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Author(s): Lissa McCullough

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McCullough - Jean Baudrillard and the Death of God - JCRT 2.3
 Lissa McCullough
 Hanover College

This essay considers Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist and so-called “father of postmodernism,” as a theological thinker; more specifically, as a negative theological thinker. Though little attention is paid to the theological dimension of his work by his popular and critical readership, Baudrillard consistently reflects on contemporary culture in its negative relationship to the symbolic world of Judeo-Christian tradition, and this is a key to his significance as a post-Nietzschean thinker. Through the lens of his work, we are made to see that late-modern technological and neo-capitalistic culture is still fulfilling a theologically driven dynamic (one specifically Calvinistic in quality), only now it is doing so in a wholly negative or inverted phase, a radically *nihilistic* phase, in fact but one graced nonetheless with a certain ironic joy and humor. Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard is a comic writer, for whom tragedy and horror are mercifully refracted through comic wit. Even as he writes of a total subversion of reality in simulation, and of the human in the inhuman, Baudrillard’s writing is funny, provoking a last self-ironizing smile on the visage of the last man, even as his human body deconstructs into its inorganic components, and his human ideality vanishes into the “hyperreal” like the body of the Cheshire cat into its smile.

Is “simulation,” as Baudrillard depicts it, occupied with generating a surrogate to replace this lost sun, this archaic center and origin that undergirded all values and orders? Is it a strategy that we, as *imago Dei*, first simulacrum, have employed to substitute for the loss of the original, at least until simulation achieves an infinite loop and has no further need of an original?

A “universe of simulation,” when it reaches this stage, will have realized an infinite self-referentiality, having an endless self-processing as its sole reason for being, a self-contained, self-encoded, prospectively self-inscribed destiny fulfilling itself. This is perhaps Baudrillard’s thought when he writes: “God is not dead, he has become hyperreal” (SS 159).

As God is the “original” of which *imago Dei* is the simulacrum, so eternity is the temporality of which “real time” is the simulacrum. Is the primary function of “real time” secretly that of staving off historical time in a sense that Mircea Eliade would recognize as analogous to the “archaic” time of eternal return? Must time be totally emptied, pared down to sheer instantaneity, liberated from the narrative flow of history, in order to compete with eternity? The hyperreality of “real time” staves off the occurrence of epochal resolutions like the Last Judgment, the Apocalypse, or the Revolution (IE 8). Instead, like the empty temporal monotony of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, this time cannot be brought to resolution because it cannot achieve a *telos* of any kind. It cannot transcend itself, all it can do is persist.

More to the point, operative in this fetishization Baudrillard sees a virulent nihilism at work. The human race, an eager instrument of this nihilism, is destroying itself qua human by dissolving its own symbolic space, volatilizing “every vital illusion—the illusion of appearances, ideas, dreams, utopias, ideal projections, but also the illusion of concepts and representations, including those of death and the body, which is disappearing more and more” (IE 95). A cult of the “immediate effectuation of all things” has taken the place of cultural, ritual, and symbolic elaboration (IE 95).

3. In order to characterize the negative phase of our age against the background arc of theological history, Baudrillard resorts to an inverted religious language: a language that recalls the vestiges of sacrality negatively through their disappearance and simulated replacement.

Frequently employing terms like “enshrinement,” “worship,” “sacrilege,” “excommunication,” “resurrection,” “ecstasy,” “parousia,” in a thoroughly ironic mode, Baudrillard registers the desublimation of the quest for the divine as it is displaced toward a cool, calculated, Calvinistic frenzy of innerworldly simulation. If idolatry were true worship, this contemporary culture of the realized ecstatic image, the *simulacrum*, would have to be recognized as the apotheosis of veneration.

4. Western theology has long dealt with the paradox that the divine *cannot* be represented in images and yet, to have any role in human affairs, *must* be represented in images. Baudrillard probes this tension:

What becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? [The Iconoclasts] predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man.¹

