

SPRING 2023

PRINT ISSN 2780-7274

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 1

E-ISSN 2728-3089

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Farce reproducing itself becomes History.

Jean Baudrillard

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**Jean Baudrillard**



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# Baudrillard and McLuhan in the Social Media Age

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In the social media age, our interminable digital identities are works of art, and we are artists. In equal parts performance, photography, film, composition, and graphic design, we write ourselves into stories to depict a virtual existence. At the same time, the “tethered togetherness” (Schroeder, 2018) of the social media age illustrates how digital selves are not a collection of monologues but communal art. Friends, followers, and online bystanders consume and authenticate our digital selves by liking, commenting, retweeting,

or even simply voyeuristically viewing our art (Gennaro & Miller, 2020a).

Social media art can produce hyperreal simulations not grounded in any referent. They exist across virtual platforms that operate in the same fashion as Jean Baudrillard’s description of Disneyland as an example of simulacra in a postmodern world. Today’s social media platforms and Baudrillard’s Disneyland create “an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter” (Baudrillard,



2017, p.2). Our digital selves exist as much inside the artificial perimeters of Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok as they do in the physical world.

A pedagogy of critical media literacy sees all media as art. It places each text, object, symbol, and interaction into dialogue with the current and historical social relations of the producer, consumer, and all who voyeuristically participate as onlookers and bystanders in the virtual space without comment. Social media engages every one of us to be artists instead of droids. To actively participate in the ongoing practices of creating social media selves that not only repeatedly negotiate our social identities with friends and followers ad nauseam but also contest meaning within dominant power structures. To engage the construction of our social selves in a society of mutating media and identities, Jean Baudrillard and Marshall McLuhan emerge as guides through the thicket of social media, digital selves, and new virtual worlds that we find ourselves immersed in. Thus, we turn to the pre-eminent media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who was a significant and acknowledged influence on Jean Baudrillard.

### **Amused Social Media Selves**

In 1967, Baudrillard wrote a review of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. He claimed that McLuhan's dictum that the "medium is the message" is "the very formula of alienation in a technical society" (1967) and criticized McLuhan for naturalizing that alienation. At this time, he shared the neo-Marxian critique of McLuhan as a technological reductionist and determinist. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, McLuhan's formula eventually became the guiding principle of his thought.

Baudrillard begins developing his media theory in the article "Requiem

for the Media" in *Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972). The title is ironic, for Baudrillard is only beginning to develop a social theory in which the media will play crucial roles in constituting a new postmodernity. Thus, Baudrillard is writing a requiem here for a Marxist theory of the media, arguing:

McLuhan has said ... that for Marx, the spiritual contemporary of the steam engine and railroads, was already obsolete in his lifetime with the appearance of the telegraph. In his candid fashion, he is saying that in his materialist analysis of production, Marx had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs, and communication generally found themselves excluded (CPES, p. 164).

Baudrillard's critique of Marx here begins a radical interrogation of and eventual break with Marxism, culminating in *The Mirror of Production* (1973). Baudrillard begins distancing himself from Marxism in "Requiem for the Media," and attacks Marx's alleged economic reductionism, or "productivism," and the alleged inability of the Marxian theory to conceptualize language, signs, and communication.

As an example of the failure of Marxian categories to provide an adequate theory of the media, Baudrillard criticizes the German activist and writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger's media theory and his attempts to develop a socialist strategy for the media (1974). Baudrillard dismisses this effort as a typical Marxian attempt to liberate productive forces from the fetters of productive relations that fail to see that in their very form, the mass media of communication "are anti-mediatory and intransitive" (CPES, pp. 169-170).

For Baudrillard, this is the “real abstraction of media” when looking at communication as an exchange, in that the mass media actually “fabricates noncommunication ... they are what always prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible (CPES, pp. 169-170). Take, for example, social media identity statements. Even when the artist’s impression is absent of the real, portraying only the illusion of reality- with enough community engagement, the fantasy becomes the consumed reality for both the original artist and their community of friends and followers.

Viewing social media identity statements as media (art) practice differs from exploring social media postings as objects of production for consumption. Raymond Williams (2014) states that as consumers of literature(art), we cannot separate the practice of consuming the object from the whole body of social practices the thing embodies. We must stop trying to isolate the object to analyze it and, in doing so, remove its historical and social context. Objectified media (art) produces a false sense of engagement and communication between the artist and the viewer.

Virtual experiences with friends and followers impact one’s physical self and displace our body and social relations with what Baudrillard described as hyperreality (Baudrillard, 2017). In this way, social media culture can generate a hyperreal mechanical reproduction of the self. In an earlier era of cultural reproduction, Walter Benjamin saw the possibility that mechanical reproduction of a work of art robbed art of its specific aura of a unique cultural presence like the Mona Lisa (1934). Likewise, the digital copy of the self in virtual worlds destroys the aura of a unique individual personality as we can construct our hyperreal virtual selves as we wish and imagine in the age of social

media. Indeed, our hyperreal selves may appear more accurate than our authentic everyday selves.

This counterfeited noncommunication of mass media results from the mass media’s focus on entertainment; as Adorno and Horkheimer have noted, the culture industry “remains the entertainment business. Its influence over the consumers is established by entertainment” (1997). Entertainment is a tool of amusement and is vital in forming consensus, whereby a small group maintains ideological and social control over larger groups through popular opinion and manufactured consent, even when it is not in the best interest of the individuals who consent to be governed.

When entertained, people turn off critical engagement with the media (art)they ingest. In doing so, media (art) is objectified – that is, it is ingested as an object, not a practice. As Baudrillard notes in *Consumer Society* (Baudrillard, 1998, p.30),

We are at the heart of consumption as the entire organization of everyday life, a total homogenization ... [w]ork, leisure, nature, and culture: all these things which were once dispersed, which once generated anxiety and complexity in our real life ... are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping.

Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) that amusement is powerlessness packaged as an escape. With the prolongation of work in capitalism, amusement is sought by those seeking an escape from the dehumanizing practices and exploitation of labor during leisure time as a period of refreshment to cope with work again. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it (1997, p.137):



All of the pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain a pleasure, it must not demand any effort ... [n]o independent thinking must be expected: the product prescribes every reaction ... [a]ny logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided.

However, the escape provided in the amusement is not from the oppression of material conditions but instead from thoughts of resisting these material conditions as a concrete reality.

Consequently, on this view, the media pander to the masses, reproducing their taste, interest in spectacle and entertainment, fantasies, and way of life, producing an implosion between mass consciousness and media phantasmagoria. In this way, Baudrillard shortcircuits the manipulation theory, which sees media manipulation imposed from above, creating mass consciousness. However, he seems to share the contempt for the masses in standard manipulation theory claiming that they want nothing more than spectacle, diversion, entertainment, and escape and are incapable of, or uninterested in, producing meaning.

Amusement in the social media age fabricates communication exchanges in the instant gratification a person receives from likes, retweets, follows, and notifications. Goals and objectives are removed and replaced by the glitter of the culture industry. Tied into these shiny objects are ideologies deeply impacted by advertising, marketing, and algorithms designed to influence and shape consumer behavior. It is here that we have the marriage between advertising and amusement. As Marshall McLuhan (1951) points out in the opening lines of *The Mechanical Bride*, noting ours to be

the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. The object is to get inside to manipulate, exploit, and control. Moreover, to generate heat, not light, is the intention. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment.

Amusement sells information through lifestyles represented as dominant, desirable, and expected, with promises of happiness to anyone who willingly consumes. Baudrillard explains this perfectly with his successive phases of the image, which could also be used to describe the successive stages of social media art in constructing and presenting digital selves (2017, p.6)

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
- it is its own pure simulacrum.

One additional phase could be added: it produces an object of pure amusement.

