

From Digital Solipsism to the Glitch

How Social Media and Digital Culture Impact Truth

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Digital media are often accused of aggravating the 'post-truth' crisis. In this thesis, I adopt philosopher Jean Baudrillard's early works to gain a clearer understanding of the contemporary post-truth society and the influence media has on truth. Baudrillard argues that the overproduction of information causes a loss of shared truth. The sense of meaninglessness and nihilism that ensues generates simulacra, a copy detached from reality, to mask the absence of truth. Working in the poststructural tradition, Baudrillard describes postmodern society as hyperreal, a self-referential system that is more real than real. In other words, we cannot tell what is real anymore because media create images that refer only to themselves. I update Baudrillard's philosophy with terms such as 'hyper-critique', 'digital solipsism' and 'glitch' to construct a conceptual framework suitable for understanding the current way of viewing truth. Critique is taken over by its simulacrum: hyper-critique, the simulation of a position of authority. The lack of true critical thought strands individuals in the digital solipsist realm, meaning that an outside perspective from which knowledge develops is no longer accessible. The only space to dismantle hyperreality opens up when a glitch occurs. Both part of hyperreality and outside of it, the glitch questions the hyperreal world and allows for the recognition of the ephemeral nature of meaning. These concepts can be valuable tools in understanding the relationship between media and the post-truth crisis.

“It’s like drawing a line on the ground that’s 8 inches wide. If you told someone to walk on top of it, they could. But then if you tell them that the line is 300 feet in the air, people start to use their imaginations. They think they’ll fall through the sky. People will accept that as how it is. So now, we have a ton of rules and restrictions around us. Those things keep us safe, but I think it also sterilizes us. So, things like imagination and one’s willingness to believe in the abnormal have all but been eliminated from our daily lives; for all intents and purposes. The end result of which is soberingly bland reality. Which is pretty much what we live in today.”

- **Satoshi Kon**

“The trees had no intention to cast their reflection
the water had no mind to receive it
And yet it was so”

- **Anonymous**

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Introduction

How do media create hyperreality? How do they affect what we consider to be true? Can we still strive for truth? To answer these questions, I critically investigate and build on the work of sociologist and media philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). My aim for this thesis is to provide a conceptual framework to better understand the contemporary ‘post-truth’ society (Snyder, 2021). I aim to understand why there is no agreement on who won the 2020 American election and whether China keeps the Uyghurs in concentration camps or re-education schools (Sudworth, 2019; Snyder, 2021). I do this by explaining and applying Baudrillard’s concepts, such as ‘hyperreality’ and the ‘code’, to the current media landscape. I build onto his philosophy to update his work to fit the new digital media world by introducing concepts such as ‘hyper-critique’, ‘digital solipsism’ and ‘glitch’. By investigating mass media and developing these conceptual tools based on Baudrillard’s philosophy, we can better understand how Western society has become ‘post-truth’, losing its sense of meaning and moving towards nihilism. Being post-truth does not mean that truth is no longer relevant or desirable. Instead, Baudrillard (1994) hypothesizes that media subsumes any kind of reality under an abundance of information, creating hyperreality. In the jungle of information and data, meaning too becomes slippery and elusive because, as Baudrillard argues, everything becomes mere information within the hyperreality as generated by the code. For example, participants in reality-TV shows base their behaviour on the way they think people in such a show behave. Their image of a reality-TV star precedes their performance in the show, even though they themselves now fit that image. The signs they use to structure their behaviour do not refer to an objective reality but to the hyperreality created by mass media. It is not the rational subject that builds this model because the model precedes and conditions thought. The code establishes it, akin to how code in computer software shapes what virtual reality looks like and how in-game characters act.

To understand the post-truth society, I examine mass media using Baudrillard’s early works and add my own concepts to update his philosophy to fit the contemporary world. The media I examine are mass communication means, such as television, social media and news sources. They are used to convey information to a large audience. The 21st century has seen a rise of many new digital media like Facebook, Google and Reddit. They have a different effect on the masses than prior media. Generally, mass media moves information in a cyclical fashion. Whatever news is circling on social media is what sets the agenda for talk shows and newspapers. Then the discussed topic on talk shows is what becomes the hot potato on social media to garner attention. Former chief editor of Dutch newspaper *Telegraaf* observes the effects of the perilous situation of newspapers. “Wanneer je steeds minder oplage en bereik hebt, ga je harder schreeuwen” [When you get less and less circulation and reach, you start shouting louder] (Huigslot, 2021). The enormous amount of information that tries to draw our attention causes “information glut” (Postman, 1984, p. 79). Due to the decrease in the media’s gatekeeper function, journalists are incentivised to cater to people’s personal interests rather than profess politically or

culturally relevant topics (Pariser, 2011, pp. 14-15). This process is visible in, among others, the Chilean newspaper *Las Últimas Noticias*, which started basing its content on the stories that got the most clicks from their readers. Journalists did not follow up on the stories that garnered no (online) attention (Pariser, 2011, p. 71). Baudrillard affirms this with his hypothesis that meaning is destroyed by more information and that, because everything and everyone is connected, we cannot create a hierarchy of truths anymore based on a mind-independent reality. In this thesis, I employ Baudrillard's concepts to explain how we got to this situation and create new concepts that allow us to theorize about the post-truth predicament.

My hypothesis is that (digital) media subsume reality under an abundance of information, creating what Baudrillard (1994) calls "hyperreality" as well as what I term 'hyper-critique' and 'digital solipsism' (p. 22). Later, I develop the concept 'glitch' as a response to Baudrillard's philosophy of media. The relation between media structure and hyperreality impacts how we see truth. I argue that due to the media being structured by the code, the information that the masses receive "*exhausts itself in the act of staging communication*" (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 80-84). This results in the absorption of the message by its medium. The media no longer mediate between a 'true reality' and a represented 'media-reality', rather, the media-reality has become more real than any true reality, becoming a hyperreality. For example, memes may influence the image I have of cats more than my empirical experience with cats does. It is more real than real because I hold its truth in higher regard than any empirical truth I might stumble upon. Baudrillard radicalizes media ecologist Marshall McLuhan's (1964) slogan "the medium is the message" by describing how the medium comes to constitute reality and truth (p. 7). According to the correspondence theory, a statement is true if it refers to a mind-independent reality (David, 2002). Such a theory of truth becomes problematic in the context of a hyperreal world that lacks the possibility of correspondence. The extent of this transformation is exemplified by the term "Paris syndrome", coined by a Japanese psychiatrist for Japanese tourists who were unable to cope with the mismatch between their expectations of Paris and their experience of the French capital (Levy, 2004). The image of Paris as the 'city of love' in magazines, films and literature becomes more real than any 'real' version of Paris. Notably, empirically experiencing Paris does not provide access to the 'true' Paris because one articulates and contextualizes such an experience through preconceived notions and media images. As Baudrillard (1994) remarks, "the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (p. 83). The immense cloud of information encompasses both the medium and reality, confusing tourists that can no longer recognize fact from fiction.

To clarify the abovementioned issues and processes, I will divide this thesis into three chapters. In the first chapter, I describe Baudrillard's (1994; 2017) concepts "hyperreality", the "code" and "the three orders of simulacra" by tracing their development from structuralism to poststructuralism (p. 22; p. 29; p. 129). I examine how we are currently in the third order, namely a "simulation" that collapses the distinction between 'real' and 'imaginary' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 3). The extension of our senses

through the internet replaced reality with hyperreality, a system in which signs only refer to themselves. In the second chapter, I elaborate on the impact the code has on the post-truth society. Information has replaced any knowledge of a mind-independent reality with mere information embedded in the code. Even critique has become a simulation of itself, resulting in what I term 'hyper-critique'. Adopting the signs of a position of authority is enough to simulate a position of authority. Empirical reality and media have imploded, stranding its consumers in the 'digital solipsist' realm. Everyone consumes divergent parts of the media-reality, disabling the possibility of an independent view on truth. In the third and final chapter, I attempt to respond to the current predicament digital media have placed truth, meaning and reality in. Building on Baudrillard, I want to tackle nihilism and meaninglessness. To do so, I introduce the concept 'glitch', which questions and dismantles hyperreality. A glitch creates a space from which the ephemeral nature of meaning and truth can be apprehended and appearances rule.

Chapter 1

In this chapter, I explain Baudrillard's idea of a postmodern society and hyperreality, detailing his theory's development. I do this by elucidating his concept of the 'code' through a structuralist description of electronic and digital media. I chronologically move through the development of different theories about reality before clarifying the relation between the code and media. This allows me to show the use of Baudrillard's concepts 'hyperreality' and 'implosion', as well as his orders of simulacra, in grasping the structure of the post-truth crisis. I outline his concepts, before building on them with my own concepts in the following chapters, because they require an update to be applied to the contemporary post-truth society and be helpful in formulating the problem of nihilism and meaninglessness. Firstly, I shortly elaborate on the structuralist understanding of 'reality' because this is the frame Baudrillard uses when he first describes it. Secondly, I describe why Baudrillard adds the prefix 'hyper' to reality as he moves beyond structuralism and modernism. Lastly, I describe how hyperreality is constituted through the 'code'.

1.1 Structuralism, Modernism & Reality

To understand Baudrillard's concept of 'hyperreality' and how the code organizes it, I must first explain what I mean by reality. Philosophers continue to ponder what constitutes 'reality', but their search remains inconclusive. The common understanding of reality is the world of objects as opposed to the world of subjects or imagination, "the aggregate of real things" (OED, 2021). When you and I sit across the dining table, we can assume that we can talk about that same table because it exists in reality and our conversation can be *about* it. A multitude of theories can explain why this would be the case. Baudrillard writes in the structuralist tradition of philosophy. He interprets the world through the idea of difference rather than identity (Kellner, 1989, p. 8-11). Something is real not because it has some feature of 'realness' but because it is not something else. To simplify, a tree is not a tree because it has the inherent property of being a tree. It is a tree because it is not a rock, a flower, a glass, etcetera. Structuralists deny identity between the word 'tree' and the concept that we call 'tree' (Saussure, 2011, pp. 65-66). They claim words gain their meaning because they are different from other words. Some more background on structuralism is necessary to be able to grasp Baudrillard's work.

