

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE *PERFECT CRIME*: TOWARDS THE
DEATH OF REALITY, REPRESENTATION AND THE MURDER OF
RESISTANCE.

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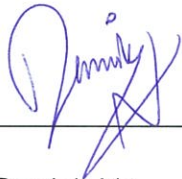
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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



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Yay.

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to contemplate the nature of active participation today in the context of social media. Social media, exemplified by platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., as the interface of the technology that produces the ‘social’, is increasingly seen as a site of resistance, allowing for new subjectivities as well as a space for challenging dominant ideologies or systems of power. While participation in general has traditionally been seen as a form of resistance and the enactment of agency, particularly in the domain of politics and art, I argue that within social media, the antithesis is also true, for active participation amongst its users, because of the cybernetic form of participation, is performing the exact opposite function, by symbolically ‘killing off’ representation and denying resistance to its very users. Participation in social media, I argue, has also become voluntarily ‘obscene’ in the Baudrillardian sense, encouraged by the technical forms of mediated participation such as the ‘like’ or ‘share’ button, resulting in the generation of an over-excess of information as well as a capacity to obliterate difference as noise. This combined effect and interplay of cybernetic simulation and obscenity of active participation in the age of social media culminates in what Baudrillard termed the ‘Perfect Crime’. Social media, I conclude, therefore embodies the perfect crime, for reality gets murdered, resistance dies and representation becomes annihilated.

Chapter One: Blinded by the Media

The revolution would *surely* be tweeted. This statement, when left by itself, without a context, seems to lend its support to popular Internet intellectuals who argue that we are on the brink of a social media revolution¹. At the same time, this appears to directly oppose Malcolm Gladwell's claim in *The New Yorker* that the revolution would not be tweeted².

Consider this scenario then, there is a terrorist attack in a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, and the terrorists have taken hostages in a violent three day shoot-out with the Kenyan police that killed more than 60 people. To counter the threat of terrorism and assuage the fear of the Kenyan public, the Kenyan police started 'live-tweeting' the hostage scenario in real-time (Abad-Santos, *n. pag.*)³. One of their tweets read: "We have taken control of all the floors. We're not here to feed the attackers with pastries but to finish and punish them⁴." Or consider the next scenario - The Boston Marathon held on 15 April, 2013, where two homemade bombs exploded, killing three people and injuring 264 others (Kotz, *n. pag.*). On 1 May, 2013, the

¹ See for instance Shirkey, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media". *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 2011. Web. 12 Sep. 2013
<<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>>

² See Gladwell, Malcom. "Why the revolution will not be tweeted". *The New Yorker*. New York. 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 10 Sep. 2013.
<http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?printable=true>

⁴ See <https://twitter.com/PoliceKE/status/382161864106737664>

Boston Police Department announced *via* Twitter that three new suspects had been placed under arrest in the Boston Marathon bombing case⁵. In both scenarios, we see the same thing: a ‘reality’ that unfolds before our screen *via* new media technologies.

When the first sentence, ‘The Revolution would *surely* be tweeted’ is taken out of context, we see that it immediately veers strongly to one side of the big debate over how social media can be ‘used’. However, when we place it back into the context of the next paragraph, we then realize that it neither affirms nor denies either side. Therein lies its significance. The fact that it can be taken out of context and immediately slot into an on-going polemic about social media suggests that it is ideological in the first instance. This is what Slavoj Žižek might call ideology at its purest, for when we focus on one single point, the very ‘use’ of the sentence, we relegate its entire context and everything else to the horizon. But what then, is so ideological about that?

The hype that surrounded the rise of social media seems to have died down a little, compared to the initial phase when it was gaining popularity. In the early stages of ‘social media’ technologies such as Facebook and Twitter, there were widespread claims of the ‘democratizing’ potential of these new media platforms, particularly harped in popular Western liberal discourses. The immediate emphasis was on how these technologies have been *used* to achieve democracy. When ten thousand people protested in the street against their communist government in Moldova, it was dubbed

⁵ See <https://twitter.com/bostonpolice/status/329612972521558016>

the Twitter revolution because of the way Twitter allowed for the social organizing of the protesters⁶. In Iran, when students threatened to protest against its authoritarian state, the U.S State Department requested for Twitter to postpone their scheduled maintenance for they didn't want a "critical organizing tool out of service at the height of the demonstrations". During this period, there were even calls for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

When a fresher and newer wave of protests termed the Arab Spring broke out from Tunisia to Egypt, the claims grew ever louder. The term Twitter Revolution proceeded to cover not only the protests in Moldova, but also in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. Once the focus of the news coverage shifted to the teleological outcome of the demonstrations and such 'revolutions' became labeled as 'successful', for instance in the case of the overthrowing of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the claims of the power of social media became ecstatic.

For the protestors, the Arab Spring revolutions were the best exemplification of how social media such as Facebook and Twitter empowered common people to eradicate unjustness and overthrow authoritarian dictators. Yet two years on, after two overthrown dictators in Egypt, first Hosni Mubarak then Mohamed Morsi, both by the military, there is still no clear end to the civil conflict that surrounds Egypt. Is there

⁶ See Hodge, Nathan. "Inside Moldova's Twitter Revolution" *Wired*. 4 Aug. 2009. Web. 13 October 2013. <<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/04/inside-moldovas/>>

just too much injustice, or too little empowerment? Or perhaps, are more social media tools needed?

The polemic on the social media revolution was not all one-sided. Critics such as Evgeny Morozov and Malcom Gladwell argued against such simplistic views of new media technologies. Morozov, in particular was a strong vocal opponent of such cyber-utopianism. In *The Net Delusion*, he argues that the hype surrounding the polemic was developed mostly because of uninformed views and a group of uncritical and cyber-utopianistic journalists. He outlines a key difference between cyber-utopianism and internet-centricism, and highlights internet-centricism as a far more dangerous ideology. To him, cyber utopianism is a mere flawed set of assumptions, while internet-centricism is the methodology that acts upon it. According to Morozov, when internet-centricism is pushed to the extreme, it “leads to hubris, arrogance, and a false sense of confidence” (Morozov, 16). He points out that Internet-centric policy makers have an illusory belief of a full and complete mastery over technological tools such as the Internet and social media and tend to assume that new media technologies directly shape the social environment thereby disregarding the possibility of other uses of technology.

Though I mostly agree with Morozov’s critique of cyber-utopianism and Internet-centricism and think that it is a valid critique, I would argue that the problem lies far deeper than that, and is not restricted to cyber-utopianism nor Internet-centricism. In fact, I would extend Morozov’s argument by arguing that even his critique is problematic as well since his entire critique rests upon his

conceptualization of new media technologies as ‘tools’ to be used. His instrumentalist arguments stem from demonstrating how new media technology such as the Internet and social media can be used not only for good, but oppressive and authoritarian governments are also capable of using such tools for more oppression, such as in the case of such as Iran and Venezuela. Thus, he repeats a certain ideological claim of social media, that they are somewhat neutral tools.

As influential philosopher Martin Heidegger points out in *The Question Concerning Technology*, when we conceive of technology as a mere neutral tool, though or perhaps even because it is so “uncannily correct”, “we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way” (288). For Heidegger, the instrumental view of technology conceals more than it reveals. In the same way, by conceptualising new media technology as mere tools, we are imposing a specific means of looking at new media technology that limits and completely disregards and erases other possibilities of thinking about new media technologies and their effects. In the case of the popular discourses surrounding social media, by focusing on the ‘better’ or ‘worse’ ways in which social media technologies, defined as neutral tools, can be used, we remain oblivious to the larger problem, that is the implications of the effects of social media on society.

Before the term social media was coined, there already existed various terms in media scholarship including ‘alternative media’ and ‘radical media’ that explored the connection between minority groups and how their use of such media technologies

challenged dominant hierarchies and power⁷. As Morozov notes, all forms of technology have always had an accompanying techno-utopianistic discourse, from the invention of the telegraph to the airplane, radio and television (276). Media technologies always had an empowering aspect to them, because of the way they seem to transform the world into a ‘global village’ through transmitting more information about the world thereby removing “causes of misunderstanding” and extending knowledge about the world (*ibid*). Both the radio and television were expected to radically transform politics and usher in a new era of public participation and create a whole new democratic world (281).

The television medium, at the point where it was still considered a new medium, was also seen as having the “potential to contribute to a more informed, inclusive, and nonpartisan democracy” (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 164). Then, Groombridge argued for television to be a vehicle for participatory democracy, even suggesting that television “be considered as candidate for a major part in the civilising of our arid communal existence and in the improvement and enlivenment of our democracy, such that more people have the opportunity, the aptitude, the incentive, and the desire to play an active personal part in what is with unconscious irony called ‘public life’” (Groombridge, 25). In short, the assumption was that newer media technologies such as the television enable *more* communication, which effectively contributes to ‘better’ communication.

⁷ See for instance (Atton, 2002, 2004; Couldry & Curran, 2003) for alternative media and (Downing, 2001) for radical media.

From these popular discourses and various studies on online media, we can tease out another implicit assumption: the assumption that those who are oppressed and marginalized formerly had little or no means of communication. As such newer forms of media, for instance social media, afford them a special form of communication that therefore allows their voices to be heard. Thus, seen in this direction, we can only conclude that with more communication and more tools for and of communication, it would only be better for society in general. Following this, one misassumption that we could immediately draw out from the underlying over-optimistic narratives surrounding new media technologies is that increased information flow is seen as equal to increased and better communication. A more critical reading of this phenomenon instead, might be that such narratives are so popular precisely because it ideologically restructures and reduces accounts of complicated, overdetermined and difficult-to-digest techno-social situations into simplistic and determinist analyses that offer a more comprehensible story for mass consumer audiences – in other words, an account that can be easily *used*.

The above simplistic conclusion of course would not only largely ignore the fact that newer forms of media problematizes communication, not only in the way net critics like Morozov described in its negative uses, but also masks the point that perhaps communication was always problematic to begin with. Such a conclusion, upon closer examination, would also reveal the presupposition of a certain rationalistic and linear model of communication, i.e. that communication only involves the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver.

The critique of the instrumentalist view of new technology is neither new nor recent. Besides Heidegger, who was more concerned about the ontological nature of technology, Marshall McLuhan already specifically warned us nearly fifty years ago that we risk being blinded by what the media can do, when we look at its uses instead of the impacts on ‘human affairs’ and such an instrumentalist outlook is the “numb stance of the technological idiot” (McLuhan, 8).

While Morozov and most other net critics and optimists may have unwittingly fallen into this category of the ‘technological idiot’, this is not to say, however that the entire field of media studies have primarily been over-optimistic with over-emphasis on the ‘uses’ of technology. It is indeed interesting and no doubt necessary to explore the ways in which minority and oppressed groups adopt and utilize new media technologies to challenge and renegotiate their struggles with dominant ideologies, systems of power, hierarchy or the state. The main reason why they are able to do so is because new media technologies increasingly allow a space for minority groups to perform what Faye Ginsberg terms ‘cultural activism’, where minority groups can re-engage with power structures that have marginalized them (Ginsberg, 139). Yet, it is also contentious to see media technologies like the Internet as a mere platform for resistance and counter hegemonic expression since it can still perpetuate the interests of dominant economic and political powers.

As Nicholas Gane points out, there is a tendency in cultural studies literature to analyze new media technologies in isolation from the general structural dynamics of capitalist culture, thereby arguing for the need to consider digital technology within

the context of capitalist culture (Gane, 431). Gane therefore argues, through the elaboration of Lyotard's theories, that the computerization of society encourages the commodification of knowledge, and also speeds up or rationalizes capitalist culture through the mechanistic reduction of knowledge to information, and information to processable bits or bytes. This point has also been taken up by scholars such as Jodi Dean, where she argues that networked communicative technologies under the effect of 'communicative capitalism' are 'profoundly' depoliticizing. Drawing upon the work of Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, she explains that communicative exchanges, rather than being intrinsic to democratic politics, are currently the "basic elements of capitalist production" (56)⁸. Thus, as a result, participation in new media, rather than allowing for true social change, forecloses politics instead. Ingrid Hoofd further builds on her argument by demonstrating how certain forms of activism are not oppositional to, but rather complicit in the processes of neoliberal globalization through the acceleration and intensification of techno-capitalism. By reversing Dean's proposition, she argues that such technologies instead of foreclosing politics, repoliticises technologies through the reproduction of the ideologies of what she terms "speed-elitism"⁹.

One reason why new media technologies are so seductive and used not just by minority groups but almost everyone nowadays, I argue, is connected to the

⁸ See Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2009. Print

⁹ For her full argument, please see Chapter 1, Complicities of Resistance, Ingrid Hoofd, *Ambiguities of Activism. Alter-globalist and the Imperatives of Speed*. New York: Routledge. 2012. Print

fundamental way such new media technologies increasingly replicate and mimic the environment of a ‘real’ community. Thus, through simulation, such technologies afford a ‘realistic’ and ‘real-time’ space for communication across spatial and temporal boundaries. However, one alarming process that is commonly neglected is the mediation process itself. If the medium, as McLuhan claims, is really the message, then what exactly does the message say? The question concerning new media technologies, thus as I interpret it, is then: what are the implications of such forms of simulation that takes place within new media technologies today?

Hence, it is from this perspective that I wish to proceed to question and analyze the medium that is social media. Rather than looking at the “uses” of social media, I diverge from the instrumentalist view to explore the implications of a reality that is increasingly simulated and mediated in the digital sphere. This thesis will also seek to engage with the works of Heidegger and draw heavily upon the theories of media philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who remains largely neglected outside the field of continental philosophy, despite the sheer relevance and importance of his work, particularly to the field of media studies today.

In this thesis, I will begin by examining the modern thinking that drives technology today and what modern technology represents in the age of social media. Following this, I will analyze some of the assumptions that pervade social media, such as the transition from being a consumer to a producer. With the aid of Baudrillard’s theories, I will argue that participation in the age of social media has become ‘obscene’ in Baudrillardian terms, precisely because of the process of

simulation that is the epitome of the digital age. This ultimately results in participation becoming a symbolic murderer of not only reality, but also representation and resistance as well, thus embodying what Baudrillard called 'The Perfect Crime'.

1.1 The Dominance of Technological thinking

It is important to state on the onset that Heidegger was not against technology per se, but rather he highlighted the dangers of *technological forms* of thinking. We can see this most clearly when he strongly criticized the new fundamental science for its cybernetic quality in *The End of Philosophy and The Task of Thinking*. He says:

For it is the theory of the *steering* of the possible planning and arrangement of human labour. Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news.

The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information...Philosophy is ending in the present age. It has found its place in the scientific attitude of socially active humanity. But the fundamental characteristic of this scientific attitude is its *cybernetic*, that is, technological character... Theory means now supposition of the categories, which are allowed only a cybernetical function, but denied any ontological meaning. The operational and model character of representation-calculative thinking becomes dominant. (Heidegger, 376-377, italics mine)

For Heidegger, cybernetics is a technological form of thinking, which modern science characterizes and it shapes how we think and the way we see the world, as such he argues that this form of rationalistic, calculative thinking effectively

forecloses philosophy. In addition, he argues that such techno-scientific thinking sustains its own justification through its ever-impressive results, in this instrumental pattern, which was ironically in the first place formalized through its own rationalizing and judging criteria. Yet, despite its ‘correctness’, it says nothing about the “what first grants the possibility of the rational and the irrational” (Heidegger, 391). Thus, Heidegger suggests that cybernetics only represents what is present and correct but not necessarily what is true. Heidegger instead yearns for a thinking that goes beyond the binary of rationality and irrationality, because the cybernetic form of thinking, according to him, is severely limiting. Though Heidegger himself is also open to critique, for while performing the critique of cybernetics, he also romanticizes and mobilizes language as his technology or *technè*, this does not diminish the validity of his criticism of cybernetics.

The term ‘cybernetic’ itself was first made popular by Norbert Wiener, who unified the field of control and communication theory, and defined it with the same title as his book: as the study of control and communication in the animal and the machine. The study of messages, in particular the “effective messages of control”, as well as notions of feedback were central to cybernetics (8). Wiener, who was a mathematician by training, defines the message as a “discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time – precisely what is called a time-series by the statisticians” (16). Cybernetics is concerned with efficiency and effectiveness, and thus seeks to control and optimize systems in order to accurately predict and manipulate outcomes. The well-known Shannon and Weaver model of communication, which proposes that communication can be reduced to a process of

transmitting information between a sender and receiver, from a source to the destination, is one such example.

The problem arises when cybernetics assumes all forms of communication, not just between systems, but including communication among humans and animals, can be reduced to mechanistic pieces of information, then coded within Boolean logic to the binaries of 1 and 0 into systems. As Wiener explicates: “whatever means of communication the race may have (whether animal or humans), it is possible to define and to measure the amount of information to the race, and to distinguish it from the amount of information available to the individual” (183). This form of reductionist logic is inevitable within the field of cybernetics and is necessary to perform, so that communication can be determinable, and therefore calculated for effective use.

