

# Blurring Boundaries: Real and Hyperreal Elements in Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World*

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## Abstract

*The academic paper centers on evaluating the real and hyperreal elements in the German novel *Measuring the World*(2005) written by Daniel Kehlmann. The novel is set in Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during the Enlightenment era, and bears a resemblance of the prominent figures of real time, namely the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and the geographer Alexander von Humboldt of the same centuries. The historical description of these prominent figures undergoes alteration, and the writer adds several dramatic events to it. This research paper attempts to analyse the theory of hyperreality by the French theorist Jean Baudrillard. The paper also highlights the concept of Simulation that Kehlmann employs in altering the reality with representations. In further, the paper aims to provide an understanding of the examination of narration, character development, and exaggerated events exploring the multiple-layered narrative.*

**Keywords:** Daniel Kehlmann, Hyperreal, Representation, Alexander Von Humboldt, Carl Friedrich Gauss

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The research article delves into the real and hyperreal environments in Daniel Kehlmann's historical novel, *Measuring the World*. Kehlmann's novel fictionally showcases the real-life events of the two historical scientists in Germany, namely Carl Friedrich Gauss and Alexander von Humboldt. Hyperreality, a concept by the theorist Jean Baudrillard, posits that the boundaries between reality and simulation are obscured. In *Measuring the World*, Kehlmann brings simulation, and such incidents are blended in the lives of Humboldt and Gauss. This paper explores how Kehlmann blurs the boundaries between real and hyperreal environments by incorporating instances from the novel. It also examines the ways in which he challenges traditional methods of storytelling.

In postmodern theory, Jean Baudrillard stands as the exponent of hyper reality. *Simulacra and Simulation*(1981) by Baudrillard stays as a seminal work that encompasses hyper reality and the escalation of simulations in the world. In German literature, the critically praised philosophical novel of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche named *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) brings the foundation for examining hyperreality as a state where reality and representation

gets ambiguous. Yet another is the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) by Alfred Döblin, which has ambiguous elements that could fall under the realm of hyperreality.

In the novel, Kehlmann explores the unclear boundaries between reality and simulation, resembling Baudrillard's theory of hyper reality. Since the novel bears a resemblance to the biographies of the two historical figures who lived in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it delves into the subjective perspectives of the author, which creates an opposition to the conventional beliefs of objective reality. Giles Foden, a British novelist, claims that "Out of these dry bones, Daniel Kehlmann has constructed a magnificent novel, which is already a bestseller in his native Germany and elsewhere in Europe" (Foden Review: *Measuring the world* by Daniel Kehlmann). In this spot, Foden praises the author's biographical attempt to showcase the lives of two historical figures while simultaneously certifying the author's incorporation of invention as well.

Kehlmann obscures the line between reality and imagination by interlacing realistic elements with the fictitious tales of the German mathematician and physicist Carl Friedrich Gauss and German geographer Alexander von Humboldt. This practice oscillates readers between fact and fiction and makes the novel more captivating. Kehlmann depicts Gauss as a reserved, excellent mathematician and physicist who is admired for his significant contributions in the branches of mathematics and science. He portrays Gauss as an introverted mastermind who is attracted to the privacy of his research and also as a person who intellectually indulges in understanding the fundamental principles of mathematics and physics. Humboldt is a German naturalist and explorer well-known for his expeditions, empirical knowledge, and scientific discoveries. He is portrayed as a dynamic and adventurous character who is enthusiastic about adventure and empirical evidence. He embarks on an adventure to South America to research and document its natural treasures.

Entering into the analysis of real and hyperreal environments in the novel, Kehlmann brings upon a blend of real historical events and the fictional inventions of the two prominent figures. In the account of Gauss, Kehlmann incorporates his real-life occurrences, that is his remarkable contributions to mathematics, incorporating his contributions in algebra, number theory, and statistics. The novel also highlights Gauss's book *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae* 1801, based on number theory, which the mathematical society admires. Kehlmann highlights an instance of a dilemma regarding Gauss's book:

The costs of having it printed meant he had to borrow from Bartels, who was almost penniless himself. Then there were problems when he insisted on reproofing the typeset pages personally; the idiot of a bookseller simply didn't understand that no one else was capable. Zimmerman wrote to the duke, who disgorged a little more money, and the *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae* could appear. He had just turned twenty and his life's work was done. He knew: however long he remained on earth, he would never be able to achieve something comparable again. (77)

His mathematical findings and methodologies are also showcased in the heart of his life. In the profile of Humboldt, the author attaches his real incidents and experiences as well. His prominent expedition to South America, which happened between 1799 and 1804, is included in the novel. Throughout the five-year journey, he studies various regions of South and Central America, covering Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Mexico, and Peru. Kehlmann records Humboldt's significant scientific examinations and the empirical knowledge he acquired on the flora, fauna, geography, and geology of the lands he visited. The novel acknowledges Humboldt's expedition as a notable scientific pursuit that significantly enriched European knowledge of the geographical world.

Through these descriptions, Kehlmann stresses the historical significance of Gauss and Humboldt and also proves their intellectual pioneers and spirit of inquiry as well.

