

Baudrillard in Cyberspace: A Metaphysical Paradise?

“Hyperreality corresponds to the third order of simulacra; in effect it is both the aesthetic and epistemological form of simulation...” (Levin, 1996, 274)

In a move away from essential Marxism towards semiology, Baudrillard’s position on postmodernity rests on a key assumption that the media and simulations constitute a new realm of experience characterised by hyperreality. By inferring that reality has somehow become removed from itself through the proliferation of re-presentations in society, Baudrillard claims our capacity to perceive reality has been drastically altered. A new conception of the reality experience now dominates the social sphere; one in which reality has been transformed into hyperreality through media simulations distancing us from an essential real. It is a narrative of the end of the production era as signs no longer refer to a real that can be produced; at present we live in an era of hyperreality where reality is re-produced. This is particularly relevant to the analysis of cybersociety that I propose here for two principle reasons. Firstly, cyberspace also has connotations of altering our capacity to experience social reality, and secondly, the Internet writ large would appear to enable a transition to hyperreality, as it is itself mediated through new technology. Thus it always involves the global network beyond the monitor screen.

“The escalating role of the media in contemporary society is for Baudrillard equivalent to the fall into the postmodern ” (Kellner, 1989, 67).

Postmodernity is the narrative of the end of production and industrial era. Categories of political economy are made irrelevant through re-producing reality in the form of a hyperreality. This may be contrasted with industrial society where reality was produced. Baudrillard marks postmodernity as this new conception of reality by noting the disappearance of a referent to actuality. Signs no longer refer to a real in this postmodern universe, as they merely signify other signifiers. His position on reality can be used to illustrate the problematic nature of postmodern metaphysical thought, while giving a context to the position of individual subjectivity within a global communication network. For this reason we will investigate the notion here in more depth, beginning with the notion of simulacra.

“The general idea of simulation is tied basically to the intellectual revolution of cybernetics and communications, structural linguistics, poststructuralist ‘textualism’, and systems theory, all of which dissolve substances into relations and entities into patterns of organisation. The schematic ordering of simulacra demonstrates the basic historical trend of modernisation: increasing formalization, step-by-step invalidation of ordinary sense experience, trivialization of emotional certainties. It is the geometric expansion in the real power of digital technology which gives the schema its greatest plausibility as a contribution to cultural studies and social history...” (Levin, 1996, 280)

The “step by step invalidation of ordinary experience,” describes the gradual process by which reality becomes removed from itself. Central to the concept of hyperreality is Baudrillard's notion of simulation. This provides an excellent locus from which to

investigate the impact of new communication forms on society. His notion of simulation questions the user as to their relationship with data. What we're interested in here is the way in which cyberspace offers a simulated situation where even the distinction between real and simulated information is blurred. This is one area where Baudrillard's frame of reference is perhaps at its most relevant, as the simulation becomes hyperreal when reality is reproduced through digital technology.

“Using McLuhan's cybernetic concept of *implosion*, Baudrillard claims that in the contemporary world the boundary between representation and reality implodes, and that, as a result, the very experience and ground of 'the real' disappears” (Kellner, 1989, 63).

The theory of implosion, which Baudrillard did indeed adopt from McLuhan, forms an integral part of the term 'cyberblitz', which refers to the information overload of media simulations in which meaning is lost. As Baudrillard interprets modernity as the period where commodification, technology and production were in a process of explosion, post-modernity now heralds a process of implosion that breaks down binary oppositions such as reality and simulation. In this respect, implosion can be seen as the process of production that constitutes hyperreality.

Baudrillard discerns three distinct orders of simulacra that trace the splitting of the sign into separated signifier and signified. The first order of simulation began with feudal society, where a fixed hierarchy of signs corresponded exactly to the fixed social hierarchy. This meant that individual social position was reflected through dress code.

Modernity constitutes the second order, which began with the industrial revolution and the infinite reproducibility that accompanied such developments, becoming the fundamental code of this era. The third order, which Baudrillard claims we are in today, is one of total simulation where simulated objects devour representation itself:

“Only affiliation to the model makes any sense, and nothing flows any longer according to its end, but proceeds from the model, the “signifier of reference,” which is a kind of anterior finality and the only resemblance there is” (Baudrillard, 1983, 101).

The third order of simulation, with digitality as a metaphysical principle, works on society in the form of a code. In a similar fashion to language containing codes & models that affect the way we communicate, society is governed by codes of simulation and reproducibility that shape the human environment and provide models of social organisation. However these codes are indeterministic in that it is often not specified which area of society a particular code constitutes. Thus the notion of a code structuring meanings in society is unarguably problematic for this very reason. I will however make a brief attempt to arrive at some definition of it here in order to clarify the discussion of Baudrillard’s theory.

