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Simulacra on steroids: AI art and the Baudrillardian hyperreal

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Abstract

This literature review probes the intersection of Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra with the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated art. Specifically, it delves into how generative AI, particularly Creative Adversarial Networks (CANs), extends Baudrillard's theories by producing art that blurs the lines between the real and the simulated. This paper introduces the concept of generative hyperreality, a novel stage in the evolution of simulacra where AI art autonomously creates new realities, challenging traditional notions of creativity, authorship, and authenticity.

Keywords: philosophy, artificial intelligence, simulacra, simulation, art

Introduction

In the late 1990's, Nevada became the haven for the underground rave circuit, a cultural zeitgeist described as, "A sort of neo-hippie environment where the children and sounds of the '80s met the ideals of the '60s," (Saylor, 2019). Rave events such as Burning Man emerged as the grandchildren of 1969's Woodstock, replacing the likes of Arlo Guthrie, Janis Joplin, and afternoons spent in a verdant New York field with pounding electronic music, elaborate costumes, and the harsh desert landscape. Though the rave subculture was steeped in science fiction aesthetics and surrealism, perhaps no rave event was more surreal than 1996's Three Days in the Desert, an occurrence in which the creator described as "a philosophical rave and summit meeting between artists and philosophers, chaosophists and croupiers, mathematicians and musicians," (Hultkrans, 1997).

The choice of the emcee and main attraction for the event was surreal in itself. Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist turned cult figure of the postmodernism movement served as the main draw of the event, occasionally emerging in a gold lamé blazer, backed by an experimental noise band, to read his prepared speeches on what one reporter summarized as "the disappearance of the real," (Hultkrans, 1997). In a raucous city located in the middle of a barren desert, among musicians making music solely through electronics, and with an audience of spectators dressed in sci-fi chic, perhaps Baudrillard's insistence that the real world was disappearing never felt more relevant or urgent.

Today, almost 30 years after his appearance at Three Days in the Desert, Baudrillard's exploration of simulacra—representations that become more real than reality itself—finds even greater relevance and urgency in the era of generative artificial intelligence (AI). His assertion that simulacra "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal," reflects the reality of the modern age of AI. These tools, capable of creating art that often cannot be distinguished from that made by human hands, not only echo his prophecies but also extend them. Generative AI capable of creating images, given the moniker 'Creative Adversarial Networks' also known as CANs, (Elgammel et al., 2017) does not merely replicate artistic styles to create new images; it demands a vast repository of real human-created art and images to

be trained on, assimilating a vast amount of human artistic expression to generate new amalgamations that simulate elements of the training data. In this way, AI, as Baudrillard once critiqued the media for shaping a hyperreality, AI is now taking on a similar role within the realm of art. The output of AI art generator platforms such as Midjourney or Dall-E 2, transforms the act of art creation, once deemed to be a purely human act, into something collaboratively artificial, thus embodying Baudrillard's vision of a world dominated by simulacra.

The aim of this paper is to probe the implications of these CANs examining how AI as a digital artist not only challenges traditional notions of creativity and authorship but also reconfigures them within a hyperreal context. We seek to understand the extent to which AI-generated art exemplifies Baudrillard's simulacra, pushing the boundaries of what is considered 'real' in art and extending the dialogue into new territories of digital expression and philosophical inquiry.

This paper examines how generative AI, specifically Creative Adversarial Networks (CANs), extends Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra into a new stage termed generative hyperreality. It argues that AI-generated art represents a novel stage in the evolution of simulacra, one that surpasses and complicates Baudrillard's original conceptualization. While Baudrillard's theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding the hyperreal, the advent of AI art introduces a dimension of simulacra that he could not have fully anticipated. This new stage is characterized by the autonomous generation of artistic content by non-human entities, blurring the lines between creator and creation in unprecedented ways. By examining this phenomenon, we extend Baudrillard's theory into the age of AI, offering new insights into the nature of reality, representation, and creativity in an era dominated by artificial intelligence.

The rhetoric of simulacra and simulation

As Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) define rhetoric as "the human use of symbols to communicate," (p. 1) Baudrillard's inclusion in their text is apt as many of the major tenants of Baudrillard's work rely on an understanding of how symbols and signs do and do not "reflect basic reality," (p. 308). In line with Marshall McLuhan's assertion that the medium is the message, Baudrillard's work relies on the notion that the media does not deliver an ideology to the masses, rather the media itself establishes the ideology (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002, p. 300). Baudrillard's work extends from these central concepts with much of his efforts focusing on "characterizing the structure of communication in a world dominated by the media," (Poster, 1988, p. 5).

