

Simulacrum and Doublethink

Baudrillard, Orwell and The Image

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Media messages and images fill every day in our post-industrialized world. The number of television screens, newspapers and computer monitors each person views in his or her daily affairs is continually increasing and makes the impact of viewing these images inescapable. The measure of social participation is increasingly based on the number of media issues, or images, with which the individual is familiar. Everything from political awareness and participation to social “water cooler” discourse focuses more and more on areas of recent media attention. Is the media simply reflecting the collective consciousness of the masses, or is mass consciousness the reflection of media imagery?

If the latter is true, then what constitutes the basis of media image reality? Where does the image come from? Whose perspective does it convey and does it serve a particular set of interests? What constituted reality before the image, and how did the change come about? These are

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questions addressed by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* wherein he develops what he calls “the precession of the simulacrum.”¹ The essence of this book is Baudrillard’s description of the process by which the reality contained within media images is transplanted and continually reproduced as the social perception of reality. The most condensed description Baudrillard provides of the progression of the image is the following:

In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance – representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance – it is the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.²

This concept of transplanted realities of artifice does not begin with Baudrillard and is perhaps characterised best, or at least most dramatically, much earlier in the novel *1984*, first published in 1949 by George Orwell. The story tells of a world gone mad, a world in which the word of a dictator is the sole source of reality and history ultimately becomes the continually modified fairytale existence of a flawless and enduring political regime. History and its shaky relation to reality are the central focus in the novel.³ The following discourse on the history of Oceania will serve to outline and exemplify the Baudrillardian progression of simulacrum.

The progression of an image as described by Baudrillard is a process of inception, rise, institutionalization and reproduction. This same progression occurs in *1984*. First and fundamentally, the history of Oceania begins with a tale of revolution and war, both domestic and foreign. It is a time of immense strife and suffering with insufficient leadership or direction, a time without Big Brother, the saviour who brings order to the chaos. Big Brother appears as a man, an icon, an image whose mere presence promises deliverance from hardship. One can imagine the rhetoric used to ingratiate the image of Big Brother. The simultaneous encapsulation of the problem, the current social order, and the solution – all combine in Big Brother. This is Baudrillard’s first stage in the progression of the simulacrum: the media – the image – reflects a profound reality. Big Brother presents himself as a link to the restoration of the order lacking in society, a representation of the *sacramental order*. Big Brother’s legitimacy arises from an association with the past and its perceived grandeur. But nonetheless he is legitimate; he has gained a toe-

hold on the mass consciousness. Without the strife of the past there would be no need for Big Brother's presence in the future. And presumably there would be no need of a saviour if there were nothing to be saved from. This leads to Baudrillard's next stage and to Big Brother's new campaign.

Once reflected, the media image moves to de-nature a profound reality in accord with Baudrillard's model. A similar process occurs in the campaigns of Big Brother. For once installed as leader and with order restored to Oceania, Big Brother's promises are fulfilled and there is no longer any need for him. A new threat, a new enemy must be found if he is to sustain his role and his authority. For Oceania this new threat is the external conflicts raging since the time of Big Brother's inception.

The geopolitical world of Orwell's novel consists of three emergent superpowers: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Big Brother and Oceania stand allied with Eastasia against the Eurasian hordes. This war is the focus of all social and economic production, regardless of the fact that its battlefronts are far from any civilized area and beyond the perception of those supporting it, thus making perception or confirmation of the situation impossible. Nonetheless, the socialization and education of children and the production of everything from boots to chocolate are geared towards the most effective wartime production. Constant updates on the war effort are delivered in Big Brother's voice across a mass televised distribution system integrated into every individual's home and work environment. The messages are uni-focused and ever-present; they sound the glory of Big Brother's administration, the accomplishments of society and the evils of the enemy. These evils of the enemy are emphasised to the point of frenzy in the daily "hates" in which individuals collectively gather around a screen depicting demonic imagery of foreign soldiers with Asiatic features committing atrocities and destroying the very fabric of security and order. This propaganda is consumed voraciously by the collected masses who are encouraged to lash out verbally and physically at the images of the enemy. In so doing they focus on their own internal hatreds and cement their personal identities with those of the greater social mass. The image of the enemy — and indeed all that does not come from Big Brother's benevolence — is de-natured and distorted to an unrecognisable collaboration of all that is undesirable and offensive. But it is the profound reality that two nations at war represent two opposing views in conflict that is truly being de-natured. Such a profound reality would suggest that a war contains two groups of

humans fighting one another, but in the de-natured reality of Oceania, there is simply humanity vs. the hoard which is evil in its *maleficence*.

