Hyporeality, the Society of the Selfie and Identification Politics

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Abstract

This paper considers the relevance of Baudrillard's work for the contemporary era. It argues that the digital revolution that has escalated since his death in 2007 represents the extension of that productivist project he identified in western, semiotic societies: the desire to produce and realize the real. The liberation of each individual as a producer of images and content increases our stock of the real, but it has the reversive effect of proliferating and hollowing out the real, causing the mass-media age of hyperreality to reverse into the digital-age of hyporeality. It also reverses the fate of individuals and their subjectivity, as they move from being merely nodes of a network to being the center of their own, personalized media ecologies and networks. The self now absorbs the world in the society of the selfie. This is not, however, the unleashing of a real interiority but the expansion of that system of semiotic simulacral control Baudrillard had critiqued in his earliest work. This emphasis on the self and its identity can also be seen today in the rise of 'identity politics.' This paper argues that Baudrillard would have opposed this as caught within the dominant system and instead argues for the importance today, in a digital-era defined by the dominance now of 'signal value,' of an 'identification politics' that functions as the real mode of control. The model for this relationship, the paper concludes, is that of the experimental subject, wired and surveyed in its pains and pleasures.

Keywords

hyporeality, selfies, identity, identity-politics, identification, digital

> *Reality has barely had time to exist and already it is disappearing…*
>
> (Baudrillard, *Intelligence* 17)

The Cambrian Explosion of Realities

Looking back, we can see more-clearly the contours of the broadcast-era. In the centuries following Gutenberg's printing press, a model developed of the mass production, distribution and consumption of information. By the 20th century, this had evolved into an industrial factory-style system, encompassing print, music, radio, cinema and television, with corporations and public organizations producing vast quantities of standardized, uniform content and pushing them at consuming mass audiences. But this wasn't just about the provision of entertainment. What was being mass-produced was *reality itself.*

It was a point well understood by Jean Baudrillard. His early work on the post-war semiotic, consumer society explores how electronic mass media transform 'the lived, unique, eventual character of the world' into signs that are combined together to produce the real (*Consumer Society* 123). 'Over the whole span of daily life,' he writes, 'a vast process of simulation is taking place,' with the media assuming 'the force of reality,' obliterating the real in favor of its own model (126). Increasingly, what characterizes these simulacra for Baudrillard is their 'hyperreality'—their excessive, high-definition, pornographic technical semio-realization of the real (*Fatal Strategies* 11, 50). By the time of *Forget Foucault, Seduction* and *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard sees this *excess* as central to our entire system. This is a culture, he argues, devoted to 'production'—understood not as industrial manufacture, but in the original sense of 'to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: *pro-ducere*' (*Forget Foucault* 21). Hence Baudrillard's furious description of our

productive society, our 'rage … to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs,' to make everything visible, legible, rendered, recorded and available, with everything passing over into 'the absolute evidence of the real' (*Seduction* 32, 29). Ours, he says, 'is a pornographic culture *par excellence*' (34).

Baudrillard died in March 2007, on the cusp of the take-off of 'web 2.0' and three months before the iPhone's smartphone revolution. The ongoing digital revolution has since left many of his musings on the mass media behind, but in one important aspect Baudrillard remains the key thinker of our era: because this revolution represents the expansion of that society of 'production' he describes. His 2004 book *The Intelligence of Evil* returns to the western drive for 'integral reality,' understood as 'the perpetuating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is "liberated," everything comes to fruition and has a meaning' (*Intelligence* 17). The digital revolution, therefore, constitutes the final liberation—*that of production itself*.

Because the digital revolution liberated the power of production and distribution for all, anyone with a smartphone and connection became an empowered producer of content, messages and imagery, adding to the stocks of the real. Using an array of devices and services, we devote ourselves to recording the details and minutiae of our lives in a mass *self-paparazzization* whose crowd-sourced production of the real makes the previous broadcast-era—where only a minority devoted themselves to this task—look like a decidedly amateur affair. Today, almost nothing escapes potential capture, shareability, and being added to the pornographic, hypervisible, hyperintimate collection of the museum of the real.

