

Simulation is not the Opposite of the Real – Jean Baudrillard on Simulation and Illusion

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“The whole world is merely an illusion of the senses and the sensory trace of that disappearance” (Baudrillard, 1997b:116).

I. Simulation as an Integral Part of Life

In his article for *Noema* (Volume 57, 2010) Pier Luigi Capucci draws attention to many of the complexities of simulation. He points to the very intimate nature of simulation for humans because even our oral and written languages are simulations with which we attempt to give the world meaning. Language, as Barthes acknowledged, is the very site of the institutionalization of subjectivity (1972:150). Capucci also points to simulation and representation (especially computer programs), holography, and virtuality while taking us into a discussion of “behaviour simulation”, the key role of “mirror neurons” (in interpersonal interactions), and the fact that simulation is at the centre of our lives today through techno-science as artificial life, robotics, and genetics all of which depend upon simulation models. In the end Capucci arrives at a series of hopeful questions and wonders if: “Recurring simulation in the anthrosphere could be intended as a confirmation that we – and all we build – are nature”. Capucci also acknowledges the role of Jean Baudrillard (and others) in theorizing simulation but an analysis of the philosophy of simulation is beyond the scope of his perceptive and thought provoking essay.

In this paper I delve specifically into Baudrillard’s thought on simulation as a way of contributing to *Noema*’s effort to encourage discussion of this vital subject today.

Jean Baudrillard published 47 books between 1968 and his death in 2007. Simulation is discussed in 30 of them. What can we learn from his writings on this intriguing concept?

Baudrillard recognized that all of human culture is the result of the collective sharing in / of simulacra (1990a:50) and that the real “has only ever been a form of simulation” (2003:39). Capital, the one entity to which our entire system is tethered, is nothing more than a very complex simulation (1993a: 36). Whatever else it is, the emergence of the bourgeois model of social organization has been a gigantic exercise in simulation (which is now attempting to globalize) (1981:41). For Baudrillard there is a maximum of simulation in the contemporary which coincides with an unfortunate minimum of sociability (1990b:155). What has changed today is that simulation is an integral part of the vast and extensive media networks and techno-sciences in which our lives are immersed. Baudrillard wonders if such a high level of simulation may make us more passive (1994a:31). He is wary of contemporary forms of simulation and how they may operate as

a kind of cold deterrence against action. He wonders if simulation can cause things not to happen and if it encourages a consensus of relative disinterest? (Ibid.:39; 1993b:181).

Simulation, Baudrillard points out, had already reached such a level in the US (by the time of Baudrillard's first visits there in the 1970s), that Americans were immersed in simulation but had no language to describe it (1988:29). To this day the best writing on simulation comes from outside of the U.S. When the passive acceptance of techno-simulation reaches such a level Baudrillard says we have reached an absolute form of banality of obscene proportions (1997:11).

Baudrillard is concerned that so much of our present is given over to simulation (1996a:23). He is apprehensive because he feels that opinion polling [an advanced form of modeling] is an operational simulation which works as a deterrence to activity (1993a:67). He pointed to the ongoing series of referenda in Europe concerning the European Constitution (where countries are made to vote repeatedly until the "yes" side wins) as "perfect forms of simulation" (Ibid.:62). It is but one vital aspect of a system characterized, he says, by the "precession of the model" (1990b:16). European leaders managing this charade could be understood as successful simulators because of their ability to make the real coincide with their models of simulation (Ibid.:2).

