# CONTEMPORARY MEDIA SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF HYPERREALITY

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## Abstract

*This paper will examine Jean Baudrillard's reflections regarding the contemporary relation of the public with a society that has been seemingly dominated by the hyperrealized function of the media. For Baudrillard, contemporary society's engagement with truth as it relates to the everyday issues of life is structured, and to a certain extent, manipulated by the hyperrealized media. The masses, however, Baudrillard observes, are far from being simply exploited and controlled by media and may have in fact "adapted" to the systemic indifference of the hyperreal.*

## Consumer Society and the Contemporary Social Order

*"No more altercations; nothing at stake. It is the parting of the dead sea."*

> *-Jean Baudrillard in "The Perfect Crime"*

Indeed, this provocative yet prophetic proclamation of one of the most renowned postmodern critical theorists especially in media culture circles, may very well be the picture that could portray our world today- a world devoid of meaning and robbed of hope. A world where as he says, "the stars flicker out."[1] A society in stupor-"vacant, withdrawn, lacking meaning in our own eyes."[2] A society of indifference pressing forward aimlessly, like a New York City jogger, "oblivious to his surroundings, running purposelessly straight ahead, dangerous when dis-

turbed."[3] A kind of society that just lets anything come along and dialogue about foundations simply disappears into that that dismissive etc….[4]  These are things worthy of reflection; for signs of such a tragedy are as ubiquitous as the kind of deceivingly weighty headlines we have in our newspapers today. This paper aims to expound on Jean Baudrillard's thoughts regarding the contemporary relation of the public or the so-called masses with a society that has been seemingly dominated by the *hyperrealized* function of the media.

In order to lay out a historical background for the subject of this essay, it will be quite helpful to illustrate the socio-historical events that prompted the radical overtones of Baudrillard's thought. Fredric Jameson, in an essay entitled "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" gave a quite thorough description of the kind of society we live in today.  He writes:

> As I have suggested, non-Marxists and Marxists alike have come around to the general feeling that at some point following WWII a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth). New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture-these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society….[5]

The rise of the free market economies in advanced capitalist societies around the world during the early 1960's centered on questions of consumption. The so-called "smokestack" economies of the industrial era began to give way to an entirely new wave of consumer-based production line, which catered not simply to the masses as such, but to individuals. Flexible marketing strategies allowed for the increased customization of products to closely targeted population segments. Niche marketing became the locus of economic activities. All of these economic and marketing structures were designed to make the consumer feel a heightened sense of freedom and individuality in terms of having the ability to continually re-invent herself according to the various lifestyle catalogues and prod-

uct brands available in the market and advertised in newspapers, magazines, radio and television. The de-massifying of media that tried to reach different niches with their own images was shattering consensus from mass standardized culture.[6] Governments pursued privatization policies on the promise that they would increase consumer choice. As Graham Murdock narrates, "Marketing men set about mapping style communities based on shared tastes, and academics, reading these signs of the times, declared the arrival of the postmodern age where the appearance eclipsed substance and what you saw was all you got."[7] It was no longer a question of a product's reliability or price, but one of image. Identity was equated with what one wore, where one ate, where one lived and what car one drove. Ironically, the market was driven by the demand to create more commodified lifestyles to add in their marketing portfolios and product-related activities to sell their brands in the masses' clamor for individualization and personalization. The popular cigarette brand *Marlboro*, for instance, signified the essence of the typical contemporary working-class male, and at the same time, became coupled with the widely consumed beer product, *Budweiser*, both of which became symbols of the all-American male worker and the kind of places (mostly bars and clubs) he hung out in after a long day at work, thus also connoting the ambiance of the essence of relaxation. All products were always associated with other products to create an ensemble of lifestyle options for the consumer. These lifestyle options began to define the general ideologies for middle-class societies.