A key McLuhanist idea taken up by Baudrillard is 'reversal,' where at the 'peak of performance,' technologies and processes reverse their effects (McLuhan 30, 33, 182). Hence if, in the broadcast-era, the *media materiel* worked to build the stocks of the real, then digital production has the opposite effect. As in the economic law of over-production leading to devaluation, our digital creativity erodes the reality principle itself. As Baudrillard suggests, 'it is the excess of reality which stops us believing in it … the real is suffocated by its own accumulation' (*Intelligence* 19). Our digital hyperproduction, therefore, reverses now into *the crash of the real*. We move from the broadcast era of hyperreality, where huge quantities of material were mobilized to perfect the real, to the digital world of *hyporeality*, where the personal reality is hyperinflated and the real as a shared experience hyperdeflates. This hyporeality ('hypo', meaning 'under' or 'less') is characterized by decline or loss: for when the real is reduced to the self and its productions, then little or nothing is required either to create or believe in it.

Recent fears over 'fake news,' disinformation, Russian propaganda and conspiracy theories have seen a growing discourse around the notion of a 'post-truth' society, with the collapse of belief in the mainstream media leading to fears for 'truth,' for democracy and for political debate itself. One explanation for this 'crisis' is Pariser's claim that we're split today into personal 'filter bubbles,' where personally-chosen networks and information and algorithmically-fed feeds remove us from a plurality of sources and a shared experience of the world. This argument has value, but it fails to recognize that the entire, previous era of broadcast media was itself a 'bubble'—a 'mainstream bubble,' encompassing the entirety of the population and filtering collectively not individually, by market demographics,

professional codes of conduct, government regulation and advertiser good-will, ensuring nothing too extreme or offensive appeared.

Our world of individual bubbles, therefore, is the result of the digital bursting of the mainstream bubble and its mass-filtered *mass-consensual reality*. Digital technologies have exploded our informational sources into the fractal fragments of everything we can see or find—every friend, follower, message, link, webpage, forum, comment, personal, direct or group message, every gif and meme, photograph, video, update, 'like' or 'story' and into anything one can think or do or explore and enjoy, however far outside the mainstream. But this isn't simply about individual bubbles, but rather the *foam* of individual bubbles—as Sloterdijk suggests of 'foam cities,' we are not dealing with 'mere agglomerations of adjacent (separation-sharing) inert and solid bodies,' but rather with 'multiplicities of loosely-touching lifeworldly cells,' each of which 'possesses the dignity of a universe' (Sloterdijk 565). This foam represents, therefore, a foam of personally-created life worlds: *a Cambrian explosion of realities*. Far from being post-truth, there has never been as much—or rather *so many* truths. At the core of this proliferation of realities is the hyper-empowered, hyper-productive digital self.

The Panic-stricken Production of the Self

Baudrillard's 1987 essay 'The Ecstasy of Communication' presents a grim image of broadcast-era subjectivity, in describing the condition of the connected individual—the dystopian abolition of all private space and interiority, the over-exposure to the world's 'obscenity,' the subject's inability to separate themselves from and their subsequent absorption into the communication network itself. 'The schizophrenic,' he says, 'cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks' (*Ecstasy* 27). The digital

revolution, however, has effected a Ptolemaic reversal of this condition, liberating the subject as *the center* of the media, reality and truth.

Because the digital is the world of '*me*-dia': a world revolving around ourselves, around *our* technological management, *our* lives, relationships, opinions and meanings (Merrin 77-92). So today the 'panic-stricken production of the real' Baudrillard warned of (*Simulacra* 7), finds expression in *the panic-stricken production of the self*. We move from the professionally-crafted, tightly-controlled and limited channels of the broadcast world to the digital-cockpit of ourselves and our devices, where we control what we consume and how and when and produce and push-on our own output to a global audience.

Hence, instead of a twitching node overwhelmed by the network, the self reverses to overwhelm the world. So, today, it is the world that can no longer produce the limits of *its* being, being reduced in turn to 'a pure absorption and resorption surface' of the self. Baudrillard's later theory of 'virtuality' and his critique of Debord's 'society of the spectacle' with his later claim that 'We are no longer spectators but actors in the performance' (*Perfect Crime* 27) already suggest this, but even he couldn't foresee the extent of the reversal that has placed the performative self as central to all reality and meaning. This is now *the society of the selfie*. Consider 'Princess Breanna''s 2014 tweet 'Selfie in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp' (Zarrell). Her smiling face fills the image, pushing the actual buildings and their historical reality out of the scene. To paraphrase Baudrillard, the Holocaust here *cannot take (a) place*—pushed out by the self's grinning evidence of its presence. Hence our new, more-dangerous form of denialism: not the exculpatory denialism of Holocaust revisionists desperate to disprove the event, but the replacement of the historical event and its reality *with ourselves*

and our experiences and feelings. If, for Adorno, to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, what would Baudrillard say of Princess Breanna's happy-face emoji?

