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# *Baudrillard Between Benjamin and McLuhan: ‘the Narcissistic Seduction’ of the Media Society*

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to further investigate some aspects of Baudrillard’s analysis of the media society, influenced by Benjamin’s aesthetic teaching and McLuhan’s mediological legacy. His purpose is to probe the effects of the symbolic speedup fueled by the repeatability of messages and contents, constantly substituted by their immanent abstractions. The dominion of the signifier upon the signified, the replacement of the referendum with its referential highlights, the emphasis on the semiotic complexity of contemporary myths (as already remarked by Barthes), all this is destined to turn media into body extensions. Hence follows the ‘narcissistic seduction’ of television, as McLuhan outlines in reference to the tautological nature of mainstream media. In this sense, Baudrillard does not neglect the heuristic relevance of daily experience, conceived as an ‘open work’ by Eco. To the fore are the expressive shifts engendered by the cultural industry in the age of consumer fever. The result is Baudrillard’s syncretistic analysis of our communicative uncertainty. The latter stems from the meaningful and repeatable objects permeating the social act, increasingly influenced by the ‘narcissistic seduction’ of media.

Keywords: communication, media, sociology, symbolism, semiotics.

## **1. Benjamin and the symbolic impact of reproducibility**

The fabulous energies at work in technics, industry and economics should not hide the fact that it is at bottom only a matter of attaining this indefinite reproducibility, which is a definite challenge to the ‘natural’ order, and

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ultimately only a ‘second-order’ simulacrum and a somewhat weak imaginary solution to the question of world mastery. In relation to the era of the counterfeit, the double, the mirror and the theatre, games of masks and appearances, the serial and technical era of reproduction is basically an era of less ambitious scope (the following era of simulation models and third-order simulacra is of much more considerable dimensions) (Baudrillard, 1993: 55).

The concept of ‘serialization’ is fundamental in Baudrillard’s analysis of the consumer society, suspended between reproducibility and homologation. He assumes that the new era of mainstream media is about to bolster the counterfeit of human relationships, stranded by the frantic accumulation of experiences. The increase of the semiotic complexity connected to our technological post-modernity implies the replacement of experiences with objects, destined to occupy every single space of the human act.

In this regard, Baudrillard is strongly persuaded by the role played by the new reproducibility techniques in the construction of social identity, deeply rooted in the evolution of symbolic paradigms. By means of an attentive activity of observation and study, Baudrillard can point out that the overlapping of myths, symbols, signs and information engenders ‘the games of masks and appearances’. These games are fostered by the dominion of the signifier upon the signified, swamped by the progressive replacement of experiences with their simulacra. In this regard, Baudrillard’s sociology of consumption cannot set aside both semiology and mediology, as his constant references to Saussure, Barthes and McLuhan demonstrate. His main writings show how addicted he is to the analysis of the consequences of the interactional scenarios shaped by media. Their symbolic action depends on the efficiency and reliability of messages.

From this point of view, the consumer society strictly depends on the amount of information, contents and symbols scattered in the public spaces, later underlined by Habermas in terms of transition ‘from the sensitive impression to the symbolic expression’ (Habermas, 2001). The passage from the culture of impressions to the civilization of expressions (so relevant in times of digital connectivity and global sharing of texts and images) turns out to be the definitive dominion of the symbolic exchange on the manual potentiality of the craftsmen. This is what Richard Sennett remarked in reference to the loss of the ‘aura’ which marked the human act before the discovery of electricity (Sennett, 2008).

The diffusion of the telegraph, photograph and cinema, preceded by the invention of printing and perspective, provides social actors with the illusion of reproducing the concealed complexity of existence. This complexity is

framed into the unfathomable correspondences between internal and external perceptions. The chance to reproduce works of art (exalted by Benjamin, 2008) accelerates the process of replacement of existence with its simulacra. This semiotic process is facilitated by the strengthening of symbolic exchanges in the media action and above all, television. The medium is the message, to the extent that the latter loses its signifying relevance in the presence of the medium itself, conceived as an object full of significance.

After all, 'the serial and technical era of reproduction is basically an era of less ambitious scope', as Walter Benjamin points out in his aesthetic writings of the Thirties and Forties. In particular, the advent of the new chances of technical reproducibility endows social actors with new and advanced semiotic landscapes. Baudrillard remarks that this is a basic feature of the consumer society, turned by the action of media into a dynamic and shifting marketplace.

Hence follow the games of masks and appearances effectively described by Goffman, in reference to the contemporary forms of talk (Goffman, 1981). The construction of simulacra is empowered by the overlapping of symbolic layers. Furthermore, the frantic reproduction of reality fosters the iconographic impact of social life. These simulacra are the reflection of the social instances marking the faster and broader collective sharing of information (Codeluppi, 1989).

Our post-modernity (recalled by Latour, 1993) is the result of the progressive replacement of the signified with its signifier as Baudrillard too legitimates in the light of the supremacy of objects upon experiences. Before Barthes and McLuhan, both exploited by Baudrillard in terms of the heuristic approach, Benjamin provides the essential interpretative keys of the communicative fall-out connected to the electric revolution:

Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', was the first to draw out the essential implications of the principle of reproduction. He shows that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changes its goals, and alters the status of the product and the producer. He shows this in the fields of art, cinema and photography, because it is there that new territories are opened up in the twentieth century, with no 'classical' tradition of productivity, placed from the outset under the sign of reproduction. Today, however, we know that all material production remains within the same sphere. Today we know that it is at the level of reproduction (fashion, the media, advertising, information and communications networks), at the level of what Marx rather carelessly used to call the *faux frais* of capital (immense historical irony!), that is, in the sphere of simulacra and the code, that the unity of the whole process of capital is formed (Baudrillard, 1993: 55-56).

