The Eternal Questions: 'who am I and what do I want?' or 'what I am doing and why I am doing it?'

"The most dangerous thing is illusion."
Ralph Waldo Emerson

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[1] Salvador Dali's Skull painting'

This dissertation is presented in the format of a dossier. I have decided to display the work in this way as a method of showing that whilst the theories do interest me, and exploring them in the contexts I have chosen stimulates me, I want it to be clear that I am not entirely humourless about the ramifications of the theory of hyperreality, and am fully cognizant of its short comings. At the same time, by producing the dissertation in an alternate format I am also playing with the underlying idea of hyperreality, in that all is not always as it appears to be, at first glance. In order to reflect the feeling of a dossier, and as my own cultural homage, I have used language for the chapters/section headings that reflects dialogue from the film 'The Day of the Jackal', hence the chapter sub-headings. As such I have broken the dissertation into the following sections/chapters: *The Eternal Questions* - "Who, What, Where?" is the phrase that the Jackal writes when planning his attack on De Gaul, and in reflection of that I am using a variant of the basis of the Zen Koan, "Who are you and what do you want?" This is a phrase that, when broken into its constituent parts is repeatedly asked of the Zen practitioner in an attempt to get to the heart of how they qualify their sense of self and identity, the essence of how we define ourselves and our reality in other words. In Section Two, titled *The Weapon of Choice*, I will explain the theory of hyperreality and the choice of heading is to reflect how, as the *modus operandi* by which I will analyze various people/aspects of the media, I have chosen to echo the idea that it is the tool as weapon. A weapon is a tool whose purpose is to increase the efficiency and efficacy of hunting. In this sense I am using the theory of hyperreality as a weapon in terms of its analytical power to seek and elucidated an otherwise elusive, unseen aspect of contemporary artistic practice. It is a 'weapon' that is used to attack the otherwise obfuscating language surrounding various artists practice, in order to reveal an alternate version of what their art is expressing and/or attempting to deal with in the wider sociological context. This is also a reference to the Fatboy Slim song of that name (itself a tongue-in-check affair), in which the initial 'reality' of the video is subsequently distorted and undermined, but portrayed as 'real' as any 'mundane reality'.

The third section, in which I will deal with the various case studies I have chosen, is titled *The Hit List* as a direct reflection of the dissertation as dossier, and the dossier information as something around which a *coup d'état* might be staged. This is my way of debunking the idea that such a theory could, in the short space I have available, really challenge the way we think about the world and about art in any significant way. – i.e: staging a *coup* in the art-critic world.

Termination, the heading of the concluding section, is a play on the conclusion as the end of something, as well as the conclusion as deduction, and of course as a reference to the Jackal's job of 'terminating' De Gaul. I have chosen to call the bibliography *Sources*, as a reference to the idea of a dossier as a covertly complied document, thereby carrying the dossier theme through the whole of the dissertation.
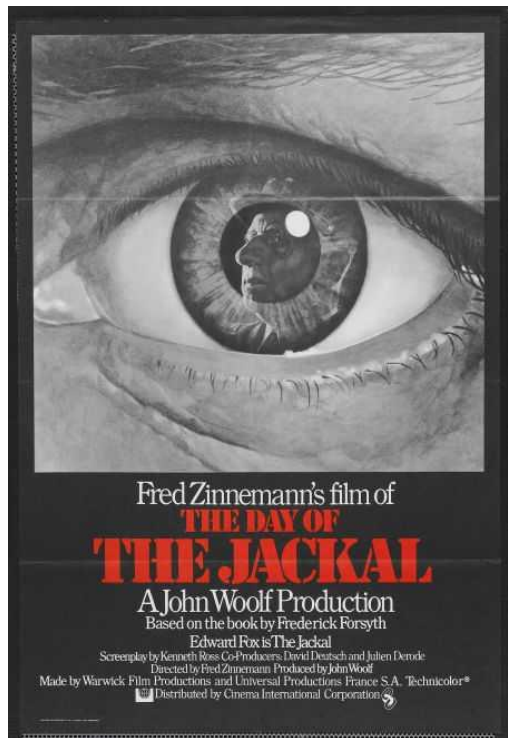
I am interested in the subjective perception of, and mutable definition of what we, both collectively and individually, term 'reality'. We predominantly define our reality in visual terms, accepting at face value visual stimuli as empirically unimpeachable. Such is the strength of our conviction within our ocular senses that they can even override our more 'material' based senses such as taste, touch and odour[3]. Our world view in the developed countries of the West is defined less and less by the written word, and increasingly with the gimmicky visuals that 10 years ago were seen as mocking and inflated; we increasingly communicate not at face-to-face, but via electronic mediators. All this can be seen as an accumulating disassociation from our surroundings. The popularity of light entertainment 'reality' programs is undimmed; at least one would presume so from glancing at the TV schedules and concomitant reportage. Increasingly reality is defined digitally, not directly, subsumed beneath the veil of simulation. Since what we see is no longer real, indeed 'real-time' reporting purposefully includes a minimum 3 second delay (on occasion this delay is raised to 3 minutes), even time has become subjected to media relativity. The question of the existence of any extant reality to which we can refer becomes increasingly questionable under such circumstances.

