

‘Media Events’ Reconsidered: from ritual theory to simulation and performativity

Key words: ritual, the sacred, simulation, implosion, performativity, duality

Abstract

This paper re-examines the long-established notion of ‘media events’ by contrasting and critically appraising three distinct approaches to the question of media events. These are: ritual theory associated with Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, secondly, Jean Baudrillard’s approach rooted in his notions of simulation and ‘non-events’ and, finally, the more recent performative approaches to media and mediation. I take Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska’s reading of media events presented in *Life After New Media* (2012) as exemplary of the performative approach.

An argument is made that the accounts of media events offered by performative approaches add very little, and, indeed, lack the critical insightfulness of the earlier approaches. Both ritual theory and Baudrillard’s thought are briefly reappraised and, against Nick Couldry, I try to show that these accounts are not characterised by binary and reductive thinking. The major misunderstandings concern the nature of the sacred and profane dualism and the further dualisms developed in Baudrillard’s thought, particularly the figures of implosion and reversibility. Finally, Baudrillard’s position on technology is addressed and the paper concludes with the suggestion that his account is not solely negative, since

technological developments are not only at the mercy of ironic reversals they may also enable new rituals of disappearance.

Introduction

The idea, long established in media studies, that media play a significant contributory role in the construction of events – social, political, historical – rather than merely reporting upon or representing independently existing events, is re-examined here. The debate concerning ‘media events’ has examined how media professionals, companies and technologies do not simply capture, relay, report upon or represent events ‘out there’ in the world, but how media bring events into being.¹

It is instructive to excavate the recent history of theorisations of ‘media events’ and of the ‘mediation’ of reality more generally. While the ‘pre-history’ of a problem can often be made to appear laughably inadequate, if only as a rhetorical flourish accruing weight to a supposedly ‘new’ or more satisfactory account, very recent history, the only recently discarded or apparently superseded, reveals much about the latest views and what they might occlude. Indeed, I will suggest that some newer trends in media theorisation of media events lack the critical insightfulness of earlier work.

The notion that many of the ‘events’ presented in the media as news: the Arab Spring, acts of war and terror, the plight of refugees seeking a new life in Europe, should be understood as ‘media events’ does not allege merely that processes of reporting and representing are highly visible, tightly-scripted, prone to bias, or can be made to serve a particular ideological agenda or hegemonic view. That much is obvious. More than

this, the notion of ‘media events’ suggests that social, political or historical events are ultimately inseparable from processes of electronic mediation and dissemination such that ‘eventness’ is constituted through mediation. In other words, events do not precede, cause or bring about their mediation, but are constituted through and as processes of mediation. Put in philosophical terms, events are not ontologically distinct or separate from the complex processes of mediation; they come into being through the acts, processes and effects of mediation. All three approaches I examine here, what I will call the ritual, the simulational and the performative accounts, agree on this essential point. Further, none of these approaches doubts that there is a ‘real’ or, at least, experiential world beyond media and communication technologies; they differ on what the process of mediation involves and where it begins and ends, and on the social effects and meanings exerted by media events.

Theories of media events can then, for the sake of clarity and critical discussion, be divided into three main approaches or branches of theorisation.² Firstly, there is the ‘ritual theory’ approach most closely associated with Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s influential study *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) and with Nick Couldry’s text *Media Rituals* (2003) which revises the earlier account. A second approach, often erroneously referred to as ‘Postmodernist’, is based upon Jean Baudrillard’s notions of simulation, hyperreality and of media events as ‘non-events’.³ In the last 15 years or so both approaches seem to have lost ground. Dayan and Katz’s work continues to be widely cited and informs more descriptive accounts of media events, though the dominant view today is that their theoretical model is dated and needs, if not to be abandoned, then supplemented with a sense of the globality and diversity of media platforms, particularly Web 2.0 technologies (Couldry, Hepp and

Krotz 2010; Mitu and Poulakidakos 2016). Baudrillard's approach to media continues to provoke and intrigue, though it is widely suggested that his position is ultimately nihilistic and even irresponsible (Kellner 1989; Sontag in Chan 2001; Kember and Zylinska 2012). In contrast, a third approach which I will term, for convenience, the performative, seems to be in ascendance. I will examine the way practitioners of this performative approach understand media events in terms of the concept of mediation. I take the Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation* (1999) and Kember and Zylinska's *Life After New Media* (2012) to be indicative of the performative approach to media and media events.

Against the grain of a number of recent studies of media events (such as Couldry, Hepp & Krotz 2010) I will argue that the ritual theory approach has important strengths which, increasingly, are unacknowledged. I will offer a brief reappraisal of the underpinnings of the ritual approach to media events which reside in Emile Durkheim's social anthropology. Secondly, I will re-assess Baudrillard's thought on simulation, implosion and media 'non-events' (Baudrillard does not generally use the term 'media events') drawing out various threads of misunderstanding. Lastly, I will offer a critique of several aspects of performativity theory, in particular, taking issue with the way it presents itself as moving beyond binary thinking – which it unhesitatingly imputes to other approaches – and its claims to a more adequate or fuller understanding of the processes of mediation. I suggest that the performative approach loses sight of some of the most radical and suggestive aspects of both ritual theory and Baudrillard's work; the result can be an overly-neat account which banishes all excesses, limits, remainders and externalities in its unyielding emphasis on process, creativity, co-constitution and relationality.

