

From Expression to Simulation: Hyperreality and Typographic Performativity in E.E. Cummings's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the typographic performativity in e.e. cummings's poetry, where visual linguistic display produces a simulated reality, reflective of a self-referential sign system. The study aims to demonstrate that modern language has evolved from a medium of expression to a simulated sign system, where representation does not imitate external reality rather creates an aesthetically and linguistically controlled image. The objective of the study is to examine how visual arrangement and grammatical deviations in e.e. cummings's selected poems function as self-referential linguistic signs that supplant reality through its modified copy thus produces a hyperreal effect. By using Jean Baudrillard's book, *Simulacra and Simulation*, as a theoretical framework, this study argues that in the post-war period, the relationship between reality and language has shifted dynamically from experimental and experiential to curated and simulative. Thus, the research gap lies in moving beyond the modernist critique of stable language to the postmodern linguistic construction of hyperreal. This study is significant for understanding the role of verbal signs and codes in the contemporary world that is increasingly shaped by the regimes of simulations such as artificial intelligence, cybernetic systems and digital humanities.

Keywords: Simulation, expression, typography, hyperreality, postmodernism

1. Introduction

Edward Estlin Cummings, famously known as e.e. cummings, is the 20th century's most experimental and innovative American poet. His poetry is emblematic of the post-war disruption of language and fragmented experiences. In his poetry, he willingly breaks syntax, grammatical order, punctuation rules and spellings to highlight post-war rebellion against traditional forms and structures. His early linguistic experimentation in his collection *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923) pertains to a mode of representation and reflection by merging conventional language with experimental techniques. However, his later collections of poems, *No Thanks* (1935) and *Poems* (1958), radicalise the dispersal of words on the page by transforming them from a mere pictorial display of reality to a self-generating image. This transition marks his shift from modern liberalism towards postmodern constructivism, where language itself substitutes reality for its filtered yet more attractive copy.

By emphasising the self-referential nature of the linguistic system, this study aims to explore how language in the postmodern period functions as a tool of simulation through which linguistically altered copy becomes the primary source of meaning and authenticity. It scrutinises how the visual and grammatical units in e.e. cummings's poetry are arranged into a graphic illustration that is aesthetically and linguistically polished. It also explores how such modified images offer an idealised account of experience or event that redirects attention from the irregular, chaotic and imperfect aspects of reality towards carefully curated and aesthetically magnified. Furthermore, it also interrogates how language, from preserving and presenting genuine experiences, develops into an induced perceptual event in which the reader's emotional and cognitive response emerges from the visual and semantic performance rather than from its original relation to external reality.



By adopting the theoretical framework of Jean Baudrillard, discussed in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, this study performs a typographical and orthographical analysis of e.e. cummings's selected poems, taken from his two collections. It draws on the concepts of "simulation" and "hyperreality" as a theoretical foundation, wherein simulation refers to the generation of reality through models and signs (simulacrum) without original referent, while hyperreality denotes a condition in which such simulations become more experientially authoritative than reality itself. Baudrillard asserts that in the postmodern world, reality cannot be simply accessed through any communicational medium because what we perceive is already a simulation, not an original copy. Thus, this study employs this framework to analyse how language in e.e. cummings's poetry destabilises the conventional relationship between signifier-referent and projects a visually and aesthetically simulated image that produces a hyperreal mode of perception.

The goal of this study is to examine how language complicates the relationship between reality and its representation in a world where their distinction is increasingly blurred. This study fills the gap by elucidating how, through linguistic performance such as visual arrangement, syntactical disruption, irregular punctuation and unusual capitalisation of letters, language itself has become a constructive mode through which experiences and reality are actively produced rather than transparently reflected. This study is significant as it enables future scholars to understand how the language refuses to remain a neutral mode of communication within the contemporary sign-saturated environment, such as AI, social media and other digital cultures that constantly shape our understanding of reality through various virtual and rhetorical trends.

1.1 Research questions

1. How does cummings's poetic evolution reflect a shift from expressive language to language as an autonomous system of meaning production?
2. In what ways does linguistic performance transform poetic language from a medium of representation into a self-referential sign system that produces hyperreal poetic experience?
3. Why do the typographic and orthographic deviations in cummings's poetry disrupt the relationship between language and reality?

