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Public Diplomacy in an Age of Synthetic Intertextuality ^[1]

According to Roland Barthes, texts can never be wholly original. Every text, or cultural product, references a prior one. This is especially true of visuals such as films, advertisements and posters that “borrow” from other texts in terms of style, color, composition and angle. A popular example is the slew of online images that reference the 2008 Barack Obama “Hope” poster. Barthes refers to this as “intertextuality” suggesting that the meaning of an image emerges through past recognition. Viewers understand a new visual because it echoes or references a previous one.

Such is the case with political memes that borrow from popular culture. The Ukrainian government has relied on pop culture memes to narrate the War with Russia as an epic struggle between good and evil similar to Marvel films. By referencing pop culture, these visuals deliver a new meaning, one that cannot be fully understood without previous knowledge. A social media user who has never seen Marvel films will be baffled by a meme depicting Ukrainian President Zelenskyy as “Captain Ukraine,” a clear reference to *Captain America*.

Over the past year, two important social media trends have collided to create a new form of “Synthetic Intertextuality.” The first is the growing a-social nature of social media. Across age groups, individuals have adopted selective exposure where they share personal content with small groups of friends through Instagram stories or WhatsApp groups. The second is individuals’ use of Generative AI to create visuals through which they comment on world events. Social media are awash with AI-generated visuals which comment on trending news stories and international affairs. The new social is thus inherently Synthetic or created through AI generators.

What is especially important is that many of these visuals rest on intertextuality by referencing or quoting previous visuals. One example of Synthetic Intertextuality is the use of AI to reimagine popular films in different eras. Such is the case with the Synthetic visual below imagining *Star Wars* as a 1950’s film saga. *Star Wars* can only be reimagined as a 1950’s saga if one is familiar with the aesthetic of that decade, the style and composition of 1950 movie posters, the iconography of Hollywood and stars like James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor. Without such knowledge, the *Star Wars* images remain beyond comprehension.

Such AI visuals can be defined through the term “Synthetic Intertextuality” as they are machine-generated and not authored by humans. AIs also allow for endless intertextuality constantly merging forms, styles and aesthetics into an endless array new visuals that reference older ones. This new form of creativity is also distinctly new. In the past, intertextuality required artistic skill to merge forms and styles. All AI require is “prompt-driven creativity,” which any user can master.

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Synthetic Intertextuality is evident in the AI visual depicting President Trump sitting in front of a Carbon frozen Nicolas Maduro. The image clearly references the *Star Wars* films, the Carbon freezing of Han Solo and his placement in the lair of famed Gangster Jabba the Hutt. Yet the image replaces Solo with Maduro, and Jabba with Trump. The new image gains meaning through intertextuality or through the reference to *Star Wars*. The political meaning of the image stems directly from its reference to *Star Wars* suggesting that Maduro is Trump's new "favorite decoration" to paraphrase Jabba the Hutt, or that Trump is akin to a gangster, having violated international law to capture Maduro or that Trump's sense of style is so gauche that he would display Maduro in his gold-plated White House.

These new types of visuals have important ramifications for public diplomacy. This is because AI transforms intertextuality from an occasional cultural practice to a dominant communicative logic, a logic that has four characteristics. The first is the simplification of international crises through pop culture analogies with wars understood through *Game of Thrones* visuals and conflicts understood through *Hunger Games* visuals. This simplification is problematic as it entails the promise of easy fixes to wicked problems, such as a quick and decisive victory of Captain Ukraine over Vladimir Thanos. As these AI visuals gain popularity, they will generate unrealistic expectations of diplomacy.

The second characteristic is the emotional appeal of Synthetic Intertextuality where AI visuals spread quickly as they evoke a sense of pleasure referencing beloved pop culture texts. Intertextuality, however, demands new types of literacies such as a comprehensive knowledge of pop culture across media, decades and genres. Without such knowledge visuals may remain beyond comprehension leading to a breakdown in shared symbols through which societies debate shared challenges. For diplomats, this means that they must become proficient in a new visual language or else they will fail to understand public debates and partake in them.

Third, pop culture may lend credibility and likability to leaders through Synthetic Intertextuality. Leaders' global appeal may be shaped not just by policies and actions but by the pop culture references used time and again to depict them. Some leaders may be visually represented as the villainous *Darth Vader*, and others as the heroic *Harry Potter*. These references to pop culture would become part of political brands, and so politics itself may become intertextual. The risk is that villains can become appealing. *Darth Putin* may elicit the same awe and respect as *Darth Vader* generating a new form of attraction in international affairs.

Finally, Synthetic Intertextuality can drive political polarization with social groups depicted through the pop culture dichotomies of heroes versus villains. For instance, social groups may increasingly depict one another using AI visuals of gruesome orcs from *Lord of the Rings*. This can lead groups to view one another as alien or foreign driving polarization and eroding the middle ground. Yet it is in the middle ground that public diplomacy takes place, where different groups come together to take collective action. If the future of public diplomacy is

Synthetic, diplomats, states and non-state actors must master intertextuality, or they risk becoming irrelevant to online discussion.