Wiener remarks:

“The telegraph and the telephone can perform their function only if the messages they transmit are continually varied in a manner not completely determined by their past, and can only be designed effectively if the variation of these messages conforms to some sort of statistical regularity. (18)

Such a functionalist outlook and technological form of thinking was criticized by Heidegger as dangerous, for it enframes the subject and induces a form of thinking that relegates nature as “standing-reserve”, into an objective resource for management, utilization and therefore opening up the possibility for exploitation (308). It would not be too far-fetched to claim that such an ideology is still being

perpetuated by modern technology today. It is also particularly contentious, taking into consideration the Kuhnian perspective that all data and experiments are still subject to interpretation¹⁰. Cybernetics seemed to postulate that interpretation is no longer necessary, for it dehumanizes communications and instead looks at communication in the form of synthetic objects. While Wiener acknowledges to a certain extent, though somewhat reluctantly, that cybernetics may not be able to fully account for processes in the social sciences when he concludes that “there is much which we must leave, whether we like it or not, to the unscientific, narrative method of the professional historian. (191)”, it is merely because he acknowledges that it might be not yet be possible for communication in the social sciences to be homeostatic in some instances, homeostasis being one of the assumptions of cybernetics.

Herbert Marcuse, Heidegger’s former student, later elaborated on the work of Heidegger by diverging from phenomenology and incorporating a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic instead. He examines the impact of such forms of technological thinking on society, and makes the argument, in *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology*, that individualistic rationality in his time has been socially conditioned and transformed into technological rationality, under the technological power of the apparatus (Marcuse, 141). For Marcuse, at the very first instance, technology constitutes a mode of domination and control. As he says:

¹⁰ See Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. Print.

Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination. (139)

Marcuse also argues that technological rationality is highly different from previous forms of rationality. Technological rationality no longer corresponded to what he denotes as natural “human needs and potentialities” (143). Rather, technological rationality has become a machinic process, which “appears as the embodiment of rationality and expediency” (*ibid*).

Marcuse, gives an elaborate but striking example of how technological rationality, with its principles of standardized efficiency, subordinates the freedom of the individual:

A man who travels by automobile to a distant place chooses his route from the highway maps. Towns, lakes and mountains appear as obstacles to be bypassed. The countryside is shaped and organized by the highway. Numerous signs and posters tell the traveller what to do and think; they even request his attention to the beauties of nature or the hallmarks of history. Others have done the thinking for him, and perhaps for the better. Convenient parking spaces have been constructed where the broadest and most surprising view is open. Giant advertisements tell him when to stop and find the pause that

refreshes. And all this is indeed for his benefit. Safety and comfort; he receives what he wants. Business, technics, human needs and nature are welded together into one rational and expedient mechanism. He will fare best who follows its directions, subordinating his spontaneity to the anonymous wisdom which ordered everything for him. (Marcuse, 143)

To him, such an example illustrates the technological form of thinking that is so *perfectly* rational and logical in today's society but simultaneously dehumanizes the individual into a subservient and compliant object. All subsequent actions, accompanied with this mindset of technological rationality, then become mere reactions to already prescribed mechanical norms. Thus, technology is a "rational apparatus, combining utmost expediency with utmost convenience, saving time and energy, removing waste, adapting all means to the end, anticipating consequences, sustaining calculability and security" (*ibid*).

To some extent, we see parallels of what he described being realized in contemporary societies today. We no longer need to plan our journey anymore, for we have our trusty Global Positioning Systems (GPS) that does it for us. Global automobile manufacturers are already starting to sell 'smart' cars, cars that can drive and navigate by itself. At major shopping complexes with parking facilities for example, there exists a system of monitoring that uses a combination of red and green lights devised to manage the flow of traffic and allow better visibility so that drivers can park more quickly and efficiently. In the same way then, we are already so deeply entrenched into such an ideology of convenience, where we are so efficient to the

point where we are not required to think, that we have outsourced thinking itself to technology, and where everything has been calculated and rationalized for us. Social media, likewise as a form of technology, has already naturalized this ideology of convenience, for it is now easier and more convenient to get news from our social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, in ‘real-time’.

Marcuse also reiterates Heidegger’s point about the close relationship between science and technological thinking, when he says in another book, *Negations*, that:

The democratic abolition of thought, which the ‘common man’ undergoes automatically and which he himself carries out (in labor and in the use and enjoyment of the apparatus of production and consumption), is brought about in ‘higher learning’ by those positivistic and positive trends of philosophy, sociology, and psychology that make the established system into an insuperable framework for conceptual thought. (Marcuse, xix)

We see this point repeated as well in *One Dimensional Man*, his critique of society as becoming one-dimensional:

The principles of modern science were a priori structured in such a way that they could serve as conceptual instruments for a universe of self-propelling, productive control; theoretical operationalism came to correspond to practical operationalism. The scientific method which led to the ever-more-effective domination of nature thus came to provide the pure concepts as well as the

instrumentalities for the ever-more-effective domination of man by man through the domination of nature... Today, domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology... Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society. (116)

Thus, for both Heidegger and Marcuse, technology and cybernetics not only signify a way of thinking and a style of practice, but also the (re)structuring of reality as an object of technical control. Marcuse takes a far more dystopianistic outlook, suggesting that in doing so, technology engenders domination and totalitarianism. Within his argument then, he also implicitly criticizes modern science for its illusions of neutrality, for it is already politicized through the act of being dominating and totalitarian, arguing that science, and by extension, technology therefore is ideological.

Lev Manovich extends this argument that technology can be totalitarian when he suggests that the phenomenon of computer mediated interactive art is in fact an advanced form of audience manipulation, where the “artist uses advanced technology to impose his or her totalitarian will on the people” (Manovich, *n. pag.*) That is why for Manovich, he turns to the design aspect of technology by examining at great detail the interfaces, applications, simulations, representations and technical content of new media. Inspired by the classic Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera*, which he interprets as a film about the possibilities of film or what he calls the ‘language of

cinema', he attempted to construct in a similar vein, a structure of new media that relates to the different techniques of representation and simulation, hence the title of his book, *The Language of New Media* (Manovich, xvii).

Manovich analyzes what he terms 'information culture', and argues that not only individual new media objects, but also the interfaces, both of an operating system and of commonly used software applications, also act as representations. By organizing data in a certain way and making it possible to access it in a particular way, technological representations privilege a particular model of the world and of the human subject. Thus, in a sense, Manovich agrees that new media technology allows for representations, but these representations are not one that subjects come to form themselves, but are instead fixed representations of the designer.

My concerns in this thesis, in this sense, mirror those of Heidegger and Marcuse's, while extending Manovich's understanding of new media to social media. Social media is a product of both cybernetics and modern science and thus reproduces certain cybernetic ideologies, including that of technological rationality. In Manovich terms then, which system of representation would social media privilege? At the very first instance, we are constructed as Internet and social media 'users', where we are able to 'control' what we say, how we look, what we think or almost any part of our self-identity, which perhaps can be construed as remnants of cybernetic thought. Furthermore, we are even given technical 'control' of our privacy online, in cyberspace. But even before we consider these different facets of social media, it is

necessary to examine in closer detail some of the ideologies in the discourses surrounding new media technologies.

Chapter Two. From Mass to Social: The Ideology of progress

2.1 Outsmarted by the Machine

The advent of social media technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, etc., encompasses this notion of a “new” participatory culture in cyberspace. It is often suggested that therein lies the radical nature of social media technologies that empowers the common people. Because of its participatory nature, every single individual is now ‘empowered’ and has achieved a certain freedom to participate in cyberspace. Terms like ‘interactive’, ‘participatory’, and ‘collaborative’, have become popular buzzwords and are used in tandem or are closely associated with any new media technology. Examples include the collaborative nature of Dropbox, the interactive nature of Myspace, and the participatory aspect of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook . The role of ‘feedback’, which was so important to the field of cybernetics, became ever more important even in the field of communications. A few questions remain though: is it social media that has allowed for us to interact more, or is it social media that is explicitly dictating for us to interact? And where does this compulsion to interact stem from?

New forms of culture naturally, as with other previous mediums, have emerged from our engagement with digital technologies, from an online sharing culture to the phenomenon of digitalization, where everything migrates online and becomes visible, to the extent it becomes immortalized in cyber space. A good example of this is Google Book’s Library Project that aims to digitalize all books by scanning and making searchable the collections of major libraries. Again, this relates

to the argument of the ideology of the convenience, and is marked as a sign of progress, where everything becomes available in cyberspace, thanks to high-tech companies like Google.

In an interesting book titled *Smarter than you Think*, technology writer Clive Thompson proposes that such new technologies like Google and their tools have made us smarter than before. While he correctly points out that the use of technological tools profoundly shapes our thinking and the way we act, he concludes that the use of such technological tools actually significantly augments our abilities, thereby making us ‘radically’ smarter in various ways. He gives the example of how Google is able to help us remember more, rather than less, by ‘outsourcing’ our memory to our technological tools, in what he terms a cure for the “tip-of-the-tongue syndrome” (99-100). For instance, in the past, there were episodic moments when we could not recall things like the title of a movie or a song, even though we were close to recalling it. Now, according to Thompson, we can overcome this syndrome by simply searching on the Internet. This narrow definition of ‘smart’, on appearance seems to contradict Heidegger’s claim that cybernetics reduces philosophy to a thinking that ceases to be because it conceals more than it reveals (Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, 390- 391).

It is curious when Thompson urges us to remember that new technology has always been a source of paralyzing resistance and fear, when in today’s context, I argue the converse, where new technology gadgets and products are heralded and treated as objects of affection and desire, seems to be more true. The craze for the

smart phone, which sees extremely long queues form whenever companies like Apple or Samsung launch their ‘latest’ smart phone is a perfect example that suggests otherwise. Thompson utilizes the example of how even writing, which he defines as the “original technology for externalizing information”, evoked fear in Greek philosopher Socrates, who saw the advent of writing as dangerous, for it might kill off the traditional Greek culture of debate and eliminate the important function of memorizing (75, 120). Thus, Thompson frames his argument to suggest that the paranoia concerned with new technologies is misguided, for it has been present since the time of Socrates, and it has historically been occurring, yet new technology will still eventually get adopted.

What Thompson fails to consider then, is how it is precisely *because* of the paranoia he describes, certain technological tools were forced to be rethought, redesigned and reshaped into the tools that they are today. Certainly it is cause for celebration to know that we have improved our capability for memory but perhaps the term ‘smart’ might not be quite an accurate way to describe it, for wouldn’t it be that being ‘smart’ in the past is strongly associated to a certain degree of having a good memory with the ability to recall without the use of technological tools? Can we even say that we can remember more now, even when we are not the ones doing the remembering? Is it not a paradox to say that we actually remember more by remembering less now? Or would that be the ideological functioning of a cybernetic illusion, that dupes us into thinking that such technological tools are essentially necessary for a more efficient functioning human being?

Even the use of the superlative ‘smart’ can be ideologically challenged. Why is it that all of our technological devices are being labeled as ‘smart’? Our phones, television, cars, and even fridges and watches are becoming ‘smarter’. It is perhaps no coincidence then that ‘smart’ is also an acronym for Self-Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Technology¹¹, a hardware monitoring system designed to prevent technological systems from failing. Originally developed by IBM, this technology was developed for IBM mainframe drives to give advanced warning of drive failures and was first referred to as Predictive Failure Analysis. But the question is, if a problem is already predicted beforehand, in advance of thought, and a solution already pre-proposed to the problem, would it still constitute a problem? Is it not mere meaninglessness? However, this acronym guides us in understanding how the term ‘smart’ is being appropriated to be associated with technology. Technology is labeled smart because it anticipates, remembers and predicts on our behalf. It is increasingly remembering all our daily habits and preferences, synonymous with the utopian phenomenon of technology making us radically smarter than Thompson described, so that it can be used to monitor, analyze and send reports to (of) us so as to predict and prevent failures. In this case, is Thompson not confused in his analysis, for it is not us that have become smarter, but instead the reverse is true, that our technological tools have become smarter than us.

¹¹ See SanDisk. *Self-Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Technology (S.M.A.R.T.)*. SanDisk. n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2013. <[http://kb.sandisk.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/8516/~self-monitoring,-analysis-and-reporting-technology-\(s.m.a.r.t.\)](http://kb.sandisk.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/8516/~self-monitoring,-analysis-and-reporting-technology-(s.m.a.r.t.))>

Another acronym commonly associated with the term ‘smart’ is in the field of Organizational Management, which involves the use of strategic management tools such as goals and objectives. Goals and objectives, from the organizational management point of view, have to be Specific, *Measurable*, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-specific (SMART). Also known as Management by Objectives, this means that in an organizational setting, goals and objectives have to be set beforehand and for these objectives to be effective, it has to satisfy the above qualities. It is a management technique that is used to ensure that employees understand the direction and vision of the organization so that employees can align themselves to these goals and objectives with the end-goal of pursuing continuous growth. It is only through these quantifiable objectives, that the goals of the organization can be fulfilled, for every employee understands the vision of these goals and objectives and thus the end goal of a smoothly functioning organization can be achieved. To put it differently, for organizations to be progressive, they need to be strategic, and one such strategy is the use of ‘SMART’ objectives. On appearance, it has absolutely no relevance to technological systems, but upon closer inspection, is this not also the cybernetic quality of thinking that renders humans as a resource to be optimized, or in Heideggerian terms the relegation of humans to standing-reserve?

Yet, while Thompson valiantly declares that our technological tool shapes the way we think, again, his focus ultimately is on the teleological outcome of whether we have become smarter than before or not. This displays precisely the sort of blindness that Heidegger and McLuhan critiqued. For Heidegger, the “essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (Heidegger, “Question

Concerning Technology”, 4). But, because of Thompson’s problematic instrumentalist definition of technology we so lovingly subscribe to, we become concerned only with the teleological outcome, for technology is seen as a means to the end. While it is of course *correct* to say we use tools to achieve certain objectives, but for Heidegger, this is not entirely *true*. Moreover, such an instrumental definition results in a fantasy of complete control and mastery over these technological tools, for we see tools as equipment to be manipulated. As Heidegger says,

“The instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology. Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as means... The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control” (Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology”, 289)

Relating this back to Thompson’s argument, it is then precisely because of his underlying premise that assumes we are in control of our technological tools, that results in us being unable to see the fundamental differences between modern forms of technology and older forms of technology, since they appear as ‘tools’ to be used by us. This is why Thompson mistakenly assumes that writing, as a technology, is no more different from Google today since his position already obscures the contextual differences between the two.

Another point that Thompson also misses out is that through the use of digital technologies itself, we are forced to conform and become like cold, calculating

machines. In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard reflects on our use of new media technologies and suggests that because of our subordination to principles of efficiency, performance and control, we are increasingly becoming ‘inhuman’¹². For Lyotard, as Gane explicates, “technological development is driven not by a desire to emancipate ‘humanity’ but rather by the instrumental quest for maximum efficiency and performance in all spheres of life” (Gane, 441).

In a passage where Lyotard describes the same phenomenon that Thompson does, he says:

Contemporary machines can accomplish operations which used to be called mental operations: taking in of data in terms of information, and storing it (memorization), regulation of access to the information (what was known as ‘recall’), calculations of possible effects according to different programmes, taking account of variables and choices (strategy). Any piece of data becomes *useful* (exploitable, operational) once it can be translated into information. This is just as much the case for so-called sensory data – colours and sounds – to the exact extent that their constitutive physical properties have been identified. After they have been put into digital form, these items of data can be synthesized anywhere and anytime to produce identical chromatic or acoustic products (simulacra). They are thereby rendered independent of the

¹² See Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Cambridge: Polity. Print. 1991.

place and time of their 'initial' reception, realizable at a spatial and temporal distance: let's say telegraphable. The whole idea of an 'initial' reception, of what since Kant has been called an 'aesthetic', an empirical or transcendental mode whereby the mind is affected by a 'matter' which it does not control, which happens to it here and now- this whole idea seems completely out of date. (Lyotard, 50)

Thus, the phenomenon Lyotard analyzes goes beyond just the fact that machines are taking over certain operations that the human mind used to perform or the Heideggerian problematic that information is determined according to an instrumental principle of 'use'. The digitalization of data, Lyotard argues, "tears both cultural artifacts and sensory experience from their moorings in physical time and space", which he terms as a 'hegemonic teleculture' in which everything now takes place at a distance (Gane, 442).

Lyotard then takes a materialist stance and questions the possibility of thought 'without a body' as the hegemonic teleculture itself effaces the physical presence of the body itself, stating that one of the goals of current techno-scientific research is in fact to eliminate the "biological obstacles that the body places in the way of communication" (Gane, 443). With the emergence of new media technologies, culture no longer needs to be tied to a physical location, but "may be diffused throughout communication networks that are virtually free from time-space constraints" (*ibid*). Lyotard concludes that this continued development should not be taken as a sign of 'progress', but instead as a sign of danger, a warning. As he elaborates:

The penetration of techno-scientific apparatus into the cultural field in no way signifies an increase of knowledge, sensibility, tolerance and liberty.

