

The New York Times

Mr. Baudrillard was once considered a postmodern guru whose analyses of modern life were too original to be taken seriously.

SPRING 2021

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1 | ISSN 2728-3089

# INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL BAUDRILLARD NOW

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I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us.  
Jean Baudrillard





# The New York Times

“ I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us.

**Jean Baudrillard**

# The Guardian

▲ The French philosopher and sociologist, Jean Baudrillard, is seen in a portrait by Feferberg/AFP

Jean Baudrillard's death did not take place. "Dying is pointless," he once wrote, "you have to know how to disappear." The New Yorker reported a reading the French sociologist gave in a New York gallery in 2005. A man from the audience, with the recent death of Jacques Derrida in mind, mentioned obituaries, and asked Baudrillard: "What would you like to be

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Alexzander Mazey

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# REVIEW OF THE LAST PROPHET OF EUROPE

## Why Baudrillard, Why Now?

Andrew McLaverty-Robinson

1

Like Baudrillard's own work, this is an unusual, original and potentially controversial book. Readers expecting the usual kitsch-poststructuralist truisms cloaked in verbosity will be disappointed. So will those looking only for introductory exegesis. Rather, what the author, Oleg Maltsev, has provided is an almost esoteric reading of Baudrillard, which is focused on the parallels between the French theorist's writings and his own findings on the history of ideas. He believes Baudrillard arrived at a definite philosophy, but deliberately publicized it only in fragments so as to avoid the misuse of its power. He him-

self provides this philosophy, presented as a more-or-less consistent system. This system serves to integrate Baudrillard's findings into a straightforward framework which speaks directly to issues in the philosophy of science/science and technology studies, psychology/psychoanalysis, sociology and philosophy. It might make sense to think of this in terms of Baudrillard as a problem-field, as name-of-history in the Deleuzian sense. Maltsev reconstructs, not Baudrillard's exact writings, but what he believes to be the operative conceptual frame behind them. The name "Baudrillard" then comes to refer to ev-

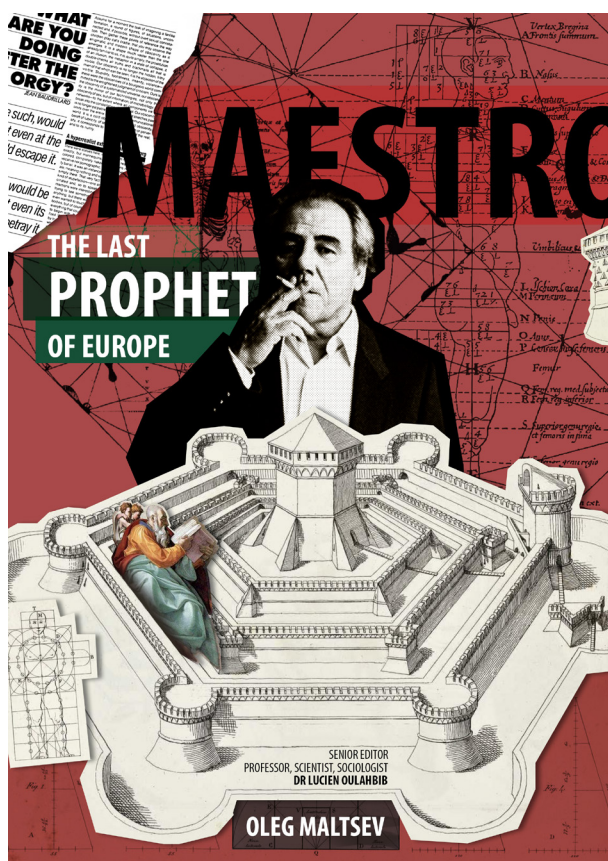
everything stemming from this conceptual frame—and thus, to a much wider sphere of contemporary relevance.

This is not how Baudrillard is usually used. In the English-speaking world, Baudrillard is usually classified as a postmodernist or poststructuralist. He attracted considerable interest in the 1980s-90s due to his apparent relevance to themes of globalisation and mass culture, and was widely read on courses dealing with these two topics. As time has progressed, interest in him has waned. Globalisation studies lost some of its iconic status after 9/11, with security studies usurping its place, and the financial crash of 2008; although Baudrillard also has plenty to say about “terrorism” and “security”, the entanglements of academia with political power in this area made such contributions more of an embarrassment than an aid to other scholars. Cultural studies has increasingly transmuted into preparatory training for the culture industry, with a heavy empha-

sis on identity politics. Here, Baudrillard is still studied, but mainly for his usefulness in interpreting particular films or fictional texts. This is a Baudrillard who is always inside the Matrix, never in the desert of the real.

In any case, Baudrillard tends to be read badly by English-speaking readers. The importation of poststructuralism in the 1980s (in conditions very different from those of its emergence in the revolutionary conditions of 1960s France) was carried out mainly by people looking for a radical-seeming alternative to academic Marxism, often people who would later be drawn towards the Third Way and its project of cybernetic/behaviorist control supplemented by educational expansion and the bizarre simultaneous endorsement of market absolutism and socialistic goals. In the early stage, many of them were ironic relativists, anxious to exorcise “naïve” anger and unironic commitment, attracted to the Dada-like playfulness and incomprehensibility of 1960s/70s French theory, and prone to treat these texts like Rorschach tests, in which linguistic complexity or poetics gives them license to find there anything they like (and ignore what they don’t). It thus follows that what they found was a mirror of their own soul, and this increasingly came to define who Baudrillard (or Deleuze, or Lacan, or Foucault...) is in academic circles, who Baudrillard can be said to be without such claims being struck down in the courts of peer-review, citation ranking, and essay marking. The history of the poststructuralist synthesis, and the contradictory and authoritarian nature of the resultant dogmas, are discussed in more detail in my three-volume critique of Homi Bhabha.

The political castration inherent in the synthesis is nowhere clearer than in the COVID-19 crisis: Baudrillard, and most





of the poststructuralists, would doubtless have reacted in much the same way as Giorgio Agamben and Raoul Vaneigem (some of the last theorists of Baudrillard's generation), yet most of the followers of the orthodox synthesis were vehemently pro-lockdown and utterly uncritical of the powers of cybernetic nudging, media manipulation, modern reason, false universalism, and biopolitics which they might elsewhere denounce; they effectively repeated the actions of the various social-democratic parties which showed their true colours when called to fight in World War I.

The creation of "poststructuralism" as a unitary perspective was often accompanied by simplification and fusion of the various (often highly complex and ter-

and receiving yes/no signals from the surrounding nodes, falls easily into the wider critique of modern and/or postmodern subjectivity and is taken up. Of course, it overlaps enormously with Virilio's theory of logistics, Deleuze's control society, Foucault's governmentality and biopower and even with standpoint theory and cybernetics (never mind that Baudrillard's main point was to oppose this reduction to nodes, whereas many of his readers support it as a means to disrupt the "modern subject" or a method of achieving greater "accountability" through behavioural nudging).

Something like Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange, on the other hand, is subversive of the overall synthesis and gets left-out, marginalised, and misread. It is

**Perhaps the biggest differences between the standard academic's Baudrillard and Maltsev's Baudrillard are that Maltsev's version is a realist and an ethical individualist.**

minologically vague or difficult) theorists grouped under this label. As a result, Baudrillard was most often read in terms of ideas common to this school: anti-essentialism, critique of "the subject" (the idea of a distinct individual), linguistic determinism, the complicity of knowledge with power, the critique of modern reason (including especially Marxism). He had projected onto him a range of concepts and concerns drawn from Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard or Foucault, or created by the Anglophone synthesisers themselves: for example, the centrality of positionality, the basically linguistic/discursive nature of reality, the total rejection of system-scale "grand narratives", etc. Thus for example, Baudrillard's claim that contemporary humans are reduced to the status of nodes, similar to computers in a network, each providing

as if they have separated out the elements in Baudrillard most compatible with their style of theory, and then cut him in half. The half they remove—the more radical, more original half—is then replaced by a simulation built up of remnants of other theorists. This is no surprise, since it's how these authors treat all the French poststructuralists. Baudrillard becomes part of the synthesis only by being subjected to the very techniques he exposes: illusion, simulation, hyperreality. Academia's Baudrillard becomes one of the innumerable Agent Smith clones released into the Matrix to fight knowledge of the real, each carrying the same few dogmas and truisms and the same worldview, interchangeable with the Deleuze-clone, the Derrida-clone, the Wittgenstein-clone, the Benjamin-clone, today even the Gand-

hi-clone or the Buddha-clone, the Black Elk-clone or the Cusicanqui-clone. (I do not mention the clones of the academics themselves; in most cases, they do not have to be cloned, because they are already clones).

Most of the feuding around Baudrillard has actually occurred around the simulated Baudrillard, the cyborg half-Baudrillard half-spectre of the poststructuralist synthesis. All too often, in the minds of both supporters and critics, Baudrillard has mutated into an advocate of simulation, “cool” capitalism, and ironic distance as an existential stance. Such perceptions no doubt contributed to the yoking of his academic fortunes to the fate of globalisation and the New Economy. By the 2010s, poststructuralism has itself been submerged into a broader synthesis dominated by identity politics, with a focus on positionality and standpoint. Baudrillard then gets further marginalised on race and gender grounds: he’s one of the bad guys, the oppressors, who are trapped inside modern reason and cannot possibly see in other ways, and who must be pushed aside to make room for people from the approved identity-groups (never mind that most of the things they say are actually borrowed in mangled form from the French poststructuralists, with or without recognition of the debt). There is a thin sliver of truth in all this: the total submersion in cybernetic control which is the focus of Baudrillard’s work, probably only applies in the global North, as he suggests in his Gulf War essays (which is just another way of saying: local knowledges and passionate commitments continue to exist, outside Europe or on its margins). Mostly, though, this style of critique/absorption of Baudrillard is a handy way of disposing of his radical critique. If the 1990s “postmodernists” accepted neoliberal capitalism pro-

vided they could keep an ironic distance, the 2010s identitarians act as if the spectacle is all there is, and openly orient their theory towards competing for strategic advantage within it. “Seize the means of cultural production”, as Spivak puts it. But today, the means of cultural production are simply the means of production of simulacra. The order of coded elements often involves profiling and discrimination, but the ultimate problem is not the ordering of elements in the code; it is the subordination of life, humanity, nature, creativity and power to the system of coding itself.

Maltsev’s Baudrillard is not the academically acceptable Baudrillard, the cyborg half-spectre. It is an alternative Baudrillard, one who is more alive, closer in some ways to his texts, but also cross-fertilised with a different set of philosophical interests and commitments. Through the work of his institute’s Expeditionary Corps, Maltsev has developed an unusual theory regarding ancient and medieval European worldviews. He believes that older European thought-systems were closer to what is elsewhere called local or indigenous science. People believed in an underlying force, and power could be exercised through particular geometries inscribed in this force. This allowed people to do amazing things, which contemporary humans cannot replicate—and to do them, I would add, with a fraction of the energy consumption, ecological impact, and everyday social control (coercive and manipulative) which is needed for today’s “achievements”. The problem is, this was a qualitative science, an art or craft requiring mastery of technique and intuitive participation in a problem-field—meaning it is unthinkable once science starts being McDonaldized, deskilled and turned into transferable units.



Maltsev reconstructs in Baudrillard's work a theory of geometries as sources of power. He believes that premodern European science and technology were based on some such geometry, and that Baudrillard somehow knew of or intuited this. The knowledge has been lost in academia and in everyday "common sense" because of the insidious corruption of both forms of knowledge by mechanisms familiar to readers of Baudrillard: circular academic knowledge-systems which beg their own questions, unreliable quantitative approaches, self-reinforcing citation clubs creating an illusion of expertise, the undermining of thought by the mass media and the endless "orgies" of consumer society, etc. This will doubtless send readers with sympathy for modern science into outbursts of "pseudoscience!" and "conspiracy theory!" Yet many of these critics would also accept very similar claims if they were made, not based on pre-modern European knowledges, but based on indigenous or non-western belief-systems. I don't know enough of the history of knowledge to assess Maltsev's claims, but his view of pre-modern science are consistent with major scholarship in the field of science and technology studies (e.g., the works of David Turnbull and Thomas Kuhn), and also with much of what survives today of ancient and medieval philosophies, particularly those of a mystical bent (such as Pythagoras and Spinoza). These geometries are also familiar to readers of critical theory under other names: the conceptual rhizome of Guattari, the topologies of desire of Lacan, or ideas such as *mana* which are imported from non-European ontologies.

Even more so than Baudrillard's own work, Maltsev's critique resonates with the currently prevalent critiques of "modern reason" and the search for "other ways of seeing" which are so prevalent in contem-

porary critical academia. However, Maltsev has the courage to go further than most of those mouthing such buzzwords, and actually propose the beginnings of a different philosophy. Also, his alternative to modern academia does not rely on standpoint epistemology or non-western traditions. Rather, he situates the problems in European thought more recently than others tend to, and recognises earlier phases of European scholarship as distinct. This should be interpreted very similarly to the appeal to non-European traditions. It is an appeal from a non-modern Europe, from a Europe which had not yet produced either modernity or colonialism/imperialism, which was still within the field of symbolic exchange and had not yet embarked on its now-fatal path.

From my point of view, it is more mysterious that Baudrillard, who had no expeditionary corps and no background in historical archives, could have discovered such a metaphysics at all. How might such ideas have found their way into the works of Baudrillard and his contemporaries? Part of the answer might be: because these ideas were still residually active even in the decadent sciences of the 1960s, and Baudrillard was particularly good at sorting the wheat from the chaff. My suspicion is that Maltsev has reconstructed the similarities to the European past based on isomorphic elements in Baudrillard's work. Baudrillard may have arrived at a similar awareness by more circuitous routes. To begin with, certain aspects of these geometries are available from the study of the unconscious, and Baudrillard was immersed in post-Freudian theory (Lacan's seminars, Situationism, etc.). Secondly, Marxism has at its roots an affinity with Jewish messianism, and it is possible that this potential, which was buried under decades of orthodoxy, began to re-emerge in

the theoretical thaw of the 1960s. Thirdly, Baudrillard was influenced by anthropologists (such as Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift), so he may thus have come across similar geometries in (say) Tlingit culture, and extrapolated from these to the European context. Importantly, the geometries in question are not those of a cybernetic control society, but involve something this society denies.

Perhaps the biggest differences between the standard academic's Baudrillard and Maltsev's Baudrillard are that Maltsev's version is a realist and an ethical individualist. Maltsev's Baudrillard believes knowledge can refer in some sense to a real world, even if this

process is necessarily mediated by socially-distorted belief-systems, and

even if the nature of this world is nothing like positivism suggests. This is very different from the usual view of Baudrillard as a strong constructivist who believes everything derives from language and all belief-systems are equally valid. Maltsev's Baudrillard also has an almost existentialist commitment to individual responsibility, of a kind which would also make him quite welcome among American pioneers (though apparently not their descendants). This is a far cry from the "death of the subject" attributed to Baudrillard in the poststructuralist synthesis, in which the subject cannot have any direct causal responsibility for anything due to its constructed nature or nonexistence, and in which individual agency is pathologized as a narcissistic illusion. (Such theories nonetheless tend to end up with paradoxical theories of performative agency and ethical obliga-

tion, without really explaining how). Maltsev thus rejects two of the central dogmas of the poststructuralist synthesis: strong social constructivism and the death of the subject.

We have yet to see if this work produces the slanderous outrage that often accompanies deviation from the orthodox line ("naive!" "obviously hasn't read the texts!" "essentialist!" "still trapped in modern reason"! ). I am all too aware of these reactions, having been subject to them a great many times. They reflect the ultimate paradox: a perspective committed to multiple perspectives and forms of knowing, hostile to any form of objectivity or essential-

ism, which nonetheless functions like a rigid orthodoxy with fixed dogmas tak-

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en as absolutely true. I also have my own Baudrillard, which to my mind is a close reading of the texts as literally as possible, but which also doubtless involves my own selections, emphases and decontestations of ambiguous passages. Close readers will notice that my Baudrillard is subtly different from Maltsev's, although both are in a sense mystical expressionists with a radical critique of postmodern civilisation.

Nonetheless, I feel this is a vitally important work. It is important whether or not the reader ultimately decides that Maltsev's Baudrillard is closer to the texts and/or more useful than the standard version. Simply the act of going back and looking at the texts, or going out and testing the texts against the world, is a radical break from the usual uncritical acceptance of a series of homogenised cyborg-spectre-clones representing the final say on what Baudril-



lard “means”. If this work makes a number of Baudrillardian scholars read the texts more openly, without closing down their meaning in advance to the poststructuralist synthesis or to what they find appealing, and/or to look at some empirical field and apply both Baudrillards to see which one works best, then it will play an extremely important role, whether or not any of the sceptics actually come around to Maltsev’s Baudrillard. Right now, Baudrillard (and the rest of the poststructuralists) is like Lenin in his tomb, frozen forever in a set of lifeless dogmas so others can build power-structures in his name. Yet old Baudrillard is not dead yet, he still has some life to give if only he can be chipped out from under all the ice. In the 1960s, writers like Baudrillard (and the rest of the poststructuralists) had the task of excavating Marxism and psychoanalysis from beneath the encrusted orthodoxies which had evolved on top of them. Today, the same task is needed with the poststructuralists themselves. We need many Baudrillards, to free Baudrillard’s legacy from its monological association with the poststructuralist synthesis.

Today, writing a work such as this takes a lot of courage, original thought, and preparedness to stake one’s name on determinate truth-claims in a way that most critical academics will not. This spirit of experimentation, critique, healthy scepticism, iconoclasm, semantic openness, close engagement with texts or phenomena rather than hasty absorption, is Baudrillard’s spirit too. Above all, it is the spirit needed, and all too lacking, in academia today.





# Jean Baudrillard. Maestro. The last prophet of Europe.

Oleg Maltsev, Lucien Oulabbib

## First chapter of the book

2

*"Greatness is not about a person himself,  
but his deeds"*

Dr. Oleg Maltsev

Jean Baudrillard. The last and the most eminent mastermind of the twentieth century. People like him are born once in a hundred years, and today perhaps, such novelty is witnessed even more rarely. For this reason, I have decided to write this book. In scrutinizing what makes this individual "great", I am tempted to say he is not just "great" in the postmodern era of the last century, but he was also ahead of his time. He can therefore be seen as the last "prophet" of Europe. The contemporary

interest in the works of Baudrillard during his lifetime was manifested in different ways, from crooked smiles to careful attention and fascination. Sometimes he was taken as a jester, playing with his readers' assumptions with dystopian parodies of modern life. His works are no less eagerly sought after his death, and maybe even more so. However, people began paying very careful attention when things he had written about became our reality; it wasn't funny anymore.

Why is Jean Baudrillard great? He has been the most popular postmodern philosopher in the world for more than 20 years. He was a source of misery and a bogeyman for many in Europe in the 60s, 70s, and even



80s. There was not a single major publication that would not consider it to be relevant to interview Baudrillard, and almost every major news publication has an interview or a piece about Baudrillard: *the New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *New Yorker*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *Suddeutschezeitung*, *Liberation* and *Le Monde* among many others. Many of the various interviews by journalists and scholars were collected into books titled *Jean Baudrillard. The Disappearance of Culture*<sup>1</sup> and *Jean Baudrillard From Hyperreality to Disappearance*<sup>2</sup>.

However, this popularity or notoriety was not always an expression of appreciation. Many found Baudrillard's views perplexing. The theorist known as the "godfather of postmodernism" was even a "foreign substance" for America at the beginning. Yet his work was sufficiently unusual and unfamiliar to provoke exceptional curiosity. After all, Jean Baudrillard dared to criticize the US, calling it a "primitive society" in his book *America*. This may be typical enough of French perceptions, but from the perspective of those who are "100% Americans" it is an indescribable arrogance. Indeed, American colonial society is founded on its difference from the "primitive".

Yet notoriety may indicate something different: Jean Baudrillard accomplished the impossible. He was able to become globally relevant as a public intellectual, to make waves in ways which few scholars ever do. He was capable of stirring society with his ideas, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, semiology, and even the style of language he used. And the fact that Baudrillard's ideas, even in his lifetime, had supporters and opponents in the society of consumption

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, D. B., & Smith, R. G. (2017). *Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Culture: Uncollected Interviews* (1st ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, R. G., & Clarke, D. B. (2015). *Jean Baudrillard: From Hyperreality to Disappearance: Uncollected Interviews* (1st ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

which he identified as the central sphere of modern society, should be recognized as an achievement — even a civic feat.

Many people consider Baudrillard to be a Marxist, hence labeling him as an enemy of capitalism, but that is not completely right. He begins from the Marxist theory of alienation and something akin to a situationist theory of the spectacle, but later becomes critical of Marxism for keeping its horizons within the world of "production". He thus concludes that Marxist proposals for change were insufficiently radical to alter the fundamental sources of alienation in modern life. His critiques always applied to administered "command societies" as much as to western market economies, and he increasingly saw both as subsumed in a type of cybernetic simulation which destroys the meaning of production itself.