In connection with this, as liberal democracy became the global model for political systems and the market began to dictate the pace of society, the ideology of consumerism and advertising, together with new forms of media technologies soon held an even greater power over citizens than the nation-state itself. Trans-national corporations replaced the nation-state as arbitrators of production in a new era of global production that erases previous boundaries of space and time.[8] Local products gained international status with the development of television and its international syndication. Advertisements for Western commodities traveled from an advertising agency in Manhattan to Bangkok in just a matter of days from its conception. Soon thereafter, everybody is suddenly smoking *Marlboro's* and acting like cowboys in small fishing villages in the Pacific. Jean

Baudrillard amplifies this point as such:

> Modern man spends less and less life in production, and more and more in the continuous production and creation of personal needs and of personal well-being. He must constantly be ready to actualize all of his potential, all of his capacity for consumption. If he forgets, he will be gently and instantly reminded that he has no right to be happy. He is therefore not passive: he is engaged, and must be engaged, in continuous activity. Otherwise, he runs the risk of being satisfied with what he has and of becoming asocial.[9]

Consumer culture carries with it a system of ideological values and a system of communication that surgically carves a nest in the consumer's mind concerning guidelines for a "productive and well-lived life." This so-called "life" that this kind of culture fosters is usually identifiable with a certain product line or brand that a certain celebrity endorses. In the media and consumer societies that emerged after the Second World War, identity has been increasingly linked to style, to producing an image, to how one looks. (MC, 232-233) In short, everybody began to act trying to be like the people they saw on television and movies.

The self-constituting subject of modernity was gradually leveled down and dissolved by the rationalized, bureaucratized and systematized ideology of postmodern consumer society. People attain status and prestige according to the products they consume. In this accelerating proliferation of images, signs and norms, the self, as modernity knew it, is being shattered and reconfigured according to the rhythm of objects. It is indeed the triumph of the image that marks the break between the industrial and post-industrial age. We are no longer consuming products; we are assuming an identity. We are no longer buying soaps, cars, clothes; we are consuming a lifestyle. Appearance, in the end, takes precedence over substance. Baudrillard, in an early work tells us that, "Consumption is the *virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in more or less coherent discourses*. Consumption, insofar as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of signs*." (*The System of Objects* in SW, 25) We are governed and absorbed by the perpetual play of significations proliferated in media. In all this, there springs a sort of stupefied acquiescence on the part of the consumer to the rhythm of the

ideology of consumption by the very magnitude and density of the information and commodities made available for her through media. As Herbert Marcuse writes:

> The so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form. The need for possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing the gadgets, devices, instruments, engines, offered to and imposed upon the people, for using these wares even at the danger of one's own destruction, has become a 'biological' need….

Globalization, for its part, has engendered the forthright flow of commodities, capital, technology, ideas, forms of culture and people across national boundaries via a global networked society. The free movement of goods and services across trans-national borders facilitated by the Internet infrastructure has promptly set the stage for a fundamental transformation of the world from one that had its basic unit in the nation-state into what Marshall McLuhan called a "global village". (*The Masses*: *The Implosion of the Social in the Media* in SW, 210) The new electronic tribalism that McLuhan advocates has, as its core, the supposition of an optimistic outlook on the new forms of technology that inaugurate a generalized planetary communication system, which makes possible mass participation in global economic, political and cultural matters. Great physical distances are traversed with a phone call or a click of a mouse via the Internet. The free market, with its infrastructure in place would then ideally be able to forge multilateral market-economic treaties and agreements between different countries from different geographic locations with little difficulty. For instance, the United States has been able to establish syndication and distribution agreements for its TV shows and movies globally with little resistance. The promise of wider horizons and embraced plurality in this global village is enough motivation for any society to welcome free market ideologies and capitalist principles to its shore.  It is no longer so much the kinds of products and information that the infrastructure of media technology can provide the consumer, as much as it restructures the way societies relate with one another.

