

MACHINE:
Mapping the Multimedia Terrain of Postmodern Society*

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"We are in uncharted waters," remarked a commentator on National Public Radio on a July evening in 1996. "We have to stay infinitely adaptable in this age of uncertainty and change." Although the person being interviewed was talking on the mercuric nature of the job market, these words seemed particularly relevant to the work we have been doing in Visual Sociology. American society, and other cultures dominated by the American media complex, have undergone profound shifts in the ways in which identity is understood (Clough 1994, Denzin 1995), ways in which language is both used and constructed, and our ways of dealing with information. These shifts have taken place in such a way that our modes of communication are undergoing changes that are no less significant.

The purpose of this article is to utilize current understandings of postmodern culture in order to explicate the first multimedia social theoretical text in sociology: The Machine trilogy. Machine is the result of combining the theoretical work of intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard (1996), Paul Virilio (1994), Gilles Deleuze (1991), and Arthur and Marilousie Kroker (1996) with the tools of postmodernism: the personal computer, digital recording techniques, and mass media and computer images. It is our contention that texts such as Machine are a necessary next step in a truly postmodern sociology, which must be, virtually by definition, a visual sociology. Machine is an attempt to map the course of Western culture from the industrial/modernist period to the present postmodern/postindustrial period, what Baudrillard (1995a) has referred to as the culture of the mediascape. Machine is meant primarily as a pedagogical tool. In the pages that follow we will provide a theoretical background for our work

and, following from Denzin, analyze our work from a critical perspective; the ultimate postmodern move into self-referentiality.

Theoretical Background

In a scant fifty years we have gone from A-bombs to ANSI bombs; from Uncle Miltie to recombinant bodies (Kroker 1993); from U.S. mail to E-mail. The leading edge of Information-age culture is riding an incandescent shockwave of high-speed data transfer, technologies du jour, and new media springing up like silicon weeds on the information superhighway. As Electronic Frontier foundation co-founder John Perry Barlow put it at a recent speech at Wake Forest University, "Everything we know is wrong..." . All our preconceptions have been swept away in the postmodern age as we all wait for the dazzling new future that will arrive tomorrow. as promised by the high tech science fiction-laden commercials put on the tube by the manufacturers of our cybernetic junk food. And we stare on in amazement, and in indifference, with what Denzin (1995) has called the "voyeurs gaze."

The rise to preeminence of the new media and emergent information technologies create serious questions to the social theorist at the fin de millennium. Can one comment through text alone on the increasingly complex issues created by a society that is transforming before our eyes in an ever-accelerating blur of telecommunications and digital media? That is to say, can the social theorist map out the terrain of the information-age society, thick with rapidly changing sound and imagery with only the written word?

We believe that the written word alone possesses a relatively narrow bandwidth for such an endeavor, and presents many limitations. As the popular British rock performer Elvis Costello aptly put a similar metaphor, "Writing about Rock & Roll is like Dancing about Architecture." In other words, in order to speak about mediated society, we must use media as a descriptor, and likewise use the technologies at hand to speak on technological society. This creates what we call a "discourse of equivalence," which lessens the problematic nature of theorizing the mass media using only the written word by creating a mediated, or "Parallel Text" via these forms of visual interpretation. By using these methodologies, the salient cognitive aspects of these visual (and later, multimedia, texts) are becoming more readily accessible to the postmodern mind, which is accustomed to the everyday visual barrage of popular media.

When formulating a methodology for speaking of a mediated information society of floating signifiers, shifting genders, and cultural panic sites in which the individual can no longer find social or cultural mooring, one would automatically begin with McLuhan's notion that the form of media dictates its content (1994). The concepts involved in our work are such that the ubiquity of McLuhan's work is implied, but proceed into the realm of what some have called Post-McLuhanism (Epstein and Epstein 1994). We have asserted the end of the pre-media society, and now speculate on society after the Baudrillardian implosion of the real into the hyperreal image, where there is an endless symbolic playing out of the end until the next apocalyptic crisis comes along (Baudrillard 1994).

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1993) wrote of the implosion of reality into the hyperreal of the digital domain of simulations and simulacra. This, in some extent, has borne itself out in the creation of the Internet, with its varied social, discursive, and simulated physical (VRML) spaces, and in the emergent communications and multimedia technologies. Following from Baudrillard, the postmodern era is oriented towards the representational qualities of visual images (Baudrillard 1987).

