

Simulation and the Hyperreal: Between 'Actual' and 'Virtual Reality'

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...a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.¹

Today, when we use the words 'virtual reality', we speak as though there is an actual or real world that simply *is* and then its virtual or unreal copy. As we have discussed, we often think of the world today as 'postmodern' because it has lost all relation with the actual world and is dominated by copies and images. The postmodern world is caught up in television, advertising, copies of designer good, cloning, the meaningless repetition of brand-names and computer simulations. Whether we celebrate or lament this world, we nevertheless describe it through a distinction between the actual and the virtual (symbolic): there was once a time when we were close to reality (which could be said to be actual) and now all we have are images (the virtual). This is why, contemporary thinkers like Jean Baudrillard, describe society as a 'simulacra'.

Disney Land

If we think about a place such as Disneyworld, in the United States, we might think of it in terms of an imaginary, fantasy representation of reality, a *simulation* of the real world, taken to its extremes (such as the 'fairy tail' Disney castle based on buildings throughout Europe). Baudrillard regards Disneyworld, and the country that surrounds it, as partaking in the 'third order' of *simulation*.

To understand what Baudrillard means by this, we can look at both 'first and second order simulation'.

- First order simulation would be where the representation of the real (a novel, a painting, a map) is obviously a just that: an artificial representation.
- A second-order simulation, however blurs the boundaries between reality and representation. Baudrillard point us towards Borges' fable 'Of Exactitude in Science', where 'the cartographer of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory'²; in other words, the 'map' and reality can no longer be discerned, so the map has become, in a sense, as real as the real.

It is easy to think about Disneyworld as a second-order simulation, where fake castles look more real than the real, because they embody all of our childish and romantic notions of what a castle should ideally look like, and the machinery of representation is so well hidden that reality and representation blur together. But the implications of Disneyworld as a third-order simulation are much harder to come to grips with. Baudrillard argues that:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when infact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.³

Baudrillard makes the comparison with prisons, arguing that prisons hide the fact that we are incarcerated in society. Michel Foucault made famous the notion of micro-powers in society functioning like the panopticon (the famous prison devised by Jeremy Bentham), that gives the notion of a discipline

mechanism through the potential of permanent surveillance. How then, might we consider our society in relation to simulation?

Through these examples, we begin to understand what Baudrillard means by the hyperreal, where a kind of virtual reality is produced by models of what we want reality to be. Baudrillard argues that both examples 'cover up' what is happening in the world, which has become both childish and duplicitous. Baudrillard also extends these ideas further when discussing the Vietnam War, first Gulf War and Terrorism. Most notably, Baudrillard's most notorious pronouncement was the Gulf War 'did not take place'. What he meant by this was that the media had so anticipated and dominated the event that the war had no *place* or real location, precisely because the war was won through images. Not only was there a war of images, where presentations of the Middle East were deployed to demonise the enemy, missiles were sent and tracked using imaging devices, the CNN television viewer could see the war as a media event while it was occurring. The place of the war was no longer limited, but extended to every Western television screen – to the point where the distinction could not be made between the sending of weapons and the sending of images. Baudrillard suggests that, in such a world, we have lost the ability to critique. We cannot measure the virtual image against the actual world, because we have lost all sense of the actual. (Consider recent attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo)

Against the polemic of Real and Virtual

Against this rigid distinction between the actual and the virtual, it could be argued that the real is always actual-virtual. Firstly, any 'actual' being is already an image. For instance, the first barn ever made, would already have been built from some idea or image of a barn. An actual thing is produced only from

virtual possibilities. There must already be some general image of a barn in order to build, recognize and perceive an actual barn.

We only realize virtual potentialities after they have been actualized. Being or things emerge from processes of copying, doubling, imaging and simulation. Each unique work of art or each human individual is a simulation: genes copy and repeat, with deviation, while art works become singular not by *being* the world but by transforming it through images (representations) that are at once actual and virtual.

¹ Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacra and Simulation* (New York: Semiotexte) p.23

² Ibid. p.1

³ Ibid. p.25

For further reading on Baudrillard please see Moodle.