The increasing *commodification* of all aspects of life; be it aes-

thetic, cultural or political may indeed have helped a great lot in giving people what they want, but at the same time, brings with it a halo of suspicion especially among critical theorists in terms of the ideology it promotes. The cultural logic of capitalism in the so-called "network society", grounded in new communications and information technology may indeed mark the triumph of capitalism and its market economy, but as with any other system or ideology, with it comes the danger of hegemony and opportunism. Worldwide audiences, through transnational syndication have been ideologically indoctrinated by Western influence.[11] The ideologies that are transmitted from advanced capitalist societies such as the United States can be interpreted as a subtle and cunning form of cultural hegemony, which comes in the form of cultural homogenization or Americanization. According to Edward Said, "cultural imperialism is the theory, practice and the attitudes of the ruling metropolitan center ruling a distant territory." (TM, 94) The media are often linked to the accumulation of strategies on the part of capital-hegemonic attempts by powerful social groups aiming to legitimize certain world-views over others. The various products, advertisements, lifestyles, movies, TV shows and even news distributed by media corporate conglomerates from a powerful center that has virtually expanded its territory through media technology, transnational partnerships and capital, may indeed leave no room for alternative lifestyle possibilities from marginalized societies. These voices from the margins themselves are challenged to keep up with the changing times and are slowly exchanging their *malongs* for a pair of Levis jeans. Indeed, there is a lurking danger with this phenomenon of capitalist excrescence and network expansion.

The global media can therefore be seen as a function of the dramatic evolution and reorganization of modern societies patterned around the production and consumption of commodities into the postmodern the social order, which is now organized around the play and exchange of images and signs. Certainly, it is beginning to become harder and harder for us to secure a substantial perspective to regain a sense of coherence and stability in our lives amidst the deafening and overwhelming spectacles and commodities peddled by the formidable tandem of capital and technology. The "increased volume of information possible, imploded established conditions between private and public, the rapidly emerging in-

formation highways, the multiplication of TV channels, increasing power of communication conglomerates and the development of new media technologies are all driven by the instrumental logics of science and profit." (TM, 158-159) We are in the age of *technocapitalism* wherein the novelty and immediate availability of new technology, coupled with potent marketing strategies incessantly inundates society not only with new gadgets and products and means of communication, but more importantly, with an overwhelming barrage of signs and images; all offered under the guise of progress.

Thus, we ask, "What has the post-industrial age made of man and his society?" "Is this a simple case of cultural imperialism?" "Is this a kind of destiny that the age of modernity logically leads to?" "Or is it more of an unforeseen challenge that has befallen postmodern man?" It is at this point where I think, we may find Baudrillard's insights exceptionally valuable.

## The Era of Obscenity

The iPod, Youtube, mindless sitcoms and Reality TV, flash newsreports, live data streaming-these are just some of the articles of contemporary society. Instead of receiving long, coherent, and related strings of ideas, organized and synthesized for us, we are increasingly exposed to short, modular blips of information-ads, commands, theories, shreds of news that resist classification and organization. The 90-second news clips intercut with 30-second commercials have become both the formal and essential unit of knowledge that we have of our society. The potentially infinite play of signs and information tidbits in the form of trivia provides postmodern man with an illusory sense of freedom and feeds his senses with a continuous supply of stimuli for entertainment.

In this vertigo of opaque and rhythmic serial signs, things have found a way to elude the dialectic of meaning through infinite proliferation. What we have is the virtual prostitution of images and signifiers without any reference. "The narcotized and mesmerized media-saturated consciousness is in such a state of fascination with image and spectacle that the concept of meaning itself (which depends on stable boundaries, fixed structures, shared consensus) dissolves."[12]

The postmodern condition, as Jean Baudrillard sees it, marks the age of the "dissolution of the subject"[13]; not simply due to her conscious withdrawal into the private; a capitulation from a society where she finds no refuge-but is essentially brought about by the relentless and overwhelming proliferation of the *hyperreal*[14]. Baudrillard's postmodern society, as Kellner notes is:

> One of hyperreality in which entertainment, information and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life. The realm of the hyperreal (media simulations of reality, Disneyland and amusement parks, malls and consumer fantasylands, TV sports) is more real than the real, whereby the models, images and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior. (CR, 8)

The subject as such, has become fully absorbed by a kind of reality, which is "more real than the real." The real no longer needs to be counterfeited, since they are going to be produced all at once on a gigantic scale. "*Hyperreality* is the volatilization of the real by its endless reproduction, stimulation and simulation that produces the self-referential system of signs between each other without any signified reality (since the dominance of the play of signs has made reality nothing but a nostalgic phenomenon)." (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* in SW, 150) Baudrillard adds, "The problem of their uniqueness, or their origin, is no longer a matter of concern."[15] The serial repetition and reproduction of objects-a proliferation of signs, images and spectacles according to demand. A world colonized by a staggering play of lights and shadows without a director or a script. A society which is no longer that of the spectacle, but a society of obscenity, where spectator and scene are undifferentiated from each other and the smooth, digital operation of *hyperreality* conditions the everyday operations in the lifeworld.

