

Baudrillard, Cioran, and the Postmodern Gods

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“The eclipse of God left us up against reality. Where will the eclipse of reality leave us?”¹

--Jean Baudrillard, *The Lucidity Pact*

“Man can breathe only in the shadow of eroded divinities.”²

--Emile Cioran, *The New Gods*

Upon the death of French postmodern sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard³ in 2007, the *London Telegraph* highlighted his biographical obituary by stating that he believed that “...God’s place was taken by the mass media... (and)...[W]e live in a Disneyesque world in which our understanding is shaped by media-driven signs, and the tools of historical intelligibility have disappeared...[so]...how can we tell what is real—if there is indeed any such thing as reality?”⁴ He came to conclude (actually self-adapting a Biblical verse from Ecclesiastes 1:17-18)⁵ that reality does exist but it has only one element: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none...The simulacrum is true.”⁶

While Baudrillard asserted that he was certain God existed, he also stated that he did not believe in Him. This postmodern paradox illustrates the simulacrum that has deconstructed the godhead that created the heavens and the earth and gave it structure and order and applied to it the human and earthly attributes of a being unrecognizable when compared to reality—if indeed any realities exist at all. In fact, God’s place in the postmodern world has been assumed by an avalanche of mass media images that obliterate tradition and reality and produce infinite numbers of alternative interpretations of every situation or object, casting any fragment of historical certainty into a wasteland where all truth is banished forever.⁷

What has come to be called “the postmodern condition” is nothing more than an evolution of answers stemming from a problematic singularity dating back to the dawn of

¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Intelligence of Evil, or the Lucidity Pact*. Trans. Chris Turner. New York: Berg. 2004. p. 21.

² Cioran, Emile. *The New Gods*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Quadrangle, 1969. p. 18.

³ Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was one of France’s leading intellectuals and a contemporary philosopher, sociologist, and postmodernist.

⁴ “Jean Baudrillard”. *The London Telegraph*. 08 March 2007. Accessed Feb. 12, 2012. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1544846/Jean-Baudrillard.html>>.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:17-18 in the 21st Century KJV reads: (17): “And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. But I perceived that this also is a vexation of spirit. (18): “For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” Baudrillard interpreted this passage to mean that since nothing is real, there can be no wisdom as that requires reality, and thus, there can be no sorrow in a simulated world. Cioran similarly posited that there is great joy in suffering as the hope that despair creates is almost an ecstatic experience, explaining religious practices from fasting to self-flagellation.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 1994. p. 1.

⁷ “Jean Baudrillard”. *The London Telegraph op.cit.*

human existence. According to the profound Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the necessity to create structure and order from chaos—in essence, the necessity of attempting to answer the “Why are we here?” question of life and existence itself—results in the creation of an artificial ordering (or structuring) of an otherwise random and unexplainable existence.⁸

Bauman continues that by employing the believable but fictional concept of “society”, an “effective enough” strategy against the fear of chaos is achieved but it is still, “a pristine and ‘brute’ fact that human beings exist in the never-ending, since never fully successful, effort to escape from Chaos: society, its institutions and their routines, its images and their composition, its structures and their managerial principles, are all facets of that forever inconclusive and relentless escape.”⁹

Using the examples of birth and death (that Bauman describes as “the entrance of the new and the exit of the familiar”), there exists “two gaping holes in the pretence [sic] of order” that can never be filled satisfactorily. The notions of “before” and “beyond” must be defined and thus the concept of God must fill the void they create.¹⁰ As Nietzsche¹¹ states,

“Natural death is independent of all reason and is really an irrational death...in other words, the annihilation of the most rational being through the most irrational element...[O]nly through religious illumination can the reverse appear;...the higher order (God) issues its orders, which the lower order must obey.”¹²

Thus, “Society needs God” and in fact (according to Bauman), Society and God are one and the same thing. As he states, “Religion and society are one; society without religion is incomplete and doomed, unable to defend itself...”¹³

This notion is not unlike the idea of Auguste Comte, the purported Father of Sociology, who in developing his “Law of Human Progress” intimated that human beings are a curious species, rationalizing and seeking to understand the causes of all phenomena that directly and indirectly affect them. When assigning attribution, if the reason is unknown, the supernatural always provides a convenient cause of anything. His “Law of Human Progress” (or “stages of knowledge” as his construction is often called) begins with the

⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. New York: Wiley, 1995. pp 12-17. The section of Bauman’s work highlighted herein is entitled, “Society: The Operation Cover-Up” and is a brilliant discussion of how human-induced order emerged from natural chaotic existence, where knowledge, religion, and wisdom have been applied to explain phenomena, and how postmodern ideas are a continuation of nothing more than subjective interpretation of an unchangeable chaotic existence.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp 13-4. Bauman’s idea herein is an adaptation of Cornelius Castoriadis, who he quotes and references in his work. That discussion can be found at Castoriadis, Cornelius. “Institution of Society and Religion.” Trans. David Ames Curtis. *Thesis Eleven*. Vol. 31, (1993). pp 1-17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp 14-5.

¹¹ Freiderich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, poet, composer and classical philologist who has remained influential in extentialism, nihilism, and postmodernism.

¹² Nietzsche, Friederich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. Paul Cohn. Edinburgh: Foulis, 1991. pp 286-7.

¹³ Bauman, *op.cit.* p. 16. [Related note: Cioran wrote, “A civilization is destroyed only when its gods are destroyed”].

earliest of humans who explained all phenomena through “fetishism”. Whether caused by inanimate objects, idols, trees, or other esoteric means, every happening had a cause, albeit one rooted in the most extreme version of the supernatural. In ancient Greece, for example, if a statue fell over and killed someone, the statue would be put on trial for murder, given the death penalty, and destroyed. When Pythagoras developed his famous theorem, since all mathematical knowledge came from the gods, he went out and sacrificed an ox thanking them for bestowing their knowledge upon him. Eventually, individual deities assumed the responsibilities for events and occurrences and the world of multiple gods dominated the causative necessity—the polytheistic stage. Finally, the gods synthesized (or morphed) into a singular God—monotheism—and He became the responsible entity for all phenomena, good, bad, or indifferent.

Comte’s theory continued, evolving humankind through the stages of metaphysics, the polyscientific, and eventually the monoscientific, where he identified his new discipline of sociology as the “queen of all sciences” and eventually equated God with society itself, where the “true religion” was nothing more than society worshipping itself and thus, society became the ultimate explanation of all human phenomena.

Comte’s “Law of Human Progress” was actually somewhat of an adaptation (perhaps even a plagiarism) of Giambattista Vico’s¹⁴ notion of “The Ages of Man.” Vico believed that human history was divided into three distinct ages—the Age of the Gods (analogous to Comte’s Theological stage), the Age of the Heroes (analogous to Comte’s Metaphysical stage), and the Age of Man, (analogous to Comte’s notion of the Positive [or scientific] Stage). However, Vico and Comte both did not recognize the potential (or eventuality) of the postmodern.

Emile Cioran¹⁵, 20th century Romanian-French contemporary philosopher, nihilist, and observer of the emerging postmodern world, also commented on this transition. Cioran believed that while “the human soul is naturally pagan”,¹⁶ (like Tertullian¹⁷) it was actually polytheism that “corresponded better to the diversity of our tendencies and our impulses.”¹⁸ As he states:

“Monotheism curbs our sensibilities: It deepens us by narrowing us. A system of constraints which affords us an inner dimension at the cost of the flowering of our powers, it constitutes a barrier, it halts our expansion, it

¹⁴ Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was an Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist. A critic of modern rationalism and apologist of classical antiquity, Vico’s *magnum opus* was entitled, *Scienza Nuova* (1725), often published in English as *The New Science*. Vico’s system was also employed by James Joyce in constructing his novel *Finnegan’s Wake*.

¹⁵ Emile Cioran (1911-1995) was born in Romania but lived in France for most of his adult life. He was a “philosopher of despair”, influenced by both Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler [*Decline of the West, Vol. 1 and 2*], and held views sympathetic to authoritarianism. He contributed to the postmodern perspective as expounded by both Bauman and Baudrillard.

