

From Counterfeit to Code: The Orders of Simulacra Did Not Stop

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Baudrillard's orders of simulacra periodize how societies manufacture reality: by resemblance, by production, by the model. Generative media extends the sequence past his death, with models trained on model output and the referent fully optional. What the framework cannot do is imagine a way out, and that cost is real.

Baudrillard is read mostly through one line, "the map precedes the territory," and the line has hardened into a catchphrase that hides the argument under it. The argument is a periodization: a claim that Western societies have manufactured reality in three successive regimes, each with its own law, each closing the door on the last. Taken as a history rather than a mood, the scheme does something a catchphrase cannot. It predicts a next stage. This essay argues that machine-generated media is that stage. The orders of simulacra did not stop at three, and the continuation of the sequence exposes both the framework's power and the one thing it has never been able to buy.

THREE REGIMES OF THE REAL

The periodization enters in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976) and gets its compressed statement later: the first order is "founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit"; the second "on energy, force, its materialization by the machine"; the third "on information, the model, the cybernetic game," tending toward "total operationality, hyperreality, total control."

Unpack the compression. In the first order, the age of the counterfeit, reality is organized by *resemblance*. The automaton imitates a man, the stucco angel imitates marble, and the deception works only because an original still sits somewhere as the court of appeal. Fakes presuppose a real; that is their tribute to it.

The second order, industrial production, stops paying the tribute. When objects come off a line, the question "which is the original?" loses its grip; every unit is as real as every other, and what certifies reality

shifts from likeness to *function*. The robot, unlike the automaton, "no longer questions appearances; its only truth is in its mechanical efficiency." Reality becomes whatever works, in however many copies.

The third order inverts the whole arrangement. Its law is the code: reality generated from models, such that 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." Baudrillard is precise about the mechanism in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control, and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these." Here the famous line stops being a slogan and becomes a technical description: "it is the map that precedes the territory" because the model is issued first (the poll before the opinion, the format before the event, the demographic before the person) and the world is then produced to spec. He even sketched a fourth turn, where the body itself joins the regime: the individual "reduced to his abstract and genetic formula," destined for serial propagation. And something goes missing in the transition that he mourns explicitly: "something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction."

THE FOUR LIVES OF THE IMAGE

Alongside the machine-orders, *Simulacra and Simulation* runs a second, finer periodization, this time of the image, and it deserves quoting whole because it is the book's cleanest instrument. The image passes through four successive phases: "it is

the reflection of a profound reality"; then "it masks and denatures a profound reality"; then "it masks the *absence* of a profound reality"; and finally "it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

The hinge is between the second and third phases, and Baudrillard calls it the "decisive turning point." A mask over a real face is still theology: the image may lie, but something true sits behind the lie, recoverable in principle. A mask over *nothing* changes the genre of the operation, from deception to conjuring. Phase two is the counterfeit's world; phase three is Disneyland's; phase four, the image that no longer even pretends to a referent, is the world of the pure simulacrum, and, as the last section of this essay argues, of the diffusion model. The quartet gives the essay its measuring stick. To locate any image regime, ask what its images are doing to the reality behind them: masking it, masking its absence, or no longer bothering with the question.

TWO WORKED EXAMPLES

The scheme earns its keep in Baudrillard's two set-piece analyses, and they are worth walking through slowly, because they show the third order operating as ordinary civic machinery rather than as science fiction.

Disneyland first. The obvious reading is that the park is a fantasy space inside a real country. Baudrillard runs it backwards: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation." The park's function is contrast maintenance rather than escape: a bounded, ticketed zone officially labeled "imaginary" that lets everything outside the gates pass as its opposite. "Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland," he writes, adding the comparison that generalizes the mechanism: "a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral." The third order does not abolish the distinction between real and imaginary. It *manufactures* the distinction, as a product, at specific sites, because the distinction is what it needs its citizens to keep believing in.

Watergate, second, and harder. The scandal's public meaning was that the system's immune response worked: corruption exposed, a president gone, the rules vindicated. Baudrillard's reading: "Watergate is still a mechanism for the ritual murder of power," a "simulation of scandal for regenerative ends." The

energetic prosecution of one visible transgression re-moralizes the whole field, restoring belief in a baseline of political reality and law at exactly the moment that baseline had dissolved. The scandal is "a lure held out by the system to catch its adversaries": the journalists, prosecutors, and critics who pursue it perform, with full sincerity, the system's own maintenance ritual. The trap is structural. Critique presupposes a real behind the appearances, and the third order has learned to *supply* that presupposition on demand, one scandal at a time.

SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE, OR WHAT EACH ORDER BURIES

Beneath the sequence runs the thing each order kills again, and in the late interviews collected as *Passwords* Baudrillard stated it plainly. Symbolic exchange is reversible circulation: the gift that demands a counter-gift, the expenditure answered by expenditure, the cycle in which even mortality is held in common, "in the symbolic universe, life and death are exchanged." And, decisively: "there is no dialectic in the symbolic," no accumulation, no progress, no one-way street. His anthropological emblem is the potlatch, value destroyed magnificently rather than stored.

Every order of simulacra is a funeral for this. The counterfeit replaces the sacred object with its image; production replaces the gift-cycle with accumulation; the code replaces reversibility with the one-way flow of information, model to territory, output to archive. Here is the observation that makes the concept more than nostalgia: reversibility is the one thing the sequence has never simulated. The third order can fake an original, fake a scandal, fake a country. It cannot fake an exchange in which both terms are equally real and mutually at stake, because its whole architecture is unidirectional, and a simulated reversibility would still run one way, from the model outward. Symbolic exchange works less as a lost paradise than as a diagnostic: the shape of what any given order of simulacra cannot process is the shape of that order.

THE TURN HE DID NOT LIVE TO SEE

Baudrillard died in 2007, the year the smartphone shipped. A periodization is built to be extrapolated, and the essay does so here, marking the step as extrapolation rather than exegesis: the claim in this section is made in Baudrillard's grammar but after his corpus, and his texts, which end in 2000, cannot

be cited for it.

Generative models are third-order logic pushed one click past itself. The third order says the model precedes the real; the new arrangement makes the referent *optional*. A language model is trained on the archive of human text and then produces text that enters the archive; image models train, increasingly, on images other models made. The map now precedes the territory and redraws itself from its own previous editions, a cartography that has stopped consulting any terrain at all. Every earlier order still needed the world somewhere in the loop, as original, as raw material, as at least the referent being polled. A model feeding on model output closes the loop entirely. If the third order was the precession of simulacra, this is closer to their self-reproduction from their own output, with no external referent required. In the image-quartet's terms, phase four has become an industrial process: images whose entire ancestry is images, "its own pure simulacrum" as a product category.

The extrapolation is not this essay's alone, and the argument is stronger for admitting it. The technical result underneath it has a name, model collapse, established by Shumailov and colleagues in *Nature* (2024), who showed that models trained recursively on generated data degrade and forget the tails of their distribution. Kate Crawford's "Eating the Future" (2025) already reads that finding through Baudrillard, casting synthetic-data recursion as hyperreality metabolized. What this essay adds to the growing shelf is the periodizing frame: not that AI is hyperreal, which is now a commonplace, but that it is the lawful next term in a sequence Baudrillard laid down in 1976, and that reading it as a sequence is what exposes the framework's limit.

His last writings had already named the direction. In the late interviews collected as *Passwords*, he treats the real as having only ever been a form of simulation, and casts the virtual as what now takes the place of the real and, in his starkest register, completes and dissolves it rather than destroying it. Note the verb-logic. The virtual does not destroy the real, it *accomplishes* it, delivers everything the real promised, coverage, fidelity, availability, and in accomplishing it dissolves the need for it. The uncanny flatness of machine-generated media, its quality of resembling *resemblance itself*, is what an image looks like when the accomplishment is complete. And the layer through which such media reaches anyone is itself model-governed, [a ranking system deciding what becomes visible](#), so the generated real arrives pre-sorted by another model. Baudrillard's "total operationality" was a hyperbole in

1976. It is a product category now. When a chatbot and a user [build a private cosmology together](#), the transcript reads like a lab demonstration of the thesis: a reality with no original anywhere in it, functioning perfectly, and persisting by configuration.

THE IMPLOSION OF MEANING

The book's other great chapter runs the analysis on information itself, and its opening move still lands like a slap: "information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social." Against the century's founding assumption, that more information produces more meaning, Baudrillard proposes the inverse: information *stages* meaning, performs it, and in the performance exhausts it. His endnote states the position with a physicist's bluntness: "INFORMATION = ENTROPY. The information or knowledge that can be obtained about a system or an event is already a form of the neutralization and entropy of this system." To be informed about something is already to have it in processed, defused, archival form.

