

Reality on the Comeback Trail

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This past semester I taught a class called "Media Theory." Toward the end, my students grappled with the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's argument that "reality" is passe, that there is simply no such thing anymore.

All that remains in our media-soaked culture, Baudrillard says, are simulations of simulations. He focuses on Disneyland, not because Disneyland itself is a fake world, but because its purpose is to disguise the fact that all of southern California is a fake world.

The real delusion - as you leave the parking lot at the amusement park and head to Burger King, or Wal-Mart, or home - is that you are heading back into real life.

Baudrillard has a point. There is almost no possible human experience in the contemporary world that is not mediated: experienced in the media or as if through the media: seen at a distance, through multiple layers of irony and self-awareness.

One of 1999's obsessions was the movie *The Matrix*, a virtual reality exploring virtual reality.

The Columbine killers, it has become apparent with the release of the video tapes they made just before the attack, were dedicated to living out video games and becoming television celebrities. They managed to do both.

American politics is a simulation of public discourse and public concern.

When George W. Bush or Al Gore says "not a single child can be left behind," they are producing a representative sample of American political discourse: it's simultaneously false (many children will be left behind no matter who is elected),

obvious (no one could possibly disagree with the basic sentiment it expresses), and empty (simply repeated by rote after being swiped from somebody else's televised speech).

But a funny thing happened on the way to the simulacrum. I don't think a single one of my students bought Baudrillard.

They all thought there was something genuine underneath the strata of ersatz. Reality is making a comeback.

After all, *The Matrix* is about a revolution, led by a metaphysician named Mobius, against simulation. Guerrillas used to fight for Marxism-Leninism.

These days they fight for reality. If the movie has a point at all, it's that fakery is bad and authenticity is good: *The Matrix* is an anti-postmodern movie if ever there was one.

In politics, people are so tired of the scripts and the empty catch-phrases that the biggest story has been the electorate's yearning for authenticity: the candidates who have it (Bradley and McCain) have jumped into serious contention not because of their positions on the issues but simply because they seem more real than the automata that oppose them.

When a reporter asked McCain, after his campaign finance summit with Bradley, whether he'd ever been influenced by large contributions, he said yes. Suddenly, I didn't feel like politics had to be a hallucination.

If there's a lesson to be learned from Harris and Klebold's media-soaked shooting spree, it's that there's all the difference in the world between fantasy and reality.

If you were the parent of one of the victims, I don't think you'd be puzzled about whether your child's life was real or not, or, for that matter, about the reality of your

own feelings, though these have been processed for months by the media.

If the shooters lost track of the distinction between reality and television, that just shows how absolutely necessary it is to keep the difference straight.

It may be that the Bible of the coming generation will be Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things*, a veneration and recovery of real land and real emotion.

Purdy, a twentysomething from rural West Virginia whose book has been widely reviled by his elders, writes with a deep lack of irony about how our culture has become too ironic, too distanced from its own experience.

He issues a call back to the real in prose as sturdy as the draught horses the Amish around here use to plow their fields.

The other night I went to the Chameleon Club in Lancaster and saw a nationally acclaimed band called the Innocence Mission.

Lead singer Karen Peris, dressed modestly and strumming an acoustic guitar, sang in an incredibly sweet soprano about nature and about God.

Throughout, she smiled a smile so sincere that it was heart-rending. The show ended with a version of "Silent Night," delivered utterly without irony. Out of innocence and sincerity, the band brought

forth an intense beauty, and the very young audience was inspired.

Maybe I'm too soaked in media and media theory to believe in the Innocence Mission, too sinful and cynical to believe in Mobius, in McCain, in Purdy, in reality. But Lord knows I want to.

Ponderables

Just remember...if the world didn't suck, we'd all fall off.



As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in public schools.



A fine is a tax for doing wrong.
A tax is a fine for doing well.



Everybody lies, but it doesn't matter since nobody listens.



Light travels faster than sound.
This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak.

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