It's not hard to speculate, for Baudrillard was, in retrospect, a key theorist of identity. The roots of this are found in *The System of Objects*, which describes the passage from the world of 'symbolic exchange' to one of semiotic consumption. For Baudrillard, western societies are built on a process of semioticisation—the transformation of the object and all relations, history, culture and communication into an organized system of signs under 'the code,' to be combined and consumed in their difference (*System* 199-205). Signs originate with the abolition of the real relationships and experiences of the 'symbolic,' reducing it to semiotic elements which derive their meaning now from their 'abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign objects' (200). The defining historical characteristic of western societies, therefore, is the abolition and semiotic replacement of the symbolic and the reorientation of all relations as relations of consumption: relations with and between signs.

In the great intellectual conflict between theories of structure and agency, Baudrillard stands firmly in the former camp. His theory of media and consumer society combines a McLuhanist concept of form and its effects, Boorstin and Debord's epistemological critique, and a Marcusian critique of social programming, integration and control, with Barthes' structuralist ideas of an ideological system of communication and Veblen's insights into social hierarchy and the use of goods for competitive distinction. Everything here points to *the systemic production of the individual*. The semiotic, consumer society represents, therefore, not a realm of freedom, sovereignty and personal expression but the opposite: our socialization in and training into the code (*Consumer Society* 81)—our semiotic 'personalisation' and production (87-98) as part of the 'total organisation of everyday life' (29).

This systemic production and personalisation, however, appears precisely as the expression of individual freedom. Baudrillard's best example, in *The System of Objects*, is of the development of interior design from the 'traditional environment' of 'the Bourgeois interior,' which personifies its complex, affective, familial and social relationships in its 'presence' and 'social dignity,' to the modern, designed interior. The latter liberates the object as a mobile, weightless sign to be manipulated by their user (*System* 15-19) and thus frees the user too from symbolic bonds to express their personal choices. We become, here, the 'active engineer of atmosphere' (26), revelling in our freedom and control. The semiotic self-expression that appears to define and celebrate our individuality, therefore, actually represents the reduction of ourselves to semiotic communication and our enslavement to its 'code.'

The same prescient critique is found in Baudrillard's discussion of the body, fashion and sexuality (*Consumer Society* 129-50; *Symbolic Exchange* 87-100; 101-24; *Seduction*). Here again, all of these are divested of symbolic meaning, with the body, for example, being abstracted as an object requiring constant semiotic labor 'to smooth it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world' (*Consumer Society* 131). In its management for personalisation, distinction and prestige, therefore, the body is systemically integrated as 'the finest consumer object' (131). This is a critique we could easily generalize to our contemporary social media presentation and the whole of influencer culture. Today, we have all become the active engineers of our online, semiotic selves, convinced of our freedom, originality, and individuality.

This critique of identity may be one of the most important aspects of Baudrillard's work today. Whereas in 1970 the private engineering of semiotic objects remained limited, today the entire realm of the interior—encompassing also our bedrooms, bodies, private lives,

experiences and thoughts—overwhelms the world as we dedicate ourselves to an endless, potentially global self-coverage. Today, Berkeley's *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived— offers not a transcendental but a terrestrial reassurance: with our existence confirmed now by the number of likes, comments, retweets and reposts. The post without engagement is a dead moment that strikes to the core of the self.

