

# Postmodern Philosophy and Contemporary Art\*

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**Abstract**—The author of the article reviews the major ideas of the postmodern philosophy that have found a visual embodiment in the artistic forms of contemporary art. In this context, the author analyzes the conceptual understanding of modern society, the position and tasks of an individual, included in the postmodern social processes. Special attention is paid to J. Baudrillard's concept on the "hyperreal" essence of the social. There are some images by contemporary artists included, which, according to the author, illustrate the proposed philosophical ideas.

**Keywords**—postmodernism; contemporary art; hyperreality; simulacrum; sociality

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article is an opportunity to bring into light some concepts of the postmodern philosophers (mainly the French ones) in their comprehension of the contemporary society in the categories of postmodernity and how these ideas were and are implemented in the forms of art.

The author of the article focuses only on the following postmodern concepts:

- Postmodern consideration of the society of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and the relevant understanding of sociality;
- Jean Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and simulacra;
- Anthropological concepts, because an individual is included in a society and is able to define himself.

## II. POSTMODERNISM: ANALYSIS OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL LIFE RELATING TO ART

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the philosophers encountered a new issue to scrutinize: whether the contemporary society has undergone such a radical transformation that there's a need to use the completely new forms of theorizing, detached from those of modernity, in order to describe the qualitatively new stage of the society's development thus entering the age of postmodernity, or, whether the contemporaneity is an unfinished sociocultural

process of modernity, that is more of a successor to the previous forms of economic, social, cultural and other spheres of social life.

From the standpoint of the classical representatives of the postmodern philosophy (we are referring primarily to the French philosophers of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), the world has changed so drastically, that it demands a completely different way of analysis, narrative, and mental operations. The postmodern philosophers offer their vision of society, identifying it as the postmodern society and describing it through a number of features that distinguish it from the previous era of modernity.

Postmodernism as a cultural-historical era (the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries) is characterized by the exhaustion of the issues and values of the metanarratives of modernity (therefore having the prefix "post") and the decline of the relevance of the social institutions as forms of the implementation of the values. Postmodernity isn't applied to any given society, but strictly to the postindustrial, the so-called "information" one.

Postmodernism emerged in the mid-1950s in the USA as an artistic phenomenon in the fields of architecture, sculpture, and art. Already at this stage, we may spotlight the eclecticism and hybridization of the styles, inherent to the postmodern contemporary art. The canon is the absence of any canon. We may witness this in numerous installations, performances, and the works of art from the postmodern era (ref the works of Francis Bacon and Paul McCarthy).



Fig. 1. Installation by Paul McCarthy.

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Having emerged as a phenomenon of the Western spiritual life, in the 1990s-postmodernism spread across the

borders, giving rise to non-Western reflexive forms, e.g. Chinese.

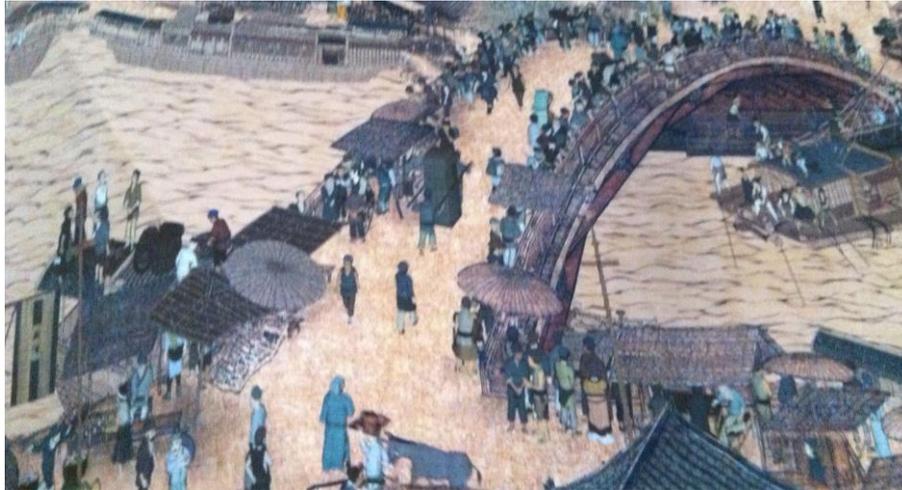


Fig. 2. Part of the installation at the Shanghai Museum of Modern Arts. Photo by the author of the article.

