Consuming Schooling: Education as Simulation

Trevor Norris
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

In this essay, I will argue that consumerism eclipses our collective ability to pursue and create a healthy public realm, and that education should function as a means of critiquing and resisting, rather than facilitating, this process. As schools turn increasingly to alternative revenue sources, corporate logos and brands populate hallways and classrooms, school buses and gymnasiums, textbooks and yearbooks. I will draw on Jean Baudrillard's identification of our changing relationship with symbolic meaning and the emergence of a new visual consumer culture in order to demonstrate the miseducative effects of consumerism and to highlight the ways schools have begun to acquiesce to, rather than resist, these phenomena. In doing so I hope to bring academic recognition to school commercialism as, with rare exceptions — for example, Deron Boyles and Emery Hyslop-Margison, educational theorists have shown far less interest in this trend than those seeking to profit from it. According to Alex Molnar of the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University,

> The education press accounts for only 1 percent of all references to school commercialism. Business and advertising magazines account for the remaining 99 percent. Simply put, the topic has yet to become one that managed to get on the "radar screen" of education journals in any consistent and systematic way.[1]

It is also my intention to initiate a new theoretical conversation within the Philosophy of Education Society by addressing how Baudrillard's account of simulation connects with education.

Baudrillard and Simulation

Following Baudrillard, I argue that the colonization of education by advertising reduces schooling to a mere simulation of its educative potential. Baudrillard documents — perhaps even anticipates — the emergence of a new and unprecedented form of political order, a regime centered around the act of consumption, the desire to consume, and the visual communicative apparatus designed to celebrate consumption and accelerate its unfolding. Consumption is so pervasive that we do not even notice it any more. Baudrillard suggests that, ironically, even as our meaning-making propensities are drawn ever more quickly into a symbolic order centered on consumption, it is through consumption that we participate in our own disappearance.

Baudrillard sought to provide an understanding of the new "hyper" form of advanced capitalism, which emerged through the simulated character of contemporary experience, by outlining several orders of simulation. First there is an original. Second is the counterfeit or emulation, notable for its falsity. Third is the mechanical copy, reproduced for equivalence and exchange and tied to mass production and capitalist modes of growth. Fourth and most important is the hyperreal — a simulation without referent, a copy of a copy. In this case, each signifier signifies

only itself and reality loops around itself in an implosion of meaning. Signification becomes self-referential, implying a presence while concealing an absence.

An example — Disneyland — will help clarify this point. The imaginary world of Disneyland, so obviously a simulation, is intended to suggest, by juxtaposition, that the rest of America is real. Instead, Baudrillard argues that mainstream American culture is itself a simulation. Thus, Disneyland conceals that all of "real" America is as simulated as Disneyland. "Americans had to invent Disneyland to convince themselves that America is real."[2] To extend this example even further by applying it to consumerism, it could be said that the function of the shopping mall is to convince ourselves that the rest of society is itself not a shopping mall, or that the consumer disposition is limited to the mall. To apply simulation to education, one of the functions of schools is to suggest that schools are the only place where learning happens.

Baudrillard's discussion of simulation can be connected to many other central features of modern society, including waste and excess, and scarcity and abundance. In his early work *The Consumer Society* he discusses the tribal practice of potlatch, in which precious goods were destroyed or given up in ceremonies intended to deepen group cohesion, establish rank, demonstrate bounty, and appease or thank divine forces. Thus, tribal peoples would burn precious herbs and tobacco, toss valuable metals into lakes and rivers, leave food on mountaintops, spill blood on objects and the earth, and so on. For Baudrillard, these gestures were symbolic, and disregarded economic notions of necessity and scarcity, maximizing utility, and rational self-interest. Baudrillard calls these practices "productive waste," and argues that in contemporary consumer society, the economic predilection for disposability and excess contributes to the development of a mentality of wastefulness. However, rather than thinking of waste in ritual terms as an occasional meaningful and deliberate sacrifice we think only of convenience, without regard for ceremony, reverence, or social and environmental consequences. Contemporary culture's waste is a hedonistic simulation of tribal societies' practices of accumulation and disposal as a living spiritual practice.