Baudrillard reads and uses the works of Marx, along with those of Nietzsche, Kant, Foucault, Freud, and others. Yet he is original in their uses and is unafraid to reject those aspects of the theorists that he does not find useful. Similarly, he was influenced by Jacques Lacan, but did not become a full adherent of Lacan. In some of his works, if one reads between the lines, his main concern is to address the problem of "the people" themselves (not their oppression by some other system from outside). Yet he does not have in mind the standard Lacanian cure, if such a thing exists; he develops his own psychology through the notion of symbolic exchange, which is absent from Marxian, Freudian and Lacanian thought.

Many have an impression that Jean Baudrillard was critical of capitalism, and that's not quite true either. He criticized people, and humanity; Baudrillard took on the heavy burden of formulating a critique of humanity, and not only capitalism. For Baudrillard, capitalism is simply a relationship type in society; since it exists it was certainly



scrutinized. Yet it is not made into the conceptual cause of all the problems of modern life. Baudrillard thus insists that capitalism has not solved the problems of humanity, that it is rather an effect of these problems. Indeed, Baudrillard also criticized the people, the social, the masses, and left-wing politics. His basic view could be put into one sentence: *it is people who are responsible and guilty for all, if people were different and not a silent "mass", everything else would be different*. He does not argue that the people are innocent or virtuous, and are oppressed by an alien system which is outside of them. He argues that the agency of humans is itself entangled in their alienation.

And that is very reasonable. More than ever, people act as passive masses, following the hivemind generated from whichever algorithmic cluster they belong to. Today, many people do not understand fairly simple things due to a lack of education, and the further evidence of the "disappearance of culture" as was mentioned by Baudrillard in numerous interviews and texts. This leads to new forms of fatalism: uncritical faith in "experts", "necessity", the shibboleths of left or right and so on. Without a scientific approach to reality, people end up taking a religious stance, with various abstractions in the place of God. If we look at widespread "religious" approach, when people say "It's all in god's hands", "God has created the world and therefore he knows what to do," and people are just "an aftereffect of a certain god", therefore everything that happens in the world pleases God. However, empirical observation demonstrates that people are ones who shape the world and not God. Today's consumption, media and political clusters often function in a similar manner, with the role of God taken by one or another sign which unifies the group, while eluding human agency.

Provided this question is looked at from a philosophical perspective, certainly, it

is possible that *somebody* created human beings, and theoretically, possibly it was God. But once he had done it, he would no longer interfere. All the rest is done by people, supposedly helping God to build this world. If we remove the "divine concept" as such and exclude God for a moment as we cannot disprove or prove its existence, then, of course, it would be correct to say that this world is built and shaped by people themselves. Hence, there is an interesting conclusion: all problems come from people (except natural causes (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) that are not in the hands of people). For this reason, Baudrillard criticized humanity and not capitalism. If you consider the entire volume of his works, roughly speaking he devoted a third of his life to "exposing" humanity. There is a whole spectrum of descriptions: masses, society of consumption, silent majority, screened out, the kingdom of the blind, carnival of mirrors, participants of the orgy... one may see for themselves how much attention the problem of the *people* receives. Baudrillard "mocks" humanity for 44 years (1970–2014). In fact, that is an act of courage, as humans can easily get offended at such criticism and treat Baudrillard as a bully.

At least a third of Baudrillard's philosophy is a critique of humanity. The main notion for the great philosopher in this regard boils down to the following: this world is the way it is because of the way people are! As simple as that. If the problem is that the media is intolerable, Baudrillard's position maintained that if you stop accepting what the media feeds you, then they will have no choice but to adjust. As the media changes, it will force politicians to change too. After all, it is very simple: stop watching and following the media, then they will have to change. In fact, mass media organizations will become unnecessary in the way they exist now. They are in high demand only when they can influence the masses, society,

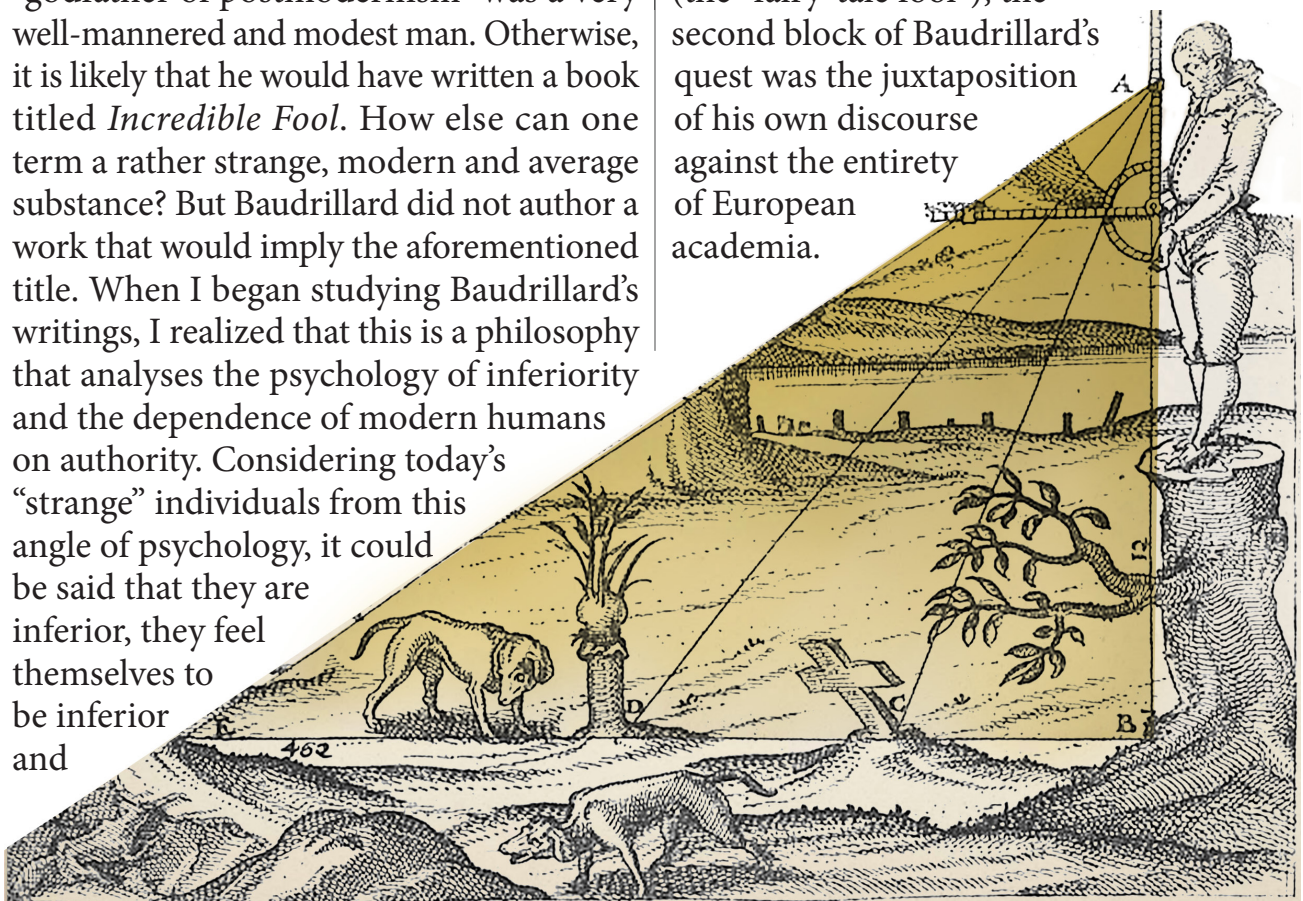
the electorate... but if they have no influence over people, they become useless and will have to change accordingly. Imagine a show presented in a circus or theatre without an audience. Nobody came to watch the show, nobody paid money for it; so why would artists work in an empty hall? Same thing with the media. Any Spectacular, alienating, propaganda, or subjectifying effects are not going to work if nobody reads newspapers or watches TV shows. That is why Baudrillard argued that the problem is in people themselves. If we conventionally divide Baudrillard's works into three parts, then the person would be in the center of it all, not the mass, not the screened-out, not the electorate but the individual.

Equally important is the fact that Jean Baudrillard is not only the last and one of the most famous philosophers in the world, but also one of the last mystics of this world. He was a mystic without a doubt (though not a "guru"), and this will be discussed later. It is impossible not to mention that the "godfather of postmodernism" was a very well-mannered and modest man. Otherwise, it is likely that he would have written a book titled *Incredible Fool*. How else can one term a rather strange, modern and average substance? But Baudrillard did not author a work that would imply the aforementioned title. When I began studying Baudrillard's writings, I realized that this is a philosophy that analyses the psychology of inferiority and the dependence of modern humans on authority. Considering today's "strange" individuals from this angle of psychology, it could be said that they are inferior, they feel themselves to be inferior and

they even aim to be inferior. Baudrillard's theoretical texts are an excellent ground for studying this subject of depth psychology as the psychology of inferiority. This is my own term and not Baudrillard's, but I believe it is a continuation of his work.

Jean Baudrillard thus takes a position like that of a tragic hero. He is great, not because some consider him as such but because he was capable of opposing himself to all mankind. Though not only opposing but also winning the battle and gaining immeasurable popularity and introducing his ideas to millions. He is quoted indefinitely. He is intellectually challenging for many and this list may go on and on. One man. All by himself.

Baudrillard has also accomplished another more vivid feat: opposition to the whole of European academia. This was the second object of his studies. Thus, if the first object of study for the philosopher and sociologist was the "masses", "screened out" and narrowed down to a single individual (the "fairy-tale fool"), the second block of Baudrillard's quest was the juxtaposition of his own discourse against the entirety of European academia.





And he argued in his works that academic science (in which I am including not only the natural sciences or quantitative research, but all research scholarship, “science” in the German or Russian sense) is not exactly academic, because it is false. It’s a hoax, a simulation. The facts it produces are circular: it feeds the masses signifiers which it then reextracts from them. It does not produce knowledge of the world or ways of acting in the world; it provides simulations which are used as blueprints to generate or simulate a world, which nevertheless remains several degrees removed from anything which seems “real”. It is clear that this paradox exposed by Baudrillard persists today.

Modern science, at least in its postmodern form, is no match for ancient science. Ancient science is a science of life, closely connected to crafts and technologies, techniques of living and ways of directing human agency to transform or relate to the world. Modern science did not appear from scratch, and at the same time, it is rather strange: it has never existed in nature. It is not an outgrowth of practices of living, but rather, emerges as part of the simulation of a social world. From Baudrillard’s viewpoint, modern science “appeared” in parallel with the Bourgeois Revolution; it provides the very science that was needed to serve consumer society (and which is very different from the earlier, fundamental science). A science that serves consumer society is bizarre and has little to do with real science, and it causes a number of paradoxes.

These paradoxes are quite simple ones. The first of these is the paradox of fragmented vision. Each of the sciences is a separate entity with its own methods, theories and

assumptions, yet the same practical issue or activity is often the subject of multiple sciences, requiring “interdisciplinary” knowledge. An issue like economics, considered only mathematically (or only ecologically, or only sociologically, or only physically...) is not considered objectively and factually; too much is left out. The choice of scientific discipline and of method “biases” determines the conclusions. The objectivity of science is fractured to such a degree as to become inaccessible. It sometimes becomes possible to consider a certain subject objectively only in the case that it is examined from the perspective of 160 sciences simultaneously. Simple question: who is going to read so many works? Just like back in

the day medicine was divided into “parts”, science at some point branched into different components. Today it

**The ancients suggested that “everything is comprehended through a demonstration,” (J. S. Carranza, et al.) but modern science does not want to demonstrate anything.**

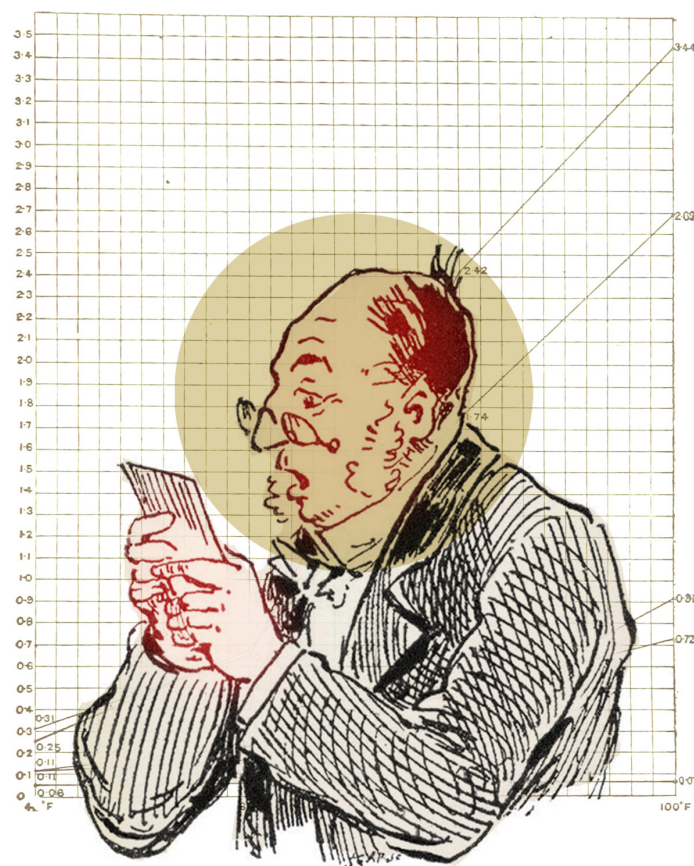
has fallen into a state where only scientific work carried out at the intersection of multiple sciences (not a single specialization) comes close to the truth (i.e. corresponds to three components of the truth: verifiability, multi applicability, and effectiveness); an approach which is not accepted by most parts of American academia, for some reason. European colleagues encourage multidisciplinary research, but this is often frustrated by an attempt to combine multiple incommensurable approaches; sometimes the specificity of a method is lost. In other parts of the world, figuratively speaking, “a historian should only be a historian”, “a philosopher could only be a philosopher” etc. A scientist should not be both (philosopher and historian) at the same time, which sounds rather absurd, but on the other hand, each branch of science has preserved some features of the exact sciences.

### *About the methodology of science.*

Real science is about discovering and understanding zones of the unknown, expanding both knowledge and agency. This goal requires that science be both oriented towards concrete social and practical questions, and that it be autonomous from requirements to conform to political or corporate interests. Today the conditions for such a science do not exist. This is paradoxical, because science is not directly censored or controlled, and scientific methods and tools have developed to an exceptional degree. In today's world, scientists have all the tools permitting them to carry out unbiased, reliable and objective work. Today's home computers have more processing power than the entirety of the Apollo mission control; the discoveries of centuries are available at the click of a mouse. But strangely enough, the average scientist has become extremely conservative about investigating the unknown or understanding and criticising methodologies. Scientists prefer to continue well-trodden paths and re-using methodologies, the rationale for which they do not understand, or rehash similar ideas without original discovery. In real science, methodology is an interactive, pragmatic and experimental field. Scientists need to consider existing methods or even develop new ones as they encounter problems in the field of knowledge, as ways to uncover the unknown. Today, what instead happens is that scientific methods are employed like algorithms: scientists study one or two established methods which they "choose" at the start of their study and apply mechanically to the subject-matter. The result is a weak kind of research in which the chosen method stilt the outcomes, and research results arising from different methods are unable to speak to each other. This is quite easy to confirm; just pay attention to the fact that year by year there are fewer and fewer scientific

discoveries compared to the achievements of scientists and the number of discoveries in (say) the 1930s. These discoveries were often made in correspondence with new methods, by scientists working on concrete problems with some degree of autonomy. Conversely, the algorithm of requirements in academic science stipulates the selection of the research method first. The development of methods is a special discipline, and who knows how long it is going to take — often many years. Governments and companies are more interested in fast results than the advancement of knowledge, even if it harms their practical interests in the long run. As a result, methods get applied mechanically, and novel methods are all too easily discarded.

Studying the unknown is an experimental process without guarantees of what will emerge or when. Yet science today is carried out according to strict timetables, of political, academic or corporate origin. If a scientist has to spend two years just to develop a method to conduct a study, after two years he might become uninterested in





doing the actual research or if he developed the method God forbid one day earlier, what then? If on the other hand the process is delayed, scientists are under pressure to rush the work, publish preliminary findings as established facts, or even falsify their research to meet the deadline. Good examples of this are states such as Russia, where scientific discoveries, according to newly approved legislation, must be made on time, that is according to the schedule. But scientific discoveries are not made on the schedule; alas, Russian leadership believes that this is possible, as if saying: we should strive for discoveries on schedule... Of course, you can make a discovery earlier, but keep it secret, wait until the 5th of the month, and present a report, simulate, so to speak.

Modern academic science at its core is a rather strange assemblage, which has heterogeneous

categories, on the one hand, and disparate scientists, on the other. Most scientists are products of the order, establishment and society where they live. They bring into their science the usual traits such as self-branding, bullshitting, attentive stress and public relations focus, which are widespread in the surrounding society and have come to be rewarded in academia. At the same time as being supposed experts, they are just the way everybody else is and simply replicate science to serve the consumer society in which we live. They formulate scientific claims in the manner others design consumer goods: for saleability, not accuracy. If we speak about Baudrillard's philosophy, his focus is on the "mass" that boils down to one individual. And the second focus of his attention is academic science, which is in fact nothing but a paradoxical structure

within consumer society. Despite all of the assets of humanity (supposedly to some extent false ones), with all of their tools of research and the possibility to create new methods and much more, modern academic science functions according to rules that make it hard or even impossible to do all of this. Science is constrained by "common sense", institutional rigidity, peer pressure and corporate and political issues.

For this reason, Baudrillard is highly insightful, as he has found the strength to oppose himself not only against mankind, to the society in which we live now, but also against academic science, allowing him to serve as a precursor for a future science; as Galileo did. Opposing academic science may be even harder than opposing "soci-

ety", since the former will necessarily take Baudrillard's work and opposition to it

**Baudrillard's basic view could be put into one sentence: it is people who are responsible and guilty for all, if people were different and not a silent "mass", everything else would be different.**

into account, whereas the latter may simply ignore him. Baudrillard threatens to expose the skeletons in the closet of modern academic science: its irrational structure resulting from its complicity in consumer society. Figuratively speaking, those skeletons can be compared to a "dead pharaoh" who is worshipped, another figure in the model of God to whom agency is alienated.

There is a huge difference between modern science and the science which supposedly preceded the current one. The earlier science was objective and designed on practical experience on the basis of the key skill of the era (as termed by the academician G. S. Popov). Humanity in different eras has the concept of a "key skill." As an example, in the middle ages, a key skill was the ability to handle a weapon to survive and the science of the particular era was built

around that vital necessity. It also had some degree of autonomy, and thus contributed to further development of the skill.

For the first time in the history of science, at some point after World War II, it began serving society and as a result of which scientists stopped being scientists. Academics have become a kind of “operating personnel of tradition”, a variety of the manager or bureaucrat plugged into the administration of consumer society, rather than artisans of crafts or pioneers of knowledge. The distinctiveness of schools or universities as spaces related to knowledge began to disappear, as both became increasingly similar to factories, offices or supermarkets. The main aspect of science — applied science (a practical aspect of science, aiming to improve people’s lives) — has disappeared; there is academic science and there is mere application. Consequently, science has found itself as one of the armaments of capital. Capitalists have always been implicitly interested in gaining an advantage over others as competition in capitalist economies never stop. Knowledge has never been more freely available, nor more constrained in its application. This leads to a kind of paradox of negative freedom. Each individual has freedom in consumer society: he can study what he wants, where and when he wants, but the whole problem is that he does not want to because he does not need it.

Without constant development of applied scientific knowledge, the learning of science also falls into crisis. The classical/liberal system of upbringing and education has disappeared, yet teachers and academics retain professional authority based on this older system, which is also paradoxical. In today’s world, some even confuse a teacher with a scientist. The vast majority of professors at universities are not scientists, they are teachers. Bad? Good? Different. Formerly, a scientist used to teach because of necessity,

but today it is the opposite: a pedagogue is a “scientist” by necessity. Academics engage in mediocre scholarship as a necessity for keeping their jobs, which are principally teaching and administrative jobs, and they often teach and administer topics in which their academic knowledge is very limited. As a matter of fact, academic science in the current form is almost useless. No-one pays it much attention, even the academics. That’s the paradox. After all, if it is a science, it has to be useful, but the facts confirm the opposite. Everyone in academia knows other academics are publishing shoddy, repetitive or workmanlike research, citing each other for mutual advantage without actually engaging with each other’s papers, redefining concepts for personal advantage, and so on; everyone knows that no more than a handful of people will read a given article, and that its central claims, unless they tread on someone’s toes, will never actually be tested, applied or criticised. Yet they keep up the game of simulating science, producing something which looks and internally functions very much like an integrated body of knowledge.

