4-15-1993

Zip Your Suits and Take Your Pills: *White Noise* and the Death of the Social; Or, How I Learned to Enjoy Postmodern Sunsets and Not Worry About Apocalypse

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.02.08

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**Recommended Citation**


DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.02.08

Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol2/iss1/8

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A comparison between Don DeLillo and Jean Baudrillard is not difficult to make: both writers are preoccupied with the media, catastrophe, and simulation. Recent studies of DeLillo and Baudrillard have been concerned with drawing corollaries between each writer's treatment of a society of simulation. In the simulation, the loss of the real devours communication in a polyphony of noise. Meaning, instead of being created, collapses from the excess of signs. The death of the social occurs after the poles of meaning implode - when a potentially infinite number of signifiers float free from their signifieds, all signs become interchangeable and self-referential. In The Ecstasy of Communication, Baudrillard writes: "All events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information..." (p. 24). Douglas Kellner, in his book Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond, explains that "the proliferation of information and media neutralizes the masses, bores and emulsifies them, thereby destroying the social" (p.86). Mass and media absorb each other; each is both the subject and the object of the simulation which causes and conceals the death of the social.

The world of DeLillo's novel White Noise is an all-too-familiar babble of images and codes, disencumbered of referentiality, and speeding towards critical mass and sensory overload. White Noise thrives on simulation; in fact, SIMUVAC teams, who typically simulate disasters in order to prepare for real catastrophes, use the real Airborne Toxic Event as an opportunity to perfect their simulation (p.139). In one of his most popular definitions, from his book Simulations, Baudrillard defines the real as:

...that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction... the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal. (p.146)

The hyperreal is that which is more real than the real, or that which perfectly suits its model. In a hyperreal world, interchangeable signs play freely behind their models or codes, and mimic significant content. The signs are interchangeable, because they are void of meaning. Meaning can be derived from them only when they are plugged into a simulation model. As more and more signs accumulate, the codes used to order meaning become oversaturated and implode. Baudrillard writes:

Nothing separates one pole from the other, the initial, from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another: an IMPLOSION... This is where simulation begins. (p.57)

As representation falls prey to simulation, the simulation absorbs the real, so that no comparison can be made between the real and the simulation. The reality principle slides deeper into the mire of simulation; DeLillo writes, "The American mystery deepens" (p. 60). In simulation, the real cannot be used as a guide; the truth of a sign depends upon the structural law of value. Outside of perspectival space, without reference to the real, the social dies in the space of simulation (SSM, p. 83).

In White Noise, the most photographed barn in America is the essence of hyperreality. The main character, Jack Gladney, and his pop culture buddy Murray Jay Suskind visit the tourist attraction to maintain a collective image of the barn. The structural code dictating what the perfect barn should look like creates the simulation of the most photographed barn in America. Murray tells Jack:

Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn... We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now. (p. 12-3)

After seeing the signs, it becomes impossible to discern the real barn from the simulation; of course, all that there is. Real and hyperreal implode into simulation, where everything is hyperreal; the truth of the model lies in its being a model of simulation (Sim, p. 63).

Under this logic of simulation, the masses and the "social" strive to conform with the code, which defines them at the same time that it allows them to escape definition (SSM, p. 33). According to Baudrillard, one can attempt to resist being structured by the code through silence and passivity (p. 33). Jack Gladney will not resist the code, since to subvert the code risks being left out or devalued. Jack Gladney will not resist the code to reaffirm his existence, when he "interacts" with an ATM machine:
disClosure: The Buying and Selling of Culture

Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval... What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. (p. 46)

As a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack unsuccessfully buries his obsession with death in his fascination with Hitler's overwhelming, almost immortal, presence in contemporary culture. Babette, Jack's wife, secretly takes Dylar, a high tech experimental drug, to counteract her own vague fear of death. Poisoned by the toxic cloud of Nyodyne D, Jack decides to murder the Dylar project manager, who Babette slept with to obtain the drug, in order to avenge his wounded pride and to obtain access to Dylar now that his own real death is inevitable. The immortality that Jack desires does not lie with Hitler or with Dylar, but within the flux and stability of the system. The individual worth that he wants is impossible for him in the society of simulation, because anybody (any body) could replace him. In fact, Jack is Babette's third husband; she is his fifth marriage. Jack, or J.A.K., Gladney is merely a sign; he is interchangeable.

