

## THE SEDUCTIVE TRAP OF A FALSE ONLINE LIFE

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The definition of art is constantly changing as more and more people try to expand the confines of art to include their unique creations. With this in mind, I believe that social media is one of the newest ways that art production can be viewed by society. Upon studying philosophical ideas pertaining to art, I found significance in the term 'hyperrealism,' which was coined by the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who used it to explain the following. "[I]t is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life. The finalities have disappeared; we are now endangered by models. There is no longer such a thing as ideology; there are only simulacra."<sup>1</sup> I find it fascinating that someone who lived before the boom of social media had predicted the ways that it would shape society today.

In this instance, the hyperreal is meant to express things that are "more real than real...different from a fiction or lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself."<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard talks a lot about the power of seduction, or as he likes to call it, obscenity. He relates his concept of hyperrealism to the idea that seduction in society is in fact "obscene and empty...has lost all risk, suspense and magic."<sup>3</sup> For example, Disneyland, which he describes as the "phantasmagoria of the inherent warmth and affection of the crowd, contrasted with

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 120

<sup>2</sup> Mark Poster, *Selected Writings Introduction*, 6

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 163

the absolute solitude of the parking lot,”<sup>4</sup> highlights the staggering difference between the real and the imaginary. I found that this was similar in the case of online technology, especially the lives shown on peoples’ social media feeds, and showcased the idea that our society is plagued by false representations of life through social media. These feeds are just a microcosm of a whole screen-world that the millennial generation is exposed to, as Baudrillard also describes TV as a “perpetual Rorschach test,”<sup>5</sup> a creation that gives viewers the ability to project their own fantasies onto what they view. Philosophical author Cynthia Freeland states in her book *But is it Art?*, that Baudrillard’s pronouncements “describe a millennial race to self-destruction in the dispersion of images of horror through the new global media.”<sup>6</sup> Her perspective on Baudrillard helped connect this philosophical theory to our current society’s obsession with the perfect online life. Millennials stage their own ‘shows’ for their followers through their “seductive yet false”<sup>7</sup> social media feeds. Additionally Baudrillard describes human enjoyment of the hyperreal as creative and somewhat subversive and that people are self-seducing themselves in this spectacle of perfect.

The social media feeds that my peers and I are familiar with are blatantly tailored in a hyperreal way, which is particularly well demonstrated by Instagram. Our millennial generation is obsessed with portraying and obtaining the perfect life, and because of this we may be missing the importance of both the highs and lows of life. People now boast of their lives through a mosaic of photos on their Facebook,

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<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 171

<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 183

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *But is it Art?*, 197

<sup>7</sup> Freeland, *But is it Art?*, 196

Instagram or other popular social media feed. These pictures seem to always exhibit a degree of sublimity that others do not have. Avid posters can't wait to share the perfect family, the perfect best friend, the perfect significant other, the perfect vacation, the perfect girls night out, the perfect plate of food or scenic view. Everything is staged, cropped, colored and posted to show the world how happy, fulfilled or for lack of a better word, perfect their lives are. Marshall McLuhan is most famous for his quote "the medium is the message," and Instagram is, as McLuhan might put it, one of the newest type of mediums through which our artfully crafted lives can be displayed. Are these social feeds showing an attainable life? Should we feel dissatisfied if our lives don't measure up to the ones showcased on profiles with 75K followers?

I want to address that Instagram along with other social media outlets are indeed an exact representation of Baudrillard's idea of hyperrealism. According to my Instagram feed, my friends have fashionable outings every weekend, ritzy tropical vacations every break, and a new snapshot celebrating their perfect relationship every monthly 'anniversary'. Daily life on screen is hyperreal, and it leaves others feeling depressed with the life they have, hoping for something unattainable. Instagram hides the obviousness of hyperrealism with a false cover that allows people to think that the pictures posted are real photos in real time. In reality, the people behind the feeds craft their art exactly like a Jackson Pollock painting, deliberate but made to look completely effortless. There are specific intentions regarding how people prefer to paint their lives in accordance to pictures they post on their feed. This approach to the online life yields an onslaught of

depression and disconnection among the viewers, stemming from the new ability to know how much they are missing. Social media lives are not only hyperreal because no one posts about the rough or uninteresting parts they experience, but also because even the good parts are further edited and enhanced.

The “phantasmagoria”<sup>8</sup> that seems to veil Instagram in a mist of perfection, is only an illusion and can be broken down into a few manipulative tricks which make the feed an exaggerated picture of happiness. People are extremely selective about what they post, as if their feed acts as a personal art exhibit. In the same way that artists’ have specific intent for their paintings, Instagram enthusiasts make their posting a developed skill, taking the time to perfect their creation and giving it a meaning that the viewer will take with them. A carefully crafted painting contains theme, style and color schemes that give it the artistic appeal, as does an Instagram profile. Similar to group photo situations where many pictures are taken in order to get one good one, ‘artists’ on Instagram tend to pose many times to find the picture where they look the cutest or sexiest, giving them the ability to pick and post the optimal picture. Traditional artists follow a similar mentality of practice makes perfect, such as Monet painting several variations of his *Water Lilies* or Degas painting several versions of his *Dancers*. The final stroke of the perfect Instagram picture is the message to be taken from the ‘art,’ the title of the painting so to speak. A caption is the most important part as it can make or break the aesthetic appeal of the post. It must be a short, often flirty or insightful quip that attempts to give the picture meaning while being simple enough to seem cool and effortless. The

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<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 163

captions are another layer in creating a false persona to advertise to the world. People who have perfected the caption game tend to be more desirable to follow. Their 'art' stands out more to the crowd and raises them above the rest. Feeds with more followers are found to have a special something that makes them more desirable to see and follow, and most often it is the person's painting of their hyperreal world that draws the followers in.

The hyperrealism that comes from the technological boom is called hyperrealism for a reason, it is supposed to be unattainably real, similarly to how Disneyland could never be a real life situation. Just like Main Street at Disneyland depicts the perfect, unattainable American town, Instagram depicts the perfect, unattainable life. It is apparent that Instagram is specifically geared towards appealing aesthetically to an audience, but it is not apparent to users why it is a hyperreal monster. Although it probably hasn't been referred to as a type of artistic work before, it possesses the unique ability to make people want their 'lives' to achieve a level of perfection only expected in a job or skill, which consequently, are two ways to describe art. This concept is especially important to me because I see these perfected accounts displaying the ultimate life of wealth, romance, and happiness and feel that my life isn't as fantastic as it could be, when in reality my actual life is probably similar to my peers, and better than the lives of many. I also see my friends' accounts depicting all the times that they are out having fun and I'm home watching Netflix. Interestingly enough, when I'm the one posting and keeping up my own hyperlife, I often forget my feelings of loneliness and FOMO (Fear of

Missing Out) as the viewer. I forget that someone else might be the viewer to my posts.

Hyperrealism as an art form in Instagram feeds is a problem, especially due to growing evidence that depression and suicide can be correlated to the use of social media. Similar to the Rorschach Test, people see what they want to see, and many times what they see is the times they are excluded, and they forget about all the times that they are included. Our desire to constantly share the latest adventure or life achievement exacerbates the feelings of depression and FOMO. People need to understand that social media is more like Disneyland than we realize: when you are there, its magical, when you see others there, you feel jealousy, when it's not on your radar, you forget that you missed it in the first place. These perfectly painted feeds are not real but it's difficult for people to rationalize that in the midst of their feelings. In turn, people can finally understand that life is not designed for perfection, but for the rise and fall of all the moments that make it life, and not a fantasy.

## REFERENCES

Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, 2001.

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

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