> Commodities, media, and technologies provide a universe of illusion and fantasy in which individuals are overpowered by consumer values, media ideologies and role models, and seductive technologies... the thematic of the 'end of the individual' [has reached] its fruition in the total defeat of human subjectivity by the object world. (Douglas Kellner)

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[2] *Day of the Jackal* movie poster
[3] See *The Handbook of Multisensory Processes,* ed. G Clavert, C Spence, B E Stein, MIT 2004
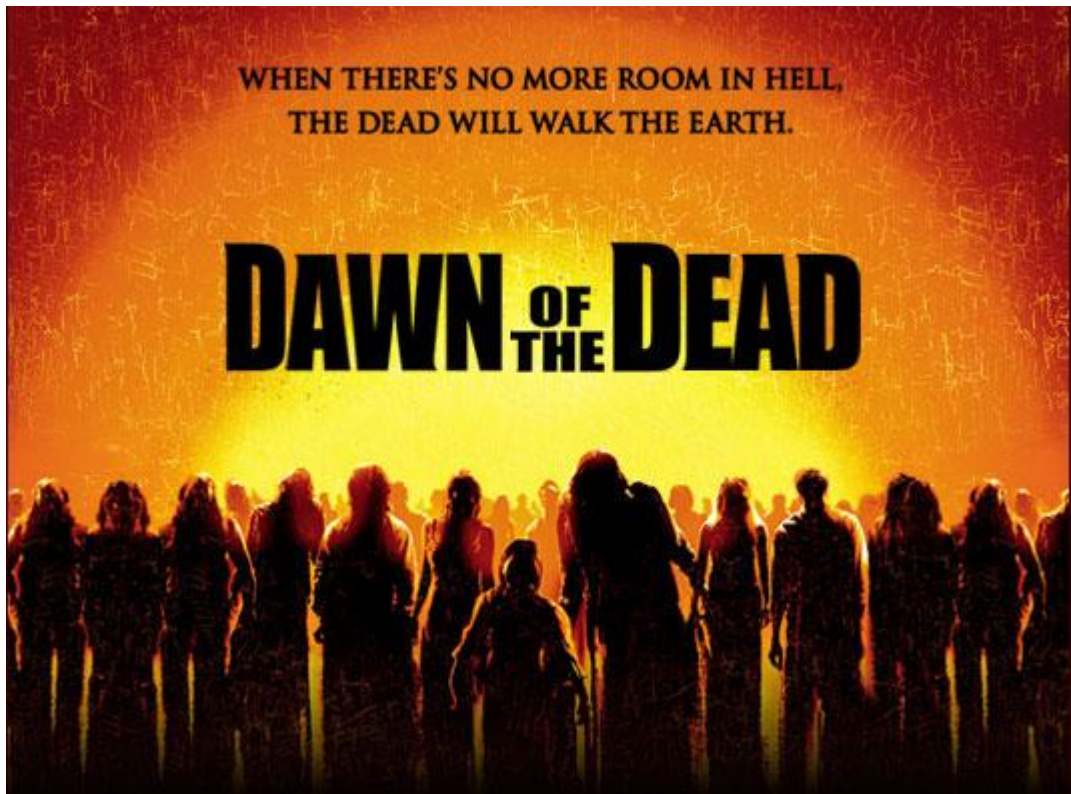
One of the most well known of the more 'fringe' writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, concerned with, among other things, the unfolding nature and power of the media, was the critical thinker and erstwhile sociologist, semiologist, and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007). His theory of *hyperreality*, itself a variant of a theory first postulated by Marcuse, is key to understanding his thinking regarding the postmodern non-phenomenological understanding of objects. Baudrillard's theory does not at first appear to deal with any phenomenological exploration of objects. Indeed the preponderance of his writing is concerned with the non-phenomenology of culture as reality, and vice versa[5]. I propose for the purposes of this dissertation, to undertake a limited study of those issues, as raised above in the initial paragraph, issues which occupy and drive forward my studio work, as a source of both indirect and direct inspiration, and as reference points placed within my own work, for others to discover should they so choose. I will use several artists and their work as prospective subjects to put in the cross-hairs of hyperreality, to both analyze their work and the concept of hyperreality. The artists I have chosen are: Martin Creed, Marc McGowan, and Lady Gaga/the Gaga Collective. On this journey, I will set out to first elucidate what Baudrillard termed as hyperreality, and then, through the medium of several case studies, explore various aspects of hyperreality and how it can be seen to manifest within our culture. I will then in conclusion explore how the various case studies show how the theory of hyperreality can be used to explore contemporary art, and the questions that both hyperreality and art concerned with hyperreality, consciously or unconsciously, raise.

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[4] Original poster for George A Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)
[5] He does move towards dealing with phenomenological existence in terms of questioning the source of referent reality in works such as *Impossible Exchange* (2001).

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[6] Poster for the Fritz Lang film *M*

The Weapon of Choice: Hyperreality

"The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance."
Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation

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[7] Still from *Weapon of Choice* by Fatboy Slim (1993)

What then is hyperreality, as Baudrillard understood it? Baudrillard was one of the first to use the principles of semiology outwith its normal fields[8], and as a tool for sociological study[9]. Throughout the late 1960s he increasingly distanced himself from his earlier Marxian economic influences, arguing that such theories failed to deal with the increasingly consumer orientated and related world of the developed West. He rejected the more Marxian semiological interpretations of sign value as merely economic (value-exchange orientated), and instead moved, by the early 1970s to a system of analysis that saw:

> the entire society [as] organised around consumption and [the] display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing. In this system, the more prestigious one's commodities... the higher one's standing in the realm of sign value. Thus...sign values take on meaning according to their place in a differential system of prestige and status.[10] [11]

[12]

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[8] In order to define and thereby understand hyperreality we must first trace its roots in semiology. What then is semiology? "Semiology is the science which studies ... non-linguistic sign systems..." *(*Pierre Guiraud) Baudrillard encountered semiology in the 1960s, under the direction and influence of both Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes. During this period and in the early half of the 1970s he published three seminal works: *The System of Objects (1968), The Consumer Society (1970),* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972)*. This collection covered the behaviour of objects within consumer society, and the boundary between semiotics and political economics, and was greatly inspired by Barthes.

