

Exploring the Role of Nostalgic Familiarity in Societal Exploitation through *The Great Gatsby*: Origins of Illusion and Ideology in Modern America

Rajat Sirohi

April 3, 2018

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1 Philosophical Argument: How Exploitation Arises From Illusion

Make America Great Again! the infamous words of our Lord and Savior Donald Trump, fairly elected by our faithful democratic system just over one year ago. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a message from the White House: "Trump elected. America saved. MAGA" [1]. At what point does America become "great again"? I'm still waiting. . .

Trump's appeal exemplifies a fundamental relationship between the nostalgic attraction of the people and their inevitable exploitation by its influential proponent. His (praise be upon Him) prophetic words, promising great deliverance, lie utterly empty as vapid entities focusing exclusively on that which is not present. Indeed, it's quite simple to hope and dream, to live by a self-perpetuation illusion, for only genuine progress necessitates actual validation. . .

While experienced most recently with President Trump, this relationship has been seen from the very primacy of civilization, even in the fetal stages of basic intercommunication. This process is the primary mechanism by which hierarchies of power develop and even maintain themselves. Illusion, therefore, lies at the heart of power.

From where, then, do such illusions originate? History, time and again, has suggested a widespread appeal to the past and/or future as the essential method by which exploitation is not simply made possible but in fact encouraged. It is through this very act that the present is unwaveringly ignored and all present

troubles are either left unnoticed or characterized as necessary for the ultimate betterment of a far more significant future.

This essay will view this trend largely through the lens of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel *The Great Gatsby* while referencing important points of historical context. Finally, a discussion of how the important relationship between illusion and exploitation has seeped into a multitude of aspects in society, including but not limited to literature, religion, and politics, will help to illuminate its widespread significance and lasting consequences.

Centered around the raging hedonism of "The Roaring Twenties," Fitzgerald concisely embodies the fallacy of the American Dream and its self-perpetuating illusion through Gatsby's nostalgic lust for Daisy and his continual failed attempts at entering the American aristocracy, under the guise of fair opportunity. Daisy symbolizes the past to which Gatsby, who is representative of the casual, hopeful American, so desperately appeals. Of course, in this fatuous attempt to retrieve the past, Gatsby leaves himself vulnerable to the reality of the present: Daisy doesn't love him. Unaccepting of this outcome, Gatsby remains obstinate in his illusion, wanting "nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken" (VI.125) [4]. As if such measures were in any way 'practical,' Gatsby requires that reality conform to his strict interpretation of the past. Knowing the impossibility of this, he resorts to confining himself in an opaque bubble of delusion. As do the rest: Myrtle continues to believe that Tom truly loves her, Wilson continues to believe that

Myrtle truly loves him, and Gatsby continues to believe that Daisy still loves him. In this cycle of incessant hallucination, the people continue on as if belief in a reality constitutes a genuine interpretation of reality. And so, Gatsby maintains his trust in not only Daisy but that he is in fact on par with the Old Money of East Egg. Indeed, he has just as much money as them, right? Of course, what Gatsby lacks is the esteemed swagger of the upper-class, as explicitly evidenced by his disgraceful interaction with the Sloanes (VI.103) [4]. He could never be accepted into the American bourgeoisie given his poor background, proletariat mannerisms, and illegitimate work. Ignorant of these obstacles, Gatsby carries on, encouraged by society, which claims hard work as the sole inhibiting factor. How then do such efforts pay off? They leave Gatsby dead. . . dead in a pool of deception, surrounded by the illusion of success. His father is left enchanted by his son's great 'success': What a big house! All this money! He was so passionate and driven! This is truly the American Dream! (IX.173) [4]. And so proceed generations of innocent dreamers, continually encouraged by their deceptive 'successes' to work hard and achieve. Meanwhile, Daisy's off creating another Gatsby. . .

So what? After all, what's wrong with illusion, even delusion, if it allows for more widespread success? Of course, the problem is the inevitability of exploitation that arises from such fantasies. Gatsby dies in the book, but the stock market crashes in reality. Wilson is left disillusioned by the fate of God in the book, but innocent victims are persecuted by the crusades of religion in reality. Indeed, these themes and outcomes are far more real than the misbeliefs that characterizes them. Power is fundamentally derived from illusion. One allows themselves, un-

knowingly, to be exploited and contribute to a systematic hierarchy by adhering to the previously described principles of delusion.

The Golden Age archetype is a well-known example of this process in literature. It fundamentally declares that the past is always perceived to be better than the present. Individuals in fact create this regression by constantly appealing to the past and disregarding the present and future with hopes of retrieving the past. In this way, the past indeed ends up being superior to the present as individuals essentially exploit themselves into constructing an ever receding hierarchy of time.

