality of digital cultures and technologies has come to dominate Western society’s overarching experience of the gaze. And because there is no clear demarcation between the online and the offline, the visuality of the ocularcentric internet comes to be the visuality of culture, writ large. None of this is to say, however, that the internet and digital cultures are solely responsible for our current visuality. It is quixotic to try to pinpoint such an exact beginning or cause of the regime of enthrallment, and it is also beside the point. Technology does not solely create visuality, and visuality does not solely impact technology. Therefore, this study looks at the relationship between visuality and technology as a dialectic, in which they both may influence each other, but neither can be fully understood without its counterpart. This is why, even in in this
section about visuality, there are many mentions of technological objects and affordances. With this in mind, I know turn to a primary focus of such technological developments and examine their affordances in order to understand how they come together as the ocularcentric internet and perpetuate a regime of enthrallment.

**The Society of the Screen**

Lev Manovich has argued “we may debate whether our society is a society of spectacle or of simulation, but, undoubtedly, it is a society of the screen.”\(^{32}\) Within the ocularcentric internet, we exist in a society of the screen, a mediation that is impacted by consumption and participation of the ocularcentric internet *through* those screens. As discussed previously, one cannot doubt the importance of the internet, its cultural dimensions, and its associated technologies in our current visuality. Those three things make up what I call the ocularcentric internet – the tendency for digital cultures, spaces, and technologies to privilege the visual experience over all others.

In focusing on the internet, and writing a dissertation that incorporates technological shifts, properties, and developments, I stay constantly vigilant to avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism. The flip side of avoiding technological determinism, however, would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater and disregard technology’s implications all together. Technology has influenced the phenomenon-object dialectic that is the ocularcentric internet, since, after all, words like selfie or Instagram would have had no meanings twenty years ago. To navigate this rocky terrain, I follow Adrienne Shaw, who argues “technology too exists within, not outside of, cultural and hegemonic power structures.”\(^{33}\) Technology does not constitute the “end all, be all” of cultural analysis, but in it can be examined in conjunction with cultural patterns
and hegemony. That is the approach I take in this study, since such a relationship offers insights into the cultural implications of technological developments, particularly through the idea of technological affordances. Affordances can be studied as the ways objects and technologies do what it looks like they should be able to do, but also how they have uses that are not always readily apparent. It is this latter part I focus on when studying how technological affordances impact the ocularcentric internet – these technologies and cultures may not have been explicitly designed to privilege the visual, but alas, they have yielded such a visual emphasis all the same. An understanding of this byproduct can be reached by examining this particular technological affordance in conjunction with visuality, cultural patterns, and hegemony. By moving technological developments to the realm of technological affordances, the cultural impacts of technology emerge as rocks and rivers in this cultural terrain.

**Properties that Influence the Ocularcentric Internet**

Variability is one key property of new media design that has become an affordance of how culture occurs in the digital media, and I extend this argument to the ocularcentric internet. In his foundational work, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich defines variability as follows: “Stored digitally, rather in a fixed medium, media elements maintain their separate identities and can be assembled into numerous sequences under program control.” By this, Manovich means that every time content moves through digital spaces (or, for the sake of my study, moves through the ocularcentric internet), it can change ever so slightly, yet remain true enough to its original form that it can be traced back to its earliest iteration. This makes new media content “simultaneously factory and showroom;” in which content is never finished but
always in flux. Images are not exempt from being “simultaneously factory and showroom.” In fact, it was the visual influences of cinema that Manovich relates to his work on the origins of new media design. New media have long-since been wrapped up in visuality, as this relationship between early technological developments and cinema indicates. Because of this shared history between cinema and the digital, it is no surprise the internet would presently be defined by ocularcentrism. Visual content, including images, lays the foundation that not only leads to the ocularcentric internet, but, taken further, it is also what allows the technology to be both factory and showroom in the first place.

Perhaps the most obvious example of an internet image that is both factory and showroom is the popular internet meme. This is such because individuals will take the fixed concept and tweak it just enough to make it their own, a process aided by sites like KnowYourMeme and MemeGenerator. However, the logic of memes as both factory and showroom can be applied to other times of online visual content as well. People don’t just create their own memes in starting volumes: they also create their own selfies, screenshots, Instagram posts, and traditional photographs in such ways and numbers. Considering the prevalence of editing software like Photoshop, websites like MemeGenerator, and platforms like Snapchat or Instagram, anyone can publish and post any type of visual content to make it their own. The likes of Photoshop, MemeGenerator, and Snapchat didn’t cause this pervasive factory and showroom practice, but they did make the phenomenon easier to occur, and they allow for it to occur more frequently. The ocularcentric internet thus yields the so-called “meme-ification of everything,” in which almost all digitally visual content online can be tweaked to suit one’s needs. Under a
regime of enthrallment, the overarching experience of the gaze that shapes this production slants everything towards entertainment, but also, the need for near-constant entertainment also assists in the drive towards the ubiquity of the factory and showroom phenomenon.

In considering how this process of being simultaneously in process and final product happens on the ocularcentric internet, it is worth looking at how content moves in digital cultures. If content is frequently altered as it moves online, then individuals are making active, conscientious choices about what to exclude and include in their personal factories and showrooms. In curating content as factory and showroom, and in deciding what to add or leave out in their selfie or meme, individuals accept or reject facets of the culture around them. According to Hoare, in thinking about culture this way, it “means thinking through how, where, and by whom culture is produced, how it is diffused and distributed, and what structures, principles, and constraints dictate its overall configuration.” 37 Once again considering the Unicorn Frappuccino, we can see how individuals took an overarching cultural experience and responded to it in a variety of ways. As noted earlier, some individuals made humorous memes. Some individuals took selfies with the drink and put their own spin on it. Some individuals called the drink everything that was wrong with America. But in talking about the magical beverage, be it through praise or scrutiny, the discourse indicates the drink’s visuality – and hegemonic – function. The Unicorn Frappuccino, and all of its surrounding images and words, indicates that we as a culture privilege being visual above all else, and this is done to such a degree that corporations will sacrifice taste for a visual online footprint. But when further examining this drink’s impact through the lens of the ocularcentric internet, it
becomes apparent that it is not just corporations that privilege a visual footprint. Individuals do too, as indicated by the startling amount of visual content they produce online.

In this way, Jenkins’s, Ford’s, and Green’s conception of movement online applies here. Jenkins et. al privilege a conception of spreadable media, as opposed to the neologism “viral media,” the former of which they define as:

Spreadability refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kind of contents than other, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community’s motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes. Spreadability helps us to understand how visuality reigns supreme on the ocularcentric internet. In assessing what kind of content moves more successfully than others, we can look towards content with a visual, entertainment slant, as indicated by the Unicorn Frappuccino, and as the rest of this study will explore. The idea of media as spreadable, as opposed to viral, incorporates agency and choice over the idea of content that merely infects idle minds. Because spreadability focuses on conscientious decisions, it is concomitant to the choice within variability. On the ocularcentric internet, individuals will publish and post content to make it their own. This is why Limor Shifman argues “purely viral content does not exist – once a photo, or a video, reaches a certain degree of popularity…you can bet that someone, somewhere, will alter it.” It is very rare for something that gains popularity on the ocularcentric internet to remain in its original state. People will make their own versions, provide commentary on it, or alter it to make
it their own. Therefore, all content on the ocularcentric internet – not just the visual – has potential to be both factory and showroom.

Scholars have made distinctions regarding the types of ways individuals alter content online, or, in other words, the way individuals churn out content in their own factories and showrooms. But whether these scholars are talking about intertextuality, mimicry, or remix is outside the scope of this study. I am not concerned with going that deep into the ways various of content merge and interact with each other. I am more concerned with content that has been altered to make something new, and the connections that it is has with the zeitgeist around it. What these types of variability offer is groundwork for understanding how seemingly incongruous elements can be juxtaposed to make something new online – like a unicorn drink and unicorn reference from one of the world’s most popular book series. While I don’t concern this study with how those specific types of variability work, I do find it worth mentioning them briefly to indicate the many different types of ways individuals move and make content on the ocularcentric internet. The finer nuances of exactly how they do this is a study for another time. This study is concerned with movement and variability, more broadly, in order to make connections to, and within, a regime of enthrallment.

**Relationship with the Press**

I have already briefly mentioned discourse as a way in which the visuality and hegemony of a regime of enthrallment is sustained. But previously, I have only discussed discourse from a more user-generated, participatory point of view by mentioning selfies, memes, and commentaries individuals make in response to a pop culture event. But such a discussion of regimes, visuality, and hegemony would not be complete without
analyzing discourse from a more institutional perspective. The traditional press has played a key role in perpetuating the regime of enthralment, and I now turn this theoretical framework towards the relationship between legacy media and this particular cultural moment.

What happens online is generally considered important and worth talking about. Presently, “online content is playing an increasingly important role in social, political, and cultural agenda-setting.” More and more, it is reaffirmed that there are no clear-cut relationships between an online “here” and an offline “there,” since the two frequently blur into each other. One way this occurs is through the press, since “many [media] outlets are so eager to present the latest, weirdest, and most sensationalist story,” and they rely on the ocularcentric internet to do just that. One byproduct of this 24-hour news cycle is that there always must be seemingly new information to present, and the internet supplies copious amounts of good, bad, ugly, weird, heartwarming, and heart-wrenching material which can be used for this purpose.

But it is not just the press that needs the internet. The internet needs the press, too. Digital cultures are born of, and embedded in, dominant offline institutions, ideologies, and tropes. Often, what occurs offline or in the press becomes the fodder for memes, trends, selfies, etc.; televised screen grabs or screenshots become the consistent base for something to become factory and showroom. Noteworthy examples of this movement from the press to the internet include, but are certainly not limited to, the Bill O’Reilly “You Can’t Explain That” meme, CNN’s Brooke Baldwin’s “What Is This 4Chan?” moment; and the Mobile Leprechaun meme that came from a local Alabama news broadcast about a possible leprechaun sighting. Additionally, after something picks up
enough steam and gains popularity on the ocularcentric internet, it can get picked up by the press again, thus demonstrating the cybernetic feedback loop relationship between the two. The press, from time to time, does rely on the ocularcentric internet for material, and, in doing so, they espouse similar visual logic in deeming the ocularcentric internet as worth talking about.

One way in which the traditional press and the internet have found themselves in this symbiotic relationship is through the process of convergence culture. Henry Jenkins defines convergence culture as the cultural moment in which “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.”43 Akin to the blurred boundaries of the press and the internet, convergence culture speaks to the collapse of media demarcations more broadly. Though, Jenkins is sure to point out, that convergence is a “process, not an endpoint” and it is “more than simply a technological shift…convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and which media consumers process news and entertainment.”44 In the collapse of traditional boundaries, media industries become a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes.

This mix of processes reflects the symbiotic relationship between the more traditional broadcast model of the press and the bottom-up, participatory nature of the ocularcentric internet. The press and the internet come together in convergence culture in new ways, and I discuss two of these ways herein. While Jenkins once argued that “broadcasting provides the common culture, and the Web offers more localized channels for responding to that culture,”45 I argue, following Phillips, that the opposite is now true. From the Academy Awards to the United States Presidential State of the Union address,
events still happen on more traditional networks and the internet provides a space for the “second screen”\textsuperscript{46} phenomenon; but the reverse also occurs. Broadcast media and the traditional press become second screen (either literally or figuratively within our society of the screen) to the ocularcentric internet when they fill their news cycles with stories of Chewbacca Mom, Slender Man, the latest selfie trend, or what Taylor Swift did on Instagram last week.

A second way convergence culture manifests in the press, as related to the regime of enthrallment, occurs through the process of memejacking. According to Pamela Vaugh, memejacking occurs when marketers and corporations appropriate existing content for brand purposes, and this often happens through the use of internet memes\textsuperscript{47}. But as the Unicorn Frappuccino shows, memejacking really reflects public and pop culture values, and it can be done through the press. In this way, it is a fundamental part of the hegemonic function of visuality. In his writings on the subject of hegemony, Gramsci suggested that a fundamental part of it was the overcoming of eco-corporatist demands in order to reach the ethical-political plane (wherein eco-corporatist refers to the forces of production).\textsuperscript{48} The ethical-political plane, according to Gramsci, is the “situation when eco-corporatist demands have been transformed into a universalistic outlook that takes into account the complex interrelations of the interest of a group with the demands and aspirations of other groups.”\textsuperscript{49} In this way, memejacking is the catapulting of current industries, including the traditional press, to the ethical-political plane, where the forces of production consider the interests of those over which they wish to exercise hegemony. Tapping into the underlying visuality logics of the regime of enthrallment becomes a crucial component for the media industries to perpetuate the cultural moment’s common
sense. The press engages in a form of memejacking in the regime of enthrallment when they tweak digitally visual content as factory and showroom for their own institutionalized purposes, a phenomenon that becomes particularly apparent in Chapter Five’s discussion of instajournalism. The concept of memejacking shows how wide- and deep-ranging the regime of enthrallment is, specifically in how the internet becomes content for the offline and vice versa.

But the press is not exempt from the shifts that privilege near-constant entertainment in the regime of enthrallment. Some scholars have argued that by engaging in new practices, as well as in a symbiotic relationship with the internet and popular culture, there has been a “softening” of traditional news. Others have viewed it as a byproduct of tabloidization, in which everything must entertain, or have a lighter angle. In this study, I avoid passing a positivist judgment on this shift as simply “good” or “bad,” instead privileging the argument that the press simply has taken on a new role – whose mere existence cannot be disputed. To me, the most interesting questions are how and why this new role has occurred, and how the regime of enthrallment impacts this newfound softening. Additionally, I am concerned with the press’s role in a regime of enthrallment because it is, perhaps, the most ubiquitous source of discourse in contemporary society, and it is through discourse that regimes are created, maintained and sustained. Because, within the press’s contemporary role, “there is an overwhelming trend…to prefer entertainment over information, visuals over text, headlines over facts, and captions over analyses,” we can tease apart these dichotomies to understand how discourse and relations work in a regime of enthrallment. Because the objects of inquiry in this study seem to focus on the first item in the previous quote’s pairings
(entertainment, visuals, headlines, and captions), it is worth considering throughout this work how and why these binaries come to exist in the first place, and how a regime of enthrallment privileges one side over the other.

**Chapter Summary**

I’ve delved into visuality, internet studies, and ideas of hegemony to lay a theoretical framework for unweaving how a regime of enthrallment manifests in the concrete. A regime of enthrallment is a type of scopic regime, predicated upon a visuality that privileges near-constant entertainment and performs a hegemonic function in curating such a structure of feeling as common sense. The regime of enthrallment is a byproduct of technological affordances, though technology is not the last and only instance that led to its prominence. Instead, technological and cultural developments, contingent upon society’s overarching experience of the gaze, impact how we make and share content in digital spaces. The main way this occurs is through variability, in which content online is never done but always able to be tweaked into some new iteration. The press plays a crucial role in this relationship, and in sustaining a regime of enthrallment, predominantly through its use of discourse. In turn, enthrallment, vis-à-vis the idea of spectacle, visuality, and scopic regimes, becomes the dominant structure of feeling in our present moment.
Notes on Chapter One


CHAPTER 2
INTERNET VOICES: MAPPING THE REGIME OF ENTHRALMENT

This chapter outlines the method I used to dismantle the common sense of a regime of enthrallment to assess how it works, and how I pieced that common sense back together into a final product with fresh eyes and new understandings. My research questions coalesce around the ideas of visuality, hegemony, common sense, power/knowledge (stylized as such to indicate their imbrication), truth, regimes, culture, new media, digital cultures, traditional mass media, and the press. My aim with this study was to analyze and assess how these phenomena work in tandem to propagate a specific, dominant version of common sense. Discourse analysis emerged as the appropriate methodological path to unpack how these sentiments manifest in our current cultural moment.

This methodology is appropriate for the questions that guide the study. As mentioned in Chapter One, these phenomena of visuality, common sense, and hegemony that come together to form a regime are not enforced from above – they are created from below and within. Therefore, the discourse that bolsters this visuality is an active, always-in-flux practice. Media texts and processes are “key social and political forces whose representational practices [are] institutionally and systematically ideological,”¹ and they are sources of discourse that shape the dominant structure of feeling at any given point in time. There are social and cultural implications to how these media texts and processes
promulgate specific discourses and ideologies, and those implications are the focus of this study. Media texts and practices can shape culture in this way, because, according to Stuart Hall, “if ideology is effective, it is because it works at both the rudimentary levels of psychic identity and the drives and at the level of the discursive formation and practices which constitute the social field. (emphasis in original)”\(^2\) Discourse thus constitutes the social field and forms the predominant avenue by which I answer this study’s research questions.

Methodologically, this is a cultural analysis of the ways in which the visuality that underscores the ocularcentric internet has become common sense in our culture. The goal of this research is not to find the outright definitive rules of visuality, discourse, and ideology that constitute a regime of enthrallment, but rather, “discover certain general ‘laws’ or ‘trends’ by which social and cultural development as a whole can be better understood.”\(^3\) This research may paint a picture of the regime of enthrallment in broad strokes, but each movement is crafted with fine detail to bolster my argument of how those broad strokes map our current, cultural, enthralling field.

Additionally, moving in broad strokes as opposed to fine lines is due, in part, to the nature of my specific object of inquiry – digital images. To study anything pertaining to the internet, digital cultures, or digital images means to always be one step behind. Your research is always already outdated. To negotiate this, I follow the advice of scholars who have navigated this trail before me: Whitney Phillips negotiates this problem through verb tenses by electing to write in the past tense.\(^4\) Tim Highfield\(^5\) and Ryan Milner,\(^6\) in their respective books on social media and the internet, follow Gramsci’s problematic, similar to the one outlined in Chapter One of this study. In doing
cultural analyses of the internet, it is most important to study the relations, practices, and processes across digital materials, whether those are politics (Highfield), memes (Milner) or the types of digital visual images that reflect and constitute a regime of enthrallment. This allows for an examination of articulations, as well as the ability to study patterns as opposed to stagnant and eventually outdated slivers. It is through these articulations that I answer the questions of how the ocularcentric internet’s visuality has become common sense and leads to a regime of enthrallment.

This chapter serves as a field guide to this study, and it moves in four parts. First, I discuss discourse analysis, and how visuality can be understood as a discourse in and of itself. Second, I distinguish discourse analysis from textual analysis, as these methods are often conflated. The point of this distinction is to specifically lay out what I am doing in this study in terms of discourse analysis, but also to highlight the nexuses where traditional textual analysis has influenced my work. Third, I discuss my explicit procedure of conducting discourse analysis. Finally, I lay out the specific occurrences of a regime of enthrallment that I used to ground this study.

**Discourse Analysis and Visuality**

Stuart Hall defines discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about [and] representing the knowledge of a particular topic at a particular historical moment.”7 Discourse perpetuates the “natural” and “oh, of course” ways of thinking about, seeing, and existing in the world. It is a way of making sense of culture and therefore imbricated in common sense. As previously discussed in Chapter One, visuality and common sense are intricately related, and visuality becomes the common sense lens through which we see the world. Because visuality and common sense amount
to a kind of truth, they must be studied in conjunction with the ideas of power and knowledge.\textsuperscript{8} This is such, according to Gillian Rose, because “the dominance of certain discourses occur[s] not only because they were located in socially powerful institutions…but also because their discourses claimed absolute truth.”\textsuperscript{9} In regard to this study, what we believe technology (specifically the ocularcentric internet) is capable of doing at any given time forms a type of truth. This truth is not inherent to the technology; rather, it is projected upon it by the pervasiveness of certain socially constructed discourses.

In his foundational work on discourse and truth, Michel Foucault discusses the ways in which power and knowledge rely heavily on one another to curate common sense and visuality. He writes:

We should admit…that power produced knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.\textsuperscript{10} Foucault relates power/knowledge to discourse in the sense that discourse is a form of discipline. Because discourse is related to knowledge, it is inevitably related to power, and therefore the visuality and common sense produced at any given time is powerful. However, it is important to remember that “discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behaviour on a pre-existing human agent…human subjects are produced through discourses.”\textsuperscript{11} Power has implications for creating visuality and common sense
because it produces subjects through discourse. Power does not in fact only repress – it produces. Therefore, discourse is an active, engaging process that is always already in the process of producing hegemony, common sense, and visuality.

Methodologically speaking, it is these active processes of production that guide my study. I am concerned with the ways in which discourse has produced a common sense that is contingent upon the ocularcentric internet’s visuality. Akin to how common sense can be studied as a discourse, I study visuality as a discourse as well. Visuality is not just a theoretical guide to this study but also a methodological one, since “between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses that make up visuality.” Visuality spreads and maintains its power, and is subsequently challenged, through discourse. It is this discourse that perpetuates the idea of “everyday seeing,” and this weaves with the idea of common sense as everyday thinking, and hegemony as everyday acting. Discourse is a thread that runs between the three to connect them through their “everydayness.”

Additionally, visuality can be conceived as a discourse because it too produces subjects. The dominant ways of thinking and acting (common sense and hegemony, respectively) influence the dominant way of seeing at a given point in time. As discussed in Chapter One, visuality has a hegemonic function alongside its common sense function because it is a socially constructed lens through which we see the world. There is nothing natural about visuality that privileges the work of enthrallment and near-constant entertainment; rather, this understanding that everything must be more spectacular was culturally made. Because of this, even though this study grounds each chapter in types of images found on the ocularcentric internet, it is less about these images than it is about
the active processes of visuality, common sense, hegemony that exist within and around said images.

In conceiving of visuality as a discourse, I follow the approach laid out by Rose, who discusses the way to do discourse analysis with images and visuality. She writes:

This type of discourse analysis follows Foucault in understanding visual images as embedded in the practices of institutions and their exercises of power. It thus pays less attention to visual images and objects themselves than to the institutional apparatuses and technologies which surround them, and which, according to this approach, produce them as particular kinds of images and objects.¹³

The selfies, memes, screenshots, etc. produced and received on the ocularcentric internet are not done so in a vacuum. By conducting a discourse analysis of these images, paradoxically, I am actually paying very little attention to the images themselves. Instead, I am more concerned with how these images are nexuses of common sense that contribute to the ocularcentric internet’s visuality seeping into almost all aspects of contemporary culture. Rose refers these articulations between the image and cultural forces as social modalities, which she defines as: “The range of economic, social, and political relations, institutions, and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used.”¹⁴ My objects of inquiry in this study are not just images, but images within their social modalities. By examining their social modalities, I ascertain the institutional and cultural forces that help maintain and sustain the dominance of this type of visuality as common sense. And, this study argues this visuality as common sense helps form a regime of enthrallment.
Discourse is found across and within these social modalities, which is why this study examines not just images but also the ways in which images are discussed by institutions. Such institutions include the traditional press, blogs, and the ways in which people respond to such images in comments on the ocularcentric internet. In analyzing the ways in which these images are presented within their social modalities, I present a nuanced understanding of the variety of how social, cultural, and institutional forces assist in propagating a regime of enthrallment. This methodology will help show this enthrallment is not due to the image-making techniques themselves. It is due to power/knowledge and what we come to believe is the truth regarding what images are capable of doing at a particular historical juncture.

Across multiple sources of analysis, the visuality and common sense that buttress a regime of enthrallment create a discursive formation. A discursive formation “is the way meanings are connected together in a particular discourse.” Discursive formations are relational, which means they present a way of understanding multiple discourses in conjunction with one another. As previously mentioned, images do not exist in a vacuum, and neither do discourses. Discourses inform one another across various types of institutions, media, and presentations. I present my analysis of this discourse in question as a discursive formation in order to examine the relationships and articulations between images, technologies, institutions, visuality, common sense, and hegemony.

**Textual Analysis and FOMO**

In digital cultures, “FOMO” means “Fear of Missing Out,” an affective phenomenon that occurs when one sees their friends posting pictures from an event they were either not invited to or could not attend. In spending so much time thus far
discussing discourse analysis, and in many conversations with my adviser about what discourse analysis actually means, I did not want textual analysis to feel neglected. While this study is a discourse analysis, it is important for me to distinguish the method of discourse analysis from the method of textual analysis. However, the two are not rigidly separated, and there are instances in this study where textual analysis shines through. This section grapples with these distinctions and defends the moments in which textual analysis underscores certain aspects of my work.

While there are numerous types of documents one can analyze when doing textual analysis, this type of analysis is historically rooted in examinations of the press as a norm-forming institution. Even presently, the dominant assumptions of textual analysis relate back to journalism, and Jack Lule suggests, “Textual analysis is a particularly effective tool for the researcher who wants to explore how stereotypical depictions are invoked through the language and conventions of the press.” Because “language is not a pure medium through which the reality of a life or the reality of an event or an experience or the reality of a society can ‘flow’,“ textual analysis is largely concerned with the not-so-innocent selections of words, phrases, images, and the positioning of the three in a text. Taken together, one conducting a textual analysis would assess how a particular event or occurrence would be socially constructed through language. Discourse analysis, however, is more broadly rooted in the tradition of examining institutions, writ large, as norm-forming entities. While this study is concerned with that same norm- and common sense-forming idea, there is not the same deep focus on language and the social construction of events, vis-à-vis the press, that one would find in textual analysis.
I should be clear, however, that the difference between textual analysis and discourse analysis goes beyond just the roles of the press and language. The role of the press is a central aspect of this study – just like it is also a central aspect of textual analysis. However, while the press would be a key entrance point for a researcher conducting a textual analysis, I examine the press in this study specifically as an institution that propagates common sense within a regime of enthrallment. The press is not my entry point; it is an augmenting point for studying the social modalities and discourses associated with images. Additionally, a stark difference between textual analysis and discourse analysis comes from the sets of items to be examined. Textual analysis is typically more concerned with a distinct set of texts to be examined (for instance, newspaper coverage of the alt-right protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, from the top ten international newspapers with highest readership). According to Stuart Hall, the textual analyzer will then “point, in detail, to the text on which an interpretation of latent meaning is based.”²⁰ By starting from an understanding that language is not pure, one conducting a textual analysis would go beneath the surface to find the ways in which an account of the world is socially constructed and presented to an audience. Discourse analysis uses a less rigid set of documents and will instead draw on all the ways in which social modalities impact the object of inquiry. For example, in this study, I may draw on some newspaper articles from international newspapers with the highest readership rates, but I also draw on blogs; think pieces; online newspaper articles; selfies; memes; YouTube videos; Instagram posts; Twitter bots; memes; tweets; and response articles to selfies, memes, Instagram posts, and tweets. While seemingly random, these pieces are
analyzed until no new patterns emerge, a process which will be more thoroughly discussed in the procedure section of this chapter.

But there is a fine line between textual analysis and discourse analysis. According to Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, and Tincknell, the boundaries between methods are never as rigid as scholars may think. This is because methodologies themselves are not part of an accumulating repertoire; they have relationships with each other, cross-cut one another, and exist in formations with one another that are full of moments of tension and harmony. In his foundational work on textual analysis in the introduction to Paper Voices, Stuart Hall writes: “Newspapers…employ verbal, visual, and typographic means for ‘making events and people in the news signify’ for their readers. Every newspaper is a structure of meaning in linguistic and visual form. It is a discourse. (emphasis in original)” Hall is purposeful here with his inclusion of the term discourse in discussions of textual analysis, and his language choices reflect the theoretical and methodological similarities between discourse and textual analysis. However, there are departures between the two methods, and it is to these deviations I turn to next.

In conducting my discourse analysis herein, I, too, am concerned with how nothing is neutral; how media always carry baggage of semantic, linguistic, and visual codes that make meaning. Discourse analysis is also concerned with how things are socially constructed. The term “discourse” even makes sense in conjunction with textual analysis, since discourse refers to the production of knowledge, and particularly newspaper texts will curate a knowledge about an event in a specific way on a specific issue. But my questions are different than Hall’s. My questions are different than one who seeks to understand how Western newspapers of varying ideological scopes and
demographics covered the 2016 presidential election. Instead of looking at what meanings arise while studying specific events through the not-so-innocent use of language, I am predominantly concerned with how common sense is made to mean through the not-so-innocent use of language. Because I am concerned with common sense, and because this study is rooted in the idea of regimes as norm-forming, ideological umbrellas that usher society in underneath, I am therefore concerned with power/knowledge and truth. Questions of power/knowledge, truth, and common sense are intricately tied to the idea of discourse as a discipline and how it produces social subjects in certain ways. This idea of power/knowledge having a “capillary existence” in flowing through society, forming a version of common sense, and then having that common sense form a regime is wrapped up in the idea of discourse in Foucault’s sense; that is discourse disciplines through knowledge and everyday actions, thinking, and seeing.

Finally, one big distinction between conducting a discourse analysis as opposed to a textual analysis relates to the object of inquiry itself. Bonnie Brennen suggests that “texts are thing that we use to make meaning from,” and in this way, textual analysis is largely concerned with the text itself. While the text may not be studied “for its own sake, nor even for the social effects it may thought to produce,” the text itself is still absolutely crucial in textual analysis, for it is the starting point and ultimate end point. By this, I mean the researcher will start with the text in question, analyze it for its patterns, relationships, latent meanings, and context, but then ultimately come to back to the text to show what specific social reality it forms. But in discourse analysis, the images I am using as my texts are my starting points. They are not necessarily my end points. The
selfies, memes, etc. I use begin my analysis, but my end point is the idea of the regime of enthallment. While I do connect the image to the regime, the image is not my final object of inquiry. In this sense, a textual analysis of images in this study would examine the images themselves, see what is in them, what is in their captions, and how and where they are positioned. But this study is less concerned with those questions and more concerned with the social modalities of these images. That is, I am more concerned with the relations of institutions, power/knowledge, and common sense that are within and surround these images.

