

“Simulacra” is derived from the Latin word “simulacrum,” which means “likeness” or “similarity.” The term simulacra was first used by Plato, when he defined the world in which we live as an imperfect replica of the world of Ideas. According to Plato, the chair that I am sitting on is not a real chair but is the imitation of a chair in utopia. For Plato, simulacrum is a replica of the imperfect reality, which is the replica of the world of the idea. Plato himself also belongs to this world. Following his theory, is there any way that we can determine the truth in this world?

Unlike Plato, Nietzsche believed in creativity, life and the reality of the world in which we live now, rather than believing in an ideal world that lies beyond this one. By insisting that in this world, there are a variety of truths that co-exist while conflicting or complementing each other, he led the movement of post-modernism. He insisted “the concept of simulacrum in the twilight of the idols, meaning that most people, by ignoring the consistent contribution of their senses and resorting to the constructs of language and reason, arrive at a distorted copy of reality.”

A fable by Jorge Luis Borges briefly depicts the concepts that preceded simulacra. Imperial mapmakers of a great empire created a map that was so excessively large and detailed that it covered the entire empire. The map existed in a life-sized version, with the grounds underlying it and the people living on it; the map was a flawless imitation of the empire. A few years later, the map started to wear out and reveal the actual ground under the map, which had turned into a barren land. In the empire, the simulacrum of reality, there was nothing left but a frayed map. Baudrillard, a renowned French social theorist and philosopher, used this fable as a specific analogy to concisely illustrate his theory.

In his book, *“Simulacra and Simulations”*, Baudrillard claimed that “the simulacrum is never that which conceals truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” By claiming this, he argues against Nietzsche’s post-modern view that the simulacrum is not an imitation of the reality, but becomes the truth itself, mentioning that in a post-modern society, the original object no longer has a true meaning. A copy can be treated as though it was the original object; the hierarchical relationship between the imitated and the original has been deconstructed. The replica of the original object rules over the real world.

According to Baudrillard, there are three phases of order of simulacra. He explains how the relationship between simulation and reality has been changed, and claims that simulacrum have existed through history, yet the meaning and the characteristic of each simulacra from different historic periods contains distinctive value.

In the pre-modern period, covering the renaissance to the industrial revolution, the artificially created image is simply the replacement of the original item, or an ideal image of nature. In this period, art camouflaged and manipulated nature; it is the reflection of a basic reality. We can often spot baroque paintings that depict figures of the surrealistically beautiful Maria and angels descending from the heaven.

In the second order of simulacra, which starts from the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the distinction between reality and its representation began to blur due to the mass production and proliferation of copies that look identical to the prototypes. In this phase, the image masks and perverts a basic reality. For instance, the advent of cameras led to the creation of photographs, while the advancement of mechanical engineering made the mechanical reproduction of paintings possible.

In the third order of simulacra, the present age, or the information age, we are dealing with a precession of simulacra. Baudrillard defines this phase as, “the simulacrum is an image without resemblance” (p. 257), “Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum” (SS p.6). Baudrillard declares that

nowadays the representation precedes and determines the original. This is the era of replica and code: computers, virtual reality, cloning, the news media generating the news, Disneyland. The real and the fake do not exist any more, but the simulations of reality; those imageries bear no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. These days information replaces the role of machine, which is the fundamental mode of production. Baudrillard defined this phenomenon as “hyper-reality”.

The term, Hyper-reality, illustrates the lack of the ability of the consciousness to distinguish reality from fantasy in this age of information and advanced technology. Hyper-reality is not only referred to as a substitution for physical reality, or virtual reality. Hyper-reality sometimes creates virtual reality as an experience within the physical reality; in hyper-reality, elements such as virtual reality and physical reality interact with each other. Hyper-reality generates the zone in which the line between the real and virtual is blurred, and the virtual seems real. The difference between hyper-reality and virtual reality is like the difference between a theme park and the cinema.

Cinema simply creates a virtual reality. When people enter the theater and the lights go out, they encounter a sequence of realistic images that replaces their perceptual system. Audiences experience the state of mind of the characters within themselves, but they do not interact with other audience members while they are in the realm of virtual reality in which the cinema is presented.

Baudrillard used Disneyland as the perfect example of the simulacrum to illustrate the idea of hyper-reality. He tells us that Disneyland is the play of illusions and phantasm, however it is much more realistic than illusion; it shows us a social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious reveling in real America, in its amusements and disadvantages. People touch and see the objects that project the fantasies of childhood. Inside, Disneyland is a flamboyant and artificially created world of the imaginary, which is neither true nor false. Outside of Disneyland, there is the parking lot, displaying absolute solitude. Disneyland is not the only thing that displays the concept of hyper-reality.



Disneyland, CA.



Parking lot. (Outside of Disneyland)

These days, we encounter surprisingly diverse types of hyper-realities without realizing that we are experiencing them almost every day, and even at every moment. When two people communicate by talking on the telephone, each of them have the belief that they are real themselves, and the other side is virtual. Being stuck in a virtual reality and a physical reality, their act, having a conversation via phone, seems natural. The incidence of the human voice in the real and virtual world generates a natural manner. Consider Los Angeles: the city is surrounded by imaginary places with certain themes, which are constantly establishing a new reality. For example, "Chinatown" in Los Angeles does not resemble any town in China; it is built according to western insights of Chinese culture, and is a fabricated simulation. However, as Chinese settlers actually moved in several decades ago and have been living in this "miniature Chinese town" it has been creating its own existence, and thus has become a newly created interpretation of a town in China.

