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Baudrillard, Sepultura and Steve Cutts' Animation. Dystopian Common Ground

Abstract: The complexity of today's cultural and social reality has turned the contemporary scene into the perfect playground for postmodern theories. One of the most prominent voices of pomo critique, Baudrillard sees the present age in dark colours, with a society lost in a simulated reality and, paradoxically, with information lost in communication. The present paper starts from various concepts of utopia constructed in the postmodernist think-tank, to eventually point out the similarities between a Baudrillard-infused, dystopian definition of "now" and the descriptions provided by a metal band (Sepultura) and a cartoonist on an educational mission, Steve Cutts.

Keywords: postmodernism, utopia, dystopia, media culture, representation

Utopia has always been the functional dream of humanity, the equation with no solution that generated a discourse of hope altogether with an acute sense of impossibility. Yet, the present state of humanity displays a series of features that transforms the very concept of utopia into a shifting metaphor of contrast – if the theorists of postmodernism (Baudrillard, Jameson, Lyotard, Fukuyama, Debord, Best, Kellner, Hassan and others) had gathered to sum up their fears, hopes and expectations about the future, the contemporary reality might have been an accurate representation of the result. For Fredric Jameson, the interconnectedness between utopia and reality can be reversed, to the extent that the discourse of utopia can provide a more accurate representation of the real and can account for the evolution of the social environment, thus acting like an educational tool. He identifies utopia as a rare phenomenon, having its conceptual meaning developed at the same level as its reality, with its ontology coinciding with its representation (Jameson 2004, 35). Jameson sees the quasi-disappearance of a social function of utopia in terms of "historical dissociation": namely, the extraordinary differences between the highly developed countries and the under-developed ones, or between the rich and the poor. These colossal differences have reshaped the world, transforming it into two different versions of itself, with each of them having a unique perspective on utopia. For the poverty stricken communities and individuals, utopia has become irrelevant, as its discourse places it too far from the actual reality. For the wealthy part,

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utopia is no longer a match for reality itself – it is the phenomenon of “utopia realized” described by Baudrillard, when all possible ideals of liberation and welfare have been already attained, thus disappeared, with society *simulating* their existence (Baudrillard 1993, 4).

A necessary condition of envisioning utopia is, according to Jameson, the utopian state of mind; he divides it into two distinct categories, corresponding to the duality between science and ideology. The first category is represented by authors like Thomas More, who approached the status of Utopian as an integral part of their life and profession, with the willingness to act as a model through personal example; this category has a rather scientific and radically articulated background, of professional involvement. The second major category, represented by thinkers like Rousseau, acknowledges utopianism as “another form of idle day dreaming” (Jameson 2005, 42).

Theorists like Lyotard avoid pairing certain types of societal construction of utopia with particular cultural movements, highlighting the idea that several views are simultaneous: realism, modernism and postmodernism coexist, at any given moment in time, in each and every culture, abiding by various modes of representation (Lyotard 1984, 60). Whereas realism provides a universally legitimate manner of representation, along the lines of master narratives, modernism and postmodernism seem to have a disruptive effect on the idea that everything can adequately become the subject of representation, with postmodernism in particular undermining the potential of art, scientific inquiry and even communication to properly function as modes of representation. Debord goes one step further to suggest that postmodernist representation is inherently oblique and significantly more subjective, compared to the modernist approach, with language no longer holding a clearly defined mechanism of signification and signs often losing their connection to reality (Debord 1970, 22).

In the arguably postmodern cultural environment of today, the line between utopia and dystopia is blurred. Both utopia and dystopia are essentially part of the same framework of intentionality, aiming at certain improvements of the socio-cultural, political or economic life, within a particular human community: utopia sums up the idealized components of a better future¹, a series of possible elements of societal evolution, while dystopia attempts to designate the perceived evils of the society, usually through their hyperbolization and the creation of an even darker setting than the very reality it criticizes.