Baudrillard's seminal work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, outlines the major tenant of his work - the idea that symbols have lost connection with reality. As such, we now live in a world largely absent of objective referents (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002, p. 307). In simpler terms, society has become so reliant on the maps, models, constructed fantasies, and signs that contact has been lost with the real world which provided the basis for these symbols, thrusting humans into the modern day hyperreality (Felluga, 2011).

Baudrillard famously wielded California's Disneyland amusement park as a prime example of the hyperreality we reside in, explaining that "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" (Baudrillard, 1983). By constructing a fantasy multiple levels removed from reality, Disneyland patrons experience a world of pirates and talking mice, ultimately reproducing such fantasy in Disneyland France and Japan (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002, p. 312).

Baudrillard outlined the journey into hyperreality through four stages: Symbolic Order, Counterfeits, Production, and Simulation, where signs and symbols become increasingly detached from basic reality (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002). Initially, signs reflect reality, such as the example of a postcard containing a photograph of the park, but as we progress, they become caricatures, then mask reality, and eventually overshadow and replace the original. Disneyland exemplifies this progression, with its animatronic pirates and cloned parks in Tokyo and Paris, illustrating how the real becomes indistinguishable from the simulation (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002, p. 310).

Baudrillard's four stages of simulation provide a useful framework for understanding the evolution of AI-generated art and its impact on our perception of reality. By applying these stages to the context of AI art, we can better understand how this technology is reshaping language, persuasion, and communication in the digital era.

Applying Baudrillard's lens of simulacra and simulation to AI art, in the first stage of symbolic order, AI art reflects basic reality. This can be seen in early AI-generated images in which models were only capable of producing simple, often abstract patterns. These images were identifiably artificial and could illustrate no effort to hide their provenance.

The second stage, counterfeits, is embodied by the proliferation of more advanced AI art generators capable of emulating human artistic styles. These systems, trained on specific artists' work, are capable of generating images that resemble those artist's styles in turn masking to some extent the AI's role in the creation process. Nonetheless, in this iteration of the technology, these images often contain indicators that the pieces generated are of artificial origin such as distorted features or nonsensical details.

Within the third stage, production, we can identify sophisticated AI art generation platforms such as Midjourney or Dall-E 2 as capable of creating realistic images often devoid of the telltale identifiers of older AI platforms. In this stage, AI-generated images become indistinguishable from photographs, traditional digital art, and pieces based on the works of specific artists, further obscuring the line between human-created and AI-generated artworks.

Within Baudrillard's final stage, simulation, this final stage represents the current frontier of AI art, where generated images bear no relation to reality. The entrance into this stage can be traced to the increasing use of AI generated images being used to train new AI art generation models, further removing produced works from reality. This may be seen in surrealist or abstract AI-generated art that create entirely new visual concepts. These images are not representations of reality but new realities unto themselves.

Though Baudrillard's four stages of simulacra and simulation provide a framework for navigating the progression from reality into hyperreality, it does not fully account for the phenomenon of AI-generated imagery, particularly as it advances into creating entirely new artistic content. In the realm of AI art, a new order of simulacra is necessitated, perhaps best labeled as generative hyperreality, that acknowledges AI's ability to not only simulate reality, but advances to autonomous creators of new realities. These AI, trained on massive datasets of human created art pieces synthesizes this data in such a way that produces works devoid of any details that would render art pieces traceable to the human influences behind them.

As Baudrillard's example of Disneyland exposed layers of simulation that run the gauntlet from mere imitation to complete substitution of reality, parallels can be seen within the sphere of art creation as generative AI platforms capable of creating visual imagery proliferates. Just as Disneyland's meticulously engineered fantasy challenges our perceiving of reality, generative AI art transforms how art is made by not simply replicating existing artworks made by humans, but through amalgamating new visual pieces

drawn from vast datasets. This new era, in which AI transforms from a tool into the creator itself, invites us to explore how generative AI continues Baudrillard's dialogue on hyperreality, now within the digital canvas of the 21st century.

AI art in the spotlight

The 2022 Colorado State Fair witnessed a pivotal moment in the discourse of AI-generated art when Jason Allen's digitally created *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* won first place, igniting debates on the nature and future of human artistry. The piece, a complex visualization resembling a space opera scene, was produced using the AI program Midjourney, challenging traditional perceptions of artistic creation and authorship.

