

**BUILDING UP TRUTHS: THE PERCEPTION OF THE REAL  
THROUGH THE MASS MEDIA IN GILLIAN FLYNN'S *GONE GIRL***

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**ABSTRACT:** The goal of this paper is to discuss the influence of the mass media on the construction or perception of the real in Gillian Flynn's best-seller *Gone Girl*, problematizing to what extent our notion of truth and reality is determined by the paradigms built by the means of communication. This work takes into account the point of view of an autodiegetic narrator to establish a contrast between being and appearing, and how one can distort and have his/her image distorted by the mass media in order to achieve his/her purposes. The novel is analyzed under the light of authors such as Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco in an attempt to understand how reality and subjectivity fade in a globalized world that seems to grow more and more virtual.

**Keywords:** mass media; simulacrum; society of the spectacle

**CONSTRUINDO VERDADES: A PERCEPÇÃO DE REALIDADE  
ATRAVÉS DA MÍDIA DE MASSA EM *GONE GIRL* DE GILLIAN  
FLYNN**

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é discutir a influência da mídia de massa na construção e percepção do real no best-seller *Gone Girl* da escritora estadunidense Gillian Flynn, problematizando até que ponto nossa noção de verdade e realidade é determinada por paradigmas construídos pelos meios de comunicação. Este trabalho leva em conta o ponto de vista de um narrador autodiegético para estabelecer um contraste entre ser e parecer, e como é possível distorcer e ter a imagem distorcida pela mídia de massa para atingir determinado fim. O romance é analisado sob a luz de autores como Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard e Umberto Eco na tentativa de compreender como realidade e subjetividade fenecem em um mundo globalizado que parece ficar cada vez mais virtual.

**Palavras-chave:** mídia de massa; simulacro; a sociedade do espetáculo

After the Globalization, the way people interact with the world in terms of time and space has deeply changed. Suddenly, the planet seemed to have shrunk fitting in the palm of our hands. Or better saying, on the screen of our mobile devices. It is hard to point out a spot on Earth we have never virtually explored. Citizens of the twenty-first century are flooded with

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tons of information that are only contained by our cognitive limitations to cope with such flow of data. With the development of the means of communication, today we have much more access to information than we would have a couple of centuries ago. We can check the weather forecast in order to wear or not a sweater for work or choose the best routes to leave home as much as we can catch up with news from a small city placed in the opposite hemisphere to our location. We may get to know different cultures and be acquainted with habits of people far different from our own without ever leaving our homes.

At first, the situation as described above does not cause any concern or suspicion. Much on the contrary. It should be seen as a great feat of the technological progress, which allows us to see beyond sight, giving the feeling that the world has nothing new to show us. However, this load of information and notion of virtual knowledge of the world that has no apparent boundaries could give room to some questions to pop-up in our minds: to what extent can we trust that the world we are familiar with is real? Is it possible to make a clear distinction between what we believe to be grounded in reality and what is a mere product from our media experience? And more: how can we tell that our own identities are genuine and not a collection of patterns derived from the mass media? Gillian Flynn inserts these questions in her best-seller novel *Gone Girl* (2012) inviting readers to see farther than the limits of the screen, making them reflect upon the reality they are fed by the means of communication.

*Gone Girl* is an autodiegetic narrative (a first-person story in which the narrator is also a protagonist) with two narrators who tell us the plot chapter by chapter alternately, providing the reader with the chance to see a single situation from two different angles, leading him/her to draw different hypotheses and conclusions about the story narrated. Let us not forget that this type of narrative might be misleading, since we get to know the facts through the narrator's perspective, which might be partial, precipitated, distorted or manipulated to meet the storyteller's goal. It will all depend on how much reliable, if any, the narrator is. For the present work, it will be taken into account the perspective of only one of the autodiegetic narrators, Nick Dunne. The choice of focusing on Nick's narrative is based on the fact that his relation with the mass media is more evident, consequently his perception between the real and the construction of a reality is more enriching for the debate.

Flynn's novel presents us to a detective story, a *domestic noir*, opened by Nick Dunne whose wife, Amy Elliot, went missing. As the investigations to find Amy develop, we are gradually led to believe that Nick Dunne has something to do with his wife disappearing,

especially because of the narrative device used by Amy in the first part of the novel, a diary, which is seen as the means people use to express their true feelings. Even his name seems to conspire against him: the surname Dunne could be interpreted as a pun with the expression “whodunit” (who has done it), reference to a type of detective story in which the reader is provided with clues throughout the story in order to deduce who the criminal is before the final revelation.

