My scholarly and creative work is concerned the design of faith. Here, faith is not synonymous with spirituality or religion, but rather is the complete trust that humans place in someone or something. In this context, faith serves as a system of vision for how we all believe what we believe and how that influences our individual agency in complex situations. In environments with multiple perceptions of truth, design serves as a form of rhetoric (Grudin, 2010). This rhetoric permeates our lives and we are constantly bombarded with fragments of information that we assemble into our own personal ideologies. Vilem Flusser, noted media critic and philosopher, claims that design is always a lie and that designers are professional liars (1999). By adopting this assertion, I place myself in an ambiguous space of reality that allows me to continually question the ethical concerns of using design as a rhetorical device to build faith and examine the ramifications of its use in the real world.

My thesis project explores faith through the lens of American popular culture and politics. I pay particular attention to technology mediated relationships as devices to perpetuate belief systems. Many, if not all, people engage in these types of relationships. This phenomena, called parasocial interaction, describes unrequited feelings that people develop for media and public personas (Horton and Wohl, 1956). With the proliferation of the Internet and social networking, people have more access into the contrived lives of these personas. Additionally, we all have the ability to adopt the role of media producer, something once reserved for the elite. Everyone has become both a creator and consumer of media, simultaneously designing and devouring image, text, video, and more. We are losing our ability to critically question this information and, in turn, parasocial personas are exploiting human empathy. We surround ourselves with like-minded individuals and we rarely have to step outside of our comfort zones to experience the lives of others. This has given power to the parasocial to take a place of authority in our everyday lives. I am currently examining the personas of Donald J. Trump, Kris Jenner, and a myriad of network marketers as design artifacts that effectively use hyperbole to build faith and diminish genuine human empathy.

Using a high-degree of criticality and a number of design research methods, I conduct my explorations through the integrated tele-network system, Reverie Network. Critical design challenges the positive assumptions associated with technological progress (Dunne & Raby, 2013). According to Johanna Drucker, this methodology is often aligned with activism more than critical thought (2014). I, however, am more interested in long-term skill acquisition — empowering my audience to take action through critical thought.

While the provocative nature of critical design is helpful in grabbing attention, increasing awareness, and even collecting preliminary data on an understanding of a phenomena, it has more to offer subjects than just satire, sarcasm, and speculation. The prototypes I create use critical design as a starting point, but aim to move beyond what this method currently affords. They are responsible objects of accountability, designed to be assessed over a long period of time. Rooted in a social practice, they are not neutral and they reflect the political and cultural present. These prototypes are not visions of the future, but rather an alternative reading of the world in its current state. By analyzing and utilizing fragments of existing media and reinterpreting the context, I provide a direct prompt for actors to use their imaginations in a familiar, yet disorienting, environment. Imagination is one of the most powerful forms of resistance because it provides a space for transformative learning. Often, however, it is stifled in an attempt for the group in control to retain dominance (hooks, 2010). The prototypes directly support this learning environment as props in a larger embodied experience that provide an opportunity for subjects to create their own affordances and paths to resistance. They are used to illustrate concepts that challenge preexisting notions and inspire this imaginative and critical thought. This directly supports both Drucker and Helfand's proposition to move design in a more humanist direction, providing a direct platform for human agency (2014, 2016). The design challenge here is not the object or experience, but rather the subject's future ability to recognize and evaluate the impact these personas have on their own empathetic response.

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