In The Transparency of Evil, Baudrillard (1993) states that many cultural spheres (aesthetics, politics, sexuality) have reached a point of "transparency". That is to say, in the postmodern, these spheres have reached their respective limits, or points of excess, but still continue to proliferate through a process of continuous self-reproduction. In so doing, the cultural spheres explode beyond their limits, infecting the rest of the culture until all of its aspects are now interrelated; the politics of sport, the aesthetics of sexuality, ad infinitum. Baudrillard writes:

"Thus every category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other; there is a total confusion of types. Sex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere - Everywhere else, in fact. Politics is no longer restricted to the political sphere, but infects every sphere; economics, science, art, sport... Sport itself, meanwhile, is no longer located in sport as such, but instead in business, in sex, in politics, in the general style of performance" (1993, p 8).

This statement can be read as a descriptor of the amorphousness inherent in the postmodern. It only makes sense that the text itself feels these epistemological shockwaves imploding it into the realm of the image. The

discursive location of itself within the aesthetic is reminiscent of the (de)evolutionary sequences of the movie Altered States. To quote Baudrillard. "Sooner or Later, implodes..." (1995a) And so it happens with the text, as it implodes into itself, infecting all other spheres of the culture. In this case, it reemerges in the hyperreal world of the digital image: a transformation into the lingua franca of the Infobahn.

Throughout his writings, Baudrillard repeatedly describes the cultural simulacrum placed before us, a mise en scene of event-scenes with no apparent cause, a free-floating mediascape in which the endless reproduction of cultural forms speeds by us on computer and TV screens. As the staccato images flash before us, the transparency of the aesthetic or "Trans-aesthetic" is clearly evident. Baudrillard's sociology privileges the visual of the media- and cyber-scape. But with Baudrillard, it is implied that the images are fixed, in stasis, and are to be confronted as individual pieces of the larger cultural landscape. The problem becomes the multiplicity of these images, which are presented at such a rate that they can not be adequately deciphered individually. This issue is addressed by another French theorist Paul Virilio (1986).

Virilio theorizes that while the juxtaposition of static images into new formations begins to capture the contradictory nature of postmodernity, its limitations are revealed because the images are fixed. In postmodernity, motion, speed, and flux are deciding features as we implode our preconceptions of time and space with ever-increasing advances in digital communications technologies. Following from Virilio, we become telepresent bodies with no sense of near or far

(1991), with monitors for eyes that perceive the imagery of the mediascape approaching us with increasing intensity and speed. As images flash across our screens at Muybridge intensity, they blur into motion, and we are held motionless, inertial. The moving panorama of the media/cyberscape speeds before us, as we are held fast, prisoners of set and setting (Virilio, 1994).

According to Virilio, the changes in society brought forth by the mobilization of the body, by the use of the motor, and its immobilization through technological acceleration implies that postmodern society is one of speed, motion, cinema, and video. As the bandwidth from which we receive media imagery, communications access, and telepresent gratification increases, so do we move away from the still image as primary transmitter of information. The sociology of the postmodern then, must incorporate speed and motion if it is to address the cultural forms which it confronts. According to Virilio:

“The techniques of rationality have ceaselessly distanced us from what we’ve taken as the advent of an objective world: the rapid tour, the accelerated transport of people, signs, or things, reproduce- by aggravating them- the effects of pyknolepsy, since they provoke a perpetually repeated hijacking of the subject from any spatial-temporal context” (1991, p 101).

Even though the utilization of motion and speed further elaborate upon the quickly changing nature of the postmodern, it does not convey the shallow, rapid quality and multiplicity of experiences evident in computer and media environments. Following from Deleuze, the postmodern terrain is rhizomatic (1991, p 28); a space in which speed creates a rapid, shallow movement across

the discursive terrain. From this, the space is highly interconnected, much like a "strawberry patch" (Deleuze) of media. That is, a continuum in which the media/discursive loci operate in intricate webs of interaction at high speeds of movement which collapse the space to the point into one where little depth in content can be introduced, sustained, or perceived when content is actually present at all. The user is presented with so much information, any depth of comprehension in its entirety is impossible. This is the realm of multimedia, the World Wide Web, and of postmodern culture in general.

Multimedia-The Need For a Referent

Before we go on we must address the question of the text, its nature and existence. Could it be possible that Baudrillard and Virilio have destroyed the written word in the breathless rush into cyberspace? If one follows them to their logical conclusions, Baudrillard's text implodes into imagery, then Virilio's cinema and video, with only traces of the text left behind on the screen. However, we have not entirely thrown ourselves into the Star Gate-like abyss of the visual, never to return. The text has not virtualized into hyperreality, thus annihilating our libraries and academies. Lanier's dream of Post-symbolic communication in the form of the virtual reality technologies have failed for the time being, (Rheingold, 1991) and we are left in need of a common base from which to operate. The human mind, even in the cybernetic age, requires a point of least abstraction, a referent, a context in which to maneuver.