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (2011), widely considered the father of structuralism, argues that two elements make up linguistic signs: a concept, or signified, and a sound-image, or signifier. The word 'tree' is a sign, consisting of a signifying sound-image, which is the written or spoken element of a word, and the signified concept of a tree. However, the relation within the sign between signifier and signified is arbitrary (Saussure, 2011, pp. 65-68). For example, if I pointed to a tree and asked what it is, my Belgian cousin would say "arbre" and my Dutch cousin would say "boom". The concept could be pointed to by any sound-image. This is not to say that any word can mean anything. What determines which signifier is connected to which signified is the linguistic community one belongs to. People

inherit language and the conventions that create meaning through differentiation from their ancestors and do not create their own language (Saussure, 2011, pp. 71-72). As Wittgenstein argued, there is no such thing as a private language. In short, signs structure and make up reality. Signs gain meaning because they are different from one another. Whether realism, idealism or another position is true with regards to metaphysics of reality is beyond the scope of this thesis.

According to Baudrillard, in the modern era signs still referred to reality. In his early work, Baudrillard analysed the consumer society based on the objects people relate to, commodities. He understood these objects not as mere products but placed them in a “chain of *signifiers*, in so far as all of these signify one another reciprocally” (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 94). Consumer reality was constituted by the complex relations between signifiers, which no longer pointed to simple concepts but to complete networks. For example, if someone buys organic bread, they logically will also buy palm oil-free butter and vegan spreads due to the logic of signifiers. This differentiates them from other consumers yet integrates them into consumer society (Kellner, 1989, p. 15). Signs are lumped together like products exhibited in the same space in a shopping centre. Food, clothes, art, books, everything is displayed in one space that is “fully air-conditioned, organized, culturalized”, creating consumer culture (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 97). During this period of his work, Baudrillard still described the relation between reality and signs as a political economy. Later he declared the end of production and of the political economy (Kellner, 1989, p. 61).

He characterizes the signs in a consumer society as a simulacrum, a copy without the original. A simulacrum is defined as “a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, *of something*” (OED, 2020). Baudrillard makes the concept his own and provides the following example:

“The Melanesian natives were thrilled by the planes which passed overhead. But those objects never came down from the skies to them, whereas they did descend for the whites, doing so because there were, in certain places, similar objects on the ground to attract the flying aircraft. So, the natives themselves set about building a simulacrum of an aeroplane from branches and creepers. They marked out a landing-ground, which they painstakingly illuminated by night, and patiently waited for the real aircraft to alight on it.” (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 101).

The Melanesian natives did not know either the signifier “landing-ground” or the signified concept of a landing strip. They merely copied the likeness of it without grasping its significance within the English linguistic system. Although they copied the sign without content, there is still a relationship between the simulacrum and reality. In the consumer society, affluence is a simulacrum of accumulated signs of happiness; they lack any content and refer only to themselves. The difference between consumers and natives is merely that for the natives their belief in the magic of aircrafts does not cease since it never lands, so they can never grasp it. For the consumer, the simulacra appear on the mediating screen of a TV, which is experienced as real. However, this difference does not mean that the consumer is different

from the native. The TV presents the image as something miraculous, obscuring the elaborate production processes behind it and thereby maintaining the magic as well (Baudrillard, 2016, pp. 101-102).

1.2 Poststructuralism, Postmodernism & Hyperreality

In later works, Baudrillard critiques structuralism by claiming that there is no signified to refer to anymore and all that is left is the interplay of signs. Like other French thinkers at the time, Baudrillard moved beyond structuralism. In his work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, published in 1976, he claimed that referentiality to reality was no longer possible (Kellner, 1989, pp. 64-65). Leaving behind the idea of a structured, knowable reality predicted the move from structuralism to poststructuralism. It meant affirming the lack of a position from which one could critique the structure because one is already embedded in it. However, poststructuralism is a less clearly defined movement and many so-called poststructuralists would object to the term.¹ In Baudrillard's poststructuralism, signs no longer referred to reality. Instead, signs only refer to one another. The simulacrum now precedes the real. In his variant of poststructuralism, there is nothing outside of what he calls 'simulation' (Kellner, 1989, pp. 89-91). Baudrillard defines it as the fourth and final phase of the image, when "it has no relation to reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6).² The image stands only in relation to other images, like intertextuality within films when frames resemble frames in other films. One such example is the "most successful virtual band in the history of music": Gorillaz, consisting only of cartoon characters with the real musicians taking a backseat (Jamie Hewlett, Gorillaz..., 2016). When the band collaborates with other artists, the artists often appear alongside the cartoon band members in video clips and even during some live performances where the band members are holograms. Many other artists report being influenced by Gorillaz, giving these animated musicians more influence than many 'real' artists. Although the illustrator of the band stated that "they are no less [real] than the caricatures that are Marilyn Manson and Eminem", these virtual images of musicians stand in relation to the images of 'real' artists (Jamie Hewlett, Gorillaz..., 2016). They present a simulation of bands, blurring the distinction between reality and imagination.

To fully grasp the new reality (or lack thereof) of the image, I must explain Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra, namely: counterfeit, (re)production and simulation (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 129). These coincide with the changes in the law of value from the Renaissance onwards. Before the Renaissance, signs were fixed in an order where the movement of meaning was considered an

¹ Philosopher Michel Foucault described both structuralists and poststructuralists as not knowing clearly what they were, suggesting the movements were simplified in the history of philosophy after the fact. For the sake of brevity, I simplify both movements here as well (Raulet, 1983).

² The first stage of the image is when "it is the reflection of a profound reality", which can be understood as a Platonic view of images that reflect Ideas. The second stage is when "it masks and denatures a profound reality, which could refer to Kant's transcendental idealism where one can only know the subjective image of reality. The third stage is when "it masks the *absence* of a profound reality", signifying the Nietzschean influence on Baudrillard because Nietzsche was sceptical about knowledge about reality (Nietzsche, 1979).

impossibility. For instance, feudal lords held power and status. Vassals would not dare to copy the signs of their lords since one could not escape (the obligations to) one's caste. Yet, when the French revolution transpired and the bourgeoisie seized power, signs were no longer fixed to any natural order (Kellner, 1989, p. 78). As we say today: people can now fake it until they make it. Firstly, the counterfeit is the closest to the real. Imagine a painter painting a forest; their painting is a counterfeit of nature. The signifier is the same. We still call the object in the painting a tree, but its signified has disappeared. Baudrillard exemplifies this with stucco, a malleable material used during the Baroque era to forge synthetic copies of natural objects. Secondly, the (re)production loses its relation to the real as it arises in the Industrial Age. A product that exists in a series, like the print of a photo that can be mechanically reproduced, lacks an original and is indistinct from other objects. This is when the only signified is a (re)production in the series, creating a chain of equivalence between x number of objects (Baudrillard, 2017, pp. 129-140). Thirdly, a signifier becomes a simulation when it no longer represents anything but an ideal "generative core called a 'model'" (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 139). Simulation is best illustrated through digital art. For example, a video game's code generates, rather than creates, the game. When the player presses buttons, they are not creating the game. Rather, the binary code generates visuals based on an underlying model of the digital world. The simulacrum precedes the player's reality to generate a real without any relation to any referent. The interplay of signifiers whose signifieds are other signifiers produces the hyperreal. Those signs have no relation to the real. Especially with today's immersive technology, the hyperreal world of games and other simulations has become extremely real.

Baudrillard argues that the indistinguishability between a real and a simulated image is what sets postmodern society apart from modern society. "There is no "objective" difference" between simulation and the real anymore (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 20). The example he provides is that of a simulated robbery. To make this more concrete one can think of the hostage situation at the Dutch Broadcast Foundation (NOS) where the perpetrator only brought a fake gun ("NOS-redactie ontruimd wegens gewapende indringer", 2015). Baudrillard wonders whether those in power would treat a simulated robbery worse than a real one. The actual robbery only threatens property rights and the order of things, whereas a virtual or simulated robbery would threaten the real itself. If the police respond to and the media report on a fake robbery, they admit to not being able to tell the difference. The simulation consists of the same signs as the real robbery, making them identical despite the difference in intention. Baudrillard concludes that a simulation will get a lesser punishment than a real robbery, because the law cannot distinguish between the real and the simulated. So, in the eyes of the law, a simulated robbery is merely a robbery without consequences. Therefore, it will treat a perfect simulation as a robbery without the usual harm to property. It can never acknowledge the simulated nature of an act since it would reveal that "*law and order themselves might be nothing but a simulation*" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 20). This is because law is mainly a second-order simulacrum, while a simulation is a third-order simulacrum. The law is produced by and depends on equivalence with the real. If the difference between real and simulated is blurred, rules cannot be applied. Hence the law assumes the real and disregards

the simulation, but it is a mere assumption like a police officer assuming that a hairbrush is a gun. The point is, according to Baudrillard, that if we cannot tell if something is a simulation, that means that “it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 21).

1.3 The Code & Media

To clarify how the real is simulated and simulations are more real than real, I will elaborate on the concept of the ‘code’ that generates simulations. My focus lies explicitly on the lack of interaction between media, consumer and reality that influences (hyper)reality. Baudrillard never clearly defined the code in his own writings (Kellner, 1989, p. 62; Poster & Mourrain, 2002, p. 7). At most, he analogized it with language, DNA, or cybernetics, the study of structures of organization in systems. Baudrillard both describes one code and multiple systems of overlapping codes that generate hyperreality at their intersections (Baudrillard, 2017, pp. 140-144).