¹⁶ Cioran, *The New Gods. op cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, anglicised as Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 225 AD),¹ was a prolific early Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He is the first Christian author to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature. He also was a notable early Christian apologist and a polemicist against heresy. Tertullian has been called "the father of Latin Christianity" and "the founder of Western theology."¹

¹⁸ Cioran, *The New Gods. op cit.*, p. 22.

throws us out of gear. Surely we were more normal with several gods than we are with only one...

Under the regime of several gods, fervor is shared. When it is addressed to one god alone, it is concentrated, exacerbated, and ends by turning into aggression, into *faith*... Faith is a Christian invention; it supposes one and the same disequilibrium in man and in God, swept on by a dialogue as dramatic as it is disordered. Whence the frantic character of the new religion. The old one, so much more human, left you the faculty of choosing the god you wanted; since it imposed none upon you, it was up to you to incline toward one or another. The more capricious you were, the more you needed to change gods... To all appearances, man has given himself gods out of a need to be protected, guaranteed—in reality, out of a greed to suffer. So long as man believed in a multitude of them, he had indulged in freedom of choice, in loopholes. Subsequently limiting himself to just one, he was thereby afflicted by a supplement of shackles and throes. Surely there is but one animal which loves and hates itself to the point of vice... What cruelty to ourselves... *The one* God makes life unbreathable.¹⁹

Given this “unnatural” monotheistic state that Cioran describes so thoroughly, it comes as no surprise that he concludes that Christianity will soon disappear, not due to rejecting the need for deities, but by experiencing a communal *restoration*²⁰ to some form of polytheistic status which is rightfully (according to Cioran) “natural” for humankind. His almost cryptic prediction is stated as follows:

“And just as paganism was to give way before Christianity, so this last God will have to yield to some new belief. Stripped of aggression, He no longer constitutes an obstacle to the outburst of other gods; they need only arrive—and perhaps they will arrive. Doubtless they will not have the countenance nor even the mask of the gods, but they will be no less fearful for that.”²¹

But who are Cioran’s “new gods”? Jean Baudrillard’s body of work and thought provides the means toward developing an answer. As the only reality, the Simulacrum²² must be the singular entity that controls every idea, thought, appearance, belief, interpretation, and in short, every earthly perception. It is the only truth from which all else emanates. Thus, the Simulacrum is a multifaceted entity that is as close to polytheistic deism²³ as can be imagined. Baudrillard would conclude that any religious (or anti-religious)

¹⁹ Cioran, *The New Gods*. *op.cit.* pp 22-23.

²⁰ Cioran was against all “progress”. His view was of the idealist reactionary. He once said he was against everything “since Adam”.

²¹ Cioran, *The New Gods*. *op.cit.* p. 31.

²² The Simulacrum (from Latin) entered the English language in the late 16th century and refers to a “likeness” or a “similarity”, used to describe a representation of something, especially of a god. See Baudrillard’s work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, *op.cit.*

²³ Deism was a form of religious attitude (mainly in France and Britain during The Enlightenment Era of the 18th century) which was based on the idea that the world can be known only through

belief (and any other belief as well) would naturally all be *interpretations* or *perceptions* of reality and truth, which exist on multiple levels. His system defines successive phases of the *image* as follows:

Baudrillard's Successive Phases of the Image
Phase 1: It is the reflection of a basic reality
Phase 2: It masks and perverts a basic reality
Phase 3: It masks the absence of a basic reality
Phase 4: It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, it is its own pure simulacrum

Regarding how the *image* of God may be applied to Baudrillard's phases, he states:

“But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference...In the first case, the image is a good appearance—the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance—of the order of malefice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance—it is of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy...the second inaugurates an age of simulacra and stimulation [*sic* “*simulation*”], in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.”²⁴

Baudrillard also warned of the danger of how and for what purposes images may be distorted. There is little to safeguard against individuals or entities being involved in purposeful simulation to deceive. He contended that to *simulate* is to “blur the boundary

observation, experience, interpretation, and reasoning. Postmodern theory rejects any accurate interpretations and grand narratives, but the deist idea expressed here is a postmodern version.

²⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. “The Precession of Simulacra” in Baudrillard's *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Phillip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

between truth and fallacy, real and imaginary...to confuse, mask, and displace reality”—a powerful idea that iconoclasts had made the main topic of their paranoia for centuries—the fear that simulacra (images of God) would displace the idea of God as a real entity and, further, reveal that God was never any more than his own simulacrum.²⁵

In the final stage of Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, simulacra reaches universal proportions. He writes:

“Today’s abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept...It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map nor does it survive it. It is the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory.”²⁶

Thus, “God is not dead—he has become hyperreal”, and a cult of the “immediate effectuation of all things” has taken the place of traditional cultural, ritual, and symbolic elaboration. Nihilism²⁷ has been achieved, albeit in a bizarre and unexpected manner—not “through the violent destruction of ideas, but through a stealth strategy of simulation...” Romanticism is its first great manifestation, surrealism, dada, the absurd, and political nihilism, are the second great manifestations, which corresponds to the destruction of the order of meaning.²⁸

“The stage of analysis itself has become uncertain...Implosion of meaning in the media. Implosion of the social in the masses...The masses themselves are caught up in a gigantic process of inertia through acceleration. They are this excrescent, devouring, process that annihilates all growth and surplus meaning. They are this circuit short-circuited by a monstrous finality.”²⁹

As Emile Cioran said, “Is the failing hero worth as little as the hero who finally triumphs? Nothing more glamorous than a splendid ending, if this world is real. If it is not, it is pure foolishness to go into ecstasies...”³⁰

Lissa McCullough sums up brilliantly Baudrillard’s final conclusions about society in her analysis of “Baudrillard and the Death of God” (2001). She states:

“Human life today, for Baudrillard, is invested in a self-intensifying cycle of obsessive reproduction and obsessive consumption, a cycle motivated by a

²⁵ Park, Adrian. “Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*” *Newcastle Digital Media Research*. March 7, 2011. Accessed February 11, 2012. <<http://dm.ncl.ac.uk/adrianpark/2011/03/07/jean-baudrillards-simulacra-and-simulation/>>.

²⁶ Qtd. in McCullough, Lissa. “Jean Baudrillard and the Death of God” 2001. JCRT 2.3. Accessed. February 15, 2012. <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/02.3/mccullough.shtml>>.

²⁷ Nihilism is defined as an extreme form of skepticism, the denial of all real existence, or the possibility of an objective basis for truth and is often associated with the total rejection of established law, institutions, and orthodoxy.

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. *op.cit.* p.159.

²⁹ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. *op.cit.* p.162.

³⁰ Cioran, Emile. *The New Gods*. *op. cit.* p.44.

death drive so powerful and so utterly in denial of itself that its activities are relegated to automation. As a cultural system, neo-capitalism³¹ produces, not abundance, but an alternation between two infinitely plastic terms—shortage and abundance...This funereal procession of reproduction and consumption arises from ‘the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life’. Reading him is a little like encountering a postmodern Pascal. There is the sense of absurd futility and melancholy; the perception of an unbridgeable chasm between Deity and the alien world in which we are sentenced to existence...”³²

Since to Cioran, humans gravitate toward the polytheistic, and since to Baudrillard, every entity, thought, idea, object, and literally, everything else is a simulation and representation of the original (which may also have been itself a simulation), then today’s postmodern gods would be many and mere representations of traditional deities—and not all of them accurate, wholesome, or even good (as in the good versus evil duality). As humans must explain the “before” and “beyond” questions of existence (traditionally done through God and faith with the concepts of Creation and Eternal Life in Heaven or Hell), the same explanations may also be satisfied through alternative “realities” or simulations. [Atheists, who do not believe in God or any tenets of organized religion, are an example of people who present an alternative simulation or explanation to the questions that merit answering.] Baudrillard concluded that postmodern society (especially American society) was almost a total simulation, “a Disneyesque World” where the image has become more important than reality itself—where only images exist and have become the reality—the same would hold true for the conception of God and how worship is conducted. Listing the characteristics of postmodernity at this point can be a useful exercise in determining precisely who the “postmodern gods” truly are:

Characteristics of Postmodernity³³
1. Incessant Choosing
2. Multiplying Uncertainties
3. Individuality
4. Fragmentation/Deconstruction
5. Media Influence

³¹ Read, “*postmodern capitalism*”.

³² McCullough, Lissa. “Jean Baudrillard and the Death of God” 2001. JCRT 2.3. Accessed. February 15, 2012. < <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/02.3/mccullough.shtml>>.

