

Meaninglessness in the Desert of the Real.

Arguing for a Form of Meaning and Unpretentious Objects.

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Abstract:

*This small paper attempts to give meaninglessness a face.¹ Or at most, to bring about some questions in relation to the notion of meaninglessness, as it is posed by Jean Baudrillard. To accept the world's meaninglessness, Baudrillard states, is to enable for a significant shift in the ongoing "desertization" of the real to happen. Consequently this would lessen the hyperreal expansion and expenditure. The question I am considering in this paper is if it is possible to address such an undertaking of a **meaninglessness end by means of playing with forms**. In the light of meaninglessness and forms in general, it seems as though 'we' cannot stop (re)making images. Behind the ongoing proliferation of images questions secretly lurks. About who asserts the qualities needed in and for meaninglessness to take place.² About whether creating a meaninglessness in a context of digital visual production is possible. And about neutralizing and counteracting the purpose of meaninglessness through its advocacy, as it then tends to configure into "strategic meaninglessness".*

Keywords:

Meaninglessness, Meaning, Images, Form, Unpretentious Objects, Jean Baudrillard.

¹ This is a somewhat revised paper from the presentation held at the interdisciplinary conference **The Succession of Simulacra: The Legacy of Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007)**, April 18-19 2008, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA.

² Gary Genosko terms this endeavour a "breakdown" and a "break-in". See Genosko (1999), *McLuhan and Baudrillard, The masters of implosion*, Routledge: London & New York. Also Victoria Grace (2000), *Baudrillard's Challenge. A feminist reading*, Routledge: London & New York. Particularly chapter six "Feminism and the Power of Dissolution", and the section entitled "The Enjoyment of Poetics and the Poetics of Enjoyment" pages 172-5.

Opening with Meaning

This is my try to create a small, and possibly too short and too imprecise, narrative about meaninglessness and about Baudrillard. Both could be seen as radical acts, each within a system of something that is its other, its opposition. There are many ways of hoping to find Baudrillard, and my hope in this narrative is through Baudrillard's usage of the term meaninglessness. Of course, meaninglessness is a never ending story. Since this session is entitled *Meaning within the Vacuum* I feel obligated to try to enact something worthy -I should by no means say meaningful- of this imagery and figuration. Although, my mind still quietly wonders whether anything within a nothing is possible, but this is a much larger issue to narrate, and possibly of narration as such, than what I will try to narrate with the forthcoming sentences. I will try to put focus on the **implications of the term meaninglessness** as used by Baudrillard. I do this by circling around two central subject matters that I find are deeply intertwined with the notion of meaninglessness namely: **the question concerning what constitute form, and how it is possible to indulge in (its) content**. In the following then, I will make some arguments based on these matters and try to work around the concept of meaninglessness. This could quite ruthlessly be translated into very basic questions concerning "*What is the matter?*", "*Who is the bystander (or observer)?*", and "*Who is the judge of all this meaning?*". And quite ruthlessly, yet again, I have reinserted these questions into the following subtitles: "The Face of Indifference", and "The Meaning of Keeping Face", and lastly as sort of summary named "Facing Meaning, or Strategic Meaninglessness". In the end, this might touch upon the possibility for another meaning and meaningfulness, beyond the Vacuum of things. <1>

Even so, relating here to the proliferation of images, I have more images for showing. I call them a meaningless pictogram. In relation to this it would perhaps be proper to say something about the flows of "slideshows" and "sideshowes", or to say something in relation to aesthetical intentions, but I will pass for now. With this I begin with "The Face of Indifference". <2>

I. The Face of Indifference

Meaninglessness is an arbitrary word. It willingly deprives something of worthy content, and in doing so makes a somewhat hazy recommendation as to what is truly and rightfully meaningful. This is perhaps nothing new, it appears as a word most foul. An insult perhaps, to the person or object that find themselves appropriated to and encapsulated in the term. **Image I** might be meaningful in this respect. This is a digital image of a reproduction print that I have at home, its depicting a nun gazing out of the window of her cell perhaps, and it looks as though she is in deep longing for something. She is in a sense elsewhere. I will come back to her, in a while. <3>



image 1.

Bluntly disregarding the foulness of the word, going perhaps for full indiscretion, Jean Baudrillard states in *Impossible Exchange* from 2001 that: **“If we could accept this meaninglessness of the world, then we could play with forms, appearances and our impulses, without worrying about their ultimate destination.”**³ <4>

And as such, this single sentence, become the precondition for all following sentences in this small narration. Because if meaninglessness is a state where an implicitly more blissful (dis)order of things would be possible, what constitute its reconstituting other, that is, what have **meaning** to do with all of this? And how would it be possible to grapple with a meaninglessness initiated and facilitated by forms and appearances? What kind of forms could then be used to enable or to make it easy for meaninglessness? <5>

What I am quite foolishly asking for here is by what **means** a meaningless state of being is made possible. As a precondition for these questions we need to engage in why meaninglessness could be a “radical other” to, “the desert of the real”, that is, to the general state of being that we currently are in, as I interpret Baudrillard’s words and writings. Belonging to this “our desert” is the immense capacity and will to make things visible and transparent in the bright lights of information. Or of science, that become fact. According to Baudrillard this is in part due to the help of a technological hand, information and its storage is made possible through, and by, the increasing technological proliferation and advancements.⁴ Everything in this reality becomes possible to decipher and to extract and distil content from. This is where the notion of meaning resides, Baudrillard states, and this is were the notion of meaninglessness comes in, because it tries to dismantle and counteract the figuration that everything is directly perceivable and knowledgeable to us. According to Baudrillard, the excess of knowledge and information also creates what it most of all despises, its polar

³ See page 127-8 in Jean Baudrillard (2001) *Impossible Exchange*, Verso: London.

