

Mediating Quarantine: Considering Netflix's *Homemade* through Baudrillard's Hyperreal and the Banal

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Abstract

Baudrillard has long been used to analyze media through critical, postmodern theory and as this paper shows, his work remains relevant as a lens through which to continue to view new works. This article considers how hyperreality and banality have made their way into viewers' homes with international representations of life during the Coronavirus pandemic. By investigating production processes, artistic choices, and narrative content contained within Netflix's *Homemade* series released in June 2020, this article considers how the remediation of quarantine exemplifies Baudrillard's hyperreality and the banal. By considering how *Homemade* remediates quarantine's social, cultural, physical, and economic realities, the films call attention to an age of increased information: we cannot escape the banal. Today, just as when Baudrillard first suggested it, the dissolution between reality and representation can be found throughout culture, leading to questions about the gap between art and the banal. As such, Baudrillard will remain a seminal media scholar who provides a distinct context through which to analyze and evaluate media and the world around us.

Keywords

Homemade, Netflix, quarantine, Coronavirus, Baudrillard, banal, hyperreality

For Baudrillard, there is no event, only its simulacrum, imploding the distinction of reality and image, message and medium, and site and studio. There is no shared, organically extended experience, only individual viewers, isolated in their technologically mediated experience, avoiding all contact or exchange. There is no shared reality, only the vicarious consumption of the signs of the real in the comfort of one's distance and pleasure of their guaranteed reference, with a succession of spectacular images. There is no global consciousness or awareness, only a real-time experience and scene imploding meaning and short-circuiting historical resonance. There is no participation, only its simulacrum, and no involvement, only a detached fascination for the corpse of a reality that is exterminated.

(Merrin 59)

Introduction

Within his career, Baudrillard wrote extensively about viruses (*Screened Out*), but it is uncertain he could have foreseen 2020's lockdown, quarantine, and social distancing policies. Yet one cannot help but see similarities with 2020's media viewers in the summary of Baudrillard's work above. Separated from family and loved ones, many people were isolated, partaking in individual "technologically mediated experience[s]," taking in, "only the vicarious consumption of the signs of the real in the comfort of one's distance and pleasure of their guaranteed references," like watching television shows and films on streaming platforms like Netflix, even watching films concerning quarantine's banality.

On June 30, 2020, Netflix released the anthology series, *Homemade*. *Homemade* was created by Lorenzo Mieli, Juan de Dios Larrain, and Pablo Larrain and produced by The Apartment Pictures, a Fremantle company, and Fabula. *Homemade* features 17 short films, each created by a different international filmmaker. These films were written, directed, filmed,

and edited while these filmmakers were in lockdown or quarantine, and/or practicing social distancing due to the pandemic. In lockdown, filmmakers developed narratives using common household items, often featuring and/or involving family members, and predominantly filmed from home using personal technologies including cell phones, video chat, cameras, and drones. The films represent a cultural prism into the lives and imaginations of some of the leading directors around the world.

The films within the *Homemade* orient viewers towards broad social contexts while simultaneously constructing precise and local contexts. In the personal experiences and imaginative stories showcased, filmmakers identify these discursive contexts and show how the virus affects life worldwide. The majority of the films are documentary in nature, yet even some fictional films, like Kristen Stewart's *Crickets* discussed later in this work, feel banal in their over-familiarity. Months after quarantines forced people inside, quarantine itself felt commonplace and ordinary. It was already part of the collective everyday experience. The life portraits in *Homemade* capture a looking glass version of everyday life in quarantine, providing a staged and edited representation of reality carefully told through filmmakers' cinematic and editing choices. Thus, viewers engage ironically with *Homemade*, turning to streaming services during times of boredom to consume media representations of others' portrayals of the same banality. Thus, quarantine becomes a tangential dilemma to the film narratives.

