One More Spiral in the Simulacrum: Jean Baudrillard's Games with Reality

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Reality has passed completely into the game of reality.
Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)

I. Introduction

While Baudrillard's theory of simulacra famously argues that it is no longer possible to make a meaningful distinction between representation and reality, these distinctions are concurrently evoked in the process of their cancellation. In this essay, I argue that an engagement with ontological levels acts as the absolute value of Baudrillard's argument, performing an explanatory function. Despite his assertion that the contemporary condition is characterised by one-dimensionality (immanence, exposure, an absence of secrecy), Baudrillard constantly uses geometrical imagery: a vocabulary of dots, circles and bubbles. Such imagery retains the inside-outside dialectic that Baudrillard ostensibly negates. This principle is also evident in Baudrillard's discussion of physical architectures, particularly in America, which acts as his exemplification

of hyperreality. Contemporary American architectures including Disneyland and the Bonaventure Hotel are conceived in terms of play – yet, if such structures participate in Baudrillard's blurring of game and reality, their physical features retain a distinction between inside and outside which conserves the 'reality principle'. Accordingly, I propose that Baudrillard's writing reveals a distinction between ontological levels from a local perspective while asserting their global equivalence, where Douglas Hofstadter's strange loop offers a way of reconciling paradoxes in Baudrillard's rhetoric. Following on from this, I propose that reading Baudrillard through a lens of 'fiction' rather than 'theory' provides a further means of accounting for his contradictions, since theory and fiction solicit distinct rhetorical expectations. As fiction, his texts provide spaces for testing and hypothesising ideas, prioritising evocation over affirmation. The compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing lies partly in the *idea* of ontological distinction, whether affirmed, negated, or simply played with through experimental rearrangement.

As indicated by this article's epigraph, the concept of game is inextricably associated with ontology (and, in addition, spatiality) in Baudrillard's thought, providing a crucial lens for this discussion. This association does not begin with Baudrillard; the relationship between games and ontology is a key feature of cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), one of the first extended studies of play. In his book, Huizinga identifies an important feature of play as its spatial demarcation:

> *The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)*

Here, Huizinga implies that play takes place on a distinct, representational level of existence: that play as an activity holds the same ontological relation to the 'ordinary world' as a theatrical play. While Huizinga gave multiple examples of playgrounds, from temples to screens, the terminology of the 'magic circle' has persisted, as evident in books on game design (such as Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*). As elaborated later in the essay, such geometrical imagery, with its attendant spatial dialectics, both informs and manifests ontological conceptualisations in Baudrillard's thought.

Recent decades have seen an increased interest in the relationship between Baudrillard's work and games; in 2007, a special issue on Baudrillard and Game Studies was published in *Games and Culture,* titled 'What if Baudrillard was a Gamer?'. This collection comprises a range of approaches, including readings of Baudrillard's writing style as a game, applications of Baudrillard's ideas to digital games, and considerations of what 'game' means in Baudrillard's writing. Alexander Galloway's essay in the collection, titled 'Radical Illusion (A Game Against)', proposes that games are the single thing that Baudrillard wrote most about, more so than other topics including symbolic exchange and simulation (p. 376). At the same time, Galloway acknowledges Baudrillard's vague use of the term, remarking:

> *By the end of his life, games and play had metastasized, infecting the entire corpus of his thought, so much so that game came to be a synonym for world, or for life, or in a very general sense for the ontological plane itself. (p. 376)*

An example of the application of 'game' to 'the ontological plane itself' is evident in *Paroxysm*, where Baudrillard calls writing a 'game, in the sense that it's the *invention* of another, antagonistic world' [italics mine] (p. 32). Yet Galloway argues that Baudrillard cancels out the ontological distinctness of games suggested by theorists such as Huizinga. Instead, he contends that Baudrillard

> *would never claim that there is a second reality that exists against normal life, precisely for the reason that 'normal life' is always already a 'second reality' from the get-go. […] The real is play. The 'virtual' is emphatically not the gamic for Baudrillard; it is this world that is the game. The magic circle is part of the here and now. (pp. 377–78)*

mentative space. Ontological distinctions comprise the pivot around which Baudrillard's argument turns in a methodology where the evocation of a concept becomes more significant than its assertion or negation.

II. The Absolute Value of Ontological Levels

The opening of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) illustrates Baudrillard's methodology. He begins by evoking the Borges fable where cartographers 'draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly' (p. 1). However, in the second paragraph, Baudrillard inverts Borges's parable, famously suggesting that the 'territory no longer precedes the map', but 'the map […] precedes the territory' (p. 1). He vividly describes how 'today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there' (p. 1). Yet despite the declarative tone of the second paragraph, which inverts the first, Baudrillard's third paragraph performs a further inversion: 'In fact, even inverted, Borges's fable is unusable' (p. 1). Both paragraphs are then replaced by a third assertion:

> *it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and another, that constituted the charm of abstraction. […] No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its*

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However, I read this argument against the grain, focusing on the fact that Baudrillard's comment that 'Reality has passed completely into the game of reality' (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 74) conjures a distinction between game and non-game in the process of implying that this distinction has collapsed. The real game is, perhaps, the interaction between reality-as-game and reality-as-non-game: the plurality of envisioned ontologies that emerge in Baudrillard's hypothetical argu-

> *concept. […] The real […] is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (p. 2)*

While the content of Baudrillard's writing abolishes the dialectic of positive-negative, as he argues that the real 'no longer measures itself against an ideal or negative instance' (p. 2), this is rhetorically expressed through a methodology of assertion followed by cancellation. Indeed, the language of this paragraph is striking for its negativity, with the almost incantatory repetition of 'no longer' and 'no more'. The condition of simulation, which has theoretically surpassed the poles of 'is' and 'is not', is described in terms of what is not. If the distinction between levels of reality has been dissolved, these levels are still present in the expression of their abolition, acting as a methodological means of performing the evolution of a concept.