A Venn Diagram is a helpful way for summing up what I have discussed in this section. Such a figure demonstrates the distinctions between textual analysis and discourse analysis yet also highlights how they are not rigidly separate categories. It also emphasizes the places where these approaches overlap in this study’s methodology. I have already discussed the distinctions presented within the diagram, but this approach is a useful way of visualizing the differences.
While I describe this study’s method as a discourse analysis, Figure 1 shows how textual analysis does influence my methodology. This is not because of sloppy jury-rigging of my research methods toolkit, but rather because there are never clear demarcations between methodological approaches. Methods offer their own epistemological avenues for answering questions about the world, and the method of discourse analysis is the most appropriate way to answer the specific research questions pertaining to how the visuality of the ocularcentric internet has become common sense in a regime of enthrallment. The specific ways I went about conducting this discourse analysis are discussed in-depth below.
Procedure

The outlining of the steps below is intended to clarify how I went about conducting an analysis of images on the ocularcentric internet in order to show how they contribute to a regime of enthrallment. These steps are not rigid, and I often moved back and forth between them. Sometimes I skipped over one only to come back to it later. This demonstrates the non-linear nature of cultural analysis, specifically in that we cannot anticipate what we will find until we begin to conduct the research. Only upon diving into the documents will we encounter detours and unexpected roadblocks that must be grappled with and addressed. Sometimes these detours and roadblocks will prompt new avenues of inquiry to be explored and written about in the study; other times, they are meant to be explored and then left alone. Throughout this study, I make it a point to address where things popped up that I was not expecting, and I discuss how this leads to a nuanced understanding of how a regime of enthrallment functions.

Step one. When I began this study, back in the days of writing my prospectus, I knew I wanted to address the ways in which specific types of digitally visual content are influenced by, as well as help maintain and sustain, a regime of enthrallment. These types of images were selected based on my several years of research into digitally visual content, and I selected the most prevalent. There were obviously types I had to leave out, and I made these purposeful choices for two main reasons: One, if I included every type of digital image, this study would never end. That would not be practical. Two, I went with what are seemingly the most common types of digital images. Scholars have written extensively about three of these types (selfies, memes, and Instagram). The last type of image I intend to examine in this study, the screenshot, was selected because I felt it was
an extremely important type of digital image that has been underrepresented in research thus far.

Step two. Once I picked these types of digital images, I had to select the specific occurrences of each type of image. For this, I based my selection criteria on two factors: How recent the occurrence of the image type was, or how impactful it had been in the digital public sphere. Chapter Three (divorce selfies) and Chapter Five (Kim Kardashian and Instagram) were selected based on how recent of occurrences they were. Chapter Four (Harambe as meme) was chosen because of the immensely profound ways it has shaped digital cultures. Chapter Six (Trump tweets, screenshots, and bots) was selected for its mix of being recent and its importance in shaping not only the internet, but current politics. The decisions behind these occurrences are discussed more in-depth in the next section.

Step three. I began searching the internet to find what had been written, produced, or recorded regarding these specific occurrences. This was done to find all the articles, blogs, op-eds, think pieces, images, parodies, etc. that discussed these occurrences. Essentially, this was done to find the discourses surrounding each occurrence. I also searched for examples to specifically ground each occurrence since, as previously mentioned, Rose suggests images must be studied within their social modalities. In this case, I read and viewed these discourses as I searched. This was done so I would be aware as to when to stop viewing. I initially read and viewed these discourses until I reached what dominant paradigm scholars would call saturation – I read until it seemed as if no new patterns and themes were emerging, or until I was reading nothing new in
terms of description. This is the point in which all the discourses began repeating themselves.

It is also important for me to note that in this stage, I made necessary and deliberate choices regarding what to include and what to exclude from this study. Had I included all discourses I found from across the entire internet, this study would have never ended. Therefore, deciding what discourse to include, what to exclude, and when to stop collecting discourses to analyze was determined based on quality over quantity. By this, I mean analyzed discourse in terms of its benefits to the study and not until I had a specific number of articles. This decision is a similar strategy to the one Anne Burns undertakes in her Foucauldian analysis of internet discourse surrounding selfie-takers, in that this selective approach is not used to make definitive, outright claims about all discourses on the internet. Instead, I am only concerned with the discourses pertaining to the visuality and the ocularcentric internet that maintain a regime of enthrallment. There are other discourses in a regime of enthrallment, and there are other discourses on the ocularcentric internet – there are racist discourses, sexist discourses, alternative discourses, homophobic discourses, iconophobic discourses, technologically deterministic discourses – and while this study may run tangential to, and even intersect, some of these at times, it is more concerned with language pertaining to visuality and digital cultures that propagate enthrallment as common sense.

Step four. Having now grounded each occurrence in a specific image and having now collected large amounts of discourse that surrounded each occurrence, I began to read the articles, blogs, op-eds, etc. that I had gathered. At this point, I just read. I read all the documents pertaining to each occurrence, and then I conducted what Stuart Hall
refers to as a “long preliminary soak.” This was my chance to think critically about what I had just read and viewed and specifically begin to think about how these discourses connect in discursive formations. By engaging in a “long preliminary soak” of these images and the discourse that surrounded them, I was conducting an analysis of what Rose refers to as the social modalities of images – I was not just analyzing these images, but the social, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape them as well.

Step five. After completing the soak, I began to read and re-read (as well as view and re-view) the articles and sources of analysis in question. Initially, I paid attention to two broad categories. First, I looked for anything that simply jumped out at me as particularly intriguing. Two, I specifically looked for anything that pertained to my definition of enthrallment and how the work of near-constant entertainment manifests in discourse. Through these two broad avenues, I also paid attention to specific ideas, themes, words, etc. that began repeating themselves. By focusing on these themes that presented repeatedly, I could assess how these tenets factor into a regime of enthrallment.

Step six. I kept reading. Once I had identified specific aspects of the discourses in question that were particularly important and relevant, I re-read and re-viewed everything again. This time, I paid closer attention to these specific instances and recurrences, and I began to tease apart these discursive strands to see how they ultimately came together as a cultural tapestry. I unraveled threads and picked apart pilfered areas to see how these individual words, phrases, themes, and ideas were far from ever being wholly or innocently individual. These words, phrases, themes, and ideas were always already wrapped up in conceptions of power/knowledge, and related to other documents I analyzed; therefore, I was at the point in my research to conduct the specific part of the
analysis that understands how discursive formations come together to curate visuality and common sense.

It was only then I could begin step seven, and that is the writing step. Writing is an integral part of my analysis, since it sometimes was not until I was writing up my findings that new themes and patterns emerged. This demonstrates the inherently non-linear nature of cultural analysis, and often in writing I went back and repeated many of the aforementioned steps. With this procedure outlined, I now turn to a compressive overview of the occurrences that ground this study.

**Occurrences of the Regime of Enthrallment**

When deciding on how to ground this study, I picked the types of visual occurrences that seemed most prevalent in digital cultures, a process that was determined by my previous research into digitally visual material. Then, I looked at various and rather current examples of these occurrences – though, as already noted, even though I did select some based on temporal recentness, they are, regardless, already outdated since their surrounding spectacle has passed or will have passed by the time this dissertation is completed. But what is more important in examining these digitally visual occurrences is the larger patterns that emerge; namely, how each type of image – as well as those who take them, make them, and talk about them – performs the cultural work of enthrallment, due in part to the affordances of the ocularcentric internet. These digitally visual examples show how the everyday is turned into spectacle and how this process has become common sense.

But first, some semiotic clarity. When writing this portion of my dissertation the term so often used in this kind of research, “case,” didn’t seem applicable. Case carried
too much baggage and made me think of methodological triangulation. Example seemed too blasé. Instance seemed to describe something too fleeting. Therefore, the word I decided on when talking about this type of digitally visual material is occurrence. I like occurrence for several reasons: First, it encompasses the idea of instances, therefore indicating something larger at work. Two, it refers to the fact or frequency of something happening, therefore also indicating that something larger is at work in culture and therefore always happening. Occurrence refers to an instance that is active. Finally, I like the literal denotation of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary defines occurrence as “the fact of something existing or being found in a place or under a particular set of conditions.”28 The idea of an occurrence privileges the conditions that exists within and around it, akin to the Gramscian problematic of relations, visuality, hegemony, and common sense. By analyzing these types of digitally visual material as occurrences, the images are more firmly rooted within their social modalities. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relations that impact their creation, reception, and discourse.

The types of occurrences I identified are as follows: selfies; memes; Instagram; and screenshots. From there, I needed to narrow down these broad categories, as well as bring in associated practices that I also see at work. These processes relate to the way images move on the ocularcentric internet, and, in turn, offer substantial insight into a regime of enthrallment. Such practices include hashtagging – a popular way to spread images and information online – and screenshotting, the practice of taking anything, including traditional text, and turning it into an image. A third element I weighed was the idea of celebrity, particularly in its role in propagating spectacle. In this, I was
particularly interested in how celebrity Instagram accounts and the tiniest actions they take on them produce endless articles and think pieces. As I began weeks of weighing my options, I considered all of the things I outlined above to create a nuanced, representative map of the regime of enthrallment’s terrain. And, the occurrences that emerge, for the most part, are seemingly average instances, turned into spreadable media and spectacular grandeur by the underlying logic of the regime of enthrallment. They are discussed in depth below.

**The Selfie**

The first occurrence I examine in Chapter Three is the selfie – arguably, one of the most controversial, joked about, and even hated hallmarks of the contemporary internet. But it would be hard to talk about contemporary visuality on the internet without talking about such an image. There were myriad examples of selfie trends to choose from – people doing duckface; fingermouthing (the new trend in which girls pose with one finger around their lips, à la Kylie Jenner); extreme selfies; boring selfies. But the trend I decided on was one gaining traction and notoriety as I was writing my prospectus – divorce selfies. Divorce selfies seemed like an ideal occurrence of how something relatively common becomes highly documented via images in the regime of enthrallment and then spread, through various discourses, on the ocularcentric internet.

**Memes**

Once done considering traditional image/text relationships online, it was time to examine new ways in which words and images blend online, and this involved returning to what I’ve already described as the most obvious example of factory and showroom on the ocularcentric internet: the internet meme. I struggled over this one. I wanted to find
something that really encapsulated the outlandish, sometimes grotesque, and occasionally bombastic spirit of the internet that had been outlined by scholars before me, while also incorporating some of the associated practices I outlined above. What seemed to work in this chapter, with turning the everyday into spectacle vis-à-vis the ocularcentric internet, was the occurrence of Harambe. Harambe was a gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo who was shot and killed by zookeepers after a three-year-old boy fell into his penned enclosure in the spring of 2016. For reasons Chapter Four will explore, Harambe found eternal life on the internet in the form of a meme. I settled on this occurrence because Harambe epitomizes the current structure of feeling on the ocularcentric internet. The meme allows me to explore themes of misogyny, sexuality, and racism linked with how content becomes factory and showroom in the regime of enthrallment – as well as how racialized, sexualized, and gendered politics are associated with such a regime.

**Celebrity Instagram**

Chapter 5 moves on to an exploration of a different kind of image/text relationship, that of the Instagram account. I needed to discuss Instagram in this study, given that it is one of the most popular digital photo sharing platforms. I also decided to use this broad occurrence to focus on issues of celebrity and how the images celebrities post online become source material for news articles. Such a relationship demonstrates the symbiotic need between the press, discourse, and the ocularcentric internet. The celebrity to pick in this case seemed relatively straightforward from the beginning. I had to go with the publicly dubbed “Queen of Instagram,” Kim Kardashian herself. Anytime Kim Kardashian does anything on Instagram, her posts are taken, inserted into
news articles, and then takes are written for days. This seemed like an apt occurrence to
examine the relationship of celebrity in the regime of enthrallment.

**Screenshots**

Finally, Chapter 6 looks at screenshotting in tandem with seemingly “hard news”
to grapple with issues of tabloidization in the factory and showroom phenomenon. The
occurrence I decided to use to ground this chapter was the President of the United States
and his use of Twitter. Specifically, this chapter looks at his tweets – which are
considered official White House statements on policy\(^3\) and shows how they are
essentially “memed” through the process of screenshotting and bots on Twitter. This
chapter grapples with how nothing is exempt from being factory and showroom on the
ocularcentric internet, and this, in turn, subjugates so-called hard news to the common
sense of the regime of enthrallment.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlines this study’s methodological approach – that of discourse
analysis. It explains how discourse performs a social regulatory function to produce
common sense at a particular point in time, and the “common sense” in question in this
study aims to understand how the visuality of the internet – also referred to as the
ocularcentric internet – helps lead to the performance of cultural work called
enthrallment. Discourse analysis is the appropriate method for this study since this work
is predominantly concerned with power/knowledge, truth, common sense, visuality, and
hegemony. After discussing the ways discourse analysis works in this study, I distinguish
discourse analysis from textual analysis but do acknowledge the points where these two
methods overlap. Then, I discuss my procedure to this study and explain the concrete –
albeit non-linear – steps I took in analyzing the discourses in question. Finally, I specifically recount the occurrences I used to ground this study based on previous research into various types of digitally visual material. Those occurrences are as follows, with the specific instance in parentheses: selfies (the divorce selfie trend); memes (Harambe); Instagram (celebrity Instagram accounts and Kim Kardashian); and screenshots and tabloidization (President Trump tweets and “hard” news).
Notes on Chapter Two


Parallel to the selfie’s rise in popularity has been its rise in notoriety. Love them or hate them, it is almost certain individuals have at least taken them. But the twenty-first century’s new way of self-portraiture has been subject to immense scrutiny. While some scholars have argued that selfies are a symptom of the Dark Triad personality behaviors of narcissism, psychopathology, and Machiavellianism,¹ critical-cultural media scholars have largely reject pathologizing selfie-takers.² In their introduction to their selfie special issue of The International Journal of Communication, Terri Senft and Nancy Baym refute the idea of isolated selfie misuse coming to stand for an entire culture and instead argue for an approach to selfie studies that examines the selfie as indicative of changing cultural phenomena.³

But even though the selfie specifies change – change in technology, change in photographic practices, change in digital landscapes – how and why one may take a selfie has been subject to whopping amounts of backlash and opinions. The most oft-use criticism of the selfie is that it is the hallmark of a narcissistic culture and that teenage girls making duckface for the camera are destroying an otherwise civil society.⁴ The previous sentence may, at first, come across as hyperbolic, but it is in fact exactly indicative of the rhetoric that surrounds selfie-takers.⁵ Selfies and their associated
acccusations of narcissism have frequently been used by traditional media outlets, journalists, and even one’s friend’s aunt on Facebook to curate a narrative that selfies are ruining traditional social values. Concomitant to this idea selfies lead to social ruin is the idea there is something at work in them that challenges existing societal norms. In my approach to selfies herein, and in examining how they spread on the ocularcentric internet, I understand selfies as indicative of cultural hegemony. If the typical reaction to the selfie is that it causes social ruin, we must ask what in fact the selfie is ruining. It was my intention to ground this chapter in an occurrence that highlights the selfie’s capability as an image-making form that challenges pre-existing social norms. In this way, then, the recent spreadable selfie trend of divorce selfies seemed to be the most appropriate occurrence to demonstrate the selfie’s social power and role in a regime of enthrallment.

The divorce selfie combines two things that are often blamed for social ruin – divorce and selfies. As the blog Mommyish reports, “People who hate selfies and people who hate divorce are really going to hate the idea of a divorce selfie.” Initially, divorce selfie seems confounding – people are photographing themselves doing what? But divorce selfies are simply exactly what they sound like. According to BuzzFeed, in their article that seemingly spread almost all the selfie trend’s popularity in 2017, “divorce selfies are when a couple takes a selfie before, after, or during the divorce process – in honor of said divorce.” I make it a point to distinguish BuzzFeed as an impetus for the 2017 trend, because, in actuality, divorce selfies have been happening for years (a search of the hashtag #DivorceSelfie on Instagram yields results going back to 2014). But one of the most famous examples of divorce selfies came from 2015, when a Canadian woman named Shannon Neuman and her husband, Chris, signed their divorce papers at the
courthouse in Calgary, Alberta. On their way out, they snapped a selfie, which Shannon posted to Facebook with the following caption:

Here's Chris Neuman and I yesterday after filing for divorce! But we're smiling?! Yep, we're kooky like that. Are we smiling because the partner we chose for forever turned out not to be the forever partner we needed? Of course not. We're smiling because we have done something extraordinary (we think anyway!) We have respectfully, thoughtfully and honourably ended our marriage in a way that will allow us to go forward as parenting partners for our children, the perfect reason that this always WAS meant to be, so they will never have to choose. They'll never have to wonder which side of the auditorium to run to after their Christmas concert or spring play, because we'll be sitting together. They won't have to struggle with their own wedding planning because we'll be sitting on the same side of the aisle - THEIR side.8

To date, Shannon’s post has been shared over 37,000 times.9 And while her popular post is from 2015, two years before the giant divorce selfie trend in 2017, the way the post spread through social media and the press indicates a particular cultural moment at work. The divorce selfie specifically emphasizes a moment of transition and of changing beliefs and perceptions. It underscores a clash between the extraordinary and the unremarkable, in that divorce-as-a-life-event may still be a big moment within one’s life, but cultural perceptions of divorce are becoming more and more naturalized. And, in posting about one’s divorce on social media, vis-à-vis the selfie, the unremarkable and the extraordinary merge. What may be a big deal within one’s own life story is presented in such a way that depicts it as seemingly ordinary in the public sphere. It acknowledges
changing public perceptions and cultural shifts. Divorce is no longer hidden, and it is no longer just out in the public sphere – it is out there in a positive way.

This chapter explores how divorce selfies exist at the nexus of ordinary and extraordinary, normalization and spectacle. Furthermore, I explore how those who take divorce selfies, post them, or even discuss them, perform the cultural work of enthrallment. Trends such as the divorce selfie are inherently variable since individuals want to participate in larger cultural and popular practices, and they can do so by putting their own spin on it. In doing so, they intrinsically bring their own unique experience to the practice since it is them doing it, and not someone else. Therefore, selfies are not necessarily what I have been referring to as “factory and showroom,” but rather the idea of selfies as a trend is. By this, I mean trends are variable and exist as factory and showroom, since they are a unifying undercurrent that cuts through a cultural moment. People who participate in said trends put their own unique spin on them, thus allowing the trend to exist in an infinite number of possible iterations. The trend stays the same just enough so that all image iterations can be related back to each other, but each iteration also puts its own twist on the larger theme. Divorce selfies and selfie-takers offer insight into a regime of enthrallment, and how in documenting everything, even the things we seemingly would not want documented, the hegemony of a regime of enthrallment shines through. The hegemony of visuality, in turn, challenges another type of hegemony – divorce is shameful.

This chapter moves in three parts. First, I discuss how the performativity at work in divorce selfies helps challenge preexisting ideas of how people act online. This section highlights the performative nature at work in the ocularcentric internet’s visuality and
takes it one step further to discuss the ways enthrallment is performative work. Second, I examine the hegemonic function of the divorce selfie trend and how it upholds enthrallment-as-hegemony while simultaneously challenging divorce-and-other-institutions-as-hegemony. Finally, I discuss the specific role of the media organization BuzzFeed in curating divorce selfies as trend, and I demonstrate how the site plays a pivotal role in amplifying the regime of enthrallment.

**Performativity**

I could not analyze divorce selfies without discussing the performative nature of social media. Posts to Facebook and Instagram often only show snippets from the best moments of people’s lives, and individuals curate online presences that reflect them at their best. Given the highly performative nature of selfies and social media, many comments posted to divorce selfies and to posts about divorce selfies were filled with shock and confusion. Many were baffled to see an oft-perceived negative and private event highlighted in such a way. Divorce selfies simultaneously perform specific events and actions on the ocularcentric internet, but they challenge existing notions of performativity at the same time. Specifically, divorce selfies subvert notions of online performativity in that typically, “bad” events are not usually posted to social media. As shown in the two examples below, divorce selfies often show happy (ex) couples smiling and commemorating their split in an amicable way.
Figure 3.1: Divorce as more exciting than a wedding
For the couple in Figure 1, taking and posting a divorce selfie appears like a natural way to end things – they celebrated their wedding day, so why not celebrate their divorce? In Figure 2, the couple acknowledges their past together in a wistful yet overtly positive way while also showing that divorce selfies are not just for heteronormative conceptions of marriage. Together, Figures 1 and 2 indicate two important themes that emerged when I began analyzing divorce selfies: First, divorce can be treated as another milestone in life, like marriage or an engagement, and two, it is important to the couples to commemorate the past that brought them to this moment, even if it was not the moment they had wished for.

For decades, divorce has typically been considered a life event that is not acceptable to talk about in certain company. It happens, of course, and at one point, it
even happened to one out of every two married couples.\textsuperscript{13} Though in recent years, divorce rates have actually declined, and another trend running parallel to this has been the performance of divorce on social media. According to the Canadian site \textit{Global News}, divorce selfies acknowledge one of the oldest truths about social media – we enjoy performing \textit{everything}. They write:

\begin{quote}
It seems like every time you scroll through your social media feed, people are posting photos that celebrate life’s major milestones, like engagement announcements, pregnancy reveals, and wedding day, “I dos.” Now, we’re adding divorce selfies to the mix because, well, it too is a big life event that couple want to honour or acknowledge in some way.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

In performing divorce online, individuals change the narrative surrounding this typically negatively perceived life event. For these couples, and for those writing about them, divorce no longer equals failure. Even though they signify termination, divorce selfies indicate the end of a marriage does not have to be shunned. The happy years that came before the moment can still be honored. One writer at \textit{Scary Mommy} begins her take on divorce selfies by arguing, “every major life event deserves a hashtag – even a divorce.”\textsuperscript{15}

The divorce selfie has become the polar opposite of the highly coveted, cleverly thought out, and extremely pithy wedding hashtag – a hashtag that couples use, and encourage their guests to use, when getting married, so they can go back and find their photos online later (examples from weddings I have personally attended: #BrinkerWedding; #TheLoveBurgs; #LoveAndBeLarried).

But the hashtag #DivorceSelfie is seemingly the polar opposite of the wedding hashtag in almost every way (signifying an end as opposed to a beginning; a seemingly
negative event as opposed to a positive one). The wedding hashtag’s function makes logistical sense – it is an easy way to gather all the photos from one’s day in a pithy, collective way. By clicking on the hashtag, all the photos from their events are at their fingertips. But a divorce selfie, and its associated hashtag, do not perform the same function. Instead, divorce selfies speak to a larger, more collective moment and trend. It is not meant to group multiple photos from a singular occasion together; rather, it is meant to group multiple occasions together in singularity and solidarity. Through such tents on the grand scale of a hashtag, cultural perceptions shift – the hashtag becomes the ground on which social transformations are worked. The factory and showroom logic of the ocularcentric internet shines through when one takes a divorce selfie and puts their own unique spin on it. These individuals are presenting their personal experience with their equally personal twist and, in doing so, normalize perceptions of divorce by literally putting faces on the phenomenon. The ocularcentric internet logic of factory and showroom thus has a naturalization power since sometimes, in continuous highlighting of the extraordinary, things can become ordinary. Through this variability, and through the associated practice of divorce selfies, it is also indicated that all major life events should be honored, even the ones we have typically been socialized to avoid.

As such, divorce selfies indicate our current prevailing visuality logic. An understanding of traditional life milestones helps me elaborate this point. Engagements, marriages, and births are typically highly photographed events. However, divorce, something that was happening frequently for decades, remained commonplace but undocumented. Divorce was largely hidden from public life, but when it did appear, it was discussed and viewed negatively, as a tragedy. This is unsurprising when considering
the different ideologies these types of milestones adhere to – or challenge. Engagements, marriages, and births represent one ideology of common sense (getting married and having kids is the “natural” order of things, and what one is “supposed” to do as they get older), and divorce goes against said ideology. There was a reason talk about divorce was kept quiet; such talk was a discursive practice that acknowledged how divorce was not adhering to the ideological status quo. In this way, traditional life milestones and their associated images and practices represent Douglas Kellner’s definition of spectacle. As stated in Chapter One, Kellner defines spectacle as “those phenomena of culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles.” These happy, traditional, and traditionally-documented life events such as marriage adhere to Kellner’s conception of spectacle – individuals partake in events that embody society’s values, and they “do what they are supposed to do,” ideologically speaking. Engagements, marriages, and births are social media events in the sense that they are highly photographed and highly visible, and in being this visible, they promote a specific ideology to others: This is what you are supposed to do in our society.

Divorce selfies, however, are more in line with my previously discussed definition of enthrallment. As presented in Chapter One, I argued that the regime of enthrallment is Kellner’s conception of spectacle taken to the next level in which everything, not just the rarities, is made to mean extraordinary. The regime of enthrallment is made up of everyday occurrences, elevated to the level of spectacle. Divorce selfies may not be what we consider when we think of the everyday, but as previously discussed, divorce has been a fairly common occurrence in Western culture
that has not been allowed to be visible in a positive light – until now. Akin to the everyday, divorce is a terrain where “worlds...coalesce, compete, and constellate.” Divorce may not be as quotidian as some of the other occurrences discussed in this study, but, it is grouped in with the everyday because it is an oft-overlooked, even if not particularly desirable, practice. It too is an arena where the transformations are worked. Through the process of factory and showroom, divorce selfies take a relatively common occurrence in culture and elevate it to the same highly visible level of extravaganza typically found in highly visible events, such as marriages, engagements, or births.

Similar to the discourse surrounding marriage celebrating the journey that brought the couple together, those who take divorce selfies commend the same stories. According to The Washington Post, “The couples [in divorce selfies] are always ecstatically, performatively happy. They’re optimistic about the future, and celebratory about the past (A frequent, recurring caption: ‘Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.’)" For the couples taking these images, they perform a certain reverence to the marriage they had. In analyzing the divorce selfie as indicative of shifting cultural practices surrounding divorce, it is very important for me to note that in my detailed search of the Instagram and Facebook hashtag, I did not encounter a single selfie that was critical of the marriage or the partner. All of them were respectful and celebrate the lives had together. It is worth remembering, however, what Scary Mommy also reports: “Of course, Instagram is notorious for showing only snapshots of people at their best and happiest, so it’s safe to assume that there were probably some not-so-smiley moments leading to these photos.” Yes, of course this is true – these couples would not be getting divorced if everything had gone well for them. Divorce selfies perform divorce as a
reverent, wistful, and positive occasion, but there is an inherent undertone that recognizes how not perfect things were leading to the selfie-taking moment. Such a focus on imperfection, be it implicit or explicit, is typically antithetical to social media’s performativity. This may be what led one writer at The Blemish to say, in regard to divorce selfies, “I’m really glad the era of using social media to promote some fake perfect version of your life is over.”20 His words are a bit hyperbolic, since someone, somewhere, will always use social media to present a curated version of their life, but at least when it comes to divorce selfies, it is becoming okay to not live the perfect life on social media. This move beyond perfection indicates some larger cultural shift at work, and it is such hegemony I turn to in the next section.

**New Narratives and Battlegrounds of Hegemonies**

Divorce selfies caused quite a media stir. However, across the press, the tone used to describe this selfie trend was not that of a moral panic, like the type other types of controversial selfies have caused, but one of laudation. The discourse surrounding this image phenomenon typically praised the selfie-takers for ending their marriages in such mature, amicable ways. This language is the opposite of the words we have come to expect surround selfies (that they are immature and narcissistic21) and not what we have come to expect surrounding divorce (that it is a tragic event or a failure of some sorts). There are definitely changes at work here – changes in language surrounding selfies and selfie-takers, and changes in how we view not just the end of marriage, but marriage as an institution.

Stuart Hall has famously written that “popular culture is the ground on which the transformations are worked.”22 Popular culture matters for many reasons, chief among
them that it constructs an active arena in which social consent and resistance are negotiated. In examining divorce selfies as such a social field, and in analyzing the discourse that swirls around said field, what becomes apparent is that there is something greater at work in divorce selfies than just amicable ends to marriages. Divorce selfies, their social modalities, and the discourse that surrounds them indicate shifting cultural norms regarding the institution of marriage. *The Daily Buzz* reports that “the thing that used to get people excommunicated from the Church is now the hip hashtag for divorcees,”23 and the sentiment in that discourse indicates a seismic shift in the common sense surrounding the end of marriages. What used to be an unspeakable event in certain (particularly religious) circles was one of the top trending hashtags on Instagram in summer of 2017.

What begins to emerge is that the institution of marriage is no longer viewed in the same way. *The Washington Post* starts its coverage of the divorce selfie trend with a rather stark headline: “On the viral rise of divorce selfies (and the death of traditional marriage).”24 But the article is more forgiving of this trend than the title lets on. It becomes clear that divorce selfies did not kill traditional marriage, but rather, they are symptoms of a time in which people begin to view marriage differently. *The Washington Post* reporter elaborates, “Er…what is going on here? This isn’t at all the type of dialogue we expect around divorce, particularly since we’ve been taught that marriage is the only viable type of adult relationships or family structure.”25 Because marriage was once treated as the only “right” course of action (even though mixed race couples and gay and lesbian couples were denied access to this “right” course for a long, long time), anything that existed outside of that life path was viewed as deviant. Growing up, falling in love,
and getting married was the common sense *du jour*, but, now, divorce selfies indicate that this may no longer be the case.

