

Simulacra and Media Technology: A Study of Baudrillard's Theory of Simulacra

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Abstract: In a consumer society, commodities are no longer primarily driven by use or exchange but are instead viewed through the lens of symbolic value to reflect social identity and cultural significance. Baudrillard argues that ideology is not a neutral tool but rather an image of contemporary reality, creating a self-sustaining simulacrum system alongside information, ultimately leading to a 'hyperreality' state—where reality is simulated and human experience is replaced by simulacra. With the development of digital ideology, the restructuring of recommendations, social platforms, and virtual images reinforces this simulated order, organising individual identity, emotions, and desires within the symbolic system. Baudrillard's early concepts of the 'object strategy' and 'seduction' sought to break through symbolic hegemony, challenging ideological control through irrational, non-productive means, and rethinking the possibilities of resistance and freedom. This theoretical endeavour critiques technological domination while expanding the agency and proactive response potential of the 'object' itself. Though it fails to offer positive alternative solutions to reality, it provides crucial intellectual resources for modern technology and humanity.

Keywords: Baudrillard, media, symbolic value

1. Introduction

Jean Baudrillard was one of the most provocative and influential thinkers of the 20th century. His theoretical contributions span sociology, philosophy, media theory, and cultural criticism, exerting a profound influence on our understanding of the structure of postmodern society. At the core of Baudrillard's thought are the concepts of 'simulacra' and 'hyperreality,' which he uses to construct a radical theory of social criticism. He rejected the traditional Marxist emphasis on material production and class relations to explain the mechanisms of social operation, instead pointing out that contemporary society is increasingly dominated by the independent play of symbols, images, and media technologies. In such a world, reality is not only distorted but replaced by a cycle of simulacra [1].

Baudrillard's concept of 'simulacra' refers to symbols that no longer point to any real object but instead refer to one another within a closed symbolic system. As Zhou Yue points out, Baudrillard's theory of simulacra marks a significant shift in critical thinking—no longer questioning whether representations accurately reflect reality, but revealing how reality is erased through endless replication. This ultimately leads to a state of 'hyperreality': simulacra become more real than

reality itself, and the world we experience is thus produced rather than directly perceived [1]. This state of 'hyperreality' is a true reflection of postmodern society, which is dominated by highly saturated media technology and digital communication. In this context, the media is no longer a neutral tool for information transmission but has become the mechanism for constructing reality itself. As Ma Xiaoru argues, Baudrillard's critique is essentially a 'anti-reality' social diagnosis: within the logic of hyperreality, the boundaries between images and reality dissolve, and what we understand as "experience" and 'truth' are actually produced within the logic of simulation. The rise of media technologies such as virtual reality, social media, and artificial intelligence demonstrates how contemporary technology no longer merely represents reality but directly creates it [2].

Baudrillard's simulacrum theory not only reveals the problems of consumer society and the mechanism of symbolic exchange, but also poses a profound challenge to the traditional understanding of truth, meaning, and subjectivity. Reality is no longer something waiting to be revealed, but a manufactured product. In such a simulation-dominated world, traditional political resistance and the concept of subjectivity gradually become ineffective [3]. This paper will explore the intrinsic connection between simulacra theory and the development of media technology, analyse how simulacra replace reality and how hyperreality organises experience, and further consider whether the 'object strategy' can serve as a theoretical counter-mechanism to break through the media-dominated era of simulation. This paper aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the critical question of how media constitute reality.

2. Symbolic value and hyperreality

2.1. Symbolic political economy

Jean Baudrillard's theoretical exploration began with a profound critique of traditional Marxist political economy. Marx primarily analysed commodities from the dimensions of use value and exchange value, a framework that takes labour as the foundation of value. However, in Baudrillard's view, with the advent of the consumer society, this value dichotomy gradually lost its explanatory power. In contemporary post-industrial capitalism, the value of commodities no longer resides solely in their practicality or market equivalence but increasingly in their symbolic status within the social meaning system. This symbolic dimension is precisely what Baudrillard refers to as 'symbolic value,' which he uses to reveal how commodities function as tools for representing social identity, difference, and power. As Li points out, Baudrillard's theory underwent a paradigm shift from a Marxist perspective: from a critique of material exploitation to a critique of symbolic manipulation. In the contemporary society permeated by media and advertising, the consumption of commodities increasingly relies on their cultural and symbolic coding rather than their practicality or economic value. In this context, symbolic value becomes the dominant logic: the 'value' of a commodity no longer depends on what it can do, but on what it represents [4].

