

The Return of Simulacra

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Simulation-based culture eliminates the principles of reality, replacing them wholly with principles of pleasure. Emotions, experiences and events lose their conclusive, binding quality. They evolve instead into a series of trials or tests which we can experience before deciding to choose nothing. Simulation-based culture is, at its core, highly aesthetic and free from boundaries and their consequences.

The concept of simulations rose to prominence in the late 20th century, mainly thanks to Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*, published in French in 1981 (in English in 1994, in Polish in 2005). He states that the notion of images, which had been applied successfully for millennia, is no longer sufficient to describe humankind's current existential situation. Why not? Because images or likenesses have always assumed the existence of some real reference point in nature. In the case of abstractions, what a work of art refers to in reality could be the author's emotions, mathematical calculations, colors, and so on. Most notably images never promised that they would become an alternative reality for their creators or recipients; they never aimed to replace the real world. The role of images, according to their critics and apologists alike, was in the worst case to replicate reality – and the latter in any case always remained their reference point. Baudrillard's simulations, in contrast, create a kind of hyperreality: severed from truth and offering new reference systems free from the burden of replication. For contemporary individuals, this means that instead of functioning in the world, they start operating in a model which is liable to an infinite number of transformations. The main difference between hyperreality and actual reality lies in the former's susceptibility to transformation. Simulation-based models standing in for the real world are unfettered by any biological, emotional, historical, logical or practical circumstances. They can be copied, removed or added to without limitation, seemingly opening up our options.

Of course there do also exist forbidden images, images devoid by their very nature of any reference to reality, impossible images which depict nothing yet provide a representation with fundamental significance for culture. Baudrillard writes about the tradition of portraying God, finding it to be the original source of simulacra: "But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but



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a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser). Abolishing the concept of references means replacing reality with its symbols, bringing to life Plato’s greatest nightmare: prisoners in a cave no longer even try to name the shadows on the wall, never mind trying to escape towards the sun and the truth, because they now see the shadows as the truest truth; the only sufficient truth.

In this context, it’s worth considering how well Baudrillard’s judgement stands up after nearly four decades. Are his fears justified? Do we really live in a “disquieting strangeness of the desert” in a world created entirely by and for ourselves? If so, we certainly have growing numbers of tools to expand our field for simulation.

However, reality isn’t letting itself be forgotten, appearing at borderline situations in individual human existence: our dream of immortality still remains a dream, as does our belief in the infinite potential of Earth’s resources, which in fact we are depleting far faster than we ever expected. What Baudrillard referred to as “the remainder” becomes all the more significant the closer we are to the inevitable end of our ability to create simulations; it would include everything which does not fit into the realm of simulation. The French philosopher explains it thus: “Once the last liter of energy has been consumed (by the last ecologist), once the last indigenous person has been analyzed (by the last ethnologist), once the ultimate commodity has been produced by the last ‘work force,’ then one will realize that this gigantic spiral of energy and production, of repression and the unconscious, thanks to which one has managed to enclose everything in an entropic and catastrophic equation, that all this is in effect nothing but a metaphysics of the remainder, and it will suddenly be resolved in all its effects” (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser). In this context, simulations reveal their basic limitation: that even though they dispose of the necessity for reference, they remain dependent on the environment in which they can be conducted. The boundary of simulation turns out to be the ability to eliminate being and existence. The dynamics of catastrophe radically eliminates the option for continuing existence beyond the principles of reality, even though it is what we want more than anything at this point. ■



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