



# Baudrillard and the Dead Internet Theory. Revisiting Baudrillard's (dis)trust in Artificial Intelligence

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is to revisit Baudrillard's take on artificial intelligence and to present a critique of AI (especially considering large language models). Baudrillard expressed his skepticism about AI already in his essay *Xerox and Infinity* from 1993. To understand Baudrillard's argumentation, it is necessary to open up his theoretical body of work, starting from Marxist value theory and leading up to his own concept of simulation theory, which he later became known for. Baudrillard's main idea throughout his work is how the meaning of a sign, once emerging out of a social bond which he calls symbolic exchange, transfers into a sphere of representative signs that then morph into a life of their own. Baudrillard's critique falls perfectly in line with the discussion around the dead internet theory and the loss of meaning within the virtual space through the rise of bots and artificially created content, stripped of human origin and connection. Artificial content is, for Baudrillard, the purest form of simulation, with signs that have lost their origin of representation and are now exponentially recreated in a digital sphere. Just like the AI-generated image of "Shrimp Jesus," which flooded the social media platform Facebook and became a viral hit. "Shrimp Jesus" is a perfect example of an artificial image pushing human-generated content out of the virtual sphere. From a Baudrillardian perspective, that dead internet, the internet dying because of the flood of artificial content, is not an accident, but an inevitable event.

**Keywords** Baudrillard · Artificial intelligence · Simulation · Hyperreality · Dead internet · Automated content · Shrimp Jesus

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## 1 Introduction

Baudrillard was one of the most influential French authors of the postmodern phase, from the late 1960 s onward. But, unlike many of his colleagues, like Bourdieu or Foucault, Baudrillard wasn't as popular in academic or public discourse, at least not initially. That changed later in his career, as his more broadly perceived work on media and philosophy gained attention, in contrast to his earlier, more heavily Marxist theoretical development. Baudrillard's work took many shifts and turns, both conceptually and terminologically, but there is a core theme that runs through it: how any form of culture or media created within a social bond then morphs into a mode of its own, and how the thread between society and its signs becomes slowly severed. This very loss of human control over the cultural signs once self-created is the morphology Baudrillard attempted to describe throughout his career, ultimately leading him to his theory of simulation and the concept of detached signs within a mediated society. One could argue that the more the media landscape became differentiated and extreme, such as competing live television coverage of war zones, the more Baudrillard's theory also became differentiated and extreme, shifting from a Marxist analysis toward a theory of proliferating signs without origin, a theory of simulacra and simulation. As wild as Baudrillard's theories may sometimes appear, they strike a nerve with the observation that certain cultural signs lose their connection to their human origin, just as we are experiencing it now with the rise of artificially created content taking over the digital sphere.

The goal of this paper is therefore to revisit Baudrillard's take on artificial intelligence, which he expressed in his essay *Xerox and Infinity* from 1993, and to present the theoretical implications of value theory and symbolic exchange that underlie in his arguments. This discussion will show how Baudrillard's notion of simulation and the proliferation of the sign foresaw the consequences of AI-generated media and content, which subsequently led to what is now subsumed to as the "dead internet theory" (Walter, 2024; Mariani, 2023; DiResta & Goldstein, 2024). From this perspective, the internet is no longer a digital representation of a once analog human culture. It has rather become a self-recreating force that has modulated and strayed away from its human origin through AI-generated content that has automated and now spreads across social media platforms, pushing human-generated content out of the virtual sphere. This phenomenon aligns with Baudrillard's understanding of detached and simulated signs within a cultural space. For Baudrillard, simulated signs no longer recruit their meaning through their duty of representation, but through their positioning within a network of other signs, as I will show later in the discussion of the industrial and code-governed era of sign production. I will argue that exactly this detachment of signs ultimately leads to a death of meaning, as we can observe now with the dead internet phenomenon. Bots, AI texts, and images are spreading uncontrollably across various digital platforms and environments, creating a sphere that becomes increasingly detached from an element of human connection and representation, therefore, a "dead internet". From a Baudrillardian perspective, the dead internet

is not an accident but an inevitable event. AI-generated content is therefore the last stage of sign simulation. To make Baudrillard's example of automated and uncoupled sign simulation within the virtual sphere more concrete, I will discuss, by the end of the paper, the artificially generated image called "Shrimp Jesus", an iconic image of Jesus composed of shrimps that has become a viral hit.

