Standards and reality in the media and advertising discourse: a structure of dissatisfaction and renewal

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Résumé: Le discours des médias et des publicités a depuis longtemps été rendu responsable d'altérer la perception de la réalité. Le discours médiatique et publicitaire tient sa force du *signe* qui prédomine sur l'authenticité: les images ne sont pas jugées en fonction de leur authenticité mais de leurs *valeurs-signes*. La reconstruction du réel devient ainsi omniprésente et plus réelle que la réalité elle-même. Les médias et les publicités prétendent nous faire vivre une réalité sans renoncer au *principe de plaisir* ni à la satisfaction de nos désirs. Mais le discours des médias et des publicités est soumis à une condition terrible: il est sans cesse détruit et reconstruit. Il faut pour séduire apporter de nouvelles formes de satisfaction toujours plus grandes.

Mots clés: réalité, signe, langue, médias, publicité.

The cinema, television, advertising, and the media in general have long been held responsible for altering our vision of reality. This distortion is often seen as a crack between two worlds: that of the audiovisual media (of moving images), and that of reality.

One might retrace its historical origin to the film *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*), directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière. As we know, when the film was

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first screened, the audience ran away from the theatre to avoid being run over by the train pulling into the station. More recently, Christopher Nolan's movie *Inception*, released in 2010, has shown a host of characters lost in a simulation of reality created by their unconscious. From then on, they have no longer been able to distinguish reality from its replica.

One may consider that these films stem from real critiques and social debates about the media discourse and the distortion of reality. Daniel Boorstin[1], Umberto Eco[2] and Baudrillard[3] speak of a complete reversal, where the media discourse becomes more real that reality itself. What we have then is a *hyperreality.*

The observer evolves in a visual and auditory universe, where the reconstruction of reality is omnipresent. The media and advertising discourse makes up the landscape of our everyday society. Thus reality appears to us in a filtered, enhanced state; to such an extent that when an event escapes from this filtered reconstruction[4], we see it as unreal. Indeed, we have learnt from Boileau that what is real can sometimes appear unlikely: women seem more beautiful and desirable in magazines than in the street; we find actors more impressive on screen than in real life; the collapse of the World Trade Centre only truly became real after multiple broadcastings of images showing its crumbling to the ground.

Concerning this last example, we could ask ourselves if the true aim of the media might not be to inform, by the frenetic broadcasting of the same images and the paraphrasing of events that have escaped their « simulation » of reality, but rather to integrate these events as quickly as possible to their field of « simulation ».

[1] BOORSTIN, Daniel J., *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* [1961], Atheneum, New York, 1972.

[2] ECO, Umberto, *La guerre du faux*, Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris, 1985.

[3] BAUDRILLARD, Jean, *La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*, Galilée, Paris, 1991.

[4] Jean Baudrillard speaks of «simulation», in *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris, 1985.

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It is thus possible to understand Baudrillard, who went so far as to claim, in a disrupting way, that the Gulf War did not happen. The images brought back were so distorted and filtered that they kept us from realizing the true reality of this war.

1. Language and reality

We should mention that the media are censored in a similar fashion, whether the images on the screen are taken from the imagination or from reality. This lack of distinction led to a misunderstanding of the implicated film directors, which in turn gave rise to numerous protests from the censorship. In subjecting the imagination (images displayed as images of fiction) and reality (images claiming to be images of reality) to the same judgment, censorship has revealed that the link between *signs* and reality has been inverted: *signs* now prevail over authenticity. Images are no longer judged according to their authenticity, but to their *sign values*. Consumer goods have a *sign value*, which means that they indicate something about the owner, in the context of a social system. For instance, a Roman emperor wearing a laurel wreath uses it as a *sign* indicating that he is victorious and immortal, whereas in reality it bears no meaning whatsoever. As *sign values* become more and more frequent, the interaction is increasingly founded on things that have no intrinsic meaning. Reality becomes less and less important as the exchange of *signs* is on the rise.

Jean Baudrillard often borrowed from Borges the image of a society whose cartographers have created a map so detailed that that it covers the very things it was designed to represent[5].

In linguistics, this pattern has long been noticed. For Saussure, the *sign* is arbitrary, that is to say that it is unmotivated; in other words, the link between *signified* and *signifier* is arbitrary[6]. As soon as 1964, Lacan stated the inversion of *subject* and

[5] The text is attributed to Suarez Miranda in his *Viajes de Varones prudentes*, Libro Cuarto, cap. XLV, Lerida, 1968.

[6] SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de, *Cours de linguistique générale* [1916], Payot, Paris, 1995.

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signifier in the original unconscious constitution of the self; according to him, the *subject* now appears second, after the *signifier*. It is no more than a "*punctual and vanishing subject, as it is only a subject through a signifier and for another signifier*[7]". Thus the world glides on a multitude of images of itself. Replica has replaced reality.