2. Literature Review

Much of the critical work on e.e. cummings's experimental poetry and typography is situated within the modernist framework of experiential language, which emphasises subjectivity and direct sensory perception through visual projection. Many critics found that e.e. cummings's experimental and visual poetry does not just add a graphic element to his poetry, in-fact make the readers experience the effect itself rather than just reading the lines. In the article "E.E. Cummings: A Case Study of Iconic Syntax", the author asserts that "Cummings iconic use of syntax was not just a part of a larger attempt to exploit iconic structures on all levels- orthographic, phonetic and syntactic- in order to infuse his poetry with perpetual fullness of the world as he perceived it" (Cureton). This reveals that the relationship between form and content, signifier and referent, event and perceptual immediacy depends on how language structures itself to produce the effect. Though the existing scholarly debates on the e.e. cummings's poetry link unconventional typography with direct experiential engagement, these studies still recognise syntactic fragmentation and visual arrangement as primary mechanisms that stimulate perception and produce meaning.

In another article, "Translation Problems in E. E. Cummings' Experimental Poetry: Visual Appearance, Plays on Words and Punctuation Marks", the author explains how e.e. cummings poetry is extremely difficult to translate because its visual and structural patterns are necessary to understand and absorb the event displayed on the page. He articulates that "the fact that Cummings ungrammatically used a punctuation mark is not arbitrary; he is clearly trying to produce a certain effect on the reader" (Jimeze). This suggests that the typographical and grammatical deviations serve more than just the purpose of purely reflecting a phenomenon; actually, they operate to generate a "certain effect" that directs the reader's emotional and cognitive response. Thus, it foregrounds how language actively constructs sensory effects and shapes perception, revealing experience as linguistically mediated rather than directly apprehended.

Norman Friedman, in his book *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer* states that e.e. cummings's techniques "are best understood as various ways of stripping the film of familiarity from language in order to strip the film of familiarity from the world. Transform the word, he seems to have felt, and you are on the way to transforming the world" (107). This suggests that language has become more than just a medium of expression; it has now emerged as a structured mode of representation which actively generates and reshapes perception. Thus, what we perceive and

translate as authentic and real is actually linguistically mediated and constructed, foregrounding that reality is no longer accessed directly but is experienced through the formative effects of language itself.

Moreover, this matter of representation of reality in the postmodern age propels one to think about how much an event or experience can be purely reflected. Such critical ideas are theorised and discussed in the book *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern age has moved beyond the age of expression or reflection into simulation, where “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (6). This suggests that the reality is largely overtaken by its fabricated and simulated version. In a book review, the critic Norman asserts that Baudrillard’s theoretical model not only provides a critical framework that explains the nature of representation in the modern world, but it also presents “a deeply unsettling idea, one that challenges our most basic assumptions about the nature of reality and our place within it” (2)

However, in another review, the critic notes that although Jean Baudrillard’s book provides a powerful critique of representation and simulation, its theoretical scope is often considered “too totalising and too pessimistic” to adequately describe the functioning of every social structure and lived reality (4). Furthermore, the framework tends to overlook the material and embodied experiences that also operate within discourse and social systems, as he says, “Focusing entirely on the world of signs and simulations risks overlooking what happens in the world of bodies and resources.” Thus, an exclusive emphasis on simulation and sign systems may disregard the concrete realities of poverty, labour, embodiment and social inequality that continue to shape human experience