Baudrillard provides us with his theory of simulation a strong theoretical framework for understanding these unconventional current events of artificially created content. Signs and signifiers, according to Baudrillard, originate from a core of gift exchange (as a metaphor), which he understands as a mode of (reciprocal) symbolic exchange that is *"inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged"* (Baudrillard, 1981). As soon as objects move from a mode of mechanical reproduction into a mode of signified representations, they lose their attachment to their original core. Within this slow process of signification and simulation, the original purpose of the sign, to represent a symbolic engagement, is lost. Instead, only the position of the sign within a network of signs becomes the predominant factor of meaning. The sign-value then morphs into a life on its own. But this does not mean that there is no style or character in the newly, artificially created sign collage, as Anna Kornbluh, with her concept of "Immediacy," pointed out (Kornbluh, 2022). The loss of meaning, for Baudrillard, means the loss of connection to the symbolic origin of representation. The consequence of that loss is something I will point out later in the discussion of the violence of the virtual code. There, sign representation is no longer a signification of a social symbolic bond, a representing symbol, but rather a divisive element in symbolic, social relationships.

In the first part of this paper, I will present Baudrillard's theory of value, which emerged from a Marxist value theory. In the second part, I will discuss his understanding of symbolic exchange, where Baudrillard takes the theory of value into the sphere of culture and media (re)production. After that, I will examine the impact of a virtually coded sign world, which has lost its symbolic meaning along the way but feeds back into the system with a vengeance, forcing all forms of reality into a network of "cybernetic control", where all cultural forms are formalized into a code of question and answer, an absolute binary system of reality (Baudrillard, 2017). Building on this, it is then possible to discuss the phenomenon of the dead internet theory from a Baudrillardian perspective. To illustrate the dead internet theory, I will conclude with the example of "Shrimp Jesus" and the loss of meaning and metaphor within an artificial intelligent network (DiResta & Goldstein, 2024).

Although Baudrillard's work is considered a historical piece in philosophy and media theory, his catalog of philosophic thought remains relevant for the current discussions on technology and AI. In particular, the reference to authors of the French postmodern phase contains a certain strength for the analysis of actual phenomena of (digital) technology. Those authors had a distinct and different view on digital and televised media, as these were new phenomena within their lifetime, as they came from a virtually and digitally unmediated society compared to today's "onlife" world, where the boundaries between media, digital code, and social life have blurred (Floridi, 2015). A digitally unmediated reality seems now like an almost forgotten relic of the past. Therefore, they had a unique perspective of strangeness and familiarity with media, which, from today's perspective, might have been lost. In

addition to Baudrillard, the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and their metaphors of “bodies without organs” and the “body machine,” provide a unique understanding of something that McLuhan framed as “the medium is the message,” to which Baudrillard also referred. This concerns the problem of subject and technology-object division, the circularity of communication media, and the impact on our understanding of subjectivity (Deane-Freeman, 2024; Kuhns, 2024; Wellner, 2022). The blurring boundaries between the machine and the human condition also led to a rise in discussions about AI under the postulate of posthumanism, which aligns with Baudrillard’s understanding of simulated reality, discussed later in this article (e.g., Coeckelbergh, 2024; Floridi, 2024). Additionally, the embodiment of human labor within technology (Muldoon et al., 2024; Pasquinelli, 2024; Garcia-Saura, 2024), as well as the context of accelerationism and potential automation for public benefit, can be found in Baudrillard’s work on value theory and simulation (Muldoon et al., 2024; Fisher, 2009; Srnicek & Williams, 2015).

For Baudrillard, the terminology of artificial intelligence is, at best, misleading. Artificial intelligence is not artificial but rather “pseudo-artificial” because of its profanity and its lack of artifice, metaphor, the unspoken, and the secret. Artificial intelligence is profane and dull because it has lost the original purpose of art as a gateway to deeper meaning and transcendence (Baudrillard, 1993). Baudrillard’s criticism of such “pseudo-artificial” machines is also historically insightful, as his essay *Xerox and Infinity* from the early 1990 s already uses the terminology of artificial intelligence and fits seamlessly into today’s AI discourse without any theoretical adjustments necessary. This fact also reminds us that AI is not as new as it might seem but is a phenomenon that has developed over decades, recently amplified by the commercialization and hype of the tech industry, which is eager to sustain its demand for “artificial” growth.<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard’s text, written just before the dot-com boom, perhaps anticipated the bubble of inflated expectations that could not manifest outside speculative finance. Taking Baudrillard’s text from the early 1990 s and putting it into the context of today also shows a similarity in the overblown expectations surrounding technology in the 1990 s and the similarity to the overblown expectation in AI today: driven by the “blitzgrowth” of tech and AI companies, AI supply firms and stock markets, boosted by venture capital, salivating for more growth and money to earn from the tech industry cash cow.