The language of contemporary advertising is another example of simulation. Previously, goods were presented based on their material qualities and function. Now, advertisers focus more on selling their brand and the brand meaning. This gradual transition results in an association of the sign with a lifestyle, and the sign's integration into the social life of people. Within Baudrillard's semiotic analysis of consumer society, this transition takes on the character of a separation between the commodity and its sign. For Baudrillard, as a result of this separation, "we disappear behind our images."[3] Although humans have always been meaning makers through symbolic production and expression, the symbolic language of advertising has become increasingly problematic; in Baudrillard's terms, it has become "a form of socialization."[4] He describes it as a type of discourse and communication that dominates consumer society but is not "speech" or language: "This is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals."[5] Elsewhere he asserts that "The advertising system

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constitutes a system of signification, but not language, for it lacks an active syntax: it has the simplicity and effectiveness of a code."[6] Advertising is a meaningless code of signals because it constructs a false world of signifiers, none of which refer back to that which is signified. This mode of communication is becoming an increasingly dominant form of discourse. However, I will argue that as we become educated in this language of consumption, we are lost within our own linguistic simulations. One cannot consume a signifier; one can only consume the signified, and so the latent promise of the signifier is perpetually unattainable. Since these signs are systematically ordered to command consumption, they thereby replicate and conceal an experience of incompletion.

Baudrillard uses this account of simulation and consumption to differentiate between modernity and post-modernity. While modernity was concerned primarily with the production of objects, postmodernism is concerned with simulation and the production of signs. It is the organization of discourse into a system of signs that characterizes the emergence of consumerism. In Baudrillard's words,

> consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse….To become an object of consumption an object must become a sign*. This conversion of the object to the systematic status of a sign implies the simultaneous transformation of the human relationship into a relationship of consumption….all desires, projects, and demands, all passions and relationships, are now abstracted as signs and as objects to be bought and consumed.[7]

Through the transformation of the commodity into a sign, the sign is able to enter into a "series" in which it becomes immersed within the endless stream of signs. The pitch of this discourse relentlessly increases, as each sign dominates our vision, blinding us, blurring into an endless stream of flashing images.

Baudrillard outlines how advertising leads consumers to buy into the "code" of signs, more than the meaning of the object itself; as we "consume the 'code,' we 'reproduce' the system."[8] He argues that the dominance of the code, the proliferation of signs, and the violence of the image entail the eclipse — even death — of the real. "The image…is violent because what happens there is the murder of the Real, the vanishing point of reality."[9] An example of this eclipse might help clarify: In the novel *Everyone in Silico* Toronto writer Jim Munroe describes a dystopian future in which we do not even know that the sky is blue, or that the moon and stars come out at night, because the sky has become filled with projected billboards and commercials. This violent erasure of even the sky itself points towards the overwhelming power of the sign to obscure.[10] Baudrillard's account of the "implosion of meaning" entailed by the proliferation of signs and the reduction of the sign to the status of commodity points toward the simultaneous experience of the loss of reality and the encounter with hyperreality. This dynamic is self-perpetuating, as signs "must [proliferate indefinitely] in order continuously to fulfill the absence of reality."[11]

In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard explores another kind of simulation in his examination of not only the central properties of objects, but also the character they have taken on as a *system* in modern consumer society. He argues that objects are in fact not what they seem, but are allegorical and metaphorical when endowed with symbolic meaning. Thus, we do not simply consume the object but rather the *system*

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to which all objects belong as signs. But this deliberate and profit-driven attempt to attach meaning that does not inhere in the object, an object often incapable of providing the experience of meaning promised by advertisers, is another form of simulation.

This dynamic results in a fundamental paradox built into consumerism. Many twentieth century thinkers have attempted to describe the process by which everything that humans encounter in the world is transformed into a lifeless and inanimate thing, ready-at-hand for human use. Various formulations of this range from Martin Heidegger's concept of the "standing-reserve" and the process of "Enframing," Martin Buber's "I-It" relationship, Max Weber's process of "Worldly Disenchantment," or Georg Lukács' discussion of "Reification." Baudrillard describes a more advanced stage in this process by which the object in turn is "animated" and endowed with simulated meaning: it becomes a sign rather than a thing. Thus, the reality of the natural world disappears even as the signs of consumption proliferate.