With the advent of the ‘principle of reproduction’, the work of art as well as the cultural products acquire an unexpected social impact. Likewise, the multiform variety of social acts gain a symbolic dimension that is destined to remove the traditional values and the experiential paradigms belonging to the past. The laws of capital rule over the intellectual balances, as Bourdieu points in reference to the ‘règles of art’ in our times (Bourdieu, 1996).

On this account, Benjamin understands in advance the epochal shifts fueled by the transformation of reproduction into a complete principle, destined to influence the symbolic exchange of postmodern relationships. The main effect of this symbolic speedup concerns the rapid deterioration of goods, both material and immaterial. Contents and information are no exception, drawn along by the productive wave washing upon the shore of social consumers. The risks of homologation and standardization, also denounced by Beck (1992), hang upon the single actors as absent specters, hidden by the collective production fever since Baudrillard quotes Marx in his sociological analysis.

The explanation of the ‘principle of reproduction’ leads the writer to dwell on the economic role played by capital in the construction of the postmodern identity. The work of art poses as a product, circulating in the market of perishable goods. This is true for every kind of narration, including literature. Adorno was not wrong when he observed, in reference to George’s lyric works: ‘If the subject is to genuinely resist reification in solitude here, it may no longer even try to withdraw into what is its own as though that were its property; the traces of an individualism that has in the meantime delivered itself over to the market in the form of the feuilleton are alarming’ (Adorno, 1974: 52).

Romantic individualism is about to be wiped out by the reification of human experiences. The symbolic exchange occupies the most concealed spaces of the social market, described by Adorno in reference to the shifting scenario of his time. It is also worth mentioning that Benjamin inherits the interest in the cultural reification from the founder of the Frankfurt school long before its worldwide diffusion. At the same time, Baudrillard strives to probe the deep link between objects, consumption and communication. Furthermore, he knows that objects dominate over human experiences. Indeed, consumption itself is experience, bound to be ruled by the laws of production. It is quite clear that the productive acceleration regards the communicative processes as well. And the advent of the digital society, shaped by the permanent exchange of images, videos and texts, requires an attentive analysis of interactional shifts. These are connected to the semiotic revolution fueled by the Internet civilization.

‘The principle of production’ highlighted by Baudrillard in compliance with Benjamin’s work seems to walk the same path of Poe’s ‘poetic principle’, exploited by McLuhan when remarking ‘the discovery of the technique of discovery’ made possible by the symbolist poets when technology started to change the urban and mental landscapes (Lombardinilo, 2017: 257-285). After all, McLuhan reminds us that electricity itself is a medium, enabled to convey information and connect people. The transition from the manuscript to the book engenders the advent of the typographic man, imbued with the visual linearity of mechanically reproduced texts. Prior to the definition of the Gutenberg galaxy (McLuhan, 2011), Benjamin dwells on the productive power of technology, as Baudrillard clearly emphasizes:

Benjamin was also the first (with McLuhan after him) to grasp technology as a medium rather than a ‘productive force’ (at which point the Marxist analysis retreats), as the form and principle of an entirely new generation of meaning. The mere fact that any given thing can simply be reproduced, as such, in an exemplary double is already a revolution: one need only think of the stupefaction of the Black boy seeing two identical books for the first time. That these two technical products are *equivalent* under the sign of necessary social labour is less important in the long term than the serial repetition of the same object (which is also the serial repetition of individuals as labour power) (Baudrillard, 1993: 56).

According to the French sociologist, Benjamin was the first to understand the social and economic impact of production as a collective medium. Production is destined to determine the ineluctable replacement of contents with their objects, the substitution of meanings with their representations, the dominion of simulacra upon experiences. The possibility to duplicate images and texts provides a heap of cognitive and learning chances, destined to shape the public opinion in all its changing facades (Habermas, 1991).

Serial repetition conceals the craving for reproducibility that men have always had in the past, as Barthes points out in *Ancienne rhetorique* (1988) and McLuhan remarks in his *Gutenberg Galaxy*. The possibility to reproduce one or more copies of the same object attests the advent of the modern mindset, moulded by the printed linearity of the printed page. The diffusion of electricity fuels the construction of the mosaic framework of the eye, reflected in the journalistic page.

Of course, the serial repetition of information and narrations (attested by contemporary TV series) implies the development of professional skills and productive expertise. The transformation of the labour market in the age of reproducibility allows Baudrillard to recall Marx’s economic previsions. But in

the light of the hectic diffusion of communicative advice, production itself acquires a definite social meaning, to the extent that every object turns into a semiotic medium. 'Thus Marxism had not been radical enough to escape the logic of capitalist exchange itself' (Gane, 2000: 14).

In this regard, Baudrillard assumes that the correspondence between the medium and its message deeply changes in the era of electric connections in compliance with the symbolic shifts. Technique is a social medium, so effective in changing the experiential ratios among the social actors. 'The labour power' is functional to the success of consumption as a collective habit, founded on the serial repeatability of consumerism. From this point of view, Baudrillard's analysis of simulacra is inspired by the serial mindset of the postmodern actors, afflicted by the end of great narrations (Lyotard, 1984) and excited by the advent of digital representations.

Simulacra are more than mere reflections of existential fragments. They are the synthesis between the internal and external insights of the mind, wrapped around the serial complexity of social environments. Together with the mainstream devices, consumption turns production into a complete medium, capable of shaping human relationships in accordance with certain consumption dynamics. This is one of the intuitions developed by McLuhan, who tried to understand media in compliance with their productive background. This fact also helps Baudrillard explain the immanent influence that every object has in our daily experience, especially in consideration of the replacement of the significant with its signifier. The medium is the message, especially when it is reproducible on a large scale. Furthermore, the technique is a medium, by means of its economic and functional impact on productive and consumer habits:

Technique as a medium gains the upper hand not only over the product's 'message' (its use-value) but also over labour power, which Marx wanted to turn into the revolutionary message of production. Benjamin and McLuhan saw more clearly than Marx, they saw that the real message, *the real ultimatum, lay in reproduction itself*. Production itself has no meaning: its social finality is lost in the series. Simulacra prevail over history (Baudrillard, 1993: 56).