<sup>1</sup> The criticism toward tech companies and their new “innovative” products is growing (e.g. Hicks, Humphries, Slater (2024), Acemoglu (2024) or Maggiori (2023)). Tech-firms have simulated themselves from serving to a customer audience, by e.g. creating hardware products, to rather produce slogans and marketing images for venture capitalists and stock-market-storytelling. Tech-firms have therefore simulated themselves from a customer-service into a simulated world of signs that is only represented in the trust in a growth curve.

## 2 Baudrillard's Value Theory

To understand Baudrillard's statement on arbitrary sign and value circulation, it is necessary to understand Baudrillard's history with value theory. Value theory is a recurring theme in Baudrillard's work. It deals with how value is created and transformed across different stages, beginning with primal social bonds and evolving into cultural forms that symbolize those bonds. Baudrillard not only built on Marx's theory, but also clearly diverged from it, using the notions of use and exchange value to develop his own theory of value that has decoupled from any source, which he calls signs value.

This specific way of analysis, which Baudrillard already started in his early works in *The System of Objects* (1968) and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), forms the foundation of his critique. This early work builds heavily on the Marxist notion of value, adding Baudrillard's own twist on Marxist value theory by introducing the understanding of sign value in addition to Marx's theory of use and exchange value. Baudrillard also acknowledges in *After the Orgy* (the opening essay of the collection *The Transparency of Evil*, where *Xerox and Infinity* is also included) that he proposed in his work a "tripartite" account of use, exchange, and sign value (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, p.3). Baudrillard sees these three elements as connected to the aspects of a natural stage (use value), commodity stage (exchange value), and structural stage (sign value) of value disposition.

The value notion of Marx, shows the basic dynamic of how value is created by a social bond and contract (value) and then becomes elevated into different spheres, first in the formation of use value (the representation of human nature in the transformation of nature) and then in the stage of commodity creation and commodity exchange and exchange value. David Harvey, author of the popular readings of Marx's *Capital*, elaborately noted that Marx's theory of value is more or less a loop theory of value circulation within a capitalist mode of production (Harvey, 2010). Harvey illustrates in his work the model of value circulation, starting from value creation by social contract, which is then elevated into a mode of value creation in the form of commodities, through production and surplus value valorization, creating commodities and money capital, which then plays back into a new loop of value and commodity creation based on the same principle (Harvey, 2017).

Baudrillard, in his early work, took this notion of value transformation and gave it a new spin. He stated that exchange value is not only the last simulated stage of value creation but out of the stage of exchange value grows the stage of the sign value. Therefore, not only exchange value was the simulated form of use-value, exchange value itself is *elevated to a new form of sign-value*. This was the main argument of Baudrillard's early work (Baudrillard, 1996, 1998, 1981, 1975). This observation also comes from Baudrillard's biographical background and the societal changes in his lifetime. In the late 1960 s and early 1970 s, a new form of society emerged: the consumer society. Baudrillard realized in that specific context of time that commodities not only represented a certain use value that was

quantified in the form of a specific exchange value by a logic of the market, but also that commodities, and the possession and proposition of commodities, developed a life on their own. A culture arose in which people bought a commodity for the sake of only its sign value to position themselves within a certain social field, using these commodities as a code of social positioning. Baudrillard foresaw the social impact of commodity possession and positioning through public or private exhibitions (e.g., his analysis of commodities in the living room) and its impact on the status of an individual in a specific social field. At this point, a new form of capital arose, signified by its position in its surroundings and unbounded by its source of use value. Although Baudrillard emphasized that the differentiation given and summarized here is formal, it nonetheless shows the stages of simulation and disconnection of value from its source of origin (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, p.5).

In addition to Marx, we can also see the terminology of the signifier and the signified creep into Baudrillard's thinking. This concept of the language model of the sign, created by the Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure, is the missing link in the painting of Baudrillard's value theory. Baudrillard saw the same structural approach in Marx and Saussure and created out of that his own (post)structural theory of culture. The detachment of the economy of the sign that Baudrillard found in Marx theory resembled, from a formal point of view, the notion of Saussure's theory of the disconnection of the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 2011, p.65). Saussure created an understanding of language that detached the sign from its ontological origin and put it into a network of phonetic structural networks of meaning. Saussure refused to understand language as a "naming process", pointing out that the notion of language structure feeds back to the source it came from: "*It assumes, that ready-made ideas exist before words (...), it lets us assume, that the linking of a name and thing is a very simple operation – and that assumption is anything but true*" (Saussure, 2011, p.65). What Saussure does here is detach the word, the phonetic form, from the symbolic (in Baudrillard's sense) source, stating that it is much more associated "in the brain" than with a specific associative bond. "*The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image*" (Saussure, 2011, p.66). Saussure sees the connection between the signifier and the signified as arbitrary, and that the signifier is not bound to an ontological core by any means. By tearing apart signifier and signified, Saussure decoupled the linguistic structure from its representational duty. Exactly this understanding of language correlates with Baudrillard's notion of Marxist value theory. Just as signs have decoupled from their source of representational meaning and now derive meaning only through their structural position to one another, value has also decoupled. It shifts from the use value of things, to an exchange value that takes on a life of its own, and ultimately to a mode of sign possession, position, and exhibition. I believe this strange connection of Saussure's structuralism and Marxist theory of value and turning it into the understanding of culture, makes Baudrillard's point unique. Ironically, Baudrillard himself detached the theories he uses from their "symbolic" core and used them in a decoupled manner from their theoretical origin. If we read Baudrillard against Baudrillard, as he forced us to do with Marx and Saussure at the beginning of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, we can see that what he was describing as an

