

Baudrillard

by Bart Nooteboom

110. Hyperreality

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Here I start a series of items that is partly inspired by the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. I am not sure that I understand him well, and in so far as I do, I agree with him only in part, but the questions he raises are interesting and here I present what I make of them. In this first item I pick up his claim that in uses of modern communication technology reality has been lost and replaced by what he calls 'hyperreality'.

To be precise about reality I recall a few basic notions in the theory of language and meaning that were discussed in earlier items in this blog. One is that of the *signifier* (word, image, sign) and what is *signified* by it. Another is that the meaning of a word or expression has two parts: *reference* (signification of words) and *sense*. The *referent* of the word 'chair' is the set of all chairs, and its sense is how an object is recognized as a chair. For a proposition reference is its truth or falsity, and sense is the argumentation for it. Propositions without arguments are senseless.

I now interpret Baudrillard as saying that in present culture we focus on the signifier, the word, and have lost sight of what it is supposed to signify, refer to. Our images and verbal constructions, still inspired somehow by reality, become footloose from what they are about. The signifier steals the show, shoving the signified off-stage. What matters is no longer so much what is said as how one says it. Not what is true but what is interesting or exciting. Not arguments but opinions. This, Baudrillard acknowledges, goes back to Marshall McLuhan's slogan that *the medium is the message*.

So what is new? The signifier/word has always stood apart from the signified/referent: it is never a true, complete representation of the signified. As we acknowledge since the philosopher Kant, we can never know and represent reality as it is in itself. As we acknowledge since the philosopher Wittgenstein, words are not a true representation of underlying thought. In some religions images of God are forbidden because if they truly represent God then God is no longer transcendent and if they do not faithfully represent him they mislead us.

Baudrillard claimed that under the impact of present information-and-communication technology, reality is replaced by *hyperreality*. That *simulates* reality, offering an idealized, more exciting, ecstatic reality, a lie that is better than truth.

Again, what is new? Art, literature, theatre, and music have always deliberately idealized, reduced, distilled, and transformed reality as we perceive it. Its purpose indeed is, and always has been, to provide a hyperreality, exploring possible or stylized worlds. This serves as a mental exploration that stimulates intellectual and moral imagination,

formation of ideas, and shifts of meaning. As discussed in items 5 and 92 it helps to simulate the consequences of possible actions, to explore morality.

It does, however, seem to be the case that we have progressed further into hyperreality. An example of hyperreality, given by Rick Roderick is the 'Swiss garden', where one finds Swiss cuckoo clocks, mountain scenes, costumes and food all brought together conveniently, to be visited without the bother of actually travelling to Switzerland. Another example was that of the shark from the film 'Jaws', more enticing and interesting than any real shark. Also, you don't exist unless you are on TV, so people hype up to get there, reducing considered opinion to a slogan, turning character into caricature.

What, if anything, is wrong with all this? When we give up on the groping for reality we surrender argument and facts to emotions and opinions. Facts, imperfect as they are, help to tie us to reality. When we disregard facts reality indeed disappears.

Next to reality, identity also is lost, Baudrillard claims. I will consider that in the following item.

111. Hyperidentity

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According to Baudrillard the individual self has lost its identity in what he calls the 'mental diaspora of networks'. Individual thought is no longer relevant and is replaced by a cacophony of voices and actions, reverberating in networks, amplified and distorted, with haphazard, unforeseeable outcomes that are intended and controlled by no one. Individual identity is replaced the *hyper-identity* (my term, not Baudrillard's) of a network or group. People form collective identities they can neither oversee nor understand, any more than the microorganisms that constitute our body have an inkling of our personal identity. There is a potential for diversity, but often it dwindles, with people parroting each other, and seeking out similar opinions.

This may sound odd. Aren't we, to the contrary, complaining about the selfish, self-obsessed, narcissist individual obsessed by the celebration of its own authentic, unique self? And wouldn't it be a good thing if people oriented themselves more towards communities?

I will try to analyze. In part, what happens is related to the theme of *hyperreality*, discussed in the preceding item in this blog. If there is no shared, outside reality on which ideas are tested, then there is no basis for ideas to converge.

Three things seem to be going on.

First, in *virtual reality* the self no longer interacts with what someone else (an author, an artist) has thought up, but with something that the reader himself configures with tools

offered to him. In virtual reality one can construct a lover to make love with, resembling one's favourite idol.

Second, often selves now construct themselves in the image of shared idols, taken from show business or sports, hoarding their tweets, becoming more like each other, cloning the celebrity. The variety of people dwindles in collective identities.

