

English 345: Cine/Technology

Baudrillard Reading Guide

Article Citation

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. 2nd ed. Ed. and introd. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. 169-187.

Article Guide

"Simulacra and Simulations" represents excerpts from "The Precession of Simulacra," a chapter in Baudrillard's book, *Simulacra and Simulation*. On our course Web site, you'll find a PowerPoint presentation on Baudrillard's essay; the presentation highlights key definitions and passages. It also includes some of my notes on the text. To access the presentation, go to the course Web site (faculty.washington.edu/kgb/cinetech), choose "Materials" and select "Simulacra and Simulations" from the list of class PowerPoint presentations.

Article Resources

- 1) The CyberSpace, Hypertext, and Critical Theory Web Site contains several student essays on Baudrillard: <http://www.cyberartsweb.org/cpace/cpace/theory/baudrillard/studentov.html>
- 2) Dino Felluga's Modules on Baudrillard (<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/postmodernism/modules/baudrillardsimulation.html>) also contains a useful overview of Baudrillard's primary concepts.
- 3) On the Postmodern Programme Web site, Professor Emeritus Dick Richter provides the following close reading of "The Precession of Simulacra" (<http://webpages.ursinus.edu/rrichter/baudrillardone.html>):

Baudrillard's idea of simulacra exemplifies the separation of an ideal existence and the existence apprehensible to the senses. This separation is fundamental to an understanding of the postmodern temper. The modernist temper preserved the semblance of an architectonic reality "behind" the reality that we deal with in the daily dimension. The modernist thought of the quotidian manifestation as a "copy" or reflection of the "really" real: this goes back to Plato. Baudrillard says that the "copy" has no original. The copy is all we have to go on.

Pages 1-7

1. B. starts defining "precession of simulacra" with a contrast drawn from a Borges fable. In the fable, cartographers draw a map in such detail that it ends up exactly covering the real territory of the empire. The map frays as the empire declines. The reality and the abstraction (map) decline together. By contrast, today that pairing has disappeared. Abstractions are no longer "the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept." [1] No longer is there simulation of a "territory, a referential being, or a substance." [1] Instead, B. sees a "real without origin or reality" being generated "by models." [1] This is the hyperreal. In the hyperreal, (referring again to the Borges fable), the map "precedes the territory." [1] And this precessive map, or simulacrum, then "engenders the territory," such as it is.

The Borges fable thus is useful only as a contrast to current reality, not as an illustration of it. B. squeezes one more figurative meaning out of the fable, the notion of empire.

With this reference he turns his attention to the model builders, the simulators, identified above as the destroyers of a viable relationship between the real and the simulated. The simulators are imperialistic in that they "attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation." [2] In doing so, they destroy "the sovereign difference" between the map and the territory, the simulation and the real. He refers nostalgically to "the charm of abstraction" which has been lost along with the sense of difference between the two-- "the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory." [2] These simulators operate on "nuclear and genetic" principles, not on the older principles, which were "specular and discursive." [2]

The "simulators" are the information technologies of today: "miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control." [2] They can produce and reproduce the "real," which now is the hyperreal, as many times as they like. They can do that because the hyperreal is no longer anchored to an ideal, to a territory.

In the hyperreality of pure simulacra, then, there is no more imitation, duplication, or parody. The simulator's model offers us "all the signs of the real" without its "vicissitudes." [2]

. . .

Under the subhead, "The Divine Irrelevance of Images," B. contrasts the meaning of "dissimulation" and "simulation" in order to clarify further his definition of the simulacra. To dissimulate is to pretend; in pretending, one imitates something real and thus affirms it: one "leaves the principle of reality intact." [3] To simulate, on the other hand, is "to feign to have what one doesn't have." [3] This destroys any connection to reality.

B. shows simulation in action in three different "terrains of simulation:" [3] medicine, the army, and religion. In the "simulacrum of divinity," he explains that the disputes over the value of icons points up the contemporary problem of simulacra. Iconoclasts were right, he says, because they saw that the icons (simulacra) would become omnipotent in themselves; they would efface God. The iconolaters, by contrast, thought that the icons could retain their representative function, standing in for God and not effacing him. When God himself could be simulated, "that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith," [4] then a "gigantic simulation" [5] results.

B. concludes this section by showing the successive phases of the movement toward simulation. We quote the entire passage because it is so basic to the understanding of his concept:

"[the image] is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the ABSENCE of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum." [6]

With the disappearance of reality as it once was, nostalgia takes on critical importance.