His worked example is May 1968: the student revolt amplified by media into a general strike, which reads as victory until you see what the amplification did. "The extension of the student action permitted the general strike, but the latter was precisely a black box that neutralized the original virulence of the movement. Amplification was itself a mortal trap and not a positive extension." Every subsequent viral movement has had the experience available to it: reach purchased at the price of virulence, the signal boosted into harmlessness. The system, on this account, does not need to suppress; it needs to circulate. And the medium itself dissolves into what it reports: "the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable," which is why he thought revolutions staged *through* media were spinning their wheels, and why the one resistance he credited to the masses was the strangest, not protest but "hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception." Overload the machine with exactly what it asks for, meaning withheld. It is a bleak tactic, and it should be attributed carefully, as his retrospective diagnosis rather than consensus history; but anyone who has watched an outrage cycle absorb its own cause will recognize the shape.

WHAT THE FRAMEWORK CANNOT BUY

Now the cost, and it should be stated as bluntly as the

power. Baudrillard's scheme describes the situation better than its rivals and offers nothing to do about it. The late work says so almost proudly. In *The Perfect Crime*, transparency itself becomes "the Evil," and the perfect crime is the murder of reality by its own verification. And critique is disarmed for a reason he had already stated in the "On Nihilism" chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation*: "the system is itself also nihilistic," carrying "the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference."

The vault this essay draws on keeps a contradiction page open against Deleuze on precisely this point, and the disagreement is instructive. For Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* and the "Plato and the Simulacrum" essay, the simulacrum is the instance that includes a difference within itself: a positive power, the end of the tyranny of originals, something to affirm. For Baudrillard, the same figure is bereavement. Both cannot be right about what the copy without an original *means*, and Baudrillard's choice of mourning is a choice, not a finding. He kept the real as a lost beloved, which made his framework maximally sensitive to its absence and unable to imagine life without it, [a lost referent doing the work a lost future does elsewhere](#). Even his own counter-concept obeys the closure: asked in *Passwords* about symbolic exchange as a way back, he refused the exit himself, "there is no point being nostalgic for it," the linear system is irreversible. Baudrillard mapped the closure in detail and then recorded, accurately, that he had no way out of it.

CONCESSION: WHERE THE READING OVERREACHES

Labels on this essay's own claims. The tidy formula of three "laws" (natural, market, structural) is a reconstruction; Baudrillard's texts give the orders by their operative principle (image, energy, information), and the law-language is interpretive scaffolding. The fifth-order reading of generative media is extrapolation, made in his grammar but after his corpus; the sources end in 2000 and cannot be cited for it. The May 1968 reading and the information-equals-entropy equation are his polemics rather than settled history or mainstream information theory, and this essay uses them as instruments to think with. Symbolic exchange is a diagnostic category, not a recoverable past, by Baudrillard's own explicit foreclosure; his endnotes even attack the fantasy of a free, natural, pre-code world as capital's own projection backward. The hardest objection is not internal but realist: that model collapse is a measurable statistical artifact, correctable by cleaner data, and that dressing it as

metaphysics adds nothing an engineer needs. The framework is vulnerable here in the way Sokal and Bricmont charged in *Intellectual Impostures* (1998), that it absorbs any outcome, degradation confirming the death of the real and clarity confirming that we can no longer tell. That is a real cost, and the honest reply is modest: the periodization is a lens for what the technical description leaves out, the question of what a culture becomes when its images stop consulting anything, and a lens earns its keep by what it lets you see, not by passing a falsification test built for a different kind of claim. None of this refutes Deleuze: the two verdicts on the simulacrum rest on different wagers about what a copy without an original is, and the wager cannot be settled by citation.

What remains is an uncomfortable inheritance. The thinker who best periodized how reality gets manufactured left behind a framework that ends in a locked room, and the decades since have kept validating the periodization while inheriting the lock. The orders did not stop. The question the sequence leaves open, the one Baudrillard refused and Deleuze answered too easily, is whether a copy without an original is a death notice or a birth certificate. That question is not resolved here, and on the current evidence it may not be resolvable by argument at all; the generative turn has only made it harder to postpone.

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