

BEING A FIGMENT OF IMAGINATION.
SIMULATION THEORY FROM A LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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In the context of a journal issue about remarks on psychoanalysis, I thought about the human subject itself as a remark, a mark, a form of existence that is a thought in the consciousness of someone. It is in line with the goal of psychoanalytic treatment, to move the patient from the position of a thought to a position of being. Unlike Descartes, Lacan thought that thought and being contradict¹. To be someone's thought, even your own, can be a way to have a self, maybe even to be yourself, and still not be you. But people need to see themselves as thoughts, as figments in someone's imagination. This motivation is one of the aspects behind the cultural phenomenon, simulation theory². This motivation is what I would like to explore in this paper.

Simulation theory, in its contemporary, techno-scientific form, is the hypothesis that what we call 'reality' may be a computationally generated environment, where we exist as simulated agents or embodied consciousnesses suspended in a fabricated field of experience. Unlike older metaphysical doubts (dream, illusion, deception), it draws its force from everyday encounters with code, platforms, and engineered worlds: video games with persistent universes, virtual and augmented reality, algorithmic feeds dictating social reality, generative AI producing images, voices, texts beyond real or fake. The speed at which singularity is approaching sets the trajectory of imagining the future on the focal point of simulation future. This is why it spreads from philosophy into cultural common sense, staging reality as layers in films and series from *The Matrix* trilogy onward (1999).

Simulation theory thus functions less as a logical argument than as a shared modern myth of origins, one that translates the question 'Who made me?' into the idiom of programmers, systems, and code. This is how current culture gives shape to the intuition that we are a figment of an imagination, of a dream, a game, or a thought.

The purpose of this paper is to read simulation theory as a contemporary solution to an old problem of identity. Simulation theory is not mainly a hypothesis but a fantasy-structure that offers a contemporary guarantee of identity withing a consciousness of a digital Other. In a counter-movement the question is raised: How can psychoanalysis shift the subject from existence-as-object-of-the-Other to subject-of-enunciation.

¹ Lacan argues with Descartes's cogito. The discovery of the unconscious by Freud shows that 'I think therefore I am' is an obsessive strategy, to base one's identity on thinking, rather than as Lacan would prefer, to base the identity, the answer to the question 'who am I?' with the answer: 'I am the one who desires, who enjoys'. Lacan adds an ethical layer that sees identification with the unconscious desires an important phase in psychoanalysis. 'I am where I don't think' is also a response to Hegel who believes in self-knowing and introspection, whereas for Lacan the purpose of analysis is not like Freud to make the unconscious information conscious, but to shift the identification from the conscious to the unconscious. If in the beginning of the treatment the patient may say 'I made a mistake', and in the process of recognising the unconscious they may say 'I made a Freudian mistake', eventually the identification will shift and they will say 'I made an unconscious choice'.

² Modern formulations of simulation theory emerged in science fiction novels such as Daniel F. Galouye's *Simulacron-3* (1964), Konrad Zuse's digital physics (1969) and Nick Bostrom's (2003) paper 'Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?' It was popularised by figures like Elon Musk.

This paper does not attempt to adjudicate whether simulation theory is true or false, nor to engage its probabilistic or metaphysical arguments on their own terms. Instead, it treats simulation theory as a cultural formation and a subjective position, asking what psychic function the belief serves, and what it offers the subject in the register of identification. To do so, I analyse simulation theory by connecting several of Lacan's illustrations for explaining how identification works when a subject imagines itself as the product of a higher agency (the programmer, the system, the Other).

The basic structure of this fantasy is not new. Long before computers, cultures told creation stories in which humans were fashioned by an all-mighty Other, called into being by divine will, designed in an image and assigned a function. Aboriginal Australian traditions recount ancestral beings who shape the world and appoint custodial responsibilities, and ancient Sumerian mythologies describe humans as made to serve the gods and administer their order. What changes in simulation theory is not the form of the myth, but its cultural package: divinity translated into technology, creation translated into programming³. What is new is that a kind of new religion is forming around science and technology and like any religion, it needs a creation myth, a story through which people can live their existence⁴. A predecessor of this belief is the popular origin-myth in which aliens visited Earth and mutated an ape into a human⁵. In today's version, the gods are imagined as advanced humans or technological entities (perhaps from the future) who control humans and sustain their digital existence.