In recent media theory, particularly that which I term performative, the term ‘mediation’ has gained a wider currency, no longer referring simply to the ‘betweenness’ characteristic of a representation, state or individual (such as a mediator in a dispute) the term mediation takes on a necessary, originary and all-encompassing status in assertions such as “all life is mediated”; “we are always, already mediated”: in short mediation becomes an ontological category. That is, mediation is presented as fundamental reality or ontology, as supplanting all other beings, subjects and structures and relegating them to effects of mediation. For example, Kember and Zylinska (2012) make a case for thinking in terms of the processes of mediation, in preference to Media Studies’ abiding interest in media institutions, objects and content:

Mediation does not serve as a translational or transparent layer or intermediary between independently existing entities (say, between the producer and consumer of a film or TV program). It is a complex and hybrid process that is simultaneously economic, social, cultural psychology, and technical.

Mediation, we suggest, is all-encompassing and indivisible. This is why “we” have never been separate from mediation (Kember and Zylinska 2012: xv).

Such assertions of the primacy or originary nature of mediation seem to be, loosely, in accord with notions of ‘originary technicity’ associated with readings of Heidegger’s influential essay *The Question Concerning Technology* (orig. 1954) and more recent theoretical approaches such as Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (1993, 2005), and the media philosophy of Friedrich Kittler (2009) as well as certain strands of

‘New Vitalism’ which reassesses the work of Henri Bergson, Gabriel Tarde and others (see Fraser, Kember and Lury 2005). The contention is that human civilisation or collective life has always been, fundamentally, about technology; in this view, prehistoric tools are considered a technology of mediation, as are speech and writing, and so technology must not be seen as new, or as uniquely modern. For Kember and Zylinska life, all life, not just human life, is a “*being in, and becoming with, the technological world*” (ibid, emphasis in orig.).

While the assertion of originary technicity or constitutive mediation is a truism, a number of further problems emerge or are entailed by some versions of this position. The problem is not simply that mediation and technicity becomes meta-terms lodged in ontological necessity that suppress or occludes other factors, dimensions or accounts. The concept of mediation, as it is used in some strains of performativity and vitalist-influenced theory, gathers all within, assimilates everything, claims all as hybrid, processual and relational and often fails to look at remainders, exclusions, barriers, excesses; at the ‘off grid’ or at the unknown, hidden, not understood. In doing so, I will argue that such a theory loses sight of some of the most interesting and suggestive work in media theory of recent decades, including ritual theory and Baudrillard’s thought on media and communication. I will now examine each of these three theoretical approaches in turn.

Ritual Media Events

Two particularly important studies of ‘media events’, Dayan and Katz’s *Media Events* (1992) and Couldry’s *Media Rituals* (2003), will be briefly re-examined in this

section and I hope to unsettle the more or less established view that Couldry's work represents a clear advance over that of Dayan and Katz. Firstly, it is important to question Couldry's reading of Durkheim which guides his reading of some media events as media rituals. In discussing ritual, Couldry neglects Durkheim's understanding of the sacred as dual and ambivalent, reducing it to a monolithic set of values. Sketching an alternative understanding of Durkheim, I will suggest that a particular strand of Durkheim-influenced theory found, for example, in Georges Bataille's writings and in also in Jean Baudrillard's studies, offers important insights, neglected in current theoretical debates on the sacred, ritual, representation and mediation.

The most remarkable feature of Dayan and Katz's study is that they understand the role of media in modernity through the duality of the sacred and the profane. Not all aspects, dimensions and effects of media, mediation and technology can be subsumed to the everyday, profane, 'rational' or relational. Media events, as Dayan and Katz define them, concern a moment of sacredness, they are "television with a halo" (1992: 4). Sacredness is manifest as a disruption to profane daily routines; ritual or ceremonial media events, which the authors summarise under the headings of "contests, conquests and coronations" (1992: 1) suspend the structures of profane life. On these occasions viewing becomes almost obligatory, TV programming schedules are altered to accommodate the ritual event, even news and current affairs programming is pushed aside or becomes, temporarily, a supplement to and summary of the ritual media event. Dayan and Katz define ritual media events as pre-planned, live, remote, interruptive and "presented with *reverence* and *ceremony*" (1992: 7, emphasis in orig.). Critical reporting is curtailed during such events which "celebrate

not conflict but reconciliation... and evoke a renewal of loyalty to the society and its legitimate authority (1992: 8-9, emphasis in orig.). Exemplary events of this kind include media coverage of the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 in the UK and the funeral of J. F. Kennedy in 1963 in the USA, though Dayan and Katz's most fully elaborated example is the state visit of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977. Media coverage of the Olympic Games and of major fund-raising and charity events such as Live Aid in 1985 are also typical, they suggest.⁴