I want to preface this section by outlining what Baudrillard is *not* saying. He does not argue that everything you see is fake or non-existent. He does not claim that the world we live in is a simulation created by external agents. He even dismissed the movie *The Matrix* (1999) as “stem[ming] mostly from misunderstandings” (Staples, 2002). To describe the world or an object as fake, there must be a real world to oppose it, which is only possible in the first order of simulacrum, the counterfeit. However, Baudrillard’s theory moves beyond this real/fake distinction. Something can be hyperfake, which is more fake than fake. For example, deep fakes are audio or video generated by artificial intelligence (AI) of events that never happened (“Zien is geloven”, 2021). This is opposed by the hyperreal, audio or video that is more real than real since it simulates an experience of the real that far surpasses it. One can imagine an action film where the protagonist must fight criminal goons, an awesome scene that any empirical experience of a fight cannot surpass because it does not match with what one thinks a ‘real’ fight is. Take the scene in *Kill Bill* (2003/2004) where Uma Thurman fights off hordes of ninjas. No mere real fight can feel as real as this cinematographically stunning sequence. Expectations and perceptions are mediated by the content consumed through media guided by the code.

As Baudrillard lacked a specific definition of ‘the code’, I do not aim to clarify Baudrillard’s use of the concept but merely my own based on his writing. In one instance, Baudrillard describes it as “a genetic, generative cell where the myriad intersections produce all the questions and all the possible solutions from which to select (for whom?)” (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 141). His reference to a generative cell again analogizes the code with the information within DNA that structures how cells, and therefore bodies, are created. As Baudrillard uses the term, ‘information’ is not to be understood as facts, meaning or knowledge, but as data in a computer, as 1’s and 0’s. He based it on biological nature to ground it in what is deemed ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ reality, which still refers to a hyperreal sign rather than a thing-in-itself. The code is not a hypostasis, an underlying reality, but rather the generation of a simulacrum that precedes one’s idea of reality and on which signs structure themselves (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 82; 2017, pp. 140-145). To exemplify, an artificial intelligence (AI) program, DeepNostalgia,

has been developed that can bring portrait paintings and photos to life. It generates a moving face based on the features of the portrait. It seems as if the person comes alive as the eyes start blinking and the corners of the mouth curl upwards. However, the image is generated based on an underlying binary data structure. The person did not come back alive. This self-guiding program generates the appearance of life by sequencing hundreds of frames based on the image(s) it's fed. The image, a model of the real, becomes the basis for the AI's video of the non-living portrait coming alive. Like hyperreality structured by the code, the moving portrait is more real than real, because even if one knows that the portrayed person is dead, it can still affect our memory or externalise our imagination (Wakefield, 2021). A new form of anxiety therapy using AI-generated images is being developed to create deep faked memories to generate more confidence ("Zien is geloven", 2021). The medium of the deep fake does not mediate between a real and a subject. Instead, it itself constitutes both the real and the subject in an implosion of both. As McLuhan famously said, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Baudrillard most clearly defined an implosion as the "absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning" and the erasure of oppositions, "including that of the medium and of the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 83). The public, the real and the media that connected them are indistinguishable. The same goes for modern digital media.

The media we use cannot be seen as separate from us. Once we shaped them, they start shaping us too. McLuhan sees media as extensions of our human senses. He described the various ways media influence our consciousness:

"A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition'. High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A Photograph is, visually, 'high definition'. A cartoon is 'low definition', simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. (...) Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience." (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 24-25)

He mainly applied these descriptions to electronic media such as the radio, TV, or telephone, because digital media were not yet widely available. Even so, he describes the world as a global village because our senses and nerves have been extended to encompass almost every corner of the Earth, now including our moon and Mars, with the speed of electricity. Like Baudrillard, he calls this an implosion but adds it that has heightened awareness of anything in our extended reach (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 3-6; Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 81-83). The implosion of the spaces around the world meant that they burst inwards to form one, as if caught in and connected by a world wide web of signifiers. This is the start of the code enclosing the (Western) world. The feedback loop between humanity and media has become global through electronic media. In 1978, Baudrillard describes mass media culture as being in a 'cool' phase where meaning and critical thought implode into the silent majorities. The low definition of the

media causes the audience to respond with fascination rather than critique, and fascination excludes meaning and understanding. Fascination fixes one's gaze without one being conscious of it. Differentiation between people no longer occurs as they become an indifferent public that spectates, with the spectacle of media becoming the model for their reality (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 34-38). However, a more dramatic implosion occurred at the onset of the digital age.

Digital media overtook electronic and analogue media in 2002, when more data was stored through digital technology than analogue technology (Hilbert, 2020). Nevertheless, the processes causing this overtaking had started much earlier and became known to the public at "The Mother of All Demos", the conference where the graphical user interface, a prototype of the modern computer and the mouse, were first showcased (Salamanca, 2009). If the medium is the message, Baudrillard wonders, then the medium might still have revolutionary potential. However, the people, the media and the real have become part of a singular mass, "a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 83). Digital media become hot media, requiring little participation. The public is fully subsumed in the digital media, no longer participating but becoming indistinguishable from media. A clear illustration of this phenomenon occurred on December 9, 1968, in San Francisco, the pioneers of human-computer interaction, Douglas Engelbart and William English, combined the media of film, TV, microwaves, and other digital technologies into a single screen to guide the conference's audience into one shared experience.

As Engelbart moved the mouse, his and the audience's eyes could follow the cursor on the screen as he moved his hand, which was filmed and shown on the screen as well. His hand was filmed separately to create an instant connection between the eye and the cursor *through* the hand on the mouse (Salamanca, 2009). He first showed that one does not need to think about how to move one's hand for the cursor to follow one's gaze on the screen. For the first time on such a scale, they blurred distinctions between virtuality and actuality, mind and machine, and reality and simulation using a computer. The screen represents the virtual, showing the graphic user interface to its audience. However, it obscures the actual people behind the flow of information that facilitate the computer display. The interaction model between mind and machine constitutes reality rather than the world behind the model. Engelbart's goal with the creation of the computer was to augment human intellect, which means "to make greater in number, size or degree" or, as McLuhan would argue, to 'extend' (OED, 2020). Engelbart realised that intellect is already augmented by language artifacts, which are "dynamically interdependent within an operating system" and whose automation "offer a logical next step in the evolution of our intellectual capability" (Engelbart, 1962, pp. 128-129). Extending human intellect through language and computers is what extend the influence of the code as well.

In short, the code is the implosion between the real, the masses and the media working to augment their intellect and extend human senses. Due to the use of digital media, our senses cannot distinguish between a real image and a simulated image. If we would discover an alien species that is as intricately interwoven with media or AI as we humans, we would likely not treat these aliens as

separate from their media (Hilbert, 2020). Due to the influence of media on our world, humanity became indistinguishable from technology or media. We might think that our reality consists of signifiers that refer to concepts in reality, but we can only perceive signifiers that refer to other signifiers within a reality that became more real for us than what we call ‘mind-independent’ reality. This is hyperreality.

Chapter 2

In this chapter, I apply Baudrillard's structuralist analysis of truth to the post-truth society to understand the contemporary nature of critique and truth in Baudrillardian terms. If a sign derives its meaning from its relation to other signs, then truth-signs can only be true in relation to other signs. When an individual aims to speak the truth, they do so within a web of relations. Firstly, I examine what it means to say something is true and the relations the subject enters into when appealing to the truth. Any truth can only be established within the code, not allowing one to take up an outer perspective to critique the code. Secondly, I argue that critique and Enlightenment have become what I call 'hypercritical'. Critique has become a sign to be embodied rather than an ideal. Even any ideal critique one strives towards already exists as a sign within the code. Thirdly, the individual simulation of truth has taken the place of the truth based on a mind-independent reality. The appearance of truth manifests itself on the level of the individual within the code, stranding people in what I call a 'digital solipsism'. The signs of truth become truer than true, a hyper-truth masking its own absence.

2.1 The Subject of Truth

Within Baudrillard's theory, the subject as autonomous, rational agent disappears into an indistinguishable circularity with its opposite, the object. Like "the wolf-child became a wolf by living among wolves", the subject became overtaken by the objects the consumer has surrounded themselves with (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 91). The only relation to truth the subject has is that of signs. Calling a statement true only serves to differentiate it from a false statement within a specific context. A folk conception of truth is that any statement that corresponds to a mind-independent reality is true. Within philosophy, this theory is referred to as the correspondence theory (Glanzberg, 2021). For Baudrillard, on the other hand, truth is a simulacrum. The epigraph of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) is a quote credited to be from the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes: "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (p. 1). However, this quote is nowhere to be found in Ecclesiastes (Longman, 1998). The epigraph perfectly exemplifies how Baudrillard regards truth. Any idea of 'objective' truth one acquires is already a simulacrum obscuring the lack of truth (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 147). Baudrillard does not deny that truth exists; it exists solely on the level of signs. Nor is he an epistemological relativist, for relativism holds that truth depends on local conceptual frameworks, but Baudrillard considers concepts to be simulacra (Baghrarian & Carter, 2021). Therefore, truth can be relative, but, again, only on the level of signs and not for Baudrillard himself. According to him, the model precedes the real, which makes any claim towards truth a falsehood from the perspective of the correspondence theorist because objective referentiality is impossible within hyperreality. If I claim that snow is white, Baudrillard might affirm that that statement is true within the language employed to convey it. However, ascribing the signifier 'true' to that statement only functions to differentiate it from statements described as 'false'. Nothing is inherently

true within a structural analysis; something is merely true because it is not another signifier. When describing a truth, one is already embedded within a system of relations so the 'view from nowhere' commonly ascribed to scientific research is unavailable.

The problem with truth for Baudrillard is that simulation disrupts the possibility of distinguishing between anything 'true' or 'false', or 'real' or 'imaginary' (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 2-3). In the post-truth society, the lack of these distinctions has problematized truth and its relation to the subject. The only possible relation is one of differentiation, where the subject can only be differentiated from the object through language, and truth can only be attained linguistically. Within the structuralist analysis, the 'autonomous subject' exists as a consequence of signs intersecting on a subject. It too is a kind of object within the relations it enters with other objects. The subject is constituted by differentiating oneself from other individuals through consumption, beliefs and needs. What one consumes serves to place themselves in a relation to others, like one might drive an electric car to showcase oneself as an ecological, conscious person because one 'needs' to do so for the environment's sake. However, consumer society produces these needs through advertisement. By showing scenes of a happy consumer driving through nature, advertisements signify what one 'needs' to do in order to differentiate themselves from people who are not concerned with the environment. Baudrillard reverses the common conception of the rational homo economicus, who plans their work in order to achieve and acquire the things they desire. There is no longer a singular relationship between subject and object, but a system of needs shaped by advertising. Signs of needs as illustrated by literal models on billboards constitute subjects and the rational, calculating subject becomes an object drawn to products within the web of signs (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 75-78; Baudrillard, 2016, pp. 173-176).