Far from being the stable base of a true, core 'interior,' therefore, this semiotic simulacrum's lack of foundations means it requires continual management and reproduction; a labor producing doubt and anxiety, as seen in the November 2015 online meltdown of *Australia's Next Top Model* contestant Cassi Van Den Dungen. Outraged that only 14 of her followers had liked her Instagram post 'Say yes to new adventures,' she lashed out at all those who hadn't: 'This, to me, either means that people A) don't like me having new adventures, as if I'm not allowed fun, or B) it means people don't like new adventures.' Her conclusion was histrionic: 'Either way, all I have to say to those people who didn't like my post and don't like having fun is YOU ALL SUCK!' (Saul). The same month Essena O'Neil, a teenager with 612,000 followers, declared she was leaving Instagram, deleting 2,000 posts 'that served no real purpose other than self-promotion,' leaving comments that exposed the simulacral strategies of the remaining posts and saying she'd focus from now on 'real-life projects' (Hunt).

In her 1995 book *Life on the Screen,* Sherry Turkle had lauded the positive possibilities opened up by the internet for a postmodern, performative, flexible and multiple self, able to play endlessly with its identity (*Life on the Screen* 177-269). By 2011's *Alone Together*, however, her feelings had changed. As she said in an interview, adolescents today 'get a kind of performance anxiety' and 'performance exhaustion' as they're constantly on. They don't

allow themselves to get off their accounts: 'They don't have a place to go where they're not performing themselves and that becomes a problem' (Mainwaring).

A similar critique is found in Byung Chul-Han's Baudrillardian attack on the digital Neo-liberal self—understood now not as 'subjects' but as unending personal 'projects', 'always fashioning and reinventing themselves' (*Psychopolitics* 1). In our new 'achievement society' (*Burnout* 8), Han argues each of us becomes 'the entrepreneur of its own self' (*Psychopolitics* 2), committed to their own 'unlimited self-production' (6). The Neo-liberal semio-economy puts individuals into 'absolute competition' with themselves (*Burnout* 46), leading to 'self-exploitation' and 'self-destruction' (47). Hence, Han explains, the pathologies we face today are not those of industrial risk and alienation but the new 'systemic' pathologies of depression, ADHD and 'burnout' (7). And all the time, this hyper-self-productive, self-destroying individual 'considers itself free' (47).

This overwhelming of the world by the subject—by the pornographic production of the self—is matched today by the overwhelming of politics by the self and its 'identity.'

From Identity Politics to *Identification* Politics

Baudrillard was always a theorist of identity, of how, under the guise of their 'liberation' and expression, individuals were structured, produced and integrated into the dominant system. His conclusion that semiotic identity is a mode of simulation and social control appears at odds, however, with an age where digital developments seem overwhelmingly positive, in allowing the discovery of oneself, the exhibition of one's personality and individuality, the validation of one's identity, the shared exploration of traditionally repressed or devalued characteristics—sexuality, ethnicity, gender, body-shape—and new modes of community, connection and

activism. Baudrillard, however, would disagree with this, just as he'd question too the politics that have arisen around the self and its identity.

Whilst today's 'identity politics' aren't new, the centrality of identitarianism to our contemporary political life is undoubtedly linked to the digital liberation of the self and its online expression. Most commentators trace the roots of today's identity politics to the late 1960s counterculture, out of which emerged new 'liberation' movements including 'black pride' and 'black power,' 'women's liberation,' and 'gay pride' and 'gay liberation' (Hartman 9-37). Each was a response, in part, to the failure of mainstream (and especially left-wing) politics to incorporate their concerns and their subsequent success owed much to the left's decline in the 1970s-80s. As political culture moved to the right, as class-based analyses fell out of favor and as the left moved to the center, accepting the Neo-liberal consensus, identitarianism was left as almost the only flourishing, radical alternative. The term 'identity politics' was coined by the African-American lesbian feminist group the 'Combahee River Collective' in 1977, to promote consciousness raising and self-liberation among identity groups (Sparrow 127-8) and, in the decades since, each movement has fought for and made substantial gains in human and civil rights in its name. The internet, especially, has helped enhance awareness and organization, aiding ongoing transformative protests such as the #Blacklivesmatter and #Metoo movements.