Without full awareness of the possibilities of art in an age of social media, this emptying of meaning from social media content will continue to challenge the liberatory value of art and instead reproduce what Baudrillard argues is art's disappearance as a force of critique and liberation. To combat this, we must use critical media literacy tools to challenge amusement as a primary and desired activity for social media users. It is not enough to consume

social media art as an object, we must also digest the media, critique it, and construct our own culture and selves out of the media.

### **Postmodern disconnected connectivity**

In the *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard noted how the “TV Object” was becoming the center of the household and was serving an essential “proof function” that the owner was a genuine member of the consumer society (CPRES, pp. 53ff). For Baudrillard, the accelerating role of the media in contemporary society is equivalent to THE FALL in the postmodern society of simulations from the modern production universe. Modernity for Baudrillard is thus the era of production characterized by the rise of industrial capitalism and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, postmodern society is an era of simulation dominated by signs, codes, and models. Modernity is thus centered on the production of things -commodities and products -- while postmodernity is characterized by radical semiurgy, by a proliferation of signs.

Furthermore, following McLuhan, Baudrillard interprets modernity as a process of the explosion of commodification, mechanization, technology, and market relations. At the same time, postmodern society is the site of an implosion of all boundaries, regions, and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance, and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory. Furthermore, while modernity could be characterized as a process of increasing differentiation of spheres of life (Max Weber as interpreted by Habermas 1988), postmodernity could be construed as a process of de-differentiation and attendant implosion.

We see here how Baudrillard (2017) out-McLuhans McLuhan interprets television and all other media simply as technological forms, as machines that produce primarily technological effects in which content, messages, or social uses are deemed irrelevant and unimportant. We also see how, like McLuhan, he anthropomorphizes the media (“the television is watching you”), a form of technological mysticism (or, to be nastier, mystification) as extreme as McLuhan. Like McLuhan, Baudrillard also globalizes media effects making the media demiurge of a new type of society and a new type of experience.

In the social media age, social media platforms’ role in producing social media art and disseminating the available interpretations of the art is disproportionate and antithetical to democracy. Our relative lack of access to the production and dissemination of ideas creates a situation where we are removed from the information production process. As hegemony suggests, we are willing participants in this process. Media exist within societies, not separate or outside the structures of social policy, cultural practices, or power relations they enforce. As a result, media (art)representations reflect and influence society by showing what the world is like and where we fit into it. Media (art) also shows us the limits and potential of our technologies to access media stories. Critical media literacy offers us an entry point for change. All texts and symbols (art) are polysemic and can have multiple meanings, so it is not a static system. Opportunities exist for oppositional social media (art), radical storytelling, and transformative education.

Our engagement with social media art is a disconnected connectivity, which mirrors what Baudrillard describes as the realm of simulation (Baudrillard, 2017).



There needs to be more connection between the frontend experiences of the social media user from the backend economics of the social media platform. For example, the user's frontend experience is a barrage of text, images, icons, symbols, videos, and emojis that have been hallowed out from the backend discourse, history, and social context of the social media platforms the user is playing on. Social media engagement frontends as harmless social connectivity. However, embedded in our social posts is a backend of the economics of our social media platforms, discourses rooted in a capitalist history that cannot be separated from Imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, and violence. The liberatory potential of art in

which seduces and fascinates the subject and enters subjectivity to produce a reified consciousness and privatized and fragmented lifestyle (Sartre's seriality). Thus, while McLuhan ascribes a generally benign social destiny to the media, for Baudrillard, the function of TV and mass media is to prevent response, to isolate and privatize individuals, and to trap them into a universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the spectacle and the real, and where individuals come to prefer sensation over "reality" (which both loses interest for the masses and its privileged status in philosophy and social theory).

The mass media are thus instruments for Baudrillard of a "cold seduction" whose narcissistic charm consists of a

*Modernity for Baudrillard is thus the era of production characterized by the rise of industrial capitalism and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie.*

the age of social media requires front-end experiences by users that paint pictures that critique the back-end politics of surveillance capitalism.

However, we might contrast McLuhan's ecumenical Catholicism here with Baudrillard's somewhat puritanical Protestantism. McLuhan fantasized about a new type of global community and even a new universal (media) consciousness and experience through disseminating a global media system, the global village. McLuhan (1964) also believed that the media could overcome alienation produced by the abstract rationality of book culture, which was replaced by a new synaesthesia and harmonizing of the mind and body, the senses, and technologies. Baudrillard (2017), by contrast, sees the media as external demigods, or idols of the mind -- to continue the Protestant metaphor --,

manipulative self-seduction in which we enjoy the play of lights, shadows, dots, and events in our mind as we change channels or media and plug into the variety of networks -- media, computer, information -- that surround us and that allow us to become modulators and controllers of an overwhelming panoply of sights, sounds, news, and events. In this sense, media have a chilling effect (which is why Baudrillard (1967) allows McLuhan's "cool" to become downright "cold") which freezes individuals into functioning as terminals of media and communication networks who become involved as part and parcel of the very apparatus of communication. The subject, then, becomes transformed into an object as part of a nexus of information and communication networks.

In addition, the spectacles of the consumer society and the dramas of the

public sphere are also being replaced by media events that replace public life and scenes with a screen that shows us everything instantaneously and without scruple or hesitation: "Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" (p. 130). The ecstasy of communication: everything is explicit, ecstatic (out of or beyond itself), and obscene in its transparency, detail, and visibility: "It is no longer the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication" (p. 131).

In the ecstasy of communication, everything becomes transparent, and there are no more secrets, scenes, privacy, depth, or hidden meaning. Instead, a promiscuity of information and communication unfolds. The media circulate and disseminate a teeming network of extraordinary, seductive, and fascinating sights and sounds to be played on one's screen and terminal. With the disappearance of exciting scenes (in the home, in the public sphere), passion evaporates in personal and social relations. However, a new fascination emerges ("the scene excites us, the obscene fascinates us") with the very universe of media and communication. In this universe, we enter a new form of subjectivity, becoming saturated with information, images, events, and ecstasies. Without defense or distance, we become "a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (p. 133). In the media society, the era of interiority, sub-

jectivity, meaning, privacy, and inner life is over; a new era of obscenity, fascination, vertigo, instantaneity, transparency, and overexposure begins: Welcome to Baudrillard's postmodern world!

### **The liberatory value of art (media) in the age of social media**

Baudrillard uses a model of the media as a black hole of signs and information which absorb all contents into cybernetic noise, which no longer communicates meaningful messages in the process of implosion, where all content implodes into form. We thus see how Baudrillard eventually adopts McLuhan's media theory as his own, claiming that:

The medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term ... that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another in content nor in form. This is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real (1983, pp. 102-103).

As Baudrillard argues, "It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or form since the medium and the real are now in a nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable" (1983, pp. 102-103). In effect, Baudrillard suggests that developing a radical media theory is impossible because there are no "media" in the sense of institutions and cultural machines mediating between dominant political and economic powers and the population below. Baudrillard suggests that the media intensify massification by producing mass audiences and massification of ideas and experiences. On the other hand, he claims that the masses absorb all media content,



neutralize, or even resist, meaning and demand and obtain more spectacle and entertainment, thus further eroding the boundary between media and “the real.” In this sense, the media implode into the masses to the extent that it is unknowable what effects they have on the masses and how they process the media.

Our engagement with social media art is a disconnected connectivity, which mirrors what Baudrillard describes as the realm of simulation (Baudrillard, 2017). There needs to be more connection between the frontend experiences of the social media user from the backend economics of the social media platform. For example, the user’s frontend experience is a barrage of text, images, icons, symbols, videos, and emojis that have been hallowed out from the backend discourse, history, and social context of the social media platforms the user is playing on. Social media engagement frontends as harmless social connectivity. However, embedded in our social posts is a backend of the economics of our social media platforms, discourses rooted in a capitalist history that cannot be separated from Imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, misogyny, and violence. The liberatory potential of art in the age of social media requires front-end experiences by users that paint pictures that critique the back-end politics of surveillance capitalism.

