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Hyperreality and virtual worlds: when the virtual is real

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Abstract

This article questions what is hyperreality and underlines the role of the signs/images fostering the perception of a virtual world. It argues the potentiality of signs as artefacts. Starting from Agamben's perspective regarding contemporary, the hyperreality is understood as a modern, visual and mass manifestation of the need for simulacra in a non-referential virtual world. How hyperreality, spectacle, simulation, and appearance emerge out of reality? What is authentic or real are issues raised using images and technological devices. The images are popular and amplify the effects of distraction and social alienation. The image is immediately absorbed, spectacular, attractive, a peculiar ready-to-think that eliminates or dilutes the concepts and produces a fast culture. Through a reflexive strategy, this article is conceptual (it has no case study or empirical work) and has the purpose of problematize the experience of hyperreality, which is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social life and social interdependence, and the ways we see, think, feel, act or just mean and interpret the reality.

Keywords

Hyperreality, image, real, virtual worlds, technology

Hiperrealidad y mundos virtuales: cuando lo virtual es real

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Resumen

Este artículo cuestiona la hiperrealidad y subraya el papel de los signos / imágenes que fomentan la percepción de un mundo virtual, argumentando la potencialidad de los signos como artefactos. Partiendo de la perspectiva de Agamben con respecto a lo contemporáneo, la hiperrealidad se entiende como una manifestación moderna, visual y masiva de la necesidad de simulacros en un mundo virtual no referencial. ¿Cómo la hiperrealidad, el espectáculo, la simulación y la apariencia emergen de la realidad? Lo que es auténtico o real son cuestiones planteadas con imágenes y dispositivos tecnológicos. Las imágenes son populares y amplifican los efectos de la distracción y alienación social. La imagen se absorbe de inmediato, espectacular, atractiva, un peculiar listo para pensar que elimina o diluye los conceptos y produce una cultura rápida. A través de una estrategia reflexiva, este artículo es conceptual y tiene el propósito de problematizar la experiencia de la hiperrealidad, que es remodelar y reestructurar los patrones de vida e interdependencia sociales, las formas en que vemos, pensamos, sentimos, actuamos o simplemente queremos decir e interpretar la realidad.

Palabras Clave

Hiperrealidad, imagen, mundos virtuales, real, tecnología

1. Introduction

“Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?”, asks Agamben (2009, p. 39) in an essay entitled *What is the Contemporary?* Firstly, it is important to understand what the contemporary is. If one wants to answer this question or just wants to grasp its meaning, one must understand that societies and cultures are dynamic, constantly changing and permanently permeable. Time explains the changes of societies and cultures, but also of human beings and their production of techniques and their choice for a certain way of life. Time explains, for example, the familiar omnipresence of technological devices in our daily lives, such as mobile phones, as well as the actions, behaviours, and attitudes that we have in society regarding these devices. Time also justifies the hyperreality paradigm we are living in and everything we do in a virtual dimension. This time is global, technological, and communicational. Facing the emergent changes, Heidegger (1982, p. 3) adverts that “there would seem to be no escape any longer”. He is referring to the modern technicization and industrialization.

According to Agamben (2009, p. 41), “contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it”. For Agamben (2009, p. 47), a good example of “this special experience of time that we call contemporariness is fashion” because it “can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity that divides it according to its relevance or irrelevance, its being-in-fashion or no-longer-being-in-fashion”. Like fashion, images that serve as a model and show trends or suggest lifestyles are also a singular example. Both fashion and images establish a peculiar and paradoxical relationship with time, because they focus on a disconnection and out-of-jointness: “Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands”, points out Agamben (2009, p. 40).

The concepts of contemporaneity, modernity, and secularization are connected. The idea of secularization is faithful to the Latin etymology of the word *saeculum*, which refers to a temporal dimension to a present and immanent time. It is the essence or the constitutive feature of modernity, which designates a time of human history inaugurated in Europe. According to Giddens (1990, p. 1), the concept of modernity refers to ways of life and

social organization that emerged in Europe around the seventeenth century and subsequently acquired a universal influence.

The modernity of societies results from the disappearance of differentiated cultural elements and from the loss of meaning regarding the past. Technology, economy, and politics (namely the neo-liberalism of the global market) create social homogeneity regarding the same or the global interests, needs, desires, consumptions, lifestyles, habits, etc.

