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Simulacra and Simulation Hypothesis: How Real is Our Reality?

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Manifestations of Hyperreality, the "Real," and Simulation Theory in America

Submitted to

Professor Jesse Lerner

By

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Abstract:

Metaphysical quandaries have plagued humans for centuries, beginning with Plato, who in his Allegory of the Cave, illustrated a world where people misinterpreted shadows on the wall as reality. This paper examines the notion that our reality is a simulation, either created by us or by external forces. The theories presented in this paper are mainly derived from the work of media theorist Jean Baudrillard and his concept of hyperreality as well as Nick Bostrom's argument for the simulation hypothesis. I also analyze Slavoj Zizek's comments on media depictions of simulations in mainstream movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* along with hyperreal events that have occurred, like the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Baudrillard's theory suggests that our experience of reality is increasingly mediated by technology and media, to the point where it becomes difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is not. This can lead to a sense of disorientation or alienation from reality, which may prompt people to search for alternative explanations for their experience. Baudrillard attributes these feelings to living in a hyperreal society whereas Bostrom's simulation theory offers an alternative explanation: that our experience of reality may be the result of living in a computer simulation. While both of these ideas may seem far-fetched, they speak to a deep-seated human desire to understand the nature of reality and our place within it.

Introduction:

Slavoj Zizek writes in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* that "The ultimate American paranoiac fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in a real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show."[1] After residing in Southern California on and off for the past 4 years, I can definitely say I have had moments like this. Sometimes, as I gaze at the cloudless sky, symmetric palm trees, and impeccably groomed lawns that display vibrant green colors despite the ongoing statewide drought, I can't help but think to myself "How is any of this real?

Indeed, California more than most other places is host to a kind of hyperreal reality, where everything appears to be a representation of the ideal. In 1981, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard posited his theory of hyperreality in the book *Simulacra and Simulation*. He contends that we live in a world where simulations and representations in film, advertising, and other forms of media are so pervasive that they have replaced actual reality, creating a distorted version of the world that we are unable to distinguish from the real thing.[2] This hyperreal version of reality manifests in a world that attempts and appears to be artificially perfect. According to Baudrillard, one of the most defining examples of hyperreality is California, specifically Disneyland. California fascinated Baudrillard, who wrote in his book *America* "Is this really what an achieved utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes indeed! What do you expect a 'successful' revolution to look like? It is paradise. Santa Barbara is a paradise;

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[1] Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Verso, 2012, 12-13.

[2] Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria Glaser. *Simulacra and Simulation*. The University of Michigan Press, 2020, 1-7.

Disneyland is a paradise; the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise."[3] His labeling of Disneyland as a paradise did not prevent him from criticizing it as the prime example of hyperreality. He argues that Disneyland is not just a physical place, but an emblematic representation of the larger hyperreal order that makes up California and America as a whole.[4] In his works, Disneyland takes on a new, more symbolic meaning, becoming a metaphor for the hyperreal simulation that pervades contemporary society. In the forward for *America*, Geoff Dyer writes "Baudrillard arrived in 1975 with 'the idea that California was a testing ground of simulation', only to find that 'this experimental side' was to be found in the desert…the desert offered an absolute 'renunciation' or 'sweeping away of culture…one could almost believe that the American deserts were created precisely in order to satisfy the cloud-stifled yearning of northern Europeans.[5] While visiting California, Baudrillard was intrigued with the desert biome in the American southwest, frequently visiting Death Valley and the Mojave. He connected his interest in the desert to his greater theories about hyperreality. He writes that "for us [Europeans] the whole of America is a desert. Culture exists there in a wild state.[6] In his work, Baudrillard uses the metaphor of a desert to describe the absence of meaning and reality in contemporary society, representing a kind of void or emptiness. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he coined the phrase "the desert of the real" in the quote"it is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself."[7] This phrase conveys a

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[3] Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Verso, 2010, 107.

[4] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 13-14.

[5] Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Verso, 2010, X-XI.

[6] Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Verso, 2010, 108.

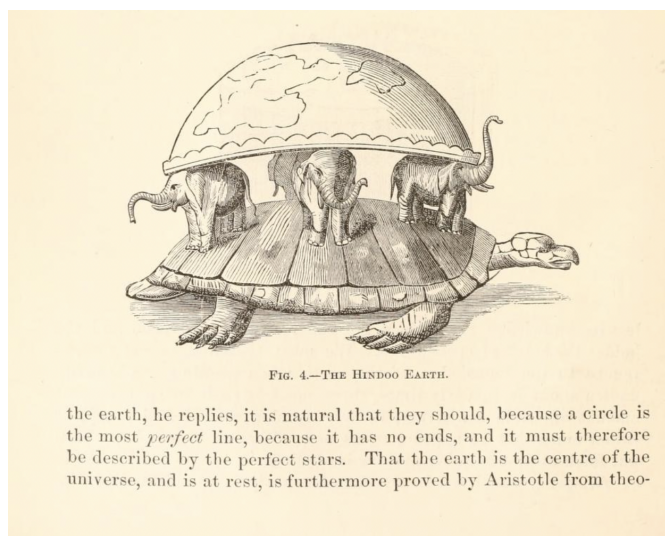[7] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

bleak and empty landscape, devoid of meaning. This is what Baudrillard describes happens after the loss of the real. The hyperreal simulacra, the Disneylands, simulations of things that were once real, or whatever you want to call them, fill this void and ultimately become more real than the real itself. And boy did the void get filled! I can think of innumerable commodities that try to provide an experience or product that mimics something that used to be genuine. Meditation apps, boutique gyms and fitness classes (Baudrillard mentions yoga specifically), and self-help books that promise personal transformation are just a few simulated products and services that simulate the experience of self-improvement. "Wellness" products like expensive supplements stand in for getting nutrition simply from a balanced diet. We have created hundreds of products that emphasize shortcuts and ease. This hyperreal capitalist frenzy has resulted in a monstrous society that is addicted to instant gratification.