Considering the Banal during the Pandemic

Much of Baudrillard's later work is concerned with banality, or the nondescript elements of everyday life. To understand how banality is relevant as a lens through which to view *Homemade*, it is important to address how quarantine itself exemplifies the banal. The series

showcases an intense fascination with such remediation of daily life and the mundanity of actions like digital communication, sleeping, cooking, and cleaning. Baudrillard suggests, “At a time when television and the media in general are less and less capable of accounting for (rendre compte) the world's (unbearable) events, they rediscover daily life” (“Dust Breeding” n.p.). There have been 52.2 million cases of COVID-19 and the virus has killed 1.2 million people at the time of this writing (“COVID-19”). To say the trauma of the pandemic feels unbearable is an understatement. While the media has worked to be “capable of accounting for” this pandemic, the masses’ “desire for the spectacle of banality” (“Dust Breeding” n.p.) brings about media like *Homemade* that remediates daily life. Indeed, news media provided near constant pandemic coverage, and coverage is still abundant in the latter months of 2020. As Kip Kline writes in his analysis of Baudrillard, “The proliferation of screens and information overload beget an increasingly banal world” (81). As viewers engage with others’ experiences of the banal and representations of reality within quarantine, they further increase their own experiences as real. Despite their manufactured nature, the careful representations found in *Homemade* are sites through which viewers can see themselves and their own realities. Thus, reality’s representation influences viewers’ perception of reality within their own experiences, as if they were also representations.

2020 brought an overwhelming increase of information streaming through screens, much of which represents the hyperreal and the banal. Watching *Homemade*, the audience is invited into such representations as the voyeur. Baudrillard once described people’s relationship with banality, “people are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent ‘nothing-to-say’ or ‘nothing-to-do,’ by the indifference of their own lives” (“Dust Breeding” n.p.). We might also borrow from Baudrillard’s consideration of boredom in

relation to the idea of vacation to show how quarantine inspires the banal. While quarantine is not a vacation, it is a break from our typical daily lives and, for many, a break from typical work-life. Baudrillard writes, "...vacation is predestined to boredom, along with the bitter and triumphant premonition of being unable to escape it" ("Fatal Strategies" 200). In vacation, boredom is increased by "happiness and recreation" (ibid.). In some cases, quarantine may be associated with increased "happiness and recreation," however it was also a time of stress, struggle, and chaos. Still, there existed a predestiny to boredom as people were limited to specific spatial boundaries, namely their homes. Further, as policies shut down commercial and recreational spaces, the limitations of those boundaries increased, increasing the inability to escape quarantine's boredom. Baudrillard argues people seek boredom as a means of "fatal diversion" (ibid.), and this statement takes on new meaning when considered within the pandemic's context. People seek out image and spectacle, like those provided by the media, to achieve diversion.

Creating *Homemade*

The films' content ranges from filmmakers' personal narratives and their families' daily lives in quarantine to fictional tales, some of which are told as if the characters are also quarantined. The genre of these films follows a diverse lineage of production techniques, especially those that amplify everyday and amateur voices. Within this we can include trends like social media, home video, reality TV, and photo and video essays, which can be created by ordinary users often with no special authority or access to traditional production-quality tools and software. The films were created with small teams that sometimes included filmmakers' family members due to lockdown restrictions. Some filmmakers included actors and production crew outside their immediate household following social distancing protocols.

Brief information about how films were made, including who was involved, where it was filmed, and what technology was employed is listed by filmmakers at the end of each film, although not all information is listed for each film. For instance, director Ladj Ly, whose film is the first episode, wrote, “This Homemade film was shot in Clichy-Montfermeil in Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the French departments that suffered the most from the pandemic. The character Buzz, with his drone, allowed us to respect the social distancing measures” (“Clichy-Montfermeil,” translated from the French). Another filmmaker, Sebastián Lelio, writes, “This homemade Musical was filmed by me with a phone along with the actress and a team formed by two family members, both with no previous filmmaking experience” (“Algoritmo”). These two examples exemplify the films’ connection to a social situation mired in the reproduction of reality and the banal.