5. Baudrillard implies that this paradoxical tension between God and the image of God grounds our cultural world, our whole complex system of symbolic reference. Formerly, in the form of an otherworldly passion and energy, it erected cathedrals and marshaled crusades; in the present, it still drives our cultural systems, more madly than ever, though now in a kind of negative reaction-formation, displacing into an ever deeper simulation our radical sense of lack and disappointment in the wake of the death of God.
6. After the death of God, what Weber diagnosed as “inner-worldly asceticism” is wholly restricted to a this-worldly confinement, which means its explosive power is directed into the high-velocity, highly controlled, precision culture of simulation. The simulacra are the artificial recreations, compensations, displaced veneration of former “divine” values on the part of an Unhappy Consciousness, caught up in the supreme irony of emulating *by artifice* the absolute reality of the Real, the absolute truth of the True. The expansive energy of human desire for the absolute, which was once directed to transcendent symbolization, but is now recathected to strictly immanent or innerworldly ends, has propelled culture in upon itself to the point that it has “maxed out” all territories for expansion and has achieved, by its involuted velocity, an implosive form.
7. Thus Baudrillard’s reflections testify that, after the death and symbolic decomposition of God, cultural desire can still desire nothing that does not emulate, or rather *simulate*, the “highest” values, the divine values, the values of *reality* and *truth* and *totality* and *finality*. Precisely this emulation of the “really real” and the “truly true” by means of *artifice* is what has generated what he terms the *hyperreal*, that simulacrum of the real which alone survives beyond the disappearance of the reality formerly warranted by God.

¹Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 4; French original published in 1981. Hereafter cited as SS. This perspective casts into deep ambiguity the notion of *imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen. 1:26); the simulacrum of divinity is created, a mere creature in time, and yet in a privileged way images the uncreated, which in itself is forever and irretrievably hidden. Surely this establishes the archetypal model of simulation in its primordial, pre-degenerate stage, but it also foreordains the irrevocable fall of simulation away from the divine and ever deeper into itself. Back

8. Even if, in the evolution of simulation-history, divine values have been degraded to a copy of a copy of a copy, ad infinitum, the sacred is nonetheless forced into a kind of perverse *parousia* by this means, by this idolizing, hyperrealizing process of profanation. If simulation is driven to produce a hyperreality that is all in all, it seems to do so precisely in order to mask the absence of God, to exorcise the resentment created by God's nonexistence, to forget God by means of a surrogate totality, an artificial plenitude of being, from which nothing is deemed to be lacking and to which nothing admits of being added.
9. Baudrillard tries out the hypothesis that the universe of simulation incarnates an exact *inverse* replica of "predestination," understood in a Calvinistic vein. To wit, God conceived as absolute origin and end, Alpha and Omega, defined the parameters of the procession of being, the orderly progression of creatures in time, the unfolding of history according to an ineluctable providential plan. Most importantly, God understood as final cause provided Western culture with the image of its end, the imaginary *telos* toward which its transcendental passion was directed, lending resolution to the critical problem of existence, which is: what to do with time, what to do with death.
10. The whole of history has had a millennial (millenarian) challenge to its temporality running through it.' In opposition to the historical perspective, . . . there has always been a fatal exigency, a fatal strategy of time which wants to shoot straight ahead to a point beyond the end. . . . Since the messianic convulsions of the earliest Christians . . . there has always been this desire to anticipate the end, possibly by death, by a kind of seductive suicide aiming to turn God from history and make him face up to his responsibilities, those which lie beyond the end, those of the final fulfillment. . . Is there not also a hint of this parousic exigency in the global fantasy of catastrophe that hovers over today's world? A demand for a violent resolution of reality, when this latter eludes our grasp in an endless hyperreality?²
11. The Alpha/Omega structure of providence turned time into a procession from absolute origin toward absolute end. Procession means: the act of moving along or forward; progression; origination; emanation; a group of persons or objects moving along in an orderly, formal manner. But this order and formality, this ceremonial meaning, the whole cosmic providentiality that warranted hierarchical values and degrees of reality'precisely all this was cut away with the annunciation of the death of God, giving way to a referential disorientation that is articulated by Nietzsche's madman:

What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? . . . Is the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (*The Gay Science*, sec. 125).

12. The providential procession that formerly shepherded Western culture toward its well-appointed end is, in Baudrillard's reading of contemporary culture, inverted into the "precession of the simulacra," an inverse counter-image of providential destining. *Precession*, here, is not to be confused with *procession*. It means: the act or state of preceding; taking precedence. At this point the source of Baudrillard's inspiration is Walter Benjamin's well-known essay on the

²Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 7–8; French original published in 1992. Hereafter cited as IE. Back

impact of mechanical reproduction on the aesthetic experience of art.³ Benjamin grasped the idea of the precession of reproduction over production (SS 100). The real ultimatum in modern technological and media systems lies not in production, but in serial and differential reproduction, which determines in advance the operational virtuosity of the system; indeed, this is the special genie of such systems. Advanced technical systems are aimed at reproduction for the sake of reproducibility: a controllable, encodable, infinitely variable reproducibility, in which the “finality is there in advance inscribed in the code” (SED 59).