Couldry criticises Dayan and Katz for their over-emphasis on the integrative and reconciliatory aspects of media events at the expense of an analysis of ideological function of such events. For Couldry media events are fabrications of a sense of the 'social centre' and of shared or hegemonic social values (Couldry 2003: 55-74). Yet, Dayan and Katz, in drawing upon Durkheim (1995) and Victor Turner (1969), do have a sense of the ambivalence and volatility of collective events which evoke the sacred, and how these ritual events can, in themselves, challenge the social authorities or simply fade into nothingness, failing to impress the viewing public. The sacred does not simply serve or underwrite social order and authority, it contains within it a sense of the explosive, the diabolical and shamanistic as Dayan and Katz emphasise (1992: 147-187). Rituals can go wrong, they can be performed against order and authority (as with magic, Satanism, and counter-cultural gatherings), or, rituals can be *too* effective in unleashing emotions, leading to uncontrollable violence. In later work Dayan turns specifically to the question of "disruptive" media events (Dayan in Couldry, Hepp and Krotz 2010: 23-31) in a much enlarged sense, including coverage of disasters, war or events which are often viewed with cynicism or indifference

rather than achieving socially integrative effects. Dayan and Katz then are not unaware of the issues of ideology and power, and how those with power attempt to seize upon or direct the collective forces evoked by the sacred. What is more problematic is that they never really examine how events, whether 'profane' news events or 'sacred' ritual events, can also integrate or unite people *through* fear, disruption and terror. A so-called disruptive media event is also integrative, seeking to create a consensus position on the state of the world: as dangerous, terrifying and in need of ever-increasing security measures. That is, Dayan and Katz do not sufficiently acknowledge the role played, by mainstream media especially, in promoting catastrophe and horror, such that these become a routine expectation. Indeed, the catastrophe *du jour* as lead news item provides thrills for audiences, while often comforting them that catastrophes happen to the other, not to us. We might call this a profanation or routinisation of images of suffering, a topic which is deserving of further analysis, but cannot be pursued here.

The underlying theoretical problem is that the application of Durkheim's approach to the relationship between sacred and profane to media, communication and media events has come at the cost of great simplification (see also Rothenbuhler 1993). Sacred and profane are not binary oppositions in Durkheim's work, they are mutually reinforcing and provide a dynamic alternation within the social system. Neither sacred nor profane are unitary or identical: the sacred consists of two tendencies the left and right (or impure and pure) sacred which cannot be separated out or demarcated except through rituals which effect movements of energy between left and right poles. For example, rituals of burial and mourning such as the *wake* transform the misery, horror

and sacred impurity associated with the corpse into the binding together of the living through the celebration of a life, the impurity of the corpse purified by fire.

Readings of ritual media events which argue that a sense of sacredness, belonging and renewal are activated through these events reduce the sacred to only one of its dimensions, the right or pure pole, and reduce the sacred to a binary opposition with the profane. This reductive move is, indeed, more evident in the work of Couldry (2003) than it is in the work of Dayan and Katz.

Whilst it is clear that Dayan and Katz over-emphasise social cohesion and reconciliation at the expense of any sustained analysis of social fractures, polarisation or indeed acts of defiance, the authors do set out from the assumption of an inseparability of historical and political realities and their mediation as events: without media companies and technologies such events would be quite different, they insist (1992: vii). Nevertheless, Dayan and Katz generally maintain clear ontological distinctions between the event, as planned or staged by organisers, as processed through broadcasting of the event and, finally, as received and interpreted by audiences of the broadcast event. The authors then offer a triangulation, where the moment of broadcasting is less important than the prior staging and planning of the event, and less important also than the audiences' judgements on the broadcast event, since audiences, they claim, provide the ultimate measure of how successful an event has been. In this account, audiences themselves limit the process of mediation involved in the media event. It is this triangular codification, and the sovereign power it ascribes to audiences, I suggest, not the use of the category of ritual and the sacred *per se* which undermines the credibility of Dayan and Katz's work.

The notion of distinct, ritual-like ‘media events’ may now seem passé: surely all events are ‘media events’ in one way or another? Indeed it has become commonplace to assert that, with the advent of ‘new’ and ‘social media’ all users are able to create, disseminate and participate in a multiplicity of ‘media events’ according to their own choices, preferences and personal connections: with social media we are all our own media event. The burgeoning field of ‘events management’ promises that online marketing will ‘Bring Your Event to Life’, giving users the option to ‘Create Event’ at the click of a mouse (*Eventbrite*). Perhaps all events from the ‘world-historic’ to the micro-level of images of holidays, food and faces are to be considered ‘media events’ (or perhaps ‘non-events’), capable of being generated by a medium or platform, of being shared almost instantly on social media, and very often as quickly forgotten, at least by human users, to be inserted within a personal ‘timeline’ and remembered only by the data-mining algorithms of corporate social media platforms (Kitchin 2014).

Indeed, it has, in the last fifteen years or so, become far less common to examine media through the notion of ritual, which is now seen as needlessly restrictive, as ill-equipped to understand the ideological dimensions of media content, and as unable to account for the plurality of modes of production, dissemination and reception in so-called ‘global media ecologies’ (Merrin 2014; Couldry and Hepp 2017). One relatively new and influential approach to media can be labelled performativity theory.