In philosophy, postmodernism was formed in the 1980s as a special ideological and theoretical course associated with a certain unity of philosophical, theoretical, and methodological approaches. Having covered all areas of social and humanitarian knowledge, philosophical postmodernism started to influence various spheres of public life – politics, cultural, international affairs to name a few.

In a search for significant events that had laid the foundation of postmodernity, many researchers point to the “exact” date of birth being the May 1968 student demonstrations in France, that took place under weird slogans like “Be realistic, demand the impossible!”. “The experience of the impossible” found its concentrated expression in the deconstructive certainty of postmodernism (J. Derrida).

“Postmodernism” is a theoretical construct, including social and philosophical teachings, concepts in art, linguistics, architecture, and literature, analyzing the postmodern society.

The social theories of postmodernism of the late 20th century are the reflection on the fundamental changes occurring in the socio-cultural, economic, and political spheres of society.

The common grounds for a postmodern society that are present in the works of the “classics” of the postmodern philosophy, including Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, noted the fragmentation of the world and social order. Zygmunt Bauman, Lyotard, Baudrillard emphasized the increasing distrust of people to political institutions, the reduction of the civil and political activities, the huge influence of mass media on people and groups. All of that “tears” institutions and social formations out of the general order and integrity. Social structure loses stability, becomes discrete, fragmented, mosaic, paradoxical; the logic of unified communications is broken.

J-F. Lyotard stated the “atomization” of the social in the era of “relaxation”. According to Lyotard, in the transition from modernity to postmodernity, the social structures disintegrate to individual atoms. In this process, “the linguistic aspect acquires a new meaning”. Social atomization is the formation of many “flexible networks of language games”. Through these models of “language games”, the social connections may get legitimized and acquire its pragmatic significance. The atomized society shows its efficiency and variability under the influence of receiving and sending information (ref the paintings of Jackson Pollock).

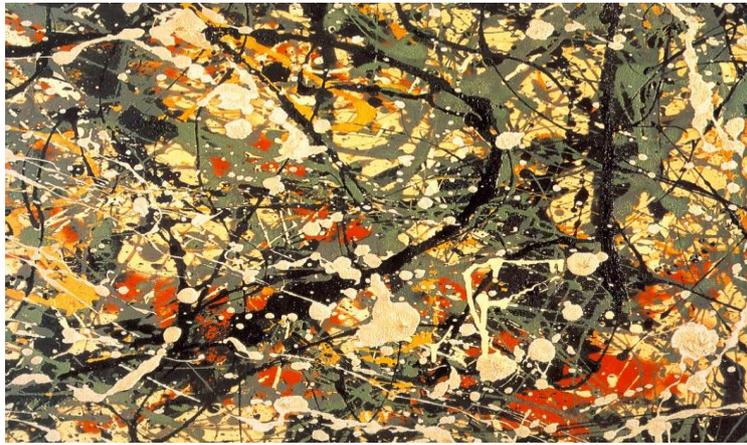


Fig. 3. The paintings of Paul Jackson Pollock represent the atomization and discrete form of postmodern society.

Sociality as such dissolves because the direct communication of individuals is replaced by language games, a dense layer of information flows that exclude an individual from the social order. Therefore, Lyotard reviews postmodernity as the profound changes in modernity, because of which modern knowledge appears to completely different than in the previous era. From its point of view, postmodernism is “the state of culture after the transformations to which the rules of the games in science, literature, and art were subjected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” [1].

J. Baudrillard while describing the postmodernity proclaimed “the end of the social” in the era of “inertia” and “melancholy”. Sociality, as the integration of individuals into society through appropriate interactions, “vanishes” at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being absorbed by the “black holes” of indifferent masses (consumers, voters, viewers). He proclaimed the ecstatic end of the social through masses.

According to Baudrillard, the social existence in the age of postmodernity also disappears, because the society ceases to be real, transforming into the signs, simulations, and virtual reality. Institutional structure is no longer a social structure itself turning into a simulational one. Following the French philosopher, prone to shocking metaphors, “sociality is dead but continues in a disgusting form just like the growing hair and nails on a corpse” [2]. This is a new state of society that might be called a “virtual society”.

Postmodern processes occur in all structures of public life, especially in mass media. Moreover, media and media images and signs become the “keys” to the knowledge of postmodern reality and event that reality itself. In the world, dominated by the artificial models, there is no longer a distinction between “words” and “things” (Michel Foucault). The world is dominated by text, including those created by media. “World as text” is one of the most important concepts and ground stones of the postmodern philosophy. Reality is incomprehensible without language, text. According to Roland Barthes, life itself is modeled after a literary work [3].