Needless to say, the consumer society has lost the memorial heritage of the past, wiped out by the religion of consumption. This religion has become a sort of collective mandatory. On account of this, the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility attests the empowerment of industrial productions in everyday life, by means of the semiotic relevance that serial objects gain in social environments. Both Benjamin and Baudrillard emphasize

the role played by the improvement of production in the nineteenth century. Marx analyzed it in reference to the religion of capital fueled by the industrial revolutions.

Benjamin quotes Marx in his *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* as 'his analysis of the capitalist mode of production'. Hence follows the hint at the functional shifts fostered by the reproducibility modernity, which was bound to turn production into a complete and powerful medium: 'Since the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture. How this process has affected culture can only now be assessed, and these assessments must meet certain prognostic requirements' (Benjamin, 2008: 19). This is very true for Baudrillard, who becomes addicted to the semiological ordeal peculiar to the mass society, deeply shaped by the intertwining of objects and information. The fever of production marking post-modernity poses as a cornerstone of social phenomenology. In this regard, the increase of production implies the loss of memory, as McLuhan claims thanks to Eliot's poetical lesson (Lombardinilo, 2017: 319-334).

The memory paradigms that once featured in public spaces are wiped out by the material habit of the technological society, more and more imbued with the irreplaceable presence of objects. This is why 'simulacra prevail over history', as the advent of digital relationships clearly shows. After all, Baudrillard already realized that the dichotomy between 'the tactile and the digital' was going to mark the progress of modern times towards a deep sensorial transformation. This is what McLuhan often points out in his writings. Once again, the medium is the message, to the extent that any new medium produces visual and tactile shifts (McLuhan, 2005a).

Baudrillard underlines that 'Digitality is among us. It haunts all the messages and signs of our society, and we can clearly locate its most concrete form in the test, the question/answer, the stimulus/response' (Baudrillard, 1993: 61-62). The binary system introduced by informatics permeates any field of the social act. Communication is no exception, as the proliferation of quizzes and games confirms. The ratios between question and answer is improved by the need to speed up the time reaction of consumers in the presence of goods and services. The latter are increasingly imposed by the billboard.

All content is neutralised by a continuous process of orchestrated interrogations, verdicts and ultimatums to be decoded, which this time no longer come from the depths of the genetic code but still possess the same tactical indeterminacy. The cycles of meaning become infinitely shorter in

the cycles of the question/answer, the bit or the return of a minuscule quantity of energy/information to its point of departure (Baudrillard, 1993: 62).

The rhetoric and symbolic spirals of the digital era stem from both productive and communicative expertise, shaped by the shifting balances of the post-modern era. In this sense, the consciousness of error inspires every choice and decision. They are functional to the effort to give the right answer to the social test we are engaged in. This leads to Baudrillard's remarks, 'The test is everywhere the fundamental social form of control' (Baudrillard, 1993: 62).

The concept of control is strictly connected to the improvement in production and industrialization. However, it recalls the use of mainstream media in the age of totalitarianisms, as Adorno and Horkheimer emphasized in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (2002). The era of mainstream is featured by the dominion of the signifier upon the signified, by the supremacy of the objects upon the subjects, by the replacement of the referential with its referendum. This is a semiotic shift destined to permeate the advent of the consumer society and the digital civilization. In addition, the transformation of production into a medium legitimates the frantic diffusion of signs and symbols that can be read as objective correlatives of our experiences (Genosko, 2002). Referenda and simulacra are the two different faces of the same medal, representing the anxiety for consumption afflicting the binary society:

We live in a *referendum* mode precisely because there is no longer any *referential*. Every sign and every message (objects of 'functional' utility just as much as fashion features or any televised information, polls or discussions) is presented to us as a question/answer. The entire communications system has passed from a complex syntactic structure of language to a binary system of question/answer signals and perpetual testing. Tests and referenda are, as we know, perfect forms of simulation: the question induces the answer, it is *design-ated* in advance. The *referendum*, then, is *only an ultimatum*: the unilateral question is precisely not an interrogation any more, but the immediate imposition of a meaning which simultaneously completes the cycle. (Baudrillard, 1993: 62).

The referendum is only an ultimatum, to the extent that its cult provides us with the illusion of participation, inclusion and perception of wealth. Surely, the myth of objects and their simulacra aim to strengthen the illusion of social representation, as Goffman assumes: 'Perhaps the most important

piece of sign equipment associated with social class consists of the status symbols through which material wealth is expressed' (Goffman, 1956: 24).

The era of mechanical reproducibility has outstandingly increased the number of status symbols enabled to show and affirm social roles, beyond the effective grade of wealth achieved by the social actors. Symbols are complete media, likewise the referenda are the denotata of our inner expectations. Our cravings for consumption depend on the game of illusions and the tactic strategies ruling our public representations. The fall of public man (Sennett, 1992) and the appearance of the digital actor (Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 1998) are fueled by the diffusion of messages as referenda and media themselves, fed by the unstoppable flow of production.

'Every message is a verdict, delivered like the verdict of polling statistics. The simulacrum of distance (or indeed of contradiction) between the two poles is nothing but a tactical hallucination, like the reality effect on the interior of the sign itself' (Baudrillard, 1993: 62). Hallucination is the mere consequence of the mainstream innovation (Thompson, 1995), which has removed the traditional perceptive paradigms, in place of the bright patterns of TV information (Mazzoli, 2013). The narrations of uncertainty described by Bauman (2005) stem from the transformation of messages into 'verdicts', imposed by the public opinion in compliance with its tactical regulation.

