A Simulated Archaeology of Hyperreal Knowledge: Foucault and Baudrillard in the Age of Facebook

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Abstract

The present paper is an inquiry into the contemporary definitions of identity, perception, knowledge and reality in the virtual environment, focusing on the case-study of social media and the metamorphosis that these concepts are going through. Definitions are dissected under the magnifying lenses provided by theorists like Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, attempting to highlight the norms of discourse within the realm of the online.

Keywords: social media, discourse, knowledge, simulation, hyperreality

Concepts like reality, meaning and identity are increasingly shifting against the background of the development of social media. Each vision of reality is the result of interaction, Reiner Keller, in his *Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse* (SKAD), underlines the fact that our sense of reality in everyday life and the meaning of every object or event are the product of interaction (Keller 2018). This is how we can gain access to the tools we need to understand the „social construction of reality" – the idea that people and groups interacting in a social system create concepts and mental representations of each other's actions; these concepts are introduced to a much larger, institutionalized form of usage, while their repetition provides the means for meaning to be accepted as universal and used accordingly by society (Berger & Luckmann 1967). However, a significant portion of the interaction is taking place online, through social media. Here, identity – individual or collective – is

subject to permanent shifts, while being eroded by the depersonalization induced by the particular functionality of cyberspace. The complex network of assumed identities makes it difficult for each individual to establish a stable interconnectedness between personal identity and the dynamics of the cyber-community, as the reconceptualization of man's place within society acts as framework for creating new distinctions: the positive-negative polarities are not context-bound, thus escaping any coherent assessment.

Internet users are not similar to the comparatively passive recipients in the case of literature or film. Even though the latter category can actively participate in decoding a certain message, in the case of digital environments they can also contribute to *producing* it. Their status is not the one regularly attributed to viewers, as they can modify the parameters, the very existence of the digital network, they are able to deliberately redefine it, to convey its "materiality" into various new versions of itself. It is no longer a matter of *relating* to a text, it becomes a matter of *being included* in it, of organically coexisting.

1. Communication Simulates Information

Through constructing a new self and/ or by assuming multiple identities, the user is subconsciously trying to adjust reality, but instead of providing a basis for consistent change in the real, digital identities cause a significant discontinuity between the two alternate – and opposite – environments. The virtual world consequently becomes the best-case scenario for each and every possible desire, given the speed at which one can actually "construct" on-line. This digital fulfilment of needs is in a way minimalist, because its functionality is only valid within the limits of virtuality and exclusively according to the particular codes of each digital space, but concurrently it is potentially non-finite, as the actual amount of time that the user chooses to spend „inside" his/ her personalized utopia can easily exceed the one spent in the real. Designing one's own space, online persona and projecting a certain image is similar to Baudrillard's theory of simulation. Here, communication, instead of offering consistent clues about the objective reality, further degrades signification, constructing a hyper-reality that has nothing in common with

primary perception. The relationship between original and copy is revearsed. It is reality that tries to mimic the copy, it is the real that attempts to reproduce the dimensions of imitation (Baudrillard 1984, 3). Referring to Borges's metaphor of the map as the absolute case of disorienting simulation, Jean Baudrillard analyses the modes in which we perceive reality. Right from the start, perception is biased by cultural mechanisms such as television and films, or the complex system of distributing information through Internet and media. For the individual trapped inside a system that constantly provides contradictory signals and double-coded clues, reality and hyperreality overlap, in their representation as well as in their effects.

Discussing the possibility of accessing, in one form or another, an integral reality, and drawing upon Nietzsche's thoughts on the real world and the world of appearances, Baudrillard sees the world not only devoid of truth, but also devoid of any intention of finding it, of any need to encompass it. The universe of reconstructions and appearances takes the place of reality, along a trajectory marked by counterfeit and illusion. Thus, the individual is trapped between the lack of coherent justification for the world and the obsessive need for reality. The contextual intervention of media in the process of deliberately obstructing the vision of the individual becomes a trademark for postmodernity; television and Internet alter perception, manipulate perspectives, and confuse relations. Communication evades conveying a message, it becomes a tool for the generalized simulacrum conceived by a perpetually duplicating reality-shaped landscape.