Historically, artworks have often stirred controversy and discussion; however, Allen's use of AI to create award-winning art brought these debates into the contemporary realm. Similar to Allen's piece, the 2018 sale of the *Portrait of Edward Bellamy* by the Paris-based art collective Obvious at Christie's for \$432,500 further highlighted these issues. The artwork, credited to AI's use of generative neural networks and trained on thousands of Renaissance paintings, questioned the boundaries of artist recognition and the definitions of originality and creativity. Although Obvious curated and promoted the artwork, numerous unseen contributors—including the young programmer Robbie Barrat—played significant roles in developing the AI that produced the painting yet received no recognition or profits from the sale (Vincent, 2018).

This sale and subsequent controversy exemplify the complexities of attribution in AI-generated art, often leading to a "Moral Crumple Zone" where responsibility and accountability become obfuscated. This phenomenon is seen when the public or the art community places undue blame or credit on individuals tangentially related to the creative process facilitated by AI (Elish, 2019). The discussions surrounding these artworks force us to reconsider what constitutes art and who is deemed its creator, reflecting Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulacra where the copy or the simulated becomes as valued or more valued than the 'original.' As AI continues to blur the lines between human and machine creativity, the art world grapples with these evolving challenges, questioning the role of the artist in the age of digital reproduction and algorithm-driven creativity.

Artists in the age of generative AI

The origins of AI-generated art trace back to the 1950s with experiments at the University of Stuttgart, where engineers used simple computer graphics to form basic shapes and patterns. As technology evolved, artists like Harold Cohen and technologies like Computer-Aided Design (CAD) pushed these boundaries further, creating more complex images and emulating the nuances of human creation. By the 1990s, AI could produce artworks that mimicked human creativity, leading to the advent of public AI art generators in 2015 with Google's Deep Dream.

Deep Dream opened the door to a wider array of AI art platforms like Wombo's Dream and OpenAI's DALL-E 2, which utilize advanced Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and stable diffusion techniques to generate art from textual prompts. These platforms have democratized art creation, allowing users to generate pieces from vast databases of existing images, blending countless styles and forms into new creations.

As of 2024, AI art generators have access to a variety of datasets for training purposes, one of the largest being the Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network, commonly referred to as LAION-5B. This extensive dataset is comprised of 5.85 billion images, encompassing the artistic works of a diverse array of artists including Damien Hirst, Jenny Holzer, and Alex Katz (Beaumont, 2023; Balderson, 2023). However, given the flexibility of GANs, AI art platforms can be trained on custom datasets, allowing creators to choose the images that align with their specific preferences and objectives regardless of existing copyright.

This democratization marks a significant shift toward what Jean Baudrillard might describe as a hyperreal environment. Here, the lines between the 'creator' and the 'creation' blur, as AI begins to function not just as a tool but as an autonomous artist, raising profound questions about authenticity and originality in art. AI's ability to replicate and innovate upon human artistic expressions epitomizes Baudrillard's simulacra, where the copy becomes as valued or more valued than the original, challenging our perceptions of art and creativity in the digital age.

The advent of AI-generated art has sparked a profound reevaluation among artists regarding the nature of art and creativity. This technology has led to concerns about potentially diminishing the value of traditional artistic skills and craftsmanship. As Li (2020) notes, artists traditionally distinguish sharply between human and machine capabilities, finding the integration of digital strategies into their workflows challenging. This echoes historical anxieties about technology's impact on art, reminiscent of fears in 1901 when Henriette Clopath speculated that photography might eventually replace painting (Clopath, 1901). However, the unique human touch that characterizes traditional art forms faces possible obfuscation as AI continues to produce increasingly sophisticated artworks. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the intrinsic value of art, challenging the very definition of what it means to be an artist in an era dominated by machines capable of generating compelling and original artworks with minimal human intervention.

Yet not all responses within the artist community are apprehensive. Allen (2018) views AI as a collaborative tool that opens new realms of complexity and possibility, reshaping our understanding of authorship and creativity. This perspective is supported by artists who utilize AI to expand the boundaries of traditional art forms, integrating AI-generated imagery into their work to explore new modes of expression (Miller, 2020; Notaro, 2020; Reben, 2021).

The potential benefits of AI in art extend beyond just creative exploration. Platforms like MidJourney and DALL-E assist artists in visualizing initial concepts and generating drafts, enhancing productivity, and allowing artists to concentrate on refining their unique visions (Nordström et al., 2023). Furthermore, AI democratizes artistic tools, enabling a broader range of artists to engage with advanced technologies without needing deep technical expertise (Schröter, 2019; Darling, 2022).

As AI-generated art further infiltrates the world of artistic creation, it warrants a reevaluation of simulacra in the digital age. The ability of AI to replicate and build upon human artistic expressions embodies Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra—where the copy becomes as significant, or possibly even more so, than the original. Such a blurring of boundaries between human and machine-generated art not only challenges traditional notions of artistic authorship but also ushers in questions regarding what constitutes 'real' art given the dawn of GANs.