Critic Eric Kohn called *Homemade*, “a lively, scattershot collage of the world in 2020,” yet even this collage, the fictional and non-fictional episodes of *Homemade*, must be understood as representations of reality. As media scholar David Buckingham writes,

By definition, media do not offer us a transparent ‘window on the world’, but a mediated version of it. They don’t just present reality, but re-present it. Media representations therefore inevitably invite us to see the world in some particular ways and not others. They are bound to be biased rather than objective. (n.p.)

We therefore must understand *Homemade*’s limitations to truthfully depict life in 2020.

Documentary and fictitious episodes are constructed through the creative team’s vision. The construction of reality is thus a series of decisions made by this team, who decides what to write, record, and silence in addition to how to edit the narrative, invoking principles of montage (Eisenstein) and considerations about what to include and exclude. For instance,

Rachel Morrison's short film "The Lucky Ones," episode three in *Homemade*, shares her hopes for what her 5-year-old will remember of his experience living through the pandemic. The film uses images and video of her son experiencing quarantine's happier moments. In the narration however, Morrison admits there are downsides to quarantine, like her son missing his friends. Yet images of her son upset remain missing from the film. Indeed, Morrison's title, "The Lucky Ones," points to the line between the inclusion and omission of her son's the day-to-day life experience, and seems to target experiences of gratitude over hardship.

Additionally, the films are crafted into efficient narratives, told on tight timelines, implying considerable editing at the filmmakers' hands. Decisions about scripting, filming, and editing consequently limit and define the narrative for audiences, and serve to remind us no story can be retold completely. Episode 11, "Mayroun and the Unicorn" by Nadine Labaki and Khaled Mouzanar tells the story of a young girl's (Mayroun) playmaking and imaginative storytelling. Mayroun Mouzanar, who plays herself in the film, is not credited as a writer, even though the story apparently follows her imaginative storytelling. This leads to speculation about whether the narrative was indeed improvised or scripted. This dissolution between the reality of the character and actor as well as between the reality and its representation within the storyline points to the hyperreal. Further, the film makes significant use of jump cuts, which assists in forming the film's short timeframe. The obvious cuts might help to increase the flow of the young girl's narrative arc, but it simultaneously reminds audiences that reality's representation is manipulated. Ultimately, what is depicted within *Homemade* is a reflection of reality, a representation of a representation.

Understanding *Homemade* as Representation

Benjamin argues "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and

humanly” drives the force behind reproduction (45). Everyone experienced the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in unique ways, influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors connected to specific location and politics governing that location. Thus, people sought to bring “closer” others’ experiences of quarantine to highlight the similar but different circumstances of people around the world. The international films in *Homemade* capture such closure “spatially and humanly.” While those watching *Homemade* from home experienced the pandemic through their unique perspectives and circumstances, the films bring a temporal and location-based experience to shape a larger pandemic narrative. They will further serve to connect viewers to the past as lockdown requirements shift, but always through a distance created by the screen’s presence and a semblance of reproduction. Benjamin writes, “in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced,” thus contributing to a sense of distance between the original and the reproduction (44). To Benjamin, the sensory experiences of viewing art are not merely physical, but also historical, and transform with humanity’s existence. A physical spatial distance between the films’ events and the space viewers watch them from still exists, along with a temporal space. With these changes come perspective and contextual changes as well. The distance between the original work and the viewer is part of the object’s aura and the sensory experience. As representation calls attention to this distance, it also calls forth its authenticity. Benjamin argues the aura is tied to an understanding of authenticity: “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (45). Moving from Benjamin to Baudrillard, authenticity becomes even more complex, as Baudrillard points to a dissolution between reality and representations of reality, to the point

where representation precedes reality and influences people to perceive representations as authentic.

