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Turning Plato Upside Down: A Re-evaluation of Baudrillard's Simulacrum

Rebecca Peterson

This is ultimately why power is so in accord with ideological discourses and discourses on ideology, for these are all discourses of truth—always good, even and especially if they are revolutionary, to counter the mortal blows of simulation.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* (182)

These words were written by Jean Baudrillard in his 1985 philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulations*, in which he discusses the loss of reality to hyperreality as it relates to a complex question of literature and philosophy: What is to be done with simulacrum? Simulacrum is defined as a copy of reality that eventually becomes a representation of its own, morphing from the real into the hyperreal. Sometimes it appears as a map that takes the place of a real Empire in our minds, a fantasyland that feels decreasingly fantasy-like, or a religious icon that takes on meaning of its own. By Baudrillard's evaluation, the simulacrum has overrun the real so much in current culture as to mourn the death of the real, and it is precisely for this reason that he finds the simulacrum at fault. Simulacra are not inherently evil, but they are offensive to the real and to the ideological discourses which they infiltrate because they have dislocated from the goals of the real and the ideological; "that weightless nebula no longer obeying the law of gravitation of the real—power itself eventually breaking apart in this space and becoming a simulation of power (disconnected from its aims and objectives)" (179). From this

perspective, Baudrillard sees with apprehension that simulacrum and the world of hyperreality have completely overtaken the real in our culture and there is no going back.

Simulacrum versus the Ideal

Baudrillard's argument traces the increasing shrouding of the real in his eulogy-like conclusion to *Simulacra and Simulations*. He laments that the real is lost to the "mortal blows of simulation" (182). The totalizing statement—"these are all discourses of *truth*—always good"—puts Baudrillard dangerously close to idealizing the real. He writes earlier in the treatise, "hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle of every objective [...] which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law" (179). Although Baudrillard spends the majority of the treatise simply defining the hyperreal and its relationship to the real, he makes several statements like this that do not outright condemn simulacrum, but rather, indicate a philosophical anxiety of its implications.

Given the context—at the brink of a highly technologized culture that is in many ways new and frightening—Baudrillard is justified in his caution regarding the simulacrum and his mourning for the real. However, Baudrillard's underlying anxiety about simulacrum does not stem simply from the alarming novelty of technology, but instead from the divergence from the real's established orders. Instead of operating on the basis of systems of "good" and "bad," simulacra operate according to a system of performativity, a completely different sphere from the real's normative "true/false" order. Critic Richard J. Lane describes Baudrillard's position in this way: "The important and disturbing point to all this is that the hyperreal doesn't exist in the realm of good and evil, because it is measured as such in terms of its performativity—how well does it work or operate?" (86) Baudrillard thus seems to view such deviance from the "true/false" system as a threat to our culture because it uproots the long-imbedded foundations of idealism for performativity when he says, hence "hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle of every object" (179).

The anxiety underlying Baudrillard's argument is neither arbitrary nor unfounded because it appears the simulacrum *is* geared toward upturning the Platonic Ideal. Take, for example, Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave in which the sun represents real truth and the shadows on the wall inside the cave are likened to simulations of reality, or simulacra. Those prisoners who are "lucky" enough to leave the cave discover the real truth of the sun outside and are "spared" of simulated truth within the cave. The assumption of one truth or a *a* reality becomes problematic

when we read this allegory within a postmodern existence that rejects such arrogance of claiming to know absolute truth. Plato's idealism is unsettling, and often interpreted as a justification for imposing a belief system onto others. Plato writes at the end of the allegory, "the process, I said, is not the turning over of an oyster-shell, but the turning round of a soul passing from a day which is little better than night to the true day of being, that is, the ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy?" ("Plato"). What simulacrum does, in a sense, is challenge the notion of Plato's "true philosophy," of what is *really* real, and how we can claim to know it as real.

