

THE SIMULATION OF COMMUNICATION IN MEDIA CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show that media culture, hyperactive in a scenario framed by the loss of referentials, by distorted meanings, and of building a new social consciousness, stages its own reality, manipulating communities that continuously recreate their fictional alternatives. The lens of the camera, far from being transparent, forms and deforms images for an audience which chooses to manifest its skepticism selectively, interrogating immediate reality and ignoring its own representation crisis.

Keywords: *communication language, social-consciousness, self-identification, media culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication, instead of offering consistent clues about the objective reality, further degrades significations, constructing a hyper-reality that has nothing in common with primary perception. Culture itself is turned into a victim of this process, flooded by the results of mass production and outlined by a logic of advertising and commercial value. Again, a line is drawn between modern and postmodern parody – the latter is self-conscious, and selfconsciousness is being taken so far as to deny its own intrinsic value, and, in exchange, to attribute a commercial value, just like any other mass-produced object. The wheels of the advertising machine metamorphosizes the filters through which society perceives culture, altering, as a consequence, its manifestations. The key concept in such a philosophical interrogation is simulation, as well postmodern society is based on models other than objective reality. These models – defined through an analogy with Borges' fable, in which the map precedes the territory – have ceased to reflect reality: the relationship between original and copy is reversed. It is reality which tries to mimic the copy, it is the real which attempts to reproduce the dimensions of imitation.¹

The process is more difficult to explain than parody, and harder to decipher than mere imitation; also, much more subtle than the concept of artificiality. Defining the artificial and its conditions of existence assumes the acceptance as norm of an undistorted sense of reality, which can work as reference in apprehending the artificial. The image, as significant part in the process of representation, goes through four consecutive phases. First, the relation is one of adherence to the objective, preserving the legitimacy of cognitive phenomenology, reflecting a fundamental reality. As a second instance of the image, it alters and conceals reality. Then, consequently, it seeks to "put in brackets" the actual absence of any reality whatsoever, only to eventually lose any connection to the reality it should have represented, becoming its own simulacrum.

2. REALITY - SIMULATION - IMITATION

Postmodernity has gone beyond the borderline between reality and simulation, the cancellation of any possibility to recognize either one corresponding to the stages of the simulacra. The first is directly connected to the pre-modern period, when the copy was only accepted and understood as a mere representation of the real, and not as a replacement. The second stage, partially generated by the effects of the industrial revolution, has brought along the proliferation of copies, mass produced, one of the consequences being that of a weakened capacity for representation and apprehension of the real. Mass production becomes so efficient, the copy imitates the original so close to perfection, that the former threatens to actually replace the latter. But here, in the second stage, the possibility of

an adequate reference to reality has not been completely lost, even though burdened by a distorted perspective. The last phase is the one when simulation becomes the supreme authority as far as perception is concerned; representation is no longer a duplicate of the real, it metamorphosizes the real, only to eventually replace it.

The distinction between reality and imitation is not only obliterated, but eradicated. Simulation is a process of substituting virtuality for reality, the spectacle of digitalized images tending to compensate for a direct apprehension of the real. The simulacrum, through the generalization of one phenomenon, the multiplication of copies, produces hyper-reality, the environment of signs without signification. Two tendencies have been manifested: the former goes one step further in assessing the ideological substratum of post-modern representation,² while the latter sees the issue of representation as oblique, indirect, or just prone to a higher degree of subjectivity compared with modernism.³ The former denies any inclusion of representation in the category of "objective", in an environment where the distance between subject and object is cancelled, where language does not possess a coherent mechanism of signification, namely the originals are endlessly multiplied into copies. Beyond their self-reference, signs have lost connection with exterior reality.

