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[Re]animation of a Simulacrum.

Digitograph

[Re]анімація симулякра.

Digitograph

Abstract. The term “simulacrum” is known back from the Latin translations of Plato, where it denoted simply an image, a picture, a representation. That was so until Jean Baudrillard reshaped the meaning of the concept. At the present time, simulacrum is one of the fundamental concepts within the theory of postmodernism. Its notion includes a pseudo-thing, an empty form, a copy lacking the original. In the contemporary world, with its technological overload, substituting reality with fake became quite common (in fashion, politics, advertising, entertainment industry, etc.). Culture has a vivid tendency for simulations. First and foremost, the article focuses, among all other categories of simulacra, on the digital video—digitograph—a field of stereotypes’ rupture that is the most convincing embodiment of the “photographically realistic” virtual inventions. It defines the new type of credibility, immanent to the process of perceiving on-screen illusions that changes the psychology of a contemporary man.

Keywords: simulacrum, digital video, digitograph, on-screen illusion, virtual reality, cyberspace, hyperreality, psychology of perception, higher mental functions.

Simulacrum, deriving from the Latin *simulacrum*, denotes deceptive resemblance, a copy that substituted original. Ideas of simulation/simulacration become of yet greater importance in the contemporary world (be it public images, fashion brands, political news, entertainment industry, economic or scientific simulacra, advertising, fake sensations etc.).

Both photography and moving screen pictures could be classified as simulacra in some sense, as since the times of the Latin translations of Plato the term meant simply a reproduction, a picture, a representation. Within the context of Plato’s representative model, simulacrum is a sign that distorts its prototype. According to Plato’s definition, simulacrum was realization of transcendental ideas (“eide”) in the real objects of the material world—a deceiving/misguiding copy, an embodiment that does not reflect essence, therefore disharmonising the Universe.

Reactualization of the “simulacrum” term, turning it into one of the core notions of postmodernism, is closely associated with the names of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard.

Deleuze bases his considerations on a statement that opposition of a model and a copy loses its reason/basis/sense/essence, when there is an external illusion instead of a “lesser resemblance”. The final emancipation of a copy from a prototype

was set in the non-representational theory of Jean Baudrillard. Not presupposing a mandatory existence of a referent, it made opposition of a copy and a “source” empty of sense.

In his work *Simulacra and Simulation* Jean Baudrillard described the unstoppable process of “virtualisation” of the world as a gradual absorption of reality by hyperreality [1, p. 157], postulating the *culture of hyperreality*, where objects and discourses with no references (i.e. real-life basis) prevail.

Overall end of the “real” (as well as of authority, history etc.), boldly proclaimed by Jean Baudrillard, was formulated by the philosopher quite radically: “the loss of the real.” Postulating rejection of a referent, the theoretician emphasized that images fade away, transforming into abstractions of genetic and computer codes. The newest technologies aide in perfecting the illusion, the simulative quality of images, which reproduce the things that had been perceived as real in the past. These images are substituted with the duplicate of reality that “by increasing the illusionary likeness with itself turns into hyperreality” [1, p. 3].

Based on the theories of Deleuze and Baudrillard, simulacrum may be defined as a sign that discovers its own being, creates a reality of its own, therefore—drives the very idea of a sign up to absurd. This is “a plaster cast, an ersatz reality, pure corporality, a credible fake, an empty form” [2, p. 57].

Such “empty form” may act as a referent itself, causing emergence of the new signs—the simulative reproductions of the next level. That is the way for the fake sign to obtain an existence of its own within the virtual reality, as well as for the semiotic sphere—to become self-sufficient.

Persuasive illusion

Culture tended to create simulacra at all times: via myth, ritual, art, science, politics. What comes to mind are the fairy-tale images of the silver platter, the magic mirror, a crystal ball, the surface of which was carefully examined in order to see elements of reality—eventually, the simulative images thereof. The contemporary situation of overall “simulacrazation” of social life is unprecedented. Due to the information technologies’ development, the system of simulacra turned into the precession that correlates with the potential social interest in some phenomenon or object.

Postmodern man is doomed to live and function in deceptive expansive-fake post-reality that attempts to oust the actuality of the physical dimension. Human consciousness eventually becomes locked into the copies with no original, as its subsequent fate would be existence in hi-tech environment and in the virtual world, produced by the latter; human consciousness would be constantly attacked by degraded signs, ersatz objectness, multifaceted phantoms, virtually persuasive illusions etc.

