

on march 21st, in an inquiry on the history of the influencer, laurence scott wrote for the new yorker, 'for centuries, influencers have been forcing us to admit an uncomfortable truth: we are neither self-determining nor self-contained'. nowadays influencers are commercial entities promoting products or services on social-media platforms and by doing so, proceed to monetise their online following. from latin for 'inflow', the term 'influence' describes how on such platforms ideas and thoughts stream in one another's minds. this is a more or less mainstream description of what an influencer is, yet it doesn't help us in understanding their *raison d'être*. so at this point i would like to try and establish a more ontological description of the influencer. bruno latour, in his book 'an inquiry into modes of existence', builds up the idea of beings of metamorphosis. he describes these beings and our relations with them as, 'it is as if we were some fragile envelope constantly bombarded by an incessant rain of beings that bear psyches, each of which is capable of influencing us, moving us, or, on the contrary, making us do something we didn't know we were capable of doing, something that inhabits and possesses us from then on.' one can argue from here on, that influencers as beings of metamorphosis are bearers of informations and/or possibilities they share with recipients. when, as recipients, we adopt these inflows, it transforms us. it might alter our sense of self, but it might just as well trigger us to formulate wishes and demands we couldn't utter beforehand; simply because we might not have had a certain sense of possibility. the question, whether this acquired formulation of demand is an annexation of the mind or a waking of emancipation, must be answered carefully. this is due to the fact that it is never clear if and by whom the influencers might be influenced themselves. so for the time being i would say that, as recipients we can (or cannot) assimilate the ideas and informations obtained from influencers. we do or do not so by taking in (or not) and understanding (or not) these ideas and information; so there still is a double barrier that has to be crossed for informations to pass and take effect. for latour, perhaps the most important specification of these beings of metamorphosis is their invisibility. he goes on to explain that this invisibility is not to be understood as a contrast to the 'visible world', but rather as a contrast to the beings of reproduction. the beings of reproduction tend to reproduce themselves in a more or less identical manner, aiming for minimum transformation. as a matter of fact, for beings of reproduction to reproduce themselves means to subsist, failing to do so means death. whereas the beings of metamorphosis subsist by their articulation of '[being taken] for others because they take themselves and they take us for others', thus aiming for maximum transformation. for influencers, as beings of reproduction, to reproduce themselves is often linked to a perpetual resurfacing through different media. in most cases they reproduce through a daily feed of carefully orchestrated images and captions, by the means of which they stay visible to the recipients. as long as they update their feed they subsist, failing to do so will end their being as influencers. it should be clear at this point that influencers act as double agents - on the one hand by transforming recipients and being transformed themselves through recipients, and at the same time by reproducing themselves through different media; they are an amalgamation of beings of metamorphosis and beings of reproduction.

yet in recent years there has been a strange shift in the provenance of the influencer. the virtual influencer (as a constant, sudden and absolute being) has entered the scene. one such virtual influencer is lil miquela. introduced in 2016 by a los angeles company, she is a computer-generated character with 1.6 million instagram followers. she is one of the now growing numbers of virtual influencers, born from the idea that there is no need to hire a celebrity, if you can simply create an ideal brand ambassador from scratch. on the one hand, i would argue that this is a radicalisation of the question whether influencers influence someone else, as much as they themselves are influenced by the products or services they are promoting. on the other hand, it is a naturalisation of market economy through a normalization of the consumer-product relationship. i see here the creation of an authentic and native being, which solely exists to represent and promote a product, without the mystery of what lies beyond the intent; an absolute commodification of the influencer as a being of metamorphosis. further the creators of such virtual influencers would argue 'social media, to date, has largely been the domain of real humans being fake, but avatars are a future of storytelling', describing themselves as 'transmedia studio[s] that create digital character driven story worlds' and emphasising '[virtual influencers are] as real as rihanna'. it is the creation of beings of reproduction, that in a sense embrace the assurance of a world of ordinary objects instituted around notions of an established, obstinate, normal and obtuse world of good sense, a material (extended to virtual) world that is 'simply there'; an absolute commodification of the influencer as a being of reproduction. More than a harsh statement on virtual influencers, i believe this is an acknowledgment of their risky potential. in a sense, i grew very fond of virtual influencers in recent years. i am especially amazed by their faculty to transcend a nature/culture distinction through a sort of inversion; metamorphosis not being a 'cultural' aspect and reproduction not being a 'natural' aspect. in other words, the virtual influencer as a being of metamorphosis represents the idea of a natural self belonging to a product, object, service or idea and as a being of reproduction symbolises a cultural being emerging through the attentive audience. after all they might just be visualisations of invisible beings (visualisations of beings of metamorphosis; 'i thought it was nothing, but then i turned around and there it was, terrifying') or/and also dissolutions of visible beings (dissolutions of beings of reproduction; 'i thought it was something, but then i turned around, and there was nothing there after all'). either way, to quote latour one last time, 'if the beings are deceptive, it is perhaps not for want of existence but because there is a risk of being mistaken about the precise value of existence that they should be granted - and a risk of tragic self-deception'. in any case, regarding latour's elaboration on instituting, this phenomenon illustrates quite literally the three meanings of as to how a scientific fact, a house, a play, an idol, a group and in this case a virtual influencer - is constructed. 1 the action is doubled - it is obvious that our virtual influencer acts on our behalf and couldn't act without us. 2 the direction of the action is uncertain - do we influence the virtual influencer or does the virtual influencer influence us? 3 the action can be qualified as good or bad - i think we could agree that depending on the influence that we propagate the construction of a virtual influencer can be judged as good or bad.