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Edited by Philip Wexler

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Edited by
Philip Wexler



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Preface

The first wave of North American critical theory was at once both academic and political. Interest in the works of the early Frankfurt School may have belonged to a more general renaissance of academic social theory that occurred in North America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. But the *passion* for critical theory came out of a particular historical political moment of self- and collective transformation. Critical theory best gave voice to the New Left understanding of politics as psychological and cultural transformation, and as an unbridgeable difference and dissent from a European and American Marxism that seemed irrelevant to the historical experience of an emergent, socially critical new class.

The subsequent defeat of the cultural revolution, and the social movements which fed it, predictably led not only to the formalization of social theory, but to an atrophy of a deep political and psychological passion for social theory. The ritualism of defeat expressed itself in an academicist interest in critical theory. Frankfurt School theory became respectable as an object of scholastic interpretation. In that sense, the academic success of critical theory was a sign of an apparent end to its political transformative project. The North American Restoration—not postmodernism—eviscerated the effort to politicize everyday life. For the new generation, it seemed that theoretical interest was either formal and scientific, or at best, in a postmodern vein, of an aesthetic interest.

Now, there are signs that we are exiting the long night of the Restoration. It is not that corporatism has ceased to flourish, or even that there is a new articulation of mass consciousness. Rather, the scholastic interest in critical theory has again become political, and the social theoretic ideology of the Interregnum, postmodernism, has proven that it can be a channel as well as a damper for the articulation of a critical theory of society. There is a new voice in critical the-

ory. It is a voice that comes through the historic political struggles of a student movement, of feminism, and of anti-racist and ecological social movements. It is a voice also schooled in a sensitivity to the theories of social disintegration or an 'implosion' that characterizes the post-modernist moment.

The authors represented in this reader are neither scholastic nor dogmatic. They do not eschew postmodernism for hackneyed slogans, nor do they embrace theory as an aesthetic substitute for theory as a socially transformative practice. They are committed both to social theory and social practice, and it is this which unifies the papers which follow. The authors are a new generation of North American critical theorists who do not retreat to European humanism in the face of social, cultural and self transformation. Each one actively encounters and works through the social and theoretical changes that have occurred since Frankfurt-style critical theory. They offer social analyses of the information society (Luke), the character of public discourse (Agger), and changes in the relation between the family and mass media (Bathrick). They all refuse to simply dismiss postmodernism, poststructuralism or discourse theories on the grounds that they are 'neo-conservative' (Habermas, 1981). Morrow, for example, offers an historical account of how critical and cultural theories converge and can incorporate structuralism and poststructuralism.

They work through, as Agger describes, a dialectic of post-modernism, and a politically interested critique of discourse theories, which as Fraser so aptly says, will lead to a 'critique of essentialism without becoming postfeminist'. Ashley takes Baudrillard's simulacra seriously as a criticism of Marxist 'productionism', but notes that Baudrillard 'does tend to get carried away'. Ashley's effort to reclaim totality as a critical vantage point, Agger's postmodern, public intellectual, Bathrick's mother as transformative mediator, and Morrow's 'disciplinary deconstructions' all show how critical theorists can avoid new forms of sublimation in discourse by a clear social analytic interest, a 'pragmatic' interest as Fraser calls it, that is not based on a desire to retain a scholastic critical theory tradition, but instead encounters new forms of cultural expression. Luke offers a reformulation of the political possibilities of critical theory in conditions of 'hyperreality', and Langman explores the cultural and psychological conditions within which a contemporary emancipatory project is possible.

The authors present different political interests, analytical dimensions and empirical examples. Despite Ashley's Adornoesque caveat that there are 'no theoretical solutions' to contemporary aporias, this

new generation of critical theorists does not accept the postmodern, poststructural, discursive dissolution of a subject who can understand and act. Their qualifications to global action are in the service of a practical, theoretically knowledgeable politics. They are redeeming critical theory, but not naively, as the integration of social analysis and political practice, at a time when such a form of life is not easily nurtured. They are exemplifying how the agon of internalized contradictions among subjects of the professional middle class may be overcome in theory and in practice.

