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SIMULATION AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE CREATION OF MEANING

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Abstract

In the information-society the production of culture and meaning has reached a level of simulation (Baudrillard). With the new technologies developed for the distribution of information (INTERNET, Satellite-TV etc.) this simulated culture and meaning confronts with the intersubjective creation of meaning in face-to-face interaction. The creation of meaning on an individual level is primarily founded on the senses. This meaning is by definition subjective and not necessarily easy to communicate. On the intersubjective level meaning is created through the spoken word. This creation of meaning takes place in face-to-face interaction with an intimate relation to praxis. It is situational, which means that there is constant reference made to a shared reality. This intersubjective creation of meaning is constantly confronted with the production of culture and meaning in the information-society. This production is of course aimed at consumers and is therefore produced in order to be significant. But as the globalisation of culture increases so does the distance between the producers and the consumers. There is no shared praxis to which this production refers. We have reached a level of simulation where production refers not to a shared reality, but to differently produced culture and meaning. This constant confrontation between the local intersubjective creation of meaning and the global production of culture and meaning is the field where the fruitful development of culture now takes place. We live in a constant flow, where our creation of meaning takes place under the influence of a global production of meaning.

Key words: simulation, global-local, intersubjective meaning, production of meaning, creation of meaning.

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE CREATION OF MEANING

THE FOUNDATION OF MEANING

The question concerning the *intersubjective creation of meaning* is whether it is an act set and limited by language or if there is something which this act depends on, in addition to language.

For Habermas, the ideal speech-act in which meaning is generated is dependent on two or more individuals who control and share a language. There is no place for a generation of meaning in a speech-less situation[1] . For Habermas the I is formed through language and, because of that, there can be no "I" behind the sentiments expressed on a pre-linguistic level. The acts we perform in the world however have a long history, they go further back than our

possibility to retell them, they are in this sense pre-linguistic. We can relate to a small child where meaning is generated for both, independent of language.

G.H.Mead reduces the creation of meaning to a role-taking which enables the individual to comprehend a situation and act accordingly[2]. The ability to take an other's view anticipatory, tends to reduce the I to the other, there is no stability or self-identity in a self from which the sense of the meeting with the world have a centre. When I act in the world the world acts in me, according to Mead, but problems arises when we try to distinguish between different acts and how these acts effect our sense of the world. If there is no centre, there can be no independent I.

We are already primarily situated in the world and act in it according to the situation[3]. From interactions taking place in the world, we form knowledge of the world. Different situations with things (and people) become significant to us in our interactions in the world. We encounter potentially possible meanings. The significance of the world is neither founded by the subject nor something independent of it, it is generated from the meeting between the subject as a sensing and conscious being situated in the world and what is sense from this position. The actions performed are dependent on what is encountered in the world. Pre-comprehension of the situation and expectations also influence action. These actions in the world, praxis, influence one's knowledge of the world and even generates new knowledge.

To experience something when acting in the world is to sense a situation bodily. With consciousness sensations are structured in relation to time and space, and to former and expected experience[4]. This process is a primary ability humans have, which is not dependent on language but on the capacity to memorise and to relate to these memories when acting in the world. Through perception individuals gain knowledge of the world, knowledge which has to be transformed into a linguistic form in order for it to be communicated.

CREATING MEANING WITH THE OTHER

The main relation one has to the world is the relation to the Other, be it a mother or some other caretaker. This relation is primary because it is mutual, i.e., it is necessary that both parts take part in order to keep the relation going. As opposed to the relation towards "dead" things, which is not mutual in this sense, things don't act, they make me act. Even the infant participates in this interaction through sucking, smiling and directing attention towards another. This interaction is basically non-verbal including gestures, miming, sounds etc. From this interaction a set of meanings are developed. Meanings transferred from the adult to the child, but also meanings created in the very interaction taking place between the two. These meanings are created in close relation to the ongoing activity, praxis.

For Habermas (1987) this relation to the other in the ideal speech-act is symmetric i.e., the two interacting persons are on the same level. There is no antagonism or constraint between the two. This version of the intersubjective foundation of meaning is truly ideal as opposed to real. "The best argument wins"-metaphysics is founded on an anthropology regarding man which assumes man as non-dominant, idealist and without any psychological secondary effect.