Performativity: from Media Events to Mediated Becomings

Performativity theory is associated with a particular (though narrow) reading of the philosophy of Michel Foucault, with the work of Judith Butler on sex and gender (1990) and, more recently, with Karen Barad's discussion of quantum physics and her notion of 'agential realism' (2007). The broad philosophical position of performativity has been applied to media and mediation by Bolter and Grusin (1999) while Kember and Zylinska (2012) present a full reading of two media events: the credit crunch of 2007/8, and the 'big crunch' – the putative final collapse of the universe – associated with the scientific experiments using the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Switzerland. I examine, briefly, their reading of these two media events below.

The key insight of performativity theory, loosely traceable to Foucault (1979), is that 'discourse' or 'culture' produces or enacts the 'realities' of which it speaks or writes. This means that there are no stable entities or substances prior to cultural inscription, and that cultural practices: writing, speaking, measuring, experimenting, actively produce and posit the objects, beings, genders, events etc. to which they refer or claim to discover and/or faithfully represent.

Some additional features of performativity theory, not salient in Foucault's work but central to the development of this approach, include a focus on materiality, biology and the natural world in addition to the study of discourse. There is, in performativity theory, a pervasive sense that linguistic approaches to media and culture have gained too much ascendancy and now need to be supplemented. There is an attempt to overcome the binary structures of linguistic categories and to replace these with an emphasis on vitality, hybridity and the blurring of boundaries, and with a sense of

temporality and movement rather than more or less fixed structural terms. This move often entails an embrace with scientific practices of knowledge production, which refuses (rightly) to see such practices as merely the ‘social construction’ of knowledge. Scientific practices are not seen as consisting solely as discourse – as sets of written claims about knowledge – but also as material engagements: doing, manipulating, measuring, anticipating. Further, and closely related, is an increased interest in the biological, nature or ‘life’ particularly as it comes into contact with, or emerges through, an engagement with technology. There is then, within this body of theory, a fairly clear distinction from earlier theoretical approaches to the media: critical negation tends to be disparaged in many variants of performativity theory, replaced by a sense of emergence, becoming, the inherent vitality of bodies, acts and minds (see Braidotti 2013 for example).

These features of thought are not unique to Performative theory, and there are many points of overlap with other branches of theory, notably Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) and also Post-representational Theory, associated with Thrift (2007) and others. At present, my interest is only in how such bodies of theory approach media, mediation and media events. When the philosophical position of performativity, strongly influenced by new vitalism, is applied to media and mediation particular problems arise. There is certainly a risk of neglecting structures, such as media ownership and power relations, and also a neglect of the processes of commodification, monetisation and of the enhanced regimes of control and surveillance enabled by the digital revolution. The over-emphasis on ‘creativity’ and vitality in such approaches: media technologies are creative, media users are creative, media consumers are creative, and even (media) representations are creative and

performative, can lead to the loss of important, critical distinctions. Indeed, critique is often considered less important than emphasising open-endedness, fluidity and change. Kember and Zylynska promote a dynamic and fluid account emphasising the “liveness” or inherent vitality of media and of mediation, its potential to always create new unprecedented effects or connections.⁵ However, Kember and Zylynska have very little to say about the often tedious predictability of media content and patterns of mediation, the maddening intrusiveness of online advertising: points that could be made through a critique of capitalism and commodification. Where is this inherent vitality of mediation supposed to reside? We might say, following Baudrillard, everywhere and nowhere!

Media events are defined, from the perspective of performativity, through the notion that media producers, users, and the technologies of mediation they employ, play an active and creative role in enacting (not merely shaping) the events which media companies and journalists claim to be representing, that is, reporting upon. As a starting point this is distinct from Dayan and Katz’s approach, for whom planners, producers and audiences shape events, and but how does it relate to Baudrillard’s position? Kember and Zylynska claim to supplement Baudrillard’s idea that representation is increasingly undermined by simulation and hyperreality, with Bergson’s critique of representation which they present as follows:

Simply, for Bergson, time itself – also understood as duration, movement, creative evolution, and life – is what happens, *but time cannot be represented*. Any act or attempt at representation transforms time into space by cutting into the flow of reality and turning something that moves into something that is

still (a photograph) or that only looks like it is moving (a film) (Kember and Zylinska 2012: 43).

In other words, time, and the time of events, is always and by definition in excess of representation. Applying this insight to the credit crunch as media event the authors argue that the great complexity of this event, made up of numerous shadowy and difficult to grasp processes: “securitization, debt bundling, junk bonds, liquidity, hedge funds, vanilla loans, quantitative easing, and so on” (2012: 47) cannot be represented and so are substituted by simple and obvious representations. These greatly simplified representations include computer graphics featured on news reports, images of long queues outside *The Northern Rock* as panicked customers seek to withdraw funds, and above all, the dapper figure of celebrity journalist Robert Peston, known for his curiously drawling tones and over-long, narcissistic reports for corporate media companies.