The use of multimedia in a sociology of the postmodern still holds true with Baudrillard, Virilio, and Deleuze. We can surmise that we have an intersection of several instances of Baudrillardian transparency, ones of technology, aesthetics, sexuality and so on. The incorporation of technological media, such as Video, CD-ROM, and Internet installations agree with Virilio's tenets of societal acceleration. And from Deleuze, all these interrelations build upon one another into the interdisciplinary web of multi mediated discourse, and this is where the sociology of the postmodern leads us, and is the repository of the textual referent.

The rhizomatic space of multimedia, the Internet, and multi-mediated society requires a referent from which to operate, much like one requires a gateway or "socket" to cyberspace. The text is now only one of many cultural referents upon which the sociology of the multi-mediated society draws. Text is now a billboard in the land of the "post-'s". It no longer enjoys the hegemonic privilege of the book. The sociology of the postmodern is now not only textual; but also aural, visual, and encompasses as many senses as the technological media will allow, including, interestingly enough, smell. It is only in this way can we truly speak accurately on the society of the Information Age.

What is created from this eruption are a series of concurrent, or parallel, texts. Comprised of the various sensoria of written word, sight, and sound, they now shift and arrange themselves in varying states of primacy or interaction as needed in a Foucaultian architectonic. It is from this point that we began our

exploration of what we have labeled “cybertheory” with the multimedia text Machine.

Machine: Interpretation, Analysis, Critique

The Machine video trilogy represents our interpretation of the postmodern as discussed earlier to the shift caused by Virilio, and begins our move into Deleuzian discursive strategies. The machine of the industrial is supplanted by the machine of the cybernetic; all wires, gears, silicon and computer graphic displays. The velocity of the imagery has now reached cinematic speeds, combining the digitally produced animations with the hyper-"real" of the televised image. The discursive strategy employed by Machine to speak on the postmodern is one of music videos, cable TV, and of cyberspace. The use of the new media delivers the message of the information society.

Machine is not the first project that has attempted to deal with social issues through the camera lens, whether virtual or physical. Other attempts that are worth noting are the M.F.A. projects of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. However, the differences between these endeavors and Machine are many. Machine is an experiment in pedagogy, of the expansion of postmodern thought within the very media which it describes, and the transmission of these often complex and abstract concepts. It is not merely a vehicle for the explanation of social issues, but a theoretical work of its own accord.

Secondly, the work of Lucas and Spielberg were produced in the film department at UCLA, a facility directly beneath the wing of the Hollywood infrastructure. In the case of Machine, production was executed independently,

using incredibly small budgets, off-the-shelf computer programs, standard Pentium desktop personal computers, and relatively low-tech analog home recording equipment such as a four track cassette recorder. The video imagery used consists of scenes of the mediascape, visions pumped directly into our homes via cable TV. Therefore, rather than a terminal art project with the potential commercial backing of one of the world's largest media factories, Machine represents a grass-roots attempt to survey the mediascape on its own terms. It is an academic research project with few ties to the media juggernaut except what was presented to it as fodder. As a pedagogical tool, Machine has met with a great deal of success.

The Machine Trilogy explores the shift from the industrial, modernist society to the postmodern and the cultural borders transgressed by these paradigm shifts through a combination of information-age computer imagery combined with video clips from the mediascape. Through this visual methodology, Machine attempts to create a discursive space in which each of the concepts relating to the specific societal event-scenes can be deconstructed.

Before delving further into the analysis of each section, certain thematic elements of the work's compositional structure are particularly germane to the discussion of Machine. Following from Paul Virilio in his essay "The Third Interval" (1994) the information-age society causes an implosion of physical and ontological spaces, allowing the individual little time to reflect on the events

transpiring in the surrounding mediascape. And so it is with Machine. The relentless barrage of imagery combined with the reinforcing visual repetition inherent in American popular media allow the viewer to experience the events, but not to assimilate or reflect on them, resulting in the existential info-blur that is 1990's cyberculture. These visual strategies build upon the concepts discussed in the following critique to reiterate the multivalent sociological discursive space that Machine represents.

Machine I: Chew on This

Part One, entitled "Chew on This," is meant to represent the angst felt by American mainstream society as it attempts to grapple with the dilemmas of rapidly changing technologies. It utilizes a visual metaphor that depicts the changes in the perception of the self and identity created by the 90's digital technologies. The video opens on a Baudrillardian note, with the vocal, "Can you BELIEVE how little you care..." along with visions of Cold War spokespersons stripped of their voices in a further recapitulation of the utter indifference of media society.