Production is the founding principle of the individual and collective simulacra that transfigure our weak relationships, moulded by the technical expertise emphasized by Benjamin at the dawn of our digital outburst.

## 2. McLuhan and the interaction between myth and mass media

As we saw above, Baudrillard stresses the metaphor of test just to highlight the functional consequences of the production society, drawn onward by the economic and semiotic force of uncontrolled consumption. The age of technical reproducibility matches the diffusion of experiential duplicability, fueled by the serialization of images, texts, messages, myths and icons. The binary mindset of the mechanical actors is strictly related to the need to filter the huge amount of goods and benefits invading the social environments. Only selection leads to attentive choices, so necessary in the magmatic mess of the consumer civilization. The binary mindset of digital actors is shaped in accordance with the serialization of actions and representations. The mainstream media keep on fueling the binary mindset in the light of the narrative instances featuring the network society (Morcellini, 2013).

Long before the advent of smart media, Benjamin saw the close connection between technique and professional attitude, with particular regard to cinema. This is an aspect expressly outlined by Baudrillard, to the extent that Benjamin was able to probe the power of cinema to re-shape reality: 'Benjamin provides this test-function at the concrete level of the technical apparatus' (Baudrillard, 1993: 62). Hence follows a long quote from paragraph 10 of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*, given here in its conclusive fragment:

The expansion of the field of the testable which mechanical equipment brings about for the actor corresponds to the extraordinary expansion of the field of the testable brought about for the individual through economic conditions. Thus, vocational aptitude tests become constantly more important. What matters in these tests are segmental performances of the individual. The film shot and the vocational aptitude test are taken before a committee of experts. The camera director in the studio occupies a place identical with that of the examiner during aptitude tests. (Baudrillard, 1993: 63-64).

Benjamin's analysis of the cultural industry provides the scholar with the heuristic skills useful to probe the connection between objects and their serial representations (Gilles, Sitz, 2015), altered by the filter of imagination. In this regard, the semiotic power of media (rightly emphasized by Barthes) poses as an irreplaceable shaping force, fueled by the overlapping of meanings, information, impressions. As McLuhan used to remark, 'The movie is the total realization of the medieval idea of change, in the form of an entertaining illusion' (McLuhan, 2003: 383).

Before the invention of electricity, the typographic culture had already wiped out the manuscript tradition, despite the radicalization of its cultural empowerment. Since the medium is the message, it is needless to point out that our sensorial faculties change when a new medium bursts into our life. This is an aspect well emphasized by Baudrillard in reference to Benjamin's description of cinema narrations. In the meantime, he involves McLuhan's mediological analysis (Genosko, 1999; Galbo, 1991): 'According to McLuhan, it is in this sense that the modern media demand greater immediate participation, incessant response and total plasticity (Benjamin compares the camera-man's operation to the surgeon's: tactility and manipulation)' (Baudrillard, 1993: 63).

Media as extensions of men is an effective metaphor that conjures the inescapable changes of our perceptive skills in relation to the communicative shifts. The transformation of messages into sharing social goods allows the actors to interpret reality in accordance with the heap of meanings released by

the intertwining of objects and their simulacra. Their function is to replace the spectre of death with the fake myth of immortality. This is why Baudrillard can afford to remark that ‘Simulacra prevail over history’. In the presence of the flood of virtual messages and images, information is removed soon after being ‘consumed’. Messages are no longer meaningful. Their function resides in their production, not in their interpretation. This is one of the main teachings stressed by McLuhan, promptly revised by Baudrillard: ‘Messages no longer have an informational role, they test and take polls, ultimately so as to control (“contra-role” in the sense that all your responses are already inscribed in the “role”, on the anticipated register of the code). Editing and encoding in fact demand that the recipient dismantle and decode in accordance with the same process’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 63).

The cinema medium has shown that narrations are to be edited before being consumed by the audience. This endeavor should require the knowledge of the secrets founding the media. Cinema brings to life the general experience provided by the medium itself, not the particular one proposed by the narrated story (Lombardinilo, 2013). This is one of the main features of the consumer society, pivoted on the replacement of live experiences with their simulacra set in motion on the screen. The mechanism of this process is finely synthesized by Baudrillard by means of McLuhan’s intuitions: ‘Every reading of a message is thus nothing more than a perpetual test of the code’. (Baudrillard, 1993: 63).

To the fore are the deep changes in our tactile and perceptive faculties, also highlighted by Sennett in reference to the loss of the old manual skills (Sennett, 2008). The narrative patterns of the electric era are the result of attentive editing paradigms:

This whole analysis directly reflects McLuhan’s formula ‘The Medium is the Message’. It is in fact the medium, the very mode of editing, cutting, questioning, enticement, and demand by the medium that rules the process of signification. So we can understand why McLuhan saw an era of *tactile* communication in the era of electronic mass-media. In this we are closer in effect to the tactile than we are to ‘the visual universe’, where there is greater distance, and reflection is always possible. At the moment that touching loses its sensory, sensual value for us (‘touching is an interaction of the senses rather than a simple contact between a skin and an object’), it is possible that it might once more become the schema of a universe of communication but this time as a field of *tactile* and *tactical* simulation where the message becomes a ‘message’, a tentacular enticement, a test. In every field we are tested, probed and sampled; the method is ‘tactical’ and the sphere of communication ‘tactile’. Not to mention the ideology of ‘contact’, which in all of its forms, seeks to replace the idea of social relations. A

whole strategic configuration revolves around the test (the question/answer cell) as it does around a molecular command-code (Baudrillard, 1993: 64-65).

