

Exploring Transparency and Simulation of Reality in Postmodern Age: A Baudrillardian Reading of Etel Adnan's *The American Malady*

استكشاف الشفافية ومحاكاة الواقع في عصر ما بعد الحداثة:
قراءة بودريلاردية لكتاب "المرض الأمريكي" لإيتيل عدنان

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Abstract:

This paper aims to examine Etel Adnan's *The American Malady* from a postmodern perspective, namely using Jean Baudrillard's notions simulacra and simulations. According to Baudrillardian perspective, the hyperreal perception is intensified in the postmodern epoch. In this sense, media affects the consciousness of the subjects through simulating reality and evoking hyperreality. It produces signs known as simulacra or simulacrum: a copy similar to a reference in reality or a copy that posses no reference in reality, thus, it becomes the only reality existing. Similarly, in *The American Malady* (2009), Adnan is concerned with the influence of media and television in particular, on postmodern society. It transpired that TV provokes a falsified hyperreal version that detaches the consciousness of the audience from reality. Hence, the lack of the distinction between the real and the imaginary results the nihilism of transparency, a feeling of emptiness due to the loss of reality.

Keywords: Simulacra, Simulation, Baudrillard, postmodernism, transparency, hyperreality, *The American Malady*, Etel Adnan.

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ملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى فحص "المرض الأمريكي" لإيتيل عدنان من منظور ما بعد الحداثة ، أي باستخدام مفاهيم الاشارات والمحاكاة التي وضعها جان بودريار. وفقاً لوجهة نظره، تم تكثيف الإدراك الواقعي المفرط في حقبة ما بعد الحداثة. بهذا المعنى ، تؤثر الميديا على وعي الأشخاص من خلال محاكاة الواقع واستحضار الواقعية المفرطة ع نسخة مشابهة لمرجع في الواقع عبر نسخة لا تمتلك أي مرجع في الواقع ، وبالتالي ، تصبح الحقيقة الوحيدة الموجودة. وبالمثل ، في رواية المرض الأمريكي للكاتبة ايتيل عدنان ، تحدثت عن تأثير الإعلام والتلفزيون بشكل خاص ، وعلى مجتمع ما بعد الحداثة. حيث أن التلفزيون يثير نسخة مزيفة من الواقعية التي تفصل وعي الجمهور عن الواقع، ومن هنا فإن عدم التمييز بين الواقعي والخيالي ينتج عنه عدمية الشفافية والشعور بالفراغ بسبب فقدان الواقع بشكل خاص . ومن هنا ، فإن عدم التمييز بين الواقعي والخيالي ينتج عنه عدمية الشفافية ، والشعور بالفراغ بسبب فقدان الواقع.

الكلمات المتاحة: محاكاة ، بودريار، ما بعد الحداثة ، الشفافية ، الواقعية الفائقة ، المرض الأمريكي ال ، ايتيل عدنان

1. Introduction :

In his book *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (Hi) Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism*, William Slocombe fosters the claim that "it is indeed difficult to find meaning, or even accept that there is meaning, in a century that saw the birth of the atomic bomb and its use, racial genocide on an unprecedented scale"(2009, p.106). During Second World War, the use of the atomic bomb, ironically the zenith of the human genius, results in the murder of millions of lives shaping a world of terror and apprehension. Hence, these horrific events gave people a strong ground to doubt the authenticity of the divine powers supposed to protect the humankind. It also invited them to question the universal values assumed to grant significance to their existence .

Despite the continuous human endeavors to search for meaning, the attitude towards existence shifts to become more pessimistic signaling the beginning of the postmodern age. Woodward states argues that: "Postmodernism as a mode of thought is often accused of being nihilistic, and postmodernity is often seen as a nihilistic state of society" (2002, p.51)

Actually, postmodernism dismantles the fundamental conceptions that once have been taken for granted as the narratives that explain the world to human beings such as politics, religion and history. In this context, Jean Francois Leotard describes postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives", and goes on to ask "Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (1984, p.XXV)

Indeed, some critics discard postmodernism because it connotes the dissolution of the western values and morals. Anthony Harrigan comments that: “the essence of postmodernism is nihilism-the denial of any meaning or purpose in existence-or, more exactly, the triumph of nihilism in societies of the western world. It is a phenomenon identical with atheism as it denies the existence of any permanent ethical order” (2009, p.88).