How, one might ask, do the citizens of Oceania fail to realize this distorted and de-natured reality with which they are presented? Rationality would suggest that some would question the nature of what they have been told. Baudrillard has an answer to that with his third stage in the progression in which the absence of a profound reality is masked. The mechanism used by Big Brother in Oceania is a common technique amongst performing magicians. Distraction, it seems, is all that is necessary to divert the rational consciousness of the masses by means of an act of societal *sorcery*.

This societal sorcery in *1984* derives from the basic social structure of Oceania. The citizens all have appointed positions reflecting their varied skills. Those with literary skills compose the literature of Big Brother and the party, and those with mechanical inclination print it. Everyone has a function and a job to perform. Even if it the work is redundant and arbitrary, it must be performed. Beyond work, involvement in outside organizations and organized recreational activities with other party members – all supporting the party line – is encouraged to the point of obligation. Any time not spent participating in party rhetoric is strictly limited. Consequently, citizens are not permitted more than a minimum of solitary or personal time under threat of death. In addition to occupying individuals' time, their behaviours and thoughts are also influenced by the ongoing trivialities of every day life and existence. Chocolate rations are reduced or increased, boots and razor blades are in short supply, but fortunately there is always plenty of victory gin to compensate. The result is a society with little time or energy to question the status quo. Like the legendary sorcerer who fears the ability of his assistant to overthrow him, Big Brother prefers assistants who are adept at eating and fighting, but not reading and writing, and thus chooses those who are incapable of understanding his practices. Throughout, the external threat of the hoard is made powerful and real by occasional rocket attacks on London. These attacks are accepted as day-to-day events and are undisturbed by the reality that all Eurasian zones of engagement are beyond the ballistic capabilities of these rockets.

This is a dark account of Oceania's history, at least from the perspective of a reader of Orwell. But to the citizens of Oceania it is the only reality, neither dark nor questionable; it simply *is*. The history of Oceania tells a story of what was and why it was so, and although it may seem unacceptable from outside, it is the nature of reality for Oceania

and it is consistent. No part of the history of Oceania is incongruent with individuals' perceptions of reality in the present. Oceania has always been allied with Eastasia and at war with Eurasia; Big Brother has always been the leader; there will always be a war effort. Such is the nature of the world with history supporting it. Of course this is the ultimate insight of Orwell's classic: that history as it actually was can be distinct from history as recorded. Winston Smith, the hero in *1984*, somehow manages to suspect that the concocted reality is wrong, and by seeing through his eyes we gain the realization that history does not necessarily support profound reality. Smith begins to perceive that events may not have occurred as they have been recorded. Oceania is not allied with Eastasia, but is, in fact, now at war with them and allied with Eurasia. And there was once a time before the war and before Big Brother. None of this matters though, because history is now a product of the present and not a description of its origins. Reality is not profound; it is simply a *simulation* of something profound.

This is Baudrillard's final stage in which the media, the image, no longer has any relation to reality, having become "its own pure simulacrum."⁴ That is, the image has become a simulation of reality based on a record of an account of a profound reality. This simulated reality is the only reality which is perceivable to the minds of Oceania individuals because their social reality is built exclusively on the words of Big Brother and his history. Any reality not so perceived would be incongruous and internally inconsistent. Ultimately, even if Big Brother were not always in power and if the war were not as perceived, the account of history and the word of Big Brother would still be true because the profound reality of Oceania holds Big Brother at its core, thus making fact and fiction paradoxically the same truth. Simulation is both the beginning and end of Oceania's concepts of reality, endlessly reproducing itself in different forms as history is rewritten to conform to the will of Big Brother.