At the root of the divorce selfie and its surrounding discursive formation is the idea that social institutions like marriage are not stable, fixed, or permanent. Large swaths of individuals have begun to rebuke some institutions’ commanding influences in everyday life. *The Washington Post* writes, regarding those who take divorce selfies, “in the process, of course, they’re reimagining what marriage is, as well: a partnership that, counter to decades of Western thought, is not necessarily all-important, all-fulfilling, or immutable.”

This, in conjunction with turning the everyday into spectacle, indicates that individuals, in documenting their lives, embrace a strong ownership of their own circumstances. This is the factory and showroom of their own life experiences – taking something “traditional” like marriage or divorce and putting their own narrative spin on it. This demonstrates the power of factory and showroom on a large scale – variability is not just the prevailing logic of the ocularcentric internet, but it is also the dominant structure of feeling, spreading, and making in culture, writ large, under a regime of enthrallment.

Though with any kind of social change like divorce selfies and the narratives they challenge, there comes backlash. As previously indicated, most of the discourse surrounding divorce selfies was laudatory, but there were a few detractors. The blog *Mommyish* references a particularly scathing set of comments on an article about divorce selfies from *The Daily Mail* in which individuals seemed highly critical of the practice. Commenters wrote, “You have to figure those who are really full of themselves would want to publicize a failure,” and “No divorce has a happy face. The tension and anger are
there.” But others wrote, “that’s awesome lol” and “I cried in my divorce…I’m glad they can smile.” In regard to these comments, *Mommyish* reports that “in spite of the conniption fits the #DivorceSelfie hashtag is giving the commenters over at *The Daily Mail* over the ‘sanctity of marriage,’ divorce selfies are actually pretty great, too.”

It makes sense that the backlash over divorce selfies has the once-perceived paramountcy of marriage as its crux. Marriage, and its associated social status, have long been considered common sense and the thing you just *do* at a certain age. Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea have pointed out that when it comes to common sense, it “tends to be socially conservative, leaning towards tradition,” so it makes sense that divorce selfies are a particularly volatile terrain on which hegemonic battles for marriage and institutions are fought.

*Mommyish*, and these aforementioned comments, demonstrate an important point regarding not just divorce selfies as a hegemony-challenging trend, but also regarding images on the ocularcentric internet in general: Comments play an important role in the spread of a trend. Comments are an important source of discourse that help to formulate the social modality of an image, and given the algorithmic structure of many social media sites, when one comments (or likes) an image, it often directs that individual’s social network members to see something they may not have otherwise seen. While a full analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of ocularcentric internet comments and comments as discourse in a regime of enthrallment is outside the scope of this project (this study would have a gargantuan amount of material, otherwise), it is still worth acknowledging the role comments play in spreading an image online. Particularly in regard to narrative-challenging images like divorce selfies, the comments section quite
literally comes to represent “the ground on which the transformations are worked” because one can find a mix of laudation and criticism of shifting cultural perceptions.

Within these shifting cultural perceptions, it becomes apparent that there is a stark age distinction at work. In the images I searched on Instagram and Facebook, most individuals seemed to be millennials, though there was the occasional Gen-X couple in there. This is reflected in press discourse as well. The digital news site Attn: interviewed one divorce selfie-taker, who reported from his own experience that:

If you could look at my Facebook page, you would see a clear demarcation in the generations…Everyone around mine and [my ex-wife’s] age is posting positive, supportive messages along the lines of “You guys are a shining example of how to do divorce right.” Whereas the older generation is all about “Thoughts, prayers, and support in this difficult time.”

Sentiment, and shifting hegemonies, are divided along an aged line of demarcation. Millennials are the early adopters challenging and rebuking institutions perceived total authority. The man interviewed in Attn:’s article elaborates on his experience, “I think millennials are recognizing divorce for what it actually is…It’s a contract that surrounds a romantic relationship. People no longer feel like if they get divorced their life is a failure.” Because millennials have a tendency to view institutions as less stable and finite than earlier generations, they are more likely to view the ending of an institution, like marriage, as just another step within life’s journey and not as something catastrophic.

In fact, the now-outdated but once-often-quoted statistic of 50% of marriages ending in divorce would have belonged to the millennials’ parents – thus making this generation more understanding of the realities of what happens in a divorce.
This age-related discourse reflects larger cultural trends and heated social conversations regarding the millennial generation. Bloomberg writes that “Young Americans are killing marriage,” in a report that reveals “in 1980, two-thirds of 25- to 34-year-olds were already married. One in eight had already been married and divorced. In 2015, just two in five millennials were married, and only 7 percent had been divorced.”

Time compounds this by reporting that divorce rates are actually at a 40-year low. Therefore, millennials are not killing marriage – they may actually be saving the so-called sanctity of it by waiting to make sure they get it right. To say millennials are killing marriage is actually a seemingly unfounded, hyperbolic claim. They are killing an older, socially constructed, institution-as-final, ideological version of marriage – but they’re embracing a different common sense version that views it as fluid, flexible, and, as one divorce selfie-taker in Attn: suggests, more practical.

Finally, it is important to note that divorce selfies may be symptomatic of changing ideas of marriage as an institution, but even those changing ideas of marriage indicate shifting ideas of institutions on a broader scale. Articles decreeing that millennials are in the process of killing something are commonplace, and they are quite popular with journalists and audiences alike. In addition to killing marriage, Mashable reports that millennials are also wanted for the murders of:

The beer industry, J. Crew, department stores, motorcycles, diamonds, golf, bar soap, college football, lunch, McDonalds, vacations, napkins, cars, crowdfunding, wine, wine corks, the Toyota Scion, fabric softener, the McWrap, handshakes, Canadian tourism, light yogurt, gambling, hotels, relationships, marmalade, running, cereal, the anti-aging industry, Buffalo Wild Wings, focus groups, travel
marketing, working, credit, trees, the American Dream, America, democracy in general, Home Depot, self-pity, the 2016 presidential election, consumerism, suits, dinner dates, movies, sex, gyms, serendipity, loyalty programs, loyalty in general, taking risks, patriotism, cruises, Applebee’s, fashion, hangout sitcoms, the Big Mac, stilettos, romance, the 9-to-5 workday, the NFL, Gen X’s retirement, the Olympics, brunch, the European Union, baby names, banks, and oil.36

*Mashable* conveniently links each one of these entities and institutions to the news article issuing the warrant for a millennials’ arrest. My intent in providing this massive list is not to be flippant, but rather, to show there is a larger cultural shift and conversation occurring around once seemingly taken-for-granted concepts, items, and institutions. Furthermore, the items in this block quote show that the millennial generation has a problem with institutions in general, not just marriage. They are not just challenging marriage as a socially constructed, permanent institution – they are challenging the permanence of all institutions. Additionally, in saying millennials have “killed” marriage, or any one of the topics on that list, journalists give society a villain in their ideological wars.

Ultimately, this vast laundry list of institutions, objects, and ideas that millennials are alleged to have killed indicates something much larger at work – something that is also indicated by divorce selfies. The cultural practice of divorce selfies, and the cultural work that goes into rebuking powerful institutions, occurs on a terrain where resistances and negotiations occur. This is shown through the tension between press discourse having a tone of laudation when it comes to divorce selfies yet popular discourse also decreeing millennials are killing marriage and institutions. There is a give-and-take at work, and, as
previously mentioned, divorce selfies signify a moment of transition. The millennial view of marriage is not yet common sense, writ large – and may not ever be – but as one generation changes its views on such institutions, some support the change while others resist it. It appears that millennials still do fully support the sanctity of marriage, though they support said sanctity in different and new ways. What they no longer support is the all-encompassing, pervasive, and powerful sanctity of institutions. However, these shifting cultural practices exist on a spectrum, and not just as bipolar opposites. Rather, millennials are recognizing institutions for what they really are – social constructs that perpetuate specific ideologies and views of common sense in everyday life.

**Divorce Selfies as Enthrallment**

After discussing how divorce selfies invoke and challenge ideas of social performativity, and how they are symptomatic of larger hegemonic discussions, I would now like to bring these elements together to discuss how they function as enthrallment. So far, in this chapter, I have shown how divorce selfies are suggestive of larger cultural and institutional transformations that include, but are certainly not limited to, marriage. This is not to say that enthrallment is the sole cause of shifting attitudes regarding institutions, but rather, the cultural work of enthrallment impacts institutions, just like institutions have some implications for enthrallment.

The online magazine *Bored Panda* reports, regarding divorce selfies, that they “might just change the way people view ending marriages.” Once again citing Martin Jay, and his argument for the importance of ocular metaphors in Western thought, it is no accident that the word “view” is used in this context. Visuality functions as a type of hegemony and common sense that focuses on the visual, as well as images and their
discursive determinations. These three tenets help us understand how visuality manifests in daily life. The visuality of divorce selfies is one that privileges the turn towards near-constant entertainment that has been outlined in this study so far, but it also indicates the important role of the visual in documenting life events. Divorce selfies, and their visuality, take a rather common life occurrence and shine new light on it. The visuality of the divorce selfie presents the end of one’s marriage as positive, which is antithetical to how people have been socialized to view divorce. It repackages divorce in a way that challenges institutions, even though some individuals are not fully on board with the idea of changing perceptions of divorce.

However, there is a critical dialectic at work in enthrallment that comes through when we analyze divorce selfies, and that is how malleable enthrallment is. Enthrallment is multifaceted and multilayered. It can simultaneously uphold one hegemony while challenging another. In this case, enthrallment upholds the heightened visuality of near-constant entertainment that helps constitute it, while simultaneously challenging the hegemony of marriage as an institution. Enthrallment is never just about one hegemony. It is about hegemonies, because multiple social shifts can occur in this cultural work at the same time.

Additionally, because of the ocularcentric internet, it is noteworthy that these were divorce selfies and not merely text-only posts. The image is crucial to understanding the divorce selfie’s visuality, and it contributes to a regime of enthrallment. Attaching people to these tales of divorce is an important component of elevating spectacle to the level of the everyday. Paul Frosh has argued that to understand the selfie, we have to understand it in terms of its kinesthetic sociability – that is, the selfie “deploys both the
index as trace and as dexus to foreground the relationship between the image and its producer because its producer and referent are identical. It says not only ‘see this, here, now,’ but also ‘see me showing you me’.”39 Because of the selfie’s ability to not only foreground the individual experience but highlight the role of the taker within said experience, it functions as a way of highlighting the circumstances of one’s own life. These circumstances, for the most part, are wholly average and not that extraordinary. Part of enthrallment, then, is see me showing you my daily life. See me showing you my own spectacle. See me turning my own everyday experiences into something I think is extraordinary.

Within a regime of enthrallment and the ocularcentric internet, there is a tendency to draw value and meaning to things that have typically not commanded such value and meaning.40 There is a tendency to find the things that have not been typically discussed, and such a thing, as discussed in this chapter, is divorce. To help understand how this focus came to be, it is crucial to look at the imbrication of culture and technology. Such an intertwined relationship plays a key role in the regime of enthrallment, as the ocularcentric internet in and of itself relies on the culture/technology dialectic to propagate a certain visuality. The divorce selfie – and selfie technologies – are not exceptions to this dialogic relationship. José Van Dijck writes that, “digitization is not the cause of [changes in photography]; instead, the tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience.”41 Divorce selfies did not happen because of the front-facing camera or selfie sticks, but those technologies certainly did make taking a selfie easier. Regardless, the affordances of digital technologies have
allowed for an intensification of daily experience, which includes more frequent
documentation, and documentation of things that previously had not been documented.
And, in documenting such things or events, one decrees they are worth looking at, which
in turn commands value and new meanings. When one intensifies their daily experience
on social media, they might be intensifying something extravagant, or, more likely, they
intensify something quotidian or overlooked.

In documenting such average or unobserved things, one elevates the occurrence to
the level of spectacle because they deem it as worth commanding attention and views.
This has implications for one simply snapping a photo of their lunch, and therefore
turning their daily dining experience into a star-studded extravaganza. Though it is
important to note that on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – and other platforms where
one may post their average-turned-extraordinary experience – there are also actual social
stars, from Taylor Swift to Kim Kardashian to Neil Degrasse Tyson. I will discuss the
role of celebrity in a regime of enthrallment and on the ocularcentric internet more in
Chapter Five, but it is worth mentioning here. By virtue of being famous, any miniscule,
mundane thing a celebrity posts on the ocularcentric is viewed as extraordinary. When a
similar logic extends to other, non-famous individuals, they act as micro-celebrities
within their own lives (once again, micro-celebrity will be discussed more in-depth in
Chapter Five). As stated in Chapter One, ordinary and extraordinary may be in the eye of
the beholder, but it is also a dialectic in which the poster can determine the level of
remarkability.
The BuzzFeed Reverberation

The last topic I want to discuss in this chapter does not directly relate to divorce selfies, but to how trends like them spread online. In analyzing the discourse surrounding divorce selfies, I noticed that the articles found were from either 2015 or 2017. This peaked my interest, so I followed the trail to see what was happening here. And what I found was that the trend of divorce selfies commanded a decent amount of attention in 2015, after Shannon Neumann’s post spread throughout the internet. But in 2017, BuzzFeed picked up the now-cold story and drew a much more massive amount of attention to the trend. In examining how the ocularcentric internet assists in propagating a regime of enthrallment, I was beginning to arrive at the notion that BuzzFeed played a crucial role in augmenting the internet’s visuality logic. Additionally, BuzzFeed seems to privilege content that is highly visual and thus relates to the heightened role the visual has in digital cultures. This suggests BuzzFeed exists in a dialogic, dialectical relationship with the ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment. In this, BuzzFeed helps spread the visuality logic of the ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment, and the ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment help BuzzFeed accomplish its mission.

But before moving forward, I want to unpack what BuzzFeed is. BuzzFeed is an American internet media company that focuses on social news, entertainment, and all things digital. It was founded in 2006 as a social think tank, in which individuals wanted to culturally examine how things “went viral” (their term; I still prefer spreadable. In this section, I will be citing quotes that refer to “going viral,” but I am only using it because it is the word the other writers choose to use). In the beginning, BuzzFeed focused on
content that had already “gone viral” to understand how and why such processes happened. They then sought to generate content that was similar in terms of processes and popularity (in the early days of the internet, these were often cute and funny pictures of cats – lots of cats). They tapped into the logic of the ocularcentric internet early on, and by being on the forefront of understanding how social processes work in digital cultures, they were able to become an online powerhouse. Today, *BuzzFeed* is now an international media giant that no longer just provides cute and funny pictures of cats. *BuzzFeed* now works on long-form journalism, investigative reporting, Hollywood gossip, technology, global media, and, still, cute and funny pictures of cats. *BuzzFeed* is a behemoth that cannot be ignored when analyzing culture and, more specifically, shifting journalistic practices. *Growth Hackers* writes:

> With deep insights into what makes people want to share, supplemented by a culture of data and testing and a strategy that distributes *BuzzFeed’s* content everywhere, its global audience has now grown to greater than 200+ million [unique visitors] per month with over 6 billion global content views.

*BuzzFeed* has its finger on the pulse of what people on the internet want and what makes content spread. When I was searching for information to ground this section, the number of articles I found that discussed “advice from *BuzzFeed*” on how to make content “go viral” was staggering. It seems that everyone wants insight from *BuzzFeed*, perhaps because it is “the most important news organization in the world.” While a study on how *BuzzFeed* went from cultural think tank to one of the most important media companies in the world is outside the scope of this dissertation, I do want to focus on the role *BuzzFeed* plays as a content amplifier on the ocularcentric internet. And while
divorce selfies are a great example, nothing quite demonstrates *BuzzFeed’s* role as amplifier, and their deep understanding of internet logic, like The Dress.

**The Dress.** The Dress was a photograph that was massively spread across the internet in the spring of 2015, when viewers passionately disagreed over the colors of the dress featured in said image. The photograph, pictured below, originated on Tumblr and was picked up *BuzzFeed*, who asked their viewers one question: Do you see white and gold, or blue and black?

![Figure 3.3: The Dress](image)

While there was actual anatomical reasoning for why people saw the color scheme they saw, #TeamWhiteAndGold and #TeamBlueAndBlack dominated digital cultures for weeks. Celebrities, politicians, and everyday folks all weighed in. Presently, *BuzzFeed’s* The Dress post has over 37 million unique views, and nothing encapsulates the logic of *BuzzFeed* – and, I argue, by extension, the logic of the ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment – like this occurrence.
The Dress demonstrates the fundamental logic of *BuzzFeed* as a media organization – create content people want to share, though “create” is a loose term here. As *Growth Hackers* reports, The Dress “wasn’t even original content. A *BuzzFeed* staffer essentially reposted something happening on Tumblr.”*46* *BuzzFeed*’s creation strategy runs parallel to the strategy of simply capturing other content online, as the global media giant often just “aggregates the things that are trending on various other social media platforms for *other* platforms, which exposes Facebook-only audiences to say, entertaining Tumblr posts they might have never seen. (emphasis in original)”*47* Facebook is largely considered to be the gatekeeper for all other media organizations in the world*48*, and to that extent, *BuzzFeed*’s strategic use of Facebook (and Facebook audiences) to spread their content means they are the de facto world’s media amplifier.

**Reverberation.** Sharing is key to how *BuzzFeed* remains so successful and so popular. The site “capitalizes on the distribution platforms that people…use to connect with one another.”*49* Additionally, “*BuzzFeed* has been clear about its strategy: Publish items that people want to share on social media. It has called Facebook the ‘new front page’ for the internet.”*50* While Reddit may protest that moniker, what is important to understand here is that *BuzzFeed* works by amplifying content. To do this, they mine the ocularcentric internet for popular things on other websites, and then use Facebook (among other major social media distribution platforms) to share them. This is exactly what happened with divorce selfies and why there is a time lapse in the articles I found. The divorce selfie trend really began in 2015, but it was only when *BuzzFeed* picked the story up in 2017 that the trend was amplified and new value and meaning were drawn to it.
BuzzFeed plays a crucial role in the regime of enthrallment through what I call the BuzzFeed Reverberation. By drawing on a deep understanding of the way the ocularcentric internet functions, once something is picked up by the media powerhouse it will be amplified ten-fold, thus increasing its chances of spreading. I refer to this process as reverberation because such a term gets at the prolonged nature and continuing implication of the way content moves in digital cultures, contingent upon BuzzFeed. The content being aggregated by BuzzFeed is not the final step in its spreadable journey, but rather, a giant leap that propels it onto an international stage. From there, the content and its implications spread out like ripples in a pond. BuzzFeed can do this, and play such a pivotal role in our present media landscape, because the site has a deep understanding of internet logic, including visuality and the internet’s ocularcentrism. BuzzFeed’s tendency to privilege highly visual content and the new role of heightened visuality on the internet can be found in both occurrences discussed in this chapter – divorce selfies and The Dress. The Atlantic suggests that “BuzzFeed is the most influential news organization in America today because the internet is the most influential medium – and, in some crucial ways, BuzzFeed demonstrates an understanding of that medium better than anybody else.”51 By tapping into this logic, BuzzFeed reifies its role as a news and popular culture giant.

Neiman Lab points out, specifically in regard to The Dress, but more broadly in regard to BuzzFeed’s focus on digital cultures’ visuality, “what’s interesting is how the existence and popularity of this post…was made possible by BuzzFeed’s embrace of internet assumptions.”52 This focus on the ocularcentric internet’s logic is paramount to BuzzFeed’s success, since the company “incentivizes its writers to fully embrace internet
assumptions, and just as importantly, [sic] disincentivizes pure sensationalism.” At first, this may seem inaccurate since most of what is amplified by and spread through BuzzFeed becomes sensational. But that is what is paramount to BuzzFeed’s reverberation – it is more about process than final product. Once something is picked up by BuzzFeed, it is in the process of being turned from wholly average into spectacle. As such, BuzzFeed simultaneously epitomizes and plays a central role in buttressing a regime of enthrallment since its content model now is the visuality of our present culture. BuzzFeed rose to immense success because it took mundane, everyday things and amplified them into spectacle. This is the case with divorce selfies and The Dress, since spreadable media privileges everyday occurrences and things that have typically not commanded much value. BuzzFeed embraces such a logic of the everyday, and in doing so, helps propagate a regime of enthrallment that does the same.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the spreadable trend of divorce selfies. First, I discussed the history of the selfie as a cultural touchstone and how it has been largely critiqued. Second, after laying this foundation, I gave some brief background of the divorce selfie trend, defining the parameters of what it is and how it is a way for couples who are in the process of getting divorced to document their experience. Third, I analyzed these selfies and the discourse that surrounds them, which places the images within their social modalities. Performativity emerged as a key theme in not only this selfie trend but how selfies function in a regime of enthrallment. Social media has been critiqued for only showing the happiest moments of people’s lives, but given their content, divorce selfies challenge that.
Fourth, I discussed how divorce selfies are battlegrounds for competing and shifting hegemonies, as they exist within a cultural moment that often accuses the millennial generation for killing institutions. Divorce selfies indicate that many people are coming to view institutions for what they actually are — not stable, and as socially constructed. After this, I discussed, in summation, how divorce selfies fit into a regime of enthrallment, and how enthrallment is a multifaceted concept. By this, I mean the work of enthrallment can uphold one hegemony (the visuality of the ocularcentric internet) by simultaneously challenging another (the stability of institutions). Lastly, I discuss BuzzFeed’s role in amplifying and reverberating spreadable content through the ocularcentric internet. This leads to an understanding of how the global news giant succeeds because it has a deep understanding of internet assumptions, including the visuality that underscores our present moment.
Notes on Chapter Three


17 ROBERTS


42 Miltner, K. (2014). 'There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats': The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme. *First Monday, 19*(8).


CHAPTER 4

“BECAUSE HIS LIFE MATTERED”: MEMES, RACE, AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE REGIME OF ENTHRALLMENT

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which the cultural work enthrallment occurs, and I also suggested that enthrallment is a multifaceted concept: it simultaneously upholds and challenges various hegemonies. But enthrallment is multidimensional in other ways as well, specifically when we begin to look at it through the lens of intersectionality. By applying intersectionality – the theory and practice that states human aspects do not exist in isolation but have complex and interwoven relationships – to enthrallment, this cultural work emerges as far from perfect. Problematic elements emerge, such as how issues of race and racism manifest within a regime of enthrallment. To press at the theoretical margins of the precarious, detrimental, and unfavorable parts of enthrallment means acknowledging that this cultural work is rooted in the lived experiences of individuals, and lived experiences are not always wholly positive. Additionally, just like with many facets of contemporary culture, such experiences are not immune from various social “isms.” Such “isms,” in turn, spread and reify social inequalities. In order to understand how such power imbalances and disparities spread on the ocularcentric internet and within a regime of enthrallment, I ground this chapter in the occurrence of 2016’s meme of the year, as determined by Google searches.¹ That meme is Harambe.
To begin to understand the baffling case of Harambe, it is worth taking a look at this passage from *Texas Monthly*:

If you’re a normal, well-adjusted human being, you might vaguely remember Harambe, the endangered gorilla who was fatally shot by zookeepers at a Cincinnati zoo after a young boy fell into his exhibition pen back in May [of 2016]. If you’re a Weird Internet Person, then you have probably not stopped thinking about Harambe since his death.²

I, the author of the present study, have made a scholarly career out of being a Weird Internet Person, so I too have never stopped thinking about Harambe. Like *Texas Monthly* reports, Harambe was just that: a seventeen-year-old endangered gorilla who was shot and killed after a three-year-old boy slipped through a fence and fell into the penned enclosure. To save the boy, zookeepers elected to shoot and kill rather than use a tranquilizer, since they feared the tranquilizer would only antagonize the gorilla before the sedative took full effect.

The public outcry and outrage at Harambe’s death was enormous. A Facebook group called “Justice for Harambe” began and gathered more than 7,500 likes in more than a day. An online petition circulated, asking state legislators to hold zoo visitors legally responsible if their actions contribute to harm or death of an endangered animal. Outside of the zoo, and across America, individuals held candlelight vigils for the gorilla. Celebrities weighed in, and their reactions were quite visceral: Comedian Ricky Gervais commented “it seems that gorillas make better parents than some people,” and Queen guitarist Brian May tweeted, “Why was this Gorilla murdered? No trial – no reason. No excuse. Who will prosecute?” Many people had intense reactions to Harambe’s death,
and it became a polarizing issue with people pointing fingers at the zoo or the boy’s parents. But then, in the discourse surrounding Harambe, something bizarre happened. According to *People* magazine, “Facebook groups and pages that were sincerely meant to let people grieve over the animal’s killing gradually mutated into image macros and Photoshop games, a shared lingua franca on internet gathering grounds like Twitter, Reddit, Imgur, and 4Chan.”3 This is what brings us to the Weird Internet People, and Harambe the meme was born.

Limor Shifman defines an internet meme as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics…that are created with awareness of each other…and shared via the internet by many users.”4 Shifman’s definition allows discussions of memes to move beyond mere objects and toward an understanding of how the online images are unique social practices. Such a definition is in line with my analysis: I examine images within their social modalities since I am not just looking at the meme, but I am also looking at the meme within its social, cultural, and historical trajectories. Furthermore, memes are a prime example of something that is considered “factory and showroom”5 in a regime of enthrallment – they involve taking a fixed concept and presenting it in a slightly new way each time it spreads through the ocularcentric internet. The new image is unique, but it relates back to the original *just enough* so that individuals are aware of the larger conversation in which they are participating. Amidst the public outrage, Harambe became a meme, and thus factory and showroom, and he remained an internet meme long after the outcries subsided. The following images are just a sampling of the types of Harambe memes that spread on the ocularcentric internet:
Figure 4.1: Guns kill Harambe

Figure 4.2: Harambe as a Frustrated Arthur meme

Figure 4.3: Harambe the angel
Figure 1 apes a type of discourse frequently used in public conversations about guns in America: Guns don’t kill people, people kill people. Figure 2 is a very traditional type of internet meme, as it relates the Harambe conversation to another popular meme on the ocularcentric internet – the “Arthur’s Fist” meme, which is a screengrab from the children’s television show, used in situations to display frustration. Figure 3 demonstrates how beloved Harambe was on the ocularcentric internet by bestowing wings and a halo upon him, and Figure 4 highlights Harambe’s perceived importance by using Photoshop to put his face on Mount Rushmore with former United States presidents. These figures show that Harambe became extremely variable on the ocularcentric internet after his death. These memes were created with awareness to one another, and they all were part of the public discourse surrounding the gorilla’s death and “meme-ification.”

Such a digital outpouring led the Cincinnati Enquirer to call Harambe “America’s (online) sweetheart” in his “strange, surprising second life.” One media outlet even went so far as to say that Harambe found a “bizarre eternal life as an internet meme.” A prevailing urban legend proposes that 20,000 votes were cast in the 2016 United States Presidential Election for Harambe (there is no way to prove this). Additionally, Harambe’s death spawned a horribly crude, and utterly baffling, digital rallying cry that
remains popular and prevalent on the ocularcentric internet to this day: “Dicks out for Harambe.” This particular and perverse subset of the meme proposes exactly what it sounds like.

This chapter explores the ways in which the Harambe meme exemplifies the cultural work of enthrallment, predicated upon the affordances of the ocularcentric internet. Additionally, it examines how memes function on the ocularcentric internet and in the regime of enthrallment by looking at how and why specific cultural occurrences become memes. I interrogate the cultural processes and spreadability in this chapter to analyze how, in “meme-ing” content, said content is often decontextualized. When content is removed from its origin and setting, it can be to the detriment of certain social groups and in support of certain social inequalities. According to Whitney Phillips, “online content is rarely presented in full political, material, and/or historical context,” and this can make us all digital culture amnesiacs. Specifically, in regard to Harambe, I examine how racism lingers under—and occasionally bursts through—the surface of the gorilla meme by situating the events from the Cincinnati Zoo within the larger American cultural and political climates of 2016. In doing so, I will argue that enthrallment is far from perfect cultural work, and that it, too, can perpetuate all types of social inequalities—particularly if one is not careful.

Because “issues of race and media directly touch issues of ideology,” my analysis of the Harambe meme is grounded in discussions of culture and what the prevailing ideologies were at the time in which the gorilla was killed. I examine how racisms played a role in the spreadability of the Harambe meme, and I conduct this approach using the Gramscian framework outlined in Chapter One of this study.
According to Michael Lacy and Mary Trierce, “Gramsci is useful to help explain the continued contradictions, ambivalence, and paradoxes surrounding the representations of, and realities of, race in America.” Gramsci helps in these cases like Harambe because he allows us to think through issues of intersectionality due to the problematic’s emphasis on multiple social stratifications within specific historical contexts.

Because present discussions of the ocularcentric internet typically mean discussions of the White ocularcentric internet (see Phillips, 2015), understandings of images in digital cultures can benefit from an intersectional perspective. This allows for examinations of the often-racist ways content gets “memed.” Issues of race in conjunction with digital images are not new, but, rather, they are new nodal points in a cultural trajectory that has long complicated race, ethnicity, racism, visuality, and ways of seeing. Images – particularly the practice of photography and resulting photographs – have a long history of using racism in a way to codify certain privileged identities to the detriment of others. Image-making and image-taking processes are imbricated in the processes of promoting and reifying racial differences to the benefits of White individuals and to the detriment of others. Memes are one way this historical trajectory manifests on the contemporary ocularcentric internet, and they also offer insight into the way issues of race are often ignored in image spreadability. Memes are complex and enthrallment is problematic because they are both indicative of dominant ideologies, and “ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings.” Because image-making techniques typically uphold dominant ideologies, they promote such articulations to create meaning. In the occurrence of Harambe, we can follow the chain of articulations and ideologies through
long-standing, racist comparisons of Black individuals to gorillas; problematic, hierarchical questions of whose life matters and whose life matters more à la the current activist group Black Lives Matter (and the fact it was a three-year-old Black child who fell into Harambe’s pen); and color-blind racism and post-racial America. The impetus for understanding Harambe’s ideological chains of meaning begins with the event itself, as mentioned in the previous list: The child that fell into Harambe’s penned enclosure was a three-year-old Black child, and thus, in meme-ing Harambe into eternity, the ocularcentric internet decided – either purposefully, or, more likely on the subconscious level on which ideology functions\(^\text{18}\) – that a gorilla mattered more than a Black child’s life.

