Escape from the Technical Implosion of Reality

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Introduction

Many contemporary writers are claiming that society is becoming rapidly deanimated. However, this idea is not entirely new. During the past century, the same observation has been made by critics as disparate as Durkheim and Marx. In general, they pointed out that as an outgrowth of industrialization, social relationships were beginning to deteriorate. In point of fact, complaints about social fragmentation and the emergence of bureaucracies were commonplace. Simply put, citizens were beginning to feel powerless and overwhelmed by their institutions. Recently, Baudrillard referred to this sentiment as indicative of the "Golden Age of Alienation."[1]

But he goes on to say that the crisis facing modern society is more profound than that experienced during this earlier time. Indeed, Baudrillard argues that the current situation would not be so dismal if persons were simply alienated. For alienation is not as serious as the systematic evisceration of people that is occurring today.

What does this shift signal? When persons are alienated, according to Baudrillard, they experience pain, resentment, and at times, hostility. This discomfort accompanies the recognition of impediments to their growth. As a result of this emotional arousal, sometimes alternatives to the repressive conditions that cause alienation are proposed. The point is that although these feelings are undesirable, they are considered to be legitimate and have served to instigate positive social change. Alienation, simply put, can lead to the formation of progressive policies and movements.

But Baudrillard contends that nowadays people are far more than alienated. Accordingly, social control is more complete than ever imagined. While expanding on a theme discussed earlier by Ellul[2] and Marcuse, he argues that a "technological ethic" has

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descended on society. Technological rationality thus extends to the core of human existence, thereby extinguishing the popular resistance that may be spawned by alienation. As described by Baudrillard, "there is a positive absorption into the transparency of computers," which is appreciably worse than alienation.[3] Due to the onslaught of technical reasoning, persons are effectively neutralized and their ability to provide social critique is undermined.

Technology and Social Control

But what is to be gained by declaring that alienation is passé? Surely this is an odd proclamation, given the high level of formalization and bureaucratization currently found in society. Furthermore, most persons have become preoccupied with searching for a more meaningful and less stressful way of life. In practically every one of his works Baudrillard bemoans the onset of a society where everything is fake, superficial, and alien to the human touch. That modern existence is characterized as a "simulacrum" can hardly be viewed as complimentary.[4] Therefore, what is Baudrillard attempting to accomplish by making the apparently absurd statement that persons are no longer alienated?

In short, he is using this facetious claim to open a serious discussion of technology. He hopes to make persons aware that they are coming to be dominated by their tools. Yet this is not some sort of neo-Luddite reaction to anything mechanical or technological. Much more is involved in his objections than a knee-jerk response to technical advances. What he intends to explore is the metaphysical basis of technology, which was mentioned by Heidegger but not discussed in sufficient detail. Baudrillard believes that communication and many other activities have been brought to their "vanishing point" by this hidden dimension of technology.[5]

Computers, for example, are not merely machines. Whereas the world is confronted by a machine, reality is (re)conceptualized by computer technology. This sentiment is captured by Margaret Boden's assessment that computers do not crunch numbers but rather manipulate symbols.[6] What she is suggesting is that computers advance beyond manual approaches to calculating because a particular world-view is accepted. A unique mode of symbolism, in other words, is vital to the successful operation of computers, and this conceptual backdrop constitutes the metaphysical rationale for computerization.

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Essential to computerization is a particular rendition of knowledge. After all, not all information can be readily introduced and processed by a computer. Each piece of input must be unambiguous and susceptible to neat pigeonholing. In the parlance of formal logic, A must be equal to A. As a result, knowledge can be easily identified, classified, and assigned an "address space" within a data reservoir.[7] Information can be treated in this way because input is envisioned to be objects or things.

But why is this outlook justified? Baudrillard notes correctly that "digitalization" is the culprit. In other words, because A=A, knowledge can be assumed to consist of bits and pieces of information. This logic is the God of today, according to Baudrillard.[8] Because every piece of input has exact parameters, the identity of each one is secure. But not all information is amenable to digitalization. Many forms of knowledge are polyvalent and defy formalization. Nonetheless, these renegade or nomadic phenomena are labelled as illogical and rejected, following the implementation of a digital or binary classificatory scheme.

