

“The meta-language of an absent world”. Baudrillard, McLuhan and the media consumption *

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This essay aims to delve into the reflections upon the media consumption developed by Baudrillard in one of the central paragraphs of *The Consumer Society* (1970), focused on Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media. The purpose is to dwell on those factors that, according to Baudrillard, determined the functional transformation of the mainstream medium into a denotative medium, founded on the construction and diffusion of particular signs and social meanings.

In the aforementioned paragraph, titled “medium is message”, Baudrillard further investigates some insights developed by McLuhan in *Understanding media* (1964). He extends his semiotic approach to the world of media (and in particular to television) and focuses on the new literacy of mainstream culture. His plan is to support the interpretation of social consumption as a communication process.

In particular, Baudrillard dwells on two of McLuhan’s insights, referred to the appearance of the media society. On the one hand, he analyzes the power that media have to alter “deep down and unconsciously” (Baudrillard, 1970, p. 123) the sensitive relationships and the perceptive models of the social actors. On the other he deals with the power of mass media to “neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogeneous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other” (Baudrillard, 1970, p. 124).

The replacement of experiences with objects and symbols expresses one of the trademarks of the consumer society that Baudrillard probes starting from the correspondence between the medium and the message pointed out by McLuhan. Baudrillard exploits the topic of the tribalization peculiar to *homo technologicus*, just to understand the symbolic distance between the old manuscript or typographic civilization and the new era of images, shaped by cinema and television.

Baudrillard provides a stimulating interpretation of media as advice able to modify our perceptive faculties. This is one of the most interesting aspects of his analysis of the television consumption, destined to convey the ideology of omnipotence of a system and superimposable symbols. Hence, the interpretation of TV images (applicable to the contemporary digital world too), as a “metalanguage of an absent world” influencing the cultural, value and symbolic dimension, observed by means of the magnifying glass of McLuhan’s telescope.

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The medium is the message: Baudrillard and the phenomenology of media consumption

In accordance with Baudrillard's interest for the mainstream language of the late Sixties, this essay deals with his reflections upon the media consumption inspired by McLuhan's mediological analysis soon after the publication of *Understanding Media* (1964). Thus, the study of the "convergence" between Baudrillard and McLuhan is restricted to the years between the publication of *The Consumer Society* (1970) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), although there were divergences later.

To the fore is the analysis of McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message", whose complex meaning is probed by Baudrillard in his *Consumer Society*:

Here, and in this sense at least, we have to accept as a fundamental feature of the analysis of consumption McLuhan's formula that 'the medium is the message'. This means that the true message the media of TV and radio deliver, the one which is decoded and 'consumed' deep down and unconsciously, 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: it is the normal, programmed, miraculous transition from Vietnam to variety, on the basis of a total abstraction of both. (Baudrillard, 1970, p. 123)

This is what Baudrillard points out in the beginning of one of the paragraphs forming chapter I ("Mass-Media Culture") of the third part of his book, devoted to "Mass Media, Sex and Leisure". The aforementioned paragraph has a complete McLuhanian title: "Medium is the message". This means that the French sociologist does not set aside the role played by media and communicative innovations in the advent of the consumer society, engendered by the increase of symbolic and interactional exchanges.

As a matter of fact, the shifts of the experiential practices peculiar to the pre-electric era accelerated the way to complexity, in compliance with the sedimentation of semiotic signals. In this sense, Baudrillard's theory of simulacra can be further explained by exploiting McLuhan's analysis of media complexity at the dawn of the broadcasting civilization. "The challenges of both McLuhan and Baudrillard had, in their respective times, to be reckoned with by academics and self-appointed serious thinkers of all persuasions" (Genosko, 1999, p. 2).

It is possible to note that the so called "Baudrillard Scene" of the Seventies took form in correspondence with the "McLuhan cult" of the same period, in consideration of the outstanding speedup of the communication of the Eighties. "Art critics and artists, critical theorists, social philosophers and bluffers of all stripes and disciplines attempted to come to some terms with the phenomenon of the Baudrillard Scene" (Genosko, 1999, p. 2). The latter stems from the convergence between semiotics, sociology and mediology, according to a research approach as original as it is interdisciplinary.