Because memes become “cultural touchstones,”\(^\text{19}\) they offer understanding into the zeitgeist. Furthermore, by assessing the larger cultural conversations happening at the time an occurrence becomes a meme, we can gain insight into how enthrallment works on the ocularcentric internet in occasionally beneficial and occasionally problematic ways. To assess these issues in this chapter, first, I present an overview of how Harambe fits into digital cultures and how one prevailing tenet of said cultures lends itself subtle forms of racism. Second, I discuss how Harambe is always already racist because of its roots, and how decontextualizing the gorilla’s death and initial internet presence leads to what Stuart Hall calls “inferential racism.” Finally, I discuss how Harambe, and memes, writ large, are indicative of enthrallment. Within this last discussion, I also examine how enthrallment can perpetuate social inequalities and power imbalances within ways of seeing on the ocularcentric internet.
“George Bush Didn’t Kill Harambe, The Internet is just Weird”: Harambe in Digital Cultures

The above quote is a headline from an article in *Texas Monthly* in which the writer details the long process that led to a spin-off of the Harambe meme – one in which the internet declares, “George [W] Bush killed Harambe.” Yes, that George Bush, forty-third president of the United States of America, and no, W did not actually kill Harambe.

But the headline is spot-on, and that’s why I decided to use it as the title this section on Harambe and digital cultures. To state the obvious: the ocularcentric internet is a weird place. Harambe was privy to the same weirdness that dominates other facets of digital cultures. According to *The Washington Post*, all Harambe memes “share the same basic approach: paying tribute to Harambe’s life to the point of absurdity.” Absurdity is an impeccable word to describe the Harambe meme’s ethos, and such spirit came to dominate the mainstream ocularcentric internet in 2016. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner refer to such weirdness as ambivalence, and in their the appropriately titled book, *The Ambivalent Internet*, they define the odd characteristics that underscore much of digital cultures as “polysemous…simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed…too variable across specific cases to be essentialized as this as opposed to that.” The ocularcentric internet becomes polysemous in part because of the variability of new media structures; by constantly being factory and showroom, nothing is ever finished and exists in numerous possible iterations. Such iterations make it nearly impossible for anything to ever be wholly definitive or mean solely one thing on the ocularcentric internet.

Harambe is not exempt from such variability, polysemy, and ambivalence. In fact, his afterlife as a meme exemplifies the tripartite relationship between these three concepts.
variability lends itself to polysemy, and polysemy then lends itself to ambivalence. This occurs because variability promotes polysemy through its factory and showroom logic. When multiple, seemingly infinite iterations of something are possible, then it is also possible to have a coexistence of multiple meanings. When multiple meanings are possible, vis-à-vis polysemy, then anything is feasibly conceivable, and ambivalence allows us to avoid picking one as a definitive, “correct” meaning. Anything becomes possible, save for one thing – definitive certainty. Harambe epitomizes variability, polysemy, and ambivalence because no one could ever really be sure what the ultimate point was. The only thing individuals could be certain of was that the Harambe meme was absurd and that it had multiple possible meanings to its creators and spreaders.

The case of Harambe characterizes not just weird internet but digital culture, in general, because of the massive scale of the meme. Harambe shows how nothing is exempt from being memed. *New York Magazine* asks, “what’s so funny about dead animals? The answer is: Nothing. And yet, Harambe…has become in his death an all-purpose punchline across Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook – a meme to be reckoned with.” Harambe dominated the ocularcentric internet in 2016, and some could argue that he still continues to do so to the present day. His dominance did not come from an inherently funny place about dead animals, but rather, from a place of ambivalence. The logic of factory and showroom meant that endless iterations of Harambe memes could be made, which is why “the internet would not let Harambe rest in peace.” There was simply too much to do with the dead gorilla’s memory; too many memes to be made; too many jokes and oddities to be presented.
However, benevolence is not guaranteed when anything is possible. Positivity is not guaranteed when multiple meanings coexist and seemingly infinite iterations of a meme can be spread. In fact, such a vast terrain easily lends itself to harmful content, inequalities, and asymmetrical power imbalances. Variability, polysemy, and ambivalence do not promise value-neutral content – mainly because there is no such thing as value-neutral content. These tenets of digital cultures specifically lend themselves to the promotion and spread of harmful content because anything is possible, and within the coexistence of multiple meanings one can simply claim they did not intend for the content to be damaging. With this in mind, I now turn to a discussion of how race and racism were propagated in conjunction with the Harambe meme, which will show how, like subconscious ideology, factors of variability, polysemy, and ambivalence work below the surface as well, as nuances and context are often ignored when spreading memes.

**Decontextualizing Race on the Ocularcentric Internet**

Since the murders of unarmed Black teenagers Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012 and Michael Brown in Missouri in 2014, racial tensions in the United States have reach a heightened state. Many individuals now consider racism and bigotry to be “imminent threats” to the country. This, however, also comes at a time in which we supposedly live in a so-called “post-racial” society, in which it is argued that we have moved past issues of racism and that race does not matter anymore. Information that aggravates this historical moment even more are the results of a 2011 Tufts University and Harvard Business School survey that found Americans believe “Whites have replaced blacks as the primary victims of racial discrimination in contemporary America.” In reconciling
all of the statements in this paragraph, it becomes apparent that we are not in fact in a post-racial society, and while Black individuals still face overt and purposeful discrimination, Black individuals in American society have seen a rise in the way racism occurs in subtle and indirect ways.

This section examines the way in which the public outrage following Harambe’s death and his subsequent meme afterlife are a part of conversations about race and racism in twenty-first century America. This section also problematizes the notion of simply referring to “the internet” in colloquial discourse, since by referring to “the internet” as a monolithic block, individuals are more often than not referring to the actions and practices of the White internet. Additionally, even theoretical conceptions of visuality in conjunction with enthrallment, as extrapolated in Chapter One, have indirectly referred to conceptions of White visuality and White enthrallment. This comes from my positionality as a researcher since I am a White woman. It is not my intention in this chapter to fall into a white savior complex regarding issues pertaining to Black individuals on the ocularcentric internet. However, I can never lose my identity as a White woman researcher, and that does influence my analysis herein. I do not intend a white savior researcher practice in this chapter since Black Twitter and other online communities of color do not need me to solve their problems. It would also go against the very Gramscian framework that underscores this study to adopt a white savior complex – at the core of hegemony and visuality are ideas of agency and resistance. Rather, this chapter problematizes the ways content spreads on the mainstream (White) internet, since this particular group often takes (and does not credit) content from areas of digital cultures called Black Twitter and Black Instagram. While this study does argue for the
conceptions of a regime of enthrallment, the cultural work of enthrallment, visuality, and the ocularcentric internet, it is important to note that I am examining them from the perspective of “the internet,” or, the mainstream White internet. This chapter serves as a deviation from that in order to understand the way the cultural work of enthrallment is also not a monolithic block, and it looks different for different people.

This section also distinguishes between racist roots and racist uses of the Harambe meme. In many cases, the Harambe meme was not used in an explicitly racist way, but rather, spread through the ocularcentric internet in absurd jest. That being said, there were some instances when the Harambe meme was used in purposefully racist ways in order to enact violence against Black individuals. See below:

![Meme Image]

*Figure 4.5: Kanye West*

The above meme invokes several of the explicitly racist themes discussed so far in this chapter: It references the initial event (in which the gorilla was killed to save a Black child’s life) by parroting the discourse in attempts to cause physical violence against a Black man (in this case, Kanye West). It also argues that Kanye West should be treated like a gorilla, thus invoking previously mentioned racist comparisons of Black
individuals to gorillas. This meme is explicitly racist, as it encourages harm – if not death – against a Black man.

However, most of the uses of Harambe did not fall into this overtly racist category, but this is not meant to absolve the meme’s creators and spreaders. These memes may not appear racist at first, but when we situate Harambe and the images within their historical and cultural context, they emerge as incredibly problematic. Such examples include the memes below:

Figure 4.6: Harambe as martyr

Figure 4.7: Harambe and "Make America Great Again"
Figure 6 shows an image of a Google search in which someone has used PhotoShop to argue that Harambe is a martyr. At first this seems harmless, but then it becomes worth asking what exactly Harambe was a martyr for. Figure 7 is arguably a little more problematic (depending on the political standpoint of the viewer), but by putting Harambe – a meme that already problematizes issues of race in twenty-first century America – in a “Make America Great Again” hat, the racist ideology and discourse of Donald Trump’s presidential platform is brought front and center. Because “Make America Great Again” has been interpreted by many to mean a return to even more explicit, discriminatory white domination and violence towards minorities in the United States (vis-à-vis the idea “Make America White Again”) Harambe in such a hat implies that Black lives do not matter.

Harambe will always exist within his own history which requires grappling with the issues of race and racism at his core. Even though I distinguish roots and uses as separate entities, it is impossible to untie the two as they exist in a dialectical relationship in which one cannot be understood without the other. Given this, I would argue that it would almost be impossible for there to ever not be a racist use of the Harambe meme, since the meme is always already wrapped up in the racism surrounding its origins. To begin to understand these roots and uses, and the way in which Harambe fits in to issues of racism in twenty-first century America, “it is worth reminding ourselves what is was like on the Internet when Harambe died.”

Summer of 2016 was a period of instances of aggravated racism and issues of more covert racism. This was the summer in which unarmed Black men Philando Castille and Alton Sterling were shot and killed by police in separate instances in Minneapolis
and Baton Rouge, respectively. Following this, protests against police shootings of unarmed Black men and women were held across the country. In Dallas, a sniper who was specifically targeting White policemen killed five people and wounded twelve. In conjunction with this, racism continued to boil over on the ocularcentric internet—in May, Harambe was shot and killed in the Cincinnati Zoo, and that summer was dominated by his subsequent meme-ification. At the same time, African-American actress Leslie Jones was targeted by Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulous in a widespread racist online campaign against the actress’s role in the remake of *Ghostbusters*, in which Harambe was used as a memed weapon against the Black actress in an explicitly racist way.

This historical specificity is paramount to understanding how and why certain content takes off and spreads on the ocularcentric internet. To further understand the backdrop against where Harambe was memed into eternal life, we have to understand what was happening in America at that specific time. American society is presently dominated by beliefs in post-racism and color-blind ideology. In some ways, color-blind ideology leads to a supposed post-racial society— if individuals believe they do not “see race,” then they can convince themselves that race is a thing of the past. However, color-blind ideology amounts to a type of racism, since “not seeing race” negates the lived experiences of non-White individuals and assumes differences no longer matter. According to Davi Johnston Thornton, “postrace sensibility works as a vital component

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1 Breitbart is purposefully not italicized here, as is typically done for journalistic publications. It is the author’s personal opinion that Breitbart is not a reputable news source but rather nothing more than a vicious, hate-mongering, smear site, given their propensity to purposefully publish falsehoods, conspiracy theories, and misleading stories. Italicizing the site name, however small of an act, would lend credibility to such hate and faux journalism.
to neoliberal color-blind ideology, cultivating a ‘light’ attitude toward race that intensifies the beliefs that race…and racism are things of the past.”

Evan Beaumont Carter expands this, arguing that “the tactics of postracial color-blindness can be conceived as a dynamic of racial hegemony since the removal of race as a signifier creates an illusion of systematic equality, which allows freedom for the continuation of the traditionally marginalizing practices of a hegemonic group.” Therefore, color-blind ideology and postracial ideas intersect to create a climate in which a more covert, sneakier type of racism occurs: the type of racism that happens when people think they can say or do anything without contemplating consequences because race is “a thing of the past.”

When individuals believe issues of race are things of the past, this does not eradicate racism but rather creates a terrain where it can exist in indirect ways. Stuart Hall calls such subtle uses of racism inferential racism, which he defines as something that “enables racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded.” Inferential racism is not overt in its bigotry, but, in fact, because of its subtlety, is arguably more insidious, and it does not explicitly declare itself as racism but remains racist in implicit ways. Color-blind racism, and the idea of a postracial society, are two common ways in which inferential racism plagues contemporary culture.

Harambe is also a nodal point that indicates inferential racism, and we can begin to parse through this by interrogating the day the gorilla was shot and killed at the Cincinnati Zoo. Harambe was shot and killed specifically to save the life of a Black child, and Vox reports, “the public seemed to value the life of a gorilla more than the life of the endangered child or the safety of his mother, both of whom are black.” This is the
origin to the Harambe story and meme, and in the all of the outrage and actions that followed many seemed to ignore the fact that Harambe was killed to save a Black child’s life. This makes memes, such as the one below, incredibly problematic with racist undertones:

![Figure 4.8: Harambe Definition](image)

The above meme is a screenshot from the site Urban Dictionary, and it often circulates in conversations surrounding Harambe. The meme blames the mother for Harambe’s death and argues the gorilla was killed because of her supposed bad parenting. This theme highlights another intersection in which race, Black women, and motherhood have been stereotyped through racist tropes such as the Welfare Queen, Mammy, Jezebel, and Angry Black Woman. In meme-ing Harambe, individuals decide – maybe overtly, but more often than not in the subconscious where ideology percolates – Harambe was more important than a Black child’s life. Such an ideology is spread through memes as the one below:
Whereas Figure 8 explicitly blames the Black mother for Harambe’s death, Figure 9 explicitly blames the Black child. The meme parodies the jacket cover of the 2016 stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* by using the format to call the child who fell into the penned enclosure cursed and responsible for not just Harambe’s death, but his murder. Such a distinction matters since blame is then placed wholly on the child.

A subsequent chain on this ideological articulation of meaning continues to proliferate inferential racism through a long-standing racist metaphor: The comparison of Black individuals to gorillas. As previously mentioned, there were purposefully racist uses of the Harambe meme. One such occurrence was the previously mentioned Twitter attack against Leslie Jones. According to *The Washington Post*:

> The racist use of Harambe isn’t quite its own meme – it’s more of a variation on a theme of the longstanding racist meme comparing Black people to primates. It’s
the same stuff that was tweeted at actor Leslie Jones…and that has long been the basis of racist photoshops of President Obama.\textsuperscript{39}

One cannot examine the Harambe meme without considering the racist ways in which Black individuals have often been dehumanized by reducing them to primates, including gorillas. See below:

\textit{Figure 4.10: Gorilla}\textsuperscript{40}

Figure 10 directly invokes the racist comparison of Black individuals to gorillas, as well as the horrible discourse that has long compared the first Black First Lady to a primate.\textsuperscript{41}

But this racist comparison intersects this issue in another way that propagates insidious, inferential racism – the child who fell into Harambe’s penned enclosure, and
his mother, are both Black. In deciding Harambe was more important than a Black child’s life, the racist comparison of Black individuals to gorillas is complicated: the paradox is that a gorilla’s life is valued more than a Black child’s life, but Black individuals are constantly reduced to gorillas. In this way, an actual gorilla emerges as worth more than racist comparisons of Black-individuals-as-gorillas. When gorilla lives and Black lives intersect, the public decides a gorilla’s life matters more.

Hierarchical considerations and perceptions of “what matters more” are at the core of the Harambe meme and are also a central issue in contemporary American society. Per Vox:

Harambe’s death occurred in the same week in which 1,100 people died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to immigrate safely into Europe. Given that the gorilla’s death largely overshadowed the conversation about actual human life, the backlash to the backlash was swift to follow. Cosmopolitan called the public’s reaction sexist and racist, noting along with other outlets that the public seemed to value the life of a gorilla more than the life of the endangered child.42

It speaks volumes about what matters more to a majority of individual people and institutions that Harambe’s death was given more news coverage than, for example, the Syrian refugee crisis. By turning the gorilla into a meme, and in spreading immense outrage over Harambe’s death, the internet, press, and public sphere decided an animal’s life was worth more than certain human lives – be them Syrian refugees or a Black child.

This specific moment also came at a time in which conversations about Black lives dominate American discussions, specifically through the international activist movement, Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM is an organization that strives to build local
support and power to intervene in state-sanctioned and vigilante violence towards Black individuals. The organization’s name states its ultimate mission – that Black lives do matter – but in meme-ing Harambe, the internet responded with, “sure, but gorilla lives matter more.” According to *The New York Times*, “outside the zoo…the gorilla’s supporters held placards that read ‘R.I.P. Harambe,’ and ‘Because his life mattered.’” The phrase ‘because his life mattered,’ used in conjunction with discourse surrounding Harambe, echoes the titular ethos of BLM and forces us to grapple with exactly whose life does matter in a so-called postracial America. Meme-ing Harambe into eternal absurdity indicates a lack of compassion for Black lives which is complicated by racist comparisons of Black individuals to gorillas. However, to understand the extent to which Harambe is the result of, and impetus for, inferential racism we have to understand where specifically the Harambe meme came from on the ocularcentric internet. With this in mind, I now turn my discussions to Black Twitter.

**Black Twitter**

When Harambe was first “memed,” he was not done so on the mainstream, White internet. The Harambe meme was first created on what is referred to as Black Twitter, a cultural dimension of the social networking site that focuses on issues relevant to the Black community. Black Twitter can be understood as “Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural discourse” specifically in regard to “user-generated…culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information.” Black Twitter refers to a specific community, set of users, set of discourses, and set of practices that exist on the social networking site, but Sarah Florini reminds us: “Just as there is no ‘Black America’ or single ‘Black culture,’ there is no
[singular] Black Twitter. What does exist are millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences…and cultural practices.” Therefore, the phrase Black Twitter may come across as the lumping of all Black Twitter uses into a singular, monolithic block; however, the term actually refers to a set of cultural and discursive practices across a specific community on Twitter.

These cultural and discursive practices which make up Black Twitter exist in conjunction with, and against, the backdrop of the mainstream White internet. As previously mentioned, Whitney Phillips notes that typical conversations about just “the internet” refer to conversations about the White internet and White internet users. The dominant assumptions about just referring to “the internet” implies whiteness, as does the concept of online fixity, which is “the assumption that online visitors either occupy an online ‘normal’ identity: White, male, middle class, and hetero; or they are so diverse that their cultural origins cannot (or should not) be ascertained.” Typical, monolithic, and mainstream discussions of the internet generally operate under the assumption of whiteness. The typical internet user is assumed to be White, and cultural and discursive practices indicating whiteness dominate the ocularcentric internet. However, “White participation in online activities is rarely understood as constitutive of White identity; instead we are trained to understand their online activities as stuff ‘people do’.” Just as being White generally leads White individuals to believe they do not have a race and that race is something other people have, White public spaces exist in a way in which they are considered the norm by visibly marginalizing groups of other races.
Therefore, Black Twitter is another iteration in which racialized populations exist in conjunction – and are defined in opposition to – a dominant group. However, as previously noted, Black Twitter and its users often use this space to challenge dominant, mainstream ideologies, which includes dominant assumptions of postracial America and color-blind ideology. According to André Brock, “Black Twitter’s use of Twitter’s rigid format to articulate Black discursive styles and cultural iconography subverts mainstream expectations of Twitter demographics, discourses, and utility.”\(^{50}\) The discursive styles and cultural iconography created on Black Twitter can ultimately enter the colloquial, mainstream, White internet lexicon even if Black Twitter users wish they would not. Black Twitter is a specific community on said social networking site which often produces many of the images, phrases, and ideas that “go viral” on the ocularcentric internet. Such examples of things that have come out of Black Twitter and essentially been culturally appropriated by the mainstream White internet include the phrases “woke,” “on fleek,” “twerk,” the Crying Jordan meme, the Confused Mr. Krabs meme, “why you always lyin’,” and, of course, Harambe.

**Harambe and Decontextualizing Black Twitter**

The Harambe meme was first created on Black Twitter, and it was done so as a jest of social commentary. *Vox* reports that “as a form of protest, black social media communities embraced the Harambe meme to comment ironically on the ways in which society tends to minimize and overlook the deaths of ordinary people of color.”\(^{51}\) Harambe the meme was initially created on Black Twitter as a way for this community to comment on an epidemic of state-sanctioned violence against Black individuals.
Figure 4.11: Harambe and Legendary Deaths

Figure 11 comes from the site WorldStarHipHop, a content-aggregator video blog often shared by individuals on Black Twitter through retweets and links. The above image groups Harambe in with several notable celebrities (and the Cleveland Cavaliers’ basketball season) that died in 2016, but it was done so in jest. Black Twitter users were making fun of many White individuals for caring more about an animal than an actual Black human life. Eventually, however, like many of the examples stated at the end of the previous section, Harambe spread so wide within Black Twitter that White internet users became interested in the meme. Therefore, White internet users did not initially meme Harambe and say a Black child’s life does not matter. They hijacked the meme from Black Twitter, removed it from its social and political origins, and, in doing so, implied a Black child’s life matters less than a gorilla’s. Such considerations indicate that who
makes a meme, who spreads a meme, and under what conditions they make and spread a meme are important in avoiding spreading social inequalities.

Decontextualizing race is one such way in which inferential racism happens, and it is a commonplace way in which inferential racism occurs – particularly on the ocularcentric internet. The underlying logics of the ocularcentric internet lend themselves to cultural appropriation and content hijacking from communities of color because of the factory and showroom property. The factory and showroom logic of the ocularcentric internet lends itself well to the ambivalent nature of digital cultures. Because something could easily mean X, or it could just as easily mean Y, or Z, content creators and spreaders have the ability to absolve themselves. If presented with the idea that their content is racist, or directly or indirectly promotes other social inequalities, they can simply say it is in the good fun of the internet, and it means something else. This is a proverbial slippery slope on which content creators and spreaders do not have to confront the problematic nature of what they post and publish online. Akin to how the factory and showroom logic that underscores the ocularcentric internet lends itself to ambivalence, ambivalence and the factory and showroom logic together can lend themselves to inferential racism. Because content could easily be this or that, content can spread on the ocularcentric internet without calling into awareness the complex, problematic, and sometimes racist foundations on which the content has been formed, spread, or decontextualized.

I know this chapter will not solve the problem of racism on the internet. It is my hope that there will one day be some resurgence of context and critical thinking in conjunction with the spreadability of memes. By simply grabbing content and
repurposing it without acknowledging its online or offline roots we propagate
ambivalence and social inequalities. While this applies to many contexts, intersections,
and communities on the ocularcentric internet, I purposefully and intentionally discuss
this idea in this chapter because Black lived experience is central to White ways of being
and ways of seeing on the ocularcentric internet. Such a hijacking of content is not new,
since White individuals and communities have often taken from Black culture. Lauren
Michelle Jackson has discussed this, particularly in conjunction with reaction GIFs, and
how they form what she calls “digital blackface.” She elaborates:

But even a casual observer of GIFing would notice that, as with much of online
culture, black people appear at the center of it all. Or, images of black people, at
least. The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Oprah, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey,
NBA Players, Tiffany Pollard, Kid Fury, and many, many other known and
anonymous black likenesses dominate day-to-day feds, even outside online black
communities…if you’ve never heard the term before, “digital blackface” is used
to describe various types of minstrel performance that became available in
cyberspace…while often associate with Jim Crow-era racism, the tenets of
minstrel performance remain alive today in television, movies, and music, and, in
its most advanced iteration, on the internet.53

Non-Black individuals using GIFs of Black individuals to engage in networked
communication, spreadable content, and enthrallment on the ocularcentric internet
amounts to forms of digital blackface – adopting an identity that is not their own by
pretending to be that person in the GIF. Like Harambe, the uses of these GIFs can never
be fully divorced from their roots in Black ocularcentric internet culture, thus leading to
decontextualization and inferential racism.

In Chapter One of this study, I discussed memejacking – the phenomenon of
corporations taking memes to use for their own purposes in appealing to consumer
audiences – but memejacking also occurs when White individuals take Black Twitter or
Instagram content and use them for their own purposes. In this way, memejacking,
decontextualization, and digital blackface are ways inferential racism occurs on the
ocularcentric internet. They are also ways in which enthrallment is far from perfect
cultural work, and it is work that occupies a precarious position because of factory and
showroom logic and ambivalence. Enthrallment can very quickly become racist work –
or other types of problematic work. It is why I encourage individuals to “think before
they meme,” and it is these implications I turn to in the next section.

A Return to Context on the Ocularcentric Internet

Three themes regarding the larger construction of a regime of enthrallment have
underscored my analysis of Harambe. First, Harambe further demonstrates the slippages
between online/offline worlds and how there are little-to-no delineations between the
two. Second, enthrallment is a historically specific type of cultural work, predicated upon
historically specific conceptions of visuality. Finally, enthrallment is far from perfect
cultural work and is fraught with complex issues and problems. These three themes are
discussed in-depth below.

In an editorial in the USA Today, Carol Motsinger writes, “Born of headlines,
Harambe the Hashtag garnered more headlines around the world. Some fact and some
fiction. As the months stretched on and the headlines piled up, this virtual existence
spilled over in the real world.” Essentially, Harambe-the-cultural-phenomenon moved through the world as follows: In May of 2016, the gorilla was killed at the Cincinnati Zoo. Then, his death garnered massive amounts of media attention. From there, the headlines produced memes – first, in social commentary jest on Black Twitter, and then in absurd ambivalence on the mainstream, White ocularcentric internet. Finally, the memes produced more newspaper headlines – many of which have been cited in this chapter – talking about the strangeness of the phenomenon. I walk through the Harambe lifecycle in this way because it demonstrates two key points outlined in Chapter One of this study: First, materiality of digital culture images is crucial to understanding how a regime of enthrallment is created and sustained. Harambe moving from an offline event, to digital culture, to news headlines and memes, and then back to news headlines, demonstrates the importance of social practice in sustaining enthrallment. Second, in a regime of enthrallment, the press and the ocularcentric internet are engaged in a dialectical relationship, and they need each other to help constantly spread content. This relationship is ultimately a cybernetic feedback loop, predicated upon the logic of factory and showroom. By the time Harambe-the-meme comes back to the newsrooms that helped created him, he looks very different – yet similar enough to the original that everyone still understands what is being discussed. Harambe becomes newsworthy two times over, due, in part, to the ocularcentric internet and the factory and showroom logic that have seeped out of digital cultures to dominate the zeitgeist. It is this variable logic of the ocularcentric internet, as well as a lack of clear-cut online/offline boundaries which help define the regime of enthrallment. Such nebulousness in conjunction with the ambivalence discussed in this chapter creates a structure of feeling in which anything
goes. In turn, this ethos lends itself to the desire – and creates the ability – for things to be bigger, grander, and more spectacular.

The second theme that emerges in this chapter reveals the desire to make everything bigger and more spectacular is the result of a particular cultural moment. Enthrallment is a historically specific type of cultural work. It is the result of a culture and society at a particular point in time, and the problems, complexities, and nuances of this work are also historically specific. As this chapter has shown, meme-ing content and making it “go viral” are results of a culture that privileges near-constant spectacle, even if that entertainment is detrimental to certain social groups. Because these events and images do not happen in vacuums, we cannot understand enthrallment or its problems outside of the historical context in which it occurs. Harambe may come across as a silly, absurd meme, but it is only when we place the meme back in its original context, offline in the Cincinnati Zoo and on Black Twitter, and against the backdrop of a summer of heightened racial tensions, do we begin to fully understand how it is not an innocent meme. Furthermore, enthrallment is not always innocent work. In another time, with the dominance of another type of technology and its affordances, against a different historical and cultural backdrop, the cultural work that dominates the zeitgeist may look very different from enthrallment. But right now, enthrallment is our dominant, hegemonic cultural work that is predicated upon a visuality that privileges digital cultures and making everything bigger, grander, and more spectacular.

This dominant logic is far from utopian. In the earliest days of cyberspace, the internet was hailed for everything it could be: A perfect, body-less, gender-less, race-less world where we could escape the problems and burdens of everyday, offline life. Such a
notion was quickly shattered. Digital spaces merely become extensions of offline issues, and given how easily and seamlessly the offline and online blur into each other, it becomes apparent the ocularcentric internet does not dissolve social problems but rather exacerbates them in new and different ways. For instance, regarding sexism online, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner have written on the ideas of networked misogyny and toxic masculinity, and how violence towards women is amplified in digital spaces not just because of anonymity, platform policies, or insufficient legal frameworks, but because of a combination of the three. They elaborate, “These explanations for online harassment…encourage a distraction from the deeply embedded contextual factors that legitimate the logic of misogyny. That is, misogyny is not only widespread and deeply entrenched in Western culture, it is naturalized.”

This distinction is important in understanding how the ocularcentric internet is far from perfect. In terms of Banet-Weiser and Miltner’s work, they argue online misogyny is not any different from offline misogyny, as the problem is the normative nature of misogyny in Western culture, amplified in new ways by technological affordances of digital cultures.

Similar problems exacerbate racism on the ocularcentric internet. In his foundational work, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” Stuart Hall writes, “Since (like gender), race appear to be ‘given’ by Nature, racism is one of the most profoundly ‘naturalized’ of existing ideologies.” Therefore, even though sexism and racism are not identical “isms” and require their own nuanced understandings, Banet-Wesier and Miltner’s framework for understanding online misogyny is useful to begin to parse through online racism. Just as the problem is not simply online or offline misogyny, the problem is not as simple as online or offline racism. The technological affordances
and underlying logics of the ocularcentric internet allow racism to present in new and different ways, and these affordances and logics can be detrimental to people of color. Additionally, these logics and affordances can be subverted, resisted, or co-opted in favor of one’s community, as is the case of Black Twitter, but this is not always the case.