Though being an exclusive approach, Baudrillard’s framework is still significant because it highlights the performative mechanism through which modern technical and social systems construct reality. Since language functions as a primary mode of communication and representation, it actively shapes how reality is experienced and perceptions are generated in the postmodern age. The early pre-war relationship between signifier and referent has broken down in the post-war period into a self-referential system of signs, where meaning is generated within the sign system rather than originating from external reality. In a world that is consistently destabilising and reorganising itself through sign systems, language becomes a potent medium that influences how we interact with reality through forms and devices. While the existing criticism emphasises the neutral working of language, this study fills the gap by elucidating how e.e. cummings has distorted the entire formal language structure to reveal the performative and constructive nature of language in the postmodern age. By applying Baudrillard’s concepts of simulation and hyperreality to the unusual typography of cummings, this study shows that the experience is not embedded within the poem; it is generated through its own linguistic performativity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a typographical and orthographical analysis of e.e. cummings’s selected poems taken from his two separate collections *No Thanks* (1935) and *Poetry* (1958). It examines how the visual pattern, syntactical distortion, unconventional capitalization and use of punctuation construct an aesthetically filtered and linguistically altered copy of reality that shape reader’s cognitive and emotional response. Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulation and hyperreality explained in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, is the key analytical framework of this study that shows how language produces a simulated reality through signs, forms and devices. This study is qualitative in nature and its approach is inductive and interpretive. The secondary sources used in the progression of this research consist of research articles and published thesis on e.e. cummings’s typography and scholarly reviews on Baudrillard’s book. This study only performs the typographical and grammatical analysis, thus has its scope limited to study of linguistic devices, visual structure, cultural symbols. This study also has other limitations including lack of critical research on theoretical framework, accessing the primary text in pdf form.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Throughout his collections of poems and lectures, cummings constantly advocates for individuality, spontaneity and direct human experience against the mechanised consciousness of “mostpeople”. However, his later experimental poems paradoxically reveal the impossibility of accessing reality in a pure or transparent form within the postmodern condition. The critic Landles also notes that “Cummings is dealing with the problems of representation itself” because the relationship between image and its external referent is blurred to such an extent that “the visual / verbal support system breaks down quickly, and furthermore, the poem seems to announce its failure to represent the object-concept-theme visually / verbally by drawing attention to its own artificial self - i.e., the fragile structure swamped in white” (40). This is where Jean Baudrillard declares the start of “age of simulation” where the contemporary culture substitutes “the signs of the real for the real itself” and generates “a real without origin or reality”

(17). Therefore, the images and events visually portrayed by Cummings in his poetry are not actual copies that reflect experiences or reality; instead, they are mediated through linguistic structures, typographical arrangements, cultural symbols and ideological sign systems that shape perception before genuine experience can occur.

Both his 'nature poems' and 'political poems' in his later collections show that meaning is generated through culturally and politically coded sign systems that shape perception prior to a lived experience or direct encounter. In the case of his moon poems, the lunar object is not a replica of an objective celestial body but is aesthetically reconstructed through typographical arrangement, producing an image that feels more coherent and intimate than the actual celestial body. Similarly, in his political poems, patriotic rhetoric, political performance and ideological slogans circulate as self-referential systems of signs that romanticise violence and transform political reality into a spectacle. In this sense, both nature and politics are mediated rather than directly encountered, as representation becomes more persuasive than reality itself. This condition resonates with Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, where there is "no longer a question of a false representation of reality but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real" (13). Consequently, Cummings' emphasis on authentic individuality becomes contradictory because his own poetry demonstrates how perception itself is linguistically constructed.

In Cummings's Moon Poems, the figure of the moon draws heavily upon the Romantic traditions that repeatedly construct it as a symbol of eternal beauty, purity, melancholy, and transcendence. In P.B Shelley's poem "To the Moon", the moon is symbolic of a divine presence who is "Wandering Companionless" (2), in Dickinson's poem "The Moon Was but a Chin of Gold", the moon is personified as a feminised celestial figure who slowly "turns Her perfect Face / Upon the World below" (4). These traditions primarily emphasise the symbolic, mythic and metaphysical dimensions of the moon, often undermining its material and structural significance. In other words, the moon functions less as a concrete object and more as a metaphysical and symbolic model. Cummings embraces these culturally idealised lunar images, yet he foregrounds the physical, material and kinetic presence of the moon through typographic experimentation and grammatic disruption. Thus, in Cummings's poetry, the moon neither appears as a purely symbolic abstraction nor a genuine material object; rather, it emerges as a linguistically mediated simulacrum shape through typography, cultural meaning and aesthetic formulation.

Thereby, the moon one encounters in the poetry of Cummings is not the objective, natural and faithful copy of the actual moon; instead, it is the culturally and linguistically simulated image that influences how readers perceive and identify the moon itself. In the poem "mOOOn Over tOWns mOOOn" Cummings presents the moon as a spherical and disk-shaped celestial object. Its circular form is visually reinforced through the perfectly circular grapheme 'O', whose typographical roundness generates an image of geometric perfection. Contrary to it, the natural and astronomical shape of the moon is not precisely circular; it is slightly spheroid, uneven and bulging at the equator. The imperfect, indifferent and mundane moon is replaced with a perfectly round, luminous and generous moon. This image is aesthetically idealised, culturally perpetuated and linguistically reinforced, rendering it as a flawless heavenly body "whO fLOat newly aLOne is dreamiest" (5-8).

