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How the Music Machine Makes Myths Real: AI, Holograms, and Ashley Eternal

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Abstract: Since ancient times, music has been instrumental in giving life to the stories we build our identities and cultures around. I will examine how, in our time, music creates new myths by creating its own heroes and heroines through capital and the star system. In traditional literary and cultural analysis, a distinction was drawn between the natural and the supernatural when discussing literary mythology; in the twentieth century, an equivalent distinction was made in works of art that, in Baudrillard's terminology, make use of the realms of the real and the "hyperreal" (1981). In today's mythmaking, the supernatural has been largely replaced by the technological, and recent developments blur the line between science fiction and fantasy; tech has become megalotech. A recent episode of the television series *Black Mirror*, "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too" (2019), explores these concepts with an examination of the pros and cons of replacing human performers with AI simulacra.

Keywords: music; myth; AI; holograms; science fiction; cults

"Mind/body, heart and soul, we got rock and roll"—Gillan et al. (1984)

1. Introduction

The popular science fiction/horror television series *Black Mirror* (Sewitsky and Brooker 2019), streamed on Netflix, is known for its examinations of the way technology affects our lives, as Nolan Clarke notes in "When *Black Mirror*'s Dystopia Becomes Our Reality: Exploring the Impact of Black Mirror's Predictive Technologies on Society and Ethics" (Clarke 2023). A 2019 episode, "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too", examined this theme in the context of holographic images of performers in concerts and the way the music business creates "stars". I will discuss the themes developed in this program and show how it draws upon ideas dating back to antiquity, including the Platonic separation of mind and body, the Pygmalion story, and the Frankenstein story, and how these topics are updated and modernized in 20th- and 21st-century science fiction, horror stories and film. I will also examine the way these themes and myths have been analyzed by 20th-century philosophers and critics such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard.

Myths are often used in song lyrics to manipulate culture and politics; modern technology is used in similar ways to make mythic figures of pop stars for profit and to sway public opinion. In particular, the "resurrection" of dead stars such as Elvis Presley, Tupac Shakur, Prince, Frank Zappa, Roy Orbison, Michael Jackson, and Ronnie James Dio using holograms in concert has become increasingly common.[1] There is a great deal of controversy around the practice between concert promoters and executors of the dead stars' estates, who see it as a lucrative, and therefore legitimate, practice, and many fans, families, and friends of the musicians, who see it as manipulative and ghoulish, and describe it in such terms as "ghost slavery", "stupid", and "a moneymaking gimmick" (Grow 2019). Of particular note is the hype used to advertise such concerts, which promote them as "fun" and "magical" (Grow 2019); these events bring to mind the ancient Cult of Dionysus, the god who returns from the dead and stimulates his followers with Bacchanalian revelries (Čop 2024).

The music industry is an integral part of the media conglomerate. Music is a powerful tool in shaping and creating public opinion (Kennedy and Mohar 2024) that has long been

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used to both criticize and support official institutions, actions, and policies. Politicians and their operatives are aware of this power, as can be seen in the use of popular and folk songs and music in political rallies and campaigns. Traditional ways to control this message have been through money, patronage, and repression, and now, technological developments in media are providing new methods of manipulating the message. As we shall see, the tools used to create cults of personality surrounding religious and political figures are also used to create cults around artists, writers, and musicians, mainly for economic, but also for political, purposes.

2. The Cult of the Synthetic Personality: Ashley Eternal

Folk and rock music have long been a means of criticizing the establishment (Bajić 2024). Part of the rock star myth has been built around the quality of rebelliousness: once stars reach a certain level of fame, they can speak their minds in defiance of their corporate managers; this quality is factored into marketing (see Robert Palmer 1990 for an account of "the revolution-as-corporate-marketing ploy" in rock music). The use of holograms in concerts is a new way of controlling what rock stars say, however; like teleprompters in front of politicians giving speeches, the scripts used in preparing the holograms are controlled by the corporation behind the star. Another factor that makes the use of holograms attractive, from a marketing and message control perspective, is repetition. With AI, the image can be programmed to say anything in the voice and with the mannerisms of the dead star; so far, however, concert promoters have resisted changing the messages that fans expect and pay for.[2] Critics and fans have noted yet another factor at play here; the constant recycling of performances from established stars has the effect of silencing the voices of new generations of musicians and singers.

Kenny Forbes describes the phenomenon of "Death Benefits" in the entertainment world: "the death of a celebrity 'encourages audiences to develop a pseudo-attachment to them' , which initiates forms of media and social mourning that inevitably lead to a spike in sales through the economics of the 'death-effect' benefit" (2021, p. 157).

In "Dead Music in Live Music Culture" (Cull 2015), Felicity Cull explains how we bring dead music back to life in two ways: by listening to digital recordings of artists who have died and by listening to live artists performing music that is recognizably from the past. Cull "questions as to how relevant the concept of mortal death can be in a music culture that is based around digital recordings. When we live in a world where dead performers can take part in live performances, such as through holographic representation, dead and live are no longer solid concepts" (p. 111). Cull defines dead music as music from the past that evokes feelings of nostalgia that many listeners prefer to contemporary music and notes, in a very astute observation, that "Listeners remember what they want, when they want to, rather than recalling exactly how things "really" were" (p. 114).[3] In a similar vein, Heather Duncan writes about how humans can achieve a form of digital immortality on social media in "Human 'ish': Voices from Beyond the Grave in Contemporary Narratives" (Duncan 2018).

"Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too", episode three of season five of the science fiction/horror television series *Black Mirror*, streamed on Netflix in 2019, showcases these themes, revealing modern myths about the music industry and the way it manipulates both its performers and its fans. Ashley O, played by Miley Cyrus, is a young pop star who is under the control of her aunt and manager, Catherine. As long as Ashley cooperates and obeys, all is well, but as she matures, she tires of the kind of bland, feel-good music she is expected to write and perform and wants to develop a different style. This, however, might interrupt or decrease the revenue flow, so her management team decides to stop her. Ashley's consciousness has already been uploaded into a machine and marketed in the form of sentient "Ashley Too" dolls, so Catherine poisons her niece and keeps her alive in a coma while connected to a brain scan machine that extracts new songs, which are then recorded using AI technology and sold. Catherine and her management team plan to turn off Ashley's life support systems on her twenty-fifth birthday, when her legal conservatorship expires, and then

have her music performed "live" in concert by the Ashley Eternal hologram. Ashley's predicament bears a striking similarity to the real-life case of Britney Spears (BBC News 2021b).[4] Ashley is rescued at the last minute, however, by her fans Rachel and Jack, and the scheme is foiled.

During a presentation of the plan to a group of enthusiastic investors, Catherine lists the benefits of holograms over living musicians: they are "photorealistic, scalable, streamable, and fully controllable". Her argument is based on the premise that audiences no longer really listen to music, but instead participate in group adulation of reified cultural icons. Several scholars have made similar observations based on real-life examples: Forbes notes that "dead celebrities remain subservient and meet the demands of their stakeholders (estates, rights owners, fans) without recourse" (2021, p. 158).[5]

One of the compelling features of "Rachel, Jack, And Ashley Too" is the way that it links different myths to show how myth has come to define and control important aspects of modern society and culture. Many critics have noted how close *Black Mirror*'s science fiction predictions are to reality (Tomlinson 2019). The plot of "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too" was predicted in a 2009 interview Miley Cyrus (Cyrus and Shanks 2010) gave on MTV News, describing the artistic transition she experienced during the production of her album *Can't Be Tamed*, which featured a song called "Robot":

> *I want to do my last pop record. I'm working on a record right now. I kind of want this to be my last record for a little while and be able to take a break and just get all the types of music that I really love. . . you know, my favorite styles, because in a few years, as I grow up, so will my fans, and I won't have to focus on that as much, and I'll be able to have more of the sound of music that I'm into.* (Dinh 2009)

The *Black Mirror* series shows how we are all becoming acclimatized to the idea of the synthetic, digital self through filters, avatars, and the proliferation of "see your rock star self" apps.

3. The Four Foundational Myths of Modern Music

The use of AI-generated music and holograms to replicate performers can be seen as an attempt of the part of producers, promoters, and executives to create "the perfect star". This is not a new theme; the attempt to create "the ideal being" goes back to ancient Greek myth and has been the subject of stories and songs in many genres, from romance to science fiction. This is the impetus behind the movement to create and implement AI and the four myths it builds on: the myth of Pygmalion, the myth of the dream vision, the myth of the separation of mind and body, and the myth of uploading consciousness into a machine are the central themes of "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too".

3.1. Myth 1: The Myth of Pygmalion

The ancient Greek story of Pygmalion has been retold and modified in works such as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (Shaw 1913), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818), Richard O'Brian's stage show and film *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman and O'Brien 1975), Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (Levin 1972—film adaptation 1975) (see Herzog 2019), an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* S5E21, "The Perfect Mate" (Bole 1992), and many more. In search of the perfect mate, the artist or scientist attempts to create an ideal being, but nearly all come to a tragic or unhappy end.

In popular music, there are many songs about soulmates, about finding (or not) the perfect mate, such as Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love" (Peretti et al. 1961); Bryan Adams' "Heaven" (Adams and Vallance 1985); Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U" (covered by Sinéad O'Connor (Prince 1990); and Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" (Sheeran 2017). There are also songs about the impossibility of finding the perfect mate, like Pukka Orchestra's "Miss Right" (Williamson 1984) ("she don't exist"); this leads to the Pygmalion/Frankenstein theme appearing overtly in songs about creating the Perfect Mate, such as Hungarian/Canadian singer/songwriter B.B. Gábor's "Girls of the Future" (Gábor 1981):

Girls of the future
will be from the East
they'll be imported
trained to be obedient

Girls of the future
will be wrapped in cellophane
sealed at the factory
far in the Orient
. . .

Girls of the future
will be programmed to serve
the girls of the future
will be serving well

I'm a little bit scared
of the girls of the future

The last stanza hints that this Utopian endeavor is bound to go wrong somehow, a misgiving that appears over and over again in retellings of the Pygmalion story. A less scifi version appears in Pukka Orchestra's "Rubber Girl" (Williamson 1981), in which the "perfectly acceptable" girlfriend is an inflatable doll. A very literal version of the Frankenstein story appears in Grace Potter's "My Mechanical Friend":

I lost my one and only friend
They say he's never coming back again
(I) hold on the hoe while I pull him from the grave
They say he's dead and gone and can't be saved

Lock the door and count to five
Metal along metal, lightning in a bottle

Oh, it's alive—my mechanical friend (my mechanical friend)
I'll cut you up and I will stitch you up again
My mechanical friend (my mechanical friend)
I'll bring you back to life—I'm with you 'till the end (Potter 2012)

One of the most common themes in poetry, novels, paintings, and drama is the difficulty of finding true love, and the lengths to which one will go to try. Psychologist Rachel Allyn writes, "The fairy tales we heard growing up regarding romance have left us with a narrow definition of love and unrealistic expectations about what's acceptable" (Allyn 2022). She explains, "the myth that love heals all and the myth that long-term relationships are the only way to be fulfilled. . . [and] a third myth that can cause more heartache than happiness. Myth 3: There is one soul mate for you, and your quest is to find them. My response: Plausible, but unrealistic" (2022).

3.2. Myth 2: Artistic Visions Appear in Dreams, Then Are Recorded After Awakening

The divided consciousness is one of the foundational themes of both myth and science fiction. A well-known portrayal of the divide between the conscious and the subconscious mind appears in the post-dream artistic reconstruction of the story surrounding Coleridge's process of writing the poem "Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream" (Coleridge 1816).