Furthermore, Baudrillard exploits Walter Benjamin's reflections upon the technical reproducibility of the work of art (Benjamin, 1936), as well as Roland Barthes' semiotics of myth (Barthes, 1957). In order to deepen the communicative implications of consumption,

he focuses on McLuhan's analysis of media changes, so as to understand better the counter effects of the interactional shifts connected to the media fall out.

McLuhan's journey into the Gutenberg Galaxy poses as an authoritative attempt to explain how the perceptive ratios of men change in compliance with the appearance of a new medium. The advent of printed books, together with the invention of perspective, marks the passage from the manuscript age to the typographic era, destined to rule our cultural scene, despite the propagation of the electric *devices*: "Print brought in the taste for exact measurement and repeatability that we now associate with science and mathematics" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 423).

The informative consumption moulded by radio and newspapers change to the extent that electricity and digitalization modify the ratios between the senses and reality. The conception of human environment as a symbolic construction (developed in the Sixties by Berger and Luckmann, 1966) is not so distant from Baudrillard's theory of cultural simulacra. Thus, the connection between simulacra and simulation reveals one of the main features of the media society: the dominion of the signifier upon the signified. The tendency to project shreds of reality into the virtual environment shaped by media attests the power of the new electric devices in reproducing the splinters of experience that mark the daily social act.

The diffusion of television, depicted by McLuhan as the «timid giant» in *Understanding Media* (chapter 31), marks the start of a new way to represent complexity, founded on the new rhetoric of images rather than on the semantic force of words: "The peculiar character of the TV image in its relation to the actor causes such familiar reactions as our not being able to recognize in real life a person whom we see every week on TV" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 423). The peculiarity of mainstream lies in the possibility to overlap images and sounds ceaselessly. To the fore is the construction of a public opinion devoid of geographical and cultural boundaries, used to sharing information on a world wide scale (Morcellini, 2013; Mazzoli, 2012; Castells, 2001).

Thanks to McLuhan's lesson (also founded on the analysis of the poetical and narrative paradigms of the past), Baudrillard knows that contemporary simulacra are built through the psychic representations of media and technological devices, which have the power to modify our perception of reality. Needless to say, mainstream media (likewise digital and mobile tools) have a deep influence on the construction of interactional habits, swamped by the iconic hypertrophy of the connected society (De Kerckhove, 1998).

The dominion of the signifier on the signified conceals the real effects of media dominion, summarized in McLuhan's aphorism "The medium is the message". Baudrillard pays attention to the shaping action carried out by mainstream media, so effective in the process of "disarticulation of the real into successive and equivalent signs". The epistemic framework of the consumer society is influenced by the progressive reification of signs, blurred by the symbolic flood featuring the connected society. In the presence of such perceptive changes, the scholar is but the observer of a shifting world, subjected to the fluctuations of experiential paradigms engendered by communication.

As a consequence, the ceremonial practices of the ancient societies suffer a substantial desacralization, engendered by the new processes of symbolization featuring the global village of information:

but the fact that ceremonial communion is no longer achieved by way of bread and wine, which can be seen as flesh and blood, but through the mass media (which are not just the messages, but the whole broadcasting set-up, the network, the station, the receivers and, of course, the programme-makers and the public). In other words, *communion is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but through a technical one*: this is what makes it communication (Baudrillard, 1970, p. 104).

In this sense, the perfect correspondence between the medium and the message allows Baudrillard to link his theory of simulacra to the iconic standardization of the mainstream era. Furthermore, his reflections make clear McLuhan's thought in a semiotic way, specifically in confirmation of the different scientific approaches applicable to media studies. Baudrillard's purpose is to clear up the semiotic ordeal strengthened not only by media representations, but also by the supremacy of objects on the expressions and feelings. This fact has to do with the concept of hyper-reality: "Baudrillard introduces the term *hyperreal* for the resultant transformation of the ontological of the object" (Gane, 2000, p. 19).

Nevertheless, the hyper-reality built by media risks plunging the social actors into an indeterminate dimension of life, in which simulacra and simulations seem to interlace unendingly. Therefore, McLuhan's dichotomy between cold and hot media provides an interpretative key suitable to understand why the contents often conceal the real nature of media. This helps us reading both Baudrillard's books, *The Consumer Society* (1970) and the *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). As Genosko points out, "the writings of Baudrillard represent, then, a vector for the transmission of McLuhan's ideas, often in distorted forms, to be sure" (Genosko, 1999, p. 3). Despite his rhapsodic references to McLuhan's works, in the third part of *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard dwells on the convergence between the medium and its message, in the way to cope with the "abolition of the signified and the *tautology of the signifier*" (Baudrillard, 1970, 125).