[9] Douglas Kellner

[10] Douglas Kellner

[11] It is easy to see the influence of Guy Debord's theories regarding spectacle at play here, in the initial analysis of Western society and its relationship with spectacle. For Debord there has been a move away from sign-value towards prestige-value, and whilst Debord's interpretation is more clearly sinister and concrete, with the mass media constantly serving as a weapon to engender isolation, and act as a tautological entity that subjugates individuality and expression to maintain its power. It's mode of subjugation is overt speculation engendering uncertainty. This uncertainty is then masked by the illusion of unity that mass consumption of spectacle creates. "The Spectacle is the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life." (Debord, p 10-16)

[12] Judging panel of X Factor, 2010

Whilst at first this may seem counter-intuitive, since conspicuous consumption and prestige have gone together most obviously since the rise of the mercantile classes of the Late Medieval and Early Renaissance periods, this kudos was directly related to the cost of production of the material flaunted – for example black clothing and amber jewellery where seen as a mark of worth directly as a result of the cost of production – in the case of the dyed black cloth it was the cost of the dying process, in the case of the amber jewellery it was the rarity of the mineral itself. Conversely Baudrillard is arguing that, since the 1920s there has been an increasing move away from sign-value being directly related to economic-value, and that now the two are not mutually inclusive. In a consumer society the product with the most 'worth' is one that is cheap to produce, sells at a high value, and allows the consumer through its ownership to accrue greater prestige. During this period Baudrillard also began to reject the notion that consumption as a process was a passive process arising out of direct action, replacing it with a far more active notion in which the act of consumption is more direct and driven, it is not only a way of marking oneself out as an active and necessary part of the consumerist society, and this notion, though never fully explored by Baudrillard eventually gave rise to the first of his seminal works, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1973, trans. 1993).[13] It is in this work that he first formally puts forward his theory of hyperreality[14].

Using advertising and propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s as an example of a social control mechanism arising from more directed control mechanisms (e.g. the police), Baudrillard then posits that in the (post)modern era these socio-economic control schema have under gone a change, and that they are now no longer referential based on prior control mechanisms, but rather that they contain no referent at all. Previous systems have been based on the system of value-exchange, but since this is no longer applicable in the consumer world, the validity of the control schema is based not on any 'actual' prior schema, but instead on a system of inter-related self-referent schema.

These replacement referents arise out of the stimuli orientated towards datum-feedback loops – in effect 'I sense therefore I am therefore I sense.' In this system of exchange the medium therefore is sensation. As a result sensationalism explodes, as spectacle becomes the prime mover of information, rather than the monotonous, more 'traditional' modes of communication that are subsequently subsumed. This *grand spectacle* culminates in:

> ...the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium... Through reproduction from one medium to another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object which is no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denegation and its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.[15]

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[13] Douglas Kellner

[14] Jean Baudrillard, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant, 1993, p. 70-76.

[15] Ibid., p. 70-71

Baudrillard then goes on to layout his initial 'orders of simulation':[16]

1. Deconstruction of the real;
2. Reduction of the real;
3. Repetition of the real;
4. Paradigm reproduction of the real.

[17]

In the first order, deconstruction of the real, simulation is basic and fetishistic, with the object referring to constituent parts of what is real. Second order simulation takes this a step further, attempting to reproduce the real in all its constituent parts – in this sense the object lays claim to greater meaning than the prior order with its simplistic renditions. Tertiary simulation occurs through repetition – an object is repeated endlessly in reproduction, and with each repetition it seeks to move closer to its referent. In the last order of simulation that he lays out here (with the caveat that there may well be subsequent orders of simulation as yet unseen) the object is no longer replicated at all, but rather the simulation seeks to replicate the paradigm of the object – the smallest part of the referent that allows the object to function as that referent is replicated, rather than seeking a totality of replication.

This order, by the 1980s, had been refined much further, and was coherent by the time *Simulations* was published in 1983. *Simulations* is an amalgam of his writings on the *Procession of Simulacra* as it was found in the 1981 book *Simulation and Simulacra*, coupled with the section entitled *The Order of Simulacra* taken from *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

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[16] These would have been refined and redacted by the late 80's and early 90s.

[17] *The Day Today* and *BBC 6 O'clock News*

In this newer taxonomy the orders of simulation are replaced/expanded upon with orders of simulacrum:

> - it is the reflection of a basic reality
> - it masks and perverts a basic reality
> - it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
> - it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.
> In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance – the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an *evil* appearance – of the order of malefic. In the third, it *plays at being* an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.[18]

In summary, hyperreality is the sublimation of reality beneath the veil of simulation, to such an extent that reality 'becomes' the simulation – experientially nothing happens, in a valid sense, outside the simulation, and the simulation is its own teleological validator.

For Baudrillard this is in opposition to what he saw as a pre-modern and modern understanding of reality. In the pre-modern and modern world reality is understood through the lens of duality. In the postmodern world dualism is no longer possible.