Coleridge wrote in the manuscript, "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium taken to check a dysentry, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church". Notable examples of more recent musical dream visions include the name of American progressive metal band "Dream Theater", and psychedelic/progressive band Spirit's album *Twelve Dreams of Dr. Sardonicus* (1970). Stories also abound of songwriters inspired by drug-induced visions. In an interview in *Prog*, Mark Andes, Spirit's bassist, said "we. . . weren't afraid to indulge. We were just regular pot-smoking, psychedelics-taking, coke-snorting guys! It worked on the record, but it might have broken the band up. . ." (Roberts 2020).

The mythology of the psychedelic and progressive music of the nineteen-sixties updated the trope of the dream vision to the concept of unlocking creative potential through altered states of consciousness created by drugs or, in some cases, sensory deprivation, which were brought about by physical isolation of the mind from the body, as Jenna Fletcher explains (Fletcher 2020).[6] Sensory deprivation is a technique used to create a number of psychological effects, including relaxation, the creation of anxiety for interrogation, and the induction of hallucinations (Purves et al. 2018).[7] The process inspired many metal, hip hop, and rock songs, including "Sensory Deprivation" by Benestrophe (1994), "Sensory Deprivation" by Dark Angel (1991), "Sensory Deprivation" by Cyanotic (2007),[8] "Sensory Deprivation" by Misery Index (2006), "Sensory Deprivation" by Paleface (2001), and "Sensory Deprivation" by Sloan (Scott 1999). Sloan's lyrics refer to the movie *Altered States* in the lines

Don't take it from me

But Altered States scared me

Should have realized it

It's when he tore apart the lab with the monkey on his back

These figurative separations of mind and body created by chemicals and/or technology and manifested in art are variants of one of the oldest and most influential myths of Western society, the actual separation of mind and body.

3.3. Myth 3: The Separation of Mind and Body

In Plato's *Phaedo* (Plato n.d.), Socrates argues that death is the separation of soul and body, and that the soul can only attain truth, justice, knowledge, and wisdom when it is separated from the body: "what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body?" Descartes proposed that "the nature of the mind (that is, a thinking, non-extended thing) is completely different from that of the body (that is, an extended, non-thinking thing), and therefore it is possible for one to exist without the other" (Skirry n.d.; see also Westphal 2019).

Modern scientists take a different view. Psychologist Alan Fogel argues that "The distinction commonly made between "mind" and "body" is a complete fiction, totally divorced from any basis in our cellular psychobiology. . . All thought is a biological process, totally dependent on the embodied conditions that sustain life and health" (Fogel 2022). However, it is still a common theme in art, literature and film. For example, Emilie Walezak notes that novelist A.S. Byatt "uses the neurosciences to investigate literary treatments of the mind/body dilemma" (Walezak 2018, p. 106) and that, like many modern writers, Byatt uses the mind/body dichotomy as a metaphor for the conflicts of modern-day life.

The separation of mind and body is a common theme running from the classics to modern popular music. For example, the opening track of the Moody Blues album *On The Threshold of a Dream*, "In the Beginning", parodies Descartes' phrase "Cogito, ergo sum" with a critique of modern society's attempts to dehumanize and mechanize humans. In the opening lines, the "First Man" says, "I think, I think I am/Therefore I am, I think", whereupon the "Establishment" replies:

Of course you are, my bright little star!
I've miles and miles of files
Pretty files of your forefathers 'fruit
And now to suit our great computer!
You're magnetic ink (Edge 1969)

The "First Man" protests, "I'm more than that! I know I am/At least, I think I must be", and the "Inner Man" consoles him: "It riles them to believe/That you perceive the web they weave/And keep on thinking free". Edge's theme is that society's pressure to conform has caused a split in the human personality as it struggles to understand and cope with life. In an interview, Moody Blues keyboardist Mike Pinder explained, "we'd just come through '67 in kaftans; everybody was out in the street and it was a fun time, and flower power and all that kind of thing. So, we were thinking, 'Hey, we're on the brink of a new consciousness, a new way of looking at things'. And so. . . it was like we were 'on the verge of a human dream, a dream of humanity'" (Murley 2004).

In Pepperian terms, the divided self is one of the basic conceptual, or root, metaphors of modern thought that inform our view of the world (Pepper 1942; see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980): "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"; "I'm of two minds about that"; "I'm not myself today"; a musical example occurs in the title of the jazz classic song, "Body and Soul" (Heyman et al. 1930). What was once taken to be literal fact is now interpreted as a metaphor for life.

Charles Fernyhough (2006) points out in his psychological analysis of mind metaphors in literature that the divided self has been a staple of metaphors in fiction throughout history. Maria Barreras uses conceptual metaphor theory to show how this concept is pervasive throughout modernist and postmodernist literature; variants include the figures of the alter ego, the double, and the Doppelgänger (Barreras 2015, p. 99).[9]

It is in the realm of science fiction that we can see the technological separation of mind and body that culminates in the theme of AI and holograms; George Slusser notes that, historically, it has been the task of science to explore the mind/body dichotomy and find a rational explanation for it:

> *the vision of science that emerged in SF magazines and culture has been dominated by the no-nonsense idea that science's task is to 'advance' the knowledge of material nature, and nothing more. This bias explains, in the hierarchy of SF subgenres, the pre-eminence of 'hard' SF. Here we expect all claims to paranormal powers to be put to the physical test, ultimately proven to be false, and thus declared to be fantastical and irrelevant.* (Slusser 2007, p. 24)

Recent authors, especially in subgenres such as cyberpunk, have put the fiction back in science fiction with explorations of fantastic worlds and alternate realities governed by the principles of quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and the uncertainty principle:

> *what role might the paranormal play in a contemporary, materialist scientific climate, where science has gradually sought to efface the dualities of both the Cartesian and the Newtonian world views, successfully blurring boundaries between such oppositional categories as space and time, matter and energy, organic and inorganic, and, finally, the dichotomy between mind and matter itself?* (Slusser 2007, p. 25)

These new realms of scientific investigation have identified and verified the inexplicable, and endeavor to find an explanation for it. Thus, "the answer, in a sense, is that science still needs a holy grail":

> *The grail search, by definition, must be always alluring, never ending. It thus sets limits and at the same time encourages endless search to exceed them. For example, neuroscience, when it seeks to explain telepathy in terms of interconnecting 'programs', inevitably raises the spectre of action at a distance as some ever-receding lure and horizon.* (p. 25)

In the realms of brain scanning, implants, and brain–computer interfacing, reality has recently caught up with fiction; this reversal has turned the metaphor back into a literal concept. The *Black Mirror* episode "Arkangel" (Foster 2017) depicted a child monitoring system installed via a brain implant, with predictably tragic results; in a recent *Scientific American* interview about the brain–computer interface constructed by Elon Musk's Neuralink company, neuroscientist John Donaghue said, "The nature of science is: you never know what's around the corner. I'm sure you saw *Oppenheimer*" (Guarino 2024). As he announced the human implant surgery, Musk said his company's product would be called Telepathy, which "Enables control of your phone or computer, and through them almost any device, just by thinking". According to Neuralink bioengineer Ed Maynard, "We have modest goals: we want to make blind people see, paralyzed people move and deaf people hear again" (2024). "But implants have long been seen as having the potential to 'enhance' people who aren't affected by such serious conditions. Musk has previously spoken about the idea of a "neural lace" that could add a symbiotic digital layer to the human brain and merge artificial intelligence with the brain" (Chappel 2024).

Following these science fiction projections that have now become fact, the next logical step after implanting a brain–computer interface leads to the mind/machine meld, long a staple of science fiction.

3.4. Myth 4: Uploading Consciousness into a Machine

The brain–computer interface is the final step toward the complete separation of the mind from the body, with the option of duplicating the mind. This is the central trope in "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too". When the artist becomes a myth, he or she becomes immortal, and a never-ending source of revenue; the hologram that will replace the physical body of Ashley O is named by Catherine "Ashley Eternal". Dan Kois describes a similar real-life scenario in the controversy surrounding a statue called "Marilyn Forever" in Palm Springs, California (Kois 2024). [10]

Sheryl Crow addresses the real-world controversy of AI replacing the human mind on the title track of her album *Evolution* (Crow 2024), which grapples with the impact of AI on people and the planet. The song begins,

Turned on the radio and there it was

A song that sounded like something I wrote

The voice and melody were hauntingly

So familiar that I thought it was a joke

Crow's lyrics describe how AI duplicated her words, voice, and melodies without permission, as in the fictional "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too". Speaking to the BBC, Crow characterized the technology as a "slippery slope" and "a betrayal" that "goes against everything humanity is based on". "You cannot bring people back from the dead and believe that they would stand for that", she protests. "It's hateful. It is antithetical to the life force that exists in all of us" (Savage 2024).

Free chatbots such as ChatGPT are now capable of writing plausible parodies of any style of text, including song lyrics, and with sampling, AI software can make convincing copies of voices, to the point where major music corporations including Universal Music Group (UMG), Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Records have sued AI companies Udio and Suno, which is partnered with Microsoft, for copyright infringement (Berger 2024). Similarly, Avery Slater traces the history of the development of CGP (Computer-Generated Poetry) from the end of the Second World War to the present day in "Post-Automation Poetics; or, How Cold-War Computers Discovered Poetry" (Slater 2023). The technology is so advanced, and its productions so convincing, that Luciano Floridi and Massimo Chiriatti advise, "Readers and consumers of texts will have to get used to not knowing whether the source is artificial or human" (Floridi and Chiriatti 2020, p. 691).

The crux of the matter, legally and ethically, is consent. Crow's song is about theft of intellectual property; on the other hand, an example of robotic musicianship used with the artist's permission is described in "Surrogate Musicianship in the Age of In Vitro Intelligence: Redefining the Live Performer" (Moore et al. 2020), which describes how "biological 'brains' grown outside the donor's body. . . control a music-making hybridized entity or, specifically, a surrogate musician" (p. 99). Guy Ben-Ary, one of the co-authors, donated skin cells that were converted into stem cells and then into neurons, which were combined into a mass and connected to a music synthesizer; the cybernetic organism, called "cellF. . . is the world's first biological neuron-driven synthesizer" (Moore et al. 2020, p. 99), "a cybernetic musician, a rock star in a petri dish". Videos of its "live" performances are available on Ben-Ary's website (Ben-Ary https://guybenary.com/work/cellf/, accessed 11 August 2024). The authors predict that "future technologies of live music production. . . will become post-corporeal" (p. 99).

A similar scenario was predicted in several science fiction/horror films of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Joseph Green's *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* (Green 1962), in which a scientist, Dr. Bill Cortner, keeps his fiancé Jan's severed head alive while searching for a donor body. Before he can complete the transplant, however, Jan manages to sabotage the operation, and she and Bill both die. Like much science fiction, Green and co-writer Rex Carlton's story was inspired by real-life events: three years earlier, *Life Magazine* had published a story, with photographs, about Russian scientist Vladimir Demikhov, who transplanted the head of a dog onto the body of another in a number of experiments (Stevens 1959).[11]

Margaret Atwood parodies the situation in a short story entitled "Cryogenics: a Symposium" (Atwood 2011), in which one of the participants states, "When I'm sixty-five I'm going to get my head cut off and flash-frozen. They've already got the technology, they've set up the corporations. . . Then it'll stay frozen until they've learned how to clone the rest of my body from a single cell, and they'll thaw out my head and reattach it" (2011, p. 217). One of his interlocutors points out the naïveté of placing such trust in a corporation: "what would stop them from taking your money, then after a few years with your head in the freezer they'd declare bankruptcy, pull out the plug, and toss your head in the garbage?" (2011, pp. 218–19). Other participants point out similar logical objections, including the likelihood of environmental and societal collapse before the technology matures.