It is the consumer who directly funds this process of animating objects and endowing them with simulated meaning. In many cases, a larger component of the price of a commodity is attributed to the cost of advertising than is for taxes. Ironically, while we all complain about paying high taxes, in many cases we are in fact paying even more to have products endowed with symbolic meaning so they can be sold to us in the first place. Dave Meslin of the Toronto Public Space Committee calls this "Advertising Sales Tax," or AST. It is notable — and troubling — that trends in the last decade indicate that the increase in spending on advertising and marketing in North America outpaces increases to spending on education. In 2004, $266 billion was spent on advertising in the United States,[12] while it is estimated that "global advertising spending will increase at a robust 5.9% during the 2005–2009 period."[13]

School Commercialism

I will now begin connecting schooling with Baudrillard's concept of simulation. Baudrillard himself wrote only in passing about education, and only a handful of educational thinkers like Michael Peters[14] and Kenneth Wain[15] have engaged his work. However, Baudrillard's writing can lead us to ask if education, overly influenced by advertising and consumer culture, has begun to disappear behind its own simulation.

Once a relatively noncommodified public good, education is being transformed into a commercial enterprise and reoriented towards a thoroughly integrated relationship with commercial interests. Today the subjugation of schooling to consumerism has attained unprecedented proportions, undermining the capacity of education to perform its public responsibility. Instead, constructing markets of young consumers has become a growing element of the socialization process and a central component of the educative project. Schoolchildren are daily exposed to thousands of advertising images, and the educational environment is itself now drawn into this trend. Desperate schools increasingly turn to corporate advertisers for revenue. Thus, the proliferation of the signs of consumption, and its ascent to a place of political dominance is increasingly apparent. Contemporary experiences of

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childhood and adolescence are increasingly the construct of consumer culture, and what has been referred to as Generation X or Y could in fact be called the Branded Generation.[16] In his recent book, *School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity,* Alex Molnar describes this dynamic in compelling terms:

> Today, across the nation and around the world, the ideal of the public school as a pillar of democracy is being transformed by a wave of commercialism. Commercialism is an expression of advanced capitalist culture and a profound threat to democratic civic institutions….Once held to be a public good that could be measured by their contribution to the community's well-being, schools have come to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing, and commodities to be bought and sold.[17]

A few examples will help demonstrate the extent to which the miseducative simulation of education is happening today. McDonalds has developed in-school presentations as a part of their "Go Active!" campaign, which has been brought to several schools throughout Canada. This campaign was intended to promote the importance of physical activity among children — although many parents will confirm that children already know very well the value of active living without a lesson from McDonalds. Following a dazzling light and sound show, several costumed figures with microphones announce that they are from McDonalds and will talk about healthy nutrition and healthy lifestyles. They proudly announce that "we've all gone to teachers college, so we're just like your teachers." Those that have not gone to teachers college are often professionally trained actors. Theater troops like the National Theatre for Children, who once performed in-school plays about smoking prevention, nutrition, energy conservation and the environment, have given way to for-profit theater troops aggressively courted by brand-name firms.

A second example is that, with their knowledge of schooling and children, more and more graduates of teacher education programs are being sought after by marketing firms. Third, even school field trips facilitate this process. A new U.S.-based company called "Field Trip Factory" replaces trips to museums, art galleries, and outdoor centers with trips to stores like Wal-Mart and Home Depot. All field trip fees are paid for by corporate sponsors, and Field Trip Factory provides everything a teacher needs for the trip, from permission slips and school buses to trained store personnel and tour guides. A seemingly innocuous drawing on their website shows hearts, stars, and apples coming out of smokestacks. To follow the meanings evoked by this image, the factory produces field trips with a by-product of fun. But arguably it is in fact the students themselves who are the product, served up to markets, and the byproduct is the erosion of the educational system. Field Trip Factory claims to have "served over 1 million classrooms over the last 10 years."[18] With a critical lens, one can ask, have they served the classrooms, or served them up to marketers?