Similar to desires, beliefs also constitute subjects as objects in relation to other objects. Beliefs about the world are based on our observations, which often occur through media in modern society. One such example is the TV; it gives a situation the appearance of reality, as if the viewers themselves are in the situation. Baudrillard exemplifies this with reality TV. The reality of the scenes we see on the TV screen is debated (Is it scripted? Is it authentic?), which illustrates our recognition of its potential simulation. Yet, these scenarios become models that subjects subsequently copy. They start modelling their beliefs and behaviour on the personae seen on TV. The news media one consumes determine the beliefs one holds. When a newscaster delivers information, it has the signs of truth value, whereas if an advertiser delivered the same information, one knows to be sceptical. Spin doctors and public relation teams shape messages so that they carry the signs of truth-value for their viewers, who again shape the goals of the spin doctors and public relation teams (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 28-30). For example, the YouTube channel PragerU has branded itself as a 'university' despite lacking the institutional legitimacy of one. Their videos confer the appearance of truth by featuring experts and scientific studies yet are strongly misleading when placed in a different context (Reuters Staff, 2020). PragerU utilizes signs of truth-value to generate the appearance of truth in their videos, which seemingly gets confirmed when YouTube algorithms suggest videos that deliver similar messages. One sees their needs and

beliefs reflected on the screens of smart devices that model our behaviour. We choose from the personalized options that algorithms present to us (Pariser, 2011, p. 109). Baudrillard anticipates algorithms as he describes a “manipulative truth (...) of the computer cards that retain your preferred sequences” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 29).

According to Baudrillard, objects ultimately supersede subjects. Objects determine the needs and beliefs of subjects rather than the other way around. The free will, knowledge and creativity of the subject can no longer control the object. As McLuhan might argue, ‘[w]e shape our tools and thereafter they shape us’ (Culkin, 1967, p. 70). Like the evil genius that philosopher René Descartes describes, the presence of objects causes doubt in the subject. Without the subject as the foundation for knowledge, as Descartes argues, any claim by a subject no longer necessarily contains truth-value. According to Baudrillard, the best strategy for the subject is to embrace a new form of theory, perhaps his theory, yet any kind of theory will be fatal because objects cannot be known or conceptualized anymore if they lack referents. However, to hold on to subjectivity while objects gain more and more prominence in the world, one must take the perspective of the object to understand their effects (Kellner, 1989, pp. 154-162). In this situation, the humanist subject that has agency, responsibility and morality is subsumed by the code, paradoxically subsumed in its indeterminacy.

Here Baudrillard’s argument seems to reach a catch-22. A subjective human being claiming that objects have taken over subjectivity is at best contradictory and at worst blinded by one’s subjective theory. His theory of implosion makes subject and object indistinguishable but does not dissolve the binary itself. To claim that the object has won over the subject is impossible if one maintains the distinction (Kellner, 1989, pp. 165-167). So, either Baudrillard’s polemic favouring the object fails because one side of a dichotomy cannot defeat the other without destroying itself, or Baudrillard’s theory itself has imploded with (science) fiction. While he may have started as a truthful critic, Baudrillard’s theory cannot be understood as a simple theory if he maintains that the model precedes reality. Accordingly, he develops the notion of “theory fiction”, a term that denotes the ambiguity and ambivalence of his descriptions and claims (Kellner, 2020). While subjects and objects may have imploded, Baudrillard maintains the duality in a kind of theory that tries to simulate future developments by stretching out his contemporary developments to their logical conclusion (Kellner, 2020). Baudrillard seems to have disregarded any claim towards truth in favour of his equivocal ‘theory fiction’.

Despite Baudrillard’s ambiguous relationship towards it, I assert that truth remains a concept of use for humanity to continue its existence because a culture requires agreement on some basic facts, even if we are aware that those facts are simulacra. Importantly, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of truth. On the level of signs, a premise can be described as true without reference to a mind-independent reality. This is the truth appealed to when a subject uses (social) media and (fake) news; the truth PragerU aims to model. It can be described as ‘true’ only to be differentiated from ‘false’ statements. Baudrillard seems to theorize on that same level, writing works of theory that can be read

as fiction and vice versa. He has dubbed his work to be science fiction at times, with fiction denoting the feigning of theory and creating of an imaginary. On the one hand, his works strive to show what the world will look like if the developments at the time continue, not unlike *Brave New World* or *1984*. On the other hand, Baudrillard's writings do claim to provide understandings of contemporary society (Kellner, 1989, pp. 203-205). He avoids making a concrete claim to a metaphysical truth, which I deem 'Truth'³. The correspondence theory aims at this level, where understanding a thing must be equal to the thing itself (Glanzberg, 2021). The impossibility of locating truth in simulation is a core part of Baudrillard's theory. He exemplifies this with his work by combining truth and fiction into "theory fiction" (Kellner, 2020).

Nevertheless, I argue that like a hungry person's preoccupation with a lack of food, his preoccupation with a lack of truth cannot but come from a desire *for* truth. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a significant influence on Baudrillard, also questions the assumption that Truth is attainable. Philosopher Michael Rosen makes a similar distinction within the concept 'truth'. On the one hand, there is the *sense* of truth, its semantic or purely meaningful dimension, and, on the other hand, there is the *criterion* of truth, its epistemic or potentially knowable dimension. He distinguishes between the capability of describing something as true and between observing something as true (Rosen, 2002, p. 22). For example, someone might argue for the truth of the benefits of vaccines without truly knowing that they are beneficial. With this distinction, Nietzsche can be understood as claiming that Truth or the *criterion* cannot be achieved while we continue discussing truth as a meaningful concept. Similarly, Baudrillard discusses truth on the level of signs, a hyperreal truth as subjectively understood, while arguing that signs have imploded on the level of Truth, or *criterion* of truth. The truth is a simulacrum that prevents us from seeing our lack of Truth (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).

2.2 Hyper-critique

The current information society, which we may term the 'post-truth crisis', does not signify the end of truth, but an overproduction of truth, which deprives society of meaning (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 79). According to Baudrillard's theory, the main cause of this problem is that there is no longer a neutral position from which the truth is accessible since truth is always already embedded and determined within the code. Meaning and truth are related because truth helps to anchor meaning. To ascribe meaning to one's life, one must develop a position that one can consider to be true. If there were a metaphysical Truth, that would give everyone uncompromising meaning. Now that truth and Truth are simulations obscuring the lack of truth and Truth, meaning cannot be derived from anything real. The search for Truth is becoming more and more hopeless as appearances come to dominate over meaning (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 164). We look to the hyperreal world for meaning, generating more information

³ Truth with a capital 't' refers to metaphysical truth. I capitalize it to differentiate it from the ordinary use of the word 'truth' and to signify a higher, transcendental truth.

but less meaning. Baudrillard claims that the idea that ‘the circulation of information creates communication’ is a myth established through consensus. Media generate content by simulating the audience itself with information through, for instance, having viewers call in or otherwise interact with the show (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 79-81). Aside from the disappearance of the distinction between reality and simulation, another effect is the disappearance and implosion of the social order; human relations and communication have imploded into the media and the masses (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 19-21). The subject is the object of information, its beliefs being constituted through modelling after media personas. The information that signifies the masses on TV exists in a feedback loop with its viewers. Information constitutes the audience and the audience constitutes the programming on TV. Content and audience have imploded. Today this is visible through politicians who discuss policies and topics covered by the media for the lion’s share of their time. The media go on to report what the politicians discussed, constituting the beliefs of the political subjects. Due to the lack of a referent, politicians base their priorities on simulations of the masses (Bregman & Frederik, 2021). Both politicians and citizens *presume* that the other knows what they want, while the media structure and maintain these suppositions (Zizek, 1989, pp. 212-213). These simulations cannot be distinguished as true or false. Yet, they can be described as true or false, irrespective of Truth. It is necessary to understand the impossibility of developing critique on the individual level to see why truth is unattainable.

Upon hearing Baudrillard’s theory(-fiction), one may potentially object that the post-truth crisis could be overcome, to an extent, by a return to critique as described by philosopher Immanuel Kant. However, as I will argue, this objection is in vain and Kant’s theory is incompatible with Baudrillard’s work. On top of that, critique became hyper-critique, disabling one’s ability to distinguish between true critique and its simulation. Here I do not refer to Kant’s transcendental critique but to the ability of citizens to assess information critically. Hyper-critique is relevant for understanding my concept ‘digital solipsism’. Without critique, one cannot accurately scrutinize their own and others’ beliefs. Kant defined Enlightenment as “human being’s emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity” (Kant, 2008, p. 17). Immaturity here is a translation of the German *Unmündigkeit*, which roughly translates as the ‘inability to use one’s mouth’, i.e., to speak for oneself. This predicament is self-incurred when humanity lacks the courage to use its own intellect to speak for itself without relying on another’s guidance (Kant, 2008, p. 17). Thus, Enlightenment requires critique, the analysis of the conditions under which legitimate use of one’s reason leads to knowledge. One could describe the project of modern philosophy as a constant critique, even of Enlightenment itself (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 32; pp. 37-38).

Against Baudrillard, one could argue for a renewal of critique, so we can re-examine how to use reason to establish Truth beyond a mere truth. Baudrillard’s early analyses seem to strive for this, for his aim is to analyze society’s predicament through Marxist analysis and the possibility of creating Truth. However, even his early conclusions seem to be that Truth has dissolved in an implosion of imagination; it has become a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 2016, pp. 392-393). We cannot locate what parts

of our reality we imagine, or media imagine for us, which entails that we cannot locate what is True (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 21). Due to algorithmic filtering and epistemic bubbles, public discourse has become fractured. What is true for one person is false for another. Kant claims that a people is more easily enlightened than individuals, but only if it has the freedom to do so. Kant was writing under the rule of Prussian king Friedrich II. He asked for more freedom to speak about and critique the king's rule while continuing to obey his rules (Kant, 2008, p. 18; pp. 22-23). In contemporary times, the public sphere is split into public bubbles organized by technology companies, meddling with humanity's ability to enlighten one another. The few enlightened rational minds cannot easily reach others to inspire *Mündigkeit* in the entire population. On top of that, even when one recognizes critique, it remains unsure whether it is True and enlightens people. Clear examples of this can be found in conspiracy theories because of their general unfalsifiability.

