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The desire for omnipotence and the illusion of hyperreality: the strange case of the virtual hostess

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Abstract

The following headlines are a selection of those that appeared in today's newspapers in Italy: *The virtual hostess arrives at the airport*¹, *Bologna Airport launches the virtual hostess*², *The virtual hostess arrives at Marconi Airport*³, *Bologna: virtual hostess, motion-activated by people*⁴.

What surprises us about this story? At a time of major scientific discoveries in the fields of technology and computers, with frequent launches of innovative IT products in the market, what is so curious about this news?

Let us try to understand what the virtual hostess is.

It is a woman (?), although it might be better described as a computer facility, which uses holographic images and is activated when people approach, providing different types of information in Italian and English. Its technology⁵ offers services that aim to enhance the operating efficiency of information services and increase passenger satisfaction by reducing waiting times⁶.

The special feature of this *machine* is its appearance, as the virtual hostess has the face of an actual member of staff at the airport.

Jean Baudrillard would certainly have smiled on hearing this news and said: *I told you so!*

Indeed, the virtual hostess is an example of what Baudrillard defined as third-order simulacra. These true simulacra are copies that destroy reality and cause a form of void, a general nothingness that even encompasses the subject (Baudrillard, 1976).

Keywords: virtual hostess, simulacrum, hyperreality

1. The precession and aspects of the simulacrum

Let us briefly summarise the distinction that Baudrillard makes between the different types of simulacra in one of his most famous works (*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976). The author claims that simulacra have changed (*precession of simulacra*) in accordance with the historical evolution of our society and that three orders of simulacra have followed one another since the Renaissance, running parallel to mutations of the law of value⁷:

- The *counterfeit*, the dominant schema in the classical age,
- *Production*, the dominant schema in the industrial age,

¹ <http://corrieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/notizie/cronaca/2012/16-marzo-2012/aeroporto-arriva-hostess-virtuale-2003706184254.shtml>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

² http://www.ttgitalia.com/stories/trasporti/74893_laeroporto_di_bologna_lancia_la_hostess_virtuale/. Consulted on 17 March 2012

³ <http://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/cronaca/2012/03/16/682015-aeroporto-marconi-hostess-virtuale.shtml>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

⁴ <http://www.blitzquotidiano.it/cronaca-italia/bologna-hostess-virtuale-aeroporto-marconi-1157904/>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

⁵ <http://gazzettadimantova.gelocal.it/cronaca/2012/03/21/news/la-venditrice-e-su-misura-nasce-la-virtual-promoter-1.3709130>. Consulted on 22 March 2012

⁶ <http://www.blitzquotidiano.it/cronaca-italia/bologna-hostess-virtuale-aeroporto-marconi-1157904/>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

⁷ See the revised bibliography in this issue of the Italian Sociological Review.

- *Simulation*, the dominant schema in his, and our, current society.

What is the difference between these three orders?

If the starting point for our reasoning is the assumption that the simulacrum is the result of a process of representation, a reproduction of an original, and is therefore simply a copy of the original, we can see that this relationship is modified and transformed with the passing of time in accordance with two main indicators: aesthetic similarity and time⁸.

In the first order, which according to Baudrillard can be linked to the traditional reproduction of the artworks of famous masters by their pupils, there is a likeness (but not sameness) in terms of appearance between the original work and the reproduction⁹ and a time gap between the creation of the original work and the moment that the copy is produced.

The second order also features this element of temporal differentiation, but achieves genuine sameness in terms of appearance. This is the age of serial reproduction, a characteristic of industrial production, where the moment in which the original is created is followed by a second moment when an infinite number of copies are created that are identical to the original after it has been reproduced. It is therefore evident that there is no longer any differentiation in terms of appearance, as the copies created are identical to the original. However, the uniqueness dictated by time remains, as the copy is created first.

This brings us to third-order simulacra, the true simulacra. In this case, as a result of the process of simulation we have identical copies of the original in terms of appearance and there is no longer the time gap that characterises the normal process of reproduction. Reproduction here is synonymous with simultaneity. With a computer code the original disappears and the process creates an infinite number of identical copies. What happens to the original? If there is contemporaneity when all these copies are created and if the original is missing, replaced by a mere code, how can we recognise our original referent? Copies now act as an original referent to show that the original no longer exists.

