The Simulation of Identity

Baudrillard and the surface of things

Pamela Robinson

ABSTRACT

Social media interactions in an information saturated society lead to a slippage of identity. We are no longer identifying with whom we see in the mirror.

Jean Baudrillard has many ideas relating to media influence on our personal interactions and how these influences affected various artistic ventures, I would like to discuss how his theories have taken cinema, literature, and visual arts from the contemporary creative process into a post-constructural context. Baudrillard's ideas of simulacra and hyperreality have given a framework for understanding the concept of slippage of personal identity in our media obsessed world. From my studies of Baudrillard and others, I would like to propose the idea that online identity has become a way that individuals are deconstructing themselves. It is also my understanding that individuals are no longer looking in the mirror or social groups to form foundations of how we perceive ourselves.

In these early years of the 21st century, a majority of people around the world have multiple online identities with slightly different versions of self for each category of interaction. Facebook and Twitter enable individuals to carefully edit our lives into a glossy idealized version of our physical selves. The new self is not a product of our mirror reflection but floating signs associated with social media. We have become the simulacra, a hyperreal second self: a self not based on the physical self. (Baudrillard 1983) Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively on the topic of human interaction with the technological media. Baudrillard focuses on how people will move from a system where image is based on physical reality into a morphing of image that has entirely no relation to reality. He uses the term "simulacrum" as a declaration of the death of reality. (Buadrillard 1983) This new world is based on the shiny surface of media where signs are for the consumer to assign, as they have no real meaning. These signs have then become a part of the new self where the product and the consumer are part of the same system and part of each other as well.

We live in a time where technology is evolving at an accelerated pace. We no longer look to past centuries to gain perspective for how tools have changed how we interact with our environment and other people. We instead look back a mere year or two to see these changes. These changes are no longer looked to as possible solutions but instead are expected as part of the continuum of life. Stripped of its powers to save society technology has moved into an integrative role where it is used as extension of the self. The integration is a slippage in the way we gather information and in how we process the world around us. For example, no longer do we look at maps for direction but rely on navigation systems to get us to our destinations. These technologies are no longer placed in a single room of the house and visited occasionally. We now have smart phones and laptops travel with us even into our most intimate of moments. Technological devices sit on our bedside stands, are ready for action in our pockets and invade our face-to-face conversations with a constant stream of information.

This slippage of identity is in relation to the devices used in social media and Internet communications not just in the content of these interactions. In his book *The Shallows* Nicholas Carr, discusses how the actual device is part of the process. He points out that change as a result of advances in technology is not a new phenomenon but the accelerated pace and its closer ties to thought patterns is new. Carr's research has led him to believe that as we use our tools they are not only becoming an extension of us but we are becoming an extension of that technology.

He quotes McLuhan as writing that "our tools end up 'numbing' whatever part of our body they 'amplify" (Carr 2011) When you apply that theory to Internet communications and information gathering, a person is left with a lowered ability to discern their own identity and has decreased their reasoning skills. People traverse from

one device to the other in a constant stream of information that floods our brains to the point of over saturation.

Patricia Mellencamp in her article *Seeing is Believing* discusses Baudrillard and Blau's view on how we view reality in film. In this article she uses the early black and white movie *Sherlock Jr* to demonstrate how cinema uses the image as a deception. The main character of this movie moves from scene to scene in a constant shifting of context that leaves to question where reality is in relation to this character. This shift of time and space is portrayed as a dangerous and traumatic experience. While talking about the fi industries input Mellencamp states, "This is the stance of contemporary film theory- predicated on an enshrined circuitry of looks capturing the spectator and thus demanding textural deconstruction for visual salvation. (Mellencamp 1985) The early example of *Sherlock Jr* demonstrates how long we have been exposed as a culture to such slippages in the hyperreal context of cinema. Today many movies and advertisements use the illusion of the hyperreal inside the real to blur the line between their product and our identity. If the self is not constructed of a firm visual referent, then it slips to other forms of input. This input in today's world is via social media, the new mirror of self.