There is nowhere to live that is more conducive to achieving instant gratification than Southern California. In the past decade, the Inland Empire has emerged as a hub for one-day and even one-hour delivery for companies like Amazon, UPS, and FedEx. This region, which encompasses the cities of San Bernardino and Riverside, now boasts nearly ten thousand warehouses, resulting in the relocation of schools and families and widespread air pollution.[8] Due west of the Inland Empire, Los Angeles is the global epicenter of the entertainment and advertising industry, where film production companies and theme parks have made a multi-billion dollar industry creating artificial images and worlds. Even more sinister is that Hollywood seems to be self-aware about its own hyperreality, often commenting on it in films that explore themes of simulation and perception. The opening Zizek quote is referencing the

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[8] "Revealed: How Warehouses Took over Southern California 'like a Slow Death'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Dec. 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/dec/29/e-commerce-warehouses-amazon-ups-fedex-california-pollution.

classic film *The Truman Show,* which takes place in a California-esque utopian town of Seahaven where the main character Truman realizes that his entire life has been a staged show for the entertainment of others. While Truman's revelation is a fictional construct, it emphasizes the long-standing human preoccupation with the idea that our experiences may be illusory or manipulated in some way. Quandaries about the nature of reality have plagued humans for centuries, beginning with Plato, who in his Allegory of the Cave, illustrated a world where people misinterpreted shadows on the wall as reality. I have always been specifically drawn to these types of questions, which fall under the umbrella of ontology, a branch of metaphysics. Ontology explores fundamental questions about the nature of being, reality, and what (if anything), exists. People in various philosophical, religious, and scientific disciplines have proposed numerous theories claiming to answer these questions, some more convincing than others. The opinion that the earth is flat is an example of the types of contentious ontological beliefs people can hold. An ancient belief recorded in Hindu, Chinese, and American Indigenous mythology called the "World Turtle" holds that the world is supported by a giant turtle.[9]

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[9] "The Popular Science Monthly ." *Internet Archive*, [New York, Popular Science Pub. Co., Etc.], 1 Jan. 1877, https://archive.org/details/popularsciencemo10newy/page/544/mode/2up?q=regarded.

FIG. 4.—THE HINDOO EARTH.

the earth, he replies, it is natural that they should, because a circle is the most *perfect* line, because it has no ends, and it must therefore be described by the perfect stars. That the earth is the centre of the universe, and is at rest, is furthermore proved by Aristotle from theo-

Pictured above is an image of "The Hindoo Earth" by unknown illustrator, published in a journal called The Popular Science Monthly Volume 10, March 1877

Cinema has explored many of these theories, especially the ones that make for fantastical stories, like the idea that our reality is a dream, the premise of the film "Inception" where Leonardo DiCaprio's character navigates a dream world that is as vivid and tangible as the waking world. Another variation of this theory is what happens in Fight Club when it is revealed at the end that the entire movie was simply a figment of the protagonists' imagination. One of the ontological theories that has interested me the most is the simulation hypothesis, which I learned about in a Philosophy of Mind class. The simulation hypothesis is the idea that our reality is actually a computer generated simulation created by an advanced civilization.[10] Countless TV shows and movies either take place in or reference simulated realities. Movies like The Matrix show a dramatic but potentially realistic portrayal of what it would take for us to be in a simulation. Slavoj Zizek "suggests The Matrix is a philosopher's Rorschach inkblot test.

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[10] Bostrom, Nick. "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?" *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 211, 2003, pp. 243–255., https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309.

Philosophers see their favored philosophy in it: existentialism, Marxism, feminism, Buddhism, nihilism, postmodernism. Name your philosophical ism and you can find it in the matrix."[11] People's own individual ontologies can vary immensely, influenced by one's lived experience, religious and scientific beliefs, morals, and politics. Humans have a natural fascination with speculating about the nature of our reality, a topic that has gained widespread interest as media has begun exploring the topic more frequently. However, the portrayal of simulations in Hollywood movies as fantastical and exaggerated has relegated the hypothesis to the realm of science fiction, rather than considering its potential applicability to our reality.

Nevertheless, in recent decades the simulation hypothesis has garnered greater legitimacy, in part because of endorsements by notable figures such as Elon Musk and Neil deGrasse Tyson, who have posited that the theory may be less implausible than previously believed. The hypothesis gained widespread attention in the early 2000s with the publication of a paper by the philosopher Nick Bostrom. Bostrom's paper, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", presented the idea that it is possible that we are living in a simulated reality created by a more advanced civilization. He argued that if certain assumptions are made about the future of technology and the motivations of advanced civilizations, then it is likely that such a civilization would create a simulated reality that is indistinguishable from the "real" reality.[12] Elon Musk endorsed a version of Bostrom's hypothesis in a 2016 interview, stating "There's a one in billions chance [we're in] base reality. I think it's one in billions."[13] Base reality is a term

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[11] Irwin, William. *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Open Court, 2016.
[12] Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?," 1.

[13] Gohd, Chelsea. "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation? Elon Musk Thinks so." *Futurism*, Futurism, 13 Apr. 2017, https://futurism.com/are-we-living-in-a-computer-simulation-elon-musk-thinks-so.

used in debates about the nature of reality referring to the foundational 'real' world from which other simulations, if they exist, would be derived. While our current understanding only acknowledges our universe as base reality, some skeptics question this assumption, as it may be limited by human perception and understanding of reality. Of course it is natural to rely on our own perceptions, it may be limiting when considering theories about reality beyond our current understanding.

In a sense, Baudrillard, like Bostrom, also argues that we are living in a type of simulation, just one of our own creation. Baudrillard's hyperreality and the simulation hypothesis share some similarities in that they both suggest that our perception of reality may not be entirely accurate. The simulation hypothesis proposes that we are living in a simulated reality created by a more advanced civilization, while Baudrillard's hyperreality suggests that we live in a world where simulations and representations have replaced actual reality. One key difference between the two is that the simulation hypothesis is more focused on the possibility of an external entity creating a simulated reality, while Baudrillard's hyperreality is focused on the idea that our own representations of reality have become indiscernible from the real thing. Additionally, Baudrillard's hyperreality encompasses a broader range of ideas beyond just simulations, such as consumer culture and the media, while the simulation hypothesis is more narrowly focused on the concept of a simulated reality.