Levin notes (1996, 268) that the term ‘code’ is metaphorically drawn from linguistics and semiotics, which Baudrillard skillfully uses to suggest that there:

“...exists a kind of supraordinate combinatorial ‘logic’ (or code) which restricts the range of meanings possible to express, or experiences possible to share, in a given social or cultural ‘system’...”

His criticism however appears to be pro Baudrillard, as he posits that:

“Although Baudrillard never specifies in detail what such a code might look like for contemporary society, he does outline a fairly comprehensive abstract theory of the codes governing social forms in modern industrial and postindustrial societies...” (Ibid.)

Perhaps in order to begin this attempted definition of abstract theory, in light of the inconclusive nature noted above; it will be helpful to look at an example of the context within which the term is used. In the early 1990’s while probing symbolic exchange (1993), Baudrillard was searching for a source of radicalism that challenged the inoculative capacities of a system with:

“no fixed determinations, a world where anything can be anything else, where everything is both equivalent to and indifferent to everything else, a society, in short, dominated by the digital logic of the code” (Kellner, 1994, 80).

His conclusion is that only death escapes the code by defying the world of simulacra as it is an act without an exchange of values. Baudrillard’s notion of ‘the code’ is never fully explained and consequently leaves theoretical gaps in the scope of its definition. It also

accepts too easily the omnipotence of social structure, by assuming that all situations fit into broadly the same model. However for the purpose of this application, we will take the code to be a code of simulation where the abstract structure of signifiers is ordered into apparent logic according to the interests of the temporally located dominant social group.

While Baudrillard fails to offer any detailed definition of 'the code', it nevertheless becomes an integral part of many simulation models. Eventually it becomes the primary constituent of social life in a discourse Kellner (1989, 62) refers to as 'semiological idealism', where social life comes to be constituted by signs and codes. However through emphasizing the role of a code governing both the structure and ultimate construction of meaning, his critical semiology misses a satisfactory explanation of a theory relating to technology and culture. Instead Baudrillard builds upon McLuhan's cybernetic concept of implosion to explain how the code structures social reality by eroding the distinction between reality and model.

"Furthermore, following McLuhan, Baudrillard interprets modernity as a process of explosion of commodification, mechanisation, technology and market relations, in contrast to post-modern society, which is the site of an *implosion* of all boundaries, regions and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory" (Ibid., 68).

Throughout his work on media and social theory, Baudrillard adopts a principally McLuhanite stance. For instance the implosion of information and meaning precipitated by the media creates pure noise, which is entirely meaningless. He draws a new model of society here where the boundary between representation and the real implodes on itself, and everything becomes simulated as the experience of 'reality' disappears (Ibid., 63). Thus the structural dimension of signs in the media gain autonomy to the exclusion of the referential. That is to say, with the referentials of signification gone the semiotic universe becomes one of total relativity, where signs refer to other signs without interacting with the real.

Programmed by industry and bureaucracy the sign is part of the strategy of power. His argument that when signs become divorced from referents and signify other signifiers a reduction of the symbolic takes place, forms the basis of his thought about postmodernity. In a universe of symbols such as cyberspace, this means that all three elements (signifier, signified & referent) are integrated into acts of communication. Once removed from the everyday context of mutual ground (i.e. through new media technologies such as the Internet), the sign becomes communication without response. Abstracted signifiers float past potential consumers at the level of infinity. Advanced capitalism institutes a new structure of meaning by allowing advertisers to attach specific commodities to these signifiers creating a new structure of meaning (Kellner, 1994, 78). Baudrillard uses a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information that absorbs all content into cybernetic noise, which no longer communicates a message. This is a particularly apt image to apply to the Internet where information is potentially

infinite, as over exposure to information is destructive of meaning. Perhaps it is with the Internet in mind that Baudrillard extends his critique of postmodernism to include the death of history itself. Isolated events transmitted at the speed of light around the planet become removed from the time zone of contemporary life. Postmodernism now stands as not simply the narrative of the end to an era characterised by production, but also the end of history, as events are now divorced from a temporal context in which history finds its own meaning. As we have become removed from a sphere of reference to the real, we have also lost our reference to history.

