

BAIMP Digital Media Futures Essay 1 –

There is no such thing as an original, only simulation. Discuss with reference to the work of Jean Baudrillard, and use examples to illustrate your answer.

The advent of popular culture in the 1960's saw a surge in fresh ideas, opinions and theories designed to combat the then seen as archaic views of bourgeois modernity; or what was separating popular from elite culture. Instead of the prior view that certain media artefacts can only be enjoyed or were of higher value to people depending on class was seen as outdated, and resultantly these pioneering boundary breakers were dubbed 'Postmodernists'. Where the preceding 'Modernists' were suspicious of all things popular, contrastingly 'Postmodernists' positively embraced this new and exciting culture; yet some such as the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard posited far more chilling prospects as to the hidden mechanism's behind popular culture – it is 'the disappearance of the real'¹ or the resultant evaporation of authenticity. As there are obviously only a finite number of ideas and solutions for these media artefacts to be attention seizing, the key was and still is within the current era of postmodernism to 'play with the pieces' or nostalgically reminisce, pastiche or recycle past creative resolutions. Each new product is branded an original, yet intrinsically could be deconstructed to various inspiring original sources - Baudrillard questioned whether this age of salvaging is a never ending spiral of non-stop simulation, or the process of the destruction of the distinction between original and copy.

'Art is everywhere, since artifice has penetrated the heart of reality. But, art is dead, not because its critical transcendence has gone, but because there is nothing left for it to transcend. The world has become so saturated with reproductions of itself, that reality has become confused with its own image; it has become its own simulation'² Within this reproduction of concrete human ideas scenario Baudrillard agreed with contemporary French theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard that grandeur meta-narratives such as *The Bible* and other overarching ideals such as religion or social theories have lost their licence to tell the truth and therefore truth has been lost; previous ideas whether regarding science or God have had their power as centres of faithful or legitimate authenticity dissolved.

Walter Benjamin saw a 'diminution in the authority of the ideas of originality, Benjamin arguing that the 'aura' of the original work of art is lost with the predominance of mechanical reproduction'³ or that the very spirit or soul of a single piece of art is lost when reproduced ad infinitum. Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum, or identical copies without their respective originals can be linked to this, that a veritable ocean of identical copies minus their originals can only signal an end to any tangible truth one may try to find; when the distinction between copies and the original have collapsed so has the confusion between them – the 'real' is now the same as the manufactured. In short 'Baudrillard describes a post-modern world in which everything has been reduced – or rather perhaps, extended and intensified – into representations and simulacra, a world in which so complete is the identification between power and representations of power, the power must be said effectively to have disappeared... his chilling suggestion is that the spread of power away from conspicuous centres of control, like the State or the armed forces is not a diffusion but a consolidation of control, a spiralling of power which can resist any resistance, can predict and encompass any form of challenge, because such challenges take place in an empty world of controlled simulations.'⁴ If reality cannot be found and truth is lost, achievement seems pointless.

This mesh of reality and simulation is consumed by popular culture without difference, and when applied to day-to-day reality is known as 'Hyperrealism'. To illustrate this Baudrillard used such manufactured places as 'Disneyland' where it no longer represents America; rather it *is* America where holidaymakers define their

‘Real American Experience’ and therefore the virtual has overtaken the actual. Themed pubs are another example of locational hyper-reality where ideals are based on conceived stereotypes of varying nationalities. It questions whether an authentic experience can even still be acquired amongst the manufactured when similarly the influence of hyper-real media suggests the same. Television soap ‘characters’ are written to by potentially oblivious people and are consequently deemed more real than the actors and actresses themselves, and the relationship works in reverse as well – spin-off books are published written by these fictional characters. Pop music has always been known for recycling itself whether in the form of cover versions, remakes, revivals or re-issues. Yet even if originality has vanished, innovation within this framework remains. The ‘*Scream*’ film trilogy (Craven, 1997 onwards) represented one of the first horror films to use sly self-referring irony to Craven’s other works and many sequels; when written into script detaches the film from reality and thus bases it inside a clever self-revealing simulation. Recent music CD’s such as DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing...* (DJ Shadow, 1996) spawned a whole new genre of ‘Cut ‘n’ Paste’ style editing where the whole album is made up as a pastiche of samples, and this illustrates that not all simulation could be seen as negative. DJ’s Yoda, Shadow and Q-bert all offer a fresh context that is breathed into these forgotten samples regardless of their origin, and consequently whether an ‘authentic experience’ even exists or not could be questioned.