Through digitalization an old rendition of dualism is resurrected. This is Cartesianism. Valid knowledge is presumed to be compatible with computerization, objective, while all other information is linked to subjectivity. According to this dichotomy, insight that is derived from subjectivity should be approached with skepticism. Therefore, these so-called soft data are inferiorized. Baudrillard describes this outcome when he writes that the "code is neutralized" as a result of digitalization.[9] By this he means that reliable knowledge appears to be value-free.

Primacy is thus given to information that conforms to the strictures imposed by computerization. Moreover, this input is believed to epitomize rationality. But the overall inferiorization of knowledge related to interpretation has dire consequences. People may begin to feel the need to purge themselves of value-based knowledge, for these ideas pose a threat to rationality. Why would anyone who is sane give credence to information that may jeopardize the exercise of reason? Consequently, the logic presupposed by computerization may begin to infiltrate every human recess, as people rush to replace interpretation with a more sensible and technical cognitive style. At this juncture Baudrillard interjects the warning that the mind and computer may become isomorphic.[10] To enhance rationality, activities such as learning and decision-making may be modeled on the principle of "electronic encephalization."[11]

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This decimation of interpretation is what prompted Baudrillard to announce that people are no longer alienated. They are no longer alienated because their values, beliefs, and commitments are dismissed as illusory.[12] Because their pleas pertaining to injustice cannot be easily encoded, these claims are suddenly invisible. Whereas the legitimacy of counter-claims is a part of alienation, thereby giving rise to anguish, according to this scenario nothing of any significance is forthcoming from deviating from technical reasoning. For example, the emotions that are inherent to alienation are treated as "noise" or non-meaning. Hence people are thoroughly anesthetized.

Because of the dualism introduced by digitalization, social control has reached a new level of sophistication. Direct assaults are outmoded, because they tend to arouse the ire of the public. Much more efficient, write Bourdieu and Passernon, is to restrict "symbolic competition."[13] By differentiating subjectivity from objectivity, particular codes can be accorded a seignorial status. Those that are believed to be divorced from interpretation can be treated as inviolable. In some cases, persons may even seek assistance in overcoming the prejudices that block access to truth, in the form of therapy and education. Is there a more efficient way to control persons than by equating the exercise of reason with self-denial? With interpretation curtailed, objectivity is safe from attack. Social reality becomes "hyper-real," for all norms are believed to be autonomous and worthy of veneration.

'This approach to social control is predicated on the "implosion" of reality.[14] As a result, power is not localized but dispersed throughout society. That is, even in the most obscure areas, a clear distinction is understood to exist between reason and unreason. And Baudrillard notes that "total ridicule" is experienced by anyone who fails to recognize this distinction; the ignoble fate of subversion awaits those who violate this binary opposition.[15] Power is thus not sustained by threat but by logic. Imagination does not pose a threat to the *status quo*, because this creativity is portrayed to represent nothing more than a flight from reality. Such extravagance is simply recognized to be inefficient and not worthy of serious consideration. Constraint is thus enforced by an ostensibly apolitical means.

While Baudrillard is certainly correct that "symbolic violence" is the primary means of control in a bureaucratic society, this finding is problematic. If the binary of subjectivity/objectivity pervades

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society, how is Baudrillard's critique possible? This is identical to the objection raised earlier to Marcuse's thesis that modern society is "one-dimensional" and basically repressive. Because his attack on technological rationality is value-based, the stand Baudrillard takes should be impossible, or at least unpersuasive. Nonetheless, his views are widespread and have had significant impact. In this sense, symbolism has been allowed to proliferate, even in the face of an unrelenting technical apparatus.

Escape from Technological Rationality

Postmodernists provide an exit from the dilemma resulting from Baudrillard's proposal. Simply put, through language use persons can escape from the labyrinth created by technological rationality. Although Baudrillard's focus is language, he does not pursue this theoretical gambit. His desire to "emancipate the sign" is thus not fulfilled.[16]

He never really addresses a crucial question in a systematic way: how is emancipation possible if language merely reflects reality? Clearly Baudrillard recognizes that language is not engulfed by reality, but he does not transform this awareness into a justification for critique or an opportunity for liberation. He does not appreciate the revolutionary implication of the discovery that language always overshoots its mark, and thus A is never exactly equal to A.[17]

The closest he comes to doing this is when he acknowledges that the symbol haunts the sign.[18] What he is suggesting is that no speech act is stable, because language use is thoroughly interpretive. Speech is inefficient, because the boundaries of language are constantly shifting due to the uncertainty of interpretation. The upshot of this demarche is that language is not necessarily informed by reality.