The success of left-wing identity politics, especially on campus (Furedi, *What's Happened*), led to a backlash from right-wing commentators and academics and a series of 'culture wars' playing out throughout the 1990s (Nagle 54-67). The 1980s-90s saw the rise of radio 'shock-jocks,' evangelical Christianity, a reaction against 'political correctness,' the 'patriot' movement and the take-off of Neo-Nazi and white supremacist online networks

(Belew; Neiwert). Obama's election in 2008 reinvigorated the right, leading to the 'Tea Party' movement and a revived militia movement. The renewed 'culture wars' became explicit with 2014's #Gamergate, which focused attention on the 'alt-right' and the online nexus of white nationalism, Neo-Nazism, the internet culture of 4Chan and Reddit, the incel and men's movements and conspiracy theorism (Hawley; Marantz; Nagle; Neiwert; Wendling). Trump's election allowed these movements to enter mainstream culture, leading to increased polarization and violence, such as at Charlottesville in August 2017 and in the 2020 BLM protests. Central to the right-wing response, therefore, was *an assertion of their own identities*. US and European right-wing politics have been overwhelmed by an identitarianism that, in its focus on whiteness, Maleness, European heritage and culture, is *an exact mirror of the left*, promoting the same assertion of value (one's core identity), the same defensiveness (to protect its culture), the same power (deeply-felt identification and emotion) and the same response (to assert the self's identity against all threats).

By 2020, therefore, it seemed as if the western, liberal-democratic ideal of reasoned debate was being overwhelmed by the politics of the self: by the implacable oppositions of identity, the impossibility of debating another's self-truth and the righteousness of personal feeling and offence. Central to this cultural war was the screen and the *foam* of 'me-dia', with the politics of the self played out through the personally-crafted hyporeal life-worlds and their barrage of evidence, links, tweets, memes, stories and photos. We might place our hopes in commonality and intersectionality, but this traditional expansive politics struggles against the implosive force of identitarianism which resolves every event back to the self and its identity. Here any other identity appears as a block to our own and a personal threat. The irreducible *core of the self* irradiates all politics.

Identitarianism is about the elevation of the self to the highest 'superlative power' (Baudrillard, *Fatal* 9): *the selfer than self*. Baudrillard quotes Marie Duval: 'I'm not beautiful, I'm worse,' suggesting the paradoxical terror of beauty when raised to a higher power (*Fatal* 9), but perhaps a better example is found in the film of *The Lord of the Rings*: when offered power, the elf Galadriel rises up as a spectral god, announcing that, '[i]n place of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen! Not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Treacherous as the sea! Stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me, and despair!' (TheLotrTV). In the age of the hyporeal self, we are all Galadriel: the self rises, beautiful and terrible, demanding that all shall love it.

Baudrillard had anticipated this identitarian mirroring. His 1990 essay 'The Melodrama of Difference' presents a semiotic, post-structuralist analysis of racial politics, in a reflection on the replacement of 'otherness' today with a world of 'differences.' In contrast to the symbolic form of otherness, where there are only 'destinies'—or 'mutually reinforcing aspects of an immutable order, parts of a reversible cycle' (*Transparency* 127), the semiotic world of differences is one of 'regulated exchange' (128). Radical, violent otherness, therefore, has been integrated today into the western, universalist system of differences, as a sign exchanging among others. Hence Baudrillard's claim that racism only exists when otherness is abolished and 'the other becomes merely different, that is to say, dangerously similar' (129). Racism, therefore, is the product of a system of differences, seizing on 'the very slightest variations on the order of signs,' quickly taking on 'a viral and automatic character,' perpetuating itself 'while reveling in a generalized semiotics' (130).

Baudrillard's analysis is overly simple, but the underlying point is important: all identitarian categories exist in the same system, in relationship with each other. Hence

Baudrillard's denial that any solution can be found within that system: any 'humanism of difference' or 'moral or political philosophy of difference' (130) would only perpetuate the exchange (131). Thus, what appears to be a conflict against an existing system is revealed to be an internal exchange. Hence identitarianism produces its identical opposition, with the same semio-logic, the same activism and even the same violence (as the shooting of antifa/BLM in Kenosha was followed by the shooting of a white nationalist in Portland).