Reinforcing this apparatus does not liberate the spirit as the *Aufklärung* thought. Experience shows rather the reverse: a new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new poverty, merciless remodeling of opinion by the media, immiseration of the mind, as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno repeatedly stressed. (Lyotard, 63)

It is therefore important to analyze Thompson's argument in light of the current climate of thinking about social media. Social media have perhaps granted us more 'freedom' than before, but what are the conditions and limits of this freedom? These effects of liberation are suspect and should be questioned. Thus, the more important question to ask, I argue, is not the teleological outcome of whether we are smarter after the use of our technological tools, but instead, how has the use of social media technologies affected our mode of being in this world?

2.2 The Liberation of Media

It would appear contradictory then, considering Marcuse's concept of technical rationality, that social media, instead of serving the needs of the capitalist state by making us more productive and efficient, is more likely to have a directly opposite effect. As we spend an increasing amount of time on social media, it is more likely that we end up neglecting our work because we are entrenched in participatory activity on social networks such as Facebook and as a result we become unproductive

instead. That is why when new media technology such as Facebook and Twitter initially became popular, organizations were at a total loss as to how to deal with such new media tools. Ban the use of them and risk employees, who frequently use social media becoming unhappy at work resulting in a drop in productivity, or allow the use of such technologies and then risk employees being too engaged with them and hence a drop in productivity as well? It is only after it became clear that capitalists could extract some form of value out of the use of social media, then social media became no longer just a fad, and the issue of whether the use of social media should be banned within a company faded away.

This contradiction however is important and reveals what Marcuse described as the 'internal contradiction' of our advanced capitalistic society, the irrational element in technological rationality (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 17). Perhaps, one could even argue that the issue of using social media in corporations is simultaneously irrational and rational, for it is irrational to even allow the use of a tool that limits productivity, but also rational to take advantage of a tool that can be used to publicize the company at the same time.

Yet, social media does not function as quite the sort of technology that Marcuse or Marx himself would imagine, for it does not seem to automate labour, in the sense of a steam mill compared to a hand mill, or a factory where machines starts to replace labour power. The strange nature of social media then calls into question the traditional Marxist definitions of terms such as production, consumption and even

alienation. For because of the voluntary nature of social media, can users be alienated from the use of social media, or does alienation even exist?

Rey argues that alienation in late capitalism has become increasingly concealed because digital prosumers, who produce and consume digital information simultaneously, often do not know the full extent of information that they are producing. Unlike workers in the physical factory, who were directly aware of their objects of labour as well as their separation from these objects, in yet another form of blindness at play, digital users are producing information that they are altogether unaware of (410). Even though there is no apparent coercion of labour, in the traditional Marxist sense of alienation, in the digital economy, it is not because we as workers become more free, but rather coercion become unnecessary because “the processes of subjection and social normalization yield a subject that desires the very things needed by the system” (409).

Whenever we use social media platforms such as Facebook, to ‘like’ a post, or update a status, we are already simultaneously producing and consuming information, commodifying it in the act of reproducing it for other users to consume. As Rey describes, with digital media, “production is increasingly enacted at sites of consumption, and consumption is increasingly being made productive” (400). This can be clearly seen not only in social media, but also in websites with web 2.0 features such as comments. Not only are audience expected to consume the news articles, but now they are also allowed to ‘produce’ their own comments. As Lovink puts it, “audience interaction (in the digital age) is now a given”. (Lovink, 52). Even

the most banal activity such as a ‘like’ on social networks is a sign, and a form of production from the user, i.e. produced by the user, that sends a message, creates a new form of value for marketing companies who survey the users in order to understand their preferences. Thus, in using social media, Rey claims, we are both consuming and producing, or ‘prosuming’, to borrow Toffler’s term¹³ (Rey, 400). This reversible transition, from consumer to producer is an important distinction in social media that will be scrutinized more closely in section 2.4 that delves into the tension between Marx and Baudrillard. The next section will first examine social media in closer detail, through a historical analysis, to question the assumption that social media is as new and revolutionary as popular discourses claim it to be.

2.3 The Beginnings of Social Media

Social media in today’s digital society has become very much a way of life for many users but what is social media exactly? Geert Lovink’s book, titled *Networks Without a Cause, a critique of Social Media*, delves into the whole web 2.0 digital culture by examining various aspects of digital phenomenon ranging from comment culture (50), to blogging (95), including a meta-analysis on what he claims to be the failures of critical theory and its larger field, media studies (76). Interestingly, despite him using various terms such as ‘social-networking sites’, ‘network cultures’, ‘user-generated content’ and quoting examples of Facebook and Twitter, he never quite mentions the term ‘social media’ at all in his book, apart from the mention of it in the

¹³ Toffler uses the term prosumer to describe the phenomenon where common consumers transformed their roles to become active in the process of the design of products. See Toffler, Alvin. *The third wave*. New York: Bantam. 1984. Print

book's cover. Would this be because for Lovink, media has become an "empty signifier" (76), or a "slippery object of study"? (77). It is rather puzzling then that despite the vast popularity of social media, the question of what exactly social media is has not quite been posed.

I remember my own experience with what has now come to be termed 'social' media. It was in late 2002 when I first had a Friendster account. Then, the experience of *owning* the Friendster account was rather thrilling. It was seen as a 'cool' thing to have a Friendster account. I could do various things with it, upload a profile picture, post information such as my favourite books or movies, add connections and friends, etc. The account allowed me to *play* around with various new media objects¹⁴, and such an experience on other websites were previously unheard of. This form of freedom was quite exhilarating and unique in a sense.

The use of the term *play* is important here. It relates strongly to the interactivity of the medium then. The feeling that Friendster aroused was that it elevated my status to a creator. I could (re)create or *simulate* myself online. Yet, such a form of digital play is not play in its purest sense, that is socially spontaneous, participatory and intimate, but instead a form of play that is "managed and

¹⁴ Here, I deviate slightly from Lev Manovich's conception of new media objects as "a still digital image, a digitally composited film, a virtual 3D environment, a computer game, a self-contained hypermedia DVD, a hypermedia Web site, or the Web as a whole" (Manovich, 39). Instead, I refer to new media objects in the form of functions within the space of the social networking sites.

rationalized” hence ‘produced’ and commodified for the digital sphere (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 244).

But today, it is different with Facebook. While some elements of simulated ‘play’ have been retained, such as the ability to ‘poke’ a friend and so on, already, there are implicit rules of conduct within Facebook even though Facebook was modeled after Friendster. There is a heavy sense of realism inscribed within social networks today. In the early stages of using Facebook, I remember some of the language associated with Facebook was rather peculiar. When I asked some of my peers if they had a Facebook account, some of them replied, “Oh, I don’t play (with Facebook)”. Again, the concept of play was heavily associated with social networks. Somehow, along the way, this concept of play was dropped replaced with the term ‘use’. But, in the use of my own language of ‘play’ and interaction with the new media objects, clearly both Heidegger and McLuhan’s notion of ‘blindness’ was at work then. I was, in a way, ‘blind’ to the notion that that form of play is but a simulation. It has already been calculated, predicted and envisaged by the designers of social networks. It was perhaps then not me ‘playing’ with the new media objects, but vice versa, the designers of social networks ‘playing’ with me, reflecting Manovich’s totalitarian grip of designers. It is thus an extremely contrived sense of ‘play’. What do we create on social networks then? We start by creating a character. We then slowly imbue it with information and mould it to become more like us. We achieve this through various rituals that are prescribed by the affordances of social media. In the end, we create an image of ourselves.

Despite all these new features of social media, it would be incorrect to conceive social media as an entirely new form of media that has suddenly been discovered and is completely divergent from previous media. It is not exactly a revolution, a radical break or sudden, inexplicable rupture that occurred, as what some net theorists seem to be claiming it is. Slightly before the explosion of such social media technologies, it has already been argued that the Internet has taken an interactive turn, also known as ‘Web 2.0’, coined by Darcy DiNucci¹⁵ to signify the shift from “monolithic and typical brochure-like displays” on static web pages to spaces where ‘everyone’ can become an author (221). Everyone, in this case, of course refers to those who already have a certain level of digital literacy. Before the presence of social media, there already existed Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs, discussion forums, and participatory news sites that were also heralded as a new frontier of free speech. It seems that all the previous web 2.0 technologies has now converged into a single unified term called social media. But what is the cultural significance of this turn to the social?

If we go further back time however, even before Web 2.0, older forms of media such as television and radio had already started to incorporate notions of audience feedback and interactivity into its form, through the advent of ‘reality’ TV, and also radio and television talk and game shows that allowed the audience to phone in. In this sense then, consumers of media content were invited to give their ‘feedback’, to not only consume but also ‘speak up’ and participate in the production of media content. Even before television and radio, the daily press had already opened

¹⁵ See Di Nucci, Darcy. “Fragmented future”. *Print* 53(4): 32, 221–222. 1999

up spaces for their readers, through the conception of the “letters to the editor” page. Walter Benjamin commented on this phenomenon, stating “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character”, for “the difference becomes merely functional... at any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (Benjamin, 9). Again then, we encounter this transition from consumer to producer, or the act of prosumption, as others have called it.

Hence, the participatory aspect of *social* media was never quite new to begin with. It was only through the processes of publicity of the consumer society that created the illusion of it being new and exciting, and perhaps even revolutionary. The beginnings of social media thus does not lie in the platforms of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, but social media began when the mass media like the radio and television began to engage the masses, when it started becoming ‘interactive’. In this case, social media is not exactly specific technologies such as Facebook, Twitter or the like, but rather it is the state that the Internet has adopted and now become. Like its predecessors of television, radio and news media, the Internet has now become more ‘social’. However, similar to the adoption of the term ‘smart’, the Internet could perhaps also be argued to be ever *less* ‘social’.

The point that I am making, that social media was never new to begin with, is not a new one either. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, in their book *Remediation, Understanding New Media*, pointed out:

“No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.” (15)

Perhaps then, a more accurate description of the current social media phenomenon would be the shift from a select few whom were previously able to interact, to the current phase where ‘everyone’ can interact, or ‘everyone’ becomes a producer of sorts, a trend that has been loosely, or perhaps even wrongly defined as “democratic”. Though this might appear to be “democratic”, the later part of this thesis will challenge this notion of “democratic” participation in the age of social media.

2.4 The Reversible: Consumer to Producer

Back in 1970, leftist media theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger already imagined this radical scenario, as a solution to the problems of capitalism, in the form of a socialist media theory. He envisioned a “reversibility of circuits” where everyone makes use of the media, since media equipment are not only “means of consumption but also means of production” and since these equipment such as tape recorders and cameras were already increasingly available to wage earners (Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” 266). In a rather familiar stance, Enzensberger claimed that “for the first time in history, the media make possible the participation of the masses in a collective process that is social and socialized,

participation in which the practical means are in the hands of the masses themselves” (Enzensberger, 97).

In opposition to these ideas, Jean Baudrillard strongly criticized the position of Enzensberger. Baudrillard argues that the position that Enzensberger adopts already assumes that new media structurally has a liberating function, and this problematic position has been the same one uncritically taken since the time of Marx (Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media”, 168). Marxist theory, as explicated by Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, argues that the role of the media, as an ideological state apparatus, was always to reproduce the ideology of the ruling class, i.e. the bourgeois capitalist class (Althusser, 129). Thus Enzensberger repeats this claim, stating that control of the media is in the hands of the dominant classes who divert them to their own advantage. But for Enzensberger and other Marxist theorists, as Baudrillard argues, the media remains “fundamentally egalitarian”, but it is corrupted by the capitalist order (168). Hence, the task is for revolutionary praxis to unleash this “potentiality inscribed in the media” (*ibid*).

Baudrillard argued that it is a big mistake to assume that the media is fundamentally egalitarian, pointing out the irony in the claim that something is liberatory, yet constantly in need of liberation, because this would also simultaneously assume that the media is inherently neutral. He calls Enzensberger’s desire to transform the media into a true medium of communication the “same dream that haunts the Marxist imaginary: strip objects of their exchange value in order to restore their use value” (168), the defetishizing of commodity. The standpoint that media is

structurally liberating relies on the underlying problematic conception of media as mere transmitters of ideology, as if the ideology of the dominant classes existed somewhere outside and beyond the media and is simply channeled through the media. Instead, while he agrees that the media is ideological, he argues that they are “not co-efficients, but effectors of ideology” (169), thus they were never “non-neutral or non-ideological” to begin with (*ibid*).

Baudrillard rejects Enzensberger and instead adopts the position of McLuhan, positing that his phrase “The medium is the message” is the true key to understanding ideology within media. In paraphrasing McLuhan, Baudrillard contends that:

Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs, and communication in general found themselves excluded. In fact, Marx does not even provide for a genuine theory of railroads as “media,” as modes of communication: they hardly enter into consideration.” (Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media”, 164)¹⁶

In this powerful critique of Marx, supplemented with the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, Baudrillard argues that through the valorization of productive forces that excludes language, signs and communication, Marxist theory becomes inadequate for analyzing media, for it is “incapable of responding to a social process that far exceeds material production” (166). He blames

¹⁶ c.f. Marshall McLuhan, “War and Peace in the Global Village” (New York, 1968)

the Marxist preconceptions of misunderstanding the exchange of signs as mere “pragmatic functional use” and its obsession with “material production and “productive labour” (167).

Baudrillard instead analyzes the commodity from a more radical perspective, to consider it not merely as a material object but as a vehicle of communication, a Sign. While production was the primary starting point for Marx, Baudrillard inverts this presupposition and argues that the analysis of the commodity in contemporary societies should no longer be based on production but this position should be reversed to its opposite, i.e., consumption. For Baudrillard, consumption is not merely the passive recipient of production through the satisfaction of needs but rather it is an active process in “the manipulation of signs” towards the creation of a “person” and its integration within the system (Mendoza, 47-48). Thus, consumption is rather the consumption of signs that then determines the ‘person’s’ status or privilege in society. In doing so then, consumption of a commodity is no longer just consumption based on a need, in the traditional Marxist sense of a use-value, but rather, it is based on the consumption of a Sign and what it signifies. Here, Baudrillard introduces his notion of the Sign-value, which he argues is central to consumption, for it is the “the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as a sign-value and where signs are produced as commodities” (Baudrillard, “For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,” 147). This is also strongly seen in social media, where the kinds of information a user consume and produce (prosume), becomes intrinsically tied to the self-identity that the user wishes to portray, instead of the fulfillment of a ‘need’ as Marx suggested.

When Enzensberger states that transforming the media is not “technically a problem”, Baudrillard then plays on his words in by agreeing so because “media ideology functions at the level of form, at the level of the separation it establishes, which is a social division” (168-169), a point which Debord also takes up. He then argues that at the level of form, the base structure of the media operates on communication being abstracted into a “simple transition-reception of a message”, where “the system of social control and power” is rooted within (169-170). Following this, he concludes that all processes of exchange are then “impossible”, except in the form of a simulated response. As he declares, “they speak (the media), or something is spoken there, but in such a way as to exclude any response anywhere” (170). Thus, for Baudrillard, the media ‘monopolizes’ speech, for “it is a speech that answers itself via the simulated detour of a response, and here as well, the absolutization of speech under the formal guise of exchange” (*ibid*). It is and never will be an equal exchange of speech and response under the existing totalizing architecture of media. To consider feedback (a simulated response), as Enzensberger does, as a revolutionary reversal of power, would therefore be a futile illusion.

Even if there were a “reversibility of circuits”, as Enzensberger puts it, it does not quite “destroy the private production methods of bourgeois intellectuals” (Enzensberger, 267), as Baudrillard points out that such reversals were already part of the media system in the form of letters to the editor, phone-in programs and poll, and yet they do not concede response nor change the original role between the sender and receiver. For Baudrillard, despite the possibility for the roles to be overturned in a

‘revolutionary’ solution’ where everyone becomes a manipulator, or what he terms the “critical reversal of the ideological concept of manipulation” (Baudrillard, 182), the category of transmitter, and therefore the fundamental structure of the political economy of communication, i.e. the structure of late capitalism, that underpins the media is still preserved.

Baudrillard further analyzes Enzensberger’s ideas and suggests that the only way to rehumanize communication and restore a simultaneous ‘response’ in the form of the original symbolic exchange, instead of a cybernetic one that preserves the underlying political economy of communication, would be to demolish the code, which can only be done at level of form (the form/content divide)¹⁷. Changing the message (content) through feedback would only retain the unequal power structure and thus obstruct any potential of true change, resulting in practices of manipulation at both ends (sender and receiver).

In other words, the strategy of subversion by reversing the roles of consumer to producer does not quite produce a strategy of revolution. As Marx put it, production and consumption are but two sides of the same coin. It merely signals a newer phase in advanced capitalism. All media does and can do is to simulate communication, and that, to Baudrillard, is a form of non-communication. It is non-communication because it has been transformed into a model of communication, neutralized into signs, and deprived of meaning.

¹⁷ This argument is also repeated by film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry and further explained in chapter 3.2.

Chapter Three. The narrative of participation: Participation as resistance?

The reversal of the role of the consumer to producer, premised on the emancipatory potential of the media, relies on the active participation of the ‘masses’, as Enzenberger notes above. As I repeat his quote, “the media make possible the participation of the masses in a collective process that is social and socialized, participation in which the practical means are in the hands of the masses themselves” (Enzenberger, 97). For Enzenberger, to be able to participate is to resist the hegemony of capitalism and it is through the liberation of the media that resistance lies.