Baudrillard proposed four levels of commodity value: use value, exchange value, symbolic value, and structural value. Among these, symbolic value plays a decisive role in regulating consumer behaviour. People no longer consume commodities to satisfy physical needs, but to produce and convey meaning within a symbolic system. For example, owning a luxury watch or the latest smartphone is more about showcasing wealth, taste, or social class than simply telling time or making calls. In other words, the meaning of consumer goods derives from their differences within the structure. Consumption is communication; choosing different brands, styles, and designs is essentially a code operation rather than a functional choice. The significance of this linguistic analogy lies in redefining consumption as a cultural practice rather than an individual behaviour.

Consumers are not freely choosing goods but are constrained by the symbolic systems predetermined by social structures [5].

In this theoretical model, the core of social control is no longer the possession of material resources or the exploitation of labour, but the manipulation of symbols, meanings, and representations. The symbolic value of commodities becomes a key link in the reproduction of ideology. As Li points out, this shift from material control to meaning control marks a profound transformation in capitalist governance—meaning itself becomes a commodity, and power operates through symbolic mechanisms. In summary, Baudrillard's theory of symbolic value and symbolic political economy marks his fundamental shift from traditional political economy to postmodern cultural criticism. This theory reveals how consumption behaviour is dominated by symbolic differences, how it is pre-set in the media, and how it reinforces capital control while masquerading as free choice. This critique laid a solid semiotic foundation for the subsequent development of core theories such as 'simulacra' and 'hyperreality' [4].

2.2. Hyperreality

In Jean Baudrillard's later works, the concept of 'hyperreality' became the core theoretical framework for his critique of postmodern society. Building on his earlier critique of the political economy of symbols, hyperreality is not merely a distortion of reality but the complete disappearance of reality under multi-layered simulation. This state describes a situation where the representation of symbols precedes and determines the perception of reality, constructing a self-sufficient symbolic system that no longer refers to any stable external reference. As Cui and Li emphasises, hyperreality marks the pinnacle of Baudrillard's simulacrum model, particularly the fourth stage, where simulation no longer masks reality but completely replaces it. Baudrillard's simulacrum model is divided into four progressive stages. In the first stage, symbols reflect deep reality; in the second stage, symbols conceal and distort reality; in the third stage, symbols conceal the absence of reality; and in the fourth stage—hyperreality—symbols are completely detached from reality, becoming self-referential loops that generate an experience that is 'more real than reality.' This process is not only an epistemological shift but also a structural transformation in the operation of meaning within late capitalism. Hyperreality is not an illusion or a mirage but a systemic state where the symbolic system becomes a self-referential entity no longer dependent on reality as a reference point. The environment it generates is more persuasive, more emotional, and more suited for consumption. In this context, experience is no longer direct lived experience but a symbolic event that is planned, produced, and consumed [6].

The significance of this theory lies in its ability to explain contemporary cultural and technological developments. From tourism, politics, brand building to war, many contemporary phenomena are constructed around simulated logic—simulating events, emotions, or authenticity while concealing the absence of real experience. In hyperreality, experience is no longer lived but manufactured by content. Media technology also plays a crucial role in constructing hyperreality. As Hu Yanan points out, modern media has evolved from passively transmitting real-world information to actively constructing meaning. Media forms such as television, advertising, live streaming, and social media do not simply reflect events but are edited, framed, and narrated to align with specific cultural, emotional, or political demands. These carefully designed images appear authentic and emotionally rich but are highly symbolic reproductions. Media has become the primary battleground for simulation, transforming reality into consumable narrative spectacles or emotional landscapes according to societal and cultural expectations. This transformation leads to the 'withdrawal' of

reality: As media becomes increasingly immersive and ubiquitous, individual experiences are increasingly shaped by media symbols rather than direct interactions with the body and society [7].