Beyond literature, the relationship between illusion and exploitation has even more significant consequences in religion and politics. Religious faith is founded upon the overarching dismissal of the present in hopes of securing an eternally benevolent future in what is known as Heaven. This mindset is yet another example of appealing to a time other than the present. As a result, religious authority grows drastically, allowing for indoctrination by and a renunciation of control to those promising ultimate deliverance. Gatsby as a skew-Christ figure demonstrates this reality with respect to the past. His faith leaves him dead and ruined as previously described. Such was the reality for most adhering to Orthodox Protestantism in the late 19th century. They were instructed, as a matter of faith, to renounce all pleasures in the present in search of a holy future. Dostoevsky, in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, offers the utter futility of illusion as a consequence of free will. He tackles this dilemma in The Grand Inquisitor [3] by claiming illusion and its associated exploitation as inevitable counter-parts due to

the innate freedom of choice which drives such actions. God, by providing people with the choice of faith, created the possibility of rejection and thereby allowed for illusion to overtake faith and trust. In doing so, He rid people of His benevolent grasp and instead encouraged a rejection of objective faith in lieu of the subjective interpretations of biased individuals aiming to exploit the innocent. In this way, Protestant-esque restrictions fueled the hedonistic lifestyle of the 1920s. From one extreme to the other, from future to past, individuals continued to reject the present. Even today, contemporary politics oozes utter exploitation of the ignorant. From empty promises to deceitful smiles, modern politics is founded upon a web of lies. The beginning of this essay referenced the presidency of Donald Trump as a recent example, however, this style of persuasion has been utilized by all people across all cultures and all times. Even Crooked Hillary is a puppet of the masses. She's an utterly emotional manipulator, from immigration to gun control. At the risk of delving too far into specific politics, it must simply be acknowledged to what extent illusion is exploited by others in all aspects of society.

Nevertheless, there lies the ungrounded assumption that all power is bad. Throughout this essay, power as a product of exploitation has been characterized negatively and associated with corruption. In reality, power and hierarchies are very natural concepts, in no way socially constructed. Discrimination is the mechanism by which good is distinguished from bad. It can't be doubted that discrimination should be exercised in say an interview process such as to identify the most competent candidate. Where then does this negative interpretation come

from? Indeed, power and inequality become harmful only when left unfounded and corrupt. Once the method of discrimination adopts subjective definitions of good and bad, it immediately becomes comparable to exploitation. It must be carefully followed then that such distinguishing features are closely adhered to and that not all power is likened to either good or bad.

In the context of the American Dream, it should be understood that it is not entirely fallacious. Indeed, the US has perhaps been most successful in all of history at ensuring equal opportunities for all people, even in the past when compared to other countries at the time. The idea of moving up in the world and making something out of one's self is highly attractive and in fact a genuine possibility. There nevertheless remain certain obstacles in the way of such a reality. Gatsby and his story serve as a reminder of such obstacles and the role of illusion in perpetuating exploitation. It is the civic duty of the people, therefore, to ensure a fair and just society in which success is determined solely by merit and equal opportunities are afforded homogeneously to all. Gatsby should not be looked down upon as an "over-the-top dreamer" but rather lauded as a motivated and determined individual to be looked up to. And yet, his success should not be measured at the expense of an illusion. Gatsby, and all others like him, did not succeed... He didn't succeed precisely because he thought he did succeed. It is fundamentally this misconception which must be brought down while American values are still maintained. How then does one combat a widely-held ideology enforced by the very people it benefits? Perhaps a simulation might help...

2 Computational Demonstration: Computer Simulation and Mathematical Analysis

In an attempt to clearly understand the philosophical argument putforth in the prior section, I have developed a simple mathematical model, consisting solely of three variables and their respective differential equation, to effectively represent the mechanism by which exploitation arises from illusion. I refer to the three variables: Influence, Desperation, and Hope. The former primarily determines the extent to which an individual is capable of exploiting others. Desperation is the ineffable need to ascribe to some set a belief systems. This significantly influences the ease with which an individual succumbs to ideology and therefore exploitation. Hope is a measure an individual's trust in any particular set of beliefs. Compared to desperation, it is the extent to which one believes some values as opposed to the extent to which one is need of any values in general. I have developed a set of equations to model the changes of such variables (I =Influence, D =Desperation, H =Hope) with respect to time, t , in an environment in which information and influence is spread homogeneously according to each variable's respective spread-factor (α =Influence factor, β =Desperation factor, γ =Hope factor):

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dI}{dt} &= (100 - I)\alpha \\ \frac{dD}{dt} &= (100 - D)\beta\end{aligned}$$

$$\frac{dH}{dt} = (100 - H)\gamma$$

As clearly seen, the differential equations for all three are structurally equivalent, reflecting similar mechanisms of intercommunication. However, drastic differences are achieved at varying initial conditions and spread-factors, as demonstrated in the simulation. First, we can further solve the above differential equations for explicit formulas. I will do so for the arbitrary variable, y , with spread-factor, ψ , and then apply the solution to the desired variables. The solution is easily obtained by solving the linear ODE:

$$\frac{dy}{dt} = (100 - y)\psi$$

$$y' = 100\psi - y\psi$$

$$y' + y\psi = 100\psi$$

We can introduce an integrating factor, u , such that $u\psi = u'$. Now, multiplying by u yields:

$$uy' + uy\psi = 100u\psi$$

$$uy' + u'y = 100u\psi$$

Using the product rule for derivatives:

$$(uy)' = 100u\psi$$

$$uy = \int 100u\psi dt + C$$

$$uy = 100\psi \int u dt + C$$

Now, we can solve for u in terms of y given its previously stated defining property:

$$u' = u\psi$$

$$\frac{1}{u} \frac{du}{dt} = \psi$$

$$\int \frac{1}{u} du = \int \psi dt$$

$$\ln |u| = t\psi + C$$

$$u = e^{t\psi} \cdot e^C$$

$$u = Ke^{t\psi}$$

Substituting this into the initial equation yields:

$$Ke^{t\psi} \cdot y = 100\psi \int Ke^{t\psi} dt + C$$

$$e^{t\psi} \cdot y = 100\psi \int e^{t\psi} dt + \frac{C}{K}$$

$$e^{t\psi} \cdot y = 100\psi \frac{e^{t\psi}}{\psi} + c$$

$$e^{t\psi} \cdot y = 100e^{t\psi} + c$$

$$y = 100 + ce^{-t\psi}$$

This can further be simplified by solving for c as a function of y_0 :

$$y_0 = 100 + ce^0$$

$$y_0 = 100 + c$$

$$c = 100 - y_0$$

Substituting, we solve:

$$y = 100 + (100 - y_0)e^{-t\psi}$$

Finally, we've obtained an explicit formula for y ! This can now be applied to the first three variables of interest:

$$I = 100 + (100 - I_0)e^{-t\alpha}$$

$$D = 100 + (100 - D_0)e^{-t\beta}$$

$$H = 100 + (100 - H_0)e^{-t\gamma}$$

Given these equations, we now have a deterministic theoretical model against which to compare a probabilistic simulation. To do this, I used pygame, a library within the popular programming language Python, to simulate an object of type Person, each with three defining characteristics: (unsurprisingly) Influence, Des-

peration, and Hope. These three values then determined not only the appearance of the object in the simulation but far more importantly how it interacted with other “people” as well.

Motion within the simulation is simply random brownian motion, with accordingly random initial velocities. For simplicity, collisions are elastic and particles interact without colliding. Color is determined on the RGB scale, with each value proportional to its associated characteristic. So, $R = 255 \frac{I}{100}$ and $(R, G, B) = 255(\frac{I}{100}, \frac{D}{100}, \frac{H}{100})$. This way, the more red, the more influence, the more green, the more desperate, the more blue, the more hopeful. Furthermore, the size (radius) of the particle in the simulation was determined proportionally to its influence in a similar manner. This was to reflect how as one influence grows, their ability to become more influential further grows alongside.

Individuals were split into two major categories by natural processes: influencers and influenced. Although all people began at the same level, the universal spread-factors for each characteristic determined the extent to which said trait dominated. This is inexplicably significant as it demonstrates hierarchies as natural products of exploitation stemming from illusion. That is the fundamental thesis presented in the philosophical argument. Such processes are natural, widely observed and undeniably significant.

The benefit of constructing a simulation is the ability to accurately assess the effectiveness of possible defensive measures and/or solutions. The primary manner in which this was done was by altering the spread-factors of each characteristic. In doing so, it became apparent that combating the predominance of Influ-

encers over the oppressed Influenced necessitated the significant reduction of all spread-factors, specifically α . In realistic terms, this means decreasing the extent to which people are motivated by expedient solutions and illusory prosperity. Furthermore, it requires that the people reject ideological belief systems designed solely as methods of exploitation. In doing so, the simulation clearly demonstrates how the effects of Influence can be drastically reduced:

Figure 1: Simulation results at $\alpha = 0.50$

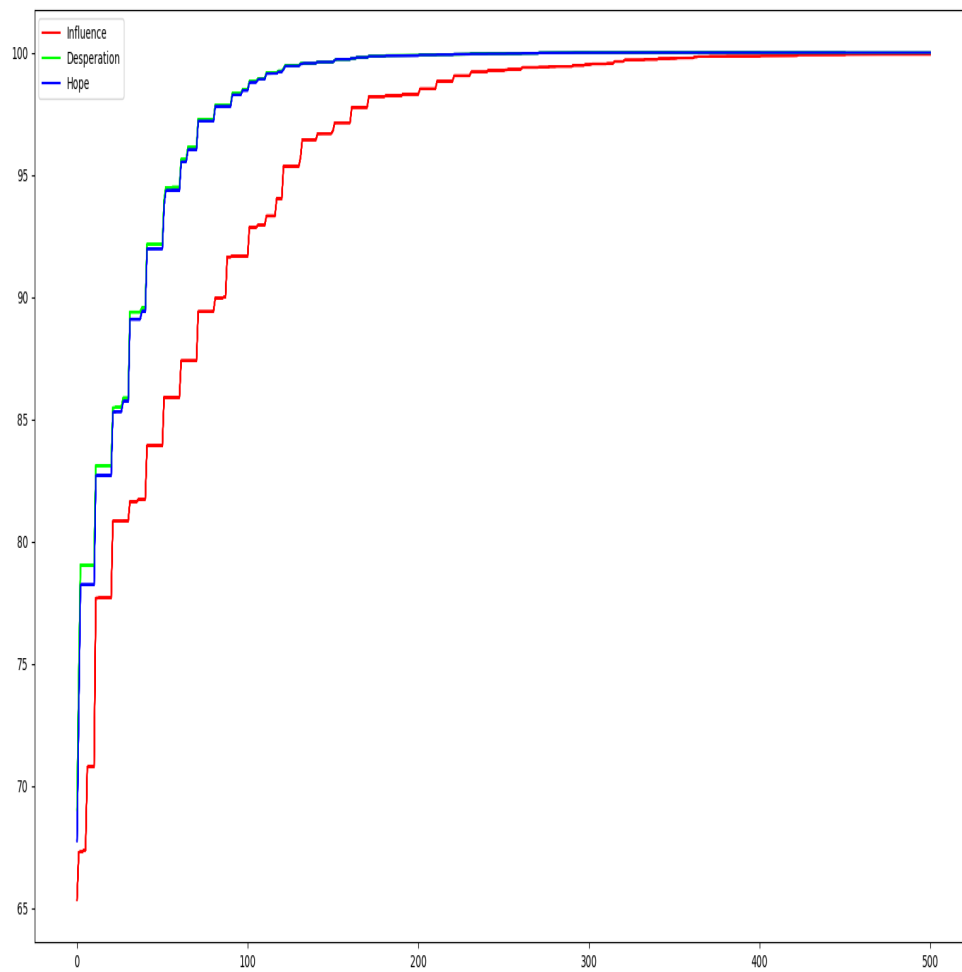


Figure 2: Simulation results at $\alpha = 0.25$

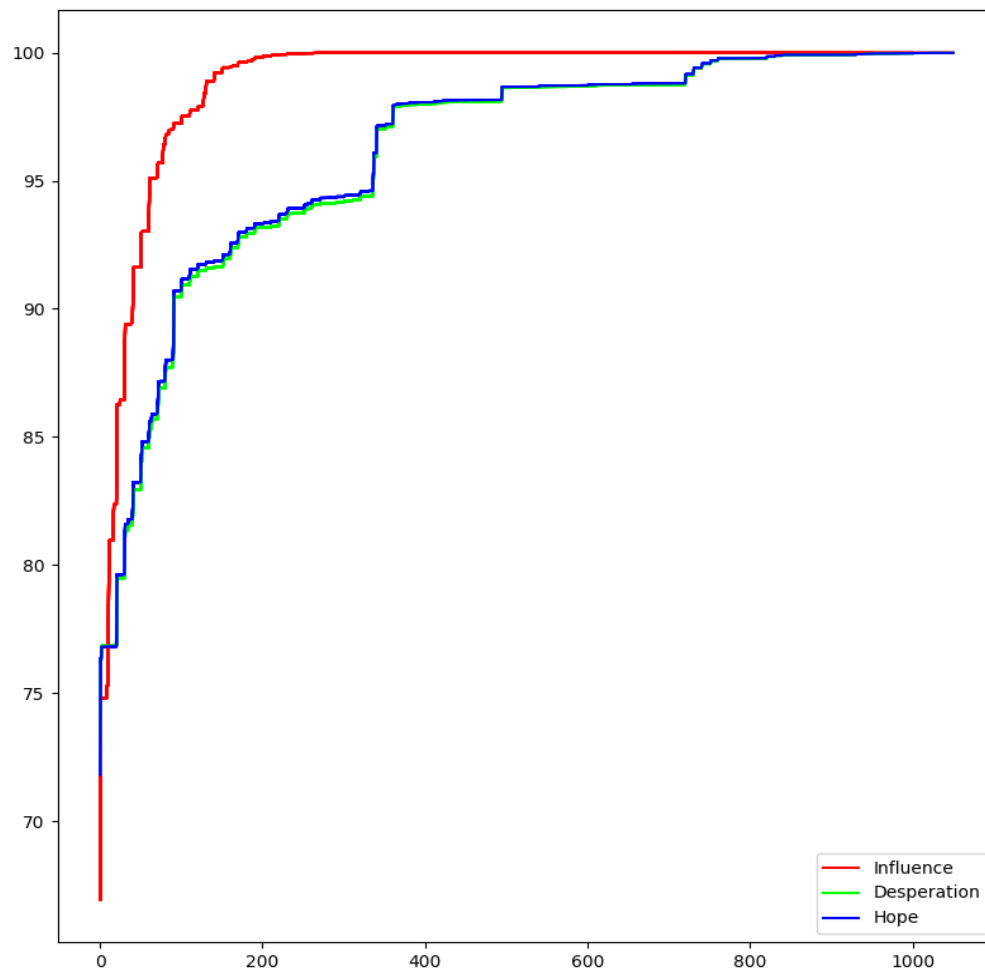
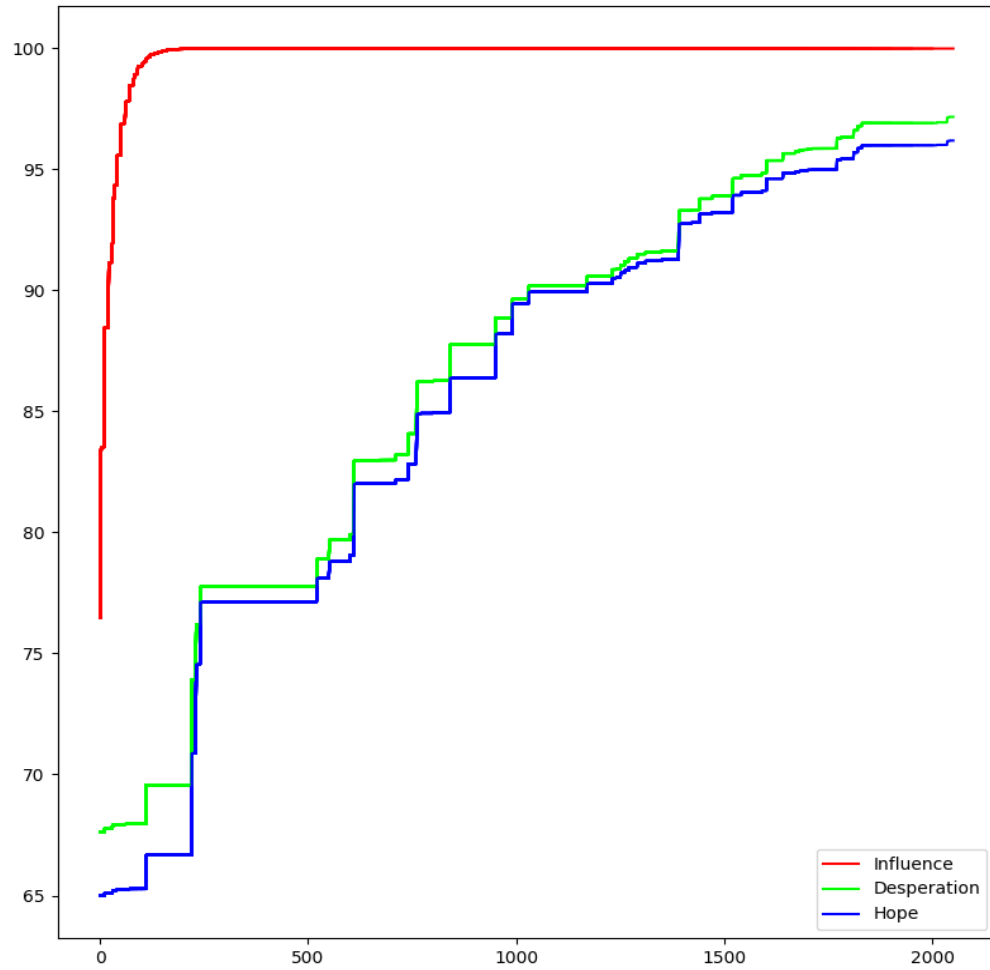