However, contemporaneity is not an ordinary time. It is a time of instantaneous, superficial and ephemeral experiences, and these experiences are global, massified, virtual; it is a digital homogenization of lifestyles. For Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 10), “the new mass is the digital swarm”. The new mass is in the digital. The new mass becomes a digital and globalized mass. There is a displacement in time, a disconnection or an anachronism: only the no-actual is contemporary. Only in this way the no-actual can perceive and grasp the time (Agamben, 1999, p. 40). The disconnection or anachronism between the subject and his time does not mean that the subject lives in another time. At most, it means that he lives a time and a space in an alienated way, according to an inversion of reality that provokes an alienation. Such inversion is in the Marxism sense.

The concept alienation comes from the Latin *alius*, meaning “other” or “another”, deriving *alienus*, “of another place or person”. Etymologically, the meaning of alienation has a spatial and existential significance. In Marx theory, the worker experiences the object of his labour as alien: even though the object has been produced through the worker’s labour, it is not accessible to the worker.

By the rule, modern mass cultures are neither traditional nor elitist, because they don’t live in the past nor are exclusive to a high-status social minority, respectively. Modern mass cultures produce everything on a large scale and for everyone. Therefore, they are popular, commercial and homogenized.

This article reflects on the hyperrealism of our contemporary, global, trivial and ordinary life and questions the hyperreality as a technological medium and its effects on the

derealization, i.e. on the changes in the perceptions or experiences of the outside world that does not seem real.

A virtual world is an interactive virtual environment, a hyper-world or a “3-D computer-based platform that allows users to interact with each other in real time” (Hodge; Collins & Giordano, 2013, p. 6). A virtual world is a three-dimensional environment in which one (an avatar, a virtual representation of one, like a virtual ego, which can have any shape as one wish) can interact with others and create objects as part of that interaction. A virtual world requires the virtualization, which is the inverse movement to the actualization, according to Pierre Lévy (1999, p. 12), and it consists in the passage of the current to the virtual, in an elevation to the power.

In his book *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality*, Benjamin Woolley (1993, p. 53) says that the virtual “was and remains a much grander word, scandalously underused, a huge vessel of semantic vacuity waiting to have meaning poured into it”. The computer has provided some of that meaning, adds Woolley.

There are a wide variety of virtual worlds since any kind of world can be created virtually, i.e. custom-built for entertainment, social relations, educational purposes or professional training, but all include connection, interactivity, online community, communication, simulation, digital dimension, technological device or medium, virtual images, fantasy. Virtual worlds may be based upon the real world or completely disconnected from the real world.

With all these features, a virtual world may also be called a digital, simulated or hyper-world world where derealization affects both the subject and the object of this experience. It alters the sense of identity. Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche argue this idea of derealization, but Nietzsche refers to being as the last breath of a vaporizing reality and to the dissolution of the distinction between the real world and the apparent world. Nietzsche's *The Twilight of the Idols* presents the history of this distinction from Plato to his time; the true world has become a useless and superfluous idea (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 22).

The hyperreality is a way of derealization, a “loss of the real” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1) since modern media facilitate our lives in a simulacrum. However, it seems more important to understand such tendency or movement towards the hyperreality, because the medium of our electric technology time, According to McLuhan, “is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life” and it is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate every thought, action, and institution formerly taken for granted, because everything is changing dramatically. “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (McLuhan, 1967, p. 8). Therefore, technological devices predispose us to think and act automatically in certain ways.

2. What is hyperreality?

Consulting the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, the prefix hyper of the concept hyperreality emphasizes the main idea of a reality and an imaginary merged, a blending of reality and signs of reality, where the latter represents realistically the former. There is no clear indication of where the reality stops and the imaginary signs representing reality begin. Hyperreality refers to something that does not actually exist. However, experiencing hyperreality may be so intense and realistic that one may confuse, even for brief moments, what is real and what is not real.

Hyper means “more at over”, something overmuch, extra, beyond or “excessive in extent or quality”, “located above”, while the term reality means what is the common sense idea: “the quality or state of being real”, “the actual nature or constitution of something”, “what has objective existence, what is not a mere idea, what is not imaginary, fictitious or pretended”, “what exists necessarily”.

What is the state of being hyperreal? If reality is the quality of being real or having an actual and objective existence, the hyperreality is a simulated reality above the reality itself. For Deleuze (1983, p. 48), “the simulacrum is an image without resemblance”. Etymologically, the concept simulacrum comes from the Latin *simulare*, “to make like, imitate, copy, represent”, i.e. “to put on an appearance of”. Simulacrum means an

insubstantial or vague semblance, “likeness, image, representation”. There is no simulacrum without signs. In this perspective, we may understand a simulacrum as a sign.