True to Baudrillard's thoughts, we are driven by our desires to interact with the hyperreal surface of media interactions. This surface is made of "useless hyper information, which claims to enlighten, when all it does is clutter up the space of the representable and itself in a silent equivalence." (Baurdrillard and Maclean 1985)

He saw the constant flow of information as an erosion of the self where we no longer are able to isolate reality from the projection of reality by the media. Baudrillard's wrote of these things in the mid 1980's before the intrusion of social media into our pant pockets and bathroom stalls via "smart" phones. The progression of technology and its

insertion into our everyday lives further blurs the line between what is and what is merely perceived. To merely see is no longer enough; we must assume that all is simulation. According to Mellencamp. "One must be deceived by the image in order to see the image". (Mellencamp 1985) Even our image of self is distorted within the context of social media. Baudrillard seems to forecast this slippage when he wrote "While the mirror and the screen of alienation was the mode of production (the imaginary subject), this new screen is simply its of disappearance." We are disappearing into a self deconstructed from the physical self into an identity of our virtual selves.

Baudrillard in his essay *The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media*, discusses the desire we have to give our choices to others. We do this by giving in to the flow of information. We type in a word or phrase into a search engine giving up the choice of direction of our research to a predetermined perimeter of insight.

> This is the way the masses escape as reality, in this very mirror, in those simulative devices which are designed to capture them. Or again, the way in which events themselves disappear behind the television screen, or the more general screen of information (for it is true that events have no probable existence except on this deflective screen—which no longer is a mirror) (Baurdrillard and Maclean 1985)

He writes that we are turning ourselves into part of the meaningless surface in the process of these interactions, "They eclipse themselves, they melt into the superficial screen ..." (Baurdrillard and Maclean 1985) (this is a type of alienation of self-brought on by excess information). In a current add running for the search engine Bing we are encouraged to use their service because not only will it bring you search results from news and other media but will also include information from social media. The category of media designated as "news" is now juxtaposed with information pulled from social media sites.

Sherry Turkle opens her book *Alone Together* by saying "Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies." MIT first carried out cybog experiments with people being constantly tethered to the Internet in 1996. In these experiments, the subjects were asked to carry around bulky abrasive predecessors to our wireless technology while living their day-to-day lives. The student subjects were reported as saying, "They felt like new selves. One subject in his mid-twenties said he had 'become' his device." (Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other 2011) The equipment they were required to wear at this point put them in a state of physical disability in many ways but they none the less felt set free. The new self was not a result of the glossy iPhones of today being in hand all day but rather of having information always available. This information is what made them feel free.

We live our lives in parallel universes at the same time. An individual often has several virtual places where they interact with information and other people. I personally have several email addresses, Facebook, MySpace, Skype and Twitter accounts as well as other group sites where I participate and have a "profile" or alter ego. According to Turkle when part of your life is lived in virtual places- it can be Second Life, a computer game, a social networking site- a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is 'true here', true in simulation. (Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other 2011) Often these Second Lives are more than an act of pure fantasy but how we view ourselves. We build avatars that have little resemblance to our physical selves. We trade shapes, genders, races and abilities in an erasing of ourselves. We have an ability to realize that for the most part "friends" on Facebook aren't the type to help out in the tough times but we still feel emotionally charged when we see people interacting with our post. We want to keep pushing our online identity more into a shape

that attracts the most responses. We feel for our friends in return but show little if any actual reaction to their tragic moments or swings of success. It is an emotional Disney Land. A land of hyper real where communications is best done while alone. (Turkle, Life on the Screen 1995)

These social constructions in the virtual world help set up a society where communications are of value over production. Baudrillard argued that the world "is the effect of the sign". (Baurdrillard and Maclean 1985) We consume not products but rather meanings, thus the centerpiece of his social theory is this symbolic exchange not the production of goods. This theory is seen in practice through the advertising industry. While surfing the Internet one discovers that there are adds that appear before the adds on YouTube. A world within a world within a world is revealed that takes us to the hyper real once again. The basic thread running through most of the ads is that they want you as a consumer to align your identity with their image: "Like us on Facebook", "Follow us on Twitter" and the individual becomes part of the advertising. There is a new app that states "Hands on with Photopon, the app that turns food porn into dinner discounts." This site lets you use your smart phone to instantly get a discount at restaurants in exchange for posting a positive review of their food onto your account on Facebook or lnstagram. The consumer becomes part of the sign and the sign now a part of the consumer.