Nick soon realizes that the situation he finds himself in is close to a spectacle, a show whose roles and lines had been previously set just waiting to be performed accordingly. In his first encounters with the police officers, Nick is confronted with questions that aims to “rule him out of suspicion”. He knew that he was the main suspect for his wife sudden disappearing, not so much because of the evidences leading to it, but for the plenty of previous models offered by media through time. People have seen too many true-crime shows where the evil husband is always the guilty one, which builds a model that precedes any reality. Such a situation leads to what is called in the novel as the CSI effect, which influences not only the general public opinion but also the legal parts involved in the investigations. In addition, with the Internet we are bombarded with information from all directions. Not only from journalistic sources, but also from common people giving their “verdict” in social networks, which helps build or destroy the image of the defendant in front of the ones who are endowed with the power to decide his/her fate, as Nick’s lawyer states, “the media has saturated the legal environment. With the Internet, Facebook, YouTube, there’s no such a thing as an unbiased jury anymore. No clean slate. Eighty, ninety percent of a case is decided before you get in a courtroom” (FLYNN, 2012, p. 324).

The role of the mass media in Flynn’s work is to supposedly provide the spectators with the facts, inform the audience the events taking place around them. However, since we have a first person narrator it is clear the distinction between what Nick does, says and thinks (or he claims to) and what the media says about him and the event concerning his wife. Such a situation makes us think about what we believe to be real.

With the development of technology, especially the means of communication, our interaction with the world has become much more virtual; consequently, our capacity to pin down what is real seems more likely to fail. We may not know whether our experience with a given situation is genuine or is just recollections of what we have read or heard on the news. Even our dreams and desires that we put effort to achieve might not be ours, but simply what

we have been influenced to long for in movies, TV shows and ads we are exposed to on a daily basis. Considering these questions, it is possible to argue that the reality we live is a mere acting, which we take part in.

Although today the influence of the mass media affecting the way we think and see the world is more perceivable due to our intimate relation with technology, this matter is not new. In the 1960s, the French writer Guy Debord proposed in his most famous work *Society of the Spectacle* that the reality we know is, in fact, counterfeit, a spectacle produced by the media, dictating our behavior and even identity. Debord claimed that “everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation” (1970, paragraph 1), which provides models of reality that mediate our life. Most of our experience with the world and society is made through the screen of our TV sets, computers and smartphones, which gives way to what we may call a screen reality. Such a situation leads us to think that the real is what we see on the spectacle provided by the media. Debord states that the more we contemplate the less we live; the more we accept ourselves in this reality mediated by the images, the less we understand our own existence and desires, for what matters is the externality. The reality provided by the media is responsible for the construction of our own identities, to the point that our gestures and words are not exactly ours, but they derive from those models represented in the means of communication (1970, paragraph 30).

While in the eye of the hurricane, in this case represented by the media coverage of Amy’s disappearing, Nick Dunne seems to realize that most of our notion of subjectivity is a collective construction whose mediator is the mass culture we are both consumers and product of. Our familiarity with a number of occasions comes from our cultural library of models compiled throughout time in the movies, books and shows we are acquainted with. Karl Erik Schollhammer named it as the Society of the Information (2002, p. 30). According to him, the real is not what reveals itself and then vanishes with the moment, but what remains stored in the memory of a society. This accumulation of data and facts gives the spectator the possibility to access this big library of videos, news, images and readings that provide him/her the chance to select and organize the data in countless ways so that the reality can be shaped to perfection based on previous models.

A great example of usage of this database of conduct is the reference that Nick makes to a real fact involving the British actor Hugh Grant a few years ago. In 1995, Grant was arrested for having sex with a prostitute in his car. The actor, who was in a relationship with actress

Elizabeth Hurley and had just played his first lead role in a Hollywood production, almost saw his career sink. Little after the scandal, Grant went to a famous American talk show<sup>2</sup> to apologize to his fans and Hurley for his misconduct. After having his image tarnished by sensationalist TV programs, Nick used Grant's interview as reference to perform his request for pardon on a talk show so that he could get himself a better angle in front of the public opinion. He said that he watched the video some many times in order to get the actor's mannerism and sheepish look that he was in danger of borrowing a British accent. Nick was "the ultimate hollow man: the husband that Amy always claimed couldn't apologize finally did, using words and emotions borrowed from an actor" (FLYNN, 2012, p. 346).

Having that in mind, we can see this perception in Nick's conclusion that none of us is a real person. We are just an assembling of models. Everything that we believe to constitute our identities is nothing more than echoes of the information we access during our lives:

I don't know that we are actually human at this point, those of us who are like most of us, who grew up with TV and movies and now the Internet. If we are betrayed, we know the words to say; when a loved one dies, we know the words to say. If we want to play the stud or the smart-ass or the fool, we know the words to say. We are all working from the same dog-eared script.