While rational thinking proves such phenomenon to be impossible, these arguments are defied by the human eye that alibies the existence of a phantasm. It is hard to believe that witnessed “with our own eyes” is unreal/illusional/ephemeral. Such trust into the optical persuasiveness of the virtual image, combined with the almost unlimited potential for manipulation with the digitalized images of the physical world, up to producing the latter “out of nowhere”, is an endeavor/encroachment aimed to intrude into the sanctum sanctorum of the physical-philosophical matter.

The above mentioned provides grounds to admit the establishment of the new convention between the author and the viewer. It is about trust, or more precisely, about credence to persuasive “credibility” of incredible images, generated through the “visual effects”.

On the background of perfecting digital technologies, the photographic accuracy of the pixel-produced illusionary world provoked emergence of the implosion syndrome—almost complete indifference towards shock coming from the visually persuasive fictions, simulative semblance/appearance that clearly dissonates with the rational thinking, physical laws, determinants of the traditional value–sense matrix, as well as with the established ethical and aesthetic imperative.

Contemporary philosophers, viewing simulacrum as an autoreferential sign, refer to it as to the final stage of the evolution (or rather involution) of an artistic image.

In an attempt to dominate the overall field of the aesthetic, simulacrazation spread over the whole postmodern text-world, including art and mass culture that resulted in the absorption of reality by the hyperreality and initiated the drift

of all aesthetic categories, as well as their reconsideration and dispersion.

Simulacrum, emerging from the depths of poststructuralism as a certain deconstruction of symbol and sign, becomes the basic category of virtualistics. This fact is quite natural, as the very term “*virtuality*”, adopted from the glossary of electronic computing technologies and quantum physics, implies absolute obviousness, not concealing any material prototype: instead of the physical existence what is offered is a certain potentiality, probability that is often directed towards divergence between the natural stereotypes of perception by senses, which build up ambiguity of the visible.

The added persuasiveness to the on-screen fictions is provided by the rapid development of technological innovations. In the second half of the 20th century, notably after the “quiet digital revolution” of the early 1990s, the field of simulacrazation expanded to the universal level.

Triumph of simulacra: Digitograph

The digital video creations—digitograph—should be considered the true triumph of simulacra. Digital filmmaking equipment, being perpetually enhanced, is no more limited to the direct reproduction of reality—instead it simulates the reality, nourished by the power of imagination.

It should be stressed: the title “[Re]animation of a Simulacrum” carries the dual semantic charge. From the one hand, it hints to the reactualization of the simulacrum concept in the postmodernism, to loading it with the new sense. From the other hand, expression “animation of a simulacrum” points to the potential of the digital video—digitograph—in the visualization of the impossible, as well as of any whimsical creations of imagination and producing photographically/graphically credible evident simulations, close to absolute fiction.

Operating with the considerable bulk of information bites, the pixel video enables visualization of phantasmagoric time–space on screen.

The term “digitograph” (coming from the English word for “number”) has been chosen in an attempt to emphasize the specific features of the sight, targeted primarily on technology, that is being broadcasted on screen. It should be distinguished from the corpus of films that, despite introducing technological innovations, nevertheless remain within the framework of artistic and aesthetical tradition of the classical cinematography.

Special effect should be considered the main expressive device of digitograph, being quite organic for this fundamentally new sight. By shocking the recipient/viewer with the stormy flow of non-stereotypical visuality, by ruining the patterns of rational thinking, on-screen special effects cause shock from the perception, provoking fundamental loss of reality at the intersection of technology and imagination.

George Lucas pioneered the creation of simulative on-screen reality, incorporating elements of computer-generated imagery back in the first *Star Wars* film. That was *Episode IV: A New Hope*, released in 1977. However, there are earlier illustrations of digitally enhanced image, i.e. *Westworld*, 1973.

Still, the first film playing significant role in the philosophical consideration of conceptual interconnection of the virtual world and physical reality is *TRON* (1982), directed by Steven Lisberger. Young gifted software engineer Kevin Flynn, who creates innovative computer games, gets digitized and trapped inside the program, in the virtual world where computer programs exist under tyranny of totalitarian Master Control Program.

The film apparently was a source of inspiration for the Wachowskis, who authored the virtual world of *The Matrix* (the original film premiered in 1999), where people are fated to exist in the virtual world they assume to be the real.

