The Supreme Illusion of Real Time as the Limit of All Accelerations

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Give up yourself unto the moment, the time is now.
Give up yourself unto the moment Let's make this moment last.
Moloko, *The Time is Now.*

Introduction

The reflection on Real Time represents the culmination of a theoretical investigation and, moreover, the most significant testament that Jean Baudrillard has left us. Upon closer inspection, one of the fundamental trajectories followed by his philosophical discourse is the transition from the centrality of space (Barile 2012) – from the "System of Objects" (1972) to Disneyland in "Simulacra and Simulations" – to that of time. In addressing this question, Baudrillard exhibits an interest typical of an epistemologist. In contrast to M. McLuhan, who was much more fascinated by the subatomic physics of Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, the French philosopher expresses himself mostly as an attempt to construct a sort of relativistic socio-anthropology.

Furthermore, his considerations on the technological domination of time remain very relevant, certainly much more so than the vulgate in the nineties that cele-

brated the emancipatory qualities of new media. This perspective still lingers in public debate as a legitimization of globalist power based on neoliberal ideology, a situation that worsened following the financial crisis of 2008. It was only then that it became clear to everyone how the logic of real-time was embodied not so much in the myth of connectivity but primarily in the financial penetration into daily life and the uncompromising valorization of every experience.

In this article, I will reconstruct a brief history of social acceleration by referencing the work of Jean Baudrillard and other authors frequently cited by him. I will then focus on Baudrillard's definition of Real Time and its permanence in contemporary academic debate.

Dromology and social acceleration

Societies affected by technology are engaged in a linear movement of spatial expansion and simultaneous physical multiplication of exchanges. This process reaches full maturity in the historical phase commonly known as modernity. This term typically denotes a moment of rupture with the logic of an era in which tradition and the past served as constant points of reference for people's conduct. In other words, premodernity is considered a phase lacking a defined historical perspective, preventing the present from being inscribed in an orderly and regulated sequence of events. Therefore, modernity represents an instance of liberation and acceleration of social systems toward an upper limit that, for a long time, could not be surpassed.

According to the philosopher, "all modernity has had as its objective the advent of this real world, the liberation of men and real energies, aimed towards an objective transformation of the world, beyond all the illusions with which the 'critical analysis has fueled philosophy and praxis" (Baudrillard 1996, p. 69). The Hegelian concept of "ascension" could be conceptualized as a theoretical model anticipating and legitimizing the thrust that science and technology have subsequently applied to modern societies. This liberation occurs in terms of a progressive technicalization of daily practice, driven by an increasing ability to manipulate time. The strength of technology, coupled with a dynamic and universalistic vision of history offered by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, has propelled Western societies not only to break the chains of tradition but also to progressively overcome every friction and obstacle that everyday life poses against the logic of the obsolescence of commodities (Baudrillard 1976; Heller 1981). However, the liberating force of technology in modernity is still relative, as well as the acceleration it imparts to social systems. Baudrillard almost formulates an equation regarding the relationship between history, modernity, and reality, which we could summarize as follows: modernity=history=reality.

A certain type of slowness or deliberation (i.e. a certain speed, but not too much), a certain distance, yet not too much, a certain liberation (the energy of rupture and change), but not too much -- all these are necessary for this condensation, for the signifying crystallization of events to take place, one that we call history -- this type of coherent unfolding of causes and effects we call the real (Baudrillard 1994).

As emphasized in "For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality..." (1999), it is impossible to conceive a clear contrast between reality and the imaginary. In fact, Baudrillard notes, "believe we are forcing the world with technology but through technology it is the world that imposes itself on us. And the surprise effect of this reversal is truly considerable" (ibid, p.107). The joint process of worldliness and the temporalization of collective experience has profoundly influenced our concept of reality. The exponential increase in social mobility is part of a linear and upward historical perspective that continually grapples with the friction imposed by reality, with the goal of overcoming it. The speed of this narrative is relative, constrained by a certain limit. It is the speed of

industry and machines that, while reducing, still maintains the separation between places and times. Consequently, the cult and the associated specter of speed have, in a sense, paved the way for the affirmation of an entirely different feeling. To explore the relationship between technology and speed, Paul Virilio (frequently cited by Baudrillard) introduced the term 'dromology'—the science of speed. This concept gained traction with advancements in optics starting as early as the tenth century and culminated in the seventeenth century in a radical revolution that Virilio labels the 'logistics of perception.'