Fourth, the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives describes the results of extensive research concerning the influence of Channel One, a private American corporation which requires that students watch its closed circuit programming for 10–12 minutes per day in exchange for its "donated" television equipment. Channel One, or in Canada the Youth News Network, has an even more profound influence on children than TV at home, because "the school environment itself reinforces the legitimacy of the messages taught within."[19] Research indicates that students who

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watched Channel One were more likely to agree with statements that "money is everything, designer labels make a difference, a nice car is more important than school, I want what I see advertised, and wealthy people are happier."[20] Furthermore, many were unable to differentiate between advertisements and news, and more likely to remember the advertisements than the news content. Some even thought that the advertisements *were* the news.[21] Not only are students unable to differentiate between news content and advertising, but also the line between education and entertainment is lost; again, advertising practices result in a miseducative simulation of education.

Through these commercial trends, schools and parents are often portrayed as the negative "other" and resented as authority figures, while the icons of consumption and entertainment are elevated as symbols of rebellion to identify with and emulate. As argued by Jonathan Rowe and Gary Ruskin, "Corporations are literally alienating children from their parents, shifting children's loyalties more toward the corporations themselves."[22] The beneficial potential of the student-teacher relationship is thus undermined before the teacher even enters the room.

The same trends are also increasingly apparent in Canada. The so-called porous border between the two countries in fact allows for a tremendous influence of American commercial forces — from Wal-Mart and Home Depot to McDonalds and Coke — on the Canadian educational systems. The Canadian Teachers Federation recently focused on the commercialization of Canadian schools at their annual meeting, and a recent national survey exploring key empirical indicators of school commercialism affirms that the same trends are at work in Canada.[23]

In its most benign forms, advertising is framed as informing, educating, and empowering us for participation in our consumer world, ensuring that we are more fully able to express ourselves through our product choices. In fact, many marketers imply that they are performing a public service. And yet advertising does not aim to educate critical thinkers and self-directed learners, but rather to condition captive consumers and ensure the development of life-long brand loyalties. This tendency invariably dilutes education in three ways: First, it undermines education as a project of inquiry oriented towards some sense of public good. For example, when a student observes a school assembly on leadership presented by Coca-Cola, the lesson on leadership is inseparable from the brand identity of Coke. Second, rather than treating students as citizens, it serves up students as a market for advertisers, which ultimately encourages students to identify their locus of power primarily in their role as consumers. Third, advertising simulates education only in its most entertaining and non-threatening forms, as "edutainment," never asking us to challenge our worldviews. This threat to education results in the expectation that learning always be made easy, leisurely, and palatable.

The Language of Consumption

Children today are so thoroughly immersed in the world of logos that they have no trouble identifying dozens of consumer brands and slogans, revealing that they have developed a new kind of literacy. Literacy discourse is characterized by tensions over what "literacy" means, whom it serves, how it ought to be measured,

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and how it should be taught and learned. There is much written about emotional literacy, functional literacy, and so on. However, what is increasingly apparent in today's students is what could be called the literacy of consumption. Even at a very early age, many children can more readily identify countless logos, and the meanings associated with them, than important historical figures. A provocative example of this occurs in the documentary "Super Size Me." Several school children were shown dozens of corporate logos and were more successful at identifying them then when shown pictures of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa. Another example can be found in the work of the American media theorist Carrie McLaren, who describes an exercise she undertook with high school students: "On the first day of class, I ask students to try and identify several plants and trees common in our Brooklyn neighborhood. They generally fail to name one. Then I show a slide of the alphabet comprised entirely from brand logos and they name almost all of them."[24] I have noticed a significant pattern emerging after showing this alphabet in several contexts, from K–8 schools to undergraduate and graduate classrooms, to academic conferences; while older academics can identify about 6–8 and university students, perhaps a dozen, younger children can generally name all of them — and usually with great enthusiasm.[25] It is noteworthy that while cultural conservatives like E.D. Hirsch lament the decline of a common knowledge and call upon education to promote "cultural literacy,"[26] it is apparent that youth today in fact already speak a common language. "What every American needs to know" is about brands and their meanings.