The consensus among scientists today appears to be that revivification of cryogenically-frozen heads and bodies in the future is unlikely, because when delicate tissues are frozen, ice crystals form and destroy the cell structure. Jacqueline Germain writes,

> *Arthur Caplan, who heads the medical ethics division at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine, tells Reuters he hasn't seen any mainstream medical professionals endorsing cryonics '. . .This notion of freezing ourselves into the future is pretty science-fiction, and it's naive', Caplan says to Reuters. 'The only group. . . getting excited about the possibility are people who specialize in studying the distant future or people who have a stake in wanting you to pay the money to do it'.* (Germain 2022)

If immortality through preserving and reviving the body is not possible in the foreseeable future, what about converting the mind into a different format? Scenarios in which in vitro intelligence is compared to artificial intelligence (Moore et al. 2020, p. 104) can be compared to the popular science fiction trope of downloading consciousness into a machine. The *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (Harris and Brooker 2013) is a modern example of Mary Shelley's theme of Dr. Frankenstein's motivation for his experiments with reanimating the dead in order to bring back a lost loved one.[12] In "Be Right Back", Martha obtains a simulacrum of her dead partner Ash from a tech company. At first, he is an online AI like ChatGPT, but the company soon provides a physical embodiment. However, she is unable to cope with the real/hyperreal dichotomy; he is real, but at the same time not real. This episode encapsulates one of the main themes of the Pygmalion/Frankenstein Myth: be careful what you wish for.

Another example appeared in John Scott Campbell's short story "The Infinite Brain" (Campbell 1930), an artificial intelligence variation of the story of Frankenstein's monster in which the creation turns against its creator. Inventor Anton Des Roubles transfers his consciousness into a machine but dies before he can complete the task. His friend Gene (who is also the narrator) helps mechanical Anton finish the job, but then "Anton" persuades him to embark on a new project: to transfer Anton's consciousness into a new iteration of the machine unencumbered by what Anton refers to as the "reflex" part of the brain, but which the reader immediately recognizes as the faculty of conscience or reflection. This new brain will transcend the limits of the human or, as Anton calls it, "finite" brain, to achieve its goal, the "infinite" brain, like a car without brakes. The Infinite Brain, unencumbered by a conscience or any human emotions (except for a sense of humor), predictably proceeds to attempt to eliminate humanity, like SkyNet in *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984).

A later science fiction story by Walter M. Miller, Jr., "Izzard and the Membrane" (1951), developed the same theme. The story is set during the Cold War; the U.S.S.R. has declared war on the United States and is winning. The Russians have kidnapped an American computer scientist and, with a combination of deception and force, have made him develop a huge, thinking computer to coordinate their military attacks. The scientist is pleased with his creation, at first: "Scotty was in love at first speech. He had made her, and she would be perfect, and she was his creature" (Miller 1951, p. 80) (Pygmalion allusion; combines Myth 4 with Myth 1). When Scotty learns he has been deceived, however, he manages to upload his own consciousness into the computer and sabotages the Russians' war plan; with the computer's help, he is then able to recreate and upload the consciousness of his wife, who had been killed in a missile attack, and the computer places them together in an alternate reality. As James Harris notes in "Can Science Fiction Predict the Future?", "it's an early tale of an emergent AI, downloading consciousness, and maybe even artificial reality. . ." (Harris 2020). A similar plot was used in the film *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (Sargent 1970).

The common theme in all of these stories is that, once the mind has been fully separated from the body, it has no further stake or interest in preserving the body or the society that produced and nurtured it, and naturally, it proceeds to act accordingly.

4. When Myth Becomes Reality in Technology and Music

In the realm of artificial intelligence, science has, in many ways, caught up with science fiction. In 1950, computer scientist Alan Turing proposed a test of machine intelligence: if an observer of a conversation between a machine and human could not tell the difference between the two (Turing 1950), the machine could be said to have passed the test. In an article entitled "Downloading Consciousness", Inafuku et al. predicted that "it is likely that most supercomputers will be able to run an accurate simulation of the human mind within the next few years" (Inafuku et al. 2011). In 2023, a group of 19 computer scientists developed a list of attributes that could suggest that an AI is conscious: "machine learning expert Eric Elmoznino applied the checklist to several AIs with different architectures, including those used for image generation such as Dall-E2. . . none of the AIs ticked more than a handful of boxes, none is a strong candidate for consciousness, although Elmoznino says, 'It would be trivial to design all these features into an AI. 'The reason no one has done so is 'it is not clear they would be useful for tasks'" (Finkel 2023, p. 823). It remains to be seen whether anyone has actually carried this out, but the article strongly suggests that it is within the realm of possibility. However, as Floridi and Chiriatti point out, artificial intelligence at the moment is exactly that, a simulation, and not real: "GPT-3 is an extraordinary piece of technology, but as intelligent, conscious, smart, aware, perceptive, insightful, sensitive and sensible (etc.) as an old typewriter Hollywood-like AI can be found only in movies, like zombies and vampires" (2020, p. 690).

While a thinking, conscious AI may not yet exist, current versions appear to pass the Turing Test in that the products they produce are indistinguishable from works made by humans. With respect to music production, in "'Death is No Longer a Deal Breaker'; The Hologram Performer in Live Music", Alan Hughes lists three categories of holographic

performances: "Dead performers; living performers; and wholly cyber-performers who were never [organically] alive" (2020, p. 115). Hughes noted, in 2020, that ChatGPT was "so accurate in reproducing the literary style(s) of authors whose works were fed into the system. . . that, fearing potential misuse with a public release, the program was available only for a limited period to journalists before access was rescinded" (2020, p. 123). Hughes predicted that soon, AI will be able to create new songs in the style of those of famous performers, and that audiences will come to accept this kind of artificial music (2020, p. 124), posing a threat to live musicians (2020, pp. 124–25); four years later, the prediction has been fulfilled (Berger 2024).

