

AUTONOMOUS MISDIRECTION

by

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Abstract

This thesis will examine how the way we experience knowledge has changed due to the ubiquity of electronic media. Specifically, there will be an examination of how the new digital media – and social media in particular – are structured to continuously redirect the attention of the thinking subject into a series of logically enclosed spaces.

The structure of this thesis follows two core arguments. The first will be an examination of how misdirection evolved as a rhetorical technique whose origins are fundamentally grounded in the project of persuasion. This thesis will argue, that misdirection as a technique uses rhetoric to distract a thinking subject, as a means of persuading that subject to the rhetorician's point of view. The foundational theory will derive primarily through an examination of Plato's *Republic* and Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* to trace the origins of this rhetorical technique and to sketch a brief chronology of its evolution to the present day.

Secondly, misdirection will be placed in the context of a changed epistemological and technological landscape. Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* will provide an examination of how the electronic landscape has transformed misdirection from a rhetorical technique into a means of experiencing the world. This thesis will argue that Baudrillard's simulated hyperreality – the constant act of imitating a poorly represented reality which leads to an enclosed world that no longer remembers its point of origin – is made possible by the self-referential and algorithmically determined structure of digital media that renders misdirection autonomous.

Finally, the thesis will conclude by taking this theoretical framework and using it to interpret recent real-world events that have occurred between the new millennium and the present day. Several phenomena,

from art to political transformations, will be contextualised and interpreted as examples of autonomous misdirection.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The 21st century has seen a radical change in the way we interact with information and communicate with one another. Digitisation has brought convenience, connectivity, and easy access to information on an increasingly global scale. While these changes have brought the world into a state of increasingly accessible communication, they have also closed us off from what might be traditionally understood to be knowledge.

In this thesis, I will be investigating some of the epistemic changes brought on by computers and information technology, with an emphasis on the transformative power of social media. Mass communication and interconnectivity are increasingly important and dominating aspects of society that is now truly global as a consequence.

I will make two major arguments. In the first, I posit a rhetorical technique called misdirection. Misdirection is a rhetorical device that causes confusion and redirects the attention of the individual away from some interest-laden facts or issues, perhaps to something false, and often to an outright fabrication. Misdirection does not need to be in service to politics, and it can take the form of being merely incorrect or part of more innocuous ‘bullshit.’ For my analysis of this phenomenon, I will use Harry Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit*, and sections of Plato’s *Republic* to provide an understanding and a theory of how misdirection operates. Misdirection, since it shifts attention of a subject from real issues, has the effect of creating an environment where truth and falsehood become less relevant than the object of attention.

My second major argument is that this misdirection is often detached from its political or discursive origins and takes on a life of its own. This is made possible by the ways in which information and discussion circulate on the closed forum of the internet. The technical structure of the internet, I will argue, legitimises and makes possible the autonomy of misdirection from any one source. Thus, misdirection becomes an epistemic force of its own.

I will explore autonomous misdirection as being characteristic of the new internet life by using Jean Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacrum* as my primary theoretical source. Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality, simulation, and the displacement of the real can be applied to events and changes happening online. Baudrillard's ideas are vital to breaking apart some of the paradoxical qualities of the internet, including an analysis of how increasing access to information has the effect of seemingly reducing the amount an individual might know. At the time of this writing, many have openly worried that we are entering into a 'post-truth' era, especially in the wake of the political earthquakes in the USA and UK in 2016. What I will argue is that these concerns over something resembling 'post-truth' are in fact about a changed kind of knowledge and information. Baudrillard's theoretical apparatus – focused on technological epistemology – is useful in crafting an understanding of the values and processes that fuel these changes online.

In this thesis I aim to examine and describe a contemporary phenomenon and the epistemic changes that follow. The descriptions and arguments provided are based on theories and events subject to rapid change. The internet has demonstrated its ability to rapidly evolve and alter itself in short order, making prediction about how the technology and its associated knowledge effects will develop a self-defeating enterprise. I will restrict my focus on how things are and have developed at the time of this writing. I hope that an understanding of how the internet shapes

knowledge will allow us to make the most of a powerful, liberating, and often dangerous technology.

Chapter 2

Misdirection and Rhetoric

To examine structural and epistemic change, it is useful to begin by revisiting the writings of Plato on the rhetorical origins of the phenomenon of misdirection. While Plato, naturally, had little to say on the digital age, his writings established the traditional account of knowledge and its valuation. In *The Republic*, Plato's various allegories set out a program of knowledge categorization for the purpose of explaining his theory of forms. The classical divisions of the line establish a hierarchy of knowledge, ranging from the truest and most worthy to the falsest and least worthy. The version of the text I will be using is Richard Sterling and William Scott's 1985 translation.

A return to the ancient world will help gain some perspective on rhetorical techniques and tactics that were already present in Plato's time and have persisted into the present day. An examination of social media will require an exploration of rhetoric, and the organisation of knowledge in such a way that a difference in presentation becomes a difference in form. Plato's theory of forms was designed to overcome this problem by presenting a kind of knowledge that is permanent, immutable, and not subject to rhetorical misdirections. Most valuable in *The Republic*, for the purposes of this thesis, is Plato's description of misdirection, including its origins, aims, and operations. Examining how the rhetorical technique of misdirection is employed as a counter to an authentic experience of the 'real world.'

Plato's use of the divided line and the cave as similes to describe a hierarchy of knowledge, ranging from 'truth' to 'misrepresentation' will be of core interest here. The classical analogies for guiding the knower to knowledge have characterised much epistemological discourse. For

example, Books VI and VII of *The Republic* engage with Plato's understandings of how misdirection, accuracy, and knowledge interact. Crucially for Plato, misdirection is identified strongly with sophistry and its political dimension. This opposition between the philosophical and the political is articulated throughout the text; but the arguments and examples of Book VI show how misdirection operates on a political level counter to finding an avenue to the truth or the good. Crucially, these analyses of political interference appear immediately before the most famous allegories and similes of the text; that of the divided line, the sun and the cave. The allegories serve as a representation of the importance of pursuing clarity, truth and the good, free from misdirection, which Plato associates with political and social machinations. The opposition between society and philosophy in Plato's writing is well documented, what will be important for the purposes of this thesis is the one manner in which this opposition can be successful.

The bulk of this section is a discussion between Socrates and Adeimantus centred on the natures of the philosopher and the non-philosopher. The philosopher, unlike to the sophist, aims to seek what is real and beyond the muddled distortions of the world where the majority live their lives: "it is in the nature of the true lover of learning to strive mightily toward what really is and that he cannot linger among the profusion of things that men only believe to be real" (490b). To be a philosopher for Plato is to engage in a constant activity that involves acting against falsehood and in service to the truth or the good: "would such a man love falsehood, or would he hate it? / He would hate it" (490b-490c). For Plato, to be a philosopher involves the constant pursuit of truth free from misdirection or falsity. Misdirection, distortion, corruption and similar terms are used by Plato to show that distortion of the truth is an aberration; a deliberate alteration of reality. The causes for why these aberrations occur are varied, but one of the main causes – and the one we will be most interested in – is due to the politics and the interjection of the relative usefulness of techniques of misdirection for achieving rhetorical ends. Why this misdirection is used is often

for utility or expediency. Liars lie for profit, and the sophists use rhetorical misdirection for their own ends.

For Plato, the potential corruption of philosophers is a major source of concern. His idealised Philosopher Kingdom must examine and determine the ways society corrupts true lovers of wisdom away from the path of the good: “we must consider why the many become corrupt and why a few escape, ending up, as they say, not evil but useless. After that we must examine those who imitate the philosophic nature and so seek to usurp a profession of which they are not worthy.” (490e-491a). Plato advocates for a strict bifurcation between those who are willing and capable of being philosophers and excluding those who would seek to divert their efforts and attention to less worthy endeavours. He writes that the Philosopher Kingdom ought to establish a means of determining “what kinds of men there are who will set themselves up to pursue a way of life whose requirements are beyond their powers to meet” (491a).

Most familiar in *The Republic* are Plato’s most famous allegories and similes, establishing the divisions of knowledge kinds. The simile of the divided line shows the importance of a clear and distinct hierarchy for the establishment of knowledge, with the clear appearance of the forms at the top of the line, and the muddled mere appearances of the shadows of forms at the very bottom: “By every measure, then, reality for the prisoners would be nothing but shadows cast by artifacts” (515c). Firmly in the cave, most of us remain muddled and without the ability to see the misdirection of the puppeteer for what it truly is – an act of purposeful obfuscation. This metaphor, when applied as a means for understanding the external world, is essential for comprehending Plato’s conception of the relationship between knowing and truthfulness. For Plato, the cave represents the first step we must take to acquire true knowledge: “the prisoner’s cave is the counterpart of our own visible order, and the light of the fire betokens the power of the

sun. If you liken the ascent and exploration of things above to the soul's journey through the intelligible order, you will have understood my thinking" (517b). Plato's cave has been subject of innumerable discussions. For the purpose of this thesis however, the cave works as a structured system of misdirection, forcibly causing the poor souls chained to its walls to be subject to a purposefully altered interpretation of the real.

Plato's sophist, in creating a closed environment for the poor and impressionable young philosopher, is effectively acting as a barrier to a knowledge of the true and the good in the same way that the cave acts as a barrier. These metaphorical barriers work by deflecting attention from the goal of accessing the true or the good and distorting the train of thought towards irrelevant issues. Here, misdirection blocks access to truthfulness. But understanding this phenomenon as a system of misdirection, an enclosed space where only certain kinds of knowledges are made possible, informs a more sophisticated form of misdirection. While Plato obviously lacks knowledge of social media which is the core aim of my thesis, his concern over misdirection and how it operates is nonetheless a foundational insight into the phenomenon of misdirection.

For Plato, correcting potential corruption is a matter of establishing correct means of training and education in his theoretical republic. But it also demands a study of corruption: "we need to identify the discords and inconsistencies in their behaviour which bring down upon philosophers and philosophy universal disrepute" (491a). Here and following, Plato is beginning to identify rhetorical techniques employed by those who are interested in subverting the good and seek the corruption of the philosopher. Plato acknowledges that there is talent in the work of the sophists and the corrupting influences. He writes that, "evil is the greater enemy of the good than of the commonplace" (491d). This corruption is often systemic in nature, and the structure of political entities in ancient Greece helped to dissuade potential philosophers from reaching their full

potential. The fault in education is that it is a productive force, establishing the conditions by which the sophists themselves are created. Talented individuals taken in by bad education are transformed into the most gifted sophists with the greatest potential to reinforce the ills of misdirection and confusion: “the most gifted, when exposed to bad education, turn out the worst. Great crimes and systematic wickedness are not the products of half-hearted natures but of the vigorous ones who have been corrupted by their upbringing. Mediocrity will never attain to any great thing, good or evil” (491e). Thus, Plato’s Philosopher Kingdom is set up in such a way to provide direction towards the pursuit of the good and truth liberated from the evils of misdirection.

Plato, through Socrates, then lays out an example of how sophistry employs political and social rhetoric to, first, influence the philosophers away from the pursuit of the true and the good and, second, to demonstrate how philosophers are pressured by the crowds of people caught up in the moment of passion. The public sphere is structured in such a way that true philosophy becomes impossible within this context. By creating a kingdom for philosophers to govern the masses, the former will be freed to pursue the good while also providing guidance for the soul to their subjects.