Such an analysis seems to add very little to the previous approaches: the credit crunch is read as a disruptive news event in which simulacra or images are used to replace or supplant detailed analysis. While the ‘event’ of the credit crunch concerns many different agencies and materialities – technical, human, organisational – representational devices are used by the mainstream media to produce the event as a fairly straightforward, representable, reality. Yet, such a simplification or codification within representation is undoubtedly effective and powerful, indeed we might say it is hyper-effective, that it enacts hegemony (Baudrillard 2009). But what might have been silenced or occluded in this performative reading? For Baudrillard it is the uncertainty, negativity, paradox and ironic reversals: Peston became a celebrity, but

the notion of the expert commentator was further discredited, perhaps feeding wider social disaffection and indifference. Paul Mason emerged as the designated critical voice at the BBC, while Peston appeared in style magazines and was feted for his hairstyle. Are these processes part of the inherently 'liveness' of mediation, or of its deathly tendency to trivialise, or "carnivalise" all values and perspectives? And what of the sufferings and humiliations brought about by a crisis in capitalism that is obscured by its being labelled the 'credit crunch' or 'financial crisis'?

While critical or political critique may not be central to performativity theory, this body of thought does make strong claims for its ethicality. While journalists, such as Peston, tend to deny their role in promoting and enacting a certain version of eventness, the more ethically robust position would be to acknowledge this constitutive role, and so be forced to acknowledge a degree of responsibility. Butler and Barad (2007), as well as Kember and Zylinska (2012), seem quite certain that performative approaches do not merely constitute an intellectual 'advance' over other theories – by banishing the supposed binaries of other positions – but also enable an enhanced ethical awareness.⁶

In the case of the events produced within the Large Hadron Collider, Kember and Zylinska re-iterate the standard ANT position: the phenomena being analysed – in this case, waves and particles – cannot be captured or even visualised by human beings, and so advanced computing is used to trace the 'smoking gun' left behind, allegedly, by the collision of particles. This advanced computing technique then is very much part of the event of particle collision. Once again, a celebrity presenter, in this case Prof. Brian Cox, serves as the representational focal point for lay audiences who, it is

assumed, could not understand the complexity of the processes involved. Yet, for Kember and Zylinska, the likes of Peston and Cox do not obscure the absence, implosion or disappearance of an event, as they feel Baudrillard would suggest, rather:

What is at stake in proposing, instead, a performative and productive entanglement between media and events is precisely their shared vitality? If a programmed event cannot constitute the event's occurrence, it can co-constitute it ... Events are not imploded in the media; instead they are transformed through mediation. Mediation does not posit a reciprocal end game – the “dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV” [Baudrillard] – but rather a productive relationality that is not an end point in history, but part of its creative evolution” (Kember and Zylinska 2012: 65).

The notion of ‘creative evolution’ drawn from Bergson is left vague, and what is far from clear is how the inherent creativity of human life relates to the supposedly inherent creativity of non-human actors and processes: is it the same; is it one, a naturalism or universal creativity? This approach seems seriously lacking in conceptual differentiation: what range of phenomena and effects are covered by the term “co-constitution”?⁷ The experiments with the Large Hadron Collider are not, at any given point considered newsworthy, they are rather placed in reserve, or immersed in simulation, cryogenically frozen, awaiting a dose of publicity. And what is the cost to science in its becoming a media event? Can excessive mediatory self-promotion not devitalise an event – or even an academic discipline such as Physics – as much as, or alongside, co-constituting it?

Not surprisingly, Kember and Zylinska reject Baudrillard for being “too nihilistic” (ibid). Yet, the “dissolution” he sketches is not teleological, not an end-point *in* history. Rather it is the end *of* history and politics, understood in representationalist terms, and marks the triumph of a particular phase of mediation which Baudrillard terms simulation. These are important distinctions, to be examined in more detail below. Indeed, mediation, as Kember and Zylinska present it – as all encompassing, constitutive and inherently creative – can be diagnosed as a symptom of the effects of simulation and implosion, and such mediation may well be ‘creative’ in some non-specific or derisory sense. In other words, Kember and Zylinska’s account can be seen as itself performing or enacting an implosion of reality and mediation, in much the way that Baudrillard’s theory suggests is a leading characteristic of contemporary life and thought. In the final section I will re-read Baudrillard against Kember and Zylinska and their attempt to transcend earlier approaches to media events.

Baudrillard: Simulation, Non-Events and Disappearance

Baudrillard’s interest in media and mediation dates back to his early work. *Requiem for the Media* (originally 1972) considered the event of May 1968 and the operations of the mainstream media which reduced this explosive or “singular” event to a spectacle to be consumed. The intensity and revolutionary energy of this event was drained away by mass media coverage: the corporate media seized upon it “to administer a mortal dose of publicity ... depriving it of its own momentum” (Baudrillard 1981: 174). Baudrillard does not claim that there can a pure or pristine event, untouched by any mediation, indeed the revolutionaries of May 1968 deployed

their own media: speech, hand-made placards, silk-screen printing but above all, Baudrillard suggests, by exchanging looks, glances and acts of defiance which move faster, and so can be more effective, than any ordered, electronic communication (Baudrillard 1990: 8). Yet, there was also a complicity of the revolutionaries in the media promotion of the event; once leaders took themselves for ‘the event’ and produced messages with the express purpose of relaying them a vital immediacy was lost, Baudrillard asserts. His contention is that a genuine rupture of the social and political system cannot be relayed through the system’s media channels without succumbing to the abstract form imposed by electronic mediation; that is, the event becomes ‘content’ carried by the commodity sign form: an abstracted “ecstatic” dizzying succession of images and text on screens.

