

Jean Baudrillard

*The Hyper-realism of Simulation*

In his essay *The Hyper-realism of Simulation* (originally published in 1976), Jean Baudrillard asserts that the use and abundance of media, signs, and symbols has so bombarded our culture that “reality itself, as something separable from signs of it ... vanished in the information-saturated, media-dominated contemporary world” (1018). Photography, mass production, television, and advertising have shaped and altered authentic experience to the point that “reality” is recognized only when it is re-produced in simulation. Truth and reality are mediated and interpreted to an extent that culture can no longer distinguish reality from fantasy. Baudrillard terms this blurring of mediated experience and reality “hyper-reality.”

Hyper-reality is a result of systematic simulation, a process in which symbols are increasingly utilized to replace actual objects and experiences. Icons or signs are stand-ins as simplified and clearer emulations of reality. Easily comprehensible and recognizable signs mask and ultimately replace the actual thing or experience, becoming more “real” than reality itself. Contemporary culture has become one of reality by proxy in which “everything is therefore right on the surface, absolutely superficial. There is no longer a need or requirement for depth or perspective; today, the real and the imaginary are confounded in the same operational totality, and aesthetic fascination is simply everywhere.” (1019)

As reality is increasingly obscured, signs lose their connection to what they initially represented (as seen is Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans, for example). Further

removed from their original meaning, signs and symbols become imitations of facsimiles and reality and fiction dissolve into indistinguishable imitations. Baudrillard considered this culture of hyper-reality an advanced stage of life-as-art: “it manages to efface even this contradiction between the real and the imaginary. Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the *real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself.*” (1018)

Unlike previous art forms such as Surrealism, which depended upon the basic understanding of reality and imagination to function, hyper-realism “makes reality swim vertiginously, arousing the dizziness of death within the confines of representation for its own sake” (1019). As art itself functions more and more through its vocabulary of signs, hyper-realism blends reality and art into a total absorption of one another. Reality is mediated and art is a re-presentation of that simulation. Baudrillard goes even further to assert that not only are life and art indistinguishable through the notions of simulation and reproduction, but that “reality itself is hyper-realistic...now the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism; we already live out the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” (1019).

Unlike the past, in which reality could be intentionally obfuscated or distorted, “today, the real and the imaginary are confounded in the same operational totality, and aesthetic fascination is everywhere” (1019). Production and art exist within the reality of their very simulation, losing the original context—the primary process—from which they once emerged. Art is part of everyday life, and daily life is a series of mirrors, reproductions,

and simulation. Mundane existence, “having expelled all content and finality, becomes, in a way, abstract and nonfigurative...it takes itself, like art, as its own teleological value” (1020). The signs ultimately mean nothing and therefore form their own abstracted meaning, and in Baudrillard’s words, “an air of nondeliberate parody clings to everything” (1020). Simulation, abstraction, and hyper-reality ultimately define contemporary reality.

Citations from Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2003.