To see the importance of this, Plato looks to the public agora, where sophists are given free rein to persuade the thoughts and feelings of the crowd. But for the purposes of this thesis, Plato points to the power of the crowd itself, and its power even over philosophers:

Is not the populace that is given to this kind of talk itself the chief sophist? Are they not the most compelling educators of all, reproducing in their own image men and women, young and old, and succeeding to their hearts’ content?

When do they do this?

Whenever the multitude convenes in assembly, in courtrooms, at the theatre, or in camp or at any other public gathering. There they will make known their approval or

censure, but always in excess, producing constant uproar with applause or clamorous protest. The volume in which praise and blame are thundered forth is redoubled by the echo from the rocks and the whole surrounding place. In such circumstances, as they say, how do you think the young man's heart will be moved? What private teaching will enable him to hold firm against the current and not be swept away by the torrents of praise and blame until he assents to whatever the crowd says is base or honourable, until he is ready to do as they do and be as they are?

The pressure will be great, Socrates. (492b,c,d)

Here we might see the agora as, in addition to the prime venue for the sophist's power, also an echo chamber. In Plato's understanding, misdirection is operated by the sophist for the sophist's own ends. The sophist misdirects the crowd in a way that leans on the crowd's own nature and creates a process of self-sustaining misdirection only initially fuelled by the sophist's rhetorical force and commanding personality. This is the kind of misdirection that the current internet delivers so well, even more effectively than did the agora Plato saw.

Returning to Plato, public spaces like agoras are literal echo chambers that systemically drown out any attempt at philosophical meditation or interpretation. The structural forms of society that Plato identifies here necessarily preclude meaningful philosophical investigation, and thus for Plato the pursuit of the knowledge or the good. The pursuit of the sophist is not for a higher principle, formal knowledge or even the good; rather, the sophist is interested in reproducing his own values for personal or political profit. Sophistry and the culture that surrounds it uses misdirection to persuade, to captivate and to lure the thinking subject away from an honest pursuit of the good.

The agora's pressure is rarely autonomous, unlike later forms of misdirection. As seen by Plato, misdirection is deliberate and requires the skill of the sophists to have any meaning whatsoever. In addition, sophistry as a series of rhetorical conventions is backed by the power of the Greek

state, which, for Plato, is far more potent than rhetorical persuasion. The sophist can bring down the power of the state to enforce conformity and the acceptance of the sophist's supremacy:

And we have yet to mention the greatest pressures of them all.

What are they?

What these erstwhile educators and sophists do when their words fail to convince. They then turn to deeds and punish resistance with fines, dishonour, and death.

Yes. They know how to punish.

So, what sophist or any kind of private teaching whatever could prevail against them?

None, I imagine.

No. It would be foolish to even try. There has not, never has been, and never will be an education contrary to theirs that could produce a different kind of person and a different virtue. (492c, d, e)

Plato's radical political proposals assume that sophistic tools and misdirection are so established that a public pursuit of the good is precluded, tarred by persistent misdirection:

[I]s it possible for the multitude to have an understanding for the reality of beauty itself, or will it be able to perceive only a multiplicity of beautiful things? Will the many be able to understand the essence of anything or only the particulars in which essence finds expression?

They will not be able to understand essence.

It follows that philosophy – the love of wisdom – is impossible for the multitude.

Impossible.

Then it is inevitable that the multitude will censure those who do philosophise.

Inevitable.

And so too, will those private persons who run with the crowd in order to flatter it.

Clearly. (493e – 494a)

Here Plato establishes a clear tension between the political and the philosophical, setting the beginnings for centuries of later tension. The multitude, or the general populace, here shown to be

wholly incapable of philosophical truth and the pursuit of the good in Plato's estimation. There is also a tension between the singular and the multitude. For Plato, the one philosopher can discipline and commit himself to the sole task of pursuing the good and the forms, which are of a singular quality. The multitude, by virtue of its nature for Plato, is profoundly incapable of attaining knowledge of the forms and perpetuates illusory sensations.

As a result, the pluralistic nature of the lower world is disagreeable to Plato, and by its nature will seek to use the confusion of plurality to enrich itself. Without the protection of the state, the philosopher who may have escaped the rhetorical traps and misdirections of the sophist will fall prey to the machinations of his comrades, since "when he becomes older is that his family and fellow citizens will want to make use of him for their own ends" (494b). The multitude, in converging upon the poor philosopher, seeks nothing but its greedy ends: "They will fawn upon him. They will present him with petitions and honours, flattering the power they anticipate will someday be his" (494c). Without the protection of the philosopher kingdom, these multitudes deliberately confuse the philosopher, and seek to misdirect his attention so that they might reproduce their own values, much in the same way the sophists did to the crowd.

This misdirection creates a confusion that is intolerable for Plato. What the multitude needs, their goods, is different from the good. Plato writes that "for the multitude, the good is pleasure. For those who claim greater refinement, the good is knowledge" (505b). Thus, the philosopher kingdom, as a bulwark, must ensure the rights of the philosopher to attain the good, so that the illusory goods of the many do not overwhelm the pursuit of the one. Otherwise, "the result of all this is that both persuasions find themselves using the terms *good* and *bad* for the same things," (505e) which is a problem to be fixed by ensuring philosophers can continue their work unimpeded by sophistry and the multitude. Baudrillard will later deal with this issue in depth in

Simulations and Simulacra, where the notion of assigning the terms good and bad to the same things becomes a defining feature of the electronic era. For Baudrillard, the distinction between philosophical truth and the misdirection collapses on itself in the age of television and the internet. Whereas Plato might have sought to escape the bounds of the metaphorical cave, modernity might be read as having happily built ourselves into a simulated one.

Chapter 3

Misdirection Evolves

The traditional understanding of information holds it to be mutually interchangeable with knowledge. The prevalence of electronic media as the primary method of disseminating information, however, has allowed for a divorcing of knowledge and information. This is a partly a new phenomenon, but its roots lie in techniques of propaganda and deliberate misinformation. Understanding the mechanisms of these roots is crucial to a modern conception of knowledge dissemination through electronic media. What we have seen from Plato has been the origins of a technique of misrepresentation, what will now be examined is how this technique has survived the centuries and evolved in the modern era.

Harry Frankfurt's essay *On Bullshit* is remarkable for its examination of a phenomenon opposed to truth but not necessarily about falsehoods. Frankfurt gives a description of a rhetorical phenomenon, bullshit, that is more concerned with self-aggrandisement and profit over any authentic engagement with truth. Where Plato's conception of the sophist's techniques of persuasion centres on how the rhetoric distorts access to the truth, Frankfurt explores a technique that itself begins a process of supplanting truthfulness. Like sophistry, bullshit does not necessarily involve lying. In Frankfurt's understanding, the bullshitter is a more dangerous agent than the liar, as the truth is ultimately irrelevant to their cause.

Bullshit, unlike lying, tends to exist nebulously, and Frankfurt finds that the "conditions are logically both necessary and sufficient for the constitution of bullshit is bound to be somewhat arbitrary" (2) and narrowing down what constitutes bullshit is difficult. Nebulousness also resists meaningful interpretation: "the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous that no crisp and

perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean” (3). As a result, Frankfurt dives into the slippery and ephemeral nature of bullshit, taking it to be an essential quality. However, the ephemerality of the thing makes it that much more difficult to identify and categorize. Frankfurt turns to the writings of Max Black on ‘humbug’ as a source of potential insight. Max Black defines humbug as “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying” (6), or “deliberate misrepresentation” (7). Herein lies the first instance of a description of bullshit as a series of rhetorical techniques meant to cause a distraction, or a verbal sleight of hand in service to another cause.

Lying requires active and conscious negation of the truth, according to Frankfurt. This is aligned with the Greek thinkers understanding of how lying is in direct, conscious, opposition with the truth. But bullshit has a characteristically technical and societal element as well. Frankfurt creates a fictional American orator whose purpose it is to inspire a faux patriotic fervor. The fictional orator goes about his business, extolling inflated and exaggerated virtues of America: “consider a Fourth of July orator, who goes on bombastically about ‘our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind.’ This is surely humbug.” (16). This American narrative may or may not have basis in reality, but its purpose is not be an accurate description. Recall Plato’s example of the sophist whipping the crowd into a frenzy by the force of their rhetorical power. The sophist and the Fourth of July orator both take advantage of a public space to advance their own agenda, deliberately creating a gap between the words said and their relative truthfulness in service of a specific end goal: “as Black’s account suggests, the orator is not lying. He would be only lying if it were his intention to bring about in his audience beliefs that he himself regards as false, concerning such matters as whether our country is great, whether it is blessed, whether the founders had divine guidance, and whether

what they did was in fact to create a new beginning for mankind.” (16-17). This irrelevance of the truth of the words used suits a particular role of deception for political gain.

As Frankfurt writes, “the orator does not really care about what his audience thinks about the founding fathers, or about the role of the deity in our country’s history, or the like. At least, it is not an interest in what anyone thinks about these matters is what motivates his speech” (17). The fictional Fourth of July orator, like the sophist, is a public figure serving a particular role, but in doing so seeks to persuade others of his own importance, thus reaffirming himself in much the same way that the sophists succeeded in the public spaces of Greece.

This orator is performing a rhetorical sleight of hand to present a narrative that in itself is empty, but nonetheless serves a carefully determined purpose:

He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. What he cares about is what people think of *him*. He wants them to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our country, who appreciates the importance of religion, who is sensitive to the greatness of our history, whose pride in that history is combined with humility before God, and so on. (18)

But, according to Frankfurt, Black is “off the mark” (19) in his definition, leaving out bullshit’s crucial nature as a technique. Frankfurt explores the weakness of this definition by identifying bullshit as something that requires careful attention, and craftsmanship. To create bullshit that is believable is often much harder than creating lies and requires discipline and techniques of skill. The bullshitter must use “thoughtful attention to detail requires discipline and objectivity. It entails accepting standards and limitations that forbid the indulgence of impulse or whim. It is this selflessness that, in connection with bullshit, strikes us as inapposite” (23). Indeed, some of the most pertinent and often obvious examples of bullshit are those that have required the greatest amount of care and energy to produce.

Frankfurt is quick to show that much of our modern political and economic discourse is framed within the context of bullshittery and has become a qualifying feature of ‘serious’ discourse. Indeed, Frankfurt identifies many of the tools used in socio-economic discussions and in politics to be paradigmatic examples of modern bullshit. He writes that “the realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept” (22). The tools used to create consensus or argument using metrics of dubious quality are expected components of any carefully conducted foray into public life. These tools are focused on their technical utility – independent of their veracity or honesty.

Turning on the television or perusing a message board on politics leads one to be bombarded by political argumentations meant to strengthen one candidate over another, but ultimately have similar or even identical rhetorical structure. Frankfurt writes that “there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right” (23). These tools of persuasion, under the guises of terms such as ‘evidence-based’ or ‘fact-oriented’ are in truth tools of misdirection in this understanding.