Since academic knowledge is no longer connected to applications, there is no way to distinguish between good and bad knowledge. Academic sciences become dependent on fashions, which are set by people whose scientific ability and knowledge are often questionable. Let’s consider as an example, “adaptive thinking” by the German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer (director Emeritus of the Center for Adaptive Behavior and Cognition (ABC) at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and director of the Harding Center for Risk Literacy). His research smashes the approach of modern science and mathematics. He demonstrates “adaptive thinking” throughout the book too: great abilities in the field of higher mathematics, using



Bayesian and other models. Gigerenzer says that today humanity elevates man above all. For example, a machinist in a factory *allegedly* has to be able to keep triple integrals in his mind or a McDonald's manager should calculate probability by means of a Bayesian model if humanity elevates man to the level of perfection. Such properties are frankly incredible; it is doubtful whether such functionaries have even heard of the Bayesian model. Nevertheless, people live without science, they are used to living this way and it seems totally fine in a consumer society. Instead of science, there is, for example, *intuition*, but the way it works or *what* it is, is not even interesting to an average person. For an average person "using" intuition is all about his or her sensations, the whole range of feelings and emotions, which periodically take a certain form; one attempts to decipher this form, calling it "intuition", but this mystifies rather than reveals the forces producing such reactions. Yet a person who does not "intuit" in the expected way is an outcast. As Baudrillard said, today ignorance is the basis of social adaptation. Currently, social inclusion is based on a condition of inferiority and deficiency which is the foundation of life in the society of consumption. Inferiority is a mark of status: the more inferior you are, the more society owes you.

I am not trying to argue against support for people who are genuinely vulnerable: poor people, disabled people, children, and so on. Society needs to take responsibility for supporting these groups. Rather, I am criticising the trend to demand that ordinary, healthy, and "happy" individuals must either claim or simulate inferiority to gain recognition, rather than exercising agency, power, knowledge, productivity, and commitment to the degree that they can. When a perfectly healthy individual, who is not deprived of anything psychologically or physiologically, becomes inferior in order to

gain as much as possible from this society, the result is a disaster, no matter how politically problematic this claim may sound. A point is reached where one must *pretend* to provide such configuration parameters to live well in society, and where the pretence becomes so ingrained that people actually *become* less than they could be. Imagine that everyone has to play the role of a disabled person in everything, all the time. Suppose, however, that this is not just faking, but produces the real effect of incapacity. As Baudrillard observes in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "*Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms*"<sup>3</sup>.

Today's situation resembles that found in *The Adventures of Buratino* (1976), a Soviet musical movie for children. (The screen version of a popular novel by Aleksey Tolstoy. A wooden boy Buratino tries to find his place in life. He befriends toys from a toy theater owned by the evil Karabas-Barabas, gets tricked by Alice the Fox and Basilio the Cat and finally discovers the mystery of a golden key given to him by the kind Tortila the Tortoise.) This movie gives a vivid example of that "country of fools". Buratino, a Pinocchio variant, sells his textbooks and his chance at knowledge to go to a puppet show, only to be targeted for destruction by the show's owner because he disrupts the show. He spends most of the movie trying to free the children forced to perform in the show. What is happening today results from inverted scientific concepts, which are, in fact, the paradoxes of this world. Another example of such a paradox: for some reason modern psychology considers it to be "normal" that masses of people go to work and every month or every week wait for their paychecks — indeed, the neoclassical

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, J., Glaser, S. F., & University of Michigan Press. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Amsterdam University Press.

economics prevalent in academic economics departments and the proliferating business studies and management studies departments take this for granted and aggressively encourage “job creation”; but the same business people who pay workers’ wages are considered in other social science disciplines such as psychology and cultural studies to be “pathological”. There are quite a lot of scientists who hysterically try to prove this. But how can those who provide the living of the “normal” be “abnormal”? Surely either the entire system is “normal”, or the entire system is “abnormal”? Another similar

policy”; the problem is that the “evidence” is very narrowly constructed and of dubious quality). Up to a certain point, science used to demonstrate certain things to the world community. For example, it fired rockets into space, built rockets, invented computers, and so on. Most of the major scientific discoveries prevalent in the postmodern world were made between the 1930s and 1950s, and have only been incrementally improved since. The last irrefutable and real scientists lived between 1984 and 1986, but even in those years, they were already at the stage of leaving science because of their

**In fact, Baudrillard’s system carries a certain concealed knowledge, accessible only to those who carry out a thorough independent study of his texts which aims to perceive their core. Baudrillard has created not only philosophy and sociology but has also provided an impetus towards establishing a new academic school in psychology.**

example is neuroscientific theories which are popularized today, often as a convenient way to justify things as they cannot be verified by experiments. Anyone can formulate a neurological or an evolutionary psychological hypothesis and present it as scientific fact. The actual development of neuroscience is still in its infancy and its findings change all of the time; most of which are uncertain and have few social or political implications, and quite a few take the form of “proving” things which are already known (that sadists enjoy others’ pain or impulsive people have lower self-control for example). Yet these findings appear in the media as if they are the height of verified scientific knowledge, and denying them is like denying gravity.

The ancients suggested that “everything is comprehended through a demonstration,” but modern science does not want to demonstrate anything. It’s just there, that’s all (Generally, experimental research is still valued, hence e.g. “evidence based

age. Some of their students continued their legacy, but very few of them. Some of these scientists, as such, can still be seen today, for instance, in cognitive psychology, Gerd Gigerenzer, Daniel Kahneman and several others. They are not young men anymore, they do not care about what “people think” and they say what they believe to be true. Even if many people do not agree with their work, these people still have no choice but to acknowledge the works of authority figures in their own fields.

However, the further progress of science has largely stopped. Science stopped needing to make discoveries, instead maintaining that “everything is already known” and “don’t revise, challenge, examine institutionalized things” as it may question the activities of previous scientists. Any new scientific discovery could question the scientific “discoveries” of others, which will expose skeletons in the cupboard. Academic gatekeeping and bureaucratic



management of research are used to ensure that science remains within the bounds of orthodoxy, endlessly reaffirming what is already believed.

There is another extremely interesting regularity: the majority of scientific work that exists today is not demanded by anyone. Academic science and society exist separately: society is not interested in what academic science is doing, and nobody even pays attention to it. At the same time, academic science does not pay attention to society. However, it cannot go on like this very long. Certainly, society at all times was in need of science, but not the kind available today. To put it very simply, a modern scientist who did his last scientific work (good, bad, simulative) 30 years ago would still be considered a “scientist” in this society even if he had not done anything in the last 30 years, and only lectured at university. Once he received his PhD or Doctorate status, he was established as a scientist for some. This is what was criticized by Jean Baudrillard: the approach taken by modern science is mediocre. Yet paradoxically, everything necessary for the existence of high-quality

science is available. There is no prohibition on methods and methodologies of science and research, as there was in the times of the Inquisition and the prohibition of certain claims in Europe. Everything is available, but the data and methods are not used. And most importantly, there is no desire among academics to be a true scientist, as the assessment criteria have become totally different. There are structural deterrents to original research. Consider the situation when a scientist deals with a certain subject that is not looked into by other scientists: there might be one or two other people who also research that subject. When such a scientist writes a scientific paper on the results of his research and sends it to a peer-reviewed scientific journal, he is asked: “Why is your citation index so low?”, to which he answers: “Well, who would cite me if there are almost no scientists dealing with the same problem?”. The journal might decide the work is too parochial to be published; alternatively, if it contradicts the previous claims of one of the reviewers, they might reject it on spurious grounds, or demand extensive revisions to bring it back in line with orthodoxy. Alas, the established paradigm followed in the academic world has its own assessment standards which are not conducive to scientific research, and which instead encourage simulation, circular repetition and mutual reinforcement of existing beliefs.

Another paradoxical situation arose recently in the Netherlands at a conference about the problems of blind review in scientific journals indexed in SCOPUS and Web of Science. One of the prominent scholars in his area, who was a participant in the conference, stood up and asked: “*Who would want to blind review my work? I am very curious about who is up to review my work?*” Remember that he is a number one academician in his area. Yet he wonders whether anyone could actually review his



work. The same problem arises today for many leading scholars. Who can review the works of Gerd Gigerenzer? It is like criticizing one of the founders of depth psychology: Leopold Szondi, or Sigmund Freud, or Carl Gustav Jung, for instance. A leading scholar can be cited, but not reviewed. These kinds of circumstances are clear evidence that the very approach of the modern academic system with the requirements of “who to cite, who to review” is dysfunctional in its essence. Who will quote whom? Imagine a genius scientist who is “forced” to make reference to incompetent experts in a particular subject, who have no relation to science. Unfortunately, today, the same norms are imposed on the entire scientific community. A scientist, of course, can refer to his predecessor, but only if he considers it to be relevant. However, if the subject of his study has never been tackled by anybody before him, where is the room for the scientific novelty that is expected in science, if one has to necessarily quote and refer to others? This, among other things, is the problem.

What is the core of the conflict between Baudrillard and the academic community? Science contributes to the worldview of an individual. In current conditions, Baudrillard divided this “worldview” into three parts: illusion (delusion), simulation, and hyperreality. Science can only contribute to this worldview if it itself promotes illusion, simulation and hyperreality. In fact, speaking about the fact that this is not a worldview, but a simulation. People living in consumer society can only handle simulated science.

An illusion is a “category” when we *think* that we know something, without actually knowing it. It is always about the superficial perception of the subject, which has long since become a regular foundation of our society. The main reason for widespread social illusions, misconceptions and

delusions is the speed and acceleration of modern life. High-paced living creates conditions favoring superficiality. As an illustration, if someone has no time to read a two-volume manuscript, they might instead choose to watch a 10-minute YouTube video which “summarizes” the subject in question. However, they may find themselves interacting with others who have also watched the same summary, at which point, it no longer matters if the core of the book was summarized properly or not.

Another important aspect of simulated science is signified by the “like/dislike” formula so clearly articulated on social media. Real science has to be based on objective data about the world. Simulated science has evolved into a set of data that is supplied with the properties of sympathy or otherwise: “I do not like this figure because of my psychological trauma, I am distressed about anything related to the digit “2” ...” For example, academics are now expected to repeat the same moralised terms when discussing particular topics, for reasons related to ethics or politics rather than objectivity. People are meant to “situate” themselves within a grid composed of algorithmic binaries, and not to produce scholarship which escapes from these binaries. In other cases, subjective perceptions are taken as “feedback”, indicating not just perceptions but attributes of (for example) a product or policy. Subjectively, while listening to many “scientists and scholars” today, I catch myself thinking about clinical norms. Supposed scholars often articulate what seems to me a psychopathological discourse with no relationship to reality. For example, one “reads” a text from one’s own preformed point of view, projects into it content which is absent or barely discernible, and presents this reading as if it were a scientific contribution to understanding the text. Can one not similarly say that every psychosis or neurosis entails “reading” the world through



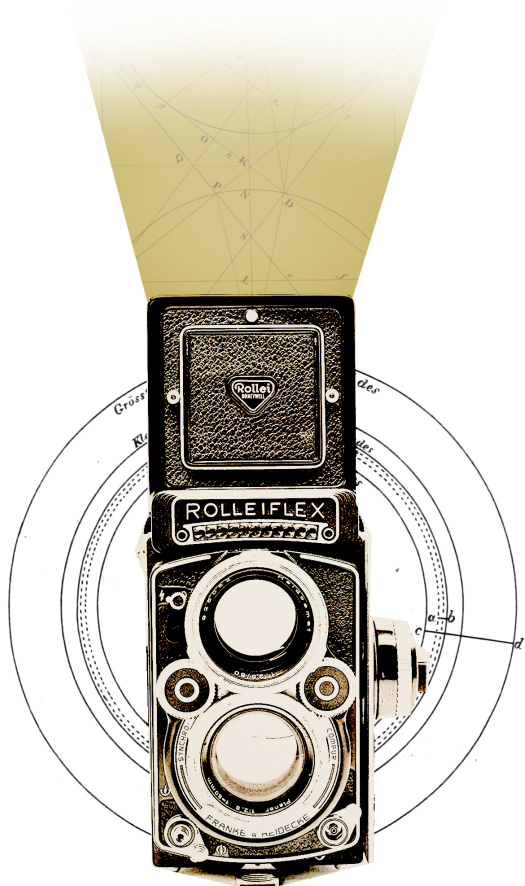
a fixed idea, and is thus equally deserving of scientific status?

Modern academia also teaches its scientists how to lie, justifying it by misusing works of predecessors, and this is another way simulation comes into play. Students learn to repeat the appropriate jargon, but do not learn what it means (if it ever meant anything). They learn to deploy signifiers as if they are buzzwords or marks of allegiance or status. The result is often indistinguishable from science to the untrained eye, yet has nothing to do with investigating the unknown. A well-grounded scheme that is not factual is a simulative scheme. It is confirmed that most scientists have no idea what they are dealing with, psychologists do not know the human psyche, and physicists do not know their units and values, except for a small number of people who are actually engaged in scientific activities. I have been in science for about 25 years, throughout this quarter of a century, I haven't met many real scientists, although I have interacted

with many supposed scientists. Paradoxically, real scientific status is a provision that requires serious sustenance, but this status is assigned to the most obedient, those who tick the boxes for academic jobs and citation metrics, and not to those who are actually engaged in research activities and who can prove their studies to the world scientific community. The category of "obedient scientist" is paradoxical by itself. A true scientist is a revolutionist in science: s/he discovers something new, something which was unknown, and is accountable to the data and not to others' opinions. After all, the main function of science is to clarify the fields of the unknown. Baudrillard attempted to contrast himself with the stupidity and vulgarity of obedience in science.

The third element scrutinized by Baudrillard was the study of the systems (essentially the results) of what has happened. His work *America* is a study of the entirety of one of these systems, the state of American life. The aforementioned text is the result of Baudrillard's study of an interaction with an individual, with a fairy-tale fool, and that very paradoxical science, the worldview imposed by the modern simulative method of science.

It is possible to say that science has made everything in the world incomprehensible. Science for an uneducated person can be, and often is, incomprehensible in detail, but at least when it comes to concepts, it must be clear and understandable. However, modern science is incomprehensible and obscure in all its manifestations. How was this "accomplished"? It is necessary for the scientist to speak in a completely foreign language, to use hundreds and thousands of unclear, complex terms in a minute so that no one understands what was meant or what was said. Furthermore, since humanity has developed a strange trait, what the Strugatsky brothers call the "toggle-switch of self-esteem", nobody wants to look like



a fool and publicly express that he has no idea what is going on. Therefore, it is easier for him to recognize incomprehensible as understandable and reliable rather than to look like an idiot. Hence, most people accept what is given to them not because they understand the essence, but because they don't understand a thing.

The settled mode of thinking in the US is quite strange as Baudrillard wrote in *America* — like people from another realm, mostly very primitive. Since I have friends and partners living in the US, I frequently deal with this country, and I must confess that in the beginning for me with my European mindset, it was not easy to communicate with them. Even the structure and vocabulary of American English and the way it is used was very strange for me in the beginning. A language can show a lot about the way people act and the way they think (translator's note: especially for somebody whose native language is Russian, these two languages are extremely divergent from each other and simply very different in their essence).

Also, there is another category of “scientists” who “adapt and transmit” works of scientists to the masses in such a way that by virtue of ignorance the masses do not understand what was being conveyed by people they have never heard of before. There is a new trend that public activists and speakers are perceived as public authorities, but in fact, are totally incompetent in what they courageously start doing. Nonetheless, these people are perceived by the public and the media as scientists and experts, and the scientific community is in no fit state to put any check on this. The list can go on and on. In a nutshell, the majority of people implicitly consider that learning, in the truest sense of the word, is simply ludicrous. Subsequently, social demands are designed correspondingly. A simple example from today are the requirements of tech

giants and large corporations, what they want from employees is not knowledge but skill, it doesn't matter how knowledgeable one is, the question is simply whether he can demonstrate results.

In today's consumer society, there is little social value in being educated or learning anything in the true sense of these terms. It is not classy to be educated, and it is socially useless or even dangerous. Consumer society's main “measuring tool” of well-being is money. Thus, if one has it, then one is fine, if not then things are bad. Many people think that it is very easy to actually earn money, that it is enough to transform your hobby into your job. Well, if this is true, perhaps it would be smart to learn what money is, how to make it, come up with ways of making money, research financial systems, etc. But people don't do that either. Why? The reason is unknown. As a result, money and wealth are further mystified. These systems cannot be investigated without having a specific approach, methodology, and research tools. And Baudrillard did brilliantly when it came to this; his approaches are conceptual, his research judgments and models are impeccable, and the conclusions he reached are unquestionably verifiable. Various things related to Baudrillard's conclusions are so remarkably apparent that it does not even require evidence, in some cases it would be enough for anybody to look around and see it for themselves. On the one hand, the study of interaction and models is extremely difficult from a research perspective, but today it is crucial. Studying the current state of affairs (things that are already formed) explains the causes of their emergence in the first place. For instance, it becomes clear *why* we ended up having something in the form of a “consumer society”, or an “economy of the sign”.

The fourth subject of Baudrillard's study is mysticism, particularly European mysticism: Baudrillard's question “*What are you*



*doing after the orgy?*” is about mysticism — the future is unknown. However, Baudrillard examined the “future” by means of different approaches. He did not just study what would happen, but also the character of relationships between people in that future, i.e., what it might look like and why. Baudrillard goes beyond the world, and tries to reflect on what is beyond hyperreality. The philosopher spoke of the fact that the world is given to us to be destroyed, that it is not enough to create a new one. Where would the previous world go? This matter was well articulated by him in *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*

Immortality tends towards the primitive. In one of the interviews from the series “The Legacy of Baudrillard’s School” and in my study of the philosophy and sociology of Baudrillard, I spoke with Dr. Thierry Bardini and he said that the idea of moving back to immortality is a simplification. The paradox is that one can reach “immortality”, but at the cost of becoming primitive and losing all his characteristics and traits, in other words, ceasing to be human. The attempt to create a superhuman, which has long been sought after all over the world in the course of history, invariably leads to the creation of a subhuman being. It leads to historical dangers such as fascism. Science can be very dangerous by itself and if used for evil, it may cause catastrophic consequences.

Baudrillard’s mysticism is expressed in concepts such as seduction, virulence, fate and the conspiracy of art. At the center of the mystical conception, there is a transparent evil, which is not inferior at all. The sign (symbolism, symbolic component) for Jean Baudrillard is a multifaceted mystical category, which he uses multi-vectorially and variously to conduct research, draw conclusions and explain causality. On the basis of mysticism, Baudrillard has written the following works: *Fatal Strategies*, *The Perfect Crime*, *Passwords* and *Radical*

*Alterity*. Some elements of this fifth part of his philosophy and its consequences can be considered prophetic.

Apparently, one of Baudrillard’s verification test tools becomes photography (even though he used to say that photography is just a way to spend his leisure time). Human perception is structured in a way that an image is referenced to a concept. For example, a “pack of cigarettes” is both an image and a title (a signifier) that gives an understanding of what it is. At some point in time, in my view, Baudrillard started taking pictures so that the patterns he described could be understood properly. I believe that he went even further with this, he may have suggested the use of the camera as a research tool of philosophy and sociology, which creates an alternative to modern society and science. Baudrillard sees that with the help of a camera a person can look into the future. In one of his interviews with Nicholas Zurbrugg, Baudrillard draws a parallel between photography and writing: “I realized that there was a relation between the activity of theoretical writing, and the activity of photography, which at the beginning seemed utterly different to me. But in fact, it’s the same thing — it’s the same process of isolating something in a kind of empty space, and analyzing it within this space, rather than interpreting it.”<sup>4</sup>

Robert Capa, one of the founders of the world’s first photo agency, Magnum Photos, in 1947, once said that he can express more with three photographs than writing three books. When we think about Baudrillard as a photographer, it is possible to take his photographic works as a supplement to his writings. Therefore, studying the philosophical and sociological thought of Baudrillard while omitting his photography would not be enough to deeply understand his thought.

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, J., Glaser, S. F., & University of Michigan Press. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Amsterdam University Press.





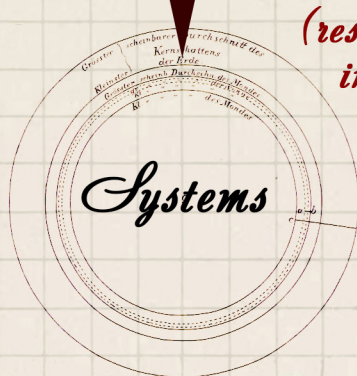
Person



Academic scholarship

PRESENT TIME

APPLIED  
SYSTEMS  
OF PRESENT



Systems

(results of their interaction  
in the form of societies,  
systems, etc.)



