



Simulacra and Hyperreality

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Lesson Outline



Of Simulacra and the Hyperreal

While it's probably fair to say postmodernism, as a body of work, has something of a reputation for both its unforgiving density and wilful-obscurantism, many aspects are both philosophically interesting and sociologically relevant, even at A-level.

One such aspect (or two if you count *hyperreality* - which we will) is **Baudrillard's** concept of *simulacra*. Not only is this concept reasonably accessible to an A2 sociology audience it's also one with which you can have a quite a bit of fun (if by "fun" you mean "mess with students' head").

This lesson plan is designed to introduce and to some extent explain the related concepts of simulacra and hyperreality using practical examples to illustrate the processes. In this respect you have a couple of choices to make as the lesson progresses – use the pre-prepared examples I've suggested (or substitute your own) and / or include some simple practical examples students can construct for themselves. If this sounds a bit over-complicated I've separated-out the two ideas in what follows to make it easier to understand where I'm going with this.

Simulacrum

The first thing to do is come up with a definition of "simulacra / simulacrum" that meets your students' needs in terms of understanding. I've kept it basic here but you can either flesh it out at the start or keep it simple and suggest ways students might want to beef-up the definition as part of any post-lesson work.

At its most basic, therefore, a simulacrum is "a representation or imitation of something"; it is, for our purposes "a copy" and, to keep things (relatively) simple we can describe **three orders** (or types) **of simulacra**.

If time is tight or you simply want to examine simulacra / hyperreality in terms of postmodernity you can skip parts 1 and 2 and go directly to part 3.

1. An original that is a copy

To understand what we mean by this order of simulacra, have a look at this picture:

You can either use a copy of this picture (or something similar) or, if you're using the accompanying video, this is the first clip.



Why is this a simulacrum?

On one level the "Mona Lisa" is an *original* 16th century painting by Leonardo Da Vinci. But it is also a *copy* because it is a representation of a real person (possibly Lisa Gherardini although her exact identity is not particularly significant for our current purpose).

In other words, "nature" is the *original* and the representation (in this instance a painting) of nature is the *copy*.

Optional student practical

If your students are allowed to bring their mobiles into class get them to take selfies on their phone. Alternatively, take a class photo using your mobile or tablet.

Once this has been done, ask your students if they can distinguish the **real** from the **representation**.

In both cases (the painting or the photograph) you will probably receive similar answers – for example, the *real* is a living, moving, three-dimensional, person while the representation is just a snapshot (quite literally if you use the student practical): a moment caught in time that represents “the real person” etc.

It would be very difficult to confuse the real with its representation here.

You can, if you want to keep the mood light, test this with your students by getting one of them to stand at the front of the class, hold the selfie they’ve taken up for the class to see and then asking your students to say which is real and which is representation.

Additional Teaching

1. You can reinforce this idea by using something like **Hagarty’s** (2004) observation that first order simulacra involve the idea:

“Representation is clearly an artificial placemaker for the real item.

The uniqueness of objects and situations marks them as irreducibly real and signification obviously gropes towards this reality”.

2. If you want to link simulacra and hyperreality to a pre-modern / modern / postmodern continuum you could note this first order of simulacra is the *dominant* mode in *pre-modern societies* (partly because the technology for more-sophisticated forms of reproduction doesn’t exist).

This first order is, however, also present in both *modern* and *postmodern* societies (with both painting and photography being obvious examples).

2. A copy of an original.

The second order of simulacra involves the development of large-scale manufacturing technology in modern societies when, for the first time in human history, it was possible to *mass produce* exact copies of something. In other words, it became possible to take an original and produce tens, thousands, even millions of exact reproductions.

An obvious contemporary example here might be the mobile phone; from one design, prototype and so forth there eventually emerge millions of identical copies.

*You can either use a copy of this picture (or something similar) or, if you’re using the accompanying video, this is the **second clip**.*



If you want another example get the students to look around their class and at each other; everything they see - tables, chairs, walls, windows, pens, clothes – are almost certain to be *second order simulacra*.

Why is this a simulacrum?

As with first order simulacra we have a distinction – a little more blurred perhaps – between an original and a copy. The main difference here, however, is that the copy is likely to be an *exact representation* of the original such that, for everyday purposes, the two are *indistinguishable*. The representation is, for all intents and purposes, that which is real.

Having said this, it could be possible, given enough resources, to distinguish between the two (although, for most of us, this is not a distinction we would bother to pursue – if we have an iphone that works and does everything we want why would we bother trying to find the “original iphone” - presupposing one actually exists - since it would do no more than the version we already have).

Optional student practical

If you've taken the selfies in the previous example the next step here is to “mass produce” them and one easy way to do this is for everyone (if it's a small class) or just a chosen individual (if it's a large class) to send their selfie to everyone else in the class.

Alternatively, send a class photo to everyone in the class.

Ask your students if they can distinguish the real from the representation.

In this instance it starts to become much more difficult to distinguish between the two because the copy is an *exact reproduction* of the original.