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The moment they appeared on the scene, the first optical devices (Al-Hasan ibn al-Haitam aka Alhazen's camera obscura in the tenth century, Roger Bacon's instruments in the thirteenth, the increasing number of visual prostheses, lenses, astronomic telescopes and so on from the Renaissance on) profoundly altered the contexts in which mental images were topographically stored and retrieved (…). The telescope, that epitome of the visual prosthesis, projected an image of a world beyond our reach and thus another way of moving about in the world, the *logistics of perception* inaugurating an unknown conveyance of sight that produced a telescoping of near and far, a *phenomenon of acceleration* obliterating our experience of distances and dimensions (Virilio 1994, p. 4).

While the paradigm in which the logistics of perception develops is primarily Newtonian, its impact on daily life somehow foreshadows the remarkable revolution we have experienced with the advent of electronic media first and then digital media. This is because, since then, technological advancements have given rise to a world previously foreign to everyday experience. Overcoming the distance between different places has dismantled space-time barriers, and the extension of perception has suggested ways to bridge the gap between the far and the near, eventually leading to the definitive elimination of distances. This process reached full maturity with the diffusion of motor vehicles, which, even in the early twentieth century, were approaching today's average speeds (Kern 1995). As McLuhan observed at the time, 'the intensification of traffic due to the advent of money and roads had put an end to the 'static' tribal condition (as Toynbee defines the nomadic culture of hunter-gatherers)' (McLuhan 1997, p. 40). However, the Canadian mediologist was perhaps one of the first to understand that the opposition between a static past, generating a sedentary culture, and a dynamic present, producing a culture of mobility, is a bold simplification. The growth in the intensity of a given process, when it reaches its limit point, results in a reversal into a condition opposite to the one from which we started. It is the logic of the saturation point that manifests itself 'when all available resources and energies have been expended in an organism or structure,' and it is at this point that 'a sort of reversal of the pattern' occurs (ibidem). Thus, while social acceleration has marked the decisive detachment of 'modern times' from the referential orbit of a stationary past, the excess of this movement has propelled the social system beyond its own limit, towards a new dimension of stasis.

Turbulence and postmodernity

The concept that Baudrillard adopts to indicate the outcome of the social acceleration imposed by technology is the still

overall 'Newtonian' one of turbulence. It signifies how, in a late modern phase, the linear concatenations that had characterized modernity begin to break down. The sense of reality, previously defined within a precise framework along the trajectory of social systems' acceleration, now starts to falter. In purely physical terms, it can be stated that the reality effect exists only in a system with relative speed and continuity.

Just as long as it took for our species to pass them through the filter of the material abstraction of the code and calculation. Having been real for a while, the world was not destined to remain so for long. It will have taken only a few centuries to traverse the orbit of the real, and be very rapidly lost beyond it. In purely physical terms, we may say that the reality effect exists only in a system of relative speed and continuity. In slower societies – primitive ones, for example – reality does not exist; it does not "crystallize," for want of a sufficient critical mass.... In societies which are over-rapid, like our own, the reality effect becomes hazy: acceleration brings a jostling of causes and effects, linearity gets lost in turbulence, and reality, in its relative continuity, no longer has time to happen (Baudrillard 1996, p. 45).

The process of physical acceleration, translating into ethical-social emancipation, reaches its extreme and tends to reverse into its opposite. This perspective highlights the utility of an agonistic thought capable of grappling with an increasingly paradoxical and hyperbolic reality. Baudrillard employs various rhetorical figures to illustrate this extreme stage, with 'metalepsis' (Baudrillard 1993) standing out. This term denotes how turbulence disrupts the linear concatenations of modernity, inverting causes with effects. We now confront the limits of scientific reflection, as the reversibility of causes and effects, means and ends, reality and the imaginary, introduces the theme of the science of imaginary solutions—Pataphysics. Baudrillard draws on the dramaturgy of A. Jarry to update it in its postmodern version. Medical and organic metaphors, such as the paroxysmal stage, triumph as well. This term indicates the moment when a disease manifests all its excrescences, revealing the deepest essence of reality precisely when it is about to be overcome. Another metaphor, hysteresis (ibidem), illustrates the reverse movement—the resistance of reality persisting in a world infected by virtuality, akin to nails and hair continuing to grow on the body of a corpse. The transition from modernity to postmodernity, unwillingly witnessed and championed by Baudrillard, underscores the paradoxical nature of the acceleration/stasis relationship.

If the Baudrillard of the seventies and eighties insisted on the intensification of exchanges and the increasingly rapid permutations of signs in a new symbolic regime that moved from production towards simulation, that of the nineties came to define the the asymptote towards which all the relative speeds of exchanges within the social system are directed. This supreme limit is precisely real time, a notion that the philosopher dissects once again through the philosophical translation of physical reasoning. This is a problematic formulation right from the words used to define it given that, despite its "real" being, it represents a supreme and definitive illusion: the effect of a suppression of the boundary between the subject and the object, the emitter from recipient, the actor from the event it produces.