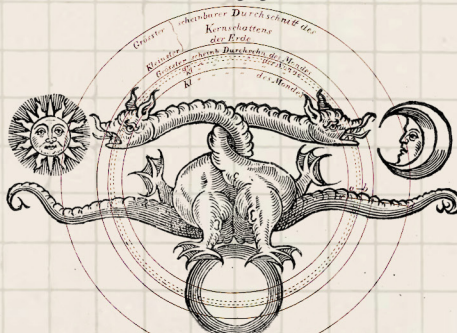
Orgy

The transition  
point from now  
to the future

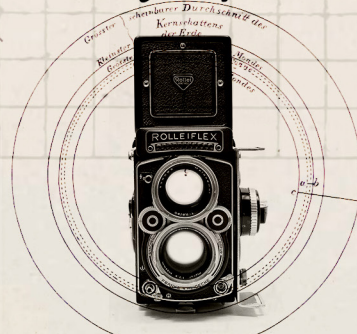
FUTURE



APPLIED  
SYSTEMS  
OF THE FUTURE



Mystique



Camera  
as a research tool



In addition, it must be noted that Baudrillard was a very good *teacher*, like all sages. He did not present his system to people just like that, in a “naked” form, but split it throughout his books and essays by turning them into intellectual configurations. He then developed a building out of them, numbered every piece, every brick. Afterward, he dismantled (figuratively) the aforementioned house, put all of its components on the table and burned all of the schemes and sketches. This means that the situation turns out to be as follows. To understand the entirety of Baudrillard’s concepts and philosophical and sociological thought, one has no choice but to study every piece of his work, one must sketch the design of the building and try to assemble it from scratch. Thus, Baudrillard “doomed” the “student” to do an independent study on his works. Why is that? The French sociologist, Professor Lucien Oulahbib, explained to me that a true insight into Baudrillard’s thought with a thorough understanding of the models and schemes developed by him might become very dangerous in the wrong hands, and that Baudrillard probably feared that. Everything has two sides, the constructive and offensive, since Baudrillard’s philosophy and sociology are very much practical, their power can be exercised in the bad sense of the word.

One professor said that “*Baudrillard is great for attacking any system, anything... it is a terrific hammer*”. The philosophy and sociology of Baudrillard do have a “sacred sphere” inside of them which has a variety of practical systems. I have conducted an experiment and seen the result; on the basis of Baudrillard’s philosophy I was able to create “Security in the 21st Century Textbook”. Certainly, I already had extensive experience in this area as I have been engaged in related research for 10 years, but Baudrillard’s philosophy allowed me to clarify the situation and to create a firm

framework for systematization relevant to current time.

In addition to all of the above, the philosophy and sociology of Jean Baudrillard are multidimensional, by using it, one can do “miracles”. That is, it is equally useful for a businessman as it is for a student, equally useful to both the military and a doctor. It could be helpful to anybody regardless of their position and area of specialty. Provided, if one diligently and seriously approaches the topic, he or she will be able to accomplish a lot.

As a result, I was able to provide a design of the philosophy and sociology of Jean Baudrillard (see image below), by schematizing it on the board.

We have thus identified five parts of Baudrillard’s philosophy, and a sixth component which is an unknown practical part of this philosophy in the form of a dual sphere:

- An individual, with the possibility of scaling levels to the city, masses, scanned, silent majority
- Academic science
- The system of interaction between these actors, the results of their interaction in the form of society and other kinds of systems
- The center of the structure has a key point of transition from the present to the future — orgy — future — mysticism. (“What are you doing after the orgy?”)
- Mysticism (future)
- The camera as a research tool
- A dual sphere of interaction among each other, a place where practical designs of the present and future are directed. All this is arranged in a way that allows us to fully comprehend an exhaustive amount of practical (applied) knowledge in the present, and understand the knowledge of the future by means of independent work and study.

In fact, Baudrillard’s system carries a certain concealed knowledge, accessible only to those who carry out a thorough independent

study of his texts which aims to perceive their core. Thus, Baudrillard has created not only philosophy and sociology but has also provided an impetus towards establishing a new academic school in psychology. Most importantly, he also created a system of independent work for an individual study that may result in an applied science of the present and the future.

Leaping ahead, I will say that I won't limit myself with just one book on Baudrillard's thought. Every book I write about his system will have its purpose, just the way this book does. The purpose of this book is to teach the reader how to study Baudrillard's philosophy on their own, how to structure the reading in a way that while studying Baudrillard's books you will be able to fill in the practical details of the present and future. Subsequent books are probably going to be about helping to understand particular details of Baudrillard's system (for example, nuances when it comes to the topic of a single individual, masses, society, science, and systems that already exist). Perhaps at some point in time, every person will need to ask themselves the same question posed by Baudrillard: What are you doing after the orgy? The law of outrunning the growth of demands and a number of other predicted patterns of nature make human desires illimitable, and desires are further intensified by impatience. The masses want everything and they want it right now! And this desire generates the orgy, but obviously, there is no eternal orgy, so what happens when the orgy is over? This is a very serious philosophical, sociological and psychological question. If the question is looked at from all three perspectives (philosophical, sociological and psychological) it yields many conclusions that should be grasped. The orgy is the key to unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life. Baudrillard's photography is a mirror of his mysticism, which is beyond the orgy, it is

an unknown future. You can look ahead to the future, and not too far away, let's say the day after tomorrow or 10 years ahead, but the further it is the worse it gets. This world can be seen as an orgy, in fact, that's what's happening right now.

For example, currently, the whole world is in quarantine because of COVID-19—it is an “orgy”, so what's after that? Baudrillard's mysticism has a direct answer to this question: there will be fatal consequences of fatal strategies. What exactly will be the consequences? One has to sit down and look into the matter, but there is no doubt that the consequences will be fatal. After an orgy, there are always fatal consequences, as is evident throughout history. How long can an orgy last? Historically they are short-lived, even if it lasts long enough in the view of people, to the history of mankind it is a drop in the ocean. All that takes place after the orgy is mystical, a consequence of fatal strategies.

For all that, the purpose of writing this book is to teach the reader how to study the philosophy of Baudrillard and to discover ways that will allow each reader to delve into the depths of his philosophy and make the best out of it.







# Jean Baudrillard, Me, and Ethnic Theme Parks

Jerome Krase

3

## Introduction

In my work, which I have tried to synthesize for this essay, I have upon occasion borrowed, mostly retroactively, from Jean Baudrillard, or other notable French, or otherwise, intellectuals to support my theorizing, descriptions, and/or findings; even my musings. It is, or was, a recognition that, without significant disciplinary reputation, my own scholarly efforts might not be able to stand the slings and arrows alone, as reviewers always look to see if something is supported by or fit into, established ways of thinking about a subject. Thinking outside the box

is a privilege for those who don't need approval. In this brief essay, I would like to show how bits of his work can warn, advise, caution, and inform ways of seeing the world around me.

When I first perused "America," I thought to myself how I would have loved to get away with such free, verbose, expression. I remember being taught in graduate school that my feelings about a subject of study, without supporting numbers, graphs, and charts, were not only irrelevant but dangerously extraneous verbiage. They were, as is *America*, essentially, more a work of art rather than science and

therefore academically irrelevant. In many ways, his whirlwind reflections on the country in which I live appeared to me as jagged fragments that would at best serve as a collection of intriguing pieces for a jigsaw puzzle of a psychedelic map of the USA.

I was particularly struck by his feelings about New York City and its people; although to my disappointment he seemed not to have ventured outside of Manhattan and its verticality; which I despise, and which is now demolishing the relatively less dizzying horizontality of the city's outer boroughs. I had hoped as well that he had spent some time (perhaps he did without comment) in New York's Little Italies and other Ethnic Theme Parks. These are the places in which the commodified social, cultural and symbolic capital produced by immigrants and their offspring, have produced diverse vernacular landscapes, festivals, restaurants, and other amusements for outsiders. In other words, where the places and its inhabitants are sold. (Krase 2012b) These social rubrics or ethnic genres of urban commercial precincts are "simulacrae" of a commodified ethnic theme park.

Although my own work does not derive in any way from a reading of Jean Baudrillard (1983), I think it is important to offer a sense of the ways in which his much more intensive concerns dovetail with my own. As opposed to representations that are a product of reality, these simulated representations are prior to, and therefore determine, what is "real" for the viewer. The postmodern observer's inability to distinguish between reality and the simulacrum is the result of a number of forces, especially the powerful media culture that not only relays information but also interprets it for the receiver. They are not merely a hegemonic demographic designation (a

place dominated by particular residents). Rather, it is an idea about a place that can be marketed in one way or another.

When discussing the visualization of American Cities. (2012a: 109-138), I argued that Jean Baudrillard reserved a special place for American cities that are, for want of better terminology, an urban *je ne sais quoi*. In other more or less European places one could find assembled the same social and physical elements. However, he thought that "missing" were the "sparkle and violence" and the "immense skies" that shaped the American mind. Speaking ill of Paris' "sickly buildings," and its high-rise business district la Defense as a French garden—"a bunch of buildings with a ribbon around it" (2010: 15), Baudrillard exalted the American city for its mad spatial competition that rejects constraints and approaches the arrogance of the urban Renaissance. For him, even demolition is a worthy spectacle:

*The twenty-storey block remains perfectly vertical as it slides towards the centre of the earth. It falls straight, with no loss of its upright bearing, like a tailor's dummy falling through a trap-door, and its own surface area absorbs the rubble. What a marvellous modern art form this is, a match for the firework displays of our childhood. (16)*

Since I am more interested in the streets than the skylines, Baudrillard offered, now dated, rejoinder:

*They say the streets are alive in Europe, but dead in America. They are wrong. Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York. They are filled with crowds, bustle, and advertisements, each by turns aggressive or casual. There are millions of people in the streets, wandering, carefree, violent, as if they had nothing better to do—and doubtless they have nothing else to do—than produce the permanent scenario of the*





Figure 1. Southeast Baltimore, Maryland, 2016  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



city. *There is music everywhere; the activity is intense, relatively violent, and silent (it is not the agitated, theatrical activity you find in Italy). The streets and avenues never empty, but the neat, spacious geometry of the city is far removed from the thronging intimacy of the narrow streets of Europe.* (2010: 16)

Robert Venturi offered an equally powerful vision of American urban landscapes that complements the conflicting notions of J.B. Jackson (1984) and Wilbur Zelinsky (1991). Venturi continues to be for architectural critics and historians, and me, the most salient reference. The architectural theorist Jean La Marche placed him, along with his partner Denise Scott Brown, among four seminal twentieth-century architects and firms that included Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Aldo Rossi. Venturi tried to entice American

architects, planners, and builders away from the predictable modernism that dominated the field in the 1960s. Of special importance was his concern for quotidian urban life and commercial signage.

### Origin and Theorizing Theme Parks

As I have written about Theme Parks (2019), large-scale public amusements have been around since ancient times in the form of religious and state sponsored festivals and performances. Historically such spectacular, often themed, collective celebrations functioned primarily to unify populations and create, or maintain, collective solidarity. In addition to confirming the social order, during the Middle-Ages, local and regional fairs provided a wide range of diversions to large crowds. Large-scale religious festivals evolved during this period and continue until today as city-

wide spectacles such as Rio di Janeiro's Mardis Gras.

**The most powerful iteration of themed amusement parks was the 1955 opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California. It was the product of the imaginative genius of Walt Disney.** For Jean Baudrillard, Disneyland was the most real place in American because it admits to being only a simulation. "The objective profile of the United States, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pacified." (Poster 1998: 171)

**Regardless of profit motivations, variations of Disneyland, resorts, and even an ideally themed American town — "Cele-**

**"Disneyfication," is the transformation of something real and unsettling into a controlled and safe environment with similar qualities.**

**bration" — have been developed around the globe. They have also given rise to a major concept**

**in sociological discourse concerning the relations between urban spaces and the people who use or inhabit them. "Disneyfication," is the transformation of something real and unsettling into a controlled and safe environment with similar qualities.** The discourse has been enhanced by similar, more academic terms, such as "disneyization" connected to theories of consumption (Bryman 1999). George Ritzer's post-modernist version -- "McDisneyization" -- have expanded Disney's idealized conceptualizations about generic spaces into a globalizing homogenizing style. (1998)

The notion of theme parks as spaces in which individual freedom is accentuated has been turned on its head by many contemporary urbanists and social critics. The leading exponent of the negative view



is architect and urbanist Michael Sorkin who declared.

This is the meaning of the theme park, the place that embodies it all, the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure --- all these artfully hoodwinking forms --- as a substitute for the democratic public realm and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work.” (1992: Xv)

In *Variations on a Theme Park*, Sorkin, presented eight essays by leading urban scholars. They were highly critical of the elitism of designers and planners that resulted in the alienation of users of a wide

range of urban spaces and places such as large-scale shopping malls, and recreated historical settings. In the same volume, Neil Smith, also discussed the role of taming unruly spaces played in gentrification and displacement New York City’s Lower East Side. (2002 see also Krase and DeSena 2016)

Such critics see contemporary cities destroying the familiar, albeit messy, liberating spaces of cities that underpinned their historically democratic potential. They also elevated, without defining, the value of visible and accessible “authentic” urban places that served to bind together the ideas and activities of increasingly diverse populations. Instead of a city wrought by organic growth, contemporary urban



Figure 2. North End, Boston, Massachusetts, 2018  
(*A Few Little Italies*)

planners and designers crafted a collection of special districts governed by marketing and feasibility studies. These social spatial strategies served to help “tame” the stereotypical disorder of the dangerous city.

While Sorkin cautioned against the loss of the bonding power of familiar spaces, elsewhere Richard Sennett had already lamented the sequester of differences because of the fear that they might be more “mutually threatening than mutually stimulating.” (1990: xii) Much earlier, Lyn Lofland had dealt with the evolution of the contemporary metropolis as a social system whose central value is managing social, cultural, and economic heterogeneity. She also spoke to the danger that fear of the “other” would create a safe but dehumanized urban life and culture in the “Public Realm.” (Lofland, 1998) Relatedly, Sharon Zukin lamented the loss of authenticity resulting from the upscaling and homogenizing redevelopment of streets, neighborhoods, and public spaces that compromises their distinctive identity. (2010: xi).

On the other hand, Susan Fainstain asked whether contempt for Disney’s widely copied model of blending theme parks, shopping malls, and street scenes together is a product “intellectual snobbery.” She “... argued that Disney World and Times Square constitute a democratic tourism and provide common reference points in an increasingly fragmented world. (2007: 14) However, as a result of such theming and tourism, urban culture itself has become a commodity, and cities have a competitive advantage over suburbs. (2007: 1) Theme parks are a form of “commodification” -- when economic value is assigned to something not previously considered in economic terms such as an idea, identity or gender. Here I should note that LBGTQ neighborhoods in cities have joined ethnic enclaves as popular tourist destinations.

David Harvey organized spectacles in urban imagery which cities can employ for consumer dollars and investment. Although primarily concerned with the modern or post-modern version of “display of the commodity” under the constraints of “flexible accumulation,” he noted that since the ancient Roman “Bread and Festivals” spectacles have also existed as a means of social control. Their creation and maintenance are also associated with increasing social and spatial polarization of urban class antagonisms. (1989: 270-73)

Kevin Fox Graham closely examined urban festivals in New Orleans, Louisiana (2005) and employed ideas of Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre to discuss the conflicts of meanings inherent in local celebrations such as Mardi Gras, suggesting that despite consisting of “hegemonic ideologies and dominant images” these events also offer opportunities for local resistance against corporate control.

*“What is new today is the way in which different types of spectacle (shopping malls, casinos, world’s fairs, sports, theme parks, tourist-oriented celebrations, and so on) and different technologies of spectacle (theming, simulation, virtual reality, and so on) have encroached into the public realm and the everyday life of the city.” (2005: 242).*

### **Theme Parks as Representation**

For Kevin Lynch landscapes play a social role “...as a vast mnemonic system for the retention of group history and ideals.” (1960: 126) The disaster landscape wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 provided New Orleans with new imagery. Consequently, Symbolic Interactionists Mark Hutter and DeMond Miller discussed the re-branding of New Orleans’ urban image as a “come back city.” One aspect was incorporating “Emotionally charged places, such as the Lower Ninth Ward, that have collective memories of death, destruction, are assembled as part





Figure 3. Near West Side Chicago, Illinois, 2019  
(*A Few Little Italies*)

of a package to be sold as a complete “Disney-style” tour experience of the city of New Orleans.” (2011: 7)

There are many examples of theme park tourism that appeal to morbid interests. I have argued, regrettably, that places like the Jewish Ghetto of Kazimiersz and Oswiecim Death Camp in Poland are of this genre. “Slumming” and ghetto tourism are similar genres that invite visitors to safely sample the dangers of stigmatized, places and peoples. As to the preservation of historically oppressive ghettos for tourists, some have argued that it helps to maintain false ideas about their inhabitants. Both real and imagined, “exotic,” ethnic places, especially Chinatowns and Black Ghettos, have been common urban spectacles producing contrasting attractive and repellent visual mental images. Jan Rath called for innovative approaches to better understand the process by which “expressions of immigrant culture can be transformed into vehicles for socio-economic development to the advantage of both immigrants and the city at large.” (2007: i)

In contrast, John Urry employs Baudrillard to criticize such urban “seeing” as something which fascinates and denigrates.

*On the one hand, we live in a society of spectacle as cities have been transformed into diverse and collectable spectacles. But on the other hand, there is denigration of the mere sightseer to different towns and cities. The person who only lets the sense of sight have free rein is ridiculed. Such sightseers are taken to be superficial in their appreciation of environments, peoples, and places. Many people are often embarrassed about mere sightseeing. Sight is not seen as the noblest of the senses but as the most superficial, as getting in the way of real experiences that should involve other senses and necessitate much longer periods of time in order to be*

*immersed in the site/ sight (see Crawshaw and Urry 1997, for further detail).*

*The critique of the sightseer is taken to the extreme in the analysis of “hyper-reality,” forms of simulated experience which have the appearance of being more “real” than the original (Baudrillard 1981; Eco 1986). The sense of vision is reduced to a limited array of features, it is then exaggerated and it comes to dominate the other senses. Hyper-real places are characterized by surface which does not respond to or welcome the viewer. The sense of sight is seduced by the most immediate and visible aspects of the scene, such as the facades of Main Street in Disneyland. (2011: 349-50)*

I think of commodified themed districts as what Jean Baudrillard (1983), called a “third order of simulacra” that are found in the postmodern age. As opposed to representations previously discussed as the product of reality, these representations are prior to and determine the real. The postmodern inability to distinguish between reality and the simulacrum results from a number of factors or forces, especially the current media culture that not only relays information but also interprets it for the receiver. As I have argued:

Students and practitioners in urban sociology are simultaneously blessed and cursed with competing theories and methods for describing the post-modern, post-industrial metropolitan urban scene. But throughout all the theoretical, methodological, and ideological questions characterizing the field, the central organizing construct for urban studies has remained, in one form or another, “space”. Therefore, explaining how these real and imagined spaces are used, contested, and transformed by different social groups remains the crucial task. As sciences are described in terms of their ability to produce cumulative knowledge, something is





Figure 4. Belmont, The Bronx, New York, 2016  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



sorely needed to tie together so many disparate threads. One may also inadvertently notice how often proponents of competing perspectives echo one another but without acknowledging the voice of the “other”. (2014SCC?: 17)

As to my favorite subject of ethnic enclaves, I have argued that no historical model can adequately represent their multiple realities as there are too many permutations and combinations of variables such as generation, class, and location. Therefore, I suggested visual and semiotic approaches to help understand the structural and cultural realities of both ethnically authentic and themed spaces. Little Italies and Chinatowns are not merely demographic entities, but what Lefebvre called “representations of spaces” as well as “spaces of representation. (1991)

I have written of and photographed many contestable versions of Italian America. By employing professional biographical narration, and employing various symbolic and semiotic theories to challenge the scholarly opinion that Italian Americans have little claim to ethnic “authenticity.” As to “Interpretation” I have offered a theory that emphasizes the sociological *verstehen* method pioneered by Max Weber to fit the sub-field of “Heritage Interpretation” that is presented to museum visitors, and other consumers of “authentic” ethnic cultures. Society is a dependent shared “text,” and my texts are visual images, thousands of photographs taken in iconic Little Italies around the world that I have presented as to their claims of authentic *Italianità*. These, what I call “Ethnic Disneylands” or “Ethnic Theme Parks,” are for many



Figure 5. Mulberry Street, Manhattan, New York, 2016  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



observers appropriate theatrical stages for the presentation of the “Italian Look.” Given the agency that we

all have, readers/viewers can make their own interpretation.

In agreement with De Certeau, Blonsky, and Sennett, I have argued that in order to experience authentic social life all one has to do is come out down from one’s more or less ivory tower and take a walk, with me around any Little Italy. There we can look at the places and spaces created by the ordinary people who live, work, and shop there and in the process provide us with multiple, often marvelously contradictory, presentations of the “Italian Look.”

My photographs are usually presented with little in the way of captions as not to distract from the claim of authenticity that is made by the image of a place and

space that in an earlier turn has made its own similar claim about which the image speaks. It must be emphasized that the possible captions provided by me might be different if written instead by those who accompanied me on the excursion, or by Michel de Certeau, Roland Barthes, Richard Sennett or Jean Baudrillard for that matter. A few photographs of more and less well-known Littles come at the end of this essay.

