

# Confronting Reality Amidst Simulation: A Response To Baudrillard

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Baudrillard is a difficult and controversial thinker whose writings have been met with great praise and rebuke alike. Though capable of penetrating analysis into the effects of media and advertising on our collective self-concept and the structure of our experiences, he is often unhelpfully hyperbolic in his writings, which prompts a distressing ambiguity regarding how one should respond to his provocations. More often than not, Baudrillard's nihilistic tone ends up disabusing his reader of any silver lining. In *Radical Thought*,<sup>1</sup> when addressing the question of how one ought to act, Baudrillard emphatically insists that we forgo our futile search for reality and instead engage the seductive embrace of illusion. Far from compelling, this supposed call-to-action is instead received as merely a sardonic resignation. In this essay, I hope to combat this reading and offer a more grounded response to Baudrillard, which maintains his core analysis whilst acknowledging the reality underlying our simulation and leaving room for serious political engagement. Specifically, I will begin by defending a form of epistemological realism against skeptical considerations along the lines of Baudrillard and end with an examination of and response to Baudrillard's critique of Marxism as an example of important political engagement discouraged by his analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, *epistemological realism* contends the following thesis: that there is an inextricable and necessary correspondence between *concepts* and *reality*. The extent and manner of this correspondence may vary across concepts, but this thesis challenges Baudrillard's claim regarding the *precession of simulacra*, whereby concepts have inescapably lost their referent in reality, ushering in a state of *hyperreality*.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. 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 nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory...<sup>2</sup>

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1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (Verso, 1996), 94-106.

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

In refuting such conclusions, the epistemological realist is naturally pressed to provide precise definitions of both *concepts* and *reality*. *Concepts* are the structures through which sense-data wade in the process of cognition before being realized as thoughts and potentially expelled as speech. As an example, consider the experience of an apple. Light bounces off the apple and reflects into one's eyes, passing through the cornea to the lens, where it is focused onto the retina and converted into electro-chemical impulses, which propagate along the optic nerve and finally reach the brain, where higher cortical processes interpret the input data according to concepts such as color, depth, and size, whereby the experience of the apple is induced in the mind.<sup>3</sup> Other senses such as touch, smell, and taste are similarly confronted by the concepts of hardness, sweetness, and juiciness respectively.

From this presentation, a question naturally proposes itself: whence do concepts arise? In the history of philosophy, there have been two competing explanations, each intersecting in important and interesting ways: (1) Rationalism: concepts exist innately within the mind (2) Empiricism: concepts are derived from experience. Returning to the apple example, a rationalist would contend that the concept of redness precedes its manifestation in the experience of the apple, whereas an empiricist would suggest that the concept of redness arises from the repeated experience of red things through the mental process of pattern-recognition, which likens red things and distinguishes them from non-red things. Without intending to settle this longstanding debate (the contents of which I've also greatly simplified), I will defend the rationalist contention that some concepts are innate whilst acknowledging the shaping roles of experiences. The indispensability of some innate concepts comes from the following: In the absence of any guiding concepts, sense-data fail to be properly situated and hang aimlessly above the possibility of experience. As such, some innate concepts are required in order to "bootstrap" the possibility of experience, whereby further concepts may be generated, refined, and even distorted. The skeptical reader is urged to attempt to reason about the experience of sense-data apart from concepts. What is left once the apple is stripped of its color, shape, size, taste, smell, position, etc.? What remains is merely the anatomical

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3. Kellogg Eye Center, *Anatomy of the Eye*, University of Michigan.

and physiological conditions, as described earlier, waiting to be expressed, hanging off the tip of the mind's tongue. Concepts thereby liberate these sense-data from this purgatory by providing them with the means of expression, hence allowing for the possibility of experience.

Armed with the existence of innate concepts, we may now tackle the notion of reality. *Reality* is the world as experienced by the *real concepts*. On what basis are these so-called *real concepts* postulated? The prior discussion established the indispensability of concepts for experience, but why shouldn't reality be subjectively created through the necessarily subjective act of experience? This explanation is deemed untenable by the great success of inter-communication. If human experience were marred by a cacophony of varied underlying concepts, inter-communication would prove impossible, for there would be no shared foundation upon which to converse. Disagreement on basic premises would arise at every step, utterly halting the possibility of any dialogue. Yet, human inter-communication is remarkably possible. This suggests a shared foundation of underlying concepts, designated by the honorific "real" and thereby establishing the existence of "real concepts."

Notably, under this definition, *reality* is not, as Baudillard often implies, the world apart from concepts / simulation, by which he concludes "[reality] is a failing of the understanding, a failing of common sense, as well as the last refuge of moral zealots and the apostles of rationality."<sup>4</sup> Rather, *reality* follows from the recognition of some foundational, shared human-experience and *illusion* is an experience guided by the wrong concepts, not devoid of concepts altogether. As such, the mere fact that our experiences are mediated through concepts, which Baudrillard rightly acknowledges, is not sufficient to conclude that our experiences are of hyperreality rather than reality. It must be further argued that these concepts are not reflective of reality, i.e. that they are simulacra.

