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A Reality Becoming Less Real

Capitalism is the backbone for much of America’s financial standings, allowing for the competitive rivalry that boosted the capital of our entire nation. Therefore, if we were to blame such a vital economic and political system for an invisible destruction, there undoubtedly will be skeptics. However, Jean Baudrillard, a French theorist, believes that the doubt of cynics is simply because of their ignorance of an issue that has been masked in reality: the hyperreality. The hyperreal, a term interpreted to recognize the prevalence simulations are to our day-to-day lives, is a theory coined in 1981 by Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard, more than just a theorist or an author, was also known to be an accomplished photographer, which was crucial to the development of his thoughts. As a photographer, Baudrillard characterized “every photographed object” to be the mere “trace left behind by the disappearance of all the rest [the rest being the reality of where the image was taken]” (Britannica). This idea of taking reality and symbolizing it in a form that is no longer reality aligns similarly to his hyperreality ideology. Hyperreality, a fake realm created by imitations of reality, is becoming increasingly predominant as humanity’s perceived truth—especially with the proliferation of newer technologies like mass media; as reality turns towards fraudulence and incompleteness, a reversion back to the truth is necessary.

Before we can discuss the drawbacks and conventions of hyperreality, we must take a step back to understand the origin of theory. Despite *Simulacra and Simulation* being the first time Baudrillard went in detail about what the hyperreal was and why it was a scary truth, he had hinted towards the concept all his life. Not only his photography but also his previous philosophies suggested a developing perception. In 1976, five years before *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard had published another book named *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Although this book received a lot less public attention, it presented evidence on Baudrillard’s thought process in crafting the hyperreality theory. While the term “death” has always had an intimidation factor to it, Baudrillard argues that we should instead be appreciating it for what it allows us to do. Even though this one word represents the end of a life, it also could signify the genesis of new life. In an interview about this idea, Baudrillard describes how death, instead, should not be shied away from; after all, it is the counterpart to every life. Only when something dies or disappears can it effectively be renewed into something more advanced. This concept of recycling between “appearing and disappearing” is the basis of “the complete symbolic operation” (Sutton 125). Because these two processes rely so heavily on one another, when one no longer has the reversibility capabilities of becoming the other, Baudrillard recognizes this as a problem. This issue can most notably be found in the capitalist regime, which depends on the lack of disappearance in order to successfully experience constant production and accumulation. Instead of being two concepts that are symbiotic, life and death are represented as opposites to one another. Humanity is put under a false understanding that destruction equates to evil and production symbolizes good; in response, we will attempt to ward off death. However, as much as we want to delete death from occurring, with life there will always be death, making death ever-present in the process of Capitalism—also known as Sigmund Freud’s “death drive” (Sutton 126). This is very important to the concept of hyperreality, as Baudrillard describes our actions as one that “tries to split the positive moment from the negative moment [life and death]” in order to (or at least attempt to) preserve “the positive” so that we end up in “a kind of ultrareal reality, a hyperreality which has no end” (Sutton 126). Capitalism conclusively creates a world that is fake—a hyperreality—to mask the truth of death. Hyperreality—an attempt to create positivity—ends up simply being an escape from all the conflicts, the risks, and the seductions that create death.

While the influence behind Baudrillard’s hyperreality is important to understanding the cause of the problem, Baudrillard illustrates the true gravity of the issue in *Simulacra and Simulation*. He first and foremost describes what the hyperreal is, splitting it into four different stages, each stage demonstrating the shift from our reality to the hyperreal. With each stage, we step further into the depths of hyperreality—every phase more fake than the previous. Until finally the fourth, and final, stage is a pure simulacrum. Simulacrum is when there is no longer an ability to differentiate a truthful reality from a false reality or a simulation. This is the world that Baudrillard fears we live in today, where products no longer even have to pretend to be “fake” to be our reality. These four stages display why the hyperreality is an issue, indicating that we have imploded into a simulated world and lose a bit more of every principle and of every objective with each passing day (Simulacra and Simulation 177). Although Baudrillard has already claimed Capitalism as the root of the issue, he specifically defines aspects of “deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialization” in capitalism which destroy human goals and shatter the differences between “true and false and good and evil” (Simulacra and Simulation 177). The wanting for production, and specifically overproduction, is why the restoration of reality eludes us and why modern-day "material production” is itself hyperreal (Simulacra and Simulation 177). The dangers of simulations are thus suggested: “over and above its object, that law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation” (Simulacra and Simulation 175). We are encroaching a hyperreality where laws become rules, then become guidelines, then eventually fade into nothing but suggestions. Before long, everyone’s purpose collapses into nothing.

