

Simulating 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 [2, 3].

It is commonplace to recognize in contemporary media culture a tendency toward 'hyperreality' [2, 56], which is associated with the greatly expanded and intensified use of images and simulations in all areas of communication and culture. The predominance of an image culture seems to de-emphasize the

cognitive generation of meaning that is achieved through the linguistically mediated logic of text or speech. The use of images reduces communicatively achieved meaning to the circulation of what, for some, have become undeconstructable 'intensities'. Habermas maintains that the rationality of communicative speech acts is logically different from the rationalities of function, strategy, instrument, power, domination or exclusion. He regards the linguistic medium to be primary (if not dominant) in rational social coordination. The reason for this is that the human use of language is fundamentally oriented toward 'reaching understanding and agreement' (*Verständigung*) among communicating subjects, an orientation that establishes the context for all other intentional action orientations and contexts. Interpretive activity oriented to mutual understanding and agreement through linguistic exchange is what Habermas calls 'communicative action'[7, 78].

2. 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” [3, 127] 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, [3, 129] 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 [3, 131].

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 cultural. 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.¹ 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 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

¹ “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.” [2, 96]

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*) [2, 131]. 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.

3. Conclusions

To conclude, even though Baudrillard did not favour the ascent of postmodern theory, [1, 89] 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 “communication”, one that is organically influenced by the theorized dissolution of truth and reality. Thus it seems not the case that the ‘age of hypersignification’ necessarily ushers in a deep crisis of meaning [6, 23-35], since consumers are invited and indeed required to do much more interpretive work with advertising today than they have ever had to do in the past. From a perspective that recognizes the key cognitive moment associated with the interpretive event, the age of hypersignification and its dominant image-based mediations certainly present problems. But since, according to Habermas, reaching mutual understanding in language requires an orientation toward validity claims, every mass-mediated signification is potentially subject to critical reflection by consumers. Such critical reflection is no longer simply excluded or suppressed by the aesthetic distractions manufactured by the culture industry. With the shift to the form of advertising analyzed here, however, autonomous – as opposed to more strictly manipulative – interpretive activity is emphasized more in and through such manipulation, which consequently de-emphasizes mere aesthetic distraction. Therefore, notwithstanding the hyperreality of a society dominated by visual culture, the critical orientation inherent in autonomous interpretive activity is also brought closer to the surface in the cognitive requirements of understanding through continual mediation in language.

Such increased reliance on consumers' interpretive capacities, even in postmodern experience, is accompanied by an increased orientation toward the achievement of valid interpretations and the ability to confirm and maintain such interpretations.

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