Contemporary literature has proven to be a popular mode for understanding post modernistic theory. Nicholas Ruddick in his essay *Ballard/Crash/Baudrillard* examines Buadrillard's views on philosophy by studying the critical response to this novel *Crash*. The novel is science fiction with a violent erotic plot written by JG Ballard. According the Ruddick,

> In spite of this, there are two aspect of Crash that seem strongly to
> support Baudrillard's reading of the text. The first is the way in

which the name of the protagonist seems to obliterate the gap between the fictional and the real worlds, so that a new hyperreal synthesis emerges (Ruddick 1992)

Once again the line between the fictional and physical worlds are blurred in Baudrillard's estimation. He sees the car crash as a way to visualize the desire we have for death. The only true way out of the simulations of the hyperreal.

The novel *White Noise* is another literary reference that follows a plot that can be used to understand Baudrillard's views on identity. In this book Don DeLillo uses a constant stream noise created by electronic devices for the background of his constantly shifting narrative. The noise of the electronic is a mimic of those of the characters where the sounds become a part of the structure of human experience.

In his article Baudrillard, *DeLillo's "White Noise", and the End of Heroic Narrative* Leonard Wilcox focuses on discussing how the plot and characters of White Noise move from a modernist quest for the heroic toward a self that is simulated into an environment of the simulation. "Thus media and technology transform death into a sign spectacle, and its reality is experienced as the body doubled in technified forms: death by "print-out." (Wilcox 1991) The main character of the novel is surrounded by the white noise of technology while trying to establish his identity as a Hitler scholar to strengthen his image via this strange association. Once again even our fascination with death is swallowed up in the simulation. The unity of the modern gives way to the loosing of self into the noise.

The visual arts are also influenced by the hyperreal experience of media. Artists are not only interacting within the context of social media but they are also using computers and other technology in ways that blur the line between artist and computers. (Wright 1989) In the past several years the technology involved in the production of art has

improved greatly. These changes in technology have made it increasingly harder to tell the difference between art created via traditional methods and those with computers. Every year there are new updates in computer software and equipment, which make it easier for the artist to use these tools without computer training. Surrounded by the hyperreal media experience art becomes a part of the simulacra.

Artists on Facebook are influenced to post new works that will get the most positive response. These works then become part of the information stream a part of the free floating signs floating by us in a constant flow. Interactions on social media site are on an international basis that erodes cultural and social differences within the art world. The artist identity is now lost in the simulation of a worldwide community. Everyday while navigating the saturated visual world of the Internet, our choices are being directed and influenced by the power of the mass of input of media. We are influenced and influencing the direction of the flow but lost in its addicting acceleration of the new and shiny.

Adam Chapman in his digital media piece takes this thought in a different direction. He created a computer program that puts into a motion a series of drawing that morph from abstract to portraits of his family and friends. According to Chapman's artist statement "I seek to capture the fleeting, euphoric moments when the mechanics of the world flash briefly into focus. My work-in-progress continues to merge the dynamic possibilities of contemporary tools with the millennia-old tradition of mark- making," (National Portrait Gallery n.d.) These images are displayed on video screen running in a continual loop that is both repetitive and original each time it cycles through the images. Chapman uses his work as an artist and writer to engage the postmodern viewer. He uses the traditional idea of a portrait and identity then sets it into the shifting realm of media streaming. The art itself leaves the viewer asking if the computer or the artist is creating

the drawings. The simulation of authorship within the work creates its own interaction and simulation in the viewers.

Art in the postmodern world approaches identity in a more communal fashion. Artist wishing to engage in this system are less worried about asserting an individual identify than in previous decades. This is more than a one directional social construct. We are often part of multiple social and cultural groups. According to Robertson and McDaniel in their book on contemporary art, "Groups still exist, but they are smaller, and an individual may identify with different situations." (Robertson and McDaniel 2005) The new frontier of social media interactions creates more platforms for identity formation than a person can easily process.

Baudrillard would have us react to this white noise of the Omni present media with an attitude of silence, a silence that cancels out the noise. He is quoted, as saying that McLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" is the very formula of alienation in a technological society. (Huyssen 1989) As artist, it is important to put our work into the context of the society we live. Today that society is living according to post constructive philosophy where our identity is formed via an interaction on social networking and other media outlets. This has led to our sense of self being a simulacra: a self that is not based on a mirror but on a simulation.