While to some, the loss of a reality and order would be incredibly daunting, others like Thomas Heyd, author of *The Real and the Hyperreal: Dance and Simulacra,* reasons otherwise. Instead of blaming capitalism for its creation and depiction of a faulty hyperreality, Heyd first addresses the positives to having omnipresent simulations in our society today. Ultimately, simulacra are used to implant happiness, and this façade that has been given by the hyperreal is meant to shelter us, to simulate something that may not have been possible in reality. And can we blame ourselves for doing so? Why would we want to follow laws of reality, when we can create or simulate something that’s better than what's defined by reality. A genetically modified fruit, an object meant to simulate that of a real fruit, has little drawbacks, seemingly only benefits—one could easily reason that there should be no reason to condemn simulations seeing how vital they are for a more fruitful life. After all, it is because the lack of laws in hyperreality that gives freedom to simulations, allowing it to "surpasses [the] traditional and natural” (Heyd 17). However, before Heyd goes too much into complementing simulation, he brings forth a new argument: simulations and the hyperreal are just for show. In simulations, objects often “exhibit certain features that make them highly attractive”, but these experiences of happiness are only a form of detachment from the “human embodied nature” (Heyd 23). As we fall into the traps that are simulations, we forget who we are as individuals. As a response, Heyd proposes a new perspective in dance. The art of dancing entails a responsiveness to the “presence of its environment”; thus, signifying that each dance is unique (Heyd 22). His assertion, therefore, is to let dance “address the alienation from nature generated by the multiplication of simulacra in societies” (Heyd 23). Heyd accepts that there is nothing we can do to stop our addiction to the hyperreal, but through the process of connecting ourselves to both the human and physical spheres of our environment, we can evade being completely enticed by hyperrealism.

Although Heid’s theory brings up some topics of interests, there may be some flaws in the ideology of dance in which Baudrillard had approached. Author William Bogard’s evaluates Baudrillard's theory of hyperrealism in *Closing down the Social: Baudrillard's Challenge to Contemporary Sociology* and composes an extension to Baudrillard’s thoughts. The subject matter that Bogard looks most closely to is social spheres and how the hyperreal relates to them. Baudrillard had stated in numerous works of his that hyperrealism is everywhere, so Bogard looks for it in social relations (Simulacra and Simulation 180). On examination, Bogard forms the argument that Baudrillard has always had the “general awareness that the social realm is, and has always been, only a delusion” (Bogard 8). In fact, Baudrillard would recognize that the social is all but a simulation, "like a ghost at dawn, its principle of reality... simply fades away" (qtd. in Board 8). If socializing is now just an act of simulation, this means a real form of the social no longer exists; then, the downfall to the real social could be portrayed in no other way than the destruction of similar realities Baudrillard had already given: “virtual suffocation of society in an economy of excess production, wasteful expenditure, and death” by capitalism (Bogard 9). What we have now (the simulation) is but an empty shell of its former; other than endlessly signifying itself, Bogard notes the simulated social’s only purpose is to fill the void and mask the disappearance of the old social (Bogard 11). Heyd’s argument of dance and the connection can now be seen as one that is impossible, for how can we ever connect ourselves with environmental or humanity spheres if the act of socializing never even existed? While Heyd does have a reasonable argument that attempts to avoid the act of simulation through connecting with the people and things around us, Baudrillard eliminates the possibility and realizes any action against the hyperreal is like fighting an inevitably-lost battle.

Baudrillard continues to state the fight for reality is an unsuccessful battle and that the hyperreal is consuming the reality of our world; however, how could we address an issue that’s not only invisible but also so deeply rooted in our society? While ambiguous on a resolution, Baudrillard does mentions that the hyperreality is already too heavily ingrained in our everyday capital-based life to rid ourselves of it (Simulacra and Simulation 172). Bogard even mentions that “Baudrillard, himself, admits to never having adequately formulated his own position on the question of the function of theory” (Bogard 12). Instead, Baudrillard’s only offer for a plausible solution is to “reinject realness” into the world around us (Simulacra and Simulation 182). Instead of regarding actions as either hyperreal or real, treat everything of reality. The consequences will ultimately be on the real world, so therefore, regardless of whether it was actually simulated or not, one will always be prepared to face their consequences. Ironically this act of injecting reality, though it leaves us more prepared for the hyperreal, is just another simulation; it is one that “delude[s] ourselves into thinking [the fight for the real] can be won” (Bogard 13). Of course, Baudrillard realizes this solution is not ideal, but he believes even the “discourse of desire” would be less dangerous than to concede to hyperreality without a fight (Simulacra and Simulation 177). At best, Baudrillard admits, “[we] can only challenge the present order—the simulated order—with a simulated indifference” (Bogard 13). He reflects on this incomplete proposal, noting how the process of creating everything into a reality is a “confusion of the reality principle” and only avoids—for the time being—getting swept into the hyperreal (Simulacra and Simulation 177).

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