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McLuhan & Baudrillard: Notes on the Discarnate, Simulations and Tetrads

Bringing McLuhan and Baudrillard together needs little justification, as there is considerable overlap between the two. Baudrillard draws some of his own provocative ideas from McLuhan and readily acknowledges his debt to the Canadian thinker. Though articulated in different styles and with varied emphases and conclusions, both have argued that information is no longer an instrument for producing ideology but that it is an ideology in itself. Faced with a communication network that is expanding and incorporating the globe into its semantic structure, we wait for an understanding of this process with bated breath. But whereas Baudrillard sees little that is positive about this transformation and speaks in apocalyptic tones of the subjugation of humanity to novel forms of control, McLuhan concludes that with the rise of the mass media an innovative way of existing, capable of seeing the world in new ways, comes into being. The Gutenberg subject dies and some new form is being born.

I would like to single out one crucial aspect of this new cultural environment, differently explored by both Baudrillard and McLuhan, and organize it around the idea of the tetrad. “The study of the media,” wrote McLuhan, “begins with the observation of their effects” (Letters of Marshall McLuhan 438). Similarly, Baudrillard begins his investigation of one of the major effects of living within an electronic environment which he calls simulations. Simulations, argues Baudrillard, entail the process of duplication and reproduction that occurs in our media-satured, image laden environment. At its most extreme, simulations involve a peculiar relationship between the original and its reproduction: the original is evacuated of its most idiosyncratic and unique qualities which are replaced with the mere stylistic effects of the original. At this stage, the simulated image bears no relationship to the original but exists as a self-referential entity. Its power lies in its ability to mask the fact that the substance of the real has disappeared.

McLuhan has a much more rhetorical and perhaps more fruitful description of this phenomenon. Without delving too deeply into the metaphysics of simulations, McLuhan realized that the reproductive thrust of our electronic environment is cleverly parodic. Parody is one road running alongside another (para hodos). It involves, wrote McLuhan in Cliche to Archetype, a Lewis Carroll
world in which a fake world is presented “as a realistic scale model” (169). At the bottom of both Baudrillard’s simulations and McLuhan’s probes into our parodic world of electronic culture lay a number of compelling observations about the transformation of our political and social world. Applying the tetrad to the idea of simulations allows us to postulate four verifiable statements:

1. What do simulations enhance or intensify?
2. What do simulations render obsolete or displace?
3. What do they retrieve that was previously made obsolete?
4. What do they produce or become when pressed to an extreme?

A brief exploration of the ideas of both McLuhan and Baudrillard that pertain to the phenomena of simulations is in order before we can apply the tetrad to simulations.

The simulated body as electronic parody

Scholars have only recently focused their attention on the history of the human body, and concluded, with little surprise, that the human body has been variously perceived, interpreted and represented in different epochs and within widely dissimilar material cultures. The full entry of the electronic media into everyday life a new interest in the body came to be formulated. Some of the early meditations on the body can be found in the work of Marshall McLuhan, who in his usual maddening style, lit up parts of the new intellectual territory and left it to others to build on his foundations.

Within this new discourse, the body becomes the arena in which society’s anxieties about faery, decay, corruption, the blunting of sensibility, and most important, about the nature of consciousness itself, came to be expressed. One of McLuhan’s central metaphors, technology as an extension of the human body, spoke in a double sense about how technology both colonizes the body and transforms the host into a servomechanism of the new electronic environment.

The technological extension of the human body also brings a new form of discarnate existence to the foreground. Being discarnate, argued McLuhan, is very much part of our modern condition. We are accustomed to talking to each other across hundreds of miles on the telephone, and to having people invade our living rooms and nervous systems through radio and television. Through electronic media, “discarnate man” [sic] can be projected in many different places simultaneously. Because it is images minus body, the self is no longer physical but rather a pattern of information in a field of other patterns of information. A phantom body parallel to the real body: a parodic extension.

From parody to irony

The identity of the discarnate individual exists in what McLuhan called “a phantom electronic world” which is more than a succession of objects, moments or arguments. It is a simultaneous barrage of electronic simulations which requires an intense involvement on the part of the hearer, listener, and viewer who is found in this new environment.