Having clarified this, the challenge to the epistemic realist is as such: What reasons does one have for thinking that his personal concepts are in alignment with the *real concepts*? One reason is the tremendous statistical uniformity of the experiences of certain concepts such as sound. If our experiences of sound were radically different, then communication through speech and mu-

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4. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 94.

sic would prove untenable. Additionally, scientific analyses of the phenomenon of sound reveal common structures responsible for auditory cognition as well as a predictable correspondence between changes in these structures and the subsequent experience of sounds. To deny the reality of concepts such as pitch or duration in light of this is to willfully ignore the evidence to the contrary. Beyond these rather obvious examples, even concepts as rich as a hero are arguably real. Depictions of heroes in literature across cultures reveal striking similarities. This archetypal hero is usually male, embodies real characteristics such as strength and courage, and is often hindered by some hubris such as pride or arrogance. The notion of a hero extends beyond fiction to describe real people such as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Jonas Salk as well; the concept is also susceptible to great scrutiny in its usage, suggesting that it's not the product of mere propaganda or whim. Given all this, in what sense is the concept of a hero illusory? One might retort that even though a concept is shared, it may still be contrived, hence illusory. Yet, my above analysis dissuades this conclusion. Rather than appearing as contrived, the concept of a hero seems to be able to be broken down into concepts foundational to the collective human-experience, such as anger, pride, strength, lust, etc. If this is true, then the repeated appearance of hero concepts in literature, media, and political discourse is not the result of hyperreal fabrication but a genuine expression of a shared human notion.

Even if one finds my analysis convincing, Baudrillard admittedly offers some compelling examples of likely simulacra in the realms of media and advertising.<sup>5</sup> His analysis regarding those very specific phenomena is often insightful, but when he makes sweeping declarations such as quoted above, he is burdened with the weighty assertion that all concepts are in fact simulacra, a notion which I hope to have hitherto refuted. Unfortunately, Baudrillard embraces this generalization:

One must be conscious that, no matter how the analysis proceeds, it proceeds toward the freezing over of meaning, it assists in the precession of simulacra and of indifferent forms. . . There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing:

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5. Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (Verso, 2001), 176-180.

meaning is mortal. . . This is where seduction begins.<sup>6</sup>

Here, we confront the logical consequences of accepting Baudrillard's grandiose conclusions. If all meaning is impossible and even the pursuit of reality a mere illusion, one must instead welcome and indeed participate in the proliferation of signs. This is an approach which Baudrillard terms *seduction*. Through it, he mocks the worries of philosophers since time-immemorial, who have concerned themselves with eschewing the seduction of appearances against reality and the "seductive veil of perceptual illusion."<sup>7</sup> Following the great materialistic success of industrial capitalism in the domains of production, Baudrillard theorizes an 'emancipated' neo-aristocracy, free to engage the 'order of sign and ritual', which characterizes seduction against production. This line of reasoning finds itself in stark opposition to the concerns of many feminists, who insist on dismantling the patriarchy and liberating women from their oppression. For Baudrillard, the patriarchy is but another sign for the seductress to play with. What becomes of women's liberation?

All that we have been asked to believe—the universal discourse on the inequality of the sexes, the theme song of an egalitarian and revolutionary modernity. . . —is perhaps one gigantic misunderstanding. The opposite hypothesis is just as plausible. . . that the feminine has never been dominated, but has always been dominant. . . Women's liberation would very much like to cast the deciding vote against this objectification. But the cause is hopeless. . .<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the sign of oppression is mixed with the sign of liberation, and together they exist as play-things for the ruling aristocracy. So, the radical danger of Baudrillard's conclusions become evident. Not only do they totally undermine serious political engagement, which is dismissed as clinging on to the illusion of reality, but they legitimate, inadvertently or otherwise, the existing hierarchies of the status-quo. This implication is more thoroughly addressed through a response to Baudrillard's critique of Marxism.

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6. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 161-164.

7. Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford University Press, 1989), 143.

8. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New World Perspectives, 1990), 15-25.