The staggering density of objects and images in their perpetual proliferation and expansion, to the superlative exhibits a careening of growth and excrescence of society, which hypertrophically expands and continuously excretes more goods, services, information, messages, demands, surpassing all rational ends and boundaries in a spiral of uncontrolled growth and replication. (CR, 15) The endless barrage of images and sound bytes proliferated by these media has driven the postmodern subject, as well as

society itself into an impasse of non-causality and incoherence, where the rapid rhythm of the show and its props leaves both actors and spectators alike in a vortex of perpetual unrest where temporality and causality break down. Interestingly characterized as a schizophrenic, Baudrillard describes the postmodern man as such:

> No more hysteria, no more projective paranoia, properly speaking, but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body to protect him anymore.[16]

The schizophrenic is vulnerable to attack from all sides. Her vulnerability however, does not merely come from an innate defect or weakness or a dementia, but from the overwhelming capacity of the hyperreal to launch its attack from all possible entry points; be it a shopping window in a shopping mall, a brother's new pair of jeans, a website, a giant billboard, an Internet pop-up, a newsflash, a text message; all prowling at the gates as it were, covering all peripheries in their conspicuous visibility. Reality is being replaced by something more real than reality itself. The intensification of human experience in the virtual realm relegates reality into mere nostalgia. "Every characteristic thus elevated to the superlative power, caught in an intensifying spiral-more true than the true, more beautiful than the beautiful, more real than the real-one is assured a vertiginous effect that is independent of all content or specific quality, and which presently has tendency of being our only passion. The passion of intensification, of escalation, of ecstasy…" (*Fatal Strategies* in SW, 189) Slow-motion replays, computer graphics, virtual reality, extreme sports, spas, paparazzi, audience-oriented TV shows, celebrity scandals, this mysterious indulgence and fascination with larger than life spectacles and experience are but a few signs of contemporary society. Such that in a rather compelling metaphor, Baudrillard would say, "The day there is a real war you will not even be able to tell the difference." (*The Gulf War did not take* place in SW, 253)

The masses clamor for spectacle and no longer for meaning-an adrenaline rush. The experience of intellectual and emotional stimulation

for its own sake, or even that aimless window-shopping in crowded shopping malls, the tourism industry, Internet chatting, our enthrallment with Hollywood, our craving for juicy political scandals, or even our unquenchable soap opera frenzy may not be as innocuous as they seem. These leisure activities have developed into cottage industries for the very reason that people are more and more developing a pathological, almost stupefied need for them. And as this happens, these activities become institutionalized and consequently become the locus of *hyperreality*. People begin to demand for their daily doses while the industry is more than willing to give them even more than they could handle. These activities which we have grown fond of may very well be symptomatic of an epidemic of schizophrenia that has blown in our midst. We may have very well fallen prey to the ecstasy of *hyperreality*. Baudrillard explains:

> It is the excess of reality that makes us stop believing in it. The saturation of the world, the technical saturation of life, the excess of possibilities, of actualization of needs and desires. How are we to believe in reality once its production has become automatic? The real is suffocated by its own accumulation. There is no way for the dream to be an expression of a desire since its virtual accomplishment is already present.[17]

