After Simulacra

On Baudrillard, Imagined Essences, Consumption, and the Effective Predator

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Reading Baudrillard today is a strange experience. He sensed the nerve of an age that has since come to resemble his descriptions even more closely. The media, advertising, political spectacles, digital avatars, synthetic voices, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence once again force us to ask where the boundary lies between reality and its image.

But this powerful diagnosis carries a dangerous implication. Simulation can begin to look like a fall from a once whole, authentic reality into a world of copies and substitutions. Baudrillard himself is more subtle than this reading, but it is often the impression his writing leaves behind.

And here the central objection arises.

Human beings have never lived in a pure reality.

We have never looked at the world through the eyes of a being without memory, expectations, or a name for what it encounters. Even the simplest act of recognition already draws upon past experience. We notice not only an object but also what it means to us, what dangers or possibilities it carries, and what actions it makes available.

We see not only light, color, movement, and surfaces. We see a home, a face, a homeland, honor, money, power, love, duty, threat, hope. Most of these meanings do not exist as separate objects that can be placed on a table. They are assembled through consciousness, memory, language, repetition, and culture.

And yet their effects on us are entirely real.

This is how what I call an imagined essence comes into being. “Imagined” does not mean false or fabricated. It describes a way of sustaining what matters: a thing, a relationship, or an event takes on a stable image through which a person can live and act. A simulacrum can be understood as one particular case of such an assembly, but it should not be equated with the whole of it.

A person deprived of the capacity to assemble imagined essences does not return to authenticity. They lose a coherent picture of the world. So the question is not how to rid ourselves of simulacra, but how to use the images we create without becoming their prey.

1. A World Before Simulacra?

Baudrillard is at his strongest when he shows how the sign no longer merely accompanies the thing but begins to lead a life of its own. A car is sold as status, a house as success, a politician as a media persona, and war becomes a televised event as well.

But was the foundation of human culture ever truly different? Myth, ritual, coat of arms, temple, crown, family name, military glory—were all of these not sustained through images and collective recognition?

There is, of course, a difference. Earlier symbolic forms were more closely bound to place, body, ritual, ancestral memory, and long repetition. Today their production has become technological, mass-scale, rapid, and global. Algorithms can assemble and alter what matters faster than people can notice the act of assembly itself.

Behind an old coat of arms stood a lineage, a ritual, an oath, and the memory of generations. Behind a modern brand stand an advertising budget, recognizable graphics, and a managed flow of attention.

These forms cannot simply be equated. But their kinship matters: both require the collective sustaining of meaning, or else they become empty pictures.

This is not a passage from a world of truth to a world of images. It is a change in the speed, scale, and power exercised over images. What is dangerous, then, is not the imagined character of essences as such, but the loss of our ability to understand who sustains a particular essence for us, and why.

2. The Simulacrum as a Tool

There is no need to demonize the simulacrum. It is like a knife. In a surgeon's hands, a knife saves lives; in a criminal's hands, it kills. What it does depends not only on its shape but also on the human context in which it operates.

The same is true of imagined essences. Money can sustain exchange and trust—or become a means of dependence. Law can protect justice—or give violence legal force. Reputation helps us find our bearings—or becomes an instrument of worship and persecution. Artificial intelligence clarifies complex connections—or produces convincing illusions.

The state can organize shared life, but it can also begin to claim that life in its entirety for the sake of its own continuation. A brand can serve as a guide to quality, or it can sell an empty feeling of belonging. In each case, what is at work is not an abstract “power of the simulacrum,” but a specific distribution of trust, attention, and power.

It is therefore not enough to declare a sign a counterfeit. We must look at what real work it performs and who gains power through that work.

Simulation does not necessarily destroy the human world. In many cases it participates in its assembly.

Corruption begins when an image stops helping us distinguish what is happening and starts replacing what is happening in someone else's interests.

3. Consumption and the Hunger Within

Baudrillard's critique of consumer society concerns above all the consumption of signs: people buy things not only for their function but also for what those things say about their owners. This is a difficult observation to dispute. But we should not confuse the consumption of signs with consumption as such.

Consumption predates the market: living beings sustain themselves through exchange with the surrounding world. Comfort, taste, beauty, and convenience are not in themselves symptoms of decline.

A plant captures energy from sunlight. An animal feeds on plants. A predator feeds on another animal.

Human beings bring not only the body but also the symbol into this cycle: through possessions, they seek recognition, signal status, and try to convince themselves that they belong to a desired world. It is here that biological consumption and the consumption of signs begin to intertwine.

The problem begins when an object stops serving life and becomes a means of satisfying a hunger no object can satisfy. A person buys not a thing but peace of mind. Seeks not convenience but proof of success. Consumes not information but a feeling of control.

One can eat well, love beautiful clothes, make a comfortable home, and enjoy technology without becoming a prisoner of consumption. The criterion is not the number of possessions in itself. It is whether a person retains the freedom to stop and the ability to distinguish a need from a promise imposed upon them.

Advertising does not invent this hunger. It taps into an existing fear of scarcity, a desire for recognition, a need for security, and the urge to surpass others. We might provisionally call this ancient motivational layer a reptilian pattern—not as a literal account of the brain's structure, but as an image of persistent impulses toward satiation, protection, and possession.

There is nothing inherently bad about this layer. Without it, living beings could not sustain themselves.

The danger arises when it subordinates areas of life that require a sense of measure, attention to others, and the ability to stop.