The supremacy of the signifier is peculiar to a society overwhelmed by the interactional exchanges and hypertrophied by the abundance of communicative chances. The semiotic mark of Baudrillard's study method resides in the Barthesian analysis of contemporary myths, somehow constructed and diffused by the imaginary world of media. But the symbolic landscapes lit up by television conceal a mysterious nature, marked by their incessant repeatability and unsolvable flow. To the fore is the replacement of the signified with the signifiers, made possible by a public environment increasingly permeated by the inflation of media:

Self-evidently, most of the time, the content conceals from us the real function of the medium. It presents itself as a message, whereas the real message, with regard to which the manifest discourse is perhaps mere connotation, is the deep structural change (of scale, of model, of habitus) wrought in human relations. Crudely put, the 'message' of the railways is not the coal or the passengers it carries, but a vision of the world, the new status of urban areas, etc. The 'message' of TV is not the images it transmits,

but the new modes of relating and perceiving it imposes, the alterations to traditional family and group structures. And we may go even further and say that, in the case of TV and the modern mass media, what is received, assimilated and “consumed” is not so much a particular spectacle as the potentiality of all spectacles. (Baudrillard, 1970, 124)

The experience of media is itself the message of their social act. The substitution of meanings with their simulacra implies, of course, a deep functional shift in human habits. This is truer if we consider, in accordance with McLuhan’s statement, that automation bolsters fragmentation, despite the apparent synchronization of human relationships: «Automation is not an extension of the mechanical principles of fragmentation and separation of operations. It is rather the invasion of the mechanical world by the instantaneous character of electricity» (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 461-2).

The extension of our nervous system is perhaps the most outstanding outcome of the invasion of media, whose power of penetration depends on their experiential permeability. And this nervous speedup is strictly related to the sudden replacement of the traditional meanings of the printed era with the new ones introduced by the electric age. The symbolic flood pursued by the new and old media led to a semiotic torrent, fueled by an obsessive cult of objects, signs, images (Marchetti, 2017, 434).

The consumer society is but the consequence of this experiential hypertrophy, marked by the invasion of objects and their fluctuating meanings. The function of objects resides in their meanings, to the extent that such meanings may convey emotions and sensations. Undoubtedly, every new electric device implies a sensorial adjustment, as happened during the transition from the manuscript page to the printed one. This is what occurred when the Gothic miniatures were made obsolete by the humanistic way to represent the external and internal spaces thanks to perspective. This process of sensorial empowerment is definitely concluded with the advent of electricity. The old linear spaces are suddenly to be replaced with synchronic and connected relationships, shaped by the semiotic influence of objects and their psychic simulacra.

In this sense, McLuhan provides Baudrillard with an unexpected interpretative key of media phenomenology (Galbo, 1991). The social meaning of railways resides in the way of life they foster, rather than in the goods they transport (as in the case of coal). In the same way, media’s influence lies in their functional and sensorial innovations, more than in their messages. The examples of railways and coal echo McLuhan’s metaphor of media as staples of natural resources: “If the formative power in the media are the media themselves, that raises a host of large matters that can only be mentioned here, although they deserve volumes. Namely, that technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil” (McLuhan, 1964, 34).

The lesson of Harold Innis (1950) about the bias of ancient and modern communication prompts McLuhan to probe the power that things and objects have to shape our daily interactions. Electric times are no exception, in accordance with the informative increase fueled by the mainstream media. Information is not knowledge, but mere experiential consciousness. Like the railway (the signifier), whose social meaning is not the coal (the signified), the power of TV resides not in broadcasts, but in the way it shapes and modifies

the daily experience of social actors. McLuhan accurately realizes that every civilization depends on some specific objects, which acquire an economic, civil and cultural meaning: "Anybody will concede that a society whose economy is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton, or grain, or lumber, or fish, or cattle is going to have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result" (McLuhan, 1964, 34).

In the same way, the consumer society described by Baudrillard is dependent both on media and electric connectivity. Our postmodern simulacra are but the concretion of interlaced experiential fragments, moulded by new and old media. As Flaiano points out just in reference to McLuhan's axiom, we go to the cinema just to live that general experience offered by the medium itself, rather than the particular event represented on the screen (Lombardinilo, 2013).