In his article titled "Plato and the Simulacrum," philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues how the simulacrum is indeed the collapse of Plato and idealist foundations. He writes, "hence, to overthrow Platonism means: to raise up simulacra, to assert their rights over icons or copies" (52). He goes on to write that "the goal is the subversion of this world, 'the twilight of the idols.'" This "subversive" attribute of simulacrum may be what ultimately underlies Baudrillard's anxiety, whether or not he recognizes it as such. Simulacra have more power than the icon, according to Deleuze, and to raise them up eventually leads to "the subversion of this world," or of the Platonic world of ideals. The problem with Baudrillard clinging to the foundation of an absolute Truth instead of a diaspora of truths is that it is not conducive to current culture that is overridden already with simulacra. Truth is viewed as somewhat indeterminate in the postmodern world because it takes perception into account. In a postmodern interpretation of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the sun (reality) may be perceived differently by various people. The sun may or may not be the absolute Truth, according to different people. And for that matter, who is to say that the shadows on the wall in the cave are not as truthful as the sun? Why could not the shadows *in addition* to the sun provide some elements of truth? Plato's Allegory of the Cave is complicated in postmodernism, for we are not so willing to grant one thing or another the label of absolute Truth. Instead, we give the benefit of the doubt with the assumption that all people, whether they are within the cave or without, may have a personal, workable source of truth.

Simulacrum in Postmodern Literature

Now let us return to the performative quality of simulacrum as revealed in literature, for exploring manifestations of simulacra in literature illuminates the performative attributes that are not only subversive to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, but also shed light on Baudrillard's unadmitted anxieties. Perhaps, for our reading, philosophy

and literature have a unique relationship; the former creates theories while the latter reworks them through performance. As writer Martha Nussbaum explains it, “literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (3). Further, literature can emphasize the world’s complexity “that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of the conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder” (3). So, although literature is inherently inseparable from philosophy, it can wander the world, free from philosophical convention.

Incorporating literature into this discussion of simulacrum is indispensable. Both literature and simulacrum stray from respective foundations: literature from philosophy and simulacrum from “reality.” Whereas philosophy lies somewhat in a vacuum and living reality is inherently contextualized, literature attempts a balance between the two. It brings philosophical content onto a contextual scene. We can unite the two even further when we study postmodern literature in particular, for postmodern literature wanders away from the isolation of “philosophical content” as well as Plato’s idealized truth. This is done largely by utilizing simulacra within the text. Postmodern authors often find positive ways of incorporating simulacra within their literature and show Baudrillard that collapsing Platonism is actually productive for postmodern culture. In examining the works of postmodern authors like Jonathan Rosen, Tim O’Brien, and Louise Erdrich, simulacra may be viewed as not a “mortal blow” as Baudrillard calls them, but as simply another workable (though imperfect) facilitator of truth. The authors show that simulacrum’s implications are not to be feared, but to be celebrated.

Coexistence and the Diaspora in *The Talmud and The Internet*

Reality and simulacra have a complex relationship, but rather than rejecting simulacrum based on its complex relationship with reality, some postmodern writers embrace it and use it to their advantage. The coexistence of reality and simulacrum is not as dysfunctional as a rationalist may think; though the contradiction is inherent, the syncretism of reality and simulacra can make for a fully functioning coexistence. Postmodern author Jonathan Rosen, for example, taps into this concept in *The Talmud and the Internet* by exploring his own disembodied spiritual experience which is Internet-simulated. He surprisingly discovers more spirituality in a virtual tour of synagogues on the computer than his personal visit to Chartres Cathedral (101). Rosen discovered the ability to hold the principles of ancient religion and modern technology simultaneously, for,

though one is virtually simulated, he finds a greater sense of spirituality in allowing the two to work alongside each other rather than deserting one for the other. This blend enables a diaspora of spiritual sources.