The same ruptures in the sphere of representing the real are sometimes interpreted in terms of narrative ideology, fundamenting such explanations on the assumption that each society orchestrates its own organization according to certain narrative patterns, the same principle being applied even to science, formerly considered the foundation of knowledge. The particularized versions of these narratives perform the role of masking contradictions in the socio-cultural existence, by morally motivating the sequential application of legitimizing principles. The critique of these narratives is thus supposed to be the very essence of post-modernism.⁴ In the case of modernism, maintaining "order" demanded an equivalent in "disorder", identifying the "positive" imposed

emphasizing the "negative". This polarity between two conceptually antagonistic markers led to a continuous reiteration of the same narratives, until they confirmed, incontestably, their dominance, starting from an *a priori* assumption: order was positive and disorder was negative. For modernists, sticking unconditionally to the functionality of this bipolar system made science evident as the ultimate way to progress towards knowledge. In sheer opposition, the unconfirmed narrative was irrational, without any relevance upon the evolution of an individual. The final purpose of cognition, in the modernist vision, was education, evolving through accumulation. In the postmodern one, knowledge is affected by a metamorphosis which brings it closer to the *l'art pour l'art* idea. Moreover, the narrative itself – previously rejected by modernists as an entity evading the conditions imposed by reason – becomes an additional facet of knowledge. This analysis emphasizes a hastening of generations in such a rapid rhythm, that one is confronted with a contradictory status of the work of art: it can become modern only if it is first postmodern, while postmodernism cannot be perceived or defined as a straightforward continuation of modernism, a primary instance of the latter – a state that is constant.⁵

While modernity resides in a "retreat" from the real, postmodernity tries to redefine the concept of representation; thus, the postmodern artist is simultaneously placed in a position of a philosopher and of a critic, his work evades preestablished rules and, consequently, cannot be apprehended by applying usual categories. Creating without rules, without categories, the artist tries to formulate them. From this perspective, the work of art – and any form of text – is always finished "too late" for the author, while its very realization begins too-early.⁶ This paradox of temporality in a work of art becomes essential for postmodernism, as well as the subversive nature of the process of legitimation.

Legitimation is one of the concepts most often challenged by postmodernism – against the background of fully accepted socio-cultural paradigms, and the dissolution of totalizing

narratives; even defining art as art presupposes triggering a complex process of denial-simultaneous-with-acceptance on the one hand, and a continuous interrogation, on the other. The definition of the artist grows unstable by the day, devoid of the capacity to be validated in institutionalized circumstances, swinging in a recurrent state of pulsation between genius and common, artistic and ordinary – both under the signs of commercial and mass production. Representation itself is subversive, interrogating or even threatening to abolish its own object.

The perception of the work of art is further altered by facility, by easiness in what concerns reproduction, by the mechanical re-creation of the original. Works of art, once unique, unrepeatable, are being produced by the mechanisms of consumer society. The concept of authenticity fades, under the umbrella of mass production. Paradoxically, even “anti-art” can be instated as “art”.

Everything is reduced to an issue or representation and interpretation: the vision of the beholder, the circumstances or the context can perform the transition from ordinary to artistic, regardless of the means of expression or classifications into various trends. Postmodern art is not only allegorical or metaphorical, it is an updated rendering of a particular aesthetic criterion. It can be conjunctural, repetitive or even indefinite, but still discursive and open to interpretation.

Space and time are redefined in the postmodern collage, the former being seen as a concept which is at the centre of contemporary preoccupations, offering it a greater share of attention in comparison with time, the latter being considered a mere distributive operator used in scrutinizing the elements of space. The consciousness of spaciality is manifest at any level, from individual to global. The spatial philosophy of the postmodern – irrespective of the degree of subjectivity or superficiality – seems to prefer surface, not depth. The exterior, even though stereotypical and manipulative, but much more spectacular than the interior, assumes its domination, from urban architecture to the idealised imagery of Disneyland.⁷

Any attempt to define postmodernism (or postmodernisms, if we appeal, right from the start, to the idea of plurality) invariably includes concepts such as fragmentariness, indeterminacy, subjectivity. Postmodernism, having itself become a category among humanistic traditions, is – not surprisingly – difficult to frame inside a particular trend, because of the multitude of tendencies that accompany it. Between the attempts to schematize its ideological attributes (Hassan, Rosenau) and quasi-exhaustive analyses of its causes, foundations and manifestations (Lyotard, Jameson, Baudrillard), postmodernism seems to redefine itself in relationship with the entire variety of critical perspectives from which one tries to apprehend it. Disqualifying from the start history as dominant narrative and rejecting the very notion of objective knowledge, postmodernism cannot be truly grasped in terms of temporal analyses either, as temporal analyses are faced up with a complex interweaving of tendencies and a jargon so complex, that it sometimes seems incomprehensible. What does remain, beyond concurrent theories, is the sum of the apparently inexhaustible argumentative resources of the postmodern in contemporary debates, whatever the field, from arts to social sciences. Perhaps we should not try to decipher the evolution of postmodernism, but analyse *human* evolution in postmodern times.⁸