One of the primary challenges of the liberatory potential of media (art) in the social media age is to differentiate *doxa* from *episteme* from our mediated experiences. In Ancient Greece, *doxa* referred to knowledge acquired through accepting popular opinion, whereas *episteme* described a more profound knowledge gained from reasoning and scientific thinking (Szaif, 2007, pp. 253-272). This is challenging since our quest for *learning*

has been evicted from our *leisure* actions. In its place, the *amusement* has replaced knowledge and now dominates all digital human interactions. It is no coincidence that the modern English word “school” originates in the Ancient Greek word for *leisure*, *schola*. In Ancient Greece, *schola* referred to a set of experiences geared towards learning that would better an individual and their virtue, thereby leading to an improvement for the common good and the individual’s happiness. As Plato demonstrates, quoting Socrates (Book VII, 2000), “do not use compulsion, but let early education be a sort of amusement; you will then be better able to find out the natural bent.” *Schola* in Ancient Greece was more than just the pursuit of pleasure. It was tied to pursuing knowledge, which was essential to happiness. As Aristotle noted: “[h]appiness, whether consisting in pleasure or virtue or both, is more often found with those who are highly cultivated in their minds and their character and have only a moderate share of external goods than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities. (Aristotle, 1908, Book 7). However, schooling today is a form of mediated amusement, and *leisure* is more closely tied to amusement as entertainment than learning.

Reclaiming *schola* is a priority to reclaiming art (media), agency, and activism. With a critical pedagogy of media literacy, the over-inundation of consumer images in the Googlborg Galaxy becomes a map that can be navigated by looking at ideologies to decide which ones are organic, naturally given to a structure, and which are arbitrary, unnaturally willed by individuals. Counterpublics arise, and negotiation as contestation emerges. As Gramsci notes (1971), organic ideologies can organize human masses and create

the terrain where people move, acquire consciousness of their position, and struggle to overcome oppression. In contrast, arbitrary ideologies only create individual movements, atomizing counterpublics by focusing on self-improvement, self-advancement, and myths such as the American dream in the Global North. The polemics of arbitrary ideologies limit the potential for positive social change, allowing only the commodification and hallowed representation of activism.

A critical pedagogy of media literacy also requires teaching the ability to read and critique the text of one's own and other cultures, including political and media discourses, social media, television programming, popular music, advertising, and other cultural forms. It also includes a critical awareness of institutions that may use their structural power to assault tolerance or promote profit for corporations over the dignity of human life or the life of our planet. A critical media literacy pedagogy must train individuals for citizenship, teaching about politics and governance while cultivating a tolerance that affirms equity and justice as core principles for all. The very nature of education in the Googleburg Galaxy requires this transformation to activate a generation of change-makers and reclaim civil society. Critical media literacy allows citizens engaging in rational critical discourse to see themselves as part of a larger community, both as participants in a virtual community of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, chat room debaters, and Instagram posters (even in disagreement) but also as a part of a larger global community of human beings.

This does not mean that critical media equals consensus and agreement. It is precisely the opposite. Critical media literacy is about dialoguing across multiple points

of view. It is about recognizing that the morning newspaper has a story to sell, an editorial bias, a host of advertisers to maintain solid relationships with, and a readership to, please. As a result of this network of intersecting priorities, whom the paper hires to write the stories, how the story gets told, and of course, which types of stories get told are heavily produced within a vacuum of bias. This does not even account for the individual biases of the writer themselves if they have an emotional investment in the topic, if they had a bad day when they wrote the story, if they have an affinity for (or hatred of) the person or persons they are writing about, or if they just broke up with their partner, lost a loved one, or have decided that they no longer want to keep their current job. Social media then are no different here from more traditional forms of media, except that the speed at which we receive information and updates are lighting fast (and sent directly to us on our mobile devices no matter where we are or what we are doing, so our guard is often down when we engage with the media itself) and that we receive these updates or news stories from friends and followers. Therefore, there is a built-in or inherent level of trust in the storyteller.

When we examine social media platforms using the critical skills of media literacy, we recognize that each of these mediums (and all mediums of popular culture and their produced texts) can be seen in a positive light in that they are good because there is a role for the audience to play. The same applies to social media news, even if the headlines are one-liners and sensationalized. Here, each reader can like, comment, share, subscribe, or retweet the news story with their commentary attached to it to help contextualize or further problematize the news story and/

or news coverage. At the same time, social media news is also problematic and offers some incongruence that needs to be critiqued. Through this lens, social media news is dangerous when there is no connection between representation and the real lives the information purports to represent. To overcome this distance between the representation suggested (either implicitly or explicitly) as normal and the real lives of the individuals represented (or not represented), misrepresentations must be turned into spaces for resistance.

It is not enough to consume information as knowledge. We must also digest the media, critique it, and construct our viewpoints to share in critical dialogue. In the case of social media news, for example, this requires us to share and reply with critical commentary. In everyday life, we construct our viewpoints to share in critical dialogue. When we examine social media platforms using the essential skills of media literacy, we recognize that social media art still offers liberatory potential since there is a role for the audience to play, even if social media platforms present us with objects of amusement that hide the process of marginalization and inequity.

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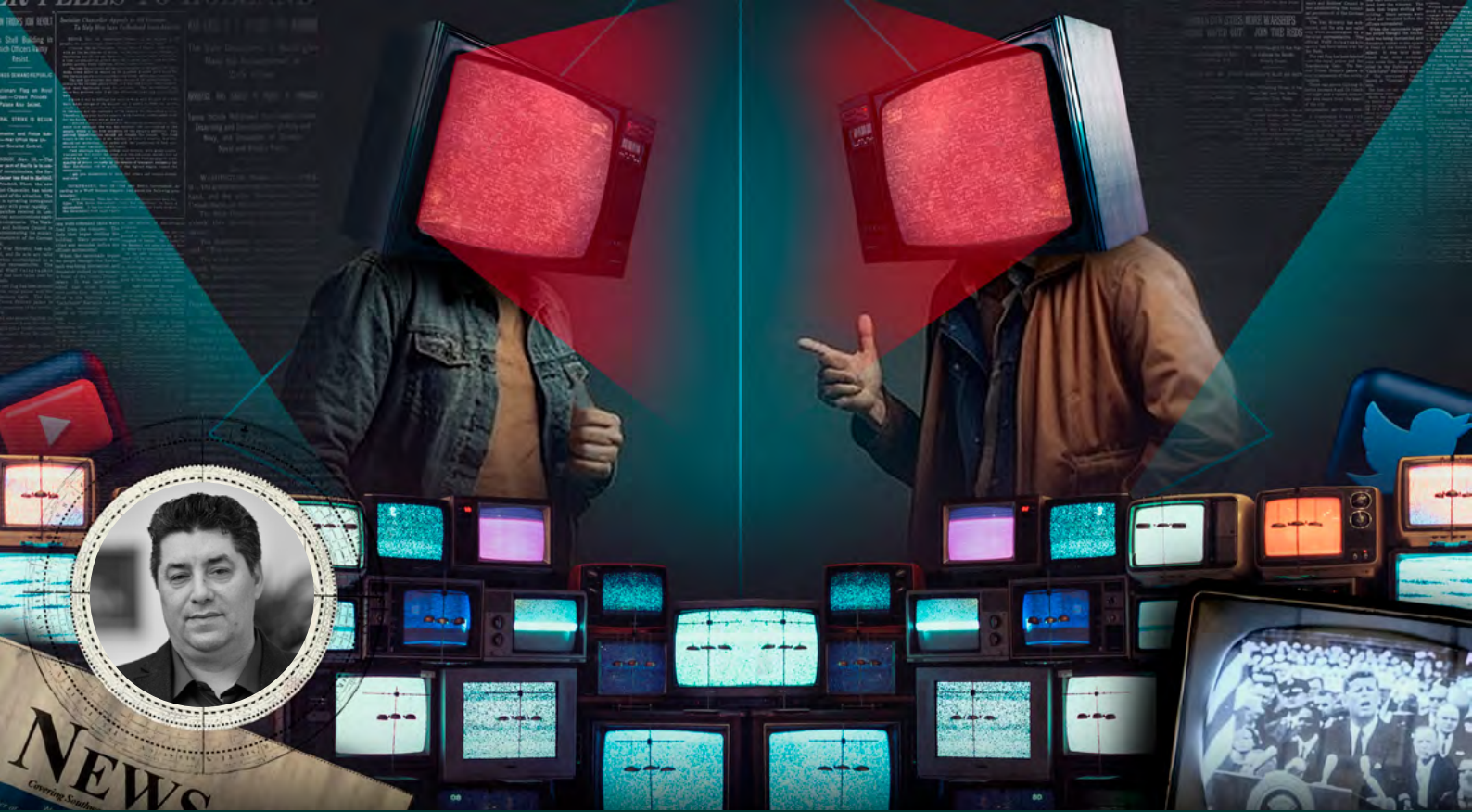
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# The Screen: Product of the Hyperreality Machine

