Contradictions of Hyperreality: Baudrillard, Žižek, and Virtual Dialectics

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Abstract

In this article I situate and make sense of Jean Baudrillard's writings regarding "hyperreality" and then consider Slavoj Žižek's insistence on the "reality of the virtual" as opposed to "virtual reality." I argue that Baudrillard has offered a contemporary, inverted variation on Leibniz's classical idealist position, whereas Žižek has followed a dialectical materialist course charted especially by Ernst Bloch. Finally, I contend that there remain contradictions of hyperreality itself that constitute a domain of virtual dialectics.

> I see where [Žižek is] coming from, his vision of things, a particular kind of perception. I share the "*feeling*" of what he writes, whilst not agreeing with him at all. You can question it all: he wants to keep a sort of dialectic, there's still Marxism in there somewhere. He works with Jameson and people like him, with American neo-Marxists. Not forgetting the form of Lacanian real he uses. All of that is mixed in together, and there are all sorts of strange complexities. I don't know whether you can separate it all out, but it's very interesting – being very much in phase and also totally out of phase.
> - Jean Baudrillard[1]

1. From Leibniz to Baudrillard

In section eight of his *Discourse on Metaphysics*[2] (1686) G.W. Leibniz asserts that

> all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it

must be contained in it virtually (*virtuellement*). That is what the philosophers call *in-esse*, when they say that the predicate is in the subject. Thus the subject term must always contain the predicate term, so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it.[3]

Several sections later Leibniz specifies that

everything that happens to a person is already contained virtually (*virtuellement*) in his nature or not, just as the properties of a circle are contained in its definition.[4]

In other words, using the classical logic available to Leibniz,[5] we may formalize the logic of predication as consisting of statements having the following structure:

S is P.

(Here "S" stands for a given subject and "P" stands for a given predicate.) Using a modern example, one could note that

1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered on April 4, 1968.

From a Leibnizian perspective, the fact of King's assassination was "virtually contained" in his soul from the beginning of time and space. Indeed, ontologically speaking, for Leibniz whatever is actual is only the realization of virtual possibilities that have always existed in the mind of God. In this sense, we can say Leibniz held a position that the actual arises from, and is dependent on, the virtual. Let us call this *the hyporeality thesis*.[6]

By contrast, as Ernst Bloch argues in *The Principle of Hope*, the underlying structure of hope is not "S is P" (nor "S is not P") but "S is not yet P."[7] For Bloch, "S is not yet P" is a properly dialectical assertion – not an *in*-esse but a *trans-esse* – in which a given predicate (P) is not already virtually contained in the subject (S) of a proposition but opens up in a forward direction that may in fact never be actualized, and that even God could not know in advance of its actualization.[8] To give a variation on the example above that conveys the sense of "S is not yet P" as the propositional structure of hope, we might propose that

2. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of economic justice has not yet been realized in the United States.

As opposed to Leibniz, Bloch argues that

knowledge itself becomes transformative only in … a dialectics of events, which are not contemplated, not enclosed within contemplated history. It is not applied merely to the knowable past, but to a real becoming, to that which is occurring and not yet finished, to a knowable and pursuable future content. S is not yet P, the proletariat has not yet been sublated (*aufgehoben*), nature is not yet a home, the real is not yet articulated reality: this Not Yet is in process, indeed it has attained or is beginning to carve out its skyline here and there (Bloch 1976: 8).

Bloch sets forth a perspective that, ontologically speaking, holds that the virtual is what emerges from, and exceeds, a singular arrangement of actually existing tendencies in the objective "world-process." In other words, he defends a position that the virtual arises from, and is dependent on, the actual. Let us call this *the surreality thesis*.[9] Bloch observes that for Leibniz

> the choice between infinitely numerous logical possibilities is … left spread out before his God (as realizer). Even inside the existing world, as one which is realized by its creator out of infinitely many possible ones, Leibniz still recognizes possibility as propensity, even though as one which cannot develop anything that is in reality new either, i.e. anything not contained in the whole of the previous world. And even if Leibniz, the only great philosopher of the Possible since Aristotle, also gives space to an infinite number of other possible world-contexts, these "primae possibilitates" once again only live in the reason of the creator and not as possibilities still capable of realization projecting into this world now realized for once. (Bloch 1986, vol. 1: 243-44)