ongoing process in culture, is the same as he did himself with Marx and Saussure: unbounding them from their core of commodity and language analysis and using their sign value for repositioning them in cultural theory and sociological dystopia.

### 3 From Value Theory to Simulation

After *The Mirror of Production* (1973), Baudrillard left the Marxist reference behind, because he believed that the Marxist argument mirrored and reproduced a capitalist way of thinking, reducing the human condition to an ontologically given state based on labor and work (Baudrillard, 1975). Baudrillard therefore went on to find metaphors to contrast the established episteme of production and economization and found this with the work of Marcel Mauss and his concept of symbolic exchange, the gift and the counter gift (Mauss, 1925). Mauss, in his anthropological study *The Gift*, analyzed primal cultures, and Baudrillard used these findings as a metaphorical example of a reciprocal relationship and a way in which social hierarchy can manifest outside the understanding of the market economy and commodity production (Baudrillard, 1981, p.30). Baudrillard refers to the potlatch gift culture described by Mauss as reciprocal, noting that the gift is not given “for free “. A gift from one tribe to another always implied a counter-gift of the same or higher value (Baudrillard, 1981). The rhythm of gift-exchange is therefore cyclical and characterized by challenge and reversibility. For Baudrillard, this also implies a form of democratic interaction, where hierarchy and power is cancelled: “*The importance of the return of the gift in the form of the counter-gift is that it contains the potential to cancel power*“ (Gane, 2017).

There is a notable similarity between Baudrillard’s term of symbolic exchange and Hartmut Rosa’s term of resonance. Rosa, like Baudrillard, draws from a Marxist concept but focuses instead on the terminology of alienation within the processes of industrial work and labor: “*Alienation refers to a state of disconnection in which subject and world become internally unconnected, indifferent, or even hostile*” (Rosa, 2016). Rosa, like Baudrillard, points out the downside of technological advancement and its integration into human thinking and acting. For Rosa, rationalization and digitization as modes of production strive to make the world accessible, or “verfügbar,” by aiming to eliminate unpredictability in life. The exclusion of unpredictability, achieved by introducing a systemic form of logic and control into all areas of life, ultimately leads to alienation and disenchantment of the world as we experience it (Rosa, 2016). Rosa’s response to this is a return to resonance, a reconnection between humans, nature, and also forms of media and technology. Being touched and evoked in meaningful, resonating relationships is Rosa’s proposed answer to the systematic alienation caused by rationalization in society (Rosa, 2019). Baudrillard also sees reciprocity as a basic form of the human condition, which is why he drew on the term symbolic exchange. For Baudrillard, reciprocity exists in the constant mode of gift-giving and counter-gift, and more importantly, in a power-canceling and reciprocal process. The difference between Baudrillard and Rosa lies in the fact, that Rosa sees resonance as being established also through media, for example recorded music,



where humans can be positively interpolated by media. For Baudrillard, interpolation, especially through binary-coded and commodified media, is a rather negative phenomenon. A binary-coded medium, for Baudrillard, is always a violent simplification of reality. Therefore, media, particularly simulated media within the process of mechanical reproduction, always entail a form of epistemic violence. Technology always denies the counter-gift. As Baudrillard expert Gane summarizes correctly: “*What is significant in modern capitalist societies is that symbolic exchange is blocked, and with this, the reciprocity of symbolic exchange is broken, as it can no longer take place and be resolved*” (Gane, 1993). This quote also highlights the shift from Baudrillard’s value theory and the emergence of sign-value to a theory of sign simulation and power. When interpersonal meaning (use-value) is elevated to a higher form of value (sign-value), new power relations are created and established, because the reciprocal, interpersonal process of give-and-take is disturbed. This is also the point Foucault was trying to make in *The Order of Things* (1970). Every episteme that evolved historically and established structurally, whether in science, medicine or other fields, always built on (sign) layers of power juxtaposition and hierarchy and was also dialectically dependent on one another (Foucault, 1970). Baudrillard based his argumentation about sign simulation and power relation on three historic phases to show how cultural simulation and cultural power creation was established: from the Renaissance to the industrial phase and up to the “code-governed” phase.

