Jean Baudrillard believes we are living in the world of the hyperreal: fact and fiction are presented as cinematic, dramatized to provide a more intense experience than reality. After some time, Baudrillard contends, the distinction between reality and the exaggerated simulation of TV, VR, etc. disappears entirely. In middle school, I read The Hot Zone by Richard Preston: a book about humanity’s bouts with highly infectious diseases like anthrax; and our attempts to use biological agents against ourselves. This book, presented as a thriller, truly began my interest in the environment.

As an undergrad, I take all chances I can get to help secure a future for the world. When given the option to do research at my university, I chose the project that would have the most direct environmental implications. The meat and dairy industries are rightly criticized for their detrimental environmental effects. Concentrated animal feeding operations are a major source of pollution for aquatic life as well as humans. Cattle waste naturally contains hormones, nitrates, phosphates; but in large enough quantities, these along with antibiotics and arsenic can enter our rivers in high concentration causing eutrophication and disruption of hormonal cycles. My research aims at determining concentrations of certain antibiotics in swine and cattle waste with HPLC/MS. Ultimately, we want to know which CAFOs will cause the most harm.

People today are exposed to existential threats from nuclear disaster to chemical warfare. Unfortunately, the routes through which we obtain factual news are the same mediums that we watch (historic or preemptive) doomsday disasters: the digital screen. And the signs and language we use to discuss the two overlaps. As such, it becomes ever more important that we do not find consonance. Reality has always been stranger than fiction, only now must we consciously try to differentiate the two.