The schizophrenic person is no longer a victim of her hallucinations, of deceit nor of counterfeit; she now experiences reality in its sublimation, in its transparent and superlative configuration. She collapses in vertiginuous unrest as the inertial thrust of *hyperreality* takes over the functions of her everyday existence. "It is no longer of imitation, nor of parody, but a matter of substituting signs of the real for the real itself." (*Simulacra and Simulations* in SW, 170) The continuous simulation of reality by capital and new media technologies has breached the dividing line that separated the real from the virtual and has taken ground on the very soil from which reality once stood. He aptly explains this point as such, "What I mean is this: what was projected psychologically and mentally, what used to be lived out on earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical scene, is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all, into an absolute space which is also that of simulation." (EC, 128) *Hyperreality* has created an entirely new dimension where the formerly

mundane activities in the life-world become short-circuited, reconfigured and translated in its more euphoric versions. Postmodern man himself may have indeed unconsciously or consciously consented to the rule of the *hyperreal*. "Info-tainment" becomes an end in itself and creates its own reality, more real than reality itself. Media technology has "already broken down reality into simple elements that it has reassembled into scenarios of regular oppositions, exactly in the same way that the photographer imposes his contrasts, lights, angles on his subject." (*Simulations*, 420) Reality is being reconfigured not only by its unconstrained reproduction, but is produced according to the scenarios and playhouses of *hyperreality*.

At first glance, this may sound nothing more than a fantastic excursion of thought-a hallucination itself. This may possibly be just a case of radical *technophobia* on Baudrillard's part. However, if one thinks about it, it may very well be that it is by virtue of the smooth and subtle operation of the *hyperreal* itself that precisely allows Baudrillard's theory to be easily dismissed as an exaggeration. The hyperreal presents itself as a harmless and even as a proud sign of a society's technological and communicative progress. The new means of communication along with the icons it has created are insignias of a society that cultivates freedom and embraces progress.

We ask the question-is there anything wrong or worthy of concern with this situation? This question is now more than ever, the question we have to ask ourselves. The vibrant billboards, "well-balanced" 30-minute newscasts, unlimited text messaging, on-line encyclopedias, soap operas, virtual video games, the density of information as such- is there any cause for alarm? He describes this enigmatically precarious situation as such:

> [T]he entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen (all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film)… today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions and objects in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regulation, in their forced signification, in their performativity, in their branching, in their polyvalence….(EC, 130-131)

For Baudrillard, what we have today is a "whole pornography of information and communication." (EC, 130) Pornography in the sense of the infinite proliferation of signs and images in their availability and polyvalence. For Baudrillard, "Visible things do not terminate in obscurity and in silence; they vanish into what is more visible than the visible: obscenity." (*Fatal Strategies* in SW, 191) For him, the chronic creation of pseudo-needs and the continuous reproduction of self-referential signs and images by the cultural and economic mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment have situated the postmodern subject in an era of obscenity. From the reporting of the sex lives of politicians, to the tragic consequences of war and famine, information as such, is promiscuously prostituted, "where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media." (EC, 130)

"Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication. (EC, 130) There is no space for retreat. Media incessantly peddles eye-candies and solicits responses from its audience from the time they wake up to the time they fall asleep watching television. We cannot help ourselves from getting involved and excited with all the spectacular events that the media has in store for us. In short, we have been assimilated by the logic of the *hyperreal*; such that now more than ever, TV shows, commercials and the Internet cater to ordinary men on the street and make money out of the "candid and the unrehearsed." Real life is not only getting colonized, but is actually auditioning and getting casted in every show. As Alvin Toffler succinctly puts it, "An information bomb is exploding in our midst, showering us with a shrapnel of images and drastically changing the way each of us perceives and acts…"[18]

Baudrillard paints a picture of a society where implosions in the differences between the private and the public, of art and commodity, of good and evil, truth and falsehood has left us with a society that has lost its foundations. Baudrillard's world is one of "dramatic implosion, in which classes, genders, political differences, and once autonomous realms of society and culture imploded into each other, erasing boundaries and differences in a postmodern kaleidoscope." (MC, 297) Everybody gets

their 15 minutes of fame. Any event, no matter how ludicrous and inconsequential as it seems, gets airtime. Media shows and societies themselves have become orgiastic extravaganzas. He writes:

> Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality-we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and auditorium, between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and its double. And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that nowhere-in art, morality and politics-is there now any possibility of a moral judgment. With the abolition of distance-of the 'pathos' of distance-everything becomes undecidable.[19]

Does anything surprise us anymore? Live video feeds of war hostages getting decapitated, politicians suddenly switching parties, "breaking news" that showcase people buried alive in mudslides have literally desensitized us and created a culture that has indeed, seen it all–where everything, in their absolute proximity and infinite reproduction has totally eradicated the possibility of gaining any "real" perspective on anything, be it politics, culture or economics. The sensational has indeed become ordinary.

