Rust simulating decay

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By way of introduction

My background is a very interdisciplinary one with a doctorate in Communications that examined relationships among, semiotics, linguistics, film and the interpretation of images. I have been involved in research into areas like the neurosciences, cognitive sciences, cultural studies, anthropology and communications for over thirty years. I began playing with Internet related technologies in the late 1970's and mounted one of Canada's first academic web pages in the early 1990's.

Some of my major areas of research have looked into the many ways in which, images, media and communications systems have evolved over the last century and into the 21st century. My new book, *How Images Think*, recently published by MIT Press, examines the increasing degree to which our culture is investing in what I describe as image-worlds and increasingly placing more and more intelligence into processes of communications and exchange. I will not explore this notion in great detail but the complexity of the networks and systems of communications that are now parts of our everyday lives need to be examined with great care and attention paid to the history of cultural change over the last twenty years or so. One of the cultural theorists who has explored these issues in great detail and with more passion and more influence than many others is Jean Baudrillard. I will pay attention to some of his concepts, but also critique the ways in which he has applied some of his central notions to the analysis of western culture.

So, this short essay has the following components:

1. An exploration of the lineage and sources for Jean Baudrillard's very powerful and influential notions of simulation.
2. Some comments on time and decay and history.

3. A few modest reflections on the power of images, imagescapes and image-worlds.

Let me begin by saying that one way of understanding Baudrillard is to take a careful look at Society of the Spectacle by Guy Debord. I have not got the time in this piece to examine and distill this relationship, suffice to say that Debord's notions of commodity, spectacle and social organization appear and reappear in Baudrillard and have been a significant influence on Baudrillard's very strategic manner of writing and speaking. Debord and the Situationists with whom Debord worked have had an important influence on French cultural theory and philosophy, and this influence is acknowledged from time to time, but not with enough depth and certainly not to the degree that is deserved.

Time slow simulating change

I will mention one crucial aspect of Debord's approach and that centers on his assertion that time is turned into a commodity within Capitalist societies. As a commodity, time becomes consumable and in so doing becomes one of the foundations for the transformation of everyday life into spectacle. The key point is that we not only participate in this but simultaneously become viewers of our own lives. In this sense, we cease to have a direct relationship to experience and instead are caught up in a cycle of increasing mediation and loss. Debord and his group grew to prominence during the May 68 period in France. It is not an accident that some of the most important work of the structuralists had appeared by that time, in particular, the work of Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Foucault with contiguous work by Althusser and Derrida.

Rust Simulating Decay

The intersection of structuralism and situationism is an important part of Baudrillard's epistemological framework. In Situationist philosophy, the word pseudo appears and reappears as a trope for what is wrong with Western societies. The English translation, however, doesn't catch an important additional element to what Debord is saying. I quote in French and I will explain:

Le temps pseudo-cyclique n'est en fait que le *déguisement consommable* du temps-marchandise de la production. Il en contient les caractères essentiels d'unités homogènes échangeables et de suppression de la dimension qualitative.

Time as we measure it has the quality of the cyclical attached to it, but this is a false quality because in reality it disguises the ways in which time has become commodified, one of many different consumable items in our society. Time is a commodity because the production process within Capitalist societies transforms time, gives it a homogeneous character and suppresses its qualitative characteristics.

Pseudo, false, suppression, the victory of commodification over quality and the overwhelming effect of capitalist modes of production on the very definitions that can be made of subjectivity, these are all fundamental to Debord and are foundational to Baudrillard. Debord creates an opposition between the natural order and pseudo nature that is dependent on his definition of time. Debord collapses all the various relations among work and leisure into pseudo time exemplifying the increasing distance and alienation that humans experience as a consequence of their transformation into commodities. Not only do the rhythms of capitalist society work against the best interests of participants, they also transform subjects into objects — the needs of production override the needs of producers with the outcome that the masses become silent witnesses to their own oppression.

This combination of Herbert Marcuse, Marx, Heidegger and the critical theorists of the 1930's like Adorno characterize all of Debord's work, although one major difference is the anarchist impulse in Debord and his followers. Since Debord's death, the anarchist movement has taken Debord as a spokesman and most of his writings are freely available on their Internet sites. Debord's approach to writing is aphoristic and quite programmatic. Baudrillard reproduces this approach in many of his books, but most notably in America.

