

Hyperreality, the Question of Agency, and the Phenomenon of Reality Television.

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This paper examines concepts of hyperreality and agency as advanced by three theorists—Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio—who argue for a decentred agency and a hyperreality that is artifactual and produced. The paper first examines these theories as they apply to broadcast cable news and reality television. Thereafter, I will explore the notion that the televisual spectator occupies a space between de-centred consumer of images and empowered voyeur. While the spectator cannot control or resist the flood of images politically aimed at diminishing his/her subjectivity and autonomy, as well as to think independently of events presented, the spectator is empowered in the sense of being granted a sense of omnipresence as voyeur, albeit a passive one. An active voyeur successfully navigates media through the intervention of his own agency. As Zizek in “How the Non-Duped Err” notes, the gaze at the same time denotes power (it enables us to exert control over the situation, to occupy the position of master) and impotence (as bearers of a gaze, we are reduced to the role of passive witness) (Zizek, 2). Derrida offers some solutions to this conundrum of a passive agent in works like *Echographies of Television*, urging us to be critical of a politics of memory and to celebrate the overcoming of the topopolitical boundaries that television enables. Again, this reminds us of Virilio’s celebration of omnipresence and omnivoyance. Thus while it is certainly television’s effect to de-centre and dissolve subjectivity, an awareness in the vein of Derrida’s affords us some mastery over the image and offers us strategies of resistance and the reclamation of agency.

Reality television explodes the division between the hyperreal and the real, but what it ultimately represents is the triumph of the hyperreal and the manufactured image. Specifically, when a consciousness loses its ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and begins to engage with the latter without understanding what it is doing, it has shifted into the world of the *hyperreal*. The nature of the hyperreal world is characterised by "enhancement" of reality. As Derrida argues, it is an "artificiality" that is produced and made rather than a record. (*Echographies of Television*, 41). Record here means something that is an exact representation of events. It also serves to satisfy our thirst for voyeurism and invasion of privacy, for as Baudrillard states, it increases our fascination with the obscene (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 33). This is an exercise of "desiring to be seen" and desiring the Other to return our gaze, as we desire the mock celebrity that reality television affords—for instance, the mock celebrity Anna Nicole, who rides more on instant fame than on a substantive career. In witnessing the privation of its participants through elimination rituals, we are also simultaneously celebrating our comforts, so that there is a sadistic element to taking pleasure in watching the sufferings of others at work as well. In coming across as "more real than real" and in our fascination with the hyperreal and manufactured image, Baudrillard's statement that we no longer watch television and that it is television watching us seems remarkably prophetic in the surge and success of reality television programmes (*Ecstasy*, 31). Reality television appeals to us because of its "live" element, its telepresence, and in Derrida's terms, the space it allows for the 'arrival' of an event, whose expectation is made of a 'nonexpectation.' In so doing, it offers a certain variety, diversity and spontaneity that we cannot find in

scripted television programmes. Reality television, though scripted, offers the illusion of being spontaneous and undirected because it captures the “authentic” and often unsavoury aspects of characters onscreen. Derrida also argues for a “messianism” that guides the event, a promise of futurity: hence perhaps it is the open-ness and heightened anticipation in which we take pleasure (*Echographies of Television*, 13). There is also an element of “testimony” and truth to live television which separates it from more scripted programmes, like talk shows and sitcoms. As it happens only once in live real time, there is a precious singularity and uniqueness to the moment; Derrida once again explains that the seized moment captures the irreplaceable present and bears witness to the fact that “this was there” (*Echographies of Television*, 94). One might also argue that the addressee enjoys its status of “being addressed” in reality television, thus enabling the addressee to participate in production of meaning, as the confessional scenes in reality, as well as reporting in broadcast programmes, are directed towards engaging the audience in being “participants” of an event, as with audience voting on shows like “American Idol” or “Grease: You’re the One That I want.” There exists an ineluctable “reality effect” when the specters on television seem to be watching us (Derrida, 123). We appear to be gazing back when we vote in the results of the reality show competitions and when the reality television show participants directly address us in dialogue onscreen (note all the “confession” scenes in *Big Brother*).