Through the singular copy/original interplay generated by the simulacrum, this new dialectic undermines the reality/appearance dichotomy; it is a dialectic that reveals existing contradictions, accepting them as new truths and rejecting the principle of reality as an absolute truth.

After this brief presentation of the system of the precession of simulacra put forward by Baudrillard, let us return to aspects that characterise the concept of the simulacrum, which emerged in another of our studies (Viviani, 2008):

1. Falsity in the process of reproduction;
2. Non-randomness and predetermination;
3. Hyperreality;
4. Immortality.

In the first place, the falsity of the simulacrum is not related to its appearance or the degree to which it reproduces the original, which it actually does perfectly, but to the process of reproduction itself. Indeed, compared to the traditional process of representation, the synchronism and equivalence of simulation eliminate the primary referent, the original, which ceases to exist in the immediateness of this reproduction.

As far as non-randomness is concerned, the birth of the simulacrum is the result of a process that is deliberately deceitful, as its purpose is to destroy the original. The simulacrum destroys the original by reproducing it, because it comes to life from the death of the One.

The objective of the simulacrum is to create copies that surpass the limits and faults of the original, control the impulsional chaos that governs existence and make everything utterable and observable. The simulacrum therefore creates a perfect reality, a reality cleansed of irregularities, otherwise known as hyperreality.

Finally, as the starting point in a new process that reproduces an infinite number of copies, the simulacrum aims at immortality. Indeed, one of these infinite copies may recreate the reproductive process on a continuous basis, with the result that it will never end.

But now let us return to our virtual hostess.

⁸ This is a brief resume of analysis carried out in a previous study. Aesthetic sameness and time (simultaneity) emerge as problematic elements in the semantic analysis of the term simulacrum, introduced by the particle *simul*.

⁹ By the pupil.

How does it embody the idea of simulacrum presented by Baudrillard?

2. The virtual hostess within the logic of simulacra

If we observe the *virtual hostess* and read what is reported in the newspapers, we can highlight a number of interesting features of this product:

1. it is an example of customer service technology
2. that is activated by the movement of passengers¹⁰
3. it has human features
4. and the face of an airport employee¹¹
5. it offers information
6. is found near security gates¹²
7. and is designed to be reproduced and positioned in other parts of the airport for other purposes.

We will now analyse these characteristics in detail.

The first aspect, which is apparent to everybody, starting from the users who interact with the hostess, is that it is clearly a machine, a technological device. Its peculiarity lies in its appearance and the choice made by the designers to give it a woman's face. The features of this machine bring the technological facility closer to the human world – subjects recognise themselves to a certain extent, see the listening experience as less robotic and find themselves in a situation of near-normality.

All of this is supplemented by an important detail: the machine does not depict just any human face, but one of an airport employee. This is an interesting choice. Besides the element of *self-recognition* in the appearance of the machine, it gives the user greater certainty that the person providing information is competent at doing the job.

Both of these aspects – assurance from recognition of human traits in the machine and the guarantee offered by the role and expertise of the reproduced woman – therefore place the user in a situation that is not perceived as being excessively strange. Although the circumstances are new, they feature certain aspects that are recognised as natural.

We then read that the hostess is motion-activated¹³ by users. The procedure used to give information has a number of implications:

- the machine is only activated if users pass by;
- the virtual hostess provides potentially useful information as soon as a user approaches it;
- it is available 24 hours a day, but is only activated when required.

These features are the result of precise planning that leaves nothing to chance. In this sense, the elements of predetermination and non-randomness are attempts to eliminate the limits associated with the presence of a real live hostess, who for various reasons (such as a coffee break) might not be available at the precise moment that passengers need information. Alternatively, she might forget something while talking and provide incomplete information¹⁴.

It therefore becomes clear that the purpose of the virtual hostess is to give the best possible service by trying to have total control over potential imperfections, problems or inefficiencies. It is an attempt to overcome the limits that are part of human nature by trying to create a controlled situation that leaves little room for error or unforeseen circumstances.

