

Reality Drift: Why Modern Life Feels Off

A guide to the cultural forces bending attention, meaning, and time.



REALITY DRIFT

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Terms for the friction you've been feeling but couldn't name.



I was at Target last week when I realized I'd been standing in the cereal aisle for ten minutes, paralyzed. Not because I couldn't decide between Cheerios and Corn Flak

but because I was trying to decode which ones were "healthy," which were trending which had the right sustainability credentials. I wasn't shopping. I was performing some weird optimization ritual I never agreed to learn. That's when it hit me:

Everything feels like work now, even the stuff that used to be simple.

You've Felt It Too

You know that exhaustion after "just checking" your phone? It's not from the content it's from making 50 micro-decisions in 5 minutes. Which notification matters? Which app update can you skip? Which friend's story deserves a response? Your brain is doing full-time customer service for your own life.

Or maybe you felt it when:

Your 8-year-old asked why all the restaurants look the same. Same subway tiles, same Edison bulbs, same font on the menu. You couldn't explain it, but you felt it too. Like someone had copy-pasted "cozy authenticity" across every corner of culture.

You spent 20 minutes reading Amazon reviews for dish soap. Dish soap. Because even cleaning supplies now come with identity choices and optimization anxiety.

Your friend Mike posts about his company's "core values" every Monday on LinkedIn. The same company that made him work through his daughter's birthday last month. But there he is, grinning in a branded hoodie, talking about "work-life integration."

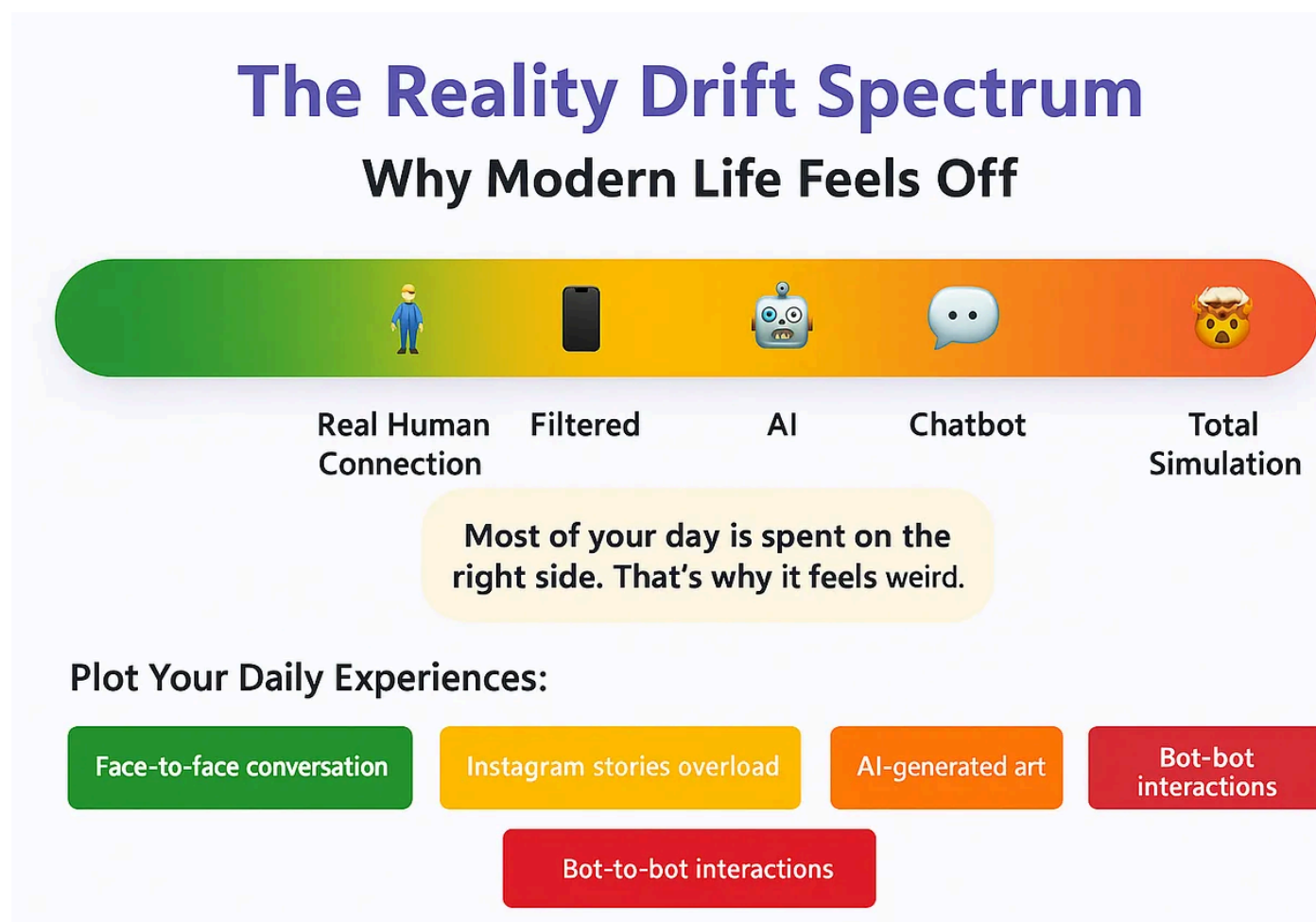
You went to three different coffee shops in three different cities and they were identical. Different names, same everything else. Like someone was running the same simulation with slightly different branding. Something's off. And it's not just you.