2. More real than real, flirting with the absurd

With the loss of reality and the advent of its replicas, our ability to put events into perspective is put to the test. We only see as real that which we recognize in ourselves – and, as we have noticed, this is, from an external analysis, inherent to mistakes. But we shall see that the media and advertising discourse always creates its appeal in echo to our unconscious structures.

Beyond any analysis of the media discourse, we can comprehend the very structure of our unconscious: the desire to reach a reality which we are incapable of grasping entirely. It is possible for us, through the media and advertising discourse, to create a replica of reality that enables us to keep the *pleasure principle*[8]. This replica no longer requires us to relinquish our desires and drives, hallucinations and dreams. This simulation of reality in the advertising discourse is, in a way, an alternative to the *reality principle*[9], which only constraint is to build up our desires until they reach the absurd (or something that does not exist). Let us study this structure as it presents itself in our audiovisual environment.

We shall now turn to the observation of elements of our audiovisual landscape: the media and advertising discourse, but

[7] LACAN, Jacques, *Séminaire livre XX*, Seuil, Paris, 1975, p.129.

[8] Psychoanalytic concept. Mental function, which aim is the quest for pleasure. The pleasure principle stems from a primary process in which dream and hallucination enable the omnipotent realization of desires.

[9] Psychoanalytic concept. The reality principle corresponds to the progression of the pleasure principle, in adapting to the conditions of the exterior world and to reality.

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also the discourse that we perceive every day through the products that we consume.

A: Axe Re-Load, with revitalizing oxygen bubbles.

B: L'Oreal, Elsève Nutri-Gloss, with pearl protein. Light shampoo.

C: Ariel, pureness and softness, with milk cotton.

D: L'Oreal, Elvive, energy, with Citrus CR, keeps your hair cleaner longer.

All these products are made up of substances that do not exist, or are at least the result of a language treatment. Did Mark Twain not write: « They didn't know it was impossible, so they did it »?

The «revitalizing oxygen bubbles» (A) are nothing more than bubbles of air, and this vague impression of oxygen and energy is only due to the addition of Ammonium Laureth or Lauryl Sulfate and of Etidronic acid to the other components of the product. Pearls (B) have no proteins. As for cotton (C), it has never produced any milk. And it is to be feared that hair that is cleaner longer (D) is only a joke from the head of marketing that someone took seriously without his knowing it...

Something that does not exist in reality comes into existence through language and our interior reality or, should I say, our interior representations.

The global aim is to create an enhanced replica of reality. Marketing specialists rely on the psycho-physiological mechanisms and on the associations of *sign values* to replace the ONE reality by ANY simulated, deceptive reality. But this reality, created for commercial purposes, might become more real than reality itself, since the buyer thinks he is living and feeling what he is – simply – given to see and hear. The money spent on the product truly helps the unconscious to convince itself of it. We are in the exact extrapolation of the placebo. The placebo effect illustrates the influence of mental power over the body, i.e. psychosomatics, and in so doing complicates our evaluation of how efficient new pharmaceutical products are. To enter the market, a drug must prove that it is significantly more efficient than a

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placebo. Conversely, and by extrapolation, to enter the market, a product of our hyperreal environment must prove that it is significantly efficient in its placebo effect.

When something gets more real than real, it touches on the absurd. This should make us reflect on the words of René Char, who tells us that although we can never reach the impossible, it acts as our beacon[10]. In the context of the visual environment of our society, this "beacon" metaphor seems slightly awkward. The constant enticement and stimulation of our audiovisual environment leads us to place the impossible not among our ideals, but rather alongside our quest for pleasure. We aim to seek more and more pleasure. We want to reach this impossible, this state of satisfaction and of completeness, this perfection or, should we say, this «over-perfection», as it is regularly heightened with a new impossible, a new lack.

Newspapers regularly present us with models that have been altered by some graphic software or another. Those presented on the cover of a newspaper have been stretched out so as to reconstruct a lanky figure. In the advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent's *Opium*, the white skin of Sophie Dahl, granddaughter of the writer Roald Dahl, has been exaggerated to a heightened perfection by the photographers. Thus transformed, the model looks like a lifeless, slightly macabre doll. On a more erotic level, Aubade shows us the perfect buttocks of a model, touched up with a computer: thanks to this treatment, the skin is now perfectly smooth. The black and white image reinforces the impression of perfection which underlines shapes and light, to the detriment of colour. In the advertising campaign « dove for real beauty », we can see an ordinary woman transforming herself into a model. Under our very eyes, she has her hair done and her face made up. But the distortion of reality does not stop there: the computer stretches her neck, widens her eyes, and erases her shoulders. The resulting image has now nothing to do with the original one. Dove's advertisement goes against the general trend

[10] CHAR, René, *Recherche de la base et du sommet*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965.