I have not treated Debord with the depth that he deserves, not because he was unimportant. Rather, what interests me is his core assumption that culture is in fact pseudo culture, or false culture. It is not too much of a jump to simulation, but before I deal with simulation, let me suggest that Debord viewed the silence of the masses as a sign of their resistance to Capital and that Baudrillard took up that issue in a piece that he published entitled, "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities." This initially creative understanding of silence as resistance was not sustained however in large part because the Situationists witnessed the failure of May 68 to generate a broad-based revolution in France. Their disappointment with the "populace" led to increasing cynicism about any form of revolt to the point where they questioned if the people would ever awake from their stupor.

In fact, for Debord, change itself finally became a further vehicle for the reinforcement of the status quo as he watched the decline of interest in revolutionary transformation. In Baudrillard this has been described as fatalism, an attachment to the inevitable impossibility of real change. Michael Gane has commented in detail on this, as has Douglas Kellner. For my purposes, this fatalism, this sense that there is inevitably little that can be done to save people from themselves has its roots in Nietzsche, but for this paper what is important, is that Baudrillard's fatalistic outlook did not keep him from writing some very important things about Western societies and the growth and importance of images to human experience. Fatalism became a container into which he could shove a great deal. This is not exactly equivalent to cynicism.

It is interesting how so many commentators and theorists and historians have actually taken up the mantel of fatalism in their descriptions and analysis of popular culture. But that is a topic for another discussion. (See Postman, Chomsky etc.)
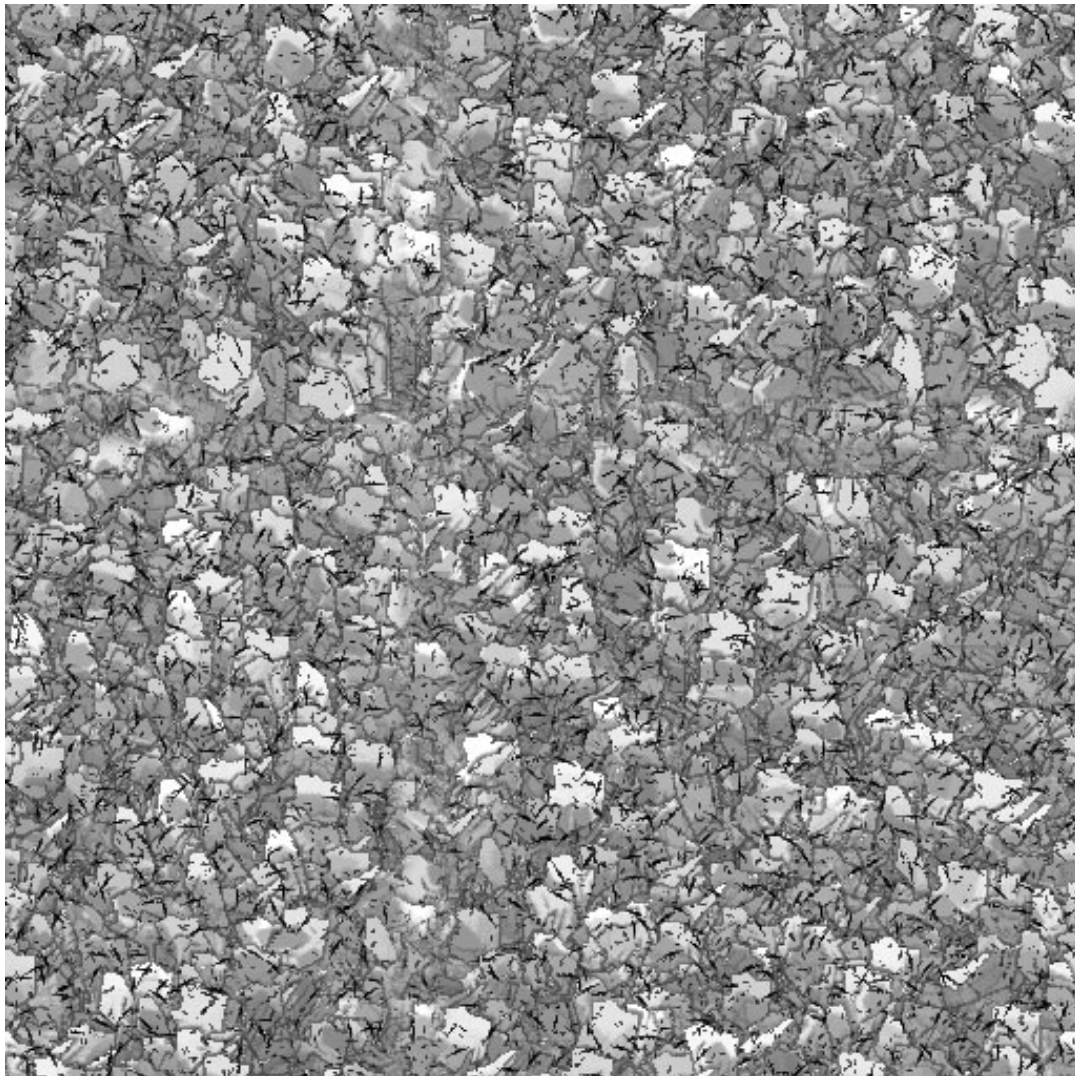
Rust in its original form

Let me suggest that simulation, which is a very complex concept, comes out of this apocalyptic understanding of French and Western societies. There are important links here to two of Baudrillard's most important mentors, Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Sartre.