I believe that readers will find in these essays a thread of continuity with Frankfurt School theory, a political reading of post-modernism, an engagement with contemporary social movements, and—what distinguishes ‘critical’ theory—a fresh effort to articulate a new critical social theory in a new historical moment.

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1

Touring Hyperreality: Critical Theory Confronts Informational Society*

Timothy W. Luke

As the 1990s begin, it is clear that the frozen impasse of the Cold War has thawed, bringing new possibilities and problems for the capitalist world-system. Yet, some central points must be remembered. During the strategic deadlock of Soviet and American superpower over the past four decades of Cold War, the everyday commerce of transnational corporate capitalism has transformed significantly the established cultures, politics, and society of many nation-states by developing electronically-mediated consumption communities within and alongside their traditional ways of life.¹ Indeed, the end of the Cold War marks the intrusion of these transformations even into the centrally planned economies of China, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Conventional codes of power, ideology and resistance are changing in all of these still modernizing regions, but in ways that now are unclear, contradictory, and incomplete. Within such transnational consumption communities, the flow of goods, services, and signs generates densely encoded 'hyperrealities' or 'mediascapes', which form new regions and sites of shared cultural consciousness that continuously but cryptically display the workings of power and ideology. But whose power and whose ideology? The institutionalized forms of organized power are increasingly dominated by the networks of transnational corporate capital (based mainly in Japan, North America, and Western Europe), under the watchful vigilance of weak transnational zone-regimes (tied to either Soviet or American superpower), which reveal their biases most directly in the electronic imagery and technology underpinning the hyperreality of contemporary mass consumption and production.

How can one best travel through these essentially contested, hyper-real terrains of the 'post-industrial', 'information-based', or 'informational' society as they have been forming with the globalization of advanced corporate capitalism since 1945? The distinctive features of

postindustrialism, such as the trends toward rising numbers of white-collar workers, decreasing numbers of blue-collar workers, a greater emphasis on services or information goods rather than industrial manufacturing, the mobilization of science as a factor in production and management, and a consumer-oriented economy of affluence, have been talked about since the mid-1950s. Intense debates over what these changes mean, and how far they go toward actually constituting a new stage of development, continue today.²

Still, these economic and social developments have not led to the carefree utopia of cybernetic postindustrialism that fascinated early space age America in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, new technical and economic forces are creating a more culturally impoverished and ecologically destructive world system, which is now based upon attaining the complete commodification of all aspects of human life. With the emergence of informationalization, one can see concomitant declines in several different but interrelated spheres—environmental quality, urban life, material living standards, cultural vitality, popular political effectiveness, and ordinary everyday community. Consequently, it should be useful here to outline some speculations—grounded in contemporary semiotic and critical theory—about the origins and operations of hyperreality by taking a brief tour through some corners of its mediascapes. In turn, these observations might disclose a few provisional traces of how power and politics seem to work in hyperreality, while setting the scene for some tentative conclusions about the project of critical theory today.

I Speculations: From Ontology to Hyperontology?

What is real? How do we know it? Given what is real and how much we know of it, what can we do? Discussing ‘reality’, as such questions indicate, always seems slightly unreal. Questions, like ‘what is’ or ‘what is “is”’ once asked, are difficult to answer. To frame responses, as in this discussion, the metaphors of maps and terrain are inevitably invoked. ‘What is’ or ‘what is “real”’ are usually given the status of an unknown ground whose topography might then be revealed through some conceptual cartography, traced out in linguistic maps or representational grids. These instruments historically have been considered inadequate disclosures of what is ‘real’ inasmuch as no abstractconceptual representation can fully disclose or encapsulate that which is real. The pre-categorical always overwhelms the categorical as the given and the lived evade that which can be thought or spo-

ken. Never completely coextensive, the metaphorical elements of ‘map’ and ‘terrain’ still have delimited the basic boundaries of ontological reflection, resting on the belief that the terrain always precedes and denominates the map as a constant invariable presence beneath its representational narratives.