The Renaissance represents the first period of sign simulation, with the distinct quality that the signs of this era were still connected to their world of origin. During this time, the first simulated signs began to emerge. Renaissance artists strived to represent and mimic nature in their art, attempting to capture reality through techniques like perspective and realism. This is significant for Baudrillard’s thought because it marked the first stage of simulation: a medium or art form that copied and covered a certain reality, such as nature. However, individual interpretation also altered these imitations, introducing subjective distortions to the images and altering the copies of reality. This brings us to the concept of the counterfeit, which Baudrillard sees as the dominant scheme of the classical period in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. The counterfeit refers to a copy or representation designed to reflect reality but also to be exchanged. More importantly, it marked the first step toward unbound sign simulation. However, the counterfeit was still tied to its origin. For instance, a Renaissance painting that imitated nature was still connected to the world it portrayed. Baudrillard differentiates here between obligatory signs and the reign of emancipated signs: “*There is no fashion in caste society*” (Baudrillard, 2017). In ranked societies, signs were protected within strict hierarchies and tied directly to social roles and functions. Fashion, as a mode of sign differentiation, only became possible with the destruction of the feudal order by the bourgeoisie. With the disintegration of hierarchical sign structures and the newfound mobility of signs across social classes, the idea of the counterfeit came into play. The power hierarchy of the sign possession by the few was redistributed into a network of signifiers possessed by the many. For Baudrillard, this marked the first stage of simulation (or simula-cra), where signs were still tied to their origins but became duplicated and exchangeable. The counterfeit, however, still “remembered” its creator, as representations like



Renaissance paintings remained tied to the reality they tried to imitate (Baudrillard, 2017, p.71).

The second phase of simulation (or simulacra), the industrial phase, is introduced with machines and robots entering the game of sign exchange. In this phase, sign exchange is no longer tied to a cultural sphere of counter-gifting to gain status. Instead, the counter-gift is replaced by the robot, a machine that operates as a rationalized mirror of men: *“As for the robot, as its name implies, it works; end of the theatre, beginning of human mechanics”* (Baudrillard, 2017, p.74). This can also be seen as the beginning of a posthuman phase, a phase of epistemological rationalization through the invocation of the machine. The capacity for industrial (re)production then drives this new phase of simulation. In this stage, the original source begins to vanish. Industrialized objects no longer have the duty to resemble the meaning of their origin, but rather to resemble each other on an assembly line. The mode of homogenization exceeds their necessity of representation. This is exactly the moment where representation disappears and is replaced by a mode of sign resemblance that sign exchange starts to build on: *“The relation between them is no longer one of an original and its counterfeit, analogy or reflection, but is instead one of equivalence and indifference. (...) The extinction of the original reference alone facilitates the general law of equivalences, that is to say the very possibility of production”* (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 76). Baudrillard credits McLuhan and Benjamin, who foresaw that the mode of production and class consciousness would be swallowed and forgotten in the mode of quasi-eternal (re)production. The mode of production is no longer the engine of social hierarchy and power relations but only the detached signified output and the repositioning of signifiers within the world of reproduced signs. If we look at the mode of production in the current AI debate, we can follow this argument very well. The precarious labor that sustains digital technology falls into the background of the discussion, becoming a peripheral topic, leaving no resources or energy for collective efforts for change or revolution of societal circumstances (Muldoon & Wu, 2023). The positioning of subjectivity within a network of signs also helps explain certain contradictions in today’s political behavior, for example, workers voting for politicians who aim to abolish labor rights and protections. This shows that one’s position within a mode of production is no longer decisive; rather, it is one’s position and interpellation within a network of signs that becomes crucial for shaping subjectivity and one’s place in a social hierarchy (Peters, 2022). Building on this notion, we can adjust W. I. Thomas’s 1920 theorem to: *“If men define media as real, media is real in its consequences”* (Thomas, 1928).