Baudrillard and Reality TV

For Baudrillard, reality television signifies that what people deeply desire is a spectacle of banality. This spectacle of banality is today's true pornography and

obscurity. It is the obscene spectacle of nullity (*nullité*), insignificance, and platitude. (*Dust Breeding*, 1) This stands as the complete opposite of the theater of cruelty, which is not cruelty in the sense of being violent, but the cruelty it takes for actors to strip away completely their masks and the cruelty of showing an audience a truth that they don't want to see. The text had been a tyrant over meaning, and there was a need for theatre made up of a unique language halfway-between thought and gesture to be conceptualized, at which point "reality television" intervened. But perhaps there is still a form of cruelty, at least a virtual one, attached to such a banality. At a time when television and the media in general are less and less capable of accounting for the world's (unbearable) events, they rediscover daily life. They discover existential banality as the deadliest event, as the most violent piece of information: the very location of the perfect crime. People are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent "nothing-to-say" or "nothing-to-do," by the indifference of their own lives, as seen when the cast of *Big Brother* engages in idle gossip, mundane banter, and squabbles over trivial domestic issues. Contemplating the Perfect Crime—banality as the latest form of fatality—has become a genuine Olympic contest, the latest version of extreme sports. Indeed, as we see with a reality series such as *Big Brother*, it is existential banality and the boredom of our own lives that we desire as spectacle. Very little happens that would not take place outside the context of the indifference of our own lives. In elevating the banal to spectacle, we are elevating ourselves as media objects. For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life—recovering the full range of human powers through revolutionary change (Debord, *Society of The Spectacle*,

44). In Debord's formulation, the concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is disengaged from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society disconnects workers from the product of their labor, art from life, and spheres of production from consumption, which involve spectators passively observing the products of social life. We are allowing hyperreality to reign over reality and hence celebrate reality as interplay of signs and the collapse of the signified. Reality television demonstrates Baudrillard's thesis that the obscene lies in the fact that there is 'nothing to see' and that the spectator, rather than desiring difference from others, desires sameness with the subjects that witnessed on television. As Baudrillard notes in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, all that matters now is to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one's formula. It is the universe of the fractal subject, dreaming of a formula to reproduce himself to infinity (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 41). Consequently, reality television incarnates our desire for sameness and our fascination with the obscenity or pornography of objective reality.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard once again reminds us that with the advent of television, as in hyperreality, the subject-object distinction collapses and we are immersed in its reality—"television becomes a control screen" (13). He uses the metaphor of driving to relate our relation to television—no longer controllers of a device, we are now subjected to its control, becoming a "computer at the wheel," not a "drunken demiurge of power" (13). He argues that television creates a space of hyperreality that overtakes reality and hence displaces metaphysics. Our subjectivities are dissolved—we are no longer 'subjects of interiority' (13) in control of television, but are instead

subjected to the controls of multiple network satellites. Television becomes an intrusive actor in our domestic space, overtaking our lives from work, consumption, play, social relations and leisure. Baudrillard further explains that the hyperreal displaces the real and renders it useless, thus turning the spectatorship into one of simulation, as we become simulated according to television events. Social relationships within the home are destroyed as face-to-face and interpersonal communications are diminished. Reality is ‘miniaturized’—television replaces our desire for human relationships or ideals and renders organic and real bodies and events superfluous (*Ecstasy*, 14). The obscene fascinates us, and replaces the organic with the machinic. In this regard, advertising also becomes an omnipresent reality—materializes its “obscenity”—monopolizing public life with its exhibition. This is also precisely what reality television shows are: Simulations and the triumph of the hyperreal and mediated reality over actuality, if this does in fact exist.

