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Hyperreality as an Instrument
of Mass Communication

In the dialogue, *Republic*, Plato expounded metaphorically on the core of his philosophical system, using the mythological story of the cave. In it he presents people as enchained in the fetters of slaves who treat the shadows of the real world that appear on the wall of the cave as reality. Their slavery results from their trust in sensory experiences that make them understand what is unreal as true. The seemingly naive story of the cave becomes imperceptibly a paradigm for formulating positions on the topic of the situation of man today who is in so many ways entangled in media communication. A fascination with the new dimension of the cave was created on the basis of the development of means of communication. Today the cave is the world of signs produced by electronic intermediaries that form the foundation for searches for a still greater field of experiences. Because of the media, there has been an essential dissonance between real life and the world of desires and illusions. People more and more choose an illusion as a mysterious path of possibilities, leaving reality to itself.

The paradigm of the cave seems to be a phenomenon concerning in particular communication frameworks, but those arise out of processes connected with human knowledge. Communication in the cognitive dimension is communication of content, the understanding of which we obtain in the larger context of reality and the real things, phenomena, and processes that occur in reality. They form the common plane of reference for the giver and receiver of a communication. The dominance of sensory perception in knowing, and in particular the dominance of the sense of sight, is the reason for the domination of the image in communication. The tendency to create a virtual reality is the reason for the dominance of the image. Hyperreality, which appears on this basis, is the sphere created by the media, and it constitutes the sum of representations of what is real. This phenomenon takes a specific form in process of communication, becoming an element that increases the development of communication media; that development is determined by the context of hyperreality. We owe in large measure to Jean Baudrillard that this approach to processes of communication has been unmasked. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, the masking of reality, and hyperreality became an inspiration for posing the question of the cognitive status of the way the media function and their role in

culture and society. This is because the dynamics of technological changes, along with benefits, also brings anxiety concerning man's cognitive condition in the world of media.

This is not going to be a text on the philosophy of communication that Jean Baudrillard proposed.[1] Baudrillard's works perform here a heuristic role. The question considered concerning the cognitive factors that affect man in the world of media are rather part of the problem of man's security, as that problem is broadly understood, and considered in the current of technological determinism. It is shown how the media through the image have monopolized space and time and have taken the form of the creator and distributor of hyperreality. Baudrillard explains the mechanisms in the framework of which reality, replaced by the sphere of the *simulacrum*, became a radical illusion. The ineffability of existence with respect to content contributes in large measure to hyperreality in communication. However, existence disappears at the level of the communication, leaving only a shadow of itself. The use of inspirations from Baudrillard to explain these matters can be described metaphorically by the paradigm of the „cave." This Platonic archetype corresponds extraordinarily to man's cognitive situation in the world of the media.[2] Therefore this can become the starting point for a discussion on the boundary between reality and the hyperreality of communication.

The Genesis of Hyperreality

Man as a participant in communication is affected by specific cognitive processes. The value of human knowledge determines the value of the communication of known contents. The sign is the element that ties both these processes together. We can describe as a sign in a broad sense that which is presented to the knowing subject as an objective content. However, a problem arises here, because the content of knowledge apprehended in a sign is not in a position to express the full content of the known thing. We cannot apprehend a thing in all its aspects. We apprehend the aspect to which we are cognitively directed. However, what we apprehend in the process of knowledge cannot be expressed only by means of signs. The limited character of the function of the sign is shown in particular in the process of the communication of known contents. Cognitive contents become incommunicable without reference to the context that the communication concerns. Communication requires not only a proper selection of the signs that appear in a verbal or visual form, but also requires an objective context. Otherwise the field of meaning of the sign is reduced, and communication ceases to refer to reality.

The phenomenon of limitation in communication processes only to the content of the sign is generally applied in the mass media. In this area, communication is more and more affected not only by contexts, but by the communicators themselves. Technical possibilities release new forms of communication, for which the sign itself is a sufficient element for the functioning of communication. The sign from the formal side possesses in itself the foundation for various ways in which it used, and it is also suited for multiplication. At the level of communication, which is suspended on the sign, the field of possibility is

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[1] In this topic we refer the reader to W. Merrin's work, *Baudrillard and the Media. A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge 2005.
[2] G. Weimann used the metaphor of Plato's „cave" to describe media phenomena in the work *Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality*, Thousand Oaks 2000.