Racism will exist online as long as there is racism offline, and new technological affordances allow pre-existing racisms to permeate culture in new and different ways. Such racism does not always have to be overt to be harmful or indicate social problems, as is the occurrence of Harambe. The meme was hijacked from Black Twitter in a way that concealed this problematic fact below the surface – in discussing this chapter with many people around me, not a single person knew that the meme had originally come from Black Twitter and initially meant something else entirely. After the meme exploded in popularity, spread, and reach, its inferential racism remained below the surface. That being said, just because the racism was subtle does not absolves the meme’s creators and spreaders. If anything, per Stuart Hall, that latency makes the racism even more insidious.

I use the occurrence of Harambe and the issues of racism it poses to make the point that enthrallment is not culturally perfect, or even culturally neutral, work. Enthrallment is rooted in conceptions of images and visuality, and these images and memes “can sometimes work in favor of marginalized perspectives...[but] they can also sometimes antagonize and silence those perspectives.” For instance, in the case of Black Twitter originally meme-ing Harambe, enthrallment was a way to make a social commentary. By making the memes of the gorilla bigger, grander, and more spectacular – and goofier – individuals were able to make a point about how White society obsessively grieves over a dead animal but is silent during murders of African-American individuals
by cops. However, it was the goofiness that ultimately caught the attention of the mainstream, White, ocularcentric internet. The very thing working in favor of marginalized voices became used in an inferential way against the community who created it.

Enthrallment will never be perfect, utopian cultural work, and I make no claim it is or ever will be. Additionally, enthrallment, as discussed in the majority of this study, is from my position as a White woman. Enthrallment may look very different for me than for someone on Black Twitter, or East Asian Instagram. It is my hope that this chapter has laid some groundwork for understanding enthrallment beyond a White lens. However, visuality has also never been neutral, and if the ocularcentric internet merely presents offline problems in new and different ways then the same could be said for the visuality that underscores this present technology. Dominant visualities often exist to the detriment of Black individuals and various other social and racial groups, either through the politics of looking, being denied the right to gaze,\textsuperscript{58} or through the typical uses of photography to construct and codify specific social ideas regarding race\textsuperscript{59}. Enthrallment is imbricated in visuality, and therefore enthrallment is subject to the same asymmetrical power imbalances that come from race and visualities.

However, just as the gaze, looking, and ways of seeing have not always been fair terrains for Black individuals, people of color have also used said gaze, and even screens, as opportunities for creative resistance. According to bell hooks:

Given the real-life public circumstances wherein Black men were murdered/lynched for looking at white womanhood, where the black male gaze was always subject to control and/or punishment by the powerful white Other, the
private realm of television screens or dark theaters could unleash the repressed
gaze.⁶⁰

Presently, phone and computer screens offer the same ability for resisting dominant
visuality as television or movie screens once did. This allows for agency and resiliency in
the face of White-dominated social structures and a White-dominated, White-centric
regime of enthrallment.

Digital cultures are always already skewed to the benefit of White creation and
sharing, and this is compounded by White communities historically taking from Black
individuals and Black culture without giving proper credit – as was the case with
Harambe. This chapter has shown that enthrallment is not perfect cultural work, and it
perpetuates racial hierarchies, problems, and injustices. However, in this analysis, I do
not intend to strip the individuals in these digital cultures of their agency, but rather, I
would just always encourage individuals to think before they meme.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the occurrence of the Harambe meme and used this as a
jumping off point to examine how enthrallment is far from perfect cultural work. To
analyze this, I first situated Harambe within broader digital cultures, in which I
specifically highlighted the ethos of ambivalence that underscores much of the content on
the ocularcentric internet. Second, I turned to a discussion of how ambivalence lends
itself to what Stuart Hall calls inferential racism, which is a type of racism common in so-
called color-blind and post-racial societies which is perpetuated by individuals who think
racism is a thing of the past and who do not have to contemplate complicated and
asymmetrical issues of race. Harambe is such an example of inferential racism – even
though the meme was often used in purposefully and explicitly racist ways – because of the roots to the meme. The meme was initially created by Black Twitter, a cultural dimension of the social networking site, to poke fun at White communities for caring more about the death of a gorilla than the life of the young Black child who had fallen into the animal’s pen. From there, the meme was hijacked by White individuals who completely decontextualized the events from the Cincinnati Zoo and the meme’s origins on Black Twitter. By not calling attention to these origins and complex predicates, the meme remains inferentially racist. I used this occurrence to show that the cultural work of enthralment, in which we strive to make everything bigger, grander, and more spectacular than what came before it, is not perfect cultural work and can often perpetuate social inequalities and power imbalances.
Notes on Chapter Four


CHAPTER 5
KEEPING UP WITH KIM KARDASHIAN(‘S INSTAGRAM): CELEBRITY, MATERIALITY, AND TABLOIDIZATION

In the previous chapter, I discussed how enthrallment is problematic cultural work and how it can spread various social isms, including racism, alongside the images it helps move through culture. In this chapter, I interrogate enthrallment further, and I analyze how other social practices influence, and are influenced by, this cultural work. Such tenets for analysis include celebrity (and, in turn, micro-celebrity), image work on social media through the concept of influencers, and how the press fits into these messy, tenuous articulations. One could not talk about these ideological pillars, spreadable images, and the ocularcentric internet without talking about the platform I use to ground this chapter – Instagram. The photo-sharing platform, which first debuted in 2010, has become a central platform and practice in the regime of enthrallment. Instagram is a harbinger of new (and problematic) cultural practices, and it is a terrain of cultural change. It is a place where regular individuals, celebrity, and aspiring celebrities merge. For instance, when I scroll through my personal Instagram feed, I am greeted by pictures of my best friend’s baby, my dissertation advisor’s trips to Turkey, my former co-worker’s transition to becoming a popular fitness model, and pictures from the lives of celebrities like Chip and Joanna Gaines, Mariska Hargitay, Dule Hill, and Beyoncé. While discussions of non-celebrity Instagram images are worth being had, this chapter
specifically focuses on celebrity Instagram to further interrogate spreadability and cultural change. Additionally, I focus on celebrity in this chapter since enthrallment is akin to non-celebrities posting their lives to social media as if they were famous – making a spectacle out of the everyday – so I wanted to analyze how actual celerity functions in the regime of enthrallment. Given this, there was no better celebrity to ground this chapter than Kim Kardashian West.

Kim Kardashian West has been called the Queen of Instagram, and that claim is not without justification. Many of the once-most liked Instagram photos of all time have belonged to Kim, and the one which held the title the longest was her wedding photo to rapper Kanye West. The entire Kardashian family, but most notably Kim, has used Instagram for the strategic benefit of garnering followers and money, building brands, and solidifying roles as some of the most identifiable pop culture icons. It has been reported “the reality TV star and businesswoman makes an estimated $300,000 per sponsored [Instagram] post”¹ and that “her public persona has leaned heavily on social media in recent years.”² Additionally, Kim uses all of her social media, particularly Instagram, to bolster her personal and business brand: “Although all of [her] assets are separate from her social media profiles, they are inextricably linked – she often unboxes new merchandise on her Snapchat…or informs her Instagram followers of new emojis in the Kimoji app.”³ There is no doubting the fact Kim Kardashian West has used Instagram to solidify her role in our contemporary cultural landscape.

All of that changed, however, in fall of 2016. Refinery29 reported in January of 2017, “Kim Kardashian credits her career to social media, but she hasn’t made a peep on her Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat since October 2 [of 2016] – the night she was bound,
gagged, and robbed at gunpoint in Paris.”⁴ The tragic assault happened to Kim while she was in Paris for Fashion Week, and the team of five armed robbers made off with a collection of her jewelry, valued at $5.6 million. *Vanity Fair* wrote, regarding the robbery, “Of the 15 Instagram photos she posted from Paris, surely the most tantalizing for thieves would have been one posted on the day after her arrival: a sexy selfie…and some of her jewelry – diamonds in her mouth and a 20-karat-diamond ring of her finger.”⁵ The stolen jewels included Kim’s Instagram famous 20-karat wedding ring, as seen in the image below, posted to Instagram only days before the robbery:

![Image of Kim Kardashian's Instagram post](image)

*Figure 5.1: Kim Kardashian West's Instagram post on her Paris trip in October 2016⁶*

Many victim-blamed Kim Kardashian West for the robbery, saying her “glamorous life was all too easy to track.”⁷ Victim-blaming Kim for the robbery is ludicrous; the only people responsible are the thieves, and to say that she brought it on herself by posting too much to social media invokes a near-hypodermic needle position of media. Such a position implies the robbers saw her ring and simply could not help themselves; they had no choice but to rob her. Nevertheless, after the robbery, Kim Kardashian’s social media habits changed. She essentially vanished from the internet, and many wondered when, or
if, she would return to the platforms that garnered her fame. However, she was not silent for too long, and after three months of avoiding the internet, Kim Kardashian West returned with a simple photo posted to Instagram – and everyone, for a lack of a better phrase, lost their minds.

This chapter uses Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram as an occurrence to ground my analysis of Instagram, celebrity, the ocularcentric internet, and the regime of enthrallment. I use her return to parse through tenets and practices common on Instagram, which include, but are certainly not limited to, celebrity, materiality, and tabloidization. While there are numerous themes and practices that could be discussed in tandem with Instagram, I use the aforementioned ones to assess the mobile application’s role in the regime of enthrallment. First, I establish some context by briefly discussing Instagram and the Kardashian family entertainment empire. Second, I use this context and discourse surrounding her return to analyze changing conceptions and practices of celebrity, as well as what celebrity means in the regime of enthrallment. Third, I examine materiality in conjunction with Kim’s return, and how many individuals and journalistic outlets wrote articles on how to mimic her photo’s aesthetic. Fourth, I look at how tabloidization plays a role in morphing her return into a cultural event. Finally, I situate celebrity, materiality, and tabloidization within a regime of enthrallment and discuss how these tenets reveal a new form of journalistic practice – a phenomenon I dub instajournalism. This chapter will further show how and why images spread in a regime of enthrallment, and how institutions such as celebrity and the press are crucial to understanding such movement.
The above song lyric from Kim Kardashian West’s husband, Kanye West, perfectly captures the ethos of Instagram and how wide-reaching it is in our cultural moment. On the photo-sharing platform, individuals curate digital presences that often reflect them at their best (though not always – see Chapter Three’s discussion of performativity and divorce selfies). In particular, the pre-robbery Kim Kardashian often curated an Instagram presence that reflected both #BadBitchAlert and #MadRichAlert, through sexy and flashy photos, thus maybe inspiring her husband’s lyrics.

Before moving forward, I must first establish some information regarding Instagram and parameters of how it is conceived in this study. To summarize, Instagram is a photo-sharing platform that is primarily used on mobile devices but also maintains a substantial desktop and internet presence. Instagram lets individuals upload photos and then apply various pre-set filters to their images. Then, users can add captions or hashtags before publishing it to their personal feed. Individuals can then like or comment on said images. However, on Instagram, “textual descriptions and replies to followers are de-emphasized in favor of images, particularly selfies.”9 While communicating with others vis-à-vis likes and comments are important, they are second to Instagram’s primary function of sharing pictures of one’s own life. That being said, it is important to clarify how I define Instagram and Instagram images in the parameters of this chapter. The other types of images in this study – selfies, memes, and screenshots – can often be found on Instagram. However, for the purposes of this chapter and study, I am considering an
“Instagram image” to be an image that is specifically uploaded in order to take advantage of the application’s affordances. I look at Instagram less as a platform than I do as a harbinger of a particular type of digital image that allows seemingly personal and authentic looks into one’s life. This chapter is specifically concerned with how these types of images on Instagram are nodal points for larger cultural practices. While selfies, memes, screenshots, and even regular photographs (as such is the case with Kim’s return) are shared on Instagram, I view content on the application as a specific type of digital image. Additionally, I use these images as jumping off points to examine the social practice of Instagram and so-called “Instagramming.” In this way, images shared to the application can be examined as their own unique types of images.

The Instagram mobile application rose to popularity and prominence when it was purchased by Facebook in 2012. The sale was valued at a hefty $1 billion. According to Alice Marwick, “a $1 billion valuation is difficult to grasp – that’s more than the New York Times is worth.” While price is not everything, such a purchase reveals Instagram’s importance as not just a cultural touchstone, but a cultural image touchstone. While other once-popular photo-sharing platforms did not survive in the digital era (the most notable being Flickr), Instagram thrived. This is due, in part, because “Instagram represents a convergence of cultural forces: mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption.” Instagram is the result of a perfect storm, and its success is a confluence of valued pillars.

Two such pillars are briefly worth discussing here: Microcelebrity and aspirational labor. Microcelebrity is defined as “a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a
profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status.” Microcelebrity occurs when individuals mimic the practices of actual celebrity to bolster their online presence. This is related to Brooke Erin Duffy’s definition of aspirational labor, in which she argues, “aspirational labour is defined as a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production.” Many individuals practice microcelebrity to perform aspirational labor in hopes of one day achieving social and economic capital. These two tenets have distinct meanings but are also intricately interwoven with each other, and Instagram is a place for individuals to perform both of them.

I mention these practices here because some have argued Kim Kardashian West was one of the original pioneers of using social media to achieve celebrity, social, and economic capital. While she is not solely responsible for these cultural shifts, she is indicative of them and has paved the way for what they have come to be. The family’s brand, and their subsequent reality television show, Keeping up with the Kardashians, have become intertwined with their social media presences, and the family members have been some of the earliest adopters of platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. According to the blog HighSnobiety, “plenty of [social media] users view themselves as a brand, albeit, a much, much lesser-known brand – like Kim Kardashian West.” Instagram users perform microcelebrity and aspirational labor to establish such a brand, and it is akin to what Kim and her famous clan did to achieve their stardom. It is such a turn I focus on in the next section.
The Kardashian Empire

Kim Kardashian and her famous family were some of the first to capitalize on social and digital media to achieve celebrity status. Once again citing HighSnobiety, “it’s obviously not the case that [new social] roles are a direct repercussion of Kardashian-West’s popularity, but there is an argument to be made that she was one of the first to truly embrace the immediacy and potential candidness of social platforms.” While Kim Kardashian paved the way for the practices and ethos of microcelebrity and aspirational labor culture, she did not singlehandedly spearhead them, and, unlike most people who adhere to those tenets, she was not unknown beforehand.

The Kardashian family first gained notoriety in 1995, when the patriarch, Robert Kardashian, was a member of the “Dream Team” legal defense during O.J. Simpson’s murder trial. As his children grew up, his second oldest daughter, Kim, became a friend and stylist to notable socialite Paris Hilton. Kim remained a relative D-list celebrity, however, until a sex tape with her and then-boyfriend, R&B singer Ray-J, was leaked in 2007. Later that year, the E! television network ordered the reality television series Keeping up with the Kardashians, which featured episodes detailing the lives of Kim, sisters Kourtney and Khloe, half-sisters Kylie Jenner and Kendall Jenner, mother Kris Jenner, and stepfather Bruce (now Caitlyn) Jenner.

The television show spawned dozens of spin-off shows, brands, social media campaigns, products, and games. In 2016, Forbes estimated that Kim Kardashian West was worth $51 million, partially due to her success as a tech and mobile mogul. Kim’s mobile application game, Kim Kardashian: Hollywood, has over 22.8 million unique players; her personal mobile application gives fans a chance to follow her and see
exclusive content before anyone else; and her Kimoji app gives fans the chance to use Kardashian-inspired GIFs and emojis from some of the reality television’s shows most famous moments. Of course, these applications do not come without a cost – either in download fees or in-game purchases.

The Kardashian clan embodies enthrallment. They have figured out how to turn their lives into near-constant spectacle. This turn comes on the coattails of their father’s involvement in the O.J. Simpson trial, a media moment Douglas Kellner argues was twentieth century’s first megaspectacle. Kellner defines a megaspectacle as those instances that “fixate attention on events that distract people from the pressing issues of their everyday lives with endless hype on shocking crimes, sports contents and personalities, political scandals, natural disasters, and the self-promoting hype of media culture itself.” Kellner further argued that the arrival of the megaspectacle meant facets of spectacle (as discussed in Chapter One of this study) dominate the media landscape, and the internet helps aid this through the proliferation of information and images. As I have argued, enthrallment is spectacle raised to the level of the everyday, in which everyday average occurrences receive the same reverence and treatment as megaspectacles. The Kardashians embody enthrallment because they built an empire on turning the everyday into something to be privileged, through their reality show and their social media. It is befitting, then, the megaspectacle that put the Kardashians on the media landscape map – the O.J. Simpson trial – laid the groundwork for the Kardashians to remain on the media landscape through the everyday spectacle of enthrallment.

Spectacle and enthrallment may be the crux of the Kardashian family brand, but it is paradoxical. AustralianNews.com reports, “The reality stars are notorious for posting
anything and everything about their lives on social media, but it’s the family’s flashy, unobtainable type posts that turned them into a multi-million-dollar brand.”

This is the genius behind the Kardashian family brand: they position themselves as simply the family next door and present an ethos that anyone can be like them. In reality, the family’s luxurious lifestyle is a far cry from what is achievable for most. Yet, as the paradox continues, this contributes to Instagram’s culture of microcelebrity and aspirational labor. Individuals know they cannot ever really be the Kardashians but that certainly does not stop them from trying. After all, the very title of the show that started it all, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, mimics the idiom “keeping up with the Joneses” – a saying that is used to compare one to their neighbor as a benchmark of social class, economic status, and material goods.

Presently, most anything that the Kardashian clan does is deemed newsworthy, perhaps in an effort to allow *us* to keep up with *them* – keeping up with the Kardashians has replaced keeping up with the Joneses as the ethos and idiom of our time; we keep up with them figuratively through news and literally through materiality. For instance, the day I wrote the first draft of this chapter was the day Kim Kardashian West and Kanye West welcomed their third child via surrogate, and that event made my quick Google searches for facts and figures about them quite difficult. All of my Google searches that day were inundated with thousands of hits regarding their new daughter. Additionally, and in order to further demonstrate their cultural dominance, spreadability, and newsworthiness, we can examine a brief occurrence from summer 2017, when it was thought Kim Kardashian West posted a video to Snapchat which had a line of cocaine on the table behind her. At the time of writing, a Google search of the phrase “Kim
Kardashian cocaine Snapchat yields over 393,000 results. The forty-eight-hour media shenanigans that followed her initial snap had everyone from model Chrissy Teigen to MSNBC anchor Chris Hayes weighing in with Kim shutting the drug rumors down numerous times. Per Vox:

What makes this a completely Kardashian moment is Kim’s ability to take controversy and maximize exposure. Kim’s flower-crowned forensic debunking of that marble table has already been retweeted more than 27,000 times. In comparison, Donald Trump Jr.’s statement and tweet about his contact with a Russian lawyer – the biggest new story of the day – was retweeted 17,000 times. Kim’s celebrity stature outranked admitted evidence that the Donald Trump presidential campaign colluded with Russia in the 2016 presidential election. On social media, it is Kim’s world, and we all just live in it, so it is no surprise her return to Instagram was treated as such.

**Kim Kardashian’s Return to Instagram**

On January 3, 2017, Kim Karadashian West posted the following image and broke her three months of social media silence:
According to *Time* magazine, “In the post, which features her with Kanye West, and their two children, North and Saint, Kardashian West and the rest of the family are dressed in matching white and black outfits; the reality TV [sic] celebutante kept her caption succinct, stating merely ‘family.’” This image became newsworthy for two main reasons: Kim was back on Instagram, and the image was a departure from the types of pictures she had previously posted. It should be noted, however, that eventually, Kim Kardashian West returned to her previous style of Instagram photo, one that has been dubbed “flashy and fleshy” – expensive jewelry and sexy, sultry images. Initially, Kim’s different Instagram aesthetic was not necessarily what drew me to this occurrence. I was more intrigued by what had happened once it was released, just like the response to the Unicorn Frappuccino. Akin to the Unicorn Frappuccino, what happened once Kim Kardashian West’s new Instagram image and aesthetic were released yields
understanding that a new, different, and usually appealing aesthetic that diverges from what we are used to can cause quite a stir.

And it was quite a stir indeed. When I began pulling and analyzing my articles for analysis, I had 162 pertaining *just* to Kim’s return to Instagram. There were many others on the state of the media and the aesthetics of Kim’s photo, but there 162 *just on the fact she posted this picture*. Articles surrounding this image-post said “This is not a drill: Kim Kardashian is BACK on Instagram”\(^\text{25}\) and “Kim Kardashian posts first Instagram since Paris robbery (and it’s adorable).”\(^\text{26}\) Articles also followed up with, “in a series of cleverly mastered moves, Kardashian West made her triumphant return to social media,”\(^\text{27}\) and “Kim Kardashian is back.”\(^\text{28}\) Beyond articles which merely reported she was back, there were myriad think pieces – there were analysis pieces (what does this image mean?); economical (how much money did Kim lose by staying off social media?); social media habits and practices (will her robbery change how we all use social media?); shifting media aesthetics (why does her photo look like this?); and issues of privacy (how can you protect what you share so you don’t wind up like Kim?). All in all, I had over 200 articles I analyzed about Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram, and they ran the gamut, as listed above.

While I do consider quality over quantity in this study, the numbers are worth noting here because they indicate it is not just *how* we talk about Kim Kardashian West but *how much*. Herein, “how” and “how much” both indicate something newsworthy about Kardashian West’s general being because she is talked about, and she is talked about quite often. However, there is nothing inherently newsworthy about Kim Kardashian West. She is made to mean newsworthy by the media landscape she exists
within. For instance, the following quote is from BuzzFeed, which spearheaded modern clickbait, but it still jumped out at me, and it should be noted the unique styling is from the original article: “I found Kim Kardashian’s return to social media *FASCINATING*. (I mean, hello, she’s like the Michelangelo of Instagram. Or maybe Michelangelo was the Kim K of painting?).” In this case, it is not just fans, but news outlets, that deem Kim Kardashian West as an important, newsworthy figure. Because Kim Kardashian West is typically treated as a newsworthy figure, it makes sense that her return would be treated as such, too.

In their foundational work, Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order, Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts argue that the news is a social product. They write, “the media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systemic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.” (emphasis in original) Kim Kardashian West as newsworthy comes from chains of meanings that permeate culture and newsrooms; her newsworthy stature as being worth talked about comes from concrete decisions to actually talk about her. With this in mind, I now turn to a discussion of what those ideological chains of meanings and articulations are, first by beginning with shifting conceptions of celebrity.

**Celebrity in the Age of Kardashian Reproduction**

While Kim Kardashian West was silent on social media, the website Social Media Explorer wrote, “While Kim Kardashian tweeted 162 times and posted 40 Instagram pictures in September [of 2016], she hasn’t posted anything at all in the month after she
was a victim of armed robbery in Paris.” Presently, part of contemporary celebrity means being able to rattle off a celebrity’s social media statistics like one would a baseball player’s RBI. As previously stated, Kim Kardashian West can attribute much of her rise to fame to strategic uses of social media, and her return to Instagram was also just as tactical. In turn, her return to Instagram is a jumping off point from which to examine what contemporary celebrity means and how it is performed.

The current moment is dominated by “publicity, [which] is the lifeblood of celebrity.” Kim Kardashian West capitalized on this lifeblood vis-à-vis social media to achieve her empire, all by showing “personal,” “authentic,” and “real,” looks into her daily life. According to Duffy, “discourses of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ have flourished over the last decade, set against the backdrop of newly emergent technologies that have ostensibly upended top-down media hierarchies and enabled consumer-audiences to be active participants in the cultural circuit.” While Duffy’s argument is not technologically deterministic, she leads us to consider how technologically-deterministic positions can prompt individuals to think that social media works as a two-way mirror, and not a stage. For instance, individuals see Kim Kardashian West’s life through Snapchat and Instagram, and while that may be part of her “authentic” self, it is also a highly curated, planned out authentic self. Discourses of authenticity and realness may have flourished, but actual authenticity and realness (two terms that, at their core, make it difficult to pinpoint ontological certainty) remain nebulous. Social media promotes these perceived values while remaining largely performative.

It is no accident that Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram featured a simple, almost-analog era style image and was simply titled “family.” While providing a
seemingly “authentic” or “real” look into her life post-robbery, this image is actually highly planned out; however, this distinction appears to not even matter in the discourse surrounding the picture. Even though the image is curated, it is still a look into Kim Kardashian West’s life, even if it is not a one hundred percent real look into her life. After all, “Kardashian-West is one of a new generation of celebrities responsible for directly encouraging our use of social media – she interacts with us online, makes unthinkable amounts of money from sponsored posts and she prides herself on giving fans unfiltered access to her personal life.” However, as I have been arguing, this image is not wholly unfiltered, but such distinction does not matter. Any glimpse into Kim Kardashian West’s life is a worthy glimpse, and that has to do with the phenomenon of hypertrophic celebrity.

According to Tom Mole, hypertrophic celebrity occurs when “the structure of the celebrity apparatus [becomes] as much an object of fascination as the individual it produces.” By this, he means individuals are not just interested in seeing their favorite celebrities in their primary medium – television, movies, etc. – but they are also interested in how that celebrity becomes famous and maintains star status. Fans are interested in seeing the inner workings and mechanisms of celebrity life and culture, and, in turn, they can adopt these strategies themselves, which leads to phenomena like microcelebrity and aspirational labor. This is why “what endures now is not the celebrity, but the format.” Individuals are more interested in watching someone become famous than they are in seeing someone be famous; this shift in tense is significant as it indicates an emphasis on process over final product.
The Kardashian family may be the first true hypertrophic celebrities of the twenty-first century because they never had a primary medium to be known in. They were only ever famous because they showed so many inner details – curated or not – of their personal lives. They never needed a final product in their Kardashian brand because they capitalized on the process of becoming famous to make individuals remain interested in their lives. According to Mole, “just as postmodern architecture displays the ducts and pipes that make a building function, so hypertrophic celebrity foregrounds the mechanisms that manufacture celebrity.” The Kardashians foregrounded themselves, and in doing so, invoke conceptions of what Daniel Boorstin has called pseudo-events. More specifically, Boorstin refers to celebrities as “human pseudo-events,” which he defines as “a person who is known for his [sic] well-knownness.” While Boorstin is on to something regarding how celebrities become known, his argument traps culture in a tautology. We can break out of that loop, however, by considering the devices of hypertrophic celebrity and the Kardashian family. A person cannot become known for their “well-knownness” if visuality and hegemony do not privilege such mechanisms of fame in the first place. For example, it is often said about Kim Kardashian that she is famous for being famous – a tautology worthy of Boorstin. However, Kim Kardashian is not famous for being famous. She is famous for having become famous against a cultural backdrop that privileges sharing personal details of one’s own life, including the not so great; turning the everyday into spectacle; showing how she gets made up instead of showing herself just made up. Kim Kardashian is famous because of enthrallment and because our culture privileges exactly what she capitalized on to become a star.
“I Wanna Be Like Kanye”39 and the Materiality of Kardashian Culture

In 2014, EDM pop duo The Chainsmokers released their single, entitled “Kanye.” The chorus simply goes, “I wanna be like Kanye/I’ll be the King of me always.” The song invokes Kim Kardashian West’s famous husband to encourage people to be more like the rapper and his family – though it seems the materiality of the Kardashian West clan needs no encouragement. A crucial component of Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram was the materiality of the newsworthy event and how it became an ethos many wanted to follow.

John Storey defines materiality as follows: “Culture is not therefore something we ‘have,’ it is something we ‘do’ – the social production and reproduction of meanings realized in materiality and social practice…[and] sometimes the material capacities of an object are such that they transform what we do.”40 Materiality was at the core of the Unicorn Frappuccino – the material capacities of the object transformed our actions of merely drinking a coffee drink to “instagramming” and “meme-ing” the drink. In the occurrence of Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram, the image became a cultural event as realized in materiality and social practice.

After it was established Kim Kardashian West had returned to social media, the next question was the new aesthetic of her photos. HighSnobiety wrote:

It’s worth noting that these images are a marked departure from the naked selfies and crystal clear press shots of her high-end outfits. This seems to be a conscious rebranding…not only is she placing emphasis on family and friends, the star has consciously ditched the flashy aesthetic and over-sharing which many (unfairly) blamed for her robbery.41
Others questioned the aesthetic further. *BuzzFeed* asked, “Why it [sic] look like she just chillin’ at my grandma’s house in the 1970s?”[^42] A separate editorial from the same site commented, “And the content of her feed has altered dramatically. Whereas we were once bombarded with predominantly ~sexy shots~, photos of her jewelry and designer clothes, nowadays Kim’s Instagram is much more geared around her family and business.” (emphasis in original)[^43] One contributor on actress Zoey Deschanel’s lifestyle website wrote as the title to her piece, “Kim Kardashian is really committing to this whole washed-out Polaroid aesthetic on Instagram.”[^44] Such examples of discourse indicate that it was not only her return to Instagram that was worth talking about, but it was also important to discuss how her photos had changed from before the robbery.