“With respect to history, the narrative has become impossible since by definition it is the potential re-narrativization of a sequence of meaning. Through the impulse of total diffusion and circulation each event is liberated for itself only – each event becomes atomized and nuclear as it follows its own trajectory into the void. In order to diffuse itself *ad infinitum*, it has to be fragmented like a particle. This is the way it attains a speed of no return, distancing it from history once and for all. Every cultural, eventual group needs to be fragmented, disarticulated to allow for its entry into the circuits, each language must be absolved into a binary mechanism or device to allow for its circulation to take place – not in our memory, but in the electronic and luminous memory of the computers. There is no human language or speech (*langage*) that could compete with the speed of light. There is no event that could withstand its own diffusion across the planet. No meaning stands a chance once offered the means of its own acceleration” (*L’Illusion de la fin: ou La greve des evenements*, Galilee: Paris, 1992 cited in http://www.ctheory.com/a-pataphysics_of_year.html, 1).

Thus we see hyperreality taken to the end of its articulation with the idea that events, once isolated have no referent in history, just as signs no longer refer to reality. Once events appear on television for example (or behind a monitor screen) they disappear from existence as such (for Baudrillard at least), and become atomised media fodder.

Baudrillard has written numerous articles for the Ctheory website

(<http://www.ctheory.com>) concerned with the end of history and the allegations that the year 2000 will not take place. It is not my project to comment on all of them here.

Although I would like to mention Baudrillard's statement about the Pompidou Centre (Beaubourg) numeric clock in Paris as I have seen the dramatic spectacle with my own eyes. The clock, which has now been removed and placed in a safe where it continues out of public view lest it cause a Millennial panic, was a countdown to the year 2000 in hours, minutes, seconds and tenths of a second. Baudrillard sees this as illustrating the characteristic of our contemporary modernity to subtract from the end, reversing time itself. The significance of a countdown device as we near the millennium is heightened by the fact that when the clock reaches zero, history will supposedly not exist anymore. We will have been projected through the black hole of the media to the other side where events now stand entirely atomised, fragmented by time and space yet transmitted around the globe at the speed of light through telecommunication technology such as the Internet. However there is a major contradiction here between Baudrillard's rejection of reality and the notion that history will 'really' end when the countdown is over.

According to the principle of hyperreality this can not be so as history has already ended

with the death of reality. This is a problematic which has become characteristic in Baudrillardian discourse.

“The final illusion of history has disappeared since history is now encapsulated in a numerical countdown (just as the final illusion of humankind disappears when man is encapsulated in genetic computations)” (Baudrillard, <http://www.ctheory.com/a61.html>, 1).

Baudrillard posits here that the real time of contemporary life may no longer be able to deal with chronological time, as the clock’s disappearance seems to undercut the advent of the year 2000, which will no longer take place at the Beaubourg Centre. Thus we must view the thesis of the death of history as epistemologically flawed as it takes an inherent contradiction of reality as one of its base premises. However Baudrillard goes beyond proclaiming that we will be removed from history by claiming that the theory we use to conceptualise our present moment (even his own) will be rendered useless.

“Even theory is no longer in the state of “reflecting” on anything anymore. All it can do is to snatch concepts from their critical zone of reference and transpose them to the point of no return, in the process of which theory itself too, passes into the hyperspace of simulation as it loses all “objective” validity, while it makes significant gains by acquiring real affinity with the current system” (*L’Illusion de la fin: ou La greve des evenements*, Galilee:Paris, 1992 cited in http://www.ctheory.com/a-pataphysics_of_year.html, 2).

This is exactly the kind of self-negation that has come to characterise Baudrillard's recent work. This appears to be the logical development of his point about postmodernity constituting the end of all grand narratives, the end of reality, history and even theory itself. However in theorising about the invalidity of theory using the same language as invalid theory, Baudrillard sweeps the 'epistemological rug' away from under his own feet. Although the theory is eloquent and Baudrillard is clearly demonstrating post-McLuhanite thinking here, it has not been sufficiently developed to a point that can critically account for its own existence. If we temporarily adopt a Baudrillardian stance here for the sake of thematic continuity, the consequences of the latter theory to a discussion of virtual space are numerous as physical space can no longer be a constituent of history. While semiotic space could perhaps theoretically constitute a historically mappable environment through the progression of signifiers, virtual space takes on a new vitality as a form of post-reality.

"What's beyond the end? Well, beyond the end, there is virtual reality, that is to say, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our physiological and social functions (memory, affect, intelligence, sexuality, work) gradually become useless. Beyond the end, in the era of the transpolitical, the transaesthetic, or the transsexual, all our desiring machines first become tiny mechanisms of spectacle, and finally turn into celibate machines which exhaust all their capabilities in an empty vortex... The countdown is the code for the automatic disappearance of the world" (Baudrillard, <http://www.ctheory.com/a61.html>, 3).