The notion of participation today, because of its intimate relationship with the emancipatory politics and resistance, remains fundamentally important, as Enzenberger pointed out. Besides Enzenberger, the narratives of democracy also suggests that in order for a democracy to work, it requires the active participation of citizens in the society, either through voting or dissent, to participate in public life and become informed on public issues so as to be able to act collectively and hold public officials accountable (National Democratic Institute, n. pag.) However, as Jacques Rancière explains in *The Uses of Democracy*, such a form of participation is a “mongrel” idea produced through the conflation of two ideas: “the reformist idea of necessary mediations between the centre and the periphery, and the revolutionary idea of the permanent involvement of citizen-subjects in every domain” (Rancière, “The Uses of Democracy”, 60). He argues that because of this conflation, participation becomes a symbolic exercise that merely fills up the empty spaces left by power.

Instead, he locates genuine participation as the “unpredictable subject who momentarily occupies the street” and the “ever open possibility of the fresh emergence of this fleeting subject” (61), rather than “a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order” (Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?” n. pag.).

Even so, within the domain of art and politics, the role of participation remains crucial, particularly during the sixties. In 1959, American artist Allan Kaprow developed a term ‘Happening’, also the title of one of his artwork, that was slowly popularized into a movement, which spurred the advent of participatory art. The basic idea, as Kaprow describes, was to “increase the responsibility of the observer” with a view on “eliminating audiences” altogether (Cornwell, 204) so as to transform them into participants and hence elevate them to become co-creators of the artwork.

Thus in a way, the basic premise of participation, whether genuine or non-genuine, as fundamentally and morally good is already deeply inscribed within Western and developed societies in general. Moreover, the concept of participation remains firmly romanticized and celebrated as benevolent, particularly in the domain of participatory art, as I will later show. In this chapter, I will seek to examine in detail the role of voluntary participation in the context of social media today. As already argued in the earlier chapters, voluntary participation itself remains a key ideological feature of social media. The transition from receiver to sender, consumer to producer itself relies on invoking a form of voluntary participation, for the consumer or user to participate in the process. In order to fully understand the

implications of voluntary participation within social media, it is first necessary to understand the theoretical framework of participation and in this chapter, I will retrace the concept of participation in the domain of film, art and then demonstrate how some concerns within these domains still remain valid and relevant in the context of social media. Examining the historical precursors of social media would also demonstrate how participation in previous media forms is remediated in social media, but rather than being a strategy of subversion, participation becomes co-opted within social media and as a result this nullifies, or perhaps reverses the effect of participation as a form resistance.

3.1 Participation as opposition to the Spectacle

The activation or physical involvement of the audience in any form did not first begin with Kaprow. As Dinkla notes, already in Futurist and Dadaist manifestos, audience participation was seen as key to reducing the distance between performer and audience (Dinkla, 279). While the Futurists used the concept of audience participation mainly in stage-like performances, Dinkla traces one of the very first form of participation in exhibitions to the second Dada exhibition in 1920, held in the backyard of the Bauhaus Winter in Cologne, where Max Ernst placed an axe next to his art work, so that the audience could use it to destroy his work if they did not like it, offering the audience a chance to explicitly and directly intervene in the exhibition (Dinkla, 279-280).

Kaprow's Happenings and other various art movements during the sixties such as Fluxus were significant because their increasing reliance on audience participation

had deep political implications due to the realization that such forms of participation made it possible to challenge the authority of the artist. As Cornwell observes, even before Kaprow, another artist, Rauschenberg, with the aid of engineers and technicians, started to use technology to create intricate art works that involved the participation of the audience. As Cornwell describes one particular art work titled *Soundings* created by Rauschenberg in 1968:

The viewer entered a darkened room faced with an "8-by-36 foot partially mirrorized panel," behind which were two transparent panels with silk-screened images of chairs in black and white with adjustable spot lights on them. If the perceiver did nothing, only his or her reflection appeared dimly in the darkened room. It was necessary to speak or generate other sounds to activate the work. "When groups of the light bulbs are triggered by sound, the frontal mirror becomes translucent and illuminated images of the chairs are seen through it." (Cornwell, 205)

Klüver and Martin surmise their description of Kaprow's *Soundings* as follows:

"To explore the work, you have to continue talking or singing. If several people are there with you, the situation is one of participation, competitiveness and cooperation as viewers try to extract more and more images from the darkness. The constantly moving image of the chairs gives you the same unreal feeling of space as the night sky." (Klüver and Martin, 88)

Technology was used by Rauschenberg “to make the viewer responsible for the artwork that he or she sees”. As Klüver and Martin observe, “Earlier I was the artist. Now the viewer will make the image, not I” (*ibid*). As such, they suggest that this form of participatory art threatens the traditional divide between the artist and the viewer, offering a space for the viewer to be involved in the production of the artwork, closing the gap between the mass audience and art, performer and audience. Also, the locations that were selected for such *Happening* events included garages, shops, or even in the streets, were intentionally chosen away from art galleries and museums so as to contribute to the idea of abolishing the exclusivity of exhibition venues (Dinkla, 281).

Another important artist, Yoko Ono, identified with the Fluxus movement, created a significant amount of work that required active participation from her viewers, participation that was perhaps even more direct than the work of Rauschenberg (Cornwell, 205-206). In one of her more prominent work that exemplified the concept of audience participation entitled *Cut Piece*, she invited audience members to come on stage, use a pair of scissors and cut off pieces of her clothing as she sat on the stage motionless facing the audience. Thus, Ono’s *Cut Piece* was able to reverse the artist’s position of authority, since the artist’s role (Ono) became an entirely passive one in relation to the audience, which becomes active through participation.

Despite the potential of audience intervention and participation however, as Dinkla argues, Kaprow’s *Happenings* and similar other art forms clearly demonstrates

that not all forms of participation will inevitably result in a higher sense of responsibility for the viewer and hence a less authoritarian role of the artist. For Dinkla, the possibilities of ‘true’ audience intervention in Kaprow’s Happenings “remain limited” (Dinkla, 282). She quotes Johannes Schröder, “Under this condition [of absolute control by the organizer] the Happening does not seem to be a step toward viewer participation, but a precisely elaborated artistic act that guarantees the integration of the participations as a material (*ibid*). She further elaborates by arguing that in most of Kaprow’s “participation” in *Happenings*, participation was still ‘staged’ in a way and the audience were not as unprepared as Kaprow claims. Instructions and scripts for the audience were always present which resulted in the performers’ behaviour being “controlled” (*ibid*). Thus, she claims, “rather, participation is located along a fragile border between emancipatory act and manipulation”.

Furthermore, Dinkla highlights the necessity of differentiating between nontechnical participation and technically mediated participation (simulation). In technically mediated participation, or interactive art in general, Dinkla convincingly argues that while the artist might withdraw into a more passive role (similar to Yoko Ono’s position in *Cut Piece*), the authorial leader role is essentially delegated to the interactive system. Thus, the introduction of technical means of control in art effectively “automates” participation, making it an automated ‘event’ (288).

Claire Bishop explains the reason why participation remains fundamentally important in the role of art and artists: “it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and

fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production” (Bishop, n. pag.). Thus, by using social participation as a strategy in the creation of the artwork, the goal is to resist the passivity and combat the alienation that contemporary capitalism produces in their subjects. This is seen not only in interactive and participatory art, but also across the domain of film and theatre.

3.2 Theatre, Film and Participation

Similar to the goal of participation as a social strategy in the domain of art, Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, through the medium of theatre, also sought to radicalize the form of theatre through ‘activating’ the audience, in what is known as ‘Epic theatre’. As Walter Benjamin writes, “Epic theatre casts doubts upon the notion that theatre is entertainment. It shakes the social validity of theatre-as-entertainment by robbing it of its function within the capitalist system. It also threatens the privileges of the critics” (Benjamin, “Understanding Brecht”, 9). The role of epic theatre, is not only to develop actions (audience participation), but represent conditions. It aims to avoid reproducing conditions, but seeks to reveal conditions as they are, so as to induce recognition (4, 5). The function, is to “revive a Socratic praxis”, where the audience is ‘shocked’ or ‘astonished’ and hence reconfigured into an ‘interested’ audience who questions and thinks, deriving a “lively and productive consciousness” (4).

In other words, Brechtian practice stigmatizes the theatrical illusion that entraps the spectator in a heightened state of passivity. Brecht works towards dispelling the illusion through the creation of an active and critical spectator, to

produce a thinking subject through the performance. For Brecht, the spectator has to reject the identification process with the spectacle and increase the distance between the spectator and spectacle, so as to truly see the theatre for what it is, nothing but an illusion. Brecht calls for a questioning critical spectator, one that is made aware of their social material conditions of production and rejects the passivity and conformity of the theatre, to be inalienated in an increasingly alienating world.

In cinema, the film spectator, like the art and theatre audience (before the advent of participatory art), on a primary level, remains passive to the image displayed before them, much like in Plato's allegory of the cave, where the prisoners are shackled by chains, condemned eternally to watch the shadows on the wall, never realizing it is an illusion masked as reality. Although it is technically and physically impossible for the film spectator to socially participate in a film since it does not unfold 'live' in front of the spectator, various film directors also sought to denounce passivity and inalienate the spectator not through direct 'active' participation from the spectator but instead through a similar process in the creation of an active and self-reflexive spectator.

Film theorists such as Baudry and Metz argue that the subject that the cinematic apparatus produces is problematic because cinema itself produces certain ideological effects, one of them being a fundamental misrecognition of the unity of the self and its continuity with the world. The filmic apparatus, as Baudry explains, relies on the "illusion of continuity", that is "dependent on the persistence of vision, restored from discontinuous elements." (Baudry, 42) At the level of technical

apparatus, even though difference is marked by frames in a reel and moments in time and space, this difference itself has to be effaced or repressed in order for meaning to emerge. Through the projection process, the difference is minimized and repressed through the rapid succession of images enabling a narrative continuity. That is why Baudry concludes that film paradoxically “lives on the denial of difference: difference is necessary for it to live, but it lives on its negation” (*ibid*).

Because it fulfills two key conditions, the suspension of mobility as well as the predominance of the visual function, since cinema subjects are isolated in a darkened room and made to watch a screen that functions like a mirror, Baudry goes on to liken the conditions of watching a film to the Lacanian Mirror-Stage process (45). In the mirror-stage, the subject misrecognizes itself and imagines itself as a whole and unified being, a sort of unification of the fragmented body. However, in film, the transcendental subject of the camera “unites into a meaningful whole the discontinuous fragments of phenomena” (Kim, 54-55). To put it in another way, the spectator, at the primary level, identifies not with that which is represented on the screen (the content or the spectacle) but rather, with the unified transcendental subject of the camera instead, or “what stages the spectacle, what makes it seen, obliging him to see what the camera sees” (Baudry, 45). Therefore, in cinema, the false ‘reality’ is not exactly the image on the screen but rather, as Baudry argues, a “simulation of the condition of the subject, the position of the subject and not of reality” (46).

For Baudry then, the filmic apparatus induces a “state of artificial regression” (56) As Kim explains, the intensity of attachment to the images and the process of

identification as a form of ideological control is accepted by the spectators because it feeds their unconscious desires (55). Baudry thus concludes that the “specific function fulfilled by the cinema” is the “support and instrument of ideology” since “it constitutes the ‘subject’ - by the illusory delimitation of a central location-whether this be that of a god or of any other substitute” (46). Cinema could therefore be thought of as an “apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology” through “creating a fantasmaticization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism” (*ibid*). In other words, in a rather Althusserian fashion, as Kim puts it, cinema “collapses the plural, heterogeneous, complex, analyzable subject, into the unanalyzable collective subject” that naturalizes and reproduces the dominant ideology (55). This is hence considered the primary ideological mechanism of film (*ibid*).

To resist this form of interpellation, Baudry suggests that there is a need to “disturb cinematic elements”, or disrupt the primary identification form, through making the processes of film-making visible to the audience (34), citing the work of Vertov in *The Man With a Movie Camera*, since he argues that “the ideological mechanism at work in the cinema is concentrated in the relation between camera and subject” (*ibid*). Also, like Baudrillard and McLuhan, Baudry privileged ‘form’ over ‘content’, adding that as long as primary identification remains possible, “forms of narratives adopted, or the ‘contents’ of the image, are of little importance” (*ibid*). Yet, as I would later argue, such a strategy of postmodern self-referentiality or self-reflexivity would no longer be subversive for it has been subsumed by capitalism and

becomes emblematic of late-capitalism, reflected particularly in the form of social media.

The French New Wave cinema movement was a strong proponent of such strategies, and one particular filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard is well known for his manipulation of the cinematic aesthetics to achieve this effect. The aesthetics of Godard films contemplate the subject of his enquiry. The traces of early Godard's leftist influences can be clearly seen within his films, which Mulvey terms as his Debord phase where he examined the society of the spectacle and spectacle of consumerism with *Une Femme Mariée* (1964) and *Deux ou Trois Choses que je sais d'elle* (1972), and his Marxist phase where he scrutinized the façade of consumerism at the direct process of the commodity's production: the factory, with *British Sounds* (1969) and *Tout va bien* (1972).

According to Mulvey, Godard works can be analyzed through three elements, the cinema, the body and the commodity, in which all three elements relates to the concept of the fetishism. It is as Mulvey proposed, "if the shiny glossy surface fascination of the screen could be unmasked, to reveal the process of production concealed behind it, the film would be stripped of its fetishistic aspects" (Mulvey, 77). Mulvey then goes on to describe Godard's films as a desire to "free cinema into the complex space and time of intertextual reference, direct address, self-reflexivity, material specificity", one that "parallels the Marxist desire to defetishize the commodity, by making *visible*, through political analysis, the specificity of its process of production" (*ibid*). Godard's strategy is clear, through *overt visibility* and the

revealing of the mechanics of production, he aimed to free the spectator and rid the alienating and illusory effects of the cinematic apparatus to create an active and self-reflexive spectator.

Kim notes that the ideological mechanism in the cinematic apparatus functions similarly to Žižek's notion of ideological fantasy. Because the identification process that makes the film viewing process possible is based on a misrecognition that represses the discontinuity of the shots and imagines the continuity of the film, the subject is essentially accepting the fundamental fantasy of the "transcendental subject of the camera" and simultaneously accepting the "interpellation of the camera as capital-S Subject." Thus, the ideological fantasy itself is instrumental to the functioning of an ideological reality (55-56), acting as a support to reality, rather than a form of false consciousness.

However, Kim also points out that the assumption that mimetic realism automatically produces a passive subject that is ideologically malleable is rather problematic. She suggests the possibility of realism having a positive ideological function and questions the other assumption that every film viewer is necessarily passive, and she lists other forms of resistance such as leaving the theatre, talking back to the screen or having an entirely different interpretation.

3.3 From Art and Film to Social media

As the narratives of participation across the different domains of film and art seem to suggest, participation and visibility is seen as an act of resistance, a form of

emancipation of the subject. This myth of emancipation is likewise heavily repeated in the media, as dominant forms of social media such as Facebook and Twitter becomes mythologized as emancipatory tools that empower individuals precisely because they allow for participation of the masses online.

The above statement that suggests a simple relation between participation and emancipation is problematic insofar as it completely disregards the context in which participation remained a key strategy in the sixties. Within the context of social media and technology today, as Lovink enlightens us, the main difference is that we are “explicitly requested to interact and no longer addressed as an anonymous mass of passive consumers, unlike before” (Lovink, 147). Even before Lovink, Baudrillard already warned us of this impending problem. As he says:

Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, organizationally, sexually, in participation, in festival, in free speech, etc. The spectre must be exorcised, it must pronounce its name. Nothing shows more dramatically that the only genuine problem today is the silence of the mass, the silence of the silent majority. (Baudrillard, “In the Shadow of the Silent Majority”, 23-24)

For Baudrillard, the strategy or resistance of the masses was their passivity itself. As he elaborates:

The strategy of power has long seemed founded on the apathy of the masses. The more passive they were, the more secure it was. But this logic is only characteristic of the bureaucratic and centralist phase of power. And it is this which today turns against it: the inertia it has fostered becomes the sign of its own death. That is why it seeks to reverse its strategies: from passivity to participation, from silence to speech. But it is too late. The threshold of the “critical mass,” that of the involution of the social through inertia, is exceeded.

(23)

However, I argue that the problem today is no longer the silence of the silent majority. As I would demonstrate later, I argue, in agreement with Baudrillard, that the entire binary of passive and active binary has already collapsed in the age of social media such that we have *no choice* but to be active ‘users’ when using social media.

Žižek recognizes this same problem and proposes an interesting thesis in relation to the notion of participation, suggesting that this ‘need’ to construct ourselves as an active participant, instead of being in opposition to the alienating effects of contemporary capitalism effectively renders us as further complicit and subservient to the needs of neo liberal capitalism so as to ensure its own successful functioning.