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Baudrillard and The Simulation of Self: indentity in a digital age

Pamela Robinson
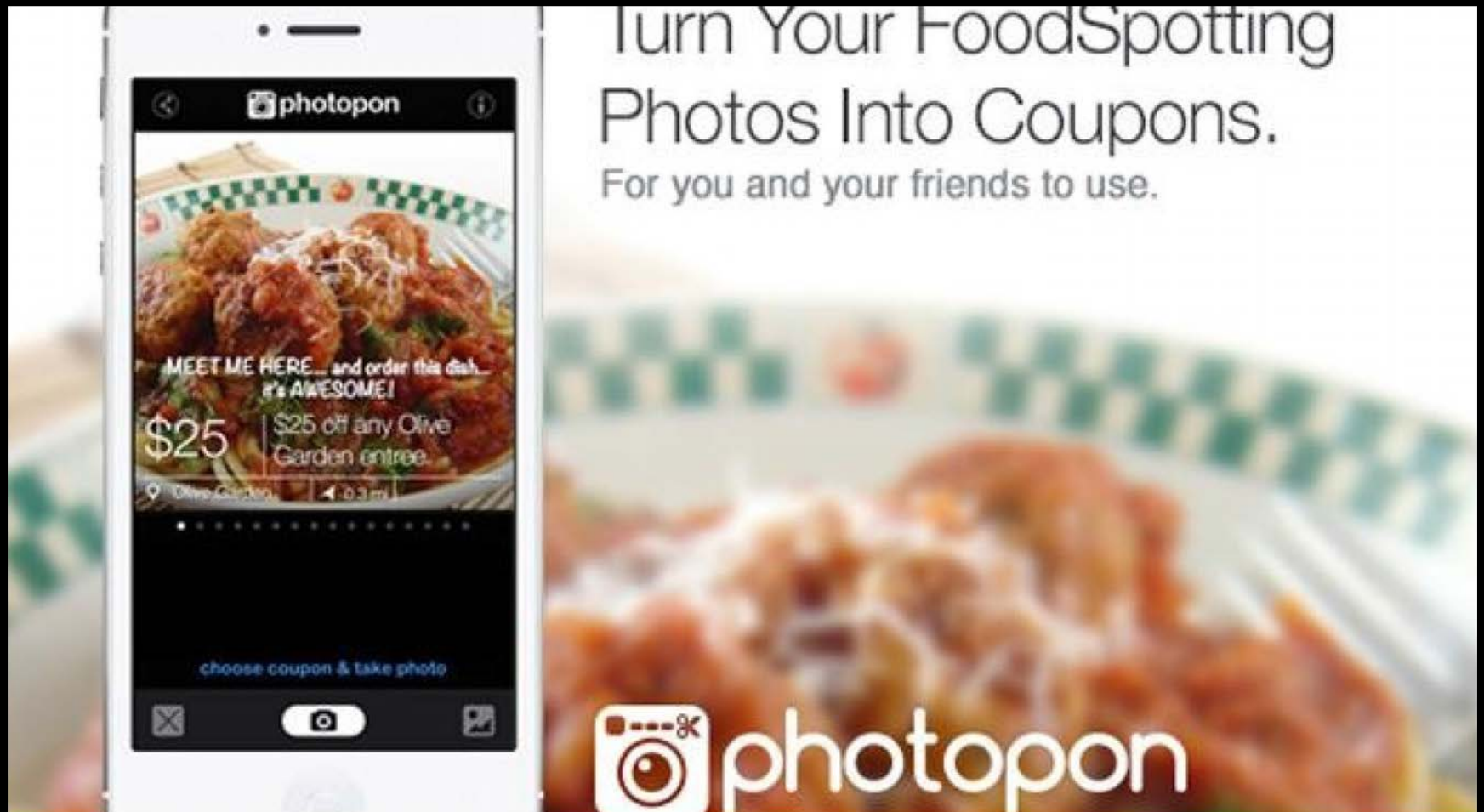
I Am The Media

The Simulation of Self

You are the Comodity

Human Empathy for Robots

Art or Possibility?