The process of signification is a complete ‘mode of editing, cutting, questioning, enticement, and demand’, influenced by the functional role played by the media in the social contexts. In this regard, Baudrillard does not set aside McLuhan’s mediological insights, whose prophetic meaning is confirmed by the digital acceleration marking the convergent society (Jenkins, 2006). This is what Genosko asserts about the influence of McLuhan’s writings on French culture and especially on Baudrillard’s thought:

Anyone familiar with the work of Baudrillard, for example, would not fail to be struck by the important influence of McLuhan’s ideas on his thinking. A critical understanding of Baudrillard’s – among others’ – work demands, then, a return to McLuhan in the context of a consideration of the extensions and reworkings of his ideas across the field of French sociological and cultural writing over the last 30 years (Genosko, 1999, 7-8).

In addition, Douglas Kellner (2017) reminds us of the importance of Baudrillard’s review of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*: ‘At this time, he shared the neo-Marxist critique of McLuhan as a technological reductionist and determinist. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, McLuhan’s formula eventually became the guiding principle of his own thought’.

This fact is confirmed not only by the several references scattered through *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, but also by one of the central paragraphs of *The Consumer Society*, entitled ‘The medium is the message’, dedicated (of course) to the analysis of McLuhan’s theory of mainstream media. In particular, Baudrillard shows he is addicted to some insights stressed in *Understanding Media*. His purpose is to support the interpretation of social consumption as a communication process, capable of turning daily objects into symbols belonging to a new codex. On the one hand, he assumes that the mainstream message ‘is not the manifest content of sounds and images, but the constraining pattern – linked to the very technical essence of those media – of the disarticulation of the real into successive and equivalent signs’ (Baudrillard, 1988: 122).

On the other hand, he copes with the power of mass media to ‘neutralize’ human experiences. This is made possible by means of the immanent repeatability of media, since they ‘are homogeneous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other’ (Baudrillard, 1988: 124). He deals with the definition of TV images as ‘the

metalinguage of an absent world', fueled by the transformation of production and technique into a postmodern form of anxiety (Maffesoli, 2003).

McLuhan's aphorism sounds like the prophetic announcement of the new civilization of objects, bolstered by the innovation of productive strategies. Communication devices are no exception, in the light of their power to create new myths and narrations. As Touraine points out, 'the information society was created by entrepreneurs of a new kind, enthusiastic and swept along by a new conception of society' (Touraine, 2005: 23). This is an aspect that McLuhan highlights in his books and critical essays, in particular those published before *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*. It is the case of the essay titled *The Medium is the Message* (published in 1960), which is 'McLuhan's first extended treatment of his best-known theme' (Gordon, 2005: 2). Basically, his insights stems from the full awareness of the semiotic complexity engendered by the increase of production and mechanization:

The world of production and management is today grappling with the changes in the patterns of command and of production resulting from the telephone and the complex synchronization in production resulting from the use of electronic tapes. The latter have ended the centuries-old regime of the assembly line. The end of the assembly line in the outer-world could well be a portent for the entire educational establishment (McLuhan, 2005a: 8).

The transition from the obsolete electronic tapes to analogical supports imposes brand new sensorial patterns that the 'world of production and management' must interpret and fuel. The construction of the 'meta-language of an absent world' depends on the visual dominion conveyed by cinema and television, whose tautological action is strictly connected to the possibility to edit, cut and question daily experiences.

Gordon has effectively remarked on McLuhan's interpretation of television as a psycho-physical medium: "Television shifted the balance among our five physical senses and altered our mental process. The shift was radical and irreversible. In the first place, the visual sense that had dominated Western culture for centuries, through the alphabet and the printing press, was suddenly dislocated by the new medium of television" (Gordon, 2010: 8). The plunge into the digital world has wiped out all the non-analogical supports of reproducibility (from tapes and records to the photographic film). But it did not determine the obsolescence of television, whose semiotic impact on the narrative representations did not cease to exist.

This tendency has educational consequences, to the extent that mainstream devices have the power to influence both behavioral and expressive habits (Silverstone, 1999). Nonetheless, television is responsible for the dominion of objects upon experiences, swamped by the illusion of social participation. Centuries later the invention of printing, technology and production keeps on determining the change of visual and auditory skills: 'The eye-order of the printed age and of the written world, as sponsored by the grammarian, may lack the organic unity and delicacy of the spoken idiom. Eye-order may here have a validity imperceptible to the structural linguist with his subliminally-espoused ear-order via electronic tape'. (McLuhan, 2005a: 12).

In the meantime, McLuhan dwells on the effects stemming from the empowerment of our sensorial skills: 'But the pros and cons can more easily be tested when the real nature of the clash is clarified' (McLuhan, 2005a: 12). Hence follows the mainstream imagery moulded by the scrolling images imposed by cinema and television:

The eye man in this order of observation is satisfied that film and television images are roughly alike. Yet just as small children can make the most delicate distinction of subtle sound structures, so do they receive and react to the distinction between movie and television imagery – that is, between the still shot and the continuous pick-up, between light *on* and light *through* an image (McLuhan, 2005a: 12).

The differentiation between 'light on and light through an image' marks the transition from the typographic era to the analogical galaxy, featured by the intertwining of multimedia inputs. Hence follows the construction of the glittering imagery peculiar to movie narrations and series representations. Benjamin already hinted at this functional transformation in the Thirties, in reference to the semiotic innovation fueled by cinema. In this regard, Baudrillard's quote from *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* matches the other quote retrieved from McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. The latter is focused on the functional revolution of media, which 'demand greater immediate participation, incessant response and total plasticity'.