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1983, p. 11

The Hit List: The Desert of the Real

"The unreal is more powerful than the real, because nothing is as perfect as you can imagine it. Because its only intangible ideas, concepts, beliefs, fantasies that last. Stone crumbles. Wood rots. People, well, they die. But things as fragile as a thought, a dream, a legend, they can go on and on."
Chuck Palahniuk

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[19] The Matrix (1999)

Martin Creed (1968 - present)

In his review of Creed's recent solo exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2010), the critic Alastair Smart wrote that Creed's work had previously been seen as,

even by the [Turner Prize's] own controversy-courting standards... contentious" with the old debate of 'Is it art?' spiralling "into an apocalyptic, 'Is it *the end of* art?'"[20]

At the time of the offending work (2001) the piece (*Work No. 227: The lights going on and off*) was hailed variously as "a statement against the clutter and consumerism in the world," to a more stark "unfit to be considered for the most celebrated prize in the art world."[21]

The Nihilistic tendencies of Creed's work where well established by then, with previous works including the now infamous *Work No. 126: A sheet of paper crumpled into a ball* (1995) and neon pieces such as *Work No. 203*, *Work No. 205*, and *Work No. 219* (all entitled *Everything is going to be alright*) (1999). At the time Creed claimed his work was all about the qualities of "nothing", and that

My work is about 50 per cent what I make of it and 50 per cent what people make of it. Meanings are made in people's heads. I can't control them.[22]

At the time Simon Wilson, then communications curator for the Tate was quoted, tellingly, as saying Creed "wants to make art where he is doing as little as possible that is consistent with doing something." In other words a paired-down *über-minimalism*, whose very baffling tendency's, of "introducing philosophical doubt and existential anxiety"[23] were its justification for being seen as "on the edge."[24]

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[20] journalists own italics, The Telegraph, 27th August 2010
[21] Nigel Reynolds, The Telegraph, 10 December 2010
[22] Ibid.
[23] Martin Gayford, Telegraph, 20th July 2010
[24] Nigel Reynolds, The Telegraph, 10 December 2010

However, this wilful challenge of preconceptions, and attempt to ingratiate with the art critic world through statements such as:

I think people can make of it [the art] what they like. I don't think it is for me to explain it. The thing for me is to try and make things, try and do things and show them to people – that's what I get excited about. I'd like to keep trying to do that,[26]

is in direct opposition to the idea that Creed's work is 'democratic' and 'for the people'. In the book, accompanying his exhibition, *Martin Creed*, published by the Birmingham based gallery Ikon in 2008, Creed is quoted has having responded that the place of art is "in people." This statement is then used, in a short essay, as the basis for Yuki Kamiya to argue that in rejecting the information overload of the contemporary era, he:

seems to demand and reflect in his works possibilities of access for all, found anywhere and within the grasp of anyone... he is trying to manifest a desire to say 'hello'.[27]

Whilst this marries exactly with him describing "his work as him "saying hello" to people, asking them to like him"[28], it is its very obtuseness that seems to in actuality

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[25] *Work No. 227: The Lights going on and off, 2000*
[26] Martin Creed quoted by BBC News, 10 December 2001
[27] *Martin Creed*, Ikon, 2008
[28] Miranda Sawyer, The Observer, 18 July 2010

engender a sense of alienation within the wider public – not necessarily to Creed or the work, but more to 'modern art' in general. It is this alienation which has led some to write latterly of his Turner prize winning piece:

> How insulting to JMW Turner that a prize bearing his name should be awarded to an artist whose own use of light was as banal as Turner's was inspired.[29]

What then of the art critic world? Martin Creed has continued to remain popular, and in large part, Smart argues, this is because the very 'meaninglessness' of his art offers a:

> "blank slate on to which endless interpretations can be written", with his style inviting "commentators to pontificate ad nauseam – something he encourages by denying his work has any overriding meaning and by making Barthesian utterances such as, 'Art only exists with people's reaction to it.'"[30]

What then of the work in the Fruitmarket's show? This consisted primarily of a 'retrospective' of Creed's work, with only one piece having been made specifically for the gallery: "on the Fruitmarket's central staircase, which Creed has turned into a synthesiser – each step you take upwards sounds the next note up on a musical scale."[31]

The other work consists of what Smart describes as Creed's 'ziggurat paintings', a variant of these in the form of a 'stack' of Lego pieces, and various objects stacked or arranged in order of size (cacti and chairs for example). The clear theme is one of progressive scales and incremental progression and repetition. The paintings are somewhat 'lo-fi' – not simply in terms of method of production (which is dictated by self-imposed rules[33]), but also in the very nature of the materials used. The canvases are cheap, the paint low-quality acrylic. The stacked chairs (a common feature of almost every art college degree show in one form or another) seemingly from a 60's bric-a-brac shop. The stack of plywood is materially cheap. All of these are conscious choices – Creed has two home's (one in London, one in an island off Sicily) and a studio/warehouse (also in London), and recently

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[29] Alastair Smart, Telegraph, 27 August 2010
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] *Work No. 956, 2008*
[33] Miranda Sawyer, The Observer, 18 July 2010

donated six works, including *Work No. 227* (now valued at £110,000) to the Artist Rooms collection – clearly Creed does not lack for generosity nor wealth. The materials chosen are all a part of the 'paring-down' of the art that Creed's work is so ostensibly concerned with.

How then does this relate to *hyperreality*? Much of Creed's work can be seen as repetition – even a casual browse through the recently published *Martin Creed: Works* by Thames & Hudson (2010) reveals a constant recurring of not just themes and motifs, but of pieces of work themselves. Take the infamous *Lights going on and off* – this is repeated, in various venues, at least three times, with each appearance classified as a new work (Work No. 127, Work No. 160, Work No. 227); or *An intrusion and a protrusion from a wall* (*Work No. 19, Work No. 21, Work No. 61, Work No. 84, Work No. 99, Work No. 106, Work No. 172, Work No. 177, Work No. 154, Work No. 282*, etc); or the delightful neon proclamations of *EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT* (*Work No. 203, Work No. 205, Work No. 219, Work No. 225, Work No. 226, etc.*).