Not unlike the social's disappearance into the masses as detailed by Baudrillard (1983), delivering critique has become a simulation of its old self. Platforms that can be differentiated as unreliable such as Breitbart, InfoWars and PragerU inform and critique current affairs, media and society in the respective formats of a news page, news show and university (Bernstein, 2018). As science sociologist Bruno Latour (2004) describes, conspiracy theorists have taken over the techniques of critique. That does not entail that the techniques are no longer useful, but merely that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish them from their simulation. The same questions raised by critical philosophers are now being adapted to undermine the authority that scientific reasoning has acquired (Latour, 2004, pp. 228-230). This seems to be in line with the purpose of critique, using it to think for oneself and to dare to know (Kant, 2008, pp. 17-18). However, conspiracists merely employ the hollow shell of critique.

In a Baudrillardian reversal, critique has become uncritical while being more critical than critical; it has turned into what I will call *hyper-critique*. Differentiating critique from its simulation has become a daily occurrence in contemporary times where public discourse is accessible to almost anyone and one must navigate an abundance of information. It is not the case that conspiracy theories are caused by the implosion of critique, since they have been around for much longer and mainly increase during periods of insecurity (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, pp. 324-325). It is the modern variation of the conspiracist who embodies the simulacrum of the modern critical attitude. They are typified by their disregard for objective truth and claim to 'only ask questions' without assuming a position in the debate themselves. Yet, the modern conspiracist simultaneously looks for truth while completely disavowing it. A clear example for this is the Dutch fashion model Doutzen Kroes. She questioned the Dutch government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic while spurring people to "denk logisch na" [think logically] and "stel je eigen vragen" [ask your own questions] (Van Gool & Van de Ven, 2020). Conspiracists, misreading popular critics, ask questions that seemingly fit within the critical attitude yet are indistinguishable from simulations. Unlike academic philosophers, who ascribe terms like 'discourse', 'capitalism' or 'false consciousness' to agents as the true moving forces, conspiracists use

somewhat less clear terms like ‘illuminati’, ‘cabal’ or the ubiquitous ‘sheeple’ (Latour, 2004, pp. 228-230; Harambam, 2017, p. 249; p. 310). The words ‘illuminati’ and ‘cabal’ signify small groups of people as the true moving forces, and ‘sheeple’ denotes the people that buy into that system. Both conspiracy theorists and philosophers apply “the hermeneutics of suspicion” that tries to discover the reality behind the one that is directly perceived (Harambam, 2017, pp. 247-248).

In today’s digital media landscape, it is difficult to recognize true critique when one encounters it. Baudrillard’s (1994) theory of hyperreality provides us with a framework to understand the processes that cast doubt on the authorities that produce truth (pp. 19-22). As evidenced by the increase in popularity of anti-media populism, many people notice the reversals of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, and imagination and perception (Müller, 2020, p. 35). This process became increasingly visible in the apparent absence of weapons of mass destruction after the Iraq war contradicted the image of reality shaped by mass media at the time. Conspiracy theorists report using their critical gaze “to uncover the hidden realities that remain unseen to those without education” (Harambam, 2017, p. 163). These reports can be placed in the wider context of mediatization in society, which changes our relation to reality as described above. Secularization, democratization, and globalization all contribute to the increased epistemic instability. Furthermore, a desire for community motivates conspiracy thinkers to come together around their abnormal beliefs (Harambam, 2017, pp. 170-173).

Due to the free movement in online spaces, it is now easier than ever to form a community by connecting to likeminded people. This enables people to live in an online world that only confirms their hyperreal experience, creating the possibility that neighbours start living in parallel realities. The gatekeepers to the public sphere have been eroded to such an extent that companies such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube barely acknowledge their responsibility, presenting themselves as mere tools for their users to connect. When, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter flagged misinforming tweets and even banned former US President Donald Trump from its platform, it reignited the discussion about their responsibility as platform (Clayton, 2021). An increase in fact-checking as a profession can allow for more accurate information to spread to open-minded people (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020). However, fact-checking people who are ‘just asking questions’ or who make unfalsifiable claims remains a thorny issue because this would start generating gigantic amounts of information that cloud the debate. Baudrillard (1994) warns that “[i]nformation devours its own content”, so producing more information results in less meaning (pp. 78-79). Writing articles that debunk conspiracy theorists’ claims would keep writers busy checking information, creating new content and, in the end, only serves to fascinate audiences rather than enlighten them. The term ‘fascination’,⁴ as used by Baudrillard, refers to the captivating and bewitching of consumers by media. Like a snake fascinates its prey, removing its

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘fascinate’ as: “Esp. of a snake: to use the eyes or gaze to deprive (prey) of the ability to resist or escape; to entrance by a gaze” (OED, 2020).

ability to move, media fascinate their audience, removing their ability to act. When people fact-check everything they read, no time or action is left to theorize or understand their predicament.

In short, the lack of gatekeeping and subsequent democratizing of the public sphere grants anyone the ability to speak, creating the possibility of copying the signs of authority in order to simulate a claim to Truth. Due to the implosion of signs, the indistinguishability of poles, Truth can be simulated by feigning a position of authority. Adopting the signs of critique suffices for statements to pass as critique, making these types of critique more critical than what used to be considered critique, creating hyper-critique. For example, if a politician promotes conspiracy theories, it has more authority because politicians employ the signs of truth speakers. On top of that, if someone criticizes that politician by pointing out the true goal behind their actions, they need not speak the truth but merely adopt the signifiers of critique. This hyper-critical attitude has become widespread, being employed by ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’⁵ sources of information. The deconstruction and suspicion behind critique have increased, becoming the defining features of appeals to Truth. Even critics with credentials and expertise like Latour start doubting the purpose of their critique, lamenting the lack of grounding for knowledge (Latour, 2004, pp. 226-227). The signs of truth have become truer than what we commonly held to be true.

2.3 Digital Solipsism

Every person takes in dissimilar parts of the media-generated hyperreality, creating separate realities for each individual. There is no longer a position from which the Truth can be accessible, and critique has become hyper-critical, becoming indistinguishable. Of course, before hyperreality, people also had dissimilar experiences of reality. However, they could overcome these differences due to the relative inflexibility of the empirical world when discussing it. Making observations about the world together allowed people to cross-examine their beliefs against their physical world experience. However, the digital world, which simulates the empirical world, is flexible to such an extent that an online user can believe in one thing, only to be ridiculed for believing it seconds later. For instance, when gorilla Harambe was shot by a zoo worker when a child entered its enclosure, the initial reaction was outrage at the child’s parents for neglecting their duties. Not long after, the reactions turned into an ironic mocking of the outrage and Harambe became a meme rather than a subject of empathy or outrage (Nagle, 2017, pp. 5-9). The truth is slippery and elusive in the digital world, “interpretation and judgment are evaded through tricks and layers of metatextual self-awareness and irony” (Nagle, 2017, 31). What is true for one person, need not be true for another. This affects the non-digital world alike, as the beliefs formed based on online sources are generalized. The distinction between the two worlds has imploded.

⁵ I put (il)legitimate in quotation marks because they are hyperreal signs and do not point to any real legitimacy.

As described in subchapter 2.1, the subject as understood through the structuralist analysis is constituted by the intersection of signifiers that determine needs and beliefs. If we assume the correspondence theory, every person may eventually arrive at the same worldview. All statements would eventually correspond to the mind-independent reality and everyone's beliefs eventually correspond with it. When beliefs are generated in an implosion of media and reality, media consumption determines one's beliefs, and thereby truth. When someone enters an echo chamber, an epistemic community where contrary opinions are heard but discredited, their beliefs are constituted through membership to that community. Members deem everyone outside of their community untrustworthy, differentiating the outsiders from the insiders (Woods, 2005, p. 10). The media one consumes and the beliefs one holds are determined by one's simulated identity, which, again, is determined by the media one consumes. The one is modelled after the other and vice versa. Media no longer mediate between reality and the subject, but a "single model, whose efficacy is immediate, simultaneously generates the message, the medium and the "real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 82). In this situation of implosion, holding a particular belief serves to differentiate oneself from outsiders that do not hold such beliefs. Again, such a process is visible in conspiracy theories, where anyone who argues against the group's beliefs is discredited by the presumption that they are part of the conspiracy. For example, when a news article denies a conspiracist's belief, it can be signified as 'fake news' despite a majority who describe the article as 'true'. Alternatively, when a non-conspiracist watches a video about a conspiracy theory, they can differentiate it as 'another conspiracy' and disregard it.

The subject is constituted on an individual level because even those within a single community need not share all the same beliefs. Conspiracists can still consume different media and disagree with one another. Their conflicting beliefs differentiate them from one another, constituting their identity. The code generates beliefs, which become visible on the individual level, like the computer code that generates a game visible on individual screens. The subject is the smallest indivisible element through which the code produces information. Baudrillard (2017) compares this to DNA, where all information of a person is stored in a single cell and reproduces itself with minimal differences. This pattern that works "like a *social genetic code*" encapsulates every person into a web of signifiers, of which the one cannot be more valuable than the other (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 145). The code differentiates individuals from one another through needs and beliefs. If every person shares information with others and minimal differences occur between them, there is no ground for the 'view from nowhere' and objectivity because every single person only exists within this code. Even science defines and explains objects it itself has formalized and created. The ethics within this system exist to defend and preserve it, according to Baudrillard, so 'objective' knowledge is defended by morals (Baudrillard, 2017, pp. 141-148). Similarly, the most essential data in a computer is the operating system, for without it the computer would not work. However, this importance does not grant it truth value. Therefore, beliefs and needs exist within the structural code, manifesting on the level of the singular subject. Knowledge as "true,

justified belief” is only attainable within this system on the level of truth, through signifiers, not on the level of Truth (Gettier, 1963, p. 121). All we are left with is information.