The Matrix (1999) leading character Neo is a hacker, who similarly to his predecessor Kevin Flynn from *TRON* (1982), becomes trapped inside the dimension of computer programs, dominated by the main tyrannical program (upgraded variant of the Master Control Program) and its Agents: cloned characters of the same face named Smiths.

The characters of *The Matrix* fight the forced hypnotic dreaming, imposed on humans by the monstrous program; their main goal is a right to live in the “real world”—outside of the Matrix. Neo as The One sees the true image of that world: a post-apocalyptic desert that is a result of the war between humans and machines.

In other words, the Matrix, using the human weaknesses and instincts, their habit to stick to common and familiar, performs a targeted influence of the neurons in the human brain to initiate the required impulses. In such way the program creates the holographic world, the computer time-space of non-existence, which is a simulacrum of life and recollections of life that in fact never happened.

The key episode for understanding the laws of simulacrum functioning should be the scene where the leading character, “assigned for” the messiah, having no idea how to get to the core of the Machine—into the master computer—goes to the Oracle, who possesses the power of foresight. Neo’s doubts are resolved by the boy he meets at the Oracle’s place. The child bends the metal spoon with the power of sight/thought/desire and explains the essence of such practice to Neo. “There is no spoon,” says the kid, touching his head. Generally, the world model, proposed in this cult film, unexpectedly intersects with the life dimension of our everyday existence, complying with the newest views on the laws of its functioning. First and foremost, it is about the correlation of mental and physical levels of being.

Experts in computer animation—3D animators—have almost unlimited prospects in manipulating the time-space. They are supreme rulers of the on-screen chronotope: able to create the virtual objectness, futuristic, space landscapes, to transform urban landscapes of the contemporary city according to the reality of a certain historical period, “deleting” modern building and introducing clear stylization, as well as the “true,” almost antiquarian reconstructions of details of practically any historical era. Supervisors and designers have powers to change on-screen appearance of an actor, his age and physical parameters, even to substitute the deceased

actor with his perfect “scanned double”, to capture facial expression of a human face and transfer it onto the digital “clone” or onto any virtual figure.

Beowulf (2007), directed by Robert Zemeckis, depicts the world of Old England everyday life, from its interiors and up to the small objects, by the means of the visual effects. Virtual phantoms—animated doubles of the “stars”, listed in credits (Anthony Hopkins, Angelina Jolie, John Malkovich, etc.) act in this illusionary chronotopy. The actors’ facial expressions serve as prototypes for creating animation blending shapes, i.e. the actors were only the “donors” of their facial expressions and body movements for their digital “photo doubles”. The idea that feature films are only an instance of animation films gets its back up. Computer transformations of “animation” images, their paradoxical kinematics provide visual basis for the stunning act of defying gravity, as well as other physical laws, genetics, etc. In such extravagant manner Robert Zemeckis, a keen lover of innovative theories and experiments in his visual practice, attempted to prove the fact that the world of fiction and fantasy is no less legitimate than the physical reality itself.

Absolutizing of technological achievements, introduced by Zemeckis in *Beowulf*, seems to be some kind of a “dead end” for the cinema aesthetics; still, general experience of total simulation resulted in paradoxical consequences.

Among the least expected results of digitalization of the on-screen world was the new status of the very physical reality: formal “simplification” of the process of mastering the world-formative “Divine archetype” highlighted the question: Could our world also be a set of databases in some “supercomputer”? This question is to a considerable extent initiated by the computer intervention, by the fear of the “fundamental loss of reality” within the constant process of digitalizing products of fiction and imagination.

Temptation of the “world as a simulation” concept

The possibility to convert natural phenomena or any set of visual images into databases and data streams (bits, like computer zeros and ones) actualized an old discussion of physicists and other natural scientists on whether or not our reality is just a set of math formulas.

Well-known theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler named this assumption “It from Bit”. Apparently, the external substantialness of such “objectness” opens new prospects for reflecting on the “world as a simulation” concept in its contemporary understanding, with regard to hi-tech achievements.

Some scholars believe that even the universe may probably be some giant computer simulation (such conceptual basis of world structure organically fits into the fantastic and philosophical plot of the *Matrix*). Despite the fact that this idea conflicts with our sensory experience, such assumption has a number of followers among the researchers.