The proliferation of simulacra origins, on the one hand, the rise of hyperreality and virtual and simulated worlds, on the other hand, the “crisis of representation”, i.e. what Paul Virilio (1991, p. 112) calls in his *The Lost Dimension* a crisis caused by the modern media technology, diluting the differences or not distinguishing what is real and true from what is fictitious.

Therefore, the concept hyperreality defines the perceptive inability to distinguish between reality and technological simulation. It is an artificialism in which reality and fiction appear indistinct. The term hyperreality is also used to mean the technological infrastructure of communication that supports the continuous and unified interaction between: a) people and virtual objects; b) people and real objects; c) human intelligence and artificial intelligence. Schematically, hyperreality is a composite structure defined by the following conjugation between the real and the non-real:

Hyperreality	
Technological infrastructure of communication that mixes / unifies and makes interacting:	
Real (the factual): physical reality.	Non-real (the fictitious or virtual): virtual reality.
Real people and real objects.	Virtual people and virtual objects (generated by computer).
Human intelligence.	Artificial intelligence.

Hyperreality is hypothetical; its accomplishment as a technological infrastructure lies in the future. “The technical challenge of hyperreality is to make physical and virtual reality appear to the full human sensory apparatus to intermix seamlessly” (Terashima, 2005, p. 7). Hyperreality provides a point or place for the unified interaction between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. It is the framing of people, objects and situations in a physical reality and a virtual reality, with human intelligence and artificial intelligence between facts and fictions, which results in the processes of interaction and communication, as if everything were part of the same plan or the world.

However, it is important to distinguish between what is real and what exists as effective, but not in fact. This distinction is not guaranteed, because one lives on a hybrid plane where one cannot readily distinguish if what one sees, hears, smells and touches results from a physical world or a world mediated by information technology.

Can hyperreality become the dominant medium through which we know reality? For Terashima, the term hyper in hyperreality emphasizes that hyperreality is more than the sum of physical reality and virtual reality; hyperreality “is predicated on systematic interaction between the two component realities”, resulting in a new form of reality that “has attributes above and beyond its component realities” (Terashima, 2005, p. 12).

Hyperreality is only possible due to the development of virtual reality. Hyperreality defined as a technological meta-concept (and with the emphasis in the prefix “hyper” to underline an extra dimension beyond the normal) is distinguished from the postmodern use of the term hyperreality and it has a communicational scope, i.e. it has the purpose of solving the fundamental problem of communication between the real and the virtual (Tiffin, 2005, p. 41). Hyperreality means a reality in which there is an extra dimension of virtual reality within a normal physical reality.

Hyper-world is a consistent and coherent blend of a real (physical) world and a virtual world. While a real world consists of real and natural things and objects, i.e. whatever is atomically present in a set, being describable as such, as it stands, a virtual world is whatever is present in a set as bits of information generated by a computer. A virtual world consists of images of reality captured by a photographic camera, which are then visually recognized by the computer and later reproduced by computer and transmitted by technological devices in virtual reality (Terashima, 2005, p. 8), being recognized as such, i.e. being recognized as distinct from reality itself.

A field of co-action or joint action “provides a common site for objects and inhabitants derived from physical reality and virtual reality and serves as a workplace or an activity area within which they interact” (Terashima, 2005, p. 9). The co-action field provides the means of communication (which includes words, gestures, body orientation and movement, sounds and touches) for its inhabitants to interact in joint activities as playing games. The behaviours of people and the aspects of the objects involved in the field

conform to the laws (natural – physics, chemistry, biology – and human) shared that govern the same elements in the reality, which reveals realism. In this perspective, a field of co-action or joint action is defined by the set of a field or place of interaction, real or virtual inhabitants (more than one), means of communication, knowledge (a system with purposes where the elements function according to the achievement of objectives), laws and controls (Terashima, 2005, p. 9). A field is the place of interaction and serves as a purpose for co-action; it is a system with defined limits and known rules.

Hyperreality is distinct from virtual reality. Although hyperreality includes virtual reality, both are increasingly difficult to be distinguished. It is even difficult to distinguish the virtual from the real. For example, real images without filters versus manipulated images of the newsmagazine's covers, like the case of the *Vanity Fair* where Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon have extra limbs, reported as "apparent editing errors" by *The Guardian* on January 26th, 2018.