Once again, the real spectacle is represented by its virtual dimension, not by its factual dimension (Bishop, 2013; Butler 1999). This is possible because, according to De Saussure, the sign has two different faces, the signifier and the signified. In our times, the signifier rules the evolution of social simulacra. Our mindset has no longer a diachronic breathe, stifled by the loss of memory and recollection. The synchronic instances of the consumer society mingle with the emotional expectations of the connected era, increasingly shaped by media inflation. Thus, the virtual dimension of our collective experience is but the psychic projection of our interactional expectations, which media enable us to live in accordance with our illusions. The media simulacra probed by Baudrillard in the third part of his *Consumer Society* take into account McLuhan's conception of media as psychic devices, capable of replacing reality with its symbolic reflection.

This is truer for the contemporary mythologies settled by media and print in the era of the economic boom. By juxtaposing an infinite number of images, cinema and television provide the illusion of the dominion of reality. The unstoppable flow of signs scrolling on the video has the power to enchant the public, until they become dazed and numb:

This, then, is the truth of the mass media: it is their function to neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogeneous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other. In the extreme case, they each become the content of the others -- and that is *the totalitarian 'message' of a consumer society*. (Baudrillard, 1970, 124)

The totalitarian message of the consumer society is tautological as well as repeatable. The semiotic flood fueled by the imaginary world of media reveals the hidden interlacing of the "multiple universe of media". Homogeneity is bound to replace fragmentation and diversity, in the light of the constant overlapping of images and messages. Baudrillard succeeds in defining a mythology of media that reckons on Barthes' semiology and McLuhan's mediology, together with Benjamin's aesthetics of cultural industry.

Repeatability, tautology, neutralization, homogeneity: these are some key words of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, so deeply embedded in the phenomenology of media built by McLuhan (Kellner, 2010, 192). McLuhan's controversial axiom reveals the

concealed secrets of mainstream communications. Their main feature is to codify a uniformed language enabled to mean the social essence of objects, much more than contents and messages.

The result, as McLuhan points out, is the permanent modification of our nervous system, connected to the diffusion of electric and, nowadays, digital devices: “Our electric technology now extends the instant processing of knowledge by interrelation that has long occurred within our central nervous system. [...] Such is also the character of “mass media”. (McLuhan, 1964, 462).

In the background is the construction of a uniformed language, shaped by the totalitarian action of media. The latter are enabled to express the multiform nature of simulacra, bound to reveal the “absent world” of our times.

McLuhan and the automated society: the medium is the message

As we saw before, the advent of the consumer society is strictly connected to the semiotic flood engendered by media. Over a short time they became an extension of our body and nervous system, as the frenzied use of smart phones and tablets shows nowadays (Boccia Artieri, 2012). This fact concerns the evolution of human relationships and the cognitive skills of social actors, whose symbolic patterns vary in compliance with what they behold. William Blake’s citation from *Jerusalem* opening the last chapter of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* can explain the way perception and observation change when a new medium appears. “If perceptive organs vary, Objects of Perception / seem to vary; / if the Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to / close also” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 299).

The effects of the printed page concern human knowledge as well as sensorial perception. Blake’s visionary verses provide McLuhan with the awareness of the insoluble ratios between the senses and reality, destined to change in compliance with reproduction techniques. In this sense, the new iconic patterns of print fuels a new visual consciousness, empowered by the newspapers and daily press. “The Seven Nations fled before him; they became what they beheld” (McLuhan, 1962, 1999). By means of Blake’s insight, McLuhan can realize the creative process founding modern visual sensitivity, destined to be implemented by TV and digital supports. We become what we behold, as for example the innumerable interlaced images, videos and sounds, linked together by the accessory presence of writing.

As Elena Lamberti notes, “The Western World will soon move towards what William Blake defined as ‘the single vision and Newton’s sleep,’ a new reality whose effects various men of letters, and various conscious craftsmen and artists, tried to probe and counterbalance through their works” (Lamberti, 2012, p. 177). Writers and poets have the sensitivity to anticipate the social shifts fueled by communicative innovations. This what Pound, T.S. Eliot and Joyce did in the twentieth century, in accordance with an experimental inspiration repeatedly noticed by McLuhan.