Furthermore, the moon's serene and subtle movement from "huge grO / pingness" to "fLOat" and ultimately "SLOwLY SPoUTING SPIR / IT" presents a "dreamiest", almost surreal moment, visually orchestrated through unusual spacing, fragmented syntax and abnormal capitalisation (4-5, 7, 9-10). The initial syllabic fragments of each lexical unit, like 'grO', 'fLO', 'SLO', 'SPo', progressively dissolve into the recurring 'o', foregrounding a sense of perfect, smooth and uninterrupted circular motion (4, 6, 7). This idealised symmetry and circularity portray the moon as an absolutely balanced, spherical and geometrically flawless object. Through this typographic performance, Cummings produces an immaculate image of the moon whose appearance implies a "mythological and spiritual force" rather than an uneven celestial object (Moe 22).

By combining the cultural and symbolical signification with aesthetic and linguistic stylisation, Cummings generates a hyperreal moon that is more coherent, more beautiful and more meaningful than the actual celestial body. This idea resonates with Baudrillard's notion of "hyperrealism of simulation", where the altered copy becomes more effective and dominating because it produces a more compelling and emotionally satisfying version, as he states that "It is this hyperreal indifference that constitutes the real" (123). The critic Khafaji also mentions that the moon in Cummings's poetry is more an "abstract perfection" that "man yearns for in dreams and imaginings", suggesting its representation is not a mere reflection but a process of modifying and idealising its perception of being a flawless, annular and dynamic entity (Khafaji 36).

In another poem, "! // o(rounD)moon, how" Cummings uses the repetition of "rounD", "rouNd(er/ than roUnd" and "Round/est" as an explicit verbal reinforcement of the moon's idealised circular form (1-3, 6). However, this effect of circularity is sensually and visually activated through the visual arrangement of words, punctuation marks, and unconventional capitalisation that functions as the internal linguistic sign system. Like the previous poem, several words are structured around the central circular grapheme 'o', like round, moon, float, goldenly, wholly, which signifies the moon's cyclical form and movement. However, here the effect operates on the auditory and vocal level,

producing a phonetic resonance in which articulation requires rounded vocal shaping of the mouth as Moe in his article explains, “The mouth becomes acrobatic through performing various motions, directed by the assonance, until one realizes that the ‘shape’ of the diphthong is iconic for the round shape of the rising moon” (188). This shows that linguistic signs, functioning as a self-referential system, prompt readers to both visually perceive and corporeally enact the moon’s form. Thus, the poem does not invite readers to encounter the real moon but provides a typographic spectacle that substitutes direct reference with a constructed lunar image that feels more immediate, personal and influential than the lunar object itself. This is precisely the cornerstone of Baudrillard’s framework, where simulation becomes more real than reality itself: “fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world” (121)

The paired o’s of the initial “mOOOn” in the poem “mOOOn Over tOWns mOOOn” and the circular “o” at the beginning of the poem “! // o(rounD)moon, how” functions as a visual motif, resembling an eye or an optical lens. These typographic elements position the poems themselves as a constructive medium that shapes how the perception of the moon and its experience is shaped through aesthetically filtered copy. This leads to what Baudrillard says, “perspectival space and depth vision but more real than natural”, where perceptions are generated, and sensations are induced through a system of signs that are not embedded in genuine representation, but tend to create real effects through simulation. Thereby, the moon one engages with in the poetry is a culturally intensified and aesthetically refined construct generated through typographic arrangement, which produces an image with which the reader connects more emotionally and sensually than with the actual lunar object itself.

Other than his nature-oriented poems, his political and social poems also highlight the working of simulacra in the postmodern age, where the personal, political and social experiences are mediated through the sign system. In his political and social poems, he discloses a world where individuals increasingly consume linguistic signs, political images and ideological representations rather than concrete realities. This foregrounds Baudrillard’s consumer society where individuals absorb only media images, nationalist performances, symbolic rhetoric and political slogans which supplant direct, tangible reality for its artificial, fabricated and hyper-rated copy as he says that “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (45).

In his famous poem “next to of course god america i”, cummings uses an implicit yet satirical tone to expose how political reality is reduced to a theatrical performance and rhetorical play rather than rooted in authentic conviction. The uninterrupted typographical structure of the poem, marked by the near absence of punctuation marks, resembles a rapid and mechanical flow of a public speech. This formal engagement of the speaker signifies the performative nature of political discourse, where the person simulates the role of a serious national authority whose rhetoric relies less on rational argument than on the endless transmission of patriotic slogans, nationalist clichés and emotionally charged expressions as he says “love you land of the pilgrims” (2).