This interchangeability implies a proliferation of signs that will necessarily collapse into the masses. When signs exchange exclusively among themselves, the masses are created. In Seduction, Baudrillard writes:

The masses themselves form a clone-like apparatus that functions without the mediation of the other... the masses are simply the sum of all the systems' terminals - a network travelled by digital impulses... given over to manipulation (self-manipulation) and "seduction" (self-seduction). (p. 173)

Fascinated by the images and events playing out across America's spectacular mediascape, the masses do not root out content; instead, they delight in the incessant play of white noise. The endless consumption of signs and images become, for Baudrillard, a use value in itself - a method to attain status or prestige (SSM, p. 45). Jack Gladney consumes fast food, advertising slogans, trivia, and pharmaceuticals, not only as a way of keeping up with the American environments department at the College-on-the-Hill, but to define himself. Mark Poster, in his introduction to Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, paraphrases Baudrillard's 1968 book, The System of Objects:

Advertising codes products through symbols that differentiate them from other products, thereby fitting the object into a series. The object has its effect when it is consumed by transferring "meaning" to the individual consumer. A potentially infinite play of signs is thus instituted which orders society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom and self-determination. (p. 2)

When Jack searches through the mall and the supermarket, he is attempting to absorb the excess meaning from the products that he consumes, in order to fill the "bland expanse" of his face (his surface) with "familiar life-enhancing labels" (pp. 65, 119).

Inundated under the noise of infinite signs, only spectacle stands out. All truth is neutralized under the pressure of perfect simulacrum - the spectacle. The spectacle becomes meaningful only insofar as it conforms with, and exceeds the expectations of, the structural law of value. To be meaningful, the spectacle must radically outdo all other sign spectacles. The escalating demand for signs to be consumed creates the white noise that causes the social to collapse. Excruciatingly detailed news reports, minute-by-minute updates, and rumors saturate the airwaves during the Airborne Toxic Event. Families crowd together in shelter to wait for the toxic cloud to dissipate. The masses are silenced by the wealth of information; signs and fragments of information travel freely, independent of human transference. The death of the social simulates the social, neutralizing social relations and thus the social itself (SSM, pp. 66-7). The devalued structure of the social, according to Baudrillard, becomes "administration pure and simple" (p. 81).

The masses gravitate to the spectacle as the simulation of the dead and decayed social. Leonard Wilcox, in his article "Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative," observes that the media transforms death itself into simulation, "death by 'print-out'" (p. 353). In spectacle, objects triumph over subjects, and upset the equilibrium of the code. Baudrillard, in Fatal Strategies, claims that:

Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit... (p. 7)

Actually, the spectacle of tremendous excess only appears to upset the code - because the code allows, and in fact creates, a simulation of rebellion against death - and thus confirms liberation as an illusion. Eluding the code is always a myth; likewise, any opportunity to subvert death, which the code engenders as antithetical to life, is an illusion propagated by the code to advance the simulation.

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The media’s modes of simulating death, Kellner explains, transform a natural event into a sign spectacle (p. 107). In the spectacle, California fulfills the role of the other. It allows us to research and examine the signs of death in obscene detail, as if a familiarity with the simulation of death will enable us to circumvent real death. California, one of DeLillo’s pop culture professors says, exists so that we can diffuse death by relegating it to the status of commodity, or sign, where we are under the mistaken impression that it can be manipulated:

For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and the TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is. (p. 66)

Sacrificial scenes of death, as spectacle, fuel our increasing demand for meaning. Jack spends family time with his children watching television, where spectacular simulations of death stage a hyperreal performance across the blank screens of their lives.