Once this new aesthetic was established, however, the discourse shifted from breaking news to teaching individuals how to emulate Kim Kardashian West’s style. This turn towards materiality can be partially attribute to the conceptions of hypertrophic celebrity, microcelebrity, and aspirational labor; a celebrity’s actions are made newsworthy, therefore the aforementioned tenets can shift to match such a practice. The blog *Who What Wear* reported, “We figured out how Kim Kardashian West is editing her Instagram photos,”[^45] and they followed up with, “while the internet is quizzing whether this new look is here to stay, we thought we’d try and work out how she’s creating it – and we think we got to the bottom of it…keep scrolling to find out how to do it and peep our attempt.”[^46] *BuzzFeed* “tried to copy Kim Kardashian’s new Instagram aesthetic, and it was hard AF”[^47] (internet neologism meaning ‘as fuck’).” *The Hollywood Reporter* advised, “to create your own Kardashian-like image, [our expert photographer] suggests using Photoshop’s Gaussian Blur, followed by a purple and blue filter.”[^48] It now was not
enough to bask in Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram; individuals wanted to mimic the same aesthetic she was using in her photos.

According to the Irish Times, “Kim may be a Kardashian, and, as such, a poster child for vacuous materialism.” While the writer is referring to a more colloquial concept of materialism – being obsessed with things – this quote jumped out at me given how I have been interested so far in this study with how the visuality of the ocularcentric internet has seeped “offline.” Kim Kardashian’s return to Instagram yields an understanding that materiality is key to understanding how enthrallment came to be hegemonic and our dominant visuality. John Storey argues that “popular culture is never just the materiality of things: it is always a simultaneous entanglement of meaning, materiality, and social practice.” An occurrence like Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram enmeshes meaning (celebrity; her role in culture), materiality (this particular and specific image as an object that transforms what we do), and social practice (actually mimicking the aesthetic of her return image). Meaning can lend itself to materiality, and materiality to social practice. However, culture is never as simplistic and straightforward as the previous sentence suggests. The opposite order can be true; many of these things happen at the same time; cultural circuits are as nebulous as they are significant.

I have already established in this chapter how Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram was made to mean newsworthy. Taken one step further, her return to Instagram was imbibed with meaning through values of contemporary pop culture hypertrophy. Kim Kardashian West’s Instagram practices are harbingers of cultural materiality that offer insight into the zeitgeist of enthrallment. Materiality thrives when individuals use some of the same technological affordances that Kim used to emulate her
in their own social and cultural practices. Such technological affordances are the bastions of materiality. Storey elaborates on this: “This admixture [of meaning, materiality, and social practice] can take various forms: A text written on an iPhone, musical sounds produced by the human body, graffiti painted on a wall, a toy loved by a child.”

Or, this admixture of meaning, materiality, and social practice can take the form of individuals and news outlets copying the Instagram style of a celebrity.

This last notion brings me to a crucial point regarding Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram: The press played a crucial role in the spreadability and materiality of this image. I have already discussed in this study the ways in which the press plays a key role in the spreadability of images on the ocularcentric internet and how the underlying logics of such movement maintain and sustain a regime of enthrallment. However, when it comes to celebrity, I must examine the press’s role from a particular angle – tabloidization.

**The Tabloidization of Kim K(‘s Instagram)**

For the purposes of this study, when defining tabloidization, I follow S. Elizabeth Bird’s conception: “The process [of tabloidization] itself – which has come to be understood as stylistic and content changes that represent a decline in traditional journalistic standards – has been ‘lamented’ for a century or more.”

She elaborates:

The tabloid is not necessarily defined by content; tabloids may cover the same topics as mainstream journalism, although typically more briefly and more flamboyantly…tabloidization of content is usually framed in terms of increasing trivialization. Celebrity news and gossip are seen to be crowding out serious
news, and human-interest stories receive more coverage than important international events.\textsuperscript{53}

Such a turn towards celebrity and human-interest pieces are often viewed as the downfall of journalism. Tabloidization has historically been viewed as a negative force, but, as Bird suggestions, it is often more complicated than that.

Presently, tabloidization manifests through many of its older iterations, but it also comes to be through new and different ways. In the case of Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram, mainstream journalism also covered the same topic to the same extent as outlets traditionally considered tabloids. For instance, my articles from analysis came from gossip sites and blogs such as \textit{HighSnobiety} and \textit{HelloGiggles}, but they also came from \textit{Time}, \textit{Vogue}, \textit{Vanity Fair}, the \textit{LA Times}, and the \textit{Huffington Post}. Graeme Turner argues such a convergence between tabloids and more traditional, mainstream media has been inevitable, and he writes, “there has been a structural shift in what western media is doing some (not all) of the time…and the explosion of celebrity, reality TV, and so-on…actually reflects something more fundamental than contemporary media fashion.”\textsuperscript{54} The press has embraced the logics of celebrity through the materiality of their newsrooms. This does not mean there has been a “dumbing down” of the press, but rather, there has been a hegemonic shift that means celebrity issues are now considered so-called “hard” news. Such a shift is indicative of the regime of enthrallment.

This movement is also at work in the coverage of Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram. While many articles and headlines could easily be dismissed as tabloid exemplars, they actually reveal the depth of journalistic convergence between hard and soft, old and new. This is why in the coverage surrounding Kim Kardashian West and her
return there are headlines such as “An update on all things Kim K”\(^{55}\) and “Here’s how Kim Kardashian’s life has changed since the robbery.”\(^{56}\) One such article elaborated, “While we’re looking forward to seeing what’s next for the queen of social media, we’re also totally okay with her taking all the time she needs. We’re just happy to see her face again.”\(^{57}\) Given the immense coverage, the questions about Kim, the reverie around her return, and the quick turn to the materiality of her visual practices, we can see how the press plays a crucial role in the regime of enthrallment. The press as an institution is a key nodal point of movement, materiality, and spreadability. Additionally, the press changes – and is changed by – a regime of enthrallment.

To be sure, enthrallment is not just the tabloidization of everything. Such a take is too simplistic for the larger cultural shifts, work, and practices I discuss in this study. The press is not a helpless institution but rather one with agency, just like individuals within the regime of enthrallment – institutions have hegemony too, because they are made up of individuals. Institutions are not simply helplessly dragged around by ideology; rather, individuals make up institutions and bring their ideologies with them. As presented thus far throughout this study, a tenet of enthrallment is its propensity to collapse contexts: between online and offline, old fashioned and new ideas, ambivalence, and even so-called hard and soft news. This convergence between the tabloids and more traditional journalism is yet another way in which boundaries blur in a regime of enthrallment. Enthrallment merges old and new, hard and soft, online and offline, everyday and spectacle to use the logics of one part of the spectrum to impact the other. Enthrallment is not necessarily hierarchical in this way; for instance, “hard” news can impact “soft” news and vice-versa. The articulations move both ways.
Just because “delineations between news and entertainment are no longer clear” does not mean that culture or journalism are in devastating, tumultuous places. In fact, per Jean Baudrillard’s problematic, such an implosion is beneficial in the way it lends itself to a new terrain of complex cultural and social discovery. Specifically, in regard to journalism, while many have looked at the way mainstream journalism has been impacted by tabloids through such collapse, I would like to use this occurrence to ground an examination of how tabloids are impacted by mainstream journalism. Approaching the subject from this angle allows me to tease apart the moments of tension and harmony between the two formats and argue that presently, there is not much different between the two. While many argue this point by saying tabloids have influenced mainstream journalism, by examining it from the other way, we can ask the question of how mainstream journalism has influenced tabloids. Asking the question in this way reveals the same answer – there is not much difference between the two formats – but we arrive here on a much different route which offers new types of knowledge. We see a mutual convergence, impacted by enthrallment, instead of a mere swallowing of one industry by the other. It is such a focus I turn to in the next section.

**The Rise of Instajournalism**

This chapter has explored the themes at work in Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram and has used them to interrogate the role of the Instagram image in the regime of enthrallment. In this section, I focus on these tenets in conjunction with the press, and how celebrity, materiality, and tabloidization, when taken together, reveal a new journalistic phenomenon that can be partially attributed to the ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment. I refer to this journalistic practice as “instajournalism.”
According to Barbie Zelizer, “as journalism has propelled forward across time and space, the emergence of different technological tools for its relay has complicated what we presume is within the parameters of the knowledge as news.”

Specifically, in regard to the internet, social, and digital media, Bird elaborates:

The internet’s promise of democratization raised hopes that this would offer a much greater variety of serious, international news. To some extent it has, but at the same time it seems clear that what has happened is that more time than ever is being devoted to the kinds of stories that are typically seen as tabloid.

In reconciling this block quote and Barbie Zelizer’s quote at the opening of this paragraph, what emerges is the idea the internet and social media complicate what is considered news and that the tabloid influence is stronger than ever. However, given what I have presented in this chapter, I do not agree that the tabloid influence is stronger than ever. What I do argue is that we are amidst an entirely new journalistic phenomenon that does not simply exist at the intersection of tabloid and mainstream, traditional journalism; this new practice implodes the intersection entirely because of a mutual convergence of mainstream journalism, tabloids, and enthrallment.

This new practice clears the way for novel understandings of how news and knowledge are found, spread, reported, and shared in a regime of enthrallment. The internet and social media have introduced new objects, actions, and practices that can be considered news – and Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram exemplifies this. This is not technological determinism, but rather, the understanding that a decade ago it would not have made much sense to report in Time or Vanity Fair on a picture that a celebrity posted online. Today, however, what a celebrity does on Instagram or on other social media...
media platforms can be made to mean newsworthy because of the enthralling processes and ideologies that construct celebrity occurrences as news. Examples of what I’m referring to can be found in headlines such as “Selena Gomez might have just addressed her alleged feud with her mother on Instagram;” “People are mom-shaming Kourtney Kardashian for a nude Instagram photo and it’s really not okay;” “Meghan Markle deletes her Facebook and Twitter accounts;” “Chris Pratt returns to social media after break.”

Kim Kardashian West is not the only celebrity to exist at the nexus of what I have discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, such reporting does not only apply to celebrity social media practice. Individual social media actions are can be made to mean newsworthy as well. For example, the hype and popularity of occurrences – and the news articles that followed – such as “Chewbacca Mom,” the woman who gave birth wearing a giraffe mask, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, and the Hot Dog Princess demonstrate that it is certain social media content in general that is privileged, not just those actions belonging to celebrities. This trend of reporting and writing articles covering a social media action is a turn towards a journalistic practice that I refer to as “instajournalism.”

Instajournalism refers to the practice of reporting on the practices of social media and digital cultures, and it relies on a swirling amalgamation of practices from traditional, mainstream journalism and the tabloids. While such journalism does often report on what a celebrity has posted to Instagram or Snapchat, the practice is not just limited to famous individuals. Another way it is different from tabloidization, however, is that it represents a complete collapse of boundaries between so-called “hard” and “soft” news. Instajournalism implodes the boundaries between mainstream journalism and the tabloids in order to create a new journalistic terrain entirely. Within this terrain, it is not just
mainstream journalism that is pulling from the tabloids, but the tabloids that are pulling from mainstream journalism. Scholars have argued that as traditional journalism adopts practices more akin to the tabloids, the quality of traditional journalism declines. And while I am not discounting the fact there has been a shift in journalistic practices over the last several decades that does mimic tabloid logic, these forces do not simply move in one direction. Graeme Turner argues that looking at these shifts through such a singular focus would lead to an understanding of the “dumbing down” of traditional journalism, but this does not provide the widest lens through which to understand how these practices have grown and changed (whether one considers them to be for better or for worse). The shifts I am describing through instajournalism understand tabloidization as a part of a regime of enthrallment, specifically in that tabloidization has contributed to a culture of near-constant entertainment. However, tabloidization is not the sole cause of this regime, and this study situates tabloidization within a culture that has long-since privileged spectacle and entertainment.

None of this is to say traditional, mainstream journalism and tabloids, as conventionally understood, no longer exist. Instajournalism is merely a new practice involving the coverage of social media that appears to equalize institutions. Instajournalism may vary in style and form, but it is always consistent in content: It involves reporting on something a celebrity did on Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Periscope, YouTube, or Facebook – or what a regular person did, and how such actions went viral – and writing an article largely about that action. Instajournalism allows us to follow celebrities, regular individuals with extraordinary social media practices, and spreadable images without “following” them, in the social media sense. Like the types of
articles discussed in the Kim Kardashian West’s return section of this chapter, these articles can take several positions or themes – simple reporting, analysis, think pieces, economical, influencer, technological, etc. However, a piece of instajournalism will feature the main acknowledgment of an individual, famous or not, performing an action or practice on a social media account, and then breaking down said action or practice in the remainder of their article. Instajournalism is a terrain befitting enthrallement, in part because it is a confluence of the themes discussed in this chapter: celebrity, materiality, and tabloidization.

Instajournalism is a byproduct of hypertrophic celebrity culture. This is such, because Instajournalism, when dealing specifically with stardom, covers not just the celebrity in their primary form of TV, movies, etc., but also covers the inner-workings and structural apparatuses of what made them famous in the first place. When celebrities like Kim Kardashian West turned to social media to bolster their brand and star standing, they were able to post pictures from their everyday lives (no matter how curated) and show many so-called “behind the scenes” images of what it takes to become a celebrity. In turn, the press picked up on these images of their everyday lives and “behind the scenes” and wrote articles about the images.

However, instajournalism is not a just a new role for the paparazzi. The traditional paparazzi go to and follow the celebrity literally; they seek out the celebrity. With instajournalism the press may “follow” the celebrity (in the social media sense), but the celebrity also comes to the press through push notifications, headlines, and updates.64 How reporters get their stories and this issue of “following,” in the figurative sense, is a crucial component of Instajournalism. According to Bird, “part of the earlier critique of
tabloid journalism was that reporters gathered information through paid informants, gossip-mongers, and simple rumor; this outrage seems almost outdated now that anyone can post anything.” In fact, because anyone can now post anything, instajournalism thrives. Reporters can now get information literally straight from the source of the celebrity’s Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, or directly from the internet when a meme or event is spreading. Instajournalism is a type of convergence between tabloid journalism and traditional, mainstream journalism, and such confluence comes from the source itself. Instajournalists use mainstream techniques – straight from the source – to report on something that has typically been deemed tabloid – celebrity practice, action, and apparatus.

Instajournalism also depends on materiality. It reveals new meanings of social practice, visuality, and hegemony within journalism. The practice thrives because of digital actions – and more often than not visual actions – are made to mean newsworthy. In this way, when a celebrity performs something new on social media, emulating their aesthetic is also made to mean newsworthy. In the case of Kim Kardashian West, it was not just enough to read about her new style of Instagram photos. Individuals performed similar aesthetics too. By performing such an aesthetic vis-à-vis materiality, the meaning is reified as important – the practice is no longer just something that celebrity does, but something many can strive to do. This is because “meanings are not in the materiality of things but in how the things are constructed as meaningful in social practices of representation.” Contemporary materiality is contingent upon not just an emphasis on the inner workings of celebrity practices but how individuals also come to attempt those practices themselves.
Instajournalism is a practice befitting enthralment. It relies on—and creates and is subsequently reified by—various pillars that make up the regime of enthralment. It is difficult to determine where instajournalism began, and it creates a chicken-or-egg scenario: Did enthralment create instajournalism, or did instajournalism create enthralment? The answer is simultaneously yes and no to both iterations of the question. Enthrallment and instajournalism have a dialectical relationship together in the cultural field, as both use the tenets propagated by the other to maintain visuality and hegemony.

This is why, as I turn to the conclusion of this chapter, this particular quote from John Storey jumps out at me:

Although material objects are always more than signs, more than symbolic representations of social relations, what they are for us is inconceivable outside a particular culture that entangles meaning, materiality, and social practice. They are never things in themselves, but always objects that are articulated in relation to a particular regime of realized signification, enabling and constraining particular types of social practices (emphasis added).67

Kim Kardashian West returning to Instagram with a new aesthetic is a social practice. Newspapers writing about her new style, and teaching individuals how to mimic it, is a social practice. Individuals mimicking Kim Kardashian West’s Instagram look on their own accounts is a social practice. And, Instajournalism is a social practice. But none of these social practices can emerge, or have meaning, or be made newsworthy, without being situated in a regime that privileges tenets of hypertrophic celebrity, tabloidization, and materiality. These tenets move past only applying to famous individuals like Kim Kardashian West and become the grounds on which individuals make the cultural
conditions of their own lives. In this way, Instagram is more than a platform, and Instagram images are more than just pictures posted to the site – Instagram is the ground on which digitally visual transformations are worked.

Chapter Summary

This chapter used the occurrence of Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram to examine the ways in which the Instagram image spreads in a regime of enthrallment. Herein, I identified the pillars and practices of celebrity, materiality, and tabloidization as key components in understanding Instagram images. By grounding this chapter in the practices of Kim Kardashian West, I explore how changing conceptions of what constitutes a celebrity trickles through culture and has implications for the cultural work of enthrallment. This often occurs via materiality, in which individuals emulate a celebrity’s visual social media practices in their own lives. The phenomenon of tabloidization assists in this spread, as the press retains a key – albeit changing – role in the dissemination of news about a celebrity. Taken together, these tenets reveal a new journalistic phenomenon, which is a practice I refer to as instajournalism. Instajournalism refers to a reporter writing an article solely based on a celebrity’s social media actions or practices and is a mutual convergence of tabloid and mainstream, traditional journalistic precepts.
Notes on Chapter Five


Over one Christmas holiday, I had a conversation with my brother. He was telling me a funny tweet he had seen recently, and I was surprised because I did not even know he had a Twitter account.

“What’s your handle?” I asked. “I want to follow you.”

“Oh,” he said. “I don’t have a Twitter account. I just see screenshots of tweets on Facebook and Reddit.”

I begin this chapter with this anecdote to highlight a point: Screenshots – particularly those from Twitter – are ubiquitous on the ocularcentric internet. It is an important distinction to refer to screenshots from Twitter, as opposed to the platform of Twitter, being ubiquitous since it is not necessarily tweets that get shared from Twitter to sites like Facebook or Reddit. It is images of those tweets that get shared.

Taking a screenshot is a simple way to share images, texts, or images and text on another site, and this done so by converting the content in question into its own distinct image. On a mobile device, one may hold down a certain combination of buttons to take a screenshot; on a computer, COMMAND+SHIFT+4 does the trick. However they are taken, they still spread at a rapid rate through digital cultures, and the ability to turn any
text or image-based online content into an image is a defining quality of the internet’s ocularcentrism in that “we have always found ways to be visual online.”

Screenshots are shared by users on sites like Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, and they can even be taken on Twitter and re-shared on the site. Two examples of these types of sharing are featured below:

\[\text{Figure 6.1: Screenshot from Twitter on Instagram, Uber}\]

I pulled this image from Instagram. But given the style conventions of what is inside the picture’s frame, it is correct to assume that this image was initially text on Twitter in the form of a tweet. But individuals are not the only ones who share and spread screenshots. Media organizations, non-profits, and activist groups have come to rely on them as well. Below is an example I took from the MissRepresentation Facebook page:

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\[\text{^A I am aware of the fact that most of the images I have included in this chapter are screenshots of screenshots – providing another level of representation and removal from the original. Taking a screenshot was simply the most effective way to capture the image I needed and to place it in my study. I have attempted to provide as much context as I can to situate these screenshots, including how I found them.}\]
Figure 6.2: A MissRepresentation Facebook Screenshot

Figure 6.2, pulled from Facebook, is also a screenshot that was taken from Twitter. These above-mentioned examples bolster the idea that was present in my conversation with my brother: that screenshots are abundant on the ocularcentric internet.

I knew I had to discuss screenshots when I began this project. Despite being abundant in digital cultures, there has been very little written on the subject. Furthermore, when I was planning out this project, I knew I wanted at least one chapter to move out of the realm of what was considered traditional popular culture. I wanted to do this in order to establish one thing I knew to be correct about enthrallment – it is not just the zeitgeist of pop culture, but it has the potential to seep into every nook, cranny, and crevice of contemporary culture, and that includes things that are typically deemed more “serious”
or “hard,” or “highbrow.” Therefore, while I have spent the bulk of my time in this study
discussing occurrences that many, if not all, readers would lump into a strictly “pop
culture” category, this chapter deviates. And while I remain skeptical and critical of
often-rigid distinctions such as “pop culture,” “high culture,” “low culture,” “soft news,”
and “hard news,” I wanted to break out of what I was typically doing and examine the
ocularcentric internet and enthralment in tandem with something considered more
“serious.” For the purposes of this study, I decided that avenue was politics, the image
type was screenshots, and the occurrence was screenshots of Donald Trump’s tweets.

It is almost impossible to conceive of the modern-day ocularcentric internet
without Donald Trump’s role on Twitter. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to
understand contemporary American politics without considering Donald Trump’s role on
Twitter. The president frequently uses the platform – 2,608 times in 2017, to be exact.
For comparison’s sake, and per The American Presidency Project, President Trump has
only held one singular press conference since taking office, which is substantially less
than his predecessors of any party. President Trump’s so-called “twitter fingers” have
immense political, cultural, and economic implications. Per the BBC:

Seven months before his shock election victory, Donald Trump promised a crowd
in Rhode Island that he would not use Twitter if he became president. Why? “Not
presidential,” he said in April 2016. Fast forward to the one-year anniversary of
his inauguration. Not only has he continued using Twitter since moving into the
White House, he’s done so with vigor, sending 2,608 tweets in the past year –

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An internet neologism meaning, per Urban Dictionary: “Somebody who fancies themselves a social
media expert and tweets and retweets incessantly as if every thought they have is vitally important to the
well-being of humanity.”

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some mundane, some inflammatory. It’s “modern-day presidential,” Trump said (in a tweet, naturally). Twitter has become the president’s favorite way of communicating, and it’s not the only way in which Donald Trump has been far from a traditional, conventional president.

In an editorial in the Sacramento Bee, columnists wrote that Donald Trump’s frequent use of Twitter has “radically transformed presidential communications” and that President Trump’s “smartphone has become one of the most powerful weapons in political history.” These claims indicate that coverage of the Trump Administration is more focused on his Twitter than policy, and these claims are also not merely hyperbolic or without facts to back them up. According to *Time*:

In Trump’s first year in office, tweets from @realdonaldtrump have cut the cost of an Air Force contract, undermined White House messaging, forced federal agencies to rebuke them, stoked a congressional investigation, spurred the former director of the FBI to leak a damaging memo, possibly led to the appointment of a special counsel, created new legal trouble for the White House, announced a new military policy to the surprise of the Pentagon, upended a Republican plan to gut an ethics office, nearly derailed two bills the White House backed and been cited by multiple judges ruling against the Administration on several issues.

This block quote, as well as the block quote from the *BBC*, suggest that the media and public’s focus on the Trump Administration is rooted in conversations of Donald Trump’s Twitter account and habits. For instance, on the first-year anniversary of his inauguration, media outlets spent more time covering the president’s Twitter habits than they did on any attempted policies. Even when they tried to sum up his year, they relied
on screenshots and links from his Twitter account to tell the story. For those who may read my dissertation and argue that enthrallment is just everything turned into popular culture, politics allows us to read it differently – these tenets seep far beyond pop culture, to myriad realms and crevices. Enthrallment refers to practices rooted in a specific moment of visuality and hegemony, and said practices produce a particular cultural moment. This work is not limited solely to popular culture.

In this chapter, I am concerned with screenshots of President Trump tweets and how they spread through the ocularcentric internet, illustrating how the regime of enthrallment works. I also look at how tenets of enthrallment discussed thus far in this study, such as the role of the press, changing journalistic norms, shifting ideologies, context, and materialism, are not just limited to the terrain we call pop culture but have impacted other facets of contemporary culture as well. As such, this chapter differs from the previous ones – instead of introducing solely brand-new tenets of enthrallment, this chapter examines previously stated ones. It does so in conjunction with American politics.

This chapter moves in five parts. First, I present some information regarding Donald Trump and Twitter in order to present the screenshots in context. Second, I situate the screenshot as a particular type of image in its proper theoretical and historical contexts. Third, I discuss how screenshots have become a key tool of the press to share images and information in a regime of enthrallment. Fourth, I discuss screenshots in conjunction with materiality and digital cultures. Finally, I discuss how the screenshot is a tricky, difficult, ambivalent image that is indicative of larger crises of truth and fake news that currently plagues contemporary America.
History – and Twitter – Has Its Eyes on You: Situating the Trump Administration

In November of 2016, in what many considered to be a shocking defeat, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lost the U.S. presidential election to real estate developer, reality TV star, and tabloid personality Donald Trump. What immediately began was a rising tide of resistance against President Trump and his ramshackle, hyper-conservative administration. Individuals flocked to social media to organize protests and Women’s Marches, make so-called “pussy hats,” and resist the politics and social injustices happening around them. Likewise, Donald Trump took to social media as well, using Twitter to define his place in American history.

Twitter has been a defining hallmark of President Trump’s administration. He uses it to hail personal attacks against private citizens and government officials – to say nothing of fellow world leaders. He uses the site to undermine his own party’s agenda, set foreign policy, provoke North Korea with shallow, childish taunts against Kim Jong-un, and provide us with the typo seen round the world – covfefe. Furthermore, in an interview with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Stanford University, current Secretary of State Rex Tillerson admitted to printing out the President’s tweets so Tillerson is in the know and that he understands the president’s wishes and plans. Therefore, images of Trump’s tweets set foreign policy. The White House has also stated many time that Trump tweets are to be considered official statements.

What individuals do with the content Donald Trump spews on Twitter is not exempt from the tenets I have discussed thus far in this dissertation. In fact, his words, actions, and behaviors are some of the most popular things to merge with the factory and
showroom logic of the ocularcentric internet. His own words and behaviors often become part of the endless fodder for material. For instance, after President Trump tweeted this:

![Donald Trump tweet from 11/11/17](image1)

**Figure 6.3: Donald Trump tweet from 11/11/17.**

Someone took his own words and inserted them within the context of a meme from the 1990s MTV hit, *Daria*, as if they were being spoken by the titular character’s vain, shallow, and vapid sister:

!["Daria" meme, made from Donald Trump's 11/11/17 tweet](image2)

**Figure 6.4: "Daria" meme, made from Donald Trump's 11/11/17 tweet**

And then, when President Trump mysteriously tweeted “covfefe” (pardon me for not knowing this – according to former Press Secretary Sean Spicer, I must be outside of the small group of people who knew what the president was saying) this meme made the rounds on the ocularcentric internet:
The above image inserts President Trump’s secret meaning tweet into the context of the 2017 movie *Arrival* – in which Amy Adams’s character (shown above) tries to teach aliens the English language by writing words on a portable white board.

Humor aside, President Trump’s tweets have had serious and concrete implications for his political agenda and the everyday lived experiences of individuals. For instance, in June of 2017, President Trump tweeted the following:

![Donald Trump tweet from 6/5/17](image)

According to The *Washington Post*, “when a federal appeals court…decided not to reinstate the president’s travel ban, it cited this tweet as an indication that the ban was targeted at entire countries, rather than simply at dangerous people within those countries who fit certain criteria.”

Screenshots of President Trump tweets came up again
regarding the president’s proposed ban of individuals who are transgender serving in the military. Once again citing the *Washington Post*:

> A federal judge…blocked Trump’s transgender military ban…and yet again, it was because Trump’s tweets contradicted what the lawyers had said. Those lawyers said the ban was merely being studied, but U.S. District Court Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly used *images of the tweets* and ruled that they proved the administration’s intention. (emphasis added)¹⁷

This above mentioned quote sets the stage for understanding the role screenshots play on the ocularcentric internet – first and foremost, they are an easy way for the already blurred boundaries of online and offline to further blend, as one can simply take content online, take a screenshot, and print it out to physical paper. Additionally, the fact that a judge used *images of President Trump tweets*, and not President Trump tweets themselves, begins to get at the issues of representation involved in the process of taking a screenshot. Screenshots are not an original, but rather, a re-presentation of something. This distinction is significant, particularly when we consider that tweets are first and foremost words, and when we turn text into images, text becomes susceptible to the properties of images. To understand this process, it is worth turning attention to the ways texts and images have historically been kept separate in literary and art history, as well as to why such a distinction matters – and what happens when text begins to function with an image’s properties.

**Screening the Screenshot: Fluctuating Properties of Images and Texts**

At the time of writing, there are gaps in media studies, cultural studies, internet studies, critical data studies, and cultural technology studies regarding the role of the
screenshot in contemporary digital cultures. That being said, when I set out to write this chapter, I did not just have to lay a theoretical foundation for understanding the screenshot – I also had to create and mix my own concrete with materials from various fields. The resulting binding material came from reading around the topic of screenshots, rather than screenshots themselves. I visited literature from computer science and technology studies. I read around screenshots by considering certain issues related to them and visited cultural media studies and internet studies vis-à-vis ephemeral media, media memory, the ethics of Photoshop, internet parody, convergence culture, and the roles of hardware and software in documenting online content. The resulting concrete is how I theorize the screenshot for the purposes of this study, and I begin by first defining what exactly a screenshot is.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a screenshot as: “A photograph or (now usually) a digital image of all or part of what is displayed at a given time on a screen, esp. a computer screen.”¹⁸ But it is Google’s definition that contains a piece of information with deep theoretical implications for the studies of these types of images – “An image of the data displayed on the screen of a computer or a mobile device.”¹⁹ The most significant part of this definition is the section that reads, “an image of the data.” This is a fundamental part of understanding the screenshot – what we see on our computer screens and cell phones is actually binary code, millions upon millions of 1s and 0s turning something into a visual representation that we can understand.