Yet, lately something seems to be changing. Like the survivors of the 1989 California earthquake, who could not describe the very solid reality of the earth shaking beneath their feet without reading their experience and its meaning through their past viewings of simulated earthquake disasters on TV or in old movies, everyday participants in informationalized societies regard what is real, and their knowledge of it, in similarly hyperreal terms. Increasingly, in the innermost individual consciousness, many ordinary judgments of reality, knowledge of the real or even how to act echo the ontology of the earthquake victims: what was it like? It was just like on TV! What did you think was happening? It was like an old sci-fi, disaster movie! Describing and interpreting this sort of ‘hyperreality’ seems more than slightly unreal. The means of information generating the symbolic basis of today’s global, transnational economy unhinge ordinary metaphorical relations between map and terrain inasmuch as the operative principles of this informational order are those of simulation. Abstract narratives can no longer function definitively as ‘the maps’, ‘the doubles’, ‘the mirrors’ or ‘the concepts’ of some ontological terrain metaphorically regarded as ‘the real’. Instead, what were once abstract frames of the real increasingly function in ordinary consciousness as simulations. The terrain is framed by television screens. Its topography is fluid not fixed, flowing in continuously shifting images. The maps are constantly under revision, changing with every new voiceover and scan of the images. The moving frames of all the viewing screens compose the pictures: without the images there is no terrain, and its features are only those drawn into the scan and pan of the camera. As Baudrillard asserts, ‘simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or a reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—it is the map that engenders the territory...’.³ In this hyperspace, the ineluctable non-identity of map and terrain disappears. Therefore, it seems that some provisional hyperontology must now somehow define and describe what ‘is’.

If such hyperrealities do exist broadly enough to have these effects, then one must look constantly for something else that is now only inconstantly there:

No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensity: rather, genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.⁴

The simulation systems of hyperreality play off and on these dissolving differences between true and false, drifting in and out of real and representation. Again, like the California earthquake survivors, as they recounted their adventures to the TV cameras, confusing themselves in the real disaster of 17 October, 1989 with images of Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald in the distant past of *San Francisco* or Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner in the indistinct future of *Earthquake*, fact and fiction are interwoven in hyperreality to the point that electronic/cinematic fictions are cited commonly as the ultimate standard for judging material facts.

Simulations rest upon absence and negation, eliminating the role of the real or the true in fabricating intersubjective experience. Actually, as Baudrillard suggests:

age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions, and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes..... A hyperreal, therefore, is sheltered from thereal and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.⁵

While systems of representation may endeavor to appropriate simula-

tion as false representation, the dynamics of simulation turn all representations into simulacra, reducing the sign to a valueless free radical capable of bonding virtually anywhere in any exchange. Specifically,

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative when the object and substance have disappeared and there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.⁶

The material means of generating hyperreality are mainly the electronic media. Traditional notions of causality, perspective and reasoning are undermined completely by the electronic means of information, which efface the differences between cause and effect, ends and means, subject and object, active and passive. ‘Rather,’ Baudrillard argues, ‘we must think of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a sort of genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal, just as the other, micro-molecular code controls the passage of the signal from a representative sphere of meaning to the genetic sphere of the programmed signal’.⁷ Simulation goes beyond the distinctions of space and time, sender and receiver, medium and message, expression and content, as the media generate and maintain a new hyperspace with ‘no sense of place’. Difference vanishes, because ‘nothing separated one pole from the other, the initial from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into another: an *implosion*—an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative electricity—an implosion of meaning. *This is where simulation begins*. Everywhere, in whatever political, biological, psychological, mediadomain, where the distinction between poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation, and hence almost absolute manipulation—not passivity, but the *non-distinction of active and passive*’.⁸