By posing as unbiased, such bullshit as opinion polling and personality tests act consciously to conceal their own contingent origins, as both tools of persuasion and misdirection. This misdirection, like propaganda, is often, but not always, in the service of some goal or ulterior motive: “however studiously and conscientiously the bullshitter proceeds, it remains true that he is also trying to get away with something” (23). Bullshit is a skill that requires conscious effort

and skill, and well-crafted bullshit elicits a begrudging reverence from Frankfurt: “There is surely in his work, as in the work of the slovenly craftsman, some kind of laxity that resists or eludes the demands of a disinterested and austere discipline” (23). Thus bullshit, in Frankfurt’s definition, is purposeful and careful, one that requires a thought-out contemplation of its utility and effectiveness. But not necessarily attention to consequences: “the pertinent mode of laxity cannot be equated, evidently, with simple carelessness or inattention to detail” (23-24)

Thus, in Frankfurt’s definition, intent is an element of classical bullshit. The Fourth of July orator and the sophists have a clear political intent to their misdirection. This deliberate act, “although it is produced without concern with the truth ... need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But that does not mean he gets them necessarily wrong” (43-44). Likewise, misdirection need not be necessarily a political tool, but is often employed as one.

The propaganda tool whataboutism, for example, uses the tactic of misdirection to direct concerns away from the misdeeds one party in favour of another. Whataboutism is a rhetorical sleight of hand that focuses the attention of a subject on something not directly connected to the original conversation. Whataboutism, then, would also qualify as bullshit in the Frankfurt understanding. While the misdeeds may not be equal, the technique was used to make it appear, through misdirection, that they were. A similar tactic is employed by Donald Trump and his supporters through various attacks on the supposed missteps of their adversaries. However, the modern use of this tactic conflates the humour of bullshit as a joke and bullshit as politics. Since the technique is the same, it provides an easy cover and shield against the identification of the technique used for political ends, a cover not available to the sophist.

As Plato would have understood this kind of phenomena, the bullshitter firmly dwells in the realm of illusion by redirecting attention away from the truth, as is the case with the sophist. Whataboutism, as a method of redirection, is a part of a greater series of techniques and rhetoric that characterises bullshit, misdirection, and sophistry. The mechanics of the circulation of bullshit, for Frankfurt, are ultimately a means of persuasion through misrepresentation. Plato would have readily identified bullshit with the sophistry and rhetorical posting that were common in Plato's time. Bullshit is a kind of rhetorical game of misdirection in service of unspoken or pre-existing prejudices or understandings.

Like the carefully orchestrated ballet of a king's vassals swearing loyalty, what matters is that the vassals accept the supremacy of a given monarch's divine right to rule or the truthfulness of their own vows. Instead, what is being accomplished in these rituals is the upholding of the state, a fact which goes unspoken. The kowtow ceremony in Imperial China, and the complex bureaucratic apparatus that characterised the Byzantine Empire served similar roles as techniques meant to uphold the integrity of the state. Yet these forms of courting would be limited to small groups of nobles and dignitaries until the Revolutionary period in Europe. Later propagandists would turn such techniques of misdirection into a popular movement, and by the 20th Century, propaganda in various forms became a feature of the state. The Soviet Union taught a continuous masterclass in asserting its strength through propaganda and institutionally enforced misdirection.

What we shall see with Baudrillard is the unmooring of techniques of misdirection from their origins, such that they become expansive enough to be confused for the truth in and of itself, at least when aided and abetted by sophisticated technologies that force the confusion of rhetorical techniques and the truth itself. While Plato and Frankfurt can show us that misdirection has been

well established for a long time, an examination of its newfound autonomy will require an altogether different kind of analysis.

Modern discourse holds many of the same technical features of older bullshit, but now it is amplified on a macro scale. Frankfurt and Plato are less concerned with a systemic interpretation of misdirection as they are for how misdirection warps the thinking of an autonomous subject. Frankfurt had rightly identified mass misdirection as an issue, but he characterises it less as a system and more as a commonly employed series of techniques with common features. To understand how misdirection truly becomes a profound issue, we must examine how it has become larger than its rhetorical origins. Whereas 20th Century propagandists relied on the state and its authority for success, today's so-called 'fake news' has become autonomous. This technique, as Plato and Frankfurt had understood it, has outgrown its origins and taken on a life of its own. A difference in scale has become a difference in kind. Through social media, the dissemination of what was formerly understood to be propaganda constitutes much of discourse in general. Fake news, photoshops, and other things of the sort are able to make lives of their own free from the strings of their former puppet masters. The techniques of misdirection may no longer be in service of a single political party or ideology but are arguably more potent than ever before.

Chapter 4

Baudrillard, Process of Simulacra

The Precession of Simulacra, Baudrillard's most influential work, includes an attempt to place and recognize the various means of experiencing the 'real.' The real, for Baudrillard, is that which is tangible, or accessible without a medium. However, with increasing technological sophistication, the experienced world is increasingly mediated, and so is not the 'real world.' Simulacra are therefore reproductions of real experiences, becoming progressively copied and recopied over time. Eventually, according to Baudrillard, the system of copies and recopying that used to represent a tangible reality become understood as the real world itself. Beginning with the introduction of the printing press, simulacra become less faithful to the original. Eventually, the proliferation of sophisticated media reproducing unfaithful depictions of the real creates an epistemic ecosystem where the representation of the real supersedes the real itself. This is how a simulation – as phenomenological and epistemic experience – is created. For Baudrillard, the simulation is the mode by which the modern world is experienced, and is determined by the interplay between media, technology and institutional norms. This structure allows – and encourages – autonomous misdirection to flourish in virtue of its structure.

What is most important about Baudrillard's writings in *The Precession of Simulacra* is the re-centering of knowledge within a technological space. Baudrillard builds on these notions to create a sense of connection to reality versus unreality. In the simulated reality of the present, the means of knowing that would otherwise provide the space for knowledge actively discourages it. This contextual anti-knowledge forms the basis of Baudrillard's diagnosis.

Throughout the text, Baudrillard displays a complicated relationship with the notion of reality. While it is doubtful that Baudrillard believed in the possibility of accessing reality in the way that Plato's forms made possible (that is, an unmediated reality that can be perceived with the right combination of education and training), he is nonetheless concerned about the systematic warping of the real that he identifies as a characteristic of modern life. Reality, for Baudrillard, is not something engaged with but is presupposed to exist. For the implicit importance placed on it, Baudrillard's reality is – ironically – irrelevant in the face of the power of mediation.

The simulation as the dominant mode of knowing is a metaphor Baudrillard uses to describe how the boundaries of our knowable world behave. In a similar way to how the cave is a restriction on knowledge and knowledge possibilities, the simulation itself delineates what might be considered possible knowledge within a given context. However, unlike Plato's belief that the cave is a restriction to be overcome so that truer and purer knowledge might be accessed and enjoyed, Baudrillard revels in simply being a cave dweller. Since the boundaries of the simulated cave restrict our possible knowledge, this space becomes both the producing and restrictive agent in terms of what may be considered true knowledge.

Baudrillard, like Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and other recent media scholars, is preoccupied by the epistemic effects of television. However, the core insights of Baudrillard's simulation are still useful for a theoretical interpretation of the internet age. Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra and its changes anticipate much of the epistemic structure that would become normalised with the development of the World Wide Web. Baudrillard's analysis of the simulation provides a valuable perspective of the enclosing of knowledge at the end of the 20th century. Though *Precession of Simulacra* was written before the general accessibility and explosive growth of the internet, Baudrillard is sensitive the technical and structural changes that

would come to define the experience of a warped reality through the lens of total mediation. The cultural norms and practices of reality television, simulated politics, and de-prioritisation of truth that Baudrillard criticizes will create the conditions for how the internet and social media will develop in the coming decades. By returning to the point of origin as described by Baudrillard in the *Precession is Simulacra*, we can contextualise the autonomous misdirection that has become such a prominent force in the modern world.

The core notions of ‘codification,’ ‘hyperreality’ and ‘simulacrum’ provide an invaluable resource from which to develop a theoretical understanding of the electronic age. Codification, for Baudrillard, is the conflation of sequentiality with experiencing the world. Code presents a formula that pre-emptively prescribes an interpretation to a given experience. Hyperreality is the moment when the power of the model supplants any other mode of interpretation, similar to how the prisoners of Plato’s cave conflate the shadows on the wall with the things themselves. The simulacrum is the epistemic framework that allows for a given method of interpreting to thrive, and for Baudrillard is rooted in technological apparatus.

Baudrillard’s core project is to provide a description of how the immersive nature of early electronic communication profoundly alters how information and knowledge circulate. It is a description of means and techniques that come together to shape the knowledge space of the simulation. If we accept the internet to work in the same fashion as Baudrillard’s simulated simulacrum, then the core method of communication and information circulation in the modern age follows similar rules. Though Baudrillard was writing in the 1980s, well before he would have encountered the internet, his central terms – such as code, model, copy, and even the simulation itself – are standard vocabulary when describing computers and the products of information technology.

Many others have drawn connections to Baudrillard's writings and computing technology; a well-known example is the appearance of *Simulations and Simulacra* in the 1999 blockbuster *The Matrix*, with the cameo presence of the text acting as an unsubtle metaphor for the autonomous unreality of Neo's computer-generated and controlled world. As early as 1995, Mark Nunes identified Baudrillardian hyperreality as being a fit description of the electronic age. In his essay, *Jean Baudrillard in cyberspace: Internet, virtuality, and postmodernity*, Nunes gives an account of the simulated reality in the context of the early internet. Nunes notes the compatibility of Baudrillard's terminology with much of the discourse surrounding the then-emergent information superhighway.

For Nunes, the structure of the internet allows its interpretation in a Baudrillardian sense, as it "does more than network the globe: it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives" (Nunes 1). Nunes, though writing in the earliest days of the emergence of global interconnectedness, notices the core fact of the internet that has only become more profound as the internet has grown to absorb many facets of the 'real world.' Since 1995, the first year of mass access to internet connectivity in the United States, the internet has grown to be the primary access point to the 'serious' world. Economics, politics, information services, and virtually all remote communication, happen online. The world's most valuable companies are tech corporations and the current President of the United States issues diktats over twitter. The internet has grown far beyond cyberspace and, having displaced most forms of print media, is now the site of news, discourse, and information dissemination.

Nunes admits that while Baudrillard had not "addressed worldwide networking and Internet specifically in his writing, his comments on telematics, along with his more general critiques of

modernity, provide an interesting means for exploring the metaphoricity of the internet” (Nunes 1). The internet acts as a “kind of cybernetic terrain [that] works to undermine the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real” (Nunes 1). The internet, as a totalising – but highly practical, force – acts in such a way that collapses the distinction between metaphor and the real world. How this works on a technical level will require a close reading of Baudrillard himself, before returning to the topic of the electronic age.

Unlike the modes of past eras, “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1). The realm of the simulation is self-referential, meaning that the simulation is self-generating and independent on any kind of ‘external’ reality. The growth and expansion of the simulation has reached, for Baudrillard, the ability to self-perpetuate itself, and as a consequence, its own kind of reality. This act of creation and self-perpetuation is, unlike previous modes, a way of establishing and perpetuating its own kind of reality. Baudrillard writes that “pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas the simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (3). The simulation disassembles the distinction between truth and falsehood by occupying the space by which the true and false are experienced. Though Baudrillard would argue that the simulacra themselves make the distinction possible, the simulation changes truth and falsity by rendering them less and less distinct. Even if truth and falsity are contingent on a what Baudrillard would see as a techno-historical reality, the collapsing of this distinction is still a massive epistemological disruption made possible by the transition into simulation.