According to Žižek:

“The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active,” to “participate,” to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, “do something”; academics participate in meaningless “debates,” and

so forth, and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a “critical” participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in a “dialogue,” to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. (Žižek, “The Obscene Knot of Ideology and How to Untie It”, 334)

He cites Alan Badiou’s provocative thesis: “It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.” Žižek paraphrases Badiou and argues that doing nothing might be better than to “engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly, through acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, and so on” (*ibid*).

He employs a unique term to describe this form of activity or active participation today, calling it an “interpassive” mode of participation, rather than interactive form of communication. He argues that in this ‘interpassive’ mode of participation where we are constantly ‘actively’ participating in various aspects of socio-ideological life, it is not participation to ensure any kind of social change but rather, participation to ensure that nothing will happen, and that nothing will change at all (Žižek, 342). He therefore suggests that the “proper radical political gesture”, the act of defiance and resistance to the contemporary condition today instead might be to be ‘passively aggressive’ rather than ‘aggressively passive’.

Another problem is also that the form participation takes today, within the sphere of digital media, is one that is highly digitized, hence a form of simulation

because it is already commodified and turned into sign-value, rather than the form of participation that art and film relied on previously. The denouncement of passivity and liberation to an active subject is increasingly achieved through technologically mediated processes that simulate and automate. Following Dinkla's delineation of technically mediated participation, where she considers non-technically mediated participation to be a purer and more authentic form of participation, and her argument that technical mediated participation effectively automates participation and transfers the authority of the artist to the interactive system, there is a pressing need to reconsider what participation in the age of social media really represents. Pursuing Žižek's train of thought then, I agree with Bishop's analysis, in that "far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it" (Bishop, 6). Hence, in this thesis, I argue that participation, in the age of social media, has become 'obscene' and embodies what Baudrillard would call the Perfect Crime.

Chapter Four: Participation in the age of Social media

In the age of social media, participation has been digitally coded into signs such as ‘comment’, ‘like’, ‘tweet’, etc. that allow for a seemingly easier and more efficient way of communicating with one another online. There are also implicit rules and cultural norms within different social networking sites. Participation online, for most users, has already been transformed into a practice that is governed by rituals such as scrolling down the news feed to get information, ‘liking’, ‘sharing’ a post or commenting on a status – all prescribed by the affordances of new media technology.

In chapter two, I argued that the idea of audience participation is not exactly one that is new because it has always existed even in previous forms of older media. However, as identified earlier, within social media now, the user is already constantly active and always participating. Even if the user does not post information online or partake in any of the aforementioned social media rituals, the instance of using social media to view different pages for information already designates the user as ‘active’ because the page-browsing habits of the user will be tracked by the technology behind social media through the clicks the user makes. For example, a Facebook user may not upload any pictures of himself or post statuses regularly, but just by looking at what people share or different Facebook pages that the user may be interested in, such as the football club Arsenal page for instance, the user already automatically generates data for Facebook and by virtue of that, becomes implicated as an ‘active’ user. Social media has therefore already collapsed the active/passive binary, making it

clearly impossible to be a passive user at all in social media, unless one completely opts out of using it.

As we can see, participation is intrinsically linked to the notion of consumption. The forms of participation in the age of social media are no more than an obligatory sign of consumption. As explained in chapter three, the advent of social media has also collapsed the binary of consumption and production, rendering the user a prosumer who simultaneously produces and consumes information. However, rather than this being a form of empowerment of the user, I argue that this instead administers a form of consumption that further exploits creative forms of user labour.

4.1 Participation as the myth of co-creation

Paradoxically, it is precisely the nature of voluntary participation that enables social media to function. The very basis of social media is the proliferation of information produced by its users. Without the participation of its users, social networks will not survive, for the sole reason that people visit social networks to consume information that other users provide, whether it is a 'status update', a photo, a news article that was shared, or various other snippets of information that social networks commodifies. Thus, the economic value of the various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. is primarily determined by their ability to command the contribution and production of information by users, in short, user-generated content. The economic success of YouTube, measured by the sale of YouTube to Google for US\$1.65 billion within the first two years of its creation, was made possible only through the willingness of YouTube users to (re)produce their

lives and the lives of others online for mass consumption (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 180). Similarly, other user-generated social media sites “expropriate the cultural labour of the masses to convert it into monetary value”, perhaps in different ways but all according to the same general logic (*ibid*).

As we can see then, the idea of social media participation is deeply entwined with the process of prosumption that was briefly discussed in chapter two. Instead of employing the term ‘prosumption’, Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody term the phenomenon of voluntary participation as the “turn towards co-creation” and suggests that it “represents one of the most advanced strategies for capitalist accumulation and consumer control” because it reshapes the landscape of marketing into a “supply function for free, unpaid, and more or less autonomous consumer labor processes.” (Zwick et al. ,177). Drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality, they explain:

“It (co-creation) is a form of government of consumers that gives birth to an active consumer whose independent, creative, and voluntary activities can now effectively be channeled into raw material for the firm’s commodity production.” (*ibid*)

Co-creation in social media thus bears much similarity to the situation of participatory art, where audiences do not merely become elevated to the role of a co-creator of the artwork, but rather, in the process of becoming a co-creator, the audience also becomes ‘used’ as a raw material in the production of the artwork, exploited as an dehumanized object, in a way not unlike the Heideggerian ‘resource’. Since users are

not being paid for their cultural labour performed on social media, but are subtly manipulated to co-produce this form of product and service online that generates economic value for only the social media owners, this amounts to an expropriation of the surplus value from the user's labour. Thus, from a Marxist point of view, co-creation results in the exploitation of users even if it is performed voluntarily and in spite of the pleasure users derive from the process (Zwick, et. al., 180). The fact that participation is voluntary, or perhaps even pleasurable, makes it all the more ideological in the first instance. We can draw a parallel here with the context of participatory art, as Bishop remarks, wherein the increased activation and agency of the audience might be seen as a heroic narrative of empowerment, it could also be read as an "ever-increasing voluntary subordination to the artist's will, and of the commodification of human bodies in a service economy" (Bishop, 5).

Similar to Žižek's argument that active participation reinforces the consumer society, Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody then argue that the processes of subjection and social normalization within social media produce a subject that desires the very things needed by the system, therefore coercion of the subject becomes absolutely unnecessary but rather, it is social media that creates this contradiction, "making the user at once free and controllable, creative *yet* docile" (163, emphasis mine).

Co-creation is not only found in social media itself but is also made possible by social media. This can be clearly seen in other forms of co-creation such as crowd-sourcing, where businesses utilize the 'wisdom of the crowd' by getting consumers to *participate* in decision-making processes that were traditionally done by the

corporations. For example, Japanese automobile makers Nissan in 2012 embarked on what they called a social media driven, crowd-sourced campaign named ‘Project 370Z’¹⁸, where they relied on asking the general public to specially design their upcoming sports car, the 2013 370Z, instead of their in-house team of designers and engineers. From the engine to be used, to the wheels, interiors and even the suspension preferred, Nissan depended entirely on their consumers to decide on almost every aspect of the new sports car, mainly through social media channels such as Facebook. Nissan specially created a Facebook page¹⁹ for the project where fans were able to vote and decisions were made according to how many ‘likes’ it obtained. The car eventually did not go on sale for reasons unspecified but was used as a performance car for races, to satisfy the consumers. The end result was supposed to be a perfect, win-win situation, where consumers are happy and satisfied having ‘collaborated’ with Nissan in a ‘democratic’ process to build a car and vice-versa, for car manufacturer Nissan having ‘listened’ to the feedback of their valued customers. However, such an interpretation would also severely obscure the fact that these consumers were also exploited by practically contributing labour to Nissan for free. Now, there even exists an online community called eYeka²⁰, that proudly calls themselves the co-creation community, connecting brands to willing consumers who

¹⁸ See Ernst, Kurt. “Nissan Unveils Its Completed Project 370Z”. *Motor Authority*. 8 Aug. 2012. Web. 1 Feb 2014. & Feder, Joel. “Nissan Invites Fans to Participate in “Project 370Z”. *Motor Authority*. 9 Feb. 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2014.

¹⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/NISMOUSA>

²⁰ See <https://en.eyeka.com/>. Their tagline is ‘Where people and brands create and market products together’.

want to co-create products or offer solutions to the problems faced by corporations without being paid for their labour.

The implications of active participation in the age of social media do not end at the exploitation of the consumer. Despite the lack of coercion and in spite of active participation, this does not necessarily mean that alienation does not exist in social media. In an art installation by artist Rachel Knoll entitled '*Listen and Repeat*', it featured a computer reading tweets containing the phrase "nobody listens" aloud through a bullhorn speaker to an audience of trees in a forest in Washington²¹. In this striking social critique of social media, Knoll's point is clear. As she says, "Social media is used to connect but concurrently serves as a disconnect from social life outside of the virtual world" (Lynch, n.pag.). In other words, participating in social media might connect users, but they are deluded by an overwhelming illusion of inclusion, a false consciousness that only serves to reproduce an alienating, isolating effect on users' lives, be it online and offline. As Knoll's installation work exemplifies, users generate content to engage and communicate but to whom? In partaking more and more often in active participation online (and essentially the illusion of empowerment) through the 'revolutionary' medium that is social media, users become separated from real human interaction through the physical act of being constantly plugged into their various technological devices from smart phones and tablets to laptops and desktops. In such a reality where 'everyone' participates and airs their

²¹ See Lynch, "Listen and Repeat, An Art Installation Featuring a Computer that Voice Reads Tweets Aloud in a Washington Forest". *Laughing Squid*. 22 Nov. 2013. Web. 2 Feb. 2014.

views, no form of mass empowerment exists; instead this reality is marred by what Bishop aptly terms as an “endless stream of banal egos” (Bishop, 6.).

While I have pointed out that consumers are being systematically exploited by a seemingly benevolent system that operates on a celebratory notion of pseudo democracy on the surface, the later part of this thesis will further demonstrate how active participation in social media not only exploits, but has now become completely ‘obscene’, and functions via a suppression of resistance, by symbolically ‘murdering’ not only ‘reality’ through simulation but also representation and resistance as well thereby embodying what Baudrillard terms the ‘Perfect Crime’.

4.2 The Obscenity of Participation

One particularly insightful concept often adopted by Baudrillard to describe the general condition of contemporary media is that of obscenity. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, he writes, “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication” (Baudrillard, 130). In another essay, *The Millennium*, he says:

“Whenever we speak of the end of history, the end of the political or the end of the social, what we are clearly dealing with is the end of *the scene of the political*, the end of the *scene of the social*, the end of *the scene of history*. In other words, in all these spheres, we are speaking of the advent of a specific era of obscenity. Obscenity may be characterized as the endless, unbridled

proliferation of the social, of the political, of information, of the economic, of the aesthetic, not to mention the sexual” (Jean Baudrillard, “The Millennium”, 160)

Here, Baudrillard’s employment of the term ‘obscene’ could be misunderstood as a mere angry rant against the contemporary state of media in general. However, we should understand Baudrillard’s playful use of the notion obscene not only in the rigid dictionary definition sense of obscenity, i.e. being morally indecent or sexually perverse, but more importantly, in its second, deeper level of connotative meaning, where he plays with the root word of *scene* in obscene. Originally, the word ‘scene’ designates the place where an event happens. When we relate this to media, the French term *misc-en-scène*, which translates to ‘the placing of the scene’, is particularly useful. In a setting of a film, the scene is also where the event unfolds, before the gaze of the camera. Hence *misc-en-scène* refers to any visual element that lies within the scene of a film production, before the presence of the camera.

Traditionally, there has always been a clear demarcation between what is produced on stage, or within the scene that the camera sees and what is ‘behind-the-scene’, the place where the camera cannot, or perhaps by choice of the director, should not see. By extension, this parallels the divide between what is commonly termed the private sphere and public sphere, since ‘scenes’ behind-the-scene is often deemed to be secret and out of public view.

One way to understand the term ‘obscene’ as Baudrillard uses it then, is that it signals a transition to the post-modern logic, where what used to be demarcated as

behind-the-scene, or inaccessible to the camera, is now completely exposed to the camera as well. Hence, everything *becomes* "exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" and this simultaneously signals the end of any form of 'scene', since everything in reality may, at any given moment in time become produced as a scene, obliterating the thin line that differentiates between the public and private sphere. Thus, for Baudrillard, the demise of the scene likewise signifies the era of obscenity.

The obscene, as Baudrillard explains, not only involves the end of 'scenes', but also marks a trend of several transitions, from the "drama of alienation" to "the ecstasy of communication" (Baudrillard, "Ecstasy of Communication", 130), from the "scene and mirror" to the "screen and network" (126), from secrecy to hypervisibility (130), from hot to cold, excitement to fascination (131), which Douglas Kellner, in his discussion of Baudrillard, characterizes as the shift from modernity to post-modernity (Kellner, n. pag.). As Kellner explains, modernity could be defined by the rise of industrial capitalism and the production and commodification of goods, while postmodernity is characterized by the proliferation of signs of which the broadcast media, in particular the television, is an important constituent, since it is able to rapidly disseminate and reproduce images, signs and codes.

During Baudrillard's time, the phenomenon that most probably fully realized his notion of obscenity was the advent of reality TV, where all aspects of life were infiltrated and subject to the pervasive surveillance of the camera, and everything became mindlessly visible. Hence he laments and refers to the phenomenon:

“Now this opposition (between private and public space) is effaced in a sort of obscenity where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media (the Loud family in the United States, the innumerable slices of peasant or patriarchal life on French television).”
(Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”, 130)

Fetveit draws the link between reality TV and the French cinéma vérité movement, outlining the evidential function of the images used. Thus he writes, “on the face of it, much of today’s reality TV seems to embody aspirations both from Vertov’s *Kino Pravda* to catch life “unawares,” and from the vérité movement of the 1960s to give an *objective* view of life as it unfolds” (Fetveit, 791). Vertov’s film, *Kino Pravda* translates directly from Russian into ‘truth’ and was considered to be Vertov’s interpretation of seeing reality ‘as it is’, not unlike the cinéma vérité movement. Reality TV was therefore in a way a precession to social media. Like reality TV, the image in social media has already obtained and maintains an ‘objective’ reality. Whatever we see on different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram forms the impression of a reality that is currently happening in ‘real-time’, an *objective view of life* as it unfolds too.

In this sense, active participation on social media is in itself a form of obscenity, for it is designed to perpetuate a needless drive to visibility. The use of social networks in itself explicitly dictates this sort of obscenity, for in social media, you are expected to make your thoughts *visible* online through status updates – the

first thing Facebook asks you upon logging in is the question: “What’s on your mind?” As if that is not enough, in that same status update post, you are also encouraged to tag people in your post, add a location in your post, add a photo or video, to reveal as much information as possible to produce content and make yourself as visible as possible in the social media sphere. Social media becomes a personal digital biography, where users automatically divulge content that was once deemed as private. The different functions on Facebook such as the ‘like’ button, the ‘share’ button or the ‘upload photo’ button all serve to reproduce this obscenity, for using these functions will effectively allow for a more visible and simultaneously faster spread of information. For example, a Facebook status post might not be seen by many people, but the use of the ‘like’ and ‘share’ button allows Facebook users to spread the post to their friends, since ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ will make the post visible on their Facebook friends’ news feeds. Also, because each single ‘like’ or ‘share’ has the capability to dissipate information exponentially to a few hundred ‘friends’ through exposing on the news feed, it is no longer merely an issue of increased visibility of information, but instead information generated ad infinitum, a form of hypervisibility, or the endless proliferation of the ‘social’ which is essentially information at base. In this sense, participation in social media can likewise be classified as a form of obscenity, making the once invisible hypervisible.

On one level, obscenity invokes the problematic of privacy and surveillance. Through the obliteration of the private and public sphere, making everything increasingly visible, naturally the right to privacy becomes threatened as the image reigns supremacy in its hypervisible form. It would seem that social media has already

naturalized Jeremy Bentham's panopticon effect on a global level, for data is now being stored in a centralized location, in the servers of social media conglomerates like Google, Facebook and Twitter, similar to how the panopticon apparatus is also a centralized system, allowing for the ease of global surveillance by state authorities of which the recent National Security Agency scandal in the United States of America remains the best example. As the often quoted phrase from Michel Foucault described the implications of the panopticon:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, 201)

Social media like Facebook functions dangerously similar to a global panopticon, where there is a conscious and sustained effort to render any and all kinds of information visible online. More pertinently, to draw on Foucault's analysis, it is precisely the introduction of a technological device or apparatus that results in an involuntary and unconscious effort to be more disciplined. Because of the very permanence in surveillance induced by the technological apparatus, the landscape of the prison has changed drastically resulting in the automatic functioning of power.

Thus, even if there is no guard standing by at the panopticon, the prisoner, by virtue of his physically subordinate position, would never know and thus the very presence of the panopticon already functions as a disciplinary tool. The same analysis could also be applied to the effects of obscenity in social media. Because of the permanence information bears online, I foresee that over time, users in the realm of social media will gradually become more mindful of what they post online and self-censor, resulting in power relations being replicated online as well, similar to the effect of the panopticon. The sense of perceived leaderlessness or flat power dynamics within social media that has been induced by the narrative of empowerment will slowly erode, resulting in the gradual emergence of mechanisms of privilege and power.

