STORYTELLING HYPERREALITY

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Abstract

In his 1985 book *America* Andy Warhol wrote: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well actually, I'd like it to say 'figment'". Starting from this caustic phrase of Warhol's expressed in the heart of the postmodern decade par excellence, the Eighties, this paper wants to trace the roots of contemporary hypernarrativity by analyzing the shift from a culture of function and meaning, the modern, to a culture of fiction and signifier, the postmodern. The metanarratives of the modern (Lyotard) ramify into the media labyrinth of contemporaneity creating a dimension in which we witness the "strike of events" (Baudrillard) and the staging of representational fiction, the spontaneity of the power of illusion and the plurality of meanings. The hypernarrativity that marks the spaces of the current debate appears to be the result of that process of substitution of reality with its aesthetic construction, already defined as "hyperreality" (Eco): it makes events of history, rather than happen, acquire meaning in their mimetic or media dimension, or narrative.

Keywords

Postmodernism, Hyperreality, Eco, Baudrillard, Fiction, Fake, Aesthetics

1. Introduction

The relationship between storytelling and postmodernism seems rather contradictory, although a general interpretation tends to overlap these two spheres. There is no doubt that postmodern culture is an immense narrative (and interpretive) network of reality, yet one of its most enduring and influential definitions starts precisely from the injunction of a possibility to have a shared and comprehensive metanarrative of reality. We are obviously referring to the well-known idea of Lyotard, for whom postmodernism marks the end of the metanarratives of modernity, of that complex of ideologies that saw progress as the engine of historical processes: what was narrated was nothing other than the idea that history was progressing towards a better world.

The idea of the end of metanarratives opened, on the contrary, a new scenario: the atomization of a progressive narrativity and the configuration of an individual, fragmented, if not chaotic storytelling. In this perspective, the end of modern ideologies configured two new dimensions: modernity changed into postmodernity and reality into hyperreality. Hyperreality thus became a possible new unifying storytelling of this unprecedented condition of contemporaneity[1]. A status that we can see summarized in a caustic phrase that Andy Warhol expressed in the heart of the postmodern decade par excellence, the Eighties. In his 1985 book *America* Warhol wrote: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well actually, I'd like it to say 'figment'."[2]

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We are witnessing the shift from a culture of function and meaning, the modern, to a culture of fiction and signifier, the postmodern on which many authors have insisted. If in Lyotard the metanarratives of the modern ramify into the media labyrinth of contemporaneity, in Baudrillard this process creates a phase in which we experience the "strike of events" and the staging of representational fiction, the spontaneity of the power of illusion and the plurality of meanings. In Baudrillard, but also in some more circumstantial observations by Eco, the hypernarrativity that marks the spaces of the current debate appears to be the result of that process of substitution of reality with its aesthetic construction, already defined as "hyperreality": it makes events of history, rather than happen, acquire meaning in their mimetic or media dimension, or narrative.

It is our opinion that this change had its first expression as operative narration and then developed into a process of dematerialization coinciding with media and digital storytelling. In the first case, we have a narrative readable in the morphologies of postmodernism. A stage that we can observe most easily in those aesthetic options that have defined postmodernism in its essential lines. These are formal values applied in an operative way above all in architecture and design and which are recognized overall in the aesthetic ideology of *pastiche*, which is in itself essentially a narrative of the past applied to everyday practices. In the second case, we have the idea of a historical reality interpreted as a suspended event, in which the metaphor evoked by Baudrillard of the real as a match behind closed doors will come in handy. This second moment simply transposes the operative morphologies of postmodernism into a dimension of technological narrative. If in the first classical phase of postmodernism, the *pastiche* still revealed a distinction between a model and its copy, at this stage the simulacrum appears to cancel this difference. It is therefore a question of historically contextualizing these passages as premises of today's storytelling, which for its part is not the specific theme of our essay. Thus, our perspective will be historical, examining some theoretical moments in the debate of the 1970s and 1980s. We will develop our discourse therefore through these two passages mentioned above.

2. Narrative morphologies: an operative storytelling

By operative storytelling we mean the fundamental change within the culture of twentieth-century design that shows the transition from function to fiction. A passage that the German historian of architecture Heinrich Klotz at the conclusion of his *The History of Postmodern Architecture*[3] has extensively emphasized in some oppositions that structure the substantial difference between modern and postmodern. The function, which embodied the idea of truth and progress in the modern interpretation of *techne*, had been replaced by the fiction, by the narration of the imaginary: from the space of industrial progress, and of its utopia, we passed to the

time of the narrative exercise, and of its plural declination. So, in a paradoxical way, but completely understandable, fiction became the new function, as Warhol's sentence let it transpire.