May 1968 was not a simulacrum “non-event” for Baudrillard, but a “singularity” – an indefinable, inexhaustible event that cannot be forgotten, that is never fully absorbed by simulation and the ramifications of which are still felt today. While most news events are, for Baudrillard “non-events”, what exactly does he mean by non-event?

The non-event is not when nothing happens. It is, rather, the realm of perpetual change, of a ceaseless updating, of an incessant succession in real time, which produces this general equivalence, this indifference, this banality that characterises the zero degree of the event (Baudrillard 2005: 95).

Events are not merely anticipated, modelled, filtered, and played out according to the scripts of media companies, there is a more fundamental issue: the sheer excess of mediated information concerning an event neutralises its intensity, creating an

unstable play of meaning and meaninglessness which produces, ultimately, reactions of indifference and of an oppressive banality, an indifference that itself serves hegemony (Baudrillard 2009). 9/11 was, for Baudrillard, also a singular event: unanticipated, unintelligible, momentous. Global media companies relayed hundreds of repetitions of the images of the twin towers collapsing, with endless varieties of follow-up stories, film and documentary, the event was not allowed to end, to conclude, to become historic, it was placed within what Baudrillard terms the “infinite trajectory” of the media. Nevertheless, and despite these techniques of semiotic or informational neutralisation, the singularity of this event could not be conjured away (Baudrillard 2002).

What then does Baudrillard mean by simulation? Firstly, it must be stressed that there is nothing fake, false, imaginary or unreal about simulation in Baudrillard’s usage. Rather, simulation comes about as the real – which is only ever an effect or artifice of representation – is abstracted, designated and technologically reproduced as a fully-functional model. In simulation, the effect of the ‘real’ (or ‘reality’) is expanded beyond all limits, it need not be contrasted with imagination, fantasy, art or literature; it need not be referred back to a ‘real’ or referent, its technological capture and reproduction over-reaches itself in striving for perfection: more pixels, higher resolution, next generation, an excess of the real. When the effect of the real is technologically generated, or modelled by simulation (rather than mechanically produced – the Bayeux tapestry or Gutenberg bible are representations, but not simulations), there is an “implosion” of the medium (signification) and reality, Baudrillard contends. Implosion does not mean that the imploded terms are lost or destroyed, but that they can no longer readily be isolated, contrasted or opposed. The

notion of implosion is a way of thinking beyond oppositions and binaries, but unlike the concepts of co-constitution and creative evolution it does not erase antagonism, violence and negativity.⁸

The effect of the real was a phase or order within European culture established by particular apparatuses of representation: Platonic philosophy, linear perspective, scientific instruments such as the telescope which creates the sense of Earth as thing to be looked at (Baudrillard 2010: 10-11). As the 'real' is posited through increasingly complex techniques of abstraction it loses its self-evidence, it becomes artefactual. As an artefact, the effect of the real is subject to further processing and synthesising by new technologies: radio, television and more fundamentally, for Baudrillard, cybernetics, digital media and advanced computation. Indeed, if the real is always already mediated and mediation is originary – as performativity theory contends – then everything is real, or, put differently, reality is in excess. This is precisely the condition Baudrillard terms hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994: 19-27).

It is little noted that Baudrillard was comfortable with phrases such as “brute reality” and “the world as it is” (Baudrillard 2010: 11) to express the idea of a state of the world before, beyond or outside of representation and simulation, a world “without us”. Nevertheless, the contention that there are distinct forms of mediation, or orders of simulacra, and that the broad cultural tendency for a shift away from representation towards simulation is crucial. Simulation becomes dominant (without destroying or supplanting representation or iconography) when images, data, objects, content, events are produced from programmes, codes, models, stereotypes.⁹ These codes or models are not 'real', they are operational or technical abstractions. They are also

ideological in the sense that they allow an avoidance of the real and facilitate social control at a level which denies the real (Baudrillard 1994). Real, in this sense, means only that of which a convincing representation can be produced.

Baudrillard is clear that during news coverage of disasters, war and terror, occasionally the 'reality' and dignity of suffering appears through the simulation models and informational effects generated by corporate media's saturation coverage. A discussion of the bombardment of Sarajevo, by Serbian forces in 1993, makes this point (Baudrillard 1994: 54-61; 2002: 45-50). However, it is not the case, for Baudrillard, that 'fake' imagery or media hype obscures the reality that exists behind them. Rather the reality of suffering is not given time or space to be represented as such – victims are dispossessed of the means to represent their suffering. Instead suffering and victimhood are coded as a series of images to be factored into the 'media event' as and when required, to supplement or intensify the dominant narratives of Western superiority, compassion or rather, for Baudrillard, pity or condescension. Indeed, images of suffering are a useful commodity to news companies and are also deployed to manage the problem of the simulacra, to make things appear really, undeniably real (2002: 46) and to obscure the presence of carefully crafted simulations. Media companies feed off the 'realities' they produce, exploiting those caught up in events, mining them for signs of reality. Indeed, for Baudrillard, "all the media live off the presumption of catastrophe and the succulent imminence of death" (1994: 55). Here Baudrillard breaks with the Durkheimian-underpinnings of approaches to media, such as those of Dayan and Katz, for whom media are socially-integrative. Nevertheless, the notion of ritual returns in Baudrillard's *rituals of transparency*, these are collective yet ironic and unanticipated

responses to life under regimes of intensive mediation. Examples might include children and students defying authority and sociability by appearing, or acting as if, immersed in their smart phones even when they are not, or, public rituals of commemoration, mourning or ‘solidarity’ played out for eager corporate media institutions, from which nothing can be deduced of the feelings, attitudes or intentions of the participants (Baudrillard 1988: 29-44).