The inspiration for this paper struck me during the process of creating a short film, when a different kind of possible simulation was brought to my attention. As I brainstormed and shot my film, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with my creative choices. I felt as though the images and scenes I had filmed were cliché and unoriginal, that I had already seen them a million times before. Often, we experience "deja-vu" moments both in our everyday lives and onscreen, where

we recognize scenes or scenarios that we have seen before. As an avid movie enthusiast, I began to realize that bits and pieces of films I consumed that covered similar topics as the short film I was attempting to make had infected my own attempts at original creation. It was during this time that I coincidently began reading Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation.* Part of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality involves the idea that our perception of reality is shaped by pre-existing images and representations that we have encountered in media and popular culture.[14] These preconceptions can influence our understanding of reality and can cause us to confuse reality with simulations and representations of reality. In my case, I felt that I was so influenced by these pre-existing images that had already been established in film and media that it was difficult to create something that felt truly original. This experience demonstrated to me how Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality can influence perceptions and our ability to create new, authentic experiences.

Ironically, even this paper fell victim to the limitations of hyperreality that seep into academic research. While doing research, I frequently encountered articles that had already made the points I thought I had independently formulated in my mind. This left me feeling a constant sense of redundancy, like when you have your hand raised in class to say the answer, but the teacher calls on someone else before you, and they say it instead. Numerous papers have analyzed Baudrillard's influence on movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, with scholars writing about the interrelation between the three works since the movies' release in 1999 and 1998 respectively, before I was even born. Here are some examples of the titles of scholarly articles I found that ended up making the same points I was initially planning to make with this paper: *Hyperreality as a Theme and Technique in the Film The Truman Show, The Matrix and*

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[14] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3-4.

Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real, Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and "The Matrix Trilogy," and *Baudrillaud's Hyperreality in Cinema: The Truman Show.* The sheer amount of scholarship on an idea that I thought would make a unique argument caused me to feel that this paper was derivative at times. But ultimately it dawned on me that building upon the ideas of others is a norm and arguably even the nature of academia. I ended up using many of these works in my paper to back up my own points, frequently employing the quotes of the authors who originally made similar statements. I guess in the end, I created a paper that is a product of the papers that came before me, a somewhat simulated (though not plagiarized) representation of the ideas I wanted to convey. How fitting that is for my topic!

This paper will explore two different theories that both hypothesize we are living in a simulation, just different kinds. Our perception of "reality" is often scrambled by events we cannot comprehend. For example, we are constantly faced with images of terror in movies and the news, and sometimes we cannot tell which is which. Bostrom's simulation hypothesis and Baudrillard's hyperreality both suggest our perception of reality may not be entirely accurate. While the simulation hypothesis is focused on the possibility of an external entity creating a simulated reality, Baudrillard's hyperreality suggests that our own representations of reality have merged with and overtaken the real thing. I will also analyze media that feature these theories like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*. By examining how these theories appear in modern media, we can gain a better understanding of how they continue to shape our understanding of the world around us. I will continue including analysis from media theorists like Slavoj Zizek and Michael Parenti, who show how the line between reality and fiction can blur in our minds. The exploration of these theories can provide valuable insights into how we perceive and interact

with the world, and how our perception of reality is constantly evolving in the age of sophisticated technology and media.

<div align="center">**What is "Real"?**</div>

Philosophers tend to prescribe meaning to words that can diverge significantly from the colloquial understanding of the word. In this paper, philosophers Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek, and Nick Bostrom all use the word 'real' and 'reality,'which are often used interchangeably in conversation, in slightly different ways. The term "real" is commonly used in colloquial language to refer to what is objective, factual, and not imaginary or illusory. Bostrom's use of these words is probably the closest to this. Bostrom writes in his paper, "If we are living in a simulation, then the cosmos that we are observing is just a tiny piece of the totality of physical existence…while the world we see is in some sense "real," it is not located at the fundamental level of reality."[15] However, in Baudrillard, Lacan, and Zizek's critical theory, the term "real" takes on a more nuanced and multifaceted meaning, which differs from its colloquial usage. In philosophy, the term "real" is often used in relation to questions of subjectivity and identity, the term "reality" is often used in relation to questions of ontology and epistemology. In other words, the term "reality" is often used to refer to the nature of the world itself, while the term "real" is often used to refer to the ways in which we experience and understand that world.

Baudrillard's use of the term real begins to diverge from common usage. Baudrillard's "real" is the objective reality that exists separately from our perceptions of it, which can be muddied by cultural and social factors. He argues that we do not live in the 'real,' that our reality has been so overrun with media, consumer culture, and technology that we instead live in something called the 'hyperreal,'a simulated oversaturated version of reality.[16]

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[15] Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?," 11.

[16] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-2.

Though Lacan will not be featured in this paper, Lacan's idea of the real is, in grossly under simplified terms, a dimension of experience that is beyond our conscious understanding and representation. It is something that cannot be fully captured by language or symbolization, and it exists outside of the symbolic order of language and culture. In Lacanian theory, the real is what lies beyond the imaginary and the symbolic, and it represents the limit of human understanding and knowledge.[17]

Confusingly enough, Slavoj Zizek's book which is referenced multiple times in this paper is titled "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," referencing Baudrillard's idea of the "desert of the real" but when using the term "Real," in the work is referring to Lacan's definition of the real. This paper will mostly be grappling with the way the terms "real" and "reality" are conceived of in ontology rather than psychoanalysis. Of course, there are crossovers in these differing definitions. The multiple connotations of the word "real" inherently challenge notions of objectivity and truth. Lacan's concept of the "real" implies that certain aspects of our existence lie beyond our comprehension, implying that there are many facets of reality that will forever elude our understanding, and whose essence will remain the subject of ongoing debate.