The encounter between fiction and the media system, the latent structure of mass culture, reconfigured the very experience of architecture as a fictional dimension. As early as 1968 the Austrian architect Hans Hollein proposed a first analysis of architectural fiction, where the image (the simulated simulacrum) is more central than the reality that may be experienced (the building): "A building can become entirely information – its message might be experienced through informational media (press, TV, etc.). In fact, it is almost no importance whether, for example, the Acropolis or the Pyramids exist in physical reality, as most people are aware of them through other media anyway and not through an experience of their own. Indeed, their importance – the role they play – is based on this effect of information. Thus, a building might be *simulated* only."[4] Recovering Benjamin's reflections discussed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Hollein focuses on the aesthetic experience of the role of the image in the media universe, no longer a substitute for the original, but the unique usable dimension: the exhibition value is the new real.

The fictional experience of places parallels – we could say that it represents almost its double – the culture of *pastiche* that innervates postmodern aesthetics. Both Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have dwelt at length on this configuration of a geography of uncontrolled quotation, of chaotic references that build an immense imaginary museum with which we narrate reality. A paradigm shift that leads from meaning to signifier (but also from message to medium, from thing to sign, and more generally from ethics to aesthetics) and that David Harvey summarized in this way: "We all of us carry around with us a *musée imaginaire* in our minds, drawn from experience (often touristic) of other places, and knowledge culled from films, television, exhibitions, travel brochures, popular magazines. [...] Fiction, fragmentation, collage, and eclecticism, all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos, are, perhaps, the themes that dominate in today's practices of architecture and urban design. And there is, evidently, much in common here with practices and thinking in many other realms such as art, literature, social theory, psychology, and philosophy".[5]

If we admit that contemporaneity has experienced three great processes of aestheticization – pop (from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s), postmodernism (from the 1970s to the late 1980s), and diffuse aesthetics (1990s to present)[6] – we can see the same practices at work, a complex strategy of falsification and hybridisation: kitsch, aesthetics of fake, cult of quotations and appearance, and fiction. These are the characteristics of storytelling, which we define operational, that build the aesthetic system of postmodernism. A grammar that, summarized in the category of kitsch, Eco, for example, since the Seventies has tended to match the concept of

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hyperreality. And it should perhaps be remembered that for Eco hyperreality is a process of mimetic improvement of reality, a concept that can be synthesized in the formula "even better than the real thing": the copy that exceeds the original in its appeal, giving the aesthetic experience almost a cosmetic meaning. An example, almost embryonic, of this process is offered by the Parthenon in Nashville, the replica of the Athenian temple built in Tennessee in 1897. And one might add that the same is true of Tianducheng, the residential complex in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, which perfectly replicates a district of Paris (including the Eiffel Tower). We will use the example of the American Parthenon – obviously only one of the many that can be employed – to introduce the concept of hyperreal storytelling.

John McHale, resorting to the Parthenon as an archetypal image and not referring directly to the one in Nashville, posed the problem of the past as an iconic function and expendable symbolic value system. It is in the way this exhibition's value is narrated that postmodernity sharpens its mimetic strategies. The processes of falsification are poured out in a cultural hermeneutics which is translated into a "replication of 'permanence past'."[7] A precise space opens up in which mass reproduction becomes both the content and the form of the now postmodern narrative: "The book, the film of the book, the book of the film, the musical of the film, the book, the TV or comic strip of the musical – or however the cycle may run – is, at each stage, a trasmutation which alters subtly the original communication".[8] On the contrary, Eco, returning to the notion of hyperreality that he had already addressed in the mid-seventies and to which we will return shortly, in *The Limit of Interpretation* cites the Parthenon of Nashville as a prototype of a hyperreality that tends to replace reality by activating a strategy of improvement of reality itself: an immense corrective cosmetics of the past, as we have already tried pointed out just above. Not the past as it appears to us now, but as it should have appeared in its present. An almost orthopedic idea of history is narrated. What emerges is the conviction that the authenticity of the past can only be experienced and shown by the artistic fake of the present. As Eco states in fact: "The Parthenon of Athens has lost its colors, a great deal of its original architectural features, and part of its stones; but the remaining ones are allegedly the same that the original builders set up. The Parthenon of Nashville, Tennessee, was built according to the Greek model as it looked at the time of its splendor; it is formally complete and probably colored as the original was intended to be. From the point of view of a purely formal and aesthetic criterion, the Greek Parthenon should be considered an alteration or a forgery of the Nashville one".[9]