³³ Adapted from the educational film and related materials, “From Modernity to Postmodernity: A Sociological Inquiry” *Films Media Group*, 1999.

In an increasingly individualistic world where people are faced with growing numbers of options and choices about which they feel overwhelmed and lack confidence in making, often to the point of second-guessing themselves or having regrets about past decisions, all the while seeing traditions and things “the way they used to be” collapsing all around them, and facing a larger world where the future is cloudy and often stressful, all the while being bombarded by varying forms of media, each presenting its alternative view, opinion, recommendation, advertisement, or rendition, a position is often adopted that material comfort, self-gratification, immediacy, self-indulgence, self-enhancement, self-worth, self-help, body-enhancement, performance-enhancement, consumer culture, Hollywood idol-worship, utopianism, risk-taking, sense-enhancement, bodily fitness, reality TV, therapy, aesthetics, environmentalism, animal rights, and generally, everything else in the Apollonian or Dionysian³⁴ worlds described by Nietzsche and more, represents those polytheistic gods to which the postmodern masses bow.

It should not be surprising that when religion today attempts to be as traditional as in the past, it is far less successful. The more orthodox churches abound with older generations of parishioners while many of the younger generations, if they attend services at all, opt for the mega church, complete with stadium or movie theater padded seating, live contemporary upbeat music, huge plasma display screens, lighting and sound effects, a star preacher, a message geared toward personal success or popular psychology, all following a visit to the in-house McDonald’s or Starbucks for breakfast or morning coffee.

Cioran and Baudrillard would recognize the reality of the modern gods immediately. In a recent study by the Barna Group entitled, “Six Reasons Young Christians Leave the Church”, it was found that younger people found the church was overprotecting, that Christianity is “shallow”, that churches are antagonistic to science, that churches are judgmental and simplistic regarding sexuality, that Christianity views itself as having a monopoly on faith, and that churches are unfriendly to any doubt someone may have.³⁵

Drew Dyck, in his book, *Generation Ex-Christian*, divides those who opt out of the traditional church into six categories: postmodern leavers, recoilers, modern leavers, neo-pagans, rebels, and drifters. In an increasingly fragmented and often cruel world with an uncertain future, many have become disillusioned with faith and God is guilty by association.³⁶ Today, traditional churches are trying to retool themselves and retailer their

³⁴ Nietzsche describes the Apollonian or Dionysian world in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) stating: Up to this point, we have considered the Apollonian and its opposite, the Dionysian, as artistic forces which break forth out of nature itself, without the mediation of the human artist and in which the human artistic drive is for the time being satisfied directly — on the one hand as a world of dream images, whose perfection has no connection with an individual’s high level of intellect or artistic education, on the other hand, as the intoxicating reality, which once again does not respect the individual, but even seeks to abolish the individual and to restore him through a mystic feeling of collective unity. In comparison to these unmediated artistic states of nature, every artist is an “Imitator,” and, in fact, an artist either of Apollonian dream or Dionysian intoxication...

³⁵ The Barna Group, *Six Reasons Young Christians Leave the Church*. Sept. 28, 2011. Accessed February 18, 2012. <<http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church>>.

³⁶ Vu, Michelle A. “Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young People are Leaving the Church” *Christianity Today*. January 7, 2011. Accessed February 17, 2012. <<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/generation.exchristian.why.young.people.are.leaving.the.church/27324-2.htm>>.

message to be more attractive to a postmodern audience, but as Baudrillard might say, simulating oneself is still a simulation in competition with endless alternative simulations while Cioran might chime in that the polytheistic appeal of some of those are infinitely more appealing.

On one final note regarding Cioran's belief that suffering and sacrificing for one's faith is a staple of all dogma, the postmodern worshipper still does. Financially, the "postmodern gods" are among the most expensive ever devised. From houses in the suburbs, to education, to nice clothes and cars, to all of the self-enhancements on the path to living a "successful" and "abundant" life, to the charitable contributions to postmodern causes, the postmodern disciples have made tithing look thrifty. Welcome to the next set of deities. The "postmodern gods" have taken the stage, and God has left the building.

Biographical Note

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