Marx's underlying philosophy radically differs from that of Baudrillard. Marx champions a transcendent human nature and identifies the estrangement of labor under capitalism as the chief obstacle to its realization.<sup>9</sup> Granted this essential and unassailable human nature, politics cannot merely operate at the ethereal level of illusion and simulation, as Baudrillard desires. Marx's political philosophy confronts the reality of labor and capital, notes their contradiction with private property, and advocates a synthesis as motivated by his dialectical analysis. Indeed, Marx explicitly promotes what he calls a "materialist" approach to philosophy:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.<sup>10</sup>

In denouncing the Young Hegelians, Marx may as well have been responding to Baudrillard: "... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Where for the Young Hegelians everything is reducible to consciousness, likewise for Baudrillard everything is reducible to simulation. Marx rightly notes that such an analysis proves radically subversive to his political aims. For Marx, the material reality constitutes what he calls a *base*. Simulacra and simulation reside in the *superstructure* of society. Insofar as the superstructure hinders the Marxist imperative through obstructing class consciousness, it must be dismantled. Baudrillard, on the other hand, denies any such base reality, contending that the "material reality," which Marx investigates, stands on no firmer ground than his dreaded superstructure. Thus, Marx's materialist approach merely perpetuates the hyper-real condition of seeking reality in illusion. In just one provocation, Baudrillard effectively undercuts the entire Marxist struggle all together. What remains is only illusion, and it is to become the

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9. Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1844), 28-35.

10. Friedrich Engels Karl Marx, *The German Ideology, including Theses on Feuerbach*, Paperback, Great Books in Philosophy (Prometheus Books, 1998), 7.

11. Karl Marx, 7.

object of seduction.

Arthur Kroker, a prominent theorist, proposes a very different reading of Baudrillard in relation to Marx.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that Baudrillard is the missing link between Marx and Nietzsche, drawing out an incredible synthesis of Marx's "fetishism of the commodity-form" and Nietzsche's "will to power" through Baudrillard's "implosion of the world of signs." Specifically, Kroker postulates that Baudrillard's discourse reinvigorates a "tragic sense of history" which entails a radical contradiction: "where nihilism is both antithetical to and conditional for historical emancipation."<sup>13</sup> Thus, although Baudrillard rejects the strict reality of Marx's contention regarding the material correspondences among labor, capital and power, instead viewing them as mere proliferations of signs, his nihilistic provocations galvanize a revolutionary fervor, not against material oppression, as Marx urged, but still in the interests of human emancipation.

Unfortunately, I don't think Kroker's optimistic reconciliation holds. Baudrillard's rhetoric is simply too ambiguous to reliably adjudicate between revolutionary invigoration and resignation to seductive play. Indeed, he capitalizes on this ideological whiplash: "You know that my way is to make ideas appear, but as soon as they appear I immediately try to make them disappear. . . nothing remains but a sense of dizziness, with which you can't do anything."<sup>14</sup> Speaking on the future of labor movements, Baudrillard asserts that "[t]here is no longer any strikes or work, but. . . a scenodrama (not to say melodrama) of production, collective dramaturgy upon the empty stage of the social."<sup>15</sup> What room is there for serious labor organization and deliberate attempts at social progress if this is its fate? Baudrillard's alternative is hyperconformism and defiance.<sup>16</sup> Through hyperconformism, such as hypermaterialism through total subjugation to the signs of status-quo consumerism, Baudrillard hopes to accelerate the implosion of the system. But by the end, will there be enough pieces left to pick up and move forward? Through defiance, Baudrillard seeks to romanticize defeat. He praises those who "act out their own death" as a means of engaging a world

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12. Arthur Kroker, "Baudrillard's Marx," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 69–83.

13. Kroker, 70.

14. Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, trans. Phil Beitchman (Semiotext(e), 2007), 118.

15. Baudrillard, 48.

16. Tony Smith, "The Critique of Marxism in Baudrillard's Later Writings," *Rethinking Marxism* 3, nos. 3–4 (1990): 285.

where signs and illusion prevail. Provocatively, but not uncharacteristically, Baudrillard attempts to correct Marx:

Let us consider now the *real* history of class struggle whose only moments were those when the dominated class fought on the basis of its self-denial “as such,” on the basis of the sole fact that it amounted to nothing.<sup>17</sup>

So much for class consciousness. . . In practical terms, Baudrillard’s resignation, though perhaps alluring to himself in its seductive potential, impacts those who must confront reality (the proletariat) the worst and appeals only to those in the privileged position of being able to ignore reality (the bourgeoisie).

I end with a quote from Douglas Kellner, an eminent Baudrillard scholar, who brilliantly summarizes the political dangers of accepting Baudrillard’s contentions unequivocally:

In political terms, this is what I believe Baudrillard’s project comes down to ultimately: capitulation to the hegemony of the Right and a secret complicity with aristocratic conservatism. Of course, Baudrillard would retort that the very categories of Left and Right no longer mean anything, and that politics has been undermined and contorted by media simulations. This view may be comforting to a critical critic in his Paris apartment who no longer wants to go out and do battle in the public sphere, but it will not help the millions being harmed, even killed, as a result of the domestic and foreign policies of the Reagans, Bushes, Thatchers, Bothas and Pinochets of the world.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 63.

18. Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, 215.



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