For Baudrillard, the remarkable progress in communication also leads to a process that involves a loss of privacy and an increased – albeit artificial – sense of control. After the "disappearance" of the scene and the mirror, the potentialities of representation have multiplied, having the concept of screen as evolutionary lineage. The images abundantly promoted by television and Internet have stirred up a metamorphosis in the entire phenomenology of communication, on the one hand, and of the individual's capability to respond to the interface between himself and the images projected, on the other. The dimensional aspects of time and space are shaped by a process of

miniaturization, as technology reduces distances and the digitalization of communication enables a new way to connect to information channels. But instead of providing closer contact, this process of miniaturization causes a displacement of the individual, rendering him unable to find coherence within the complexity of information, images and continuously changing concepts (Baudrillard 1983, 127).

Everything can be readily turned into spectacle, against the background of a complex inversion between interior and exterior, between public and private. The boundaries allegedly preserving privacy intact are being altered by the arbitrary exposure to incomprehensible amounts of information. The supposedly unrestricted access to information does not create any need for validity and does not lead to better understanding. Instead, it consumes any means of objective representation, transforming the loss of privacy and the cluelessness brought about by the excessive amount of information into an obscene "ecstasy of communication". Any sense of secrecy is dissolved in the digitalized interface between the spectacle and the increasingly alienated individual, entangled in the superficiality of image, representation and conceptualization. The overexposure to a universe that has become too transparent can exacerbate the existential rhythm of the individual to a schizophrenic stage (Baudrillard 1983, 131).

In the realm of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and so many others, the institutionalized patters of knowledge considered by Foucault, Best and Kellner to be the landmarks of coherent social and cultural functionality are no longer stable. Conventionalism is dissolved, reduced to contingencies and fragmentariness. While assessing the interconnectedness between truth, power and knowledge, it is argued that each individual is inevitably subjectified by society and its hierarchies; being part of the hierarchical system represents a form of confinement, of disempowering classification. Historical studies, under such circumstances, merely unravel a specific pattern of subjectivity and the shifting design of power. Rationality no longer governs the interference between knowledge and power; its place is taken by new social and cultural constructs, which are in turn subject to change and complex influences. As a result, the transformations

undergone by the power structures – and, consequently, by their respective effects – cannot be objectively apprehended against a background of suppressed norms and consistency (Best & Kellner 1997, 157). The polarity of the changes can only be deciphered through the socially and culturally ignited power-mechanisms, and there is no universal standpoint in evaluating their potentiality.

2. The Discourse of the Unreal

Virtual reality has ceased to be a refuge from the "objective" one, becoming an autonomous environment, an alternative perceived as *real*. Hyperreality, through the substantiality and coherence of its organization, is no longer a referential counterpart for the tangible reality, on the contrary, it grows up to a functional environment that is superior to everyday reality, from the viewpoint of the extensive appeal to all senses and the hyperbolization of "enactment" possibilities – any idea can be "materialized". Cyberspace is transformed by the collective consciousness into a conceptual model for metamorphosis; reality does not mould fiction, it is fiction that tends to modify and adapt the "present continuous" of postmodernism (McHale 1991).

Each discourse – including the digital/ virtual one – can only exist within a specific, coherent context, linguistically defined and culturally altered. In Foucault's view, contextualization becomes the explanatory element in assessing the epistemological breaks along the historical evolution (Foucault 1989, 47). Nevertheless, the intrinsic value of a particular discourse, document or critical assertion surpasses the strictly contextual environment; the discontinuities of history are ultimately reflected in the study of value itself, as a sum-total of discursive practices, modulations in applying the norms of understanding and the alternation of discourses. The various procedures employed to decode meaning ultimately influence the very production of discourse through intricate patterns of inclusion, exclusion and transformation according to their relationship with the structures of power. Foucault sees discourse as a tripartite mechanism, having as functional elements the statement, the discursive function and the discursive formations. The focus is placed on the possibilities of inscribing each sentence within a particular system

of order, in order to let it acquire legitimacy. The hierarchy of the different statements is construed in a context-bound manner as well (Foucault 1982).