Marxists also contend that the postmodern capitalist society continues to decline because “it violates all defensible conceptions of a rational moral order” (Macintyre, 1993, p.4). In addition, Feminists also lament postmodernism because “it is simply another crisis in masculine being and knowing, a clash of the Titans” (1993, p.136). All of these critics agree that postmodernism destroys the pillars that grant order to the western society.

Indeed, the postmodern movement fosters a strong reaction against the ideologies of modernism. However, the attitude of postmodernism towards modernism is controversial. Some critics claim that postmodernism is a radical break from modernism which dates back to the end of the 1950’s or the early 1960’s. Others see postmodernism as being a complex cultural phenomenon related to different aspects of contemporary life including literature, art, philosophy, history, linguistics, economics, architecture and fiction .

A set of definitions are given to the cultural concept of postmodernism by several theoreticians including Jean-François Leotard, Jürgen Habermas and Frederic Jameson. For instance, Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* argues that there is a rupture between modernism and postmodernism:

The end of labor. The end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic ... this historical and social mutation is legible at every level. In this way the era of simulation is announced everywhere ... everywhere we see the genesis of simulacra” (2016, p.30).

The precedent economic system characterized as being a mode of production alters drastically in the sense that it becomes no longer a relation between owners of modes’ productions and laborers. That is to say, in the modern period, the private owners used to monopolize the means of production to make financial profits exploiting by this transaction the bodies of the workers under ‘the capitalist system’. Nonetheless, in the postmodern age, ‘the simulacrum’ which is “the generation by models of a real without origin” (Baudrillard, 1994, p.170), that is to say, an imaginary copy of reality generated via technology and media, determines a new social system where the image precedes reality. Therefore, Baudrillard assumes the occurrence of a drastic break in history establishing the end of the modern era

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and the starting of a postmodern era, dominated by the simulation of reality, exercised basically by technology and media.

Among the postmodern writers who were interested in the postmodern cultural and social dilemmas is the American- Syrian writer Etel Adnan. She was born in 1925 in Beirut to a Greek mother and a Syrian father. Etel studied in the Sorbonne University of Paris where she got a degree in philosophy and then she becomes a poet, essayist and also a visual artist. Another significant achievement to Etel is the publication of *Sitt Marie Rose* (2011) which was also awarded the France-Pays Arabes. Her piece of prose *Master of the Eclipse* (2010) also marked an international appeal and gratification for it obtained the Arab American Book Awards. It pays a close attention the influence of media on reality in the postmodern society.

If we assume that, under the postmodern condition, fiction and reality are blurred in the consciousness of the subjects, so how the meaning of reality is perceived and does it disappear completely? Hypothetically, the postmodern subject suffers a deterritorialization from the world's reality.

In this respect, this article bridges the gap between postmodernism and media studies. Then, it examines Etel Adnan's fiction from a postmodern perspective by drawing upon Jean Baudrillard's criticism, in particular, this study lies in reading notions of "Simulacra" and "Simulations" in Etel Adnan's *The American Malady*, a short story within her book *Master of the Eclipse*.

2 .Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation:

Indeed, a drastic swerve of reality perception prevails in the postmodern age. Jean Baudrillard's publication *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) explains that the sign system constructed by the empire of mass media surpasses reality. These signs are called "simulacra" and they represent a misleading version of reality. Simulacra has three orders and it develops gradually in the span before, in the middle and after the era of modernism:

- The first order of simulacrum originates at the beginning of the modern period and it represents a copy or an image that possesses a specific reference in reality.
- The second order of simulacrum signifies the overlap between reality and a falsified image of reality due to the rise of photography and the cinema that emerges out of the boom of the Industrial Revolution .

-The third order of simulacrum monopolizes the postmodern era which witnesses an unprecedented revolution that permits simulacra to surpass its original reference. Therefore, Baudrillard emphasizes that in the postmodern age, the society becomes manipulated by the third order of simulacra:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: hyperreality. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra. (1994, p.1).

To put it other words, Baudrillard clarifies that in the third order of simulacrum the map no longer simulates the geographic characteristics of a certain territory supposedly being a constant reference in reality. Yet, it becomes a map without a real territory or a simulacrum without a reference in reality or as it is labelled in Baudrillard's words 'pure simulacra'. The third order of simulacra spreads a new shape of nihilism that is manifested through "the destruction of the real" (2010, p.63). That is to say, the emergence of the hyperreal state due to media simulations distorts the meaning of reality in the consciousness of the postmodern individual.