Writer Henry Adams plays the role of his counterpart in the book—a prototype character perhaps enumerated as a Baudrillard figure—who claims the impossibility of reconciliation between religion and what he calls the dynamo, “the dawning technological world” (76). Such inability to simultaneously hold contradictory concepts for Adams is analogous to refusing to reconcile the coexistence of reality and simulacra in postmodernity. Baudrillard fears that simulacra wipe out reality altogether, but is it not possible to have both like in Rosen’s situation? Contradictory complexities like the coexistence of reality and simulacra are functional in our culture because postmodern existence *is* complex: it is fragmented, traumatized, colonized, sexualized, politicized, and technologized. Is it non sequitur to embrace the complexity of contradictory realities if our world is just as contradictory and complex?

Rosen would say it is not. He would agree that the presence of the virtual simulation allows access to concepts otherwise inaccessible, or in his case, access to a diaspora of religious sources and practices: “‘On the one hand’ and ‘on the other hand’ is frustrating for people seeking absolute faith,” he writes, “but for me it gives religion an ambidextrous quality” (85). Baudrillard acknowledges that simulacra has indelibly infiltrated our culture, but fails to recognize its contributions in making our complex existence functional and open to a diaspora of truth facilitators. Rosen admits that “the Internet has no moral center,” but he still shows how it can be a sublime spiritual experience for those like himself who are accepting of the virtually simulated religious experience (111). If “real” (less-virtual) religious facilitators fail to spiritually affect, Internet simulation or other simulacra may provide an access to spirituality. In crediting simulacra such as the Internet, Rosen opens himself to a diaspora of religions and their sources of spirituality and practices, which tolerance aims to bridge the gap between others and Self in postmodernity. Thus the so-called “irreconcilable” coexistence of reality and simulacra makes sense when functioning in a complex (postmodern) existence and allows that existence access to a great array of spiritual facilitators. It makes our existences, in Rosen’s words, more “ambidextrous.”

Story-truth and Malleability in *The Things They Carried*

Although simulacrum is different from reality, it is often just as revealing. Tim O’Brien supports such an opinion with the war stories he writes in his post-Vietnam War novel, *The Things They Carried*.

The war stories he recounts are so fictitious that they have become a reality of their own with little reflection of war itself—simulacra to put it simply. Baudrillard warns of the legitimacy of truth from simulacra, writing that in it “there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” (Baudrillard 171). But O’Brien’s book tells us that sometimes simulacra are just as revealing as reality. He explains the simulacra versus reality debacle by writing directly to the reader, “I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (O’Brien 179). He goes on with a further demonstration of this:

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories do, I guess, is make things present. (180)

This example shows that some feelings and mental states are better felt or explained through the use of simulacra. The psychological trauma of war falls into this category. In a roundabout way, simulacra illuminate the “story-truth” of post-war mentality. When it comes to war, we need something more than senseless reality to explain it (war is often senseless). We use simulacrum to fill in the gaps of reasoning and allow us to feel and understand in a way we cannot in reality.

O’Brien goes on to establish another fact of simulacra’s nature: unlike reality, it can be controlled. Just as Walt Disney can build a magnetizing fantasyland and in so doing, as Baudrillard says, conceal “that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter,” we can manipulate simulacrum to express what we desire (Baudrillard 172). O’Brien did this over and over with each made-up war story he wrote. In a 1991 interview, he explains that “in fiction we not only transform reality, we sort of invent our own lives, invent our histories, our autobiographies” (Naparsteck 8). The nature of simulacrum is thus malleable to us; because *we* create it, simulacrum must exist for *us* and not vice versa. This liberation suggests that the power to manipulate

simulacrum is in O'Brien's pen and in our own hands. We are not able to always distinguish between reality and simulacra as easily as we do in *The Things They Carried*, but knowing that we can control simulacrum lessens the elusiveness Baudrillard claims it has when he writes, "it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real" (Baudrillard 179).

With the power to mold our own realities with a simulacrum—to create "story-truths" as O'Brien calls it—gives us freedom of mind. This is especially needed when physical freedom is restricted as in wartime: a main benefit of simulacrum and simulations is again in their performativity—how functional would our lives be without them? Simulacra are preferable to reality when reality is too horrific for normal functioning within it. Baudrillard writes that if you try to establish a simulacrum, "you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real ... that's exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play" (178). But what if there are no institutions to interfere? What if justice never comes? In a state of destruction, the power to shape a new reality becomes invaluable to our survival.