He adds, "Today, every event is virtually without consequences, it is open to all possible interpretations, none of which can fix meaning: the equipropbability of every cause and every consequence." (*Fatal Strategies* in SW, 196) Here, the question of relativism immediately comes to mind. However, if we come to think of it, this may indeed be the case, especially in the Philippines. Debates concerning the ZTE Corruption scandal Probe for example, are never in the end, entirely blamed on any party. An inhumane act of a terrorist group for instance may headline the news on Monday, but surely, tomorrow, after pompous political analysts have finished conjuring their own analyses and making them sound scientific, everybody begins to point their fingers on the government, and people begin to suspect that the government itself staged the whole thing. Until in the end, after all speculations got their airtime and newspapers made their profits, a juicier scandal comes along and as the old saying goes, "everything else becomes yesterday's news." It is always a question of entertaining one's fancy and exploring various possibilities; a route, which tragi-

cally never arrives at any veritable conclusion and never solves anything-- but at least it sold newspapers and kept the public "informed". The thin line between real and fake, staged and unrehearsed, show and reality has been expunged by the subtle operations of the *hyperreal*. In the end, what we have are nothing but speculations–speculations that made reality more exciting and more engaging. "A game of the undecidable; a game of chance; a game of undecidability of the political scene, of the equifinality of all tendencies." (*The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media* in SW, 215) Media bytes, info-bits, dramatic photographs, and marvelous storytelling that make one feel as if the headlines took place in one's backyard flood the minds of stupefied spectators and consumers. In the end, we have to ask, "Are the people actually getting informed and do the contemporary forms of communication, as they would claim, really promote the pursuit for truth and solidarity?"

## The Strategy of the Masses and the Hyperreal

> "*Real society is losing interest in the political class, while none-theless availing itself of the spectacle.*" (SO, 80)
> -Jean Baudrillard in *Screened Out*

If we are to apply Baudrillard's ideas with the kind of media that we have today, the so-called contemporary locus of the public sphere, it is quite intriguing to see how "news" itself is virtually prostituted and *hyperrealized* just as how one would sell any commodity. This process in turn undermines its primordial function as the vehicle for free speech. The media was essentially established to encourage participatory democracy where issues concerning the society are made available for everyone. However, as we know, ownership of the members of society's upper crust naturally results in publicity for even the most trivial affairs of the rich and the viewpoints, which appear in print and television, are often controlled by a few powerful interests. Such that the media, as the arena where reason and coherence would ideally find its base is actually conditioned and manipulated by a few. Since only sensationalized news sells, the people are often exposed to information and opinions that undermine the basic principle of news itself. Spaces that are ideally allotted for press-

ing matters of public concern are usually occupied by a disproportionate amount of advertisements and sensationalized news. The ideal is indeed a far cry from what is actually happening.

Larger than life scandals and spectacles that are open to all points of interpretation are the news' bread and butter. All arguments are (in)validated by speculation and opinion cloaked by the benevolent quest for truth, justice and other ideals. All we have are opinions that ride the airwaves and knock on every person's front porch as anonymous insignias of an "eventful and exciting society" until everything becomes a possibility and the truth is shelved for the sake of expediency and democracy withers into idle talk and gossip. Baudrillard amplifies this point:

> Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists; or of extreme right-wing provocation; or staged by centrists to bring every terrorist extreme into dispute and to shore up its own failing power; or again, is it a police-inspired scenario in order to appeal to calls for public security? All this is equally true, and the search for proof–indeed the objectivity of the fact–does not check this vertigo of interpretation. We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons. (*Simulacra and Simulations* in SW, 178)

