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Fragmented Empathy: TikTok, Subjective Reality, and the Culture of Critique

The digital age has reshaped human interaction, making social media a powerful tool for communication, self-expression, and critique. However, platforms like TikTok have also become arenas for relentless judgment, where every aspect of human behavior—especially that of women and marginalized communities—is scrutinized, ridiculed, and commodified for entertainment. This pervasiveness of judgment is not just a reflection of digital culture, but a compelling lens through which to explore Jakob von Uexküll's concept of Umwelt: the idea that the world is composed not of a single, objective reality but of billions of individual subjective perceptual worlds (Uexküll 5). This essay argues that TikTok, as a digital environment shaped by engagement-driven algorithms, fosters hostile, judgmental cultures by distorting subjective experience. By analyzing TikTok through Uexküll's theory of Umwelt, Goethe's philosophy of sensuous perception, ecofeminist critiques of gendered domination, and Alexander von Humboldt's vision of ecological interconnectedness, we can see how social media transforms subjectivity into a tool of control rather than empathy.

Uexküll's Umwelt presents a profound challenge to the idea of a shared, objective reality. In his view, every living creature navigates the world through its own perceptual filter—a unique subjective reality formed by the senses, needs, and capabilities of that organism. TikTok reflects a modern, digital version of this concept. Every user's feed is algorithmically curated, creating a personalized environment that

seems to reflect their interests and values. Yet instead of promoting empathy or mutual understanding between these digital worlds, TikTok's design often reinforces narrow perspectives. Algorithms reward engagement, not nuance, meaning that polarizing, mocking, or emotionally charged content is more likely to be seen. Rather than fostering billions of equally valued Umwelten, the platform amplifies those that provoke reactions—often at the expense of empathy.

Women in particular find their every action vulnerable to surveillance and ridicule on TikTok. Whether they are sharing makeup routines, daily habits, or expressing enthusiasm about a niche interest, their content can become viral not because of appreciation but because of mockery. Subjectivity, in theory, should allow each individual to express their own truth and perspective. Yet in practice, TikTok's infrastructure weaponizes that subjectivity. The personal becomes performative, the intimate becomes spectacle, and every expression is filtered through the risk of ridicule. Uexküll's idea, which was intended to foster empathy across species lines, becomes distorted in the digital age (Uexküll 8). TikTok hosts fragmented Umwelten, but rather than encouraging understanding between them, it promotes competition, conflict, and judgment.

This transformation of subjectivity into a commodity echoes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's rejection of disembodied, abstract knowledge in favor of what he called sensuous cognition. Goethe believed that the deepest truths about the world are not found through cold, objective observation, but through direct perception and felt experience (Goethe 23). His science was one of colors, plants, and movement—phenomena best understood through embodiment. TikTok, in contrast, is

defined by its disembodiment. It presents a deluge of visual content meant to stimulate but not to immerse. Users scroll quickly, with minimal context and little room for reflection. What Goethe might have viewed as meaningful perception is replaced with a hollowed-out simulation—what we see is curated, edited, and often performed to meet the expectations of virality (Goethe 25).

Where Goethe saw subjectivity as a pathway to understanding the world more deeply, TikTok's use of subjectivity often achieves the opposite. The platform reduces complex human behaviors to quick visual bites. In this format, users rarely experience the fullness of another's perspective. Instead, they are encouraged to judge from a distance, to categorize and critique without deeper engagement. The result is a digital environment that discourages curiosity and promotes reaction—a landscape in which Goethe's sensuous, engaged perception is displaced by a detached, algorithm-driven spectacle.

Ecofeminist theory helps clarify how this spectacle disproportionately targets and objectifies women. Ecofeminism draws a connection between the domination of the natural world and the oppression of women, highlighting how patriarchal systems seek to control, classify, and exploit both (Warren 22). TikTok operates within this same logic. Women's bodies, voices, and choices are treated as public property—subject to debate, mockery, and control. Trends like the criticism of "girl dinner," or the public shaming of women for using specific slang, makeup styles, or even camera angles, reflect an ongoing digital policing of femininity. This mirrors the ecofeminist understanding that the same cultural frameworks that exploit the environment are at work in the treatment of women.

The commodification of women's digital identities on TikTok parallels the commodification of nature: both are viewed as resources to be consumed, judged, and discarded. Ecofeminism insists that the domination of nature and the devaluation of the feminine stem from the same worldview—one that prizes control, standardization, and hierarchy (Warren 41). TikTok, despite its democratic appearance, reinforces this worldview by rewarding users who conform to specific norms and punishing those who deviate. Women who step outside the narrow boundaries of accepted behavior often find themselves targeted by waves of public shaming. The platform, like industrial systems that extract from the earth without care for sustainability, extracts value from women's self-expression without regard for emotional harm.

Alexander von Humboldt, another key figure in ecocritical thought, would likely view TikTok's digital ecology as dangerously fragmented. Humboldt emphasized the interconnectedness of all life, famously describing nature as "a unity in diversity of phenomena"(Humboldt 24). He believed that the natural world was a vast web of relationships and that the health of any one element depended on its connection to the whole. TikTok, on the surface, connects billions of users—but these connections are often shallow, competitive, and curated to isolate rather than integrate. Instead of fostering unity through diversity, the platform encourages division through difference.

Humboldt also valued art and storytelling as tools for understanding and preserving the complexity of the world. On TikTok, storytelling exists, but it is rarely given the space or seriousness required to build true understanding. Instead, users are trained to expect and reward brief, emotionally charged content that appeals to instincts rather than insight. Humboldt's vision of an interconnected world where all parts

contribute to a larger, meaningful whole is at odds with a platform that reduces people to moments and conflict (Humboldt, Views of Nature 18). The fragmented nature of TikTok content encourages users to view one another as isolated pieces of entertainment rather than as interconnected participants in a shared digital ecosystem.

In considering all these frameworks—Uexküll's Umwelt, Goethe's sensuous perception, ecofeminist critique, and Humboldt's ecological unity—we are confronted with a pressing question: If social media shapes our realities, how can those realities be made more hospitable? TikTok, in its current form, fosters disconnection under the guise of personalization. It transforms subjectivity into spectacle and rewards critique over empathy. But this is not inevitable. If we acknowledge that each user navigates a subjective digital world, we must also acknowledge the ethical responsibility of shaping those worlds with care. Platforms could prioritize content that promotes understanding and curiosity rather than outrage. Users could be encouraged to share narratives rather than react to fragments. And perhaps most importantly, digital spaces could be reimagined not as arenas for judgment, but as communities for connection.

Ultimately, TikTok offers a powerful case study for how digital environments influence culture. By examining it through the ecocritical theories of Uexküll, Goethe, Humboldt, and ecofeminism, we begin to understand not just how platforms shape perception, but how they shape behavior, ethics, and empathy. As more of life is lived online, the values embedded in our platforms will increasingly determine the quality of our shared world. If we want that world to be more compassionate, inclusive, and sustainable, we must begin by challenging the systems that turn subjectivity into a weapon and judgment into entertainment.

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