Another case is the recurring propaganda of North Korea in producing simulacra through the strategic manipulation of images. In May 2015, it becomes paradigmatic the broadcasting of false images made by North Korea, which showed the launch of a submarine missile to show the technological progress achieved by this country. Before that, in 2008, North Korea manipulated Iranian missile-launch test images, but these were considered digitally manipulated. In 2017, North Korea's official television broadcast a video that simulates a US missile strike during a state event commemorating Kim Il-Sung's birthday. The false images (known as such) were displayed with pomp and circumstance at the ceremony and were celebrated with apotheosis as if they were real images.

The development of digital photography has brought numerous cases of manipulation of images that are disseminated, including in the media, as reproductions of events that did not happen. This is the case of an image of Canadarm 2, a remote-control mechanical arm of the international space station. The image, released in 2014, was digitally retouched to appear the Canadian government symbol.

"We already live in a mixture of the real and the virtual", argues Tiffin (2005, p. 32), but "the virtual realities generated outside ourselves are normally separated from our physical

surroundings by some kind of frame". Therefore, "the long-term goal of hyperreality research, however, is that the frames will disappear, and we will cease to be conscious of any seams between the virtual and the real" (Tiffin, 2005, p. 32).

Hyperreality is a technological paradigm. Indeed, hyperreality is associated with the development of technology and it implies such profound transformations, i.e. it invites us to reflect on what is (what is its nature and what are its characteristics) and on how will be in the future (we don't know what its final form will be nor the size). The technique always brings a new way of thinking about it. "*Technê* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poetic", argues Heidegger (1977, p. 13). *Technê* is part of the "production", the *poiesis*. Each new medium is a poetic or "pro-ductive" technique of communication and, bringing new procedures and new ways of being in the world, it invites reflection.

Hyperreality is also the age of new social relations in a virtual world. "The industrial society has been profoundly shaped by mass media, where the one to many modes of communication encourages a view of people as a mass audience" (Tiffin & Terashima, 2005, p. 146). Accordingly, hyperreality would appear to give primacy to the communication of the self, contributing to form a selfish society.

Considering that the real world and the virtual world present themselves seamless, i.e. diluted into one another, unified, Cartesian doubts about the self, the cogito and the perception of reality are relevant again in contemporary societies, because the knowledge of individual existence is the only reality in which one can have confidence (Tiffin & Terashima, 2005, p. 146). People tend to change their appearance to impress others. However, if the physical world places limitations to these modifications of appearance (if one cannot change age, weight, body measurements or gender), the virtual world allows all such modifications (Tiffin & Terashima, 2005, p. 146). Therefore, hyperreality emerges as a supreme technology for self-realization.

3. Signs of hyperreality: when the virtual is real

In April 2017, the image of the top model Gisele Bündchen was projected at the Empire State Building. It was a promotional action to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the American magazine *Harper's Bazaar*. The Empire State Building symbolizes America's technological prowess and economic strength. However, in this promotional strategy, the building loses its identity and symbolism of North American culture and financial power to become a means to project the ephemeral and immediate values and the content of Harper's Bazaar magazine: fashion, beauty, celebrity, modern lifestyle (image, looks, vanity, appearance, ostentation, etc.).

This is a paradigmatic case of modernity as a process of secularization of values, ideals, and principles, which is indicative of a change in social and cultural lifestyles. This case reminds another one occurred in 1999: the projection of an image of a sexy woman on the facade of the London Parliament, during a successful guerrilla advertising campaign for the male magazine *FHM*.

What are the similar and interesting aspects of these two cases? The similar and interesting aspects are: a) the use of images to symbolize what is considered important to contemporary cultures (fashion, beauty, celebrity, modern lifestyle); b) impertinent appeals to the consumer; c) unprecedented, inappropriate or improbable spaces or places to make consumerist appeals (places where most serious economic, business, and political issues are discussed than the appearance of a sexy body issue).

Today, images are not just likenesses, but also models, according to Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 27), and we "flee into images in order to be better, more beautiful, and more alive". "The digital medium is bringing about an iconic reversal that is making images seem more alive, more beautiful, and better than reality itself" (Han, 2017, p. 27). On the one hand, reality strikes us as defective, argues Byung-Chul Han, on the other hand, "we are now producing images in enormous quantity by means of digital media", which means that i) we are producing more spectacle; ii) we are more and more familiar with the profusion of images (including shock images); and iii) we are living according these images, i.e. imitating them.