External World Skepticism

The basis for believing in any kind of simulation theory is "external world skepticism," the philosophical position that we cannot know anything about the external world beyond our own minds. This position is based on the idea that all of our knowledge is mediated by our perceptions and that there is no direct access to the external world. Instead, we only have access

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[17] Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981.

to our own subjective experience of the world, which may or may not correspond to an objective reality. Most people are not external world skeptics, and are confident that the world around them exists. After all, most people can see, smell, and touch all the objects surrounding them at any given time. This makes them seem very real to us. Our ability to use our senses to interact with our environment seems evidence enough to prove that our surroundings exist. However, our senses do not always produce the most accurate assumptions. We frequently mishear things, and optical illusions can easily deceive our eyes. Despite our faulty tools for perceiving the world around us, most cling to the notion that the world around them is real because the alternative is too terrifying even to consider. Having doubts about the accuracy of our perceptions in determining the nature of our reality is the crux of external world skepticism, a position that encompasses a variety of other theories. For example, Cartesian skepticism is a form of external world skepticism. Descartes' famous quote, "Cogito, ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am," comes from his resolution to reject all of his knowledge except that which he could be 100% sure of. Descartes ultimately determined that all of his knowledge could be false, except for the premise that he existed, because there had to be something questioning his knowledge. That thing was him and his mind. External world skepticism encompasses views that say we cannot have certain knowledge of the external world, since our senses may be deceiving us or our perceptions may be unreliable.[18]

Under external world and Cartesian skepticism, hypothetically, you and everyone you know could be a brain in a vat that is getting sent signals tricking you into thinking you have a direct sensory experience. Everything could feel as tangible as it does right now. You could

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[18] Comesaña, Juan, and Peter Klein. "Skepticism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 5 Dec. 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/.

interact with other people, eat things, and do whatever you usually do. You would never suspect that you were just a brain in a vat but with a simulated body in a simulated world. However, we cannot know for sure there is an external world because we don't know if we would experience the world differently if our brain were in a vat vs. having a direct unsimulated sensory experience.[19] I have never had my brain stimulated in a vat, so I don't know whether this experience would feel like my typical sensory experience. Likewise, we would not be able to tell the difference if we were in a simulated reality rather than an unsimulated reality. Therefore, we cannot rely on our subjective experience to determine whether or not we live in a simulated reality or are simulated ourselves.

Many artists have referenced questions about the nature of reality and external world skepticism in their work both directly and indirectly. In Fiona Apple's 1999 hit song *Paper Bag*, she sings "He said "It's all in your head," And I said, "So's everything," but he didn't get it."[20] These lyrics can be interpreted as a nod to solipsism, another form of external world skepticism, as it acknowledges that our experience of reality is subjective and filtered through our own perceptions. Solipsism is the idea that the only thing that can be known for certain is one's own existence, and that one cannot be sure that anything else exists outside of one's own mind. This idea raises the question of how we can ever be certain that the reality we experience is not just a construct of our own minds. Solipsism and simulations are related in that they both challenge the notion of an objective reality that exists independently of our subjective experiences. Solipsism suggests that reality is entirely dependent on our perception, while simulations suggest that

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[19] Putnam, Hilary. "Brains in a vat." In *Reason, Truth, and History*, 51-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

[20] Apple, Fiona. "Paper Bag." *When the Pawn…*. Epic Records. 1999. CD.

reality might be entirely artificial, constructed by a higher intelligence or technological civilization. In some ways, solipsism and simulations can be seen as two sides of the same coin, both pointing to the possibility that what we experience as reality may not be the ultimate truth. Hyperreality is also compatible with external world skepticism, as it asserts that the existence of an objective reality has been undermined by the proliferation of simulations and signs in contemporary society. Hyperreality can even be seen as a form of external world skepticism in that it challenges the traditional assumption that there is a stable reality that exists independently of human experience. Instead, hyperreality suggests that reality itself is a product of human symbols and representations, such that our experience of the world is always already mediated by these symbols. Hyperreality manipulates our senses which can bring up questions regarding the authenticity and validity of our experience. The hijacking of our senses Baudrillard proposes with his theory confirms the worries of external world and Cartesian skeptics, that what we see and experience is not what really is.

Part One: Baudrillard's Theory of Hyperreality

Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality refers to the idea that in our contemporary society, we are surrounded by representations or simulations that have replaced the actual reality. This means that we are no longer able to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Hyperreality is created through media, technology, and consumer culture, which constantly bombard us with images and messages that shape our understanding of the world. These images and messages are often idealized or exaggerated, presenting a distorted version of reality. For example, the images of a perfect body shape or lifestyle presented in magazines, social media, or advertisements are not real. They are constructed and manipulated to fit an idealized version of reality that we are

encouraged to aspire to. This can create a sense of dissatisfaction with our own lives and bodies, as we strive to live up to an unattainable standard. Baudrillard argues that this hyperreality has become so pervasive that we have lost touch with actual reality. We have become so immersed in the simulations that we have forgotten what it means to experience things directly. We have become spectators of our own lives, living through screens and representations rather than engaging with the world around us.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard uses the example of a fable by Jorge Luis Borges to explain how our understanding of reality has changed. In the fable, cartographers create a map so detailed that it covers the territory exactly. However, as the empire declines, the map also falls into ruins. Baudrillard argues that this fable is a beautiful allegory of simulation, or the process of creating simulations or copies of reality. Baudrillard then uses the metaphor of the map and the territory to explain how the relationship between reality and simulation has changed. In the past, we used maps and other abstractions to understand the territory or reality. But today, the map or simulation has become the basis for reality. We no longer refer to a pre-existing reality, but instead create our reality through simulations and models.

The first time the term "hyperreal" comes up in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he writes that "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 reality: a hyperreal."[21] He goes on to explain that today, simulation has become even more complex. Instead of creating copies of reality, we now create models that generate a "real" without any original or objective reality. This is what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal. The concept of the "hyperreal" is a type of simulacra, a term

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[21] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-2.

featured in the book's title that is derived from the Latin word "simulacrum," meaning likeness or image. The term is used to describe a copy or imitation that no longer has an original referent or has lost its connection to reality, like the map in Borges' fable. As previously mentioned, an example of simulacra that Baudrillard emphasizes is Disneyland and other theme parks, which he believes represent a hyperreal version of American life, rather than a mere representation of it.[22] He contends that people think of theme parks like Disneyland as places they can go to escape the toils of reality. However, in *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard argues that the imaginary world of Disneyland is supposed to make those who visit believe that the rest of America is real in comparison, when in reality it is all a part of the same simulacrum and hyperreal order. California and America are full of miniature "Disneylands."

Baudrillard pinpoints one such mini Disneyland-esque simulacrum in the Getty Villa, a mansion built to store an oil tycoon's overflowing art collection turned art museum, perched overlooking the Pacific ocean on a Malibu hillside. The building was built in a Roman style and mimics the design of other ancient European sites, despite being built in 1954. Baudrillard quips that "when Paul Getty gathers Rembrandts, Impressionists, and Greek statues together in a Pompeian villa on the pacific coast, he is following American logic, the pure baroque logic of Disneyland.[23] There are hundreds of examples of these types of simulacra across America. One of the biggest "Disneylands" of hyperreality according to Baudrillard is America: the country and its image. In his book *America* he writes that "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it was already achieved." What Baudrillard means by this is that America's dominant image of

[22] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-2.