3. REALITY AND ARTIFICIALITY

Drawing upon Borges’s metaphor of the map, Jean Baudrillard analyses the modes in which we perceive reality. Right from the start, perception is biased by cultural mechanisms such as television and films, or the complex system of distributing information through Internet and media. For the individual, trapped inside a system that constantly provides contradictory signals and double-coded clues, reality and hyperreality overlap, in their representation as well as in their effects.

Individuality itself is affected by the newly proclaimed rules of the consumer society, with

the overwhelming proliferation of information technology and media communication; mass production, mass media, mass information – these are the new coordinates dictating and shaping the perspective in postmodernity, where the sign has lost its referential capacity and, being devoid of coherent meaning, becomes another product, a new item specifically manufactured for consumption, engineered to fulfil a need or to play a particular part in the new cultural and economic framework. The correspondence between sign and reality is now dependent upon the same rule of supply and demand at work in the socio-economic mechanisms, signs become essentially goods, mass produced to fill a hole in the processes of understanding and representing reality, but bearing no solid attachment to the latter. Identity is easily lost or blurred in this complex cultural sphere, constructed upon simulation and consumerism. The over-consumption of images and signs creates a paradoxical environment, in which not only objective reality is dissolved, but also the very *need* for it. If simulation proves more gratifying than reality, it is readily preferred – and consequently reproduced in a variety of versions. The distance between individual and environment is artificially enhanced, as the former unconsciously identifies himself with his simulated projections of a flexible reality (modelled, again, in direct relationship with the dynamics of consumer society) than with the more rigid – and more difficult to apprehend – objective reality. True signification being abolished, individuals are suspended in a make-belief environment, where perception itself becomes a social construct.

Discussing the possibility of accessing, in one form or another, an integral reality, and drawing upon Nietzsche's thoughts on the real world and the world of appearances, Baudrillard sees the world not only devoid of truth, but also devoid of any intention of finding it, of any need to encompass it. The universe of reconstructions and appearances takes the place of reality, along a trajectory marked by counterfeit and illusion. Thus, the individual is trapped between the lack of coherent justification for the world and the

obsessive need for reality. The contextual intervention of media in the process of deliberately obstructing the vision of the individual becomes a trademark for postmodernity; television alters perception, manipulates perspectives, confuses relations. Communication evades conveying a message, it becomes a tool for the generalized simulacrum conceived by a perpetually duplicating reality-shaped landscape.

For Baudrillard, the postmodern age does not entail a mere remarkable progress in communication, but also a complex process that involves loss of privacy and an increased sense of control. After the "disappearance"⁹ of the scene and the mirror, the potentialities of representation have multiplied, having the concept of screen as evolutionary lineage. The images abundantly promoted by television have stirred up a metamorphosis in the entire phenomenology of communication, on the one hand, and of the individual's capability to respond to the interface between himself and the images projected, on the other.

The dimensional aspects of time and space are shaped by a process of miniaturization, as technology reduces distances and the digitalization of communication enables a new way to connect to information channels. But, instead of providing closer contact, this process of miniaturization causes a displacement of the individual, rendering him unable to find coherence within the complexity of information, images and continuously changing concepts.

Individual functionality seems cancelled by the entire miniaturization that affects the scene of human existence, as far as information technology is concerned: the very adaptability of the human being depends upon the regulatory mechanisms of electronic tools, the "clues" offered by television,¹⁰ or the information provided by the cultural environment. The extensive commodification at play within the whole range of communication media has constructed a new dimension in the use of images, in general, and in the function of advertising, in particular. The domestic sphere has lost both its privacy and its formerly inherent

need for privacy: the television screen transforms individual identities into virtual destinies, available for everyone to “consume” *via* the newly created interface between man and society.