Thus, acting, action and performance become indistinguishable from the real. The self-referential nature of the simulation perpetuates the reality of the simulation with no external signification.

The action is what creates the reality, independent of any sort of platonic notions of the real. However, the reality of the simulation asserts itself once again through the power of self-reference and reproduction. Baudrillard writes that “against this lack of distinction that classical reason armed itself in all its categories. But it is what today again outflanks them, submerging the principle of truth” (4). The nature of the simulation is such that it presents itself as being structurally real entity in and of itself. Baudrillard refers to this example at length within the text to illustrate a contemporary example of a simulated experience. The act and the reality, having been conflated, show for Baudrillard the transition from the world of the iconoclasts to the simulated modernity. Whereas the iconoclasts held a sharp division between the sign and its representation, holding an image of God to be a poor imitation of God himself, the sign is worth more within the modern system than the actual signified. This is a turn toward the hyperreal.

Any understanding of the “mechanics” of a simulation or simulacrum requires a historical context. What is important for Baudrillard is the simulacra of the simulation has emerged gradually over a long period of time. Baudrillard references the various Christian iconoclast movements as sensing the danger of the self-referential. The iconoclasts “predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their desire to destroy the images” (4). The iconoclasm was, in effect, an attempt to react against the simulacrum of the image, to reassert the ‘real’ of the divine against the simulacrum of the representation. As Baudrillard writes of the iconoclasts, “one can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own

fascination” (5). For the iconoclasts, the worship of the images is the action of referring to the reference, rather than the image representing the divine the image is treated as the divine in itself. The image is taken for the real.

A simulacrum is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (6). Knowledge is traditionally understood to need a reference and a ‘grounding’ to something external to itself. To know is to be able to make a connection between the sign and the real as connected, as Baudrillard writes: “Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real” (6). Knowing as representation depends on this relationship. Representation and reproduction allow for the preservation of this relationship based on the internal structure of their own simulacra, but the simulation by its nature confused and collapses this relationship. Baudrillard writes that “simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference” (6). Like the icons, the simulation refers to itself ‘all that way down.’ It is a process of continuous re-affirmation of the sign not as referent, but as a phenomenon that can only indicate itself. Though the simulation will make reference to the world outside of itself, this reference is not evidence in the way evidence is traditionally understood. The simulation employs external references to justify itself and reinforce its hold on reference in general, and appropriates signs and significance not to engage, but to assimilate. This continuous replay of sign and referent is what characterises the simulation. The real, indistinguishable from the sign, dissolves through the loss of its independence from the sign.

Within the sciences more broadly, there is this tendency to rehearse the conflation of the sign and the real. The sciences work to isolate their objects from the surrounding environments so as to

reduce error and uncertainty, but in doing so risk establishing a scenario where the experiment has no connection with the real. By confining the object of knowledge to a set of parameters, the experiment only permits a set number of valid outcomes. In this sense, the experiment – to a certain extent – predetermines the kind of information that is deemed legitimate. While the sciences in isolation rely on this principle to a certain degree, its extension to the broader culture creates epistemic problems, as Baudrillard writes: “The confinement of the scientific object is equal to the confinement of the mad and the dead. And just as all of society is irredeemably contaminated by this mirror of madness that it has held up to itself, science can’t help but die contaminated by the death of this object that is its inverse mirror.” (Baudrillard 9). The object of knowledge and the representation of that knowledge get conflated in this model, and recursive relationship becomes the norm. the referent referring to itself is the dominant way of creating knowing for Baudrillard: “It is science that masters the objects, but it is the objects that invest it with depth, according to an unconscious reversion, which only gives a dead and circular response to a dead and circular interrogation” (9).

The sum consequence of this epistemic structure is what Baudrillard refers to as a doubling. The doubling of the object, or the act of conflating the reference and the referent, is the fundamental characteristic of the simulation. The doubling, the re-referential, all conclude in an epistemic atmosphere where true, false and fact are indistinct. As Baudrillard argues, the original, its copy and the process of doubling act to implode the state of meaning: “everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original – things are doubled by their own scenario” (11). What is significant in this act of implosion is not the death of meaning per se – but the devaluation of meaning. Meaning takes on a new role as a referent, something that is to be worked towards as a goal rather than a quality intrinsic to the object itself. Doubling is the name Baudrillard gives to this process, and the altered valuation of the sign in contemporary discourse: “this doubling does

not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of [the death of meaning] – they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes” (11). Meaning is not ‘dead,’ but the conflation of the sign and the signifier spells the collapse of the structure that allowed meaning in the classical sense to have epistemic significance.

This re-centring of meaning is – critically – a product of technological changes and the way that information becomes disseminated. Mass media, mass consumption and mass production all generated ways of experiencing and understandings that would follow. The introduction of the computer, with its emphasis on the mass dissemination of information, not just as a media but as a way of generating knowledge, is understood to be the vehicle for the shift towards simulation. Baudrillard’s use of the term ‘simulation’ itself implies a kind of the reality created in the life electric.

However, the foundations of the simulated age, for Baudrillard, are co-original with mass media and often precede many changes brought by electric and digital media. The simulacrum of the simulation began in the mid-20th century United States. Disneyland is of particular interest for Baudrillard, as it is a real-life simulation of an idealised United States of America made possible by the technology of the automobile. Through the use of this particular technology, the construction of this alternate reality was possible. This represents Baudrillard’s focus on the importance of individual technologies to facilitate a kind of reality. Disneyland is an institution of particular consternation for Baudrillard, as it is a prime example of a world built through technological means. Disneyland itself is a product of the automobile and electronic media – without these two core technologies Disneyland would not be functional as an apparatus. These

two technologies in conjunction with each other make the illusory world of Disneyland possible: the movies create the myths and the automobile allows for its relative isolation.

The role of Disneyland is not necessary to create itself as a fictional world, but rather as a means of collapsing the fiction and recreating it in an artificial reality: “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the debility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration.” (13). Disneyland as an institution, in Baudrillard’s reading, exists to render the reality of the world outside irrelevant. The reality of Disneyland only exists to present itself as a superior kind of reality to what might otherwise be experienced: “this world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere – that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness” (13). This collapsing of the real is itself an act of deliberate misdirection, the adults who seek childhood are deliberately redirecting their efforts into a world of illusion similar to how Frankfurt’s bullshitter misdirects attention. The difference between the bullshitter and Disneyland is that those going there deceive *themselves* as opposed to others. By purposefully misdirecting themselves, the guests at Disneyland signal their lack of concern for the real, in Baudrillard’s view.

In a similar vein, Baudrillard identifies the Watergate scandal as the moment when technological misdirection revealed its form. Watergate, for Baudrillard, showed the simulation and its misdirection entered the realm of political discourse by framing the exchange of information in the discourse not as a dialectic but as the maneuvering and application of social capital. The raw information of the Watergate scandal was not an object of knowledge, but rather existed as a medium of exchange dedicated to achieving political ends. Recalling Frankfurt once again, what

makes Watergate problematic is the way it redirects the attention of the viewer, employing rhetorical styles that cared little for the guilt or innocence of Richard Nixon. Watergate for Baudrillard was watershed insofar as it represents the transformation of information into capital, where the loss of knowledge as valuable is exchanged with the information as a political resource. Baudrillard writes that “all that capital asks of us is to receive it as rational *or* to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral *or* to combat it in the name of morality. Because *these are the same*, which *can be thought of in another way*: formerly one worked to dissimulate scandal – today one works to conceal that there is none” (15). Thus, the treatment of the scandal as political capital is a kind of fundamental misdirection, as it became analogous to Frankfurt’s bullshit. The misdirection and de-prioritisation of events is what gave the Watergate scandal in contemporary character, insofar as the facts are means of asserting power and authority without resorting to old-fashioned propaganda. In the identification of the facts as capital, Baudrillard shows how they are disconnected from the real and are instead valued for their utility.

For Baudrillard, this relationship between authority and capital is one where capital is an assertion of the very authority it purports to work against: “Capital, in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominated. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a *challenge to society*, and it must be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral or economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law. (15)”

Thus, Watergate was a simulation of a scandal, as it was in essence a self-referential event that acted as much as political propaganda as much as it was truly a crime: Watergate was a “lure held out by the system to catch its adversaries – a simulation of a scandal for regenerative ends” (16). Deep throat was not a manipulator of Woodward and Bernstein, but rather used the information relayed to the journalists as a weaponised form of information, independent of the relative guilt or

innocence of Richard Nixon. This tactic could not be possible without the transformation of information into capital, and the associated use of information as misdirection. Information is not what is known, but rather is a force of power that is deployed when needed. Politically, information is deployed as a tool with a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. What happened in Watergate was really not the point: so long as people were convinced and the simulation upheld, the scandal acted as a means to an end. Recall Frankfurt's bullshit once again. The tactics of both Nixon and the reporters – being the same – ultimately focused on the same kind of rhetorical and structural misdirection.

Baudrillard references another phenomenon that was contemporary at the time of writing, the bombing campaigns taken out by political provocateurs in Italy: “Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist *mise-en-scène* to discredit all extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security?” (16). These events, though clearly something that happens in reality, are subject to multiple possible causes based on what is the most politically expedient, according to Baudrillard. Navigating this can prove difficult, since all these interpretations are “simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation. That is, we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with the logic of facts and an order of reason” (16). Information is divorced from any relationship to fact or knowledge but is instead treated as a commodity. Politically, these simulations are an act of misdirection focused on upholding the established order and maintaining the political power of authority. The simulation in these cases is generated from a distinct source with a distinct agenda.

Baudrillard focuses on the Watergate and Italian bombing cases to show a kind of political structure emerging that places less of an emphasis on the discoverability of the real world as it does on the utility of that real world to servicing political ends. Nixon's relative guilt or innocence was irrelevant in the face of the technocratic rehearsal of partisan support, opinion polling, and media analysis. Whether or not the real world is important or discoverable is no longer important, even if it had been in the past. Whether or not Nixon authorised the burglary, whether or not the Italian bombings were undertaken by left- or right-wing extremists, getting to truly know the reality of these events is irrelevant in the face of the political and social motions that are engaged in a constant state of hyperreal interplay. Where the truth of Nixon's misdeeds might have been found, Baudrillard finds a system of techniques and misdirection through reproduction that characterises the pseudo-reality of the simulation.

For Baudrillard, these preceding events signal the beginning of modernity and the bifurcation of information from knowledge. Much as bullshit need not be false, the misdirection and concealment of the simulation need not be false either. While information still contains fact and the rehearsal of knowledge, knowledge and information cannot be exchanged one for the other. While the simulation is explicitly the self-reference of the referent upon itself, a consequence of this formulation is the divorce of information from its relationship to fact and knowledge. Information takes on a new role as the representative of the simulation, and the simulation uses information as a vehicle for its own perpetuation. Baudrillard writes that "simulation is characterised by a *precession of the model*, of all models based on the merest of fact – the models come first, their circulation, orbital like that of the bomb, constitutes the genuine magnetic field of the event" (16). Information in this context can be viewed as interchangeable with fact, and for the simulation, they need to be indistinct for the model to function. This interchangeability and

the collapse of the fact in favour of the model will become an essential characteristic of the internet later on.