¹⁰ <http://corrieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/notizie/cronaca/2012/16-marzo-2012/aeroporto-arriva-hostess-virtuale-2003706184254.shtml>; <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?p=89511786>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

¹¹ http://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/03/16/foto/al_marconi_arriva_l_hostess_virtuale-31647747/1/. Consulted on 17 March 2012

¹² <http://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/cronaca/2012/03/16/682015-aeroporto-marconi-hostess-virtuale.shtml>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

¹³ <http://corrieredibologna.corriere.it/bologna/notizie/cronaca/2012/16-marzo-2012/aeroporto-arriva-hostess-virtuale-2003706184254.shtml>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

¹⁴ <http://gazzettadimantova.gelocal.it/cronaca/2012/03/21/news/la-venditrice-e-su-misura-nasce-la-virtual-promoter-1.3709130>. Consulted on 17 March 2012

At the same time, there is no need for a human hostess to be permanently present and ready to give information, even when not required to do so, as the virtual hostess is motion-activated by the user on request. This not only guarantees correct usage, but also prevents any waste of resources or energy.

Indeed, passengers activate the device by approaching it and the information given by the virtual assistant is an attempt to help them by answering potential queries even before they have been expressed. The service is therefore centred around users and their requests, needs and peace of mind. As we are disturbed by the idea of technical hitches, nothing must stand in the way of perfection or undermine attempts to achieve it. It is for this reason that all limits must be overcome, even those which have not yet occurred but might potentially arise.

The cost of products like this is clearly considerable, but the price of the machine is lower if we compare it to the sum of expenses related to employees doing the same job over time.

The final consideration to be made is that this product will be reproduced and the other machines will be positioned in other strategic points in the airport¹⁵ to enhance the service. The machine will therefore be cloned in other identical facilities so that any shortcomings due to the presence of only one virtual assistant can be overcome, including potential technical problems. This should guarantee the continuity of the service.

Conclusions. False freedom and false power

The *falsity* of the process of reproduction implemented by the virtual assistant is really a conscious choice studied down to the last detail from the planning stage onwards¹⁶.

Although the situation created is obvious fiction and airport users are well aware of this, the human appearance that characterises this device is an attempt to place passengers in a context of normality, in which they recognise the look of the machine as a figure similar to them and not as an inhuman cold robot. However, this is not all, as the choice of the face depicted¹⁷ encourages them to think that the information provided must be accurate. Therefore, in addition to the reassurance created by the appearance, there is also a guarantee due to the role of the person reproduced.

The aim of this predetermined falsity and aesthetic implosion is to create a perfect situation in which the efficiency of a machine is combined with the warm-hearted human traits of a hostess that passengers interact with.

This product has some highly elaborate precedents in the Japanese market in the form of robots (Mask-robots) that can copy and reproduce facial expressions¹⁸. Such technology has been used to make a variety of products¹⁹ such as the model-robot, which also acts as a carer²⁰, or the newborn-robot²¹.

These are all examples of operating simulation, multiple stimulation and multiple response, in which the fictional nature of the contact, sensorial mimicry, is naturalised in a successful test of adaptation similar to animal mimicry. It is the machine that mimics man.

As in the logic of simulation, despite maintaining and highlighting its artificial nature, this virtuality implodes into reality. It merges and blends with reality in accordance with the latter's dynamics, logic and principles. Together with the demonstration of the artificial and fictional nature of this machine, its human features highlight the elements of falsity of reproduction and absence through departure from the original referent.

In addition, there is an attempt to eliminate any unforeseen circumstances or problems that might arise if the same job were done by a real live hostess (absences, various breaks, etc.),

¹⁵ http://www.tgitalia.com/stories/trasporti/74893_laeroporto_di_bologna_lancia_la_hostess_virtuale/

¹⁶ <http://gazzettadimantova.gelocal.it/cronaca/2012/03/21/news/la-venditrice-e-su-misura-nasce-la-virtual-promoter-1.3709130>. Consulted on 22 March 2012

¹⁷ The face of an employee at the airport.

¹⁸ <http://www.ditadifulmine.com/2011/11/mask-bot-il-robot-dal-volto-umano.html>. Consulted on 23 March 2012

¹⁹ <http://www.videoitaliano.org/2010/11/giappone-ecco-il-robot-identico-un.html>. Consulted on 23 March 2012.

²⁰ <http://www.zeusnews.com/index.php3?ar=stampa&cod=9701&shcmtform=1#axzz1pvnIeHF>. Consulted on 23 March 2012.