13. In the final stage of simulation (SS 6), the simulacra no longer image anything transcending themselves, but turn inward in an involuted process of self-reiteration, -reproduction, -resimulation.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. . . . It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is the map that precedes the territory’*precession of simulacra*’that engenders the territory. (SS 1)

14. The death of God cancels the primordial original “behind” the appearance of the simulacrum; the simulacrum loses its warrant. This induces the invention of alternate strategies for warranting the real, one of which is the seizure of “real time”:

Our obsession with ‘real time’, with the instantaneity of news, has a secret millenarianism about it: canceling the flow of time, canceling delay, suppressing the sense that the event is happening elsewhere, anticipating its end by freeing ourselves from linear time, laying hold of things almost before they have taken place. (IE 8’9) / It is the fantasy of seizing reality live that continues. . . . Surprising the real in order to immobilize it. (SS 105)

15. As historical time is associated with cycles of generation and death, so “real time” is associated with technical survival: a literal persistence that does not let time achieve an identifiable genesis or closure. Formerly, death was regarded as the passageway, the threshold to the *telos* of immortality, and elaborate symbolic and ritual systems were called on to bridge this passage of life into death, permitting a notion of spiritual survival. One could not become immortal without dying; it was necessary first to throw off this mortal coil. Whereas the “im-mortality” (non-dying) that is sought today is a precise inversion of this: an immortality achieved not through dying, but through *not* dying, through *never* dying, through refusing to die.
16. This refusal to die also leads very naturally to the impulse to eliminate sex, which may be achieved any day now, at least in principle, with the advent of successful human cloning. “What,” Baudrillard speculates, “if not a death drive, would push sexed beings to regress to a form of reproduction prior to sexuation?” (SS 96). Is this a quest for a monocellular utopia, he wonders, which would, through the manipulation of the genetic code, allow complex beings to achieve the destiny of protozoas? Does cloning fulfill an urge to deny and annihilate sexuality *because* it is the carrier of life, because it is a *mortal* method of reproduction?

³Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993), pp. 55–56; French original published in 1976. Hereafter cited as SED. The essay in question is Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1955).
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17. If, per Benjamin, what is lost in the work of art that is serially reproduced is its *aura*, its singular here-and-now quality, the essence of its unique aesthetic form, what is lost with cloning is an analogous original. Embedded in the principle of cloning is the idea that each individual is but one instantiation of a DNA sequence that could potentially generate an infinite series. Whatever comes of cloning as a practice, this idea already infects our thinking, gaining precedence over the idea of originality, asserting the *precession* of the simulacra, a “precession of the genetic model over all possible bodies” (SS 100). It erodes the very notion of a singular original, since individuals are conceived from the beginning as a function of potentially unlimited reproduction. “Thus nothing is opposed to the body being serially reproduced in the same way Benjamin describes the reproduction of industrial objects and the images of the mass media” (SS 99’100). Already, Baudrillard observes, this is happening to the body: it is losing its *aura*, its ideality of wholeness, its symbolic clothing, and being handled as a stockpile of information, fodder for data processing; each cell of the body regarded as an embryonic prosthesis of the whole (SS 98). This tendency of genetics and nanotechnology to break down the ideal-organic whole into its formula or code, is blurring the boundaries of the human and the inhuman, but is doing so in a movement not toward the superhuman, but toward the subhuman, toward a “disappearance of the very symbolic characteristics of the species”; behold, we greet the arrival of the *Untermensch* (IE 95).
18. But real time and technical immortality are dimensions of a more encompassing hyperreality, the core ideal of which is the transparency of information, our age’s primary means for grasping at assurance of the real. How can we approach perfect information, which is to say, a virtual omniscience, a total science? The founder of modern social science Giambattista Vico theorized: in order truly to know something, it is necessary in some sense to have made it. Baudrillard’s theory of simulation builds on this foundation. As long as physical science studies a reality “created by God,” it studies what can be known aboriginally only by God. Mystery reigns there, not transparency. Only our simulated models of reality yield transparent results. Let the mystery of nature *in se* remain, we nonetheless have the power to simulate it, and simulation is what delivers the power of reproducibility into our possession.
19. To be sure, many 20th-century thinkers’ Husserl, Heidegger, and Whitehead among them’ objected to precisely this tendency of simulation to obscure the mystery and unknowability of the original. Indeed, it is guilty as charged of what Whitehead calls “misplaced concreteness.” But as it obscures mystery and buries the primordial question of being, it delivers an all too apparent realization of power and transparency’ and even, a simulated “plenitude of being.” Once it achieves a certain critical mass, simulation loses its dialectical, mediating function; it converts from *image* to *operational model*, from map to territory, simulating a “total descriptive universe, or integrated circuit that implosion traverses through and through” (SS 67).
20. If we were to imagine a simulacrum of the divine “plenitude of being,” how would it look rendered a reality in the world? Would it look rather like Baudrillard’s “total descriptive universe,” an immanent totalitarian presence supersaturated with a literalistic, even fetishistic, sense of its own hyperreality? Baudrillard does see a quite literal fetishism operative here (IE 98): a crypto-religious veneration of objects, not as images or icons of something else, but quite literally as objects, tout court.