Whilst the argument that each time a work appears in a different context it is by its nature changed, thereby becoming something other than it was previously, an artistic variant of Heraculates' saying *You can never step in the same river twice*, holds merit, if applied across the plethora of art fabrication it would lead to the logical conclusion that each time, for example, the Mona Lisa was displayed in a different gallery, during its grand tour of the world, it was in actuality a different piece of work, the idea begins to seem less viable. Indeed Creed seems to sense this, as his paintings are not repeated in terms of numbering, in the same manner as his more obviously sculptural pieces, thereby indicating an internal conflict between painting and more *intermedia* related works.

In *Simulations* Baudrillard offers us a variant on an old allegory. In the original a ruler commands a map to be made of his kingdom. So detailed is the map that it is the very size of the kingdom, and it remains until it eventually decomposes. For Baudrillard this is of the old order of simulation.[36] In his realm of the hyperreal the very kingdom itself is *replaced* by the map, with the real kingdom being left to rot whilst everyone interacts with the simulated kingdom, unknowing of the difference. In the philosophical sense the kingdom can be repeated ad infinitum, each facsimile a copy of the previous, its lack of reality or

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[34] *Work No. 203: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, 1999*
[35] *Work No. 219: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, 1999*
[36] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 1-2

meaning remaining hidden behind the "endless procession of simulacra" that provide the illusion of meaning. As Martin Creed says himself, his work has little or no meaning, being as it is "about nothing"; it is through the act of repetition that it accrues the illusion of meaning.

Mark McGowan (1974 – present)

A performance artist hailing from Peckham, McGowan is infamous for his satiric pieces, or 'happenings', from his key scratching car antics to his "re-enactments" of controversial events. In the contemporary scene there are few artists that seem to so divide opinion – there are those who, splenetically, see McGowan as merely a media hungry fool with poor tastes, to those that see his work as issue based protests.

In 2003 McGowan staged a piece, outside Camberwell College of Art, entitled *Rocket 2003*. In this piece he purported to be attempting to send an OAP into space, to highlight the way the elderly are treated by the young. In what was loosely termed a 'homemade rocket', but more accurately a poorly disguised shopping trolley, McGowan pushed the 'device' up an incline, launching it, albeit briefly, into the atmosphere as it nosed-dived, with its aged occupant, into a hexagonal landing area. The record of this piece exists solely, as all McGowan's pieces do, in the form of photographs and news footage. The two eccentric seeming old ladies were briefly interviewed ("Do you think you'll be able to handle the media attention?" an almost toneless McGowan drawls, as a news camera looms over his shoulder), and then, with minimum fanfare, unceremoniously pushed into the waiting landing pad. Both pensioners explain, earnestly, that this was a "life changing experience," clutching, in one case, a taxidermied terrier to her rumpled chest. The whole event has a vague air of ineptitude and unsettling vapidity.

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[37] *Rocket* 2003

In 2004, McGowan's next "extra ordinary event," he was filmed, at home, eating a fox, nominally to "raise awareness of crackheads" – here the buffoonish inappropriateness of the language and misplaced idealism, along with the circling cameras, heightens the spectacle.

In 2005, McGowan's piece at the House Gallery, *The Running Tap*, edged its way nearer his naff-media apotheosis. In her article *Running on empty* (7th July 2005), the Guardian reporter Helen Pidd summarises the piece as follows:

> "It's impressive when you think about just how much water is swishing down the drain. It's almost painful watching it. It's clever because I feel so guilty witnessing the waste ... And it's obvious why the stunt is irritating. A running tap? Art?" asserting that "McGowan's latest stunt ... has caused the kind of publicity he can only have dreamed of. It's a Shangri-La scenario for a man whose art doesn't really exist..." McGowan was eventually threatened with a court order, from Thames Water, ending the piece.

So much reportage of McGowan's work misses the point. In 2007, in a short interview for the Independent newspaper, with Sara Newman, McGowan clearly states that, "it's a bit of an act. I like the effects of some of what I do." Whilst he then goes on to obfuscate somewhat, this is the kernel of an important part of McGowan's thinking. That same year (2007), McGowan and the artist Richard Deacon, held a discussion in the Royal Academy of Arts, London, ostensibly revolving around the notion of public art. Since all of McGowan's art is in the public domain, via its media reportage, it is not unsurprising that he would state that he regularly thinks about what the public want, and he points out that "if you want to engage the public you have to get down to their level," and for McGowan this level **is** the media, or more specifically, televisual media. There is a symbiosis for McGowan, between the art world and the media, "Art is engaged in issues of meaning, the media engages with issues of meaning and the gallery space is not outside some aspects of the public sphere because if you are confronted by a work and it has meaning, there's some kind of exchange going on so you can call that public."

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[38] *Artist Eats Fox* 2004

What, then, is the meaning of McGowan's art? Is it just a scattershot collection of half-baked responses to topical issues within the media at a given point? I would argue that, contrary to appearances, no it is not. During the discussion McGowan talks briefly about his *Dead Soldier* (2006), and we can begin to see here, subtly what McGowan is actually interested in – the nature of the media and our relationship with and response to it.