Since these are two large projected images, have we the chance to not see them? Can we refuse to see them? The use of these images is strategic and, as such, it aims to

condition and to determine both our collective perception and thinking. Baudrillard (2005, p. 93) recognizes this situation as a violence of the image that rests in the hegemony and the omnipresence of the image (that is, it is in the excess of the image itself, in the plethora), as well as in the contents of the images (that is, it is in what is made in the image, in what is shown through the image).

For Baudrillard (2005, p. 93), the image is an operator or the medium of visibility, i.e. of an integral visibility/reality: “becoming-real going hand in hand with becoming-visible” and “everything must be seen, everything must be visible, and the image is pre-eminently the site of this visibility”.

The visual effects of the images are violent because these effects create illusions and “distort” the real. Images make the real disappear. The imperative of modern massification is that everything must be visible; everything must be seen, and the image is the means par excellence for this absolute visibility. It is a dictatorship of the image. Paradoxically, the image makes everything visible and it is the means responsible for the disappearance of reality.

It is in this perspective that Baudrillard refers to the end of the social. In his work *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities – Or the End of the Social*, Baudrillard identifies this collective demand for new forms of expression which culminates in the end or death of the social (the social emptiness) and, by contrast, in the apogee of the masses. According to Baudrillard (1983, p. 10), “the masses scandalously resist this imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle”.

Baudrillard refers to an apocalyptic perspective on the image. In modern societies, where simulation is the central element for Baudrillard, the media are responsible for the unbridled production of signs that no longer have a relation to reality; the media create a kind of other reality or a hyperreality. What is understood as hyperreal is produced with the claim of being more real than reality itself, which is no longer reality. Baudrillard demonstrates that the reality is supplanted or concealed by the imitation of the image, which is always new and more complete and therefore more interesting and captivating for the mass popular and visual culture.

This is the hyperreality, which is everywhere. According to Baudrillard, the world becomes a hyperreal world of simulacra, in which images (and the spectacles of the images, for Debord) replace the concepts of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary societies. Baudrillard (1994, p. 1) argues that today “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance”; on the contrary, “it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”. Inspired by Jorge Luís Borges’ story of the map, Baudrillard points out the map as an analogy of simulacra. That means “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it”; “it is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).

A hologram (an intermediate photograph containing information for reproducing a three-dimensional image by holography) is a perfect example of the hyperreality. For Baudrillard, it has no need of imaginary mediation in order to reproduce itself and to represent what it represents. A holographic reproduction is “no longer real, is already hyperreal”; “not an exact, but a transgressive truth, that is to say already on the other side of the truth (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 108). In this perspective, “Baudrillard has effectively inverted Leibniz by proposing that the latter’s question ‘Why is there something instead of nothing?’ has become ‘Why is there nothing instead of something?’” (Stolze, 2006, p. 91). The hyperreal replaces the real, i.e. the immanent and contingent replaces the substantial and necessary.

In *America*, Baudrillard uses the term hyperreality to describe how our perception of the world is increasingly dependent on simulations of reality as we become an information society. Baudrillard’s perspective is based on the use of signs of hyperreality. It is understandable if we recognize the “tendency for signs to break loose from their referential moorings, to fly free of cognitive meaning and take on a hyper-life of their own that is more real than reality and hence hyperreal” (Tiffin, 2005, p. 41).

For Baudrillard, America is the perfect simulacrum of immanence and material transcription of all values. America, as Baudrillard (1988a, p. 28) says, is neither a dream nor a reality, it is a hyperreality, because it is a utopia always lived as accomplished, in which everything is paradoxically real and utopian. In this perspective, hyperreality is indistinct from reality, from image (as a sign representing reality) and from sensation of

appearance in the forms of simulation: “Today, the entire system is fluctuating in indeterminacy, all of the reality absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation” (Baudrillard, 1988b, p. 120). This indeterminacy is reshaped by deep social transformations, whose modalities are hyperreality and simulation. For Baudrillard, what regulates social life today is a principle of simulation, and not of reality.

3.1. The virtual and the problem of what is not the truth

The problem of truth (the problem of questioning and observing the truth or what the truth is) is the problem of the virtual. The concepts of virtual and truth are related; both refer to the distinction between what is the case (truth, real, factual or actual) and what is not the case (appearance, fiction, false, unreal or illusion). If virtual is an illusion, such illusion is provoked by the medium and it resides in the capacity of virtualization produced by the medium. The capacity of the medium to create an illusion is a process of virtualization. But the virtual is not, as Baudrillard (2005, p. 83) explains, “the last word”; it is merely “the virtual illusion, the illusion of the virtual”.

