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Signs Beget Signs: an Exploration of the Deviance of Language

Baudrillard, in “The Precession of Simulacra”, abstractly delineates a genre of simulative essentialism, privileging a 'reality' whereby (simulated) essence precedes existence: things exist as figurative subjects as opposed to real objects. Moreover, things exist insofar as they point towards something outside of themselves, making them mere images. In other words, the signified is subsumed, and ultimately suffocated, by the signifier: the simulated copy supersedes the 'real' object. On a linguistic stratum, language itself functions as a 'simulacrum' insofar as it "substitute[s] signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard 1733) –words are sought to represent the real, not words. According to Saussure, "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (964) "in that [the signifier] actually has no natural connection with the signified" (965); therefore, linguistic representations of reality have no real connection to reality itself. One is left navigating through linguistic associations, utilizing sign[ifier]s as substitutes of the 'real'/signified to be intelligible to one another; therefore, Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum manifests and sustains itself through language.

Language is inorganic and inherently external--it does not exist in nature; as such, language is a contrived system of signs fabricated by man in order to make sense of the world and communicate within it. Moreover, we experience the 'real' as it presents itself through language; our experience is translated into signs of signification making language the medium of experience, invariably fragmenting ourselves from it¹. As such, language is the lens of intelligibility: we see things insofar as we can identify them through language---the sign[ifier] precedes the signified. Thus, everything we experience is mediated through language itself. In

¹ Instead of accessing the real itself, we access/experience it through the internalized signs of signification: language. Language divorces us from the real by trying to simulate it, invariably creating a simulacrum, a “desert of the real” (1733), as opposed to heightening/accentuating our relationship with the real itself. Therefore, language serves to fragment us from the immediacy of the real.

other words, language is the means whereby reality becomes present to us; therefore, reality is subsumed and made intelligible only through language. According to Baudrillard, "present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models" (Baudrillard 1733); thus, generating simulative "models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1732). As such, language, a system of significations, is superimposed over the 'real', creating a transcendental signifying 'hyperreal.' In this respect, language is more 'real' than reality (because of our intimate connection/relationship to it, constantly/actively engaging/employing language as the familiar agent for mediating experience), or/rather, language becomes the hyperreal, making it the only reality intelligible to us. Therefore, as language strives to simulate reality, it stands in for reality, making reality subordinate to language itself. Consequently, signs of the signification, language, become the 'real' simulacra.

According to Baudrillard,

simulation starts from the utopia of [a] principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as a value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference.

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false

representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum (1736);

therefore, language destroys the 'real', engulfing and consuming it through the process of trying to represent it. More plainly, a system of signs of signification is developed to be able to create a more authentic relationship to the real by trying to comprehend it through logos intelligible to us: "a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (1733), i.e. the mechanisms of language. However, through its usage, the signifiers become detached from the signified: instead of recollecting the object/signified, we recall its associative counterpoint, the subject/signifier. What one might have sought as equilibrium between signifier and signified becomes unbalanced. The fluidity of

association, the multiple signs that stand in for the signified, overwhelms it, making the play of association no longer between the signifier and signified, but rather, between various signifiers. The signifier no longer simulates the signified; it merely creates a more elaborate lexicon of signifiers. This is seen more clearly through Baudrillard's successive stages of simulacra.

Baudrillard delineates four "successive phases of the image" (1736) which can be likened to the precession of language as simulacrum. They are as follows: firstly, "the reflection of a basic reality" (1736). This stage is comparable to language insofar as words/signifiers are sought to represent the signified (object, feeling, thought, idea, etc.). Secondly, the image "masks and perverts a basic reality" (1736) akin to how words/signifiers manipulate the signified through the sheer act of trying to translate it into sign[ifier]s that can be intelligible, 'perverting' the real through the insistence of articulating/associating and superimposing foreign signs of signification.. Thirdly, the image "masks the absence of a basic reality" (1736); therefore, in relation to language, words/signifiers are used in place of the signified - signs of signification are substituted for the 'real'. As such, the lack of the signified is masked through the intelligibility of the signifier itself: its ability to signify without presence of the signified. And fourthly, the image "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum." (1736). This fourth stage of the simulacrum is the most important and controversial characteristic of the power of language: words/signifiers themselves are arbitrary --they bear no authentic relationship to the signified. As such, there is "no more imaginary coextensivity" (1733) between the image and the real, the signifier and the signified; "the real is no longer what it used to be" (1736) as it is now subordinate to the signifier/simulation. Moreover, language is "not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (1736); therefore, it "no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance" (1733). "*Never again will the real*

have to be produced"(1733) as the signifiers are autonomous, able to signify outside the signified, thus simulating a reality whereby the signified is defunct.

The signified's essence is superseded because the sign[ifier] has usurped it. Therefore, the sign, the symbolic/linguistic precession of simulacrum, appropriates the real/signified. As Baudrillard suggests, the "age of simulacra and stimulation" (1736), the age of the signifier without the signified, propagates an inability to "separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, [because] everything is already dead and risen in advance" (1736). As such, this creates a "nostalgia"(1736) for the 'real'/signified which surfaces in a "proliferation of myths of origin and signs or reality" (1736), "resurrect[ing] [the] figurative where the object and substance have disappeared" (1736). Any attempt to access to the 'real'/signified is preformed through signifiers, perpetuating a stronger reliance on the signifier, thus creating further alienation from the signified by reinforcing the sign[ifier].

As such, the reliance on language fragments us from the real, creating a reality intelligible only through the association of signifiers, uprooted from the real, anchored in the simulacrum. Therefore, "it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (1741). We do not have to use our imagination to concoct fantastic theories explored in the "Matrix": the second we open our mouths, we are perpetually fragmenting ourselves from reality. Those who submit to language's ability to inform reality are those who are deeply embedded in the simulacrum. However, being creatures of language, is the real ever accessible to us?

Works Cited

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