

## **Hyper-Production / by Anneke Coppoolse**

Ultra-modern subway stations with super-fast subway trains passing by every minute; business districts full of skyscrapers, 'populated' by tie-wearing men and suit-wearing women, and fancy shopping areas with billboards and Starbucks cafes. That is the general image of contemporary Shanghai. In metropolitan world cities like Shanghai, the sky is the limit. These cities speak to your imagination; they are places of freedom, modernity and chances. But despite this cheerful appearance of contemporary metropolises, one has to understand that these cities are also places of generality and repetition. Traditions and unique expressions of culture and art do not seem to exist anymore within these modern environments.

Surrounded by hundreds of people, stuffed up in the subway train on line four, I felt very much aware of my own unique existence. I felt, I smelled and I tasted in an uncomfortable but intense way the business of the Shanghai traffic jam. When I finally had the chance to turn my head after the exodus from the subway underneath its business district Pudong, my eyes fell upon one of the subway's built-in television screens. A music video was showing, with a group of girls dancing in a hip hop style setting designed with graffiti and spotlights. But it wasn't the hip hop honeys I was used to from American music videos. Somewhat clumsily – yet wearing tops and hot-pants that were just as small and sexy as those of their American counterparts – a group of Chinese dancers showed me that even in modern China, an American concept like this could be adopted without any problems in a brand-new pop culture.

In his studies from the 80s and 90s, Jean Baudrillard claims that post-modern society left behind the imaginary that was ruled by mirror and otherness. We have entered the realm of the screen, interfaces, contiguity and networks – and most importantly within this new realm, new power structures have developed. The position of the virtual is getting stronger, and the real together with the fragile, hegemonic and capitalist West is getting weaker. The West exists within an artificially created membrane, in which all tracks of negativity in both history and the present have been wiped out in order to keep up a certain sense of general goodwill. Violence and power through money only exist on a latent level. Power on a symbolic level is by far the strongest, and is definitely manifest.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mirsepassi, Ali. 'New Geographies of Modernity.' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, No. 1 (2006): 1-3.

Authenticity does not exist in the 'copy' world we live in, according to Baudrillard. Everything is a reproduction of something else. Everything has been done before. In Baudrillard's words: 'The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced; that is the hyper-real... which is entirely in simulation.'<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard positions mass-society not as a political power, he understands it as a passive medium used for the cultural simulation of social needs, political interests and popular opinions. The mass, easily instructed by print and television media, is being absorbed in a commodified environment.<sup>3</sup>

Baudrillard understands 'hyper-reality' as a paradigm that can clarify and make explicit different contemporary, cultural conditions. Consumerism and its dependence on the value of the exchange of signs contributes to the creation of this hyper-reality. Reality has embraced the unreal at the moment that capitalist society became dependent on myth and fantasy, fictional wealth and virtual reality. But Baudrillard's theory is based mainly on a view of the West. And he once concluded that America especially had changed from a bubbling production society to a passive consumption society.<sup>4</sup> A view of the East would probably not have fitted the scope of Baudrillard's research – although today capitalism and hyper-realism cannot be denied in Eastern parts of the world.

Sociologist Ali Mirsepassi also identifies the shift from dialectical modernity to the world of networks in a more geographical manner. The transition of the binary paradigm of modernity has transformed the clear and distinct geographical world into a moving and fragmented surface. The geography of uneven development and lines of difference and hierarchy will no longer be found along stable national and international boundaries, but through fluid infra- and super-national borders.<sup>5</sup>

Nation state always served the historical institutionalisation of global capitalism. It tried to monopolise the meaning of modernity and to integrate national identity – but since its geography is fragmenting and destabilising, certain attempts never succeeded. Today, businesses and corporations tend to structure and articulate

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<sup>2</sup> European Graduate School. 'Biography: Jean Baudrillard.' *The European Graduate School, Media and Communications division*, (1997): <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Kalaidjian, Walter. 'Mainlining Postmodernism: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and the Art of Intervention.' *Postmodern Culture*, No. 3 (May, 1992): 16.

<sup>4</sup> Gonzalez, Madelena. 'The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology.' *Journal of Narrative Theory*, No. 1 (Winter 2008): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mirsepassi (2006): 4.

territories and populations directly. Nation states are becoming instruments that record and register the flows of commodities, money and population. In this context, mass migrations have become necessary for production, and borders of national sovereignty have become nothing more than bureaucratic sieves in which every attempt towards complete regulation immediately experience enormous pressure. This development has undermined the conventional practice of the nation state as a bounded territory. The full realisation of the world market inevitably means the end of imperialism and internalisation and the universalisation of intervention.<sup>6</sup>

As Baudrillard understands the West as moving towards a consumption society, China and her enormous production capacity seems to move in exactly the opposite direction. One can understand this country as 'the other' par excellence in the story, until the transformation of the new network world. And the communist state regulations possibly make the Chinese trade market even more controlled than the West has ever been. Despite this, modern Shanghai and other large Chinese cities form a big hyper-real cover for this huge production country. Taking a closer look, the big Chinese department stores full of Western products produced in China are not only built to prepare tourists and expats with a fitting modern lifestyle, but also to fulfil the Chinese desire for Armani jeans and Calvin Klein underwear. And the fake markets that you find in every Chinese city can be more or less understood as hyper-real copy worlds of the consumption bastions from the main shopping areas – because in these environments branding and lifestyle are, more than ever, a reproduction of a reproduction of a reproduction.

Even though it is chiefly Western borders that are changing into the direction of intra- and super-national frontiers, and corporations mainly tend to fragmentise the West, China is changing too. Chinese hip hop is 'the bomb'! And the Chinese government does not seem to completely stem the thundering stream of commodities, people and images. In the West, this stream is the tangible foundation of the undermining of control on ideas of nationhood, and I'm curious how this will take shape in communist China.

Societies are moving towards a reproducible 'culture'. Corporations fragmentise the world and borders become fluid. The reality is disappearing and a hyper-realistic world is growing. The free individual or man as unique 'producer' doesn't seem to exist

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<sup>6</sup> Mirsepassi (2006): 4-6.

anymore, because everything has already been done before and nothing is unique. Man can only simulate and copy. The unique individual is being sucked into a big consuming mass. If everything is a copy of something else, one has to conclude that it is not only culture that is simply a reproduction of a reproduction, but also that 'art' or autonomously 'produced' work cannot exist anymore. Together with the disappearance of the 'original', 'autonomy' seems to disappear as well. What is left is a mould in which culture can be reproduced until eternity.

Nevertheless, I understand this hyper-realistic concept as a mainly generalised conception. Even though it seems very obvious that man cannot make his own autonomous decisions within this absorbing mass, I would like to point at the difference between a hyper-realistic, reproduced experience and the personal perception of this experience. Although we cannot deny the existence of the hyper-real, it is only a new, 'old' reality. And this makes me wonder – can't it just be a general platform? Hyper-reality as a source of inspiration for every individual! Because somehow my own unique moment in a specific place in the hyper-real of the Shanghai subway traffic jam is something very personal. It is a moment that is received from the inside out. And this kernel is a unique tool that can bring an individual to something new, something that does not yet exist; not a copy but something authentic. Maybe the hyper-real is not only a universal world, but something current that can be used to create something new. Hyper-production?