From the traditional systems and models of communication and mediation to the modern digital forms of communication and mediation, there is the appearance of narrative artefacts and models of communication and mediation; narrative and interactive virtual environments, with the consequent expansion of artificial memory in the cyberspace and more interactivity, sharing and immersion; new levels of virtual and interactive representation and narration. It is in this sense that Baudrillard (2005, p. 31) considers immersion, immanence, and immediacy as the characteristics of the virtual.

Let us remember the case of Zilla van der Born, a 25-year-old graphic designer who, fascinated by the possibility and danger of manipulated images, hid out in her apartment for five weeks in 2014, while she was posting on the internet, telling everyone she knew (even her parents) that she was jetting around Southeast Asia. According to *The Washington Post* (September 12, 2014), the artist used the social media and Photoshop to develop a project on the malleability of truth online, attempting to answer the question “What is the reality?”

Zilla van der Born argues on her Web site that we live in a visual culture in which mediated information and reality are intertwined. The artist admits that what intrigues her is that a photo has an insidious, ambiguous relationship with reality, because there is a constant battle going on between two photographic considerations: making the photographed object as beautiful as possible and telling the truth. The result is that a picture never shows the exact situation as it really was, it is “a flavoured version of the truth”. People always look for perfect, beautiful, and spectacular pictures (particularly selfies), using many filters to make these pictures look more perfect, beautiful, and spectacular before showing them on social media. Doing this, people are creating hyperreality and living in it as a sort of ideal world online, which is false, distorted and has nothing to do with reality.

3.2. Hyperreality, spectacle, and simulation

Will our sense of the Self be affected by the result of this cloning if we can infinitely clone our self in a perfect way as we prefer in hyperreality? Is hyperreality different from reality? Is it distinct or not from the image and from all representative signs of reality, as well as from the sensation of appearance in the forms of simulation? Considering that any representation is carried out through signs and, therefore, presuppose referents (existent referents or non-existent/fictional referents), how does the psychological effect of derealization of the real take place? How do the images create structures or forms of signification that exceed or invert the representative and distinctive proportionality between the real and the unreal? Or, as Baudrillard (2005, p. 78) asks: What are we doing with an interactive world in which the line of demarcation between subject and object is virtually abolished?

Baudrillard understands that hyperreality is indistinguishable from reality, from images (i.e., from the representative signs of reality) and from the sensation of appearance in the forms of simulation. However, if Baudrillard shows that the reality is supplanted or retracted by the imitation that is always new and more complete and consequently more interesting for mass culture, Umberto Eco, who also understands the indistinction between reality and hyperreality, insists on the criticism of mass culture and spectacle, as Guy Debord originally presented in 1967, in his work *The Society of the Spectacle*.

From the assumptions of a critical theory of mass culture and social spectacle of images, Umberto Eco analyses the effects of an iconolatry (or semiocracy, in general) on the processes of language and cognition, which distorts the real with the artificial, the apparent and the virtual, i.e. with the strategic production of images and products of an entertainment cultural industry. Umberto Eco presents *Faith in Fakes - Travels in Hyperreality* as a critical essay on contemporary culture. A visual, tautological and hyperbolic culture, which is essential for the creation of perceptions of appearance, fostering the production of signs as a support for virtualization of reality or hyperreality (Eco, 1998, p. 19). Umberto Eco “invoke what he understands as those culturally specific situations in which the copy comes first” (Perry, 1998, p. xiii). Hyperreality is the false exponent in which imitations not only reproduce reality, but also try to improve it.

There are museums that function as ways of providing the experience of another oneiric or fictional reality, one that reality itself does not satisfy. Is this fiction? The dream is desire, it is what one would like to have, but don't have it; reality is what arouses the dream as a form of evasion of reality itself.

For Umberto Eco, the best example of hyperreality is the Disneyland, a place where the fake is produced by the technological development and it is admired, since it gives us more reality than nature, i.e. “the hyperreal is that which is more real than real, the copy which is more perfect than the original” (Perry, 1998, p. 42).