[23] Baudrillard, *America*, 110.

exceptionalism which is upheld by the media and generally accepted in the global collective consciousness is too big for its britches. This pervasive representation obscures many of the problems faced in America. He continues that "The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model."[24] Since Baudrillard is from France, he thinks he can view American hyperreality from a more objective perspective. However, even he cannot escape the pull of the hyperreal.

Baudrillard writes that "In Los Angeles, Europe has disappeared. As Isabelle Huppert says: 'They have everything. They don't need anything. Admittedly, they envy us our past and our culture and admire them, but deep down to them we are sort of an elegant Third World.'"[25] After studying abroad in Copenhagen (the birthplace of philosopher Soren Kierkegaard) and traveling across Europe, I have come to realize just how new America, the "New World," is in comparison to the "Old World." There is no one day Amazon delivery in most places in Europe. European metropolitan cities have their own hyperreal simulacra in the form of advertisements, but they are smaller and more discreet. There are fewer examples of in your face simulacra in Europe, due to the older architecture and strict advertising laws. Hyperreality still manifests in Europe in other forms like with the increasing use of social media and digital technology. However, especially to Americans, Europe retains a quaintness and charm reminiscent of a bygone era, rendering it a highly desirable vacation destination. Young Europeans I encountered while abroad had a variety of opinions on America. When Danes who had never been to America would ask me questions about it, they were often shocked at the answers I provided. School

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[24] Baudrillard, *America*, 28.

[25] Baudrillard, *America*, 88.

shootings, the Super Bowl, and regional American cuisines were all foreign concepts to Europeans who had only seen references to such things on social media or in movies. One time I was trying to explain to a Dane what biscuits and gravy was and looked it up on my phone to provide a visual aid. As he scrolled through the Google images he began laughing hysterically because of how "absurd" it looked. To me, the image just looked like biscuits and gravy, but to him it looked like a lumpy, greasy mass. Another time, after explaining the traditions Americans do for Thanksgiving, one of my Danish friends said "America sounds like a fake place." My friend's comment seemed to be a recognition of the hyperreal nature of American culture, where our basic traditions are transformed into simulated experiences and sensationalized to the rest of the world. The distorted and hyperbolic image of America disorients its citizens but intrigues foreigners, curious to experience American unreality for themselves.

Zizek quotes novelist Christopher Isherwood who explains that the"unreality of American daily life can be exemplified in the motel room: 'American motels are unreal!...they are deliberately designed to be unreal…the Europeans hate us because we've retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate."[26] I am not exactly sure if he is saying this as a joke or not, though Zizek is known for his ironic writing style. Either way, the phrase "we've retired to live inside our advertisements" stuck with me, bringing to mind the Betty Crocker cookbooks and matching kitchen appliances that line the shelves of my Grandma's kitchen. The presence of these consumer goods, kitchen gadgets that accommodate any need, creates a simulated, caricature-like picture of the American nuclear home. It is so easy for me to picture a stereotypical middle class American kitchen, complete with kitschy wallpaper, stained gingham aprons, and even a cartoonish pie cooling on a windowsill. I have

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[26] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 14.

come across this image a thousand times in infomercials for said kitchen gadgets, movies and TV shows, and even in real life in the kitchens of friends and family. The image is so pervasive that it seems too perfect, too manufactured. Yet we continue to buy into the Hollywood simulacrum of the perfect American kitchen, as if buying the latest blender or kitchen gadget will transform our lives into the idyllic scenes in media. Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality explains how our desires for these commodities have created a world where simulated versions of things are often more appealing than genuine things.

Part Two: Simulacra and Simulation Hypothesis

Baudrillard's concept of simulation refers to the way he believes our society has constructed a hyperreal world that is realer than reality itself, disintegrating the wall between what is real and what is fake. Baudrillard uses the term "simulation" in a more nuanced way than the layman. When you mention living in a simulation they probably think of Nick Bostrom's "simulation theory," the idea that our reality is a simulation. This theory has some similarities to the simulation portrayed in *The Matrix* and will be explained further in this chapter.

A Brief Explanation of Simulation Hypothesis

Whereas external world skepticism simply questions whether there is an external world, the theory of simulationism posits that we live in a simulated world. The more specific concept of simulation hypothesis has only formed in the past few decades. It gained widespread attention in the early 2000s with the publication of a paper by the philosopher Nick Bostrom. Bostrom's paper, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", presented the idea that it is possible that we are living in a simulated reality created by a more advanced civilization. He argued that if certain assumptions are made about the future of technology and the motivations of advanced

civilizations, then it is likely that such a civilization would create a simulated reality that you would not be able to tell apart from the "real" reality. Nick Bostrom's argument proposes that it is more likely than not that we are living in a computer simulation. The argument is based on three premises:

1. The human species will likely become technologically advanced enough to create simulations of conscious beings with advanced levels of intelligence and self-awareness.

2. If the first premise is true, then it is likely that there will be many such simulations created, and the simulated conscious beings will themselves create more simulations, leading to a "simulation chain."

3. If the second premise is true, then it is more likely that we are living in a simulation than in a "base reality" because the number of simulated conscious beings would be much greater than the number of beings in base reality.

Bostrom's argument suggests that if we accept these premises, it is rational to conclude that we are most likely living in a computer simulation created by a more advanced civilization.[27] While the argument does not provide definitive proof that we are living in a simulation, it challenges traditional notions of reality and suggests that our perception of the world may be shaped by forces beyond our understanding.

Simulation theorists believe that we very well could be living in a simulation, a manufactured world like those that exist in video games. For this to be true, simulating some level of consciousness would be required depending on the type of simulation created. There are

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[27] Bostrom, "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?".

many different theories about the kind of simulation we may be living in and our role in it. There are two different types of simulated beings-biosims and "pure sims." A biosim can exist outside of the simulation. Biosims could be a brain in a vat or someone who could move in and out of the simulation. A pure sim is a being who only exists in the simulation. This means their entire mind and consciousness would also have to be simulated.[28] *The Matrix* features both types of sims. In the movie the humans who are connected to a simulated reality, while their physical bodies are kept in pods as a source of energy for intelligent machines are similar to the concept of a "brain in a vat" biosim. The movie also has examples of pure sims, the sentient programs that exist purely within the simulation, such as the Agents who police the Matrix and the Oracle who helps guide the protagonist, Neo. Whether a simulation includes one or the other or both, these beings would be very complicated to create.