As activism disappears into referenda and opinion poll data Baudrillard noted that events also disappear into television coverage which scripts the event and covers the outcome before the event even takes place (1988:32). We can think of any major political or economic summit of world leaders and how the event is fed, in advance, through the television processors to know the practices which concern Baudrillard. His favourite example was the first Gulf War which he claimed "did not take place" – "a dead war" (1995:23) – "a war exchanged for the signs of war" (1994b:62). It was, he said: "...war processing, the enemy appears only as a computerized target" (1995:62). He added: "CNN's Gulf War was a prototype of the event which did not take place because it took place in real time, in the instantaneity of CNN ...Disney might restage the Gulf War as a global attraction" (2002:151). The proliferation of media simulation of events was troubling to Baudrillard precisely because 24-hour real-time coverage never ends and in-depth analysis never begins. In the case of the Gulf War we are, he said, "well along the way to confusing the war with the model of war" (1983:83-84). Here, our media, which we believe should function as a democratic mechanism of genuine information for debate, are almost entirely given over to positivity and factitiousness (1993c:44) – precisely the kind one would expect from a culture in which advertising has become an epidemic (Ibid.:4).

II. Are We In Simulation?

Baudrillard does not believe we have, as yet, fully entered into simulation because when we have entered into it fully we will no longer be able to speak of simulation (1993b:166). We are however advancing further into simulation at an unprecedented pace. One of the hallmarks of our era is what he refers to as the "liquidation of all referentials" (1994:2) or what we could call the beginning of an endless era without foundations which many analysts have pointed toward for the past thirty years. This is also part of that very familiar feeling we share concerning the unhinging of linear continuity and the kinds of polarities essential to dialectics (Ibid.:16). Many refer to it as the

postmodern but Baudrillard found this to be a hollow concept (1993b:22). One of the makers of our progression into simulation involves what he calls “the implosion of meaning” or the collapse of poles of meaning (Ibid.:31). A good example of this is contemporary politics where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the left from the right as whichever party is in power pursues negative policies (1988:113). Even though politics is no longer recognizable, and while we await what Agamben calls “a politics to come” (Agamben, 2004), politics continues on as if in complete indifference to what it has been (Baudrillard, 2000:44). The art of government today – government by negative means, by deterrence – involves convincing people of their powerlessness (2002:143). It is a form of governance which well suits the 500 channel television universe, modeled and staged events, and opinion polling. It is government which befits the age of genetics – a form of simulation having reached the point of no return (1990b:172).

Today Baudrillard says we are in a state of simulation to the extent that we are obliged to replay all the scenarios because they have taken place already (1993c:4). Our entire system of media and information are being transformed into a gigantic machine for what he calls the “production of the event as a sign” (2001:132). If objects (and objects are at the core of our system), become signs, this is when we will be in simulation true and proper (2001:129). As yet we are merely Baudrillard believes, in a time when only “the principle of simulation governs us” (1993a:2). If we were completely in simulation, according to Baudrillard, we would be in a world from which all reference has disappeared (1993b:165).

III. Saved by the Illusion of the World

What perhaps troubles Baudrillard the most about the eruption of unprecedented levels of simulation in our lives are efforts which confuse simulation with illusion. Here we must tread very carefully because, as we know, the world is understood through the simulation that is language. Indeed, our very ability to understand any “real” world is doubly compounded by the fact that “real”, whatever it is, remains hidden beneath an enigmatic realm of appearances (1996a:72). Take for example any simple table which appears to us as flat, cool, motionless, and solid. Any good physicist can repeat the brilliant theory fiction (for Baudrillard all theory is fiction), in which the table is understood as a mass of swirling atomic structures and substructures. Indeed, the physicist may also point out that the spaces in between the atomic substructures occupies more of what we conceive of as the table than to the atomic substructures themselves. Whatever the “real” table is remains hidden in these swirling atomic masses under the realm of the appearances (which we perceive as flatness, coolness, motionlessness, stability etc.). The illusion of the world is thus guaranteed by the fact that the real always hides behind appearances and that we “know” it through discourse.

What is properly meant by “simulation” for Baudrillard involves the effort of every systemic organization and operator (including each of us) “to put the illusion of the world to death” and to replace it with “an absolutely real world” (1996a:16). And this is a vitally important contribution to philosophy made by Baudrillard – the notion that the real is not the opposite of simulation. The opposite of simulation is illusion. The “real” which is the outcome of discourse and language simulations is merely a “particular case of simulation” (Ibid.:16).