The most intimate processes of our lives become feeding grounds for the media (the Louds on television—a family which was put under camera surveillance—also might draw a parallel to the current phenomenon of Reality TV shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Temptation Island*, *The Bachelor*, and so on. These are produced by Fox, CBS, ABC, and Channel 4, among other networks. The Louds family was a popular American family which was put under 7 months of uninterrupted shooting. 300 hours of direct non-stop broadcasting, without script or scenario. They were broadcast live on television by an American broadcasting company in 1971. For them, and for us, all aspects of life are permeated and infiltrated by the media, subjecting everything to visibility, exposing

everything to the inexorable light of communication. In Baudrillard's terms, we live in the "ecstasy of communication," which is obscene because it renders the private exposed, a pornography of information and communication. "The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image. The obscene puts an end to every representation. But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is a whole pornography of information and communication....It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication" (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 130-131).

It is the obscenity of the hidden that is suddenly overexposed and visible. Sex, scandal and gossip, once taboo, explode in public onscreen. In this dissolution of the exterior and the interior, Baudrillard likens the contemporary subject to the schizophrenic—a subject who cannot distinguish between inner and outer and who is subject to all the vagaries of the external world (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 14). The subject's sense of individuality and distinction from external objects is dissolved. He becomes obscene, as is the world he or she inhabits. The subject is the total prey of hyperreality, a pure screen, a switching center for all networks of influence. For Baudrillard, the body and the "self", both of which conform to images, can be divided and commodified, as governed by the capitalist/advertising code (*Ecstasy*, 42). To see the "self" as a technology possessed by the mediascape, as Baudrillard does, is to become schizophrenic oneself by splitting one's own subject between image and reality.

Baudrillard's subject is therefore completely de-centred and dominated by the image. While hyperreality performs an act of de-centering and impinges on our identities, is there not some sense by which we derive identities (albeit simulated and virtual ones) from the virtual worlds we inhabit? Is it not possible that the hyperreal also functions as our ontological frame of reference, an interpretive framework from which we derive our sense of agency? I would argue that television in a way functions as an existential source of meaning, a source of agency for characters themselves and also for the subjects gazing upon them. While Baudrillard certainly does make a strong case for the destruction of subjectivity, we will see with Derrida that there is a possibility that we are in a position, via *différance* and selection, to appropriate and compose our perspective on images.

Derrida, Reality Television and Agency

In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida, contrary to Baudrillard, argues that the subject has never been simply a passive viewer. Derrida occupies a middle position, arguing that while images have a politics that threaten to determine us, we are also in a position to have strategies of appropriation, selection, and critical thought with regards to the image. While it is a fantasy to believe that the consumer will completely reappropriate the images which come to him or her, Derrida states that the addressee does not become completely passive. A relative reappropriation is under way, what Derrida calls "exappropriation" (58).

According to Derrida, we are in a state of quasi-illiteracy with respect to the image. We must learn to discriminate, compose, paste and edit images to gain mastery

over them. This is a skill which must be developed within and outside of schools. For Derrida, this strategy involves developing a new relation to the politics of memory. Derrida contends that any politics of memory would imply the intervention of the state—a state that legislates and acts with regard to nonfinite material to be stored (59). While today we can almost claim to archive everything, or keep a record of televisual events, Derrida wonders if it is ultimately the state that decides what is worthy of preservation, and will always privilege the national and the public over the private and personal. If we were to delegate this responsibility of the politics of memory to a state institution, then it will be a minority or a fraction of the nation rather than “integral” or “general will” (Rousseau) that preserves this memory. Although Derrida says that a politics of memory might exist, he also emphasizes that it is nevertheless necessary to educate citizens, subjects, or televisual audiences to be vigilant with regard to the politics of memory: to be alert that it was a particular politics, as well as essentially a politics, that intervenes in the viewer’s experience of an event in a manner fashioned by the producers. One must simultaneously practice and be critical of a politics of memory (63). In Derrida’s view, this means developing an awareness of selectivity, which he defines as “a re-appropriation of images” (63). Derrida argues that this awareness will never be a spectatorial critique, or a theoretical vigilance. To politicize these technical events alternatively and to democratize them, one must also be wary of politicization. Here, Derrida’s reading of developing a critical stance towards a politics of memory proves to be immensely liberating in light of Baudrillard and Virilio’s pessimistic assessments of the potential for agency with regards to television. His is the most optimistic reading of

the three, fostering a meta-awareness of a politics of memory in order to politicize it alternatively.