In Eco the hyperreality is outlined almost as a morphology of the present, a signifier that obviously affects its own meanings. In the account of his journey into the American make-believe in 1975, Eco notes a decisive dialectic: the relationship between the real thing and the absolute fake. No longer platonically opposed in an ontological conflict, these poles now define a continuous

display of the desire in a culture increasingly linked to the image. The desire for authenticity can only be expressed in the logic of absolute fake, as demonstrated by the case of the Parthenon or in the other exemplary case, that of the Venus de Milo with her arms: "the 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake'."[10] This involves a shift in the role played by the mimetic. Now Plato's polemic targets, activated by mimesis (illusion, double, iconic seduction), become a cultural frame: the fake parts from the mimetic process, that process that still considers itself subordinately linked to an original model, becomes the sign of itself, creates a new dimension of reality, hyperreality. Even the aesthetic pleasure aroused by the hyperreal has its own inner logic. The fake is not so much the achievement of a technical perfection, but the criterion of aesthetic pleasure: the real will always be inferior and therefore less pleasant and desirable. In this framework, Eco's hyperreality seems to align itself with the idea of the past as an imaginary museum in which the obsession with mimetic normativity imposes itself as the main direction of meaning.

3. History as a Behind Closed Doors Match

Eco's conception of hyperreality, however, is still tied to a material dimension, we could say a narrative of historical reality almost naively touristy. But it can also be considered as the arrival of a new phase of aesthetic taste in which kitsch – which is the basic grammar that Eco indicates as the foundation of hyperreality, we repeat once again – arrives at a stage of self-awareness. To better understand this passage marked by the overcoming of taste and by the consolidation of the centrality of communicative values, we are helped by a sentence, almost a manifesto of the postmodern hyperreal kitsch, expressed by Jeff Koons: "My work has no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication. I believe that taste is really unimportant."[11]

Marginalization of taste, or its cancellation, and affirmation of communication: it is on these axes that we can recognize in Baudrillard's numerous theorizings hyperreality as a a process of derealisation by interpreting contemporaneity as an evident agony of the real and rational that is the modern, and as an input into an era of simulation: to the time of production follows the time of simulation, as to the logic of meaning (or sense) follows the logic of fascination (or seduction). Baudrillard, as known, especially since the second half of the Eighties and early Nineties will indicate this process as the interweaving of two interrelated processes: the vanishing point of art and the strike of events. It is thus outlined in a Platonic scheme (the simulation) the strongest narrative that modernity has conceived within it: the Hegelian narrative of the end, end of art and end of history.

In *The Illusion of the End* Baudrillard, by recording the exit from history and the entry into simulation time, thematizes a point not irrelevant to our discourse. The end of history (the strike of events, i.e., the substitution of information and event in the logic of cause-effect) is actually

nothing more than a repeated exercise of "feeding" the end: "the end is always experienced after it has actually happened, in its symbolic elaboration. [...] History in real time is CNN, instant news, which is the exact opposite of history".[12] Warhol's art (more than that of Koons) is, we might add, one of these symbolic operations: a contemporary entrance into the universe of simulation and globalization. What is represented and conceived is not so much the final catastrophe (the sublime. if we want to use a category of traditional aesthetics), the disappearance of the world *tout court*, but the disappearance of these symbolic operations. It is precisely the modality of this representation that is in crisis. The center is not the disappearance of the world, but of its image, namely art. One of the crucial centers of modernity, as Hegel had already predicted: the end of history and the end of art, a fatal coincidence that bears the name of modernity.[13]

Baudrillard in *The Perfect Crime* outlines this catastrophic immanence as the imperceptible overlapping of two processes: making reality disappear and masking this reality at the same time. Therefore, a given historical reality disappears, the time of the human being, and an artificial, robotic, virtual, simulated reality emerges, that dark destiny for which "the image can no longer imagine the real, because is the real."[14] Extrapolating the negative meaning of aestheticization – the idea and the inheritance that Baudrillard has picked up, in his own way and in his own words, from Benjamin (the mechanical reproduction of the aesthetic) and McLuhan (the identity of medium and message) – means grasping in technique a new generation of meaning that offers itself as an aestheticized dimension. As reality is replaced by the simulation, so the production responds to the seduction as a principle that presides over the order of appearances, artifices, simulacra. Warhol is in this reading the ineluctable figure that connects these processes: on the one hand the dematerialization of art (vanishing point, "disappearance"), on the other hand the materialization of the aesthetic in operative form. This represents a further step forward with respect to the system of simulacra that oriented postmodernism. One enters into a "transaesthetic" in which art proliferating everywhere discovers itself engaged in its own disappearance. A storytelling that basically revolves around the concepts of disappearance and excess: disappearance of art, disappearance of history and disappearance of reality on the one hand, and excess of images of art, history and reality on the other hand.

In view of this approach – effectively a philosophy of history in which, as Baudrillard has insisted rather obsessively for years, the civilization of the mirror (the mimesis) is replaced by the civilization of the screen (the simulacrum) – it is possible to understand the metaphor that guides this hyperreal storytelling in which the event is totally absorbed by its communicative excess, cancelling any link with the real event.