Baudrillard also alludes to the possible revolutionary thrust of language when he argues that the capitalist's architectonic is purely symbolic.[19] The aim of this statement is to illustrate that both the base and superstructure are cultural. In other words, because the base is fully mediated by language, the economy does not serve as a causal mechanism. Instead, to use Adorno's imagery, in a capitalist society a host of symbolic forces are arranged in particular constellation, whereby some are assumed to be more influential than others.[20] The significance of the economy is not based on natural law but particular symbolism.

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Again, he is claiming that no aspect of society exists *sui generis*, even the economic realm so cherished by Marxists. Because the economic themes that sustain capitalism are reinforced by specific definitions of reality, persons are not necessarily enveloped by this social system. In fact, the success of capitalism depends on the inculcation of a unique conceptual scheme. What Baudrillard does not develop is the idea that presupposed by every attempt to systematize knowledge and order is the exercise of interpretation.

Although Baudrillard applauds "subversive communication," he does not give much detail as to how standardized codes can be circumvented.[21] The issue that must be raised is: why have attempts to rationalize language proven to be unsuccessful? Law, the workplace, and even the human body have been fairly easily rationalized and objectified.[22] Due to what he calls a "cyberblitz," these and other phenomena have been systematized, formalized, and administered according to economic formulae. Spontaneity and creativity have thus been routinized. Through this effort to secularize the human spirit, society is believed to be improved because emotional and other disruptive influences are controlled.

However, similar attempts to domesticate language have been unsuccessful. During the 1950s and 1960s the so-called scientific study of language became very popular.[23] Additionally, due to the rapid development of computers language had to be made manageable. While the desire to neutralize language is found in the work of logical positivists and early structuralists, the use of structural metaphors to describe speech acts reached a new level during the mid to late 1960s. Language came to be understood as a tool, net, or some other mechanism that simply filters input and classifies events.[24] And if this structure could be duplicated, the view was advanced that practically every aspect of social life could be eventually computerized.

This optimism has begun to wane, however, among computer scientists and other technicians. For example, in the field of artificial intelligence the computerization of language has proven to be problematic. Even Marvin Minsky admits that taming the everyday use of language may be an insurmountable task. What proponents of computerization have been reluctant to consider is that perhaps language is not a framework organized around structural primitives. For acknowledging this limitation would call into question the method of dissecting language that is required for the operation of computers.

Nonetheless, every time a structure is imposed, language escapes from these attempts at formalization. As illustrated by Merleau-Ponty, the expansion of interpretation seems to be undeterred by the boundaries established by structural matrices.[25] Why is this the case? Apparently, language is much more profound than any structural model of speech.

This is what postmodern authors such as Lyotard and Kristeva maintain. For instance, Lyotard insists that language operates like a game, in a manner described in the late work of Wittgenstein.[26] As a consequence of making various linguistic gambits, different realities are created. Central to this theory is that language mediates all knowledge, and therefore structures can never become autonomous. Structures, stated briefly, are merely manifestations of language use and should not be expected to represent completely speech acts. Further, because structures are a modality of speech, or symbolic, they are imaginary and have no inherent power. As postmodernists are fond of saying, structures are indeterminate because of their interpretive character. Structures are not stable because they contain an excess of meaning.

Since there is no escape from language, a privileged position should not be given to structures. Yet this conclusion raises another issue: language must consist of far more than its various manifestations. This is what Kristeva asserts when she states that the realm of "semiosis" is more vital than speech.[27] Her position is that language is not found among the surface features of speech, but instead is the ability to invent conceptual schemes, (re)arrange these frameworks, ascribe meaning to events, and further interpret these phenomena. In sum, language use is the creative capacity to constitute the experience known as reality.