The first screenshots emerged from the Computer Aided Design (CAD) project at MIT in the early 1960s. These earliest iterations of the screenshot were literally photographs taken of computer screens, and then individuals created the technology for
the computer to be able to take the photograph of itself, by itself. The need and want for the ability to take screenshots emerged when the scientists and engineers at MIT “began talking about a future of ‘human-computer symbiosis…and they created a new type of image – the screenshot – that represented this new possibility.” Presently, this “human-computer symbiosis” manifests in lighter, nimbler, and more easily accessible ways than the earliest CAD project. Furthermore, said relationship between humans, technology, and associated screenshots can be understood through technological affordances.

Affordances are ways of looking at the cultural materiality of technology, in that we can look at the ways people use devices in ways that are not always obvious. Screenshots are such an affordance because they are a way for users to bypass restrictions on social media platforms and share content across sites. This was not the initial purpose of the screenshot, but through individual’s uses of media, culture, and technology, the screenshot emerged as a new social practice and type of affordance.

Platforms and mobile applications have their own distinct conventions, styles, and designs, and unless they are owned by the same parent company, sharing across them is difficult. Images, however, typically function in similar ways across all platforms, particularly due to universal programming languages – despite what Facebook or Twitter, respectively, may want to do, they still have to do it in computer code. Therefore, most images are programmed in the same way. Through screenshots, individuals found a way to move around the constraints of Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit, and share content-as-image across multiple platforms. Because of the screenshot’s emergence as a particular social practice intended to bypass technological constraints, it is not only an affordance, but it also demonstrates how total digital harmony and platform cohesion will never come
to be. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins referred to this technological wishful thinking as the Black Back Fallacy: The misinformed idea that one day, all media will flow through one singular black box in our living rooms.\(^{22}\) The perpetual tangle of cords, the lack of interoperability between platforms and applications, and the perceived financial advantages Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey have for keeping their companies separate, means that the idea of all media existing in perfect technological harmony is not only a fallacy, like Jenkins says, but a pipe dream. Screenshots demonstrate just how far away we are from total digital congruence but also how materiality is a defining concept of the ocularcentric internet. This will be discussed more in-depth later on in the chapter, but for right now, laying a theoretical and historical foundation for the screenshot means acknowledging how the screenshot emerged as a material practice to spread content despite technological constraints.

The modern screenshot may have emerged from a human-technological symbiosis, but, like other novel image forms, it brought with it particular styles, conventions, and theoretical implications for scholars to parse through. According to Allen, “understanding screenshots requires not only tracking their circulation but also looking closely at their distinct visual conventions.”\(^ {23}\) Screenshots, like all other types of images, are always within the realm of representations, “that is, the fact that [screenshots] are photographs of screens is part of their representational content.”\(^ {24}\) Herein, representation and spreadability are interwoven, since to spread an image means to produce a representation. When one shares or reposts an image, it is creating a new iteration of the image and therefore a new representation.
Understanding these complex relationships of spreadability and representation requires understanding the close-knit history of computer and visual conventions.

According to Lev Manovich:

If we believe the word *cinematograph*, which means “writing movement,” the essence of cinema is recording and storing visible data in a material form. A film camera records and stores data on film; a film projector reads it off. The cinematic apparatus is similar to a computer in one key respect: A computer’s program and data also have to be stored in a medium. This is why the Universal Turing Machine looks like a film projector…In fact, the development of a suitable storage medium and a method for coding data represent important parts of the prehistory of both cinema and the computer. As we know, the inventors of cinema eventually settled on using discrete images recorded on a strip of celluloid; the inventors of the computer – which needed much greater speed of access as well as the ability to quickly read and write data – eventually decided to store it electronically in binary code.\(^\text{25}\)

Despite appearing still, the content on computer screens is always moving. Essentially, the content on the computer screen is like a movie that changes itself in reaction to our actions and the code we interact with – as if the director were making changes, in real time, as we interact with it. This is the case since an image on a typical computer screen turns over 3600 times a second (this is an average estimate; the turnover can be more or less depending on the type of display screen one’s computer has). What that means is binary code is stored the computer’s frame buffer approximately 3600 times a second,
and a screenshot is merely one image of those 3600 turnovers. A screenshot is like pulling a singular frame from a movie.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag wrote, “as the old advertising slogan of Paris Match, founded in 1949, had it: The weight of words, the shock of photos.” But, given, the play and interplay discussed thus far in this chapter of turning text into image, but now the reverse is also true: “the shock of words, and the weight of photos.” By this, I return to the occurrence that grounds this chapter – Donald Trump’s tweets. Many have called President Trump’s Twitter behavior callous and inappropriate, and therefore, the tweets manage to shock us with new lows. But the weight of photos, as opposed to the shock of photos, comes in when we consider the screenshot. For example, there is a Twitter bot (an algorithm or software programmed through the site’s API – application programming interface – to automatically perform certain actions) that is called @RealPressSecBot. @RealPressSecBot was created after Sean Spicer declared the president’s tweets were official White House statements, and the code was designed to reflect this cultural announcement. Below, I have included a screenshot I took from @RealPressSecBot after an inflammatory President Trump tweet against North Korea:
Because the White House has insisted that President Trump tweets are official policy, the @RealPressSecBot takes screenshots of said tweets and turns them into “correct” presidential statement press release format. In this format, the shock of President Trump’s words generates a staggering weight within the image, as we must grapple with the dissonance of such inflammatory words in the image of official presidential conventions.

I have discussed what screenshots can do and how they are technically created, and I have provided several examples. Before turning to the next section of this chapter, I would like to first establish some parameters regarding types of screenshots. In general, there are three types: Screenshots of images, screenshots of text, and screenshots of images and text. This chapter is concerned with screenshots of texts and screenshots of images and texts. Within this typology, there are further breakdowns. For instance, there are the most simplistic, straightforward types of screenshot, which is something “real” and unedited that has been passed around. See below.
This is the most straightforward type of screenshot – unedited information taken from one platform and shared on another. Another popular type of screenshot, however, is the “real” screenshot, but one that has been edited in a way that one cannot possibly question whether it’s real or not. These types of images are quite clearly fake, and it is quite obvious they have been altered. For instance:
This above image takes a real screenshot and then edits it in a program like Microsoft Paint or PhotoShop. The image has changed Donald Trump’s original tweet of “Thank you to the LGBT community! I will fight for you while Hillary brings in more people that will threaten your freedom and beliefs” to “To the LGBT community! I will fight you.” The fact that we can still see smidgens of the original tweet is important, for this helps us understand that this tweet, while done is jest, is rooted in important discussions of LGBT rights. Screenshots like these do not necessarily have to be skillfully edited; in fact, it is in the purposeful lack of high quality that the edited screenshot conveys its message while solidifying that it is, in fact, a representation. Finally, a third type of screenshot is the made-in-Photoshop image that is made to look exactly like a screenshot but is, in fact, completely fake.
The above image was a screenshot that circulated on Twitter after Donald Trump fired FBI Director James Comey in May 2017. It was said to be circulating as a screenshot because Comey had tweeted it and then deleted it. The tweet, however, was fake – one, it was debunked by Comey himself, and two, the realization came that the tweet was more than 180 characters long (Twitter’s space limit at the time).

Now, after having established theoretical and historical context for the screenshot, as well as the types of screenshots one can encounter on the ocularcentric internet, I now turn to some of the dominant forms made available in examining how screenshots of Donald Trump tweets spread in the regime of enthrallment.

**Straight from the Represented Source: Screenshots and Journalism**

As briefly demonstrated in Chapter Five’s discussion of instajournalism, social media platforms and individual practices have influenced journalism. Presently, another way this change manifests is through the incorporation of tweets in articles. For instance, when the Philadelphia Eagles won the Super Bowl, *Sports Illustrated’s* coverage consisted not only of an article about the victory, but pithy and celebratory tweets from individuals on Twitter. This is not a one-off example: The one-year anniversary of President Trump’s inauguration happened while I was writing this chapter. Therefore, a
lot of what I was finding were articles summing up his first year in office through links to, or images of now deleted, tweets. These articles did not just describe what he had done in his first year of office; they included links and images followed by explanations and analyses of the impact they had on U.S. and international affairs. This is instajournalism in the realm of politics – it is not limited to celebrity.

In Washington D.C. political culture, one of the worst things that can happen to a presidential administration is what is referred to as a “process story.” A process story “is a story about how policy is made, not the policy itself.” It is a focus on politics that considers the behind-the-scenes of D.C., and it is a focus on politics that is just as interested in how policy is made as opposed to the end result. If the language sounds familiar here to what I discussed in Chapter Five, it should – process story is to hypertrophic celebrity as politics is to celebrity. With Donald Trump, we have had a convergence of everything in the previous sentence’s analogy. Even if the Trump Administration could get anything done, the focus would be on how it got done, mainly through discussions and analyses of the president’s tweets. The fact that Donald Trump’s first year in office was covered through tweets instead of policy indicates that what is actually newsworthy is how President Trump attempts to be president instead of what he actually is getting done as president. Therefore, the focus is on the structural apparatuses in question instead of policy, making process stories the reality television and hypertrophic celebrity of politics.

Twitter as a structural apparatus, and Twitter as the “behind the scenes” look of Trump’s presidency means that the social media platform is always already embedded within the President’s cultural and political ethos. I do not follow Donald Trump on
Twitter, but I always see his tweets, either through others interacting with them on my Twitter feed, or in articles that compile and analyze them. This is noteworthy, since even though President Trump tweets, and screenshots of President Trump tweets, are often shared on Twitter, based on my analysis the bulk of their spread comes from the ocularcentric internet’s symbiotic relationship with the traditional press. President Trump’s tweets can be shared in these articles either through direct links, or through screenshots, and the press works as an indirect amplifier to his message. For instance, *Newsweek* writes, “as much as Donald Trump loathes the mainstream media, it could be argued that he needs those outlets to spread his messages – because they reach far more people than his beloved Twitter account.” At first, such a claim seems paradoxical, because at the time of writing, Donald Trump has 47.4 million Twitter followers. One would think that would be enough to help spread his message. And even though the *Houston Chronicle* reports that “Trump’s tweets were shared more than 48 million times by users” in 2017, the tweets were actually “seen by less than 1% of his followers.” The explanation for this is two-fold: First, as previously discussed in this chapter, Twitter bots play a role in boosting numbers on the platform, and during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a significant portion of President Trump’s twitter stats came solely from bots. The second explanation invokes materialism, which I will discuss in the next section.

That being said, if Donald Trump does want to get his message out to those not following him on Twitter, he needs the mainstream media. As established in various points throughout this study, the ocularcentric internet and the mainstream press exist in a cybernetic feedback loop within the regime of enthrallment, and such a relationship is one of the hallmarks of this cultural work. For instance, *Newsweek* interviewed Social
Flow (a social media optimization company), and their CEO Jim Anderson, said, regarding President Trump’s tweets, that “[Trump] does get some retweet action, but really the [sic] lion share of his attention comes from the media – everyone picking it up.” 34 This is, as one news outlet puts it, “unfortunate for Trump, who has termed most news networks and newspapers ‘fake news’.” 35 Additionally, not everyone has a Twitter account, which means that if Donald Trump does want to use his favorite mode of communication to be “modern-day presidential,” he is still going to need some help getting out that message.

However, a bulk of his help comes from one particular node within this symbiotic relationship: Fox News. The **BBC** writes, “32% of [Trump’s] tweets were sent between 06:00 and 09:00 (perhaps it’s not a coincidence that this is the time his favourite TV show, Fox and Friends, is on air).” 36 Matthew Gertz, a writer for **Politico** magazine, spent months studying the relationship between Donald Trump, his twitter, and Fox and Friends, and what he found was truly indicative of a feedback loop. 37 Gertz writes, “but my many hours following the president’s tweets…have convinced me the truth is often much simpler: The president is just live-tweeting Fox, particularly the network’s Trump-loving morning show, *Fox & Friends.*” 38 Therefore, the relationship between the press and the ocularcentric internet plays out not just with memes, selfies, and Kim Kardashian West, but in the realm of America’s politics as well. Such a cycle, in this case, looks as follows: President Trump watches Fox and Friends, and he does so in a very now-debunked hypodermic needle model of media effects by merely repeating exactly what they say in his tweets. He posts those tweets. People – users supporting him, despising him, or journalists writing stories – will take screenshots of his tweets and share them in
articles or in other ways on Twitter. Many other news outlets become inundated with screenshots of President Trump’s tweets and analyzing what they could mean. Fox and Friends reports positively on President Trump and his tweets. President Trump watches Fox and Friends. And the cycle begins all over again. This may be why *The Economist* writes that “Fox News enjoys considerable influence over the world’s most important Twitter account.”

The Trump/Twitter/Fox News cycle is merely one example of how the press and the ocularcentric internet interact within the regime of enthrallment. While the *Sacramento Bee* writes, “[Trump’s] tweets fixation fuels a parasitic economy in which people complete to ride his digital coattails,” and *Bustle* claims, “Time and time again, Donald Trump has been cited as the reason why the news cycle in America has changed for the worse.” I take issue with both these claims – mainly, they are far too simplistic. President Trump, his twitter habits, and the ubiquitous spread of his screenshots are born of, and embedded within, hegemonic and institutional cultural practices and values. Specifically, they are born of, and embedded within, a culture that privileges enthrallment and ocularcentrism. The same culture that gave us Kim Kardashian West, divorce selfies, and Harambe also gave us President Donald Trump, and while many may scoff or dismiss this as the downfall of culture (as many have done when I have discussed the topics of this dissertation), it cannot be ignored. We are not idle, passive dupes but agentic individuals who actively participate in the making of our own culture – even if that culture includes things we do not like, such as Donald Trump or Harambe.

Similarly, the obsessive, 24/7 news cycle did not start with Donald Trump’s political career, and it certainly will not end with it. Therefore, claims like “statements
from the president are inherently newsworthy,” bolster the veracity of the very media practices pundits, writers, and civilians alike criticize. Newsworthiness is not simply a quality something has; a story or an event has to be made to mean newsworthy through cultural values and hegemony. Screenshots of President Trump’s tweets, and the incessant media coverage that surround them, spread the way they do because individuals make the conscious choice to react in that way. They are not idle or helpless. Screenshots of President Trump’s tweets spread the way they do because of the dominant cultural work of this particular moment in time, in which we can turn politics into occurrences which enthrall.

**Screenshots and Materialism**

Understanding how and why people edit, create, and spread screenshots of President Trump tweets in the ways they do relies on an understanding of materiality. As previously mentioned in Chapter Five, John Storey conceives of materiality as follows: “Culture is not therefore something we ‘have,’ it is something we ‘do’ – the social production and reproduction of meanings realized in materiality and social practice…[and] sometimes the material capacities of an object are such that they transform what we do.” Culture emerges through the social practices of what we do with material objects, and when we act, we insert meaning into our practices. Materialism helps us understand screenshots of Donald Trump’s tweets in two mains that are asymptotic at times: First, it helps us understand why some people take screenshots of his tweets only to edit them in comedic ways, or, second, what happens when people interact with Donald Trump on Twitter despite loathing him.
Twitter users editing screenshots of Donald Trump’s tweets in purposefully low-quality ways relates to the fact that users on the platform have long complained over the fact they cannot edit tweets. Therefore, the material capacities of the object in question, the tweet, transformed the social practice around it through the creation of screenshots. As previously mentioned in this chapter, the screenshot was an affordance through which individuals could share content on one platform on another, but it is also a social practice that allowed users to bypass the technological constraints of Twitter through cultural adaptation. For instance, materiality can help us understand why people edit in a purposefully low-quality manner:

![Figure 6.11: Edited Donald Trump tweet from 9/15/17](image-url)
In these instances, users have taken a screenshot of President Trump’s original tweet and edited in some kind of photo editing software – something as elementary as Microsoft Paint would do the trick. These are not elaborately planned out designs, nor are they intended to be. They are occurrences of individuals creating their own meanings of President Trump tweets. It is impossible to do what the creators of Figures 6.11 and 6.12 did on Twitter; they must take a screenshot, open it on their computer, and edit it through an editing software or Microsoft Paint.

In doing so, the users are not just being humorous – they are using affordances and social practices to critique President Trump, particularly in reference to him not denouncing White Supremacists or his campaign’s illegal dealings with Russia during the 2016 election. These tweets may be comedic, but as Figure 6.12 specifically demonstrates, individuals are using screenshots to “fix” the President Trump administration and take political action. This is an everyday way in which individuals can resist, thus turning something grand and spectacular like the presidency into an
occurrence on the level of the everyday. Creating edited screenshots in this way, then, is enthrallment, since individuals are responding to the world around them by taking something extraordinary and engaging in practices on the level of the everyday. In his book, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, Tim Highfield argues that “everyday practices are commonplace in politically relevant social media activity, including @mentioning other users, retweeting and sharing others’ comments, replying and liking, positing and creating memes and markers like hashtags for topical, structural, and emotive purposes alike.”

This is cultural materiality; individuals will use what is at their disposal – including the screenshot – for topical, structural, and emotive reasons. Highfield elaborates, “everyday politics can be seen as ‘everyday’ in part because it has a direct, personal impact or a connection that is not fleeting, even if the issue or topic at hand is not ‘political’ in the sense of budget negotiations or election debates.” In the regime of enthrallment, the everyday is just as privileged and ubiquitous as the screenshot. Budget negotiations and election debates are fleeting, but individuals interacting with politicians or using affordances, such as screenshots, for political purposes is of the everyday ilk.

The second way materialism helps to understand the screenshot is through the everyday practices of those who dislike Donald Trump – but interact with him on Twitter nevertheless. Cultural materialism helps to explain some statistics I presented in an earlier section of this chapter: that Donald Trump’s tweets were shared more than 48 million times by users in 2017. His tweets are actually only seen by about 1% of his followers. And while it has been estimated that bots account for roughly 4% of Donald Trump’s twitter statistics and interactions, where are the rest of his interactions coming from? Certainly the entirety of those interacting with the President are not doing this, but,
I would say a portion are those who dislike Donald Trump but are purposefully interacting with him on Twitter. By this, I mean many people that engage with Donald Trump on Twitter loathe him, do not technically follow him, but still interact with him. This is a curious intersection where politics, parody, resistance, and even anti-fandom emerge, and I call this junction “hate-interacting.”

Hate-interacting is not necessarily cyber bullying because it refers to digital practices in the realm of politics. And while it is not necessarily nice to hurl insults at your congressman on Twitter, the practice does offer insight into how and why individuals not only use screenshots to interact with those they dislike online, but also how screenshots have a function within political resistance. I pull the term from fan studies, beginning with Highfield, who argues that individuals may purposefully interact with content they do not enjoy on Twitter,49 as well as Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones, who suggest that Twitter is an ideal platform in which to engage in anti-fandom.50 Harman and Jones define anti-fandom as: “Instead of seeing themselves in the text, however, they find elements within the text that they react against and oppose.” Anti-fandom manifests through “practices such as hatewatching, snark, and live-tweeting.”52 Hate-watching, or hate-reading, are practices in which a text is consumed “for the sole purpose of ridiculing it, or indulging the [viewer’s] disdain for the author and/or the content.”53 Individuals can, and will, interact with what they disagree with and feel antagonizes them, and there is no reason for a so-called politician like Donald Trump to be excluded from that.

Anti-fandom or hate-interacting, explains why a substantial portion of people that do not like Donald Trump interact with him on Twitter. For example, on February, 5,
2018, writers and pundits Charles Blow and Ana Navarro quote retweeted Donald Trump like so:

![Ana Navarro tweet from 2/5/18](image)

*Figure 6.13: Ana Navarro tweet from 2/5/18*
Democratic *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow and Republican strategist Ana Navarro have been two very vocal critics of and dissenters against Donald Trump. Yet, they interact with him in this way on Twitter. In the case of Navarro, she is interacting with Donald Trump to remind *her* followers of Trump’s inconsistencies, whereas Charles Blow is more directly speaking to President Trump in opposition.

In this chapter, however, I am less concerned with interactions as the ones above as I am with how people hate-interact with Donald Trump through screenshots. For example:
While a tad crass, Figure 6.15 indicates an important point: President Trump was first and foremost a celebrity, and therefore it is not unreasonable to assess his present political role through celebrity and fan theories. Additionally, such a screenshot shows how anti-fandom can become even more political than it already is, and that such “hate-interacting” on Twitter can be an act of political resistance.

Though editing photos in this way, however funny or minute, has far-reaching implications. Text, be it in in hieroglyphics, books, or even the way it was programmed to be representational in HTML code, was always meant to be finished, stagnant in the way it could not be edited. When text is opened up to the unique properties of images, text becomes susceptible to the same problems as images – they can be staged, forged, edited, or faked. Per Susan Sontag, “Fiddling with pictures long antedates the era of digital photography and Photoshop manipulations: it has always been possible for photographs to misrepresent.” Therefore, it becomes possible for text to misrepresent.
A theme that has underscored this dissertation but has not explicitly been stated until now is one regarding the image’s ontological uncertainties. In Chapter Three, it was performativity that made us question what was really happening during – and in the unhappy moments before – the divorce selfie was taken. In Chapter Four, it was the lack of context surrounding Harambe and his subsequent memes. In Chapter Five, it was that even though we live in an era where we want unfettered access to a celebrity’s life – and occasionally believe we have it – the images they put out into hypertrophic culture are still staged. With this in mind, and having just concluded a discussion on materialism, I now turn towards how screenshots are an appropriate avenue to examine issues of ontology in the regime of enthralment.

**Ontological Uncertainties of Factory and Showroom**

On February 5, 2018, in the middle of writing this chapter, the Dow Jones plummeted almost 1,600 points, making it the worst rapid decline in the stock market’s history. Shortly after, the following image of a tweet began circulating online:

![Fake Donald Trump tweet](image)

*Figure 6.16: Fake Donald Trump tweet*  

The spread of this tweet fit into a running Twitter joke: During the Obama Administration, Donald Trump frequently levied insults at the president. Now, it has become a running gag on Twitter to retweet these insulting tweets every time something
happens in the Trump Administration that is an actual failure, as opposed to the perceived problems President Trump saw in the Obama administration. Despite the uncertainty of the stock market’s decline, individuals in the Twittersphere could not get enough of this tweet and found it hilarious, yet again, that a tweet from President Trump’s past had come back to haunt him, like the ghost of Christmas Past to Ebenezer Scrooge. The only problem? This was not an actual tweet. It was not shared in the quote retweet manner, meaning it would have been linked back to the original posting. It was shared only as an image of a tweet, and it was purposefully created by a blogger by the name of Shaun Usher – who admitted in a Twitter message to the fact-checking website, Snopes.com, that the tweet was fake. He wrote: “Naively thought it was too ridiculous to be believable. Says a lot, really. Was going to delete it but it was everywhere within minutes: feels like I need to leave it up in its place of birth.” Usher followed up with public tweets acknowledging his gaffe, sending tweets that ultimately were pulled as screenshots into articles, of course:

![Image of tweet responses](image.png)

*Figure 6.17: Creator's response to fake Trump tweet image* As the Usher example shows, creating a fake screenshot is not always done with malicious intent. Sometimes it is done just to be humorous, but in an era where
boundaries blur, contexts collapse, and everything seems to be taken at face value, I
would not declare humor dead, but it definitely went out for a carton of milk and is taking
its time coming back. Lack of setting, as is the case with an image of a tweet, means that
just as with humor we miss the joke if we do not understand the context.

Completely fake screenshots are the third type of screenshot in the typology I
outlined at the start of this chapter. But what is ironic about them, however, is that they
are not actually screenshots. They are, per Jean Baudrillard, simulations. In *Simulacra
and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes:

> To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to
> have what one doesn’t. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is
> more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: “Whoever fakes
> an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever
> simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.” Therefore
> pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is
> always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference
> between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.”

Screenshots are ideal jumping off points from which to examine “truth” in the regime of
enthrallment because of their play with levels of representation. Specifically, fabricated
screenshots, like Usher’s Dow Jones image, create pause and the need for reflection on
what happens when we pull everything into the factory and showroom logic of the
ocularcentric internet.

When there is a seemingly endless fodder for material, and we can constantly
strive to make everything bigger, grander, and more spectacular, we often slip into the
realm of simulating, as opposed to dissimulating. Because we are constantly making specifically visual content, and visual content is malleable, the factory and showroom ethos can threaten distinctions between “true” and “false,” “imaginary” and “real” – just a few more distinctions that enthrallment collapses. When individuals edit screenshots of President Trump tweets or create them in Photoshop they are simulating; they are pretending to have what they do not actually have. The imbibe in their newly created or edited image certain facets of the real (like the reference to “there always being a tweet”), but it is always removed from the actual real itself (President Trump never actually wrote that tweet that became an image).

Even when screenshots are not edited or created in Photoshop, they are tenuous markers of truth and reality. According to Matthew Allen, “the screenshot conveys an extra bit of information: the fact that image was captured directly from a screen. The extra semiotic content may be unimportant…but sometimes…the sense of it being ‘from the screen’ [is] the most important content of the image.” Screenshots are always at least a double representation – there is the representational work of code that turns it into something on the screen, and then the screenshot captures an image of what is on the screen. However, the fact that they are from the screen is also the thing most likely to be forgotten in their spread. Allen elaborates, “because they are understood as straightforward representations or reality (simple copies of images on screens), screenshots serve as…sometimes misleading pieces of evidence.” There is nothing straightforward or simple about the screenshot. Even when it is actual screenshot of a President Trump tweet being shared in an article on CNN or MSNBC, the screenshot has
been removed from its context. Additionally, it has now been re-presented in a new context that can influence its meaning.

In the earliest days of the original screenshot project within CAD at MIT, the screenshot was thought to be a mark of “circumscribed conceptual world.” It was believed, back then, that the screenshot did have a straightforward, limited, bounded purpose – to simply photograph whatever was present on the screen at a given moment in time. Presently, however, the opposite is true. Screenshots are harbingers of an uncircumscribed world. This is not to say absolutely anything is possible, but rather, that the vivid, visual description of text, as an image/screen often bleeds into the ocularcentric internet around it. By this, I mean it could be understood that a screenshot is still a framed image; the choice to take it was an active, conscious one in which certain content was elected to be included and certain content elected to be excluded. But often what happens, as in the case with Usher’s Dow Jones image, the screenshot is accepted at face value. As Susan Sontag has written, “the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.” In privileging only the image in question and divorcing it from its context – or not searching for verification or context at all – individuals remember the screenshots, and not the screenshot in context. Similarly, when the media write their process stories, detailing President Trump’s year in office through tweets instead of what he did or did not get done, we come to remember President Trump’s presidency not even through process stories and tweets, but images of tweets. The screenshots and the behind-the-scenes look come to eclipse the very thing they are capturing in the first place.
In this way, screenshots fit into Baudrillard’s problematic in two main ways: First, in our culture of ubiquitous images, screenshots of President Trump tweets surpass the actual politics of the President Trump administration. They are what Baudrillard refers to as simulacra, where “it is no longer a question of imitation, not or duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”67 This idea of substituting the signs of the real for the real is the second way in which Baudrillard’s problematic can help us understand screenshots: when individuals, like Usher, make completely fabricated images, they are indeed substituting the sign for the real thing. Per Baudrillard, this creation of screenshots in Photoshop, as opposed to Twitter, indicates “the general of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory.”68 I feel that Baudrillard would not like for me to call screenshots, like the one Usher created, completely fake, because I feel he would argue I was missing the point. It is not that they are fake – the relate, through however an unraveled thread, to the cultural implications of Donald Trump’s twitter habits and our cultural moment. For instance, following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many think pieces emerged claiming that Facebook and Twitter destroyed democracy, since they were the main platforms on which people maintained their filter bubbles and could encounter “fake news.” But that is far too simplistic and far too technologically deterministic of a take. If we truly follow Baudrillard’s problematic, however, we understand that not all hope is lost, for every troubling consequence of a regime of enthrallment, one can also find a perceived benefit.
When we collapse contexts and blur boundaries we implode the cultural terrain we are familiar with. When that happens, we find ourselves in a new, unchartered cultural arena. The problem is, as articles claiming Facebook killed democracy indicate, we are trying to find our way in this new territory with the map from the old one (pardon the use, albeit in a different way, of Baudrillard’s famous metaphor). The other side of trying to find a solution however, is exactly what Baudrillard warned of – maps are not meant to precede the territory. If we want to find answers to these pressing problems of truth and falsehoods in our time, we must be patient, get a sense of where we are, and accept that it is not where we used to – or may even want – to be.

We live in an era in which we have more access to information than ever before. Yet, this notion seems to be used in perplexing and questionable ways to solidify individual perceptions of the world instead of learning more and branching out. Enthrallment creates more and more – it may create more problematic content, but it also lends itself to the creation of more helpful content. Similarly, the time for thinking critically has never been more urgent. When it comes to screenshots on Twitter, take an extra second before reacting. If someone is posting a picture of a tweet, and not the tweet itself, question it. Pictures of tweets are more susceptible to edits than tweets themselves. Also, if the tweet has been edited in a comedic way, then it is obviously fake. But if it is an image of a tweet that looks convincingly real, question it.

**Simulating “Hot Potato”**

Screenshots are messy. Even the advice I ended the last section with – *if it’s an image of a tweet that looks convincingly real, question it* – does not work in every situation. The problem is that not all images of tweets without access to the original are
fake. Sometimes the screenshot is taken, and then the original tweet is deleted (as was the case with President Trump’s “covfefe” tweet). The multiple possible iterations of what a screenshot can be or mean is what makes it such a challenging, complex, and elusive image to understand. Essentially, trying to study the screenshot means to always be playing a proverbial game of “hot potato,” for we can only grasp the object of inquiry for a brief moment in time before losing our grip on it. That being said, in summing up and analyzing the information presented in this chapter, I would like to complicate the very screenshot typology I outlined at the start.

