



Searching For A Sign: Massurrealism, Simulacratistical Fantasies and the Hypperreal

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Introduction

In his work *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard theorises the emergence of a new theory of signification, one that resembles the Saussurean system of signs in reverse. The sign becomes almost anti-representational in nature. Baudrillard's theory of simulation, holds that the ordering of the basic elements of signs, usually considered in terms of the signified proceeding the signifier, is now, in the postmodern society, reversed. Now that the signifier - the image, the symbol, the icon and index - proceeds the signified, the real basis of the sign points to a world where capitalism has run rampant. Any concept of the real, or of meaning and history, has been eroded. Baudrillard's postmodern world is that of mass communication, mass media and the proliferation of signs across all boundaries. Baudrillard's formation of postmodernism in its extreme conclusion would entail the eventual disintegration of the Saussurean concept of the sign, leaving a world completely divorced from the real and containing infinitely recursive simulacra.

The term Massurrealism was coined by New York artist James Seehafer in his 1992 essay 'Introduction to Massurrealism – A Free Association of Contemporary Influences'[1] to identify a contemporary art style in development since the 1980's. This movement was precipitated by Seehafer's "Shopping Cart"[2] series of works. These images reflected the culture's preoccupation with consumerism on many different levels and also Seehafer's artistic basis in Surrealism, combined with the influence from the mass media and technology deluge. This image of the shopping cart instigated what Massurrealism was to follow, the relative experimentation and relocation of the aesthetic sign within the movement's own discourse, commodity culture. Massurrealist art, parodies and develops Baudrillard's theory of simulation. In his Introductory Essay, Seehafer describes Massurrealism as:

"A coalescence of pop art/mass media and surrealism (...) employing the basis of pop art qualities, using subjects and techniques taken from commercial art forms, (both traditional and cutting edge) combined with Surrealist imagery based on dreamlike fantasy and disinterested play of thought." [3]

To be truly Massurrealist, an artwork must be more than simply a combination of these artistic styles. It must explore and develop the interactions arising from the juxtapositions of these sensibilities. If Massurrealism is to justify its claim in necessitating a new word to identify itself, it must demonstrate an active dialogue among its defining elements. Pop art, mass media and Surrealism do not so much define Massurrealism as they define the boundaries containing it. This new art movement is employing the form of commodity culture to explore that very discourse. Massurrealism provides the perfect platform from which to examine the status of art in a world where the signification of commodity dominates and my search for the location of the sign, the aesthetic ideal, in this postmodern culture begins.

Massurrealism manipulates the sign in a way that parodies the emergence of the new theory of signification that Baudrillard identifies in *Simulations*, whereby the sign becomes almost anti-representational in nature. Both Massurrealism and Baudrillard identify the signification of commodity as integral to the ambiguity and vacillation of the aesthetic sign. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard explains how the concept of use value had been eroded for material goods that come to have only exchange value. In the same way, the concept of use value of the signified's relation to the signifier became eroded, leaving only exchange value between signs. Here lies the origin of simulation, a sign whose only value is that of exchange with other signs. Massurrealism demonstrates an attempt to recover the aesthetic sign in a number of ways. It uses its identification as 'aesthetic practice' as means to hijack the sign from its signification within historical context, separate the sign from its symbol as representational image and project it into the realm of the hyperreal. The movement thus embodies reality and imagination in a 'oneness' which challenges the interpretation of commercial symbols.

Michael F. Morris reinforces this idea in his essay 'Massurrealism – A More Realistic Way of Seeing the World:' "And here is Massurrealism, dealing with all of this, rejecting none of it – the realities outside, and the visions, emotions and realities inside." [4] Massurrealism develops the concept of the hyperreal by representing, through its dualistic appropriation of the surreal and the commodified, an integration of the real and the imagined. Furthermore, it poses the question: Is there a difference? Massurrealism resolves to recover the aesthetic sign through a process of

dialectic autonomy. The form manipulates the self-referential nature of representation by appropriating commercial symbols within art and controlling their signification in a way that ultimately refers back to the image in question. These works, which are often created from a simulated medium, simulate their expected signification in such an ironic way that the reference comes full circle and the piece is able to regain control. Massurrealism relies on the hegemonic system of control which society perpetrates in order to inverse this signification to the extent that, as Baudrillard explains, the sign becomes almost anti – representational in nature. In *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard made the shocking revelation that:

"Art is gone." [5]

Massurrealism explores the disappearance of the sign into the hyperreal, but reinforces the claim that Art is still very much in existence. This claim is integral to my investigation into the location and agency of the aesthetic sign in the postmodern age. It is important to question Baudrillard's statement and examine the ways in which traditional art has metamorphosed into the very simulation of its former self. I intend to identify the extent to which Baudrillard is correct and that 'l'art pour l'art' has disappeared at the site of its new found investment in the political economy. Massurrealism, using the discourse of commodity culture, suggests the necessity for the sign to be relocated in order to withstand the crisis of representation that surrounds it. It may be argued that, together with the claim that "Art is gone," representation itself ceases to exist and what remains is only a mass of simulacra that becomes invested in the easiest and most naturalised system of signification, the commodity. Art is now irreconcilably a part of the signification of commodity. In my first chapter I intend to concentrate on its new status. It is a fascinating coercion since art is both empowered and destroyed by the discourse. Massurrealist art experiments with the location of the commodity within the aesthetic sign. Art becomes autonomous both through a realisation of its commodified potential and through its relative liberation from this discourse in ways that Massurrealism demonstrates. Terry Eagleton's essay 'From the Polis to Postmodernism' explains the paradoxical way that art's mobilisation into the signification of commodity marks the site of its relative liberation from the cognitive, ethical and political. Eagleton sees this autonomy as achieved through art's integration into the capitalist mode of production: "When art becomes a commodity, it is released from its traditional social functions within church, court and state into the anonymous freedom of the market place." [6] Chapter I: Symbolic Exchange – The Mythic Simulation of the Sign, will demonstrate the mobilisation of *myth* within symbolic exchange, in particular reference to the commodity. Myth is infinitely involved in the ideology of simulation. In a climate where commodity aesthetics and simulated art both thrive on the development of technology as "an extension of the human sense perception", myth plays an ambiguous role in ensuring the relative proliferation or disintegration of the aesthetic sign. Although Eagleton argues that art's participation in the signification of the commodity ensures its autonomy, the integration of myth subverts this very signification. Art becomes politicised for capitalism's own purpose, consumerism.

The commodity is integral to artistic representation and therefore, it is important to consider the site of the conjunction between art and industry. Art and industry can change signs. Andy Warhol claimed "I want to be a machine," [7] through which he hoped to achieve ultimate objectivity, become immersed in the signification of commodity and part of the labour force involved in the sign's exchange value. Baudrillard in 'The Hyperrealism of Simulation' identifies how Warhol could achieve his aim without forfeiting aesthetic independence and for production to also maintain its status in the interchange:

"Art and industry can thus exchange signs: art, in order to become a reproductive machine, without ceasing to be art, since this machine is only a sign; and production, in order to lose all social purpose and thus to verify and exalt itself at last in the hyperbolic and aesthetic signs of prestige."

Together with its sign exchange with art, industry can further dictate the location of the aesthetic sign through its development of medium. The collaboration of art and industry will be the focal argument within Chapter II: The Medium is the Message – The Signification of Commodity. McLuhan's belief in *Understanding Media* that 'The medium is the message' will provide the basis for an investigation into the extent to which aesthetic form is linked to the politics of signification. Massurrealism has demonstrated the aesthetic symbol's ability to control signification through its form and thus manipulate its dialectic sign. However, the relative fetishisation of the aesthetic sign within the signification of commodity does, through its own autonomy, present a challenge to the dialectical synonymy of medium and message that McLuhan identifies. This chapter will address the nature of medium and message in relation to their function within the political economy. It will question the extent to which their relationship contributes to the mobilisation of political ideology and disruption of social norms. This deconstruction leads to Chapter III: Holding a Mirror up to Nature – Deconstructing the Sign. Imperative to an understanding of the location and status of the aesthetic sign is the realisation of Baudrillard's distinction between the 'real' and the mirror of the 'real', the hyperreal.

As a result of its Surrealist heritage, Massurrealism is rooted in the experimentation of these concepts. Massurrealism, exercising its development from Surrealism, presents a challenge to such psychic apparatus as the concept of simulacra, which is involved in contributing to the proliferation of hegemonic control. Baudrillard's work *The Mirror of Production* will be integral to this chapter's realisation of the over determination of the role of the individual within the system of signification. The need to hold a mirror up to nature leads to the 'production' of oneself over 'being' oneself. The individual becomes commodified in the same way as art in a system of exchange value between signs. This narcissistic tendency to identify with the sign of the self is apparent in the development of technology as a form of biological extension, which has implication for aesthetic medium. The aesthetic signification of advertising makes advantageous use of the desire to become one with the reference ideal.