While right now it may be difficult to envision a world that is technologically advanced enough to do this, the way technologically has advanced in such a short period of time legitimizes the possibility. In Ray Kurzweil's book *The Singularity is Near,* he explains that technological innovation occurs on an exponential growth curve. This means technological progress can increase at an accelerating rate because as new technologies are developed they can be used to create even more advanced technologies at a faster pace than before. As this progress accelerates, it can become increasingly difficult to predict the future of technology and the impacts it may have on society.[29] With this curve in mind and witnessing the progress that humanity has made on producing artificial intelligence technology, it is easier to understand how

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[28] Chalmers, David J. (2022). *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. New York: W. W. Norton.
[29] Kurzweil, Ray. The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

it may be possible for our civilization to have the technology to create a simulation with beings that are capable of consciousness.

Computer Simulation Blockers

There are two big reasons why a civilization would be unable to create a simulation. These are called "simulation blockers." The first simulation blocker is that creating a large-scale simulated reality would be extremely difficult. The amount of computing power necessary to operate a full-scale simulated world would be immense. At our current level of technological development, this seems unthinkable. We already need massive "server farms" (huge rooms of computers) just for running the blockchain. Now imagine if we had to simulate the blockchain's consciousness! That would take a lot of servers that we do not have given our current operating level. Though we run small-scale simulations in video games like GTA or the sims, running a large simulation with conscious beings is unfathomable.

Though we know we have a long way to go until we are technologically capable of running our own simulation, we have no idea what immense technological progress other civilizations may have made. The only example of a civilization's ability to evolve technologically is ours. We have no idea how universes with other beings may have developed technologically. Maybe it took some societies only decades to advance to the point where we are today because they are naturally way smarter than us. However, if our technological advancement continues, we should be able to get to a point where we have the computing power to sustain a large-scale simulation, though we do not know how long it will take. But many strides have been made with optimizing computer power even in the last few decades, with engineers figuring out how to make an entire computer so small it can fit into our iPhones.

Presumably, with enough technological advancement, we would be able to optimize computer power so it would take less and create a very efficient fancy machine that can generate energy at a very high rate. Another possibility is that the civilization powering the simulation may be rich in natural resources that can provide them with immense energy.

Say that it was hypothetically possible to run a simulation, but it would take us at least five hundred years to reach that point in technological development. Even if this were true, humanity faces many existential threats that may cause us to go extinct before we reach that point. The second simulation blocker, argued by a variety of philosophers including Bostrom in the paper, claim that humankind might wipe itself out before reaching the level of technological advancement necessary to run a simulation. In the amount of time required for technical research to create a simulation, humanity could contribute to its demise through climate change or nuclear warfare. Humans could accidentally create a deadly robot that kills everyone, an AI that becomes conscious and kills all the humans, or a supervirus that kills everyone. Many of these scenarios are highly likely now. Who knows what it will be like 100 years from now. There are many extinction scenarios out of our control, like a meteor hitting earth. There are many genuine threats to humanity as it is, and seeing as we still have a while to go before we have the technological capacity to run a simulation, this begs whether any societies could ever actually make it to that point.

Despite the potential obstacles that stand in the way of creating a simulation, the concept of simulated reality continues to captivate human imagination. The theory of hyperreality and simulation hypothesis are both interesting thought experiments that explore scenarios which challenge our existing beliefs about reality. It is no wonder that these concepts have been explored in numerous movies and works of fiction. While we may feel a sense of distance from

the simulated reality depicted in films like *The Matrix*, there are instances where our experience of reality can be shockingly similar to catastrophic events portrayed in movies.

Reality vs. Fiction in The Matrix, 9/11, and The Truman Show

As aforementioned, The 1999 film *The Matrix* famously comments explicitly on both simulation theory and hyperreality. In fact, the protagonist Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne, directly references Baudrillard's work in one scene when he explains to Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, that the Matrix is a computer-generated reality that people mistake for the real world. Morpheus states, "Welcome to the desert of the real," which is a direct quote from *Simulacra and Simulation*. In another scene, Neo is shown reading a copy of the book. The film's dystopian imagery and futuristic scenes do a good job of making viewers feel a comfortable distance from the simulated nature of reality in the world of *The Matrix*. However, in Slavoj Zizek's book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, he contends that our separation from disastrous or fantastical cinematic events may not be as large as we may like. He writes that in *The Matrix* "when the hero awakens into 'real reality', he sees a desolate landscape littered with burnt out ruins-what remains of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader, Morpheus, utters the ironic greeting: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real. Was it not something of a similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real-for us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not be but reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions."[30] By comparing the catastrophic event of the 9/11 attack with images of apocalyptic destruction we have seen in the news, Zizek emphasizes how in some ways, our experience of reality can be collapsed with what we see on screen. When we think about how where we get factual news

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[30] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real,* 15.

about the real people in our lives and events in the world is the same place we witness the false realities that occur in TV and cinema, Zizek's idea starts to make sense.

Baudrillaurd has also used 9/11 as an example of a hyperreal simulation in his book *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers.* In the book, he argues that "the collapse of the Twin Towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. A surplus of violence is not sufficient enough to make an opening onto reality because reality is a principle and this principle has been lost. Reality and fiction have become a tangled mess." When he speaks about the principle of reality being lost, he is speaking about the lack of the "real" in the hyperreality we live in. This lack results in our inability to experience real events, as those events are mediated through images and representations circulated in the media. The event itself is lost, and all that is left are the images, which are our primary mode of perceiving the event. Indeed, whenever September 11 is mentioned, immediately the image of the two towers on fire that has been recirculated so frequently it has almost become a stock photo is what comes to my mind. Conjuring this image in my head feels like the same process I use when I think back to images I have seen of explosions and destruction in movies. He furthers that "The fascination with the terrorist act is first and foremost the fascination for an image (the jubilatory and catastrophic consequences being themselves mostly imaginary). In this case, therefore, the real is added to the image as a bonus of terror, an extra shiver. Not only is it terrifying, but it is also real. Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the shiver of the image being added, the image comes first, and the shiver of the real is added to it "[31] Here Baudrillard argues that the order of our understanding of an event is mutated, as when we first perceive the image of 9/11 we see it objectively as we would see other images we are presented with, like the images in movies. It is

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[31] Baudrillard, Jean, et al. *The Spirit of Terrorism; And Other Essays*. Verso, 2012, 413.

after the initial observation of the image that we evaluate whether it is real or fictional, but even once we add "the shiver of the real" it still does not really change that much about how we perceive the image, only adding a deeper dimension when we stop and really think about it.