expanded for the construction of virtual relations and means of formulating content. The network of relations produced on the basis of aspective views of a thing turns out to be richer than the thing itself. The result is that the communication acquires autonomy and forms its own field of discourse. That discourse becomes independent of real states of things. If we treat the sign in itself as an autonomous element (without reference to what is signified), it functionally ceases to be a sign and appears as the primary plane. In such a situation, a system of signs can be constructed independently of reality. One indicator of the values of communication are the rules for the use and production of signs by the media. The possibilities for the use of a sign in the media become practically unlimited.[3]

Communicated contents appear along with other signs that make a given content more precise, and sometimes also interpret it. Such an operation leads to the giving of a new meaning to sign, a meaning that follows from the rules for the use of a sign and is connected with the system of other signs. In this is contained the position that Wittgenstain had expressed earlier: „the limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[4] Also in this way, a possibility can interpreted as a reality. In the mass media, the content is constructed in a way corresponding to the communicator, on the basis of whom it becomes the content of the message. However, without reference to any fact, the content of the message ceases to be a sign of any real event and loses its power to persuade. Therefore in communication we a dealing with a media fact from results the possibility of expanding the field of interpretation of a real fact. One real fact can be the source of many media facts, and even facts with opposing cognitive qualifications. This allows the media to construct an alternate model of reality.

The media (especially the digital media) have overcome space and time, and this has allowed their creative possibilities to appear. McLuhan's postulate of a „global village" showed the direction of changes and released abilities latent in the media for overstepping natural barriers and limitations. The context of the real world that appears in communication was replaced by context-free information.[5] However, reality as a sphere that cannot be reduced to the order of the media was replaced by the hyperreal place that the new context produces. The hyperreal plane is a resultant of the relations that arise in the communicators and it forms the field of the possibility of the identification of messages. This allowed the rise of a way for the media to function that was not limited by reality.

The rise of the hyperreal plane of communication is interwoven with the social need for information and the easy reception of information. Therefore the providing of information in the form of prepared images became more and more widespread. The ubiquity of "screens" causes the domination of the image over other forms of human knowing.[6] This has consequences for the course and value of cognitive processes. What is visible through the media allows the replacement of the creative operation of the construction of images by the reproductive acceptance of a prepared image. Such an act of replacement is possible on account of the form of the reception of data about the world. Through visual impressions we can receive the presented image as something

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[3] Cf. T. Binkley, *Refiguring Culture*, in: *Future Visions. New Technologies of the Screen*, P. Hayward and T. Wollen (eds.), London 1993, pp. 92–122.
[4] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, C. K. Ogden (trans.), London 1922, 5.6.
[5] Neil Postman used this term to describe this phenomenon, see: *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse In the Age of Show Business*, New York 2006, pp. 67–71.
[6] See: J. Baudrillard, *The perfect Crime*, Ch. Turner (trans.), New York 1996, p. 5.

given that allows us to neglect the work of the imagination. The imagination, however, requires a cognitive operation that is performed by uniting sensory data into one internal image and on this basis the intellect apprehends the meaning of a thing. This allows the intellect to perform multi-aspective work and allows us to expand the cognitive field that is discovered by the senses in contact with reality. The image itself becomes prepared cognitive material that reduces our perception to a single aspect, the aspect of the visible.

The image as a sign is a subjective way of seeing the world. It becomes the reason for a division between the "image of the thing" and the "thing itself." The image of the world can cease to be a sign of things and can become something autonomous and independent of things. The image of the world can become what Heidegger describes as a world-picture.[7] The apprehension of the world in the form of a world-picture is an extremely subjective approach. However, the region of the "pictures of things" that occurs in our consciousness acquires due to the media the rank of intersubjectivity. In our universal access to the media we discover a community of "world-picture." This allows for the virtual dimension of the media, a dimension that makes possible the elastic formation of images (simulations). At the same time the media release in man a creative factor in relation to reality. The ambiguity of the "world-picture" that results from uncertainty concerning existence is an inspiration for providing reality with a new shape. Baudrillard calls this a *simulacrum*, that is, a plane of signs that no longer refers to anything.[8] The *simulacrum* becomes the foundation for hyperreality and constitutes the elimination of reality from discourse through the complete replacement of reality with signs. This is because the communications media produce a quasi-reality that is a cause of the mental reduction of what is real to what is virtual.

The blurring of the difference between the thing and the sign consequently leads to the loss of any real point of reference for communication. Media instruments constructed for apprehending reality, through the transformation of the sign become themselves "reality." The use of digital media as copying machines became the decisive moment in the rise of hyperreality. The constant refinement of those tools increases even more the phenomenon of the concealment of reality. The imposition of successive layers of copies consequently leads to the replacement of reality by hyperreality. What we take as reality is already hyperreality, which constitutes a minutely detailed multiplication of reality, and thereby leads to the destruction of reality.[9] In this ontological perspective, communication processes occur that shape the image of the world and the conditions of the world's existence. We find ourselves at a temporal-spatial point that possesses its own copy, and we treat the copy as if it were reality. Meanwhile, it is one of the layers that form a new reference of simulation and effectively conceal what is real.