This collapse of meaning means that “facts no longer have a single trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all the models at once” (16-17). The distribution of facts become reliant on their adherence with the model, creating a phenomenon identified by Baudrillard as ‘anticipation.’ He writes that “this anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model ... is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all true, in the sense that their truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the models from which they derive, in a generalised cycle” (17). Events, facts and information lose their independence of value, rendering multiple interpretations of the same information able to exist in parallel. The conspiracies, narratives and multiple interpretations of the Watergate scandal exist as capital. The end result is that “all of this is simultaneously true” (17). This is where Baudrillard will be found to be deviating crucially from Frankfurt. Whereas Frankfurt’s motivation for identifying bullshit as a form of misdirection is a reaction against deception, Baudrillard identifies misdirection as an essential feature of a modernity, technological in nature.

For Baudrillard, the simulation is radically different from earlier forms of rhetoric. Whereas rhetorical tools are about presenting information in a specific way, information and facts as capital insists on having information not represent anything beyond the confines of the simulation. Sophists, bullshitters, and propagandists try and create a world that is to be imposed on a persuaded world, but simulations are a kind of metamorphized misdirection that has transcended a point of origin and become autonomous and directionless.

Baudrillard writes what “it is the secret of a discourse that it is no longer simply ambiguous ... but that it conveys the impossibility of a determined position of power, the impossibility of a determined discursive position” (17). Rhetoric and sophistry involve, to a certain extent, rely on a shared grounding to formulate an interpretation. In the simulation, there is no longer a pole to rely on: “this logic is neither that of one party or another. It traverses all discourses without them wanting to” (17). The transformation of information into capital causes the implosion of method as well. The way discourses circulate use identical methodology, rendering them less and less distinct. The implosion of the poles of reasoning is what gives the simulation its autonomous character. In dialectical reasoning, there must be at least two poles of power opposing each other in the search for truth: in the simulation, there are no more poles. Reinforcing the strength of the model is the core concern of the simulation.

The end result is the elimination of conceptual and technical polarity. Knowledge practices become rendered in the same kind of discourse, eliminating necessary distinctions: “all the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion. Not so long ago, sex and work were fiercely opposed terms; today both are dissolved in the same type of demand” (18). Necessary radical divisions that make the distinctions between ideas meaningful becomes lost in the technical progression of signs and signifiers that comprises modern discourse. Baudrillard notes that in earlier eras, “the discourse on history derived its power from violently opposing itself to that of nature, the discourse of desire to that of power – today they exchange their signifiers and scenarios” (18). Terms like ‘human nature’ and ‘social sciences,’ are for Baudrillard emblematic of the collapse of discourse into signification.

Signification bifurcates meaning from knowledge in a way that mimics the collapse of discourse into signification. There is a force of implosive violence used on knowledge in the traditional

sense that concentrates it on a singular entity, the signifier, while simultaneously subjecting it to the explosive force that detaches knowledge from its traditional grounding. What we are left with is discourse and signification is the discourse of power and technique. The simulation, being self-referential, must justify its own existence before referring to any externalities. In this way, the simulation acts as a means to constitute and reinforce itself. Power in Baudrillard's context is the means that the simulation used to isolate itself from traditional practices of discourse. By attempting to refer to a 'grounding' outside the simulacra, we must use the tools of the simulation in order for this to convey any kind of meaning. However, this attempt to use the tools of the simulation against itself merely reinforces the model for Baudrillard. This is because the model or simulation forces those engaged in its rules to adopt its tools of power and assert to its conception of the real: "the only weapon of power, its only strategy against this deflection, is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production" (22). The result of this process is that we become trapped in the simulation or the model, completing the transition into the what Baudrillard deems the 'hyperreal.' Hyperreality is the totalising re-referencing of the object and the model upon themselves. Like Disneyworld attempting to create its own reality in microcosm, hyperreality asserts that the distinctions between truth and falsity are irrelevant, only that the rules it sets are adhered to.

Likewise, the simulated scandal of Watergate was not about principles or ethics, according to Baudrillard, but about asserting techniques of power and purging enemies of the system: "Completely purged of a *political* dimension, it, like any other commodity, is dependent on mass production and consumption. Its spark has disappeared, only the fiction of a political universe remains" (26). The internet, for many intents and purposes, is the ultimate enabler of the commodification of politics, through its creation of online echo chambers and use of algorithms

to autonomously group like-minded people into the same forum space. Politics in the traditional sense becomes impossible in this context: “hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective, they turn against power the deterrent that it used so well for such a long time” (22). In the hyperreal there can be no principled or valued judgement, since any notion of value must be referred back onto itself via the simulation. ‘Higher principles’ are extinguished. What we are left with is the totality of self-referent, self-justification and self-valuation based on the needs of the simulation and its model. Unlike previous shifts in technique or paradigms, the simulation is able to reproduce itself in ways that previous simulacra could not accomplish. Baudrillard writes that simulations “can last indefinitely, because, as distinct from ‘true’ power – which is, or was, a structure, a strategy, a relation of force, a stake – it is nothing but the object of a social *demand*, and this as the object of the law of supply and demand, it is no longer subject to violence and death” (26). Power is compartmentalised and made measurable, it is no longer a principle or a tactic, it becomes like a unit of currency and used as a medium of exchange.

However, the actual process of exchange itself becomes corrupted. Work in the traditional sense becomes servile to the needs of the simulation. Through mechanical production, most of the basic goods needed to survive are acquired outside our means, but the theatrics of maintaining a working labour force persists: “the whole world still produces, and increasingly, but subtly work has become something else: a need ... the object of a social demand, like leisure, to which it is equivalent in the course of everyday life” (26). Work, traditionally based on the act of producing to meet one’s needs, has been largely replaced by working to serve the needs of the simulation. As Baudrillard writes, “the *scenario* of work is there to conceal that the real of work, the real of production, has disappeared” (26). Work itself becomes a form of capital, used to enrich the needs of the simulation. Work, rather than creating capital, is seen as the capital itself. Persuasion

and misdirection, seen as tools and techniques, become the driving force of a technological society.

Baudrillard sees this process as unsettling and resettling the seat of knowledge.

Simulations can also be the end of panopticons: “the eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency” (29). The gaze of power, enabled by the state and power structures, no longer has direction to and from certain directions. TV, print media, art, even oral communication, all are sites of media that allow rhetorical persuasion or other techniques of sensory manipulation to flourish. Not all of these techniques are in service to power or some other practical purpose, but their techniques and structure make the source of their influence intelligible. In the case of the internet and the simulated reality, it becomes omnidirectional. Rendering the simulation intelligible requires jettisoning a sense of direction, since assuming autonomous misdirection can come from a direction at all “still presupposes an objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of the despotic gaze. It is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of mapping” (29).

Baudrillard continues, emphasizing the value of analyzing “more subtly, but always externally, playing on the opposition of seeing and being seen, even if the panoptic focal point may be blind” (29). In regard to the panopticism of older simulacra, Baudrillard makes reference to Foucault’s famous conception of power relations, drawing a contrast between the structure of the simulation to the simulacra of previous eras. The Foucauldian panopticon is based on the distinct centring of the gaze from a fixed point. The propagation of power also requires there to be a determined and clear sequential logic that no longer applies under the simulation: “a switch from the panoptic mechanism of surveillance (*Discipline and Punish*) to a system of deterrence, in which the distinction between the passive and the active is abolished. There is no longer any imperative of

submission to the model, or to the gaze: ‘YOU are the model,’ ‘YOU are the majority!’” (29). Whereas once there had been the push to power in favour of uniformity and control, the simulation achieves these ends by subverting expectations and misdirecting the attention of the formerly disciplined. The simulation does not make its subjects real, but rather confuses its subjects for the real thing. As Baudrillard writes: “such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality, in which the real is confused with the model, as in the statistical operation, or with the medium” (29). The internet as a simulation acts as a post-power institution. It is aimed at not control, power or discipline, but rather the redefining of knowledge by establishing constraints through self-reference. Whereas we were once caught in a system of control, pushing and pulling, we are now caught in a directionless model of misdirection.

Thus, the core linkage of the internet to Baudrillard’s conception of the simulation is that persuasion, bullshit, and misdirection are no longer in service to anything, but become real unto themselves. The digital model is “is the last stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, of ideology, of publicity, etc.) but one of deterrence: ‘YOU are information, you are the social, you are involved, you have the word, etc.’” (29). The internet enables this purposeful misdirection by absorbing all other points of reference and mediums of communication. Misdirection is autonomous, since a referent of true nor false has any tangible meaning. This is not to say that things true things no longer exist, but they take on a different meaning. Whereas truth could be guaranteed by authorship and institutional authority, every anonymous internet commentator becomes their own publisher. The focus on the individual, as an individual divorced from its context, confuses the state of being in the world to that of being oneself: “An about-face through which it becomes impossible to locate one instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, because *you* are already on the other side. No more subject, no more focal point, no more centre or periphery: pure flexion or circular

inflexion” (29). Whereas power and control were made possible by the gaze of power, in the Foucauldian interpretation, power in this sense becomes meaningless since there cannot be a gaze from anywhere. Mass surveillance in the modern form cannot be surveillance in a traditional way, according to the Baudrillardian interpretation, since it is not about control or discipline, but rather the accumulation of information: “no more violence or surveillance: only ‘information,’ secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion, and simulacra of spaces in which the effect of the real must come into play” (29-30).

The real is displaced by an increasingly sophisticated system of informatics, mediation, and technique. The collapse of traditional media and the triumph of the internet as a totalising force is where Baudrillard’s interpretation of media is most valuable. Baudrillard summarized the simulation itself thus:

in fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from any other anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: *implosion* – an absorption of the radiating mode of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative charge – an implosion of meaning. *That is where simulation begins.* (30)

The internet provides a simulated reality more engrossing than anything presented by televised media. Baudrillard’s notion of the simulation, though focused on the reality of television, apprehended the transition into the digital reality that would soon come to pass not long after the publication of *Simulations and Simulacrum*.

Although Baudrillard was writing with the power of the television in mind, these core components of the simulation can easily be reformulated to the internet age. Indeed, though

Baudrillard was employing these technical terms in a way that is different from their contemporary usage in information technology, they seem to indicate an anticipation to the then-emerging realm of the internet.

Chapter 5

Adapting to the Immaterial World

Returning to Nunes's interpretation of Baudrillard will allow us to see an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon in action. Nunes was writing in the mid 1990s, when information technology and mass communication were taking on their modern forms. The internet, though structurally the same as it was in the mid-to-late 1990s, is now a much more expansive and totalising force. Nunes argues that the structure of the internet as it has developed, "does more than network the globe: it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives" (1). The internet and cyberspace are a realm of extension, a computer generated and operated space where both real phenomena and simulated or artificial phenomena exist in parallel. The creation of the internet as a possibility space remains one of the more common points of discussion regarding information technology. Few will dispute that computer modelling, and integrated communication schemes have become increasingly powerful and ubiquitous tools for navigating and understanding the world. These possibilities have been historically met with enthusiasm and optimism, especially when the discussion is centred on the rise of new epistemic possibilities, or worlds. But as Nunes points out, "the more ecstatic the promises of new possible worlds, the more problematic the concept of 'the world' becomes" (1). The digitalised nature of the modern experience creates a split into two realms. There is the physical world we inhabit, and the metaphorical simulated internet world where we are increasingly conducting business, politics, communication, and 'serious' work.