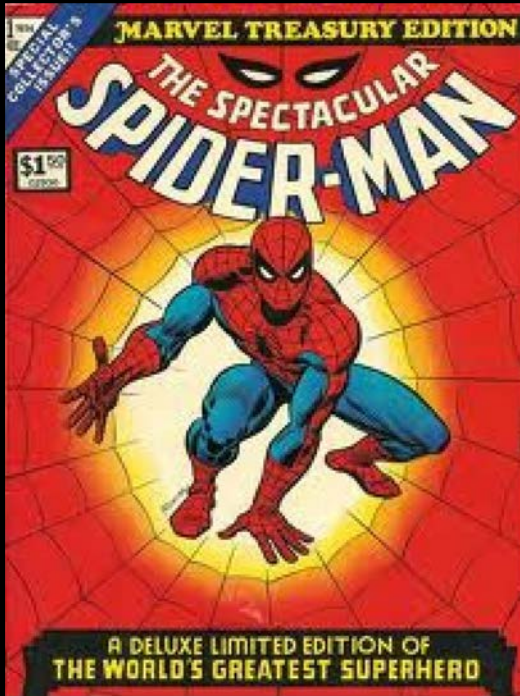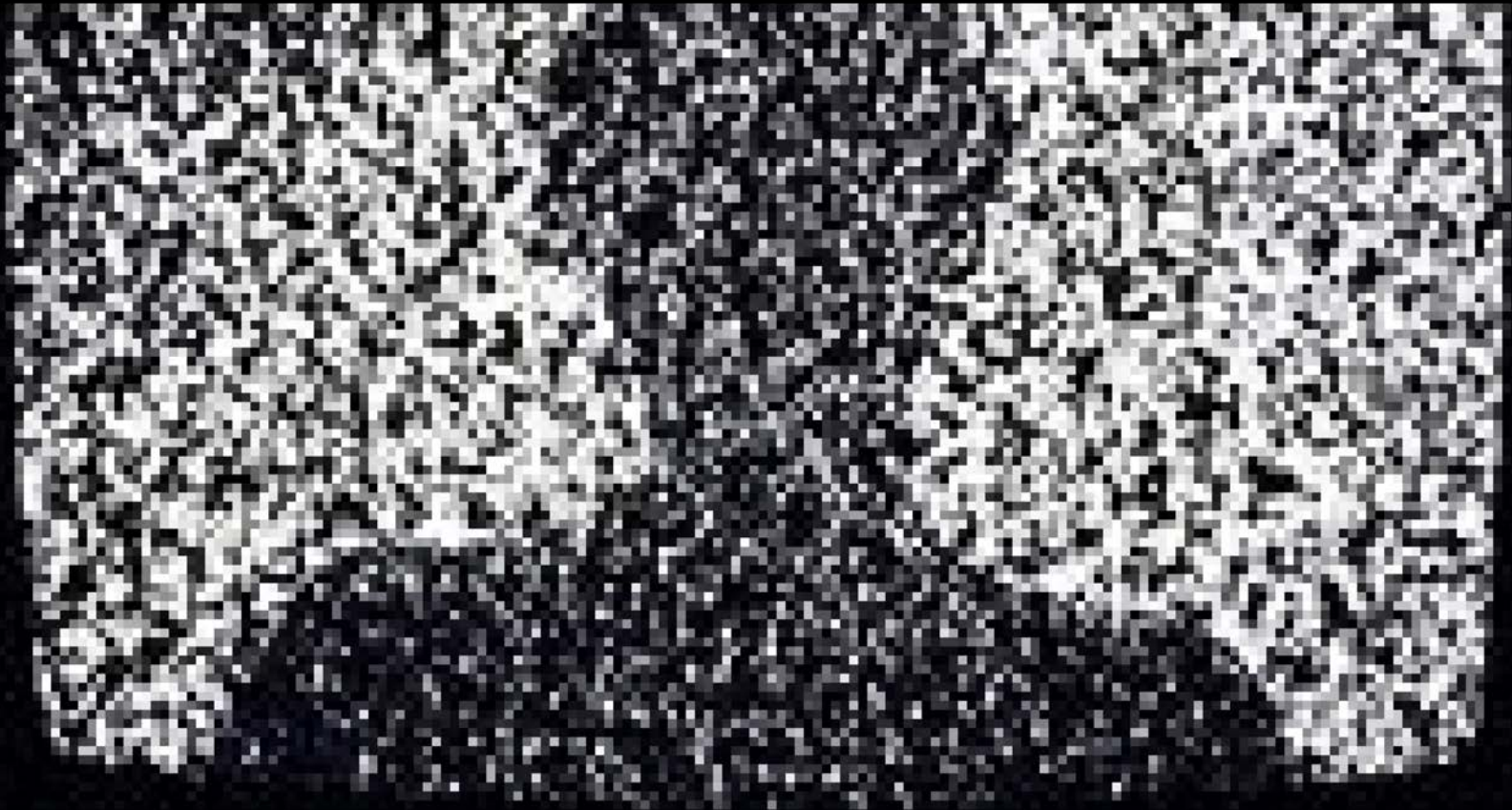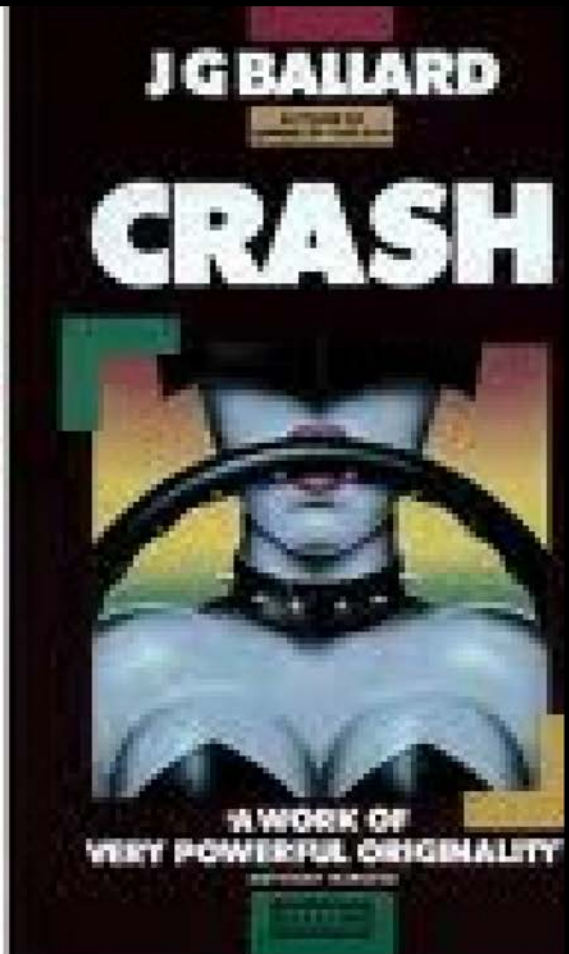