Comparing whose beliefs are more or less true based solely on information does not allow for a hierarchy of truths since truths are only differentiated by the information that constitutes them. As Baudrillard uses it, information is incomparable when it comes to truth-value, like files in a computer are neither truer nor less true than other files. Still, people generally aim at truth when they inquire or search for information. Nietzsche (1979) describes an “honest and pure drive for truth” in humanity, although he means “honest and truth” ironically (p. 1). He questions why this has developed because, as he sees it, humans live under constant illusions. He argues that humans do not necessarily desire truth (or Truth) but “the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth” (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 2). The reason for the drive to truth is a duty imposed by society for it to keep existing. Metaphors cover up the Truth, requiring translation from sense stimulus to an image and from an image to a word. Language cannot capture the Truth, only truth is attainable on the level of metaphors. Using the ‘correct’ metaphors means speaking the truth. Lying then only becomes problematic if it entails negative consequences; one must exclusively lie according to the accepted conventions and metaphors (Nietzsche, 1979, pp. 3-4). For example, writing a fiction book or complementing an ugly hairdo are oftentimes not problematic, but writing a fictional scientific article in a journal or giving someone the wrong directions are mostly considered morally wrong. For Nietzsche (1979), every known thing, every concept and every truth are “illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” (p. 4). Like Baudrillard, Nietzsche understands truth as a social concept and acknowledges its illusory nature.

One difference between Baudrillard and Nietzsche is that when Nietzsche was writing, the implosion that Baudrillard describes had not occurred yet. In the 19th century, the electronic and digital media had not yet created today’s global village, where the world has imploded into an ambivalent hyperreality (McLuhan, 1964, p. 5). Humanity continues to look for Truth in simulations, only finding truth that conceals the lack of the higher Truth. However, in a world where signifiers only refer to themselves and information is overproduced, even agreeing on one truth has become a laborious task. Distinguishing between truth and illusion in the (online) world is virtually impossible, according to Baudrillard (1994), because simulation has imploded the difference (p. 2). The only way of differentiating is by asserting one belief as truer or less true, making it stand out from others, but ultimately it still exists within the code. Differentiating can only happen within the code, otherwise, there is nothing for it to differ from. Likewise, an independent thinker can only be independent in relation to a system in which others are dependent.

Each person’s beliefs exist only for them within the code’s structure and are as good or as bad as any other, stranding them in what I call a ‘digital solipsism’. This is a world shaped by the code on the individual’s level, the signs that constitute the subject also constitute that subject’s unique world. It is digital because, unlike the conventional understanding of solipsism, it originates from the information embedded in the code. The models created by media, upon which simulations are built, generate each

person's beliefs when they converge in an individual subject. The information they hold can only be differentiated as truer for themselves by generating more information, like conspiracy theorists measure 5G radiation to validate their beliefs. There are no signs that point towards any possibility of their belief being True. Digital solipsism is incommensurable with Truth. Beliefs are true only because the code determines which information is true, obscuring the lack of Truth. The code simulates meaning in a meaningless world.

In conclusion, the autonomous, rational subject has become more like the objects it has surrounded itself with, meaning it only exists within the structure as defined by the code. This leaves us in a simulation where we can only differentiate 'true' from 'false' statements rather than know whether a statement is True. Desires and beliefs form the subject rather than vice versa. Due to the implosion of subject and object, Truth cannot be reached. Baudrillard also refers to his work as theory-fiction rather than critique. Even if it was a critique, we cannot recognize the difference between real critique and hyper-critique, which is only the signs of critique. One can adopt the signs of truth to signify truth without speaking the Truth, the signs are truer than true. Due to the democratizing of the public sphere, anyone is able to simulate a position of epistemic authority that becomes more convincing than the institutions that traditionally occupied that position. Every individual consumes different parts of hyperreality; whether this occurs through digital media or empirical observation does not matter because the world has imploded into a single simulation. Individuals are stranded in the realm of digital solipsism, leaving them with only their own beliefs as generated by the signs of the code. Critique is not available as a tool to distinguish knowledge from information. This makes any kind of meaning seem out of reach. However, in chapter 3, I will consider how to respond to the loss of meaning and examine whether revolutionary change is still possible.

Chapter 3

In the final chapter of this thesis, I discuss potential responses to my Baudrillardian analysis of the post-truth crisis and some potential objections against this thesis. The potential for revolution or change is already incorporated within Baudrillard's system, leaving no room for changing the system itself. Opposition to and questioning of the system are already inscribed within it. Terrorist attacks against the hegemonic places of power cannot be located in the real, because the signs recur without referential as "the play of simulation" that gets at the real but never reaches it (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 21-22). Revolutionary potential is never realised because no event can truly question the code from the outside. However, I aim to unveil what I think is a possibility for change. First, I consider three objections against my theory. If I argue that Truth is no longer attainable and truth only exists as appearance, then this thesis, written by me, also comes from a place of digital solipsism. I do not disagree with this objection but describe this work as a 'theory-fiction', akin to Baudrillard's work (De Boer, 2005). Secondly, I explore the consequences of the condition of digital solipsism. Everyone exists in a digital solipsist realm connected by the code, meaning that, although every 'subject' is a single point, all those points exist within a single system. Thirdly, I introduce the concept of 'glitch' and explain how glitches can facilitate change.

3.1 Objections

Before elaborating on the responses to my Baudrillardian analysis of the structure of the post-truth society, I consider three objections to my thesis. Firstly, the objection that my thesis contains no truth-value. Secondly, that my thesis is simply a product of the code coming from my position in a digital solipsist realm. Finally, I consider the possible objection that my thesis contributes to the overproduction of meaning and whether silence is not a better response.

Within Baudrillard's theory-fiction, Truth is unattainable, and truth only exists on the level of signs. This thesis adopts his philosophical system and is written using signs of the English language. Those fluent in English might consider it true by on the level of signs but it can never reach the metaphysical level of Truth with certainty. My thesis is true only if the standards of the code determine it to be true. I differentiate my analysis from other analyses through the information I provide in support of it. However, differentiation does not allow for a hierarchy of truth. Someone else's analysis of the post-truth society might be significantly incompatible with mine but still be understood as true. This makes it difficult to determine whether to attach value to my thesis or not. On top of that, one may object that this analysis is also an instance of hyper-critique. I could be accused of adopting the mere signs of critique rather than delivering an actual critique. By presenting this analysis as a master's thesis, it gains more legitimacy than if I presented it as a Facebook post because the former medium is more strongly associated with truth-value than the latter. Again, I am vulnerable to the charge that these signs are simulacra that obscure the lack of Truth.

To this objection, I reply that my analysis is a hermeneutical one. My thesis provides an angle through which the post-truth crisis can be understood, without making claims to Truth or knowledge. I strive for understanding and analysis. Hermeneutics mediates between something already mediated, namely language. Something always escapes interpretation as language is already an interpretation of the world. The interpretation I deliver signifies only other signifiers, pointing out the relations between them and nothing more (Grondin, 1997, pp. 21-22). Baudrillard (1994) calls this the “vertigo of interpretation” (p. 16), where everything is simulated and stands on itself within the code. The connection to any mind-independent reality is nowhere to be found. Interpretation is the only possibility left within hyperreality. Without a position from which to distinguish truth from illusion, all that is left is explicating the current situation with the tools available to us. Baudrillard (1994) writes that every articulated interpretation “is simultaneously true” and that facts “are born at the intersection of models” (pp. 16-17). The more one interpretation is embedded in differing models, the more it starts to seem like fact, but it remains unclear whether it is True or whether it is another simulacrum. In any case, this analysis too remains embedded in the structural code of signs, which constitutes it and makes it intelligible. At the same time, this thesis is aware of its place in the hyperreality. I want to point out the nature of this text as a thesis to ensure that it is the interpretation that convinces you, the reader, not the format signifying truth-value.

One can reply to my counterargument that my interpretation is also a manifestation of the code. Departing from my existence in the code, I provide information that is as good or as bad as anyone else coming from a position of a digital solipsist. However, in response, I would claim that if fiction and theory have imploded, then all language is of equal importance and no work can be privileged over another. It is ‘true’ that my work exists only on the level of signs. Yet, if it convinces the reader, it at least provides a manner of understanding the assumed predicament of the post-truth society. Escaping from the code cannot be done through the code itself. As philosopher Audre Lorde (2018) states, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 2). I interpret her statement as claiming that we cannot use the tools that the code supplies to make the code vulnerable to a theoretical critique. Any description of its structure necessarily exists within it in order to be articulated. In subchapter 3.3, I intend to use the tools of the code to point to possible tools that can dismantle the code. Supposing something exists outside of the code, it must be integrated in signs for it to be apprehended by individuals. Regardless, perhaps such an unintelligible position can dismantle the coded hyperreality.

Finally, one can object that the production of information within this thesis contributes to the overproduction of information, destroying meaning. Baudrillard’s (1994) own hypothesis is that “where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs” (p. 80). He provides two reasons for it. Firstly, simulating meaning robs the information of that exact meaning because it becomes indistinguishable from meaninglessness due to its simulation. Secondly, media have restructured social relations, imploding the masses with the media as well as the media with reality. Baudrillard (1983) discusses silence as a response to the implosion. The social sphere of society no longer has a referent,

‘the people’, the referent which was the basis for the political, has imploded with its simulation. The distinction between who the people are and how they are represented has disappeared; surveys, referenda and test determine models that underlie social relations. Instead of ‘the people’, now politics represents the ‘silent majority’, “whose existence is no longer social but statistical” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 20). Attempting to rejuvenate the silent majority, again, results in an overproduction of meaning because socialization is understood through the sharing of information (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 26). So, neither silence nor socialization are sufficient responses to the lack of meaning Baudrillard highlights.