### **Little Italy as a Baudrillardesque Spatial Semiotic..**

In my study of urban neighborhoods, I have tried to maintain the edge of my own Sociological Imagination; “...a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities.” (Mills, 1959:15)



Figure 7. Federal Hill, Providence, Rhode Island, 2010  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



Like all real and imagined ethnic neighborhoods, Little Italy is a product and source of both social and cultural capital. Although the ordinary people who live in them ultimately are at the mercy of distant forces, in their naivete they continue to create and modify local spaces allocated to them. In spite of and because of their efforts they become part of the urban landscape. Urban residents and the spaces they inhabit become symbols. Ironically, they come to represent themselves and thereby lose their autonomy as the enclave comes to symbolize its imagined inhabitants and stands for them independent of their residence in it. Localized reproductions of cultural spaces can also be easily commodified. For example, The expropriated cultural capital of the Italian American vernacular such as resistance to diversity,

cultural insularity, and perhaps even racial intolerance becomes a sales point in real estate parlance as a quaint “safe” neighborhood, with “old world charm”, and romantically symbolizing the “way it used to be”. In almost every Italian neighborhood I have researched and photographed I have either been led to, or discovered on my own, a local *bocce* court. At another level, this particular physical space and the people, especially old people, playing within it is a common semiotic for Italians and their urban neighborhoods. I have a small collection of photographs of *bocce* courts that are used to illustrate the written texts about Italian neighborhoods that appear in newspapers and magazines. As to media attention, Italian enclaves are generally featured in local periodicals around October 12<sup>th</sup> (Columbus Day), or



Figure 6. Wooster Street, New Haven, Connecticut, 2016  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



stories about organized crime.

Because there are too many permutations and combinations of variables such as generation, class, and location, no historical model can adequately represent the multiple realities of any ethnic-America. However, I have attempted to show how Little Italy speaks to the idea of Italian America and how a visual sociological approach can add to our understanding of its structural and cultural realities.

Idealized ethnic urban spaces are “Representations of Spaces” as well as “Spaces of Representation”. I have termed them: Oblivion, Ruination, Ethnic Theme Parks, Immigration Museums, and Anthropological Gardens. (Krase, 1997)

“1) Oblivion means “the state of being forgotten.” Every day thousands

of trucks and cars drive through spaces which once contained vital and vibrant Italian American neighborhoods in major cities such as Boston, Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco.

2) Ruins. Nostalgia for the rubble of ancient Rome or Pompeii is no match for that of the stores, businesses, and homes in Italian American neighborhoods abandoned in anticipation of “renewal”, cleared of misnamed “slums”-, and still awaiting new uses.

3) Ethnic Theme Parks. Despite displacement of most of the “natives” the most famous of American Little Italies are preserved as spectacles for the appreciation of tourists, and the streetscapes which are used by film crews shooting “locations” for Mafia movies. Manhattan’s Mulberry Street, and the world-famous Feast of San Gennaro takes place in an Asian neighborhood decorated with “Italian” store fronts,

street furniture, and outdoor cafes where restaurateurs recruit “swarthy” waiters from Latino communities. A few ethnically sympathetic vendors might attempt to recreate Italian markets, but many are more likely unashamedly hawk “Kiss Me I’m Italian” buttons, ethnically offensive, or inoffensive, bumper stickers, miniature Italian flags, and almost anything else in red, white and green.

Most Theme Parks contain (4.) Assimilation Museums and (5.) Anthropological Gardens. Assimilation Museums are places for the preservation and display of inanimate objects whereas Anthropological Gardens (Human Zoos) are places where the subjects of curiosity are maintained

in their live state.

In Assimilation Museums we find Memorabilia Exhibits, Archives, and

Galleries run by groups devoted to the “Preservation of **OUR** Ethnic Heritage”, ubiquitous monuments to Christopher Columbus, homes of the famous such as mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and the more infamous, like Al Capone.

Anthropological Gardens are usually crisscrossed by Naples Streets and Columbus Avenues. There one can observe “Local Italians” at memorial *bocce* courts, senior citizen centers, and social clubs. Video journalists use them as repositories for on-camera interviews about organized crime. Those left behind are the keepers of the tradition who can tell you how it was in the “good old days” in the old neighborhoods. (104-5). (2014: 34-36)

At the turn of the twentieth century, American cities contained settlements, mostly of European immigrants, for example, in the form of Pole Towns and Jew Towns, with a smattering of Chinatowns.

**The image of America becomes  
imaginary for Americans themselves,  
at a point when it is without doubt  
profoundly compromised.**

Today, at the turn of the twenty-first century one is more likely to discover those of newcomers from Asia and the Southern Hemisphere such as Koreatowns, Little Bombay's, perhaps a Little Lagos, and a wide assortment of *Barrios*.

Across the vast American landscape there are many different versions of cultural and historical commodification the most familiar are "wild western" cattle, mining and lively ghost towns. In some states, tourists are offered visits to Native American reservations to view performances or simply buy local handicrafts. There are also numerous recreated and preserved settlements that pay some sort of homage to American history such as Colonial Williamsburg living history museum in Virginia replete with historical interpreters and character actors. The Amish found in "Pennsylvania Dutch Country" and the

similar American places that these simple folks have settled have also been used by entrepreneurs to tap into the pockets of the curious.

As Much as Mike Davis (2001) might like to celebrate Latino cultural agency in Los Angeles, their *Latinidad* is also hardly immune to trivialization and commodification. In downtown Los Angeles across the street from Union Station is the location of the historic *El Pueblo de Los Angeles*, that is currently re-presented as a Mexican Ethnic Theme Park called "Olvera Street" consisting of a *faux* Mexican market place with ethnically appropriate shops, restaurants and museums. According to every tourist guide, Los Angeles also offers other more and less authentic enclaves such as "Ramen Row" in Little Tokyo that attracts suburbanized Japanese Americans by offering Buddhist temples, shops, restau-



Figure 8. Bella Vista, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2018  
(*A Few Little Italies*)



rants, taverns, and the Japanese American National Museum.

### **Baudrillard and More and Less current Politics**

Trying to finish this essay on Election Day 2020 in the USA, I could not ignore Baudrillard's prescience as to the The End of US Power.

*The fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and*

*you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power. In the seventies power was still there, but the spell was broken. That was orgy time (war, sex, Manson, Woodstock). Today the orgy is over. The US, like everyone else, now has to face up to a soft world order, a soft situation. Power has become impotent. But if America is now no longer the monopolistic centre of world power, this is not because it has lost power, but simply because there is no centre any more. It has, rather, become the orbit of an imaginary power to which everyone now refers.*

*...America has retained power, both political and cultural, but it is now power as a special effect. In the image of Reagan, the whole of America has become Californian. Exactor and ex-governor of California that he is, he has worked up his euphoric, cinematic, extraverted, advertising vision of the artificial paradises of the West to all-American dimensions. (2011: 103-104)*

*In Reagan, a system of values that was formerly effective turns into something ideal and imaginary. The image of America becomes imaginary for Americans themselves, at a point when it is without doubt profoundly compromised. This transformation of spontaneous confidence into paradoxical confidence and an achieved Utopia into an imaginary hyperbole seems to me to mark a decisive turning-point. But doubtless things are not this simple. For I am not saying that the image of America is*

*deeply altered in the eyes of the Americans themselves. I am not saying that this change of direction in the Reagan era is anything other than an incidental development. Who knows?*

*You have the same difficulty today distinguishing between a process and its simulation, for example between a flight and a flight simulation. America, too, has entered this era of undecidability: is it still really powerful or merely simulating power? (109)*

The morning after the US Presidential election in 2016 I gave the Keynote Address for the Fieldwork Photography Symposium at the University of Central Lancaster, in Preston UK. I began my talk by anticipating the questions that would be asked of me at the first coffee break, by saying "Yesterday a battle in the USA took place between Whore of Babylon and the Anti-Christ, and the Anti-Christ won." Four years later, we have a subsequent simulation, this time of hyperreal masculinities where, according to Jessica Bennet, in the "Politics of Manliness," it is "the tough guy" versus "the nice guy"

*On the one extreme is President Trump, who leaves little subtlety in his approach: Bragging about his sexual prowess, along with the size of his nuclear button, proclaiming "domination" over coronavirus and mocking his opponent for the size of his mask ("the biggest mask I've ever seen"), as if mask-wearing is somehow weak. ... On the other end of the spectrum, or perhaps somewhere in the middle, is Mr. Biden, a "Dad-like" figure, as the philosopher Kate Manne put it, who has vowed to be America's protector through a dark period, with some combination of strength, empathy and compassion. (Bennet 2020)*

In the same paper, Julie Bosman reports on a semiotic Presidential battle raging where "Signs Get Snatched, Kicked,

Burned as Political Battle Reaches the Front Lawn.” (2020)

*In Illinois, Florida and Arizona, police officers have been summoned to investigate Biden signs set ablaze and Trump flags swiped in the night. Homeowners, angry over their campaign signs disappearing, have set up elaborate motion-activated cameras to catch the culprits. A sneaky few have booby-trapped signs with sharp razor blades glinting underneath. ..“There’s just a lot of bad feelings now, and this is what it comes to,” said Annie Phillips, 82, a retired educator in suburban Seattle who had two Biden signs stolen from her front yard. “I’m holding my breath until the election is settled.” Fed up after her second sign was taken, Ms. Phillips bought a third one and nailed it to her garage door.*

The only thing we can be certain of after this simulation of electoral democracy is over, is that Jean Baudrillard would have written a scintillating essay about it, and we would spend a great deal of time deciphering hyper-and not-so-hyper-reality of it.

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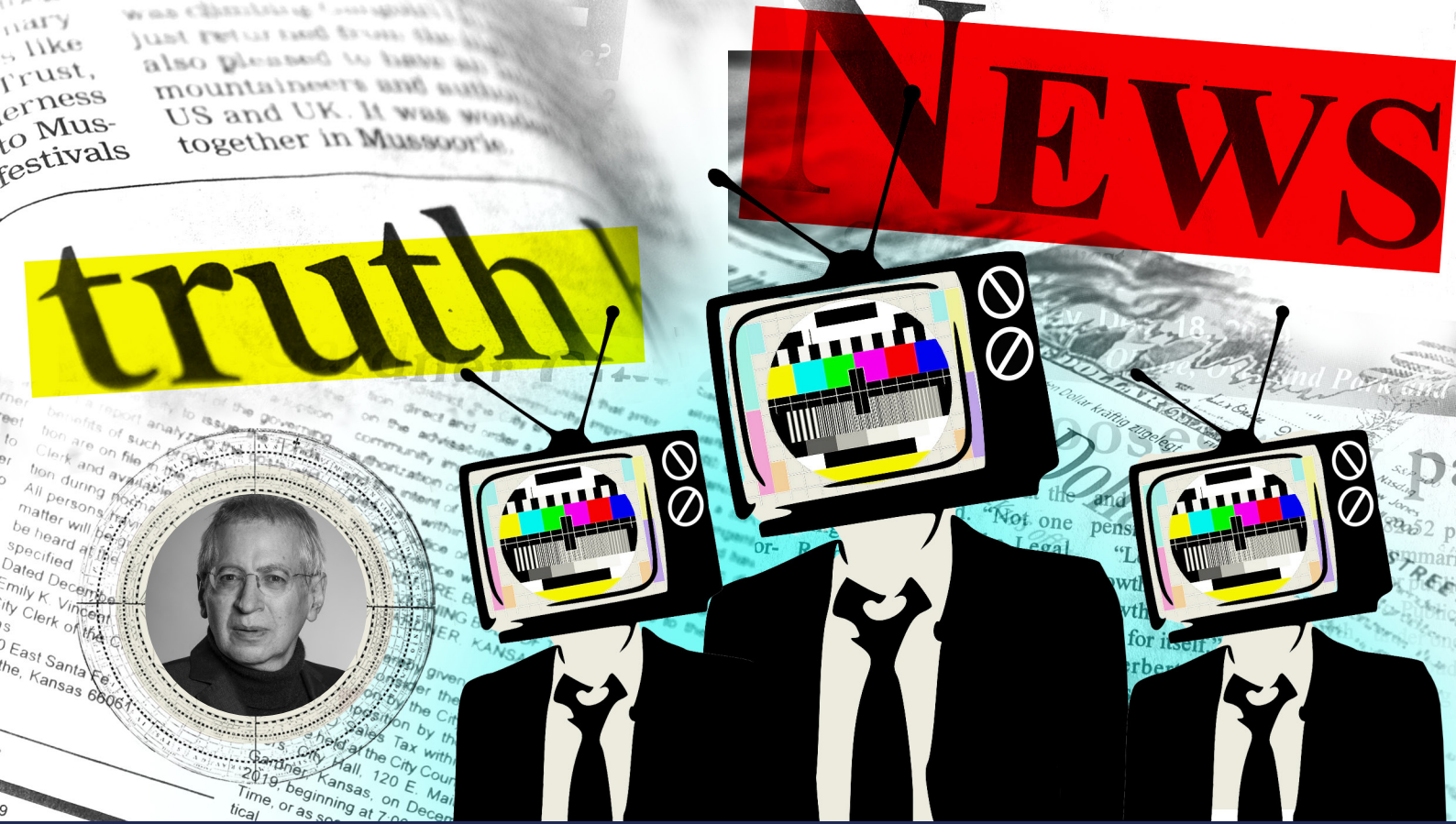
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# Jean Baudrillard and the Donald: Is Trump a Fascist or is He the Parody of Fascism?

Alan N. Shapiro

4

## Epistemology of True and False

The kind of media theory or media analysis which has been prevalent on the American political left for the past several decades operates essentially with an epistemology of true and false. Noam Chomsky has always been subtle and nuanced in describing the moral complicity of the intellectual class (and his own personal struggle to overcome that complicity) with abhorrent U.S. government policies such as the destruction of Vietnam in the 1960s or of Iraq in 1991. Yet Chomsky's com-

mentaries on what the corporate liberal media reports on politics, current events, and world affairs are largely about exposing the lies that the news media tells and recounting the contextual and factual realities *on the ground* which they conceal. Chomsky only analyzes the entity called the news media. He does not analyze the media as a whole – for example, entertainment TV shows, advertising, celebrity culture, or blockbuster movies. He assumes that an understanding of the news media or of the domain called politics or



the public sphere can be accomplished without connecting the news media to the media in general in the overall situation of advanced capitalism. In classic works such as *Manufacturing Consent* (co-authored with Edward S. Herman and published in 1992) and *Media Control* (2002), Chomsky argues that the mass communications news media carries out the propaganda function of lying.<sup>1</sup> Powerful business interests which have a profit motive manipulate the media, which in turn manipulates and controls the citizenry. The truth that American foreign policy has the essential function of establishing governments around the world which are politically controlled by us and are friendly to big companies is concealed by the dissemination of falsehoods. The role of the leftist activist or journalist is to tell the truth about any given political conjuncture. Chomsky's work is extremely valuable, yet what is Chomsky's perspective missing?

In their war against Trump, the liberal political media – CNN and the *New York Times*, for example – take the same tack as Noam Chomsky in epistemologically framing their struggle with the fake billionaire as a battle between true and false, between facts and lies. Trump is constantly telling lies and the *Washington Post* is unmasking them every day, keeping a list of them, setting the record straight. As of July 2020, Trump had told twenty thousand lies. It is no surprise that Chomsky and the liberal media share this same epistemology – they both believe in the philosophy and the historical project of the modernist Enlightenment: facts, science, truth, communication, rationality – these are allegedly the great achievements of the democratic West. Never mind that it was this same liberal media that helped Trump win the Republican nomination for President in the first place against sixteen oth-

er candidates in 2016. Trump merged the sphere of politics with *shock jock* Reality TV World Wrestling Federation media entertainment. He provided those liberal TV stations, newspapers, and websites with a new sensationalistic headline every day for many months. Since making money is their highest priority – and astonishment, titillation, and breakdown are the commodities they sell – the media loved it and made Trump their absolute focus of attention.

### **Society of the Spectacle and Hyperreality**

An alternative to the epistemology of true and false as a media theory – which is derivative of the assumption that Enlightenment rationality and the civilized discussion advocated by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* are going to save us – was offered by the French Situationist Guy Debord in his 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle*.<sup>2</sup> Let me state that my position is that we should seek a balance between the *modernist* commitment to *truth* and the *post-modernist* placing into question of that assumption. I do not want to reject rationality and truth, but I believe that new strategies are urgently required as well. Guy Debord was a neo-Marxist thinker attempting to comprehend how control over the lives of workers by capitalists expanded from the sphere of production to consumerism, everyday life, and the media culture of images and rhetoric in the historical progression to advanced capitalism. With his concept of *the spectacle*, Debord understood that the omnipresence of visual images institutes a world of both abstraction and passivity, a diminishing of what is “directly lived” and an increase in the autonomy and power of the images themselves.<sup>3</sup> Something becomes true – or *more true than true* – by virtue of having been said, or said charismatically, in the media. In

the *spectacle*, “the liar has lied to himself.” “In a world which is *topsy-turvy*,” writes Debord, “*the true is a moment of the false*.”<sup>4</sup> Social life goes beyond the shift from *being* to *having* to *appearing* and the reign of appearances.

The media theorist and semiotician Jean Baudrillard developed Guy Debord’s notion of the *society of the spectacle* even further into his theory of *simulation*, *simulacra*, and *hyper-reality*.<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard’s most celebrated book is his 1981 volume *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he famously wrote about the map preceding the territory, and about Disneyland existing to conceal the fact that all of America is Disneyland.<sup>6</sup> Simulacra are copies without originals. Semiotics (linguistics applied to culture) teaches us about *the signifier* and *the signified*, which

**The media in general have cut us off from real access to historical events.**

together constitute the linguistic-cultural sign. In post-modernism, the *signifiers* (images and discourses) come to replace the *signifieds* (facts and references) of which the visuals and words are supposed to be the reliable and verifiable representations. Representation is surpassed by simulation. Words and images stand on their own and have no reference.<sup>7</sup>

The *spectacle itself* has become the main thing that the contemporary society and economy produce. Consumer objects, architectural ambiances, and media artefacts all primarily have an abstract *semiotic* function. In the *system of objects* (Bau-

drillard’s first book of 1968 was *The System of Objects*), the physicality and definite location of objects gets subordinated to their participation in the “perfect circulation of messages.”<sup>8</sup> The intercommunication and relationality of sign-objects to each other takes precedence over the specificity of each. All objects and media content enter into an equivalence through their common belonging to the *universal* self-congratulatory communication system. Each product ad refers not only to the individual product that it is *informing* us about – it also refers to itself as ad, endorsing the wonder of advertising *per se*. Through the spectacular celebration or *radical visibility* of a single object or brand, it is the totality of objects and a universe made complete

by brands that is promoted. In speaking of

one single consumer object, *advertising* virtually glorifies all spectacle objects and media images. Consumer society (Baudrillard’s second book of 1970 was *The Consumer Society*) does not satisfy needs but is rather a manipulation of signs.<sup>9</sup> To become a consumer object or media message, the entity must first enter into the universal sign-system.

Baudrillard’s third book of 1972 was *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx’s political-economic theory of the commodity-form of exchange value in production capitalism gets merged – and in a critical way – with a radicalization of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic semiotics in an original fusion cri-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; theses 2, 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Alan N. Shapiro, “Baudrillard and the Situationists,” NoemaLab.eu, September 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, originally published in French in 1981) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The best study of Baudrillard and semiotics remains Gary Genosko, *Baudrillard and Signs: Signification Ablaze* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (translated by James Benedict, originally published in French in 1968) (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation: ses mythes, ses structures* (Paris: Denoël, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).



tique of the sign-form in consumer capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard articulates the homology between Saussure's linguistic sign and Marx's commodity form. This unified *political economy of the sign* or analysis of the commodity-slash-sign form equals the code. The real, the lived, the myth of an objective reality – they all become alibis for the simulation models. The signifier of the greatness of America's prosperity is standing in for concrete singularities of objects. The code of signifiers substitutes for references in the immense process of simulation. We live in the formal democracy of standards of living and signs of affluence – the republic of the automobile, the cheeseburger, and the home entertainment system. Affluence is the accumulation of signs of happiness.

The media in general have cut us off from real access to historical events. Everything that I know about the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the Vietnam War comes from Hollywood films about those events which I have seen. Baudrillard cites many times an aphorism by Jewish German-language philosopher Elias Canetti from 1945, speaking about a certain point in history, when exactly this point was is unknowable, when history itself disappeared. Canetti writes: "As of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality, everything happening since then was not true; but we didn't notice."<sup>12</sup> In his essay on Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 blockbuster Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now*, Baudrillard writes that Coppola's masterpiece is the continuation of

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (translated by Samuel Moore) (CreateSpace, 2007); Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (translated by Roy Harris) (Open Court, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Human Province* (translated by Joachim Neugroschel) (New York: The Seabury Press, 1998); p.69.

the Vietnam War by other means. "Nothing else in the world smells like that," says Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall). "I love the smell of napalm in the morning... It smells like victory."<sup>13</sup> The high-budget extravaganza was produced the same way that America fought in Vietnam. "War became film," writes Baudrillard. "Film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology."<sup>14</sup> There is implosion or mutual contamination between *film becoming Virtual Reality* and War.

### Donald Trump the Empty Signifier

Donald Trump is a product of this culture of postmodern *anything goes* images and rhetoric. The mythology of Trump was born during the New York City gilded 1980s, the era of Ivan Boesky and Gordon Gecko greed and Wall Street insider trading. Donald Trump plastered the name Donald Trump everywhere he could. He of the golden toilet, he the playboy ladies' man, the casino owner, the entrepreneur of the opulence of the billion-dollar Atlantic City Taj Majal gambling and entertainment paradise-complex. He was a failed businessman and a gangster, but on Reality TV he played the ultimate glamorous billionaire whom many Americans admired and dreamed of themselves becoming. President Trump lies and his supporters believe it. For them, his charismatic speech has become more powerful than the democratic and scientific systems of true and false.