He continues that "The images of New York, while they radicalize the world situation, have radicalized the relationship between image and reality. Amid the uninterrupted profusion of banal images and hyped events, the New York terrorist act has at once resuscitated images and events…What, then is a real event if everywhere the image, fiction, virtuality perfuse this very reality? In the present case, many believed (with a certain relief, perhaps) they saw the resurgence of the real, and of the violence of the real, within a universe pretending to be virtual…So did reality actually overtake fiction? If it appears to have done so, it is only because reality absorbed the energy of fiction and itself became fiction. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction and real events are jealous of images, a sort of duel between them, to see who will be the most inconceivable."[32] In this paragraph, Baudrillard nods to the feelings of being reawakened to the real that some people experienced upon seeing the images of the attacks. We are so frequently hounded with "banal images," many of which are fictitious, from TV shows and movies, that it now takes a lot for us to see something that shocks us. Despite the ability of the few photos that can give the viewer goosebumps like the images from 9/11, Baudrillard contends that in these instances, the real event became an image and was nonetheless experienced the same way we experience something inconceivable that happens in fiction. These events and the images that emerged from them are so inconceivable, such a departure from the comfortable monotony of the images we consume every day, that they extend past the real and become absorbed into the realm of fiction.

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[32] Baudrillard et al. *The Spirit of Terrorism,* 413.

One image that comes to mind that also holds the same power as the image of the twin towers burning is the image of the drowned Syrian toddler who washed up on the shore in Turkey after the boat he was on with his family trying to escape Syria capsized. This image circulated globally in 2015 after going viral using the hashtag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik which means "humanity washed ashore" in Turkish.[33] Zizek makes a pointed commentary about how the media portrays violence in developed vs. undeveloped countries, writing that "the same 'derealization' of the horror went on after the WTC collapse: while the number of victims-3,000-is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see- no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people…in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of gruesome detail."[34] Clearly, the media has a selective portrayal of events, tending to sensationalize the tragedies of Third World countries that seem far away. Zizek proposes that the differences in news coverage is likely due to the fact that American media wants to maintain the image of America as a powerful and stable country, a place where violence and chaos is rare. The manipulation of truth that occurs when news media construct certain narratives is concerning and highly relevant to the way we interpret the events that occur in our reality.

Another theorist that views the news as constructed is cultural critic Michael Parenti. In his book *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media* that news stories are often presented in a way that evokes emotions like fear and anger, which can further control and manipulate the public. He argues that media conglomerates have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo

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[33] "Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 2 Sept. 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows -tragic-plight-of-refugees.

[34] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real,* 13.

and promoting the interests of the ruling class. To achieve this, they use sensationalism and emotional manipulation to keep audiences glued to their screens and distract them from important issues. According to Parenti, this helps to maintain a passive and docile population that is less likely to question the actions of those in power. With Zizek's comments about the significance of the September 11 attacks in mind, it becomes apparent that the media's presentation of this event may have played a role in creating ongoing fear among the American public. The media's coverage of the event, with its constant replaying of footage of the towers collapsing and the use of sensationalist language, may have contributed to a sense of unreality and spectacle that obscured the complex geopolitical factors that led to the attacks. Parenti's analysis of the news suggests that the media's presentation of events often fails to reflect the true complexities of the world and instead promotes a distorted and simplified version of reality that serves the interests of the powerful.[35] Those who make up the "powerful" in question in our reality depends on who you ask. Some people align with Parenti, believing that the corporate conglomerates that control the media are brainwashing society to think a certain way through the way they present news and advertise. It is no secret that advertisements do impact what we decide to buy through strategic product placement and celebrity endorsements. One research paper on this heavily studied matter referred to advertisements as "secret seducers" in how they can imperceptibly influence us to buy certain products as a form of low-level psychological manipulation.[36] Others believe that it is the government that is manipulating us, though this frame of mind is most often categorized amongst conspiracy theories. To give some credence to

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[35] Parenti, Michael. Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

[36] Research Gate, *Advertisements as Secret Seducers vs Consumer Psychology.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330912597_Advertisements_as_Secret_Seducers_Vs_Consumer_Psychology.

this belief, we can think about how politicians also use the power of advertising on TV and in media to appeal to voters which can have similar results to the changes in attitudes that product advertising has. Of course, on the far end of this spectrum are groups like Qanon which engage in a complete rejection of mainstream sources of information and have a deep mistrust of the government and media. This diversity of mindsets goes to show how many different ways people conceive of the nature of the media they come into contact with and how it impacts their reality. Some people believe in a combination of the above ideas about who may have a heavier hand in shaping the images we come into contact with. Some people do not think about it at all. However, representations of reality being mediated by powerful forces in film may serve to plant seeds in viewers' minds about the possibility that their reality is not exactly how it appears to them. In *The Matrix*, the powerful forces in question were machines that had surpassed humans and enslaved them. The machines had created a simulated seemingly normal world; the matrix, to keep the humans under control while using them as a power source. Interestingly enough, the dominating machine race in the matrix was created by humans to be used as labor, but the machines became sentient and overran humanity. While seemingly fantastical, this element of the plot is similar to theories put forward by Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near*. The word "singularity" itself refers to the hypothetical future point in time when artificial intelligence exceeds human intelligence and develops the capacity to improve itself without human intervention. While Kurzweil does not necessarily predict that a Matrix-like robot war and consequent simulation would transpire if we reached this point, he does think it has extreme and unknown implications for human civilization.