Each change in the perception of historicism corresponds to an alteration in meaning, as far as the „deciphering” of the utopian design is concerned. The particularities of postmodernism have added a supplementary layer of subjectivity, relativity and fragmentarism to the classical dimensions. By modulating interpretation patterns, the discourse of postmodernism has

affected the coherence of its utopias as much as their conceptual consistency. The various *readings* of the same articulation of a utopian discourse can greatly differ, in as much as utopia can turn into dystopia along the same temporal axis, or even be interpreted in contradicting terms when analyzed through disparate ideological lenses.

When trying to understand the subtle ways in which the contemporary cultural puzzle works, one needs to pin down the redefined concepts of space and time, and the novel consciousness and philosophy accompanying this change. A certain awareness of spatiality is manifest at any level, from individual to global. The spatial philosophy of the postmodern – irrespective of the degree of subjectivity or superficiality – seems to prefer surface, not depth. The exterior, even though stereotypical and manipulative, but much more spectacular than the interior, assumes its domination, from urban architecture to the idealised imagery of Disneyland (Eco 1986, 43).

Any definition of the present state of reality seems to be reduced to a subtle interplay between subjectivity and communication, against a background of increased fragmentariness. If Derrida, Lyotard and Jameson still considered communication as a consistent tool in handling information (at least in part, and albeit subjective), Baudrillard perceives communication as an added layer of confusion on top of the already chaotic build of the present. The over-abundance of information, through all possible channels, from television to Internet, has a paradoxical effect as well: that of cancelling the very possibility to extract meaning. Moreover, information ultimately causes an impossibility to signify meaningfully, because of the proliferation of signs at such a rate². Another element upon which Baudrillard focuses his attention is the central item of the commodification process, also theorized by Lyotard, Jameson and McLuhan: the commodity itself. The new sign-value associated with the commodity in the contemporary age acquires certain discursive elements, since it can convey a variety of messages and can display a significant amount of information within the framework of cultural and social norms.

This sign-value eventually exceeds use- and/or exchange-value, since it can also provide a more consistent effect within the process of simulation around which the entire functionality of the postmodern environment revolves. Simultaneous with the reversal between representation and reality, the occurrence of a new type of “real” – the hyperreal – further dissolves meaning, against the same background of over-abundance of information. Here, as well, the mechanisms of media act not as facilitators for the process of apprehending reality, but as an annulment of the very possibility to do so. Everyday life is inherently tied to this deterioration of perception and representation, making the individual prone to fall under the disorienting influence of media.

Thus, the individual permanently experiences a schizophrenic pattern of existence, when the reality surrounding him unravels itself aggressively, destroying intimacy and turning introversion into impossibility. The inherent state of confusion that follows becomes a regular expression of the way in which the individual seeks to adapt to the social/cultural environment – with too much information and too little distance from everything around him, the individual is sentenced to a psychologically crippling openness to reality. In this scenario, staged by postmodernity, with proximity being an invasive influence on the subject, existence is simultaneously transparent and coded (through media, culture and the overflow of images, exceeding one's capacity to properly interiorize their *meaning*) (Baudrillard 1983). Amidst an environment shaped by simulation and a seemingly meaningless play of images, external reality has become a forgotten myth, since any appropriation of the real is either mediated, biased or excessively subjective.