One key reason for the drive to obscenity can be attributed to the proliferation of cameras thanks to the advancement in camera technologies, where every mobile phone now has an in-built camera. This near-ubiquity of cameras in communication devices that are now increasingly mobile has allowed for the proliferation of images that can now capture ‘reality’ at any moment in time, in what Paul Virilio has termed the “democratization of voyeurism on a planetary scale” (Virilio, 109). Mann however extols the virtues of such a phenomenon, arguing that it actually empowers the common people, arming them with the same tools that the state used to have, therefore problematizing and challenging these “technologies of control” used on individuals (Mann, Nolan & Wellman, 302). Thus, he terms this phenomenon “sousveillance”, where instead of surveillance, which he defines as organizations observing people, sousveillance subverts this notion by inverting the gaze of the

panopticon onto organizations, through people observing organizations (*ibid*, 332-333).

While sousveillance may be able to invert the authoritative gaze, Mann's argument however overlooks the crucial implication of people observing people, or as Virilio puts it, voyeurism taken to the extreme. The irony lies in the fact that while Baudrillard contests that there is no more secrecy in the age of obscenity and it seems to stand true, yet if we look at it in a different way, as Virilio maintains, is it not also true that everyone, in the age of social media, has now become a voyeur and are secretly observing each other while maintaining the very act of observation as the secret? Similarly, in Heidegger's words, the essence of technology is enframing [Gestell], which is a way of revealing, or unconcealment. Yet for Heidegger, all revealing also conceals, as enframing "not only conceals a former way of revealing, but it conceals itself and with it that wherein unconcealment, i.e. truth, comes to pass", and that is the danger of the essence of technology (Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", 309).

One of the clearest signs of obscenity in the age of social media can be seen with the use of the hash tag tool (#). The use of hash tags in social media originated with Twitter, but was picked up by other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as well. As Facebook explains, the use of hash tags in Facebook will turn a status post into a clickable link, rendering it searchable, and therefore more visible (obscene) to other users who might share similar tastes or traits. For example, if I visited a café with good coffee and decide to share this information with my

friends on Facebook through posting a status saying “This place has really good coffee,” by utilizing the hash tag to include #goodcoffee, or even to include my location, #Singapore, though Facebook already automatically geo-tags the location, other users who are not my Facebook ‘friends’, are able to see the status that I have posted when they search the tag #goodcoffee, even with privacy settings turned on. Without the hashtag, my post would not have achieved such visibility. As seen then, using the hash tag adds on another layer of visibility, making it more visible than visible, or hypervisible as Baudrillard terms it, since the initial post is not only exposed to my Facebook ‘friends’, but a second layer of visibility provided by the hashtag allows anyone on Facebook to view that particular post.

Another popular trend in Twitter involving the hash tag that demonstrates this form of obscenity is #followfriday, or #ff. This trend has been in existence since 2009 and is used exclusively on Fridays, where twitter users use the abbreviation and hashtag to recommend other twitter users to follow, to their current Twitter followers. Such recommendations help to encourage Twitter users to ‘follow’ more personalities on Twitter, effectively generating more visibility and publicity for various ‘interesting’ Twitter users, through actively and voluntarily participating in this trend.

As such, participation in social media has already been inscribed with an ‘obscene’ character in the Baudrillardian sense. There is a constant, active flurry of participation on social media as if everything that happens in the real world has to be captured and rendered visible on social networks, otherwise, it simply didn’t happen. Participation in the age of social media enforces an obscene form of visibility online.

That, for Baudrillard, is the violence of the image, for in the age of obscenity, “everything must be seen, must be visible, and the image is the site par excellence of this visibility” (Baudrillard, “The Violence of The Image”, n.pag). Forms of participation have become obscene to the point where even the same piece of information, is being posted by the same user on different social media channels, as if to say that the same status update that is being posted on Facebook is not visible enough, so it has to be reposted on Twitter, Instagram or other social networking sites as well to make sure as many people as possible see it. Such is the “order of the visible”, where according to Baudrillard, “there is no longer a scene of the obscene; there is nothing but the dilation of the visibility of all things to the point of ecstasy. The obscene is the end of any scene” (Baudrillard, “Fatal Strategies”, 79). Without a scene, this then also signifies the end of the subject, since there is no more mirror, but a mere screen and network.

5.1 Decrypting the ‘Like’ button

In almost all forms of social media, from Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and so on, there exists a ‘like’ button, which I define as a form of participation in the age of social media. Different social networks might have a different name to label this button, for instance, it is represented with a retweet button in Twitter, while on Instagram it is represented with a heart icon and Facebook designates it with a thumbs up button and calls it a ‘like’. Across these different (-re)presentations though, the function is quite the same, to affirm, demonstrate support or agreement, or just plainly to state that one likes the post. The ‘like’ button thus appears simple and innocuous. But the crucial question is then, why is there no ‘dislike’ button²²?

Before we pursue this line of questioning, it is first necessary to digress and contemplate two of Baudrillard’s key concepts, simulation, and hyper-reality. Simulation, as Baudrillard describes, leveraging on the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes again, is the “generation by models of the real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 2). As he elaborates, “simulation starts from the *utopia* of this principle of equivalence, from the *radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every

²² Certain social media platforms such as YouTube, Reddit and Quora utilizes both the ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ functions however here I refer to specific major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Also, my argument stands regardless of whether there is a ‘dislike’ button or not.

reference” (11). Here, he suggests that simulation is the reproduction of a real by models but the outcome of simulation, or simulacra, is that it no longer carries any original referent, leaving it as a pure signifier by itself. Thus, the simulacrum is not unreal, but “never exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (*ibid*).

While Baudrillard’s idea of simulation and simulacra may seem to lend itself very well to today’s age of digital computers, it is paramount to point out that simulation does not *only* refer to digital reproduction, for such a view would be too restrictive. What Baudrillard is referring to, instead, is the idea that *information* itself can be a form of simulation. Thus his theory of simulation does not just include digital systems of reproduction but can include any form of model that claims to represent the real, including Science or even Marxist theory. That is why Baudrillard, in his radical analysis of Marx’s critique of society, argues that:

From now on political economy is the real for us, which is to say precisely that it is the sign’s referential, the horizon of a defunct order whose *simulation* preserves it in a ‘dialectical’ equilibrium. It is the real and therefore the imaginary, since here again the two formerly distinct categories have fused and drifted together. (Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death”, 31)

Thus, the structure of Marxist discourse and its concepts including the commodity form and its abstraction has already become “a giant simulation model” where it has

become generalized to the point it becomes an ideological universalizing claim.

(Baudrillard, “Mirror of Production”, 33)

The Hyperreal then, is the result of the disappearance of the Imaginary through the simulation process. It is a real that is produced by the model and taken to be more true than reality itself, hence more real than real. Baudrillard elaborates:

This imaginary of representation... disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic... it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these... It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard, “Precession of Simulacra”, 3)

If we accept Baudrillard’s proposition that we live in an age of hyper-reality and conceive of the ‘like’ button as a simulation, the answer to the absence of the ‘dislike’ button becomes quite clear. The act of agreement has already become a simulacra. While in Manovich’s terms, a ‘like’ button might be designated as an object of ‘representation’, Baudrillard would instead call it an object of simulation in hyper-reality. The ‘like’ button is its “operational double”, the simulation of the real act of agreeing (Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 4). Once the ‘like’ button is

clicked, not only is it reproduced indefinitely as commodity, for other users to consume, but is also subject to the processes of measurement and reinjected into the cybernetic system of communication as information or feedback to the system, to the panoptic gaze of the social network, for purposes of becoming information to yet another simulation system, so as to assist companies in their marketing schemes and campaigns.

There is therefore no longer a need for a ‘dislike’ button for as simulacra, the ‘like’ button sufficiently performs the function of a model. Thus, as far as the cybernetic system is concerned, in its binary definition, not ‘liking’ already designates you as in disagreement with the post. Neither ambivalence nor ambiguity is accepted into the cybernetic system. Both are rendered irrelevant and useless, captured as noise. Following the trend of positivism, both ambivalence and ambiguity, determined as ‘negative’ becomes eliminated, in a twisted form of purging of “noise”. It operates in the exact same way as one method of the social sciences, the survey. On the commonly used Likert scale, the instrument for quantitative surveys, the midpoint, or the designated neutral point, is considered useless information. For social scientists, this is because the data generated does not help the research finding in any way, serving only to highlight the irony of an ‘objective’ science, which prides itself on neutrality, yet denies neutrality to its object. That is why, for Baudrillard too, “science itself has become pure simulation²³” (15).

²³ Baudrillard, here, refers to the *human* sciences

In this way, the ‘like’ button corresponds similarly to George Orwell’s dystopian vision of the future in his novel *1984*²⁴. In the novel, an entirely new language ‘Newspeak’ was designed by the totalitarian state so as to remove all shades or vagueness of meaning in an attempt to control language and deny resistance so as to eventually render thinking outside of the rhetoric of the state, or perhaps even the act of thinking itself, impossible. Thus, words with negative meaning were deemed as useless information and therefore axed from the official lexicon, for example, ‘bad’ became ‘ungood’. The aim, ironically, was rather Marxist in nature, for it was to control the means of production to thinking, i.e. language. Thus, by limiting language, thoughts about revolution and overthrowing the totalitarian regime, or what Orwell termed ‘thoughtcrime’ was severely restricted. Another way of interpreting this could be that the aim was also to universalize a single language, and hence through this universalizing process control meaning and thought. It is thus strikingly similar to how the ‘like’ button functions on social media, whose form (Marshall McLuhan’s conception of medium) imposes and condemns reality, or language in this case, to a single universal meaning, its most literal representation, if we could still call it representation as such. A ‘like’ button is so ontologically simple, or *parsimonious*. It reduces the need to communicate any agreement. There is no longer a need for expression through language, for the articulation of any form of thought has been replaced by the ‘like’ button, which already performs that role. It communicates *without* communication.

²⁴ See Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet Classic, 1950. Print

To further elucidate this point, consider a recent court case where a federal court of appeal in the United States ruled that using the ‘like’ button constitutes a “constitutionally protected free speech and can be considered the 21st century-equivalent of a campaign yard sign”, overturning a previous decision (Daily Mail, *n.pag*). The three-judge court said “liking a political candidate's campaign page communicates the users’ *approval* of the candidate and *supports* the campaign by associating the user with it” (*ibid*). Thus, if even the institution of law conflates a ‘like’ as speech, could we still deem the ‘like’ button as a representation? The answer would be no, for it is only simulation. This is why Baudrillard says “There is an increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality which no longer leaves room for representation as such” (Baudrillard, “The Evil Demon of Images”, 27). Without space for representation to ‘play’, and because of social media’s capacity to obliterate difference, when representation becomes one-dimensional, or perhaps even totalitarian, within the realm of social media, this perhaps also signifies the end of democracy.

This then possibly becomes the closest example of hyper-reality, where the virtual gets conflated with the real, the sign becomes its own referent, and there is no longer any distinction between what is real or virtual. Reality has been seduced, to use Baudrillard’s vocabulary, to conform into the model that has been prescribed by the technological system that is social media. As Baudrillard says:

“It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an

operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.” (Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 4)

The ‘like’ button does not imitate, nor duplicate and it is almost absurd to say one ‘likes’ something on social media to disapprove or dislike, thus satire is not even possible. The perfect descriptive machine that is social media offers all the signs of the real by ‘demonstrating’ reality ‘as it is’, through the constant stream of information it offers in its ‘news feed’ that gives the impression that everything is happening in ‘real’ time. The ‘like button’ merely simulates the act of support or agreement and in doing so reduces it to a pale model. It is a model, like how the survey is also a model, and as Baudrillard says, “the model, unlike the concept, is not of the order of representation, but of simulation, and it is a total misunderstanding to apply to it the logic of a representative system” (Baudrillard, “Fatal Strategies”, 116). It is *only* information, and not meaning. It does not represent, it simulates. That is why for Baudrillard, “there is nothing in common between a system of meaning and a system of simulation” (117). In the same way, in the case of the Nissan co-creation campaign discussed in chapter 4.1, to proclaim that the campaign, based on the number of ‘likes’, is a democratic demonstration of the consumer’s will would be severely foolish, for it is a mere cybernetic, simplistic measure of agreement that inherently has no meaning. Furthermore, the campaign serves to reproduce a certain ideological function while concealing the systematic exploitation of labour.

5.2 Death of Reality or the Murder of the Real

All models, affirms Baudrillard, “call an end to the real” (“The Implosion of meaning in the media”, 81). It leads to a “death of the real” because simulation leaves the principle of reality “no longer intact”, he claims (“The Precession of Simulacra”, 5). In some of his other works, he also calls this the “murder of the real” (“Violence of the Image”, n. pag.). An interesting analogy to this could be found in one scene from an episode in the British comedy series *Blackadder*. Hugh Laurie, in his character as a foolish and ignorant Prince George, was brought to see the play ‘Julius Caesar’ by his manservant Blackadder, played by Rowan Atkinson. In the play, just as Brutus was about to stab Caesar, Prince George, despite being a spectator in the play, yelled, “ Look behind you Mr Caesar!” The scene is humorous because Prince George, being a fool, was unable to differentiate between what is real, and what is staged, mistaking the play for reality. It is because Prince George believed that he was seeing reality ‘as it is’, that the play replicated and had a one-to-one relationship with reality, there is no chance for a re-presentation of reality to take place, in which the domain of the Real lies. Thus, the Real has no time to be produced as such.

Contrast this then, to a recent event, when a pseudo news article from an American satirical website titled *The Assam Rape Festival In India Begins This Week* went viral on social media²⁵. It was intended as a satirical remark on the current situation in India, where violent rape cases have been on the rise and the state

²⁵ For the original article, please see National Report, *The Assam Rape Festival In India Begins This Week*. *National Report*, 3 Nov. 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2013 <<http://nationalreport.net/assam-rape-festival-india-begins-week/>>

authority has been accused of being either too slow to react or ineffective in the enactment of justice.

The article describes a fictitious festival in the state of Assam that has been around since 43 BC, where as tradition during the festival, Indian men are allowed to rape any woman within sight and the women from that state are expected to flee to a safety zone outside of the town. In the article, men were portrayed as anxiously awaiting the commencement of the festival and were even practicing for it, in order to win a trophy that recognizes the winner of the festival with the most rapes. The news report was shared more than 89,500 times on Facebook and around 1,000 times on Twitter (Deka, n. pag.)²⁶.

The article provoked a viral and hostile reaction online, as social media ‘users’ were shocked at the audacity of Indian men. It was not the contemptible and tasteless humor of the article that people took offence at, but rather, they *believed* the article in spite of the absurdity of the farce, taking it for a real event that is happening. One comment in response to the incident was “India is always raping something. Makes me sick!” (*ibid*). Ultimately, the content of the responses do not matter. This situation is the exact same situation we find with Prince George, but yet rather different as well, for it is no longer a scene out of a comedy, but a scene in ‘reality’.

²⁶ This number would have probably risen by much more by the time this thesis is published.

The question to ask then is, why are people mistaking that particular image for reality? Why does the image in social media have such a ‘truthful’ and ‘objective’ quality of reality? Does this then not reveal the ideological effects of the medium? Does this not also corroborate Baudrillard’s critique that in the age of simulation, one can no longer identify what is true and real anymore? Images in the age of social media can only be pronounced as images of ‘truth’, *as it happens*. Could we not read these responses as symptomatic of a ‘reality’ that is slowly disappearing and hence we can no longer differentiate between what is real and what is not?

While the article itself looks legitimate and real because in terms of appearance, it possesses a similar look and feel to other articles on trusted news sites such as BBC or CNN, there is also an added layer of ‘objectiveness’ once it appears on a social media platform like Facebook. Apart from the additional celebrated functions of interactivity (the designer’s intentions), and visibility, i.e. a reflection of publicity, the system of ‘like’ buttons itself induces a sense of objectivity and legitimacy. Thus, when more people start to like and share the article, this problematically reproduces the misguided notion of legitimacy, generating a stronger illusion of truth and reality, as if the number of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ correlates to how true that article is. Despite its ‘objective’ appearance, the fact that it is only fiction demonstrates Baudrillard’s point that all that remains of the simulated image is an ‘objective’ hyper-reality, where even its ‘objectivity’ can be questioned. Thus, I argue that the system of ‘like’ buttons that allows for participation online not only generates publicity and interactivity, but is itself a form of *techné* that subtly introduces a problematic legitimizing function, in the sense of Marcuse’s technical rationality, as if

the strength in numbers of 'likes' represent a stronger argument, or a reality that is more 'true', even though it is increasingly constructed by the 'social'.