As I have described, Baudrillard's analysis reveals the symbols of such advertising to be degraded signs, empty of signification. This hegemonic literacy derived from such advertising is a mere simulation of learning, a degradation of traditional literacy. While today's students may possess this kind of commercial literacy, they are limited in their ability to use this literacy to communicate dissent. As Carly Stasko argues in an interview about her work as a Media Activist: "There's no dialogue when mass media is so focused on selling us stuff."[27]

In essence, advertising destroys education by copying and co-opting it. Thus, not only does consumer culture pose a threat to education because it simulates it, but also because it absorbs and negates it. Many educational thinkers, from recent critical pedagogy to the earlier work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis and Pierre Bourdieu, analyze schooling through a theory of reproduction, arguing that schools reproduce hegemonic and ideological social structures. This might match well with Baudrillard's idea of simulation as a copy of a copy. However, advertising construed as "education" changes the original, while presenting a facsimile of the educative experience.

Conclusion: The Transformative Function of Education

In conclusion, consumerism has become the new "real". What Baudrillard reveals is that consumption is not necessarily about buying or enjoying, needs or wants, or fulfillment or affluence, but is a self-sustaining totalizing order of significations that obscures nature and reality. Baudrillard's work demonstrates that we live and move and have our being in the realm of false things and artificial

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meanings, yet continue to long for that which lies behind the sign. Baudrillard describes the increasing desperation with which we seek out and attempt to recapture the real. But this desperation also parallels a complacent acceptance of the prevalence of consumerism. Even our consumer dissatisfaction leads us to stronger belief in the promise of consumption, and compels us to continue to participate in its endless cycle.

Baudrillard leaves us with this bleak picture, one increasingly nihilistic as he moved into the 1980s and 1990s. The originality and insightfulness of his critique of consumer society is tempered by his wariness towards remedies or recommendations. It was never his project to alter this postmodern consumer landscape — or "brandscape." Baudrillard is a thinker whose contributions are diagnostic and descriptive, rather than directive or prescriptive. While it is not always appropriate to demand of philosophers that their work be readily translatable into immediate practical application, nor measure the value of their work according to this standard, I do maintain that education can function as a site for the critical engagement of trends toward consumerism.

Commercial inroads into schools invariably draw the next generation into the simulated and coercive discourse of consumption. Thus, education is reduced to an empty signifier, and the student eclipsed by the consumer, when schools and schooling are used to imbue products with legitimacy. However, education need not acquiesce to these trends. Consumerism — and even the commercialization of education itself — can in fact be explored within the classroom by teachers willing and able to raise these controversial issues.

One way to start addressing these trends is through both adequate funding and appropriate policies regulating school-business partnerships. However, I also want to suggest that commercialism can in fact be explicitly addressed within the curriculum. Recent teaching experiences have led me to think that there are pedagogical strategies that can effectively enable schooling to preserve its public function. For example, activities like role playing and in-class debates have been fruitful ways to encourage students to defend critical positions they are unfamiliar with and perhaps have never heard before. Resistance can turn this debate into a learning opportunity where students are enabled to develop critical literacy in response to consumerism, as well as discuss and examine the implications of corporate influences on the larger project of education. In a context where corporations are buying their way into textbooks — for instance, "If Sarah has two Smarties and David gives her seven, how many Smarties does Sarah have?" — critical discussion, rather than a sponsored presence, is required.

A good example of this discussion can be found in a recent Canadian civics textbook in which students consider Pepsi's bid for exclusive sales rights in Toronto District Schools.[28] The students are encouraged to take the position of decision makers who weigh the issues and examine the controversy of such school-business contracts. In both the Smarties and Pepsi case, corporate products are being discussed in classrooms. However, in the latter, the learning is focused around

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developing a critical awareness of the role of corporations, while the former simply reinforces such presence without question.

If education is increasingly dependent on funding from corporate sponsors, and if the values from consumer culture become integrated into the lessons presented, where can such a critical dialogue transpire? My concern is that without critical engagement, consumerism will narrow our political and pedagogical horizons by undermining the personally and politically transformative functions of education. We are left vulnerable to having education replaced by a copy of itself, which has a very different intent and outcome because it omits the critical dialogue on consumer culture so desperately needed.

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