The metaphor that we can infer from Baudrillard is that of the match behind closed doors. He introduced it at the end of the 1980s and then took it up again in a more systematic

way in *The Transparency of Evil.* The event was the European Cup match between Real Madrid and Napoli in September 1987. The game was played in a Santiago Bernabeu stadium without spectators: a disciplinary sanction imposed on Spanish fans for the acts of vandalism committed in the Uefa Cup final won the previous season. The match marked for Baudrillard further than the Brussels Heysel stadium tragedy, the final between Juventus and Liverpool in 1985, in which the violence of the hooligans that caused thirty-nine victims was made into a television spectacle. If in Brussels the tragedy was at the same time a media narration and a real tragedy, in the case of the Madrid match the link with the real data is cancelled. In Brussels, the hooligans transformed their role as spectators into that of protagonists, usurping that of the footballers: the spectator (the live viewer or the tv one) is the one who observes the event, but also the one who is the protagonist. He is the object and the subject of the narration. This reading, deeply indebted to Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics, is completely depersonalized in the Madrid event, in which the subjects (the football players, the spectators) are totally incorporated into an event that transcends and dematerializes them: thus, the prototype of the hyperreal event is born. This is the core of the hyperreal narrative that from mere chronicle becomes a historiographic model, an interpretive paradigm of the world. It is no coincidence that the two great historical events that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and marked the entry into a new phase of history, the first Gulf War and the Twin Towers attack, show for Baudrillard the pervasive violence of globalization that between indifference and terrorism asserts itself as the true and only possible narrative. The closed-door match in Madrid and, obviously, in a more polemical and problematic way, that great video game that was the bombing of Baghdad in January 1991: "perfectly exemplify the terroristic hyperrealism of our world, a world where a 'real' event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar, televisually."[15]

The two meanings of hyperreality to which we have referred, first a mimetic and operative hyperreality and then a simulated and post-historical hyperreality, probably lay the foundations of today communication: a kind of bulimia of postmodern signs that takes to the extreme the instantaneousness of increasingly globalized and interchangeable and, at the same time, increasingly individual and self-referential contents. The first phase of postmodern hyperreality had its own more recognizable dimension: the replicas of the past were concrete signs, sometimes vulgar, sometimes ironic, kitsch in their aesthetic essence. This phase, however, in order to assert itself or even simply to find its own identity, had to resort to continuously narrating a present that was a large collection of the past. History was either replicated or assembled. In this process of narrative construction, as we have seen or at least as we have tried to show quickly, hyperreality and kitsch met.

On the contrary, the storytelling activated by technological hyperreality was based on the idea not of replicating the past, but of replacing the data of (historical) reality with those of communicative excess. Postmodern storytelling had thus produced, in the space of about twenty years, at least two versions of the narration of the present: the fake Parthenon (a kitsch hypermimetic building), on the one hand, and a behind closed doors match (a purely media event), on the other. Two symbolic and exemplary paradigms of two different storytelling, but united by the same common denominator: reality interpreted as an immense fictional setting.

It would be tempting to affirm that this massive tangled assembly is the basis, or at least some of its first assumptions, of the narration that we are going through today. And if we give the term narration its classical collocation, namely literature, we could claim together with the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, right at the dawn of postmodernism, that "the same reason that makes signs (visual, artistic, linguistic and literary) works of Pop Art (the need for high-speed communication with maximum meaning) makes them Pop literature as well."[16]

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[1] We use the term "contemporaneity" to essentially indicate the historical phase that begins with the affirmation of the dominance of communication over production and that, sociologically labeled as mass culture, begins more or less in the middle of the twentieth century. It is therefore a questionable lexical usage, purely functional for this paper.

[2] Andy Warhol, *America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 129.

[3] Heinrich Klotz, *The History of Postmodern Architecture*, trans. R. Donnell (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press) 1988.

[4] Hans Hollein, *Everything is Architecture*, in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, ed. by J. Ockman (New York: Rizzoli, 1993) 462.

[5] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 87-98.

[6] Andrea Mecacci, *Dopo Warhol. Il pop, il postmoderno, l'estetica diffusa* (Roma: Donzelli) 2017.

[7] John McHale, "The Plastic Parthenon", in *Kitsch. An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. by G. Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1973) 104.

[8] MacHale, "The Plastic Parthenon", 108.

[9] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 184-185.

[10] Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. W. Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 7

[11] Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 31.

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. C. Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 90.

[13] Gianni Vattimo has indicated in the meaning of the end (of modernity) one of the central points of postmodernism: *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. J.R. Snyder (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press) 1988. Eva Geulen, on the other hand, has insisted on the narrative role of the idea of the end of art in Hegel as one of the axes of the construction of modern philosophical debate: *The End of Art. Readings in a Rumor after Hegel*, trans. J. MacFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2006

[14] Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. C. Turner (London-New York: Verso, 1996), 5.

[15] Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. J. Benedict (London-New York: Verso, 1993), 79.

[16] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 80.