Third, in social networks, such as Facebook, others are selected for their similarity. People congregate and even lock themselves up in networks or groups of like-minded people

In all three cases, the other is no longer a genuine other, and as a result will scarcely help to free oneself from one's prejudice. The self gets steamed up in itself, with self-created or similar others that duplicate rather than contrast the self. That is likely to destroy attention, tolerance, empathy and understanding of real others.

Within groups and social networks there is a reduction of what earlier in this blog (in item 57) I called *cognitive distance*, and since cognitive distance is a source of learning and discovery, people are now mimicking each other, in blissful agreement on a shared prejudice, and ridiculing others, in outside groups. Developing in environments of intellectual incest, minds become dumb. Sender and receiver become similar, in circulation of similarity, in what Baudrillard called *circolocution*.

In the development of cloned identities in sub-cultures, shared views become self-evident, forming the established language game, and outsiders are not just wrong but wrong-headed, deviant, out of line.

Between groups, shared interests become difficult to negotiate. An overarching politics becomes virtually impossible. So, what were self-oriented selves now get assimilated and socialized into self-oriented hyperidentities. They achieve their sense of authenticity and worth by proxy from the group.

112. Loss of information, variety and life

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Baudrillard said that with modern communication we are flooded with information and that 'more information yields less information'. How can this paradoxical statement be understood? He also said that 'what flourishes by the same must perish by the same'. What does that mean?

In so-called *information theory* the degree to which information is *informative* is modelled in terms of its *improbability*, as a measure of its surprise value. Predicting the outcome of the toss of a coin (head or tails) is less informative than predicting the outcome of the throw of a dice (six possibilities). Known, familiar, trite, cliché propositions have little surprise value and hence low information value. Confirming an

established view, practice or theory is less informative than refuting it and coming up with a new, distinctive, contrary one.

In the preceding item in this blog I went along with Baudrillard's claim that with present communication technology people tend to assimilate themselves in groups of like-minded people, with similar ideas and habits, and that this reduces variety and *cognitive distance*, in a kind of intellectual incest. Conspiracy theorists seek each other out to nurse their favourite grudge. Lesser differentiation within groups narrows individual identity and merges individuals into *hyperidentities*. How fast and far this goes depends on how closed a community is, on how few outside relations members have.

Now, the measure of *uninformativeness* used in information theory is the same as the measure of *entropy*, lack of differentiation of energy states, used in thermodynamics. According to the second law of thermodynamics, in a closed system differences in energy states decay. When two bodies of different temperature are brought together they will exchange heat until temperatures are the same.

Here we see a parallel with the decay of information in the loss of differentiation in babble within closed social groups. Views and ideas converge to the same.

One definition of life is that it goes *against* the increase of entropy, in producing differentiated, distinctive, improbable forms of life. To do that, a form of life cannot be a closed system and must ingest food and excrete refuse to maintain its distinctive structure. Death yields decay into an undifferentiated mass, a chaos, of elementary particles.

Now I can understand Baudrillard's claim that more information is yielding less information, in two ways.

First, with communication technology there is an explosion of messages and images thrown around, but much of it arises from repetition, duplication, redundancy, amplification, reverberation in the internet, and from impulsive, unreflected and unargued utterances. Opinions rather than facts. Ease and low cost of communication allow for lower effort, in an explosion of triviality, a disintegration of information, a swell of entropy.

Second, what people send and select, the babble of what people tell each other within groups, has decreasing surprise value. In internally oriented, homogeneous social groups there is loss of cognitive distance, loss of differentiation in views and ideas. We can now say that this goes against life, constitutes a form of decay, a form of death.

Intolerance, closed minds, parochialism, chauvinism and nationalism are killers of cultural life. For life to remain, in communication, we need to break open closed communities. To live, closed systems must be opened to ingest and to defecate.

Indeed, as Baudrillard said: what flourishes by the same will perish by the same.

113. Loss of responsibility

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In item 109 of this blog I discussed what I called *system tragedy*. Well-intentioned ideas and actions are laced together in a complex, interdependent system, with cross-overs and mutations, yielding outcomes that cannot be foreseen and that nobody wants, let alone intends. This is mingled with personal and institutional interests.

Under this complexity, managers, in business and government, cannot realize the responsibilities they assume. They cannot admit this, since that would eliminate their authority and position. Inevitably, they regularly fall into failure. When pressed, they have to admit this. Yet they maintain the illusion of control, ritualized in high remuneration and bonuses, rationalized by the difficulties and risks they face. They credit success to their actions and blame failure on complexities.