Translated into the functionality of social media, Foucault's theory could mean the increasingly rare interventions of the real in the virtual. In the enormously complex universe of social media, communication and extracting meaning are also strictly tied to the specific rules of an essentially subjective environment; even though some elements may be "universally" valid, thus able to transgress the (virtual) boundaries between different digital spaces, most of them are communicational and logical representations of user's views, independently, free from foreign influences. Moreover, even within the same environment, meaning is shifting, signs are interchangeable, and the only palpable continuity is the one provided by the user's complete freedom in programming his/ her own digital identity. Any unwanted feature can quickly become disposable; everything can be replaced or deleted without consequences. There is no irrevocable transformation within the digital environment; everything can be done, undone or re-done with one click.

The mutation of the digital environment from virtual playground to an addictive substitute for reality represents a twofold process. First, cyberspace and real life become interchangeable in the mind of the user, so that he/ she manifests a non-dissimulated preference for the former. It all happens in a fashion comparable with Baudrillard's three stages of simulacra, with the only obvious metanarrative of the digital being boundless freedom, as opposed to the real; limitless possibilities, the chance of "experiencing" a completely new dimension of existence and the absence of any need to conform are all facets of constructing an avatar in cyberspace, but in the same time they encapsulate the reasons for addiction. Providing such a multitude of chances to adjust one's identity through designing one's avatar, together with the excessiveness of freedom, cyberspace tends to produce a negative reflection on the "objective" reality of the user.

Progressively unfolding the inherent conflict between the real and the virtual, the individual begins to deliberately blur the distinction, only to legitimate the digital as the matrix-of-choice for personal existence. Unlike social and individual identity in real

life, the identity constructed within the digital can eventually de-materialize the "true" one, defined by economic, social, personal, ethnic or gender-based constraints. If at first only attenuated by the possibility of experiencing existence in a completely boundless environment, the real begins to be sanctioned for its inadequacy to the individual perspective and its incapacity to rise to personal standards, so, in the case of addiction, it gets sublimated altogether.

This displacement of identity within the digital is marked by a complex phenomenology, as each user is not limited to a single new digital alter-ego, but constantly exposed to the possibility of assuming multiple identities. Each new account, each new user-name creates a new digital extension of the self, a new cyber-materialization of a desire. And if the intervention of the real becomes too intrusive for the digital existence, there is a new solution at hand: delegating the virtual identity to another user, who, for a certain amount of (real) money, will be playing instead, so that the game itself does not suffer any damage. The preservation of the functional and evolutionary integrity of the digital environment is an essential part of its quasi-autonomous existence.

The phenomenology of (re)constructing identity within the digital environment is intimately connected to the particularities of cyber-spatiality: as the "territory" is non-finite, its occupants escape all types of regularization, evade all attempts to contextualize a limit. The cybernetic pattern of interaction between individual and environment is marked by another crucial feature, next to boundless (digital) space – instantaneity. Instantaneous access to any segment of virtual space and time means a transcendence of perception itself, not only of that directly concerning time and space, but also to the one connected to one's parameters of existence. Interaction is always instantaneous, temporality is suspended, and the digitalized environment functions not according to rules, but on the contrary, within a rule-free framework.

The instantaneity of interaction does not imply that the digital space is characterized by meaninglessness – meaning is always remnant, always validated and re-validated by each and every user, according to each and every individual perspective.

Meaning has not disappeared; moreover, it has simply become subjective, it has multiplied itself, its expansion being capable of permanently adjusting in order to conform to any change in the user's vision. Individuality is simultaneously dissolved in the mass of Internet users and heightened by the limitless possibilities to create, adapt and re-shape one's identity within the cybernetic community. Each individual becomes able to build a particular configuration of his or her own master narrative through the fragmentation and pastiche of the ones previously articulated by society; the new digital identity becomes the contextualization of the user's personal norms and representations, a unique vision of existence, apart from reality, but visible to the other users as well.