It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless automat of characters. And if all of us are play-acting, there can be no such a thing as a soul mate, because we don't have genuine souls (FLYNN, 2012, p. 81).

In agreement with Debord's views, the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard also put in check the reality surrounding us and claimed the precedence of the representation over the objects. Based on the fable by the Argentinian author Jorge Luís Borges<sup>3</sup>, Baudrillard proposed the concepts of simulacrum. The fable tells about the mapmakers of the empire who made a great effort to create a thorough representation of the territory that ended up perfectly covering the entire land. With the downfall of the empire, what is left is the map, representing a territory

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Grant went to different TV shows at the time of the scandal, but the one mentioned in Flynn's novel is *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Grants interview is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIdDCmjOSBk>. Accessed on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Do Rigor na Ciência* translated by Andrew Hurley into English as *On Exactitude in Science*. . . In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

that no longer exists. A model based on the real that does not exist. This idea is the base for the simulacrum, which is an idealized simulation impossible to be reached since it has no ground in the real world. However, the simulacrum acquires the status of the real, the model to be followed. We wish so hard to achieve a standard of idealization that we end up forgetting the real thing the simulacrum tries to emulate. When the simulation usurps the place of the reference external to the representation, eliminating any trace of the real, we come to a phenomenon that Baudrillard calls as hyper-reality. In other words, the creation of models of the real without any origin or reality (BAUDRILLARD, 1991, p. 8).

Once the real blurs into the representation, the virtual becomes the truth, the reference to be achieved. Every aspect of our existence must reflect what is beautifully represented in the hyper-reality. Our bodies must fit the patterns we find on magazines and ads. The clothes we wear, the words we say, the relationships we have must follow the models labelled by the media as the ideal, correct and socially acceptable in order to achieve fulfillment and happiness.

With the development of technology, we have the tools to explore the vastness of our planet and culture as a whole, even though our adventures are mediated by images. Most of our knowledge has as reference the representation. Most of our experiences are virtually provided by the means of communication, giving us the sensation of having seen everything in the world. In fact, we know a lot, we have seen a lot. Yet, this accumulation of world knowledge is based on the mediatic. The image precedes the object, confirming Baudrillard's view that the hyper-reality and the simulacrum take the place of the real. As Nick says, the image is crisper. We prefer the sign rather than the object:

We were the first human beings who would never see anything for the first time. We stare at the wonders of the world, dull-eyed, underwhelmed. Mona Lisa, the Pyramids, the Empire State Building. Jungle animals on attack, ancient icebergs collapsing, volcanoes erupting. I can't recall a single amazing thing I have seen firsthand that I didn't immediately reference to a movie or TV show. [...] I've literally seen it all, and the worst thing is, the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out is: the secondhand experience is always better (FLYNN, 2012, p. 80).

According to Nick, the media experience prevails for its capacity of producing more enticing situations. "The camera angle and the soundtrack manipulate emotions in a way reality can't anymore" (FLYNN, 2012, p. 80). The TV has gained the property of producing realities. The reality offered by the TV is more appealing in comparison to the so-called real world.

With the widespread of TV after the World War II, the Italian writer Umberto Eco claimed that we are living a new era of TV communication: the neo-TV. According to Eco, the neo-TV consists of a different approach in how the events and shows are broadcast; the focus is more on the TV itself rather than on the external world, not trying to hide its structures and resources. The neo-TV talks a lot about itself. By showing its structure, the TV tries to convince the audience of its veracity. “Here am I, and if I am in fact here it means that what lies in front of you is the reality” (ECO, 1986, p. 192). Eco mentions that the new kind of TV has as ultimate goal to entertain the spectator. With the neo-TV, entertainment and fact become so intertwined to the point that it is no longer possible to tell fiction from fact. In this case, the role of TV shifts from a mirror of the reality to a producer of reality.

Probably the biggest impact of the new approach of TV broadcasting is the way it interferes in the real events. The TV that claims to be authentic and true to its spectators needs to provide them with a real spectacle. When it is known beforehand that an event is going to be aired live, a great preparation is set in order to make it more beautiful on the screen. Eco mentions that some events would never have happened the way they did if they were not meant to be shot by TV cameras. To exemplify this adaptation of reality for broadcasting, Eco mentions the change of the ball used in soccer matches. The old ball made of raw leather was not clear enough on TV. The traditional model we are used to today, the black and white ball, was then introduced to be better visualized on TV. Even the election for the new Pope was influenced in order to become a more appealing spectacle to be aired.