**Dr. Oleg Maltsev**

Author, founder and head of the Memory Institute,  
EUASU Academician and Presidium Member

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Jean Baudrillard considered different pressing phenomena and introduced many concepts to describe today's world of hyperreality - among them the screen, seduction, simulacra and simulations, and the silent majority. All of these are determinate elements that, when woven together, constitute hyperreality, and it is the machine of hyperreality that generates these elements. It is hyperreality that transforms people into a mass, a screened out, silent majority, as theorized by Baudrillard. This article focuses on the screen as one of the phenomena generated by the machine of hyperreality. It describes the stages through which it is formed and examines how it affects human life.

In my work as a criminologist and sociologist working with the Expeditionary Corps of the Memory Institute, I have led over 40 field studies and investigations of case studies across four continents. In recent research on the Sicilian mafia conducted in Italy, the expeditionary group focused on the methodology involved in the upbringing of the mafia leader, the Capo. Before starting the study, and after studying the work of other scholars, we came to the conclusion that no-one had done such a study before. Previous scholars have described particular mafia bosses and their biographies, but we were interested in exploring the intermediate stages through which someone passes en route

to becoming a Capo. The real-world mafia has little in common with representations in cinema and literature.

This new study on the process of becoming a Capo required a research methodology that had not previously existed. For this purpose we took the “language” of European mysticism and that of Baudrillard and compared them, and came to the conclusion that the essence of “Baudrillard’s language” corresponds completely with the language of European mysticism. This analysis has been presented in detail in my earlier work, “Maestro: The Last Prophet of Europe”. Thanks to the methodology gleaned from Baudrillard, we were able to assemble a complete working model of the machine of hyperreality, the elements of which Baudrillard described in his writings. The results of this research form the basis of my next book on Baudrillard’s system, *Ownerless Herd*. “Ownerless Herd” is another name for what Baudrillard calls the “masses”, the “silent majority”, or the “screened out. This book is about the world order that we live in and is designed to provide an analysis of the real functioning of the global machine of hyperreality, including an analysis of the elements of this machine and their impact on the opportunities of each person. The book will also provide in-depth analysis of information distortion methods and models that explain the nature of many of today’s conflicts, be they geopolitical conflicts or an everyday conflict between two people. This straightforward and practical book will show how different mechanisms and elements that are an integral part of our societies create hyperreality and turn people into an “ownerless herd”, in other words, into idiots.

**Contents of the book:**

1. Ownerless herd
2. Ode to Hyperreality



3. Baudrillard’s Hypothesis of Hyperreality (Machine and Fate)
4. Who are we dealing with?
5. Theory and Practice of Conflict
6. Simulation and Simulacra
7. Denial of Memory
8. Screen and Hyperreality (First Approach to Hyperreality)
9. Seduction
10. Working with the Machine of Hyperreality
11. Expertise as an Inherent Part of the Machine of Hyperreality
12. Everything (even pregnancy) is a Reflection of the Instinct for Power
13. Transformer (Two-side Group Technology). Blogger (key and insight)
14. You Are Given to Yourselves to Be Destroyed
15. The Machine of Hyperreality: Assembling
  - Generator - Conflict
  - Generator - Simulacra and Simulation
  - Blocker - Denial of Memory
  - Staging - Seduction
  - Reducer - Expertise
  - Transformer - Media and Global Network
  - Stabilizer - Adaptability and Maladaptability
16. Technological Efficiency and Hyperreality



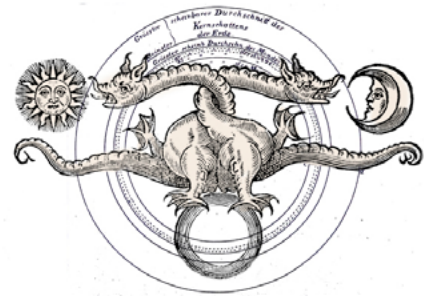
# JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S CONSTRUCTION



**WORLD**



**PRISM**



**INEXPLICABLE  
MYSTICAL  
PHENOMENA**

In the book [“Maestro: The Last Prophet of Europe,”](#) I offered a construction of Baudrillard’s philosophy which is reflected in a model which consists of three parts:

1. The world in which we live;
2. A kind of prism (or screen) through which we look at this world;
3. Unexplained mystical phenomena.

The everyday experience of the world does not accord with the world itself, but rather, is filtered through ideological ways of relating to it. These ways of relating are themselves co-constituted with the social machine they represent, which today is the machine of hyperreality. The screen or prism does not appear out of thin air, and there are very concrete reasons for its existence. It is probably unnecessary to tell most readers that the civilized age is oversaturated with information. Today there is a totally imaginary belief that we can find all kinds of information on Wikipedia, Goo-

gle, etc. These sites provide unprecedented accumulations of real and purported facts, often beyond capabilities to process for a modern man. But it was not for nothing that Baudrillard said, “We are in a world in which there is more and more information and less and less meaning.” Despite the abundance of information, people are not able to find knowledge that would help to acquire the skills, tactics and logic of winning, that would help achieve results. People are surrounded by information, but are often unable to tell the authentic from the dissimulated, to filter the biases of sources, or to make use of data in creating meaningful analyses of the world. The more facts we accumulate, the more stupid we become.

One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the rejection of historicism. By this, I do not mean a particular philosophy such as a teleology of history. I mean a broad



awareness of the place of the present in a wider, and changing, historical context, a context in which causal, structural, and intentional forces operate. Today we are caught in an eternal present, a situation of “present shock” in which the sense of past and future are lost. Historicism is what a healthy human mind relies on to situate the wider social environment, and which contributes to an identification of one’s self. Modern man is essentially devoid of historicism, and the word itself does not evoke any associations for most people.