This reliance on negativity is acknowledged by Baudrillard. Describing simulation, he remarks:

> *In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, […] a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: implosion – an absorption of […] positive and negative charge […]. That is where simulation begins. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 31)*

A 'negative form' is necessary in order to articulate the collapse of the distinction between positive and negative, as simulation is approached through a vocabulary of paradox and deferral. Baudrillard goes on to adopt a language of inexpressibility when describing how 'simulation is of the third order, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond rational distinctions upon which the whole of the social and power depend' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21). Reinforced by the rhythm of a rhetorical triad, the language of 'beyond' suggests that Baudrillard's articulation of simulation is a stepping stone towards something that defies the conditions of expression.

Still, Baudrillard is also aware of the persistence of the negated concept; if the era of simulation involves 'a liquidation of all referentials', this is accompanied by 'their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21). Referentials are simultaneously absent and present: artificially resurrected, they participate in A phantasm of ontological distinction. Similarly, in the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Baudrillard describes how

> *each configuration of value is seized by the next in a higher order of simulacra. And each phase of value integrates the prior apparatus into its own as a phantom reference, a puppet reference, a simulated reference. (pp. 2-3)*

If the reference does not exist, the *idea* of the reference exists in 'phantom', 'puppet' and 'simulated' states. When Baudrillard outlines the orders of simulacra from the Renaissance onwards, he describes the story of stucco, which transforms distinctions into 'a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent for all the others' (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 52). While on one level (material) there is equivalence, on another (representational) there is distinction. The *idea* is retained, even if its actuality is insisted against: distinction is displaced to a more abstract plane, becoming geometrical rather than material. A further example of this increasingly abstract but persistent

distinction is in *Forget Foucault*, where Baudrillard alludes to 'the institution of spatial perspective versus "real" space in the Renaissance', where the former 'is only a simulation of perspective' (p. 21). Again, the principle of perspective is retained, even if it ceases to exist in concrete form.

This principle can be considered the 'modulus' of Baudrillard's thought. In mathematics, the 'modulus' describes the absolute value of a term, ignoring whether it is positive or negative: for instance, the 'modulus' of negative twelve and twelve is twelve. Along these lines, Galloway remarks: 'Mathematically speaking, Baudrillard's is the "absolute value" of the dialectic' (p. 381). Baudrillard reinforces this idea in 'Radical Thought', where he remarks:

> *Ultimately, it is not even a disavowal of the concept of reality. It is an illusion, or in other words a game with reality, just as seduction is a game with desire (it brings it into play) and just as metaphor is a game with the truth. (p. 54)*

Rather than avowal and disavowal, Baudrillard's purpose is defined as bringing an idea into the argumentative field. Here 'game' and 'play' are used to describe the process of interacting with a concept or theme rather than affirming or negating it. Conceived in terms of play, theory becomes a tool rather than a truth. Baudrillard thus asserts that 'the value of thought lies not so much in its inevitable convergences with the truth as in its immeasurable divergences from the truth' ('Radical Thought', p. 53). The relationship is prioritised over the assertion, as the negative value of the thought is equivalent to its positive value.

Considering the modulus of Baudrillard's terms provides a means of addressing his contradictions, which emerge in, among other areas, his comments on games and ontology. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, he makes reference to 'the great game of simulacra, which makes things appear and disappear' (p. 71). However, at the end of the text he envisions the era of simulation as follows: 'What if the modern universe of communication, of hyper-communication, had plunged us, not into the senseless, but into a tremendous saturation of meaning entirely consumed by its success – without the game, the secret, or distance?' (p. 103). In the same text, the 'game of simulacra' contradictorily coexists with the simulacral absence of game. Simulation constitutes a game because, in Baudrillard's terms, nothing is at stake. Yet simulation is not a game because it has no distance, no alternative ontology, participating in a condition of immanence where everything is simultaneously present and exposed. In this spirit, Zygmunt Bauman observes that Baudrillard's words