Today, we live in the third phase, the code-governed phase. The code of today for Baudrillard is now a virtual system, governed by the rule of binary code, to which every sign and signifier must obey to: *“The great man-made simulacra pass from a universe of natural laws into a universe of forces and tensions, and today pass into a universe of structures and binary oppositions”* (Baudrillard, 2017, p.78). All forms of life are now forced into a binary system of question and answer. All forms are represented in their simplest form of binary outline, and there is no more reference to a negative or transcendence of any sort. Everything must fit into a mode of cybernetic questioning (true/false) in order to be allowed into the virtual sphere. Modes of

vagueness and perceptions that lie outside the mode of binary question and answer are cut out in this process of digitization and binarization. What began as an intellectual framework in Leibniz's vision, to express all things by binary numbers, has now morphed into an ontological reality: a binary-coded reality that encompasses all forms of life. A binary logic that leaves no room for escape, as it imposes its structure onto every aspect of existence. It is this totalizing system that leads us to what Baudrillard calls the violence of the virtual code.

## 4 The Violence of the Virtual Code

The virtual space is a binary coded space. For Baudrillard, this is a cold space, cleansed of the warmth of phantasies, which a lack of depth and ambiguity. It is pure presentation, no more representation. It is a virtual realm of detached and distilled images purged of all potential metaphors. As Baudrillard described at the beginning of simulacra and simulation, the desert of the real is where the real has found its place. The land map of the sterilized image of a binary-coded world has now become a threat to the world. Symbolic reversibility, the culture of ongoing give and take, the gift and the counter gift, is in danger of being lost within these all-encompassing coded systems. If we see the human resonance as form of warm and lively interaction, the binary system of the virtual code must then be the cold opposite. In Baudrillard's terms, the cold code gives without taking, it is un-reciprocal by definition.

However, there is from reversibility, but a mutilating one. Those cold systems of binary code, which lost their roots of meaning from their social core where they derived from, loop back into the imagination of the mutilated users of those digital worlds. Those systems of code are therefore epistemological scissors, cutting off the rest of the imagination and metaphors from the source they came from. The violence of today is therefore an epistemic one and it is executed by the engagement with virtual and digital realms. Violence from this perspective lies within the structure of our worldview. This does not include subjective or objective violence, meaning harm executed by single persons or institutions, but it lays the epistemological foundation for that. What is left then are men who are mutilated by their devices, as Baudrillard unapologetically puts it in *Xerox and Infinity*: "*These Men of Artificial Intelligence will traverse their own mental space bound hand and foot to their computers. Immobile in front of his computer, Virtual Man makes love via the screen and gives lessons by means of the teleconference. He is a physical — and no doubt also a mental — cripple. That is the price he pays for being operational. it is similarly to be feared that artificial intelligence and the hardware that supports it will become a mental prosthesis for a species without the capacity for thought*" (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, S.52). This is also the gift of binary code, first invoked by an idea of Leibniz, that keeps on giving to this day. The all-encompassing code of binary code that penetrates now all forms of life, politics, sex and art alike, into the same sphere of homogenized binaries: "*Digitality is among us. It haunts all the messages and signs of our society, and we can clearly locate its most concrete form in the test, the question/answer, the stimulus/response*" (Baudrillard, 2017, p.82).

## 5 From Simulation to the Death of Meaning

What Baudrillard described as “the haunting of digitality” has now entered its most extreme form with the rise of AI-generated content and automated communication systems. The virtual sphere, taken over by bots, synthetic media, and algorithmically generated signs, pushes simulation into a terminal phase of meaninglessness. In a mode of all-encompassing binary homogenization, things not only lose their source of origin and become arbitrary in the sense of lost meaning connected to a symbolic source, but first, they also start to proliferate into different spheres, as the boundaries between these spheres have been lifted and abolished. All elements of reality are now homogenized into the realm of the digital sphere and have therefore become exchangeable: “*The law that is imposed on us is the law of the confusion of categories. Everything is sexual. Everything is political. Everything is aesthetic*” (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, S.9). Proliferation is therefore the first step before the death of symbolic meaning, before going into pure transparency and dissolving into indifference. This does not mean that meaning is disappearing at all. But rather, that in simulation meaning shifts in a mode without boundaries, a shallow form on a signified surface of constant repetition and pure circulation. The sign that used to represent a symbolic engagement, can represent anything or nothing now. Baudrillard writes about the loss of representation and boundaries leading up to the loss of meaning: “*Each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories*” (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, p.9). This is a quote from *After the Orgy*, where Baudrillard gives the examples of the loss meaning with the political, the aesthetic, and the sexual. Sexuality, for instance, has been decoupled from a core built on sensitivity, fantasy, and metaphor and placed into a code of mass production and recreation. As soon as things ripen off from their origin and meaning and are transferred into a code of mass consumption, they become accessible through the mutilation of a preestablished code. This code cuts off the edges of their meaning and metaphors and places them into a virtual display of cultural exhibition. From there, all other forms can exploit the mutilated entity until nothing remains but a plain field. This is where we can also understand Baudrillard’s notion of transsexuality. It extends beyond sex and traverses into the fields of media, advertisements, and all other forms of communication. If everything is connoted as sexual, it strips the core of its meaning and origin away. Sexuality becomes transparent in its mechanical mode, losing its “sex” by being proliferated into every sphere: “*Sex is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere – everywhere else, in fact*” (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017, p.8). The symbolic image is extracted into a mechanical code of (re)produced images in advertisements and pornography. This is the moment of detachment and the *death* of the impact and historic meaning of the cultural object itself.