3. Ecstasy and Inertia:

In effect, Jean Baudrillard clarifies that technology in the postmodern age shapes a hyperreal world that absorbs the meaning of reality, in the sense that, it deprives the subject from achieving the real through the process of simulation. Therefore, simulacra predominate and reach the status of 'ecstasy', on the contrary, the postmodern subject reaches a status of 'inertia'. As being individuals in a postmodern world, *Master of the Eclipse's* characters mark a status of inertia, as they become depressed or more accurately in Baudrillardian terms 'melancholic'. In describing his friend Kate, the narrator states: "when I first saw her there was a sense of deep melancholy about her, which could have been worrisome" (2009, p.105). Baudrillard explains the term melancholia as "the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning" and believes that "We are all melancholic" (1994, p.162). Hence, 'melancholia' and 'inertia' are two basic aspects of the postmodern man's behavior who is devoid of meaning due to the process of simulation exercised through the intervention of technology.

Indeed, we are bombarded with pictures and symbols on a quotidian basis. Trying to spend time without a mobile phone or computer is a terrific way to see how much we rely on

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networks. It is possible that many people would assume this interruption as a psychological torture. In this sense, technology and media have conquered our homes and disconnected us from reality. Subsequently, a virtual representation of reality has been altered and beautified .

4. The Simulation of Reality:

In *The American Malady*, the narrator is preoccupied with the relationship between mass media events and the spectator, especially television shows and movies. Every day there was an obsession with a poisonous leak, with the news. Interestingly, there were no mentions of this phenomenon. It was nothing more than a television show. Only those who were directly engaged in these negative news seemed to be psychologically harmed as “Everything makes “news” nowadays. Newspapers, television, the radio, all follow events the way a hunting dog follows the game and bring back in its muzzle a dying bird. And people have never been as little informed as they are now (2009, p.74). Interestingly, the more means of communication are developed the more they became less efficient.

Hence, the narrator continues criticizing media for its lack of effectiveness and for being unreliable medium of information; it squeezes down the real time of events occurrence into few seconds. In this respect , the narrator mentions: “Camel caravans were much more reliable lines of communication than the stupid reporting that allows three minutes for an earthquake, a few seconds for the landing of a Saudi King, a minute and a half for the bombing of an Iraqi nuclear power plant, a bombing that in real time took twenty seconds” (ibid).

Due to the intermediary of media signals, the postmodern subject experiences an instability of meaning due to the interchange of reality with simulation, thus the substitution of the real with the unreal in postmodern society. Consequently, the universal standards for reality judgment are challenged by series of pictures that represent empty indications outside media system. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, media, according to Baudrillard, deceives the audience by transmitting visuals, which represent just a simulation or a copy of reality. Thus, the audience's ability to distinguish between what is genuine and what is not is weakened .

4.1. The Simulation of War Events:

Again, in *The American Malady*, journalists falsifies the truth about war secrets in media and deceives the audience through subjective contradictory versions. The narrator states: “Foreign journalists remain foreign to these matters. They don't know that we vomit in

our planes as soon as we enter our country's air space, because of all the contradictions at war within our stomachs" (Etel, 2009, p.76). The narrator continues describing the manipulation of horrific world events in media. They captures images of "Karantina massacre, of Tel Zaatar's siege, of the shelling of Ashrafieh, of the turmoil in Zahleh ...they have created the particular aesthetics of the Arab-Mediterranean wars" (ibid). Thus, war is presented as an art, an image, biased and embellished as a TV performance as "TV journalists know that they drive the most famous movie directors crazy with envy because they are the authors as well as the actors of an ongoing worldwide performance" (Etel, 2009, p.76). The distortion of reality is made possible because:

The era of simulation is everywhere ... the interchangeability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion; of the right and the left in politics; of the true and false in every media; of the useful and the useless at the level of objects; and of nature and culture at every level of meaning. All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of civilization of moral, aesthetic, specializes and practical judgment, vanish in our system of images and signs" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.131).

Similarly, in *The American Malady*, television transforms apocalyptic events into a dream as previously explained earlier; or into simulacrum, a copy of reality, equally transformed by journalists into a reality accepted by the audience .

Therefore, values, morals, is destabilized in the middle of media images. A strong instance is "The entertainment (that) goes on. On nights when on Channel 4 or 5 nobody dies in Somalia or in Elsalvador , children refuse to eat their soup, parents get upset and the family meal is spoiled. Television transforms events into dreams and in their turn, journalists' dreams become reality" (Etel,2009, p.74). It is noteworthy that the tremendous effect of mass media on the public and individual daily life is highly addressed when criticizing the western culture, particularly the American culture. The latter explains the author's title choice: "The American Malady", an eye catching expression that symbolizes the foolish obsession of Americans with media news; in addition, they became interested in superficial daily topics and overlook serious distressing subject matters like human beings starving in Somalia or dying in Elsalvador. Hence, the society loses its purpose of existence and becomes shallow as a result of media's distortion of reality.