This is much truer for cinema, whose reproducibility power does not set aside the role played by mechanization in the construction of more and more sophisticated symbolic simulacra. The advent of the mass society would be far from possible without the development of television as a social medium, inspired by a peculiar rhetoric pattern. Synesthesia and metaphor are the main rhetoric tools of the mainstream language, marked by the replacement of texts with their iconic reflections:

"The weak "definition" of TV condemns its viewer to rearrange the few points he retains into a kind of abstract work of art. He thereby participates in the creation of a reality which is only pointilistically presented: the televiwer is in the situation of an individual who is asked to project his own phantasma onto inkblots which are not supposed to represent anything'. TV as a perpetual Rorschach test. Again: 'The TV image obliges us to always be filling in the blanks on the screen in a convulsive, kinetic and tactile sensory participation' (McLuhan quoted by Baudrillard, 1993: 84).

The passage from the 'abstract work' recalled by McLuhan to the 'open work' proposed by Umberto Eco reveals the full advent of post-modernity and its aesthetic creativity, deprived of any expressive boundaries. The open work is substantially unfinished and in progress, thanks to the incompleteness of human existence in the age of value nihilism. In this sense, the mosaic pattern of the TV image is the result of hyper-specialization and mechanic improvement (Codeluppi, 2012).

All the attributes of this digitalized world permeate things as well as men, wrapped around the meaningful accumulation of impressions. Therefore, myth poses as the perpetual need to immortalize human experience in accordance with its provisional nature. Myth makes it inclusive of its unsolvable contradictions. This is what the symbolist poets tried to express through their intensive use of analogy, functional to the need to probe the unfathomable depths of consciousness. Their artistic involvement was related to the sudden shifts engendered by electricity (Meyrowitz, 1985). And they considered the new reproducibility media peculiar to the second industrial revolution too.

This is why McLuhan can afford to remark that symbolism is a 'jazz of the intellect', a complete 'parataxis' of the mind, stranded by the dizzy development of sensorial faculties (Lombardinilo, 2016). Symbolists strove to describe the unconscious landscapes of human experience. Their poetry poses as the first reliable test to measure the human mindset shaped by technology and media, destined to revolutionize the way of living in a frantic and frenzied world. The new myth of global connection looms on the horizon, by means of the unifying action supported by the mainstream media. This is what McLuhan assumes in a critical essay titled *Myth and Mass Media* (1959), in which 'a one-off application of an illuminating *camera obscura* metaphor is applied to the speed-up effected by print and television media' (McLuhan, 2005b: 2). To the fore is the previously mentioned 'language of an absent world', supported by the mythmaking power that every medium may implement thanks to its transfiguring force. Reality is but the representation of

our expectations, fulfilled and interpreted by media contents. In this sense, media turn into complete mythmakers, bolstered by the convergence between reproducibility and production:

The mythmaking power of a medium that is itself a myth form appears now in the postliterate age as the rejection of the consumer in favor of the producer. The movie now can be seen as the peak of the consumer-oriented society, being in its form the natural means both of providing and of glorifying consumer goods and attitudes. But in the arts of the past century the swing has been away from packaging for the consumer to providing do-it-yourself kits. The spectator or reader must now be cocreator (McLuhan, 2005b: 15).

One year after the publication of Barthes' *Mythologies* (published in 1957), McLuhan highlights the central role played by the electric media in the construction of contemporary myths. The spectator is more than a simple actor: he craves to become a co-creator of the public scene, more and more imbued with the informative shafts of broadcasting. After all, the dichotomy between producers and consumers is relevant not only in Benjamin's analysis, but also in McLuhan's studies.

Media tautological nature endows the social actors with ever changing mythic paradigms: 'It is not strange that we should long have been obsessed with the literary and 'content' aspect of myth and media. The "form" and "content" dichotomy is as native to the abstract, written, and printed forms of codification as is the "producer" and "consumer" dichotomy' (McLuhan, 2005b: 16). Needless to say, the proximity between McLuhan's and Barthes' studies of myth, since the form is (according to Barthes) the signifier face of mythical sign (signification), stemming from the union of the form (signifier) and the concept (signified). The mythical signification is a second semiotic system, resting on a linguistic semiotic stratum still existing (Barthes, 2013).

Thus, every new product or person might turn into a contemporary myth, built through the shaping action of the media and production system. After all, McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* poses as an early attempt to explore the increasing complexity of media messages, in compliance with their mythmaking power. In the same years Barthes is engaged in a similar endeavor, carried out from a semiological point of view. In reference to their intellectual engagement, Genosko observes: 'In a letter to the Canadian journalist Robert Fulford, who referred to Barthes as "France's Marshall McLuhan", McLuhan would point to their similarities and differences. He saw in Barthes' writing a method that, like his own, examines effects rather than

causes, studies patterns without overarching theories. He explains that his own writings depend entirely on perceptions and not ideas' (Genosko, 2005: 165).

This is why it is possible to dwell on the proximity of the 'metalanguage of an absent world' of media and the conception of myth as a 'stolen language' pointed out by Barthes. Baudrillard exploits McLuhan's mediological insights as well as Barthes' intuitions on contemporary myths, probed in accordance with his structuralism paradigms. To the fore is the production and consumption of symbols hanging on in public and individual environments (Habermas, 1991). After all, symbols 'appear in all kinds of physic manifestations. There are symbolic thoughts and feelings, symbolic acts and situations' (Jung, 1964: 55). The communicative power of symbols resides in their 'ambiguity', as Baudrillard remarks when he observes that 'Jakobson is content to substitute the *ambiguity* of the signified for the *ambivalence* of the signifier' (Baudrillard, 1993: 215). Thanks to McLuhan's teaching, Baudrillard already stressed this concept in *The Consumer Society*, in relation to the 'the abolition of the signified and the tautology of the signifier' marking the TV messages:

This is what defines consumption, the systematic consumption effect at the level of the mass media. Instead of going out to the world via the mediation of the image, it is the image which circles back on itself via the world (it is the signifier which designates itself under cover of the signified). We move from the message centred on the signified – a transitive message – to the message centred on the signifier (Baudrillard, 1988: 124).