The nature of the education received by the citizens of Oceania speaks to this simulation effect. The concept of "doublethink" is the mental conditioning of the population to accept and support two opposite truths simultaneously. The epitome of doublethink is the concept of blackwhite, two mutually exclusive concepts which, due to the simulacrum of reality, come to accurately define the world. They may mean different things, but this combination of opposing meanings is what has come to describe most accurately the nature of reality. It may be that in order to comprehend such a reality, one must be able to claim that when

an opponent says black is white, they are obviously in conflict with plain fact. But when an ally says the same, they are not and that response is as accurate now as it has ever been. One must be able to change not only an opinion but also an attitude as well as the memory that the answer could be anything different. Ultimately, whether one believes in Big Brother or not results in the same support of him because he is the image from which the simulation is produced.

Perhaps a closer look at Orwell's protagonist, Winston Smith, and his struggle against Big Brother can clarify and expand on this paradoxical reality. Winston Smith follows a long and incremental path in the pursuit of disconformities in the social reality of Oceania. Initially he begins by thinking along unconventional lines, questioning what are presented as objective facts. Eventually he writes all his thoughts and concerns over the reality of his situation in a journal. Then he progresses to a forbidden personal and sexual interaction with a woman of similar dissenting notions. Together they join "the resistance movement" which officially does not exist and yet is the subject of official attention, particularly during the daily "hates." All the while Winston Smith knows that his actions can and most likely will result in his apprehension, torture and eventual death, yet he pursues this path out of some need to discover the truth of reality and to bring that truth to the social consciousness. As he expects, he is incarcerated, questioned and tortured. The leader of the resistance, a man named O'Brien, is revealed to be an agent of Big Brother and all his subversive efforts have been, in fact, merely another system of control for extending the simulated reality of Big Brother. The resistance, it turns out, is just a means of identifying, isolating and controlling individuals who fail to accept the created reality, history, double-think and Big Brother himself, all of which comprise the image on which reality is based. Regardless of his actions, affiliations or beliefs Smith is a subject of Big Brother and cannot be less because Big Brother is reality. Baudrillard paints this same picture with different subjects in his discourse on *the Implosion of Meaning in the Media*:

We are face to face with this system in a double situation and insoluble double bind - exactly like children face with the demands of the adult world. Children are simultaneously required to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive, inert, obedient, conforming objects. The child resists on all levels, and to

a contradictory demand he responds with a double strategy ... Neither strategy has more objective value than the other.⁵

Smith, like the children of Baudrillard's example, faces a double bind. He must on the one hand be a productive, participating member of society and the party while at the same time remain true to his own convictions about the nature of reality and society. His actions, however, in pursuing these goals are in mutual opposition. If he is a good party member he will not only think things are as they should be, but he will believe it to his core. But he does not believe; he questions what he is told is true because it conflicts with what he knows to be true. And yet whether he chooses to conform and to believe in the truth of doublethink, maintaining that black is white and always has been, or if he chooses to pursue the rebellious path of resistance and proclaim even to himself that black is not white and never was, he is nonetheless confined to the reality in which he finds himself. This reality is that of Big Brother in which all action operates in the service of the party. Whether he supports O'Brien or Big Brother, the result is the same; "neither strategy has any more objective reality than the other." In the end Winston Smith loves Big Brother.

What does this say about our own "real world" society? Perhaps we are not so naive, so influenced by the image, as to accept the total recreation of history. But is there really so great a divide between a society focused on only one all-encompassing issue, the hoard, and one which moves through a list of popular discourses handed down by the network programmer? Could the way we perceive events, their implications and their interactions, many of which are beyond our physical environment and our ability to corroborate, really represent an understanding of a profound reality, given their origins elsewhere, recorded and transmitted by others? If one hates terrorism and terrorists, can one consider the logical assumption that terrorist action is motivated by a different set of beliefs? Or is terrorism merely perceived as an attack on freedom and order? Do terrorist hate our freedom, or do they simply value their own? Do we value our freedom or simply fear theirs? Is our freedom truly our own, and if not, whose is it? Is black really black or white, white? Can we even know? Baudrillard might answer in the negative if media images so dominate our perceptions that reality is nothing more than a simulation. In the final analysis, is simulated reality, reality nonetheless?

Notes

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1995), 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ George Orwell, *1984*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-5.