



# What headPhones Quarterly

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What are the **implications** of the **culture of simulation** and the notion of the **simulacra** to the supposed **true reality**?

I was looking for a pair of “cans” (large DJ style headphones). They had to be large, comfortable and precise to the extreme. I purchased a pair of Sennheiser HD595’s, the thought of them in pulsing with music gave me a thrill (yes, I am a self-professed audiophile).

When the moment came to finally put them on, I felt the experience to be flawed. They were large, bordering on comical; the discomfort of the weight on my head outweighed the soft felt used for lining and the acoustic fidelity was in no way an ultimate audio experience.

I could not help but realise the process of my purchase symbolised the environment of the late capitalist era we live in. An era where the mass culturally fuelled simulation of anything outweighs the eventual physical experience of it, where the copy in our minds provides greater stimulation than the object in our hands and the object of our desires, our minds eye, is to draw attention on our own narcissistic selves (I wanted to be just like the kid who listens to “doof-doof” music disturbingly loud on the train, that we all hate, but we unconsciously continue to stare at (you know the one)).

The logic of this late capitalist era of cultural simulation en mass provides us with impetus to exchange emotional security, the experience of reality and money/materialistic rewards interchangeably. Advertisements may have lost their impact but their saturation into the fabric of society has imparted a much

more deeply imbedded message into our psyche. How can we continue to resist the propagation of advertisements from far-reaching global conglomerates to “Enjoy” or “Just Do It”, pleas, which facilitate and propagate our desire to consume an image of ourselves as consumers?

Technological advancement has ensured the proverbial shrinking of the world and guaranteed the nigh impossibility of a truly virginal experience. And, in a competitive society, the urge to “keep up with Jones’s” keeps us in search of ever more stimulating simulations. The rise of mass media, film and photography has led to a crisis in the representation and status of these images – action films, self-portraits and pornography are now substitutes for the real and fame begets fame (the phenomena of celebrity).

It is impossible to discuss simulation without hyperrealism – unending simulations of simulations; the original loses sovereignty over its meaning. Like semiotics gone mad, we attribute the signs associated with simulations as feedback of the “true” reality. If we get the same emotional feedback (which leads to physical reaction) as the real thing, who is to say it is not real?

The logic of simulation, as Jean Baudrillard constructed it, concluded that the process of faking – rather than creating a reality as such - is now impossible.

*“Simulate a robbery in a large store: how to persuade security that it is a simulated robbery? There is no ‘objective’ difference: the gestures, the signs are the same as for a real robbery.”*

Simulation strikes a chord with the core meaning of Post Modernism – that nothing is original anymore – not in a physical sense, rather a socially widespread mentality - all realities have already been played out in some place, at some time, in any one of our infinitely warped minds.

In *Simulacra and Simulations* Baudrillard theorized a concept of simulation that could be based on Ferdinand de Saussure's system of signs in *Writings in General Linguistics*, where it is supposed that the signified precedes the signifier. However, Baudrillard's theory of simulation in a post modern society, its core supposition anti-symbolical, is such that the signifier - the symbol, the image, and the icon now precedes the signified, the basis of the sign, if the signified is represented at all.

Baudrillard envisioned (mentally simulated, even) in his post modern world, a society is infiltrated by mass media, mass communication and the rampant proliferation and exchange without basis, of signs. A world where capitalist sentiment has become an epidemic, and any concept of the real, or of the concept of meaning, or of history, has been eroded, containing only infinitely recursive simulacra.

As Fredric Jameson argued, in regards to the crisis in historicity of this era,

*"There no longer does seem to be any organic relationship between the American history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current, multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life"*

The reality (in an ironic sense – reality has moved towards an un-reality) is society *has* moved towards a culture where information is readily accessible and arguably available on any topic you could possibly imagine, users are able to simulate/feign experiences of a chosen holiday location, of a particular academic field, of intimate knowledge of any subject. With limitless information we can create any number of simulated realities – it is an *age of self-deification through information/knowledge*. This is a direct result of a society that fetishizes commoditization, a society that places more and more value on information, to be applied to ideas and images themselves.

Part of this is creating and/or conforming to pre-conceived notions, based on the information received from advertising. Advertising *is* information as there is no longer anything else to choose from. The recognition of a brand name (or a select range of brand names) has taken the place of choice, and at the same time the totality of it forces everyone to subconsciously go along with the process – advertising has broken society down into the most primitive survival instinct, to go with the masses and survive – the ownership of a symbol (such as Guess bag's, Apple iPod's or even Sennheiser headphones) gives status to its owner, propagating preconceived notions that the original purchase was intended for – *image is status*. This is what happens under a monopolistic mass culture.

Jorge Luis Borges possibly provides the finest metaphor of simulation in his fable about the precession of simulacra, *On Exactitude in Science*. Cartographers of the Empire have drawn up a map so exact that it encompasses the Empire itself (this is a simulacrum itself as it draws on the idea of the fictitious map with a scale of one mile to one mile in Lewis Carrol's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*). As the

strength of the Empire ebbed and flowed so did the map until, eventually, the map disintegrated along with the Empire. It was Baudrillard's argument that the people were living within the map, a simulation of reality, and the world outside of the map, the "true" reality, crumbled away from disuse.

But we have begun to move beyond Borges allegory; beyond the Second Order of Simulacra, an age of mass reproduction and crisis in representation of the original; beyond the concept of "origin" or "original" – the words "fake" or "counterfeit" no longer exist without a "real" for comparison (and the old cliché, "what is real?").

We have moved into an age of simulation without an original abstraction. A virtual reality can be mistaken for reality for all its fidelity. Music from the past can be re-mastered, edited, cleaned up and, without prior knowledge, seem like it was recorded yesterday (think of the Celine Dion/Frank Sinatra duet All the Way; and that was performed live). No longer are science fiction novels fantasizing about alternate realities and the possibilities of the future but simulating the current; the real has been absorbed into a hyper real, cybernetic universe. Information has replaced physical machinery as the means of (re) production.

As Jean Baudrillard said in a catalogue of selected work (incorrectly quoting from the Ecclesiastics),

*"The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth, which conceals that there is none.*

*The simulacrum is true."*

Simulations are a part of our society, of which, its definition is comprised of various simulacra. The classes we place others and ourselves into – social, ethnic, economic, religious and vocational – and the socially embedded moralities and laws, which we are governed by are all conceptual, intangible. We are ruled by that, which is devoid of a real foundation, of any concrete referential.

So, where does this leave us? Despairing at the impulse exchange of currency for pair of headphones, unfaithful to the self-image we desire. A simulacrum for a simulacrum, both worthless in reality, but both evoke all that is desirable in the simulated universe we live in.

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