Hyper-reality in a broader context can be seen on everyday television, a dominant role in our society. What was once deemed a mere representation is now no longer just a reflection. Baudrillard would argue that television is real life, and with the emergence of reality TV the relationship works in reverse equally – the current state of the pop music charts are overflowing with television that made bands and acts, a non-stop conveyer belt of simulacrum, yet paradoxically these acts make high rating television which thus serves a variety of economic benefits for both television and music corporations. The politicians we are to supposedly look up to as restrained leaders of the country and not for any glamour, thrill or fascination are prepared, groomed and trained specifically for televisual appearances - it has become reality. Music concerts also fall prey to hyper-media the eighties singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen was one of the first to use gigantic video screens to project his live performance, the result again being that reality and simulation are experienced without difference.

‘Springsteen’s appearances on his world tour in 1985, which were rarely to fewer than 50,000 people made sure no member of the vast audience could escape the slightest nuance of music or voice. Behind him, an enormous video screen projected claustrophobically every detail of his agonised facial expressions in a close-up, which at one and the same time abolished and re-emphasised the actual distance between him and the audience’⁵ Whether Springsteen was seen in the flesh or not became irrelevant; his simulation was present for those at the back. Taken to it’s ultimate conclusion could be viewed by the recent music band ‘*Gorillaz*’ which similar to ‘*Scream*’ uses cunning self-revealing irony within its band name - a homage to the first manufactured band of the 1960’s ‘*The Monkees*’. Created by Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett primarily they set out to create the definitive manufactured band, perhaps the most clever self-revealing simulation; the twist being that two-dimensional cartoon characters by Hewlett were the stars rather than Albarn and his musicians. When playing live, the audience were played gigantic animations whilst the band performed behind these massive video screens. ‘Audiences of 80,000 or more now regularly attend concerts to watch videos, albeit ‘live videos; the ecstasy of experience is what Baudrillard calls an ‘ecstasy of communication’, a fantastic, barely controllable excess of images and

representations⁶ It seems that the merge of reality with simulation is no longer important.

Thus the mediated simulation and representation are now the same as the real experience. It could be argued that media artefacts become one dimensional, devoid of context or substance such as American ‘Gangsta Rap’ music videos when consumed by middle white America; the ideals are seen as ‘cool’ and then appropriated into their own culture yet none of them have probably even visited the Ghetto’s or Bronx that these artists rap about. This detachment from intrinsic reality can be mirrored by televisual political representation as seen by the First Gulf War, which was the first war to be appropriated and absorbed by TV politics. Life or death annihilation could be viewed for the first time 24 hours a day on CNN from the comfort of an armchair; it seems far less real from such a distance and the sense of panic and chaos is lost. No collateral damage was reported, so to the television groomed no civilians were killed; the reality is not replaced by simulation rather reality is the simulation. The harsh authenticity of war become normalised and ironically detached from truth to the viewer.

The ‘Father of Cyberpunk fiction’ William Gibson has written many novels on the perils of living in a world adjacent to cyberspace. His general notion is when one no longer compares the world to real things one rather only references simulation leaving the protagonist bewildered as to what reality actually is. It is similar to the storyline of *The Matrix* (Wachowski’s 1998), which was similarly based on Baudrillard’s theories. ‘These are the decisions we must face in our real world environment.

Recognizing that we're enslaved by a system is the first step. The next step involves a willingness to sacrifice safety for freedom. Both these steps were taken by all the film's protagonists, is there something beyond them? The chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation* entitled "On Nihilism" advocates terrorism as the means of "checking in broad daylight" the mechanisms of control, but observes that the system is itself nihilistic and can absorb even violence into its indifference. Thus, to Baudrillard, the problem seems insoluble’.⁷

The seemingly intangible maze of simulation after simulation could be scrutinised understandably in an unsympathetic negative light, yet imaginative projections offer seemingly positive escapism; the entertainment industry is based on this fact - it represents the ideal and by subscribing to these one feels better. Although not original, innovation when ‘playing with the pieces’ of media offer fresh new lights to see the world through and may inspire more innovative simulacrum. New Media hints that recycled ideas in a new form are equally as captivating as original once were; even if the distinction between originals and copies are indefinable.

Academic texts

Surname	Initial	Date	Title	Publisher
1, page 13 – Bennet	O	2001	Cultural Pessimism	Edinburgh Uni Press
2, page 133 - Bennet	O	2001	Cultural Pessimism	Edinburgh Uni Press
3, page 174 - Connor	S	1997	Postmodernist Culture	London Uni Press
4, page 253 - Connor	S	1997	Postmodernist Culture	London Uni Press
5, page 174 - Connor	S	1997	Postmodernist Culture	London Uni Press
6, page 175 - Connor	S	1997	Postmodernist Culture	London Uni Press

Websites

Site Name	Address
Baudrillard and Hollywood	7, http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/hollywood.html
Baudrillard on The Web	http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/audweb.html