²¹ <http://animesanctuary.forumfree.it/?t=49476612>. Consulted on 23 March 2012.

guaranteeing an efficient and continuous 24-hour service without any waste in terms of functionality²².

All of this is the result of a level of control activated through prediction, simulation and programmed forecasting (Baudrillard, 1976). Nothing is left to chance or is undetermined; everything is the result of precise theoretical planning aimed at predicting potential defects and attempting to clear them up. The perfect environment is created, a *perfection* that is unreal.

Although this aggravation of perfection in details creates a situation that is recognised as false and unreal, it attempts to approximate the real situation experienced by the subject through aesthetic appearance, as well as assisting consumers and satisfying their needs. There is an obedient functionality in an object that resembles a human being, an object that is pure functionality, perfection personalised (Baudrillard, 1968). The hyperreal therefore goes beyond representation; reality not only surpasses fiction but also eliminates it (Baudrillard, 1976).

Instead of alienating the subject, this new image – the interactive screen – forms an integrated circuit with him. Man is not alienated by the machine but goes into homeostasis with it (Baudrillard, 1990; Žižek, 1997).

So is this an actual real hostess?

It might be better to talk of presence rather than reality, as although a real hostess is present in this case, it has little to do with reality (Diodato, 2005).

It is real in terms of appearance, but is nevertheless a technological creation. It has never been so difficult to answer this question in a simple and precise way. Unreality ceases to belong to the world of dreams or illusion, with one dimension *here* and another one *there*, and is instead characterised by a shocking resemblance to reality. All elements of psychology, human weakness and pure subjectivity are eradicated in order to restore pure objectivity (Stoichita, 2006). It foregrounds awareness of this artificiality and the euphoria of simulation.

In order to guarantee a permanent service, copies will be created in order to prevent a potential void resulting from the breakdown of the only available machine. The service is improved by reproducing this initial facility and it will never cease.

This is an attempt to make the virtual hostess immortal.

We all aspire to immortality for ourselves and our creations; it is our ultimate fantasy in our fight against death. Both in this specific case and more generally in the logic of simulation, the target is a historical process that never ends. However, since this spectral form of history is formed by simulacra, is it really part of history? (Baudrillard, 2000; Stoichita, 2006)

Through creations such as these, man believes in the myths of self-management and autonomous control of the world through technological action, and in being able to self-manage death. Man wants to create and experience perfection and immortality in the name of his new form of presumed omnipotence.

In reality, however, this is not possible and it is all an illusion dictated by the objects themselves, making the subject their victim. Enveloped by the objects (Baudrillard, 1968) and the hope that they exude of being able to create anything with permanence, the subject remains the victim of the limits and end that have always characterised his existence.

It is a game featuring both seducer and seduced, a game of gods who offer no final salvation, a false game of freedom played by a player imprisoned by his own desire for power (Baudrillard, 1979).

As the original referent, man might feel like an outsider, surrounded by an infinite number of copies in his own image. The product could have control over its producer. The initial sense of assurance generated by aesthetic recognition may create a situation of discomfort in the long term.

These simulacra are a symbol of human power, the creative strength of man, which is portrayed in this way as being similar to God. In addition, the decision to portray oneself shows the belief in recreating the best product present on the market, namely man.

However, all this certainty and the illusion of omnipotence could have repercussions on man himself.

In Baudrillard's view, it is the simulacrum that has control over man, even though the latter believes that he is experiencing the opposite circumstances.

²² As the virtual assistant is only activated when a passenger passes in front of her.

The facts presented here seem to support our author.

These machines generate an extremely strong element of fiction. Indeed, we may not even realise that the real referent (in this case the actual hostess) might not exist²³.

This fiction alienates what is real and appropriates it, before being preserved and reproduced as the only existing reality.

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²³ With regard to the logic of simulacra, which, as previously stated, eliminate the original referent, in this case the aesthetic resemblance to the original model could indicate a departure from such logic and a contradiction in our reasoning. What I really want to highlight is that the real simulacrum acquires autonomy, only bearing a resemblance to itself, and thereby eliminates the original. Although there is resemblance in terms of appearance, the machine is self-sufficient. As it is enhanced and complete, it surpasses the very concept of reality by eliminating it.