In light of the respective theses of Leibniz and Bloch, I would like to situate and make sense of Jean Baudrillard's writings regarding *hyperreality* and then to consider Slavoj Žižek's insistence on the "reality of the virtual" as opposed to "virtual reality." As I shall argue below, Baudrillard has offered a contemporary, *inverted* variation on Leibniz's classical idealist position (*hyporeality* having become *hyperreality*),[10] whereas Žižek has followed the dialectical materialist course charted by Bloch.

2. Baudrillard on Hyperreality

Baudrillard's most fully elaborated account of hyperreality may be found in his essay "The Precession of Simulacra" (in Baudrillard 1994: 1-42). Baudrillard writes that

> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. 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 nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself …
>
> It is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard 1994: 1-2)

In order to explain what he means by hyperreality, Baudrillard also offers an image of the hologram:

> A segment has no need of imaginary mediation in order to reproduce itself, any more than the earthworm needs earth: each segment of the worm is directly reproduced as a whole worm, just as each cell of the American CEO can produce a new CEO. Just as each fragment of a hologram can again become the matrix of the complete hologram: the information remains whole, with perhaps somewhat less definition, in each of the dispersed fragments of the hologram (Baudrillard 1994: 97).

Moreover, Baudrillard contends,

> holographic reproduction, like all fantasies of the exact synthesis or resurrection of the real (this also goes for scientific experimentation), is already no longer real, is already *hyperreal*. Not an exact, but a transgressive truth, that is to say already on the other side of the truth. What happens on the other side of the truth, not in what would be false, but in what is more true than the true, more real than he real? (Baudrillard 1994: 108).

Baudrillard has effectively *inverted* Leibniz by proposing that the latter's question "Why is there something instead of nothing?" has become "Why is there nothing instead of something?"[11] Moreover, Baudrillard has cut loose Leibniz's hyporeality thesis from its mooring in God's necessary existence. Indeed, as the real has disappeared, all that remains is contingent hyperreality. Moreover, hyperreality has somehow escaped or exceeded negation and contradiction:

> Thus, the modern world foreseen by Marx, driven on by the work of the negative, by the engine of contradiction, became, by the very excess of its fulfillment, another world in which things no longer even need their opposites in order to exist, in which light no longer needs shade, the feminine no longer needs the masculine (or vice versa?), good no longer needs evil – and the world no longer needs us (Baudrillard 2011: 16).

For Baudrillard this is a world from which human beings have – tendentially, at least – *disappeared* and in which there has occurred a "dissolution of values, of the real, of ideologies, of ultimate ends" (Baudrillard 2011: 21). Yet not everything vanishes at once; traces remain; there is a "clandestine existence … [that] … exert[s] an occult influence" (Baudrillard 2011: 26); indeed, there remains an "artificial survival," a "prolongation to perpetuity of something that has disappeared, but just keeps on and on disappearing." Consequently, what remains requires a "whole art … to know how to disappear before dying and instead of dying" (Baudrillard 2011: 25). At this point Baudrillard evokes the trace of God as akin to the frightening smile left over from Lewis Carroll's vanished Cheshire Cat: "And God's judgment is terrifying in itself, but the judgment of God without God …" (Baudrillard: 25-26). Baudrillard describes this as "an overall hegemonic process" in which there is a

reabsorption of any negativity in human affairs, the reduction to the simplest unitary formula, the formula to which there is no alternative, 0/1 - pure difference of potential, into which the aim is to have all conflicts vanish digitally (Baudrillard 2011: 44-45).

Not only the world is disappearing but the subject, too, "as agency of will, of freedom, of knowledge, of history" (Baudrillard 2011: 27). Only the subject's "ghost" or "narcissistic double" is left behind by this process of disappearance:

> The subject disappears, gives way to a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelopes everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness – all things radiating out from a subjectivity without object; each monad, each molecule caught in the toils of a definitive narcissism, a perpetual image-playback. This is the image of an end-end-of-world subjectivity, a subjectivity for an end of the world from which the subject as such has disappeared, no longer having anything left to grapple with. The subject is the victim of this fateful turn of events, and, in a sense, it no longer has anything standing over against it – neither objects, nor the real, nor the Other (Baudrillard 2011: 27).