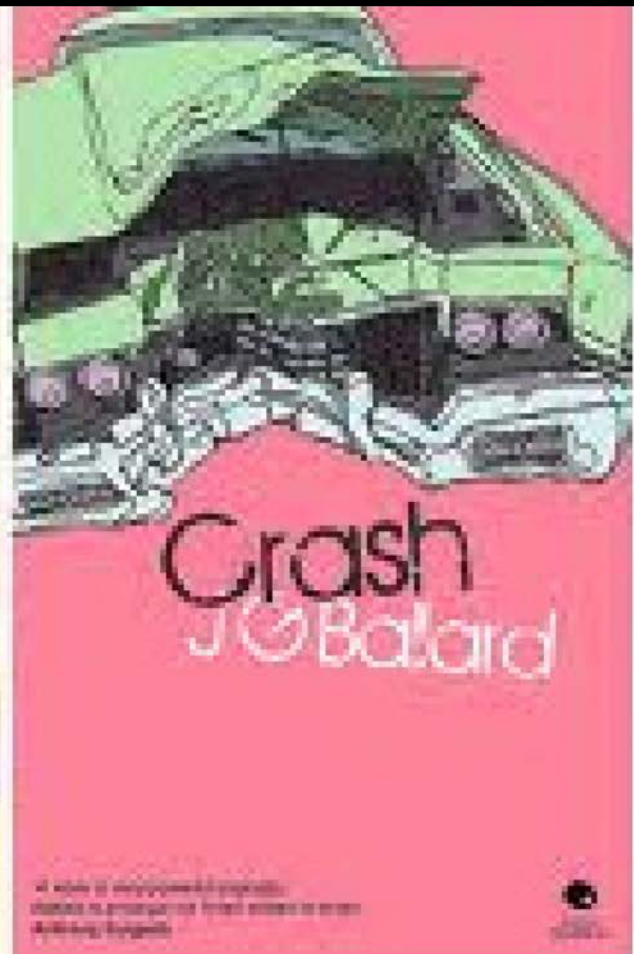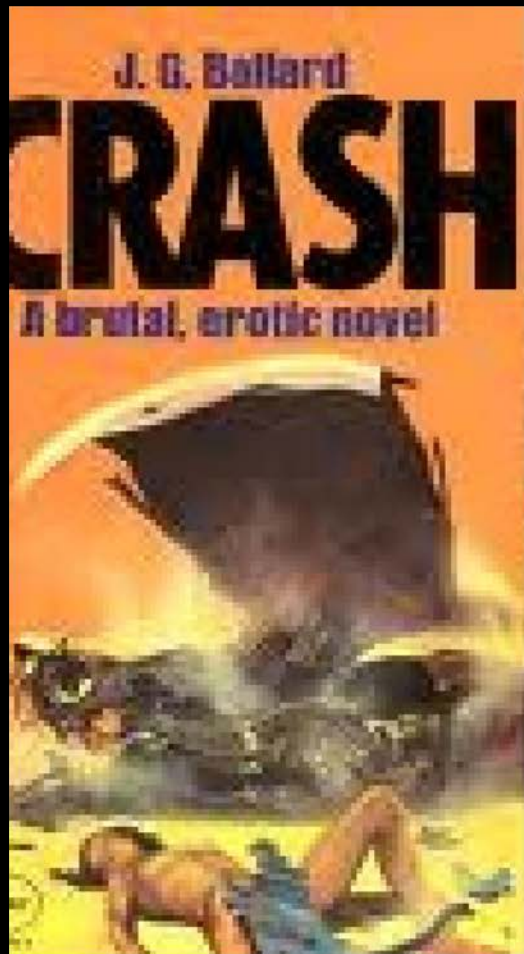# Parody meets news