In the end, it is the show that matters. It is a matter of gaining profit and marketing eye-candies. This media-driven society, in all its various forms claim to inform the public with relevant issues and consequently reinforce our democratic institutions. However, if we flip the coin for a moment, Baudrillard shows us, not simply in a crude and cynical way, the possibility of the media being the very obstacle for the values it claims to uphold, that of truth, democracy and free speech. Maybe, the media does not even aspire to know the truth, much less report it. Maybe, it is content with stirring people's emotions and keeping them at the edge of their seats, so to speak, incited and excited, waiting for the next scandal to unfold. Maybe it tells stories that were written without an ending, yet purposely designed with chapters loaded with exciting and escalating twist and turns, imbued with larger than life characters and magnificent settings that serve no other purpose than to dazzle and overwhelm, with the next chapter more exciting than the previous, making yesterdays news seem a decade

old; as it is with the fashion industry. Maybe, as Fredric Jameson thinks, "the very function of the news media is to relegate such historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past…they are the agents and mechanisms of historical amnesia."[20]  Maybe, there is no truth in the media. Perhaps, there is no longer a demand for such a thing. Caught up in the universe of simulations, "the masses, the silent majorities are bathed in a media massage without messages or meaning." (CR, 10) The narcotics of *hyperreality* may in fact have lodged completely in our consciousness and have desensitized us from everything. We may indeed be living in a society devoid of meaning, a universe where theories float in a void, unanchored in any secured harbor. (CR, 11) The obscenity of information and the transparency of reality may have indeed amassed enough inertia to run down any form of resistance. The people may indeed no longer be interested in knowing the truth.  They may very well be becoming extensions of the logistical system of the *hyperreal*.

Baudrillard sees a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information, which absorbs all contents into noise, which no longer communicates meaningful messages where substance and truth implode into form. The medium and the message implode in such a way that it becomes *virtually* impossible to distinguish between media representations and the reality they supposedly represent. The real catastrophe of television and the Internet for instance, has been how deeply they have failed to live up to the promise of providing information, its supposed modern function. We dreamed of the media as giving us freedom, new public space. (SO, 189-190) Instead we get nothing but a noisy and congested complex of expressways that lead nowhere.  As Baudrillard poignantly notes:

> The information superhighways will have the same effect as our present superhighways or motorways. They will cancel out the landscape, lay waste to the territory and abolish real distances. What is merely geographical and physical in the case of our motorways will assume its full dimensions in the electronic field with the abolition of mental distances and the absolute shrinkage of time. (SO, 58)

In the ecstasy of communication everything becomes transparent, time becomes an illusion and there are no more secrets, scenes, privacy, depth or hidden meaning. Instead, a promiscuity of information and com-

munication unfolds in which the media circulate and disseminate a teeming network of seductive and fascinating sights and sounds to be played on one's own screen and terminal.

Baudrillard gives an interesting theory concerning the relationship between the masses and media. Refining his previous position that media engenders a culture of passive absorption by the recipient, he now presents his position as such, "I would no longer see it as a sign of passivity and alienation, but to the contrary, as an original strategy." (*The Masses, The Implosion of the Social* in the Media in SW, 211) The masses may have indeed developed a kind of stupefied tolerance for the condition and content of the media these days. As we have mentioned earlier, we may have indeed seen it all and our remaining interest in any quest for ideals could have dissipated in the vociferous corridors of our spectacular society. We may actually be witnessing the collapse of the real to *hyperreality*. Humanity may have indeed (d)evolved into a society of disjointed and indifferent media junkies that are challenged to survive in a world of infotainment for no higher purpose. Perhaps, there is no point in willing anything or becoming concerned about something anyway because nothing can be accomplished. Baudrillard however, as I have noted, sees this phenomenon from an interesting angle. He states:

> The present argument of the system is to maximize speech. To maximize the production of meaning, of participation, and so, the strategic resistance is that of refusal of meaning and speech or the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is another form of refusal by over-acceptance. (*The Masses: The Implosion of the Social* in the Media in SW, 222)

For Baudrillard, it is not a simple case of indifference on the part of the masses, which can be seen as an original reaction towards the noisy and image-saturated media. They are willing to enter the game, but in their own terms. The masses themselves, as Baudrillard sees them may actually play the game to gain control of the show, take the directors chair and revise the script anytime they wish. He adds:

