Simulacra and Simulation
written by Alex Lee | October 28, 2014

Simulacra and Simulation by Jean Baudrillard
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This is not an easy book to read, in part because Baudrillard starts off with his ideas in full development and then talks around them, to explain them. He will start off with an example, develop the idea within the example, and then end by wrapping the example around itself, rather than ending on continual applications of the idea. In any case, he doesn’t do the historicity thing by telling you the past, where the idea may have come from, and then develop the series of thoughts that outline the form of the idea. Instead, Baudrillard plops you in the middle and makes you flounder. And unlike other thinkers, he doesn’t quote too many philosophers; in fact, nearly none at all. Instead of giving you guide posts along the way, he’d rather you sink or swim. Get it or not.

Baudrillard’s basic idea is that we don’t live in reality—that is, in the common sense use of the word, there is no thing-in-itself. He doesn’t even talk that way, as though the thing-in-itself is unnecessary. Following Quentin Meillasoux, Baudrillard is an absolute correlationist: the relationship we have with language is what also determinates any outside of language. Thus, for Baudrillard, we live in a world of simulacra. That’s easy so far. But there’s a catch. For Baudrillard, reality has already been exceeded because the processes that we buy into. These processes are unthinking, mechanical means that produce the simulacra which we then take for the actual thing. The easy examples of postmodern malls in America come to mind, or Disneyland.

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the
rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.

But such simulations only act to hide the fact that we can’t get back to reality because we’ve lost it. So this explains why Baudrillard drops us into the mix. He can’t explain why this happened. Once we’ve gotten sucked into hyperreality we’re here. It’s a traumatic event. The sheer force of hyperreality obscures any possibility of a central signifier. There is no metaphysics of presence; in fact he doesn’t even mention such a concept because it’s not important. Instead, he talks of what remains when the model has exhausted itself. “When a system has absorbed everything, when one has added everything up, when nothings remains, the entire sum turns to the remainder and becomes the remainder (144, original italics).” One of the key sections, philosophy-wise, in this book has to do with the remainder, which is another way of talking about emptiness as a thing. The remainder is the excessive real, “in a strict sense, it cannot be defined except as the remainder of the remainder (143)”–that is, left over after processes have stopped.

You might say hey, wait, isn’t everything real? And yes, that’s how language is, but the model for what is real and what is hyperreal have become the same. For instance, in talking of diplomas, their ubiquity and the ease at which they can be acquired—for whoever goes through the process gets one—signifies nothing but their meaninglessness. What makes diplomas meaningless is that it’s not about knowledge; it’s about process. Diplomas connect in a system of simulacra that only point to other simulacra. Similar to Derrida, with Baudrillard, we end with a passed reference that is always missed. What’s left over is the reality we deal with, the remainder that we must recycle back into a process for it to be what we think it is, which is a problem we have today with things that are “meta,” that the meaning of a thing today is often exactly what it is, a simulation, a context that determines our locus, not what it should be for us. For example, if we go to say, Paris, that trip will be like “a family trip,” with all the clichés and potholes of a family trip, which might as well be a sitcom simulating a family trip. The process of going through replaces the reality of a family trip, so that really, you’re just “doing” the “family trip.” You can’t otherwise because we are trapped in hyperreality. This is like how fake internet money in a game treated like real money in an economy becomes real money. The caveat is that real money then is just as fake as fake money because it’s just another simulation due to a formal process. Baudrillard notes that, like the Borges story, the territory itself decays when the map of the territory replaces the territory by being the territory itself. The simulacra of simulation, the pattern itself, the hyperreality has taken over reality by replacing reality. In hyperreality, the map meant to represent reality becomes a simulacra of reality itself so that we don’t get real; we get the map qua real qua map.

The fact that he is able to note the lack of a lack, as Zizek would say: the anti-philosophy at the heart of philosophy, so to speak, places Baudrillard with all the other philosophical greats of our time. He notices the void that
persists throughout simulation: that which organizes simulacra and leaves only sense making in its wake.