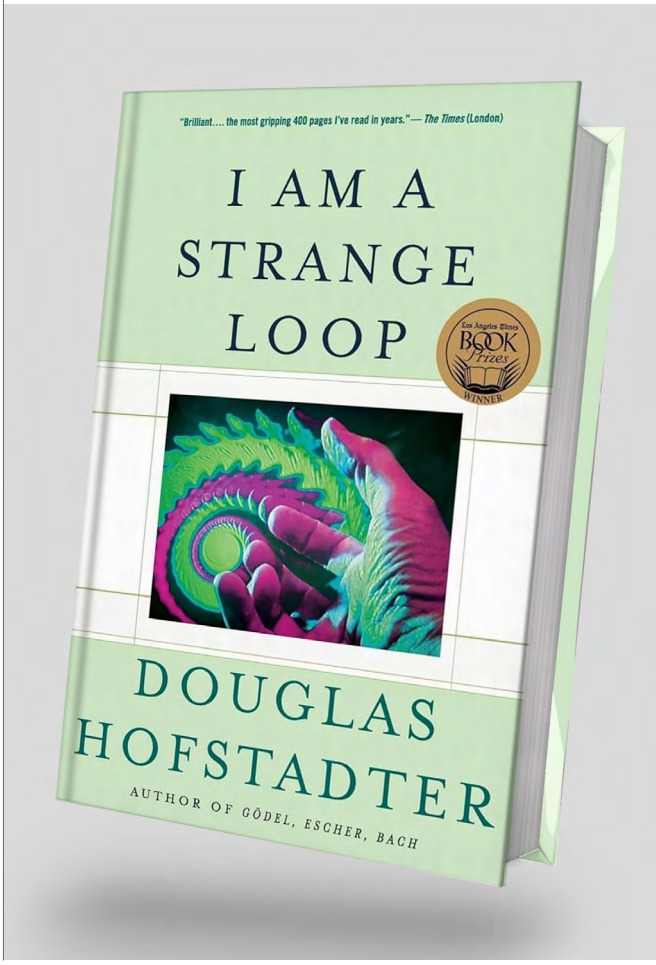
> *create a world in which they may dissolve, […] a universe of meaning in which their own, private meanings, having done their job, are no longer identifiable, merging into a universe of experience that cancels meanings it cannot, and wishes not, to absorb. (p. 22)*

Accordingly, different features of 'game' are drawn out in each context of its use, as play forms a floating principle with which simulation is always interacting.

Yet another way of accounting for Baudrillard's internal inconsistencies is through the figure of Douglas Hofstadter's 'Strange Loop', or 'tangled hierarchy'. Hofstadter describes how 'The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started' (p. 10). This is visualised in, for instance, the drawings of Escher, as 'each local region of Escher's *Ascending and*

Descending is quite legitimate; it is only the way that they are globally put together that creates an impossibility' (*Gödel, Escher, Bach*, p. 21). Baudrillard himself evokes such patterns when discussing how 'All the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 18), where the Möbius strip also exhibits local distinction and general equivalence. Similarly, in *Cool Memories II*, Baudrillard describes how: 'At Disneyland in Florida they are building a giant mock-up of Hollywood, with the boulevards, studios, etc. One more spiral in the simulacrum. One day they will rebuild Disneyland at Disneyworld' (p. 42). While a local juxtaposition between the mock-up Hollywood and 'real' Hollywood suggests that the former is a second-order representation of the latter, from afar the two become equivalent: in the order of simulation, there is no original, only a replication of models. Yet in Baudrillard's own language, the mock-up Hollywood is a 'spiral' in the simulacrum, indicating a relative distinction. A spiral is a rich geometrical figure; extending the circle into a third dimension, it is comprised of levels which are locally distinct but, if the spiral continues infinitely, phenomenologically equivalent. From a top-down perspective, a spiral is indistinguishable from a circle, but when viewed from the side it extends into space. Such perspectival multiplicity encapsulates the flexibility of Baudrillard's concepts, which change shape depending on the angle from which they are perceived. This sense is bolstered by his reference to spirals in *Revenge of the Crystal*, where he identifies theory as 'game': 'as narrative, as *spiral*, as concatenation' [italics mine] (p. 23). The spiral, like the strange loop, performs a kind of optical trick, changing shape depending on perspective.

Christopher Norris remarks that it is 'impossible for Baudrillard to present his case without falling back into a language that betrays the opposite compulsion at work' (pp. 377–78). And yet, this 'opposite compulsion' is often the opposite of the collapse of opposites. Baudrillard's language betrays a reliance on opposites in order to deconstruct them, participating in the paradoxical rhetoric of immanent criticism, aware of its linguistic limitations but unable to surpass them. As discussed above, Baudrillard's contradictions can be approached by taking the 'absolute value' of the objects he simultaneously affirms and negates, suggesting a conception of theory based on interaction rather than assertion. At the same time, his strategy of articulating ideas through the sequential process of evoking, affirming, and then negating suggests that scale must also be taken into account: the local perspective of his writing is distinct from the global perspective. As represented by strange loops, which are



related to Baudrillard's own vocabulary of spirals and Möbius strips, local distinction coexists with global equivalence. Taken in isolation, the second paragraph of *Simulacra and Simulation* would contradict his overall thesis. Understood within a wider frame of reference, it provides an illustration of a methodology that conceives of concepts as tools rather than truths: stepping stones towards a perspective which is enacted rather than affirmed. This strategy is elucidated through a closer consideration of Baudrillard's geometrical vocabulary, elaborated in the next section.

III. Dots and Bubbles: Baudrillard's Phantom Dimensionality

As suggested by his discussion of stucco, Baudrillard's world contains simulated architectures: one-dimensional spaces whose three-dimensionality is a *trompe l'oeil* illusion. This is linked to his identification of a condition of immanence. In *Revenge of the Crystal*, Baudrillard remarks that his work is in line with recent trends in the search for 'an immanence of things', aligning himself with Deleuze (p. 19). His most extensive discussion of immanence is in *Ecstasy*, where in the text's opening he comments that 'There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication' (p. 12). Baudrillard goes on to suggest that 'the distinction between an interior and an exterior […] has been blurred in a double obscenity' (*Ecstasy*, p. 20). The cancellation of the distinction between interior and exterior recalls Galloway's thesis that Baudrillard's writing on games eradicates the magic circle. What Baudrillard calls the 'ecstasy of communication' is an 'over-proximity of all things' (*Ecstasy*, p. 27), a vacuum without space or distance, with 'all functions abolished into one dimension' (*Ecstasy*, p. 23).