Finding a position from which hyperreality becomes vulnerable to revolutionary change leads us back to reconsidering digital solipsism. As described above, the individual differentiates themselves from others by adopting different signs. Within Baudrillard’s (1983) theory-fiction, identity can only be simulated this way. Social relations are not only mediated by signs, but signs are constitutive of them. Any underlying ‘true’ identity “just hypostatizes a simulacrum” (pp. 70-72). Standing out from the crowd does not entail a position outside of the group; standing out can only be done in relation to the crowd itself. Yet, if we assume that every individual exists within a digital solipsism, as I argued based on Baudrillard’s ideas, we accept that a form of universalism exists within the code. It affects each individual that exists within it. The consequence is that the entirety of the simulated social life becomes constitutive of hyperreality. Signs generate social relations and social relations, in turn, generate signs. For instance, when the signifier ‘influencer’ is used to signify an individual, that signifier becomes the condition through which the world is interpreted for the individual. It seems as if they *are* an influencer, but they are only so because of the constitution through the code. Baudrillard (1983) hypothesizes that either social relations never existed or that they have becoming all-encompassing. In the case of the latter, the relational aspect of the structure of society becomes total. The models in the code pre-determine its appearances (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 72-73). In other words, the positions, as well as the individuals that can take them up are generated beforehand based on pre-existing structures. Consequently, the goal of finding a position from which critique is possible and from which Truth is accessible seems like the wrong approach if the goal is to formulate a new revolutionary potential within Baudrillard’s analysis. First, I must ask why revolution is necessary. That means asking whether existing within the hyperreality is necessarily problematic or objectionable.

3.2 Meaning(lessness) and Nihilism

Deriving meaning through differentiation deprives the world of meaning. According to Baudrillard (1994), any ‘knowledge’ is mere information that exhausts itself from meaning through communication. The overproduction of information prevents meaning from attaching to anything (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 80). For instance, if you often hear that global warming is going to disrupt ecosystems and cause sea levels to rise to unsustainable levels, as well as hearing that global warming is a natural side effect of Earth’s atmosphere and will likely not significantly impact ecosystems, then this contradicting information results in a loss of meaning. Someone with a firm resolve may choose to conduct more

research to figure out which information can be considered 'true'. Still, locating the Truth is impossible because all experimentation and research presuppose models. So, more research results in more information, more simulacra that obscure the lack of Truth. Thus, the human desire for Truth and meaning is frustrated, which brings us to why a revolutionary alternative is desirable.

Nihilism, the belief that nothing has inherent meaning, is the position that Baudrillard (1994) seems to ascribe to (p. 160). He writes his theory-fiction while affirming their fictional nature. As I argued above, Baudrillard and Nietzsche (1979) both acknowledge the illusory nature of Truth. As I will explain, the resemblance does not stop there. Nietzsche does acknowledge the desire for Truth in humanity in order to create a culture. However, he argues that people do not hate lies and deception either, merely their unpleasant consequences. Deceiving without injuring is acceptable and even allows humans to be "enchanted with happiness" at "epic fables" (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 2; p. 8). Baudrillard (1994) seems to have taken up the task of fascinating his readers with his theory-fictions. He employs "the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real" (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 2). Baudrillard uses his creativity to create theory-fictions that undermine and question the status of ordinary theories as being true. He creatively terrorizes other theories and critiques, showing that the destruction of meaning and the disappearances of ourselves are the conditions in which the post-truth crisis occurs in the postmodern society. In other words, meaning and Kantian subjectivity are no longer understood as 'real' due to simulation becoming dominant. Even though postmodern society might seem similar to modernity, its nature as simulation changes the way people relate to truth and makes having a shared culture or facts difficult. It merely appropriates the modernist aesthetic at times (Fisher, 2009, p. 8).

The appearances themselves disappear behind "the violence of interpretation and of history", which leaves the world disenchanted like love is disenchanted when reduced to purely scientific terms. Nothing magical can stand out in the undifferentiated disappearance of the world into hyperreality, a world more real than the real world (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 160-161). Nietzsche (1979) describes the origin of creativity through the intellect and writes that "[s]o long as it is able to deceive without injuring, that master of deception, the intellect, is free" (p. 8). In this case, being free means being able to share stories that do not injure others. Taking fiction as truth limits humanity's ability to wonder, its freedom and its imagination, because such creativity is not needed when truth is assumed. Heinous acts have been committed in the name of truths that turned out to be fictions, as is visible whenever fascism arises or when war is started in, for instance, Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan (Giroux, 2020, p. 19). When one shares a story about the superiority of a particular people as truth, that story injures those who take it as truth as well as the supposed inferior people. It limits their freedom and creativity by capturing people in a truth of someone's creation or, in the case of hyperreality, of nobody *and* everyone's creation. Perhaps that is why cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009) preferred the term 'capitalist realism' over 'postmodernism' because when the word 'postmodernism' was used alternatives still existed. Today "[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher, 2009, pp. 7-9).

Free, non-injurious creativity can re-enchant humanity by showing the imaginary nature of human concepts by highlighting contradictions and obfuscating realities that seem obvious. My point is that Baudrillard (1994) seems to use creativity to dismantle the “hegemony of the system”; through implosion and reversibility he “mobilizes the imaginary” (p. 163). The imaginary can be interpreted as the creativity Nietzsche refers to, an imagination of new possibilities different from or even outside of the code. The tool of (theory-)fiction restores humanity’s ability to imagine an ideal future of its own making. In order to be free, the hegemony of the system must be made vulnerable, meaning it must be understood as contingent and confusing. Only then can the creativity of the intellect free itself. In the contemporary world, such a dismantling continues to be required to achieve freedom from hyperreality. That is why striving for revolution is necessary. Baudrillard strives for this freedom, yet I argue that we must go further than implosion and reversibility.

Like the media he describes, Baudrillard fascinates the reader with stories about hyperreality. Yet, he describes the “system” as having a “nihilism of neutralization”, referring to the inherent lack of meaning in hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 163). If all signs refer to other signs, the system only consists of *is* meaning or total meaninglessness, but there is no ground to privilege one sign over another. They may be ‘true’ but never ‘True’, that is the neutralization of signs. Surprisingly, Baudrillard rejoices at the destruction of meaning and celebrates appearances for their immortality. He claims that meaning “has imposed its ephemeral reign” on appearances that are “invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 164). Although appearances are constantly changing, the existence of some kind of appearance, independent of their form, is eternal; its interpretation or meaning, however, remains fleeting. Here, he understands appearances not as phenomenological appearances to a Kantian subject, but as appearances as such. One way of understanding them is through Nietzsche’s interpretation of philosopher Heraclitus’ concept of ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘being’. The latter is the basic assumption upon which most of Western philosophy rests, namely that something can ‘be’. In short, it allows for the equation of two things that might be completely different in statements such as ‘pizza is a kind of bread’ through the use of ‘is’. As Nietzsche explains it, Heraclitus describes the world as in a constant state of ‘becoming’, signifying the constant change as apprehended by the senses. Heraclitus exemplified this with his famous statement that ‘you cannot step into the same river twice’. Platonic philosophy distrusts the senses in favour of rational contemplation of the world, aiming at discovering reality or Truth behind the senses (Cox, 1999, pp. 184). In Baudrillardian terms, *being* is the essence of simulacra that hide the absence of Truth. Appearances are that which is becoming, not behind the simulacra, but unrelated to them. The constant change itself is what makes Baudrillard rejoice at the death of meaning. Appearances cannot deceive because they merely ‘become’. Although they are always changing, appearances are always there regardless of form. Baudrillard’s unobtrusive desire for some kind of Truth therein once again becomes visible, potentially being gratified in Heraclitus’ ever-changing river.

Revolution is necessary because, without truth, humanity can envision neither past nor future, and without those humanity will disappear into the implosion. Even though any articulation of appearances necessarily occurs through the code, appearances themselves cannot be neutralized because they appear before any mediation. However, the search for Truth and meaning continues even within hyperreality. Based on Baudrillard's theory-fiction, I cannot resort to phenomenological experience because it is excluded due to the subject's implosion with the object and because any language in which to relate to the experience is already embedded in the code. Baudrillard argues that due to implosion, there are no more media that mediate between subject and reality. Media generate reality through signs. Revolution is no longer possible through messages since the medium itself has become the message. Even the appropriation of new media for revolutionary purposes has become an impossibility because the medium and the real have imploded (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 82-83). However, I will add to Baudrillard and his concepts the move towards the inarticulable, a 'glitch' in the code if you will.

3.3 A Glitch in the Code

My point in subchapter 3.3 is that inarticulable, singular appearances can dismantle the code that generates hyperreality. By treating Baudrillard's work as a kind of negative theology, I argue that singular appearances that remain inarticulate constitute a space untouched by hyperreality. Baudrillard (1994) also uses negativity rather than positivity to describe hyperreality, describing simulacra that hide Truth's absence (pp. 4-5). The difference between Baudrillard and negative theologians is that Baudrillard does not claim that what is left is True or real but that the absence itself is the space from which meaning can arise (King, 2020). Yet, the absence itself cannot be articulated. Inarticulability defines the boundary between hyperreality and the glitch, a fault in the code that is irreparable due to its transience.

As I argued in this thesis, the code that generates hyperreality has subsumed the world in information, drowning out the possibility of Truth and meaning. The structuralist analysis interprets the world through difference, defining identity through that which it is not. Baudrillard's move towards post-structuralism radicalises this interpretation into an all-encompassing totality of difference and indifference, eliminating any position outside of the code. Reality has disappeared in favour of the more real than real, hyperreality. Questioning hyperreality only affirms it; responding with silence allows models to dominate. What I call a 'glitch' does both and neither. The function of a glitch is to interrupt "a digital representation in such a way that its simulation of analog can no longer remain covert" (Manon & Temkin, 2011, p. 1). It disrupts the code by exposing and dismantling it on the level of the individual, not by cancelling the digital solipsism but by highlighting it. It does so by exposing the nature of simulation *as simulation*. It questions the concepts we use to define the world around us, like a false memory makes one question all of one's memories or a typo in a novel that aborts the suspension of disbelief.