Massurrealism founds its ultimate dichotomy on the natural and the mass produced. The final chapter will reflect the way in which the primary function of the sociological mirror is to simulate the crucial powers that are assigned to the dominion of nature. In his essay 'Nature and Culture,' Peter Halley identifies these as: "The power of thought, repeated in the computer, which 'realises' bourgeois dualism; the ability to create life, accomplished chemically and mechanically; and the ability to create space itself in the binary circuitry of computer animation devices. Thus the circle of bourgeois thought is finally completed; the bourgeois world is made to refer back only to itself." [9] Massurrealism reflects both the narcissistic, self-reflective tendency of the individual and culture alike. Thus appropriating the definitive rule of symbolic exchange upon with the search for the sign is founded: "Return what you received. Never less, but always more." [10]

Post Scriptum

Massurrealist thought and Seehafer's work stirred much interest and provoked Seehafer into launching his web site located at <http://www.massurrealism.com/>. The site is posted on the World Wide Web as an information resource to Massurrealist art and Massurrealist art theory. The web site contains essays by various Massurrealist artists and regularly updated online exhibitions. Seehafer identifies the interest the site has evoked together with its role as providing definition for artists whose work strongly identifies with Massurrealism but previously had been lacking direction and distinction.

I discovered Massurrealism through research on the Internet into the developing trends of postmodern art. I was attracted to its relationship with commodity culture, which was not one of awe but of intrigue and manipulation. Massurrealism demonstrates the ability to look both objectively and subjectively at the contemporary world by means of aesthetic experimentation. Motivated by such ideas, my desire to examine and explore the search for the location of the sign, the aesthetic ideal, in postmodern culture arose. As did the quest that comprises this thesis. I realised that the research for such a subject as Massurrealism was going to be difficult and unproductive in terms of existing material on the subject. There is no published work on the art form outside that which is posted on the web site, which consists of general background information and short essays by artists exhibiting on the site. I decided that this need not be a negative factor since, if no critical work has been attempted, then the Massurrealists themselves might be more willing to contribute to a study such as my own. Through the email addresses listed on the Massurrealist web site, I approached several artists in regard to my thesis proposal and asked for their cooperation. The response was very encouraging and through contact made with other artists I began correspondence with Massurrealism's founder, James Seehafer, who has become the main point of reference for my research. I have had extensive email and telephone contact throughout the process of writing this thesis, contributing strong primary resource material and authenticity to my work. All the artists have been supportive, owing to the fact that I have covered new ground, their ground, with my study. My work with James Seehafer has led to our collaboration in the development of a web page dedicated to this thesis. This site introduces the core thought that provided a framework for '**Searching for a Sign –Massurrealism, Simulacratistical Fantasies and the Hypperreal**'. In addition it offers forth an historical context for the Massurrealist movement in the shape of an informative time line. •

Footnotes :

- [1] James Seehafer. 'Introduction to Massurrealism.' 1992. <<http://www.massurrealism.com/>>
- [2] James Seehafer. 'Charcoal on Paper.' 1990. Appendix A.
- [3] James Seehafer. 'Introduction to Massurrealism.' Ibid.
- [4] Michael F. Morris. 'Massurrealism – A More Realistic Way of Seeing the World.' 1998. <<http://www.massurrealism.com/>>
- [5] Jean Baudrillard. 'Transaesthetics.' The Transparency of Evil – Essays on Extreme Phenomena. James Benedict, Trans. 1993.
- [6] Terry Eagleton. 'From the Polis to Postmodernism.' The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1990. p368.
- [7] Andy Warhol. 'Interview with Gene Swenson.' 1963. Art In Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 2000. p730.
- [8] Jean Baudrillard. 'The Hyperrealism of Simulation.' 1976. Art in Theory 1900-1990. p1049.
- [9] Peter Halley. 'Nature and Culture.' Art in Theory 1900-1990. p 107.
- [10] Jean Baudrillard. 'La Pensee Radical.' ('Radical Thought'). Sens and Tonka Eds. Collection Morsure. Paris: Editions Autrement. 1994. p7.

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