Real Time as limit of accelerations

Real time: "instantaneous proximity of the event and its double, in information. Proximity of man and his action at a distance [...]" (Baudrillard 1996, p. 36).

Technology, and particularly its ultimate product—information, serves as the primary architect in neutralizing the distance that separates causes and effects, agents and actions. It also contributes to the suppression of what is commonly referred to as reality. Real-time, therefore, represents the pinnacle of nihilism of technology. After centuries of modifying social perceptions of time, technology manages to completely transform its nature. Baudrillardian analysis, when delving into something as fundamental as the nature of time, takes on Heideggerian traits. The polemical objective consistently revolves around the cybernetic conception of life, which sacrifices the illusion of the world—embodied this time by deferred time, a time of difference—to instead extol the purely artificial time of immediacy, proximity, and promiscuity among all subjects and events. While Heidegger, influenced by humanistic residues, argued against information sciences for reducing "man to a simple disturbing factor in cybernetic calculation" (Heidegger 1993), Baudrillard raises the stakes considerably. His concern revolves around the ontological game between an illusion striving to preserve the dimension of the secret, and probably the symbolic, and a technique that aims to reveal and operationalize every facet of life.

Moreover, embracing the epistemological suggestion of Baudrillard, while for Heidegger, cybernetics represents nothing more than the continuation and fulfillment of the techno-science project, our perspective identifies a disjunction between science and technology. Relativistic physics, based on the ultimate limit of the speed of light, more effectively preserves the ontological status of the illusion of the world than cybernetics. If Einstein's relativity holds true, asserting that nothing can travel at a speed higher than that of light, a time interval—however infinitesimal—will persist between an event and its image (its double), between a subject and an object, and between an emitting station sending the signal and a receiving one. This is precisely why Baudrillard emphasizes that our existence is always deferred. In contrast, the supreme illusion of real-time, fueled by technology, aspires to a kind of total insulation where all events are close and transparent to the human gaze.

The objective illusion is the physical fact that in this universe no things coexist in real time – not sexes, stars, this glass, this table, or myself and all that surrounds me. By the fact of dispersal and the relative speed of light, all things exist only in a recorded version, in an unutterable disorder of time-scales, at an inescapable distance from each other. And so they are never truly present to each other, nor are they, therefore, `real' for each other. The fact of this irremediable distance and this impossible simultaneity, the fact that when I perceive this star it has perhaps already disappeared -- a relationship which can be extended, relatively speaking, to any physical object or living being -- this is the ultimate foundation, the material definition, so to speak, of illusion. (…) `Real' time does not, therefore, exist; no one exists in real time; nothing takes place in real time -- and the misunderstanding is total. (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 52-53).

The notion of an almost Manichean contrast between the world of nature and techno-science rests on the premise that our existence is consistently "deferred," and immediacy is merely an artifact. In fact, time, presumptuously defined as 'real,' does not genuinely exist; as Baudrillard puts it, "no one exists in real time, nothing takes place in real time: the misunderstanding is total" (p. 58). Everything we perceive in this moment is already past. Deferred time, endorsed by Einsteinian relativity, serves to maintain a delicate balance between the two ontological levels of reality and illusion. On the contrary,

real-time as cybernetic time blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, granting significant power to virtuality and the simulacrum. This perspective starkly contrasts with Maurizio Ferraris' (2012) idea of riding the new realism as an intellectual counter-trend post the fall of postmodernism. Ferraris staunchly advocates for the separation between epistemology and ontology, insisting that "what is in front of us cannot be corrected or transformed through the mere use of conceptual schemes" (p. 48). According to him, not only are all philosophies of language obsolete, but even science itself examines a reality beyond the mere phenomenology of everyday life. In this light, Baudrillard's relativistic conception of time might seem too profound or abstract when compared to plausible ontological explanations for what we could term the middle-world. Conversely, the apparent alliance between science and illusion gains support from the peculiar and paradoxical developments in contemporary physics, particularly those attempting to reconcile quantum physics with general relativity. Figures like S. Hawking (1996) propose the concept of "imaginary time" as the true substrate of phenomenological reality. If, indeed, real time is nothing more than a supreme fiction produced by technology, the imaginary time of physics, perpendicular to Newtonian time, emerges as the "real" time.

One can conceptualize ordinary, real time as a horizontal line, where the past lies to the left, and the future to the right. However, there exists another dimension of time in the vertical direction, known as imaginary time. Although not the kind of time we typically experience, it is, in a sense, just as real as what we conventionally term as real time (Hawking 1996, pp. 92, 203).