I feel that Baudrillard's notion of simulation freezes relations of meaning primarily because for better or worse, simulation is seen in opposition to reality and is of a higher order than reality. Simulation is part of a culture obsessed with sign systems and the creation of 'distal' forms of experience. Writing, even language allows humans to abstract themselves from reality and deplete the senses, all of which leads to various forms of disembodiment. These issues are extended to even greater complexity and effect by digitization.

Charles Levin says it well: The sense that we are caught up in more and more abstract systems of writing, distancing us from the emotional immediacy of the body and from the problem of negotiating the boundary between inside and outside…. (184) The sense of simulation as a digitally enhanced, all-encompassing override of sensory experience — of society as a kind of total medium, or generalized hyperrealist surround which abolishes critical distance and absorbs the individual into a "mass" or "black hole" of identificatory fascination. (184) For Baudrillard, simulation is constitutive of society, as foundational as grammar is for language. The links here to Debord should be obvious, but the links to structuralist thinking are not that apparent.

But what is important here is Baudrillard's assumption that critical distance is not possible within western societies and that as a result people are submerged in their everyday experiences without much of a chance to develop a critical enough distance to examine what is happening to them. As with Debord, and many others, the irony is that Baudrillard has very little respect for the creative potential of the "masses" (his and Debord's term) to recreate their experience in self-reflexive ways. In that sense, Baudrillard falls prey to a metaphysical approach because even if some of what he says is useful, the reality is that the masses as a term and concept is not very helpful in understanding the meaning and diversity of human experience.

In this context, I would say that Baudrillard has created a closed system and in so doing he is actually reinstalling the very distinctions, for example between mind and body that much of his writing has tried to critique.

How did this happen? Why did Baudrillard end up creating such a frozen view of human subjectivity? This is a complex, yet central question. Part of it has to do with Baudrillard's uncritical use of the symbolic, which in his work becomes equivalent to a set of rules that govern how people experience the world around them. These rules are actually the basis for a series of codes, a syntax that allows Baudrillard to create an inventory at an idealized level, a catalogue of sorts of how societies sustain the illusions that they create. Remember that in 1953 Jacques Lacan declared that: The unconscious is structured like a language. This made it possible for structuralists to investigate human thought and action through a rationalist linguistic model and to open up the possibility of speculating about the mind through metaphors of fixity and stasis. This trope remains very powerful even among those who do not call themselves structuralists such as Paul Virilio and Arthur Kroker.

Baudrillard has always used many of the elements of Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralist approach to the analysis of myth, some of which are very useful. But Baudrillard makes a strategic error. Levi-Strauss drew upon ethnographic and phenomenological observation of the diachronic and time based experiences of developing societies and extrapolated a series of synchronic oppositions that became a reflection to Levi-Strauss of the operations of the human mind. The synchronic level, closed and unchanging, timeless, allowed Levi-Strauss to explore a whole set of characteristics of human activity and place them into a series of categories that transcended the everyday history of the societies he examined. There are of course many problems with this approach, although I might add, that Roland Barthes did much the same thing with the sole exception of his book, Camera Lucida and has not been attacked to the same degree as Levi-Strauss. This move from the diachronic to the synchronic is attractive because it makes it possible to extrapolate characteristics of human activity into a realm where they can be inventoried and analyzed without reference to historical events and on-going social changes. Much of the semiotic enterprise and in particular Saussure's linguistics depends upon this shift to the synchronic. The signifier/signified relationship is divided along similar lines.

Let me suggest that Baudrillard elevates simulation to a synchronic level and this comes out because he describes the simulacrum in terms that pull the entire process out of history into a universal category. This is not as unusual as one would think. As I have said his work on the symbolic is very much in line with structuralist methodologies and this has influenced the social theory that he developed. It is important to understand that Baudrillard's notion of simulation has taken on a central role in discussions of digital culture and influenced an entire generation's view of the role of artifice in sustaining image-based imaginary worlds.