The effects of discarnate existence are intricate and complex, for if the discarnate world is one of high involvement. It is also a world of profound irony and intellectual distancing. This paradox has to be seen to some extent as a consequence of living at the intersection between participation with the electronic media on the one hand, and the decline of an older, private identity on the other. The electronic world, which McLuhan suggests has retrieved myth and simultaneity, has also displaced private personal identity and thus erased some of the older typographical qualities of seriousness, clarity, linearity and the value of public discourse.

Many of the results of the tension of this paradox are discomforting. We are courted with images. We know at some level that we are being lied to by the advertising images that we consume and that much of television information is decontextualized and fragmented. We even congratulate ourselves on our ability to see through the hokum of PR image management. We pride ourselves on our mental superiority. At the same time, our direct and intense involvement with images makes us vulnerable to its exhortations. Unlike discursive language, images do not make arguments or state propositions; they convey a mood, a feeling, a sense of well or ill-being without a clear cut articulation of any issues. The image world is essentially ironic. Like other forms of irony, images say what they do not entirely mean. Nobody is obliged to take them literally, and this creates a false sense of detachment. It is a paradoxical form of perception which can be identified as detached involvement. Images make us think we are detached when we feel highly involved.

Baudrillard and simulations

Baudrillard addresses a similar issue when he argues that we have become fascinated with the media reference to human creation as an endless mirroring process. Ours has become the information culture of the simulacrum, the simulated world of signs in which the real has been replaced by words and images that refers to it.

Lacan’s description of the bourgeois ego in its mirror stage is worth mentioning here. Within the context of Lacan’s reformulation of Freud, domination takes the form of mis-recognition, in which one mistakes the seeming unity of the image for the reality. And this involves a mis-recognition of identity, and a mis-reading of the actual social relations that constitute subjectivity.

The new “cold” universe of communication, maintains Baudrillard, has replaced the old Faustian and Prometheus period of production. Previously, the materials that we were being manipulated were real bodies living within the intimate world of projection, the imaginary, and the symbolic. It was a world of interiority, private space, and domestic scenes: McLuhan termed it the literate world where the opposition of subject/object and public/private were still meaningful. Now in place of a reflexive subject—what Baudrillard calls the Lacanian mirror stage, the site of identification and subjectivity—there is the non-reflexive surface on which the smooth operations of communication unfold. Baudrillard
concludes that “with the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object of this era—our body and the whole surrounding universe becomes a control screen” (Simulations 169).

The body politic becomes a body of political polls, image consultants and spin doctors. Representative democracy becomes a representation of democracy. Politics have become the reproduction of politics at the level of media spectacle. "If McLuhan’s formula makes any sense," writes Baudrillard, “it is certainly in this connection" (126). The medium of simulation is now the message. The Global Village is also Bentham’s Panopticon. When people are translated into images and information, the chief mode of control becomes information. Everything from Nielsen ratings, to market surveys, to polls and census taking, to credit bureau investigation, becomes part of the intelligence gathering operations that constantly monitor and maintain our own electronically constructed social identities.

As the materials being manipulated are no longer bodies but images, and as the body is being displaced into electronic commands, we enter into a postmodern world of simulations. The real is, like Antonioni’s photographer, trapped by its own “blow up.” At the center of Baudrillard’s ideas is the Lacanian notion of misrecognition, the inability to recognize the pseudo-event that has displaced and nudged reality out of the picture. Baudrillard operates on an epistemological level where reality has imploded into the reproduction, and that the reproduction has taken on a new, entirely negative function.

McLuhan exhorts us to examine this phenomenon in a different light, not as mirror and reflection which posits both a physical link and a possibility of misrecognition (the Baudrillard model), but as lamp and illumination: a structure of parallels without obvious connection. McLuhan’s epistemology operated on the level of “homologies.” Both image and reality are twins that constantly impel us onward towards their transformation. It is McLuhan’s homological model that is so central to the heuristic of the tetrad.

If we apply the tetrad to simulations we can ask some relevant questions about the cognitive processes that are being extended by our technology. If simulations enhance a discernable existence of intense involvement and ironic distancing, what do they retrieve? What do simulations obviate? What do simulations turn into when pushed to an extreme? These questions are to be viewed as the beginning of a provisional analysis; many of the ideas generated will be self-contradictory, but they are a useful aid to the study of the media and its effects.

Enhances: Extension of body, parody, irony, postmodernity, recombinant style.
Retrieves: Tribal bricolage, Eclecticism
Flips: Erasure of body, makes power structures more transparent, and intervention more plausible.
Obsolesces: Private identity, the idea of authorship.

Works Cited