And yet, Baudrillard's references to depth, surface, interiority, exteriority, proximity, space, distance and dimensions emphasises how his concepts are grounded in spatial dynamics. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he suggests that the disappearance of the distinction between reality and simulation is precisely *because* of the disappearance of distance, indicating a correspondence between embodied experience and conceptual configurations: 'there is no imaginary except at a certain distance' (p. 121), where, as the order of simulacra progress, there is a tendency 'toward the reabsorption of this distance, of this gap that leaves room for an ideal or critical projection' (pp. 121–22). In an interview titled 'Games with Vestiges', he describes how there is

> *no longer any transcendence of judgment. There is a kind of participation, coagulation, proliferation of messages and signs, etc. You are no longer in a state to judge, and no potential to reflect. You are taken into the screen, you are a gaze-simulacrum. This is fascination. It is a form of ecstasy. (p. 85)*

This inability to 'reflect' further elucidates Baudrillard's methodology: since theory cannot fulfil its etymological function of observation, it must instead function through participation. Nevertheless, Baudrillard's insistence on the vanishing of space is concurrent with a persistent rhetorical evocation of space. His language is infused with spatial, geometrical terminology: a vocabulary of dots, circles and bubbles, which respectively correspond with one-dimensionality, two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. His conception of immanence relies on the evocation of theoretical distance in order to express its dissolution as spatiality continues to perform a phantom function.

The primary figure which maintains three-dimensional space in Baudrillard's rhetoric is the sphere. Despite *Ecstasy*'s insistence on the one-dimensional vacuum, the text is suffused with a language of bubbles. At the beginning, Baudrillard describes the subject's integration with their object of use through the example of the automobile: 'The vehicle […] becomes a bubble, the dashboard a console, and the landscape all around unfolds as a television screen' (*Ecstasy*, p. 13). The key to this process is the term 'becomes', 'devient' (*L'Autre*, p. 13), implying a temporal distinction: we *enter* a world in which there is only one dimension, its alternative inaccessible but theoretically and historically extant. Later in *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard remarks:

> *each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, […] in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity. (p. 15)*

Baudrillard's metaphysics is constantly alluding to *physics*, as the astronaut comparison engages a material metaphor. An astronaut only experiences weightlessness with the equipment of the spacecraft and the atmosphere of space, and Baudrillard's terminology of bubbles similarly retains a hypothetical outside. The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' (*Ecstasy*, p. 14) is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.

In 'Prophylaxis and Virulence', an essay in *Transparency and Evil*, Baudrillard discusses the 'Boy in the Bubble', referring to an American child born in the 1970s with severe immunodeficiency. The boy was kept alive in a sterilised, transparent, spherical chamber. In *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard suggests that such a 'vacuum-sealed existence' is representative of his contemporary social condition:

> *To each his own bubble; that is the law today. Just as we have reached the limits of geographic space and have explored all the confines of the planet, we can only implode into a space which is reduced daily as a result of our increasing mobility made possible by airplanes and the media, to the point where all trips have already taken place; where the vaguest desire for dispersion, evasion and movement are concentrated in a fixed point, in an immobility that has ceased to be one of non-movement and has become that of a potential ubiquity, of an absolute mobility, which voids its own space by crossing it ceaselessly and without effort. (Ecstasy, p. 39).*

What is striking about this description is that it describes an implicit transition from bubble to vacuum, culminating in a state where 'each individual is contained in one hyperpotential point' (*Ecstasy*, p. 41). The bubble *contains* the vacuum: the abolition of inside and outside is itself enclosed inside a defined system. As in the above example of the automobile, this shift is indicated by the term 'become': 'Our very brain, our very bodies have *become* this bubble, this sanitized sphere, a transparent envelope in which we seek refuge' [italics mine] (*Ecstasy*, p. 39). The scheme of transcendence underpinning the Platonic cave is not absolutely dispensed with. Probing the intricacies of Baudrillard's spatial rhetoric, one might hypothesise that, if the subjects now inside the 'bubble' could be equipped with the correct apparatus – if their eyes or antibodies *could* cope with the external environment – they could 'transcend' to a reality outside the metaphorical cave. Dimensionality is theoretically conserved.

Several critics have challenged Baudrillard's conception of immanence on spatial grounds; Katherine Hayles notes that 'Baudrillard would no doubt object that hyperrealism is not about transcendence but precisely its opposite – an immanent world that is only surface' ('Response', p. 4). Hayles argues against this, critiquing Baudrillard's reading of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* by arguing that the 'drive to transcend physical limitations' is evident in the signs of flight dominating the text, where 'desire' is not absent but reconfigured (p. 5). Commenting on the performative quality of Baudrillard's writing, she continues that 'The realm that Ballard sees beckoning to us from the margins, Baudrillard places at the center and inflates to consume the whole' (p. 5). Hayles thus sets Baudrillard's own reflections within a wider spatial framework, similarly suggesting that Baudrillard's depiction of a world without a distinction between inside and outside *itself* has an outside. David Porush, in 'The Architextuality of Transcendence', also reacts against Baudrillard's implication that imagination and transcendence will be 'sterilized' in hyperreality, arguing that transcendence can be both preserved and enhanced ('Response', p. 6). Porush defines transcendence as a process of revelation or explication, citing as an example the ancient architecture of the Temple of Solomon with its 'successive layers mediating between the populace and the holy scrolls, including curtains, doors, layers in the ark itself, veils, walls, tapestries, more walls, rooms, more doors, courtyards, further systems of walls' (p. 6). Here, transcendence is embodied architecturally through concrete structures comprising levels and layers. Rather than alluding to a metaphysical transition, Porush's transcendence describes a process of spatial disclosure.