I want to be clear about something. I am not staking out a position here that is "against" structuralism. That would be absurd. Rather, I am trying to understand why simulation as a concept would have enough power to become one of the central tropes of modern and postmodern theory. One answer may be that simulation describes a self-regulating system that appears to transcend human efforts to change direction or orientation. This is your classic cybernetic scheme in which information circulates without any necessary connection to meaning. Ultimately, the danger is that this approach as Levin suggests, "exhausts the semantic domain," (187) or at least suggests so many limitations that human activity and thought sink into a quagmire from which it is very difficult to emerge.

Now, this gives me an opportunity to return to RUST and explain the title of this short essay. Rust is about debris and also is about chemical processes most of which take place without the intervention of human beings. Rust is about decay sometimes systematic, most often opportunistic. It is very easy to simulate in a lab but why would one? In other words, it is natural, inevitable, and transparent. Rust is also about deterioration, sometimes because of neglect. As anyone who owns a car knows, corrosion on the body of a car spreads quite quickly, like a disease. Rust is ultimately about surfaces, loss and the stripping away of the object. The rust heap in the above image does have a history and in fact, rust is an excellent indicator of time. I could explore the stories of the cars, fridges, bikes and so on. These stories would add to the power of the debris, subjectify and perhaps overcome the neglect that led to this situation in the first place. My point is that any moment in the existence of

an object can become far more than we think by the simple application of the human imagination.

Disposal

Simulation is merely one of many strategies that humans use to project their own needs and desires into the world they inhabit. It is not some false universe created for perverse reasons to avoid reality or even to override the real. Simulation is about hypothetical worlds generated by the human imagination often with the help of technology. The panoramas of the 19th century were simulations. The theatres of the seventeenth centuries were simulations and so on. Baudrillard has reified simulation to a level that removes human agency from the equation and in so doing he has transformed an everyday human activity into a synchronic, timeless example of loss and emptiness.

As Michel Serres has so eloquently suggested, when you place human activities into a timeless space, you gain power over the chaos of everyday life and are able to designate with seeming precision what is going on. You create a model and isolate the flux and flow of the human imagination from any connection to the realities of daily life. Simulations allow for and encourage this process of modeling, but this must be seen as an extension of human activity and not as a programmatic example of the decline of the capacity of humans to interfere in the development of their own and their society's histories.

Levin again, "A simulation is not so much an attempt to resemble something in appearance as to reassemble it from within, algorithmically…(191)

From within, almost homeostatic, but never complete, there is no simple way to the ideal simulation devoid of connections to the complexities of the real and history.

One of the most suggestive examples of simulation is VR or virtual reality. The idea that placing a helmet on your head will allow for and encourage the experience of simulations faces the same issues encountered with most image-based experiences. For better or for worse, the algorithms that define the characteristics of a simulation are constructed within a craft oriented and artistic space. The diachronic always enters the synchronic. This suggests that even virtual reality, with all of its attractions and problems will never achieve that sense of complete immersion that technologists have promised for years. The virtual has been a part of all art since humans began to play in that particular sandbox. The virtual does not sit in opposition to the real; instead I would suggest that there is continuity at all sorts of levels connecting the virtual to the imaginary as one of many strategies humans use to recreate the worlds they live in.

The challenge is that image-worlds make it appear as if the real can be transformed on an almost continual basis. No set of meanings is more stable than any other set. There is no question that images are playful and sometimes dangerous simulations of the real. In fact, if we move away from the simplicity of representation and recognize that images are the way in which humans visualize the world around them, then the virtual becomes just another of many subsets of the real world.

There is a key concept within the structuralist movement that is often forgotten and it is bricolage. The bricoleur as Levi-Strauss says, is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. The rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand'. (Savage Mind, p. 17) This is ironically the way in which Baudrillard writes and more recently shoot photographs, with the caveat being that he asserts his ideas as if context, history, and lived experience are merely simulacra in an overdetermined virtualized world.

To conclude

In his book *Simulations* Baudrillard says the following: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance…It is the map that precedes the territory…it is the map that engenders the territory. (Levin 196) The insight here is that reference need not be at the centre of simulation but that is only possible if there is no observer to the scene, no person who interprets or challenges whether the map is in fact correct or whether it should exist. Baudrillard's impulse here is to invert territory and map because simulations make it possible, even desirable to create worlds that have no material base. But to me, simulation is about new forms of materiality and new ways of thinking about embodiment. But even here, the new may just be a repetition of existing forms and shapes taken to other levels of mediation. The real is simply being produced in different ways. The challenge is to understand how and to be able to generate meaning from the experience. So, Rust cannot simulate decay because that is above all else a human activity and not simply a chemical one.

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