Baudrillard makes a similar point in another 1990 essay, 'Transsexuality.' Early in *The Transparency of Evil,* he describes the 'transversal' forms of this society of productive 'liberation' which, he says, include 'transpolitics,' 'transaesthetics,' 'transeconomics' and 'transsexuality' (*Transparency* 7). Baudrillard uses the term 'transsexuality' here in several ways but ultimately relies on body surgery as a metaphor for the entire realm of sexuality, so today, instead of 'surgery' we employ 'semio-urgy': an endless, post-structuralist 'playing with the commutability of the signs of sex' (20). Hence, he explains, about the liberation of sex as a play of signs, 'we are all transsexuals' (21): 'the rule of transvestitism has become the very basis of our behaviour' (23). His choice of language obviously offends contemporary sensibilities, but the underlying point is identical to Judith Butler's in her book *Gender Trouble*, published the same year (though where Baudrillard is implacably critical, Butler celebrates this process). Butler begins by removing any claims to a referential real of 'woman' or the 'body,' repeating Derrida's poststructuralist critique of a 'metaphysics of substance,' and using Foucault to demonstrate their production through the system of power (*Gender Trouble* 1-46) before defending 'gender' as an empowering, semiotic 'performative' act (34, 185, 190).

That poststructuralist conception of identity as semio-performance was hugely influential in identitarian circles, in suggesting the liberative power of self-creation, but it has also proven controversial and in tension with the constant need to reassert a real behind identity, whether in the transgender bodily experience, the sexual body for UK 'gender critical feminists,' or the body as a targeted site of violence in the #Metoo and #Blacklivesmatter movements. Baudrillard would resist both this semio-performativity and bodily real, placing his critical hopes instead in the 'symbolic' and its many forms, hence in *The Transparency of Evil* his repeated defence of 'radical otherness' (138) and 'radical exoticism' (146-55). But there are problems here, as his appeal to the non-western is not the radical 'de-colonialization' it may first appear, in depending entirely on a Durkheimian social-anthropological and philosophical tradition which remains a very white, male, western-derived image of the other. It was a point Lyotard made as early as 1974, when he charged that tradition as belonging 'in its entirety to western racism and imperialism' and Baudrillard with inheriting and utilizing the concept of the 'good savage' (Lyotard 106).

But Lyotard too quickly dismisses Baudrillard, a thinker whose work retains its radicality and value. One of his most important contributions was fusing (structuralist and post-structuralist) semiotics with political economy in an expanded 'general political economy' (*For a Critique* 128). The industrial-era logics of 'use value' and 'exchange value' had been extended and transformed, he argued, by the elevation of the commodity to a 'sign' and the subsequent domination of 'sign-value' (*For a Critique* 143-64), hence industrial capitalism gave way to a new, expanded mode of semio-capitalism. Today, following his lead, we can develop this further. With the digital revolution, we have seen the emergence of a higher systemic form, based upon a new, higher 'logic'—that of *signal value*. We pass from the

political economy of the sign to *the political economy of the signal*. Digitality has transformed capitalism, allowing new modes of exploitation based upon digital activity, and in particular, upon the ongoing, continuous, real-time transmission of information and activity—of digital signals—which pour from every individual and connected device, creating what scholars have come to call 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff).

It took broadband, public and domestic WFI, the Web 2.0 revolution and the post-2007 smart-phone revolution to turn digital signals into a near continuous, personally connected stream, and recent developments are moving towards a total capture of life. Today our private spaces have become recording and signaling environments, with the penetration of the home of 'smart' devices, and AI home assistants and cameras: 'wearables' capture our intimate bodily data and rhythms, while outside the home the 'Internet of Things' connects cars, streets, and all public spaces through sensors, computers and cameras. There is little, in theory, that can escape capture: experiments in implants and brain-computer interfaces promise a whole new frontier, with China, for example, already using EEG 'mind-reading' helmets on key workers (Fullerton).

But this is about more than capture: the aim is analysis and identification, hence the take-off of digital biometrics, using the voice, face, iris etc. or other identificatory characteristics such as gait or keystroke pattern. Linked with other systems such as databases, Big Data analysis, CCTVs and drones, we see a vast, emerging, connected complex of AI-powered oversight. The US and UK's aim of 'total information awareness' (Horgan) was exposed by Snowden, but others are more open about their surveillance, as seen in the Chinese treatment of the Uighurs (Wall Street Journal, Byler), their 'social-credit' system and use of facial recognition (Mistreanu; Dudley). These surveillance systems were expanded in response

to Covid-19, which, in imploding the office and home, also expanded accessibility, opening all

private spaces to digital transparency (Klein). What this exposes is the movement of all

political systems today to totalitarianism.