Cummings sarcastically saturates the speech with clichés slogans and nationalist phrases such as “my country”, “glorious name”, “pride” and “by jingo by gee by gosh by gum”, to reveal that in the post-war world, the notions of nationalism and patriotism operate only through the pre-structured linguistic signs and performance (3, 8-9). Baudrillard also emphasizes that in postmodern society the distinction between social and personal, political and theatrical, historical and aesthetic collapsed into each other, forming a world in which the differences are blurred, oppositions are merged into each other and reality no longer exist independently of signs, as he says that “nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other... no matter what domain - political, biological, psychological, mediatized - in which the distinction between these two poles can no longer be maintained” (33).

In these circumstances, politics becomes less a domain of authentic ideological engagement and more a spectacle maintained through repetitive signs, nationalist performances and symbolic rituals. Moreover, the speaker romanticises war, violence and bloodshed in the line “what could be more beautiful than these heroic, happy dead who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter”. This shows how a critical and alarming situation of war becomes ideologically and socially consumable through the projection of culturally familiar images of heroism, sacrifice and national glory associated with war and massacre. Consequently, war becomes a hyperreal spectacle that appears noble, satisfying and morally meaningful through rhetoric rather than reality itself. The concluding line, “he spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water,” further intensifies the emptiness of the speech of heroic authenticity by revealing it as a mere theatrical performance rather than a sincere moral conviction (13).

In another poem, “why must itself up every of a Park,” the poet explicitly criticises the public monuments, patriotic symbols and nationalist rhetoric. Public monuments no longer commemorate authentic heroism; rather, they function as ideological simulations that normalise obedience, nationalism and violence. The ironic quotation marks undermine the authority of patriotic symbols “quote statue unquote”, exposing them as constructed signs rather than sacred truths (2). This highlights that political authorities and legislators exercise control, not through direct force but through the circulation of symbolic images, public performance and ideological signs that shape collective perception

and emotional response. This closely parallels Baudrillard's assertion that "Power floats like money, like language", highlighting how power is no longer exercised through compulsive means but rather exerted through linguistically and culturally consumable signs (78).

Furthermore, cummings demonstrates how through the glorified representations of heroism and sacrifice, the state transforms violence into a moral performance where "if the quote state unquote says / 'kill' killing is act of christian love." (5-6). The emphasis on 'kill' through direct quotation marks elucidates that the act of killing no longer appears brutal or inhuman, but rather signifies patriotic duty and religious righteousness. It is because the linguistic signs and cultural symbols emerge not from the material realities of war, violence and disturbance; instead, they construct an aesthetically sanitised and morally idealised simulacra that produces a hyperreal state representation become more influential than historical reality itself. Here, the use of parentheses is extremely significant because it reveals the material reality that was concealed beneath the rhetorical signs and cultural idealisation. The parenthetical assertion "(to err is human; to forgive divine)" and "Nothing" in 1944 AD "can stand against the argument of military necessity" (generalissimo e)" dismantles the dominant patriotic and moral rhetoric by uncovering the violence and political manipulation that such linguistic constructions attempt to obscure. These insertions disclose the lived realities and historical experiences that have been aesthetically fabricated, ideologically sanitised, and made culturally consumable through nationalist discourse and linguistic justification. Baudrillard also argues that the only way to undo hyperreality is to recover the genuine experiences and authentic confrontation with realities, as he states that "the only weapon of power is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere" (189).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined e.e. cummings's experimental typography through the theoretical framework of Jean Baudrillard, demonstrating how poetic language moves beyond representational transparency to produce constructed perceptual effects. The analysis has shown that cummings's typographical and grammatical deviations destabilize the conventional signifier–referent relationship, generating meaning through visual arrangement and linguistic fragmentation. When read through Baudrillard's notion of simulation and hyperreality, these poetic strategies reveal how language constructs an alternative reality that is more persuasive and appealing than the authentic reality. Future studies may extend this approach within the contemporary context of AI generated text, cyber communication, digital humanities to further investigate how language in relation to technological forms continue to reshape perception, textuality and the production of meaning.

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