⁴ See for instance chapters “The Precession of Simulacra”, “History: A Retro Scenario” and “On Nihilism” in Baudrillard (1994, (1981)), *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, The University of Michigan Press, Michigan. For the term “desert of the real” see page 1.

opposite, the capital Vacuum, the disappearance of information in information.⁵ Meaning-making thus enlists to a faith in a reality out there ready to be brought in and formulated. Yet, meaning has no finality as Baudrillard puts it, because there exists no actual outer absolute reference, neither to confirm nor to condemn meaning and its (re)construction. And this is what secretly lurks behind meaning-making when trying to make sense of the world, by forcing it to mean and matter through the advocacy of meaning.⁶ <6>

Even so, this state of being, this hyperreal it is double-edged, because as I interpret Baudrillard, it is both the state most unwanted, yet it is the very prerequisite for an oppositional space to occur, that is, for “radical thought” and the notion of meaninglessness. Hyperreality enables the radical -in the form of thought and illusion- something that could be seen as, and I quote Baudrillard, “the final accomplishment of reality”⁷ The inevitable question on whether **the hyperreal can be seen as a state genuinely “bad”, in lack of better wording, or as a something were some “good” can come out**, is in this more abstract way answered. When everything has spiralled out of control, the time to indulge in acts of meaninglessness has come. Yet, how can this understanding be **transfigured** to concern an indulgence in much smaller matters of materiality? In concreteness? I believe this has to do with what constitute form. But before going into such matters, perhaps it is time for the nun. Is she the face of indifference, in a state where meaning or meaningfulness in a sense is missing? Or could it be seen as an account of **unattended indifference**, very much belonging to the spatial situation and the context, where an act of meaninglessness in a way is already set in motion? This might just be an undirected form of opposition, a radical singularity in meaninglessness. Possibly, this could relate to the notion of the supposed **general indifference** of the “masses”. A notion neither particularly new, nor strikingly controversial, yet it seems, very persistent in thought. Very much so I believe, in relation to the question of art and its enterprise.⁸ <7>

So perhaps all is well in the world of meaninglessness. But how is it that meaninglessness is without all the messy context of its making, does it not also have forces around it, trying to narrate and forge it into something that it perhaps is not? This will be the question of the following chapter. <8>

⁵ Here Baudrillard's and Paul Virilio's thoughts meet. See for Paul Virilio (1996 (1989)), *Försvinnandets estetik*, Bokförlaget Korpen: Uddevalla.

⁶ For Jean Baudrillard's work on form and meaning(lessness), see for example (2005) *Conspiracy of Art*, Semiotext(e): New York & Los Angeles, (2001) *Impossible Exchange*, translated by Chris Turner, Verso: London, (1998 (1997)), *Paroxysm. Interviews with Philippe Petit*, Verso: London & New York, and (1994, (1981)) *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, Michigan. In this context Karen Barad (2003), offers a somewhat different form for questions on materiality and making matter and meaning.

⁷ Quote in Baudrillard: 2001, page 121.

⁸ Indifference, as an implicit **configuration** of “the masses” in relation to form and aesthetics see Theodor W. Adorno (2002, (1981)), *The Culture Industry*, Routledge: London & New York. Walter Benjamin raise this question somewhat differently, although the question of the dawning (mass) proliferation of imagery touches upon, as I see it, **the image as becoming “the mass”**. See Benjamin (?), “Konstverket i den tekniska reproduktionsåldern”, in Burrill, John (1987), *Kritisk teori: en introduktion*, Daidalos: Göteborg.

II. The Meaning of Keeping Face

Going back to the initial quote by Baudrillard, what constitute form is pivotal both for the initiation and the facilitation of meaninglessness. Baudrillard states that art and language are examples of these forms. They open up for illusion, form being “the illusion of the world and the possibility to invent this other scene”.⁹ But art is also a form that has become increasingly pretentious, Baudrillard writes in *Conspiracy of Art*, because it attempts to encapsulate and devour all of reality, as it aspires to be reality. Images in this scenario, as part of art, have increasingly lost their potential for any form of radicality, be it radical thought, singularity, and/or meaninglessness. Paradoxically it seems, as though “we” cannot stop (re)making images. They are circulating everywhere.¹⁰ The next **Image II**, might serve as a reminder of not getting enough of images. It shows the very crowded entrance hall of the Louvre in Paris, taken late last December. Although, the Louvre as an example might narrate the image in a more narrow way than what Baudrillard intended, since the Louvre in itself is a narrowing narrator of the creation of art and of images. <9>



image II.

