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# WHAT HAPPENED TO REALITY? A BAUDRILLARDIAN ANALYSIS OF J.G. BALLARD'S THE SECRET HISTORY OF WORLD WAR 3

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## Abstract

Many critics are unwilling to accept Jean Baudrillard as a serious thinker and have tried to disparage him and his work, but the fact that his analyses have proved to be correct and accurate many times such as his analysis of twin towers almost a decade before 9/11, proves, without a shred of doubt, that he is one of the best and most accurate analysts and theoreticians of current (post)modern society. In his thought, we live in a hyper-real world in which simulation reigns supreme. The reality and, along with it, the reality of power have vanished in the current era of simulation. In this paper, the concepts of simulation and hyper-reality have been investigated and their consequences, namely the loss of the real and power, have also been examined. Finally, a Baudrillardian reading of *The Secret history of world war 3* by J.G. Ballard has been conducted which acts as the example for a better understanding of the aforementioned concepts.

**Keywords:** Simulation, Hyperrealism, Ballard, Baudrillard, Manipulation, Spectacle, Simulacrum

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We have heard, so many times, phrases and sentences such as 'it is all a big show' or 'this is all a game' that refer to politics, society, etc. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1994) Guy Debord has examined this aspect of human life quite thoroughly. He introduces the concept of spectacle which is not, contrary to common belief, restricted to 'mass media'. Spectacle is not merely a collection of images "rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1994: 12). Or in other words images and the spectacles of the society have replaced human activity and have pushed people into passivity. Instead of doing anything, we are mesmerized by the show that is put on for us and realize our dreams and desires through these spectacles. In Debord's view we are all spectators in this game, exactly like a man/woman sitting in a living room immersed in a TV program. But as always, Jean Baudrillard has another opinion.

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard, 1994), Baudrillard asserts that spectacle in the sense that Debord had in mind is no longer possible because we live in the era of simulation. To understand this matter more fully, first of all, we have to know what simulation is. In his own words, simulation is an act in which "the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control- and it can be reproduced an infinite number of times" (Baudrillard, 1994: 1) or in other words when 'the signs of the real' replace the real. For the sake of clarification we can review an example that Baudrillard gives us in the same book: a patient that goes to a doctor and fakes an illness can be called on his bluff easily, but a patient who simulates an illness produces some of the signs and symptoms of that illness. The second patient cannot be called a liar or be called on a bluff because in the first case, we have a real/fake basis upon which judgment is possible but in the second case there is no fake or real; there is only a simulacrum of an illness. (Baudrillard, 1994: 2-3)

There is an interesting catch in the history of simulation. It was capitalism that first tried to destroy the real and along with it the distinction between good and evil (Baudrillard, 1994: 15), but this strategy backfired since the law in society can only operate within the domain of the real. So as a counter measure, capital(ism) has to inject the real back into society. Alas this is not possible, because only the signs of the real can be produced. So capitalism is caught in endless simulation which results in hyper-reality or a reality 'that is more real than the real'.

In *Perfect Crime* (Baudrillard, 1996), Baudrillard states that the perfect crime is the perfect control or murder of the real. But it must be kept in mind that perfect control is always eluding the capital. Simply because it is not possible to account for everything; there is always an element of surprise or a radical act for the sake of its own radicalism like the attack on twin towers in New York.

### 1.1 Vanishing Power

Regarding what has been discussed so far, we can ask ourselves then, what does happen when the real vanishes? Two consequences of this matter concern us here. First, let us examine this in the case of the mass media and spectacles. As I mentioned at the beginning Baudrillard believes that there is no more spectacle in society. He claims so, since a spectacle presupposes two things: a group of spectators and a spectacle. The term spectator connotes a distance between these two. But in our era these poles have imploded and there is no more a distance and:

*everywhere, in no matter what domain...in which the distinction between these two poles can no longer be maintained one enters into simulation and thus into absolute manipulation- not into passivity but into the indifferention of the active and passive. (Baudrillard, 1994:21)*

In other words we are no longer the ones watching the TV, but the other way around. We are not the spectators of spectacle; we are part of the spectacle. Politicians do not put up a show for us, rather we are the show.

The second consequence is that in the era of simulation and disappearance of the real, power becomes lost and we only ever have a shadow or a ghost of power. Law and power cannot operate in the domain of the hyper-real. They both need a real/fake basis to operate upon. Power needs the real in order to continue its existence. Keep in mind that here by power, the traditional forms of power is meant; the one that Foucault analyzed so vehemently during his career. And when this happens another matter "comes into play: that of collective demand for signs of power" (Baudrillard, 1994: 15). The whole of society refuses to accept that there is no more real power and asks for it even if it is just an effigy of power. They fear the collapse of the political sphere. So what is the solution? Producing more and more signs of the real and the signs of power which will result in an ever growing simulation and finally in a hyper-real politics. Now for the sake of clarity, let us summarize these discussions in a few points:

1. We live in the era of simulation which is producing or 'generating by models' the signs of the real.
2. We do live in a society of spectacles, but not in a Debordian sense. Because when there is no more distance between the spectator and the spectacle. We are part of the spectacle
3. In a hyper-real society we are under absolute manipulation which does not mean simple passivity.
4. The real of the power and politics has vanished and people, fearing the collapse of the politics, ask for the signs of power. And since real power cannot be reproduced only a 'resemblance' is produced.