Our absent world is about to be fulfilled with a flood of illusive narrations. Their effect is to substitute our factual experience with the immanent simulacra of our consuming anxiety. Production and repeatability are the different facades of the same medal, glittering in the shade of the myths of the consumer society. When messages are pivoted on the signifier and the signified loses its centrality, the symbolic exchange among humans is projected towards a rapid decay (Bishop, 2013). This is why Baudrillard can assert that 'Everydayness is difference in repetition' (Baudrillard, 1988: 118). He takes for granted that 'The analyses of both Benjamin and McLuhan stand on the borders of reproduction and simulation, at the point where referential reason disappears and production is seized by vertigo' (Baudrillard, 1993: 56).

### **3. Medium as an ‘open work’: the ‘narcissistic seduction’ of the consumer society**

In his *The Symbolic Exchange and the Death*, Baudrillard repeatedly highlights the seductive power of our consumer civilization. He deals with the outstanding explosion of meanings, symbols and contents marking the empowerment of production and technology. Consumption is but a semiotic scenery, as well as myth, defined by Barthes nothing more than ‘a word’ (Barthes, 2013).

Baudrillard wonders how the symbolic paradigms change in relation to the post-modern productive speedup. This is why the symbolic exchange is interpreted as a social process, fueled by the outburst of the semantic magma of the digital era. ‘The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a “structure”, but an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 133). In the background are the ‘semantics of images’ and symbols, shaping the anthropological structures of the imaginary world investigated by Durand (2016: 405-426).

The dichotomy between reality and imagination conceals the contraposition between the signifier and signified, bound to permeate the social act without any solution of continuity. The secret of the consumer society lies in the way it overcomes these contrasts between experiences and simulacra, exalted by the ‘narcissistic mirage’ of media. As a matter of fact, media are fascinating as well as narcotizing, because of their apparent openness to the external world. Their social influence is founded on their apparent inclusive action, fostered by the serialization of experiences. Their main feature has to do with the narcissistic attraction of their representations, in confirmation of the fact that the message will never cease to be the medium. This is a principle well pointed out by McLuhan in *Understanding Media*: ‘It is the continuous embrace of our technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms’ (McLuhan, 2003: 68).

The analogy of ‘Narcissus as narcosis’ (chosen by McLuhan as the title of chapter 4) helps us understand the fictional power of mainstream myths, seldom inspired by everlasting values or symbols (Secondulfo, 2007). On the contrary, mainstream myths can make people numb. This may happen because of the ever shifting ratios between beauty and perception, as the system of fashion testifies. It is not by chance that Baudrillard copes with ‘the “Pulsion” of Fashion’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 93). Their social impact concerns its

semiotic dynamism, as Benjamin himself underlined in *Paris Capital of the XIX Century* by quoting one of Leopardi's most brilliant moral essays, titled *Dialogue between Fashion and Death* (Benjamin, 2003).

The decay of human products is perfectly expressed by the system of fashion, analyzed by Barthes (1983) as a complete communication system. Fashion is but the narcissistic myth of human signification, unbearable without the cooperative process ruling the social act. This is what Baudrillard assumes in reference to the fluctuations of signs marking the consumer society:

Paying tribute to it, he finds salvation in fashion. A passion for collecting, passion for signs, passion for the cycle (the collection is also a cycle); one line of fashion put into circulation and distributed at dizzying speeds across the entire social body, sealing its integration and taking in all identifications (as the line in collection unifies the subject in one and the same infinitely repeated cyclic process) (Baudrillard, 1993: 93).

It is the entire social body to be imbued with the effects of global distribution and sharing of signs and symbols. These are the same effects conveyed by fashion in terms of fascination and numbness. The social power of media is strictly connected to the same 'narcissistic models' imposed by fashion thanks to its enchanting mirage. This is why Baudrillard refers to a sort of 'semiurgy of fashion', founded on Barthes' analysis of its narcissistic meanings:

This force, this enjoyment, takes root in the sign of fashion itself. The semiurgy of fashion rebels against the functionalism of the economic sphere. Against the ethics of production stands the aesthetics of manipulation, of the reduplication and convergence of the single mirror of the model: 'Without content, it [fashion] then becomes the spectacle human beings grant themselves of their power to make the insignificant signify' (Barthes, *The Fashion System*). The charm and fascination of fashion derives from this: the decree it proclaims with no other justification but itself. The arbitrary is enjoyed like an election, like class solidarity holding fast to the discrimination of the sign. It is in this way that it diverges radically from the economic while also being its crowning achievement. In relation to the pitiless finality of production and the market, which, however, it also stages, fashion is a festival. It epitomises everything that the regime of economic abstraction censures. It inverts every categorical imperative (Baudrillard, 1993: 93).

The power of fashion is fostered by the tendency to fulfill the symbolic emptiness of postmodern life, marked by the death of reality, simulation of

truth and magic of goods. In this sense, fashion is a ‘supersign’, able to give signification to the insolvable emptiness of mechanized times (Habermas, 2015). Barthes’ interpretation of fashion and myth hints at the right way to interpret the role played by simulation and manipulation in the communicative ordeal of our times (Boccia Artieri, 2012). It is determined by the convergence between objects and contents, between signifier and signified, referendum and referential.

The society of disorder is much more than a visionary prophecy (Boudon, 1984). Once again, Baudrillard’s metaphor of media as ‘a meta-language of an absent world’ matches with Barthes’ analysis of myth as a ‘stolen language’. This concept is strengthened by McLuhan’s vision of ‘media as translators’: ‘All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms’ (McLuhan, 2003: 85). The metaphoric power of media would not be so active without the narcissistic force of its communicative flow. Its fluctuating tide is modeled in accordance with the symbolic instances of the consuming actors.