The dominance of information technologies and media as means of communication in the postmodern era leads to such

an accelerated turnover of information, that a “deterritorialization of culture” occurs, leading to the construction of the forms of social identity that are not strictly related to a place.

Closely related to the phenomenon of the “deterritorialization of culture” is the principle of the absolutization of the present time, its ultimate, atemporal nature. Postmodernism deprives the situation of its historical context, ripping of the social development from the historical background. History turns into situation, although any situation may be extracted from any era, it doesn’t matter, where and when does an event occur. The principles of deterritorialization of culture and timelessness are being vividly revealed in contemporary art.

Thus, the essential feature of postmodernism is its presentism, the concentrated embodiment of any era in the transition to the future. Postmodernism presents a sense of exhaustion of the old and the speed and unpredictability of the future. Postmodernism is even more focused on the future than on the present.

### III. J. BAUDRILLARD’S CONCEPT OF HYPERREALITY AND SIMULATION OF THE WORLD

Social phenomena appear as the virtual ones if the images of real objects or processes replace the institutionalized certain actions (economic, political, etc.). This position is based on the denial of the stereotypical views on society as a system of institutions. Postmodernists claim that in the recent decades a society, structured as a system of institutions, has become an unstable phenomenon. Therefore, the institutional structure of society gave way to the simulation, which is the social content of virtualization. The principle of virtualization is the following: reality is being substituted by the images.

In the conditions of the simulation of reality, cyber-prosthetics, the development of the logic of virtualization, the most important question arises – what happens to a person, how does he perceive virtual reality, how is he included in the real social process?

The essence of a postmodern individual is alienated not to the social, but to the virtual reality. A person of the age of modernity live in a natural world, perceiving it as a social reality, in which he acts, works, learns, and which could be changed. A postmodern person is immersed in virtual reality, realizing its conventionality, ephemeral nature and the opportunity of exiting it.

Virtual reality is artificial. Actually, everything human, social is artificial, i.e. non-biological. Karl Jaspers wrote: “The nature of a man is his artificiality” [4]. But it’s a human-artificial reality, therefore naturally and organically entering the human existence. A postmodern individual lives in an artificially created world, the world of simulative processes, simulacra, signs, and images. With the spread of improved information technologies, the deepening of virtualization of society, and the expansion of the replacement of the real social processes with their simulations, the artificial world is becoming more and more natural for people.

The artificial world of postmodernity is a symbolic reality, which has almost lost its connections with the real subjective world. The symbolic reality acts as an independent world, not representing and not reflecting the world of the real sociality. J. Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality most vividly and fundamentally shows the essence and the stages of development of the simulative, non-linear world.

First of all, let us define the concepts of “sign” and “simulacra”, which have the greatest importance for the J. Baudrillard’s concept.

In the European culture, a sign has acted as an object, property, relation, acting as a representative of some other object, property, or relation. The emphasis was made on representation, on the indication of something else, invisible, but assumed. The sign thus recorded the absence of something real, authentic, unchanged.

In the postmodern era, there is a crisis of representation with the postmodern understanding of simulacra and simulation being a theoretical reaction to this crisis, an attempt to show, keep the reality in the newly acquired conditions. Baudrillard lends philosophical ontological concept to the concept of “simulacrum”.

Baudrillard liked to give examples of the simulacra using the artworks, particularly, the works of Andy Warhol. In this context, a simulacrum is thousands of copies of an original. For example, thousands of copies of “Turquoise Marilyn” (the original copy is exhibited in the MoMA New York).



Fig. 4. Andy Warhol, “Turquoise Marilyn”. Photo by the author of the article.

In his “Symbolic Exchange and Death”, Baudrillard presents the historical logic of the development of the “three orders” of the simulacra, being successive in the new European culture from the Renaissance to the present days:

- Counterfeit (from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution).
- The initial order of the simulacra is associated with the existence of everyday household values. It corresponds to the natural state of the world. The value develops according to the prevailing customs, following the law of natural development.
- Production (Industrial age).
- The market order is when a value also serves as a mean of exchange. The values develop according to the logic of trade, following the law of the market.
- Simulation (age, governed by code – a structural game with a meaning).
- The structural order is when the value of a symbol emerges, thus being a symbol, following the structural law of the values. A certain set of rules emerges, and a value develops according to the existing set of images.