In her article "On Speed and Ecstasy: Paul Virilio's the aesthetics of disappearance and the Rhetoric of Media", Sandy Baldwin supports Virilio's ideas concerned with the relationship between speed and media. She sates that "Virilio's uses speed to explain media,

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arriving at something like the following: the aesthetics of immediate perception disappear through dromological media techniques, replaced instead by proliferating fantastical telepresent real-time images, and leading ultimately to a complete derealization of the world” (2002, p.134). The proliferated images transmitted through media affect the human consciousness, in particular the human five senses that submit to the consecutive images. Consequently, the real collapses and the subject is devoured by the hyperreal; thus, he experiences what a derealization of the world. This tremendous media effect is highly apparent when the narrator describes her immersion in the movie about the Gulf war: “while drinking coffee I am in the midst of the Gulf War: a movie is passing in front of my eyes but the images are not in black and white, they are the color of my skin” (Etel, 2009, p.5)

5. Media and Consumerism:

In addition, it is noteworthy that media and consumerism are two faces of the same coin since media is a key player in the capitalist system dominance. Advertisements and television programs are used in media to persuade consumers to purchase products. In “Media in Consumer culture: an Introduction”, Mehita Iqani advances the claim that “Two key characteristics of the contemporary age of late capitalism are that it is saturated with media texts and technologies, and that it is fundamentally organized around a consumer economy. We live in the age of consumption; we live in the age of media” (2012, p.1).

Indeed, the capitalist system originates a state of delirium to the consumer's mind as he is enmeshed in the world of commodities and consumerism, inducing him to buy. The supermarket constitutes a place of fantasy for the customer where he can possess everything he needs. Furthermore, the glamour of the capitalist system makes the postmodern subject enjoy the ecstasy of getting an eternal life. Similarly, media involves the spectators in a dream.

6. Hyperreality and the Nihilism of Transparency:

‘Hyperreal’ is a term initiated by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, to describe the postmodern world in which technology interferes with the boundaries between reality and imagination. There are several ways in which media manipulates reality via

simulation, resulting in what is known as an “artificial idealized representation of reality that is really simply a fabricated duplicate of reality” (2009, p.34). Interestingly, Baudrillard refers that “the simulacrum is never what hides the truth-it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (2009, p.1)

In describing the apocalyptic atmosphere in Beirut, the narrator states: “Beirut isn’t only a privileged laboratory for urban Guerrillas but also a darn good movie lab. Hollywood, Italy, Tokyo cannot compete for realism with the picture taken of Arab body, still wearing its underwear that a taxicab filled with passengers was carrying on its roof on its way to the morgue” (2009, p.77). This simulation merges the consciousness of the audience in a mythical spectacle that hides the dark depth of the Lebanese war. Thus, simulation conquers the postmodern existence as it even falsifies the atrocities of the war and transforms it into an enhanced TV show, so the masses will watch the intended version of the story and not reality .

In his article titled "On Nihilism" in which Baudrillard claims that: “nihilism no longer wears the dark, Wagnerian, Spenglerian, fuliginous colors of the end of century. It no longer comes from a Weltanschauung of decadences nor from a metaphysical radicalism born of the death of God and of all the consequences that must be taken from this death. Today’s nihilism is one of transparency” (1994, p.159). In other words, the pre-modern assumptions about nihilism that deny the presence of God are no longer the concern, since an extreme type of nihilism known as "the nihilism of transparency" has emerged in the postmodern era. Postmodern society distributes a broad lack of distinction between reality and the imaginary, which may lead to the preference of the imagined over reality. Thus, the term 'epistemological nihilism' is coined to describe the loss of reality.

7. Conclusion:

To conclude, Etel through her piece *The American Malady* expresses her concerns about the state of the postmodern subject. Mainly, the crucial problem is the destabilization of reality due to the intervention of media signs that simulate reality and provides a version which mostly more accepted than reality itself. As a consequence, the postmodern subject experience what is called the nihilism of transparency, a new version of nihilism that is far distant than the traditional one. It is no longer about the absence of God, but about the disappearance of the reality and its replacement with the imaginary .

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