Furthermore, media technology constructs a 'structured perceptual landscape' where human perception increasingly relies on screens and images, with the real world replaced by virtual structures. News is no longer merely reporting facts but has become a visual spectacle; social interactions are increasingly realised through virtual avatars, emojis, and video loops. This dynamic severely challenges the subject's agency. The hyper-real subject is not a critical actor but a passive recipient immersed in the encoded structure, and even resistance is often transformed into 'subcultural styles' or 'aesthetic postures' within the system. As the simulation loop intensifies, traditional social boundaries gradually dissolve: the lines between public and private, production and consumption, observer and observed become blurred. As Ma notes, media no longer merely represent reality but are reality itself. Events are no longer directly experienced but become 'media events'—performances existing for the sake of dissemination and consumption. The logic of hyperreality is equally evident in the consumer culture and entertainment industry of real life. Take brand marketing and celebrity culture as examples: brands not only sell products but also shape a symbolic identity and lifestyle. Advertisements create idealised visual and emotional experiences, evoking consumers' longing for a certain lifestyle, an experience that often transcends the product's actual functionality. Celebrity images are constantly refined and disseminated through social media, becoming symbolic carriers of public attention and imitation rather than real individuals. Fans' emotional investment in celebrities is more about identifying with this constructed symbol than understanding the real person. Hyperreality depicts the operational logic of contemporary society—a system where all meaning is manufactured, reality becomes performance, and resistance is absorbed.

3. Simulacra and media technology

3.1. The concept of simulacra

The concept of the simulacrum, as the core idea of Baudrillard's media theory, underwent significant changes in its theoretical evolution from early to mid-period. Initially, the simulacrum was primarily understood as a replication or representation of reality—images as references to some external reality. However, as Baudrillard's theoretical framework developed, particularly after his transition from political economy criticism to symbolic exchange theory, the meaning of the simulacrum no longer merely represented a distorted mirror of reality but evolved into a symbol detached from its original referent. This shift marked a transition from a representational paradigm to a symbolic paradigm, where 'reality' no longer exists as a stable foundation but gradually disintegrates within multiple layers of simulation. According to Baudrillard's four-stage model of simulacra, images undergo a process from reflecting reality, distorting reality, concealing the non-existence of reality, to ultimately reaching 'pure simulacra'—where images only refer to themselves and are no longer related to any real foundation. This transformation brings a new understanding of reality: reality is no longer a 'backstage reality' that can be revealed, but is replaced by a symbolic system. Zhou points out that one of Baudrillard's significant contributions is that he proposed that simulacra are not merely illusions or deceptions but operational structural realities that functionally replace the position of 'reality' [1].

In the contemporary digital media environment, this simulation logic has also taken on new forms of expression. Wang and Yang pointing out that digital technology constructs a symbolic environment that no longer merely extends reality but directly generates new experiential structures. In digital environments such as social media, live-streaming platforms, virtual reality, and

algorithmic recommendation systems, media are no longer tools for extending reality but mechanisms for actively creating ‘sensible reality.’ These systems no longer reproduce the world but construct perceptual spaces that align with the system's coding logic, where code determines what is ‘real,’ visible, and desirable. In this environment, users no longer face a mapping of reality but a ‘symbolic order’ constituted by platform rules, interface design, and personalised algorithms. This transforms the ‘reality’ we understand into a constructed and designed outcome. People's perceptions increasingly rely on screens and visual symbols rather than direct bodily experience. In this simulated environment, ‘reality’ is not negated but systematically replaced. Users' perceptions, emotions, desires, and identities are all shaped within this symbolic logic. This environment even alters the fundamental experience of ‘space.’ Traditional space is based on bodily movement and sensory interaction, while digital space is a symbolic existence [8].

Liu further explores how digital image media reorganise the logic of simulacra in the visual domain. He analyses how platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu operate, pointing out that these platforms are not merely tools for information dissemination but mechanisms for generating simulacra. The images on these platforms are not simple records of reality but are processed through filters, beautification, editing, and emotional manipulation. They are not reproductions but symbols used to attract attention and create emotional resonance [9]. In this visual environment, multiple levels of simulation processes emerge: first, the images themselves are technologically manipulated; second, the platform's feedback mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares serve as symbolic validation, determining which symbols gain recognition; finally, the platform's algorithmic recommendations create a “symbolic echo chamber” where repetition is equated with authenticity, and recognition stems from the consistency of symbols rather than their differences. In summary, contemporary understandings of simulacra have far surpassed the traditional notion that ‘images distort reality.’ ‘Reality’ is no longer the starting point of meaning but rather a product of symbolic structures. Individuals living within screens are surrounded, driven, and re-encoded by constantly generated simulacra, as the boundaries between reality and simulation quietly dissolve, giving rise to a contemporary world dominated by simulacra.