In two of his final texts – *Carnival and Cannibal* and *The Agony of Power* – written shortly before his death in 2007, Jean Baudrillard describes a newer "order of simulacra" which is the phase of irony, parody and *the carnivalesque*.<sup>15</sup> Baudril-

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Apocalypse Now" in *Simulacra and Simulation*; pp. 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Carnaval et cannibale* (Par-

lard upgrades his concepts of *simulacra*, *simulation*, and *hyper-reality* into a cogent diagnosis of the self-parodistic stage of Western society. *Simulation* or *hyper-reality* is no longer the artificial staging of a so-called *reality* by the models and codes which precede it. Simulation is now a farce, an immense irony, a masquerade, a fun-house-mirror distortion of the previous values and ideals of modernism: freedom, culture, truth, humanitarianism. “Every signification is eliminated in its own sign,” writes Baudrillard in *The Agony of Power*, “and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality... Power is only the parody of the signs of power – the can-

platforms.<sup>17</sup> Donald Trump is a successful *empty signifier*. “The bigger he got as a name, the smaller he got as a person,” said recently the former Trump Organization executive Barbara A. Res.<sup>18</sup> Trump is the ultimate *simulacrum*, the living demonstration of the rule of the *signifiers* over the *signifieds*. Fake is not a betrayal of authenticity. Trump is the most talented fake in the world. Lies are exciting. They set in motion their own forceful narrative. When Trump says something, it becomes true because Trump says it, and there is little that the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* can do about it. The institutional bases for consensus and legitimation of the

**The “ecstasy” of objects is their proliferation and expansion to the Nth degree, to the superlative; ecstasy as going outside of or beyond oneself; the beautiful as more beautiful than beautiful in fashion, the real more real than the real in television, sex more sexual than sex in pornography.**

nibalization of reality by signs.”<sup>16</sup> The values of the West and of America degenerate into a caricature of themselves and devour themselves. This is Donald Trump.

We have experienced these past four years – in the masterful showmanship of Donald Trump and his fanatic *deplorable* followers, in the full-scale replacement of politics by Reality TV, in the *tele-morphosis* of the merger between Reality TV and everyday life – the disappearance of political substance into the fascination with the *banality of insults* (see Hannah Arendt’s *banality of evil*) that is now the hallmark of the media-celebrity-gossip culture of obscenity which dominates American life and the online monopoly social media

is: L’Herne, 2008); Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (translated by Ames Hodges) (New York: Semiotext(e), 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*; p.35.

*truth* have disappeared beneath the mountains of information and the virtualization of discourse. The media culture in general paved the way for Trump. All of America is responsible for the disastrous situation in which we now find ourselves.

### **From Simulation to the Grotesque and the Self-Parody**

A not so well-known aspect of Baudrillard’s theory of *simulation* and *hyper-reality* is the way that he links the postmodern culture of media images to the *motif* of the grotesque in art, literature and performance, as a cultural expression moves from *parody* to *self-parody*, as something

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Barbara A. Res, *Tower of Lies: What My Eighteen Years of Working with Donald Trump Reveals About Him* (Graymalkin Media, 2020).



becoming a parody or caricature of itself. We are living the historical phase of the self-parody of the revered values of Western civilization. Simulation takes a major step forward from merely “*the hyper-real replacing the real*” to the grotesque. We are on the fast track to what Baudrillard calls *carnivalization* and *cannibalization*. Carnivals were historically very political – they were parodies made of the powerful by the oppressed. At festivals, the black African colonized dressed up monkeys in admiral suits and hats to parody the white colonizers.<sup>19</sup> In Cologne and in the Rhineland region of Germany, parody and mockery of the French and Prussian occupiers were at the center of the carnival tradition that began in the nineteenth century. But self-parody is something different. It occurs without conscious intention. It is like what Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, writing about the French *coup d'état* of 1851, when Marx famously said: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”<sup>20</sup> To avoid having to give up the Presidency, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte staged a self-coup to stay in power. He carried out Operation Rubicon on the anniversary of his uncle Napoleon’s triumph at Austerlitz in 1805.

Self-parody sinks its unaware performer into debasement or abjection. America sank into abjection with the 2004 Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse scandal (Baudrillard wrote about Abu Ghraib in his 2004 essay “War Porn”).<sup>21</sup> U.S. Army

and Central Intelligence Agency personnel sent selfies to their friends and relatives from Saddam Hussein’s infamous prison, now taken over by the occupying American power, smiling and *saying cheese* while standing next to prisoners whom they had just sodomized and tortured. Disneyland and the *Americana* culture of universal total simulation seem like harmless fun. Radical simulation is how America came to achieve hegemony over the world. America had no peers in its fabrication of fantasies and spectacles. Yet at what point does that become seriously perverse? Donald Trump is the embodied metaphor of that turning point. You want to be the world’s only superpower through *the image*? Then you will bring yourself down by the endlessly looping video image and the image-playback.<sup>22</sup> After the tragic event of September 11, 2001, the video footage of the implosion of the World Trade Center twin towers was played back thousands of times over and over again on TV in an endless loop, the eyes of the tele-spectators fixed to the screen in perverse fascination. Baudrillard detected a symbolism in the way that the two tallest buildings of the Manhattan skyline collapsed or imploded in a visually *suicidal* motion, seemingly responding in turn as a counter-gesture to the murder-suicides of the 19 terrorists.<sup>23</sup> The carnival of the image is also the self-cannibalization by the image.<sup>24</sup>

An important precursor of Trump playing the President on television and on Twitter was the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California in 2003. The elevation to a powerful political post of the Mr. Olympia bodybuilder and star of the *Terminator* series of science

<sup>19</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Carnaval et cannibale*; p.9.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “War Porn,” in *The Conspiracy of Art* (translated by Ames Hodges) (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Carnaval et cannibale*; p.24.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (translated by Chris Turner) (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

fiction films was a not-so-surprising caricature of democracy. Reagan the Hollywood actor and TV host of General Electric Theater had already been governor and President. Politics has been fully banalized into a game of idols and fans, the triumph of the celebrity culture.<sup>25</sup> Schwarzenegger would have certainly become President if not for the bad luck of an antiquated clause in the Constitution which disqualified him *a priori* on xenophobic grounds. As we are now witnessing the probable end of the Trump presidency – and thinking with Baudrillard – I contemplate the contempt for the rest of the world which the Trump supporters feel and express through their allegiance to him. Those who identify the most with the *simulacrum* of America take revenge symbolically for the envy and scorn which the rest of the world feels for the American *simulacrum*. America exercises its power in the world through its mastery of images. Yet a certain desperation seems to have now set in. The Trump phenomenon is the marriage of that showman grifter narcissist and the desperation of the MAGA throngs worried about losing their standing.

### Springtime for Hitler

For a long time, some Jewish theologians thought that showing images of the Holocaust should be taboo, since the event was the ultimate unrepresentable evil. Humanities theorists of photography have sometimes argued generally that historical truth cannot be depicted through visual images. Similarly, it was thought that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s were so morally reprehensible that parody or comedy or jokes about them should be taboo. In the 1967 film *The Producers* made by Mel Brooks, bankrupt Broadway producer Max Bialystock, played by Zero Mostel, needs to stage a musical that is guar-

anteed to be a flop in order to carry out a complex scam to save himself from financial ruin. Bialystock hits upon the apparently ingenious idea of producing a musical comedy about Hitler and the Nazis. It will be in such bad taste that the show is guaranteed to be panned by the public and the theatre critics and to close in disgrace on opening night. Yet to Bialystock's astonishment, the show is a smashing success. The Broadway public finds *Springtime for Hitler* to be the funniest thing in the world. Adolf Hitler is unintentionally brilliantly parodied by deranged ex-Nazi Franz Liebkind. Due to the unexpected triumph, Bialystock now paradoxically faces financial ruin and even prison.<sup>26</sup>

Is Trump a fascist or is he the parody of fascism? Here is my answer: he is the parody of fascism. Yet he is also the *self-parody* of America and, at one step removed, of the celebrated values of the West. Trump is the self-parody of the most hyper-mediatized culture in the world: the culture of consumerism and shopping mall *no-place* ambient spaces; television and advertising; the media- and image-saturated *society of the spectacle*; and the hyper-real fantasy aesthetics of Disneyland. As both the parody of fascism and the self-parody of the post-World War II so-called *American way of life*, as the synthesis of both (self-) parodies, Donald Trump has brought us to the precipice, to the edge of the cliff, to the spot from where we are now standing and staring down into the abyss.

Classical fascism works according to the *Führer* principle and a strong and stable set of beliefs. There are territorial claims, hard nationalism, and theories of race. For Trump, these aspects become variable and *anything goes*. He changes his mind every

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *The Producers* had further incarnations as a real Broadway musical which ran from 2001 to 2007, and a 2005 film version starring Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick.



day and has no goals or agenda other than *greatness* and *freedom*. The energetic force of fascism persists, but without the fixed ideological reference points. This parodies fascism since absolute truth is transferred to the double-system of the empty self-referential *signifiers* and the arbitrary *signifieds*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thank you to Denise Werth for thinking through these ideas with me.





# Baudrillard and Trump

Douglas Kellner

5

French theorist Jean Baudrillard has long been one of the foremost critics of contemporary society, politics, and culture. A professor of sociology at the University of Nanterre from 1966 to 1987, Baudrillard was for some years a cult figure of postmodern theory. Yet Baudrillard moved beyond the discourse of the postmodern from the early 1980s to his death in 2007, and developed a highly idiosyncratic mode of theoretical and socio-cultural analysis that went beyond the confines of modern philosophy and social theory.

In Baudrillard's postmodern world, individuals flee from the "desert of the re-

al" for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realm of computer, media, and technological experience. In this universe, subjectivities are fragmented and lost, and a new terrain of experience appears, which for Baudrillard renders previous social theories and politics obsolete and irrelevant. Tracing the vicissitudes of the subject in contemporary society, Baudrillard claims that contemporary subjects are no longer afflicted with modern pathologies like hysteria or paranoia, but exist in "a state of terror which is characteristic of the schizophrenic, an over-proximity of all things, a foul promiscuity of all things which beleaguer and penetrate him, meet-



ing with no resistance, and no halo, no aura, not even the aura of his own body protects him. In spite of himself the schizophrenic is open to everything and lives in the most extreme confusion" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 27). For Baudrillard, the "ecstasy of communication" means that the subject is in close proximity to instantaneous images and information, in an overexposed and transparent world. In this situation, the subject "becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influence networks" (ibid.).

Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies* (1983, translated in 1990) presents a bizarre metaphysical scenario concerning the triumph of objects over subjects within the "obscene" proliferation of an object world so completely out of control that it surpasses all attempts to understand, conceptualize, and control it. His scenario concerns the proliferation and growing supremacy of objects over subjects and the eventual triumph of the object. In a discussion of "ecstasy and inertia," Baudrillard discusses how objects and events in contemporary society are continually surpassing themselves, growing and expanding in power. The "ecstasy" of objects is their proliferation and expansion to the *N*th degree, to the superlative; ecstasy as going outside of or beyond oneself; the beautiful as more beautiful than beautiful in fashion, the real more real than the real in television, sex more sexual than sex in pornography. Ecstasy is thus the form of obscenity (fully explicit, nothing hidden) and of the hyperreality described by Baudrillard earlier taken to a higher level, redoubled and intensified. His vision of contemporary society exhibits a careening of growth and ex-crescence (*croissance et excroissance*), expanding and excreting ever more goods, services, information, messages, or demands — surpassing all rational ends and

boundaries in a spiral of uncontrolled growth and replication.

Baudrillard's world is fully realized in Donald's Trump's America where the obscene President reveals his every thought, aggression, and inanity in his daily Twitter feeds and ec-static media performances where he lets it all hang out, revealing his hatreds, insecurities, and mendacities, often abstracted from the consensual reality of the mainstream media which has documented thousands of flat-out lies, absurdities, outrages, and outrageousness. The *Access Hollywood* tape, which reveals Trump in his full obscenity in an interview with Billie Bush just before the 2016 election, was spun over and over in the ecstasy of the media, obscenely presented The Real Donald Trump, a vulgar sexual predator whose celebrity creds allowed him to do what he wanted with women, "grab 'em by the pussy."

This tape, itself an exhibit of the ecstasy of communication in the hypermedia age, was dominating its media cycle some days before the 2016 election when WikiLeaks dumped its hacking of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta's leaked emails and the omnipresent hypermedia went into surrealistic overdrive turning to embarrassing tidbits from the Clinton campaign. Hence, damning footage of the obscenity of Donald Trump, Sexual Predator, was quickly lost in the next hyperreal flow of the mediascape, and the Donald's improbable lurch into the Presidency was not derailed — despite scores of women revealing explicit details of Donald Trump's groping and other crude forms of sexual predatory behavior, a phenomena that had been going on for decades.

Yet after Trump dubiously assumed the Presidency, women, segments of the media, and those disgusted by Deplorable

Donald, launched a full assault on the Trumpster, signaled the day after Trump's inauguration by the Women's March in Washington, one of the largest demonstrations in history. Soon, revelations came out of sexual harassment and assault on an epic scale by Harvey Weinstein, the King of Hollywood, and lesser lights in the film, television, and other media industries, as well as politicians. Soon obscene details of Trump's sexual vulgarity, crudity, and assaults on women circulated throughout media world like a sliced salami, and parts of the Patriarchy like Harvey Weinstein, the most powerful mogul in Hollywood, and numerous other male media celebrities started going down in a paroxysm of cuts and sound-bytes as the #MeToo movement took hold, and, yet Trump

escaped the fury of the women he had abused.

Hence, Baudrillard's ecstasy of

communication reveled in minute details of vile Patriarchs running amok and one-by-one many of the worst offenders were forced to resign or hide. The #MeToo movement hashtagged its way into and through the mediascape and Patriarchs faced trial and annihilation by the media. Porn star Stormy Daniels and her tenacious lawyer Michael Avinetti continued to reveal obscenities about Trump and his entourage. The raiding of the office of Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen in April of 2018, followed by revelations of the millions of dollars that flowed into Cohen's account to gain access to Trump by major corporations, some with Russian oligarch connections, and to pay off women who had suffered the agonies of Trump and his cronies' predations. Other criminal allegations against Trump and his cro-

nies continued to mushroom through the daily media cycles throughout Trump's presidency, as the Patriarchy was losing its luster and the Phallocracy shivered and shrank under the glare of the omnipresent media.

We have arguably been living in Baudrillard's ecstasy of communication, open to everything and living in the most extreme confusion, since the heyday of Baudrillard's popularity, but with the explosion of new digital media and social networking, revelations of the most intimate details of life — of celebrities, politicians, and ordinary people has intensified. At the same time, in the Trump era, advanced high-tech societies polarized and fragmented into a veritable media circus of pro and anti-Trump sites, as well as different in-

**Baudrillard's world is fully realized in Donald's Trump's America where the obscene President reveals his every thought, aggression, and inanity in his daily Twitter feeds...**

dividuals and groups who support #MeToo vs a witch's brew of an-

ti-women and anti-feminist voices, along with the racist, Islamophobic, alt-right and other fringe groups that Trump has brought out of the swamps and into mainstream cyber and media culture.

Tendencies described by Baudrillard have accelerated since his death in 2007, and Trump and his followers and critics have arguably intensified media noise, perverse explosions of aggression and hate in social media like Twitter, obscene (in JB's sense) exposure of celebrities and politicians by themselves or their critics, as well as social networking promotion by individuals who revel in sharing the most intimate and perhaps shocking aspects of their personal lives.

Some believe that Trump and others use of social media is a distraction and deflection from focus on Trump's right-wing,



Republican-led attack on the basic institutions of US democracy, and while there is some purchase on this argument, it's also true that the Trump attack on truth, alternative facts and fake news

— defined by Trump and his minions as anything critical of Trump

— threatened to erode the heart of democratic discourse, civility, and the norms of democratic life.

The attack on media, truth, and critical discourse by the Trump administration attempted to erode the distinctions between the real and hyperreal in the postmodern world described by Baudrillard. Those who live in a Trumpian world, circumscribed by Trump's twitter feed, Fox News, which is the first Kremlinesque state political propaganda apparatus, and supported by alt-right and conservative websites and social media, live in a Hyperreal Trumpscape impervious to rational argument, critique, or alternative facts. In this neo-Orwellian world, Trump was Big Father, and his propaganda apparatus are an often-conflicted and changing personnel define facts and fake news, good and evil, and friend and enemy, while attempting to drown competing discourses in Trumpspeak, creating a new hyperreal political scene for those who wish to participate and those forced to suffer the reign of King Donald.

Authoritarian populism often leads to and produces violence, as an enraged leader or group stigmatize and take out their grievances on minority groups who they blame for their own, or social, problems. This leads to demagoguery, outrage and hate which produces societal division and violence. The autocrat chooses an "Other," who his followers see as an "enemy," dividing the society and polis into "Us" and "Them." Hence, Trump has blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on the Obama administration and the Democrats, the Me-

dia, the World Health Administration, and the "China virus," which in a typical racist Trumpian trope, he denominated the "Kung Flu."

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic shows that authoritarian populist leaders like Trump not only threaten democracy, its institutions, the Reign of Truth in politics, and the environment, but also the health and well-being of the population. Yet authoritarian leaders may generate resistance — especially if the leader threatens the people with destructive wars or massive out-of-control pandemics like the current global epidemic. As people find themselves sick or dying, lose family friends, or loved ones, anger grows and people look to find who was responsible for pandemics like COVID-19 spreading without any significant government response or protections.<sup>1</sup> Further, institutions, groups, and individuals that the autocrat attacks, and that his followers are led to demonize and hate, may fight back, mobilizing individuals against the autocrat and his anti-democratic forces in newspapers, books, mass media, public demonstrations and oppositional movements — which we saw happening as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to intensify in certain regions like the U.S which was happening in the U.S. during the 2020 presidential election. In addition, significant Trump resistance movements arose in the multiple crises in response to the deadly virus attacking people's health, democracy, and the sustainability of human life on the planet, accompanied by other resistance movements like Black Lives

<sup>1</sup> Many believe that Trump lost the 2020 U.S. Presidential election to Joe Biden because of his failed response to the COVID-19 virus. See Chris Cillizza, "How Trump lost the public on coronavirus" CNN, April 20, 2020 at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/19/politics/us-election-2020-week-ahead/index.html> (accessed January 24, 2021).

Matter, the Dreamers, and earlier the Occupy movement.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, crises as intense as the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to rage globally as I finish this article, create opportunities for constructive and progressive change. The health systems of the U.S., U.K., Brazil, and other major countries hit hard by the crisis have shown themselves to be inadequate and in many cases lacking, requiring a focus on public health and more adequate health systems. To the question of how to pay for better government funded health care, the answer is provided by Bernie Sanders, who along with Senate colleagues offered a bill to “Introduce Tax on Billionaire Wealth Gains to Provide Health Care for All.”<sup>3</sup> The failures of authoritarian leaders, such as Trump, show the necessity of electing leaders and governments that will protect the public, uphold their rights, and provide adequate health and welfare. Authori-

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<sup>2</sup> On the Trump and other resistance movements that sprung up during Trump’s authoritarian reign, see Douglas Kellner and Roslyn M. Satchel (2020). “Resisting Youth: From Occupy Through Black Lives Matter to the Trump Resistance” in *The SAGE Handbook of Critical Pedagogies*, Chapter 107, edited by Shirley Steinberg and Barry Downs. London: Sage Publications.

<sup>3</sup> Bernie Sanders, “Rationale of the ‘Make Billionaires Pay Act’: It’s good for our health. The pandemic is helping the rich get even richer. It’s time to tax their obscene wealth,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2020 at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/11/the-pandemic-is-helping-the-rich-get-even-richers-time-to-tax-their-obscene-wealth> (accessed on August 12, 2020); see also Senator Bernie Sanders, “Sanders, Colleagues Introduce Tax on Billionaire Wealth Gains to Provide Health Care for All,” August 6, 2020 at <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-colleagues-introduce-tax-on-billionaire-wealth-gains-to-provide-health-care-for-all-> (accessed August 10, 2020).

tarian leaders breed resistance, as I argued above, leading to the possibilities of governments that serve the needs and interests of the people rather than the Authoritarian Leader and his clique of insiders and political base.

Surely the plagues of the COVID-19 virus and authoritarian populism helped bring down Trump in the 2020 U.S. election against Joe Biden, as throughout Trump’s presidency he denied the seriousness of the pandemic, prescribed looney antidotes while failing to take any action, and contributing to the more than 500,000 U.S. citizens who died during his Reign of Error. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has brought down global markets, capitalist expansion, and commerce to a massive slowdown that provides for the first time since at least WWII the possibility of actually transforming the world from an unsustainable economic (dis)order and chaotic “market” economy into a more sustainable planetary community to deal with multiple crises of the future, including dire ecological crisis which Trump intensified by weakening policies that protect the environmental and undoing sound ecological policies.