One of the supporters of the hypothesis about the simulation as a basis of our world is George Smoot, an American astrophysicist and a Nobel laureate, who defends the idea that humans are totally simulated creatures, being instead the da-

ta flows, like the characters of a video game. Considering the prospective progress in computer and information technologies in the upcoming decades, such assumption would not be too daring. And the more so—taking into account the persuasiveness of the virtual world of contemporary video games and their heroes, who realistically interact with the player. Instead, the opponents object: If we really exist inside simulation, the possibility to explore the boundaries of this “matrix” from the outside is unlikely, because our very lives and our brains are simulations as well, which react on stimuli irrespective to the nature of the impulse. Therefore, both contradicting theories could be neither proved, nor disproved. Yet, both hypotheses are not more than surmises. That is why the apologists for both theories seek for unassailable arguments. The followers of the theory of simulative nature of the universe try to discover the “program bugs” introduced by the “instance” of a higher level, considering explorations in terms of compromising the canons of classical physics, basing on the discoveries in quantum mechanics, wave mechanics, laws of motion of microparticles, etc.

Among those not seeing any sense in verifying the simulative or materialistic bases of existence of our world is a Harvard physicist Lisa Randall, who reckons that confirming the total simulative nature of the universe does not change anything in studying and perceiving the world. [3, p. 28]

Whatever would be the conclusions of the experts in cosmology, physics, mathematics and a number of quasi-scientific disciplines, it is hardly deniable that cinematography, primarily digital video, attempts to solve these ontological issues in its own visually persuasive manner, sometimes outpacing the scholars of natural sciences.

In some sense, the formation of digital sight, where the edge between the real world and irreality, between knowledge and faith, science and fiction, is linked with the model of life as a game. This phase of ethical and aesthetical infantilism of digitograph bears strong associations with the cinema’s “coming of age,” when it “finished” literature, scientific groundwork, adapting different plots in a naive, primitivized versions. Moreover, what prevail are the awful predictions, the on-screen embodiments of concealed and evident fears of humanity. This list comprises of anti-utopias and post-apocalyptic futuristic films depicting catastrophes that wipe out most of humankind due to: alien invasion (*They Live*, *Metro 2033*, *World Invasion: Battle Los Angeles*), technogenic causes (*Terminator*), natural disasters (*Waterworld*), pandemics (*I Am Legend*). At times, the creators of science fiction films, predicting future pick up some quite paradoxical sci-fi ideas that conceptualize different world models, for instance: the image of chaotic, variable time-space or the synergetic model of the universe, most popular as of today, directly linked to the quantum theory. According to the postulates of quantum mechanics, the uncertainty principle underlies the nature of physical reality. This statement is clarified by Stephen Hawking, a contemporary researcher of quantum theory, who also excelled at communicating science to the public: “The universe rolls the dice all the time to find out what happens next; it does

not have a unified plot, as one would assume. On the contrary, the universe incorporates all possible plots—each with certain probability.” [4, p. 3].

And while physicists and mathematicians work on conjoining Einstein’s theory of relativity with the theories of Feynman and Hawking, digitograph produces the on-screen versions of stories’ variability, each having some probability to be realized—depending on the combination of numerous influences of seemingly unimportant factors. This phenomenon, proclaimed by the STEM disciplines, has been repeatedly exploited in the works of art. “It has been said that something as small as the flutter of a butterfly’s wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world”, such perfect image-bearing illustration of the chaos theory was chosen as an epigraph for the *Butterfly Effect* film (2004, directed by Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber), where the leading character returns to his mother’s womb to commit suicide. This situation provides an equivalent to the well-known paradox, formulated by the physicists, “What would happen if you revert to the past and kill your own grandfather even before he conceives your father?” [4, p. 143]

The scientists often view this aporia as a counter instance that ruins the very possibility of time travel. Digitograph likes to form the simulacra of his own, based on the quasi-scientific concepts, adapting them as the fantasy, science fiction and philosophical films. The films *Déjà Vu*, *The Fountain*, *Avatar* could serve as the examples.