The individualized society described by Bauman (2001) results from this permanent instability of signs and symbols, destined to perish and be reborn again and again. Hyper-reality stems from the permanent intertwining of social signs (Nadine, 2016). In this sense, the consumer is a co-creator of his social environment, just as the observer or the reader is the co-interpreter of works of art. To the fore is the ‘miniaturization in our relationship to objects’ (Butler, 1999: 31).

The mythic power of mainstream messages resides in their open structure, in a time marked by ‘the absent structure’ denounced by Umberto Eco in the late Sixties. Before the fading of the structural fences of the social act, Eco highlighted the progressive openness of the work of art towards the serialized codex of the cultural industry. The image of the ‘open work’ effectively shows the new cooperative relationships between the authors and the audience: ‘In other words, the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work *to be completed*. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own’ (Eco, 1989: 19).

The creative process founding the poetical message might attest the chance that language has to fill out the emptiness of our psychic simulacra. After all, the openness of the work of art is linked to its reproducible nature, determining the attempt to probe the way leading to ‘the semantic density of language, the wealth of information’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 217). Thus, after having quoted Barthes’ system of fashion, Baudrillard exploits Eco’s analysis of the ‘Open work’ to empower his interpretation of the symbolic exchange as

a system of communication. Its ‘rhetoric of ambiguity’ is founded on the fluctuations between the denotatum and its denotandum:

Eco appropriates this cosmology for himself, and retranscribes it in linguistic terms. The totalisation of meaning takes place by means of a ‘chain reaction’ and the infinite subdivision of signifieds: ‘All this is attained by means of an identification between signifier and signified... the aesthetic sign . . . is not confined to a given denotatum, but rather expands every time the structure within which it is inevitably *embodied*, is duly appreciated a sign. Its signified, resounding relentlessly against its signifier, keeps acquiring new echoes’ (Eco, 1989: 36). This, then, is a schema of a first (denotative) phase of reference, followed by a second phase of ‘harmonic’ reference, where a ‘theoretically unlimited’ chain reaction is operative hence the evocation of the cosmic (Baudrillard, 1993: 217).

The semiotic chain reaction at the basis of the consumer society stems from the unbearable complexity of the symbolic commodities hovering about the social actors. In the era of media connectivity, their main endeavor seems to concern the replacement of psychic perceptions with their external simulacra, increasingly attracted by the signifier webs of objects. Among the consequences of the risk society (Beck, 1992) are the dominion of simulation, serialization and ambiguity. The fullness of sense sought by human beings in their existential paths is far from being achieved.

In the background is the outstanding ‘semiological imaginary’ that ‘easily reconciles romantic polyphony’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 218). McLuhan emphasizes the polyphonic force of romantic poetry in reference to Blake’s prophetic announcement. The English poet was already aware of the incoming shifts fueled by the typographic revolution: ‘If Perceptive Organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary; / If Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also’ (McLuhan, 2003: 68). This is what happens when we use a new medium, destined to become a body-extension and modify our perception of ourselves. The only shelter from the symbolic flood of the consumer era is the return to a more authentic intellectual dimension. ‘Here again, the poetic gives you more’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 218).

Of course, the recovery of the aura of the work of art (Benjamin) does not exclude the theory of the open work (Eco), both stressed by Baudrillard to explain the psychic narcosis connected the narcissism of media. The ‘rules of art’ (Bourdieu, 1996) pose as an interpretative device of human interactions, built with several internal and external correspondences. To the fore is the unsolvable relationship between the symbolic exchange and the myth of death. This semiotic exchange is to mark our semiological redundancy: ‘This theory serves as the basic ideology of everything we have

been able to say about the poetic (nor does psychoanalysis escape this) ambiguity, polysemy, polyvalence, polyphony of meaning; it is always a matter of the *radiation of the signified*, of a simultaneity of significations' (Baudrillard, 1993: 217).

#### 4. Conclusions

'Reproduction is diabolical in its essence, sending tremors down to our roots' (Baudrillard, 1993: 84). As we saw before, Benjamin's analysis of the age of technical reproducibility provides Baudrillard with some relevant interpretative keys of the consumer society. The latter seems to be founded on the symbolic shifts engendered by the media revolution. To the fore are the narcissistic models that television is able to diffuse by means of its iconic power. Therefore, the myth of electric media resides in the expressive chances moulded by the mainstream languages, connected to the semiotic complexity of reality.

The consumer society is more and more swamped by objects, symbols and signs, as Barthes rightly pointed out in his semiological writings. He allows Baudrillard to demonstrate that the mirage of inclusion endows the social actors with a narcissistic numbness, fueled by the possibility to turn daily experience into provisional simulacra. It is not by chance that Baudrillard inherits from McLuhan the metaphor of media as body extension. His purpose is to explain why the signified has been replaced with its signifier. In the meantime, he aims to highlight the process of symbolic reification of our times:

In this way all reproduction implies maleficence, from the event of being seduced by one's own image in the water, like Narcissus, to being haunted by the double, and, who knows, even to the mortal reversal of the vast array of technical equipment that today man disguises in his own image (the narcissistic mirage of technology, as McLuhan says), and that sends back endless halting and distorted reproductions of himself and his power, to the ends of the earth (Baudrillard, 1993: 84).

The process of abstraction which the consumer society is imbued with allows the scholar to intertwine the interpretation of media as a 'language of an absent world' with that sort of 'metaphysics of the Code' (Baudrillard, 1993: 57) which media may develop thanks to the new analogical and digital devices. The only salvation from the symbolic flood of our consumer civilization is related to the awareness of the uncertain nature of our existence. This is what Eco meant with his analysis of the 'open work'. Baudrillard

invites us to escape imminent symbolic death by recovering our ancient cultural syncretism. It must certainly include mediology, semiology, aesthetics and literature, so as to probe a 'Reason of the sign and a Reason of production' (Baudrillard, 1993: 57).

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