With the cyber-identity so perfectly hypostatizing one's desires, its capacity of becoming addictive does not resemble usual forms of dependence. Instead, the user's conceptualization of otherness begins to refer to the real. The digital is perceived as the most appropriate environment for self-development, whereas the real seems a medium marked by a prevailing possibility of failure, the assemblage of all the potentialities denied, of all the wishes unfulfilled. With each revaluation of the possibilities offered by the two – the real and the digital – the former is superseded by the non-restrictive structure of the latter. Cyberspace is conceptualized as the very embodiment of individual freedom. Just like social identity, constructed through perpetual interaction within a certain community and adherence to various sets of societal liberties and restrictions, building a digital self involves the same factors – except for the part involving restrictions. Each user is free to build multiple identities, a new and different one for every game played. Virtual world games and role-playing games, they are all based on the same concept of building an entirely digital identity in a specifically designed cyber-world, within the thematic framework of each environment and having as sole boundaries those dictated by the functionality patterns of the digital world.

There are no restrictions regarding transgressing boundaries – between different games, different online communities or different versions of cyberspace – and the same transversality remains valid for the digital identity (or identities). Even if within each particular cyber-world the possibilities are

boundless, each digital identity is normalized and validated only *inside that world*. Identity itself is immutable. Another game, another identity, same user. The transitional trajectory of each user seems to be in contrast with the arbitrary, seemingly static, territory-bound character of each particular identity. Thus, the concept of identity is being eroded by its own metamorphosis in the digital: once signed in, and having consequently overtaken a particular identity, the user cannot shift between various cyber-dimensions without appealing to another version of it. Identity is marked by specificity, as it is only validated for the particular environment for which the user has created it. The features conveyed by each cyber-world eventually shape the design of the single or multiple identities; the particularized identity becomes instrumental in the user's perception of the virtual reality he "inhabits".

3. New World, New Rules, New Identity

Along with identity, causality is another element which undergoes a metamorphosis in the digital space; the interconnectedness between cause and effect, as opposed to the real, is no more straightforward or natural, it is shaped by the same multiplicity of perspective that dictates the entire functionality of cyberspace. Based on this substantially shifting causality, perception or representation will automatically be layered, unstable, disjointed. By digitalizing human attributes, each cyber-dimension constructs a matrix of subjective rules and individualized codes, within which the user can create an apparently timeless but space-related identity, corresponding to the particularities of each setting. The patterns of information used to generate each slice of cyber-reality are all designed to transform the digital space, seemingly deprived of authentic sensations, into a valid and articulate environment, where identities can be substantively developed. Thus, the textuality projected by the medium-plus-identity assemblage becomes coherent and meaningful, not only for the user, but also for the entire online community, since it all functions as a whole, according to the same principles, within the same framework of identity building.

Questioning the reality of the digital is equivalent to questioning the real itself – it all depends on perspective and on the understanding of the various degrees of simulation. In Baudrillardian terms, it would be a matter of discerning between the artificial and the imitation of the artificial, the possibility of an authentic grasp of reality being already cancelled in this typically postmodern space. Identities are just as elastic as the definition of reality and just as superfluous as the concept of knowledge. Between the digitally constructed identity and the particular environment that validates its existence there is a programmatic pattern of doubled manipulation: on the one hand, the user is shaping and re-shaping the environment, and on the other, the digital space itself molds the possibilities of hypostatizing each identity and of inscribing it into the functional configuration of the whole. As if applying Foucault's visionary description of an interface producing new ways of domination while cancelling the equation of equality between reason, emancipation and progress (Foucault 2002, 37), each identity seeks to evolve – whatever definition of evolution might be applicable – and, simultaneously, to re-articulate the (virtual) reality and contextualize it in order for it to best fit the user's vision against a background of negotiated meanings.

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