If you know something about the original (such as, in the student practical example, who took the picture) then it may be possible to decide which is real and which is the representation) but this, of course, is not always possible in the wider world.

A key point here is that, theoretically, it might be possible – with sufficient investigation – to decide which is the original and which is the copy. This will, of course, be easier for some objects than others. In the case of a painting, for example, it may be relatively easy to identify the original from which many identical copies have been made, especially if the creator of the original has somehow authenticated their work.

Additional Teaching

1. If you want to link simulacra and hyperreality to a pre-modern / modern / postmodern continuum you could note that this 2nd order of simulacra is the *dominant mode* in modern societies.

Here, distinctions between the *real* and the *representation* breakdown precisely because copies that are indistinguishable from both the original and the myriad other representations can be mass-produced. In basic terms, the representation is effectively a *clone* of the original.

2. We also start to see the concept of *representational commodification* here in the sense that mass reproductions are made specifically for sale.

As with the previous order this kind of mass reproduction is present in *postmodernity* (but not pre-modernity) in both its *commodified form* (such as mobile phones and cars) and *uncommodified form*, such as sharing pictures on the Internet – although if you decide to go down this route with your students there's an interesting discussion to be had about *commodification in postmodernity* – the pictures and videos shared on the Internet can be commodified by people other than those who create and own them...

3. A copy without an original

If the first two (scene-setting) ideas seem pretty straightforward, this third order of simulacra requires a little more thought, mainly because it begs the question of how it is possible to have a copy of something (“an original”) that doesn’t actually exist?

The (simple) answer is that we’re moving away from the idea of tangible *objects* (such as a painting, photograph or phone) and into the realm of subjective, intangible, *ideas* about the world. In other words we’re starting to explore how people see and understand their world and, by so doing, we’re moving into a realm that consists of *representations of representations*.

To try to make these ideas intelligible to students we’re going to use an example – in this instance the idea of “**The Wild West**” but you can use anything with which you’re comfortable and the students are familiar (something like Downton Abbey would work equally as well).

Introduce the idea of a narrative and define it if necessary:

A narrative is a story we tell to make sense of something, such as “The Wild West”. It does this by imposing an overarching sense of structure and order on an event – or, in the case of the Wild West, series of disparate, largely unconnected, events – that gives it some sort of meaning.

We’ve chosen this example for two reasons:

- a. “The Wild West” is just a name we give to a period in 19th century American history. In this respect it is in itself a representation.
- b. It’s a period with which students should have a passing familiarity - enough for our current purpose at least.

Ask your students to tell you about “The Wild West” – what was it and what did it involve?

They can either write down what “The Wild West” means to them individually or you can treat this as a class exercise – students call-out answers, for example.

*While students should be able to come-up with a range of ideas you can use the **third clip** on the accompanying video if necessary as a way of stimulating ideas.*

You’ll probably get a range of ideas along the lines of:

- Cowboys;
- Indians;
- Gun fighters / fights;
- Notorious Outlaws;
- Saloons / saloon girls / fights.

Why is this a simulacrum?

The point to get across here is that the representation we believe to be “The Wild West” bears no relationship to any reality; it is almost entirely the product of *mediated images* passed down to us over the past 150 years through:

- Journals and comics of the time that mythologised “cowboys” and gunfighters
- Wild west shows (such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows that toured the world between 1883 and 1913) that mythologised Cowboys, Indians, frontier life and the like.
- Hollywood films from the early 1900’s through to the 1950’s
- Television shows from the 1950’s onward

In this respect our perception of the wild west – what we believe it to be – is a *mediated reality* where one invented idea is layered on the next to produce a representation of reality that consists entirely of copies that have no originals except other copies.

“The Wild West” is, in this respect, a *representation of a representation* - a copy without an original...

Hyperreality

The Wild West example – or any other example you might have used - also illustrates the concept of **hyperreality**: a representation that is “more real” than the reality it purports to represent.

Our beliefs about “The Wild West”, for example, are *more real* to us than the reality of this period in American history.

In this respect we can see how simulacra – what **Baudrillard** calls “representations that refer to other representations” – are inextricably tied to the concept of *hyperreality*; they are two sides of the same coin.

In the Wild West example, is it possible to distinguish the real from the representation?

When thinking about 3rd order simulacra, therefore, to talk about separating “the real from the representation” is meaningless since, if we accept this argument, the representation *is* the real – or, if you prefer, *in postmodernity representations are the only reality*.

Additional Teaching

If you want to apply these ideas further there are plenty of opportunities in Sociology to do this, the most-obvious being in relation to the **mass media**.

Representations

While modernist approaches consider representations in terms of how and why they *misrepresent* particular groups, **Baudrillard** (1995) argues representations can't be assessed in terms of whether something like class or gender is accurately or inaccurately represented because how something is represented *is* its reality.

Modernist approaches suggest the media represents ideas like class, age, gender, *ethnicity* and the like in ways that distort its reality; “the real” is compared to its media representation in order to disentangle it from the “not real”. **Baudrillard** suggests this approach is mistaken on two levels:

1. It assumes things in the social world have a reality outside of how they are represented. In the *physical world*, for example, we can look at the original, authentic, Taj Mahal and compare it to the various ways it has been represented through inauthentic copies such as the “Trump Taj Mahal” casino.