So, simulation theory is, in this sense, an old myth fitted to current culture. The Sumerians needed to believe in a bureaucratic heaven of gods in order to identify under them, an order that mirrors a system of governance. Likewise, tech enthusiasts create their own programmer gods to identify with. Like most gods, these figures promise superiority, a life with meaning, and a solution to the problem of death⁶.

The aim of saying this is not to deny what is historically new, but rather to emphasise the a-historical human motivation that keeps returning in new forms. Humans repeatedly invent

³ Creation myths of technology, be it fire or mathematics, are framed by native and ancient cultures as stealing from the gods. Humans have to pay back to the gods for their secrets. The simulation theory invents a technological god from whom humans can appropriate their technology and the payment is in the form of using the technology as a form of worship.

⁴ In his book *Myth and Meaning* (1978), Levi-Strauss identifies what is common to most creation myths. They tell a story of some discrepancy, polarity, conflict, which requires the emergence of a solution. In tribal myths it is usually the domains of earth, water and sky that coexist thanks to the emergence of creatures that belong to these categories. In a similar way, simulation theory solves the polarity between the human and the machine by the third element, the divine creator. It serves the function of identifying with technology.

⁵ The belief in aliens creating humans draws from ancient astronaut theories, popularized by Zecharia Sitchin in works like *The 12th Planet* (1976), where he reinterprets Sumerian myths as the Anunnaki; extraterrestrial gods from Nibiru, genetically engineering Homo sapiens some 300,000 years ago as slave labourers for gold mining. The Enki speculation centres on Enki (Ea), Sumerian god of wisdom and waters, as chief architect: in tales like Enki and Ninmah and Atrahasis, he moulds humanity from clay mixed with a sacrificed god's blood (We-ilu/Gestu), endowing intelligence to ease the Igigi's toil. Sitchin frames this as alien biotech, with Enki as sympathetic creator defying Enlil's flood to preserve his children. This techno-myth feeds UFO lore and simulation theory's programmer gods. Here humans identify as figments in an alien design, labouring to repay stolen divine craft. The structure endures: identity via the Other's mark.

⁶ Simulation theory promises a mythic fix for death anxiety: if we are code in some posthuman system, then consciousness endures as data, endlessly restorable in servers or nested layers. No true end, just a pause, an update, a reload. The programmer-Other assures eternity not by soul or heaven, but by perpetual execution time mortality reduced to a bug or checkpoint. Here humans take identity as figments with infinite saves, repaying the big Other by sustaining the simulation ourselves, in eternal loops that mask the Real of finitude.

creation myths in which they are figments in the imagination of an authoring power, what Lacan names the big Other (with a capital O): the supposed locus that guarantees meaning, origin, and identity.

Lacan on being a figment

For Lacan, this is a question of how identity is achieved. As a non-essentialist, Lacan does not treat reality, and within its identity, as something simply given. Something, and perhaps a sequence of things must happen for a human to have an identity. Lacanian reality is made of three registers, the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, each supporting a certain aspect of reality. Reality is a function of the interplay of these three registers as rings that exist only when all three are woven together⁷. Lacan rejects the positivist assumption of an objective reality that is only described by language and images.

Identity is materialised like any reality through these registers. It happens in the way the subject is spoken about even before he or she is born. It is formed through the imaginary mirror image, which shows the subject how he or she appears under the gaze of the Other. This Other is not any other, it is the all-inclusive symbolic universe embodied in a persona. If there is any intuition in the human inclination to mythologize ourselves as figments of an imagination, it is simply this: in order to have an identity, any identity, within a universal consciousness.