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[7] Heidegger suggests that: "Understood in an essential way, "world-picture" does not mean "picture of the world" but, rather, the world grasped as picture. Beings as a whole are now taken in such a way that a being is first and only in being insofar as it is set in place by representing-producing (*vorstellend-berstellenden*) humanity", M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World-picture*, in: M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, J. Young and K. Haynes (trans.), Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 67–68.

[8] Cf. J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, S.F. Glaser (trans.), University of Michigan Press 1994, pp. 1–7.

[9] See: J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, I. Hamilton Grant (trans.), London 1993, pp. 70–74.

The technological wealth of the media allows for greater and greater possibilities to shape communication processes. Those possibilities result from the intentional way in which the media function. Remaining at the level of signs, they cannot reach the barrier of real states. The level of signs allows for the construction of the content of a message that is affected only by the productivity of the communicator. Since the communication system is more and more dependent on communicators, at the same time it becomes more and more distant from reality. Content-based apprehensions in communication form a message that lacks any reference to real states. The means of communication provide a field for unlimited possibilities in the shaping of a message. The image expresses the specific character of content-based apprehensions in the media. The entire potential of the media accumulates in the image. The image is a derivative of the content-related aspect of things, and in particular of the qualitative aspect of reality whereby the message acquires the possibility of making various connections of content. As the consequence of such an operation, empty signs and empty images are produced.[10] Scrupulousness in the description of content and the possibility of multiplying content provides the media with rich material that can be used without any reference to real states.

The phenomenon of the media's product of empty images is fostered by the epistemological rules for knowing and expressing the fact of existence. Reality is incommunicable because the existence of things can only be apprehended without signs.[11] We are not in a position to make an intellectual sign for the existence of something. Existence as such is not subject to the cognitive operation of conceptualization and it is not possible to depict existence in an image. It also does not introduce any additional meaning to propositions expressed in language. Language in communication basically "presupposes" the existence of the object. However, a departure in communication beyond the context of reality has the result that in the end we lose existence from the field of meaning. Consequently we lose contact with reality, for which existence is the sole guarantee of realness. Existence loses its value in the media because it cannot be expressed by any form of communication. The value of a communication is formulated only with reference to the aspect of content. Therefore a communication draws from a thing only the content, giving the content a virtual mode of existence. The technical abilities of the communicator more closely define the existential situation for the thing that constitutes the content of the communication.

A communication or message as the transmission of a set of content-based elements can be presented in different ways. A frequent change in the systematic arrangement of contents, in its forms of transmission, or the quantity of communicated pieces of information requires a plurality and variety of facts. Meanwhile the universality and attractiveness of a communication is the fundamental postulate for the functioning of media in the marketplace. For this reason media facts are produced that meet the need for material used in communications. These are not only momentary and valueless snapshots, but are also

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[10] See: J. Baudrillard, *The perfect Crime*, pp. 6–7.
[11] This problem is analyzed in the ground of classical realistic philosophy, cf. M. A. Krąpiec OP, *Is Linguistics a Prerequisite to Philosophizing?*, "Angelicum" LXVII (1990), pp. 185–202.

virtually constructed events.[12] Media facts as constructed units of communication are introduced into social circulation and form a unique field of operation for the mass media. The quantity of media facts can exceed many times the quantity of real facts. On the basis of one real fact, we can obtain an impressive number of media facts that are produced at the level of the technical abilities of the communicator. The communication media not only provide information about the world, but they also create a picture of the world. The phenomenon of the construction of media facts becomes the proper field for the realization of the hyperreal level of communication.

The development of the communications media led to changes in the paradigm of how communication functions. In the times when local communication was dominant, which was made concrete with respect to the "here and now," communication possessed its own clear subject and audience. Global communication completely abandoned the rules for the communication process. The communication created here first "seeks" its audience. In the first case, the audience is most important, but in the second case only the communication or message is important. This dissonance (or properly speaking, the reduction of the reference point) on the one hand causes the sudden development of the communication media, but on the other hand it introduces a new order of communication. This new order consists in making the audience dependent on the communication media. The abilities that the communication media provide are in a position to dominate every kind of discourse. Moreover, the mass media force communication, and social discourse is only a resultant of the mass media. Consequently, the production of an excess of information about the world ultimately brings the audience into a state of information or loss of meaning.[13] Therefore the media fact as suitably constructed and fully controlled becomes much more legible and valuable for the audience than the real fact is.