Moreover — and most dramatically —, after Trump decisively lost the election to Joe Biden on November 3, 2020, he refused to concede the election, and he and his minions circulated the Big Lie that the election was a hoax and was stolen. Trump’s lawyers sued election commissions in over 50 precincts and not one piece of evidence of election fraud or wrong doing was found, and each court threw out Trump’s claims of a rigged election, including the Supreme Court which Trump helped pack. Nonetheless, Trump and his mob continued to spread the Big Lie and on January 6, 2021 when Congress met to ratify the election, Trump unleashed his most violent followers who came to Washington to



protest the election and after a rally when Trump, Don Jr., his Consigliere Crazy Rudy G, and other members of Trump's Thugocracy whipped the crowd into a frenzy, Trump and his capos urged his soldiers into attacking the U.S. Capitol.

The Alt-Right followers of Trump had planned their insurrection for weeks and stormed the Capitol, overpowering the police, and wreaking havoc in the House and Senate Chambers.<sup>4</sup> They chanted "Stop the Steal," "Fight for Trump," and "Kill Mike Pence," Trump's loyal Vice-President, who, however, refused Trump's order not to ratify the election results. The rampage — televised live in an ecstasy of communication — shocked the nation and the violence in the rampage caused major damage in the Capitol and left five dead, demonstrating the danger of Trump's reign of lies and thuggery, dangers that continue to plague the polity.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent documentary showing how one of Trump's Alt-Right groups planned the attack on the Capital, see Alex Gibney's six-part documentary just released on HBO Q: Into the Storm. The documentary centers on the rise of the Q-Anon Alt-right group that circulated crazy conspiracy theories and fervently supported Trump; the documentary shows how the Internet can give rise to extremist groups who literally live in their own world of rightwing ideology. Another HBO documentary, Andrew Rossi's *After Truth: Disinformation and The Rise of Fake News* (2020), shows how during the Trump era conspiracy theories and fake news dominated the Trumpian rightwing news-sphere, illustrating Baudrillard's theory of the implosion of fact and fantasy in media spectacles.

Yet although Trump lost the 2020 election decisively to Joe Biden, proving again that those who live by the media may die by the media, the fact that they may also be reborn by the media is reason to recollect once again what a terrible president and person Trump was and what a moving target for all modes of critical theory and continued threat to U.S. democracy.

It is clear, that Trump's authoritarian populism has created crises and political oppression throughout the globe that threatens democracy, civility, and human life. In the aftermath of Trump's hate speech against immigrants, one of his followers went on a rampage and killed at least 20, mostly Mexican-Americans, in a Walmarkt in El Paso, Texas during October 2020, with the shooter leaving behind rants against immigrants that showed he was influenced by Trump. Following Trump's attack on China and the Kung-Flu virus, there have been a rampage of hate crimes against Asians, including one attack on a series of Georgia massage parlors in March 2021 that left at least ten dead.

Trump's reality-show presidency had been played out for four years on Twitter and social media, TV channels like *Fox News*, and the Alt-Right internet as a TV reality show, with Trump as host, entertainer, and promotor, whose daily tweets attacked and vilified his enemies and energized his followers, thus dividing the country into pro and anti-Trump forces. While he claimed he was going to put "the best people" in his government, he chose "experts" from *Fox News* and Alt-right internet sites who praised him and promoted his ideas, while converting Trump to their whacky conspiracy theories, thus imploding reality and surreality, as Baudrillard had predicted.

Of course, there was from the beginning a vigorous anti-Trump Resistance, honorable media attempting to separate the true from the false, or at least provide more factual accounts of what is actually taking place and where it is leading us. And there have been throughout the Trump era resistance groups fiercely undertaking their own struggles like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, the Dreamers, environmentalists, and an array of progressivist groups, as well as individuals attempting to nav-

igate through the contentious cacophony of conflicting voices. Never before has there been as intense a battle for the truth, the real, the norms of democratic culture, and other beacons of the Good Life, that have long been eroding and under assault.

It is, of course, impossible to predict where Trump and his followers will strike next and his ban from Twitter, Facebook, and Social Media while his January 6, 2021 insurrection, where he and his followers made a farcical attempt to steal the presidency, has forced the Trump Show to go dark during the first months of the Biden administration. Yet over the last four years during Trump's reign never before has the ecstasy of communication unveiled so many revelations of so much piggery, and never has the obscenity of unfiltered racism, sexism, and multiple forms of reaction revealed so many of the ugly aspects of U.S. life, unleashed by an autocratic political regime that spewed into the mediascape daily hate speech and tirades of racism, sexism, bile, and loathing that has divided the nation. Yet never has there been such contestation of the President and an increasingly fascist autocratic regime by a resisting public and media in so many realms during the Trump presidency, and with such intensity. Thankfully, it appears, as with so many times before, that those who live by media may sooner or later go down and disappear in the media.<sup>1</sup>

Trump was thus the first postmodern Post-Truth president who ran a Reality-TV show administrating collapsing politics into entertainment, and left behind a nation suffering under an ongoing pandemic that has sickened millions and killed hundreds of thousands, an environment threatened by climate disasters, and a nation where many still live in a fantasy world whose followers continue to assault U.S. democracy and who await the Word

of their Maximum Leader to send them Into the Storm and return the exiled King. Hopefully, reality, truth, and a democratic citizenry has not yet disappeared and is ready to fight for democracy, health, the earth, and social progress against the unhinged enemies of Truth, Democracy, and a Better World.

### Note

Asked to provide an article for *Baudrillard Now*, I went through my files and found an unpublished article on "Baudrillard and Trump." First, written in the early years of the Trump administration, as it turns out, I believe it is an interesting reading of Trump and shows that Baudrillard's work can be used retrospectively and that his theoretical corpus is still of relevance and use for analyzing contemporary reality. Thanks to Kanykei Tursunbaeva for asking me for an unpublished work I have on Baudrillard for this issue of the journal, and to Steve Best who rightly insisted I should update the article through the end of Trump regime, including the violent aftermath. All of the claims I make about Trump in this article are documented in my books *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2016 and *The American Horror Show: Election 2016 and the Ascent of Donald J. Trump*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2017. Unfortunately, my Baudrillard analysis didn't make it into these two books so I am grateful to the editors of *Baudrillard Now* for publishing this piece in their journal.







# From a Critique of Consumer Society to Forms of Global Psychotherapy or the Illusion of Life

Oleg Maltsev

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In this paper, the author conducts a praxiological and descriptive analysis of Chapter 4, “A Critique of Consumer Society,” of the book *Remembering Baudrillard* by researcher Serge Latouche. The purpose of this research is to identify the critical social and psychological reasons behind the ultimate paradigm of “consumer society,” which, in the 21st century, is the predominant and integral norm of life in present-day society. Metaphorically, the author refers to the lifestyle chosen by the individual favoring the consumer society paradigm as the environment of illusion. This paper offers an insight into the cog-

nitive and other socio-psychological motivations triggers and an overview of the consequences for the life processes of the “consumer society” paradigm.

Jean Baudrillard is the first fundamental questioner of Consumer Society. While a definition of *consumer society* already existed before Baudrillard, it was the French philosopher who comprehensively studied this phenomenon and outlined its social, economic and anthropological role. The concept of “consumer society” was first used in the 1960s. Serge Latouche attributes this to the scholar Jean Marie Dominique. However, Jean Marie Dom-

inique's writings, particularly the definition of "consumer society," were not popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Though, during this period, according to Serge Latouche's research, Baudrillard, was at the age of 41 when he was directly assigned to investigate the phenomenon of "Consumer Society." It is not particularized by whom, but it is regarded that the intent of this assignment was to create a 'commissioned book on sociology.'

The consumer society represents a critique of consumerism and the myth of a society of abundance (or excess). Quoting *Remembering Baudrillard*, it is essential to focus on a specific saying "We face the first announcement of the diagnosis of globalization." Therefore, in the course of his study, Baudrillard asks several questions (for the first time in scientific discourse), like "who is the consumer?"; "what is a consumer society?"; and this ultimately derives the following tendency—the society of plenty is arriving. The philosopher also described the consumption paradigm in a dynamic relationship with social changes of the 20th century. What we see globally is the growth of a society of abundance. In our society, the very idea of excess is probably somewhat different, and not the one people once aspired to. Around 100-150 years ago an excess of resources would have meant increased supplies for survival (forage, ammunition, etc.,—everything one needs to fulfill his or her necessities, and have some extra for an unforeseen future), today a "surplus of resources or products" has a symbolic meaning rather.

In becoming a consumer society, however, a deadlock is created in that economic and technological growth does not produce goods simultaneously as humans need them. Consequently, there is a necessity (demand), and there are commodities. The growth of demand, and demand,

is strongly inferior to the growth of commodities, and consequently, this creates a market oversaturation due to a commodity surplus. This oversaturation—imaginary and deliberate or artificially orchestrated—is presented as abundance because humanity has everything in abundance and even more goods. So the era of abundance has arrived, which is a direct reflection of well-being. *According to S. Latouche*: "Abundance exists only in the sight of spectacle..."

*In other words, understanding the players' roles in the market, the following has to be outlined: it is not the consumer who has become competent; it is not the consumer who regulates the product's quality. The consumer does not regulate anything. The market is simply oversaturated with goods, justifying the notion that these are not natural processes but favorable ones, indicative of a high standard of living.*

A whole field of entertainment, affluence, beautiful and healthy living is shown to human desire. Why is this being demonstrated? *To breed even more desire.* Latouche powerfully denotes that the consumer is deliberately shaped to envy an object, a commodity, and to possess and have it by demonstrating this fact to other consumers. However, all these goods will never satisfy an irrepressible desire for more. The drive to dominate and possess, to receive more and more products and attributes, symbolically confirming the status of the "self as a possessor" and thus a person who is strong, independent, different from the others, is inherent in the unconscious nature of every human being (the paradigm is researched and verified in detail by the Swiss scholar and fate analyst Lipot Szondi in his book "I-Analysis")

Besides the possibility of easy access to all kinds of goods, the display and "exhibition of wealth" should take place as a cele-



bration, as a show. Separately, the flip side of the coin of this processes outlined is also analyzed. It is not enough for the consumer to understand that they have access to every product they need. The consumer must be influenced by specific conditions (social inequality) in which one may not afford 100 percent of the time having what one strives for. Subsequently, according to human nature (the triggering of automatic mechanisms), if one individual cannot afford something (but he desires to have something or object), and as he watches someone already possesses that “desired thing”, the non-possessor feels lustful. That is called envy. Those who can afford to buy up everything are disappointed; however, admitting that one is jealous and disappointed usually is not essential for a person. He cannot admit that. Moreover, there comes a denial of scarcity, as Latouche remarks: *“Too much is offered for the contemplation of the crowd.”*

A critical reflection on this statement by Serge Latouche (and especially the denial of the scarcity paradigm) applies to the elaboration of such phenomena as the “store” and then the “supermarket”. As a matter of fact, until the middle of the 19th century, supermarkets did not even exist. The idea had never even crossed anyone’s mind in those days. *Memorizing the first trips back to Amsterdam in 80-90 of the 20th century, there were already supermarkets there, three-storey, four-storey, but they were not yet, ‘the Walmart like’ in the USA. Moreover, it turns out that even then, entrepreneurs still were aiming for small shops.* For example, there was a fascinating shop in Germany on Rose Street. The shop was about two hundred years old, selling leather goods bags and other hand-made leath-

**Too much is offered for  
the contemplation of the crowd.**

er products. Moreover, it has been operated by the women of that family for generations. I remember the “grandmother” running the shop since I visited many times. That woman was a great saleswoman. Then she passed away, and the shop was sold. The relatives did not want to engage, that is, make money in the old business. There are new shop owners now, selling something else. Here is an example of how for 200 years, entrepreneurs preferred small boutiques over huge stores. Moreover, now the majority tends to act more passively. So, we now produce new hypermarkets, and associates demand to be lured there. What happens next: the public should feel

they are getting a better life, better conditions, that wages are raised

and that welfare is improved. Any horrors of the factories’ workers, those terrible conditions, they begin to fade away. Suddenly trade and market exchange by its bounty seems like a gift now—a reward. Everything seems to be beautiful.

The next step: now, the new lifestyle should be represented; it has to be decorated. That is—the aesthetic design, the façade of “new life” has to be gorgeous. The façade has to be beautiful. Two fields of knowledge are emerging—design and advertising, and something that was not necessary before is now becoming essential. Further on, some clever people start coming up with big posters—posters include drawings. The first thing the consumer is taught to do is to consume images. The consumer, as Latouche has stated, becomes inclined to consume the image. They are no longer interested in satisfying basic needs. Consumption seeks to reflect perfectly the nature of reality. However, as Baudrillard points out, this all involves real subversion. Then in *Remembering Bau-*

*drillard*, it is said, “Signs of change replace work processes.” That is, design defines asceticism. We now also need to be informed about it. Thus, the following powerful vector emerges—the vector of media. How do people know that they are making progress—it is crucial to assure everyone that all changes are positive.

The primary vector to make everyone believe they might get what they require is a credit card. Right there, the credit card is precisely the bait for any fish in the society of consumption. Moreover, at the core of this feeding procedure is the requirement for psychotherapy. Studying the *never satisfied irrepressible desire* is the key of the paradigm of the ancestral unconscious and other unconscious processes of human nature according to Lipot Szondi’s scientific school of Fate psychology, this finding of the relevance of psychotherapy and discharge (liberation from the burden of life cycles) is logical and reliable.

That is to say, our drive (usually it is an unconscious drive) for psychotherapy is already “built within us” since birth. Any system that exists must have a function such as “offloading” (or discharge). If a car is dropping revolutions, and the engine cannot run on a constant voltage, this means it has to restart. Most importantly, the car does not go on forever. It rests for a while. Logically, the engines in an aircraft run for a certain amount of time. They have a limit. Take-off, then reset. The plane gets a horizontal position in space and slowly begins to take off like a fighter jet. However, it cannot climb nearly vertically; passengers cannot be carried in this way. Furthermore, when the revs are dropping at a certain speed, and the plane begins to climb upwards slowly, *that is the motional-dynamic model of therapy*.

When applying the above-mentioned motional-dynamic model to consumer

society’s psychological background, it appears psychologically; consumption *serves as a kind of global therapy*. There is a strive to consume more and more, which creates short-termed relief and easement every time the person purchases or acquires something. How do these processes function? To start with, consider the natural types or methods of therapy processes. The first human psychotherapy is sleeping. People work during the day (*that brings pressure*), and they sleep at night (*that helps to release the pressure, a so-called “natural discharge process”*). That is the primary standard of human psychotherapy, which is “set in human nature.” Moreover, this is a form of psychotherapy that assumes that consumption is a form of psychotherapy, an artificially created therapy type. One may use that therapy, but in fact, one cannot. If the pressure increases, natural forms of psychotherapy become insufficient. I will provide the most straightforward example to clarify that: let’s hypothetically think of a person who lives in the 17th century. The amount of information in the 17th century per capita is 400 times less than now. That is, he does not need to process 400 signals. One person may encounter 1200 and another 400 messages today. Count the number of messages we get on the internet in a day, and consider that one letter in the 17th century would take 2-3 months to arrive. In order to get one message, one waits for three months. Presume the strain on one’s mind in the 17th century as compared to the 21st. This should be taken for granted, and the above-mentioned is just an example. Nevertheless, it is possible to address hundreds of such examples, not two or three, i.e., the load on a person nowadays is many times higher than it was in the 17th century. Accordingly, those forms of natural psychotherapy that exist now are



not enough, so the external form (buying more) is the person's relief under pressure. A question, how many clothes did a person have in the 17th century? For example, three, or four suits. Today one walks around the city and sees thousands of suits or other garment variants. It was physically impossible to produce so many suits in the 17th century. So, the fact remains that there were no shops in such quantity and excess, as we see these days. One hundred years ago, there was no fashion in the form in which it exists today, and there was not a massive number of things required to be done as there is today. However, that is the tendency representing the role of the external form of psychotherapy.

The internal is embedded in a person; for example, one shares a basic data

**The first human psychotherapy is sleeping. People work during the day (pressure), and they sleep at night (pressure release, a so-called “natural discharge process.”)**

package of therapy steps, but someone increases the daily pressure. *In new conditions, the previous therapy is no longer good enough.* Then, someone starts offering to the consumers of ‘therapy’ some other forms to help—the additional psychotherapy forms.

In wartime, in contrast, when there was no psychotherapy. The only psychotherapy was a knife. If one kills somebody—then that is also one of the forms of psychotherapy. It may sound a bit scary; still, there is a perspective in the American psychiatry environment, claiming that people may go crazy if they do not kill since they are prohibited from carrying and using weapons today. David Buss, professor of psychology at the University of Texas-Austin, surveyed 5,000 people for his book, “The Murderer Next Door: Why the Mind Is Designed to Kill,” and found that 91%

of men and 84% of women had thought about killing someone, often with particular hypothetical victims and methods in mind. Douglas Fields, neuroscientist and author of the book “Why We Snap,” says our brains have evolved to monitor danger and spark aggression in response to any perceived danger as a defence mechanism. “We all have the capacity for violence because, in certain situations, it is necessary for our survival,” he says. “You do not need to be taught defensive aggression because it is a life-saving behaviour that’s unfortunately sometimes required.”

What happens when a person feels the impulse of aggression as a natural reaction to an external stimulus (for example,

in a situation where he has been unfairly treated), yet laws and social regulations do not

allow him to “splash out” this aggression outwardly? Unlike in previous eras, today, a person does not have the right to judge himself, nor does he have the right to kill his kind (this is not democratic, not tolerant, and so forth). What happens in such a case? In that case, the individual himself becomes a victim of his aggression. Moreover, this impulse is no longer directed outside (at the source of the external irritation) but inside, at himself. Such impulses do not go away completely, causing considerable damage to the psyche, generating mental traumas, deviations, and even illnesses. Sigmund Freud verified this paradigm explicitly in his most famous book, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (or *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*). Freud outlines psychoanalysis’ critical paradigms, including the unconscious mind and the theory of neuroses and

dreams. Overall, it might be assumed that psychotherapy arises as a necessity when a human is prohibited from using his weapons. The weapons are taken away, and the new therapy necessity arises.

*The paper further suggests a praxeological reflection on the outlined processes and forms of therapy transformation in the context of historical discourse. Namely, after the 1830s, a crucial shift in social norms and regulations and the formation of a new global role for money appeared.*

Studying history, we may recognize the enormous consequences of a “no-weapon” paradigm. Meanwhile, in 1830 money became a new weapon (instead of guns), matching a form of weapon that emerged in a new era. Money emerged as a substitute for weapons. So people gave up their knives and their guns and took up money instead—merely some paper banknotes. Thus it should be straightforwardly stated that **money came into existence as a substitute for weapons**. One is not allowed to kill; one can only purchase. Moreover, whoever kills will go to prison. Hence this is where the roots of law are from. In the form that we are now contemplating, not a set of rules, not regulations but precisely a law, which is governed by specific articles and sanctions: for example, for murder—one is sentenced to 10-20 years. Murder, as such, converts into a basic form of psychotherapy and a forbidden form of that. The Americans argued that a lack of killing is the main form and cause of mental illness. And the cause of visible and outward human behavior. That is, if a man knew that he would be killed for misconduct, he would not behave like that. The reasoning was that “*we need to untie consumers’ hands and give them a key*.” The money, as it is said, still smells of the sweat and blood of the worker. It is all disappearing—a symbol of capitalism fades away.

Living in capitalism and using a credit card is now the norm. Now we not only have a bank card. But also a bank card advertisement. For example, here is the paradigm: buy now, pay later—what in the US has essentially become substitution methods. Everyone has suffered a lot because today, when companies start using financial banking methods, they forget that they do not have a reserve fund, i.e., insurance for some kind of case. For instance, as a result of this, Lufthansa almost went bankrupt.

As S. Latouche remarks, Baudrillard concludes that one can make the consumer believe other values emerge: social security, family benefits, pensions and even unemployment insurance; institutional altruism. You have been given everything, now consume. It is the same as imposing certain social stereotypes of possession. One has to possess a house, one has to possess a car and so forth. This tendency is particularly evident in the American way of life.

*“The welfare revolution replaces the old socialism.” (Remembering Baudrillard)*

Serge Latouche notes that Baudrillard was very attentive to social networks. Even before the computerization of them, Jean Baudrillard foresaw it all, and this is partly why he is called a prophet. He made the prognosis of the new society of the millennium and the virtualization of the world. So, computerization emphasizes the virtualization of reality; i.e., Baudrillard pointed out that computers will create new possibilities, and everyone will use them. Secondly, he said that this growth would exceed consumption and overkill, and there will be a crisis as a result. The economy must reboot: a crisis is a reboot of the economy. This is where the following form comes in. If there is a consumer society, then there will be a consumer waste society. It becomes a consumer waste society.



