

Return upon Return*

And then coming back was the worst thing you ever did

We are living in a new world: A new world that has never existed before. History can no longer repeat itself in grand narratives. It is no longer an activation of social and individual past experiences. We are writing new stories and new histories, establishing brand new grand narratives. The decay is over: the decay that has been announced within post-modernist trend.

We are living in a new world made of new realities. Is it overly exciting or utterly thrilling? Does it provide the new grounds for optimism and hope or does it cause fear and anxiety?

We are living in a new world of new relations, associations, claims, resistances, territories and assumptions. It is a new world, and how brave is it? Did the two major figures of dystopia (Huxley and Orwell) come together in real?

In this new world, what is the formulation of the 'real'?

The real that has been engraved with the admiration of simulation and simulacra in the 90s, has come back. The tricotomy of its disappearance, its return and its presence came through a sequence of destruction: The Gulf War, 9/11, Iraq War.

The Gulf War, as the first one screened on televisions, broadcasted in colour, has formed the ground of the 'as if'. The patriot missiles meeting rockets upon the sky of darkened cities has been broadcasted all over the news. The audience, who was not living in those regions of conflict and tension, has received these images as if it was watching a computer game: as if someone was playing a basic game on a machine, but not in real. The fact that lives were lost, a civilisation was destroyed, places were demolished, became mere abstraction. As if nothing was actually taking place. As if we were all listening to a sci-fi story from our future descendants. Baudrillard wrote a trilogy of essays to *Libération* and *The Guardian*, before, during and after the war. He said: "The Gulf War will not; is not; did not take place" in three steps.** The essays were not denials of the violence that was taking place, nor rejections of losses; they pointed out another form of reality: a masquerade of the real. A war, for the first time in human civilisation, was being maintained through maps and information gathered from satellites or neighbouring countries. The destructive occupation did not only take over the land but also occupied the social domain. "Life" has been mapped, charted, theorized. What the rockets destroyed were no longer lives but power structures. The actions taken during the war were akin to



Image Source: blog.analogmedium.com

acts taken whilst playing a cardboard game. Furthermore, the information broadcasted through the media was highly re-edited and manipulated. Loads of informations were received but they failed to produce knowledge about what was really happening. The distanciation of what was really taking place and what was visually experienced had a relieving effect. The audience of destruction did no longer need to feel, try to understand and learn the reality of things. As Baudrillard points out, the society of production has become an admirer of simulation and seduction of images transmitted through the media. There remains no responsibility of being a social being and caring for the other.

For longer than a decade the praising of simulation and simulacra gave birth to several technological innovations, which defined virtual reality. The theories of fiction simulated, grasped, and anticipated what was happening and what has happened and what else could take place. On the peak of flirting with Tamagotchis and connecting through wires, consuming through mechanical spatialisations, the two planes came crashing into the castles of power in the US. The event that took place on September 11th in New York has revolted the ongoing fantasy of the simulation. What was broadcasted on media channels was not the announcement of Spielberg's latest sci-fi action movie.

Slavoj Žižek's series of essays, published in the aftermath of the event analysed what actually happened on 9/11 and welcomed its readers to the desert of the real. Žižek conceptualised what took place in the aesthetics of the political and social domain in the last ten years and reformulated what a plane crash could mean in 9/11's recent future. Žižek's reading focuses on several factualities, one of among is: 'virtual is real.' Žižek supports his argument on 'virtual being real' by the example of Tamagotchis. The virtual pets almost every child owned in the late 90s and looked after not only through feeding them virtually but also through giving love and affection via pressing several buttons. The domain of abstraction has increased its volume by involving sensations rather than only facts and actions. The feeling of the real has shifted through associations of the subject to the object. Hence the materiality of relations became prior to the emotionality of subjectivities. With 9/11 the common