Nunes's reading of Baudrillard's theories on simulations and the changed nature of the real provide an avenue of interpretation for understanding this shift. Nunes admits that while Baudrillard did not specifically address the internet in a direct way, "his comments on telematics,

along with his more general critiques of modernity, provide an interesting means for exploring the metaphoricity of Internet” (1). Understanding the internet – as it is a phenomenon that relies heavily on metaphor to give itself substance – metaphorically in the Baudrillardian sense, allows us an avenue of interpretation that examines the broader cultural structures and processes at play. Metaphor gives the internet much of its ‘real’ character, from the simulated networks to the contingent and constructed nature of forums, websites, apps, and linkages. Navigating the internet requires the employment of terms related to space, distance and time that have no physical counterpart in cyberspace. Searches, exploring, sites, domains, are all terms used to describe places on the virtual plane that have metaphoric and symbolic permanence. Navigational terms create what Nunes calls the ‘cybernetic terrain,’ that gives a meaningful sense of shape and permanence to this virtual area. But as Nunes points out, “this figuration of Internet as a kind of cybernetic terrain works to undermine the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real” (Nunes 1) by establishing that the terrain of the internet shares the same kind of nature as the earth. The metaphor becomes absorbed into its source. Metaphor and its object in this case run the risk of collapsing on each other.

At this moment, with the confusion of the metaphor for its object, the internet becomes Baudrillardian hyperreality, that is, a reality unanchored to any external force. While this talk of metaphoricity is only one aspect of the internet’s structure, it is emblematic of a series of trends that take place on a macro level throughout cyberspace. Whereas the sophists and the bullshitters and propagandists all relied on the notion of a tangible shared world that could be referred to as an external reality. The internet, being a potentially closed system, need not rely on externality in the same way, and instead becomes self-referential. Nunes sees this abandonment of the external referent as hyperreality manifesting itself. The internet “abandons ‘the real’ for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehensible world” (1).

However, hyperreality is only part of the issue at hand for Nunes. When Baudrillard referred to hyperreality in the 1980s, he was referring to a particular kind of phenomenon associated with the media of the day, mostly television and cinema. What the internet provides is a space for hyperreality to displace the reality outside the virtual space of the internet. Nunes, writing in the 1990s, sees the growing influence of the early internet as moving “toward Baudrillard's ‘hypertelia,’ that fated catastrophe when the sophistication of a model outdoes the reality it attempts to comprehend.” (1). Since then, the internet has only grown more expansive and its models more sophisticated.

To understand this direction towards, it is necessary to explore the internet as a space where hyperreality thrives. Hyperreality gives rise to the simulation, and the total pervasiveness of the simulation gives rise to hypertelia. The key transition is “for Baudrillard, the shift from the real to the hyperreal occurs when representation gives way to simulation” (2), or when representation is no longer capable of representing anything other than itself. The structure of the internet as a closed system is perfect grounds for the emergence of hyperreal systems. Nunes returns to his example of how the metaphor of motion gets turned on its head. Motion on the internet is only a reference to itself. Nunes writes that the notion of movement applies to the internet in novel ways that did not apply to preceding techniques or technologies: “One does not ‘go’ somewhere when picking up the telephone. But when the computer couples with these same telephone lines, suddenly spatial and kinetic metaphors begin to proliferate” (2).

Nunes identifies the proliferation of this metaphorical topography as illustrative of how the meta-structure of the internet can apply to Baudrillardian terms of simulation. Since this “information superhighway depends upon a more subtle metaphorical figuration, a virtual topography in which speed, motion, and direction become possible” (2). This reference to movement is a reference

only to movement on the internet itself. The territoriality of the internet is itself a kind of misdirection. The possibility space here is a kind of creation that defines its own possibilities, with the references to any externality slowly becoming displaced as the simulation becomes more sophisticated over time. The metaphor of motion, drawing us into the simulation, provides grounds to understand it in terms other than itself. Nunes writes that in its original form, the “internet becomes a simulated territory we traverse via computer-modem roadster in which the computer screen replaces the windscreen” (2).

The screen acts as a mediating force for the automobile, television, and the internet alike. They carry very different meanings when applied to different technologies yet retain the same kind of function in both cases. Nunes identifies Baudrillard’s insight that the screen acts as a divider between the world and the viewer. This division isolates the viewer from an experience other than what is presented and what is visible. Baudrillard “notes how easily motion can transform into a visual experience in which the driver-viewer interacts with images, rather than with the physical world (Ecstasy 13)” (2). A comparison can be drawn to the prisoners in Plato’s cave. By being forced to interact with only the images presented by the shadowy puppeteers, they can only act with an illusionary perception of what is. While the screen of the automotive windscreen is transparent, and one may exit the vehicle and interact physically with the objects beyond, the computer screen opening onto the internet is only capable of projecting images, illustrations, and renderings. A more encompassing tactic Plato’s puppeteers could not have asked for. While Baudrillard focused his attention on the television screen, the same analysis can be applied to the internet as both are ‘enscreened’ media. Nunes writes that “for Baudrillard, the screen presents an example of the ‘satellisation of the real’ by achieving the escape velocity of hyperreality: ‘that which was previously mentally projected, which was lived as a metaphor in the terrestrial habitat

is from now on projected entirely without metaphor, into the absolute space of simulation' (Ecstasy 16). This 'enscreening' traps us in what the screen allows us to see.

Unlike in television, which presents a mediated reality that gives the viewer a predetermined sequence of images, the internet has no such restriction. Users are free to roam the simulated landscape of the internet and experience its images in many of the same ways the automobile allows free roaming, but without the ability to leave the vehicle and experience what lies beyond the screen. Thus, the fundamental change with the computer means that Baudrillard's metaphors for screens and automobiles become "no longer a metaphor for change, the simulated highway of Internet becomes a form of virtual reality." (2). This is a new kind of reality, a hyperreality that establishes and dictates its own rules. Nunes returns to the metaphor of the screen as a means of travel alloys for the seamless transition to Baudrillardian hyperreality: "In this model, the screen becomes a hyperreal vehicle for traveling across a simulated world. A large number of Internet 'guide' books make use of this geographical metaphor, evoking images of navigation and exploration" (2). To travel the internet is to travel an illusionary space. By no means is one moving in any physical way but through the simulated reality that is presented by the images on the screen.

These things become 'imaginary,' or created by the images themselves. In the same way that the projections on the wall of Plato's cave were images representing a kind of unreality, the images presented by the internet work in the same way. The difference between the cave and the internet is that we are not chained but free to move through this imaginary space at our own volition or desire: "motion, speed, and travel lose their 'real'" meanings while gaining power as technological simulations. For Baudrillard, this transference of power from the real to the hyperreal presents the fulfillment of the modern drive to master the world" (2). Indeed, for Nunes,

“geography implodes on one hyperreal point” (2), completing the transformation into a radically all-encompassing hyperreality. Despite claims to the contrary, the “conceptual model of a cybernetic ‘space’ does not augment the world; it abandons the world for one that can be fully realized and fully encompassed: a world of transparency and immediacy” (2).

The phenomena of screening and hyperreality, defined by the twin characteristics of transparency and immediacy, are supplemented by seemingly paradoxical qualities. While the screen is transparent, it itself cannot be seen. The screen presents an immediate reality that cannot be accessed in any physical sense. Nunes uses Baudrillard’s notion of the ‘telecomputer man’ from the *Transparency of Evil* gives a brief description of this phenomenon at work: “‘Telecomputer Man’ experiences ‘a very special kind of distance which can only be described as unbridgeable by the body The screen is merely virtual – and hence unbridgeable’ (Transparency 55)” (3). Being unable to physically cross the barrier means that the viewer and internet experiencer, can only move and experience the virtual world on the virtual worlds terms, within the pre-determined confines of the internet itself. Thus, “although he cannot cross his screen, he can ‘circulate’ himself through the media” (3) of internet life. Whereas the automobile and the television screens either allow the user to either move physically though the world, as in the case of the automobile, or experience a reality of images devoid of distance, as is the case with the television, the internet allows for both of these phenomena to happen at once.

Nunes identifies this as a form of Baudrillardian implosion, where the creation of a simulated reality collapses the meaningful distinction between real and virtual distance. He writes that “the implosion of real distance creates the need for a strategy of deterrence: a simulation of space and distance that the body cannot breach but that a simulated self (complete with computer prostheses) can travel” (3). Indeed, “[the] internet does not simply lay down a mesh of

connections between real-life nodes/computers, annihilating distance; it creates and maintains its own simulated world in place of the physical world of spatial distances.” (3). For the user on the internet, they are caught in the paradox of both real and unreal movement occurring simultaneously.

What occurs by the displacement of the real on the internet is the establishment of a simulated environment has absorbed the practices of ‘serious’ and ‘real’ performance. The beginning of the 21st century saw the sudden migration of political, economic, and intellectual activity to the online sphere. Nunes apprehends this motion, writing that “International business – internationalism in general – disappears, subsumed by a simulated world of international networks” (3). The internet, in absorbing the site of discussion, creates a space that excludes meaningful discourse outside of a present and predetermined space whose parameters have already been established. Nunes saw in 1995 that the internet was moving to absorb much of the sites of discourse, writing that as “[the] Internet moves closer to its dream of total connectivity, one might imagine with Baudrillard that moment of closure when this metaphorical ‘cyberspace’ becomes the hyperreal, more important than the real space it once simulated” (3). While politics and economics still exist, they develop and change to suit the needs of the simulated reality online, rather than acting for their own ends. Politics becomes a way for the internet to reinforce itself, the information economy relies on abstractions in place of goods with a real presence: “No longer does technology encompass the world; now it replaces it with a ‘more real than real’ simulation” (3). The internet thus actively misdirects the users’ attention by the nature of its structure. The shadows on the walls of Plato’s cave now become much more real and meaningful than anything outside of the cave.

Much as the cave actively restricts the prisoners' ability to perform meaningful activity, the internet acts as its own kind of limit to the types of discourses that occur in its virtual networks. From character limits to algorithms that determine the extent of exposure, the internet and social media act to predetermine much of the possible discourse. This is to the detriment of the discourse itself, as what is being said becomes less important than the exposure of the person saying it, and if they can utilise the series of significations important to the internet itself: "the metaphor of cyberspace presents Internet as a globe to its own world; virtual territory only exists once it has been traced onto a pre-existing code of connectivity" (3). The sophists needed to rely on an echo chamber, built up by whipping up the crowd. Now, the echo chamber is built by the agora itself. Nunes writes that, "from a Baudrillardian perspective, the immanence of this realm – its very vastness and limitlessness – is nothing more than the simulation of these significations, simulacra that perform a strategy of deterrence, holding back the realization of the spaceless, limited world of the code" (4). This limitedness is not by design, but rather a consequence of the forced and encoded interconnectedness. In using the internet, we are forced to connect on the internet's terms, and following the coded pathways established prior to our own use.