“...in this perspective, Baudrillard notes the attitude to consumption is equal to the attitude to production waste”—S. Latouche emphasizes. One gets the imaginary feeling that surplus is essential to them, and not current needs. This is another form of psychotherapy. When spending is already repeatedly preceded not only by earning opportunities in the here and now, but, also when one’s expectations are deceived. Hereabouts advertising plays a strategic role. Rationality is better replaced by abundance, and “*this is what they call freedom.*”

One is free if one can afford everything, but at the same time, one is ‘placing’ himself in subjugation and so on and so on, and the worst part is that one will never pay for it in

**Money came into existence as a substitute  
for weapons.**

the future. Mortgages and everything else in America is vividly shown.

S. Latouche claims: “A society of excess seems to suppress puritanism and turns into a spectacle, in short, a society - into a show. The desire for evolution replaces the revolution of desire.” Why should a man be forbidden to do everything? On the contrary, it is better to allow him everything. To make a person manageable, on the contrary, everything is given to him in excess, in abundance. Such an approach works much more effectively.

“Next, the concept of individual needs disappears.” (*Remembering Baudrillard*)

There is no point in working to meet needs. Individual needs are no longer of any colossal interest. More significance is now credited to overabundances, to excesses. There is no point now in working only for the sake of satisfaction. Earlier, one used to work because one had to pay the rent; that is in an industrial society. *Now freedom is valued; one can afford more.* An apart-

ment, a car—that comes immediately. So, everything can be purchased or acquired. At the same time, this structural paradigm generates an oversupply of goods. What happens next is overstocking, overcapacity moreover, and after that comes the crisis. The next phenomenon to get analyzed is the *abstract need*. In *Remembering Baudrillard*, it is questioned: “But what is the Benchmark of abstract needs? The natural needs that used to be. Anything above this threshold is called a waste.” It is like people taking out a loan in order to pay off a loan, practically. This is why we have the following definition - “Waste Consumers’ Society.” Further on, it seems that the nature of consumption is changing. Con-

sumption is now a show, a surplus

plus and everything else. *Serge Latouche assumes*, “Consumption is consumption apart from pleasure.” The system itself has remained the same, that is, goods in the form of commodities. If one takes something, one has to pay; you have to give, and so forth. People may think otherwise, however, the processes of overstocking lead to a crisis. It is great to recall that the credit crunch originated in 2007-2008. This is **the transition to no longer being a consumer**. Then social phenomena such as stress, burnouts, bankruptcy, suicide and mass dissatisfaction became the realia of daily routine life. However, the system itself, the value, has remained the same, while the environment has not changed. Two parallels to psychotherapy arise here: personal internal psychotherapy (the usual human habits, like watching TV, jogging, etc.) and external economy therapy. External psychotherapy brings the same effect as a crisis does to the economy—it is a reset. Baudrillard compares illness to the econ-

omy, and he compares the phenomenon to disease. That is, as an allegory that is applied to explain what is occurring in the market.

*In particular*, the notion of ecology in economics is very often applied nowadays. The so-called “clean ecology approach.” Ecology in economics is fair competition, where competition becomes unfair if the parties involve some higher levels: moreover, such game minds have invisible reasons—that is, the source of competition is invisible. That is the whole point. Today it is a well-known fact; nobody wants to go to prison. This is why I have to describe some former USSR society realia, the

consumption, etc. Just as an example, it might be mentioned, while a car used to run for 60 years, then some old cars ran for 30 years, but a modern car is deliberately made to break down after two years. Latouche provides the reader with a metaphoric standpoint: “Deliberately accelerated obsolescence... of products and machines, destruction of old structures, etc.” Current marketing is hanging on to three things now: advertising, planned obsolescence and consumer credit. These are the components of makeup marketing. Moreover, that marketing is the driver of growth. Plus the media, communication is the vehicle for the dissemination of

**The consumer does not regulate anything. The market is simply oversaturated with goods, justifying the notion that these are not natural processes but favorable ones, indicative of a high standard of living.**

changes of the nineties. The nineties were the year of banditry; banditry emerged, though many criminals went to jail. However, the rest became smarter after the 90s. Thus, they improved their brilliance, and in fact, today’s business is built on the bones and blood of people “wiped away” in the nineties. In Ukraine, for instance, there is no other business. Not here, not in America. Everything will be built on bones, sooner or later. Business people already have something to lose: power, money and other things, and consequently they develop more and more perverse covert methods of competition. Latouche applies this ecological dimension to his analysis of consumer society, while attempting to characterize consumer society’s production. The researcher follows Baudrillard’s picture, trash civilization and the processes it involves: advertising, deliberate consumption below its expiry date, accelerated wear and tear, single-use

advertising. “Advertising plays a central role in building society.”—Serge Latouche concludes.

Baudrillard again emphasizes the insoluble nature of the effectiveness of advertising. The philosopher describes this phenomenon in *Simulations and Simulacra* along with the scale of this phenomenon. The following scale of advertising is propaganda, i.e., the next level of development of advertising in scale. Thus the resounding conclusion is drawn: that we have all been deceived. We live in a world of deception. Latouche remarks, “*Essentially, advertising has succeeded in blurring the lines between show and production.*” The more the supply of goods grows, the more we overstock the market, the more excellent the advertising has to be. Advertising in its various guises is what is required in a consumer society. Moreover, there is no model, but comparing shops and supermarkets to temples, then consumption or purchase can be tak-



en as a ritual. Latouche: “...*an abundance or abundance of spectacle is ineffective in any way eliminating scarcity or frustration.*” That provides spectacular assumptions. On the one hand, the world provides what one needs, but on the other hand? Even if one earns all the money globally and buys everything, it is of no use and makes no sense. Latouche: “*The division of people into social classes is inextricably linked to the ideology of growth and consumption.*” Baudrillard says that all people are equal before objects in terms of some kind of use-value and not equal before objects in terms of difference, which is profoundly unromantic. How does this manifest itself? If one wants to be higher up on the human status hierarchy, then one requires an iPhone (and so on). In fact, according to Baudrillard’s conclusions, **growth is counter-productive**. That is to say, behind a particular vapour, an effect is created which contradicts the goal altogether, i.e., the satisfaction of needs as such. So, the limit of saturation cannot be reached, i.e., human greed is infinite. It can only burst—burst, then crisis and then the crisis is a reset.

The most important thing that happens is that it is temporary and unsatisfying. An example is the simplest: anything might be considered ‘an excellent issue’ no longer than for a year. Until the next model of iPhone comes out, that is a specific time. The pleasure of being cool. Consequently, abundance is fictional 100%; any satisfaction is temporary. Progress and abundance go hand in hand with trouble, i.e., new products entail new costs.

To conclude, abundance is created for the “silent majority.” In return, the majority is extorted from what the “creators” need, such as votes in political elections. Abundance is produced for people at their own expense. People live for “today”; the masses have no “future” since they are

not interested. They have everything today and get that “everything” automatically. Therefore, if all this is perfectly created for confirming a “solid today,” then one is eager to keep their “precious today.” The guaranteed today is the most important thing for the consumer from the masses, and for that, they need to vote for those who create the comfortable and cozy “picture of today.” Moreover, if anyone dares to change their comfortable “today,”—the silent majority’s representatives will have a particular reaction, which in psychological terms can be called neurosis.





# Baudrillard's Pendulum

Alexzander Mazey

7

*'Conspiracies do exist.'*  
Umberto Eco

A Coca-Cola billboard appears, only very briefly, above the American town of Hope, Washington, in the 1982 film, *'First Blood'*. Interestingly enough, this billboard (the domestic soft power) is elevated above Will Teasle, the sheriff of the town (the domestic hard power, so to speak) who pursues (haunts) John Rambo throughout the film, significant, perhaps, as elevating Coca-Cola above all things in American life.

Isn't it interesting how the final scenes of *'First Blood'* show Stallone putting an end to

the billboards and advertisements that litter the landscape of this quaint, thoroughly American, township? Isn't this another example of domestic 'soft power' meeting the 'hard power' of a rifle; a co-opted 'hard power', so to speak? It is striking, the way John Rambo, through sheer will and violence (a violence manifesting as an inability to communicate the crimes of imperialism), removes these corrupted artifices of capitalist America or, at the very least, those that litter this small-town landscape.

John Rambo's sense of righteousness in *'First Blood'* – as with all moral righteousness – leads to a sentence of hard labour



at the hands of *Criminal Justice*. This lays the groundwork for *'Rambo: First Blood Part II'* (1985), whereby we observe Colonel Sam Trautman meeting John at a prison-labour camp, asking for help.

Slavoj Žižek provides a good overview of this second film, where we see Rambo travelling to Vietnam to save a group of veterans from a Soviet backed outfit of militia. In an interview with Josefina Ayerza, published in *'Lusitania'* in the Fall of 1994, Žižek says about the film:

*'In the United States, I was struck by the series of films like Rambo [...] which are based on the American obsession that there are still some prisoners, some Americans alive down there in Vietnam. The hero, Rambo, saves them, brings them back. I think the fantasy behind it is that the most precious part of America was stolen and the hero brings it back to where it belongs. Because this "treasure" was missing under Jimmy Carter, America was weak. If the hero brings it back, America will be strong again.'* (<https://www.lacan.com/perfume/Zizekinter.htm>)

In other words, after dismantling the quiet town of Hope, Washington – littered with its corporate artifice – Rambo seeks to return something to America that has been lost, years ago, in the jungles of Vietnam. What has been lost here, in these jungles, other than some 'nostalgic referential', a sense of humanity, something to point the way forward, a love for something beyond the commodities of a lost America.

Once again, the commodity is located within the sign-values of Coca-Cola, a drink that features heavily in the mise en scène of *'Rambo: First Blood Part II'*, particularly within the military operations base, where we observe generals glugging away at Coca-Cola, (cans of Coke, chilled in a vending machine, no less), alongside

the blinking lights of unrecognisable technologies; computers and equipment which Rambo will come to destroy in another scene of spectacular vengeance.

Even so, what does Rambo find in his return to the jungles of Vietnam? Love, of course. Not the love of a commodity, full of 'metaphysical nasties', but rather the love of a living, breathing, human being. A living referential for what America has lost in its desire for imperialistic conquest. Isn't it interesting how Rambo finds his unbeknownst love, his assigned contact, Co Bao, as he passes through a littered landscape of lost, Buddhist (I assume) relics? Here, I am reminded of Mark Fisher's analysis of those stone statues on Easter Island.

In *'The Weird and the Eerie'*, Fisher writes:

*'The problem here is not why the people who created these structures disappeared – there is no mystery here – but the nature of what disappeared. What kinds of being created these structures? How were they similar to us, and how were they different? What kind of symbolic order did these beings belong to, and what role did the monuments they constructed play in it? For the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and inscrutability of the Real itself. Confronted with Easter Island or Stonehenge, it is hard not to speculate about what the relics of our culture will look like when the semiotic systems in which they are currently embedded have fallen away.'*

This is – perhaps – Fisher's greatest insight, where he came to locate the source of his own hauntological circumstance as an experience originating from dwindling points of reference. The residue of a world 'rotted away'. In some sense, we can consider the Britain of Fisher's youth – full of

subcultural vibrancy and rave culture – as his own Easter Island, put to death by the enemy of neoliberal values inherent in the prevailing capitalist (hyper)realism of the twenty-first century.

Nothing is more painful than the lost referential, *monuments out of time*, divorced from the semiotic systems that once governed them. It is an intriguing question to ask what would be lost from our own structures if not the order of the hyperreal that governs them; the irreality of sign-value and the like? Would Wall Street not look sepulchral without the virtual territorialization of ‘transeconomic’ metastasis? All around us, cities like ready-built tombs.

Even so, it is never a case of what has been lost, it is always more important to observe what has been left behind; to view the lost in relation to what’s left behind is nostalgia incarnate. Nevertheless, to consider what has been left behind is perhaps more painful than to consider what has been taken away. Isn’t this the melancholy that drives both Mark Fisher *and* John Rambo? After all, he is not angry at what has been taken away from him – he is angry at *what’s left*; a vapidness of existence, a shallow and passive nihilism, which is to say, a position we could characterise as Baudrillard’s ‘terminal melancholy’.

This is why Rambo seeks comfort in the silence and depth of a spiritual Buddhism, perhaps? It is fascinating how Buddhism – and its icons – feature in every Rambo film, aside from ‘First Blood’, the one film grounded in the landscape of America. After all, with its penchant for silence, how could Buddhism exist in a utopia built on the foundations of an endless and ecstatic

communication, other than by way of simulation and image?

One of the more prescient expositions of the dynamic interplay between Coca-Cola and Buddhism appears in ‘*Rambo III*’ (1988). In the opening scene, as John prepares for a prize-fight, shots of Buddhist monks are interjected alongside scenes of Colonel Sam Trautman walking from the American Embassy of Thailand. As the Colonel strides through the market bizarre, we see the distinct Coca-Cola logo, the ‘soft power’ of American capitalist values – as it always appears in the ‘developing’ world – integrated neatly into the sign-value system of the local marketplace.

Likewise, in the early cinematic adaptation of ‘*Total Recall*’, (1990) Coca-Cola appears as a billboard advertisement with-

**Nothing is more painful than the lost referential, monuments out of time, divorced from the semiotic systems that once governed them.**

in the ‘future’ world of the Philip K. Dick novel, which can today be read as a theo-

ry-fiction into the nature of the hyperreal trajectory. Later on, in the 1995 adaption of ‘*Judge Dredd*’, Coca-Cola would appear, once again, this time in the ‘cursed lands’, where a Coke bottle appears – both strikingly and briefly – to be stood on in the desert wastelands of a futuristic America.

In terms of Baudrillardian analysis, ‘*First Blood*’ tells the story of the commodities’ dominion, ‘the domestic battle’ over the American landscape, where the commodity has finally ‘overcome’ humanism, negating the alternative philosophies of depth and silence inherent in the spiritual posturing of Buddhism, for example. Both ‘*Rambo: First Blood Part II*’ and ‘*Rambo III*’ tell the story of a ‘globalisation’, a confrontation between the individual – with all its spiritual grotesquery – against the



ecstatic delights of the commodity's materialization. This is Coca-Cola as a harbinger of the hyperreal, finding fruition in 'Judge Dredd', through which we glimpse our 'cursed' future; our desert of the real.

Of course, if you think I am over-reaching, just remember how the *'Rambo Trilogy of the Eighties'*, and *'Judge Dredd'*, all feature Sylvester Stallone as title characters. (Aside from the film – *'First Blood'* – where the commodity has already prevailed over the human subject of small-town America; the commodity has already drawn 'first blood', so to speak.) The smoking gun of this theory can be found in Buzz Feitshans, the executive producer of all five films discussed, here.

In conclusion, we have the appearances of the exact same commodity, a similar casting, the exact same executive producer; how much of this is purely coincidental? These five films, all produced by Feitshans, actually tell a meta-narrative of Coca-Cola dominating small town American life in *'First Blood'*, before representing the beverage as a product of colonial hard power in *'Rambo: First Blood Part II'*, then as a global consumer object of soft power in *'Rambo III'*, before featuring in the dystopian landscape of Philip K. Dick's *'Total Recall'*, and finding a fruition of its trajectory as a product of the hyperreal order in the desert of the 'cursed earth' in *'Judge Dredd'*. It seems we are given, in these films, a meta-narrative regarding the perverse omnipresence of the commodity; the mythological trajectory of Coca-Cola itself.

I would also like to mention John McTiernan's masterpiece, *'Die Hard'* (1988). What is John McClane (Bruce Willis) – the hero and protagonists – other than a Linkolan 'Guardian of Life', operating chiefly as another cinematic recurrence of a 'masculine referential', a character (a po-

lice cop, nonetheless) ostracised from the hyperreal 'corporate' world; a man who understands the sacrifices that need to be made in an attempt to preserve life? Ironically, during the climax – in order to save his estranged wife (Bonnie Bedelia), the damsel, from the clutches of a 'referential evil', Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) – John sacrifices an expensive, personalised Rolex watch. Is this scene not loaded with a powerful meta-significance? The sign-value significance given over to that commodity, particularly in the scene between Hans Gruber and Harry Ellis, is truly fascinating.

It is amusing how Harry Ellis – a stereotypical, morally relativistic, corporate cocaine addict – asks the terrorists for a Coca-Cola. It is interesting how Coca-Cola becomes a signifier of Ellis' hallucinatory notions of coked-up power. Compare, for example, in that final scene between Ellis and Gruber, the interplay between the impotence of Ellis' chosen commodity (a referential soft power) compared to the force of Gruber's handgun (a referential hard power). Isn't it interesting how Gruber's hard power is only overcome by the 'nostalgic referential' – the American hard power – in other words, a previously ostracised, 'sheriff's justice' – finding representation in John McClane? In overcoming Gruber's terroristic plot, McClane must concede the 'soft power' of the Rolex watch. Gruber's corrupted desire for commodities – stealing negotiable bearer bonds to purchase additional 'John Philips' suits in London, I imagine – has to be mediated by a thoroughly 'Americanised' sense of justice. In this way, *'Die Hard'* is a deeply propagandistic film; but a great action flick, nonetheless. It is Alan Rickman's greatest performance, perhaps? second only to his portrayal of the Sheriff of Nottingham in *'Robin Hood: Prince*

of *Thieves*' (1991). A film where the thoroughly corrupted morality of (Christian) justice, lost in the capture of Jerusalem by the army of Saladin, must be returned to England in the form of Robin of Locksley (Kevin Costner).

Even so, the portrayal of Coca-Cola as a means of 'hallucinatory power' – the 'sign-value' of this particular commodity, (particularly as a means of soft power) – is prevalent throughout the mise en scène of many 80s' action films; perhaps most strikingly in the 80s' 'Rambo' trilogy, featuring Sylvester Stallone as US Army veteran, John Rambo. It should be noted how, much like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone has developed, over the years, into a 'transcendental referential'; in other words, a referential that transcends the limits of the cinematic fiction. He had – in terms of the hyperreal – come to represent the 'nostalgic referential' of hypermasculinity in particular, even outside the remit of the cinema screen. If you want additional examples of Stallone's hyperreal credentials, one only has to visit the Smithsonian Museum of America, where you will find a multitude of props from *'Rocky'* (1976), selected by the Library of Congress as culturally significant, worthy of preservation and so on. Alternatively, you could consider Rocky Balboa's inclusion into the 'International Boxing Hall of Fame'. Not bad achievements for someone who does not really exist, but rather retains a presence, a residue, in thoroughly simulated forms; in other words, exists as a point of reference, the 'idealised American man', in this case.

In terms of Baudrillardian analysis, the fictionalised account of the 'American Dream', portrayed in *'Rocky'*, and its five sequels, actually masks the reality of its total absence in American life. Here, I will recall to your mind the words of America's greatest intellectual, George Carlin: 'The

owners of this country know the truth; it's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.'

What we lack in a simulated reality, we make up for in fiction. Isn't this the hidden motivation behind the 80s' 'Rambo' trilogy, for example? A film where the downtrodden, Vietnam veteran is able to exercise his fantasies through an aestheticized vengeance, initially, upon small town America, *'First Blood'* (1982), and later, an American military base of operations, *'Rambo: First Blood Part II'* (1985). It is fascinating how this all-American hero later fights in the Soviet–Afghan War, fighting alongside the Mujahideen, no less, in *'Rambo III'* (1988). Nothing is more painfully ironic, these days, than to observe the final commemoration of that film, whereby we see *'Rambo III'* dedicated 'to the gallant people of Afghanistan.' Interestingly enough, a rumour circulates, (a conspiracy theory of sorts) claiming the film's commemoration once read 'to the brave Mujahideen fighters', with alterations taking place in response to the September 11 attacks. Will we ever really know the truth in regards to this rumour's persistence? More importantly – it begs the question – do we believe our mythology is beyond such revisionism?

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*First Blood*, 1982, Online Streaming Service (SkyGo), Anabasis Investments, N.V., US, distributed by Orion Pictures, directed by Ted Kotcheff. (Buzz Feitshans is credited as the producer for this film.)

*Judge Dredd*, 1995, Online Streaming Service (SkyGo), Hollywood Pictures, Cinergi Pictures, Edward R. Pressman Film Corporation, US, distributed by Buena Vista Pictures (North America/South America) Cinergi Productions (International), directed by Danny Cannon. (Buzz Feitshans had joined Cinergi Productions in 1992.)

*Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985, Online Streaming Service (SkyGo), Anabasis Investments, N.V., US, distributed by TriStar Pictures (US), Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment (UK) directed by George P. Cosmatos. (Buzz Feitshans is credited as the producer for this film.)

*Rambo III*, 1988, Online Streaming Service (SkyGo), Carolco Pictures, US, distributed by TriStar Pictures, directed by Peter MacDonald. (Buzz Feitshans is credited as the producer for this film.)

*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, 1991, Online Streaming Service (Netflix), Morgan Creek Productions, US, distributed by

Warner Bros., directed by Kevin Reynolds.

*Rocky*, 1976, Online Streaming Service (Netflix), Chartoff-Winkler Productions, US, distributed by United Artists, directed by John G. Avildsen.

*Total Recall*, 1990, Online Streaming Service (SkyGo), Carolco Pictures, US, distributed by TriStar Pictures, directed by Paul Verhoeven. (Buzz Feitshans is credited as the producer for this film.)

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Mr. Baudrillard was once considered a postmodern g  
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