The way the communication media acts on the audience is the method that makes it possible to accept such a course in communication processes. The media make an unlimited communication, which not without reason is described as "mass." The media are everywhere. However, despite such broad possibilities for the functioning of communication, the reception of a communication remains individual. Computer technologies have atomized society. The mass character of the media is not their action on crowds or masses but on individual recipients. The form of communication evokes in each recipient subjective cognitive reactions that individualize the reception of the contents of communication. As a result, the recipient has the impression of being exception and unrepeatable, and communication becomes for him a personal relation. An element of trust occurs here, which is the foundation of the persuasive mechanism that is the foundation for the engagement of the recipient in communication.[14] Meanwhile, the social reactions that arise as the result of communication still have a mass character in the recipient, and that mass character is something of which he is not aware. The individualization of the reception of communication becomes the cause of the "masking" of the effect of the mass character and of the uncontrolled dependence on the media. Consequently, the existential perspective of man's participation in communication processes is suspended.

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[12] See: J. Baudrillard, *The Vanisching Point of Comunication*, in: *Jean Baudrillard. Fatal Theories*, D. B. Clarke, M. Doel, W. Merrin, R. Smith (eds.), Routledge, London and New York 2008, pp.15–23.
[13] See: *The Implosion of the meaning in the Media in: Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 79–86.
[14] See: A. R. Pratkanis and E. Aronson present the processes of persuasion in their work *The Age of Propaganda. The everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, New York 2001.

Communication thus appears as an autonomous structure that possesses instruments for creating social interactions. This is possible because the means of communication, or *medium*, is indistinguishable from the communication as such, or *message*. The thesis that McLuhan formulated – *the medium is the message* – suggests that the media possess tendencies to autonomy that are contained in their structure.[15] The media not only make the message, but force the message. The vehicles of communication become the fundamental stimulus for the occurrence of communication. The media impose a form and content of the communication that can be produced by the communications media themselves. McLuhan's formula (perhaps even contrary to its author's intentions) quickly became a slogan to open the way for the comprehensive development of the communication media. However, in this formulate there lies a yet greater mystery, which was not fully legible in McLuhan's time because of the level of the development of the media. The media not only force the message, but the media also constitute an autotelic instrument for the creation of hyperreality.[16] The possibility of the recipient's mental involvement through a picture, a sound, or the dynamic of changes has the result that the media makes its own context that can completely ignore the aspect of agreement with reality. Persuasion in the media, which is the effect of ultimate confidence in the power of communication, causes the recipient not to doubt the message. Here the phenomenon of the "media loop" is produced in which the created message refers only to itself. Both the recipients of messages and the context of reality cease to be necessary conditions for the content of the message to come into existence or to be verified. Only messages that are alienated from existence count for communication in the hyperreal dimension. Baudrillard explains this also through the phenomenon of the *trompe-l'oeil* known in art, which is a form that produces an illusion of reality that bears a metaphysical dimension.[17] This is because it is the reason for the *simulacrum* that through a virtually produced illusion of reality can effectively delude us.

Uncertainty regarding existence is the basic reason for the occurrence of the phenomenon of hyperreality in communication. When man does not have access to objective grounds for evaluating a message, he loses his orientation in real space and time. This is because the media create an exceptional form of interaction capable of dominating the human cognitive sphere, and the media become the cause of a cognitive blockade on reality. Man's cognitive process are reduced in this area to the stimuli that flow from the medium. One result of this phenomenon is that man's cognitive abilities are limited, and communication itself becomes autonomous. By creating an illusion of reality, the media effectively conceal what is real and they replace reality with a sum of presented images.

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[15] See: M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge 1994. Baudrillard remarks that McLuhan's formulation "is the first great formula of this new era" (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 30), but Baudriallard gives it a different meaning. Cf. on this topic also J. Baudrillard, *Reviev of Marschall McLuhan's 'Understanding Media'*, in: *Uncollected Baudrillard*, G. Genosko (ed.), London 2001, pp. 39–44.

[16] See: J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 81–83.

[17] See: J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, B. Singer (trans.), Montreal 1990, pp. 60–64. "They attack our sense of reality or functionality and, therefore, our sense of consciousness. They seek out the wrong or reverse side of things, and undermine the world's apparent factuality. This is why the pleasure that they give us, their seductiveness, however small, is radical; for it comes from a radical surprise borne of appearances, from a life prior to the mode of production of the real world." p. 64.