I would suggest a more realistic version of this relation and assume an asymmetry between the two sides. Levinas (1971) regards this relation as the possibility to reach an even higher

level (infinity) by regarding the other as an elevated Other. Whereas putting yourself in this position only maintains the normal state-of-things which is "war" (between people, classes, ethnic groups and nations)[5]. Disregarding the importance of asymmetry in the relations between two persons in the process of creating meaning is a major default[6]. The possibility to force your own interpretation of the world onto somebody else, or being forced into accepting an other's interpretation is a common situation. The asymmetric relationship is not only the reality, it is also, as for Levinas, the possibility.

Interaction with another is a constant process of interpreting the other through role-taking (Mead). What we interpret is not only speech but also gestures, miming, etc. We also interact with others in an activity going on in the world, when we do things together. From this shared activity we create meanings intersubjectivily (see below for an example with the bikers). We signify what we are doing with the help of language, and we modify our prior meanings according to new experiences. This signifying and modifying is a process constantly going on which does not depend on what Habermas calls "an ideal speech-act", where consensus is achieved through the best argument, but in asymmetric relationships where domination or manipulation are common strategies. An informal leader in a group achieves this position perhaps through being verbally outstanding, by being the one who defines the situation. This interpretation of the situation becomes the shared meaning of it. A theory about the intersubjective creation of meaning must consider the subtle ingredients of domination in the relations between people. These ingredients are important in understanding how we come to share meanings. They are vital for the development of cultural content and are not something avoidable.

PRAXIS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR LANGUAGE

As we learn to use language, we also learn to verbalise experience and to communicate them to others. But we also use the language when we interact with another person, when we act in the world together. From our actions in the world, praxis, we create meanings with the help of language, we signify the world and we discuss and come to conclusions about the meaning of things and events. But this intersubjective creation of meaning has its origin in praxis, i.e., language is always signified from the way it is used. For Wittgenstein (1967) the way to comprehend a word is to study the way the word is used, in terms of the cultural context from which it derives its meaning. Going into the cultural context means studying the praxis in which it is used. Of course, we also use the language in an abstract way, not closely connected to present actions, however the meaning of a word is ultimately given through praxis.

I will try to exemplify this. The Japanese artist Yutaka Sone has made a bicycle which is supposed to be used by 18 different bikers all from different nationalities[7]. This bicycle is very difficult to ride, it is very unstable and about 20 meters long, which means that the riders had to practice a lot together in order to be able to ride. To be able to fulfil this difficult task they had to co-ordinate their actions with the help of language. But since they all had different nationalities they had no common language to communicate in. They were forced to invent new words and give them meaning deriving from their activity. Of course it only came down to a very few words, performatives, and not a complete language, but what I want to

show with this example is the notion that language is primarily founded on praxis, and on this micro-level language always derives its meaning out of an activity.

Praxis, defined as our actions in the world, social as well as non-social, is the ground for cognitive content. Durkheim (1984) held this notion in assuming the division of labour as the ground on which distinguish pre-modern from modern society. In pre-modern society, the division of labour is simple which means that many people share the same work i.e. actions in the world. This gave about the same cognitive content i.e. they shared the same meanings. Durkheim's concept mechanical solidarity is developed on this notion where people share the same meanings, ideas and norms. They form a collective consciousness. Marx (1960) also held the notion that what you do, your work, forms the way your sense of the world is structured. The concept of false consciousness is developed from the notion that ones position in relation towards the forces of production produces a certain consciousness, but under the influence of capitalist culture one is fooled into holding false beliefs i.e. false consciousness.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

With the language we are able to signify the world. This gives us the possibility to speak to other people with whom we share these signifiers. We do not necessarily have to share the same experience to be able to understand each other. Because of the possibilities contained within language, to abstract a situation and retell it, we are able to communicate meaning independently of a situation. Another person is able to generate meaning out of a situation retold by me. This is one example of how meaning can be created independently of praxis.