Virilio: Reality and Subjectivity

Virilio's subjectivity comes close to Baudrillard's in being passive and manipulated, but he also argues that as voyeurs we are granted the powers of the divine, and that we are made partners in the propaganda that we choose to believe. Virilio also argues that the media authenticity which "real time" television seeks to promote is an illusion and a deception. Virilio provides the instance of the Gulf War and likens its media spectacle to theatrical production—arranged by directors of media channels (*Desert Screen*, 41). News channels skillfully construct the theatre of "real time"—we take as true the mediated reality of "real time" in place of live spectatorship. Virilio likens such a presentation of war to a game played in a stadium where audiences take sides, keeping track of goals scored between the two countries at war. He discusses the notion of "telepresence," where our positions as voyeurs allow us simultaneously to participate in events that take place on screen. This phenomenon is similar to us being metamorphosed into divine beings, having gained powers of omniscience (*Desert Screen*, 42). Iraq 2007 replicates this theatrical production of images as we are consistently presented with spectacles that affirm and justify the war on CNN.

Television now controls public opinion and replaces the public space of politics as broadcast news becomes the medium for disseminating the "reality" of events as they unfold. It is the forum of all emotions and opinions. Interestingly, as Virilio explains, democracy takes place via television and incites one to vote—it is not accidental that these

images are also controlled and manipulated. Hence, the entire world is under tele-surveillance and we become passive witnesses of an orchestrated production. As Virilio says, one does not discuss a live image, one undergoes it. Derrida, however, offers a solution to the hegemony of this artifactuality—by promoting, through discussion, education, and culture, occasions for preferring alternative productions in the consumers or addressees, who are beginning to participate in production and to undermine the politics of mainstream media. For instance, round-table discussions and forums should be held to discuss alternatives to the dominant ideology that is being perpetuated onscreen. Derrida terms this the “cultural exception”—the pursuit of singularity and identity against hegemony. This is the seeking of individual opinion against the grain of the slanted ideology of broadcast media.

Interestingly, the novelty of the war coverage is the communication with worldwide viewers by satellite—instantaneous retransmission in homes around the world. This development is novel because of the instantaneous communication of the event, for instance when we witness the Hussein lynching as caught by a cellphone and broadcast on YouTube, it has an immediacy that reaches us as if we were really present at the event. Tele-spectators are constantly being emotionally manipulated in what Virilio calls a “publicity clip” (*Desert Screen*, 51). As mentioned earlier, Virilio argues that mass communication possesses traditional attributes of the divine: omnivoyance and omnipresence. War is no longer a war of images but one of waves, war that takes place at the speed of light, this indirect light which illuminates and blinds the minds of a dumbfounded public. News channels alert the entire world to their version of real-time conflict, presenting their version of the truth of events (*Desert Screen*, 52). Thus, Virilio

argues that we become victims of television. Virilio makes a convincing case, like Baudrillard, for de-centred agency being passive and manipulated by images which are deceptively produced and orchestrated by television networks. Finally, in the essay “Reality Gulf,” Baudrillard states that the virtual war which takes place on television usurps the place of the actual war in our minds; it desensitizes us to the actual horror of war and replaces actual war in our minds (100). According to Virilio, television manipulates our ideological stance on events and perpetrates a theatrical reality rather than an actual one.