Yet Baudrillard implies that even such spatial disclosure is no longer possible, identifying the contemporary condition as one of 'visibility, the total disappearance of secrecy. […] There is no longer any ontologically secret substance' ('The Art of Disappearing', p. 187). This applies equally to architecture: 'today our only architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles, and molecules were refracted' (*Ecstasy*, p. 20). The implication is that the architecture of the screen has no levels, no secrets, only a flat circulation of states. And yet, are there no 'secret' spaces in simulated architectures? Is there absolute visibility in the navigation of password-protected websites, and in the unlocking of new areas or abilities in video game levels? The development of digital technology corresponds with developments in the capacity to simulate space; video games, for instance, have progressed from two-dimensional text games to increasingly complex three-dimensional representations. The principle of depth is carried over, constructed through virtual rather than physical materials.

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In sum, Baudrillard might assert that transcendence is not possible in a world where everything is exposed, but enclosing this exposed world within the temporally-defined boundaries of a specific context or culture, figured as a bubble, retains the idea of transcendence in a rel-

ative sense. Moreover, even within virtual architectures, the principle of transition and disclosure persists, enacted on a more abstract plane.

IV. Architectures of Play

Moving from theoretical to physical architectures in Baudrillard's writing involves a move to America, which, for Baudrillard, is frequently held as the embodiment of hyperreality. In *America* (1989), he describes America as 'neither dream nor reality' but 'a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved' (p. 28). He continues to suggest that 'the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values' (pp. 28–29). Indeed, the 'truth of America' observed by a European will also be a different 'truth' to that perceived by an Asian, African or Australian – not to mention the vast variety of perspectives contained within these continental generalisations. Nevertheless, this description again encloses hyperreality inside the bubble of a specific system, temporally and geographically bound. Baudrillard implies that, through another cultural perspective, it is possible to step outside the system of simulation and observe it – at least, to the extent allowed by the limitations of one's own vantage point. America provides Baudrillard with a case study in simulation, and he identifies a particularly gamic quality in American architectures from Disneyland to the Bonaventure Hotel.

One of Baudrillard's most striking and frequently-cited examples of simulation in *Simulacra and Simulation* is Disneyland: an explicit place of play. Disneyland, like America overall, provides the 'perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra' (p. 12). Baudrillard remarks:

> *It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 12)*

'Play' as applied to illusions and phantasms refers to movement: interactivity and rearrangement. Disneyland is a world composed of worlds, containing the subsections of Pirates, Frontier, Future World, and so on. At the same time, these worlds are defined as equivalent to the world that contains them, the distinction lying only in scale ('miniaturized'). Challenging Baudrillard's insistence on equivalence, Hayles comments that

> *Every existing simulation has boundaries that distinguish it from the surrounding environment. Disneyland sports a fence, dense hedges, and acres of parking lots. Only when these boundaries do not exist, or cease to signify that one has left the simulation and entered reality, does the dreamscape that Baudrillard evokes shimmer into existence. ('Response', p. 3)*

Yet Baudrillard's argument is that, recalling the strange loop, these boundaries provide only local distinctions. He contends that, *despite* physical demarcations, the quality of America's Disneyland is the same as the quality of America:

> *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. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 12)*

The boundaries are serving a purpose, but that purpose is 'saving the reality *principle*' [italics mine] (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 13). They maintain the idea of distinction: the absolute value.

At the same time, this local distinction is precisely the locus of attraction; Baudrillard himself has admitted that the crowds are drawn to the 'miniaturised' and the 'microcosm'. They are attracted to the principle of moving between representational levels: more abstractly, to the specific *point* at which the Möbius strip twists, or to the shift provided by the individual Penrose step. This observation does not contradict Baudrillard's claims so much as identify a nuance in his insistence on equivalence. Baudrillard's own rhetoric reveals that the game lies not so much in Disneyland itself, but in the localised transition between ontological levels. If reality had 'passed completely into the game of reality', there would be no more game, but retaining the idea of a boundary correspondingly retains the idea of a game, here expressed through a geometry of embedded (miniaturised) worlds.

A second American architecture discussed extensively by Baudrillard is the Bonaventure Hotel, which he also interprets as an architecture of play. Brian Gogan, in *The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange*, notes the contrast between Baudrillard's description and that of Fredric Jameson:

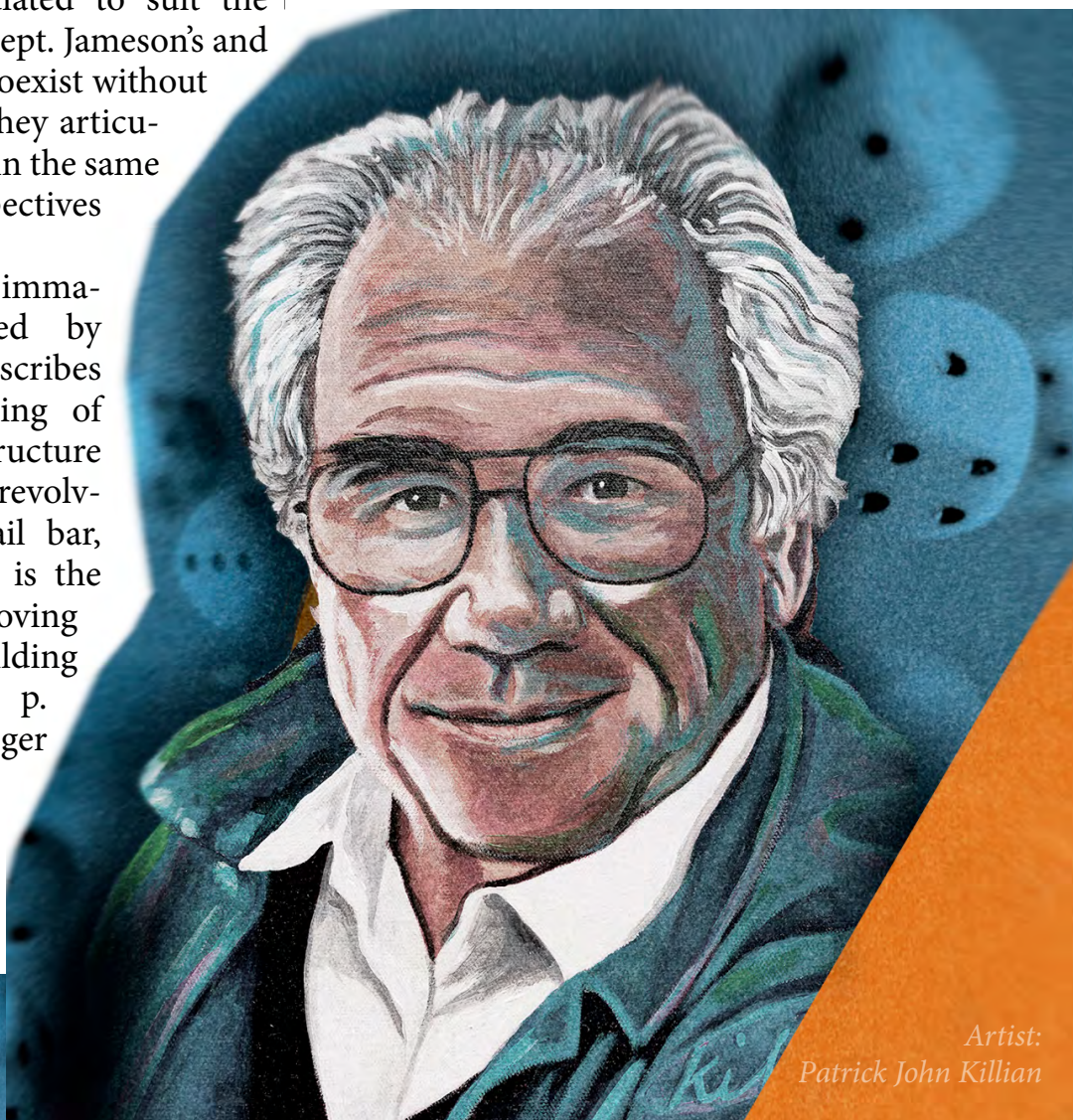
> *Whereas Jameson's treatment commences at the hotel entrances […] and eventually ascends to the rotating cocktail lounges perched atop the hotel […], Baudrillard's treatment begins at the cocktail lounge […] and descends in an attempt to find the hotel's exit […]. Jameson, on the one hand, understands the hotel as a transformative and transcendent space – one that gives humans a new view […] and one that requires new perceptual capacities […]. Baudrillard, on the other hand, understands the hotel as an 'internal refraction' that lacks mystery […]. (p. 23)*

Whether the hotel is understood through a scheme of immanence or transcendence depends on the way that each theorist chooses to descriptively navigate it. In Jameson's discussion, each element of the architecture is successively revealed through a progression inwards and upwards: entrances, gardens, glass skin, lobby, towers, cocktail lounge ('Bonaventure', pp. 11–16). He emphasises the role of escalators and elevators in stimulating a radical 'spatial experience: that of rapidly shooting up through the ceiling and outside, along one of the four symmetrical towers', finally reaching the revolving cocktail lounge in which one is 'rotated about and offered a contemplative spectacle of the city itself' (p. 15). This movement, which involves surpassing a physical boundary of enclosure (the ceiling), generates an experience of transcendence. At the same time, Jameson notes a qualitative suppression of depth: 'a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed […] without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume', where 'the suppression of depth observable in postmodern painting and literature' is achieved in an architectural medium (p. 14). This implication of immanence is accompanied by an explicit expression of transcendence, as 'this latest mutation in space […] has finally succeeded in *transcending* the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself' [italics mine] (p. 16). One transcends spatial systems in the movement through architectural levels, while this space is saturated with a sense of

immanent presence, where this saturation in turn transcends a subject's cognitive sense of location. The two conditions interact through the interplay between the physical and the phenomenological.

Contrastingly, Baudrillard begins his account with a short sentence: 'The top of the Bonaventure Hotel' (*America*, p. 62). The sentence's lack of subject exemplifies the immanent participation that Baudrillard emphasises as a feature of the hotel. By choosing to begin at the top, he negates the possibility of ascension, and his disorientation in failing to find an exit ('you cannot get out of the building itself' (*America*, p. 63)) bolsters his insistence on immanence. Yet Baudrillard has rhetorically performed the feat of being *already inside* the architecture by deliberately omitting description of the entrance. Since to be already inside the building is not physically possible, this is to instigate a rhetorical magic trick. Translated into a textual medium, architecture is manipulated to suit the framework of each concept. Jameson's and Baudrillard's accounts coexist without contradicting because they articulate different paths within the same space – different perspectives of the same object.