These meanings, or knowledge, are not lived through. That is, I haven't reached them with my own experience, they are not conquered by myself, but gained intellectually or theoretically. This makes these meanings secondary compared to meanings out of my own experience. A lot of our knowledge is gained not from our own experience but from secondary sources. Of course this knowledge is important as a preparation for the real or physical experience, but because of the way this knowledge is brought on to me, through reading, telling, television etc. it doesn't involve the whole of me, my body, my senses. The interpretation of the experience into words or other media's is done by somebody else and then communicated on to me.

If we divide knowledge into theoretical and practical (lived through) knowledge these two constantly influence each other. I am able to transform my theoretically gained knowledge into practical when I act in the world, and my practically gained knowledge forms the ground upon which I can understand knowledge gained theoretically. In order to understand mediated knowledge, theoretical knowledge, there has to be links between my own practical knowledge and the mediated knowledge. The possibility for this theoretical knowledge to be significant to me is whether it can connect on to knowledge I have already stored. Or to put it in another way, the significance of the mediated knowledge depends on my disposition, what I find significant depends on my prior knowledge. The way I interpret it depends on my cognitive content. The way I experience something, be it in praxis or in front of the TV, depends on my sedimented knowledge and meanings. But this is not a static

relationship, my sedimented knowledge is constantly being modified by my new experiences and by time[8].

Within the culture I share with different people around me my interpretation of something will be pretty much the same as theirs, because we share more or less the same cognitive content coming from our common experiences in praxis. I can rely on how people I share a culture with interpret me, what I do and what I say. I expect a certain interpretation from their side and I act and talk on this ground. The problems arise when we don't share this cultural ground, praxis, and the foreigner cannot expect to be interpreted the way he wants and neither can I. Problems with how to understand and be understood arise by the reduction of a common ground[9].

This is the focus for my paper: How is it possible for the producers of a global culture to be interpreted the way they want without a shared local culture. How is it possible for me to understand the meanings produced globally with no reference to my local context.

THE GLOBAL PRODUCTION OF MEANING

THE INFORMATION-SOCIETY

If we recognise the major changes that has taken place in the post-war world, we can label today's society in different ways: a post-industrial society (Bell), a post-traditional society (Giddens), late-capitalism (Habermas), post-modern society (Lyotard). I would prefer to call it *information-society*[10] because of my focus on meaning.

In the information-society several aspects integrate the individual to the global context. Giddens (1990) speaks of the global consequences most every action on a local level has in presupposing and relying on a linkage and a dependence on a wide range between the local and the global. The international production system integrates most every part of the globe and connects you with the whole world. The question for Giddens is the traditional Durkheimian: What helps people function together? His answer is trust, where Durkheim speaks of organic solidarity. But Giddens doesn't recognise the difficulties in understanding why I act according to these globally produced meanings. How these globally produced meanings become significant to me and integrates me by my actions.

Another aspect integrating the individual globally is the extension of media which functions as a levelling transmitter between different local contexts. The local contexts are joint together by the globally produced meanings. On the earth different local contexts have their language-games (Wittgenstein) connected to the local praxis, but in participating with the global mass-media they connect to each other in sharing a globally produced meaning-structure.

Habermas speaks about the colonisation of the life world[11] i.e. the local context. The global economic system forces its way more and more into the life world, taking over and diminishing the important social relations in the local context. This pessimistic account for modernity doesn't recognise the fruitful meeting between the local and the global as a constant process of influencing each other. My focus is more held at understanding this meeting than comparing modernity to a premodern way of life.

Meyrowitz (1985) is studying this meeting between the electronic media and the local praxis focusing on how the media is levelling many of the social relations between gender, generations and towards public authorities. Friedman (1994) accounts for the relation between the global processes and the local identity formation. He is studying the influences on the local production of culture and identity from the expanding globalisation and how these influences are being integrated locally. Being an anthropologist his examples are of wide rang from every corner of the globe.

A significant difference from the pre-war world is the expansion of mass-media. Satellite-TV and the electronic-superhighways increases the access and the interactiveness of these mass-media's. They make people actively take part of the huge quantity of information distributed globally.