Discussion

The emergence of AI-generated art pushes Baudrillard's concept of simulacra into uncharted territory. While Baudrillard conceived of simulacra as representations that become more real than reality itself, AI

art introduces a new dimension where the very act of creation is simulated. This represents a fifth stage in the evolution of simulacra, beyond Baudrillard's four stages of symbolic order, counterfeits, production, and simulation. In this fifth stage, which we might term 'generative simulation,' the distinction between original and copy becomes not just blurred but fundamentally irrelevant. AI art generators don't simply reproduce existing artworks or styles; they autonomously create new works by synthesizing vast datasets of human artistic expression. This results in artworks that are simultaneously original and derivative, authentic and artificial. The AI, in essence, becomes both the map and the territory in Baudrillard's metaphor, collapsing the distinction between the real and the hyperreal in ways that extend beyond Baudrillard's original conception.

AI-generated art and the CANs that enable its creation serves as a compelling case study in the era of simulacra. Through AI, the art creation process—once a purely human endeavor—is now replicated by machines that can mimic and even enhance human artistic expressions. AI art platforms like Midjourney and DALL-E 2, which transform textual descriptions into visual artworks, exemplify how technology can create 'art' without traditional human intervention. This phenomenon challenges our conventional understanding of creativity and authorship and raises critical questions about the authenticity of 'creation' itself.

These AI-generated artworks, often indistinguishable from those created by humans, blur the lines between the 'original' and the 'copy,' making them perfect examples of Baudrillard's simulacra. They exist not just as artworks but as manifestations of the hyperreal—a world where the distinction between reality and representation has collapsed, and where the artwork does not just represent reality but becomes its own reality.

This expanded understanding of simulacra expands upon Baudrillard's concept of simulacra presenting the opportunity for several practical implications. Firstly, the challenging of traditional notions of copyright necessitates a reevaluation of the many legal and ethical frameworks currently employed in the art world. In an era where millions of art pieces are generated daily drawing from vast datasets of human-created pieces, new tools may need to be implemented in order to trace these amalgamations back to their original sources. Without the ability to trace these influences, AI-generated art further contributes to the hyperreal, where distinctions between the real and the simulated become increasingly blurred.

Secondly, art institutions and galleries may need to develop new criteria for identifying, evaluating, and exhibiting AI-generated works, potentially creating separate categories or developing new curatorial approaches. Procedures to identify AI-generated pieces may aid in these processes, however these institutions will be required to determine how, if possible, to identify and credit the works scraped via large training datasets in creating the AI piece. Furthermore, new language for identifying provenance of AI-generated pieces may need to be implemented, such as that which would identify the human prompt writer, the AI art generation platform used, the prompt guiding the creation of the work, the datasets used to train the platform, and the individual art pieces contained within.

Furthermore, applying an expanded concept of simulacra opens up new avenues for philosophical and cultural studies, inviting scholars to explore how AI-generated art reflects and shapes societal values, perceptions, and the human experience in the age of AI. This framework could assist in understanding our growing consumption of AI-generated images, and guide AI developers and artists in creating more sophisticated and ethically conscious AI art platforms and pieces, encouraging them to consider the broader implications of their work on our understanding of creativity, reality, and human-machine interaction. By recognizing AI art as an element in a new, unpredicted stage of simulacra, we can better navigate the complex interplay between technology, creativity, and reality in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The implications of Baudrillard's concept of simulation can provide a severe lens through which to view the world; a lens illuminating the notion that the 'real world' has passed and all that remains for us to consume is the "brilliant ambiance of the simulacra" (Baudrillard, J., 1983, p.150). In this stark reality, Baudrillard does not offer us "principles to live by or present panacea" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 2002, p. 330). Nonetheless, his work provides clues on how to explore and navigate a world dominated by simulation.

However, Baudrillard could not have fully anticipated the dawn of CANs and the use of AI technologies based on vast datasets containing extensive human creation. As such, expansion of his framework to include a new stage of generative hyperreality in which AI art not only replicates but also autonomously creates new realities may further challenge traditional notions of creativity, authorship, and the meaning of art itself. In practical terms, entrance into the generative hyperreality predicates a need for new legal and ethical frameworks to address the complexities of copyright, authorship, and authenticity in AI art. By recognizing AI art as a pivotal element in this new era in which AI continues to proliferate, we can then navigate the world of generative AI as Baudrillard might have seen it; a world in which nothing is true, and everything is possible.

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