The next sections of "Chew on This" interrogate the future directions of societal constructs of group identity, such as religion, the military, and governmental figures. As the video progresses these themes further question the boundaries of our societal memory versus those offered by the media. Salient imagery of note are the Stonehenge-like machine altar and the gear eyed androgynous CyberChrist (Representing technology as the new postmodern religion, a theme that will be returned to in Machine III), and the Lang- inspired

Metropolis images (symbolizing industrial society reconstructed in the digital culture). These themes will be repeated in the following two sections, as the recurring concepts in the series are embellished.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Machine II: Access Denied

The motifs in Machine II: Access Denied deal with the twofold manner in which technology stratifies society and culture. Access Denied begins with an apparently innocent entry into cyberspace, greeting the viewer with a cheery welcome (“Welcome to Cybernet...Engaged”). However, the ramifications of the emergent technologies become evident as flashes of people from underdeveloped, politically oppressed, and impoverished regions appear, juxtaposed with the warning “access Denied,” culminating the ultimate denial; the now infamous footage of the execution of a civilian during the Vietnam War.

The technologically-driven stratification of society along political, economic, and educational lines is evident by this time, and now that the privileged technocracy has blurred the distinction between the real and the virtual, the question of history and cultural memory in a technocracy comes to the fore. The cultural memory test begins as the head mounted display, like that used in Virtual Reality computer games such as Mechwarrior, swings down.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

To paraphrase Paul Virilio, “What is perceived is already lost...”. In the cyber- mediated society, the speed of the information processing accelerates

culture, identity, and history into a vanishing point which obscures memory in the lens, or “screen” (Baudrillard 1987) of the media. As the ‘cultural memory test’ begins, the very notion of whether history can exist in the virtual mediascape becomes a panic site in which pop cultural referents mix with politics and media news records. This creates slippages between cultural signifiers, such as the historical and media perceptions of institutions as the American presidency, suggesting that the ‘memory’ (history, etc.), is problematic in the age of E-Mail. Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, blur into a video blur as the Iran Contra Hearings are conflated with *Bedtime for Bonzo*, and *Whitewater* is just another “-water” political buzzword following after *Watergate*. The memory test fractures in the video blitz and ends in failure.

What is the result of this ‘virtual amnesia’ for a mediascape which delights in creating events whose existence is dubious at best? Combined with the axiom that a society that cannot remember its mistakes is doomed to repeat them is extended to ‘War as Global Memory Failure’ and to Baudrillard’s perceptions of the Gulf War (Baudrillard 1995b) as a giant mediated video game. The striking similarities between *Super Mario Kart* and *Smart Bomb* video footage is obvious, and with advertising buzz slogans such as “It’s Wild!/It’s Madness!”, the conflict is ready to be consumed by the American entertainment complex. However, ultimately the onslaught of the spectacle feeds upon itself resulting in its own ontological implosion as modernity implodes into the fragmented existence of postmodernity, in which technology becomes the primary mediator of the social.

Machine III: Deus Ex Machina

In an age that continually recreates itself around emergent communications technologies, we are all taken on the thrill-of-a-lifetime roller coaster ride through the media. Culture becomes a vortex of endlessly repeating spectacles and panic sites; of riding the smart bomb of video culture out of the imploding bunkers of modernity. As 24-hour a day news reports constantly pump in through our television screens, the endless repetition of the image drains current and past events of all meaning, ensuring the indifference of the spectator. The O. J. Simpson trial is put on cultural parity with the Crucifixion; the Civil Rights Movement becomes a vehicle for movies and books on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The speed of information transfer increases until it reaches the vanishing point of human saturation; after a certain point, information becomes noise. As Machine III states, 'The Medium Implodes the Message...'

The cybernetic media culture surrounds the spectator with technology and media spectacle until the point in which it reaches ubiquity. According to Kroker, Kroker and Cook (1989), the fast paced frenzy of postmodernity has created a series of 'panic sites' in which it is not possible for the individual to secure a social or cultural mooring. We are adrift in the dynamics of the postmodern cybernetic multi mediascape in which the individual is overwhelmed by the preponderance of information that is presented to them with relentless repetition. The idea of the panic site breaks down here, as corporate media enforces the ideology that technological 'progress' is not just necessary but inevitable. This image serves as an opiate to the masses asserting that the massive

technological shifts inherent in the 20th century fin de siecle are a force for positive social change. Therefore, the cybernetic society is not a panic site fraught with anomie, but one in which the corporate world, proclaims the positive influence of technology on the life of the individual, while promising that same individual that to live in the assumption of the coming techno-utopia is to be truly alive. In this manner technology becomes the new religion of the postmodern.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