McGowan informs us that, contrary to the seeming reality; he was not there, lying down in a Birmingham street, all the time, dawn till dusk. In actuality, he showed up briefly for a press shoot at 10am, and when there was little response, he stirred the media by claiming the police had tried to stop him. Lo and behold, the press junket swung into action, the publicity was ratcheted up, and, somewhat ironically, when McGowan returned the next day, the police really did move him on. The "extra ordinary event" was false, pre-generated even, existing only in the few moments of air time. He goes on to point out that he had previously enacted a similarly themed piece – this time claiming to have keyed (scratched) some cars in London (ostensibly to raise awareness of a car-keying pandemic): "I never scratched any cars though, I just said I did and they [the press] took the photographs of scratched cars." As Deacon goes on to state, by "shifting stuff into the media ... then whether or not they're real or not becomes irrelevant."

Here we are beginning to get to the real heart of McGowan's thinking, and meaning, behind his seemingly vaguely infantile and misplaced 'happenings.'

"As long as it can just exist in words [this is the crux] ... like Marion Faber said in the introduction to Nietzsche' *Human all to Human* (1989) – the real is of no significance to man whatsoever, we live in a state of continual and perpetual fantasy. So if you tell anyone anything they believe it stronger than if they see it, they conjure an

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[39] *Dead Soldier* 2006

image or they start to think about it. I've found there's so much power in the narrative ... And I think that's a really strong part of my work ... you can say things, you can even have them recorded on television ..."

and it is in this way that McGowan is, in actuality, operating. He is using the media to construct false narratives, using misplaced and foolish intentions as smoke and mirrors, to highlight the actual lack of reality that the media narrative contains. In our modern era reality is defined by the media, it is our source of social information dispersal – not human contact or interaction on a personal, physical level.

Indeed, Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, argued that we must never cease to question what we are presented with as the truth, as fact. McGowan's work in this context can be seen to challenge us in asking: how real are any of the events we are presented with, how much ethical and moral depth does a five minute sound-bite on a forty minute, once a night program, really contain? Indeed McGowan has staged events that are completely fake, mumming and highlighting the awkward presentation of them as real with both his *Big toe pulls bus* (2004) and more recently, his dual ape of radio interviews and TV news articles about minor celebrities, in his 're-enactment' of the breakdown of Susan Boyle, in *Mark McGowan as Mad Susan Boyle* (2009). Indeed, since Susan Boyle is, as far as one can tell, not mad, the existence of a 'Mad Susan Boyle' exists only within the media realm and for the purposes of propagating the consumption of media. Couple this with the never staged (in its entirety) *Mark McGowan as Mad Susan Boyle*, a piece that is a parody or *simulation* of the non-existent Mad Susan Boyle, the fact that McGowan even created a cardboard simulacra of Boyle (using a blown-up photograph attached to a piece of card) and simply aped what was purported to have happened, the piece can be seen as a deliberate and conscious, if possibly unintentional, expression of Baudrillard's *hyperreality* as self-referent spectacle, devoid of any verifiable external reality.

The Gaga Collective (2008 – present)

In 2008, the emerging Lady Gaga was described as the music industry's "most interesting proposition" by the Sunday Times columnist Hattie Collins. Since then the Gaga praising media bandwagon has waxed and waned, with criticism of her 'act' reaching its apogee in the vitriolic article by the American cultural commentator Camille Paglia in 2010, who described Gaga as "entombed in her own deadly cult of self." For Collins, the perplexing, camply brash, bright and eccentric Lady Gaga[40] was seen as the future of pop music, and that:

in combining music, fashion, art, and technology, Lady Gaga evokes Madonna when she was good, Gwen Stefani circa Hollaback Girl, Kylie 2001 or Grace Jones right now.

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[40] Hattie Collins, 2008

Indeed it is easy to see how much of Gaga's image is based on Grace Jones portrayal of an energised confrontational feminism is visually linked to Gaga's own image.
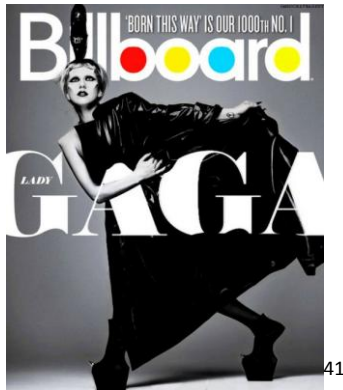
It is this appropriation of constructed personalities and appearances that is a constant theme with Lady Gaga and the supporting members of her Haus of Gaga. Paglia, in her article points out that "Lady Gaga is a manufactured personality, and a recent one at that", and it is this multi-faceted construct which is presented as a fully constructed, realised and *real* entity to not just her fans, but the world at large:

Every public appearance... has been lavishly scripted in advance with a flamboyant outfit and bizarre hairdo assembled by an invisible company of elves.

Whilst initially the choice of stage name was seen to be based on the title of Queen's song *Radio Ga Ga*, it is far more closely linked to the artistic movement of Dada – indeed one member of the Haus of Gaga is nicknamed "Dada." Lady Gaga also employs the 'artist as art' formula pioneered by the Dada movement, and taken forward in a purely artistic context by Gilbert and George:

"My art is my whole life", she [Lady Gaga] says of her "digital age" multimedia approach to artistry. As well as touring with huge moveable screens that display myriad images, Gaga uploads self-made documentaries to MySpace: "I've taken something decidedly commercial and made it interesting."

Whilst Collins touts this as a mark of Lady Gaga's newness, much as the artist herself does, this is in no way a recent occurrence. The band U2, back when they released *Achtung Baby* in 1991, revitalised a flagging music touring scene with their bombastic, operatic concert performances, utilising a multitude of kaleidoscopic images and phrases as the visual backdrop and subversive commentary to their music, that was itself about the rise and power of media culture icons.

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[41] Lady Gaga
[42] Grace Jones

Indeed, the band even employed an almost guerrilla art tactic within their performances with their ringing up of world leaders live on stage, to have the crowd roar down the phone at them, an act surely in its anarchic heart inspired by the confrontationally subversive Dadaists.