5. Myth + Reality = Hyperreality

In defining what "live" performance means today, considering that the term has often been used to describe televised performances, Angela Jones and Rebecca Bennett predict that "the experience of live music could soon do away with flesh altogether" (Jones and Bennett 2015, p. viii).

Noting that, in our time, we have become surrounded by phenomena that previous generations would have considered fantastic, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard analyses the shifting nature of our perceptions of what is reality and what is not: "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence" (1981, p. 3). According to Baudrillard, the way we perceive the difference has changed over time with advances in technology and cognitive science:

> *Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real. . . Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.* (p. 6)

This has important implications for art and culture. Baudrillard claims that "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (p. 7). Between the World Wars and the Cold War, he continues, "Myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema" (p. 46). Furthermore, he distinguishes between the effect of television and cinema on the imagination:

> *television . . . is harmless to the imagination (including that of children) because it no longer carries the imaginary and this for the simple reason that it is no longer an image. . . By contrast with the cinema, which is still blessed (but less and less so because more and more contaminated by TV) with an intense imaginary—because the cinema is an image. That is to say not only a screen and a visual form, but a myth, something that still retains something of the double, of the phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream, etc.* (p. 53)

In the decades since Baudrillard wrote this, broadcast television and cinema have been largely superseded by internet, streaming, podcasts, and many forms of digital imagery; however, the basic reasoning still applies. In the context of musical performance, representation comprises a film or a video broadcast of an artist or a band in concert, while a simulation is an AI image or a hologram of the artist or group. At many live concerts today, an enlarged image of the performers is projected on a screen behind the stage, providing a real-time "double". Advances in technology, such as holograms and CGI in film and television, have made it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between what is real and what is artificial: "The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (p. 21). This has become noticeable in political polling in 2024; many people refuse to believe what they hear on the radio or see on television. The phrase, "alternative facts", coined to obfuscate demonstrable falsehoods, along with the prevalence of video "deep fakes", and the knowledge that any photograph or image can be

manipulated in Photoshop, has turned the news into the kind of "alternate reality" once found only in fiction.

According to Baudrillard's reasoning, this explains why people will pay to watch a hologram in a concert setting when they could be watching a film version of the dead performer in concert on television or their home computer for free, because concerts still possess the quality of the imaginary:

> *Such is the logic of simulacra, it is no longer that of divine predestination, it is that of the precession of models, but it is just as inexorable. And it is because of this that events no longer have meaning: it is not that they are insignificant in themselves, it is that they were preceded by the model, with which their processes only coincided.* (Baudrillard 1981, p. 57)

This also explains why the Neuralink experiments are not big news in 2024; the actual events were preceded by simulacra in science fiction movies and television programs. It is not news anymore, even though the simulacra that preceded the reality were not real.

In Baudrillard's view, modern mass media construct a simulation of media and communication; people have more access to information than ever but, ironically, respond to it with doubt, ambivalence, and disbelief: "Behind this exacerbated mise-en-scène of communication, the mass media, the pressure of information pursues an irresistible destructuration of the social" (p. 81). Baudrillard quotes Marshall McLuhan's catchphrase: "the medium is the message" and concludes that it neutralizes all content. We want to see and hear only people who are already famous, no matter what they say or do, whether they are real or not.

In his discussion of cybernetic information theory, Baudrillard analyzes the media coverage of the May 1968 student protests in France and concludes that, since conflicting news reports appear to promote the interest of the media itself, rather than that of its audience (the general public), "INFORMATION = ENTROPY" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 86).[13] In the current media context, the situation appears even worse: AI is replacing human producers of information in newsrooms, corporations, and political speechwriting rooms, but AI does not create information, it merely recycles and distorts it. AI texts, which can often be seen being read by AI avatars on video and television, are thus perceived as "doubles":

> *Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.* (Baudrillard 1981, p. 95)

This phenomenon often happens in fiction: Victor Frankenstein finally sees himself reflected in the monster he created just before they both die; Ashley O sees herself in Ashley Too and Ashley Eternal before she is scheduled to die, just before her miraculous reprieve when the hologram is turned off; one of them has to die, either the original or the double.

It appears that we live in an age where "art imitates life" with great success:

> *It is necessary to revisit what Walter Benjamin said of the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. What is lost in the work that is serially reproduced, is its aura, its singular quality of the here and now, its aesthetic form (it had already lost its ritual form, in its aesthetic quality), and, according to Benjamin, it takes on, in its ineluctable destiny of reproduction, a political form. What is lost is the original, which only a history itself nostalgic and retrospective can reconstitute as 'authentic'.* (Baudrillard 1981, p. 99)

6. Holograms

Holograms are the "doubles" in today's world. One hologram that stands in for a living person appears in the science fiction television series *Star Trek: Voyager*, set in the 24th century, in which the ship's doctor, played by actor Robert Picardo, is a computer-generated hologram.[14] Picardo was given the role after improvising the line "I'm a doctor, not a nightlight", parodying the catchphrase of Dr. McCoy on the original series. This line demonstrates the breaking of the boundary between reality and hyperreality by demonstrating that the AI doctor has a sense of humor, one of the traditional indicators of human intelligence. Writing in 1981, Baudrillard anticipated Picardo's holographic character in the 1995–2001 series:

> *It is the fantasy of seizing reality live that continues—ever since Narcissus bent over his spring. Surprising the real in order to immobilize it, suspending the real in the expiration of its double. . . We dream of passing through ourselves and of finding ourselves in the beyond: the day when your holographic double will be there in space, eventually moving and talking, you will have realized this miracle. Of course, it will no longer be a dream, so its charm will be lost.* (Baudrillard 1981, p. 105)

In the chapter "Simulacra and Science Fiction", Baudrillard argues that science fiction as we have known it is dead, for simulations and models have taken the place of the imagination: "The models no longer constitute either transcendence or projection, they no longer constitute the imaginary in relation to the real, they are themselves an anticipation of the real, and thus leave no room for any sort of fictional anticipation; they are immanent, and thus leave no room for any kind of imaginary transcendence" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 122). Beyond the context of science fiction, this comment has relevance for current-day phenomena in the music business. The fan phenomenon can be corporatized and monetized, harnessing the adoration and belief of a cult, when the object of devotion is replaced with a simulacrum. Holograms on stage are thus empty signifiers of a site where devotion once focused.