He attaches these historical elements to the novel; so, inside the novel, he provides a depiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germany, representing its intellectual and scientific

development of the time. It also examines the Enlightenment era's importance to empirical knowledge and exploration, which inspired Gauss and Humboldt in their progress. The above-mentioned are some of the references to the real and historical elements the author involves in the novel.

Kehlmann, in *Measuring the World*, constructs a hyperrealistic storyline to present the nature of facts through imaginative narration. As the backdrop of Gauss and Humboldt provides solemnity, it entails more aspects of imagination and manipulation than historical facts about the prominent figures. Thus, he offers a fresh perspective for the readers as they engage in savoury reading. With the application of hyperreal events, he distracts the novel from the conventional model of narration, implements a kind of simulation to investigate the psychological and emotional depth of his characters, and introduces a new method of storytelling. Kehlmann, in the novel, polishes reality with his own innovative representations and streams it under the title of fiction rather than a historical autobiography. The major hyperreal event to which the novel witnesses is the meeting of Gauss and Humboldt at their old age at a conference in Berlin, which is an unoccurring event in the real lives of the prominent figures. He incorporates this imaginative event to analyse the character sketch and put a mark on their intellect and pursuit of empirical knowledge. In the text, Kehlmann records the fictional meeting:

In September 1828, the greatest mathematician in the country left his hometown for the first time in years, to attend the German Scientific Congress in Berlin. Naturally he had no desire to go. He had been declining to accept for months, but Alexander von Humboldt had remained adamant, until in a moment of weakness and the hope that the day would never come, he had said yes. (3)

Despite the fact that the encounter between Gauss and Humboldt is a fabrication, Kehlmann adds more features to their encounter at the Berlin conference. One of the instances is the respect Humboldt keeps for Gauss as a result of his contribution to mathematics and physics. He admires his dedication to research and enigmatic persona, and in this spot, Kehlmann sharpens the narration with the themes of scientific knowledge, intellect, and admiration. The novel records Humboldt's admiration, "finally the door swung open and Gauss clambered care- fully down into the street. He shrank back as Humboldt seized him by the shoulders and cried what an honor it was, what a great moment for Germany, for science, for him personally" (10).

Kehlmann fabricates the psychological and personal lives of the two figures to add additional attributes to their characters. In the account of Gauss, he is portrayed as having a reserved and introverted personality. Kehlmann performs this act to exhibit his intelligent and passionate psyche. Gauss, being a reserved person, likes investing time in acquiring knowledge, as he often hesitates to talk with his family members. Once, he rejects his son Eugene's conversation and demands that "he wanted a book" (4). Gauss travels to meet the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kehlmann records the fictional encounter to add complexity and to highlight Gauss's quest for scientific knowledge and science. By incorporating their encounter, he discusses the themes of philosophy, science, and the Enlightenment era. The novel witnesses their interaction:

**He crouched down, so that his face was level with the little man's. He waited.**

**The little eyes looked at him.**

**Sausage, said Kant.**

**Pardon?**

**Buy sausage, said Kant to the servant. And stars. Buy stars too.**

**Gauss stood up.**

**I have not lost all my manners, said Kant. Gentlemen! A drop of spittle ran down his cheek. (80-81)**

In the description of Gauss's family life, Kehlmann fictionalises a pessimistic image. His relationship with his wife, Minna, is complex and emotionally distant as he prioritises loneliness

and reservation. The novel identifies Gauss's stance towards Minna; he voices that she "was a hindrance, and limited, and the misfortune of his old age" (3). He maintains a distant relationship with his son Eugene, as the major reason relies on his obsessive attention towards the mathematical world; consequently, he calls "Eugene a failure" (4). Due to his lack of social conventions, introverted personality, and intense focus on his passion, he becomes antisocial; accordingly, he ignores journeys and conferences. Once he goes forcefully to the Berlin scientific conference, at the venue, he endeavours to leave the event, as Gauss "said he wanted to go home" (10).

On the account of Humboldt, Kehlmann fetches several pictorial imaginations. As he is called a person of expedition, the author presents his courageous endeavours. One major hyperreal event the author attributes to Humboldt is his desire to witness a volcanic eruption. As the novel encounters Humboldt's fulfilment, "the volcano that had suddenly erupted fifty years before in thunder, a storm of fire and a blizzard of ashes. As it appeared in the distance, Humboldt clapped his hands in excitement. He must climb it, he dictated to the journalists, it would provide the final refutation of the theory of Neptunism" (177). The author addresses this event to expose the character's curiosity to gain empirical knowledge from the natural world. In the novel, Humboldt witnesses electric eels with his co-explorer, Aime Bopoland. Kehlmann remarks on the incident as a brave act by them, as they capture it and Humboldt takes it for his scientific experiment:

They came to a pond. Bopoland pulled off his clothes, climbed in, stopped for a moment, groaned, and then sank his full length. The water was full of electric eels.

Three days later Humboldt wrote down the results of their investigation with a numb hand. The animals could deliver shocks without even being touched. The shock produced no sparks, no reaction on the electrometer, no deviation of the magnetic needle; in short it left no trace except the pain it delivered. If one seized the eel in both hands or held it in one hand while holding a piece of metal in the other, the effect was stronger. It was the same if two people held hands and only one of them touched the animal. In this case both felt the shock at the same moment and with the same force. (86-87).