Big Brother: A Reading

Big Brother (Channel 4, 2000-2007) is a reality television show which is based on the concept of depriving participants of their usual comforts to be locked in a house and to witness slowly the politics of various participants’ being evacuated until the most popular, or the most successful participant, is left in the house and claims victory. Originally a Dutch programme launched in 1999, this successful show led to the development of an American clone in 2000. The show has done so well in the U.S. that there has even been the need for an All-Stars season (*Big Brother 7*, 2006). Mark Andrejevic, in *Reality TV, The Work of Being Watched*, discusses the premise of the U.S. version of *Big Brother*: it is a show of ten contestants, representing “a cross section of personalities, ethnicities, geographies, and sexual orientations” who “live together in a house constructed by the producers on a lot in Studio City, California” (“Reality TV,” 118). To win the show’s cash prizes (\$500 000 grand prize), contestants agree not to

leave the house and its small, attached garden until they are voted out by members of the audience. Each week, the 'houseguests'—as the show's producers call them—are allowed to nominate two of their housemates to be banished. The two or more houseguests who receive the highest number of nominations are then selected for potential banishment. Throughout the following week, viewers are urged to phone in their vote for who should be expelled. A week after, the nominations are announced, and one houseguest is selected to leave, based on the results of the audience vote the week before. The banishment process continues until there are only three houseguests left, and the audience decides who would win the first-, second-, and third-place prizes of \$500 000, \$100 000, and \$50 000.

The promise of *Big Brother* lies in the fact that it grants access to reality via electronic surveillance. The viewers are put in the position of authenticating reality in the *Big Brother* house thanks to the extensive surveillance to which they have access. *Big Brother* represents the triumph of hyperreality which seems more real than real and our fascination with the obscenity of objective reality. Big Brother is exemplary of the hyperreal because of the mundanity and banality of its images. The heightened participation it allows in surveillance and telepresence is also part of its appeal. As Baudrillard clarifies, the obvious goal of this kind of reality television is to enslave the spectators, who are its victims. But the victims are quite willing. They are rejoicing at the pain and the shame they suffer, such as when reality television assaults us with the obscenity of its banality and the crudity of its dialogue. Everybody must abide by society's fundamental logic: interactive exclusion (*Dust Breeding*, 1). As defined by

Baudrillard, interactive exclusion is the illusion of participation when one is really an outsider to an event.

Using an especially pertinent scene from this crucial Reality TV series, I would now like to examine the show's dynamics; in this scene, we encounter in the *Big Brother* house a gender conflict taking place that mimics the real-life struggle for power and respect between the sexes which cuts across all human cultures (*Big Brother 4*, 2003). The pleasure thus lies in witnessing the verisimilitude of events rather than an idealized depiction of unproblematic relations that we see in many television programmes, such as serials like *Desperate Housewives* or *Sex in the City*. We thus witness the desiring of sameness on television that Baudrillard points out, as well as the obscenity of objective reality. In this scene, taken from Episode 5 of the fourth season, the conflict lies in the struggle over food. Women are accustomed to a kind of privilege in domestic situations, being traditionally responsible for presiding over the scene of nourishment. Women are used to domestic privilege as men are the dominant bread-winners, and this surfaces in the women on *Big Brother* through their monopolizing the food in the refrigerator, which leads the men to complain. Jon complains to Nush that the women have been consuming all the milk, snacks on food in the refrigerator. As such the men complain nightly about their hunger and the women's selfish behavior. Nush in turn retorts that she has hardly eaten anything from the refrigerator. Earlier in the day Nush and Jon had a similar heated discussion on the maternity benefits granted to women in the workplace, with Jon contending that women deserved lower salaries because they had to go on maternity leave and were less aggressive at the workplace. Nush had retorted that this was

stereotypical and untrue. Could it also be that the participants, being aware of the camera, magnify their gender roles? Are they being exceptionally self-conscious about the performance of their gender onscreen? While the scene is certainly hyperreal because it is, after all, a staging of roles and performances before a camera that the participants are aware of, it does seem to possess a greater verisimilitude than the non-problematic and static gender relationships we see in many other television shows such as drama serials that do not depict the real-life power struggle between the sexes with their steady depiction of idealized romances that do not problematize gender inequality.