> The masses, which have always provided an alibi for political representation, take their revenge by allowing themselves the theatrical representation of the political scene. The people have become public. They even

allow themselves the luxury of enjoying the fluctuations of their own opinion in the daily reading of the opinion polls. (*The Masses: The Implosion of the Social* in the Media in SW, 215)

The masses have developed an "obsession" with themselves and the power that the media may have wittingly or unwittingly handed over to them such that the media becomes a mere function of the whims and opinions of people who may not really be sharing what they think. Baudrillard gives an example of opinion polls wherein he observes a certain culture of continual voyeurism of the group in relation to itself. He detects a certain strain of connivance among the masses, which translate into the senseless charts and demographics and statistics. The masses in the end implode into the social and relinquish any trace of rational will, reality and sincerity in an opinion—just like children hogging the camera and making faces. They enjoy the fluctuations of the statistics and the effects it has on the social order. They may not actually care about issues. They may simply be enjoying the reaction and the anxiety of other sectors with their opinions. They may not actually care about the ending. They may simply be enjoying the show. It is no longer a question of producing an opinion, but of *reproducing* them—like how the GNP's and GDP's of economics serve as the imaginary mirrors of productive forces without regard to their social ends or lack thereof. (*Simulations*, 421) Do they really affect the vote? Do they give an exact picture of reality? Or are they just configurations of the indeterminate operations of *hyperreality*?

This is how Baudrillard thinks the people bypass the incessant solicitation and noise of the media, which tragically ends in the perversion of public opinion. Again, this may indeed sound nothing more than a crude, contemptuous and cynical theory. And yet, do we not live in an era where speculation and cynical reason fuel the engines of society? I find nothing wrong in entertaining skeptical rhetoric so long as I see in it an impetus for change. Maybe Baudrillard has a point. Perhaps there is no harm in lending an ear to his orations. Although it is a much grim and frightening notion, it is nonetheless one worthy of thought and reflection. And it is at this juncture that we ask, "Are the new media technologies responsible for undermining a sense of community by robbing the masses of participatory

public spaces through the proliferation of the *hyperreality*; or are they the sites where more diversified relations of solidarity can be made?" Jean Baudrillard took us for an odyssey into a dream world. A dream as real as life itself. May we have the resolve and capacity to wake up and face reality as it slowly dissipates before our eyes.

## Endnotes

[1] Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal*, ed. Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (Sydney: Plato Press, 1990), 186.

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso Publishing, 2002), 143.

[3] Stuart Sim, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Great Britatin: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 131.

[4] *Ibid.*, 133.

[5] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Bay Press, 1998), 124-125.

[6] Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 158.

[7] Michael Scoumand and Kim Christian Schroder, ed., *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

[8] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 17-18. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as MC and affixed at the end of the quote)

[9] Jean Baudrillard, "*Consumer Society,*" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 51. [Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as SW and affixed at the end of the quote with the specific title of the essay from which the quote was taken from, eg. (Symbolic Exchange and Death in SW, 150)]

[10] Marcuse, Herbert, *An Essay on Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1972), 20-21.

[11] Nick Stevenson, *The Transformation of the Media: Globalization, Morality and Ethics* (New York: Pearson, 1999), 100. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as TM and affixed at the end of the quote.)

[12] Douglas Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 9. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as CR and affixed at the end of the quote)

[13] Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: Bay Press, 1998), xi.

[14] Baudrillard builds on the supposition that our age is the era of *hyperreality*. This term signifies a system of self-reproducing, self-referential signs with no trace-

able origin much like Walter Benjamin's idea concerning the dissolution of the *aura* of the work of art due to its endless reproduction (See Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Continental Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2001. 166-181.)

[15]Jean Baudrillard, "Simulations", in *Continental Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Massachusets: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 414. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as *Simulations* and affixed at the end of the quote.)

[16]Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Bay Press, 1998), 132. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as EC and affixed at the end of the quote.)

[17]Jean Baudrillard. *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Berg, 2004), 19.

[18]Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 156.

[19]Jean Baudrillard. *Screened Out*. trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso Publishing, 2002), 176. (Henceforth, references to this work shall be abbreviated as SO and affixed at the end of the quote.)

[20]Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Bay Press, 1998), 125.


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