The existential awkwardness afflicting postmodern men implies the construction of new expressive melodies, bound to shape the infirmity of human spirit (Nadine, 2016). It is not by chance that Baudrillard, dwelling on McLuhan's axiom, hints at the theatrical lesson of Bertolt Brecht, seen as the interpreter of postmodern spiritual bewilderment:

We move from the message centred on the signified -- a transitive message -- to the message centred on the signifier. For example (in the case of TV), from events signified by the image to the consumption of the image as such -- i.e. precisely as something different from those events, as spectacular -- Brecht would say 'culinary' -- substance, exhausting itself in the very time-span of its absorption, and never referring on beyond. (Baudrillard, 1970, 125).

The frenzied mastication and digestion of fragments of experience is one of the trademarks of the consumer society, in which the message is but a signifier of daily life. After all, the metaphor of informative consumption as culinary habits effectively expresses the craving for social participation that Brecht seems to have mislaid. Men live within a suspended world, ruled by a wearing sense of waiting. Despite the inflation of interactional opportunities, the supremacy of the signifier on the signified marks the evolution of men towards an absent world that only an artificial language can express.

Brecht's plays successfully mean the communicative counter-circuit stemming from the transformation of messages in uncontrolled consumption. This is what McLuhan argues in chapter 27 of *Understanding Media*, devoted to the telephone: "Brecht's plays have the same participational quality of the world of the comic strip and the newspaper mosaic that TV has made acceptable, as pop art" (McLuhan, 1970, p. 363). Both McLuhan and Baudrillard show how relevant the literary medium (and in particular dramas) can be in a socio-cultural way. *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett, for example, is but the representation of nonsense experience, in which words and gestures have no longer any connection. No connection can be found between the language and the story told.

Language stopped meaning. It acquires a primary relevance, both self-reflexive and narcissistic. This is one of the main legacies of Futurism, Cubism and Dadaism, which deeply changed how stories are told and the representation of human complexity. After all, storytelling has always been a primary need for the social actors, both in the manuscript age and in the era of convergent culture: "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 116).

The digital reproducibility of our existence is about to produce an infinite discourse on experience itself, despite the attempts to feed the illusion of immortality. The loss of memory is well matched with the fading of traditional identity, swamped by the irresistible force of technological devices. The risk society described by Beck (1992) is not so far from the consumer society that Baudrillard shapes in reference to the correspondence between existence and its symbolic reflection. The loss of memory and identity is only one of the aspects marking the advent of media society, in which the medium is not only the message, but also the reality.

To the fore is the neutralizing action carried out by media consumption, fostered by the increasing chances to take part in the public ordeal. McLuhan emphasizes all these aspects in the first chapter of *Understanding Media*, entitled “The medium is the message”. He wonders why electricity deeply influences our daily life and why media can anesthetize sensorial ratios. After all, McLuhan is aware of the cultural shifts that such a revolution implies for the social actors, not yet used to conceiving media as functional devices:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (McLuhan, 1964, 19)

On this account, the metaphor of media as a body extension allows McLuhan to explain why any new medium is more than a technological device. The way to convey messages peculiar to any medium poses as a representing technique, as—happened when perspective was invented. In this sense, McLuhan’s references to literature and art are not accidental. The pictorial renewal carried out by the Impressionists, together with the symbolist revolution fueled by Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, reveals the possibility to depict the interior landscapes of the psyche (Lombardinilo, 2017, 257–317). The symbolist mindset is but the result of the sensorial speed-up supported by electricity, in accordance with the new communicative patterns diffused by the telegraph, telephone and newspapers.

In fact, the journalistic mark is clearly present in our digital habits, as the mosaic framework of mobile and social networks attests. The only difference is that nowadays we no longer turn the pages, but we scroll them, with evident effects in the management of the enormous amount of information submerging us. By scrolling the pages of our private digital dominion we foster the way to tautology and repeatability, as McLuhan points out in his main works.

This is an aspect well reckoned by Joachim Knape, in reference to the correspondence between the medium and its message: “This idea is the origin of the tautology found throughout McLuhan’s work. Terminological definitions are tautological when the term itself is used in its definition. Where does a medium come from? From a medium. What constitutes a medium? A medium. What does a medium do? It produces media. And so on and so forth, *ad infinitum*” (Knape, 2013, p. 259).