Presentation between science and technology

The paradoxical fate of the disjunction between science and technology lies in the semantic dystonia of the categories "real time" and "imaginary time." These terms, used to denote phenomena opposite to their literal meanings, paradoxically converge in their definition of the same phenomenon: a non-time that simply is, devoid of any flow. There exists a tacit agreement between philosophers and scientists in celebrating this perpendicular, synchronic, dilated, and eternalized time. With the system's generalized acceleration driven by diffusion and total circulation, society has seemingly entered a meta-historical dimension. Here, the compression of space/time manifests in the fateful process of presentification, a concept cherished by postmodernists. In other words, the paradox described has already been outlined in previous pages. However, in this instance, the dynamism/stasis relationship moves beyond the symbolic dimension, where it was previously relegated as a metaphor. Instead, it surfaces in the pragmatic sphere of experienced reality. The psychological and cultural condition of individuals experiencing real time mirrors that of the schizophrenic, as Baudrillard frequently emphasized, particularly since the late 1980s when he declared:

The schizo is deprived of all scene, open to all in spite of himself, and in the greatest confusion. (...) What characterizes him is

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Stephen Hawking

less his light-years distance from the real, a radical break, than absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness of things, defenseless, with no retreat; end of interiority and intimacy, overexposure and transparency of the world that traverses him without his being able to interpose any barrier. For he can no longer produce the limits of his own being, and reflect himself; he is only an absorbent screen (Baudrillard 1990, p. 69-70).

Until the nineties, many authors were tempted to view the process of presentification as the definitive arrival of advanced societies—a time propelled towards the "speed of no return, which definitively distances it from history" (Baudrillard 1993). It seems as if history had taken a decisive leap from the regime of transcendence—specific to the Christian vision but surviving in the ascending linearity of modern history—towards a state of total immanence (Magatti 2010). This realization echoes what Abruzzese had envisioned, particularly in the cultural landscape of the nineties: "In cybernetics, the possibility of seeing, just behind the collapse of the historical languages of modern civilization, the birth, or rather the liberation, of a new dimension is announced". Anthropological version of living, of a new culture, a 'new entity' (Flichy), "not transcendent but immanent to social processes" (Abruzzese 1996, p. 29). This accomplishment owes much to what David Harvey (1993) critically termed as "space-time compression," whose dissemination through the media facilitated the so-called presentification of experience. However, this process, deemed desirable from a certain liberal or neoliberal perspective, unfolds within its own negation, or in a significant impasse that perilously traverses contemporary history. This catastrophic point was already thematized in a booklet dedicated to the fate of social acceleration, which, nearing the end of the millennium, would be reversed into its opposite in a McLuhanian fashion. It's worth noting that, before delving into the recent critiques of algorithmic reason, Pierre Levy was notably enthusiastic about the advantages promised by real time, seeing it as leading to a genuine anthropological mutation.

Einstein's theory of relativity is evidently the daughter of the space-movement of goods, as evidenced by the thought experiences that illustrate it: clocks, elevator trains, space shuttles, one after the other, in speed ratio...Sustained flow: zero storage cancels the territorial game on the

future and duration. The deferral vanishes in the zero interval of the industry as in the live with the media. Finally, real time in the sphere of telecommunications and information technology designates the immediacy of transmission, calculation and response, the processing and instant presentation of information. On the horizon of accelerations, in the eye of the cyclone of speeds, real, immobile time moves the space-time of goods. Real time is the reality of the time of commodities, its entelechy, its ideal: a time no longer sequential but parallel, no longer linear but point-like, a time of simultaneity, the limit of accelerations (Levy 1998, p. 179) .

Pierre Levy concluded the entire decade of the nineties with a compendium of Baudrillard's formidable intuition, utilizing an interpretation borrowed from relativistic physics. Here, too, Levy explores the concept of an anthropology of the limit, particularly the acceleration of what he terms the "space of goods." However, unlike Baudrillard's approach, Levy's stance leans toward an almost mystical-philosophical orientation. He aims to reconstruct the history of communication as a procession of phases leading to the advent of collective intelligence. This substantial euphoria, aligning with the techno-enthusiastic tendencies of the time, was partially later denied by Levy himself. It stands in stark contrast to the disillusioned and prospective gaze of Baudrillard, whose desperate criticism managed to capture the interest of both technophiles and technophobes. For this reason, Baudrillard's vision has traced a trajectory that, more or less explicitly, other theorists have taken up. Their goal is to refine intellectual weapons to counter the increasingly overwhelming process of globalization imposed by neoliberal ideology.