Meaning, truth, the real cannot appear except locally, in a restricted horizon, they are partial objects, partial effects of the mirror and of equivalence. All doubling, all generalization, all passage to the limit, all holographic extension (the fancy of exhaustively taking account of this universe) makes them surface in their mockery.

Thus, the curve of meaning making is in fact what is created through the distortion of the absent remainder, leaving us only sensible sense, the trace that makes sense. In other words, when speaking of truth, or ideology, Baudrillard is able to show us how adding the unnameable nothing (the social totality, the remainder) back into the mix gets us the totality that we cannot exceed. The simulation always over-codes totality by naming its void, leaving us always within the wake of its own logic. Baudrillard writes: “As the social in its progression eliminates all residue, it itself becomes residue. In designating residual categories as ‘Society,’ the social designates itself as a remainder. (144, original italics).” This is another way of saying that in trying to split a totality like the social, we name parts of it also things, so as to make a thing out of its parts. But the social as a totality, as a bare named signifier, persists because the social always remains as a residue to mark the situation we are in. With the naming of any void, the absent remainder, we can never get away from conditions like being in society, whatever ideology or other kinds of hyperreality. Hyperreality is the kind of situation presupposes the very topography that we are trying to define, to get away from! If anything, what is confusing about Baudrillard is that he does not allow us any access, imaginary or real, to what we are talking about. What he calls simulation is also the very naming of a given set of the conditions that allow us to talk about anything at all, simply because such terms act as null reference points to its own generic logic.

I am split on liking the reviews (through Goodreads and Amazon) where people obviously didn’t get it, and thus didn’t like it, and disliking such reviews by hurt readers who rebelled at feeling stupid, or having their time wasted (and it’s hard to tell the difference when you’re not sure what you are reading about). To be honest, I’ve read this book three times over the past 10 years, and each time I’ve come away with a fuller picture. This is one of the hardest books I’ve ever read, and that includes any of Zizek or Deleuze’s works.

Overall, I appreciate this difficulty because in making you work for it, the concept will stick with you. You’ll make the concept your own, and you’ll remember it better. It can inspire you, help you along. If the entire concept everything was handed to you, you’d lose the influence. In this sense, by stretching in a new way, you end up in the ‘pataphysical, where the meaning stands on its own. Is this a site of resistance to the ubiquitous hyperreality? With ‘pataphysics, you get something that can stand in for itself on its own by itself, in this case, each particular re-reading. Although, it is arguable that while there is the process of reading, if you read the good stuff, each time it will be different. This difference however,
is really a pre-fabricated genre soaked simularca because it is different. We assume, in Baudrillardian terms, that what we are reading relies on a kind of perhaps, “naïve faith in a pact of the similitude of things to themselves.” We assume that what we are talking about is the same as what we are talking about, and this is where our conception, or model or map, gets in the very way of what we are so desirous to speak of.

The real, the real object is supposed to be equal to itself, it is supposed to resemble itself like a face in a mirror—and this virtual similitude is in effect the only definition of real—and any attempt, including the holographic one, that rests on it, will inevitably miss its object, because it does not take its shadow into account (precisely the reason why it does not resemble itself)—this hidden face where the object crumbles, its secret. The holographic attempt literally jumps over its shadow, and plunges into transparency, to lose itself there (original italics).

And in this way, you can say that each time you process Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* you’ve actually miss-encountered it. Whatever process of reading you have, you inevitably create a conception of it, and in that conception, blur the totality of everything else around it, to make room for this conception. So in a twist of Baudrillardian logic, perhaps we read *Simulacra and Simulation* in order to claim everything is a simulation. In finding simulacra everywhere around us—we dig extra deep in order to hide the fact that we already don’t really live in reality, that our very response in naming and determining differences around us for orientation—to get at reality creates the very condition we want to escape from.