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**Affinitas and Aversus: Constructing Meaning in the Museum as Simulacrum**  
(2382 words)

We exist within an age where images and ideas proliferate without consensus. From the individualism of online opinion to the deconstruction of historical canons, the limitless, unchecked reproduction of unsorted information has undermined the notion of didactic authority, including that of cultural institutions such as the museum. Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard characterizes this destructive process as deriving from his conception of the *simulacrum* which, as a result of its obfuscated, hyperreal state, has a singular and sinister outcome: the total destruction of reality. Yet, this need not be an inevitability, but merely one possibility for the simulacrum specific to Baudrillard's own, antipathetic point of view. Rather, all simulacra are capable of two experiential outcomes: either the *experienti aversus*, a sense of the *unheimlich*, or the *experienti affinitas*, a sense of nostalgia. The *aversus*, owing itself to Baudrillard's negativity, is characterized by the uncanny and a sensation of disquietude through defamiliarization. Its other, the *affinitas*, is linked to wistful affection for the familiar and a sensation of comfort. While the *aversus* and the *affinitas* have antipodal effects on the psyche, both are rooted in the flux of familiar versus unfamiliar, real versus hyperreal latent to the simulacrum. The museum, which embodies these characteristics of the simulacrum in addition to being a cultural authority, is, like all simulacra, capable of eliciting either sensation. But which of the two experiential outcomes should be privileged? While the *affinitas* seems the obvious choice as a result of its ties to pleasure, only the *aversus* offers an alternative to Baudrillard's chaotic predictions. The *aversus* enables simulacra to suggest the real as a direct result of its process of defamiliarization, not in spite of it: by deliberately disordering our extant knowledge base, new knowledge about the world can be created. In this fashion, the simulacrum exhibits strength precisely where Baudrillard conceives its weakness. Its inability to represent truth directly offers a blessing in disguise: the simulacrum, i.e. the museum, can instead allude to the real by both generating and propagating multiple, even contrasting interpretations.

In "Simulacra and Simulation," Jean Baudrillard defines simulacra as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (166). That is, simulacra are not merely simulation or reproductions of the real, but beyond reality (170). He writes:

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum (170).

Thus, the act of representation is no longer that of copying. The processes of the simulacrum absorb the act of copying, allowing it to gain independence from that which it intended to emulate. Simulacra are therefore beyond mere simulation: they are autonomous, hyperreal entities.

As a primary example of the simulacrum, Baudrillard cites Disneyland:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of the country] is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation (176).

The American values supposedly concretized via Disneyland both produce and exceed simulation. Disneyland falls into Baudrillard's simulacrum in that the referent of America is destroyed by its own bizarre interpretation. America and "Americanness," as interpreted as real concepts, are exceeded by the hyperreality of a Disneyland that no longer represents them, but embodies only itself. Yet Disneyland's existence, as a perverse microcosm of American ideals, becomes intellectually fused with the original concept of America, distorting it without embodying it, and eventually effacing it. This elucidates the sinister nature of the simulacrum within the hands of Baudrillard: that, in attempting simulation, the simulacrum not only fails, but through its resultant autonomy simultaneously destroys that which it attempts to copy. This augments the hyperreality intrinsic to the simulacrum, the existence of which presupposes that there is no reality, or at least no reality that could ever be made knowable.

In this conception, the experience of the simulacrum is clearly negative, an effect deemed within this essay as the *experienti aversus*. The *aversus* is derived from Sigmund Freud's concept of *unheimlich*, literally unhomely, as defined in "The Uncanny." In this work, Freud describes the effect of *unheimlich* as deriving from the disordering of the familiar, and moreover of the sense of disquietude this process elicits (211). Freud cites the *doppelgänger*, or double, as an example of *unheimlich*. This figure feeds into Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum in that both are ostensibly copies or simulated entities. They also un hinge the ordinary by obscuring their origin's "real" identity. The *doppelgänger*, in the eyes of Freud, evokes the *unheimlich* because it both displaces and questions the real. In translating this onto the simulacrum, the *experienti aversus* similarly induces anxiety through its own repositioning and eradication of reality.

This ominous outcome of the simulacrum is entrenched in Baudrillard's work. He writes,

[the] confusion of the fact with its model ... is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true in the sense that their truth is exchangeable (178).

This effacement of the referent/reality creates an unknowable state where the "[simulacrum] suggests, over and above its object, that law and order themselves might really be nothing more than simulation" (180). Beyond litigious definition, this reference to law and order hints at the dismantling of all ordering systems of the world, and thus of constructs of knowledge. This implicates the *experienti aversus* in Baudrillard's perceived state of chaos, suggesting that no new knowledge can be gained via the simulacrum.

While Baudrillard foresees a dire future, this essay contends that the *aversus* does not represent the only outcome of simulacra. Nostalgia, represented here as the *experienti affinitas*, also becomes a possibility. Nostalgia refers to a sentimental yearning for a condition that no longer exists, superficially as a result of the passage of time or, more apt to the simulacrum, because of its destruction via mnemonic reproduction. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *nostos* and the Latin *algia* which, when combined, literally translate to "akin to returning home" ("Nostalgia"). Notable in this translation is

the word *akin*, which suggests that nostalgia contains a certain impossibility of reproduction: a moment of recollection that is inevitably a misrecollection. While this strikes an accord with Baudrillard's definition of the simulacrum, the sentimentality integral to nostalgia, and thus the *affinitas*, renders it a positive experience.

The identification of the *experienti affinitas* initially owes itself to Gilles Deleuze, who writes:

The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction (253).