Figure 3: Simulation results at $\alpha = 0.10$



These simulation results can also be compared to the theoretical expectations

predicted by the previously derived explicit formulas:

Figure 4: Theoretical predictions at $\alpha = 0.50$

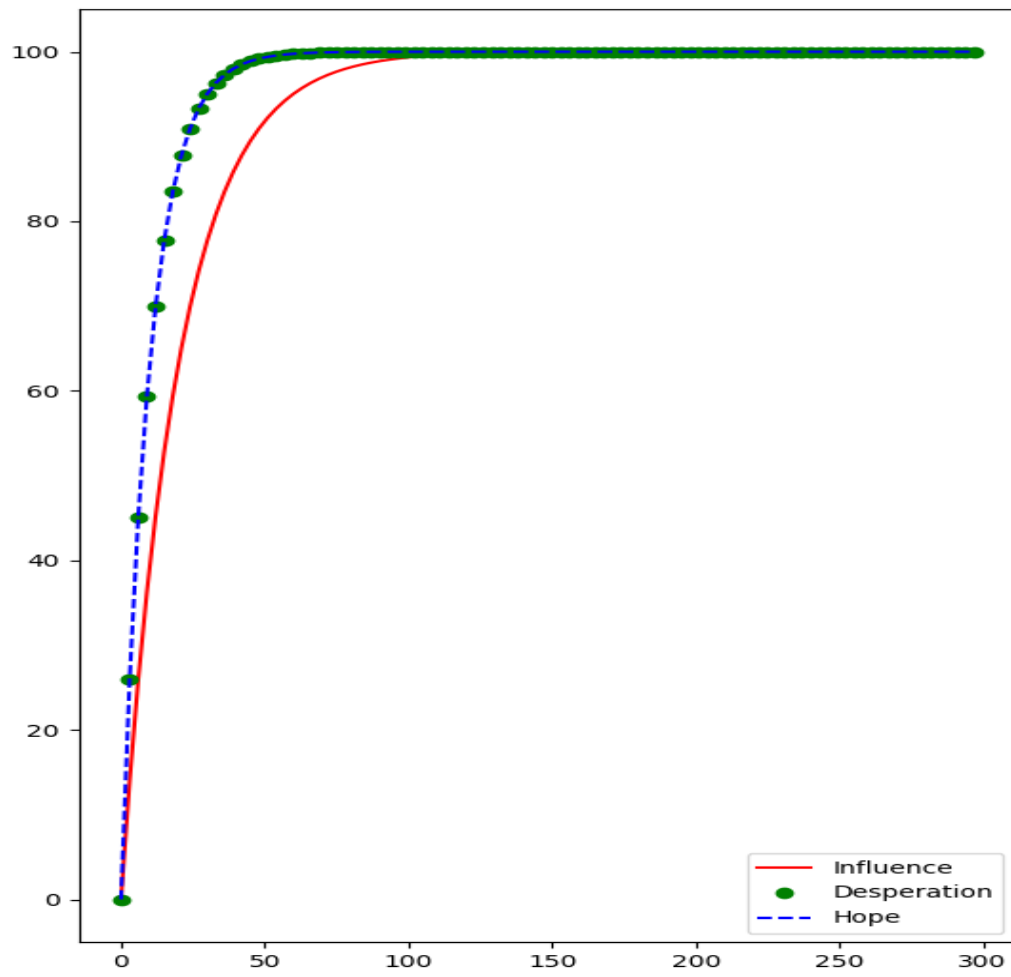


Figure 5: Theoretical predictions at $\alpha = 0.25$

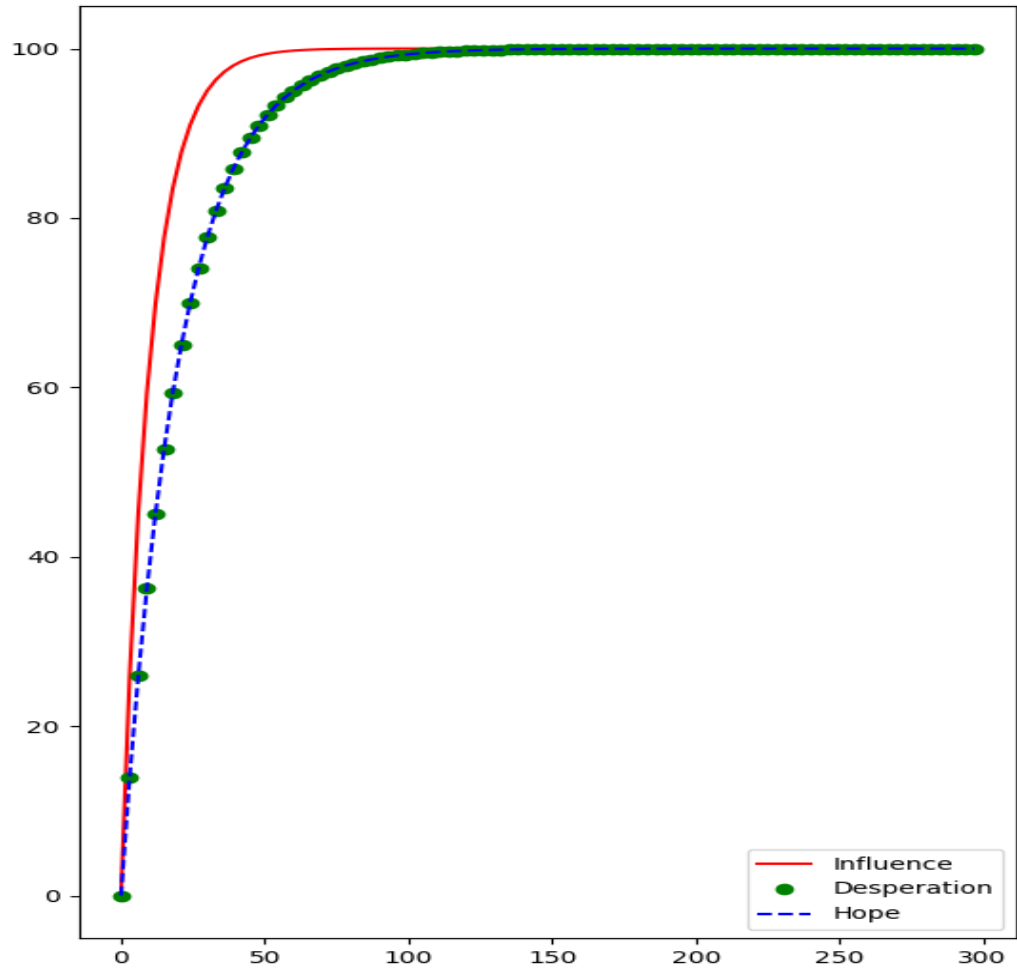
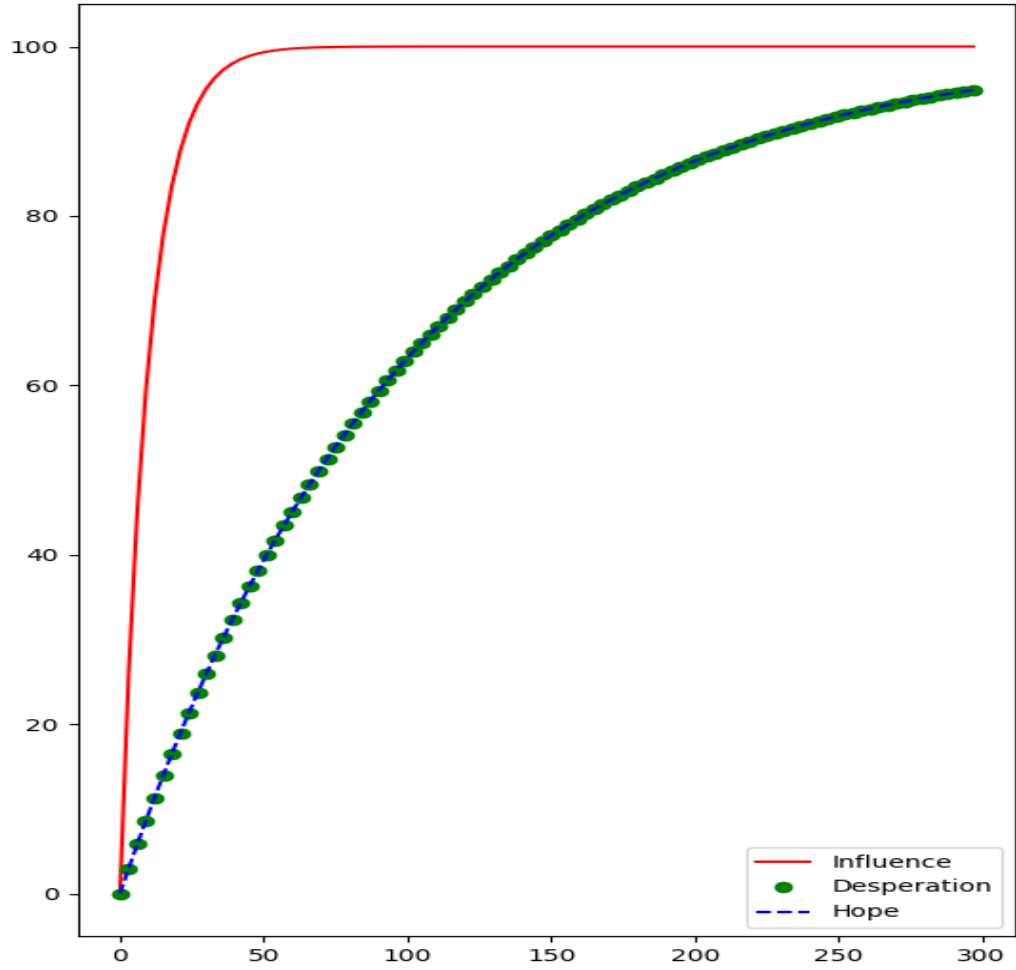