In *Faith in Fakes - Travels in Hyperreality* and in *America*, Umberto Eco and Baudrillard, respectively, use the term hyperreality to describe how our perception of the world is increasingly dependent on simulacra of reality, as we have become a communicational, technological and hyperreal society. Umberto Eco and Baudrillard recognize the building of a kind of semiocracy (an empire of prepotent, massive and influential signs that impose a certain way of seeing, thinking, feeling, acting or just meaning and interpreting the world). Hyperreality is made up of signs and it serves as an escape or detachment from referentiality. Therefore, signs escape from referential moorings to create predetermined and coined meanings, transforming the real.

The representation of social simulation is carried out through spectacle-images, such as those of advertising billboards, relating ideology and appearance or false consciousness.

As per Debord, “the spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (1995, p. 23). In this perspective, Debord’s theses on the spectacle as an ideological discourse, namely the spectacle as the fabrication of alienation, the spectacle as accumulated capital that becomes an image and the spectacle as language itself, according to Agamben.

Modern societies are systems of spectacle and they result from a culture of the image where visibility is prevalent. If there is visibility it is because there are images and if there are images there must exist perception and interpretation of a given reality represented in the image. Modernity is an age of hegemony and arrogance of images that always and necessarily represent something. There is an iconolatry or the splendour of the image. The images of the world provided by the media, according to Gianni Vattimo’s *The Transparent Society* (1992), constitute the proper objectivity of the world, and not just different interpretations of a given reality in some way.

The iconolatry is a sort of splendour of images, a modern social cult which is duly emphasized by Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*: “the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles”, which represents a “concrete inversion of life” and the “autonomous movement of non-life” (1995, p. 12). This view is subscribed by Deleuze (1997, p. 21), for whom “it is a civilization of the cliché where all the powers have an interest in hiding images from us, not necessarily in hiding the same thing from us, but in hiding something in the image”. The civilization of the image or the civilization of the cliché is the civilization of iconic inflation that rests on redundancy, concealment, distortion, manipulation.

The representation of sociability is simulated through images and it is also blessed with the spectacle conveyed by images either in form or content, becoming ideological discourses. The impoverishment of experience is identified in the excitement provoked by the spectacle. The spectacle, in turn, comes from the technicization of experience, from the excessive production of images that result in the formation of simulations. These are the main points argue by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, which correspond to the idea of the non-experience of Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, when he mentions the “concrete inversion of life” and the “autonomous movement of non-life”.

Debord demonstrates a reactionary and critical character, inciting a fight against the spectacular and consumerist perversion of modern life and cultural imperialism, which prefers the image and the representation rather than the concrete and natural realism. In the society of the spectacle, the real world becomes simple images that, in turn, paradoxically become reality. In the society of spectacle criticized by Debord, the image is more important than reality, objects and truth. This thesis confronts what happens in contemporary societies and reveals its actuality and adequacy. Today, images dismiss truth and reality. The more spectacular the images are, the more they achieve this perverse effect in visual cultures.

What is the spectacle? The spectacle is the fetishism produced in contemporary society. However, it is not necessary for technical and scientific development nor should we accept the easy and tempting fallacy according to which something is true because it is technological. For Debord, the spectacle is the ideological discourse of certain interests and social orders, i.e. it is the discourse of society. It is a tautological, empty, hyperbolic discourse; it is a laudatory monologue, a self-portrait of the current or established power (the *status quo*).

In this sense, Debord (1995, p. 12) points out that societies are an accumulation of spectacle and the lived and the experience lose authenticity in the representation. For Debord, the spectacle is the inversion of life, like the Marx and Engels (1998, p. 42) concept of ideology appearing upside-down as in a camera obscura. The spectacle is the “autonomous movement of non-life” (Debord, 1995, p. 12), because it does not consist in an authentic experience; it is merely intermediation or representation (Debord, 1995, p. 12).

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord denounces the omnipresence of the media and its images. By overexposing the image, the media falsify the real experimentation of the world by individuals (spectators and passive consumers of images). It is, according to Debord, the alienation of the spectator facing the object contemplated (which is the result of his own unconscious activity). The more the spectator contemplates, the less he lives; the more the spectator accepts to recognize himself in the dominant images of the consumerist necessity, the less he understands his own life and his own desires.

Corroborating Debord, in a photograph taken by John Blanding (*The Boston Globe*, September 15, 2015) a crowd watches the cast of *Black Mass* movie visiting the Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline. The crowd are not living authentically the reality nor enjoying the special and unique moment, because they are distracted in capturing the moment, registering it for an un-lived life of hyperreality. It is the spectacle as the “autonomous movement of non-life” that Debord argues (1995, p. 12).