Hence the implosion of the “real” and “reel,” as life and television dissolve into each other and we are simultaneously voyeurs and the subjects being watched by television. In other scenes, many arguments take place as characters grate on each others nerves due to excessive time together. For example, characters are offended by the idiosyncratic behaviours of certain housemates, such as Anouska’s rampant flirting with the men that creates excessive sexual frissons in the household, and decide to complain about their behaviour onscreen. Jon, on the other hand, is opinionated and critical of housemates in each of his confessional scenes and reminds the producers of Big Brother to keep tabs on the items he had brought into the household, as he found it unfair that he had brought more than others, thus reflecting a certain calculative streak in his character. There does seem to be a greater realism than in most scripted television shows. The worst part of this obscene and indecent visibility is the forced enrollment, the automatic complicity of the spectator who has been blackmailed into participating. Yet there is a voyeuristic appeal at work in such programmes. Spectators are empowered as

omnipresent voyeurs. Thus, these shows de-centre in the sense of exploding our sense of the real, but empower simultaneously by the omnivoyant gaze they grant us. While we are complicit with the images, our power as spectator is that of our omni-present, demiurgical gaze. The content of *Big Brother*, which documents rampant flirting, exhibitionism and sexual innuendos, even characters stripping their clothes off in front of the camera, demonstrates Baudrillard's thesis that obscenity and pornography are our fascination, as well as the fact that sexuality is a ritual of transparency (*Ecstasy of Communication*, 32). On *Big Brother*, Sexuality is over-exposed and overly visible rather than hidden, as in days of old when sex was taboo (the age of the *Brady Bunch* and wholesome family entertainment).

Images have become our true sex object. We exalt sex on a screen because we seek to reduce it into partial objects. Melanie Klein offered a profound revision of the Freudian theory of libidinal development by proposing a duality in the life and death instincts. She stressed the precocious nature of the superego and the subject undergoing an Oedipus complex. She claimed that the triangular structure of the Oedipus complex could be observed well before the beginning of the genital phase and before the child considered *total objects*, *partial objects* (breast, feces, penis) being the only objects having a role to play at this time. She also stressed the precocious modes of object relations, referring to them not as *phases* in libidinal organization, but as *positions*: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. We reduce sex to partial objects in reality television when we fetishize body parts in the many occasions of partial or full nudity that occurs on reality television as participants decide to expose themselves in

their desire to turn the programme into a near pornographic performance on their part. We fulfill desire in the technical sophistication of the body, which is a metastatic body (where desire has traveled from its origin to be sublimated secondarily in the body), a fractal body which can no longer hope for resurrection. In other words, sex is de-sublimated, objectified and made technologically consumable.

We have seen how television assaults our subjectivity and de-centres us by imploding the “real” and the “reel,” as Baudrillard argues. Hyperreality threatens to dissolve subjectivity and to control minds; we are subjects of domination by the image and the politics that are encoded within it. The politics encoded in *Big Brother* is that of the popularity contest and the survival of the contestant who endures the show’s tricky political intrigues to win the cash prize. The obscene, which is the pornography of banal images, and the spectacle of insignificance, which is the elevation of the banal to spectacle, finally triumph in these reality series. This obscenity also threatens to undermine agency, as real life and television morph into one another and the line between hyperreality and reality collapses. The only agency we are assured in these situations is that of omnipresence as a voyeur, but this is an impotent and passive subjectivity. However, the path out of this radical de-centredness, as Derrida argues, is an awareness and vigilance towards the politics of memory and the politicization events alternately in a way that conceptualizes the image and thought. To conceptualize differently is to reframe events politically and incorporate them into one’s individual narrative rather than into a hegemonic one. Our only hope for reclaiming agency, hence, is the critical awareness and distance from the image for which Derrida argues.. While

Baudrillard and Virilio argue for the triumph of the manufactured image that dominates and usurps us as simulacra, Derrida provides us hope for reclaiming agency by re-appropriating images and assigning an alternative political meaning to them, one that is different from hegemonic ideology.

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