Language supplies the necessary depth to experience, or what might be called the organizational capacity of understanding. But this is not the sphere introduced by Chomsky, for he assumes linguistic competence is derived from features of cognition that subtend the mind. The rendition of depth adopted here is characterized more adequately by Terry Winograd.[28] Language use, emphasizes Winograd, is the activity whereby existence is given meaning; interpersonal competence and linguistic coherence are actually revealed in speech acts. The surface or structural features of language would be disjointed without this organizational capacity, but this ability cannot be divorced from these visible components of speech. The co-constitution of the organization and

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form of this creativity is language. Benjamin captures the essence of this definition when he writes, "language is the mental being of things."[29]

Therefore, language can resist any assault by technology. The reason for this optimism is that language is more encompassing than technique. *Techne* does not embody language, but rather represents merely one linguistic game among others. Technology, as Heidegger suggests, is only a modality of Being-in-the-world; technology is one approach to conceptualizing and analyzing reality. This is what Heidegger intends when he remarks that the thrust of technology is not technological.[30] Ameliorating the impact of technological rationality, accordingly, is not necessarily a technical undertaking. Actually, assigning priority to a different style of speech may be more fruitful. Understanding technology to be fundamentally a "discursive practice" should be viewed as liberating.[31] When *techne* was thought to be technological, it appeared that only through ever-increasing technological improvements could dehumanization be averted. Yet this method of improving the human condition often made matters worse, for an imposing technological edifice was erected. Hence technology became more threatening.

Due to the discovery that technology is linguistic, this strategy for humanizing technological rationality is defunct. A much simpler and, as Heidegger suggests, obvious solution to the dominance of technology is available. If technology consists of an interpretation of reality, the claim is no longer credible that technological rationality epitomizes reason. In effect, this theoretical maneuver results in subverting the status usually accorded to technological rationality. The conditions are thus established for challenging successfully the reign of technology.

Clearly an avenue of escape from the one-dimensional, technological world depicted by Baudrillard is made available by language use. Because language expands beyond the parameters indigenous to technological rationality, access is provided to other interpretations of reality. A crisis or breakdown is likely following any attempt to circumscribe language, for no interpretation is final. Interpretations, in other words, tend to be cloudy even after clarification is thought to be reached. And because interpretation pervades *techne*, other modes of language are available to supplant technological rationality. Most important, due to the ubiquity of language, resistance can erupt at any moment.

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Language and Alienation

Alienation should not be considered outmoded, because of the pervasiveness of language. This is not to say that Baudrillard misunderstands the potential impact of the newest technological means of social control. On the contrary, he documents clearly the latest attack on imagination. Nonetheless, presupposed by every advance made by technological rationality is the ineluctability of *praxis*. Even in the worst scenario, short of death, persons are confronted by illegitimate demands. The point is that the self does not simply disappear because of the value recently placed on technology.

Critics should be encouraged by this inability to eliminate *praxis*. Furthermore, as argued by Bell Hooks, because language is "counter-hegemonic" it can be invoked to reduce alienation in a number of ways.[32] She is correct that language is a "place of struggle," due to the multiplicity of voices present in every utterance. Even in supposedly objective or scientific speech, for example, political motives can be found. Because language is incomplete and discontinuous – defies totalization – embarrassing *faux pas* such as this must be concealed. Those who engage in symbolic violence, therefore, are in constant fear that interpretation will spread in the wrong direction.

With regard to abolishing alienation, the following ideas are significant. First, the frustration of human desires is not justified by reality. Because of the inability to overcome the influence of language, to paraphrase Ionesco, even realism is not realistic. This means an oppressive ideology is nothing but a mode of interpretation that has become frozen. And what right does one form of doxa have to repress another? Following the complete mediation of reality by language, the standard metaphysical rationale for repression is illegitimate. An ominous and foreboding reality is merely a "dominant mode of signification" that can be reinterpreted and reprioritized.[33] Second, the usual tactic does not have to be adopted to remedy alienation, whereby the attempt is made to convince people that they should not be in awe of reality, or, in other words, that they do not have to be defined by traditional roles. Why should this solution be expected to work, if people are completely alienated? After all, the last act they can be expected to perform is to mock reality. But implied by the antidualism of the postmodern theory of language is that persons have not been severed from reality, even one that is odious. Therefore, the aim is not to reestablish

a link that has been lost between human interests and reality. Emphasis should be devoted, instead, to showing that this associa- tion always remains intact, and that during repressive periods an illusion is perpetrated to hide this fact. Rather than liberation from reality, persons should strive to reorient the world.