Digitalization of images in turn leads to a disappearance of "the entire symbolic articulation of language and thought":

> Soon there will no longer be any thought-sensitive surface of confrontation, any suspension of thought between illusion and reality. There will be no blanks any more, no silences, no contradiction - just a single continuous flow, a single integrated circuit (Baudrillard 2011: 40).

It would be difficult to find a more revealing account of Baudrillard's inverted Leibnizianism: the reassertion of windowless monads, the invocation of a holographic universe in which each individual expresses the totality of all individuals but only from within – the outside has effectively dissolved. External relations between and among individuals have folded into, been exhausted by, internal relations alone. In short, as Warren Montag has perceptively noted, "Baudrillard celebrates a silent world, a world that has rid itself of every hint of conflict or contradiction" (Montag 1988: 101).[12]

3. A Žižekian Response to Baudrillard

What should one make of Baudrillard's account of the self-emptying of the real, its mundane *kēnosis*? It would be inadequate to say it is mistaken, just an exaggeration of a contemporary tendency toward dematerialization. What is required is an immanent critique by which to restore the materialist lines of demarcation that might push Baudrillard's thought beyond itself without simply rejecting it *in toto*. In effect, what is needed is not only an *inversion* of Leibniz but also a *displacement*.

Here then arises, as Žižek has suggested, a new opportunity for materialism to assert itself at the ground zero of the real and subjectivity that Baudrillard has identified. We must begin anew with "less than nothing" and nonetheless insist, as Galileo allegedly said of the earth, that *eppur si muove* ("and yet it moves").[13] Indeed, there remain contradictions of hyperreality itself that constitute a domain of *virtual dialectics*.

Following the lead of Engels and Lenin, Žižek has compellingly argued that philosophers periodically have to rethink the meaning of materialism in light of new scientific, cultural, and political events – such "breakthroughs" as relativity theory, quantum physics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and "the failures of twentieth-century communism."[14] Such is certainly the case with the emergence of the new electronic technologies that Baudrillard has rightly identified as fostering a "hegemonic process" that tendentially gives rise to *hyperreality*.

Baudrillard seeks to reverse Leibniz's question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" by asking "Why is there nothing rather than something?" Let us even grant Baudrillard's point about the contemporary tendency to dematerialization, disappearance, indeed – to *nothing*. But, as G.W.F. Hegel contends at the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, "nothing" is highly unstable.[15] It operates, we could say, as a dynamic void:

> *Nothing, pure nothingness*; it is simple equality with itself, complete emptiness, complete absence of determination and content; lack of all distinction within. – In so far as mention can be made here of intuiting and thinking, it makes a difference whether something or *nothing* is being intuited or thought. To intuit or to think nothing has therefore a meaning; the two are distinguished and so nothing *is* (concretely exists) in our intuiting or thinking; or rather it is the empty intuiting and thinking itself, like pure being. – Nothing is therefore the same determination or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as what pure *being* is (Hegel 2010: 59).

By similar reasoning, Hegel also shows that "Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing." As a result, not only is there an irreducible void in the midst of Being, but also something incessantly arises in the midst of Nothingness. So the inherent instability of both pure Being and pure Nothingness "pass over" to "becoming" – and the dialectic is off and running.

Another plausible way to respond to Baudrillard, though, would be to note a key contrast between Leibniz and his contemporary Baruch de Spinoza. As we have already seen, according to Leibniz, God's primal act in creating the world serves only to initiate a drawn-out process of actualizing what was virtually contained in his mind from the beginning; this truly is an origination of "something from nothing." Spinoza, however, explains the relationship between God and the world in a way that anticipates Hegel – or rather can be retrospectively appreciated from a Hegelian vantage point. Spinoza argues that the world was not created once long ago

but instead always already commences – and not from nothing but only through the *internal division* within God (or substance) between "naturing nature" (*natura naturans*) and "natured nature" (*natura naturata*).[16] In Leibniz's metaphysics virtual possibilities simply await their actualization; in Spinoza's metaphysics, though, we discover something "less than substance" that drives and incessantly reopens the ontological process by which both singular things (actualities) and accompanying new real-possibilities (virtualities) arise.