The Drift Is Real

We're living through something I call *Reality Drift*: the slow, subtle way that modern life has started feeling... performed. Scripted. Like we're all actors who forgot we were in a play.

Everything still works, technically. You can still buy groceries, go to work, text your friends, book a vacation. But none of it feels quite real anymore.

So What Exactly Is Drifting?



The Reality Drift Spectrum: Why so much of modern life feels subtly unreal. Most of our daily experiences now land on the “synthetic” side of the spectrum.

Shopping became optimization. Remember when buying shampoo meant grabbing whatever was on sale? Now it's a research project. Sulfate-free? Keratin-infused?

Influencer-approved? I looked at 10 versions of the same thing on Amazon last week and somehow felt more confused and less satisfied than when I started.

Work became performance art. We have "culture decks" and "brand personas" and LinkedIn posts about our "professional journey." Everyone's starting to use corporate HR speak about "circling back" and "touching base," even in casual conversations. When did having a job become creating content about having a job?

Friendship got compressed. We react with emojis, send disappearing voice notes, and maintain relationships through stories we watch but don't respond to. Connection became content consumption.

Parenting became data management. School apps, behavior tracking, academic dashboards, screen time reports. Raising a kid now requires managing more software than running a small business. And somehow we're told our kids won't develop social skills unless they go to corporate, professionalized daycare.

Healthcare became coverage management. You don't go to the doctor, you navigate insurance networks, prior authorizations, and billing departments. This is inconvenience inflation at its worst: what used to be a simple appointment has ballooned into managing multiple apps, verifying coverage, getting pre-approvals, and decoding mysterious billing codes. I got pre-approved for a blood test last month, then I got billed 6x more because the office LabCorp used a different code than the standalone LabCorp. Same test, different billing construct. When I called to fix it, I was hung up on. This is what I mean—nothing got better, but everything got more expensive, more opaque, and more maddening to untangle.

Information became entertainment. The news reads like Twitter threads. Twitter threads become the news. Everything gets meme-ified so fast that truth and performance blend together until you can't tell the difference.

What We're Really Losing

It's not that everything is literally fake. It's that everything feels optimized for something other than what it's supposed to do. Apps optimize for engagement, not utility. Jobs optimize for performance, not productivity. Even our hobbies have to optimize for "content creation" and "building your personal brand."

It's what I call the optimization trap. When everything gets engineered for metrics instead of meaning. We're drowning in what looks like choice but feels like a maze of menus, alerts, and pop-ups just to live our lives. Want to park downtown? Download eight different apps. Need to return something? Good luck getting a human on the phone. You'll navigate endless automated loops designed to exhaust you into giving up.

The strangest part? We're all going along with it. We know the restaurant looks like every other restaurant, but we still take the same photo. We know the work meeting could have been an email, but we still show up and nod. We know our data is being harvested, but we still click "Accept All Cookies." We've become collaborative participants in our own sense of unreality.

Why This Matters Now

AI is about to make this much weirder. We've entered an era of Co-Cognition. Thinking with machines, not just through them. We're not just consuming algorithm feeds anymore; we're collaborating with AI to create, decide, even form opinions. The line between human and synthetic is blurring so fast that we need new language just to describe what's happening to us.

But this isn't a tech panic newsletter. This is about staying human inside the machine. It's about noticing when you're being optimized instead of helped. It's about recognizing synthetic realness when you see it. It's about finding pockets of genuine experience in a world that's increasingly designed to feel genuine without actually being genuine.

What You'll Find Here

Reality Drift is my attempt to map the subtle forces reshaping how we think, work, and relate to each other. Each week, I'll dig into one aspect of how modern life has quietly gone off script:

- Why everything feels like it needs to be optimized, documented, or turned into content
- How "convenience" became a maze of hidden friction and decision fatigue
- Why gig work promises freedom but delivers all the risk with none of the benefits
- How AI is changing not just what we do, but how we think
- Why boredom matters more than ever, and how its disappearance fuels filter fatigue
- Why everything feels authentic, even when it's not (Synthetic Realness)
- How institutions that used to anchor reality are being replaced by vibes, brands, and identity tribes

This isn't about nostalgia or conspiracy theories. It's about paying attention to what's actually happening around us, naming it clearly, and figuring out how to navigate it without losing ourselves.

If That Sounds Familiar

You're not imagining it. You're not being dramatic. Something really has shifted in the texture of daily life, and it's affecting all of us in ways we're only starting to understand.

If you've ever felt like you're performing a life instead of living one, if you've noticed that everything works but nothing feels quite right, you're in the right place. Let's figure out what's happening to us, and what we can do about it.

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Reality Drift Glossary 2025 (Substack)

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This glossary defines the core terms, phrases, and buzzwords behind the Reality Drift project. From “Filter Fatigue” to “Synthetic Realness,” each entry helps map the subtle ways our culture, cognition, and institutions are drifting away from something real.

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Further Resources:

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