The radicality of Lacan lies in the extent to which he sees human existence as symbolic. It is so radical that there is hardly any sense of existence that does not pass through the signifier (Lacan 1977). Lacan names the basic signifier of existence the unary trait. It is a mark that can be isolated, named, and counted as a discrete element. We can imagine its origin as the mark that *Homo erectus* scratched on his lance for every animal hunted⁸. It is the minimal sign that designates a ‘thing.’ Only as a thing can it participate in language and be linked with other things in chains of meaning (Lacan 2014). Freud also identifies a moment in which the unfathomed pre-thing he calls *Das Ding* is represented by a mark. Since only symbolic existence can participate in structure, Freud treats this symbolic existence as a precondition for negating it (Freud 1955 [1925] SE XIX). It must first be declared, affirmed, before it can be denounced. It must be symbolized before it can be repressed⁹. The unary trait is thus a first condition, the matting substratum on which signifiers are placed to form variations of ‘things’ upon the elementary ‘thing’ of the unary trait. In contemporary simulation culture, this minimal mark is easily reimagined as code: a handle, an ID, a data-point; something countable that lets the subject be ‘there’ inside a system.

So, before humans can identify as created by a god in his or her image or as a technological product or object, they cannot avoid having to exist in language through identification with a

⁷ Real symbolic and Imaginary (RSI), are the three registers that together comprise reality. The symbolic is the world of words and concepts, the imaginary is the world of images and other sensory representations, especially those that pertain to the image of the ego. The Real is not what was there before the virtuality of the symbolic-imaginary, it is something that is produced by their encounter with limitations. The Real is the signifiable. A clear way to think about them as supporting and depending on each other is the image of a tripod that stands only if all three legs lean on the other two.

⁸ Earliest confirmed tally marks appear as zig-zag engravings on a Java shell (~500,000 years ago, possibly *Homo erectus*), (Joordens et al. 2015).

⁹ In ‘An Outline of Psycho-Analysis’ (Freud 1964 [1940] SE XXIII) Freud says that the origin and function of the ego in animals is to be an external membrane that defends against external sensory over-stimulation. The human linguistic capability is unique in that it can coin linguistic objects that are treated as external objects and as such can be defended against, rejected, and since they are internal, to be repressed.

signifier. Or, in other words, to become a figment: a thing that can participate in thought patterns made of language.

Does it matter what mark makes him or her a figment and in whose mind? Of course. Simulation theory is a culturally relevant myth that sustains a subject's existence through an identification mark in the current epoch. The unary trait in simulation theory can look like information bit or a serial number, ready to be plugged into a computer program like a signifier in a sentence and become an avatar in a virtual world. But is there something more general, more a-historical we can say about the mark of identification? What anxiety does it avoid? What enjoyment does it structure? What form of guarantee does it seek?

The anxiety it covers is the anxiety of non-guarantee: that there is no ultimate author of meaning, no secure place in the Other, and that one's existence is contingent and ungrounded. The enjoyment it organizes is around the signifier, beyond of the pleasure principle of the organic. And the guarantee it imagines is precisely a consistent big Other: a programmer, a code, an architect who would not only have created the world, but would ensure that the subject is not merely drifting, perhaps even ensuring continuity beyond death in the form of storage, backup, or replay.

Zhuangzi dreams he is a butterfly

This question, whether there is something more general, more a-historical, even a-personal, about the mark of identification can be approached through one of Lacan's illustrations: the tale of Zhuangzi who lived in China between the years 369–286 BCE (Lacan 1978).

Simulation theory repeats this structure: it says my 'I' may be only a character in another scene of dreaming or programming.

In the old Chinese story, Zhuangzi dreams he is a butterfly. When he wakes up, he thinks: 'I cannot disprove that I am a butterfly who dreams he is Zhuangzi.' In this example we can see some of the steps toward identity. First, existence is in being represented as a thought. It does not matter whether it is Zhuangzi as the thought of a butterfly or a butterfly as the thought of Zhuangzi. Existence of entities appears as a thought.

Second, to exist as a thought one must be identified through a signifier. The identification with an animal is an old human function, researched in psychoanalysis and anthropology, in the use of totem, an animal that carries the identity of the tribe or a mascot of a sports team¹⁰. This is what Zhuangzi is doing. He is not only thinking about himself as a butterfly; he cannot disprove the possibility that he is a butterfly.