The upshot is that both Leibniz's and Baudrillard's positions are one sided and effectively amount to holding the same position. As Althusser famously put it regarding Marx's own relationship to Hegel,

> it is clear that to turn an object right round changes neither its nature nor its content by virtue merely of a rotation! A man on his head is the same man when he is finally walking on his feet. And a philosophy inverted in this way cannot be regarded as *anything more* than the philosophy *reversed* except in theoretical metaphor: in fact, its structure, its problems and the meaning of these problems is still haunted by the *same problematic* (Althusser 2005: 73).

What is required, then, is a conceptual shift or displacement with respect to both Leibniz's and Baudrillard's questions and a transformation of the theoretical problematic itself. The truth is to be sought in the dynamic interaction between something and nothing, in what Bloch notably called the category of the "*Front* of the world-process … the so little thought-out, foremost segment of Being of animated, utopian open matter" (Bloch 1986, Vol. 1: 200). For Bloch the Front not only helps to ground "militant optimism" but also serves as the leading edge of material movement or "forward matter" (Bloch 1986, Vol. 1: 209). In this context, Bloch distinguishes his conception of the "merely cognitively or objectively Possible and the Real-Possible":

> Objectively possible is everything whose entry, on the basis of a mere partial-cognition of its existing conditions, is scientifically to be expected, or at least cannot be discounted. Whereas really possible is everything whose conditions in the sphere of the object itself are not yet fully assembled; whether because they are still maturing, or above all because new conditions – though mediated with the existing ones – arise for the entry of a new Real (Bloch 1986, Vol. 1: 196).

Finally, Bloch stresses how real possibility compels us to conceive of matter as processual continually opening what has not-yet been realized in the world:

> Real possibility thus does not reside in any ready-made ontology of the being of That-Which-Is up to now, but in the ontology, which must constantly be grounded anew, of the being of That-Which-Is-Not-Yet, which discovers future even in the past and in the whole of nature. Its new space thus emphasizes itself in the old space in the most momentous manner: real possibility is the categorical In-Front-of-Itself of material movement considered as a process; it is the specific regional character of reality itself, on the Front

of its occurrence. How else could we explain the future-laden properties of matter? – there is no true realism without the true dimension of this openness (Bloch 1986, Vol. 1: 237).

Žižek has noted that Bloch's position is not simply non-teleological but acknowledges the "ontological incompleteness of reality itself."[17] As a result, Bloch's conception of a radically "open universe" is at odds with a widespread perspective that we live in – or at least will do so in the near future – a closed "simulated universe" (Žižek 2013: xviii).

The proper way to frame the contemporary ontological question, then, is not in terms of *hyperreality* or virtual reality but in terms of the underlying *reality of the virtual*. As Žižek writes in his book on Deleuze,

Virtual Reality in itself is a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproducing its experience in an artificial medium. The reality of the Virtual, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the Virtual as such, for its real effects and consequences (Žižek 2004: 3).

It is, of course, true that Baudrillard regards hyperreality not as a mirror of reality but as a detachment from reality and, as we have already seen, it generates a disappearance of the real (Baudrillard 2011: 33). However, the problem with this way of framing the issue is that this very disappearance occurs as *an effect* of the material world itself. Baudrillard himself proposes that this effect historically arose from modern scientific inquiry into the structure of the external world as well as its technological transformation; indeed, for him "the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very time as it begins to exist" (Baudrillard 2011: 11). Consequently, it would more accurate to say that the material world has not disappeared but has remained causally effective, however much it has become increasingly mediated through technological, cultural, and conceptual means. Moreover, the *disappearance-effect* associated with hyperreality is conditioned, and determined "in the last instance," by material causal factors. Hyperreality remains only relatively autonomous from its underlying and causally efficacious material reality.