The simulacra of the first two orders still retain a link of similarity with the things; the simulacra of the last, third order loses all similarity with the things. In 1990 Baudrillard adds one more – “the fractal order of value”. The French philosopher compares the final fourth order with cancer that duplicates and reproduces its cells. “After the initial, the market, and the structural orders comes the fractal order of value... At this order there is no more equivalence, neither natural nor any at all, there is only a kind of epidemic of value, ubiquitous metastases of value, its aleatory distribution and dispersion” [5].

The order of fragmentation is the viral stage of the diffusion of values when there is no correspondence to anything. Values spread without any logic. There is no more equivalence, no law of value, there is instead something similar to the epidemic of value, to the growth of the

“metastases of value”, as the spread of values occurs by chance. The very definition of value is relative because in the infinite scattering, crushing, reproduction the evaluation vanishes.

Such is the current pattern of our culture, when media, advertising, and culture reach the state of the “Xerox of Culture” (J. Baudrillard).

For Baudrillard simulacra are filled with social meaning: they’re not just a part of some symbolic or language game, they hold inside “special social relations, a special instance of power”. By no accident, the philosopher connects the transition of some types of simulacra to the other in a connection with a radical change in social, political, and economic structures.

At the third order, the signs-simulacra do not contain any traces of similarity with the original, objective reality. Signs now resemble themselves, they are the only reality. Having lost stability and link to the subjective world, signs obtained the freedom of movement through the information space and infinite possibilities for combination. A simulacrum acts as an imaginary image, unreal object, and gradually losing reference in transition to the third order.



Fig. 5. Industrially reproduced and distributed simulacra (as Baudrillard) are portrayed by the Campbell's Soup Cans (A. Warhol). The original image is displayed at MoMA New York. Photo by the author of the article.

Following J. Baudrillard’s theoretical principles, we stress the fact that media and circulating flows of media information occupy the most important place in the world of simulations.

An individual finds it almost impossible to distinguish reality from a simulation. Thus emerges a problem of obtaining true knowledge, because the information society almost eliminates a “gap” between the truth and lies, between the posing of a question and the expectation of an answer: truth itself becomes a simulacrum.

The public opinion, which the French philosopher describes, is being formed systematically and consistently and depends on the purposes of its shaping and the degree of manipulative influence on society.

The simulative processes are embraced by hyperrealism (J. Baudrillard), the simulacra are hyperreal. Hyperreality is a world dominated by simulacra as self-sufficient and preferential signs, that do not represent external reality, lack any tether to a subject.

“Hyperreality is a much higher stage because it erases the very contradiction of the real and imaginary” [6]. This kind of self-repetition, copies of copies, is constantly occurring in hyper reality, a vicious circle of a kind; often enough a person views an original through the “glasses” of a copy. This affects image makers, PR and advertising people, content producers, etc.

Yet, simulation is not a manipulative process. Manipulation supposes some kind of genuine reality around which manipulation unfolds. The postmodern simulation denies the existence of a link to reality. The simulation creates a special structural-game reality, which is located outside the real/unreal dichotomy. Hyperreality is “what has already been reproduced”.

Thus, Baudrillard’s concepts of simulacra and hyperreality reveal the idea that there is no actual (i.e., authentic or exemplary) reality left at all, meaning, that it couldn’t be distorted. A simulacrum is not a counterfeit, as it doesn’t conceal the truth. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (J. Baudrillard).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

An individual today lives in a sign-symbolic environment, in the world of images, similarities, simulative imitations. With the help of information technologies, the world of simulation is easily transformed into the virtual world, which basic principles we have tried to describe in this article. Media easily create images, simulacra, based on the distinctive properties of the object. The production of such signs/images is now even more profitable than the production of goods and services. The latter accrues desire and image with the help of information (advertising, media, etc.). The product nowadays has a symbolic load, illusory (simulative) structure (look, good mood, naturalness, etc.) which do not exist in reality. By mixing subjective and objective realities, the buyer acquires not so much a product, as its created image, or, in fact, a simulacrum.

A postmodern individual finds it difficult to navigate in the huge space of connotations, signs, symbols, and to comprehend the diversity and fast-changing information flows [7] [8].

The images do seem better and deeper than the originals, especially when it’s hard to reach them. The authenticity of human existence is replaced by the signs of his reality, including the signs and images of art.

The merit of the postmodern philosophy is that it analyzes and predicts the powerful trend of our civilization in its movement to “almost life”, i.e. simulative life and hyperreal society and culture.

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