A modern example not connected to discourse would be the idea of a search engine. Google, today one of the largest and most powerful multinational corporations grew to this prominence by acting as the gatekeeper of internet life. In 1995, Nunes identified the strength and potential of such a program and analyses the behaviour of the primitive search engine 'Gopher' in Baudrillardian terms. As Google does now, Gopher catalogues and indexes information on the internet. Nunes writes that a tool "that allows users to search for information at multiple sites, demonstrates that Internet only simulates an unknown terrain of knowledge. The possibility of reproducing a particular coding of information precedes - and precludes - any attempt to locate it. One never discovers on Internet; one only uncovers" (4). Google, acting as the gatekeeper of

internet knowledge, only acts as the arbiter of uncovering, but not discovering. Google does not show anything 'new,' but rather postings and websites that already exist as knowledge objects. Google merely directs (or in some cases misdirects) the user to these sites. Search engines do not tell you what is known, however. They only direct you to what you want to know. Sophists and bullshitters, like the Google search, do not care about the information so much as if the person reading the information is convinced of its accuracy.

In this system, the internet co-opts the history of the written word for its own ends. Nunes writes that "writing is the dominant means of communication on the Internet, and, as such, it finds its place within a general history of writing as a material presence for communication (as opposed to the more "ephemeral" voice)" (5). The written word that is presented after a Google search appears to hold onto the same sort legitimacy offered in a written document from a legitimate authority. A text or a journal has a system of peer review or enforced legitimacy. Texts from reputable sources can trace a kind of lineage, through references, sourcing, and proof that it is derived from an academic culture. However, the Google search provides a sourced document that bears none of these origins, and instead pretends to have them based on the legitimacy of its presenter. Earlier propaganda and works of misdirection attempted to create an environment similar to the internet but were hamstrung by the fact that there existed a division in presentation between reliable and unreliable information. No such division exists online. Further confusing the situation is that real, sourced and traditionally verifiable written works may appear side by side with nonsense, conflating the two. Nunes writes that "Baudrillard's comments on communication, however, would seem to position Internet at writing's 'hypertelic' moment, beyond its own end" (5). The ends of the internet use writings no longer as a means of communicating, or presenting authorship, but by confusing the fake and the real to create a new simulated world.

The reproducibility of computer knowledge is also a point of concern. The ease of copying and pasting information creates a challenge for traditional notions of ownership and distorts the origins of arguments or information. One may, with ease, share and reproduce information online in ways impossible in the pre-internet age: “the fax machine, for example, sends a reproduction over phone lines, but e-mail produces and sends a simulated document, one that can be copied infinitely, forwarded simultaneously, reproduced in multiple formats, and so forth” (7). This infinite reproducibility allows for both the mass dispersal of information, but also destroys the real basis or grounding of an argument. What becomes important is the nature of the argument in its electronic form, independent of its source external to the internet. “E-mail obscures the concept of ‘the original,’ but it likewise throws into question both origin and destination since a virtual address is independent of the user's physical location” (7) Propaganda and sophistry in this space become impossible to identify as such. The power of information, rhetoric, and argumentation to circulate becomes a power in and of itself. Critiquing an argument for faulty premises or for having a sophistic or bullshit origin becomes impossible in many cases, since the real origins of the discourse become obscured. The direction of the reader or the viewer is shaped in a kind of independent sophistry or bullshit made possible by the technical structure of the internet itself.

Chapter 6

Exploring the ‘Real’ World

I posit autonomous misdirection as a phenomenon that uses the structure of the internet to enhance the power of rhetorical or propagandistic misdirection, and to detach such misdirection from its origins. Autonomous propaganda, bullshit and sophistry may circulate freely and voluntarily, but no longer necessarily in the service of their originators, and no longer necessarily propelled by their originators. Older forms of misdirection can and do exist alongside more modern techniques, but what makes the misdirection unique in its online form is that it becomes detached from the conditions that created it and takes on a ‘life of its own.’ What we see occurring as a feature of contemporary online discourse is the mass rehearsal and recirculation of false, misleading, or otherwise unsound information. Unlike the propagandists, sophists, and bullshitters, the internet can circulate propaganda, sophistry, and bullshit – such as today’s fake news and conspiracy theories – autonomously and often unaided. While a dedicated individual can and often will support the circulation of falsehoods, the methods used are not techniques in and of themselves, but rather employ how the internet itself allows discourse to circulate. In the simulated world of the information superhighway, the hyperreality of the immediate interconnectedness supplants the reality that is experienced outside of the enclosed network.

While the old rules for knowledge circulation still apply to older media, including television, print, etc., the internet creates its own kind of information ecosystem and autonomously prioritises certain kinds of discourse with rhetorical strengths that thrive in the online space. The notion of the echo chamber is crucial to understanding how the internet, (social media specifically), allow for the autonomy of misdirection to flourish. The creation of a closed

information circuit, independent of the external world, relying on only linkages within itself, has the potential to create powerful reverberating discourses that feed and are fuelled by themselves.

For most of its history, the internet was relatively detached from politics. Until around the year 2010, the internet did not have the mass connections required to engage the public as a mass movement in and of itself. However, the structural norms that would later characterise the later developments took shape with the introduction of modern social media in the beginning of the 21st century. Networking and enclosed communication created a simulated discourse that automatically connected people of similar motivations, interests and perspectives, while blocking out those that disagreed. In the algorithms of Twitter, Facebook, Google, and similar large tech firms', feedback loops group like-minded people together, independent of the relative veracity of what they have to say. Recall the echo chamber carefully crafted by the sophist to prevent the young philosopher from having any kind of authentic relationship with knowledge. Whereas Plato's sophist, the bullshitter and the propagandists had to actively create a misdirection from a dedicated point of origin, this new misdirection is from nowhere, and is a part of the system.

In the world of video games, there has long been a general programme of trying to make the games feel 'real,' but without specifying what form this reality is supposed to subsume. For many years it was assumed that increased graphical fidelity, the ability to render images and behave in a way that perfectly encapsulates the 'outside' world. But attempts to perfectly recreate the world in a computer simulation leads to an imperfect and often unenjoyable experience, leading to bad games. The 2000 computer game *The Sims* creates a fictionalised American suburbia where the player has control over the parameters of a life simulation, dictating the needs and goals of computer-generated characters called sims. *The Sims* as a title is full of deliberate exaggerations meant to add a cartoon twist to a simulation surrounding real life, but one exaggeration in

particular stands out due to its Baudrillardian implications. Early in the design stage, the sims were planned to speak several repeated lines of English to create virtual conversation. Playtesting revealed that players grew easily tired of the repetitious dialogue. As a remedy, designers created a fictional language called ‘simlish’¹. The language was crafted with the dedicated purpose of having no content, and to allow for easy access to the simulation. This conscious rejection of an external reality allowed the simulation to disguise its nature as an imitation of reality, and to create a more perfect reality in its stead.

What matters for realism in games is that they feel real, that they follow their own internal logic and create a kind of world that functions sensibly according to its own rules, independent of what the rules outside the game might be. The perfect reality of the game is ultimately a hyperreality, a simulation that feels real by virtue of its own priorities and consistencies. Social media functions in a way not unlike the game, by creating closed communities of discourses where the internal logic and sense of realness trumps the truth of the ideas being circulated. The characters in *The Sims* literally say nothing and trivialize the act of expression, but this imitation succeeded in making the world realer to the player due to reinforcing its own internal logic, irrespective of what the case might be outside its simulated boundaries. The deliberate fake became more tangible than the world it was trying to represent.

The year 2016 was a watershed year for the internet, as the power of autonomous misdirection to facilitate political transformation was demonstrated in two major events: the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and the vote by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Though the origins of Trumpism and Brexit as political phenomena remain

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/7/21126705/the-sims-simlish-language-history-20th-anniversary-game>

highly controversial, an important characteristic shared by both is a reliance on social media to fuel their campaigns.

Prior to 2016, social media was mostly used in the same way as radio, television or other earlier electronic media for Public Relations or image management purposes. The internet was largely approached by established political institutions mostly as an extension of legacy media and was treated as such. Examples of this can be found in the American 2012 election campaign, where both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney employed advertising firms to help manage and control their online personas: “Both candidates tried to make themselves seem relatable by posting pictures of their families, trivial things around them, fans from their campaign stops, and snapshots from their daily lives” (Dalton-Hoffman 1). The trivialisation of the campaign made the politics of the candidates irrelevant compared to their relatability as persons. While this is not a new political technique, both campaigns attempted to use this ‘relatability’ to an amplified degree made possible online.

But the two were not equally successful. Despite similar amounts of funds being dedicated to each campaign, the Obama team invested much more in creating and maintaining a heavy online presence that could present an image of Obama that make use of the new medium. Obama’s advertising teams used tools to micro-target potential voters and was generally more aware of how to employ the new technologies for positive effect. Obama’s team made it “more attractive to share campaign generated social posts, creating unity resulting in a crowdsourced support base. This gathered many social media users around common values, counteracting the free-for-all negative, unique posts” (Dalton-Hoffman 2). Obama’s campaign, by using a centralised and often apolitical message, was able to maintain an effective public relations strategy. Conversely, the Romney campaign undervalued the possibilities presented by information technology and

allowed themselves to be overwhelmed on the internet by supposedly grassroots movements:

“For the Republicans, with an uncertain central policy position, the result was decentralization of power. Social media magnified a wide range of views from ‘right wing’ affiliates. This removed power and unity from Romney’s message” (Dalton-Hoffman 2). The assertion of the internet discourse, resulting in the breakdown of central authority, will become a distinct feature of the net as it expanded its reach and influence. To engage online, you need to follow the rules of the web.

The microtargeting used by the Obama campaign is relatively rudimentary compared to what was seen in 2016, with microtargeting campaign ads being reduced to an exact science. The story of Cambridge Analytica captured headlines in late 2016 and early 2017 captivated headlines through its use of data techniques to swing elections. By using automated programs to autonomously control the exposure of individuals in order to influence them towards certain viewpoints, Cambridge Analytica was able to have a profound impact on the outcome of the election.^{2,3}

Whereas the Obama campaign used microtargeting from a perspective of power motivated by an older idea of simply generating exposure, Cambridge Analytica made the misdirection appear to come from the system itself. It engineered the exposure and circulation of discourse to autonomously misdirect potential voters from more ‘legitimate’ issues in favour of fabrications and simulated perspectives – bots, fake news, and other techniques overrode the

Another key difference between the 2012 election and the subsequent events was the increased potential for radicalisation in later years. Given time to develop and reach broader audiences, online conspiracy theories and extremist politics have gained traction and become increasingly mainstream. Anti-vaccination movements, flat earthers and conspiracy theorists flourish online by building and maintaining strong communities of dedicated followers. The members of these

² Philip N. Howard, Samuel Woolley & Ryan Calo (2018)

³ Berghal 2018

communities find a kind of meaning in their ideology and group consensus, regardless of its relative veracity or support by scientific or political consensus outside of the chatroom bubble.