With these point mentioned, let us turn to our reading of *the Secret History of World War 3* by J. G. Ballard.

### 2. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

In 1995 the third world war happens, but it only lasts for four minutes and no one seems to have noticed it except the main character who is an ordinary pediatrician. In the beginning of 1990s the crises abound around the world and the tension between USA and the Soviet Union is high. The successor to Reagan is unable to control the matters and everything seems to be on the verge of collapsing. As a solution, it is decided that Reagan should be given a third chance at presidency and after passing a bill legalizing his return, he is elected for his third term in the white house. But the old boy is only a ghost of what he used to be. The age of the president and his health become a concern for the nation. The doctors in white house release a bulletin of Reagan's test results and examinations and claim that he is completely healthy. After this relief, everything goes back to normal and the stock market even takes a leap.

Seeing how this measure has been effective, the politicians decide to continue it. First they publish the health bulletin weekly, then daily and finally their dream of the identification of the president and the TV seems fairly fulfilled when Reagan's heartbeat and brainwaves are broadcast on TV 24/7. The masses are absorbed in this feat. They follow every detail of his health, even the news of his successful bowel movement makes them happy. In the meantime the tensions between nations around the world rises and USA goes into war with Soviet Union. The third world war is declared, but it only lasts for four minute. The news of the declaration and the end of the war is also broadcast on TV, but no one notices because they were concerned with the rise in president's heartbeat which is ironically due to the war.

After the war, the main character wonders if it was just an act of deterrence and peacemaking because the missiles were bound for unpopulated areas in Alaska and Siberia and the next day many factions and terrorist groups disarm themselves. And finally some time later, while participating in a public event the president is assassinated, after a few minutes his heartbeat on the TV informs every one of his survival; and the main character remains wondering whether he was ever alive to begin with.

### 3. ANALYSIS

The story gives us a perfect picture of a hyper-real society in which simulation abounds and we can observe the points discussed at the first part in this story. First of all, let us begin by examining the president, his return, and the conditions in which he returns.

The successor to the second term of Reagan is unable to do anything to better the conditions of society because there is no more real power. Remember this is the era of simulation so the real of the power has vanished alongside reality. This society does not know how to mourn the loss of the real and that is why they refuse to acknowledge the fact that the real of the power has disappeared. So they ask for power to be reproduced and since the last powerful man in their eyes is Reagan, he is elected for the third time. The old and aging Reagan is nothing but a shadow of what he used to be and in order to ensure the masses that he is the real deal, more and more signs of power are produced which in this case are his health signs.

This point brings us to another aspect in the story, that of the spectacle. The resurrection of Reagan is done by the TV and in this spectacle which seems to be designed for the masses; the people are actually part of it. They are not the spectators, rather the participants. That is why they can be easily manipulated. The poles of the distance and meaning have imploded. People are neither active nor passive. This is what Jean Baudrillard calls the abreaction of the masses (*In the Shadow of Silent Majorities*, 1983).

A proof of the elusiveness of perfect control is the main character in the story. We do not know how many more people are like him, but he is enough for us as an example. Also a proof of the implosion of the poles of meaning and distance in this story is how everything is interconnected. President's blood sugar level influences the stock prices of Pepsi. The main character's wife when confronted with her husband's bewilderment reassures him that it is all connected and that he can check the stocks tomorrow. (Ballard, 2010: 830).

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard, 1994) Baudrillard mentions the king's sacrifice and death in primitive societies. The king was put to death and this was the source of his power and holiness. (Baudrillard, 1994:23) Baudrillard also claims that the last president to hold real power in USA was John F. Kennedy and that was the reason for his assassination. All the presidents after him in an attempt to revive their lost power were either the targets of failed assassinations or what in the case of Nixon amount to it. (Baudrillard, 1994: 25) Of course, these attempts are in vain since when the real vanishes only its signs can be produced in its place. The same thing happens in this story. A president with no real power is elected and in order to gain credibility and power he is assassinated. It goes without saying that this strategy is not effective for reasons that I already mentioned. The main character points to the heart of the matter when wonders whether he was ever alive. (Ballard, 2010: 833).

### 4. CONCLUSION

A hyper-real society in which simulation reigns is depicted for us. Not knowing how to mourn the loss of the real, the society resurrects a shadow of power. And to ensure people of this shadow's reality, it is more and more identified with the TV screen. In this spectacle in which the distance between subject and the object has been destroyed, the masses are under absolute manipulation to the extent that they are oblivious to the fact that the third world war was declared right before their eyes.

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