We tend all too easily to forget that our reality comes to us through the media, the tragic events of the past included. This means that it is too late to verify and understand them historically, for precisely what characterizes our century’s end is the fact that the tools of historical intelligibility have disappeared. History had to be understood while there still was history. (Baudrillard, J. (2014). *Screened Out.*)

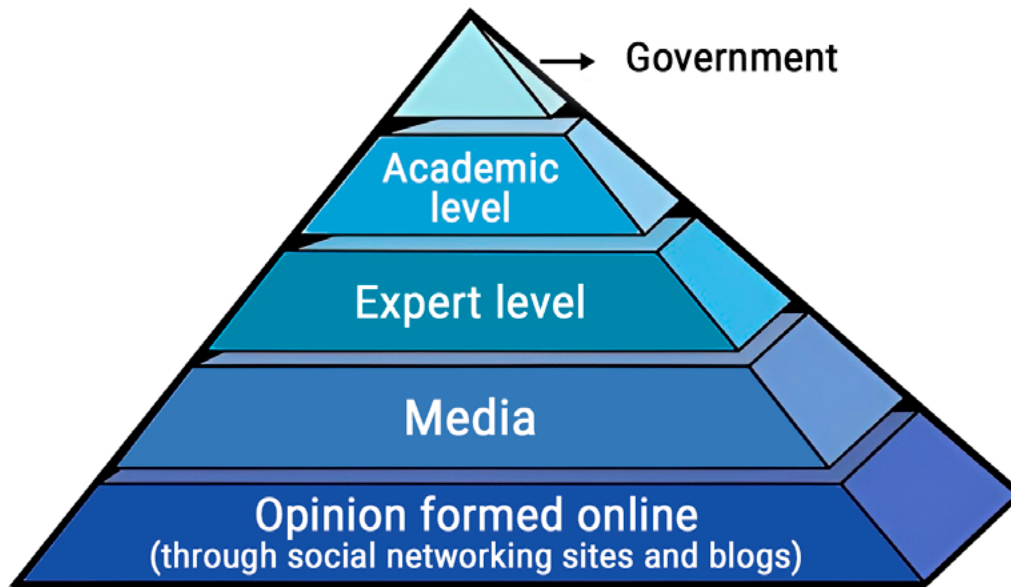
And is there really any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple, but conventional, space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond these search parameters. Every question has its anticipated response. (Baudrillard, J. (2014). *Screened Out.*)

Instead of historicism, modernity offers a kind of information swamp, a seething mass of data in which people boil. It only takes a little critical thinking to find out

that that information swamp is an accumulation of distortions, contradictions, half-truths, and misinformation. Everything is filtered through the machine of hyperreality which constitutes the present, with the result that the past and future cannot be seen clearly. The simplest example of the distorted view of history provided by the information swamp is the widespread view of the Middle Ages. Today, most people believe that medieval Europeans were uneducated, dirty, unenlightened, and vastly inferior to the people of today in their science, technology, and philosophy. Yet this is in sharp discrepancy with the surviving material culture of what these supposedly uneducated people were able to build. Medieval architecture continues to fascinate modern observers and attracts tourists from all over the world. These wonders of European mysticism were created by the same “uneducated” persons denounced by modernity. If one does not study historical processes, does not ask such questions, the rejection of historicism has consequences. In order to explain this in the modern context, here is a heuristic model of the pyramid that shapes public opinion (according to Prof. Massimo Introvigne):

There are five levels in this pyramid from top to bottom: government, academics, experts, media, and social media. Most information flows hierarchically down the pyramid, or in more complex cases, is extrapolated upwards and then fed back downwards to those who were its initial source. Top-down information flows down this pyramid directly to the masses. Consumers devour this information and so they form a certain screen, a way of seeing and relating. And when two people look at each other, they look through the prism of this pyramid. In

## FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION



reality, the frame is being passed down from above in the majority of cases. There are often invisible hierarchies at work, including legal and other contestations regarding the regulation of the supply of information. Different decision making fractions use the same top-down process for different purposes. Often, these purposes are polarized, with certain elite fractions trying to monopolize authority in a given field, so as to capture rents or influence. The result of this process is that the screens available do little to aid understanding of a complex reality, and do not even provide an overarching ideological unity. **The screen does not reflect reality, but generates conflict.** Because two people look at the same situation through two different prisms, they see it very differently, and in the logic of hyperreality, the resultant conflicts of interests, opinions, and so forth, often become insoluble. They are determined at the level of framing, and are not subject to mutual understanding, mutually recognised evidence, or common forms of reasoning. On a larger scale, this conflict of screens leads to the recurrence of violence, war, and terrorism, as Baudril-

lard argued. On top of that people are so caught in a hyperreal media bubble that they cannot assess information except in a manner which reproduces existing biases.

The screen is not just a way of explaining things, in the manner of a scientific or philosophical theory. The screen allows one *not to think*. It provides pre-formed answers to all questions, and allows a properly conditioned ideological subject to live in dangerous, changing social conditions without feeling stressed. The screen thus meets an important emotional need: human beings do not like to feel pressure and stress, and in conditions like those today, excessive stress can be debilitating. Someone who foregoes the use of the screen to avoid doubt and worry may collapse under the strain. Yet this coping mechanism, useful for individuals, is devastating on a social scale. The more the two sides in a conflict are given simple answers and means to avoid thinking, the further their points of view drift apart, and the more fear and hatred arise between them. Because of this, people find themselves caught in daily arguments and conflicts, without having any awareness of what the

grounds of the conflict are: they feel they are simply coming across others who are absurdly irrational, ill-informed, and morally outrageous. In reality, this impression arises because one is arguing with someone subjected to a different screen, and neither oneself nor the adversary is able to see either of the screens at work or to compare them to reality.

**90% of the decisions in life are made on the basis of the information which is screened, and this situation in turn generates most of the problems on all layers of society. People think they are making free and rational decisions, but in fact, the screening process predetermines many of the choices or restrains them within given parameters.**

of secondary, half-true or outright false data (“someone told me...”). The context of free opinions is mobilized in the service of screening, operating as a cover for the right never to doubt one’s screen. This situation has spread to all aspects of social life: not just everyday political and lifestyle discussions, but also business, economics, politics, international relations, science, technology, and so on.

The screen brings with it another danger: a consensus based on consent. It is the constant attempt to arrive at a consensus on the basis of the consequence of the screen, of screened vision, which leads people into subjective conditions similar to psychiatric disorders. If people continually come to consensus and agree that we

*90% of the decisions in life are made on the basis of the information which is screened, and this situation in turn generates most of the problems on all layers of society.*

A person cannot give up the screen because he knows nothing about it. The screen today starts in childhood, with parental norms and commands which the child is not to question on pain of punishment. The associated beliefs are taken as true. The role of the parent passes smoothly into that of school, of the peer-group, and later of various kinds of online “experts” on sites like YouTube. People never get outside the screen in which they are raised, even though at the same time, there is some pluralism of opinion. In principle, each person can look at a situation or phenomenon the way they want, and everyone learns about democracy, rights, free speech, differences of opinion, etc. However, none of this stops the screening of worldviews, and people continue to shape their perceptions of the world on the basis

now call a red object green, or that green and red are the same, then this is how everyone will become color-blind. All too often, consensus on surface slogans and concepts conceals a vagueness and even a polarized view of the content of these words.

What have we gained through consensus? Science, among other things, has become a kind of simulation. Without clear conceptual distinctions, nothing can be tested, confirmed, or refuted. Instead, we get an illusion, a consensus-by-diktat in which the distinction is rhetorically denied or occluded. We might think, for example, that a pen has become a rhinoceros - but this is simply an illusion, a change in conventional language which is mistaken for a change in reality. Today, accumulations of these kinds of consensus



illusions are piling up as extended constructs known as simulations. Because people keep agreeing, they keep looking for causal connections between all these incoherent objects. The result is that certain of these constructs seem to society to have been “proven”, and in a sense have been, since the posited objects observably relate - but the resultant knowledge is too imprecise to be scientific.