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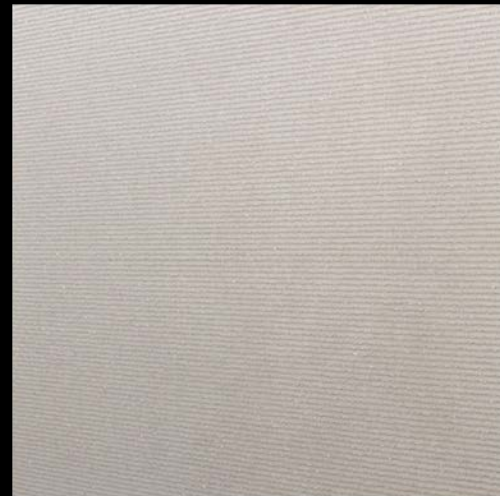# Identifying with the Hyperreal

White Noise

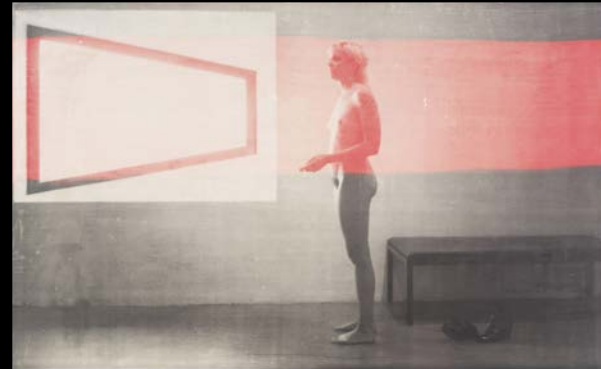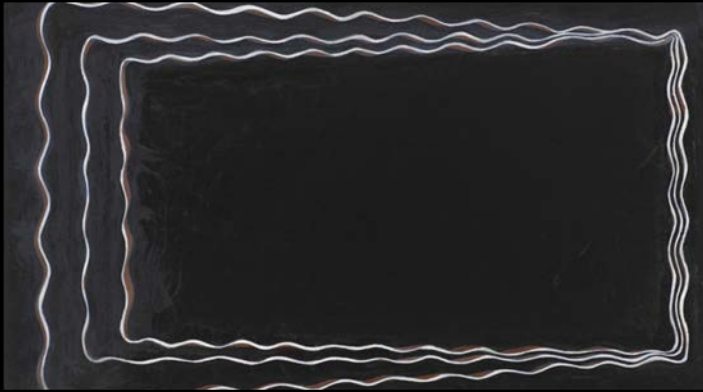# Baudrillard on Ballard

Jim Campbell, *Digital Watch*. 1991

Updated version with new technology

R.H Quaytman, *Distracting Distance.*
Chapter 16

Adam Chapman. *Diagram of Isolated Moments forming Memory*