Baudrillard furthers the discrepancy between original and reproduction Benjamin first highlighted by suggesting that the ability to determine an original from the reproduction is no longer possible, and has in fact entered, hyperreality. Baudrillard posited that hyperreality displaces reality as reproductions are generated “by models of a real without origin or reality,” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). The hyperreal is thus a simulacrum, a copy without an original. Viewers watching *Homemade* are experiencing reproductions of the films rather than originals, which, following Baudrillard’s theory, do not exist. Because of this lack of distinction, viewers experience reality and simulation within the same experience. As John Storey writes, “representation does not stand at one remove from reality, to conceal or distort, it is reality” (190). The idea that representation is reality is especially pertinent to *Homemade*.

In *Crickets* (episode 14), filmmaker Kristen Stewart offers a curiously apt commentary about working on the films: “Art that is born of restriction has a way of becoming itself in a surprising and cosmic sort of way” (Menta n.p.). Stewart’s comment further condenses the distinction between reality and representation by suggesting that the cultural, economic, and technological reality of the film’s creation “[becomes] itself” in the work. The text at the film’s end explains: “This Homemade film was made at home(s). By a couple people maintaining social distance” (“Crickets”). Stewart wrote, directed, and starred in “Crickets,” a common trend within *Homemade* and representative of lockdown restrictions put in place across the world. The title comes from the oppressive sound of crickets keeping Stewart’s character awake at night. Notably, Stewart’s character doesn’t have a name. Rather, audiences watch as Stewart, presumably playing a character, enacts the plot of the film. Here again, viewers

contemplate hyperreality. Is the character Stewart herself or is she playing a role? Is this Stewart's quarantine experience or is this any time? Stewart does not mention quarantine during the short film, unlike many other episodes. She does, however, open and close with the character's assertion that she needs a break presumably from the annoying sound of the crickets. Metaphorically, we could associate this break with quarantine, which gave people a break from their familiar daily lives. Alternatively, this could be associated with a break from the monotony of quarantine.

Stewart's film makes a useful case study for understanding how content and filmmaking processes represent quarantine experiences in ways that lead to understanding these films as hyperreal. In *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard calls attention to the distinction between "rubbish" and a "work of art" at play in Duchamp's "Fountain." He then suggests media can also "[open] on to a generalized virtuality which puts an end to the real by its promotion of every single instant" (29). Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality has also shown the dissolution of the distinction between reality and reproduction, which he furthers through a consideration of the destruction of the real through the promotion of the banal. While *Homemade* opens a door to the unique experiences and imaginations of filmmakers, they also present viewers with a picture of banality. This trend is long-coming, considering Baudrillard's trajectory of research. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues, "The cinema in its current efforts is getting closer and closer, and with greater and greater perfection, to the absolute real, in its banality, its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom, and at the same time in its presumption, in its pretension to being the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the craziest of undertakings..." (30). Baudrillard additionally turns such discussion on the medium of television.

As an audio-visual medium, the becoming-itself-ness Stewart acknowledges within such quarantine films bring about a connection to Baudrillard's argument of the world "becoming-image" in its hyperreality. He writes, "Television inculcates indifference, distance, scepticism and unconditional apathy. Through the world's becoming-image, it anesthetizes the imagination, provokes a sickened abreaction, together with a surge of adrenalin which induces total disillusionment" (*The Illusion of the End* 61). Later, in his discussion of reality TV, Baudrillard suggests such television points to the masses' "[profound] desire for a spectacle of banality," which he characterizes as "nothingness, insignificance, and flatness" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). While the films in *Homemade* do not fit within the genre of reality television, it is worth comparing Baudrillard's exploration of banality to the series, as they work as a "transposition of an 'everyday life'" where "the televisual universe is merely a holographic detail of the global reality" (ibid.) The banal in *Homemade* becomes especially apparent in its documentary shorts, but is additionally apparent in the fictitious works, like Stewart's *Crickets* detailed above; Pablo Larraín's *Last Call*, which focuses on a man in a nursing home video conferencing with an ex-girlfriend; and Rungano Nyoni's *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL*, which details the dissolution and resolution of a couple's relationship through a series of texts between the couple and their friends.