Beyond the end of the countdown Baudrillard posits that the world as we know it will disappear entirely and the 'trans-social' era will reign as we enter a programmed reality in which our social functions become useless. However I do not subscribe to the notion that an arbitrary point in the future, (even the millennium is an arbitrary point without reference to the Christian calendar), can be predicted upon in this manner. To state that the countdown is an automated code leading to a point of total simulation, Baudrillard must have some affinity with the future that the rest of us are excluded from. Thus, as scholars we must reject this notion as an eloquent extension of previous epistemologically shaky theory.

Despite the problematic status of self-negation evident in recent Baudrillardian discourse, 'implosion' and 'hyperreality', are an attempt at exploring the relationship between technology and culture. They are the constituents of a new postmodern world that destroy the categories of industrial society while establishing new forms of social organisation and experience (Kellner, 1989, 60). In this light, they offer groundbreaking thought about an era in which technology and knowledge systems replace the old industrial order as the central organising feature of the elitist world of developed nations.

The question of how we define ourselves in relation to technology and what effect this definition has on the culture of technology, hinges on the relationship at the heart of human machine interface. Thus a critical investigation of cybersociety must involve the technology of culture and vice versa to an extent, if only to examine the relationship

between man and machine by coming back to McLuhan's metaphor of new media as electrical impulse driven extensions to the central nervous system. However this is not the case for all cultures across the globe. For example a Chinese peasant rice farmer or some tribe in remote Africa that practise ritual clitoridectomy, will not have seen any dramatic change in the technology of media in their respective lifeworld over the last thirty years; the only access many third world countries get to technology is assembling components in poor conditions of work. The logical implications of this are that cybersociety is a relatively inaccessible, elitist space in terms of global cultures. Thus, cybercommunities are typically made up of isolated individuals with their own means of access, usually from developed nations.

What is "normal" in everyday life varies qualitatively depending on the specific temporal moment of existence and culture of a specific people. Global cultures, especially in the third world (i.e. remote parts of Africa), may not even be in contact with any media, therefore Baudrillard's theories of postmodernity as hyper reality only offer a radical break with modernity in terms of production and knowledge in the Western world. In this case the relationship between technology and culture is dependent on both our definition of technology and how we define ourselves in relation to it; primitive technologies may include skilfully crafted arrowheads for instance. If arrowheads are necessary to a community sustaining itself, they take on added significance in the immediate social agenda and would be a constituent of primitive identity. Thus the relationship between technology and culture is of paramount importance.

As globalisation is essentially a postmodern issue this aspect of theoretical uniformity between cultures must deserve at least some deeper thought. The most relevant aspect of the relationship between technology and culture in this context is communications. Cave paintings are a good example of early culture developing through a communication medium. Looking at how technology has transformed culture leads us into the global village that McLuhan is the prophet of. Telecommunications make the world seem a smaller place by facilitating international calls (which are becoming cheaper and thus more frequent all the time). This also has the implication of decentralising the power that was needed in days of old to communicate across great distance. In the mythic days of King Arthur for instance, only the highest members of society had the power to communicate across boundaries, as messengers on horseback were the highest technology medium of the day. Today, anybody with access to cyberspace has the potential to contact someone on the other side of the globe.

Cyberspace tensions between the individual and the collective consciousness can now be seen as symptomatic of postmodernity, in the sense that implosion theory accounts for a mixing of representation and reality. As the boundary between representation and reality implodes, individual reality thus becomes confused with a collective representation. Baudrillard's 'death of history' notion also signals the death of the historically situated individual event, which would leave nothing but collective consciousness, as without history we are all sucked into a void of simulation. However we encounter another problematic here as even atomised events, isolated from history must surely have some logical order. Baudrillard's answer appears to be the precession of simulacra with its four

phases of the image (Baudrillard, 1983, 11) that are used to communicate, bridging the gap between culture and technology through proliferating on the Internet.

Stretching metaphysical tradition, Baudrillard even attempts to provide an answer to the question: how could religion survive in an entirely simulated reality? It is perhaps worth noting the religious divide between Baudrillard as Protestant and McLuhan as Catholic here. In his infinite optimism, McLuhan posits a new global media community in which universal consciousness will overcome the alienation inherent in book culture, which isolated the subject in their reception of the message. In the 'global village' the old order is replaced by a harmonisation of human senses and technology, which form the new global consciousness. Baudrillard on the other hand carries the protestant ethic in his ideas about the murderous capacity of images:

“Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity” (Ibid., 10).