The real tragedy of alienation is that persons are forced to adjust to institutions they created. So why reify the social world further during the liberation process? Accordingly, critique should not be viewed as an endeavor whereby autonomous factors are reappro- priated. Contrary to traditional wisdom, no revolt against alien- ation should be conducted in simply economic or political terms. Instead, criticism should take place on the symbolic level. Or more to the point, these and other aspects of social life should be under- stood as essentially symbolic.

As a result, liberation does not require that reality be overcome. Anyway, with reality equated with symbolism, attempting to grasp whatever is exalted as real is futile. What is possible and noteworthy is the momentary stabilization of symbols that are polysemic. The opportunity is thus made available to give direc- tion to symbols that are uncertain. Surely such a venture is less menacing than trying to destroy reality. This is what Benjamin has in mind when he advises that the world should be redeemed before a revolution is inaugurated.[34]

Conclusion

Opponents of Baudrillard are certainly correct when they argue that if human action is preempted, liberation is an illusion.[35] Nonetheless, he appears to be unable to extricate himself from the contradiction revealed in his discussion of technology. Perhaps he is simply too preoccupied with the "revenge of the object," as men- tioned by Kellner.[36] That objects turn on their creators appears to be simply a natural occurrence. Persons are thus placed in the unenviable position of having to anticipate and protect themselves from these tragic events.[37] Given his unreflexive portrayal of tech- nology, Baudrillard seems to be almost seduced by reality. This is not to suggest that he is uncritical of technological rationality, but the ground of this style of thinking is not exposed.

Maybe his obsession with the object explains what critics refer to as Baudrillard's cynicism and despair during the 1980s. His rejec- tion of dualism may not be complete, thereby allowing reality to

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again become autonomous. What Baudrillard has apparently forgotten is that technology, or for that matter anything else, does not affect people in a causal manner. Stated differently, the impact of a phenomenon on people is never direct. Such directness is impossible because imagination cannot be divorced from reality. The denouement of this association can be summarized as follows: reality is merely an interpretation that has longevity.

Claude Lefort writes that technology constitutes a version of the "social imaginary."[38] Because of the inability to transcend language everything is imaginary; the usual metaphysical approach to legitimation is defunct. What separates reality from illusion are the nuances of speech. Therefore, the legitimacy granted to technology is quite fragile and tentative. If technological rationality becomes a fetish, this is the result of pure fantasy. For nothing inherent to *techne* warrants this kind of admiration.

In this regard, persons are not trapped by technology. They are on the verge of being held hostage, instead, by their own imagination. But as Freud proposed some time ago, a lapse of consciousness such as this is not necessarily fatal. Contrary to Baudrillard's scenario, recovery is always possible. People can come to recognize they are locked in a prison of their own device.

Possibly this is what Heidegger meant when he wrote that danger and salvation are closely united in technology.[39] The same factor that gives power to *techne* also serves to release people from its spell. Through language-use life can be both given and taken away from technology. When alienation is most intense, however, achieving this insight may be exceptionally difficult. Nonetheless, deciding to play another language game is always possible and much easier than challenging reality.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Communication." Lecture given at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL, 19 March 1991, p. 12.

2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. New York: Random House, 1964, p. 127.

3. Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Medial." In *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 210.

4. Baudrillard, *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

5. Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Technology."

6. Margaret Boden, *Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man*. New York: Basic Books, 1977, pp. 15–17.

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7. J. David Bolter, *Turing's Man: Western Culture in the Computer Age*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, pp. 83–90.

8. Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death." In *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, p. 143.

9. Ibid., p. 142.

10. Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Communication," p. 13.

11. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1988, p. 17.

12. Ibid., p. 12.

13. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction and Education*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977.

14. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 56–57.

15. Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," p. 122.

16. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981, pp. 172–177.

17. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 51.

18. Ibid., pp. 150–157.

19. Ibid., pp. 145–148.

20. Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

21. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, pp. 176–177.

22. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, pp. 18–19.

23. Frederick J. Newmeyer, *The Politics of Linguistics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

24. Ibid., pp. 31–62.

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp. 153–155.

26. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp. 9–11.

27. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 67.

28. Terry Winograd, "Computer Software for Working with Language," Scientific American 251(3), 1984, pp. 131–145.

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30. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 4.

31. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 31–39.

32. Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990, pp. 145–153.

33. Felix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 168.

34. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 262.

35. Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989, pp. 153–185.

36. Ibid., p. 156.

37. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 101.

38. Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986, pp. 181–236.

39. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 28.