For example, in psychology, people have supposedly been able to prove to each other than human beings exist simply at a neurophysiological level. The mind is the brain, and the brain is observable by scientists. This belief is certainly not true: there is also the level of the experienced psyche, and there is also a spiritual component, the experience of qualia, of an “I”, etc. But if you take the vast majority of psychologists in the world today, they will only reach the anthropological and neurophysiological level in their conversation. And as soon as they start talking about psychology, if not all of them, then very many will say that it is too ephemeral and not quite scientific... and that a human being has no “I” as such. Today we clearly see that very many scientists approach the question in the way described above. Jean Baudrillard, as always, was to the point, in his description of what is happening in the modern world:

“But the trap with these plural identities, these multiple existences, this devolution on to ‘intelligent machines’—dice machines as well as the machines of the networks — is that once the general equivalent has disappeared, all the new possibilities are equivalent to one another and hence cancel each other out in a general indifference. Equivalence is still there, but it is no longer the equivalence of an agency at the top

(the ego); it is the equivalence of all the little egos ‘liberated’ by its disappearance.”

(Baudrillard, J. (2013). *The Intelligence of Evil: or, The Lucidity Pact* (Bloomsbury Revelations) (Reprint ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.)

The motivation for the consensus is profit. Illusory consensus offers both an illusory profit, an illusion of social consensus, and a real profit, an avoidance of stress and doubt. The pseudo-consensus appears to be advantageous for everyone. That is, the screen allows one to think profitably - in the way that is convenient for the person at a certain moment in time. At the same time, the screen allows (or even compels) someone to change their opinion as the situation changes, since the information they are reacting to also changes. A person thus becomes “multifaceted”, “flexible”, because the screen determines the perceived reality towards which one orients. The screen gives a lot of information, and a person can choose the one that is beneficial to him and ignore the one that is not. A certain kind of psychiatric madness, a pattern of self-reproducing delusions and quasi-hallucinated realities, thus becomes a general human condition. There is no longer a reality-check on wishful thinking or on compulsive moral imperatives. That is, the danger of the screen is that it leads to the destabilization of the human psyche.

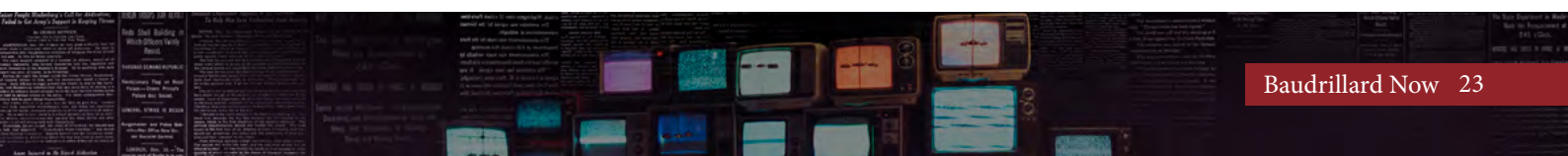
The result is not a disappearance of reality, but a complete lack of fit between perceived reality and the environment in which people operate - or more precisely, between the social environment (simulation, hyperreality) and the physical, natural, bodily, spiritual, and other realities which are not part of hyperreality. Hyperreal thinking makes it easy to say that black is white, or that black and white

are both gray, that real differences do not exist. This takes away the function of concepts in sorting objects in the world. When someone says that black is white, they lose their entire system of orientation in the world. We might say, for instance, that someone chooses a map of New York, because this map seems the most profitable, the most appealing or aesthetically pleasing, the most strategically useful, or the map which is used by a person's peer-group. Using this map of New York, the person travels through Paris - taking the map as a guide. Undoubtedly, very soon, such a person will have an accident or become completely lost. This happens all the time today, metaphorically speaking, as people use conceptual toolkits chosen for completely the wrong reasons, and run up against realities which do not fit their models.

In hyperreality, we can continue, the person using the wrong map gets used to it, and does it all the time, is constantly lost, and gets into accidents of all kinds all the time. Yet they never question the map (which, after all, is a good enough map for some purposes). This is taken to be "just life", or proof of the general inadequacy of maps, or explained away on the basis of other ad hoc theories forming part of their worldview. Perhaps the person becomes convinced that they themselves are inherently flawed and this is why they have accidents. Perhaps they become convinced that some structural force or invisible adversary is sabotaging their journeys over and over. In fact, the screen is causing the accidents. The person is relating to information, and relating to reality mediated by information, but the information bears no relation to the reality at hand.

A person's opinion is formed on the basis of self-interest, wishful thinking, under the influence of their screen.

But an opinion based on unreliable information has never led anyone to anything good. We have looked at how the screen is formed and what the consequences are. Why would anyone want to do this? The most important thing is the human factor. The whole hyperreality machine, the product of which is the screen, came into being in a context of social conflict and crisis, to control the human factor, to make all people a derelict herd, and frankly to make them fools. Hyperreality is an effective means to defuse the forces which otherwise undermine social control. The fact is that people with a sense of their status (whether as workers, farmers, businesspeople...) demand more from the state, they are difficult to control, but the masses are much easier. The category of the fool is vulnerable and helpless. It has no power component or cannot use its power component and all this has lasted for generations. This is advantageous because helpless people who know nothing and can't do anything can't change the social order. The prevailing mass of fools is a natural social safety net that ensures the established order will last.







# Rethinking Baudrillard After the Orgy and How to Get Out of a Simulation

Dr. Steve Gennaro

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A review of *Maestro. Jean Baudrillard. The Last Prophet of Europe* (Dr. Oleg Maltsev)

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The years of 2022-3 continue to bring with it a series of unfortunate global events and accompanying uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic remains widespread and more recently the actions of Russia in Ukraine pose a significant danger to human life and to global security. And yet, as Dr. Oleg Maltsev brilliantly points out in his recent work *Maestro. Jean Baudrillard. The Last Prophet of Europe*, all these events were foreseen and were in fact quite predictable. What is perhaps more concerning, is what will come next: after the pandemic ends, after Russia exits Ukraine, after Elon Musk

will finish introducing new reforms in Twitter, or sends more millionaires into space? What will fill the void after the orgy? If history is any indication, then what will follow is increased simulation, amplified hyperreality, intensified mysticism, and diminished choice (apart from the illusion of choice in a consumer society). However, in his examination of Philosopher Jean Baudrillard, Dr. Oleg Maltsev suggests an alternative: that in fact, Jean Baudrillard's work offers us a fuller understanding of the game, of the structures that allow the game to operate and perpetuates the