While simulating the tectonic processes happening in the depth of human psyche, the act of perception should be considered one of its dominating aspects that is vividly illustrated by the David Lynch films. After the *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) the director clearly concentrated on the *Inland Empire* (2007), where changes of images within or outside our consciousness are the imitations/simulations of the inner tectonic processes. Since the perception of the world for the author, characters, viewer would be different, these films presume that no definite time-space interpretations within the set system of coordinates are present. The world is presented as unknowable. The reality—as a discourse of problems. The experts in perception psychology, including John Suler, who specializes in psychoanalytic cyberpsychology and researches basic psychological characteristics of the virtual space, describe the cyberspace as an environment, capable of provoking transformations in conscious states, with the signature feeling of the altered state of mind: “Everything happening while in it, is perceived as real—sometimes even more real than reality itself” [5, p. 98]. Therefore, it could be concluded that after reproducing the processes of thinking and perception of the world (“outer world as the inner” and “inner state of the person on screen”) screen evolved to the deeper levels of subjectivity. The focus has been put on visualization of the other variative continuum—*irrational schizo-flow* (term coined by Deleuze and Guattari) by stating fatal diffusion of boundaries between the virtual and real as the main reason for transforming the biosocial nature of man and of human higher mental functions.

In summary, some conclusions could be made.

The socio-cultural existence has experienced significant changes as a result of vast simulacra expansion—being illusions and fictions, wrapped up in the technologically perfected digital “cover”. For example, the virtual–digital art sphere turned into the fruitful soil for the various visually persuasive fictions. This sphere is the newest phenomenon that requires systematical consideration from the aesthetical, philosophical, psychological and other points of view.

From the one hand, it is a breakthrough within the information science: the innovative technologies allow the most possible immersion into the virtual reality, where consumer/person may experience the flow of life in a completely new manner, to change the parameters of one’s own corporality (up to the “escape from one’s own body”).

From the other hand, what may be observed is the grad-

ual drift towards the virtual simulation of the live/existence itself, towards the falsification of the person’s activity within the physical, business, psychological, sexual-erotic, sensual, and other fields, achieved by the direct stimulation of the neurons of the brain. The vivid illustration of that would be extensive circulation of such concepts as “virtual relationship”, “virtual sex”, “virtual money”, “virtual journey”, etc. in the everyday life. By offering a surrogate of existence, full of events, the visually persuasive flow of simulations (of digitograph or interactive computer games, etc.) practically induces a person into a quasi-schizophrenic state that conceals a real danger of totally dissolving the user’s mentality in the cyberspace, while the biological body stays in the actual world. Such gap between the mental and corporal, when the soul as if “flies off” into the behind-the-screen virtuality, in a way questions the time and space of the physical existence.

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Зубавіна І. Б.

[Re]анімація симулякра. Digitograph

Анотація. Термін «симулякр» відомий ще від латинських перекладів Платона, коли simulacrum означав просто зображення, картинку, репрезентацію. Так було до оновлення змісту цього поняття Жаном Бодрійяром. Нині симулякр є одним із ключових понять у теорії постмодернізму. Розуміємо його як псевдоріч, порожню форму, копію без оригіналу. В сучасному світі, дедалі більше насиченому технологіями, стала звичною заміна реальності фейком (у моді, політиці, рекламі, розвагах тощо). Культура надає помітну перевагу симуляціям. Серед всіх категорій симулякрів ми зупинимось насамперед на цифровому відео — дигітографі — сфері розриву шаблонів, що найбільш переконливо унаочнює «фотографічно реалістичні» віртуальні вигадки, визначаючи новий тип достовірності при сприйнятті екранних ілюзій, змінюючи психологію сучасної людини.

Ключові слова: симулякр, цифрове відео, дигітограф, екранна ілюзія, віртуальна реальність, кіберпростір, гіперреальність, психологія сприйняття, вищі психічні функції.

Зубавина И. Б.

[Re]анимация симулякра. Digitograph

Аннотация. Термин «симулякр» известен еще со времен латинских переводов Платона, где simulacrum означал просто изображение, картинку, репрезентацию. Такое толкование существовало до обновления смысла этого понятия Жаном Бодрийяром. В настоящее время симулякр является одним из ключевых понятий в теории постмодернизма. Понимаем его как псевдовещь, пустую форму, копию без оригинала. В современном мире, все более насыщенном технологиями, стала привычной подмена реальности фейком (в моде, политике, рекламе, развлечениях и так далее). Культура отдает заметное предпочтение симуляциям. Среди всех категорий симуляций мы остановимся прежде всего на цифровом видео — дигитографе — сфере разрыва шаблонов, которая наиболее убедительно иллюстрирует «фотографически реалистичные» виртуальные выдумки, определяя новый тип достоверности при восприятии экранных иллюзий, изменяющий психологию современного человека.

Ключевые слова: симулякр, цифровое видео, дигитограф, экранная иллюзия, виртуальная реальность, киберпространство, гиперреальность, психология восприятия, высшие психические функции.