Figure 6: Theoretical predictions at $\alpha = 0.10$



Finally, some snapshots of the simulation at different α values reveal with

visual ease the difference in outcome:

Figure 7: Simulation endphase at $\alpha = 0.50$

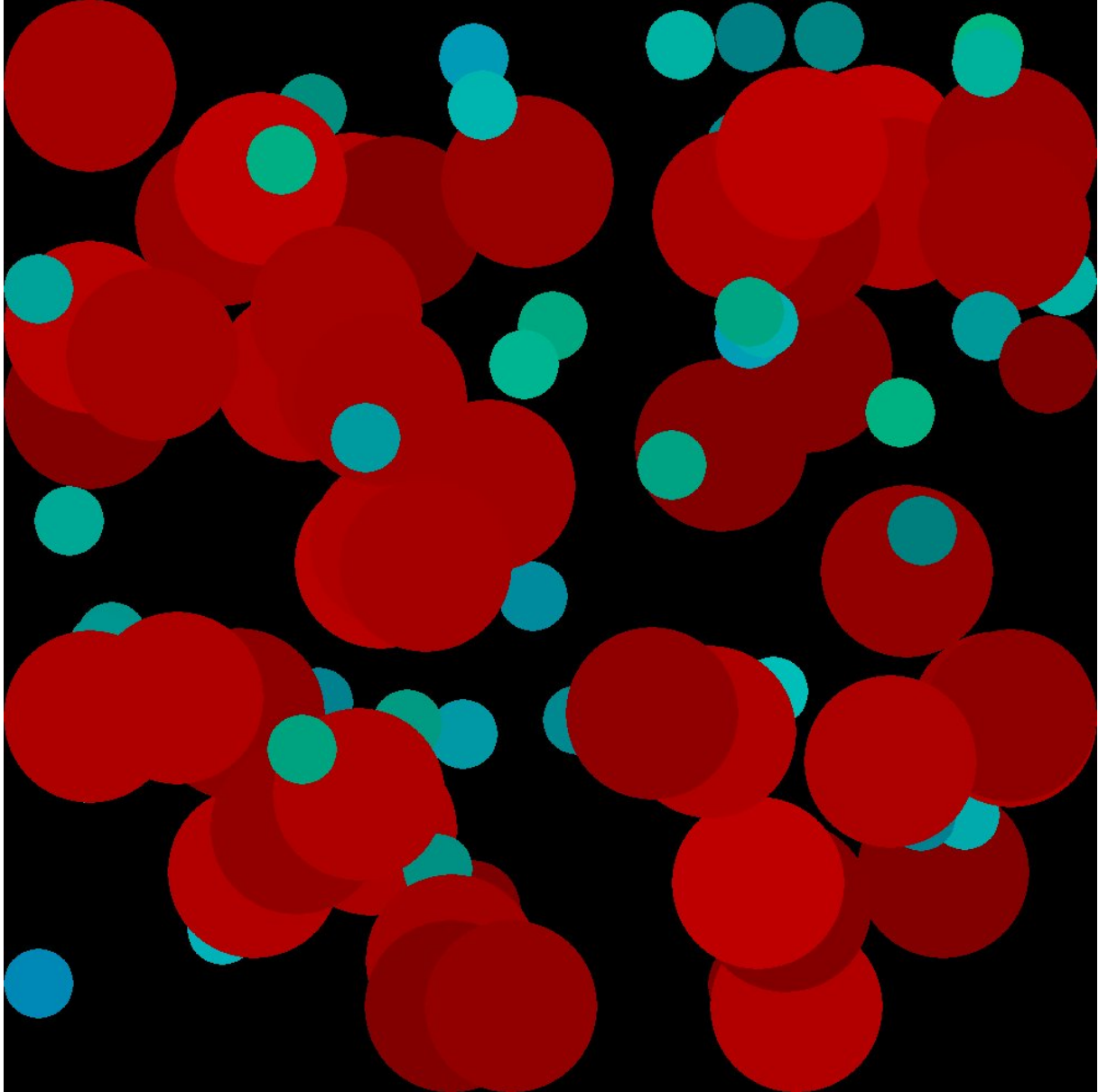
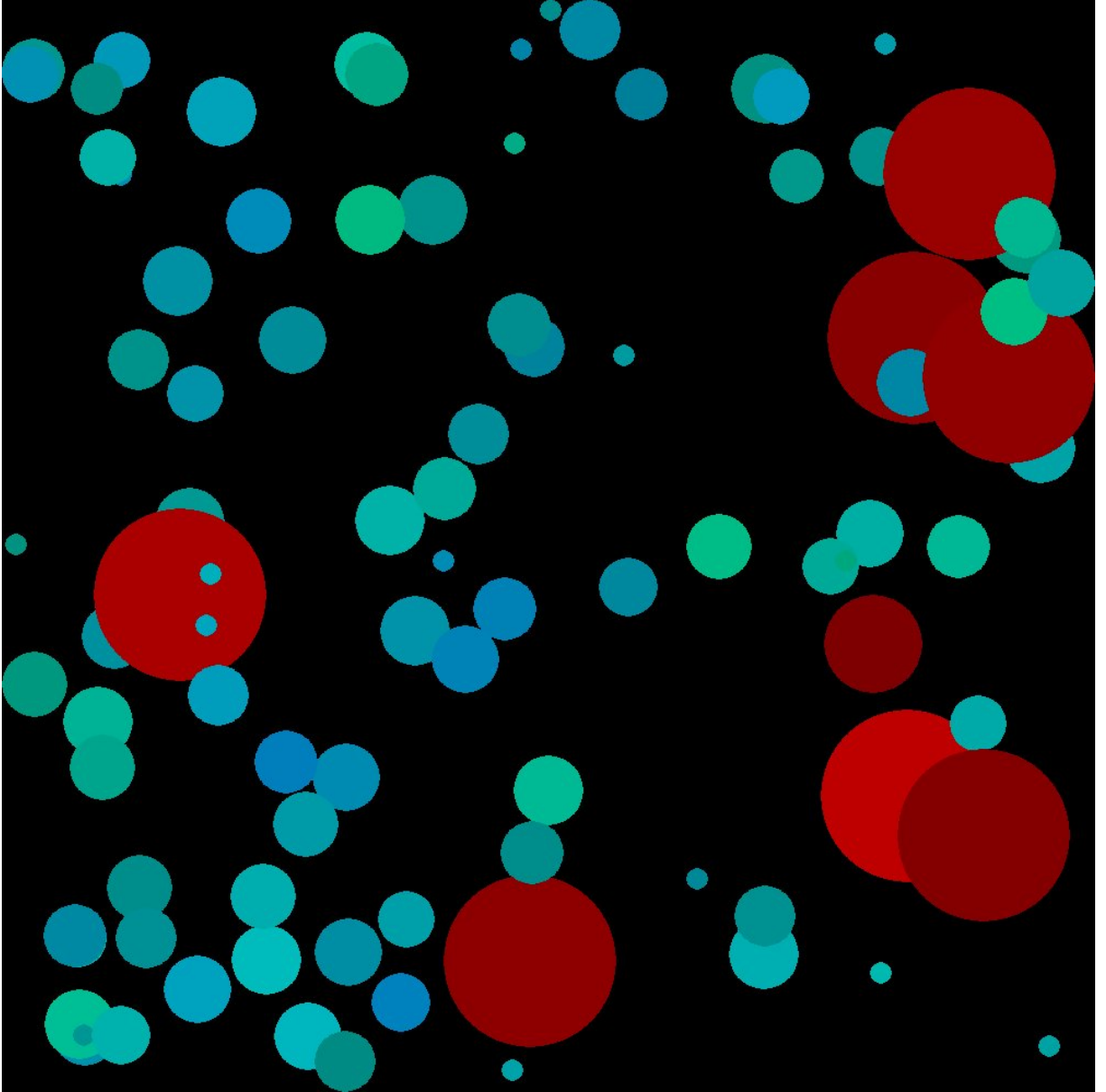