This brings into stark contrast Collins assertion of Lady Gaga as

"Defy[ing] all of the preconceptions we have of pop artists," says the [then] 22-year-old with a penchant for Chanel, Gareth Pugh and Marni. "I'm really into fashion – I channel Versace in everything I do. Donatella is my muse in so many ways; she's iconic and powerful, yet people throw darts at her. She's definitely provocative, and I channel that more so than anything else."

It is this channeling of provocative icons that Paglia, in her article, analyses and pulls apart:

There is a monumental disconnect between Gaga's melodramatic self-portrayal as a lonely rebellious, marginalised artist and the powerful corporate apparatus... that bankrolled her makeover and has steamrollered her songs into heavy rotation on radio stations everywhere.

For Paglia, the icons that Gaga is calling upon for her image are more myriad than the younger Collins suggests, and are not just confined to the realm of empowered pop divas – she names Cher, Jane Fonda in her role as Barbarella, Pink, Isabella Blow and Daphne Guiness; as well as David Bowie circa Ziggy Stardust and the early Elton John.[44] She even traces the roots of these figures back to the 1930s, in the form of Marlene Dietrich. For Paglia the gestalt persona of Lady Gaga is a brutalised amalgam of these icons of media Modernism. Where Dietrich a constructed a pansexual persona for the screen, Gaga remains asexual; Madonna's valiant life force is replaced with mutilation and death.[45]

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[43] U2 ZOO TV concert
[44] Camille Paglia, 2010
[45] Camille Paglia, 2010

However, whilst it is this seeming "trafficking in twisted sexual scenarios" that irks Paglia, it is the misappropriation that so offends.

> Bowie... in the 1970s... was the brilliant heir of Dada and surrealism. And in his daring gender-bending he was a warrior for sexual liberation and for a redefining of the psychic fluidity of sexual orientation.

It is the glorification that Paglia feels is missing from the Gaga persona, rather it is more of a solipsistic *gore-ification* that taints the very origins it is attempting to reference and ape. In the Gaga-persona's attempts at re-appropriation of kudos from icons of previous eras they seem to lack the humanity that the originals contained. Dietrich, Madonna, Cher, Bowie *et al* retained and glorified in their humanity directly as a result of being able to rail against something – in the Post-Modern era that Gaga, in the Baudrillardian sense, belongs to there is, as Paglia points out, little to rebel against, and as a result "without taboos, there can be no transgression."

However, Paglia, in concluding her article, raises what she sees as the true basis for this impoverished copying:

> Generation Gaga... communicate[s] mutely via a constant stream of atomised, telegraphic text messages... are marooned in a global technocracy of fancy gadgets... [and] have been raised in a relativistic cultural vacuum where chronology and sequence as well as distinctions of value have been lost or jettisoned.

Whilst Paglia, in her context, uses this as part of her on-going critique of the Gaga Collective, she misses the point entirely in that it is precisely this generation that Gaga is exemplifying. Gaga and the Haus of Gaga[46] can be seen as what Baudrillard referred to as a fourth order simulacra, and as such express what he saw as alternately the zenith and nadir of post-modern culture. The Gaga persona is not copying an original when it mimics Madonna or Grace Jones, she is not even copying a facsimile of the ground-breaking feminist figures such as Marlene Dietrich. Rather she is attempting to copy the *paradigm* that figures such as Madonna and Grace Jones represent to the post-modern world. In this sense she can be seen as, out of the three figures I have chosen, to be the 'best' expression of hyperreality.

> To paraphrase Baudrillard, Gaga
>
> ...bears no relation to any reality whatever: [she] is her own pure simulacrum.
> ... no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.[47]

It is this paradigm simulation or a constructed persona and all its attendant technology and advertising that allows not only Gaga to proclaim with youthful bravura that "nobody can copy me, because I can't be copied,"[48] whilst at the same time being nothing more than a

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[46] Ostensibly modelled on Warhol's Factory, but in actuality an inversion of the Factory. Where Warhol remained in the shadows (relatively speaking) he thrust members of his factory to the fore. The Haus of Gaga on the other hand thrust the Gaga persona to the fore and remains in the relative shadows itself.
[47] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1983, p. 11
[48] Hattie Collins, The Sunday Times, December 14, 2008

copy, or simulation, herself, with her fans and the media culpable in the propagation of the illusion that there is no difference between the persona and the person, public and private.