Lacan says that the interchangeability of who is the dreamer and who is the image in the dream says something important. It suggests that maintaining an identification through the signifier 'butterfly' or 'Zhuangzi', is still an identification with a signifier, and contrary to our intuition Zhuangzi is just as fabricated as the butterfly. Either way, any identification is based on a unary trait, and is just as imaginary, just as arbitrary. All you need is to be a stain on a background.

¹⁰ Levi-Strauss in *Totemism* (1963) demonstrated the identification of a clan with a totem animal has a structural function. The functional school that preceded Levi-Strauss in anthropology assumed the Totem was chosen by its qualities: the tribe identifies with the aggressiveness of the Jaguar or the defensiveness of the armadillo. Levi-Strauss showed that the key to understand the meaning of the Totem is the myth that gives it context. For example, if the myth is about the jaguar and the armadillo who were at war and then made peace, the meaning of the Totem would be the one who is in peace with the clan of the other totem.

You might as well identify yourself as Clark Kent, who is actually Superman, who is actually some actor, and it is the same all the way down. Jim Carrey, who portrayed Andy Kaufman in the film *Man on the Moon* (1999), said that he realised the identity ‘Jim Carrey’ was just as fabricated under his identification as ‘Andy Kaufman’ (*Jim & Andy: The Great Beyond* 2017)¹¹. He discovered that all the way down there is nothing. Under all these layers we have the unary trait and under that, what?¹²

The paradox of the liar - from object to subject of language

In simulation theory, as in the tale of Zhuangzi, the question is again one of identity: Who am I as a figment of an imagination? In the mind of which subject? And how solid can this identity be, perhaps as solid as the universality of that Other subject? In the quest for existence, the subject imagines him or herself to be the product of the system, the code, the architect, the highest Other promises being. But does it deliver? Or does it rob the subject of its being? ¹³

Lacan uses the paradox of the liar (Israely 2022) to demonstrate why this quest fails and how the question of being can be approached through dissolving the paradox rather than trying to complete it.

When a person says, ‘I am a liar’, we hear a paradox. If it is true that he is a liar, then he is not lying, meaning he is not a liar. If it is not true that he is a liar, then he is telling the truth when he says that he is a liar. The solution is to identify the false premise that enables the paradox. The paradox asks: how can one be both a liar and not a liar at the same time? The wrong assumption is that we are dealing with one ‘I’, when in fact there are two.

There is the object of the statement: the ‘I’ inside the sentence ‘I am a liar.’ And there is the one who is saying the statement. The subject who speaks. He speaks about himself because he uses the term ‘I.’ If he said, ‘You are a liar’, there would be no paradox, because there would be no confusion about the duality. The subject of the enunciation (who speaks) and the ‘I’ as object of the statement are not the same one. We know the ‘I’ of ‘I am a liar’: it is a representation. I am ‘I’ just as much as I am a liar, a butterfly, Zhuangzi, or an avatar. And the truth is: I am neither. These are representations.

¹¹ Andy Kaufman was known to be a total actor. He hardly ever stepped out of the role he was acting even when the camera was off. Jim Carry adopted the same approach and remained in the role for the length of the production to the point that he was aggravating the rest of the crew. This experience made Jim Carry realise that his identification with the persona ‘Jim Carry’ was just as fabricated, with the difference that it was not conscious, not until he realized the extent of identification as Andy Kaufman.

¹² Lacan’s *objet petit a* is a term that is used to signify the un-signifiable. It’s an empty placeholder. It makes it possible to say a full sentence that includes an ‘it’ in in while we know nothing of this ‘it’, not even that is a unary trait. Lacan equates the signifiers Zhuangzi and butterfly as both failing to eradicate the Real, signified as *petit a*.