Figure 8: Simulation endphase at $\alpha = 0.10$



Clearly, as the value of α goes down, the people are less susceptible to ex-

ploitation and therefore their Hope and Desperation remain at manageable levels such that reasonable time is allotted for intervention and other such defensive measures. The drastic difference in impact of Influence seen between Figures 1 and 4 and Figures 3 and 6 is highly illustrative of the solution's effectiveness.

Nevertheless, the real-world implementation of such an approach is rather futile. There is no effective way to control the thoughts of the masses (unless... [5]). So, this essay serves more so as a warning to the impending danger of exploitation as a direct product of inescapable illusion. The simulation helps to solidify this hierarchical result as a natural outcome as opposed to some social construction. Furthermore, it reveals the capability of the masses to escape the influence of the aristocracy without a direct overthrow of their power. Indeed, the power of their influence lies solely within the extent to which one is willing to be influenced. How this realization can be exposed to the masses remain unclear. Whether this be construed as a fatalistic surrender to inequality or perhaps a defense of hierarchies of power is left for the reader to decide...

References

- [1] Albert Camus. *The Stranger*. Editions Gallimard, 1942.
- [2] John Carpenter. *They Live*. Universal Pictures. 1988.
- [3] Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Russian Messenger, 1880.
- [4] F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- [5] George Orwell. *1984*. Secker & Warburg, 1949.
- [6] Slavoj Zizek. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Zeitgeist Films. 2013.

I couldn't help but make a little reference to [1] in the beginning. His brilliant opening line in *L'Etranger* beautifully captures the absurdist nature often seen with regard to US elections. People often are unhappy with the outcome, but feel nevertheless powerless. "Oh Trump's president? Oh well... It's not like Crooked Hillary was any better! Oh boy, I'm so glad to live in a democratic system that preserves my and everyone else's voices as equally (in)significant. After all, we live in the American Dream, right?" Right...

[6] was a nice resource on how ideology infiltrates the masses and remains prevalent throughout time. It makes direct reference to [2], which was recreated in the beginning scene of Zizek's film. Overall, it's interesting to see the film industry's take on propaganda given that it itself is a large contributor to propaganda for the masses.