In elaborating the practical logic of hyperreality, one must recognize how it also reflects the general operation of monopoly capital as

transnational corporate planning effaces the historical contradictions between capital and labor, production and consumption, supply and demand. Traditionally, ‘capital only had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today it is necessary to produce consumers, to produce demand, and this production is infinitely more costly than that of goods’.⁹ As part of the production of demand, the forms and substance of society itself are manufactured to sustain consumption. Consequently, every dimension of social existence today is essentially a complex simulation of reality, designed specifically to sustain the fragile cycles of political, economic and cultural reproduction. Since individual desires are abstractly autonomized into pre-packaged needs that serve as *productive forces*, the social devolves into an aggregate of atomized individuals, whose role is to mediate the packaged meaning of their desires in the corporate marketplace. The traditional cultural forms of attaining both individuality and the social collapse under these conditions. Instead, particular individual subjects ‘are only episodic conductors of meaning, for in the main, and profoundly, we *form a mass*, living most of the time in panic or haphazardly, above and beyond any meaning’.¹⁰

At the same time, ‘the masses’ are neither a subject nor an object. These social forces bear little relation to any historical referent—a class, a nation, a folk or the proletariat. Rather, they are a demographic construct, a statistical entity whose only traces appear in the social survey or opinion poll. Their members and extent vary with the complex coding of the media and the marketplaces, which set and reset the outer boundaries of the mass, in that ‘it only exists at the point of convergence of all the media waves which depict it’.¹¹ The masses can no longer act as traditional historical subjects in this social and political context. Nonetheless, they cast an immense shadow as the silent majorities that ground and channel or diffuse and deflect the circuits of corporate power and state authority in their personal activities.

What is deterred by hyperreal strategies of deterrence? Essentially, everything that might be or become ‘real life’ totally separate and completely free from the planned imperatives of social programs and designer models of everyday life as set by corporate production agenda. In this vacuum of (in)significance, the proliferation of second-hand authenticity has plainly become the primary growth industry of the present era. Power and politics assume new forms in hyperreality as electronic mediations of experience and meaning substitute the imaginary for the real, simulations displace actuality, simulacra merge into the real. No longer duplicity or counterfeit, simulation acquires

an almost total integrity, actually becoming what many regard as what is real. Signs of this process surface in many sites on the contemporary post-1945 political horizon, ranging from televisual democracy to nuclear deterrence to urban renewal. The sites of struggle are staked out here over generating and perhaps resisting hyperreal illusions of what is. By controlling what is considered real, the simulations weakly control human activity.

Simulation as an organizing principle requires a continuous and purposeful substitution of the signs of the real for reality itself, but the deeper ties to the cycles of commodification clearly need not be broken. Hyperreality simply brings new forms of hyperreal commodification along with it. The entire ethos of national electoral politics in the United States, for example, largely rests upon the panic-stricken efforts to produce a real consensus, a national mandate, and a true representation of the electorate's preferences from an increasingly divided, smaller, segmented and apathetic public that participates in a simulation rather than a real representative democracy. In democratic electoral politics, a simulated hyperreality of public life emerges from public opinion polls, whose mathematical indices are substituted in practice for 'the public' itself. The ever-changing outcomes of daily, weekly, and monthly surveys continually span the gap between the opinion leaders and opinion holders. The mathematical montages of satisfaction and dissatisfaction from such polls, in turn, increasingly constitute what the contemporary public accepts as its sense of itself. The whole process is one of hyperrealistically simulating a particular type of democratic reality in order to substitute it for the real workings of democracy.¹² These artifacts are much more potent than traditional ideology as a mode of exercising power. Most historical forms of ideology entailed the betrayal or distortion of some actual reality with signs as 'false consciousness', but simulation entails the complete 'short-circuit of reality' and its 'reduplication by signs'¹³ in ways that suspend truth and falsity almost entirely in the fabric of hyperreality itself. Much like daily television news programs which create false stylized narratives about contemporary political 'reality' with actors, sets and scripts to report 'what is true' about American politics by merging reality and representation in an electron haze, the hyperreal practices of democracy form in the changing coded conventions of its own continuous fabrication.