Concepts like class or ethnicity, however, have no *authentic* reality because they are social constructs; the product of how they are initially described and represented. All the media does, therefore, is construct **simulacra**: *representations of representations*.



2. "Reality" is experienced differently depending on who you are, where you are, your source of information and so forth. Every audience constructs its own version of reality and everything represented in the media is experienced as multiple realities, all of which - and none of which - are *authentically real*; everything is simply a representation of something seen from different viewpoints. The "reality of anything" - class, age, gender, ethnicity or whatever - can't be found in any single definitive account or experience.

The *conventional* way to look at media representations, therefore, is in terms of how and why they *misrepresent* particular groups. **Baudrillard** (1995), however, argues representations shouldn't be considered in terms of whether something is fairly or unfairly represented because how something is represented *is* its reality.

Social Construction of News

Conventional approaches suggest the media re-presents something like 'news' in a way that's somehow different to the original event; 'something happens' that is then described (*re-presented*) to an audience. Conventionally, therefore, sociologists contrast 'the real' - the 'thing' that 'happened' - with its *representation* and examine the media to see if they can disentangle the *real* from the *not real*.

Baudrillard however suggests "reality" is experienced differently depending on who you were, where you are and your source of information. Every audience, therefore, ultimately constructs its own version of reality and everything represented in the media is experienced as **multiple realities**, all of which - and none of which - are **real**; everything is a representation of something seen from different viewpoints. Thus, the *reality* of anything can't be found in any single definitive account or experience

Baudrillard uses the term **hyperreality** to express how different narrative accounts interweave and conflict in an ever-changing pattern of representation-built-upon-representation until they form a 'reality' in themselves – something "more real than reality"

since our knowledge of 'reality' is itself the product of different representations. Each reality, therefore, is constructed from the way individuals pick-and-choose different ideas to suit their own particular prejudices or beliefs.

To talk about media representations as distortions of some hidden or obscured 'reality' ('*deep structures*') misses the point: The media don't simply 'mediate the message' through representations; as **McCluhan** (1992) argues "they *are* the message".

This idea is important in relation to something like the *social construction of news* since news reporting involves a representation of reality that **Fiske** (1987) calls the **transparency fallacy** – a rejection of the idea news reporting represents a neutral 'window on the world' that objectively reports events as they unfold. The world represented through the media is always and inevitably a *reconstructed reality* – one filtered through a media lens that is no more and no less objective than any other reality filter.

Postmodernists argue *power*, in terms of control over the production and distribution of information, is no longer concentrated within institutions, but within *social networks*, where information is produced and consumed by the same people. Information flows between different points (*nodes*) within a network in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between *producer* and *consumer*. This idea challenges Marxist and Feminist notions of power as **centred**, on class and gender respectively, and that misrepresentations flow from this centred control of information.

Lyotard (1984), for example, argues that in postmodernity there are "many centres" and "none of them hold". In other words, in postmodernity there are many centres of information, each of which pumps-out different representations of categories like class, age, gender and ethnicity. Unlike in the past there are no *dominant* forms of representation because there are no dominant forms of media anymore. What we have, in a media-saturated society built on information structures and networks, is a series of shifting representations of these categories.

You can link the concepts of simulacra and hyperreality to other areas of the Specification by asking your students to think about things like:

- **Family Life:** is “The family” a simulacra?
- **Education:** to what extent is the idea of “5 good GCSE’s” a simulacrum of education?
- **Religion:** how is the concept of religion itself a simulacrum?
- Sociological perspectives (such as Functionalism, Marxism, Feminism and Postmodernism) - to what extent are these both simulacra and examples of hyperreality?

Summary

Simulacra and Hyperreality

1st order simulacra

Less real than what it represents

Example: a painting

2nd order simulacra

As real as what it represents

Example: mobile phone

3rd order simulacra

More real (hyperreal) than what it represents

Examples: The Wild West / Disneyland

Film Clips

Through this text we’ve made reference to a range of film clips you might want to use to illustrate some of the ideas contained here.

You can find the following clips [here](https://youtu.be/ilps5xefBp8) (or here: <https://youtu.be/ilps5xefBp8>)

1. **Mona Lisa** - about 30 seconds of the painting
2. **Iphone** - 30 seconds of examples
3. **Wild West** - old Hollywood clips showing various aspects of “The Wild West” (gunfights, saloon brawls etc. (students might want to note that both black people and women are represented - if at all - in periphery roles...))
4. **Disneyworld** - a quick tour around the different “worlds”.
5. **Wild West at Disneyland** - the “Wild West Shows” at Disneyland are an example of “simulacra within simulacra”.
6. **Real Food / Fictional Farms** - short clip showing how supermarkets have created fictional farms to create the idea of “real food” that is actually sourced from a wide variety of (largely anonymous) global suppliers.