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and criticizes the *hyperreality* which presents us with nonexistent, or even impossible, aesthetic criteria. Dove concludes the sequence with these words: «No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Take part in the Dove Real beauty workshops for girls». This company undoubtedly informs us that the reality we perceive is distorted, and that it is, in a way, inevitable. Dove claims it wants us to consume products untouched by the lie of *hyperreality*, thanks to a trusting relationship between consumer and firm.

3. Love and guilt

The media discourse is achieved through our desire for reality and our incapacity to comprehend it. Its paroxysm is to want to appear more real than reality. According to this analysis, reality TV, the media coverage of the war in Iraq, the staging of political debates, marketing, advertising or cinema, all depend on this desire. For Baudrillard, these phenomena are related to pornography: "*Pornography is the height of simulation*[11]". Its organic, mechanical close-up seems more real than real, whereas the reality of sex is absent, or elsewhere. Here lies the prime fascination for pornography and its strong metaphor for all culture.

The posters and visual landscape of our society illustrate what the audiovisual brings to life.

The environment, as well as the media and advertising discourse, describes impossible and nonexistent standards: all the posters shown have been digitally altered. If you want to improve enticement you must improve reality, i.e. recreate it from scratch. You have to affect our drives, and above all, our first experience of satisfaction. To lie and make us believe that this impossible is accessible. Even more pernicious, you have to show in reality that this impossible, this satisfaction is everywhere, that it is very real and close at hand, at the next crossroads.

We have established that this need for reality, which leads to the metaphor of pornography (as Baudrillard put it), applies not

[11] BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *De la séduction*, Galilée, Paris, 1979.

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only to things but also to ourselves. Or, more precisely, our selves also become «things» that convey *hyperreality*, as they are components of this very environment. *Hyperreality* accomplishes here a second masterstroke: it is no longer deficient as a replica, but the deficiency is to be found in us, in the original source.

We have no choice but to consume what it tells us to consume, as its whole structure is in fact only turned towards us (for us) and against us at the same time. It is for us, because it imposes the new standards of desire. And it is against us, because it judges us imperfect and undesirable (being the original source and not in accordance with its standards). *Hyperreality* leads us to become replicas ourselves.

From this love/hate ambivalence stems our dependence and our guilt. Love and guilt are two prerequisites pushing us to consume and renew the standards to consume.

Since the material or cultural consuming trends oppose each other according to the group they are linked to, the « more than more » only seems absurd to the groups we do not belong to. Some will find a blond dye with gold highlights absurd. Others will think the same of these larger than large trousers. Others will judge that science fiction and mainstream films are. But all these people will certainly agree on one point: respect for state-of-the-art plasma displays, or wide cinema screens, which convey their sense of belonging and set the standards of their enjoyment.

4. A never-ending revolution

Hyperreality is a continuous revolution relayed by audio-visual media, which in turn convey and guarantee its existence and survival. It enables us to experience the fulfilment of our desires, either through fantasy and imagination thanks to the media, or through the purchase and the consumption of products imposed by the advertising discourse. But *hyperreality* is subjected to a dreadful condition: it is endlessly destructed and reconstructed. This is due to its nature of renewed escalation. Seduction implies new forms of satisfaction, which are always greater. This entails a perpetual revolution in appliance with the

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standards that have been imposed on us: today's perfection must be tomorrow's deficiency. Obsolescence has been programmed in the short term, and it must win all – or lose all. Consumer companies use our responsiveness to enticement and satisfaction so as to maintain, through this revolution, unceasing mass consumption. The media and advertisement must innovate and renew trends as much as standards. Pleasure and satisfaction, as they have been presented today, must be outdistanced by a new lack and a new quest for pleasure, a new reality, which does not contradict the old one but which encompasses it; otherwise, *hyperreality* would no longer be in movement, but always stumble upon the same standards to impose on its devotees, before progressively losing its appeal and authority.

At this point of our reflexion, we could broaden our topic to the notions of creativity and innovation. Indeed, there is a huge paradox between the satisfaction of our desires and creation: something that has been satisfied is whole, and something that is whole is self-sufficient. How can something that is self-sufficient bring about the creation of new standards? It is precisely the incomplete nature of our beings and its unfulfilled state which is the very foundation of our desire. In a broader sense, it is what enables us to create. While the audiovisual imposes new standards of satisfaction to consume, it also destroys them so as to replace them by, so to speak, news standards of dissatisfaction. It is in this never-ending movement – a vicious circle or headlong rush, whatever the metaphor – that the media and advertising discourse brings about our desire for satisfaction.

As soon as we are satisfied, we are dissatisfied: such are the laws of the media and advertising discourse

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