How is it possible to **create** a meaninglessness in a context of digital visual production? If media are “technical objects” that impose “new modes of relation and perception”, is it possible to exert **radical modes of relations**, without enacting the hyperreal, or enacting meaning as such?¹¹ Can images lead to a shift of some kind, or are we in a way already deserted? I would like to take the work of the Finnish artist Ilkka Halso as a reference to digital imagery and the question of possible shifts. This image, **Image III**, is taken from Halso’s pamphlet *Museum of Nature* from 2004, and the image is entitled “Kitka-river”. It envisions a future building-plan of “nature”, where “nature” is becoming, or has become, the last possible venue for a museum. <10>

⁹ Quote from Baudrillard:2005 p57f in the interview “Art between Utopia and Anticipation”.

¹⁰ Ibid. This relates to what Paul Virilio is arguing for, that is the disappearance of art in art. See Virilio (2003, (2000)), *Art and Fear*, Continuum: London & New York, and also Virilio (1996 (1989)), *Försvinnandets estetik*, Bokförlaget Korpen: Uddevalla.

¹¹ See Gary Genosko page 93 for quote, in Genosko:1999. This question for me relates to what Victoria Grace implies in her final chapter, that the (only?) way out of the hyperreal is through the poetic. See Grace:2000.



image III.

In this work Halso uses photography and combines it with computer generated 3D-models. I do not want to make a plea for “art” here, I merely want to raise the question of **contextualised understanding**, in and of **desert-deciphering**. There is no need to be affirmatively positive of ‘iconoclashing’ like Bruno Latour is in his article “What Is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?”. Neither distinguishing between medium nor the frequency of form, doesn’t make things easier to understand. The question that I find to be important here is **who can assert** what constitute a “breakdown” and a “break-in” into the hyperreal, and into the constituting meaning. Who asserts whether Halso’s work- his usage of technology in creating an object perceived to be inside the realm of art- foster radical potential or not? In this, what might be problematic is if a “break-in” aspire to **deconstruct** meaning. What if these matters are futile, in terms of being already **code-incorporated**?¹² To remain in the position were one simply “decode the message” seem awfully much like a one- coded story.¹³ The question that I am finding increasingly troubling is, who qualifies as a knowing subject in all of this? And if we stray away from “the pretentiousness of art” to quote Baudrillard, when signifying some acts as breakdown or break-in, maybe we do not always need **specifically categorised and constructed objects**, such as “art”, to create illusion and play of the mind?¹⁴ I wonder if it might not be the case to turn to **unpretentious objects**. The next image, **Image IV**, can perhaps work as an example of this. <11>

¹² For the article by Bruno Latour (2002), “What Is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?”, go to www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/084.html. The terms “break-in” and “breakdown” see Genosko:1999, page 90. For a discussion on the positioning of oneself as (n)either a deconstructivist (n)or a poststructuralist, see Tilottama Rajan (2002), *Deconstruction and the Remains of Phenomenology*, Stanford University Press: Stanford.

¹³ Stuart Hall might be pleased. Encoding/decoding still seem to be canonical business. See Hall’s chapter “Encode/Decode” in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis (eds.) (1980), *Culture, Media, Language*, Routledge: London & New York.

¹⁴ See Grace:2000, page 172f about the poetic as transference and a form of reversion-mode.



image IV.

This is my Parisian globe that rests on my desk at home, and it reminds me of Baudrillard and his work on simulacra. An utterly meaningless object per se, but as a contextualised object, situated, it encapsulates many thoughts. To me the question of what could **constitute (a) form**, and in this art, should be pivotal when thinking about radical potential. Is the globe filled with another type of meaning? <12>

III. Facing Meaning, or “Strategic Meaninglessness”

Summing up, and possibly facing meaning. Arguing for meaninglessness nonetheless, could certainly strike one as constituting a meaningful activity, that could somewhat paradoxically, lead to possible acts of “strategic meaninglessness”. By advocating meaninglessness through and by form, **meaninglessness become an other meaning**, something in a sense more meaningful than meaning. Meaninglessness (become) matter. <13>

With this said, could the notion of meaninglessness be a sort of **ontological remedy**, a way of counteracting the hyperreal expansion and expenditure? The **question of maintenance** align. Since the initiation of “radical thought” and “symbolic exchange” somehow lay in our desert, in the hyperreal, we seem to need the duality for constitutive purposes. Yet, if the hyperreal allows for certain outbursts, could it not be that the singularities of radical thought or meaninglessness are included, in an all inclusive system? Although, asking about the possibility to live in a perpetual, happier state of meaninglessness might be getting too close to the hazardous fields of **utopia**. Even so, attempting **ephemeral meaninglessness**, can we endure its temporality? A final quote by Baudrillard to end with, from *Conspiracy Of Art*: “I have no illusion, no belief, except in forms – reversibility, seduction or metamorphosis.”¹⁵ <14>

¹⁵ See Baudrillard:2005, page 59.

IV. Reference Matter

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