In one essay where Baudrillard investigates the status of the object and question its very form, the base of its objectivity, and the strategies 'objects' invoke to deceive the subject, he writes,

“Everything happens entirely as if the screen itself were the cause and origin of the phenomena that appear there, so serious are the consequences of the current sophistication of the systems of “objective” capture that they have annihilated the very objectivity of their processes... The object, disappears on the horizons of science. The event, the meaning, disappears on the horizons of the media. (Baudrillard, “Fatal Strategies”, 113)

What Baudrillard explored in the essay, was the notion of reversibility, under the effects of systems of simulation and a purely rational society. He argues that because of the excess of information, which results in total simulation generated in the form of models, the object becomes overanalyzed and pushed into a strategy of defiance by reversal. Cause then gets misunderstood as effect and what is thought to be objective becomes reversible and through analysis turn subjective.

Baudrillard playfully terms this the Evil Genie of the Object (108), thereby evoking the metaphor of the Cartesian evil demon that used illusion to deceive, which was also alluded to in another essay, *The Evil Demon of Images*. Perhaps

Baudrillard's point was not only to rebuke Descartes's rational approach, but also to subtly illustrate that even the most rationalistic system designed to comprehend the object could be a mere illusion as well. Now, within the current climate of simulation, the very question of whether we should trust our senses or use reason becomes irrelevant because we no longer perceive through either of them. Instead, we perceive objects through our screen, through media, at a distance, thus Baudrillard, in agreement with Lyotard, argues that instead of a subject-object relationship, now we have a network-screen relationship (Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", 126).

As a result, Baudrillard hypothesizes that despite the creation of objective systems which are essentially systems of simulation to 'capture' the object, what happens instead is a disappearance of the object, not in the sense of its actual physical disappearance, but that the object constantly evades the individual's (scientist's) attempt to control it, as its ontological meaning constantly slips away. Similarly, because the event and its meaning are constantly subjected to the presence of media and its processes of publicity, which in itself constitute an overarching system of simulation, the end result, according to Baudrillard, may only be a disappearance of the event as well as the implosion of meaning.

The Assam Rape Festival therefore functions as such an event, despite being a non-event, because of its fictional existence. Yet, it is also not an event in the true sense of the word either. On one level, it is a simulated event because it pretends to be a model of reality, carrying the same weight of reality as reality itself, to the point

where it is mistaken as real and true as more people ‘shared’ and ‘liked’ the event on social media, generating a momentum of ‘truth’. Hence one ideological effect of social media as such is precisely to produce this effect of truth, though whether it succeeds or not is another question altogether. The function of ‘going viral’, the term often adopted for any event that manages to attain widespread coverage on social networks, is to instill this notion of a ‘reality’ effect that is subjected to a multiplier effect as it spreads.

It would be almost tempting to call it a media spectacle as Debord coins it because the signs and images in social media have already seduced reality into a simulated appearance (what happens in the online sphere). Like the way Debord describes the *Society of the Spectacle* then, we consume the news article of the Assam Rape Festival not as a product itself; instead we consume its meaning through the proliferation of signs and images that are mediated via social media. For Debord, as Mendoza notes, the society of the Spectacle is one that reduces the world into signs that are being exchanged with each other and the resulting hyperbolic image becomes the spectacle, as basis of the “sign mediated-relationship between subject and object” (Mendoza, 54).

But if we ask ourselves what the event really means or represents, there is no clear answer. Does this mean that now we no longer have the ability to discern what is true and what is false? Perhaps. The event that is the news of the pseudo Assam Rape Festival therefore seems to correspond with Baudrillard’s third hypothesis in *The Implosion of Meaning in the Media* where he asserts that though information produces

meaning, the technical form of information itself results in information directly destroying meaning and signification through neutralization (Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media”, 79). In spite of the excessive information that the Assam Rape Festival parody news article produced, through the incessant sharing on social media networks and the various comments generated by social media users, it does not inherently mean nor signify anything anymore. Whose comment should be taken most seriously? What does the event even mean? None of the information produced can help answer any of these questions.

5.3 Of Fools in Hyper Reality

Žižek describes a similar effect of virtual reality. According to Žižek, virtual reality offers a product that is deprived of its “malignant” properties, likening it to products such as coffee without caffeine or beer without alcohol, hence virtual reality is an ‘unreal’ reality in a sense (Žižek, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real”, 10-11). At the same time, he argues that the result of virtualization is that it effects a virtualization of reality, i.e. reality is increasingly being experienced as virtual. The example Žižek cites in his analysis was the September 11 World Trade Centre attack. During the media coverage of that radical event, he argues, the image of the plane hitting the tower that was incessantly repeated, were in fact experienced by us as “*jouissance* in its purest” sense (12). We watched the scene as if it was unreal, virtual and synthetic, made for pleasure. Because of the tele-nature of the news media, despite carrying the broadcast from as many different angles as they possibly could, it did not result in a deeper and fuller understanding of what was happening on the

ground but instead caused a more spectacular view of the whole incident, as if it was a scene from a war film in the cinema.

Likewise, with the case of the Assam Rape Festival, I would argue that there are two processes at work. It is not only the form of the medium, i.e. the presence of the National Report news article within social media that presents it as a fiction of reality, but also the obscenity of participation, or the processes of publicity itself, i.e. through forms of participation such as ‘sharing’ and ‘liking’ that further cements the news article’s position as hyper-reality. From Baudrillard’s point of view then, whether the news article is true or not does not even matter anymore. Instead, it is in the *very reaction* of the crowd that pronounces it as real, thereby producing it as a hyperreal.

The simulated forms of participation within social media reproduces a predominately one-dimensional representation that generates a problematic portrayal of the Assam Rape Festival that is predominantly Eurocentric in nature, in which Indian men are not only viewed as but believed to be the violent and savage Other. Through the respective means of heightened visibility and simulated reality, both enabled through social media, such tenets of representation and participation, depicted as ‘democratic’ goods, facilitated the spread of a problematic ‘Indian’ image. This is further exacerbated by the accelerated spread of information through the form of the ‘viral’, thereby naturalizing orientalist and exotic stereotypes, furthering the agenda of global capitalism, with the endless production and reproduction of goods and service,

now to include even digital prosumption, without concern or sympathy for problematic issues of representation.

The obscenity of participation, i.e. all the sharing and liking done which renders the Assam news article more visible to other users in social media, generates and reproduces an excess of information of the same, that particular news article, in this cybernetic model of information reproduction. This suggests that by virtue of incessant repetition, it becomes more and more real, and likewise more one-dimensional. Instead of supplanting the myth of the festival, it develops a movement of truth that broadcasts the same form, which spreads like a mechanical virus, predicting reality in advance, hence killing off the 'real' reality. Thus, the function of sharing afforded by the very 'like' button only serves to fashion itself as an apparatus of control by social media, designed to condemn reality to a single meaning. The original intention of the authors, who meant to critique the rape situation in India has likewise been forlornly condemned to oblivion. Ironically, though social media platforms like Facebook are designed for users to have 'control' of their content or messages, the form that going 'viral' takes often involves the content being 'out of control', like in an epidemic where the virus is no longer controllable. This distinctively emphasizes both Marcuse's and Heidegger's points about technology and the contradiction of control, where the more humans try to manipulate technology to achieve certain means, the more technology "threatens to slip from human control" (Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", 289).

A recent short film put together by art director Thomas Jullien powerfully conveys the message that the processes of simulation in the age of social media problematizes issues of representation through simplification²⁷. Jullien created a film that ran for less than two minutes, out of 852 different pictures, taken from 852 different Instagram users, weaving together a story that takes the spectator of the film on a journey from Paris to New York. He says, “Instagram is an incredible resource for all kinds of images. I wanted to create structure out of this chaos. The result is a crowd sourced short-film that shows the endless possibilities of social media” (Jullien, n. pag.). While Jullien’s intention was to demonstrate the wonderful possibilities that the new media form Instagram provides, the effect the film produced eventually exhibited quite the opposite: a one dimensional juxtaposition of images that all look very similar. Instead of a celebration of alterity and diversity then, what we see is a repetition of the same image taken by different people, a blueprint or Baudrillard’s model if you will, as if there were only one single simplistic representation of the Eiffel Tower. The end result is sadly a difference that is flattened into uniformed otherness, repeating Marcuse’s claim about society becoming one-dimensional. Gizmodo’s blogger Casey Chan rightly commented, “By seeing all these pictures in a pseudo stop animation you realize how similar all of our photos end up being. Nothing is original. We’re all just frames in someone’s next movie” (Chan, n. pag.) For in the age of social media, we have been turned into simulacra, a copy without any original.

²⁷ The short film can be seen on Thomas Jullien’s website at <http://www.iamthomasjullien.com/albums/an-instagram-short-film/>

The Lacanian definition of a fool, according to Žižek, is “somebody who believes in his immediate identity with himself; somebody who is not capable of a dialectically mediated distance towards himself”. He gives the example of a “king who thinks he is a king, who takes his being-a-king as his immediate property and not as a symbolic mandate imposed on him by a network of intersubjective relations of which he is a part” (Žižek, “The Sublime Object of Ideology”, 46). If we slightly modify Lacan’s definition of a fool, could we not say that the same refers to somebody who is incapable of maintaining a mediated distance from the object he perceives? To put it in another way, the media, through its tele-properties has convinced us to believe that what we ‘see’ is reality as it is. If that is so, then all hyperreality does through simulation, is to turn us all into fools. Therefore, as I have shown above, social media and its effects of simulation, through its attempt to model reality paradoxically results in reality having no time to be produced. This disrupts the cause-effect relationship, resulting in the binary of reality and fiction becoming increasingly unstable, producing the effect which Baudrillard calls the ‘death of the real’, or murder of reality, which is far from being ‘smart’ at all.

5.4 The Perfect Crime: The Murder of Resistance

The perversion of images, according to Baudrillard, lies in the logic that as simulation, the image “precedes and inverts the causal and logical order” of reality (Baudrillard, “Evil Demon of Images”, 13). The analysis of the ‘like’ button above perpetuates this inversion on two levels. At the first level, as social media users, we have been subtly invited to react and respond with the click of a button even *before* we read any posts on social media. The ‘like’ button is fixed in place *in advance* of

time, and is ever present in the first instance. As we participate in social media by clicking the ‘like’ button, the actual ‘real’ act of agreeing no longer needs to be produced. Even if it is eventually produced, it will first happen in virtual space produced posterior to the ‘like’ button, perpetually catching up to the anterior of the virtual. Hence, we see the valorization of the virtual and the symbolic murder of the Real as argued in the previous chapter as effects of social media. Following this thought, the question we could raise is: wouldn’t the very presence of the ‘like’ button in advance of the event itself, actually prevent the event from happening?

The second level of perversion lies within the cybernetic neoliberal model of consumption that underpins social media: its advertising model. Once the user clicks the ‘like’ button in social media, it is permanently remembered by the *smart* system. In the future, similar posts will be recommended or suggested to that user because the system remembers every user’s preferences and categorizes each user. The advertising system works in the same way. Perfectly calculated, this embodies the technological rationality of the system that is very much the new age of advertising, where advertising messages that are determined by a cybernetic formula to be relevant to your preferences are specially crafted and ‘pushed’ to you. As Facebook themselves put it, “we think relevant advertising is good for your overall experience on Facebook”²⁸ (Facebook, n. pag.). In other words, Facebook’s advertising operates via focused targeting, much like a military strike, where precision is key.

²⁸ Facebook. *How Advertising Works on Facebook*. 7 Jul. 2010. Web. 16 Dec 2013. <<https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10150228703690484>>

This means advertisers can select not only the demographics of the group they wish to show their advertisement to, but also the location where the users are from, and most importantly, the crucial distinction between advertising on older forms of media and social media: key words²⁹. Thus, based on the preferences and ‘likes’ that a Facebook user *voluntarily* keys into his or her profile, the user is segmented into different categories, i.e. the subject is reversed and turned into an object-target for tailored advertising. This is also the reason why social media companies such as Facebook and Google³⁰ require voluntary and active participation from their users, so that they are able to turn the content that is produced from their participation into ‘feedback’, which then drives their advertising model and renders it more precise, accurate and targeted. Google uses a similar software called ‘Adwords’ where their selling point is to “bring your message to *exactly the right customers* wherever they are online” (Google, n.pag). With their contextual targeting tool, Google claims to be able to help advertisers target the *right* user in the *right* context.

The key ideological difference between this form of advertising and previous forms of advertising that underpin older media is that social media now thrives on active and voluntary participation. At the same time, it is also precisely through this voluntary participation in the age of social media, the willing ‘surrender’ of personal

²⁹ The video ‘How advertising works on Facebook’ demonstrates very clearly how their advertising model work and how one can advertise on their site. See Facebook. *How Advertising Works on Facebook*. 7 Jul. 2010. Web. 16 Dec 2013. <<https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10150228703690484>>

³⁰ Google owns Youtube and Google plus which are social networks that fall into the conventional definition of social media. Also, as argued earlier, social media should be conceptualized more as the current state of the Internet instead of an individual form of networking site such as the usual culprits of Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc.

information by the masses that drives and provides the impetus for machines to be increasingly smarter and increasingly more adept at predicting reality. By contributing more and more information through its users, social media is part of the phenomenon known as “Big Data”, where information collected through the surveillance of social media technologies have produced a conundrum for scientists because the data set are just too large and complex. It is getting increasingly difficult to make sense of the data within ‘Big Data’, or as the scientists might put it, it is harder to make the data *meaningful* anymore, as their current tools become inadequate to interpret ‘Big Data’.

5.5 Deep(?) Learning

This therefore lays the premise for more technology, i.e. more sophisticated and ever ‘smarter’ machines to be developed in order to take over the role of the scientist in interpreting data since the scientist is deemed to be too slow compared to a machine. In a branch of artificial intelligence called Deep Learning, software is now being trained to understand and decipher meaning. Through the use of complex algorithms to completely simulate or mimic how the human brain works in learning and understanding meaning, this “purer” form of artificial intelligence is now able to gather and react to information. With Deep Learning, the system is able to understand and determine what certain words or images ‘are’ without the aid of a human first pre-labeling them or without a context. Thus, the system can now identify, ‘learn’ and categorize objects by itself, without any form of human intervention, unlike previous machine learning tools. This is done through simulating the operation of how the brain works when it processes a wealth of different cues from visual, auditory to

written cues so as to understand and respond to the environment (Hernandez, n.pag), and this in itself is already a problematic cybernetic illusion.

Following the ‘information revolution’ then, Deep Learning can be seen as the next cybernetic dream – of technology replacing humans so as to produce the perfect condition for the “true understanding” of “meaning”. William O’Connor, a writer from *The Daily Beast*, commented on Facebook hiring the supposed ‘godfather’ of Deep Learning, New York University’s professor Yann LeCun, as the director of Facebook’s new artificial intelligence lab. He says, “In Silicon Valley—whether it is driverless cars, drones delivering pizza, or ratification intelligence—there’s a great deal of optimism about the capacity of machines to replace humans” (O’Connor, n.pag). As another writer, Daniela Hernandez from *Wired* puts it, “The big potential (for Deep Learning) lies in deciphering the words we post to the web — the status updates and the tweets and instant messages and the comments — and there’s enough of that to keep companies like Facebook, Google, and Yahoo busy for an awfully long time. The aim is to give these services the power to actually understand what their users are saying — without help from other humans” (Hernandez, n.pag).

It is not just Facebook, but various other technology giants such as Microsoft, IBM, Chinese search engine giant Baidu, and Google have also started to dabble in the field of Deep Learning. Already, Deep Learning has helped improved voice search on smartphones, making the system more accurate and precise, resulting in a twenty five percent reduction in errors (Hof, n.pag). Technology writer Tim Simonite thus suggests, “Deep learning has shown potential as the basis for software that could work

out the emotions or events described in text even if they aren't explicitly referenced, recognize objects in photos, and make sophisticated predictions about people's likely future behavior".

For Facebook, besides better understanding the data collected from their users, the Deep Learning technology holds many uses, including improving the current facial recognition technology such that it helps users automatically tag their friends in photos uploaded to Facebook as well as enhancing advertising effectiveness on Facebook. However, one key use of Deep Learning that immediately stands out is using it to better manage and improve the news feed, the personalized list of news updates termed the "killer app" of Facebook (Simonite, n.pag). Currently, on average, a Facebook user receives about 1500 news updates, in the form of status updates from their Facebook 'friends' which includes the sharing of non-original content found on the Internet, photos, likes, etc. (*ibid*). In order to organize the news feed to make sense of the content for the user and not overwhelm them with unnecessary information, Facebook uses conventional machine learning techniques to help users filter and sift through the data to reduce it to about 30 to 60 news updates, through an algorithm that prioritizes certain updates, which Facebook will not release publicly (*ibid*).

As Facebook users naturally start to generate more information and gain more friends, coupled with the increased usage not only through the website, but through prolonged usage on mobile interface as well, the data set grows exponentially in size. Since the method of Deep Learning allows for faster processing of data, with almost minimal human intervention in a rather strange automation of automation, it will

allow Facebook to better “understand” what their users are posting, and enable the technology behind Facebook, i.e. the algorithm, to better select ‘news’ that Facebook users would find interesting. That is why for O’Conner, one of LeCun and his artificial intelligence research team’s immediate goal would be to further ‘optimize’ Facebook’s news feed using Deep Learning (O’Conner, n. pag.). As LeCun remarks, “if you know the users’ interests and aspirations and goals in life and things like this, you might be able to do a better job at picking out the right news to display” (*ibid*).