Recently, media theorists have contrasted Baudrillard’s notion of simulation to mediation, arguing that the concept of simulation does not properly capture or acknowledge the performativity and creativity of all media and all mediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000; Massumi 2002: 137; Kember and Zylinska 2012: 38-41). However, simulation models are dynamic, creative and, indeed, performative; this is what makes them such effective means of control. Moreover, as I have suggested, from Baudrillard’s perspective ‘mediation’ as construed by performativity theory can be seen as a symptom of simulation and implosion; the concept of mediation collapses distinctions associated with representational thinking and discovers itself everywhere, from the beginning to the end, since mediation is, allegedly, life itself.¹⁰

Baudrillard’s later work, concerning the putative Fourth Order, develops the concepts of disappearance, telemorphosis and integral reality. Reality is not destroyed, obscured or forgotten, rather it proliferates to excess, moving beyond the limited and separate models and codes of simulation and hyperreality to an integral state: “integral reality” (Baudrillard 2005: 17-24). The phenomenon of reality TV is one of Baudrillard’s major examples of “telemorphosis”, the transformation of reality through electronic mediation such that the action of the medium on reality can no

longer be isolated, separated or contrasted with reality. Reality appears as immediately telemorphic; we expect there to be images, video, footage of everything and anything that is real, if these are not available the ‘reality’ of a thing or event is immediately thrown into doubt. A written or discursive (representational) account is no longer enough to convince us of the presence of ‘reality’.

It is in a discussion of an early Reality TV show that Baudrillard uses the phrase “dissolution of life in TV, dissolution of TV in life” (Baudrillard 1994: 30), the phrase vilified by Kember and Zylinska. Baudrillard’s phrase, a characteristic rhetorical reversal, is an illustration of the effects of simulation and implosion; it expresses the point that life is, indeed, mediated, but Baudrillard does not universalise mediation, he differentiates between representation, simulation and virtual or integral reality. While we are all at the mercy of the culture of telemorphosis, we also resist it and exploit it. We do not resist it only as an external enemy to be held back, but as an “immanent” mode of disappearance. Televised and online identities are never real, never true; the signs of truth are manipulated by producers and programmers in a staging of truth, yet performers and participants can, ritualistically, disappear behind this staging, or can, in turn, re-stage the staging of truth. The technological condition then, which, very loosely speaking, may be considered “originary” or constitutive, as performative theorists insist, is also, for Baudrillard a mode of escape and disappearance, a means of preserving distance in a culture that seeks total, integral control.

Concluding Remarks

Ritual media events, in Dayan and Katz's sense, are perhaps disappearing. Yet ritual media events continue to disappear – into news, into social media, into ubiquity – without being eliminated; this disappearance or transformation perhaps takes the form to which Baudrillard refers: a disappearance by excess, by over-realisation and implosion.

Kember and Zylinska, in promoting their revised-version of performativity theory, mistakenly impute a binary structure to the thinking of Dayan and Katz, and to also Baudrillard, however neither the sacred and profane distinction nor Baudrillard's position can be characterised as binary, as I have argued above. Sacred and profane are an ambivalent, volatile duality, while ambivalence and reversibility are central to Baudrillard's notions of singularity, disappearance and rituals of transparency.

Baudrillard does not so much offer an alternative reading of 'media events' – a competing theory for the media studies textbooks – as a dislocation of the notion of 'media events' through the figures of non-events, reversal and disappearance. For this reason, Baudrillard's concept of simulation should not be interpreted as providing a 'model' for the reading of media events, indeed Baudrillard refuses to provide an abstract, operation model for the interpretation of media events as such a model would be no more than an exercise in simulation.

It is then important to be cautious when directly comparing different theoretical constructions or engagements with 'media events'. Perhaps one implication of these very different approaches to media and mediation is that there cannot be a universal or general theory of mediation or of media events. The different approaches are able to

reveal, theorise or, in the language of performativity produce and enact certain effects, while necessarily occluding others. The attempt by Couldry, Hepp and Krotz (eds 2012: 1-20) to legislate a ‘correct’ way of reading media events is both disappointing and inherently problematic. In contrast, Dayan and Katz’s approach undoubtedly captures something of the auratic in certain orchestrated or ritual media events, this may be sneered at or rejected yet it is also palpable, however short-lived.