The simulacrum, in maintaining its independence from reality, cannot impact any referent since there is none; its autonomy is total, and therefore its effects benign. However, what Deleuze fails to anticipate is that simulacra are rarely explicitly obvious; rather, they have a tendency to masquerade as reproductions that are both derivative and representative of certain truths. While the *experienti affinitas* is an agreeable sensation, it nevertheless diverges from Deleuze in that it masks the sinister verity that it is, like the *experienti aversus* as well as all simulacra, hyperreal.

Whether *aversus* or *affinitas*, the experience of simulacra is always mediated. These experiences are simultaneously produced and facilitated by their medium. This can occur in the present via direct, real-time engagement, or at a distance through spatial or temporal removal, or both. As well, this mediation can manifest through sensoria, such as hearing and vision, or its technological extensions, such as television. Uniquely, the institution of the museum is not only a mediator for the experience of simulacra, but also a simulacrum in-itself. According to the International Council of Museums' statutes, a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. The museum offers a lens through which its patrons perceive knowledge; therefore it serves as a mediator for audience experience. However, as a static, biased and synecdochical representation of the world, the museum is also a simulacrum. Although its exhibitions posit a link to fact, they are in actuality interpretations completely autonomous from the real. Even with well-conducted research and the usage of "authentic" artifacts, exhibitions not only distort or destroy that which they are attempting to represent, but become independent entities in-themselves. This occurs through the selection of a particular curatorial prerogative, and through the binding power of an exhibition's title and the physical constraints of its specific location. Beyond its exhibitions, the museum as a whole collapses space and time by combining, for example, specific ethnographic, historical, or artistic samples together within the unified ensemble of the museum's entity through its mission statement, governance and collecting principles, as well as through its architectural whole. This dichotomy renders the museum as a *heterotopia*, a site described by Michel Foucault as juxtaposing in a single, physical location several spaces that are themselves incompatible, making them simultaneously representative of all places as well as none: a site of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages. For this reason, museums have a unique societal import as an interpretive authority capable of conditioning public knowledge. It therefore follows suit that they are responsible not merely for the content they present, but for our experience of them as well.

Given the museum's educational prerogatives and dual status as both mediator and simulacrum, which experience has greater value: *affinitas* or *aversus*? Although the *experienti affinitas* affirms the familiar, it may not be the ideal outcome for the museum; the sense of comfort it imparts is ultimately unchallenging. Because it panders to that which makes individuals feel "safe," the informative value of the *affinitas* is negligible, being reliant on what we already know. Moreover, because museal content that deliberately educes the *affinitas* contributes no new knowledge, it can aid in enforcing one of the most negative results of the simulacrum: the creation of stereotype.

As an alternative to the *affinitas*, the *experienti aversus* should instead be the aim of museal displays. While this may seem counterintuitive considering its links to disquietude and chaos, the *aversus* arguably has the ability to produce a positive educative outcome. Revisiting Baudrillard, while the *aversus* "allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory" to exist while simultaneously competing with one another, its inability to reveal truth may be the perfect foil to the museum's dual identity as both a simulacrum and an interpretive, mediating authority (178). Because the museum is a simulacrum, it masks reality to become its own hyperreality. Yet, its purpose, according to its designation as the locus of institutionalized culture, necessitates that it supposedly espouse truth. This elucidates the impossible situation of museums, but also realizes the potential they have to generate useful dialectics via the *aversus*.

While Baudrillard foresaw this dialectical ability of the simulacrum as a step toward both chaos of meaning and the degeneration of ordering systems, its effects may be less negative than proposed. Because museums are simulacra, and therefore unable to espouse definitive truths on the nature of reality, they can instead reposition their authority exclusively onto their mediating function. Implemented as a guiding strategy, museums could circumvent dubious truths as opposed to leading open-ended discussions via their exhibition displays. Theoretically, this could be accomplished through the deliberate generation of controversy, where controversy is defined as a constructive outcome allowing for individual interpretation to take precedence over didactic truth. In practical terms, this could be achieved via the curatorial research, the objects on view and the text panels, where all are selected and refined to create exhibitions that maximize discussion through considerate ambiguity. While it remains that the *aversus* may still lead to a sense of discomfort by potentially defamiliarizing visitors with their extant knowledge base, it nevertheless allows for the creation of new meaning by forcing audiences to contend with disparate perspectives. In the case of the museum, the *experienti aversus* transcends the *unheimlich* of the reproduction. Rather, museums are able to take the displacement and eradication of reality inherent to the *aversus* and reformulate it as a constructive strategy. Thus, the positive attitude espoused by Deleuze appears to be transferable to the *aversus*, and moreover belies the notion that reality is best addressed through "hard facts." Instead of being encapsulated in a single notion, truth exists in the interstice between polemic engagements. In this conception, the *aversus* offers an effective model for the education and representation of reality through confrontation: truth cannot be revealed through dictation, but instead is best understood through dialectics.

This does not mean that the effectiveness of the *aversus* is by any means universal: controversy can often lead to greater misunderstanding, and ambiguity to confusion and apathy. While I would suggest that a rethinking of Baudrillard and the development of both the *experienti aversus* and the *experienti affinitas* can create new avenues for knowing, this is at present a philosophy of potential, not an effective, implementable plan.

Yet, imperatively, museums and all simulacra must not become entrenched in Baudrillard's doomed perspective: To allow this would be to accept all information as fallible, and therefore negligible. With society's constant progression, it must be assumed that a scaffold of knowledge has permitted this progress, and therefore that truth is achievable. The simulacrum-as-mediator has the potential to reveal innumerable paths to knowledge; it is not truth in-itself, or a destructive entity. Instead, it can outline reality through the creation of as many divergent interpretations as possible, where these perceptions engage constructively with one another.

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