In this way, the media become the creator of hyperreality.[18] The acceptance of the impressions that take as real what is presented is the cause of the effective misleading of man by the media. The act of remaining at the level of a passive recipient of stimuli can lead to complete entanglement in the hyperreality of the media. Man as a participant in communication seems more and more powerless in the face of the proper qualification of communications. Therefore the distance between man's cognitive abilities and the media communication disappears. At the same time, the constant search in the media for greater and greater reserves of creativity produces a need for hyperreality.

Conclusions

The technological development of the instruments of the media endows man with exceptional abilities to achieve communication processes. The media have become the ubiquitous and sole distributor covering all communication processes in culture and society. However, along with the social need for the refinement of media tools, the risk of threats resulting from the lack of a real evaluation of the value of communications increases. An image of the world that is the sum of simulations and of the multiplication of empty signs is one result of these processes. In this way, the mass media produce the sphere of hyperreality, which is saturated with signs that have no reference to reality. The content of each communication through the digital vehicles of communication that are dominant in culture takes the form of material that is apt for transformation. Under the influence of the mass media, the level of the sign remains, which is imposed on reality and fills that reality. Also, although that layer is an illusion, its persuasive power is very great.

The dynamic development of the media, with its typical features of ubiquity and its autotelic character, in addition increases the dominant role of hyperreality in social life. The influence, imperceptible in everyday life, of the media on human life, is causing us to become more and more helpless with the help of the media. This is because hyperreality acts as an "imperceptible force" that we voluntarily accept without being aware of any threat. The disappearance of cognitive reflection on the processes of the functioning of the media, which is the cause of ignorance, can lead in the long term to complete helplessness and loss in the recipient. The hyperreal mode of the function of the media causes communication to lose completely its personal and purposeful dimension. The idealized world of the digital media, a world that is a model for "imperfect" reality and is a synonym for progress in civilization, is a machine for simulation. Hyperreality, the consequence of which is the adaptation of what is real to what is virtual, is an effect of the processes of simulation.

Baudrillard had no illusions about the possibility of getting out of the "cave of the media." His vision is a catastrophic and cold-blooded prediction, the consequences of which he perversely calls a "perfect crime." However, this is not a nihilism of negation, but a nihilism in which something that can be interpreted as negative in human knowledge is filled in cognitively. This form of nihilism of consequences is based on the cognitive dissonance that results from the alie-

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[18] In this context, Baudrillard's thesis that "we live in a world where highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance" (J. Baudrillard, *The perfect Crime*, p. 6), becomes very relevant.

nation of existence from content. The use of this dissonance by the media, even if this use is something of which people are not fully aware, leads to hyperreality. For this reason, an important element in philosophical discussion on the media is an analysis of the possibility of a cognitive apprehension of reality, and in particular, the possibility of knowing the existence of things. This is because this is a starting point for reflection on the value of knowledge and on the consequences of knowledge in communication processes.

It is impossible to distill the process of communication to such a degree that we will rid ourselves of the illusion that the media carry with them. However, the sharpening or training of the cognitive sphere concerning meta-media reflection, covering how the media function in relation to reality, and the postulate that the recipient should perfect the ability to think critically, become a method for acquiring a cognitive orientation in the zone of media hyperreality. This also provide the possibility of maintaining constant contact with what is real. Knowledge of existence constitutes an operation that accompanies all content-based cognitive processes. Knowledge of existence does not impoverish detailed knowledge about the world, nor can it be expressed in language. However, it allows us to maintain constant cognitive contact with reality. The context of our reference to reality is a necessary condition for a proper evaluation of the value of communication. Ultimately all the elements of communication who the fullness of their operation only in a holistic perspective on the process, and so, in a perspective that considers the objective and subject factors that affect it. Otherwise there is a tacit consent to hyperreality.

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HYPERREALITY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION
SUMMARY

Jean Baudrillard's reflection on the mechanisms of how the mass media function bring us to the question of hyperreality. The problem of hyperreality results from the limitation of man's cognitive abilities, which appear especially in the context of the media. The mass media produce a sphere saturated with signs that have no reference to reality. One effect of those processes is hyperreality, in which what is real is adapted to what is virtual. The inexpressibility of existence with respect to content contributes to the creation of hyperreality in communication processes. Therefore an important element in philosophical discussion on the media is an analysis of the possibility of a cognitive apprehension of reality, and in particular, an analysis of the possibility of the knowledge of things' existence. This is because this is the starting point for reflections on the value of knowledge and on knowledge's consequences in communication processes.

Key words: mass communication, existence, reality, hyperreality, Jean Baudrillard