In Machine III, the ubiquity of technology, the use of spectacle of any sort as corporate media commodity, and the illusion of social stability as product of the Civil Rights Movement provide the masses with the impression that the New Church is viable and continues to satisfy the needs of the faithful. Companies like Microsoft continue to define ontologies unto itself through operating systems like medieval encyclicals. You can click on an Icon and confess to the Holy Father online in the new nirvana of cyberspace. The un-WIRED heretics are then left to the sinfulness of the body and physical world, or “meatspace.”

Machine III then is a reiteration that the media implodes all meaning from any and all events through the opiate of the video screen to further the social imperatives of the entertainment megaconglomerates. Malcolm X and the Million Man March are now banalized into corporate pop culture referents ready for merchandising, and the underlying decay lies covered in a thin veneer of media spin doctoring. Apathy for any real social progress sets in as cultural manipulation disguised as entertainment becomes epidemic, but no one seems

to notice, or care. Machine ends with the civil rights protesters marching out of Washington in utter silence, the words of Martin Luther King unraveling in reverse, the fallen lay unaided, as Judas, signifier of the last righteous man, hangs beneath the gaze of the spectator's apathy.

Impact

From the results gained from several upper-level classes at American universities (including Kent State University, The University of Colorado, and Wake Forest University among others) using Machine in programs dealing with concepts in postmodern sociology, cultural studies, and media, the students resoundingly identified with the concepts presented. This would lead us to believe that the use of the "multi mediated", or "parallel" text speaks to a culture that was raised on cable TV, Nintendo, and personal computers. This is the culture that routinely processes information in a multimedia way, through visual, tactile, aural ways, and not only through the text. Through Machine, the participants can actually see what we, the theorists, mean.

The twenty-something of the 1990's, who are the ones that have seen Machine most often, are a generation raised on hit-and-run media tactics, of sound bites and MTV cinematography. For them, history is encapsulated in seven-second chunks and films are seldom longer than four minutes. Attention-deficit disorder is the syndrome of the day, and this is the group that Machine seems to speak to most clearly. The fast-paced imagery, combined with original music, that is much like that which is heard on alternative rock radio stations, encodes culture in a media blast that creates a theoretical event-scene

that appears to resonate profoundly with the current crop of young people in the undergraduate classroom. Machine is sociology that these students understand viscerally.

Future Directions

Of our video/multimedia-based discursive spaces, Machine is only the first of series of works to use our methodologies of visual sociology. Machine is currently up to date with our methods, and the next proposed work, Web, will expand on the content inherent within the cultural aesthetic form Machine establishes. However, there are new technologies, such as the 3-dimensional VRML Internet spaces, online multimedia (Shockwave), and interactive meeting areas which offer further exploration. As these emergent technologies develop, we will expand the discourse into these spaces. Machine is hardly a terminal point, but merely traces where process was shown, marks on our map of the postmodern terrain. The crucial point is that the medium is not the only message here, to say this would be merely rehashing McLuhan. Our sociology of the postmodern uses the media merely as tools to describe the cultural forms we wish to address directly with no translation into the narrow bandwidth that text alone presents.

Machine takes as its starting point the assertion made by Max Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism that “the peculiar modern Western form of capitalism has been, at first sight, strongly influenced by the development of technological possibilities. Its rationality is today essentially dependent on the calculability of the most important technical factors” (1996). In

the late twentieth century, commerce and technology have finally achieved the penultimate capitalist dream by becoming totally inseparable, made even more insidious by wrapping it all in the guise of “infotainment.” Increasingly, it is more and more difficult to determine where entertainment and distraction end, and the manipulations of the media corporate sales pitches and advertising begins. As Weber (1996) noticed at the turn of the 20th century:

Today the spirit of religious asceticism-whatever finally, who knows?- has escaped from the cage- But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs to support it no longer. The rosy blush of it's laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfilment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when on the other hand it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of it's highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth stripped of it's religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions...” (P 181-182)

What is distinctly troubling about this is the way in which the technologies of postmodernism have become the sacred cow of the governments, businesses, and educational concerns, all of whom are scurrying onto the Internet in record numbers without taking the time to weigh the potential benefits against the possible problems such action can, and undoubtedly will, create. Machine, then, can also be read as a warning, a plea as it were, to take care when considering our technologically mediated future.

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