This constant flow of information which is produced not for a specific local context but for a general (westernised) global context is a major difference from the pre-war world. Nowadays we are constantly exposed to information, i. e. produced meaning, effecting our daily life. It influences our consuming, our dreams and our sentiments.

The huge quantity of information we are exposed to daily differs from the knowledge I gain from my own acting in the world and from face-to-face interaction with others. This information is not addressed specially to me and it presupposes a wide rang of competence on behalf of me in order to be significant. Yet this is a competence which is supposed to be global and not developed only in one local cultural context. This global necessity forces the information to be structured in a mode as to be comprehended in a large variety of local contexts.

Of course, one way of analysing this process is to study the post-war expansion of the commercial American culture-industry. Such an analyses would focus on how a commercial culture is been integrated in a local context and dealt with according to it. My aim is to study the way this culture or information is *structured* in order to be comprehensible in a local context.

This is where the concept of *simulation*[12] provides us with an understanding of how it is possible for the globally produced meanings to fit into the local contexts.

SIMULATION AS A MEANING-STRUCTURE

On this macro-level of society we can study information i.e., images, texts, etc. as signs. Signs normally refer to something real[13], an existing object or phenomena, but on this level with the globally produced meanings the referent is no longer to be found in reality. The referent for the signs are no longer attached to something existing in a local context, which would make them particular, but to an abstraction or an idealised model of something real, which make them general. It is this idealised model which has been reproduced over and over again in the commercial culture, the model of family structure, the model of manhood, of happiness and despair etc. Nowadays, these idealised models have become the referent for the way the globally produced meanings are constructed.

If we for instance take the advertising as an example. The Marlboro ad's (with the Cowboy-hat and -boots smoking Marlboro-man promising freedom and independence) are totally dependent on the viewers knowledge of Western-movies and its mythology. The ad's

signify a way of life totally abstracted and idealised compared to what it really was like during the white mans "going West". The referent for these ad's are not something empirically possible to find either in the present nor in history, but to a mythology deep rooted in American culture.

This relationship between the sign and the referent is what Baudrillard calls "the third order of simulacra"[14]. It is a historically developed relationship starting in the "classical" period ranging from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution where the relationship between the sign and the referent was close and modelled as a counterfeit. The examples are the *stucco* and the *Trompe l'|il-paintings* in which the effort is to imitate as close as possible the reality and "fool the eye". But the referent, reality, is still the criterion from which you judge the quality of the counterfeit.

The next period is the industrial era where the mass production of goods out of an original levels the superiority of the original. The mass-produced goods are exactly the same as the original, their value are not generated in comparison with the original but in comparison with each other, its expediency. The referent has lost its primacy. The T-Ford was the first mass-produced car and it gained its value not in comparison with the original T-Ford but in comparison with other T-Fords and more expensive cars.

In the post-industrial era a new relationship is established where the referent, corresponding to something real, is vanished. Things and signs no longer refer to something real, but to an abstracted model of reality created within the system itself, the commercial culture industry or the consumption-industry. This is what Baudrillard calls simulation, where the referent no longer exists as something real.

Abolishing the real referent, necessarily coming out of a local context, is, as I argue, the possibility for the globally produced culture and meanings to become significant in a local context. Instead of referring to a local context which makes the signs particular, the globally produced meanings have to refer to themselves, i.e., to the meanings already produced and established, which makes them general. The globally produced meanings assume a competence by the consumer in having knowledge of this commercial culture and its significance. Without this competence the commercial culture becomes quite absurd. This competence has been developed more and more in the post-war era and we are constantly being exposed to it from birth. It has become a part of our culture and the way we understand the world. But there is a difference between this knowledge and the knowledge gained from our own actions in the world.

THE MEETING BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

The interesting notion of this is the meeting between the globally produced meanings and the locally created meanings. In order for the globally produced meanings to be significant on a local level it must correspond in one way or another to the local meanings. This is a very trivial statement, but if we look into it a bit further we can recognise the tensions between the two levels and understand how these tensions brings out moderation's and shifting's on both levels. These tensions are in fact one major part in the changes of cognitive content of a culture in today's society. The fact that we are within this constant flow of information is the reason why praxis has lost its main importance in being the source for changes in the

information-society. We no longer have the praxis as the major source for our creation and moderation of meanings. Even though we always ground our knowledge of the world in the praxis, this praxis become less and less important in generating changes. It is no longer what we do that counts but what we participate in.