In these latter two examples, we again see Stewart's comment about art "born of restriction...becoming itself" (Menta, n.p.). The technologies through which the stories are told are significant communication technologies associated with the quarantine and social distancing restrictions as they enable people to maintain communication with one another. Yet, in and of themselves, as mediums of communication, they are banal. To then compose narratives around these mediums, increasingly showcases "the art of restriction...becoming

itself” as well as the “promotion of every single instant.” As William Merrin writes, quoting Baudrillard, “Truth raised to its highest level becomes banal in its obviousness, reducing us to a stupefied acceptance that destroys our relationship to it and thus its ‘ring of truth’ (*Cool Memories* (CM) 118)” (40). And while video conferencing and texting are seen as ordinary by today’s standards, they further represent Baudrillard’s claim that “the cinematic illusion fade[s] as technical prowess increase[s]” (*The Perfect Crime* 30). Baudrillard makes this comment about the development of reality TV and the feeling of the camera seeming always-on and supposedly capturing *everything* happening. Yet, the feeling is apt considering the use of video conferencing and text messaging in lieu of “the cinematic illusion.” both seemingly remove the mysteriousness from the artistic creation process since audiences are aware of the recording medium and technological boundaries are built into the films’ frameworks. In *The Last Call*, the audience is aware of watching computer screens, and in *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL*, the audience is aware of watching a cell phone. Baudrillard insists the media “[take] on themselves the triumphant illusion of the world of communications, the whole ambiguity of mass culture, the confusion of ideologies, the stereotypes, the spectacle, the banality” (*The Illusion of the End* 61). The machines’ presence intervenes with the audience’s ability to read the films with an ambiance of illusion, promoting the hyperreal and the banal.

It is worth unpacking these two examples further, to understand how such choices remove “the cinematic illusion.” In *The Last Call*, the visuals focus on the actors’ computer cameras whether placed individually on screen or side by side. Here, viewers can consider the computer cameras in the same way Baudrillard considered the cameras in the filming of reality TV programming, at least insofar as they are expected to believe the cameras are capturing *real* scenes. They continuously capture the conversations and reactions of the actors, without the

illusion of different framing or the editing of the story. In *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL* the only video footage used is supposedly real-time screen-captures of the couples' text messages and social media. The film is shot vertically so audiences imagine they are looking at a cellphone. Again, in the context of the story, we are expected to believe this footage is real. The use of these mediums and the apparent use of personal media like cellphones as recording devices in other episodes help remediate (Bolter and Grusin) quarantine into the films themselves, an act of the world "becoming-image" through "the representation of one medium in another" (45). In remediating communication technologies as cinematic practices, these films remediate the act of maintaining social networks during quarantine.

Conclusion

Baudrillard's lengthy career spanned the later half of the 20th Century and into the first decade of the 21st. His postmodern critical media theory still speaks to and influences readings of new cinematic works today. If this trend holds true, Baudrillard will remain a germinal media scholar who provides a distinct context through which to analyze and evaluate media and the world around us. Today, just as when Baudrillard first suggested it, the dissolution between reality and representation can be found throughout culture, leading to questions about the gap between art and the banal. Quarantine has increased audiences' "[profound] desire for a spectacle of banality" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). *Homemade* helps fulfill this desire by at once reminding viewers of the home videos and reality TV they previously consumed and providing narratives through which viewers can imagine themselves as participants in the ordinary and banal. In the films, hyperreality and banality surface as striking elemental factors that viewers may engage with on a daily basis without giving much thought to the representations of such reality. Here, Zoom and text are mediated narrative devices; children's play and household

chores are made worthy of being told through story. These everyday procedures and experiences amplify the ordinary to the level of spectacle. By considering how this series remediates and represents the social, cultural, physical, and economic realities of quarantine, *Homemade* reminds viewers that in an age of increased information, banality is all around us.

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