VIII A
The Critique of Originality

1 Jean Baudrillard (b. 1929) ‘The Hyper-realism of Simulation’

The development of Baudrillard’s ‘critique of the political economy of the sign’ turned in the early 1970s into a thesis that reality itself, as something separable from signs of it, had vanished in the information-saturated, media-dominated contemporary world. This condition Baudrillard dubbed ‘hyper-realism’. Tellingly, his points of reference for this thesis are predominantly drawn from the world of art: Surrealism, the nouveau roman, Andy Warhol, Pop art and photography. The upshot is a conception of the contemporary world as radically abstract, a ‘place’ from which reality has absented itself and all is ‘simulacrum’. This is, as Baudrillard himself confesses, an aestheticization; but as such it is unapologetic. It is perhaps in the very extremity of this implausible abstraction that the compelling power of Baudrillard’s conception has lain. Originally published as a section of L’Echange symbolique et la mort, Paris, 1976; translated by Charles Levin as Symbolic Exchange and Death in J. Fekete (ed.), The Structural Allegory, Minneapolis, 1984; this translation reprinted in Mark Poster (ed.), Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, Stanford, CA, 1988, pp. 143–7, from which the present text is taken.

[. . .] Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography. From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes reality for its own sake, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.

Realism had already inaugurated this process. The rhetoric of the real signaled its gravely altered status (its golden age was characterized by an innocence of language in which it was not obliged to redouble what it said with a reality effect). Surrealism remained within the purview of the realism it contested – but also redoubled – through its rupture with the Imaginary. The hyperreal represents a much more advanced stage insofar as 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. To escape the crisis of representation, reality loops around itself in pure repetition, a tendency that was already apparent, before the days of pop art and pictorial neorealism, in the nouveau roman. There, the project was already to enclose the real in a vacuum, to extirpate all psychology and subjectivity in order to render a pristine objectivity. In fact, this objectivity was only that of the pure gaze – an objectivity at last liberated from the object, which is no more
than the blind relay of the look that scans it. It attempts a kind of circular seduction in which one can easily mark the unconscious undertaking to become invisible.

This is certainly the impression created by the neonovel: the rage for eliding meaning in a blind and meticulous reality. Both syntax and semantics have disappeared. There is no longer an apparition, but an arraignment of the object, the eager examination of its scattered fragments: neither metaphor nor metonymy, but a successive immanence beneath the police agency of the look. This objective microscopics makes reality swim vertiginously, arousing the dizziness of death within the confines of representation for its own sake. The old illusions of relief, perspective, and spatial and psychological depth linked to the perception of the object give way to an optics functioning on the surface of things, as if the gaze had become the molecular code of the object.

A possible definition of the real is: that for which it is possible to provide an equivalent representation. This definition is contemporary with science, which postulates a universal system of equivalences (classical representation was not so much a matter of equivalence as of transcription, interpretation, commentary). At the conclusion of this process of reproduction, the real becomes not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal. But this does not mean that reality and art are in some sense extinguished through total absorption in one another. Hyperrealism is something like their mutual fulfillment and overflowing into one another through an exchange at the level of simulation of their respective foundational privileges and prejudices. Hyperrealism is only beyond representation because it functions entirely within the realm of simulation. There, the whirligig of representation goes made, but with an implosive insanity which, far from being ex-centric, casts longing eyes at the center, toward its own repetition en abîme. Like the distancing effect within a dream, which tells one that one is dreaming, but only in behalf of the censor, in order that we continue dreaming, hyperrealism is an integral part of a coded reality, which it perpetuates without modifying.

In fact, we must interpret hyperrealism inversely: today, reality itself is hyperrealistic. The secret of surrealism was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only at privileged moments, which still derived from art and the imaginary. 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. The old saying, ‘reality is stranger than fiction,’ which belonged to the surrealist phase of the aestheticization of life, has been surpassed. There is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it; reality has passed over into the play of reality, radically disenchanted, the ‘cool’ cybernetic phase supplanting the ‘hot’ and phantasmatic.

There once existed a specific class of objects that were allegorical, and even a bit diabolical, such as mirrors, images, works of art (and concepts?); of course, these too were simulacra, but they were transparent and manifest... they had their own style and characteristic savoir faire. In these objects, pleasure consisted more in discovering something ‘natural’ in what was artificial and counterfeit. Today, the real and the imaginary are confounded in the same operational totality, and aesthetic fascination is simply everywhere. It involves a kind of subliminal perception, a kind of sixth sense for fakery, montage, scenarios, and the overexposition of reality in the lighting of models. This is no longer a productive space, but a kind of ciphering strip, a coding and
decoding tape, a tape recording magnetized with signs. It is an aesthetic reality, to be sure, but no longer by virtue of art's premeditation and distance, but through a kind of elevation to the second power, via the anticipation and the immanence of the code. An air of nondeliberate parody clings to everything — a tactical simulation — like an undecided game to which is attached a specifically aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure in reading (lecture) and in the rules of the game...

For a long time now art has prefigured this transformation of everyday life. Very quickly, the work of art redoubled itself as a manipulation of the signs of art: this oversignification, or as Lévi-Strauss would call it, this 'academicism of the signifier;' introduced art to the sign form. Thus art entered the phase of its own indefinite reproduction, everything that redoubles in itself, even ordinary, everyday reality, falls in the same stroke under the sign of art, and becomes aesthetic. The same goes for production, of which one can say that today it is commencing this aesthetic doubling at the point where, having expelled all content and finality, it becomes, in a way, abstract and nonfigurative. It begins to express the pure form of production; it takes itself, like art, as its own teleological value.

Art and industry can thus exchange signs: art, in order to become a reproductive machine (Andy Warhol), without ceasing to be art, since this machine is only a sign; and production, in order to lose all social purpose and thus to verify and exalt itself at last in the hyperbolic and aesthetic signs of prestige that are the great industrial combines, the 400-meter-high business blocks and the statistical mysteries of the GNP... In this vertigo of serial signs — shadowless, impossible to sublimate, immanent in their repetition — who can say where the reality of what they simulate resides? Apparently, these signs repress nothing... even the primary process is abolished. The cool universe of digitality absorbs the worlds of metaphor and of metonymy, and the principle of simulation thus triumphs over both the reality principle and the pleasure principle.


Bourdieu studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure before embarking on a career in anthropology and sociology. His early work was in the field of education, studied as a system of social reproduction. Since the 1960s his main focus has been on the cultural field, likewise regarded as a system which functions to reproduce social difference — in the end, that is, inequality — not least through the acquisition and deployment of what Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital'. Bourdieu's intellectual project was to develop a position free from the subjectivism of phenomenology and Existentialism on the one hand, and from the objectivism of Marxism and structuralism on the other. His key concept is that of the cultural field. This has been characterized as a form of radical contextualization. In the English-speaking world at least, Bourdieu's wide-ranging social-scientific investigations have been seen as reinforcing the postmodernist opposition to the various kinds of formalist aesthetics which underpinned traditional theories of artistic Modernism. Bourdieu's most influential study in this respect has been Distinction (Paris 1979, English translation 1984), in which he investigates the social ground of aesthetic taste, concluding that 'art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.' Our present text is a subsection from a longer essay, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', originally published in