The exteriority of the spectacle has effects on man, since his own gestures are no longer his own. Therefore, the spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

Paradoxically, society becomes what it is not: the spectacle transforms society and becomes society itself. “The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification” (Debord, 1995, p. 12). The problem of spectacle is to be a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. The spectacle is not a simple collection of images. Human relations cease to be based on pure and direct experience and are mediated by the images of spectacle. In addition to social relations, perception and perspective on reality also change due to the intermediation and spectacle of images.

The spectacle presents itself in human experience as a particular and dominant model of life and social relation. The spectacle inverts the real because it is produced so that the lived reality ends materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle. “In a world that really has been turned on its head, the truth is a moment of falsehood” (Debord, 1995, p. 14). The conclusion is what Debord (1992, p. 15) calls the “monopolization of the realm of appearances”. The spectacle is “essentially tautological”, according to Debord, because its means and its ends are identical.

The spectacle is “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image”, argues Debord (1995, p. 24). The spectacle has roots in economics: “The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the product of that field which must, in the end, come to dominate the spectacular market” (Debord, 1995, p. 37). The spectacle is an octopus whose tentacles are extended to all domains of life, altering the human

experience in society, which becomes alienated by the ideology produced by the spectacle. “Ideology was no longer a weapon, but an end in itself [...] The ideology that took on material form in this context did not transform the world economically, as capitalism in its affluent stage has done; it succeeded only in using police methods to transform perception” (Debord, 1995, p. 73).

Etymologically, the word respect means “looking back”, but looking with distance, i.e. a distanced look, “the *pathos* of distance”, according to Byung-Chul Han. In his book *In the Swarm – Digital Prospects*, Han (2017, p. 1) argues that “today, it is yielding to the obtrusive staring of the spectacle”. *Spectare*, from which spectacle arises, “is voyeuristic gazing that lacks deferential consideration – that is, respect”, because “distance is what makes *respectare* different from *spectare*”. Therefore, “a society without respect “paves the way for the society of scandal” (Han, 2017, p. 1).

4. Conclusion

Contemporaneity is more and more visual, technological, hyperreal, and it seems increasingly more real than reality itself. The technological development is a dominant phenomenon of our contemporaneity. Technology brings new communication devices and new ways to use these devices anywhere and anytime. Therefore, it is more and more difficult to see, think, feel, act, mean and interpret the real, on the one hand, and to understand of whom and of what are we contemporaries, on the other hand. For this reason, Baudrillard argues that the simulacra are ahead of us everywhere; simulacra do not conceal the truth, it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The contemporary world is increasingly hyperreal, full of simulacra and meanings, and for this reason the world is delusional. If the world is delusional, people misunderstand the world, what the world and things really are or what exists.

Hyperreality prevails in this contemporaneity we live today, and it is made up of signs (especially virtual images created by computer). Hyperreality forces us to escape or paradoxically disconnect from time, space, reality and referentiality. It just changes our contemporaneity, our relationship with time and our existence and meanings in the world,

transforming reality or, at least, our collective way to see, think, feel, act, mean and interpret the reality and the world.

Images are representations through which what is represented is or (at least) seems more present in its symbol than in the immediate reality. It is like a symbolic social construction of reality, considering that our social reality is permanently under-construction. Simulating reality within artificial (virtual, digital) *media* presupposes that we are simply reproducing or creating signs that communicate, but whose referents do not actually exist, and we must be aware of its realistic aspect of the image. But the main question is how appearance emerges out of reality and how we can distinguish and be aware of them (appearance and reality).

Language amplifies the reality; it creates possible worlds and replaces whatever is real by the fictional. Language is the *praxis* of the *logos* and *poiesis*, a transformational action of reality through a dialectical unit called *logopoiesis*, a form of production of the possible using signs and representation.

In a contemporary and global age where communication emerges as a paradigm of virtual hyperreality and worlds, incommunicability is paradoxically manifested. The transition of plans between the lived and the thought is only possible through the symbolic, which is inherent to human experiences and interrelationships. The symbolic organizes and constructs the experience, making it thinkable and communicable. The human experience (which is an experience of adaptation to the contemporary hyper-environment, hyper-action and hyper-interaction) is necessarily symbolic. If to undergo an experience with something means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us, as Heidegger points out in *On The Way To Language*, to go through a virtual and digital experience in the hyperreality is much more to be struck by what happens or comes; it is much more changeable. In this transformation, one is passive and object of experience, because one receives from the experience what reaches and submits him.

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