This is the paradox of "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too": as we watch the story unfold, we know that what was once imaginary has become, in Baudrillard's terminology, "hyper-real". This modern world leaves nothing to the imagination. Kenny Forbes expands on a comment by Alan Hughes in his explanation of the mechanism by which this works: "This capacity for contemporary audiences to experience 'realistic' dead stars live underlines that holograms can resonate by exploiting the curiosity and emotions of fans, both old and new, through the combined impact of 'nostalgia, heritage and the mythology of the deceased performers'" (Hughes 2020, p. 114) in (Forbes 2021, p. 157). Forbes argues that "the increasing mediatization of the live event, which has compelled audiences toward engaging with images as performance via large screens" (Forbes 2021, p. 160) has resulted in a diminution of the effect of live performances. From a distance, as in a large arena, the image projected on the big screen has more impact than the actual performers, who are dwarfed by their own images on the screen behind them.

In a comparative analysis of two holographic music performances, one featuring the "resurrected" Tupac Shakur, and the other the "humanoid vocaloid performer created by Crypton Future Music" (Jones et al. 2015, p. 126), named Miku, Jones et al. observe that "audiences are more comfortable with bodies that emerge from simulacra and are brought to life, rather than actual human bodies that are brought back to life" (2015, p. 128). The hologram of Tupac "invoked its human audience's fears of death as well as the fear of technology becoming too much like human life" (p. 130), when audience members reported that they were much more comfortable with the hologram of a character they knew to be artificial. There appears to be an underlying fear of artificial beings that are indistinguishable from real ones: unlike Commander Data from *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (Roddenberry 1987–1994), who is loved by audiences because he is obviously artificial, or the cartoon members of the synthetic band Gorillaz, the Tupac hologram evokes fear in some observers because, like the replicants in *Blade Runner*, it is indistinguishable from "live" humans: "it also frightened some because the image appeared to be 'too real' for

comfort" (p. 136), recalling Baudrillard's comment that the appearance of the simulacrum portends imminent death.[15]

A successful variant of the simulacrum recently appeared in a series of "world tours" featuring "Abba-tars", digital avatars created by clothing the original band members of the 1980s pop supergroup Abba, now all in their 70s, in motion capture suits, then projecting and filming their movements with avatars that capture the way they looked forty years ago. "Agnetha, Frida, Benny and Bjorn got on stage in front of 160 cameras and almost as many VFX geniuses, and they performed every song in this show, to perfection, over five weeks", explained producer Ludvig Andersson. "So when you see this show, it is not four people pretending to Abba, it is actually them" (BBC News 2021a). The fans seem to agree, as the show sold out in venues around the world in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024.[16] Justin Matthews and Angelique Nairn found that the majority of Abba fans enthusiastically approved of the holographic versions of the band members (Matthews and Nairn 2023).

7. Holograms Portend The Death of the Author

In "The Death of The Author", Roland Barthes (1967) argued that, in the modern age, the author has become irrelevant, building on Wimsatt and Beardsley's principle of the "Intentional Fallacy" in *The Verbal Icon* (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946), which claims that it is a mistake to try to interpret the meaning of a text by attempting to determine what the author intended when s/he wrote it. Wimsatt, Beardsley, and other New Critics instead assumed the existence of an "Ideal Reader" who interprets the word on the page and assigns meaning, instead of trying to discover whatever meaning the author might have intended. Reader-response critics refined this concept by adding that the meaning of a text depends on interpretations that change over time.

The Death of the Author can be seen as a root metaphor for the relationship between the artist, the work, and the audience in the postmodern world. In Baudrillard's hyperreality, when the simulacrum comes into existence, the original dies; in New Criticism, when the work comes into existence, the author dies; in science fiction, when the consciousness is uploaded into a machine, the human body dies. In all these contexts, the author has uploaded her/his consciousness into the work of art, so it is inevitable that the artist dies (either metaphorically or physically) and the work takes on a life of its own, to be interpreted, or created, by the readers or viewers.

The ending of "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too" provides a visual metaphor for this dynamic at work: after narrowly escaping physical death at the hands of her management team, behind the end credits, in a scene where Ashley plays her new music with a punk band, her old fans walk into the club and the horrified look on their faces show that they reject this Ashley for who she really is: what they really want is the pop culture simulacrum of Ashley created by Catherine and her assistants. When the fans turn their back on the new, real Ashley and walk out, she has, symbolically, died to them. They do not want Ashley to survive and grow up; rather, they choose the simulacrum of nostalgia, the Ashley of Eternal Youth.