Media tautology conceals the dizzy stratification of symbols and signifiers permeating public environments, turned by electric media into anesthetized emotional spaces. Thanks to McLuhan, Baudrillard can point out that the signifier is more important than the signified, the container is more relevant than the content. Electricity is a medium itself, to the extent that it conveys new experiential patterns, deprived of any apparent content and signified:

The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no “content”. And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the

“content” (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of the electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth (McLuhan, 1964, p. 21).

Radical, pervasive and decentralized: these are the main features of the media action in the era of the consumer society, in which symbolic appearances prevail upon the meaning of gestures and behaviors. “The image on a television screen is not photographic, like that of film. It is, as McLuhan constantly stressed, iconic and sculptural rather than pictorial” (Gordon, 2010, p. 7). However, the images on the pc screens are the sources of our daily simulacra, like the texts scrolling on our mobiles and the vocal messages animating our digital relationships. The medium is the message, since messages is mere consumption, bolstered by the collective fever that marks the connected society (Gilles & Sitz, 2013; Codeluppi 1989). This is one of the main features of the consumer society, suspended between experiential tautology and interactional decentralization.

Conclusion. Hot and cold simulacra

“For Baudrillard, eventually, all the dominant media become “cool”, erasing McLuhan’s (problematical) distinction between hot and cool media (Kellner, 2010, p. 191). According to Baudrillard, the neutralization of social experience seems to be one of the main features of media influence. Nevertheless, media have the power to involve and include the social actors in a collective ordeal, marked by the anxiety of participation.

In this sense, the signifier overcomes the signified, to the extent that the medium itself conveys the contents of communicative experience. Baudrillard erases McLuhan’s dichotomy between hot and cold media since he is more focused on objects than McLuhan. The construction of individual and collective simulacra are but the psychic effort to represent daily complexity, overwhelmed by the symbolic flood of our times (Secondulfo, 2007). This is why Baudrillard can afford to interlace De Saussure’s linguistics with McLuhan’s mediology, so as to deal with the cultural and interactional habits of the consumer society.

To the fore is the “ecstasy of communication” (Kellner, 2010, p. 191) that marks the informative complexity of the Seventies, destined to become more and more sophisticated with the advent of the internet and the diffusion of mobile devices. Media really pose as a meta-language, enabled to mean the postmodern oxymoron of a hollow and bloated world:

What the TV medium conveys by its technical organization is the idea (the ideology) of a world endlessly visualizable, endlessly segmentable and readable in images. It conveys the ideology of the omnipotence of a system of reading over a world become a system of signs. TV images present themselves as the meta-language of an absent world. Just as the smallest technical object, the tiniest gadget, is a promise of a universal technical (Baudrillard, 1970, p. 124).

The consumer society is a system of signs, just as media mythologies are semiotic systems, founded on the empowerment of signal reticulates. In rhetoric terms, the tautologies of social experiences stems from the construction of a meta-language enabled to express the nonsensical and absurd nature of postmodern meanings, as emphasized by Brecht, Ionesco, Ibsen, Beckett. The dialogue of the deaf featured in *-Waiting for Godot* reminds us of the importance of human dialogue, as McLuhan highlighted in his relevant essay published in 1953, entitled *Culture without literacy*:

Perhaps we could sum up our problem by saying that technological man must betake himself to visual metaphor in contriving a new unified language for the multiverse of cultures of the entire globe. All language or expression is metaphorical because metaphor is the seeing of one situation through another one. Right on the beam. I'll take a rain check on that (McLuhan, 1953, p. 21).

Media, as well as languages, are metaphors of a neutralized world, moulded by the incessant action of symbolic interactions. Baudrillard's concept of meta-language seems to stem from McLuhan's reference to the new unified language required by the semiotic and expressive complexity of our times. This is a core issue in Baudrillard's theory of media, founded on the counter-circuit between visual and tactile aspects: "images we encounter, increasingly indistinguishable across genres, both report a world we are to take as actual, and therefore inclusive of our own lives and situations, and, necessarily, present a world as other, as spectacle" (Hopkins, 2015, 73).

Thus, objects and consumption pose as the metaphor of an alternative world, fueled by consumption and experiential exchanges. This is an aspect rightly emphasized by Baudrillard in compliance with McLuhan's lesson, long before the advent of the connected society (Merrin, 2005).

Biographical note

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