Towards a neo-critical conception of real time

Since the nineties, Franco Berardi (Bifo) has been engaging with Baudrillard's work from a radical left and neo-critical standpoint, evident in works like "Mutazione e cyberpunk" (1993). In this text, he extensively elaborated on themes such as the cognitive exploitation of the subject by semio-capitalism, information overload known as "hype hermeticism," and psychopathology as a product of the techno-media system or as an escape route from it. Berardi frequently revisits these themes, challenging a pillar of Marxist conception. As the new millennium unfolds, Bifo's criticism gradually shifts towards the issue of the financial exploitation of time while maintaining a Deleuzian and Baudrillardian framework. Baudrillard, in Berardi's interpretation, anticipates a trend that has become prevalent over the decades: simulation alters the relationship between subject and object, placing the subject in the subordinate position of one who is subject to seduction rather than the active agent.

Consequently, the entire problem of alienation, repression and the resulting discomfort dissolves [...]. The info-cratic regime of Semiocapital bases its power on overload, accelerates semiotic flows, makes information sources proliferate until they reach noise white of the indistinguishable, the irrelevant, the indecipherable [...]. The hyper-stimulation of attention reduces the capacity for critical sequential interpretation, but also reduces the time available for the emotional processing of the other, of the other's body and of the other's speech, which seeks to be understood without being able to do so (Berardi 2007).

Baudrillard's meticulous examination of the regime of simulation results in the depletion of the Marxian concept of alienation in terms of analytical utility, primarily due to a substantial reversal of function between the subject and the object. Simultaneously, the phenomenon of information overload, characterized by an unconditional increase in information stimulation and exchanges, engenders a pervasive pathology that becomes the average condition of individuals in the era of semio-capitalism. The hyper-stimulation generated by information overload gives rise to a novel form of control, wherein

the system not only diminishes the critical abilities of subjects but also impairs their relational and affective skills (ibidem). Advancing the critique of the neoliberal vision, Geert Lovink contributes significantly, evident in his chapter titled "The Colonization of Real Time." Lovink, a friend of F. Berardi, is among the few interpreters of Baudrillard who actively engages in updating these reflections for the era of the so-called web 2.0. He incorporates various quotations from your work in the exergue of different chapters of his book. While many of Baudrillard's "critical" positions may seem overcome by the participatory and neo-communitarian quality of social media, Lovink's perspective seeks to identify elements of dissonance hidden beneath the surface of new enthusiasm. These elements reintroduce new forms of alienation. An example of this phenomenon is what is often perceived as the manipulation of time and, more notably, a new wave of "information overload" (Lovink 2012, p. 37), leading to the fateful "Carr effect." This label highlights the dysfunctions of a culture dominated by the logic of multitasking, impoverished by an economy of distraction, and increasingly reliant on short, immediate information with minimal in-depth analysis.

Standing in front of Wave's "blackboard", it feels like sitting on the bank of a river, watching the current flow. It is no longer necessary to ask questions to the PC and then dive into the archive. The Internet as a whole is now real-time, attempting to approximate the disorder and complexity of the real social world. However, what is one step forward involves two steps back in terms of design. Just look at the awkward design of Twitter, which is reminiscent of the first ASCII coded emails and text messages on a cell phone from 2001. To what extent is this an intentional special effect? The HTML style with its sloppiness and typos may not be a technical imperfection, but rather a symptom of the infinity of the Eternal Present in which we are caught (Lovink 2010, p. 30).

According to Lovink, "real time" primarily signifies the lack of time to attend to either the style or content of communication. What was once considered a substantial background noise fueling counterculture aesthetics, like lo-fi, has now become a mainstream phenomenon for a global audience. Even Twitter, under a different name, once aspired to be impassively "Faster than the real time" (Keen 2012). However, by definition, nothing can be faster than immediate communication. From Lovink's viewpoint, real-time communication is associated with the aesthetic of imperfection because there's no time for post-production. The simplicity of low fidelity, at times sloppy or childish, becomes a useful tool for retaining users who feel at ease in a less intimidating world, more within their reach, and ultimately open to improvement (or worsening) by the users themselves.

Lovink also discusses with particular enthusiasm the equivalence between the capitalist valorization of daily micro-time and that operated by finance. In his words, "like finance, the media industry is exploring the possibilities of maximizing added value by exploiting nanoseconds. But unlike hedge funds, this is technology for everyone. Profits grow only if the colonization of real time unfolds on a planetary scale" (ivi, p. 29). Lovink's work illustrates how Baudrillard's legacy remains significant even in an era where technology seems to have undergone substantial changes, becoming more ambiguous, amphibious, and tactical than in the past.

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