Baudrillard's vision is a complex assemblage of simulation, hyperreal, cultural metamorphosis and shifting concepts of utopia; these are all tenets of present-day media culture, with individuals lost in-between social media, an objective reality perceived through the lenses of consumerism-driven norms and a perpetual need for originality in a world of copies. Captive inside an endless duplication of signs and imposed meanings, the contemporary self is reinvented at the same pace with global trends and the disarticulated needs. What Baudrillard theorized – a distorted, dystopian instance of a certain stage in human evolution – is paradoxically similar to the realism-infused representations of today's humanity in two of the most prominent vehicles of expression today, music and cartoons. Namely, the video for a song called "Phantom Self", from Sepultura, one of the most iconic metal bands, and a short animation by Steve Cutts, "Consumerism". They both crucify people's addiction to technology and their obsession with mobile phones, and they both have a double layer of signification. On the one hand, they question the disruptive relationship between man and technology. On the other hand, we catch a glimpse at a much more intense debate, one on the very nature of reality – since perception is mediated through various cultural and technological mechanisms, and the concept of the real is undermined by subjective perspectives, reality is no longer the immediate source of inspiration to create versions of utopia, but becomes a utopia in itself; the thought of accessing reality as it is has become the utopian dream of contemporary culture, while individuals behave like avatars in a hyperreal environment.

The video for "Phantom Self"/ Sepultura uncovers fast moving images, as if seen through a robotic eye; alternating scenes – religious icons and modern architecture; a world populated by zombie-like humans, absorbed

by their mobile phones, indifferent towards the surroundings – and the environment. In such a demented, technology-driven universe, the most severe individual crisis is a phone battery dying out – and any attempt to borrow energy from other individuals is obliterated by the all-encompassing indifference that seems to be the central governor of this particular Brave New World. This is a world where people are essentially manufactured, as they have come to rely on technology to such a degree, that not only is everything replaceable through robotics, but any attempt to perceive reality directly, through human senses, is regarded as a flaw. Humans mimic their whole existence in front of the phone camera, postponing their actual life.

Symptomatic for people's attitude towards technology is the running competition between two runners – one of them, with a prosthetic leg, easily wins the race, while the other curses his “only human” nature and decides to take matters into his own hands by cutting off his right leg. The high level of visual aggression in the “repair” scene symbolizes the intensity with which society imposes its newly found ideals upon the individual; giving up a healthy, fully functional limb just to access an alleged superiority is a syndrome of a society that imposes artificial ideals of perfection, while rejecting what is authentically human.

An entire society seems captive inside the two dimensional utopia of a small screen – the mobile phone, the symbol and symptom of the new breed of human, simultaneously functions as road and destination for all possible human desires. Unable to distinguish between the natural and the artificial, the individuals who seem to favour the former are regarded as flawed and sent to “repair”; everyone needs to be cured from a non-mediated perception of reality. A direct connection to what is real is perceived as a sign of illness, and consequently cannot fit into the framework of technologically imposed perfection. The ending of the video entails two layers of signification: on the one hand, we have an illustration of hope, of solution to the men-becoming-robots problem. A man who throws away his mobile phone and a woman who chooses to actually *look* at the world instead of staring at a screen. On the other hand, the ultimate symbol of hope – and of religion, in the same time – Christ the Redeemer, in Rio, is presented as a robotic assemblage of metallic parts, a machinery covered by a mere illusion of humanity. So, even if at the individual level salvation can be found, as a species, as a global community, humanity seems to be doomed, with its downfall brought by its own creation: technology.

The same idea of salvation allowed individually but denied collectively is shared by Steve Cutts' animated story “Consumerism”. The viewer is abruptly introduced to a mechanic, senseless destruction of the natural environment with the sole purpose of producing mobile phones (just like “Phantom Self”, in the cartoonish rendition of the modern times the mobile