The term 'glitch' is commonly associated with computing and electronics jargon, denoting a malfunction of electric fuses due to a change in voltage. A glitch is not an ordinary malfunction due to an external error, but a slipping up of the system due to an internal change (Glenn, 1962, p. 86). A singular instance can cause a system to collapse from within, highlighting that it is really a system. The glitch is perhaps best understood in the context of video games. I adapt the term from computing jargon to apply it to hyperreality. The glitch is a reminder that one is playing a digital game, being both part of the game and not part of the game. It is not supposed to occur, but it occurs anyhow. There are two poles to a glitch, on the one hand, it prevents progress because it disrupts the intended development and, on the other hand, it allows for unintended development leading to new possibilities that disregard previously accepted rules to the game. From the player's or digital solipsist's perspective, at first, it seems a dysfunction in the game, but it can also challenge the player to reinterpret the game's logic. Neither interpretation is more 'true' than the other: "a glitch does not reveal the true functionality of the computer, it shows the ghostly conventionality of the forms by which digital spaces are organized" (Goriunova & Shulgin, 2008, pp. 110-114). This challenge does only occur within a single game, leaving other games unaffected. Yet for one player, the internal error highlights the pure meaning that the code generates, whether it is Baudrillard's code or the code of a video game. The glitch, through questioning the interpretation of the logic of hyperreality, makes prior interpretations seem contingent. One can compare this to writer Albert Camus's (1955) description of 'the absurd', the clash of a person's search for meaning and the impossibility of finding it in an unreasonable world (p. 22). The moment one realizes the absurd, the only thing that remains is the questioning of any meaning. Similarly, the glitch questions the structure of the code, not from an outside position but through internal questioning.

The glitch, however, is not a term of resistance because resistance implies active involvement, whereas the glitch is not created or produced; it is triggered. One has no control over the appearance of a glitch. Since the rational subject has imploded with the subject, it cannot arise through willpower. Rather, it arises within the aleatory⁶ motions of the code itself. Unlike terrorism or the apocalypse, which the system has incorporated, the glitch exists on a ghostly plane between appearances and hyperreality. As Baudrillard (1994) describes, terrorism and the apocalypse continue to fascinate, whereas the glitch both draws attention to itself and cannot be grasped (pp. 204-205). One can visualize the 'place' in which the glitch occurs as a void, being only obliquely apprehended. It will arise in a singular individual point, to be experienced, not by a subject but by pure, pre-linguistic consciousness. Unlike digital solipsism, hyperreality does not bound this consciousness; it is wide open. The description I attempt to give here cannot do it justice. The glitch is like the root of the tree that Antoine Roquentin, the main character of Sartre's novel *Nausea* (2000), describes as he apprehends its pure

⁶ Unlike randomness, we cannot predict aleatory occurrences. Once the probabilities are known, random occurrences can be predicted. However, aleatory occurrences, like the glitch, are unpredictable.

existence. No qualities can be attributed to it. No words can be used to describe Roquentin's experience, although he (or Sartre) does his best. The root, like the glitch, merely exists and "what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*" (Sartre, 2000, p. 188). Describing the glitch is a contradiction in terms, but if pressed to provide an example, I would refer to near-death experiences, limit experiences (induced by drugs or not) or perhaps the impact of the Anthropocene as climate change accelerates.

The glitch does not destroy the code but *annihilates* the world generated by it. On the individual level, the world as generated by the code becomes contingent. That includes the idea of oneself. One's hyperreal world is exposed as a simulacrum, dwindling to nothingness. This is a different kind of nihilism than the "neutralization of the system" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 163). Finding truth or Truth through the glitch is an impossibility because the glitch only allows for the question to be posed, with any answers remaining contingent interpretations. As Baudrillard (1994) describes, "[t]he more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals" (p. 163). This means that, even though no final answer can be discovered, the stronger the system the more impact a dismantling can have on an individual's imagination. There is no need for true knowledge or an autonomous subject for interpretations to arise; the play of signs while knowing they are signs are enough to re-enchant the world. Fisher (2009) claimed that "[f]rom a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again" (p. 81).

Undecidability appears within Baudrillard's nihilism between passive nihilism and complete nihilism. On the one hand, passive nihilism refers to the meaninglessness of the system, the simulacra that simulate meaning and the neutralization of signs. On the other hand, complete nihilism is the final stage of nihilism, where one is no longer a nihilist because nihilism itself has lost its meaning. A complete nihilist is only a nihilist in the eyes of others. Like Nietzsche's Heraclitus, they have moved to the world of becoming, in which all meaning and Truth are transient (Woodward, 2008). My point is that, because of the possibility of the glitch, passive nihilism, like the neutralization of the system, is not sustainable and finite due to its inevitable dismantling by the glitch. Complete nihilism, on the other hand, is an inevitability. The only question that remains is how such nihilism can be understood.

I offer two interpretations of complete nihilism, one that is compatible with the will for Truth and one that is not. To start with the latter, one can respond to complete nihilism with frustration due to an unfulfilled will for Truth or meaning. This is the situation to which digital solipsism leads, the overproduction of truth in the form of simulacra that conceals the fact that there is none. The will to truth turns on its hyperdrive, producing the more real than real to compensate for its lack of reality. The interpretation compatible with Truth and truth is the embrace of becoming, where Truth is ephemeral and ludic. Acquiring Truth is a constant process of creation because it is 'be-coming'. Truth is always a process that is deferred and moulded in the moment. Choosing between these interpretations is not a rational process but another undecidability to which one can only respond with an answer. Whether that answer is True or true can always be questioned.

Conclusion

This thesis draws on Jean Baudrillard's theory-fiction to critically investigate hyperreality, hyper-critique and digital solipsism on the concept of truth in post-truth society. To do so, I first described Baudrillard's methodology, outlining his move from structuralism to poststructuralism and from modernity to postmodernity. Baudrillard developed the concepts 'simulacra', 'simulation', 'code' and 'hyperreality' to describe postmodern society. In it, he applies the structuralist analysis to words and signs based on difference rather than identity. All signs become self-referential and constitute their own (hyper)reality. He first describes this in consumer society, where TV images become self-referential. In postmodern society, Baudrillard argues that any knowable, mind-independent reality became inaccessible. This is because we are in the third order of the simulacrum, the simulation. As he writes, "[t]here is no "objective" difference" between anything real and anything simulated, which means that one can never be sure whether something is real (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 20). Information embedded in the code replaced knowledge. Since the code generates hyperreality, all parts and signs have imploded. The entire structuralist analysis of difference now exists on one level. Media cannot be separated from its messages or its receivers, which became visible in the Mother of All Demos in 1968.

Due to implosion, the autonomous, rational subject becomes indistinguishable from the objects it surrounds itself with, the same goes for truths and falsehoods. Baudrillard reverses the common understanding that the subject has beliefs and needs, arguing that beliefs and needs constitute the subject. Baudrillard's claim seems paradoxical if reality and simulation imploded. Therefore, we must understand Baudrillard's work as theory-fiction. Nevertheless, truth continues to be useful for humanity to share a common culture and facts to base their actions and society on. Baudrillard's own refusal to consider his work as 'true' or True can be understood as coming from a desire for Truth. Critique is not available because it became hypercritical, meaning it exaggerates critique's regular features to mimic it. In other words, it has become simulated. Due to epistemic and filter bubbles forming online, it has become easier for people to live in parallel realities within hyperreality. When everyone consumes dissimilar parts of hyperreality, everyone's beliefs become as good as anyone else's. There is no point from which to compare or judge the beliefs outside of the system that constitutes them, stranding individuals in the digital solipsist realm. A hierarchy of truth is no longer possible, which Nietzsche acknowledged as well when he observed the tension between a will to truth and an eternal lack of it. The difference between Baudrillard and Nietzsche is their cultural context, the former writing in the media-reality and Nietzsche before it.

I considered three objections to my thesis. Firstly, that my theory is also a theory-fiction and cannot be held as true or True. To which I responded that my analysis is a hermeneutical one, focussing on interpretation rather than on truth-value. Secondly, that my thesis is generated by the code from my digital solipsism. If my theory convinces the reader, it can still be useful in discussing our predicament. Thirdly, that I contribute to the overproduction of meaning and information. The other possibility would

be silence, but Baudrillard has already discussed why silence will not alter meaninglessness. The reason why revolution is necessary is nihilism, which frustrates the human will to meaning and disenchants the world. Baudrillard, like Nietzsche, tries to re-enchant the world through stories like his theory-fictions. He aims to terrorize the hegemony of the code by reversing its signs to highlight its nature as simulation. He prefers appearances over meaning because the former are immortal and cannot be neutralized. That is why I introduce the concept 'glitch', which questions and dismantles the hyperreal simulation. It exists inside and outside of hyperreality, which allows for a new perspective to be taken up within digital solipsism. Like Camus' absurd, it highlights the meaninglessness *and* the pure meaning that constitute the imploded world, like when the power of a master over a slave is annihilated with a single smile back at the master. It allows us to recognize the passive nihilism of the hegemonic structure of signs and moves us into the complete nihilist world of 'becoming', where appearances rule. My point is that passive nihilism frustrates our will for Truth and meaning, causing an overproduction of truth and reality, and that complete nihilism accepts the constant process of creating Truth and meaning.

Further research must explore the effects of complete nihilism on a larger culture. I considered the effects on the individual level through digital solipsism but did not examine the consequences of a glitch on a societal level. Although it is inarticulable, theory-fiction hypothesize about what ideal circumstances constitute a glitch. Aside from that, this thesis was limited to the Western understanding of reality, other interpretations are possible. Baudrillard has already been compared to Eastern philosophy, but that can be expanded upon. One such example is the comparison of 'becoming' and the Buddhist concept of tathata, or 'suchness' (King, 2020). With this thesis, I hope to provide a helpful conceptual framework for future theorizing about the post-truth crisis. I updated the valuable work Baudrillard has done in his time to better suit the age of digital media. Taking Baudrillard and Nietzsche's arguments seriously is no easy task. The crisis of truth and the problem of nihilism and meaninglessness can seem frightening. Reality and simulation are indistinguishable in a hyperreal simulacrum that masks the absence of truth, but one glitch is all that is needed for the freedom to ask questions and the creativity that answers them to return.

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