Identity Construction and De-centering the Self in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

Another benefit of the simulacrum as seen in postmodern literature is that it holds great power for the individual, for it gives the freedom to re-define the Self. In Louise Erdrich's postmodern novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich questions if there is any reality at all to identity, "self," or if "self" is all just constructed. The priest in the book meditates on the identities of Father Damien and her former identity as Agnes, asking, "Between these two, where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?" (Erdrich 76). The question of identity is put forth at length and does not prove to be originating from one thing or another; identity in a postmodern sense is a constructed simulacrum without an origin. Baudrillard might argue that it is impossible for an identity to be simulated from no natural origin in saying that there are "successive phases of the image" as it moves from basic reality to full-fledged simulacrum, but Father Damien proves otherwise (Baudrillard 170). She finds that the very nature of identity is flexible and inherently subject to construction, for she feels that she is not "meant" to be one person or another.

Erdrich's novel thus promotes dualism in identity through the

simulated-self, for the priest is both Father Damien and Agnes, two distinct but just-as-present personas in one person. Not only is this liberating in the sense of identity, but it ultimately becomes a metaphor for de-centering the Self to make room for others. If a simulacrum allows for differing identities to be constructed simultaneously in one person, what else is to be concluded but that simulacrum accomplishes multi-vocalism? Simulacrum respects others by allowing multiple constructed identities to coexist, whether within one person or among many people. Father Damien, in taking on multiple identities has internalized this concept and by the end, we see that

He now practiced a mixture of faiths, kept the pipe, translated hymns or brought in the drum, and had placed in the nave of his church a statue of the Virgin—solid, dark, kind eyed, hideous, and gentle. He was welcome where no other white man was allowed. It was apparent, to the people, that the priest was in the service of the spirit of goodness, wherever that might evidence itself. (276)

Conclusion

After looking at simulacra in postmodern literature, the fairest claim to make is that Baudrillard, though still recognized as the authority on simulacra, fails to recognize the positive implications of embracing simulacra in postmodern culture. It is reductionary to say that Baudrillard thought simulacra were evil, “mortal blows” to our culture or that he is just scared of technology and destroying the foundations of idealism. To make such claims is to undercut the legitimacy of his entire body of work, the large majority of which is extremely valid. But still something does not add up. In his preoccupation with how simulacrum subverts the foundations of what Western culture has heretofore called “reality,” Baudrillard misses how constructive it is to postmodern culture.

Simulacra and simulations are already a part of our contemporary world, and though they lead to the collapse of the ideal, there seems something essentially ethical about accepting and incorporating simulacra rather than mourning the loss of the real. Postmodernism needs to re-evaluate simulacra if it is to continue, for the *post* postmodern project is piecing back together bits of our lives obliterated by centuries of wars, religious decline, and the more recent hyper-technologization and –sexualization of cultures worldwide. Our reality is senseless when we cannot reconcile this complex world with the potentially problematic

ideals Plato favored. This is the postmodern goal we must continually work toward: re-constructing our concept of reality to include truths lying outside the bounds of simplistic idealism. Simulacrum aids in this philosophical, if not literary project, to re-build our concept of truth piece by piece.

Postmodern writers realize the potential the simulacrum offers to further this project: It is yet another way to turn Plato upside down and frustrate the concept of Ideal Truth in favor of a diaspora of truths. Simulacrum leaves room for a diaspora of truth facilitators, gives access to concepts otherwise inaccessible to reality, and allows us control over our own realities. It liberates the mind, permits flexibility of identity, and promotes a more ethical approach by de-centering the self and respecting others. Through postmodern texts by authors who realize the powerful performativity of literature, we see that the collapse of Platonic Ideals or the real is not a death to be mourned; it is cause for celebration.

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