This participation differs from praxis because it doesn't involve the working body - the doing is reduced to zipping on the remote-control or handling the computer-keyboard. The absence of a specific praxis connected to cognitive content reduces the sensed experience (this is why the computer game-industry tries to develop interfaces which stimulate as many senses as possible in order to increase the sense of reality, praxis). We participate with our bodies in front of the screen, we use our senses and handle the interface, but we don't do things as in ordinary life. We don't touch the things on the screen, we point at them with the mouse, we don't experience the Bosnia-war bodily, the experience is mediated to us by somebody else.

Of course, we still do things in life, we have a praxis and we share it with others, but the influence on our life has shifted radically since the pre-war period. When we experience something unexpected or dramatic bodily, with all our senses, it has a major impact on our sentiments, much greater than what we experience in front of the screen, but in our daily life the globally produced meanings tends to influence us more than the local praxis.

This influence is also a part of how we experience the world. We use the knowledge gained from the global production of meaning in our own actions in the world. We consume under this influence, we develop our taste from this, like music, fashion etc. But we don't do this without any reflexivity, this is a process where the globally produced meanings influence our sentiments derived from our acting in the world, it doesn't completely take over our sentiments and colonise our minds. There is a meeting between the global and the local which can be very fruitful in developing new ideas and meanings. This meeting influence our actions not only on the commercial level but also on the level where we ourselves create meanings and products.

The producers of a global culture are trying to become significant in a local context in order to make us act in a certain way, mainly by consuming. It is not possible to relate to the different local meaning-structures globally. This is where simulation as the structuring of the globally produced meanings comes in. But the tension between the local interpretation of the global culture and the intended interpretation is a very dynamic process generating new meanings on a local level and modifying it constantly.

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Notes:

[1] With speechless I don't mean literally, so what I mean is that for Habermas all communication is in a linguistic form, whether we use words or not. His reading of Wittgenstein through Winch tends to reduce everything to linguistics, Habermas (1970).

[2] Joas is accounting for Meads position in his book on Mead, Joas (1985).

[3] I will here try to account for a sociological micro-theory founded primarily on my reading of the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), (1968). The limits of this paper doesn't allow me to argue against other positions to the extent I would like to.

[4] Merleau-Ponty (1962) has a thoroughgoing account for this process.

[5] In *Totality and infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas establishes his phenomenology in which the relation to the Other becomes the most basic and primary relation to the world and the possibility to have a relation to God (as infinity), Levinas (1971).

[6] Basically the difference between Habermas and Levinas is that Levinas is trying to describe how it is and not how it should be as Habermas ideal philosophy accounts for.

[7] From the exhibition *Nutopia* at the modern art museum *Rooseum* in Malmö, Sweden 1995. I talked to one of the participants in this project who gave me the story of how they managed to bike this multinational bicycle.

[8] Merleau-Ponty has developed these notions aboute sedimented knowledge, retension, protension etc. from Husserl in *Phenomenology of perception*.

[9] Of course, there are limits within a shared culture in the possibilities of being interpreted correctly. On one level everything is more or less totally subjective, not possible for anybody else to understand (and sometimes not even myself) but my focus is on the intersubjective level where meanings are created and shared.

[10] This concept is a more fluent one, not immediately associated to anyone. McLuhan is maybe the first to analyse society from this point of view, McLuhan (1964).

[11] Habermas (1970) which he developed further in *The Theory of communicative action.*

[12] The concept of simulation is developed throughout the works by Jean Baudrillard, specially in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1993 (1976).

[13] Peirce' pragmatically oriented semiotics argues for this notion while Saussure argues for the intra-referentiality where signs refer to other signs and the reality is left aside. Genosko (1994) has a thoroughgoing account for Baudrillards relation towards Saussure and Peirce

[14] Baudrillard (1993) 50-86