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude with an example. Consider a screen – whether a computer, cell phone, or tablet. Recent neuro-linguistic research has indicated that screen-based reading and writing significantly reduce memory retention and have proven to be less effective means of study than simply reading and writing on paper.[18] One is tempted, in fact, to say that an electronic screen embodies and yields *less* virtuality than does a newspaper, magazine, or book. As a result, the contemporary situation has turned out not to be the proliferation of hyperreality via new

technologies; rather, it has become the impoverishment of human imaginative, empathic, and cognitive capacities.

Moreover, a screen is composed of material and is materially produced, its illumination and functionality is materially generated, its energy source is materially produced and conveyed; and it is eventually discarded as material electronic waste – or perhaps it is materially recycled. There exists, in other words, an entire material economic process – extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal[19] –underlying whatever effect is associated with the screen to provide information or entertainment. It is true that this effect cannot wholly be subsumed into an overdetermination of material causes; but neither can it be entirely detached from them, not least of which because of the actually existing *scarcity* of the rare earth metals whose continued extraction and recycling are essential for the production of such technology.[20]

In sum, Baudrillard is doubtless correct to point out that screens and their images give rise to certain disappearance-effects. But there is a more plausible response to the pointed question expressed in the title of one of his last books: "Why has the world not disappeared?" Answer: Because the world has always already existed prior to, and forever remains independent of, the very posing of the question.

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Notes

[1] Hegarty 2004, p. 140.

[2] Citations from *Discourse on Metaphysics* (DM) are based on Leibniz 1991. I have also consulted the superb French critical edition edited by Michel Fichant; see Leibniz 2004.

[3] Leibniz 1991, p. 8. See also DM 13, 26 on "virtual containment."

[4] DM 13; Leibniz 1991, pp. 12-13.

[5] On Leibniz's place within the history of logic, see Jolley 2005: 46-55; and Shenefelt and White 2013: 210.

[6] I use the term "hyporeality" in order to emphasize Leibniz's anti-materialism, according to which the virtual exists prior to, and independent of, the actual.

[7] Indeed, Bloch once remarked to his friend Adolph Lowe that "S is not yet P" served as a kind of one-sentence summary of his entire philosophy; see Cox 1970: 9.

[8] Interestingly, in his famous 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King himself upheld such "open theism" when he observed that "human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation" (King 2015: 136).

[9] I use the term "surreality" in order to echo what Dominique Lecourt (1981: 211-18) has called "surmaterialism" and to signify the irreducible ontological excess of the actual over the virtual.

[10] Baudrillard's attempted inversion of Leibniz is clear in Baudrillard 2009: 63. As we know from Althusser, however, an inversion of another theoretical problematic fails to surpass it; what is still required is a displacement - which is what Bloch and Žižek achieve.

[11] See Leibniz's formulation in his implicitly anti-Epicurean 1697 essay "On the Ultimate Origination of Things" (*De Rerum origination radicali*), see Leibniz 2006: 31-38. For Baudrillard's implicit reversal of Leibniz, see Baudrillard 2011: 63. In his foreward to Baudrillard 2011, François L'Yvonnet explicitly characterizes Baudrillard's position as "Leibniz's question, exactly reversed" and proposes that "it is a radical way of taking one's leave of metaphysics" (p. 3). However, the question remains whether it is possible to "take one's leave" of metaphysics through a process of reversal (or inversion) alone.

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[12] My only qualification to Montag's observation would be that in his last work Baudrillard's tone is not celebratory but mournful; see Baudrillard 2011.

[13] See Žižek 2012: 3-4.

[14] Žižek 2014a.

[15] Here I follow Žižek's compelling reading of Hegel; see Žižek 2014: 385.

[16] See especially the scholium to proposition 29 of the *Ethics*; Spinoza 1996: 20-21. For the distinction between "origination" and "commencement," I draw on Althusser 2014: 67.

[17] The thesis of "ontological incompleteness" (or the "non-All") is one of the central themes of his two recent books on dialectical materialism; see Žižek 2012 and Žižek 2014.

[18] See, for example, Baron 2015 and Greenfield 2015.

[19] For an introduction to these five moments of the "materials economy," see Leonard 2010.

[20] On the problems associated with extracting and recycling rare earth metals, see Veronese 2015.

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