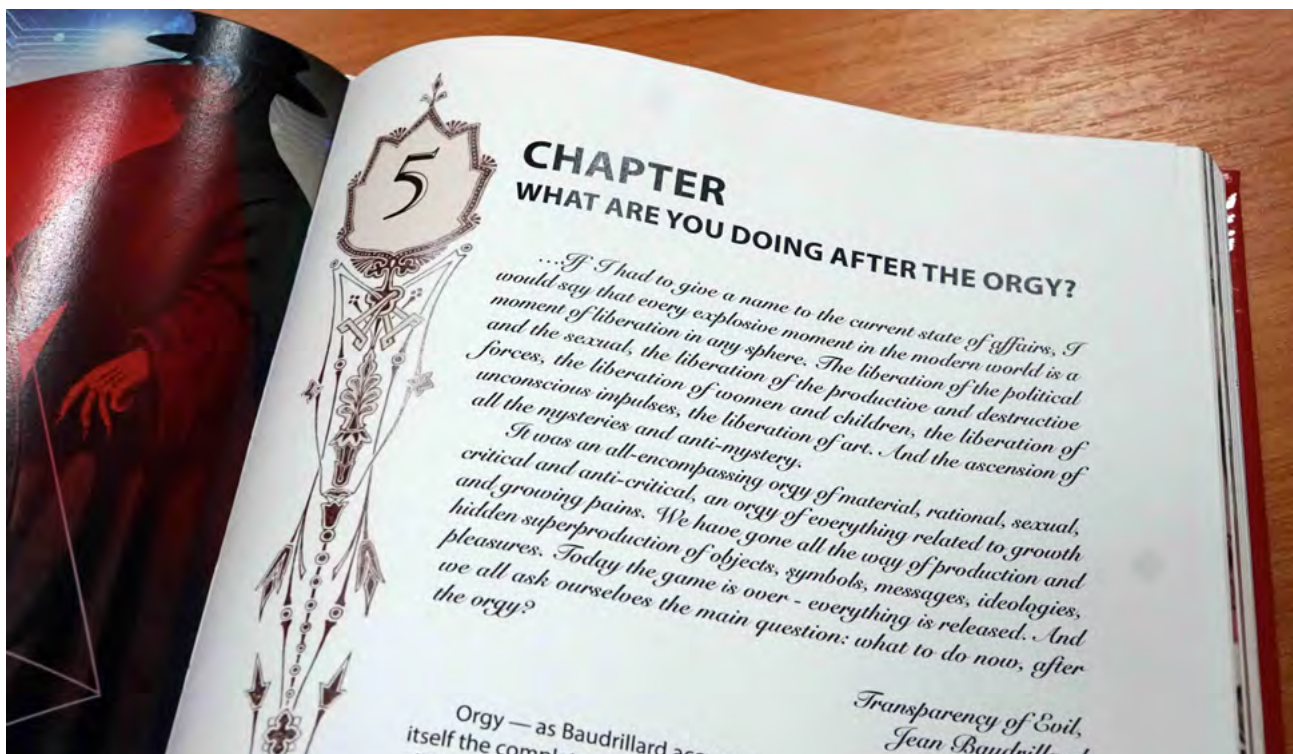
game's existence, and for the ability of each individual to be a philosopher in action. The answer is simple: see past the illusion, choose to speak to truth, and "unrob the bank."

Reading Maltsev's *Maestro. Jean Baudrillard. The Last Prophet of Europe* reminded me of stories and movies where characters get sucked deeper and deeper into a simulation. In the Red Dwarf novels, there is a video game called "Better than Life". The game is dangerously addictive. Once someone is inside the game, they do not realize that it is a game. Leaving the game is simple: clap their hands three times, whereupon the virtual reality system disengages. But if someone does not know they are in a game – whether they are having a great time, or living a nightmare – they will not try to get out, and will not remember how to get out. The analogy here is: globalization was built as a blueprint for a new reality, a New World Order which has turned into a nightmare.

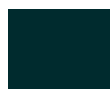
In the process of building the new reality, the infrastructure which existed

to head-off or respond to crises such as pandemics and wars has been dismantled. Health systems are overwhelmed even in normal times; militaries are dependent on state contractors and global production networks. Lockdowns, wars, and instability are disrupting global production chains: suddenly western Europe is short of grain and gas because of a war it cannot control, or consumer goods from China are suddenly unavailable worldwide. The Internet has turned into a field of information manipulation and information warfare, necessary for today's businesses yet riddled with reputational dangers. Yet nobody knows how to get out of the simulation, and the world's leaders, such as the WEF, are trying to dig us deeper and deeper into it.

*Maestro. Jean Baudrillard. The Last Prophet of Europe* is a thorough investigation of Jean Baudrillard's complete written works and his photography as one complete system of thought by Dr. Oleg Maltsev. Maltsev's approach is thorough and rational, balancing science



and philosophy in the same fashion that Baudrillard himself examined social interactions, capitalism, and mysticism as both a sociologist and a philosopher. This connection between sociology and philosophy is important to Maltsev's unique exploration of Baudrillard since, as explained to the reader, Baudrillard's importance and legacy have been largely overlooked when he is examined only in one or the other discipline (or by limiting him to being just a postmodernist, or a globalization theorist, etc). In the book, Dr. Maltsev reassembles brick by brick the overarching structure and techniques put forth by Baudrillard to not only criticize the emergence of the virtual and hyperreal, but also how to deal with these, by making visible key ideas of Jean Baudrillard that have been hidden from the naked eye (and deliberately by Baudrillard as Maltsev argues). This book has caused me to re-think what I thought about Baudrillard and has offered me insight into a whole new frame for examining what has taken place before, what is taking place now, and how to deal with what is on the horizon. In short, despite the pushback from academia and popular discourse against Jean Baudrillard's ideas, in *Maestro. Jean Baudrillard. The Last Prophet of Europe* Maltsev successfully shows us how to clap our hands and leave the game.





“

WE HAVE TO GIVE OBJECTS,  
INCLUDING OBJECTS OF DESIRE,  
**A CHANCE TO DIE VIOLENTLY.**

A VASE, A CHAIR, A BOOK, A CUPBOARD.  
FIRE, BREAKAGE, DISUSE, OBLIVION.

**A CHANCE TO BREAK INSIDE YOUR HEAD  
AND BE SMASHED TO SMITHEREENS.**

*Jean Baudrillard*







# Beyond the Driver Barrier

**Prof. Dr. Gary Genosko**

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Much has been written about Baudrillard as a critic, but hardly anything about his driving. Baudrillard wrote auto-critically in *America* (53-4) about driving on the highways of the mid-west and west coast. His apprehension of Los Angeles freeways as collective and ceremonial and his deployment of driving as an anti-academic method richer than anything he could learn from a university research institute remain touchpoints for his understanding of automotivity.

As a motorsport enthusiast, Baudrillard's essay, "The Racing Driver and His Double," allows him to take some distance from these earlier experiences: as a driver

he retains drivers and all the perceptual distortions of driving, and inherits speed as a "pure object" that is initiatory since it creates forgetting and emptiness (Baudrillard, "Driver" 6-7). The mythic drivers of the Grand Prix circuit and the calm of maximum acceleration are contrasted to the ordinary highways and byways of everyday transportation. The open road gives way to the closed track, and the relationship between them remains to be negotiated. Indeed, Baudrillard went into the desert, in order to find the Bonneville Salt Flats, the site of land speed records: "the Bonneville track on the immaculate surface of the Great Salt Lake desert, where

prototype cars achieve the highest speeds in the world.” (*America 4*)

What would Baudrillard say about the status of drivers – not like you and me, in our pokey Subarus, but in the motorsport world – in the era of driverless vehicles, that is, of what is known today as robo-racing? What critical reflective approach would he recommend that may be applied to break through what is called here the *driver barrier* into a universe in which conceptual vehicles have been actualized through an aggressive program of motorsport artificial intelligence. Once the driver barrier is breached, the cockpit is emptied and motorsport racing can experiment with a culture change in which race car driver

### Driver and Double

Given a promising promiscuity of human and machine, this relation will become a template for Baudrillard in “The Racing Driver and His Double,” and his careful confusion of doubling: race car driver and machine, working together, pushing forward one another “without it being clear which is the engine of this meteoric advance and which is merely the other’s double” (“Driver” 166). Baudrillard focuses his effort on the advance of the tensile relation between driver and machine, which are engaged in a mutual “haunting” that is sealed as a pact of sorts through “excessive expenditure” and reconciled in “the ecstasy of speed” (“Driver”

*The tip of this pyramid of expenditure is the driver. He is, as Baudrillard insists, “no longer anyone.” He is alone in his cockpit already merging with his car, inexorably losing some of his identity while also gaining a machinic form.*

celebrity-athletes are displaced definitively by their vehicles, which are themselves indexed to cinematic designs and developments in software engineering. The driverless future displaces human vision onto techno-sensing the track as well as mapping and analyzing its parameters. The primary example deployed here is the robo-race competition, a branch of Formula E racing. However, Baudrillard often wrote as a driver in an almost nostalgic mode about the so-called open road, and his reflections are quite autobiographical, and it is only when he considers the Formula 1 driver and car in terms of doubles that their mutual imbrication permits an opening to a driverless future of autonomous vehicles, a development in motorsport, it is noted, beyond his experience by some 10 years since his death.