In the post-modern society, the following phenomena cause a loss of distinction between reality and the simulacrum: Multinational capitalism, Urbanization, Language and ideology and Media culture.

Baudrillard claimed that capital defines our identity. As the industrial process becomes more and more sophisticated and complex, consumers have lost track of the real value of the products they consume; in the territory of multinational corporations, national identity does not even have a role to play. Most people cannot identify the actual plant that produces the coffee bean. Ironically, Starbucks increasingly identifies our urban realities.

Urbanization causes the dislocation of reality, and has changed our conception of the natural world. Originally, the urban area was surrounded by nature, yet we now often distinguish natural areas within the urban area as "protected zones". Also, the emergence of massive townhouses and new kinds of urban planning, such as "Americana," in which all kinds of artificially created cultural symbols and commercial identities are mixed in one place, resulting in a neighborhood that almost looks like a theme park, has given us a surrealistic living environment.

According to Baudrillard, post-modernism understands ideology as the support for our very perception of reality. Post-modern society very much depends on utilizing language to structure its perceptions; all created representations of reality are always ideological already, and are always already assembled by simulacra.

Contemporary media, such as television, film and the Internet are recognized as bridges that display and send information or stories to us. In this era, the functions of media go beyond those simple tasks, and also act as a lens that enables us to echo and interpret ourselves through media images, which are mostly created by mass culture.

Multinational companies use the mechanism of simulacra in their commercials as a strategy to seduce consumers to manipulate their will in order to make profits. Television not only limits the viewer's thought process but is also the most powerful medium that produces simulacra by spreading information; television manipulates and fabricates the truth, and makes a massive amount of viewers believe in it in a very short amount of time. The viewers who believe the manipulated truth, generated by television, reproduce another manipulated truth by communicating with each other; and as they communicate these fabricated truths, they discard the junction between truth and manipulated truth. In other words, at the stage where the proliferation of information and sign derived from media reaches its climax, the function and meaning of individual information and signs will be destroyed and this will cause the media-created reality and reality itself to collapse into one, and thus create a society of simulation. In the society of simulation, the masses absorb all information, signs, and messages, and make them all meaningless.

Baudrillard is skeptical about the society of the simulacra in the post-modern era, which could take control over the fundamental discipline of society, such as moral values, and misuse the simulacrum to create a false political agenda. However, ironically, some artists from the early post-modern period caused people to recognize the reality in which they live by adapting characteristics of this phenomena to their work.

Marcel Duchamp's work, "Fountain", which was created in 1917, is an example of an artwork that does not represent the artist's own craft. By bestowing the meaning of "art" on a ready-made product, Duchamp transformed a commercial product into an art piece, eliminating the borderline between mass culture and traditional art, and the media used in each. He insisted that the procedure of choosing the object is also a critical part of art making. He addressed the idea that if an object is removed from its context, it loses its previous definition, and becomes an independent object possessing an entirely new and different meaning; the "Fountain" is probably the first art piece to echo Baudrillard's idea of simulacrum.



Marcel Duchamp, "Fountain" (1917)

Andy Warhol took the next step by bravely bringing a few stacks of boxes of Brillo (1964), sculptures made of wood, which are products that symbolize mass production, from the supermarket to the gallery space and turning them into an art work. Warhol mass-produced artwork by using silk screening and mass-produced goods to create most of his works. He tore down the boundary between art and mass culture by taking his imagery from advertising and the mass media, making statements such as: "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine." These days, everyday-goods with ordinary contexts are replacing artifacts, like the imitation replacing the original.



Andy Warhol, "Brillo" (1964).

Currently, many computer-generated images are being created, and the structure of traditional art has been deconstructed due to the advancement of technology. Nam Jun Paik invented a method of creating his own work by using television, which represents the mass media culture. Like Duchamp and Warhol used ready-made goods to create their art, Paik used television to create his art. Buddha TV (1974), his groundbreaking work, creates an infinite feedback loop between a Buddha statue and its own image on a monitor, projected by a closed-circuit video camera and creating a mirror effect. In the infinite loop of the interaction between the statue and the video camera encountering each other, it is hard to tell which one is the original and which one is the leader of the relationship between them. This work creates its own miniature world of simulacrum inside of it. By juxtaposing two totally different objects, the statue of Buddha and the western media, the past and the present, Paik demolished the boundaries between them.



Nam Jun Paik, "Buddha TV" (1974).

As technology develops rapidly, the potential of digital art has become limitless. Multi-edition art pieces with no original source are now being created; there is no original artwork, but simply a digital file, consisting of numbers and codes. The advent of digital media widened the realm of creativity for designers and artists and gave them a chance to explore and create new types of artworks. In the words of Nam Jun Paik, "As the collage technique replaced oil painting, so will the cathode-ray tube replace the canvas," and as such, more and more artists and designers are creating virtual imagery. They represent the reality and no longer narrate about the world in which they were produced, but represent a completely different world that is independent from where they were generated.

Artists should take advantage of digital media using the nature of simulacra by simply mirroring the fragment of this era to visualize the dilemma of society, and thus to trigger viewers to recollect the idea of the truth that lies underneath the manipulated artificial images generated by society. Now, what is needed is design that does not deteriorate the original or that is better than original, to have a positive impact on other designers. For this reason, I believe that the role of artists and designers is becoming more significant today, in this era of oblivion. Just like scientists and artists, designers today must embody their generation as well as suggest a blueprint for the next culture. Design is one of the human behaviors to adapt that environment that surrounds us, and it should guide us to reach the next step.

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