As creatures of discourse we should know better than to take appearances, or any discourse on the real for the real, or understand the real as anything but simulation. We should know that simulation is merely a hypothesis – “a game, Baudrillard says, that turns reality itself into one eventuality among others” (2006:92). The problem of simulation for a discursive creature such as humanity, in our time when the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear, is that at the same time the sign also functions to mask this disappearance (see Baudrillard: 1997:12 ff.).

IV. Favouring the Enigma

Baudrillard points to two related aspects of existence which work to keep simulation at bay: 1) the illusion of the world; and 2) a philosophy [his] that favours enigma over truth.

Our first line of defense against tumbling into hyper-simulation is the discursive nature of our interaction with the world. For Baudrillard, given that illusion is the opposite of simulation, when the knowledge industries of the system present us with the demand that we produce the real (simulation) we can respond by making enigmatic that which is clear, and render unintelligible what is only too intelligible. We can make the event itself unreadable, accentuate the false transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion about it, and offer a radical disillusioning of the real (1996a:104). For Baudrillard the world which appears to us as enigmatic and unintelligible – is not predestined for “truth” of the kind which produces a “real” world. By seeking illusion we also seek the inner absence of everything to itself – the core of illusion (1997:49). This entails going against screen perceptions in real time which bring to us the definitive end of illusion (1996b:85). Screen culture or “tele-reality” as Baudrillard called it, attempts to end the illusion of thought, of the scene, of passion and entails the end of the illusion of the world and its vision which vanish into tele-reality, into real time, into the virtual, into the opposite of illusion (1996a:33).

And so, ironically, it is our discursive form of interaction with the world which saves us from total simulation. “Objectively”, Baudrillard writes, “the world is an illusion: it can only appear to us” (2006:62). In order to understand radical illusion Baudrillard points to an analogue from cosmology: “.. the light of the stars needs a very long time to reach us; sometimes we perceive it after the star itself has disappeared. This gap between the star as a virtual source and its perception by us... is an inescapable part of the illusion of the world, the absence at the heart of the world that constitutes the illusion” (2000:71). So illusion (the opposite of simulations of the real), has about it a very subtle reality! As Baudrillard writes elsewhere: “the fact that things are never what they seem to be or what they believe themselves to be, accordingly, the world, likewise, is never what it seems, it presents itself as one thing but is something else, the world plays with us in a manner of speaking, and we have a subjective illusion, the illusion of being a subject, whereas the objective illusion derives from the fact that the world presents itself as one thing, but it is not really this at all (1997:40). The illusion of the world cannot be dispelled (1996a:19) – from its very beginning the world has never been – as realism believes – identical with itself, never real (Ibid.:8). How could it be when we know it via language? The world is an objective illusion which entails the radical impossibility of a real presence of things or beings, their definitive absence from themselves” (2000:70).

Baudrillard also points to a method against simulation. He writes that: “the task of philosophical thought is to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic. The only justification for thinking and writing is that it accelerates these terminal processes. Here, beyond the discourse of truth, resides the poetic and enigmatic value of thinking. For, facing a world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic” (Ibid.:83). This understanding of philosophy is not one which seeks to be obscure or to create nonsense but is one which respects the illusion of the world over simulation.

Why would such an imaginative creature as humans prefer simulation over an embrace of the illusory nature of the world? It is one of the more sublime qualities of Baudrillard’s writing that he forces us to see ourselves as occupants of an uncertain world where the real hides behind appearances (1998:110). Ours is an existence of unceasing illusion – no matter how much we embrace simulacra the illusion of the world is what prevents us from tumbling all the way into simulation.

No matter how we try to perfect the world its imperfections will remain because the world is illusion. This is why Baudrillard chose to be “a weaver of illusions, if illusion is understood... as something which drives a breach into a world that is too known, too conventional, too real” (1996a:71).

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