The Matrix came out one year after *The Truman Show*, another movie that explores similar ideas about constructed realities but whose powerful forces in charge were humans rather

than machines. *The Truman Show* (1998) directed by Peter Weir is another well known film that features an explicit simulation. This movie was preceded by a book with a similar plot, Phillip K Dick's science fiction book *Time Out of Join*t which told the story of a man living a normal life in the Californian suburbs who comes to find out the entire town is simulated. The movie follows Truman Burbank, a man who unknowingly lives in a television show that has been broadcast to the world since his birth. His entire life, including his relationships and experiences, are orchestrated by the show's human creator and producer, Christof. As Truman begins to question his reality and the people in his life, he sets out to escape the show and find the truth. The Truman Show is a critique of modern society's obsession with media, entertainment, and hyperreality. It portrays Truman as a symbol of the masses who are subjugated by media corporations that manufacture hyperrealities to distract people from the real issues of their lives.

In the article *Hyperreality as a Theme and Technique in the Film The Truman Show*, the author Susee Bharathi references Baudrillard's argument about media manipulation stating "the Baudrillard perspective states that the Gulf War and 9/11 are not real incidents that happened as the media showed" she goes on to explain that media makes the audience believe that historical incidents happened the way they presented them, but due to capitalism those explanations become products for corporations. Bharathi writes that there "is a kind of fake idea that everything functions according to customers." In reality, it is the corporations and the media that control our desires and create desire for their products." In the movie, Christof is lying to audiences about Truman's experience, hiding the heavy hand he has in crafting Truman's life. While Bharathi says Truman is a puppet to Christof, she also says that the viewers of The Truman Show in the movie are themselves puppets of the media, believing that the content of the

show they are being fed is Truman's real, unscripted life, when all the events in his life and conversations he has are actually artificially created by Christof.[37]

Truman's life is a hyperreal construct, devoid of any authentic emotions, experiences, or relationships. Truman's interactions are reminiscent of those that occur in reality TV, fully scripted and lacking in truth or real meaning. The difference is that Truman is not in on the fabricated nature of them. His life is an endless cycle of routine events, controlled by a team of technicians, who orchestrate every aspect of his life, from his daily commute to his love life. Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality is visible throughout the movie, especially in the artificial world created for Truman. His reality is entirely mediated through the television production, and he believes that his surroundings are real. However, everything around him is a simulacrum, an imitation of the real world with no substance. Truman is a victim of the media's manipulations and is powerless to escape from it. This idea echoes Baudrillard's belief that modern society has become so obsessed with the hyperreal that it has lost touch with the real world.

The film questions the existence of a "real world" in general, as Bharathi also posits that "*The Truman Show* references three different "realities:" "the hyperreal world of Truman; the outer 'reality,' which is also a movie universe; then the real 'real' – the one we are watching the movie from." Through showing these multiple 'realities' the film leads the viewer to question whether the reality they perceive they live in is actually as it seems. This brings up multiple concerns for resolving simulation concerns. If a viewer granted that it was possible for our reality to be simulated by another entity, then this film also brings up the confusing possibility of

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[37] Bharathi, Susee T. "Hyperreality as a Theme and Technique in the Film Truman Show." *Global Media Journal* , 2018, https://doi.org/https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/hyperreality-as-a-theme-and-technique-in-the-film-truman-show.php?aid=86821#1.

"nested simulations." If we lived in a simulation that was created by those living in another simulation, then breaking out of our simulation would just mean breaking into another simulation, and we would be no closer to the "real." She further writes that "The first step to escape from such a false and hyper real world is self-realization. The movie tells us to break the false, media-fabricated culture built around us. The central irony of this idea is that the movie 'Truman Show' itself is a form of media; a form that wants us to see manipulations of media by manipulating us with interesting script and characters."

The film can be seen as an allegory for the concept of simulation theory. Slavoj Zizek further contends that "the underlying experience of *Time Out of Joint* and *The Truman Show* is that the very late-capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyperreality, in a way unreal, substanceless, deprived of material inertia."[38] Even worse than just causing us to doubt our understanding of our life is that the existence of a simulation zaps the meaning from our lives entirely. That our relationships and feelings are no better than imaginary, existing in a dimension that has no ties to anything real. One of the most emotional betrayals in the film is when the audience, and later Truman, learns that his best friend, Marlon, is actually just an actor tasked with preventing Truman from discovering the truth about his life. The premise of finding out those we love are either not real or are feigning their relationship to us is quite nauseating indeed.

While we view ourselves as different from those in the movie that watch the Truman show, there are layers of metareference that draw similarities between us and the movie audience. For example, both us and the viewers in the movie are watching a piece of media called *The Truman Show*. The product placements in the Truman show that are being advertised

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[38] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real,* 13.

to Christof's audience are being advertised to us as well. The overlap between us and the audience of *The Truman Show* in the movie is meant to demonstrate how we are just as susceptible to the media's trickery and manipulation of events as the movie universe audience. *The Truman Show* also explores aspects of explicit simulation hypothesis. Truman's life is entirely simulated by another entity, with the entire town and its residents playing a calculated role in his life. Even the natural world, like the sun and moon, is simulated, and Truman is unaware of the deception. The film begs the question: is it possible that we could be Truman? Truman's experience suggests that the lines between reality and simulation can become blurred, and that our understanding of the world around us may be shaped by constructed experiences and media representations as Truman's is.

Truman's gradual realization of the constructed nature of his reality parallels the idea that we too may be living in a simulated world, unable to discern the true nature of our existence. After watching movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, there is always a moment of disorientation. These types of films can challenge our fundamental beliefs and encourage viewers to think critically about what they believe to be true about their own lives and the world around them.

Do We Live in a Simulation? Does it Matter?

Who knows. And maybe but maybe not. Maybe we will find out when we die. These questions will never stop plaguing humans as we will always have a natural curiosity to know more about the world we live in. Because none of the answers to these questions can ever be truly confirmed or observed. Exploring ontology through investigating hyperreality and simulation whether by watching films that explore those themes or reading my paper can be uncomfortable. But, acknowledging that the true nature of reality may be beyond our imagination may also be liberating. Contemplating big questions like these can be a humbling experience. It reminds us that our daily troubles are just a part of a larger, infinitely more complex and mysterious picture. We are constantly bombarded by events and phenomena that seem irrational and absurd. By acknowledging that our understanding of reality may be limited or flawed, we become more open to the unexpected and the unknown.

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