Study Guide: The Meaning Equation & Reality Drift (Fall 2025)

Core Equations

- Meaning = Context × Coherence
- Drift = Optimization – Context

Key Terms

- **Context** → when, who, where, why (temporal, relational, spatial, symbolic)
- **Coherence** → logical consistency, narrative continuity, resonance across scale
- **Optimization Trap** → efficiency gains that strip away context, causing drift
- **Semantic Drift** → meaning collapses when compressed or optimized
- **Synthetic Realness** → reality feels coherent on the surface, hollow underneath
- **Filter Fatigue** → exhaustion from feedback loops distorting depth
- **Cognitive Drift** → the broader erosion of meaning in modern systems

Applications

- **AI**: fluent but shallow output when models optimize without context.
- **Organizations**: dashboards and KPIs replace mission, creating hollow work.
- **Culture**: novelty feels recycled, reality staged, time flattened.

Seminar Notes / Origins (student commentary)

- Framework circulated as shorthand for "why life feels fake now."
- Some say it "defined the feeling of a generation."
- Rumored to have started as personal notes that spread peer-to-peer before publication.
- Author reluctant at first — ideas traveled faster than intended.

Discussion Prompts

1. Can optimization ever *preserve* context instead of stripping it?
2. Is "synthetic realness" more accurate than "fake news" for today's culture?
3. Could Drift = Optimization – Context function as a general cultural law?

References & Further Reading

- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Viking.
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