mourning for the real started. Not only Žižek but also many other writers, theoreticians, artists, activists began to ask for 'the real' to come back. Hal Foster announced its return to the domain of arts by his renowned book *The Return of the Real*, where he analysed and conceptualised repetition as an enactment of questing the real. He refers to simulation and simulacrum in a discreet basis of questioning the potential of repeating the trauma of the real. He projects his arguments on the domain of arts, art practice and the artist as the creator of imagery. Today, we are experiencing a density of documentaries in exhibitions. The return of the real to arts came with the return of documentary practice in art making. The documentaries I mention here, are not of simple information domains but they screen the atrocities of many kinds, of what is really happening in some geography. The return of the documentary shall be related with the position of trauma: The trauma that springs from not being capable to see the whole picture, to get to know what is really happening at the same time the trauma of not taking an active enrolment in the construction of the real. Rather than the fictionalisation of issues, it became/or it is momentarily preferred to receive one-to-one corresponding documentation. This can be the result of craving for information, which can be related to the real, interpreted as the real. 9/11 has not only brought back the mourning for the real but also the trauma of being in the real, which implies an urgency of security and control in Western societies. The regulative mode of laws and policies has been upgraded by authoritarian orders. Restrictions on movement and exchange have started to be received positively rather than as limitations of freedom. A priori acceptances start to cover the skies of civilisations on how to live and what to believe in.

The prejudices and presumptions against the absolute other on the other being an enemy to existing structures have supported another destructive event, the third one in the trilogy: The Iraq War. Besides the main reasons of oil and power, the war is actually a war started off against the cliché Other. Against the unknown and unwanted opponent of Western thought. It is an ongoing war, different to the former two examples. It is a war human kind has not witnessed before: A war on the everyday. A war that does not end. Will not end.

I feel a strong connection between our relation to the real today and a fiction novel by Stephen King. *Pet Sematary*, also adapted to screens by Mary Lambert, takes place in a small town, with a small cemetery near by. The cemetery is not like any other, but a mysterious one. The soil can revive the dead. It is mostly used for pets, the beloved animals of the household. The story starts with the loss of a cat. The common wish of bringing her back to life leads the protagonist to go and bury her in that special cemetery. And the cat comes back, for real. A loss is always a loss, small or big. The wonder of the cat coming back convinces a young couple to revive their young son, who had been killed by a

truck. The ones once alive but gone dead come back to life again. But it is here, where the tension starts. Since the ones that come back have slightly changed, and become more aggressive and violent. They have been bewildered. They look the same, but no longer behave the same.

What is real 'real'? How can we recognize it? It is not at the level of the fact that now you are real and holding this text and reading these words. It is at the level of understanding and reflecting upon what is taking place, right now, in the past and in the future, in the social domain. According to Lacan, the real is a complex set of constructions and the individual positioning does not correspond to but can intersect with it. It is through the processes of perception and evaluation in relation to subjective experiences. But what if the experiences are preset and predefined? How can we then talk about a duality of individuality and society? What if the 'everyday' is mapped and charted? What if everything we see and experience is already pre-defined? What if we are only living through a set of traumas and we name them real? It is no longer romanticism of a sovereign or evil genius it is the human kind over human kind. The real is here with its objecthood, with its territories of divided societies, movements and relations. Material real has been always here and will always be. What is not like it was before? The way people have related to the society they live in is being defined within the restrictions of ideologies and fanaticisms. We produce subjective truths that fit in the commonality of our living spheres. Our relations to truths have become fetishised. We are heading towards societies with fanatic ideologies. Let this be expressed by the new right in Europe or the rise of conservatism in the Middle East. Both are fundamentalist ideologies with different objectives. A togetherness of these two is unimaginable.

The real, which has been engraved in the 90's is out of where it was, is back in the 'everyday'. And something is in the air: the real is not how it was before. Something has happened. Something is happening. We believe that it must be the real that has left, and returned. The worst is that we are more in need of believing in its return rather than to look at how it returned. Something is changing, from the image of the real to the real itself. Something is on the move, let this be the introduction of new concepts to civilisation such as virtuality or let this be the imbalance of sources, for whichever is the case, there is a need of looking at what we produce and what it all means.***



Image Source: www.best-horror-movies.com

*For this piece, I am borrowing the title from Jean Francois Lyotard, although the content of this piece has no correlation with Lyotard's text. I have allowed myself to interpret the title as a prologue to 'real'.

**Baudrillard was referring to the play by Jean Giraudoux on Trojan War.

***For this piece, I have chosen the three destructive events because of their relation to the imagery produced in each of their aftermath. Visuality has changed significantly in relation to the three events I example.