Baudrillard's immanence is accompanied by playfulness as he describes the disorientating feeling of perceiving the metal structure at the top of the hotel revolving around the cocktail bar, before realising that it is the bar's platform that is moving while the rest of the building remains still (*America*, p. 62). Drawing on Roger Caillois's four categories of play, this description corresponds to *ilinx*, or vertigo, whereby 'one produces in oneself, by a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder' (p. 12). Baudrillard goes on to identify something suspiciously gamic in this structure: 'Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and hallucinogenic, is this post-modern architecture?' (*America*, p. 62). He goes on to address Jameson's observation that 'the Bonaventure aspires to be a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city' ('Bonaventure', p. 12) by remarking: 'Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it' (*America*, p. 62). Both Jameson and Baudrillard suggest that the hotel is self-contained; like the magic circle of a game, it is a complete and detached space. However, this implies that, if there is no inside-outside *within* the hotel, there is an outside *outside* the



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hotel. Baudrillard's immanence is relative to a certain systematic configuration because he cannot theoretically abolish the structure of physical space. It could be argued that physicality is irrelevant here, as Baudrillard is discussing something more subtle and perceptual. Yet throughout this essay I have aimed to illustrate how the physical and metaphorical inform each other. As Jameson noted in his description of the elevator's upward motion, the physical vertical movement facilitated by the hotel's features, and selectively ignored in Baudrillard's description, enacts an experience of revelation and discovery. The architecture of the hotel is linguistically manipulated by each critic, making immanence relative.

In sum, Baudrillard's writing depicts Disneyland and the Bonevanture hotel as ludic worlds where the distinction between inside and outside is theoretically negated but materially present. This local distinction, I have argued, is a point of attraction and can stimulate a sense of play. The significance of local transition is also implied in *Paroxysm*, where Baudrillard comments on the relationship between America and Europe: 'with us, everything is always philosophical – even the glorification of appearances against depth […]. Over there, even theory *becomes* once again what it is: a fiction' [Italics mine] (p. 82). The terminology of 'becomes' suggests that the transition between a culture of philosophy and a culture of fiction can be transformative and revelatory. Along these lines, explicitly conceiving of theory as fiction has implications which will be unpacked in the following section.

IV. Theory-Fiction

Baudrillard's style is frequently characterised as compelling but unclear, lacking solid argumentative infrastructure. Mark Poster suggests that his writings are open to several criticisms: 'he fails to define his major terms, such as the code'; 'His writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate'; 'He totalises his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims' (p. 83). Christopher Norris articulates a similar ambivalence:

> *so long as we don't read too carefully he can thus carry off the performative trick of conjuring away with one hand those same criteria (truth, reality, history etc.) which he then summons up with the other for purposes of contrastive definition. (p. 379)*

He goes on to conclude that Baudrillard is 'thoroughly inconsequent and muddled when it comes to philosophising on the basis of his own observations' (p. 379). According to the above, Baudrillard's flaws can be summarised as imprecision, confusion and contradiction. As Norris points out, there is a sense of a *trick* in his rhetoric: something that cannot be grasped, performed behind the scenes, deliberately misleading and resisting clarification.

Still, Baudrillard anticipates these charges. In *Paroxysm*, he remarks: 'I am aware of the paradoxical rhetoric in my writing, a rhetoric that exceeds its own probability. The terms are purposefully exaggerated' (p. 186). Perhaps one way of accounting for these paradoxes and contradictions on a rhetorical level is to treat Baudrillard's texts as fiction. There is precedence for this from both Baudrillard and his critics. Regarding the latter, Guy Bellavance, in an interview with Baudrillard, introduces *The Fatal Strategy* as a work of '*sociology fiction*' (*Crystal*, p. 15). Similarly, Hayles comments that 'Baudrillard is as skilled a fiction writer as Ballard, Dick, or Lem', where his works do not only 'describe the implosion into simulation' but 'enact it by systematically eliding the borders that

mark the differences between simulation and reality' ('Response', p. 5). She mentions the 'high' described by her students after reading Baudrillard, categorising his writing with 'performative texts' (p. 5). This 'high' points to the compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing, which corresponds with the attraction to the local transition between levels of representation.

Fiction functions according to different rhetorical expectations to theory. As suggested by Hayles, Baudrillard's ideas are performed rather than described, enacted rather than elucidated. Along these lines, Gogan identifies a 'performative dimension' (p. 13) to Baudrillard's aphoristic writing. Conducting a detailed analysis of aphorisms, he outlines how 'the aphorism leaves open the possibility that the world maintains its suprasensibility – that is, a fundamental position above human sensibility' (pp. 136–37). The aphorism 'maintains the mystery of the world' (p. 137) – a mystery which has, Baudrillard asserted, also disappeared. Indeed, Gogan concludes that 'Baudrillard's use of the aphorism genre performs appearance and disappearance at the same time' (p. 138). The practice of holding contradictions simultaneously in play can be performed by fiction, which, as postmodernist fiction exemplifies, is under no obligation to resolve paradox.