Baudrillard’s reading of media “non-events” may appear to be generally negative about technology, yet he is quite insistent that technology also offers a mode of escape and disappearance. Simulation models are dynamic and vital, capable of growing, assimilating and neutralising dissent: this is their ultimate purpose. Kember and Zylinksa simplify and reduce the accounts presented by both Dayan and Katz and Baudrillard in order to strengthen their case for a new or superior account. I have argued that their account adds very little to the earlier approaches and, indeed, loses sight of some of the most revealing features of them.

Media events continue to be fascinating, and to make new demands on theorists.

Perhaps media events will disappear, but disappear by excess into ubiquity; something of such a disappearance is suggested by all three approaches reviewed here.

Notes

- 1) The notion of the ‘media event’ has many precursors, and a complex genealogy, of particular importance is Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* first published in 1961. Boorstin describes the increasingly

important image management industry and how it is used by the powerful to influence what appears on the television news. It is an important study, yet it is clear that for Boorstin a pseudo-event can be fairly sharply distinguished from a genuine, real world historic event – a war or crisis that cannot easily be stage-managed by elites. Boorstin's position lives on but chiefly as a soft target from which writers will launch their own supposedly superior view.

2) In this paper, I will be only secondarily concerned with examples of particular 'media events', my interest is in competing branches of theory.

3) Baudrillard's ideas have, of course, already been assimilated into media studies but often at the cost of simplification and misunderstanding. In contrast, Genosko (1999) and Merrin (2005) build on Gane's earlier discussions (1991a, 1991b), emphasising the influence of McLuhan on Baudrillard's media theory and making a case for Baudrillard's approach in preference to Marxist and audience centred accounts. My concern here is to contrast Baudrillard's thought with the more recent performative and vitalist approaches.

4) Dayan and Katz distinguish between a happening or an occurrence and the making of media events. To speak of a happening or an occurrence can be said to be already mediated by language, but a 'media event' is much more than this. The making of a media event involves decisions by journalists, editors and technicians; these are shaped by ownership, regulation and commercial interests which together produce an event for consumption and for electronic mediation.

5) There is a strong measure of what Noys (2010) calls affirmationism in such performative theory, a sense that critique, in and of itself, is too negative, too hostile, indeed rather offensive to inherently creative media users, and also, that critique and critics take themselves far too seriously. Kember and Zylinska seem quite certain,

indeed, proud to assert that to be interested in Derrida, Deleuze or any other theoretical master or mistress, is acceptable only if it allows us to “respond to the multiple flows of mediation” (2012: xvi).

6) Kember and Zylinska’s claims for the ethical superiority of performativity theory are sketchy and disappointing. They draw heavily upon the feminist physicist Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of “intra-action”, a form of relationality that insists that entities have no separate being or identity prior to or separable from their contingent intra-action. Whether or not this is the case for quantum waves, when applied to the ethics of human life by Kember and Zylinska it seems to amount to little more than an injunction for an ongoing awareness of our responsibilities to each other and to the natural world: good advice but hardly groundbreaking.

7) For Kember and Zylinska there is nothing outside of mediation, nothing outside of the creative evolving of flows and cuts within flows. Dayan and Katz (1992) and Couldry (2002) are thereby rejected for being too constructionist, for separating ‘media’ from ‘society’ and then focussing on how media construct, shape, influence social processes. It is worth noting that after offering a performative/vitalist reading of media events, later in their study Kember and Zylinska attempt a synthesis of performativity and critique, but only on condition that critique remodels itself as performative (2012: 173-200). Kember and Zylinska’s account is perhaps at its most wobbly when they refer vaguely to “Durkheim’s religious sociology” – conflating the sociological study of religion with a religious perspective on society (Kember and Zylinska 2012: 31&33). The problem here is that Dayan and Katz (1992) and Couldry (2002) already operate with a reductive account of Durkheim’s thought on the sacred and ritual, which is only exacerbated by Kember and Zylinska’s reading. All these

writers neglect Durkheim's emphasis on the dual or ambiguous nature of the sacred (Durkheim 1995: 303-417).

8) Baudrillard's work examined the collapsing together or implosion of media events and news events, indeed this is only one of a series of implosions: of signifier and referent or image and reality; of medium and message; of event and mediation; of site and studio; of actors and spectators in a process he terms simulation.

9) Baudrillard's distinction between simulacra and simulation is often misunderstood, or the terms are conflated. Baudrillard's work challenges the distinction, made by Plato in *The Sophist*, between icons, which are images that capture or partake in the Idea of the original – for example religious icons – and simulacra which are merely semblances and do not participate in the true Idea of the original. For Baudrillard the attempt to distinguish between icons and simulacra, and to maintain a strict, hierarchical relation between them, can never be made solid and durable. It can always be challenged or undermined in a number of ways. For example simulacra can be so artfully produced that they overpower the original, even that they suggest the original Idea is itself simulacral. This is the case with the history of institutional Christianity, Baudrillard maintains (1994: 4-5). As the distinction between icons and simulacra is so unstable, there are several phases in the historical attempt to order and discipline simulacra. These are summarised by Baudrillard's four orders of simulacra. Simulation appears in the third order of simulacra with the advent of cybernetics, molecular biology and electronic media and communications.

10) Indeed, why single out particular media(tion) events, such as the credit crunch and the big crunch from the flux of creative becomings, as Kember and Zyglinska do?

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