Currently, the anxiety for Facebook, as a profit-driven corporation, is that its users might find the content generated on their news-feed irrelevant, uninteresting, or not appealing enough, thereby triggering a gradual exodus of the social networking site. Facebook’s effort to constantly revamp their user interface and their newsfeed could be seen as an attempt to curb this. In its last improvement of its news feed feature in March 2013, Facebook allowed their users to customize their news feed by seemingly giving Facebook users more ‘control’ in seeing what appears on their news feed (Gaudin, n.pag.). Yet, at the same time, this giving of more ‘control’ to the users, by allowing them to choose what they see on their news feed is itself a form of control by Facebook over the users, by reducing clutter and “noise” so as to achieve a smoother user experience on Facebook and ensuring that users continue to actively participate and be drawn deeper into the fantasy of producing themselves as an image online thereby continuing to generate the information that Facebook requires. With Deep Learning in the equation, Facebook wants to increase the illusive sense of ‘control’ users feel, such that the Facebook news feed becomes more optimized and relevant.

In other words, Deep Learning in the context of social media, operates as a advanced form of ‘automated’ data mining software whose basic function is to analyze and predict, an aim that is increasingly related to the digital humanities. According to Liu, the increased usage of the term data mining in the field of digital humanities suggests a shift from the earlier paradigm of text analysis, to a more sophisticated form of data analytics (Liu, 14). In fact, in the age of new media, author centrality analyses, author degree distribution analyses, and pattern-recognition analysis are increasingly being deployed as techniques for better understanding mined data, with Deep Learning emerging as one such advanced technique that is highlighted as an ultimate breakthrough. Yet, like most of the digital humanists, the proponents of Deep Learning completely fail to consider the cultural impact and significance of their project. Liu puts it, in the case of the digital humanities, there is a glaring lack of “adequate critical awareness of the larger social, economic, and cultural issues at stake” (11). For instance, what are the ethical implications of using a data-mining method that users are almost altogether unaware of? How does the use of such a form of technology threaten the agency of the user? Can language be problematically reduced to a simplistic notion of a code that is left to a machine to decrypt, devoid of a context?

With the case of Deep Learning, to claim to be able to reduce all forms of oral or written discourse to a fixed and stable logical structure that can then be decoded, is nothing more than a cybernetic fantasy that is at best hubristic, repeating the fallacy of Shannon and Weaver’s model of communication. Such discourses are not ascribable

to a ‘model’ of communication because doing so would be a mere *simulation* that disregards the dynamic interaction between producers, codes, material supports and audiences. The meaning that is produced does not simply emerge from the two processes of analysis and modeling, but rather, as Halliday argues, emerges through cooperation (Halliday, 185). Thus, as Fiormonte argues, a discourse is a “cultural artifact made of syntax, semantics and above all, pragmatics, and that is why all the data of human culture are so hard to formalize” (Fiormonte, 72). While Fiormonte might argue that data of human culture might be hard to ‘formalize’, I argue that it is an impossible task to begin with, and any attempt to do so cybernetically would only impoverish language itself.

It is also impossible because Deep Learning repeats the classic logocentric assumption – that whatever one writes on social media, that meaning can be abstracted, mined, retrieved and transferred from one to another, whether machine or human, whereas Jacques Derrida has shown in the piece, *Signature Event Context*³¹, how such an assumption breaks down under questioning. Drawing on Derrida’s argument, communication is a far more complex idea than the mere transmission of meaning from one subject (or object) to the other as a form of transport. Even though language, as communication, has to be iterable and is structurally governed by a code in order for it to be communicable, as Derrida shows, it is also governed by the logic of *différance*, which renders the notion of context never absolutely determinable, because of an “irreducible absence of intention” (18). The polemic that evolved

³¹ See Derrida, Jacques. “Signature Event Context.” in *Limited Inc.* Ed. Graff Gerald. Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1988. Print

between Derrida and Searle after his article was published is an apt example of the problematic that communication poses. Even with the presence of the signature (the mark of Derrida), an event (the philosophy colloquium that Derrida spoke at) and a context, this does not prevent Searle from misunderstanding and misrepresenting the ideas of Derrida. Hence, the cybernetic logo-centric notion that all forms of discourse online can be affixed and decoded by a machine would be nothing short of a hubristic fantasy.

The uses of Deep Learning technique include not only the optimization of the news feed feature of Facebook, but most likely also include enhancing the prediction of a user's overall behaviour online in order to further refine and optimize its revenue model, its advertising algorithm. Considering how targeted and precise the current neoliberal advertising model that underlie social media already is, the introduction of the Deep Learning technology to further automate the process can only lead to one logical conclusion. Social media users, under the effects of simulation and through their own voluntary obscene participation, are increasingly rendered complicit in what Baudrillard calls the 'Perfect Crime', that is not only the murder of reality or of the real through simulation, but more critically, the murder of their own agency and by extension, the ability to resist messages of advertising.

While consumers in older media had some degree of agency to resist and reject messages of consumerism because of various reasons such as irrelevance or incompatibility of the product to the consumer, this transition to social media and this 'new' system of advertising drastically diminishes the degree of agency consumers

once had. Thus, such a system effects another form of blindness, in that it results in one being no longer able to resist these messages because they are precisely what one wants. But what one think one wants is in effect a desire that is created, manipulated and determined by the capitalist system itself in the very first instance. In this circular loop then, resistance to consumerism is therefore rendered futile, even though ironically, the cybernetic system relies on a 'voluntary' input of information. To put it in another way then, in using social media, it is not the system that denies consumers a space for resistance but instead, it is the system that coerces consumers to deny themselves of their own right to resist through reducing their own agency.

The use of Deep Learning in the context of social media, as I have pointed out, is premised on the notion of predictability. As part of a cybernetic system, it seeks to turn the subject or user of social media into a model through simulation, so that it is increasingly possible to predict what the user likes or dislike. Yet, the root of simulation is intrinsically tied to the violent nature of the military and war itself, in particular the Cold War. As Ryan Bishop points out, "Simulation is the *sine qua non* of the Cold War" (Bishop, "Baudrillard, Death, and Cold War Theory", 48). The end goal of simulation, in the logic of the Cold War, is to similarly "predict human behaviour in a given situation", so that "events can be modeled ahead of time, predicated, and therefore, if desired, brought to fruition or terminated" (49). Also, only with the aid of simulation, a pre-emptive strike, the "essential dimension of the Cold War", could be launched and justified (*ibid*). Thus, according to Bishop, simulation seeks to "reduce and absorb" all that is singular and irreducible (62). The same then applies with the introduction of Deep Learning, and the proliferation of

other similar modeling and analytic software. The obsession of predicting ‘reality’, especially in the case of social media, has culminated to the point where anything that tries to impede this form of simulation is either “co-opted or obliterated” (64).

When we use more of social media then, we are drawing closer to what Baudrillard terms Integral Reality, the illusion of an objective reality where everything has become calculated and predicted, and hence a reality that is no longer ‘real’, evoking another profound paradox where the cybernetic attempt to (re)model reality on social media, to make it look ‘real’, results in a reality that is less and less real. Baudrillard writes, “Integral Reality is the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project where everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is ‘liberated’, everything comes to fruition and has a meaning” (Baudrillard, “Intelligence of Evil”, 17). It is here that we should be reminded, as Lyotard cautioned:

Complete information means neutralizing more events. What is already known cannot, in principle, be experienced as an event. Consequently, if one wants to control a process, the best way of doing so is to subordinate the present to what is (still) called the ‘future’, since in these conditions the ‘future’ will be completely predetermined and the present itself will cease opening onto an uncertain and contingent ‘afterwards’. (Lyotard, 65)

More problematically though, it is the very ideological nature of voluntary participation in the age of social media, that has become so obscene that it has

transformed us into 'inhuman' machines that automatically and continuously feed the technology that is social media, information such as our thoughts, through 'active participation', reducing everything into machinic bits of information to be spread like capital. If the trend towards active participation in social media continues unabatedly without slowing down to think through and reconsider critical questions of participation, then the 'perfect crime', the murder of both reality and resistance would be committed sooner, rather than later.

Chapter Six. Death, or the End to come [l'avenir]

Baudrillard, in a passage from *In the shadow of the Silent Majority*, raises two hypotheses concerning the 'social'. In the first hypothesis, he suggests that the 'social' has never really existed (71). In the second hypothesis, he suggests:

The social has really existed, it exists even more and more, it invests everything, it alone exists. Far from being volatilized, it is the social which triumphs; the reality of the social is imposed everywhere. But, contrary to the antiquated idea which makes the social into an objective progress of mankind, everything which escapes it being only residue, it is possible to envisage that the social itself is only residue, and that, if it has triumphed in the real, it is precisely as such. Litter piling up from the symbolic order as it blows around, it is the social as remainder which as assumed real force and which is soon to be universal. Here is a more subtle form of death. (Baudrillard, "In the shadow of the silent majority", 72)

In this sense, he introduces the element of death associated with the 'social', a theme which this thesis draws upon as well. For Baudrillard, "it can no longer be said that the social is dying, since it is already the accumulation of death." As he elaborates: "In effect we are in a civilization of the supersocial, and simultaneously in a civilization of non-degradable, indestructible residue, piling up as the social spreads" (Baudrillard, "In the shadow of the silent majority", 73). Social media, likewise, is an extension and a further exacerbation of this scenario.

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to draw attention to the way in which much of the discourse on social media has been focused solely on the instrumental ‘uses’ of social media. In doing so, we risk becoming ‘blind’, in Heideggerian terms, to the pronounced effects of using social media. The dominance of such a form of thinking, as I have demonstrated, is intrinsically tied to cybernetics and its underlying logic, which coincides with what Heidegger called ‘the end of philosophy’, where language gets transformed “into an exchange of news and the arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information” (Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, 376).

Social media, examined from a historical perspective, is an extension of cybernetic logic, for in a way, it seeks to replicate and simulate ‘reality’ as it is, but through a reductionist logic that (re)structures reality as an object of technical control, of which this sense of control is at best, an illusion. Far from this being an ‘objective progress of mankind’, this continued development towards the logic of principles of efficiency, performance and control effectively render us increasingly “inhuman” and therefore ironically anti-social instead (Lyotard, “The Inhuman: Reflections on Time”).

As elaborated in the introduction of this thesis, social media in a way functions exactly like a technological fetish, in the way Jodi Dean describes:

“A technological fetish is at work when one disavows the lack or fundamental antagonism forever rupturing (yet producing) the social by advocating a particular technological fix. The “fix” lets us think that all we need is to *universalize* a particular technology, and then we will have a democratic or reconciled social order.” (Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics”, 63)

Social media becomes this particular fix, whether for the dream of a democratic social order, or for the fantasy of a perfect form of communication. Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg repeats this claim, and recently outlined his next ‘global social’ quest under the Internet.org project³², where he aims to universalize Internet access. He proposed that through connecting the entire globe, the problem of global economic disparity could be resolved, claiming connectivity as an essential “human right” and efficiency as key to helping businesses drive internet access (Zuckerberg, n. pag.). Through his rhetoric, social media becomes fulfilled as the ultimate technological fetish, the ‘fix’ that *needs* to be applied, *the* panacea to a troublesome affliction. Yet what is being occluded is that this in itself is already a form of simulation, for the technological ‘fix’ becomes a model that is extrapolated, that claims to be universal and problematically reproduced and applied for any scenario. Again, because the romanticized emphasis is on how social media, or what Zuckerberg terms ‘connectivity’, can supposedly be *used* appropriately to eradicate injustice, we

³² The Internet.org project is a project spearheaded by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg which include major technology and communication corporations such as Nokia and Samsung, that aspires to connect the world through providing Internet access to every single person on Earth. See www.internet.org for more details.

become somewhat blind to the notion that economic disparity is in effect a structural problem that exists within neoliberal capitalism today and it is a problem that will continue to persist even with the ‘cure’ prescribed by Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg’s claim is a perfect example of how new media technology such as the Internet, or social media becomes problematically mythologized as *the* tool for emancipation, that engenders freedom, liberation and the empowerment of the individual.

As I have discussed in chapter 3.1 as well as in chapter 5.1, the ideological transition that social media promises, the transition from a consumer to a producer, or the process of prosumption, has been wrongfully conflated with the idea of emancipation and liberation. The reversibility of the consumer to a producer that is contingent on the active participation of the prosumer does not produce a strategy of revolution because the fundamental structure of the political economy of communication that underpins the media remains the same (Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media”, 182). Although social media is increasingly seen as a site of resistance, allowing for new subjectivities to be formed as well as a space for challenging dominant ideologies or systems of power, precisely because communication through social media is *simulation* in a Baudrillardian sense, the converse is also true as I have argued, for through simulated forms of participation in the age of social media, representation is symbolically being ‘killed off’, and resistance threatened through the erasure of the user’s agency.

Even though active participation at the theoretical level is often seen as a strategy of resistance or a form of enacting agency, particularly in the domain of art

and film as discussed in chapter three, I have argued, through examples such as the ‘like’ button, the fictitious ‘Assam Rape Festival’ and the Deep Learning technology, that active participation in the age of social media no longer functions as a strategy of resistance against passivity, but rather sutures the user into a deeper illusion of pseudo activity, or what Žižek calls “inter-passivity” (Žižek, “The Obscene Knot of Ideology and How to Untie It”, 342), where in the first instance, it is entirely impossible to be passive in social media because as social media users, we are always constructed, or implicated as an ‘active’ user in the first instance.

More problematically, active participation in the age of social media has become voluntarily ‘obscene’, in the Baudrillardian sense, where there no longer remains a proper ‘scene’ for representation, where everything becomes (hyper)visible and completely exposed to the world. This, for Baudrillard, was a form of violence of the image as well as information, and we have moved from the stage of the scene and mirror, to the screen and network (Baudrillard, “Ecstasy of Communication”, 130). As Kevin Robins notes in his analysis of the representation of the Gulf War, “The screen exposes the ordinary viewer to harsh realities, but it screens out the harshness of those realities. It has a certain moral weightlessness: It grants sensation without demanding responsibility, and it involves us in a spectacle without engaging us in the complexity of its reality” (Robins, 80). The screen only offers a simple reality, and in doing so, engenders what Baudrillard called the murder of the ‘real’.

The obscenity of participation in social media, aided and encouraged by the technical forms of mediated participation such as the ‘like’ or ‘share’ button, results in

the generation of an excess of information, and rather than this generating a form of communication that is more meaningful, the opposite is true, for meaning “exhausts itself in the act of staging communication.” (Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media”, 80). In the end, with communication via social media, i.e. increasingly mediated or simulated participation online, the “imaginary of representation starts to disappear” (Baudrillard, “Precession of Simulacra”, 3), resulting in the death of representation because representation becomes ‘fixed’ and one-dimensional, and space for representation ceases to exist. More importantly, such a drastic outcome suggests far more troubling implications, since the incapability of social media to have multiple representations or even represent difference suggests that the very idea of democracy is being challenged through active participation in social media precisely because of social media’s capacity to obliterate difference as noise.

The combined effect and interplay of simulation and obscenity of active participation in the age of social media culminates in what Baudrillard termed the ‘Perfect Crime’. The perfect crime, is the “elimination of the real world”, which begins with the “elimination of the original illusion” (Baudrillard, “The Perfect Crime”, 61). The multiple deaths that I have described in this thesis, as a result of active participation in social media, i.e. the death of representation and therefore democracy, the death of the ‘scene’, the death of ‘reality’ as well as the death of resistance, is a step headed in the direction of Baudrillard’s perfect crime, the crime of perfection:

“Such is the story of the perfect crime, which shows itself in the whole current ‘operationality’ of the world, in our ways of realizing those things that are dreams, phantasms, utopias, transcribing them digitally, turning them into information, which is the work of the virtual in its most widely accepted sense. This is the crime: we attain a perfection in the sense of a total accomplishment, and that totalization is an end. There is no longer any destination elsewhere, nor even any ‘elsewhere’. The perfect crime destroys otherness, the other. It is the reign of the same. The world is identified with itself, identical to itself, by exclusion of any principle of otherness. (Baudrillard, “The Perfect Crime”, 63)

Yet, the perfect crime remains in itself an impossibility. It is impossible because, like the reversals and paradoxes brought up thus far, the perfect crime is *the* complete paradox. For if a perfect crime has been committed, there would be “no criminal, no victim, and no motive”. Nobody would even realize that a crime has been committed. There would be absolutely no trace of anything left, but nothingness. That is why Baudrillard says, “Fortunately the crime is never perfect” (Baudrillard, “The Perfect Crime”, 7). Perhaps then, the ultimate illusion is the thought that we can do away with illusion itself altogether.

Social media might attempt to replicate and simulate reality through transposing reality digitally online, mirroring the cybernetic attempt to erase, recreate or reproduce singularity by making everything operational and calculable but eventually, this attempt remains imperfect, and traces of this imperfection can be seen

from the various paradoxes and contradictions that social media evoke. That is why though social media may realize the multiple deaths of representation, reality, and resistance, but in the last instance, this is not a final death, but in Derrida's words, always a death *to come*.

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