What fiction provides for Baudrillard is a space of hypothesis. In *Paroxysm* he explicitly comments that his exploration of what happens 'after the demise of different things and truths' can only be performed 'through the use of thought experiments' (p. 186). Fiction acts as an exploratory space that allows objects to be experimentally rearranged in different configurations. Accordingly, in the Bellavance interview Baudrillard acknowledges that

> *the concepts I use are not exactly concepts. I wouldn't insist on their conceptual rigour: that would be far too constricting […]. You can play around with them. But that isn't frivolous or mundane; it is very serious in my opinion. It is the only possible way to account for the movement of things. (Crystal, p. 23)*

The reference to 'movement' is associated with the etymology of play in both English and French. In English, the word's primary OED definition is 'Exercise, brisk or free movement or action'; in French, *jeu* encompasses 'free movement' as well as play and games in its span of definitions (definition 8, Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary). This is the sense foregrounded by Derrida when discussing the play of substitutions in 'Structure, Sign and Play', although the ludic aspect is also simultaneously evoked. In Baudrillard's interview comment above, the sense of play as movement is defined against the implied stasis of rigorously defined objects. Play describes

a methodology as well as an activity, performed with a purposive intent which seeks illumination through interactivity. When Bellavance asks if Baudrillard is saying that 'theory ultimately has the right not to be true', he responds 'Absolutely, the right to play or to be radical' (*Crystal*, p. 24). If truth is something fixed and unchanging, play is, contrastingly, moving and evolving. Play does not affirm because affirmation is static; instead, play 'brings more intense things into being' (*Crystal*, p. 24). Again, the absolute value of an idea takes precedence over affirmation and negation, where bringing into being is prioritised over the question as to whether the object brought into being is 'true'.

an attempt at shifting the conversation, a means of suggesting that 'We need to have many ways of expressing theory' (p. 24). In his own words, Baudrillard's writing both *is* and *is not* fiction: fiction is affirmed and negated at the same time, drawing attention to the term's absolute value.

Fiction forms a world in the way that a game forms a world, suggesting another ontology, while at the same time this reality is attached like a Möbius strip to the reality from which it was created – and, from afar, can be seen as the same reality. Baudrillard explores this in *Paroxysm*, where he comments: 'Let's say that we manufacture a double of the world which substitutes itself for the world, we

The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.

The sense of fiction as hypothesis is made explicit in *Cool Memories II*, when Baudrillard comments:

> *Fiction? That's what I do already. My characters are a number of crazy hypotheses which maltreat reality in various ways and which I kill off at the end when they have done their work. The only way to treat ideas: murder (they kill concepts, don't they?) – but the crime has to be perfect. This is all imaginary, of course. (pp. 21–22)*

Fiction allows for this theoretical violence because it takes place within a magic circle: a world without stakes. Here, characters can be dead and alive at the same time, since the significance lies is the *modulus* of their existence. At the same time, in *Revenge of the Crystal* Baudrillard qualifies that 'the aim is not exactly fiction as such', implying that his use of 'fiction' is simply

generate the confusion between the world and its double' (p. 43). To employ another metaphor, these multiplied 'worlds' float around each other and interact, a strategy summarised by Baudrillard in 'Games with Vestiges': since one is 'entirely within systems', one 'plays off and through the commutations of the systems themselves' (p. 94). The purpose of inventing theoretical 'worlds' is to generate friction and energy through the interaction between them. This is through a mode of relation that is eccentric rather than concentric; in 'Radical Thought', Baudrillard describes radical thought as a game that is 'eccentric to the real, ex-centred from the real world' (p. 54). Similarly, in *Paroxysm*, he suggests a shift from dialectical thinking to 'what is ex-centred, eccentric' (p. 43). Whereas concentric circles are a series of circles that all have the same centre, eccentric circles are interlinked but have different centres.

If Baudrillard's thought is eccentric to the real, then it is does not precisely align with the real but somehow overlaps with it. There is no shared point between subject and object, between theory and world, but a sideways relationship – something that allows *friction*, because the mapping is not precise.

In response to the 'game of reality', then, Baudrillard suggests a 'game *with* reality' [italics mine] ('Radical Thought', p. 54), putting forward a conception of theory which does not pretend to be above its object of description but is, instead, knowingly equivalent. He remarks: 'it is not enough for theory to describe and analyse, it must itself be an event in the universe it describes' (*Ecstasy*, p. 99). In a condition of immanence, theory cannot pretend to be outside the system it is attempting to define. Accordingly, its etymological definition of *theoria*, as observation, gives way to *fiction*, as fabrication. It is no longer a window but an object, something opaque rather than transparent. In Baudrillard's writing, reality seems to be composed of a series of equivalent worlds, where the world of fiction is no less real than the world of non-fiction, but another floating and equivalent plane which interacts with the other floating and equivalent planes – and, through this interaction, generates illumination.

Reading strange loops into Baudrillard's disaffirmation of distinctions between representations and realities does not necessarily contradict his arguments – as, in his own words, Baudrillard eschews the dialectic by anticipating that theory has a 'right not to be true' but instead 'play' (*Crystal*, p. 24). Through this article, I hope to have shown that local distinctions in simulacra coexist with global ontological equivalence, performing explanatory work and revealing a transformative potential in the moment of transition. In the same vein, one-dimensional immanence coexists with a simulation of depth that maintains abstract but functional distinctions. Viewing Baudrillard's writing through a lens of fiction sets his paradoxes in a context of experimentation and hypothesis, where an idea's 'absolute value' takes precedence over conclusive assertion. Baudrillard both affirms and disaffirms that reality is a game. He both affirms and disaffirms that simulacra are a game. In formulating such compelling contradictions, he is inviting both readers and critics to play.

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