phone acts as symbol for technology and for people's addiction to it). The complex technological stages are presented accompanied by eerie music (rarely interrupted by what seem to be screams of nature being mutilated), against a background of a grey, somber, decaying world. The viewer witnesses the maddeningly repetitive work of countless robotic workers, performing the same movements over and over again, to ensure the appearance of the ultimate product, a mobile phone with "built in obsolescence", metaphorically called "Y Fone" – the question alluded to in its name is soon answered by a generic individual who seeks emotional fulfillment through relentlessly purchasing newer and newer models of Y Fone, with a decreased intensity of the moment of delight and an increased frustration caused by the speed with which new models make their way into his life. Symbolical for the eventual destruction of human life through mindless consumerism, the weight of all the now-obsolete mobile phones eventually leads to the prolonged fall of the man (or Man) into an immense wasteland of abandoned cellphones. As if awakened from an apocalyptic nightmare by a phone ringing, the man finds himself sleeping at home, with his TV set obsessively broadcasting the latest news about mobile phones. Just like emerging from a hypnotic state, he turns off both his TV and his phone, only to experience a sudden realization that he had long lost contact with the reality around him. He longingly looks at the portraits of his family and slowly starts to appreciate the small wonders of the world again. He looks at a bird, fascinated by its presence; he goes outside, talks to real people in a real park, and then proceeds to walk along with them on a real path. However, just when the signs of a happy end are adding up, the devastation of the nature around him is resumed, as a brutal reminder that humanity is still on the same journey of self-destruction, unimpressed, uncompassionate and unforgiving.

In both cases, individuals are faced with a brutal intrusion of objective reality into their own personal utopia; what is significantly different, however, is the presence – or, respectively, the absence – of religion. In "Phantom Self", there is an apparent veil of hope at the end, the image of Christ the Redeemer, but that veil is soon deconstructed and the viewer witnesses the dissolution of the religious icon into the same robotic make-up that acts as novel foundation for the entire human kind. In "Consumerism" there is no reference to religion – but this absence could signify the author's subtextual intention of highlighting technology as the ultimate religion of humanity, and the cellphone as an egocentric God that desires absolute commitment and sacrifice. Yet the conclusion is the same: irrespective of individual efforts, collective doom is to follow.

The profoundly dystopian outlook encoded in both "Phantom Self" and "Consumerism" finds its exact replica in Baudrillard's writings about utopia,

dystopia and reality. For Baudrillard, the discourse of utopianism is not necessarily a formula for envisioning better versions of reality, but rather reality itself can trigger some unconscious utopian mechanisms – perhaps one of the best examples is *America*, in which an entire nation is viewed as a work of fiction, whose ambivalent and dispersed projection becomes the very equivalent of utopia. More specifically, two places in the United States personify the ultimate utopian scenario: Biosphere and Disneyland. Both of them have the function of proving that America does not consist of a real, true-to-life component – that, beyond the two perfect incarnations of utopia, the real America ceases to exist – and its disappearance transforms the subjective utopia into a seemingly objective dystopia. Relentlessly bombarded with audio and visual bits of falsification, Americans are led to *believe* in movies and propaganda. And not only do they actually believe the utopian scenario they are permanently exposed to, but they eventually get to believe in *nothing else* (Baudrillard 1988) – we find the same level of obsession in Sepultura’s video and Steve Cutts’ animation, with individuals no longer connected to the real. Living in a society that has exceeded all expectations, with reality having already surpassed fiction on so many grounds, the imaginary is no longer a pretext for the real. Once the reality principle has been cancelled by the complex socio-cultural devices of postmodernity, accompanied by an endless mass production of arbitrary symbols, against a background of generalized simulation, the imaginary no longer needs legitimation. On the contrary, reality is the one that is undergoing a process of dissolution, of mutation into a non-attainable dimension, so that the real itself becomes the utopia of contemporaneity (Baudrillard 1991). Instead of designing improved versions of reality, projections of a better future or alternate realities that more adequately correspond to its dreams, humanity has lost contact with reality itself, being suspended between the real and the fictional. Baudrillard, Sepultura and Steve Cutts all seem to sentence humanity to a perspective of life inside a carefully manufactured dystopia, constructed on the ashes of a long-forgotten technological utopia.

Notes

¹ Temporality itself is subjective, when it comes to the design of utopia: the imagined place and time of each utopia do not necessarily belong to future *per se*. Alternate realities, distorted time or simulated spaces also represent valid options for envisioning utopia/dystopia.

² “Information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and mass media. Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social... information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy.” (Baudrillard 1994, 96)

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