Throughout Humboldt's and Bopoland's journey in South America, Kehlmann fabricates their encounters with various indigenous people. Socializing with them, the two voyagers gain insights about their culture, livelihood, and medicinal applications. Kehlmann invents the topic of cannibalism, and in the tale of Humboldt, the writer rumours about the character's practice of cannibalism. Analysing their lifestyle, the voyagers gain an in-depth understanding, and Kehlmann examines the themes of the impact of colonialism and the struggle of civilization. Another pictorial imagination he provides is Humboldt's and Bopoland's ambition to climb Mount Chimborazo. In real life, the expeditionists made attempts to climb but could not summit. Kehlmann creates a fictionalised setup of them climbing and conquering with hyperrealistic elements. This attempt makes the novel more engaging, and it shares the themes of pursuit, exploration, and discovery. The novel records Humboldt's ecstasy, "that night, huddled under a blanket against the driving snow, Humboldt wrote two dozen letters, in which he made Europe party to the news that he had climbed higher than any mortal who had ever existed. Carefully he sealed each one. Only then did he lose consciousness" (153). Above quoted are some of the hyperreal incidents invented by Kehlmann in his literary representations of Gauss and Humboldt.

As explored in *Measuring the World*, Kehlmann incorporates hyperreal events to interrupt conventional notions of truth and historical description, especially through the encounter between Humboldt and Gauss and a list of events that happened in their lives. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality offers a lens for insight into this blend of fact and fiction. The theory gives importance to identifying the space between reality and simulation. In the article, *Baudrillard's Concept of Hyperreality*, Mambrol states Baudrillard's hyperreality as:

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is closely linked to his idea of Simulacrum, which he defines as something which replaces reality with its representations. Baudrillard observes that the contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been replaced by false images, to such an extent that one cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal. (Mambrol Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality).

The encounter of the two prominent figures at the scientific congress in Berlin stands as the main instance of simulation in the novel. As their meeting is fictional and an unknown event in history, Kehlmann creates the scene to advocate their pursuits and intellect and provides a base for the readers to conduct a thematic examination. In Baudrillard's theory, the simulation created here blurs the space between fact and simulation and offers a variant of occurrences that is not historically evident but embraced as part of the story. Examining the psychological aspects of the figures, Kehlmann provides several exaggerated descriptions to bring intensity to their personalities. Hyperreality posits that these hyperreal elements contribute to the overall development of the narrative and eliminate mundane feelings. For instance, Gauss in real life is a normal human being, but in the novel, Kehlmann portrays him as an anti-social and introverted character who lacks relationships. These features promote his pursuit of mathematics, and hence, readers find the novel more captivating.

Kehlmann features some hyperreal elements to exhibit the heroic and courageous spirit of the characters, such as Humboldt's longing to summit Mount Chimborazo and his ambition to witness the volcanic eruption. In real life, Humboldt had the same wish of climbing Mount Chimborazo; however, Kehlmann makes it successful in his novel. So, these events based on history are altered into dramatic events by him. This alteration in the historical facts reinforces the conventional setting of reality and blurs the line between reality and hyperreality. Humboldt's travels in South America prompted him to think about the issues within civilization and the effects of colonialism; hence, Kehlmann brings more themes into the novel. Hyperreality states that these themes are mediated through the hyperreal manifestations of Humboldt and Gauss, and it makes readers question the accuracy of historical representations. In general, Kehlmann uses hyperrealistic representations to interrupt conventional setups of reality and the accuracy of historical facts. With the help of fictional encounters, hyperreal events, and exaggerated depictions, he introduces a storytelling style that questions the reader's intellect on understanding truth and encourages them to dive into the text on a deeper level. The article, titled *Almost Hyperreal*, discusses the human difficulty in understanding reality and simulation. It states that:

Baudrillard's insight with hyperreality isn't to note how reality becomes confused because of simulations and simulacra (although this can happen). Instead, Baudrillard outlines the conditions by which we form our sense of what is real, and how this sense can easily become distorted by our own, often innocent, attempts to improve our lifeworld. (Lee *Almost hyperreal*)

In the novel, the interplay between real and hyper elements helps in shaping the novel's character development, narrative structure, and thematic motifs. Kehlmann brilliantly incorporates hyperreal elements into character development. For example, Gauss and Humboldt's historical descriptions are altered, and the author features them as complex personalities with motivations, fears, and desires. Another attempt is the exploration of the inner mind, which alters their psychological state and inner self.

In the narrative structure, as discussed earlier, the Kehlmann blends facts and simulation together; this process creates active and engaging narrative as the novel witnesses multi-layered storytelling and rejects traditional linear storytelling.

Through hyperreal environments in the novel, he introduces more themes associated with the story, and these elements prompt readers to reconsider their interpretation of truth, history, and



storytelling. To conclude, Kehlmann's *Measuring the World* blurs the boundaries between real and hyperreal environments and challenges the traditional notions of storytelling.

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