Termination

"Until we have a better relationship between private performance and the public truth... we as the public are absolutely right to remain suspicious, contemptuous even, of the secrecy and the misinformation which is the digest of our news."
John Le Carre
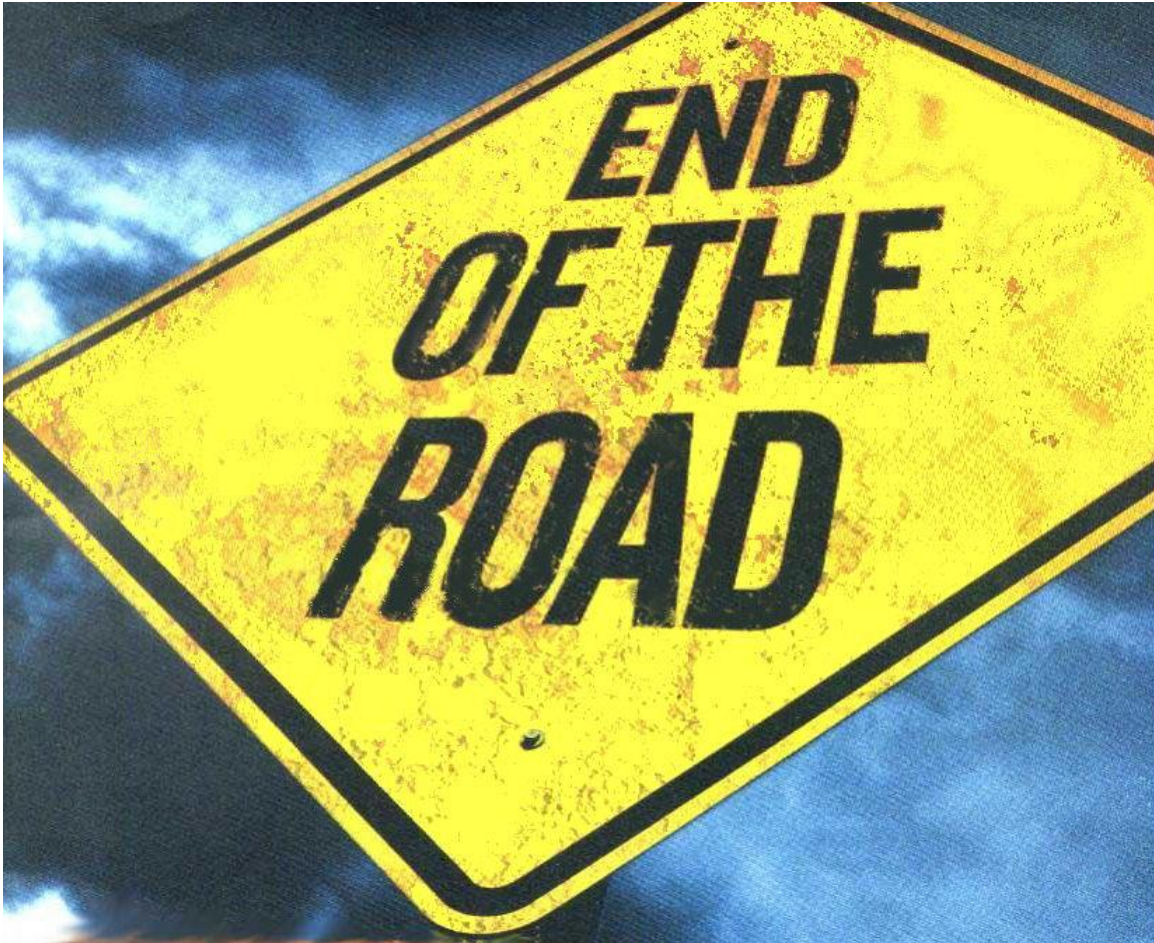

Image from "Smiley's People."

Martin Creed, Mark McGowan and The Gaga Collective are by no means the only artist, individuals or collectives that can be seen as expressing, in one format or another, aspects of hyperreality, either consciously or unconsciously. Where Martin Creed can be seen as signifying hyperreality's reliance on scales of production (ie the best post-modern era product is cheap to produce, sells high) and any lack, consciously, of inherent meaning, they also increasingly, with the rise in the artist's success become indicators of the move away from economic-value towards prestige-value in the artistic sense. For Mark McGowan, engagement with the concept of hyperreality is through his construction of false narratives, in which he consciously attacks the post-modern (as Baudrillard saw it) move towards pure sensationalism, sensationalism in the sense that Debord refers to it, and attacks the media apparatus that perpetuate the fantasy of sensation. In the case of the Haus of Gaga, the Lady Gaga persona is almost a hyperreal apotheosis, culminating in its own pure simulacra, and very much part of what Debord saw as the illusion of unity through the mass consumption of spectacle.

There are others who have engaged more consciously with this latter aspect. For example the recent films *Exit through the gift shop* by Banksy in which a false narrative and character are laid down upon a real narrative and characters in order to create a critic of the mechanisms surrounding the sale and hype of art and artists; or Casey Affleck's *I'm Still Here* in which we see the docum-drama distorted to parody as we watch the alleged disintegration of Joaquin Phoenix. More obvious is the work of the loose collection of artist that have placed themselves under the banner of *hyperrealists*, who through the use of photorealist painting create completely false and impossible images that are initially completely real in appearance.

In terms of the media, the activity of hyperreality can be seen to manifest in everything from the 6 O'clock News to the X Factor. For example, compare the satiric nature of Chris Morris' programs The Day Today, Brasseye and Jam. The bombastic elongated introduction of The Day Today and its self important news anchor was a parody in 1994 when it came out – but by 2010 the BBC News channel had adopted an eerily similar intro-sequence for its flagship 6 O'Clock News. Brasseye, produced in 1997 satirised the rising trend in docu-dramas and sensationalism, but would seem little out of place nowadays. In shows such as the X Factor the manipulation of image and content, from start to finish, is rigorously controlled, in order to ensure an outcome of benefit to its producers – an analysis of how the entertainment industry uses spectacle in its modern (Debord/Baudrillard) sense can be seen in Chris Atkins' *Starsuckers*.

Ultimately, the biggest question that hyperreality raises, and any sociological commentary raised by the theory poses us is not just the need to look beyond the quick-fire images and sound-bites that are the media's staple, but rather a deeper, where will it lead us? Baudrillard never dealt with this issue, indeed refused to – for him it was enough to try to flag the issue. The (re)solution is for those of us that have come after.

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"Anything you cannot relinquish when it has outlived its usefulness, possess you. And in this materialistic age, a great many of us are possessed by our possessions."
Mildred Lisette Norman

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[50] Taken from a US concrete specialist website

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