At the beginning of this chapter, I presented a typology of the screenshot that was three-fold:

1. Seemingly straightforward screenshots of something “real” that are unedited and spread through the ocularcentric internet.
2. The “real” screenshot, but it has been edited, in a comedic way, through program like Microsoft Paint. Given how poorly the edits are, one can get a sense that this is fake screenshot.
3. Completely fake screenshots. As stated in this section, these images are not actually screenshots, but images made in a program like Photoshop to look like a screenshot. They are simulations.

But after everything I have presented thus far in this chapter, a more accurate typology of screenshots would include all of the above, and:

4. Seemingly straightforward screenshots of something “real” that are unedited and spread through the ocularcentric internet, but in which the original content has been deleted (such as Donald Trump’s “covfefe” tweet).
5. The “real” screenshot that has been edited in a comedic fashion, but, akin to number 4, the original content has also been deleted.

6. Screenshots that have been taken when the content is purposefully made to be finite – such as in Snapchat or within Instagram Stories. The idiom “the internet is forever” is not quite true. Originals can be deleted, but screenshots can last forever. That being said, a more correct adage might be “the simulated, or represented internet is forever.”

Such typologies are what make screenshots so nebulous and tricky to study, and even define. Clarity, precise definitions, and rigid boundaries are necessary to study an image phenomenon that lacks clarity, precise definitions, and rigid boundaries.

Furthermore, the way screenshots spread on the ocularcentric internet is also not straightforward. In this chapter, I detailed some ways in which such circulation occurs. I discussed hate-interacting, but sometimes, screenshots can be a method to precisely not interact in digital cultures. By this, I mean one can interact with a tweet, or a screenshot of a tweet like Charles Blow or Anna Navarro did, or they can edit a screenshot of a tweet to make President Trump’s words read “I am a tool.” The particular striking detail about the “I am a tool” screenshot is that it does not require direct interaction. Such “hate-interacting” would not boost the social media statistics of the original poster, whose content is being screenshotted. Just like how screenshots are a way to maneuver around the interoperability of platforms, they can also be used to circumvent directly interacting or connecting with the one online. The creator of the “I am a tool” screenshot can make such content without ever actually interacting with the one whose content she is taking a screenshot of. Mark Zuckberg may have wanted to “make the world more connected,”
but screenshots can be a slight of hand, a digital trap door, a mirage that allows us to
interact without really interacting.

**Simulating Certainty**

Interacting without interacting is a phenomenon worthy of Jean Baudrillard. The
simulation moves beyond just the image to having further concrete implications for how
content moves in digital cultures. Interacting without interacting – vis-à-vis screenshots –
is a byproduct of the hyperreal and simulations in digital cultures. According to
Baudrillard, “this precession, this short-circuit…is what allows each time for all possible
interpretations, even the most contradictory.”

Interacting without interacting sounds like
a contradiction, but it is what is possible when dealing with this complex, nebulous
precession of images and properties in digital cultures. Once again citing Baudrillard,
“with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than
meaning, in that lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all
combinatory algebra.”

Anything can mean anything when dealing with simulations,
such as screenshots, and that is an ethos that echoes one already described in this study –
ambivalence.

As stated in chapter four, the internet is “polysemous…simultaneously
antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed…too variable
across specific cases to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that.*” The ocularcentric
internet becomes polysemous in part because of the variability of new media structures;
by constantly being factory and showroom, nothing is ever finished but exists in
numerous possible iterations. Such iterations make it nearly impossible for anything to
ever be wholly definitive or solely one thing on the ocularcentric internet. In Chapter
Four, I discussed how such an ambivalence can lend itself to social inequality. With the parameters of this chapter, ambivalence can be understood as the thread that ties together many implications of the regime of enthrallment.

The issues of fake or edited images, and their tenuous relationship to ontology – and even personal belief – is nothing new. Images have always been associated with some degree of ambivalence In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag wrote, “images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera.” Sontag makes a crucial point here – we are more likely to view images we agree with as true and ones we disagree with as false. Such phenomenon is not new and certainly did not arise with screenshots, but screenshots are certainly made such precarious instability much more common. In a way, this also indicates ambivalence. When one is presented with an image of a tweet or Instagram post, whether or not they agree with it plays a role in how they receive it. The image could be this, or the image could be that. The image could be true, or the image could be false. A deciding factor, as Sontag indicates, can often be whether or not one agrees with the ambivalence presented to them. In the case of Harambe, ambivalence was skewed towards the creators of the meme: a perpetual excuse for not being content that could offend. In the case of fake screenshots, the ambivalence is skewed towards the viewer, sharer, and spreader: “well, I guess this could be true.” Following one’s convictions are admirable in certain situations, but when one starts allowing such personal beliefs to outweigh basic facts (for a notable recent example, see the Kyrie Irving and “flat earth” belief) is when a crisis of ontology beings.
When individuals were presented with Shaun Usher’s fake tweet about President Trump and the Dow Jones, it is possible that those whose worldview was upheld by it shared it. In creating these fake types of images of tweets and having them pass as real screenshots, “present-day simulators attempt to make the real…coincide with their models of simulation.” This is a byproduct of the logic of factory and showroom: Individuals like Usher can create their own fake images that coincide with a semblance of reality – in this case, the Twitter belief that “there is always a tweet.” Even if such fake images are not created with malicious intent, they skew what is actually real. This is how factory and showroom, and ambivalence, lend themselves to the hyperreal, to simulation, to simulacra.

The ocularcentric internet and the regime of enthrallment are not solely responsible for such a crisis of ontology. While near-constant entertainment and factory and showroom have seeped out of digital cultures and into the corporate boardroom of Starbucks, so has the baggage associated with the logics and ethos. We do not get a regime of enthrallment, a culture of near-constant entertainment, and the factory and showroom of the ocularcentric internet without also getting the potential problems and implications associated with them. Factory and showroom may come to be hegemony, but so does the polysemy and ambivalence associated with it. Screenshots are an ambivalent image because they are born of, and embedded within, the ambivalence, polysemy, and factory and showroom of the ocularcentric internet. Akin to Harambe, social inequalities are not the only implication when context is decontextualized on the ocularcentric internet. When screenshots move and spread, and thus are decontextualized, truth can also get left behind.
The fact that truth plays such a key role in not only this chapter, but in this entire study, gives me pause as I consider hegemony, visuality, and common sense. In a regime of enthrallment, we privilege a visuality that enjoys near-constant entertainment. It is in this pursuit and spread of near-constant entertainment that we give rise to cultural practices and solidify hegemony. In constantly trying to make new content, making it bigger and better than the iteration before it, slippages can occur. These slippages can propagate social injustices, or they can contribute to a country’s growing crisis of distinguishing between truth and falsehoods. In this study, I have historically located and culturally embedded contemporary image occurrences within their modes of production, sharing, and consumption – all within a regime of enthrallment. The screenshot is the epitome of this, an image that captures warring hegemonies and narratives, ambivalence and decontextualization, and materiality, all with a slant towards near-constant entertainment. But as I discussed in Chapter One of this study, my problematic herein is similar to the one outlined by John Tagg in *The Burden of Representation*. In Tagg’s scholarship, he discusses how the ideologies projected onto the camera led to a certain type of regime of truth, in which it was believed images cannot lie. But presently, we know images can lie, and yet, as has been presented in this chapter, still occasionally take them at face-value.

I do not believe that such an answer lies in a simplistic take that we, as a culture, have lost some intelligence or have become gullible. As I have presented thus far in this chapter, truth, falsehood, real images, and fake issues are never simple or straightforward. It must be something else. This reflection makes me think that maybe we never fully shed the ideologies and visualities we project onto technology. By this, I mean maybe
visualities are cumulative. Even though presently, we may know on some level that the camera does in fact lie, but, since such ideologies occur behind the scenes or on subconscious levels, maybe we do not wholly grasp that. Regimes are not isolated or discrete units. They build on each other. So even though we may know now that cameras can lie, there is still a historical and cultural based, somewhere within our regime of enthrallment, that can be skewed towards images don’t lie – and this may help explain the crises of truth and ontology perpetuated by a slant towards near-constant entertainment. Regimes, ideologies, and visualities are hegemonic. They adapt and change with the times, but some semblance of the previous iteration remains. In this way, visuality, ideology, hegemony, and regimes are factory and showroom – they change just enough as they progress through time, but a part of them can always be traced back to their earlier iterations.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter examines just how wide-reaching the regime of enthrallment is. The occurrence used to ground to this chapter is the spreadability of screenshots of Donald Trump’s tweets, since I also wanted to have a chapter about the ubiquitous online image that is the screenshot. Screenshots, or images of data on a screen, are quite popular online and are often used to bypass platform interoperability to share content from one site on another. This is the case since images typically work the same across all platforms, regardless of individual style and form conventions. Screenshots also work in tandem with previously established tents of enthrallment, such as in conjunction with journalism and cultural materiality. These avenues help us to understand how and why screenshots
are so ubiquitous on the ocularcentric internet. Additionally, screenshots offer insight into understanding the crisis of information, truth, and fact.
Notes on Chapter Six


11 @RealDonaldTrump. (2017, November 11). Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me “old,” when I would NEVER call him “short and fat?” Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend – and maybe someday that will happen. [Twitter Post].


15 @RealDonaldTrump (2017, June 5). People, the lawyers and the courts can call it whatever they want, but I am calling it what we need and what it is, a TRAVEL BAN! [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/871674214356484096


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CHAPTER 7

FROM THE UNICORN FRAPPUCCINO TO ‘RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY SALAD’

In the summer of 2017, a meme with a very NSFW (not suitable for work) origin spread throughout the ocularcentric internet. The meme was called “Right in front of my salad” and, according to BuzzFeed, it went like this: “A gay porn scene in which two men wearing aprons have sex in a kitchen while a woman sits at the counter eating salad has gone viral after people became quite entertained by the woman’s reaction to the whole scenario: ‘Are you guys [redacted]? Are you serious? Right in front of my salad?!?’” The post credited with the spread began on Tumblr on July 29, 2017 with GIFs clipped from the original film. The meme quickly spread to Twitter, where the original tweet racked up over 12,900 retweets and 25,000 likes. From there, people began inserting the phrase “right in front of my salad” following anything they deemed unbelievable, offensive, or ridiculous. For example:
The vegetable meme with the pornographic origins reached the popularity it did because, as one pundit argued, “it was a really great response to anything that you found troubling, upsetting, or downright irritating.” This meme was successful and funny for a few days and that would have been that. But what made me turn to this as occurrence to use in my dissertation conclusion was what happened next: The adult film company that made the original film made a meme-themed sequel.
The source material for this meme was a pornographic film initially titled “Private Lessons Part 3.” In the sequel, however, it underwent a rebranding to become “Right in front of my Salad…Again!” The video’s description reads, “Jaxton wants to make it up to his wife with a nice in-home massage, but things don’t go as planned when masseur Luke offers up some [redacted]. Little does he know he’s about to get caught and right in front of that salad again!” The film company in question, Men.com (not a website, but the name of the production group) made no attempt to hide the fact their sequel was entirely inspired by and devoted to the “right in front of my salad” meme. Said meme was the real star of the sequel, with slow motion and sultry shots of the salad’s creation, the eating of it, as well as its tragic demise to the floor. “Right in front of my salad” was to the porn industry what the Unicorn Frappuccino was to Starbucks. Bustle called the sequel “bizarrely meme-able,” but, for the purposes of this study, what the outlet is really describing is enthrallment. “Meme-able” also refers to the process of making seemingly endless amounts of images through the logics and affordances of the ocularcentric internet.

In this study I argued for understanding the cultural work that seems to dominate our present moment. That cultural work is contingent upon a particular visuality that privileges near-constant entertainment. I call this type of cultural work enthrallment, in that it is predicated on a visuality, common sense, and hegemony that leads to the cultural dominance of visual captivation. This dominance, however, is not all consuming or outright powerful – I refer to it as such because it is the most prevalent logic in contemporary culture, and it comes about through simultaneous acceptance, negotiation, and resistance.
Enthrallment is contingent upon the internet as a technology and the internet as culture, but more specifically, it is contingent upon the internet’s ocularcentrism. Ocularcentrism is the “perception and epistemological bias [that ranks] vision over the other senses in Western culture.”\(^7\) In this study I have also shown how the internet is ocularcentric, specifically in that visuality, the visual, images, and their modalities are crucial and ubiquitous in defining the contemporary and typical experience of digital cultures. I have referred to this cultural phenomenon-technological object dialectic as the ocularcentric internet, and this leads to an understanding of how the visual experience and a particular overarching experience of the gaze, works in tandem with digital cultures to create an online experience hinging on a heightened role of visuality.

That specific heightened role of visuality is what I have referred to as enthrallment, and it privileges near-constant entertainment. Because visuality refers to social ways of seeing and challenges the notion of Cartesian Perspectivalism, it aims to understand the “behind the scenes” of culture that impacts our visual experiences. Elevated to the level of culture, this behind the scenes notion of the visual forms what Martin Jay calls a scopic regime – the “overarching experience of the gaze, as enacted upon an entire culture.”\(^8\) The cultural work of enthrallment contributes to this overarching experience of the visual in culture, writ large, because individuals come together – and at times may resist – the ocularcentrism of the internet. Cultural-technological imbrications have a long history of impacting the visuality, hegemony, and common sense of a culture at any given point in time, with the most notable of these occurrences being the camera. Per John Tagg, when it was thought that “the camera could not lie,” the camera, and the images it produced, led to the creation of a “regime of truth”
in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{9} That truth was that the images and their modes of production produced could not lie, which is what led to the rise of visual evidence being admitted in courts of law and the use of photographs on identification documents. Presently, however, we know that the camera can lie, and it lies frequently (though not always in a malicious way). The takeaway from Tagg’s argument I have used to ground my study is cultural, phenomenon-technological object dialectics are crucial to understanding the zeitgeist. Or, as John Storey puts it, “any common basis for understanding…can only emerge through a shared regime of realized signification within which the material object is situated and made meaningful.”\textsuperscript{10} For the purposes of what I have discussed in this study, this means understanding not just the technological affordances of an object, such as the internet, but understanding the cultural meanings and signifiers that situate the object. Or, in the case of this study, making the occurrence in question ocularcentric.

Enthrallment, therefore, is not just limited to the online experience, but, as Right in Front of my Salad and the Unicorn Frappuccino show, it has also become the common sense logic du jour, predicated on a privileging of the visual in almost all aspects of culture.

That ocularcentrism of the internet assists in ushering in what I have referred to as a regime of enthrallment. This regime is an overarching experience of the gaze that privileges a heightened role of visuality and near-constant entertainment. It is also the meaning-making hegemony of a culture that operates, accepts, resists, and negotiates realized significations. Enthrallment is the cultural work that says, “of course the Snapchat filter entertains.” “Of course one would take a divorce selfie.” “Of course Kim Kardashian West’s return to Instagram has the cultural impact it does.”
Furthermore, this study has shown in order for enthrallment to be a specific type of cultural work it must resituate the quotidian experiences of everyday life to a privileged position. What is privileged in a regime of enthrallment and on the ocularcentric internet is a privileging of the everyday, and a privileging of near-constant entertainment. At first, there seems to be ample tension in what I just described since it seems paradoxical for the everyday and for near-constant entertainment to be coupled together; particularly since the everyday is largely made up of those often-overlooked quotidian practices – the day-to-day measures and motions of individual life. But that is exactly the point of enthrallment as cultural work and overarching experience of the gaze. Enthrallment takes the concept of spectacle and elevates it to the next level, in which everything, and not just the rarities, is made to mean extraordinary. Enthrallment turns the practices and occurrences that often happen in the background of pop culture analysis, media extravaganzas, or social controversies and brings them front and center. Now, one’s lunch on Snapchat, or their desire to make their Instagram photos look like Kim Kardashian West’s new aesthetic, are made to mean extraordinary.

In this study, I have examined the tenets of enthrallment and how these pillars contribute to it as a particular type of cultural work that dominates the zeitgeist. One of the main ways enthrallment works is precisely through the hegemony that led to its dominance in the first place. By this, I mean enthrallment is not the work of passive, cultural dopes. Individuals are active makers of their own meanings and social practices, and in doing so, they can adhere to enthrallment while finding ways to challenge other hegemonic norms, practices, and institutions (as seen in Chapter Three’s discussion of divorce selfies). Enthrallment is multifaceted, multilayered, and complex cultural work in
that it can uphold one hegemony (near-constant entertainment and spectacle on the level of the everyday) while simultaneously challenging others (as indicative of shifting attitudes regarding institutions, like marriage and divorce). Enthrallment is therefore never just about hegemony, but hegemonies, because it offers insight into how multiple social shifts can be upheld and challenged at the same time.

That being said, however, enthrallment is not perfect cultural work. The underlying logics of enthrallment and the ocularcentric internet can lend themselves to social injustices and problems. This arises because in the quest for near-constant entertainment individuals can become cultural amnesiacs. In making, posting, publishing, and spreading myriad visual materials on the ocularcentric internet, we can decontextualize content from its origins, and this allows for multiple possible iterations of content and meanings to exist. The problems emerge, however, when such a removal of context contributes to social injustices, such as racism. By constantly making and remaking images, the ocularcentric internet becomes polysemous. In addition to propagating social inequalities, this can also lead to tenuous boundaries of “truth” and “fiction,” as shown in Chapter Six. This is why, per Chapter Four, I advise individuals to constantly “think before they meme.”

Enthrallment is also intricately related to the cultural concept of hypertrophy. I presented hypertrophy in the context of Chapter Five through the notion of hypertrophic celebrity – the structural apparatus, the behind the scenes aspect of celebrity being just as interesting, if not more, than the celebrity in their primary form. I use this concept to ground my discussion of the Instagram image, particularly in the sense this turn towards the inner-workings of one’s life as noteworthy highlights enthrallment’s focus on the
everyday. Specifically on Instagram, this turn helps us to understand the rise of practices such as microcelebrity and aspirational labor – practices in which individuals mimic celebrity work for deferred benefits and compensation. This is why it was not just newsworthy that Kim Kardashian West returned to Instagram with a new type of image after her 2016 Paris robbery; individuals aimed to mimic and match her aesthetic as well.

Because of the mimicry and emulation present not just on Instagram, but in the press and digital cultures, writ large, materiality is key to understanding enthrallment. Materiality is how individuals make meaning within their own lives and culture. Materiality may be the most crucial component to understanding enthrallment and the ocularcentric internet because it offers insight into how this type of regime comes to be maintained and sustained. Individuals do not always willingly submit, and in fact, they may actively resist the zeitgeist. As the Unicorn Frappuccino shows, many may oppose what is happening, but even in making their own meanings of the drink they are still participating in hegemony. Materiality helps to explain the factory and showroom ethos of the ocularcentric internet and how individuals aim to make their own visual meanings in digital spaces. Materiality offers insights into why an adult film company made a pornographic sequel about a meme – all because visuality enjoys a heightened presence in digital cultures, and because the things we sometimes overlook or take for granted in the everyday can be made to mean extraordinary through social practice.

Finally, enthrallment is contingent upon a particular type of relationship with the press. This relationship helps explain my methodology for this study in that we cannot ignore the traditional press in examining how and why images move through digital cultures. As Kate Miltner has argued, “online content [plays] an increasingly important
role in social, political, and cultural agenda-setting.” What happens on the ocularcentric internet can be made to mean newsworthy because of enthrallment, because of the heightened role of visuality, and because of the privileging of the everyday in tandem with near-constant entertainment. The press assists in the spread of content on the ocularcentric internet, particularly because they share their articles on the very same ocularcentric internet. Even when this content is shared on television or in traditional newspapers there is still a key relationship because these moments can become fodder for more memes, images, discussions, and enthrallment. Then, by the time the meme or image is made newsworthy and comes back to the journalists that help create it, it looks very different – but similar enough – to the original. Therefore, the press and the ocularcentric internet have a symbiotic relationship and exist in a cybernetic feedback loop within the regime of enthrallment: they need each other for constant supplies of visual materials and the spread of such images.

But enthrallment is not perfect, and it is not work or an experience of the gaze without serious implications. Once again referencing the regime of truth ushered in by the camera, eventually individuals came to understand the camera can and does lie. This ushered in a crisis of “truth” associated with the very evidence, identification, meaning, and social practices that the zeitgeist assisted in bringing about in the first place. As Chapter Six of this study showed, the same holds true for enthrallment and the technologies of the ocularcentric internet. Truth becomes muddled, messy, and tenuous in a culture that privileges near-constant entertainment, and sometimes in striving for such amusement wholly fake content emerges. The problem is, however, because of the
decontextualization that is common on the ocularcentric internet, such images then become taken as fact and unquestioned.

In the original *Jurassic Park* film, Jeff Goldblum’s character of Ian Malcom issues what has become a rather iconic proclamation. And, because this is a study of the visual on the ocularcentric internet, I want to present it as an internet image in traditional meme format:

![Meme Image](image.png)

*Figure 7.3: Ian Malcolm’s advice from Jurassic Park*¹²

The context of this image and quote comes from Goldblum’s character criticizing scientists for not thinking through the consequences and implications of their work. Essentially, the character is saying, “just because you can does not mean you should.” I reference this quote here because I believe it can serve as some cultural brakes and give us pause in the same sense it should give the scientists in *Jurassic Park*.

But first, some context and justification: I spent Chapter One of this study arguing against a scientific conception of cultural problems and practices. Even though the above quote is critical of science, and the quote has been adopted in non-movie critiques of innovation, I believe it can offer insight into culture – particularly because the iconic quote about science does, in fact, come from pop culture. This is not suggesting we
should understanding culture as science since I believe such moves deftly eliminate agency and offer far too simplistic explanations for complex social issues. It is suggesting, however, that maybe Ian Malcom was years ahead of the zeitgeist.

The logic of enthrallment – to make a spectacle out of the everyday, to make everything bigger and grander than what came before it – is not just limited to the terrain of pop culture, or even politics, as I show in Chapter Six. This logic of enthrallment is exactly what led to the troubles in *Jurassic Park* – make everything bigger, grander, and more spectacular. It also contributes to an ethos that is all too common in the technology sector in Silicon Valley – just within the past week at the time of writing (February 2018), I have seen NBC advertise to me to watch the Winter Olympics on my VR headset; the often-mocked and “viral” Boston Dynamics make a robotic dog that can open doors; and Elon Musk shoot a car into space. We live in an environment of constant change, and in order to remain relevant, businesses, tech, science, etc. – everyone must innovate to stay ahead, and to stay germane.\(^{13}\) This is the same logic the dominates enthrallment and the associated practices of instajournalism, screenshots, aspirational labor, and microcelebrity. To stay relevant or to stay popular, one must constantly be bigger, grander, and more spectacular than the iteration that came before it. Because science and technology, like politics, are always already imbricated in a culture and do not exist neutrally outside of it, their logics impact and are impacted by the ethos that is hegemonic in other parts of culture, such as pop culture, the internet, and celebrity. The logic and practice of enthrallment, then, is the logic and practice that have dominated science and technology for decades – make it bigger. Constantly innovate. And innovation can be good – it is certainly not all bad.
That being said, Ian Malcolm’s reminder for tech workers and for scientists is also solid advice for the cultural plane. The same culture that gives us divorce selfies and Harambe has also given us more horrific uses of enthrallment – individuals using Facebook livestream while they commit murders; platforms as gathering grounds for hate groups and violence; occurrences of individuals videoing and uploading violence to themselves or others. These are further examples of the darker undertones of enthrallment because enthrallment is certainly not limited to harmless occurrences. These are the extreme cases, but as shown through this study enthrallment can lend itself to problematic social injustices and inequalities. It can also contribute to crises of truths. That being said, Ian Malcom’s quote from Jurassic Park does serve as a sturdy reminder and works as cultural brakes: Just because we can does not always mean we should. Just because we can make content that is bigger, grander, and more spectacular does not always mean we should.

On the other side of this dialectic, however, is the idea that sometimes using enthrallment to shed light on society’s more awful moment has benefits. For instance, in July of 2016, Philando Castille was shot and killed by police during a traffic stop in Minneapolis. His girlfriend and her young daughter were in the car, and, feeling utterly helpless, she live-streamed the whole horrific ordeal to Facebook. The video, in turn, helped galvanize national protests about police violence against unarmed Black men. Similarly, at the time of writing, the United States has just experienced its 18th mass shooting of the year in 2018. On Valentine’s Day 2018, an expelled student walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and killed 17 students with a semi-automatic assault rifle. Many news organizations played Snapchat videos students
took of their peers hiding under desks with horrifying gun shots going off closely in the background. These videos offered a first-hand account of what it was like in the school at the time of the shooting, and the videos showed the terrifying reality of what it is like to live through an active shooter. While some critiqued the “gen Z-ers” for Snapchatting instead of calling 911 (though one Marjory Stoneman Douglas student tweeted in response that they were asked to stop calling 911 since they were flooding the lines), several of the high school students on Twitter, as well as many individuals not even associated with the school, have used this visual documentation in the hopes that maybe something will finally be done about excessive gun violence in America. In this way the logic of live-streaming a helpless situation or recording gun violence can have social benefits of hopefully initiating long-term change.

These examples in this chapter show enthrallment is never solely one thing. It is multiple things, hegemonies, ideas, and ideologies at the same time. It can be cultural work performed for good, or cultural work performed in horrifying ways. In either case, culture and cultural work are currently dominated by the visual experience and the objects and images we make from those experiences. These images, in turn, maintain and sustain the cultural work through spread and materiality.

It is my hope that this work into enthrallment has laid groundwork for other studies to examine the other ways in which near-constant entertainment occurs across various terrains. There are myriad other facets of culture that can be examined in tandem with enthrallment, and such studies are not limited to the ones I have outlined herein. Additionally, there are many types of images found on the ocularcentric internet (emojis, bitmojis, GIFs, VSCO filters, etc.) that can be examined in conjunction with their social
modalities and within enthrallment. Future studies may also be able to address limitations of this study – for instance, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, visuality and scopic regimes work because one discourse “fights to the top,” so to speak, to become hegemonic. This dissertation does not address visualities that compete with enthrallment. Additionally, this dissertation briefly addresses, but does not fully interrogate, the way enthrallment may be performed differently within non-white, non-middle class-and-above social and demographic groups.

Furthermore, as stated in the methodology chapter of this study, I am a researcher who lives, studies, works, asks questions, and finds answers within the very regime of enthrallment I analyze. I am not immune or exempt from the tenets I have presented and examined herein, and neither is this dissertation.

In that sense, this dissertation is a selfie. As a researcher, I can never be divorced from my objects of study. I live, work, study, and play within the very regime of enthrallment I analyze. This work is an image that specifically I have taken of culture at a given point and time, and I am imbricated in my findings. I am inextricably linked to the snapshot of culture I have provided, and even, however, tangentially, I am in it. Therefore, this dissertation is a selfie.

This dissertation is a meme. It is an object that was created with awareness to the other discourses – scholarly and colloquial – that it invokes, and it shares common characteristics with the scholars it reverently invokes. It has been shared and circulated on the internet across my personal Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, and one day, it will, in certain parts, circulate on the internet through a journal article I intend to
write. It will also circulate in culture and the internet through university archives and the book I one day intend to write from this study.

This dissertation is an Instagram image. By this, I mean I have invoked aspects of cultural hypertrophy to share my dissertation on the ocularcentric internet as I have written it. Below are images I have shared on my personal accounts that show the “behind the scenes” of dissertation writing, and not just the final product in its primary academic form:

![Figure 7.4: Author's Instagram photo of her dissertation process. Image courtesy of author.](image-url)
My images herein are indicative of the tenets of hypertrophic celebrity, aspirational labor, and microcelebrity. It turns my dissertation writing (something of the everyday for academics) into spectacle. Additional, cultural hypertrophy privileging a behind the scenes understanding of an apparatus is akin to visuality aiming to understand the behind the scenes of cultural that impacts the overarching experience of the gaze.

This dissertation is a screenshot. In part it is a screenshot since a substantial portion of the images incorporated in this study were taken as screenshots, since that was the best way to grab them and spread them into my body of work. Additionally, like the various types of screenshots that exist on the ocularcentric internet, this study questions “truth” and what the cultural work we do looks like when performed. Like screenshots, this dissertation is also contingent upon screens, as indicated by Lev Manovich’s idea that

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*Figure 7.5: Author's Instagram photo of her dissertation process, 2. Image courtesy of author.*
we are “in a society of the screen.” Lastly, like images that become screenshots, this dissertation is malleable. It introduces a problematic that can be adopted by other scholars for future use, and my own work within this scholarship may change over the years. Scholarly works, like images, are meant to be malleable.

Finally, this dissertation is enthrallment. The idea of a dissertation in and of itself turns the everyday experience of the novice scholar into something spectacular, something huge and grand to be defended and revered. But this dissertation specifically is enthrallment in the sense that, it, like the cultural work it describes, is contingent upon the ocularcentric internet and is constantly in flux. To study the internet and digital cultures means to always be behind, since the phenomenon in question is most likely over by the time an article gets written or conference paper presented. What matters the most, then, are the tenets, the pillars, the patterns, and the practices that sustain the things we study and can constantly turn them into bigger, grander, and more spectacular things. This dissertation is enthrallment because it is not divorced from, or exist in isolation against, the culture it examines. This dissertation is enthrallment, because in pursing truths and meaning across cultural practices, that is where the most interesting tenets – for the researcher, for the self, and for the larger bodies of scholarship – can emerge.
Notes on the Conclusion


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