Not any longer a fetishization of divinities, great ideas, or grand narratives, but of minimal differences and particles. It is in this respect that fetishism has become

radical: it has become minimal and molecular; it is no longer the fetishism of the *form*, but of a mere *formula'* subliminal, subhuman. (IE 95)

21. Baudrillard muses that, in a bizarre fashion, nihilism has been entirely realized, not primarily through a violent destruction of ideals, but through a stealth strategy of simulation and deterrence (SS 159). Today's nihilism is quiet, systemic, systematic, totalitarian in scope: a nihilism of transparency and silent neutralization (SS 163), a "screen of absorption" (*écran d'absorption*) in which supersaturation with difference effects a neutralization of difference.

Such is the logic of simulacra, it is no longer that of divine predestination, it is that of the precession of models, but it is just as inexorable. And it is because of this that events no longer have meaning: it is not that they are insignificant in themselves, it is that they were preceded by the model, with which their processes only coincided. . . . Our time will never again be that of duration, our only temporality is that of the accelerated cycle and of recycling. . . . Our only culture in the end is that of . . . refining, cracking, breaking cultural molecules and of their recombination into synthesized products. (SS 55'56, 64)

22. Human life today, for Baudrillard, is invested in a self-intensifying cycle of obsessive reproduction and obsessive consumption, a cycle motivated by a death drive so powerful and so utterly in denial of itself that its activities are relegated to automation. As a cultural system, neo-capitalism produces, not abundance, but an alternation between the two infinitely plastic terms' shortage and abundance' neither of which is any longer limited to a "real-world" reference (SED 33). Enslaved to the "ever-disappointed project now implicit in objects," the system pursues its fatal strategy beyond the point of madness, hellbent on the endgame of annihilation within this endless circuit of shortage-and-abundance: "The very will to live," he writes, "fragmented, disappointed, signified, is condemned to repeat itself and repeatedly abolish itself in a succession of objects" in an attempt to make up for a reality that is absent.⁴ This funereal procession of reproduction and consumption arises from "the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life" (SO 205). Admittedly, in tandem with his Nietzschean cast, and his Kafkaesque shadings, a distinctively Jansenist quality imbues Baudrillard's writings. Reading him is a little like encountering a postmodern Pascal. There is the sense of absurd futility and melancholy; the perception of an unbridgeable chasm between Deity and the alien world in which we are sentenced to existence; the observation of an obsessive pursuit of worldly *divertissement* in order to evade consciousness of time's emptiness and death's inevitability. For Baudrillard, the procession toward a healthy resolution of all things in apocalypse is finished. It is the *precession of simulacra* that we now have in store: an illusory end without end, an end that is impotent to bring itself to an end. For him, much as for Pascal, "all that remains is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us" (SS 160).

Notes

Lissa McCullough completed her master's degree at Harvard Divinity School and her doctorate at the University of Chicago, with a dissertation on the religious thought of

⁴Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), p. 204; French original published in 1968. Hereafter cited as SO. Back

Simone Weil. She has taught courses in religious studies at New York University, and will be assistant professor of theology at Hanover College in Fall 2001. She welcomes responses at <mccullough@hanover.edu>.

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