For Baudrillard, only death escapes the code. As Jack begins to identify with the programmed signals assailing him from the television, he assumes that he can manipulate the signs and subvert his own death. He tries to lie to the doctor who is testing him for Nyodyne D poisoning, but is incapable of responding without referring to the code. Similarly, his daughters do not contract the symptoms of toxic exposure until after the radio informs them what the symptoms are. To act alone, without reference to the structural model, means escaping hyperreality into death. Although death exists as a sign in the realm of simulation, death defies simulation; dying recovers the real. As well as expressing his frustrated desire for immortality, Jack’s obsessive fear of death, particularly of mass death, is a response to the horror of the real - the terror of escaping simulation into an unfamiliar “reality.” Nuclear annihilation - to which, ironically, critics often compare the imploding Airborne Toxic Event - Baudrillard claims, is the final sign of simulation (Sim, p. 74-5). Since nuclear war threatens to eliminate spectacle under the massive retaliation of the real, the drive to spectacle - and the increasing desire to consume more signs - makes apocalypse unlikely (FS, p. 186).

Except death, only the ironic reversion of value can defy the simulation. In In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities Or, The End of the Social, Baudrillard writes that defiance “is a process of extermination of the structural position of each term...it is a defiance of meaning, of power, of truth, of their existing as such, of their pretending to exist as such” (p. 69-70). Ironic defiance allows one to regain the position of a manipulative subject within the structural code of simulation. Although Nyodyne D has encoded Jack in the simulation of death, his refusal to see the doctor distances him from the simulation - his actions do not fit within the logic of simulation:

Dr. Chakravarty wants to talk to me but I am making it a point to stay away. ...He wants to insert me once more in the imaging block, where charged particles collide, high winds blow. But I am afraid of the imaging block. ... I am taking no calls. (p. 325)

In the information dense society of simulation, Jack stops searching for meaning and revels in the pure joy of signs.

Within the space of the simulation, Jack has achieved a tenuous hold on his position as a subject (one who has been accepted and encoded by the simulation). He has the power to manipulate the infinite number of interchangeable signs as play, since “meaning” is merely a structural relationship between signs in the simulation code. Recognizing his own presence in the simulation, Jack calls off his quest for meaning - which was speeding him towards removal from the code and real death. Jack recovers the pleasure of pure sign-play: “Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery. Why try to describe it?” (p. 227). Why indeed?

Endnotes


2 Baudrillard, in In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, claims, “The mass and the media are one single process” (p. 44). Oversaturated with messages, the social collapses into the indifference of the masses. As mass and media implode, the social suffocates in an atmosphere of hyperconformity. The masses, which Baudrillard suspects have always been more powerful than the media, reject meaning in favor of spectacle; he explains:

Messages are given to them, they only want some sign, they idolise the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolise any content so long as it...
resolves itself into a spectacular sequence. ... [The masses] accept everything and redirect everything en bloc into the spectacular, without requiring any other code, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination. (p. 10, 43-44)

The sphere of the social is overrun by countless simulations of the social, killing meaningful social relationships.

3 For Baudrillard, the structural law of value accepts only those signs which replicate their simulacra - the hyperreal. Simply put, the hyperreality of a simulation is measured by how accurately the simulation represents the structural model of the simulation.

4 Through the endless proliferation of the model, the hyperconformity of the masses creates the simulation of the social. The social itself is less real that the simulation of the social, because the simulation, as model, provides the measure of "reality." In the space of simulation, the real is transfigured into model. Baudrillard writes:

The real is hyperrealised. Neither realised, nor idealised: but hyperrealised. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent destruction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model. (SSM, p. 84)

The simulacra absorbs the real - the social.

Works Cited