3.2. Media and object strategies

In Baudrillard's later theoretical development, the concept of ‘seduction’ became a key framework for rethinking media, subjectivity, and technologically mediated states of perception. Unlike his earlier focus on ideological and political-economic critique, Baudrillard defined seduction as a symbolic game and superficial logic that rejects depth, utility, and definitive meaning. Rather than operating through transparency or the logic of representation, seduction functions through opacity, appearance, and delay—it does not aim to reveal truth but to attract subjects by arousing fascination. Contemporary interfaces—such as social media feeds, algorithmic recommendations, and visually smooth graphic structures—are not truly about ‘communication,’ but rather generate seduction through their form itself, drawing users into the flow of perception without appealing to deeper understanding. In this sense, seduction is not an exception to media logic but its dominant aesthetic and sensory mechanism [10].

Modern screens and interfaces embody the full unfolding of this seduction mechanism at the perceptual level. According to Tu, digital media are no longer solely visual media but have shifted toward tactile engagement, where the body is no longer merely an organ of vision but a key node integrated into the communication loop. Technologies such as haptic feedback, gesture control, vibration alerts, and touch sensors transform the screen into a ‘sensory membrane’-like medium—inducing the body's immediate response through rhythm, feedback, and gestures. Users are no

longer passive observers but active perceivers enveloped in a multisensory loop. Under these conditions, seduction is no longer merely rhetorical or symbolic but technical: it is embodied in the interface design itself, in the perceptual mechanisms that silently control behaviour and response. Every swipe, tap, and press is part of the feedback rhythm between the body and code, forming a 'closed loop of emotional capture.' This tactile mechanism further reinforces the logic of immersion, where perception becomes an immediate response, and 'sense of reality' gives way to a sense of existence constructed by synchronous mechanisms [11]. What complicates this state further is the agency of the 'object'—the media system itself no longer passively transmits content but actively induces the subject's participation. Cui and Sha notes that contemporary media technology has long possessed the ability to actively entice. Whether it be smartphones, app interfaces, or algorithmic mechanisms, they all employ strategies to attract users through pre-set responses [12].

The contemporary media environment has realised Baudrillard's 'logic of enticement' through technological, aesthetic, and systemic means. This logic is not only reflected in interface design but also penetrates into the structural layer of user behaviour. Media objects induce perception and response through form, rhythm, and feedback mechanisms, transforming the subject's participation from active engagement into a responsive node within the technological cycle. In this logic, 'authentic interaction' gives way to 'visible feedback,' and individuals are integrated into the seduction structure as codable and triggerable elements. This is the technological essence of the contemporary 'seduction society.'

4. Conclusion

When reflecting on the influence of Baudrillard's simulacrum theory and his concept of 'hyperreality' on contemporary media culture, we can clearly recognise that the boundary between virtual and reality is not only blurred but has collapsed, transforming into a self-sustaining simulated system. As discussed in this paper, Baudrillard's theoretical shift from symbolic political economy to the logic of simulation structures provides a powerful framework for understanding the cultural operations of the digital media age. Simulacra are no longer derivative imitations of reality but autonomous structures detached from their original referents, generating their own 'real effects.' This evolution marks a fundamental transformation in how we perceive the real world. According to Zhou the final stage of simulation development—where symbols no longer have any connection to reality—has become the dominant logic of the digital media environment. Platforms characterised by image dissemination, algorithmic customisation, and immersive interfaces no longer aim to reflect reality but to construct a consumable reality that users perceive as real [1]. Users often experience a sense of presence in immersive experiences that is indistinguishable from reality, even though they know it is fictional. This technologically constructed sensory structure challenges traditional human perceptual mechanisms, transforming 'experience' into 'media-shaped' perceptual fragments [13].

Lysokolenko argues, The media are playing a game of apotropy — a game of deterrence, intimidation, a game of dissuasion. The game with reality through the media can go to extreme limits, leading to the disappearance of social instances through the invasion of the game into discursive social practices and the realm of values [14]. The media environment not only deceives or interferes with the subject's perception but also irresistibly invites individuals to participate in a symbolic exchange game governed by pre-set rules. In this logic, the surreal is not merely a cultural state but a structural blockade of understanding itself — criticism, representation, and resistance are also absorbed into the system as components of the 'game.' Baudrillard does not propose explicit resistance strategies, but he reveals the 'structural trap' we are in: in a society dominated by

simulation, the priority is not to escape but to become aware—reality has vanished beneath the seductive surface of the virtual.

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