This reminds me of a scene in the film 'Orfeu negro', the story of Orpheus and Euridice in the setting of carnival in Rio. At the beginning of the film the hero plays the guitar at daybreak, to a ring of admiring youths who believe that the sun will rise because of his play. And then, indeed it does.

Like former robber barons, kings and dictators, managers strive to maintain their position, no longer with physical force but on the basis of mythmaking and indoctrination. Conduct is enforced by conformism. Criticism is needed to make problems visible, but it is discouraged by ostracism or dismissal. Blinded, organizations stumble into crises. Procedures are enforced to regulate even professional labour that cannot be forced into closed protocols. Little is left to personal imagination or interpretation. This kills variety. And motivation. And as I argued in the preceding item of this blog, closed systems are bound to fail, to lose life.

Ideology has been defined as what is in the interest of others for me to believe. Foucault showed how ideology is assimilated and accommodated in our subconscious. Culture is ideology embodied in institutions, in rules of language games. This serves to hide the interests behind ideology.

Risk avoidance and the drive to master complexity and uncertainty by more rules runs into limitations, professional and entrepreneurial resistance, and work-arounds to escape from them. The resulting gaps are patched up by yet more rules. This contributes to yet further complexity, resulting in further unpredictability and inability of control, and strangling initiative.

I end with an illustration. Presently, under the drive towards a market regime in health care, in the Netherlands, hospitals are forced to subject professional medical practice to protocols for diagnosis and treatment. This is needed for health insurers to judge efficiency and impose conditions for funding. Problems remain in the judgement of quality, and further rules are designed for it. Surgeons are only allowed to perform operations if they

do them a minimum number of times per year. This yields concentration of complex treatments in larger hospitals. That yields a drive towards alliances or takeovers between hospitals, with all the problems involved. A political drive to control surging costs of health care leads to limits of funding. Hospital management is dependent on the community of specialists and does not dare to discipline them to prevent waste, expensive hobbyism, shirking, and corruption. The minister for health threatens to impose further controls. What is intended as a market is in fact an explosion of rules.

In this environment, it is almost impossible for managers to fulfill their tasks, and most managers are far from up to it. This leads to a ban on the reporting of problems, and a destruction of responsibility among both management and staff. This is about to erupt in public scandal.

114. Remedies?

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In the preceding four items in this blog, inspired by the work of Baudrillard, I paraded a few complaints about present society. Can I also offer any remedies? I indicated a few but here I will expand on them and give a survey.

Against loss of contact with reality, in *hyperreality*, we can go against mere opinion, emotion, hype and ecstasy and persist in demanding arguments and facts, even if, admittedly, facts are never 'rock bottom' objective, never identical to reality, and are mentally and socially construed. At least they entail a commitment to grasp reality, even if that is imperfect. The imperfection of our grasp entails the need for debate, for a contrast between what you and I think we grasp. And we can step out of the virtuality of games and make-believe, to combine experience with entertainment, action with simulation, face with console.

Against loss of individual identity, in *hyperidentity*, we can maintain variety, utilize and revitalize cognitive distance, and insist on room for one's own interpretation, one's own path in the construction of the self, even if that construction is social and we need others to loosen ourselves from our prejudice. We can try to use social networks to make new connections rather than consolidate existing ones. We can resist the regimentation of ideology embedded in institutions by bringing it to light, applying the x-ray of analysis.

Against *closed groups* or communities we can resist myopia, intolerance, nationalism, chauvinism, and insist on their opening up, on outside connections, and on turnover of membership. This applies to boards of directors and supervisors, committees, organizations, positions, jobs, etc. Democracy is never perfect, is often a myth, but it does yield turnover of power due to elections.

Against *loss of responsibility* we can stop hiding the inability to exercise responsibility as a result of *system tragedy*, unmask and demystify managerial fables of control, accept that not all uncertainty can or should be eliminated, leave room for error, and seek new forms of control. Here I refer to item 75 in this blog, on *horizontal control*. The crux of

that is that those controlled help to inform the control over them, with the reward of less control if they do so honestly.

Against system tragedy due to *complexity* of social systems, we can reduce complexity by decentralization, with a large degree of local autonomy, in localized government and smaller, more independent organizations, collaborating rather than concentrating in mergers or acquisitions. This is a classic solution: decompose. Another solution is to reduce strong ties, by reducing rules, untightening control. Here again I refer to horizontal control.

On a deeper level, underlying all this is the issue of universals that I discussed repeatedly in this blog. We should surrender claims of closed, complete and universal ideas and rules, applying everywhere and always, to recognize variety and contingency of circumstance, and the flux involved in life and society, the changes that cannot be foreseen and planned for. In short: imperfection on the move.