8. Conclusions

Recent developments in the music business were predicted by the science fiction of the past century. "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too" is a shocking reminder of how far we have fallen down the rabbit hole of technological development fueled by corporate profits. Science fiction explores the boundaries of our perceptions of the real world; unlike fantasy, which asks "what if" our world was governed by magic, the supernatural, the impossible, science fiction asks "what if" we were to extrapolate from our knowledge of the current laws of science to predict a natural and possible future. Accounts from both artists and scientists demonstrate what we know about the ways that science and technology enable and affect the creation and consumption of music. Films, television programs, songs, and scholarly research all explore the future of music from different perspectives, and an overview of artistic productions and scientific articles reveals that the future is breaking

upon us faster than we might have expected. Again and again, we have seen how the speculative fictions of one decade become the news stories of the next. Some may lament the loss of tradition and indulge in nostalgia for the songs, styles, and performers of the past, while others eagerly anticipate new developments in art and culture. B.B. Gabor sang, "I'm a little bit scared of the girls of the future", but as musicologists, musicians, and fans all agree, music reflects who we are, and today, more than ever, who we are becoming. To be "a little bit scared of the music of the future" reflects an understandable worry about who, or what, humanity is becoming.

The theme of "Rachel, Jack, and Ashley Too" is that advanced technology allows the "mechanical reproduction" not just of the artwork but of the artist/performer as well, an issue that has cropped up before, after the invention of photography and of sound/video recording. However, music and its composed lyrics occupy a place in the classical Platonic imaginary that touches the divine. Music and lyrical composition represent the myth of the soul in the body, the immanence of divinity in the human. Although recent studies have shown that most audience members view holographic performances positively, a substantial number still express misgivings; to create the creation that takes on life (Pygmalion/Frankenstein) is to challenge human boundaries, but to create a creator who performs the boundary-breaking act of soul-making is to challenge divinity itself. This is why some find AI so disturbing: a performing hologram may be eerie, but it remains on the Pygmalion level; an AI composing indistinguishably from a human composer usurps one of our most cherished species concepts, that humans in their highest levels of creativity are animated by a divine spark. On the secular humanist level, music is one of the deepest and most profound means of communicating feelings and emotions between people; to have this usurped by machines negates one of our most personal and intimate experiences. As Roger Waters wrote in his critique of the music business, "Welcome to the Machine" (Waters 1975).

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Notes

1 Several commentators have noted that the use of the term "hologram" is incorrect in the context, but it appears to have stuck in popular discourse, so I will use it with the caveat that the terms "projection" and "video" are more accurate (see Anson 2014, p. 111; Skopicki 2020, p. 21; Hughes 2020, p. 115; Forbes 2021, p. 158).

2 Deepfakes in advertising and the news are another story (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020).

3 Recently, a number of newly released recordings and videos have been created by taking old recordings, often demos, made by stars such as John Lennon, "enhancing" them with new technologies, including AI, and dubbing in backing tracks and/or new arrangements by original members of the group (Sheffield 2023).

4 In the highly publicized scandal around the 2008–2021 legal conservatorship of pop star Britney Spears, Spears testified in court that "she was forced to go on tour, made to take medication she didn't want, and go into rehab" (BBC News 2021b).

5 In her novel *Yellowface* (Kuang 2023), hailed by critics as a satire of the book publishing business, Rebecca Kuang describes a similar situation in the literary world: the protagonist, June, submits to the temptation to plagiarize from her deceased friend/rival Athena and is rewarded with a contract by Eden Press, from which she is threatened with expulsion when evidence of her crime begins to surface. Kuang shows how publishers use advertising and awards ceremonies to manipulate sales and the careers of their authors. June's agent and publishers ignore evidence of her plagiarism, going so far as to fire and blacklist one of their own employees for mentioning the subject, because her sales are strong. *Yellowface* shows the cultural appeal of the artist given a sort of immortality after death, in this case by having her manuscript stolen by another writer.

6 "A sensory deprivation tank is a dark, soundproof, floatation device that reduces external stimulation. It may help with anxiety, pain, creativity, and physical recovery, but it can also cause hallucinations or discomfort" (Fletcher 2020).

[7] Purves et al. note that it is also used for interrogations and torture.

[8] Cyanotic's web page describes the band as "part band, part machine, the Chicago-based angry robot outfit Cyanotic, has been producing their own hybrid of angry robot music since forming in 2002". (https://cyanotic.bandcamp.com/album/transhuman-20) (accessed on 24 July 2024).

[9] Science fiction versions include the clone, "Der mechanischer Doppelgänger", and as we shall see, the hologram.

[10] The controversy around the "Forever Marilyn" statue revolves, like the plot of "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too", around money. Some fans are delighted by the tribute to the star, while others are more negative over what they see as a cash grab, including residents of the community who complain about the negative effects the statue might have on the value of their real estate. Kois comments wryly that "An unlikely statue has become a rich-person controversy for the ages" (Kois 2024).

[11] The story of the modern-day Dr. Frankenstein was the subject of a recent BBC documentary (Farncombe 2024). In 1970, American surgeon Dr. Robert White performed a similar operation in which a transplanted monkey's head lived for eight days after the experiment.

[12] Shelley was inspired by Galvani's 1786 experiments in which he was able to elicit a physical reaction by administering electricity to the legs of dead frogs (Galvani 1791).

[13] College students protested the extremely conservative policies of the de Gaulle government, and factory workers soon joined in with a general strike that totalled ten million workers. However, "Because television was state-owned, the government censored coverage of the violent demonstrations. But private and other radio networks continued to bring live reports to millions of French people" (Beardsley 2018). The conflicting stories led to demonstrations between students and workers on the one side and Gaullists on the other, and eventually to the fall of the de Gaulle government.

[14] Berman, Rick (showrunner). *Star Trek: Voyager*. Paramount. 1995–2001.

[15] In many scifi stories of cloning, like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), clones are regarded as less than human.

[16] Many newspaper accounts have made clear that the artists indeed have not been brought *back* to life, and the show has been constructed with their enthusiastic consent and participation, as can be seen from the fact that ticket prices at the Saturday, 17 August 2024, show at ABBA Arena, London, ranged from GBP 104.50 to GBP 181.50, and the Ticketmaster website shows that the concerts are regularly sold out (https://www.ticketmaster.co.uk/event/35005F27BEC958B5?brand=abba_voyage) (accessed on 11 August 2024).

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