We remain too bewitched by 20th-century totalitarianism distracted by the uniforms, the

spectacle, the symbolism, the public terror, the hyper-visible, aesthetically organised regimes

that tried to abolish the separation of public and private life to achieve Mussolini's dream of

'totalitario': 'All within the state, nothing outside the state, none against the state' (Conquest

249). Now, at a historical distance, we can see the essence of totalitarianism is actually *the*

informational claim to penetrate and oversee every aspect of private life. Today's

totalitarianism fulfils itself as an ideal of digital transparency, employed across all political

systems (including western liberal democracy). Freed from political theatrics, the burden of

terror, and the cost of costumery, it reverses from spectacle to secrecy and from public to

private, as a project aiming at the oversight, monitoring, capture and evaluation of every aspect

of personal interiority. Baudrillard described the 'code' of signification as 'totalitarian,' but the

digital code—*the pornography of the signal*—comes closer to its realization.

Hence sign-value is eclipsed today by signal-value, and the entire psychodrama of

semiology and identity is superseded by non-human processes of capture and algorithmic

processing. Identity, therefore, is less important today than *identification* and the cold, hidden

identification-politics produced by this totalitarian digital regime is more important than our

hot, public, identity-politics. It is through identification today—whether precise, personal

detection, or the broader processes of sorting and categorization within identified

populations—that we are controlled. The digital avatar—made in the moment and continually

reconfigured through new signals (Cheney-Lippold)—becomes the basis for decision-

making—for financial and employment decisions, for predictive policing, for commercial and political targeting, for our possession and enjoyment of civil rights, and for the possibility of state oppression. With the US DoD's 'Project Maven,' with its AI analysis of drone imagery for targeting, and the new 'Agile Condor' drone-pod which allows real-time, in-flight AI analysis of data (Fang, Trevithick), identification may even determine our right to life itself.

So, today, the entire realm of semiology and humanly-created and interpreted imagery is in the process of being surpassed by machine-reading and the interpretation of invisible signals, whose decisions impact our lives and control our behaviors. In this *post-semiological* era, therefore, we can look back at *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* with nostalgia, at the quaint era, now gone, when humans and their meaning mattered.

The Experimental Subject

In his 1978 book *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Baudrillard describes the 'black hole' of the masses, who were forced to speak through polls and representations and who acted as an 'earth,' an 'inertia' and an 'implosive' force upon all media meaning. Today this too has reversed: the digital masses *do nothing but speak*. The masses are no longer silent, leading us, in the spirit of Baudrillard, to three possible hypotheses.

1. The productivist assumption: the masses speak and it is good. It is a positive, productive phenomenon, uncovering and asserting the real, interior meaning and identity of each individual.

2. The Baudrillardian assertion: the masses' speech is merely an extension and expansion of the system of simulacra and its controls. Its expansion of the real leads, in its reversal, to our world of hyporeality.

3. The higher level realisation: beneath the speech of the masses there is its real speech: the mass of signals. This is a new, experimental, *signal capitalism*—experimental not just because it is new and its implications have yet to be seen, but also because its model is *the experimental animal*.

This is no longer the relationship of pollster and polled (*In the Shadow* 20), but of experimenter and 'subject': though, crucially, not that subject which we believe in and valorise —that self-groomed subject overflowing with identity, reality and unique value—but the experimental subject—a wired animal, sending continuous signals to their connected interlocutors, tortured and experimented on by the technology companies, advertisers and political campaigners (just like Cambridge Analytica experimented on their targets with different types of ad), all read symptomatically on the screen in real-time through the electronic pulses of their physiological and psycho-responses. Hence the 'silent majority' is replaced here by *the screaming majority*: both the masses' real-time, ubiquitous speech that overwhelms the world with itself and the silent electronic screams of the signals.

Instead, therefore, of the digital liberation of production leading to the realization of the self and its identity, it represents instead an expansion of the simulacral system of control and the transformation of the system through the higher level logic of signal-value, which allows a new mode of identification politics based upon the harvesting of signals from the liberated, wired, experimental subject which is tortured for its likes, its comments and its selfies.

This is a profoundly negative, critical, near-dystopian interpretation of our world. But who could doubt that Baudrillard would agree with it?

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