This is especially clear in everyday life. One person chooses a useful object and forgets about it as soon as they begin using it. Another returns to the act of buying again and again: comparing themselves to other people's photographs, seeking the next reassurance, and gradually losing the ability to distinguish where the object ends and the judgment of their own worth begins.

At that point, the person is no longer consuming an object. They are consuming confirmation of themselves. And it is precisely here that room opens for the effective predator.

4. The Effective Predator

The effective predator need not be crude or openly aggressive. They may be charming, educated, spiritual, persuasive. Their defining skill is to discover what an audience longs for, assemble that

longing into a stable image, and turn it into a resource.

They may not think of themselves as villains at all. Sometimes they sincerely believe what they say and even do some good. This is why it is difficult to recognize them by lies or overt violence alone. It is far more important to see what happens to those who find themselves inside the form the predator has created.

People fear the future—and are offered an image of the enemy along with a promise of order. They seek salvation—and receive the figure of a mentor who possesses the one true path. They want to be different from others—and buy a brand as proof of their own exceptional status. They long for a clear explanation—and accept a formula that promises, at last, to explain everything.

Appealing to human needs does not in itself make someone a predator. The boundary is crossed when another person's need becomes an enduring source of dependence: instead of helping people make sense of things, the predator makes them return again and again for reassurance, protection, or initiation. This can happen even without a consciously planned deception.

The predator then does more than offer an image. They sustain conditions in which, without that image, people feel afraid, empty, or ashamed. A symbol that might have opened a path begins to confine people to a single supplier of meaning. Independent discernment is replaced by loyalty.

There is a paradox here that concerns the critique of simulacra itself. A theory that exposes the power of signs can itself become a sign: it is quoted as a password of intellectual belonging, while the image of its author becomes an imagined essence in its own right. This does not refute Baudrillard or make him a predator. On the contrary, it shows that even a thinker of simulation does not stand outside the world he describes.

One can criticize consumption while consuming one's own critical pose. One can expose simulacra while living inside the simulacrum of the debunker. What matters is distinguishing a thought that helps us see from the image of a thinker with which we find it convenient to adorn ourselves.

5. Intoxication with New Tools

The arrival of a new tool is rarely accompanied immediately by a culture of its use. Humanity first becomes captivated by its possibilities, then discovers its consequences, and only later tries to develop a sense of measure.

Consider synthetic materials. At first, novelty itself seemed reason enough to use them everywhere. Later it became clear that they were indispensable for some purposes and inferior to older solutions for others. We learned to distinguish their properties and conditions of use—without declaring the material either a salvation or a curse.

Television learned not only to educate but also to capture attention. The internet expanded access to knowledge while creating new dependencies. Social networks gave millions a voice, but turned recognition and anxiety into measurable resources.

With artificial intelligence this process becomes especially intense. Machines can already produce texts, faces, and voices that are difficult to distinguish from the testimony of a living person. This is

therefore more than a new form of entertainment: trust, authorship, and the very habit of treating an image or recording as a trace of a real event are at stake.

It does not follow that AI must be rejected. But neither can we console ourselves with the certainty that culture will inevitably cope on its own. We will need new skills of discernment, rules for labeling, accountability for deception, and the ability not to hand machines the final authority to determine what matters.

What makes the present moment distinctive is that the means of producing images are now available to almost everyone, while the speed at which those images spread far exceeds the speed at which they can be verified. Where an institution, studio, or editorial office was once required, a few commands now suffice. This brings not only new freedoms but also a new vulnerability of trust.

Intoxication with a tool is not yet a final diagnosis of civilization. The inability to develop a sense of measure might be.

6. The Hygiene of Imagined Essences

What is needed after simulacra is not another lament for lost authenticity, but a discipline in how we handle images. We might call it a hygiene of imagined essences.

It does not require us to give up money, media, technology, entertainment, or consumption. It asks us to see them as forms that sustain something and exert effects on something else.

What imagined essence has been created here? What makes it convincing? Who sustains it, and who draws resources from it? What fear or hunger does it serve? Does it help a person discern the world—or offer a ready-made script in which independent judgment is no longer required?

Above all, these questions must not become yet another system of debunking that suspects falsehood everywhere. Some imagined essences sustain life better than any formal rule: a promise, respect, fidelity, trust. Hygiene is not meant to destroy them, but to help them remain living forms rather than become self-sustaining machines of subjugation.

These questions concern not only advertising and politics. We should also ask them of our own convictions, relationships, favorite theories, and even our self-image as independent people.

The hygiene of imagined essences does not destroy the image. It restores the distance from which a person can examine it again, change it, accept it, or reject it. For recognizing an essence as imagined does not mean declaring it false. It means seeing the work and interests through which it continues to exist.

7. After Baudrillard

The future will not be any less saturated with images. It is all the more important, then, to distinguish where an image sustains living beings and where living beings are turned into resources for an image.

We will increasingly encounter another person's words spoken in a synthesized voice, a familiar face in an artificial image, and a convincing story about an event that never occurred. Yet we will also find new ways to learn, create, work with memory, and understand one another. Such a world cannot be judged by a single formula about the end of reality.

We will not return to a world in which things speak for themselves, without language, memory, status, or expectations. No such human world has ever existed. But we can learn to see our own work in assembling it—and the work of those who try to assemble it for us.

The problem is not simulacra. It is the predatory mode in which they are used. Not consumption, but the loss of measure. Not technology, but the fact that people too often surrender to it the right to determine what genuinely matters to them.

The task after Baudrillard, then, is not to destroy the simulacrum, but to restore our ability to see how it works.