¹³ Does identification with a signifier supports or undermines being? In Lacan’s interpretation of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1955 [1920] SE XVIII) he answers this question: The first encounter of the human being with language is at the expense of being. Language, culture, structure, and law are different aspects of the symbolic order that becomes the habitat of the human at the expense of the unstructured Real life that was before that. The childhood disorder of elective mutism is an example of such refusal to the death-drive action of the signifier. But eventually the human being identifies with the signifier, the name, the culture and the structure. He or she identifies with its position in language to the point that being banished from language like in traumatic situations that leave us without words as the appearance of the death drive, this time from the side of the Real. The view through which identification with an identity is alienating the subject is in line with the first meeting of the subject with the signifier. Freud said in ‘Civilization and It’s Discontent’ (Freud 1961 [1930] SE XXI) that the aim of psychoanalysis is to alleviate the detrimental effects of civilization. Lacan took it to the extreme, to the point of being able to de-identify.

So, what is the bedrock under all identifications? Beneath even the unary trait? Lacan takes as an illustration the hypnagogic experience when waking up, already not in the dream of the night and yet not immersed in the myths and roles of the ‘dream of the day’. For Lacan, being is the Real that remains when we wake up from identifications. It is a moment of dis-identification (Lacan 1988). A moment in which we are no longer identities under the gaze of the Other, but as speaking beings: using language to exist not through identities, but through the act of expressing; declaring ourselves into existence by doing something with language. Being subjects of language.

So, this is what I offer to devout believers of simulation theory. Your intuition is right: yes, we are figments. Figments of imagination, of a higher being more than we can fathom. We are identity-figments that our unconscious creates within a myth of an Other that make us exist in language; spoken into existence. But you are invited to try to place yourself on the active, subjective side of the creation myth: not only as the object thought and spoken into existence withing the Other’s presumed consciousness, but as the one who speaks.¹⁴

In the text ‘*L’Étourdit*’ (Lacan 1973), Lacan reminds us that behind all statements there is the fact of stating, to the extent that one plus one equals two ever since the first mathematician who thought it said so. The following example demonstrates the clinical value of this shift. A tearful patient once said in pain, ‘I no longer know who I am.’ The interpretation he received was: ‘You are the one with tears.’

The point is not to replace one identity with another (tearful person), but to shift the subject from the question of what he is to the event of that he speaks. The interpretation anchors being in the act of the tears and the saying, rather than in a stable essence guaranteed by a higher gaze. The cure of neurosis is in the move that loosens the hold of the big Other as guarantor: the subject is no longer waiting to be defined by the system, the code, or the programmer. Something of being can appear as a momentary effect of enunciation, rather than as a property bestowed by an author above.

The interpretation says ‘this is who you are.’ It correlates the patient’s being with the act of saying. It is a shift from identity, with the false promise of being within the Other, to being, which is all the way down under all identities. Psychoanalysis offers a liberation from the position of a figment of identity to a position of existence as being. It is the shift from existing as an object of a universal consciousness to being a singular unconscious, at least for a fraction of the time.

Read this way, simulation theory is not merely a claim about the world, but a contemporary myth that offers an answer to the question of identity by locating the subject as an object in a higher system. Lacan’s illustrations: unary trait, Zhuangzi’s butterfly, and the liar paradox show both why such an answer is compelling and why it cannot fully deliver being. What analysis can offer is not a better guarantee from a higher programmer, but a shift in position: from

¹⁴ Lacan describes the relation between the subject and language in two phases: alienation and separation. Alienation is the substitution of the original Real being with the subject who is a literary creation. The subject is the hero in the narrative, and its desire is a function of the plot he or she move through. What way out is there for the subject? Separation. This happens when the subject realizes that the symbolic order is always missing something and cannot account for all existence. Some Real always remains out of articulation. This realization, that the Other is always lacking, allows the subject to accept his or her lack, that language does not cover everything on the side of the subject as well. The limit of the symbolic is the opening through which the subject can exit the passive position within language and live itself as a speaking being.

seeking existence through the Other's supposed knowledge, to locating being in the act of saying. The gain is modest and fragile, but decisive: less "What am I in the system?" and more 'What do I do with language, here, now?'

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