We can observe the same phenomenon with the notion of all things becoming political, whereby nothing is truly political anymore; the word itself loses its meaning by being absorbed into all other areas. When everything carries a political meaning in language, media, or even desire, the core of the thing becomes so

generalized that the necessary distinction of uniqueness is lost. Vice versa, everything is aestheticized, following a rule of design, making the sphere of original art and aesthetic indistinguishable from other spheres. A code of design creeps into every aspect of life, from coffee shops and dental offices to political party marketing. Everything obeys the same logic of design pragmatism; everything becomes exchangeable. The art of design, therefore, becomes shallow and meaningless, a mere representation of a homogenized code of alignment and reproduction. The sphere of artificial imagination, metaphor and unsaid beauty is then gone. Politics are now aestheticized and follow the rule of design and media. Design and media are politicized, every corner has a political connotation and meaning. Both spheres have blurred into each other, making it impossible to distinguish them.

## 6 The Dead Internet Theory

What Baudrillard describes as the death of meaning: signs losing their origin, proliferating into all spheres, and becoming indifferent, is precisely the topic being discussed today under the term “dead internet theory.” The basic idea behind the dead internet theory is that AI- and bot-generated content have surpassed human-generated elements in the realm of digital artifacts, effectively overtaking the human-generated internet. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly visible, especially as social media platforms integrate more automated AI content (Walter, 2024).

This signals a “paradigm shift” within internet culture, as the integration of automated content departs from what was once the purpose of the networked internet structure and, foremost, social media platforms: the technological possibility of connecting people via digital devices. Meta CEO Zuckerberg did not become tired emphasizing the fact, that connecting people still remains the main drive for their Meta business endeavors (Hoffmann, Proferes, Zimmer, 2018). As Shoshana Zuboff successfully pointed out in her book *Surveillance Capitalism*, this goal of connecting people has been slowly but surely replaced over the past decade by the commodification of something that had not been commodified before: our personal connections, our connections to our families, our private interests, and the education about our hobbies and interests, from cooking to playing heavy metal guitar (Zuboff, 2019). By transferring these social elements into a homogenized, binary-coded environment, all those social experiences were suddenly commodified by setting up barriers between digitalized private connections, through advertisements, premium connection options, etc. (Zuboff, 2019).

The next step, that is now being carried out by tech companies, is fatal: allowing AI content and bots to run free. As Baudrillard noted, fatality is the ultimate end goal in the mode of the proliferation of the sign (Baudrillard, 1993, 2017). Tech companies such as Reddit, Meta, and Google, with their platforms Facebook and YouTube, have benefited for decades from free labor. Reddit was built on user engagement and comments, Facebook relied on people sharing their private lives digitally, and YouTube thrived on free content labor provided by thousands of individuals showcasing their (often product advertisement) skills within the YouTube landscape. Sign-value was created on an unprecedented scale. Nearly all aspects of

life have been transformed into virtual sign-value, which has, in turn, looped back into the reality of life, creating and destroying entire industries and reshaping both societal and private lives.

With the next step of automated AI-content, the last fatal step of all-encompassing surplus creation is now unfolding. Since sign-value was extracted from human labor, the system is now ready to cut its ties with its origin, the human element, and move fully into a space of simulated and self-governed sign-spheres. Just as Baudrillard saw it coming with media, the dead internet, cutting out the human element, is the perfect example of a system that was built to represent symbolic meaning, but by transferring it into binary code and sign value, it has proliferated into a sphere of its own, leaving its source origin behind. Artists, creators, and users, the backbone of the (intellectual) digital content infrastructure and the unpaid labor force, are slowly realizing that, from the perspective of big tech firms, their duty of free labor is done and that they are now slowly being replaced by AI-generated content. They realize the development by their own user experience and by seeing their work being used to feed the machine learning system. Therefore, awareness and protests are growing alike (Washington Post, 2024). While the dead internet theory is not a scientific theory, it reflects the growing public awareness of a fundamental shift within the digital infrastructure. This phenomenon clearly highlights the departure of a system of signs from the origin of their creation. As Baudrillard predicted in *Xerox and Infinity*, a system of signs has taken on a life on its own and is now ready to grow and proliferate uncontrollably. Uncontrolled growth of text and images alike, all across the digital sphere, creating the perfect environment for a seemingly random digital phenomena to emerge and go viral: “Shrimp Jesus”. The perfect AI-generated image that embodies the absurdity and detachment of sign circulation without symbolic meaning.