Everything can be readily turned into spectacle, against the background of a complex inversion between interior and exterior, between public and private. The boundaries allegedly preserving privacy intact are being altered by the arbitrary exposure to incomprehensible amounts of information. The supposedly unrestricted access to information does not create any need for validity and does not lead to better understanding. Instead, it consumes any means of objective representation, transforming the loss of privacy and the cluelessness brought about by the excessive amount of information into an obscene “ecstasy of communication”. Any sense of secrecy is dissolved in the digitalized interface between the spectacle and the increasingly alienated individual, entangled in the superficiality of image, representation and conceptualization. The overexposure to a universe that has become too transparent can exacerbate the existential rhythm of the individual to a schizophrenic stage.¹¹

With media being the most prominent mechanism in creating and perfecting the simulations demanded by popular culture, the entire phenomenology of representation is filtered through the same mechanism: television is no longer an illustration of reality, but of the specific *version* of reality desired by the viewers. As in the stock market, the demand eventually shapes the offer. Cinema no longer imitates real life; instead, real life becomes unknowingly influenced by its own projection on the screen, trying to conform to an idealized, artificial version of itself.

Baudrillard also analyses the difference between modernity and postmodernity in terms of their respective dominant processes – in the case of modernity, the most “obvious” one was that of an explosion, an explosion of commodification. The limitless expansion of production and duplication, in all possible definitions, was bound, in the time of modernity,

to the respective logic of the market relations and their interconnectedness with popular culture. Postmodernity “reversed” the process, transforming it into an implosion of distinctions in all spheres, from social to culture. This disappearance of boundaries is directly tied to the spiraling evolution of information-exchange, fueled by technology. Social and cultural norms have been transformed accordingly: with reality intermingled with hyperreality, ideologies progressively lose their straightforward lines, their coherence.

The over-abundance of information, through all possible channels, from television to Internet, has a paradoxical effect as well: that of cancelling the very possibility to extract meaning. Moreover, information ultimately causes an impossibility to signify meaningfully, because of the proliferation of signs at such a rate.¹² Another element upon which Baudrillard focuses his attention is the central item of the commodification process, also theorized by Lyotard, Jameson and McLuhan: the commodity itself. The new sign-value associated with the commodity in the contemporary age acquires certain discursive elements, since it can convey a variety of messages and can display a significant amount of information within the framework of cultural and social norms.

This sign-value eventually exceeds use-and/or exchange-value, since it can also provide a more consistent effect within the process of simulation around which the entire functionality of the postmodern environment revolves. Simultaneous with the reversal between representation and reality, the occurrence of a new type of “real” – the hyperreal – further dissolves meaning, against the same background of over-abundance of information. Here, as well, the mechanisms of media act not as facilitators for the process of apprehending reality, but as an annulment of the very possibility to do so. Everyday life is inherently tied to this deterioration of perception and representation, making the individual prone to fall under the disorienting influence of media. Thus, the individual permanently experiences a schizophrenic pattern of existence, when the reality

surrounding him unravels itself aggressively, destroying intimacy and turning introversion into impossibility. The inherent state of confusion that follows becomes a regular expression of the way in which the individual seeks to adapt himself to the social/cultural environment – with too much information and too little distance from everything around him, the individual is sentenced to a psychologically crippling openness to reality. In this scenario, staged by postmodernity, with proximity being an invasive influence on the subject, existence is simultaneously transparent and coded (through media, culture and the overflow of images, exceeding one's capacity to properly interiorize their *meaning*).¹³ Amidst an environment shaped by simulation and a seemingly meaningless play of images, external reality has become a forgotten myth, since any appropriation of the real is either mediated, biased or excessively subjective.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, even though Baudrillard did not favour the ascent of postmodern theory,¹⁴ focusing on more specific issues like simulation, the hyperreal, the spectacle and the conceptual metamorphosis of the sign, his vision of utopia – or utopian environment – includes all the major tenets of postmodernism. Along with them, the blending together of media culture, hyperreality and simulacra develops into a new concept of utopia, one that is organically influenced by the theorized dissolution of truth and reality.

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Endnotes

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- 2 Jean Baudrillard, *op.cit.*, p. 18.
- 3 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit, 1970, p. 22.
- 4 Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 14.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 7 Umberto Eco, *Travels In Hyperreality*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, p. 43.
- 8 Ihab Hassan, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
- 9 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, p. 127.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 12 "Information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and mass media. Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social... information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994, p. 96.
- 13 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983.
- 14 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 70: "The postmodern... is a world-wide verbal fornication."