At the level of global politics, nuclear deterrence is the epitome of simulation. The arsenals in nuclear arms races are the signs of hyperreality that neutralize the reality of actual nuclear war. Real nuclear war would annihilate the geopolitical stakes at issue in global power

struggles. Consequently, the superpowers devote their energies to the hyperreal simulations of preparing and rehearsing for such a war, which short-circuits that reality.¹⁴ However, this struggle reduplicates the conflict as a war of signs between the opposing superpowers. The balance of terror is the terror of balance', as the simulations ensure that the real event of nuclear war will not disturb the equilibrium of the general system.¹⁵ This macrological system of deterrence also pervades the micrological dimensions of everyday life: 'The same model of planned infallibility, of maximal security and deterrence, now governs the spread of the social', throughout the networks of social control.¹⁶ Every effort is now being made, through constant simulations and resimulations of every conceivable eventuality in daily life, to guarantee that 'nothing will be left to chance'. The accidents that do occur, like the Three Mile Island or Chernobyl nuclear disasters, are very exceptional. As rare incidents of purposive human error, they are regarded as inconceivable and therefore appear as totally unsimulated events. Once they happen, however, they become, like oil refinery disasters, civil defense drills, airliner crashes, or high-rise fires, a new modeling scenario for innumerable fresh simulations. Indeed, the relatively low loss of life and high degree of social cohesion after the 1989 California earthquake are, in large part, attributable to the Bay Area's residents' continuous simulation of coping with disaster in emergency services drills and practice runs.

In the decaying core of today's immense exurban/post-urban agglomerations, for example, expensive efforts at urban revitalization and renewal being made by the Rouse Company and other redevelopment corporations thrash out image-driven simulations of city life in urban dead zones where none has existed for decades. However, these redevelopment programs are typically pitched to the commuting sub-urban upscale gentry rather than ordinary citizens who are still in residence.¹⁷ By the late 1950s, the classic urban industrial core of most American cities was in complete decline for many reasons, ranging from suburbanization, maturing markets, and foreign competition, to regional population shifts, runaway shops, and building the interstate highway system. Racial conflict and economic hard times in the 1960s and 1970s virtually killed off what was left in most urban downtowns, turning what were once vibrant self-contained communities into nothing but 'central business districts'.

To recapture some sense of urban excitement and diversity, many consciously planned efforts have been made by alliances of corporate capital and various state agencies since the 1970s to renew, renovate or rebuild certain regions in such cities' downtown cores via 'redevelop-

opment'. What has been created, however, in such re-creations is not a revitalization of what once was alive. Rather, it is more often merely a gentrified simulation, trading off of memories about what is believed to once have been by presenting packaged fantasies that now will be accepted as true. Remaining essentially ultra-contemporary in both form and function, redevelopment is cleverly denominated, nonetheless, with as many symbols of the past as are necessary to sell the commodity of itself in the present. These simulations displace and surpass serious efforts at careful historical reconstruction by using just enough historic tokens to seem basically convincing to many people.

Such commodification of urban spaces only takes on a disguise of close, face-to-face concern for neighborhood renovation, civic preservation, historic conservation. The acids of exchange continue splashing through their familiar transnational tubes behind the hyperreal renovated facades of local architectural and urban traditions. Corporate capital, here in the form of civic-minded urban development partnerships or just plain real estate speculation, aims at colonizing the hitherto and probably otherwise impenetrable preserves of urban decay with new outposts of commodification. Its continuing mission is to accumulate greater power and authority via exchange, but dress up the exchange in spectacle and illusion. These campaigns for expanding the controlled policing of space behind the valorized boundaries of development districts take place behind the screen of hyperreal illusion. Up to a point, at one time, significant questions about the nature of urban life could still be asked. Is it real or is it Memorex? Is this real life or a movie? Is this really happening or are we on television? Is this a live performance or an electronic mediation/ simulation? These are now much less meaningful questions. We all know the answer about life in such cities. Redeveloped or rehabbed urban life is an illusion. Yet, we all seem to like it that way. Hyper-reality absolutely requires the consent of the audiences accepting and incorporating its narratives into its representation of the real in order to close its codes.

Commercial megastructures, like Georgetown Park or Union Station in Washington, Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Richmond's Sixth Street Marketplace, St Louis' Union Station, Underground Atlanta or The Cannery and Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco are each in their own ways nostalgic expressions of the troubled conscience in media-driven informational society. Economic exchange and cultural enlightenment, because of the electronic media, computerization, telecommunications, and jet travel, can and do happen almost anywhere.