He places this murderous capacity in opposition to the dialectical capacity of representation as mediating the real in an intelligible manner. By stating that Western faith was caught up in this opposition between icons as murderers and a referent to the depth of religious meaning, I believe Baudrillard is in fact addressing the Protestant/Catholic issue. However he doesn't rule out the possibility of a total simulacrum:

“But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum...” (Ibid., 11)

This would involve signs exchanging only within themselves and never the real in an unbreakable circuit of internal reference. Though he doesn't develop this idea any further and despite the problematic status of the society of simulations, it does at least provide a religious aesthetic dimension that extends hyperreality into the area of human faith.

As postmodernity purports to alter our experience of reality, Baudrillard's key theories offer a radical explanation for the transformation of reality in terms of global media. Signs produced by the global media (which have become increasingly prolific in our present age) no longer refer to an actual reality, instead they signify other signifiers which refer to reality indirectly through other signifiers. This hyper-context is precisely the alteration of our capacity to experience reality that Baudrillard identifies. However in assessing the problematic status of hyperreality it has to be said that Baudrillard's recent theories often undermine their own authority by negating themselves. In order to theorise the concept Baudrillard adopts an omniscient vantage point to define hyperreality: a world that denies itself existence in reality through the logical articulation of its own theory.

As a theorisation of postmodernity, the first problematic encountered is having to use rational criteria to deny the existence of rational principles. Hand uses the cultural relativist position to illustrate this, as nothing is real when everything is culturally relative (1997, 24), which contradicts itself by definition. It is through precisely this self-negation that Baudrillard's thesis of simulation concealing the boundary between true and false reality can be viewed as epistemologically flawed. The very language we have available to us is never sufficient to produce a critical account of the concept, as it becomes simulated and loses its place in reality. Simulation therefore is an attempt to describe the concept of which it is itself part. Any attempt to document the concept is itself simulated and thus disabled by the very language it is made up of.

Thus a definition of simulation as a 'real' concept is doomed to failure from the outset as it is entirely simulated and has no referent in actuality. However to acknowledge this one must be aware of the key assumption one is making in that reality exists as there is a dichotomy between simulation and reality. As the concept of simulation has been shown to be epistemologically flawed reality must prevail. Rather than conceive a false reality, Baudrillard's position on simulation posits erosion of the distinction between the two, (Bauman, 1992, Chapter 6: cited in *Ibid.*). However it is difficult to undermine Baudrillard's position here as reality has many conceptions and a commonly accepted notion would have to be arrived at in order to disprove his theory.

"Baudrillard seems to have created a kind of conceptual ladder whereby once one reaches the top, the rungs disappear" (*Ibid.*, 23).

The impossible nature of his position can be clearly demonstrated through considering that to be in a position to theorise, he must know the reality/simulation difference in order to identify the disappearance of two distinct categories, which would place him outside reality in the realm of autonomous technology. Despite the theoretical problematic, the notion of simulation is a relatively useful tool for thinking about new media, and while it is not entirely compatible with virtual world simulations, it does at least give some context to the notion of a 'meta-simulation'.

Within Baudrillard's metaphysical commentary then I have isolated certain notions that, although clearly demonstrated to be problematic, are useful to the discussion of simulation. For instance, the notion of implosion/cyberblitz as the process of production that constitutes hyperreality, gives an extra dimension to the term which was not evident in McLuhan's discourse. Also the code of total simulation is useful as it provides a conceptual means of thinking about the erosion of a distinction between simulation and reality. The excerpts from the 'Ctheory' website are included as a gradual commentary on the knot Baudrillard ties himself into, as eventually he has to theorise the invalidity of his own theory. Postmodernity as the death of history is a potentially dangerous notion, as it deeply contradicts the rejection of reality (when the millennium clock reaches zero). How can reality not exist yet history will really end...? Baudrillard seems to counteract this contradiction with a further speculation about entirely virtual reality existing just beyond the end of the millennium countdown.

Despite the self-negating nature of hyperreality, his metaphysical commentary on the information revolution does at least attempt to explore the relationship between technology and culture in the Western world as one of simulation. This is done within an inherently problematic discourse of postmodernity. Now that Baudrillard's position has been critically documented the discussion moves onto Foucault here, to provide a theory of power. Power is of equal importance to simulation here, as within the boundary of this thesis they are the conceptual means of interrogating virtual worlds.