Another great example that Eco provides is Prince Charles’s Royal Wedding. According to him, everything was meticulously thought in advance having in mind the live broadcast. From the color of the flowers to the color of the dirt left by the horses pulling the carriage, all the details were conceived to be shown more spectacular on TV.

With all the cameras surrounding and pointing at him, Nick feels as if he were part of a show provided by the mass media. As we know the story through Nick’s point of view, we know that his main concern is not to find his wife and have her back. After all, their marriage was about to collapse. His main motivation is not to let people think he has killed his wife. He

aims to get rid of the Ellen Abbott effect<sup>4</sup> and all the sensationalist TV shows that constructed him as the villain. More than anything he needs to appear to be innocent.

At this point, we conclude that in the big mediatic circus a good show is a better product than the truth. The audience is usually more pleased when they get the made-up, the carefully handled and crafted as “real”. Nicola Nixon mentions that in the late 1970s, the figure of the serial killer was inserted as the main representation of evil in the American culture. With the label of “real”, the new American monster provoked much more dread than the old gothic representations of monstrosity, drawing the public attention to the issue. The market started to produce non-fictional books about the individuals responsible for such terrible crimes. However, Nixon says that the notorious killers were dull and too ordinary, not living up to the public expectation. In order to fill the gap between the shocking murders and the ordinariness of the criminals behind them, the writers of non-fictional books turned to the gothic horror and its metaphors, which helped provide more interesting narratives for the serial killers’ accounts. Works involving murderers such as Henry Lee Lucas or Ted Bundy would use classic gothic images of Frankenstein monster or hunting ghosts to illustrate the “real” monsters and their actions. Somehow, the fictional figures of the gothic, the monster, the vampire, the malevolent entity, ended up serving as a metaphorical translation of the real serial killer.

The distinction between truth and manipulated reality is evident after the plot twist in the novel. In the second part of the book, Nick and the reader discover that Amy has forged her disappearing and staged all the evidences, including her diary, to frame her husband. Still, Nick is talked into not bringing his discovery publicly for this story is too complicated, and if it is not good TV it will not convince the jury. Rather than providing facts or truths, Nick needs to build up a convincing image so that the audience can empathize with him. Even though he hated Amy for paving his way to jail, Nick had to perform the role of the worried husband anytime a camera was capturing him. He needed to deliver what the TV viewers expected:

We’d all seen these news conferences before – when other women went missing. We were forced to perform the scene that TV viewers expected: the worried but hopeful family. Caffeine-dazed eyes and ragdoll arms. My name was being said; the room gave a collective gulp of expectation. Showtime (FLYNN, 2012, p. 71).

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Abbott is a character of Flynn’s novel that represents a journalist of a sensationalist TV show specialized in women victims of violence in which the husband is always the guilty one. Ellen’s show has a huge contribution in pointing out Nick as a suspect for Amy’s disappearing.



As part of a spectacle in which appearing subdues being, Nick understands that he needs to find the angle that would spare him from going to prison. He started turning around the public opinion when he decided to take control of the situation by manipulating the means of communication that used his “tragedy” to entertain the spectators. After all, even his young mistress managed to put up a character to raise the sympathy of the audience when Nick’s infidelity came publicly. She went from the image of a seducing marriage breaker to a naïve well-behaved babysitter who was in fact a defenseless victim of an older professor. Instead of rejection, Nick’s mistress provoked pity.

With the suspicions drawing nearer, Nick puts up a character people may appreciate and forgive. The capital point in the story takes place when Nick is interviewed at bar by a young journalist using only her cellphone to capture Nick’s moment of sincerity. The entire scene was meant to sound sincere. A man at a bar, slightly drunk, under the effect of alcoholic honesty declaring his love for his wife, pleading her to return to him so that they could be happily ever after. The scene was typical of a sweet romantic comedy movie. It does not matter if it sounds tacky or if in fact Nick was silently cursing his wife in his mind. The point is that the forged scene pleased the audience. People bought Nick’s sorry husband role. Once posted on YouTube, the video went viral and people started changing Nick’s verdict from the obvious wife killer to a good guy who did not kill his wife after all. He managed to manipulate the media to construct a better image for himself.

More than a good detective story with a startling plot twist, *Gone Girl* serves as an example of the influence of the media in our perception of the world around us. Due to the evolution of the means of communication, information travels at a vertiginous speed and jumps onto our eyes and ears. From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed the mass media brings us the real world. Still, the reality we see on our wonderful screens may hide the fact that it is a construction, whose real reference may be manipulated to meet somebody else’s goal. Enchanted and dazed by the mediatic spectacle, we hardly ever stop to ponder about the facts we are faced with every day. We usually take it for granted as the real thing. After all, if it is on TV or on the Internet it is likely to be true.

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