## 7 Enter the kingdom of Shrimp Jesus

A preprint paper from Stanford University revealed that AI-generated images are slowly taking over Facebook content posts. The goal is to create clickbait for the growth of Facebook pages, with Meta embracing this trend in hopes of replacing “free” virtual human labor with AI-generated content (DiResta & Goldstein, 2024). The output of those creations ranges from pure meaninglessness to disturbing content, including pedophilia. The poster image of these virtual, arbitrary sign compositions has become the image of “Shrimp Jesus”. “Shrimp Jesus”, an AI-generated image portraying an iconic image of Jesus in a shrimp body, or another version, Jesus with his head on the body of a lobster Researchers discovered, by analyzing Facebook pages generating and posting those AI-created images, that these sites grew enormously in reach and clicks. These pictures of arbitrary monstrosity seem to lure us in. For example, one of those posts containing an AI-generated image became one of the most viewed pieces of content on Facebook in Q3 2023, garnering 40 million views (DiResta & Goldstein, 2024).

Shrimp Jesus is the finest example of a cultural representation that has morphed from an image of representation to a pure sign simulation. With Shrimp Jesus, the

task of representation is gone, and the image of Jesus becomes pure simulation, completely detached from any meaning. While some might interpret Shrimp Jesus as internet satire or absurdist commentary, from a Baudrillardian perspective, this does not reattach the sign to symbolic meaning. Its circulation remains detached, operating within a system of signs without reference.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard outlines the stages of uncoupling the image from its core: from the reflection of a profound reality, to the step-by-step masking of a profound reality, followed by the gradual disappearance of a profound reality, until there is no relation to any reality whatsoever (Baudrillard, 1994, p.4). In other words, within a mode of symbolic representation of reality, Shrimp Jesus may never have entered the world, at least on the scale as it has now. Only in a sphere of decoupled signs, decoupled from their core of representation and reordered within a network of virtual sign juxtaposition, the episteme opened for Shrimp Jesus to appear. Jesus, once a metaphor and gatekeeper to the transcendence of God, morphed into the image of a man himself, until there was no more God connotated to the image. Now, the gatekeeper image has simulated and morphed into a virtual life of its own. Shrimp Jesus and his apostles are an unholy hit without any transcendence in an artificial environment of proliferated signs without meaning. We can observe the same with another AI-generated image, the hidden city beneath the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. and many other AI-generated images, that have gone viral (seecheck.org, 2024).

A digital information network representing human interaction has now grown into an uncontrollable mass of artificially created text and images that dominate the virtual world. First, information decoupled, then communication followed by its detachment. Now we enter the third stage of free-floating simulation: from data to text, and now to completely decoupled images from its symbolic source. Images without any origin, images without any meaning or metaphor. However, as we have seen before, the wave of code simulation always returns like a set of waves after the ebb, and now comes the flood of images. They feed back into our lives as they portray the epistemological mirrors of our minds. They have become the visual and arbitrary scissors cutting off our phantasy through a narrowed image cocktail, based on a biased framework set of superficial and homogenized digital code within the realm of the virtual. The prison of binary code we built for ourselves has become visualized, and its poster boy is Shrimp Jesus: an image with no value, no meaning, or purpose. Yet it feeds back into the origin of its social genesis and disrupts any social-cultural connections by being the point of cultural reference. Signs have finally proliferated into a fractal system detached from any symbolic source. Just as Jesus was supposedly the messenger for God, Shrimp Jesus is the messenger for the fatal system maneuvered ourselves into. Decoupled, proliferated, and in a state of exponential metastasis.

From Baudrillard's perspective, we are in the midst of a fatal strategy: signs without origin proliferate within a homogenized network of exchangeable signs. But this is only the first part of his fatal hypothesis. The second part is that signs are doomed to die after losing their boundaries and morphing into a state of full transparency. This means that while we witness the rise of the kingdom of Shrimp Jesus, with his apostles of bots and artificially created texts and images, they are ultimately doomed

to perish. Therefore, Shrimp Jesus is not so much the king of a new kingdom as he is a prophet of a kingdom, the internet, that is already set to perish, at least as we once knew it.

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**Consent for Publication** I, Thomas Sommerer, have approved the final manuscript and I consent to its publication.

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