In many ways the events of 2016 were the Baudrillardian nightmare come to fruition. Simulated discussions eclipsed the real and became more important and valuable than what was once previously 'authentic.' The transition to a space of hyperreality characterised the new kind of politics, made possible by online echo chambers operating an autonomous level. This politics is characterised by selected facts, group association, and a heavy online presence. Whereas Obama used micro-targeting to reinforce a political message, what is made new in the 2016 discourse is that the political messages were reinforced by the online discourse. A notable example of this phenomenon was the first Republican debate in 2015, where the questions presented to candidates were taken from Facebook and presented to the candidates.⁴ The simulated discourse and hyperreal ideology supplanted the establishment Republicans, who failed to recognise the changed nature of how their party members selected a candidate. Donald Trump was far more successful at maintaining an online following and promoting a message that resonated within online discussion groups. In these groups, messages, trends and discussions were shared between people on social media, with little regard for their veracity or factuality in the outside world.

One of the most talked about phenomena of the 2016 was the circulation of fake news, and its influences on the election of Donald Trump and Brexit are hotly debated. However, there is a broad consensus that these events are fuelled in part by information (and misinformation) spread online.⁵ Conspiracy narratives such as pizzagate, Qanon, and similar kinds of rumours might emerge organically, but are closely affiliated with political movements that have been labelled as

⁴ <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/12/16/rush-transcript-second-debate-cnn-facebook-republican-presidential-debate/>

⁵ Howard, Wooley, & Calo 2018

‘post-truth.’ Leaving the anglosphere, there is an increasing trend towards similar kinds of politics in other nations. As access to the internet becomes more available to increasing numbers of people, so does the reach of autonomous misdirection. Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro has been identified as a product of Brazilian online discourse, and the 2017 ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Myanmar was partly fuelled by baseless rumours that circulated online⁶. Both these cases show how the radicalisation of the population and the migration of hyperreal discourse to ‘real’ politics is developing into a global phenomenon.

At the time of this writing, there is a trend towards an increased bifurcation of the political sphere. The internet is trending towards increased message control, with journalists relying on paywalls to sustain their livings.^{7,8} This has the consequence of sealing off ‘real’ news and information from much of the population, while fake news and echo chambers thrive in an accessible environment. Like the automobile travelling on an established network of highways, the internet user follows a mostly predetermined path, and one that directs the viewer to a location established by the highways. If the internet is truly the information superhighway, then it is just as restrictive as the American interstate in its informational journeys.

One aspect of the internet that has become a source of increasing consternation has been the increasing reliance on automated social media accounts, known as bots, to disseminate propaganda. Bots are, at first glance, functionally indistinguishable from a normal human user, but are in reality an automated program meant to behave and interact with the social media

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

⁷ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-facebook-elections>

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/11/the-big-unanswered-questions-about-paywalls/547091/>

ecosystem in much the same way humans do. Bots can be an essential tool to automate the dissemination of propaganda or misdirection more generally, but do not need to be propagandistic in their origins.

Unlike propaganda newspapers of sophistic rhetoric, the use of bots needs not be in service to any particular point of view, though this is often the case. Autonomously self-circulating programs are not new features of internet life, with computer viruses, spam email, and similar kinds of programs being well established since the early days of the net. What is distinct about bots is their deliberate attempt at impersonating a real person. In 2017, it was found that over half of Donald Trump's twitter followers consisted of fake accounts,⁹ implying that there is a propagandistic nature to the artificial humans that follow him. Whether this is still the case is unknown, at the time of this writing, with conflicting evidence since twitter has made a concerted effort to reduce the number of false accounts on the platform.^{10,11,12} Regardless, the emergence of this phenomenon is telling. Trump's various diktats on the platform are a simulated discourse for a simulated audience, reproducing misdirection in a space designed to amplify it autonomously.

But their function and operation are not dissimilar to more 'legitimate' automatic tools meant to guide and control discussions on these forums. Online forums commonly use screening tools to filter out terms that are racist, conspiratorial or otherwise objectionable. This effort in service of the system itself is emblematic of the transition to the simulation. What matters most in this

⁹ <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-twitter-followers-fake-617873>

¹⁰ <https://sparktoro.com/blog/we-analyzed-every-twitter-account-following-donald-trump-61-are-bots-spam-inactive-or-propaganda/>

¹¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-twitter-followers-fake-617873>

¹² <https://www.twitteraudit.com/realdonaldtrump>

context is not that one is real, or that one might be famous enough to have several million twitter followers, but that these behaviours are meaningful within the controlled space of the sealed online ecosystem.

Alice Marwick's 2013 book *Status Update* is an examination of internet culture and societies as they grow and develop on terms unrelated to the external happenings of the world. Marwick identifies much of the structure and values of the internet as being descended from California's distinct culture of celebrity and social capital. Silicon Valley, being based in California's Bay Area, has imprinted much of its cultural values into the structure of the internet and information technology more generally. Key among these is for Marwick is celebrity culture, which is given new life online. Whereas the old notion of celebrity is intrinsically tied to power, wealth, and influence via television or the cinema, this new kind of celebrity is given a new lease on life because of social media. Marwick names these individuals as 'micro-celebrities,' given their small but effective reach.

In her book, Marwick interviewed many aspiring micro-celebrities, and found that the motivation for becoming a microcelebrity was, in theory, the same as becoming a traditional celebrity: "for her, becoming a micro-celebrity was a means to an end: a way to achieve traditional celebrity (and, presumably, wealth)" (Marwick 160). The traditional celebrity status has been co-opted into the hyperreality of the internet, and though many of these new micro-celebrities found success within the boundaries of social media, there remained a gap between what succeeded online and what brought material success: "many of my informants found that their notoriety did not translate into more money; there was no equivalence between micro-status and income" (Marwick 160). Internet celebrity status finds itself only meaningful within the confines of the

internet, but paradoxically seems to be an increasingly demanding requirement for professions outside the internet.

Marwick writes that “the cultural logic of celebrity has infiltrated so many occupations that blatant self-promotion is now stock in trade not only for up-and-coming rap stars and actresses, but also for software developers, journalists, and academics” (Marwick 160-161). This seemingly contradictory characteristic of internet celebrity, being both simultaneously essential yet useless, is only truly contradictory when viewed from the paradigm of the ‘real world.’ The rules of the internet create a distinct set of demands and expectations that are unique to it. Since “the primary motivation for pursuing micro-celebrity seems to be attention and status” (Marwick 162), the particular kind of attention and status is valuable online in a way that would be senseless offline. This drive for attention, characteristic of ‘Web 2.0’ is allowed to flourish in the closed ecosystem of online discourse. As more of our politics and economic activity moves online, so too will these traditionally ‘real’ areas be bound to the rules of micro-celebrity and influencers, divorced from any ‘real-world’ pressures. The hyperreality of the internet becomes the primary motivation.

These cybercelebrities are motivated not by any traditional conception of fame, which is associated with power, wealth, and influence in the classical model. A classic Hollywood movie star could expect to leverage their fame in film into real world benefits. This new class of cyber celebrities is detached from any of these motivations in favour of becoming famous within the bounds of the internet and its values, with little hope of any tangible reward in the traditional sense. The modern phenomena of the ‘influencer,’ or an individual with an established social media presence but with little tangible authority, can be in many ways seen as an extension of the micro-celebrity phenomenon. Since Marwick’s 2013 publication, these influencers and microcelebrities have only grown more numerous with the increasing reach of the internet.

The cyber celebrities, hyper-leaders, and the massed online presence of influences collectively come to represent a misdirection that has become detached and 'free floating,' independent from their points of origin. What matters is the status of celebrity itself, formerly a technique for material wealth, now works in favour of servicing the needs of the autonomously self-regulating world of online discussion.

Outside the internet, many of the 'old rules' still apply. Print culture behaves much the same way it always did, and cable television has not much changed since the early 2000s. But these media are slowly being subsumed into the broader totalising force that the internet has become. As much of our daily lives slowly migrate online, there is an increasing pressure to conform to these rules that make the knowledge-objects of internet discussion meaningful. While the autonomous misdirection of online discourse seems to have created a crisis in politics outside the internet, online there is no crisis. Techniques of misdirection, long used in rhetoric, politics, bullshit and propaganda, are part of the 'authentic' mode of existing within the world of the internet. This misdirection, amplified and made possible by algorithmic connections that gather similar discourses together while isolating dissenting views, create powerful echo chambers that distract the audience from alternatives in favour of communities whose values need not be supported by any kind of external justification.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Autonomous misdirection, as a concept explored in this thesis, is ultimately a historical technique of persuasion that has become unmoored from its roots and has taken on an independent existence. What was once a conscious technique has become an unconscious way of experiencing and being in the digital world. Cambridge Analytica's microtargeting campaign did not use the internet in a radically new way. What made it powerful is that it used tools and means that already existed within social media (and the internet more generally) to achieve political ends. By using algorithmic targeting in an algorithmic world, it presented a reality to its users in a space where the simulated reality is functionally indistinguishable from alternative sources. Its own techniques of misdirection and propaganda fit neatly into a simulated discourse.

While the overview presented in this thesis of autonomous misdirection is an attempt to describe its origins and development over the course of the 2010s, the rate of change will only continue to accelerate. Since the events of 2016, there has been an increased awareness of the power of the internet to misdirect and shape conversations in ways that are increasingly disconnected from the "outside world." Measures appear to be taken – albeit slowly and cautiously – by established institutions to counter the influence of autonomous misdirection. For example, social media companies have attempted to flag bots, fake news, and government funded news outlets in an attempt to identify them as the threats they are to a pre-digital intellectual order. However, the closed amphitheatre of modern discourse, the sophistry of the micro celebrity's bullshit will prove difficult to overcome.

Meanwhile, there are others who have attempted to co-opt misdirection for their own ends. At the time of this writing, Donald Trump appears to have survived Special Counsel Mueller's investigation into possible Russian collusion but is being pressured by an emerging set of improprieties involving Ukraine. Unlike the previous controversy, the new one appears to be a greater threat since the prosecution is refusing to allow Trump's misdirection to control the narrative using what appear to be emerging techniques of message control. As Baudrillard observed of Watergate, the system appears to be asserting itself to eliminate its enemies.

What will develop in the future is not within the scope of this thesis, though the pressure to make such a claim is Baudrillardian in and of itself. The internet, in collapsing the distinctions between real and unreal, also consumes the distinctions of time. An online profile creates a self that is simultaneously past and present, a new persona that is timeless and without time. The temporality of the spoken word and the permanence of the written word are fused more perfectly than cinema and television could ever have hoped to achieve. Misdirection forces us into an epistemic reality where all times are the present, and the thinking self - led by the screen - is a perpetual multitasker, pulled by the simulation into all directions at once. The upending of focus is the source of vertigo that characterises the modern condition.

Though autonomous misdirection might be the mode of existence characteristic of our interconnected world, it is hoped that the philosophers through their use of the printed word, can see through the misdirection of digital sophistry as it emerges. As Plato had hoped for his own students, perhaps we can take ourselves out of the digital cave we have crafted ourselves to attempt to view the simulation from a fixed position. The shadows projected onto the wall may appear to be as persuasive as online fakery, but the possibility remains that we may grasp the real if the simulation can be revealed for the system of misdirection it truly is.

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