166). Ultimately, the interface between driver and vehicle points toward the driver’s reduction to an integrated component so that in the future to peer into the cockpit of a Formula One vehicle – providing such a cavity still exists – will be to find it empty. That future is nearly upon us since only a few years ago the robo-car autonomous racing vehicle debuted before a Formula E event.

Let’s consider the slow disappearance of the driver. We begin at a point on the continuum on a Formula One track or circuit established by closing off public roadways for a brief time. With the double of the driver, that is, the car, a condensation occurs. The efforts of many team members are condensed for the sake of a “dazzling moment” broadcast to millions. The tip of this pyramid of expenditure is the driver.



He is, as Baudrillard insists, “no longer anyone.” He is *alone* in his cockpit already merging with his car, inexorably losing some of his identity while also gaining a machinic form. His loneliness is neither that of a long-distance runner, nor a *tore-ro*, not even that of a goaltender before a penalty kick. It arises from, thinks Baudrillard, alluding to the great French driver Alain Prost, not seeing the other drivers, except at the pole. A Grand Prix is nothing more than an “obstacle course” of calculations that is “teleconducted” by drivers, rather than a competition. The passion for winning is strictly “operational” and the vehicle “incorporates the driver’s will [to win] as one of the technical elements” (“Driver” 168). This incorporation is still incomplete as the question of passion remains, displaced onto the audience in the form of spectacular crashes. Baudrillard could be alluding to Sebring, 1966,

when he notes it is unlikely that spectators and drivers would lose their lives as those “sacrificial days” are over (“Driver” 168). Death has become less personal, more a matter of engines and cars rather than drivers: “Only the technical double dies, which reinforces the abstract nature of the race” (“Driver” 168-9). Yet the history of Grand Prix racing is riddled with driver, marshal and spectator deaths. As the driver slowly loses his identity, speeds approaching 200 mph begin to affect perception, and vision gives way to a predominantly tactile apprehension of space (“Driver” 168): Baudrillard concludes that F1 is a “monster” whose time is slipping away as “monsters are doomed to disappear” (“Driver” 170).

#### **The Accident**

The anthropological question for Baudrillard is death and destruction: the Accident. It relocates by moving us



Alain Prost - Williams FW15C during practice for the 1993 British Grand Prix  
Photo credit: Martin Lee from London, UK ([CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))



smoothly back and forth along the continuum from closed circuit to open road. In his early book on *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard wrote: “Smash up your car, the insurance will do the rest!” Indeed, the car is without doubt one of the main foci of daily and long-term waste.” (47) Baudrillard explained the importance of waste beyond both a moral and economic vision that would criticize it as either irrational or counter-productive. The symbolic force of useless expenditure cannot be grasped in recycling, and those places where it hasn’t really caught on are interesting in this regard, less so than those wealthy enclaves where it is *de rigueur*, but must regain the social meaning of destruction as essential to the entire system of goods; the compass for the whole system, that is, and its social purpose maintains relationships. Yet the meaning of expenditure in potlatch ceremonies, for instance, is largely lost in the consumer society, reduced to “something more” (*Consumer Society* 45): a second home or car; or, even better, the “whiff of potlatch” that clings to the fantastic expenditures of the heroes of consumption, their glorious burnouts, parties, and lost weekends. For Baudrillard, this is already integrated into consumption, and poses no threat. Rather, it is this kind of squandering on a spectacular scale that lacks symbolic force because it has been reduced to a personal style and therefore has no collective meaning. Even if the death of a celebrity – James Dean’s crashed Porsche – is a kind of apotheosis of this degraded loss, it only signifies abundance and stimulates more consumption: “we have to distinguish individual or collective waste as a symbolic act of expenditure, as a festive ritual and an exalted form of socialization, from its gloomy, bureaucratic caricature in our societies.” (*Consumer*

*Society* 47) Hence, the car as the vehicle of this gloom that has the whiff of taxation rather than ceremonial loss.

What about Ayrton Senna da Silva, the great Brazilian F1 driver? His death in 1994 at the Autodrome in Imola, Italy, at the San Marino Grand Prix on the very corner, the Tamburello, that he had predicted would take more lives if not modified, is surely a moment of collective loss, attested to by the millions who watched or attended his state funeral in Sao Paolo. This death is perhaps closer to Baudrillard’s sense of the unproductive nature of loss, and the anguish it triggers, restoring an intimacy that would be, otherwise, reallocated to a productive order concerned with leaving something for the next day’s enterprise. (Bataille, *Accursed Share* 58) For F1 drivers are worth sacrificing! They willingly enter a space that can bring death; the treacherous corner of a track is a good example of the site of violent consumption. Think of how many car songs, like “Dead Man’s Curve” (written by Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys), evoke death and place, a known curvature of a road or track that invites a *knowing* self-sacrifice.

### **Robo-racing Beyond Death**

There is yet another route if we turn to Formula E for electric-powered cars that employs vehicle designers such as Daniel Simon to achieve a Baudrillardian insight into robo-racing. Readers of Baudrillard should look to fantasy vehicles for a glimpse of the driverless, post-sacrificial future in which only the cars are risked. Simon is the designer of the Tron Legacy Light Cycle and its offshoots – light runner, jet, and tank – the latter modelled on Syd Mead’s original 1982 concept.

Simon worked with Michelin on the concept of an autonomous race car, the Robo-car, that would support the Formula

E circuit. The robo-car debuted only in 2017 before the race on the Paris ePrix; two development vehicles, known as DevBots, are also used for track testing, but have an optional driver mode. Eventually, if it survives, a robo-race championship series will be run on the E circuit, although software development lags behind hardware and some companies have recently dropped out (BMW and Audi). The prospect of a meatless accident, at least on the track, but perhaps not in the stands, should dispel any lingering attachments to flesh fantasies of chromium incorporations and evacuations. Goodbye JG Ballard and Harry Crews, too!

What would Baudrillard say about robo-racing? He might point out that the reference point entails the transfer of advanced auto technology from the track to the streets, a typical belief about motorsport development. Indeed, the FIA decision to require halo cockpit protection in 2018 would be step back towards the mundane notion of road and driver safety. Hence, the robo-car concept is not enough of a monster and will take time to garner the kind of prestige that an F1 car enjoys, with the Ferrari, McLaren, etc. imprimaturs. Of course, team imprimaturs such as Jaguar, and Venturi (designer of the land speed record holding electric vehicle) persist on the E circuit, which only dates from 2014.

### **The Destiny of Racing**

The empty cockpit of the electric car was already encrypted in the theory of speed and disappearance that announced a loss of consciousness, of a spectralization of the environment. This was driving after consciousness or beyond thinking (Pearce 92); a philosophy of the windshield that fetishized the driver's seat and the view from the car, no matter how denatured. The driver will have outlived his privilege

and will soon be merely a set of encoded instructions in a lifeless algorithm. Of course, there is still a degree of ambiguity here as Formula E racing features professional drivers and even some robo-cars have space for drivers, especially in the case of staged lap time competitions between driverless and professionally driven electric race cars. In this sense drivers persist, and enter into competition with software developers. This human versus AI model rehearses the Garry Kasparov victory against IBM's chess playing computer Deep Blue first staged in 1996 (Baudrillard "Deep Blue" 160). For Baudrillard, at first Deep Blue was trapped in calculation while Kasparov enjoyed the "secret weapons" of human weakness, irony, and intuition (*Impossible Exchange* 116). Kasparov's subsequent defeat by Deeper Blue in 1997, a turn of events in which the computer followed a cunning non-optimal strategy against its "calculating nature," ("Deep Blue" 118) raised the idea of machine-induced freedom to fail, and to create, that was not only for human players. Baudrillard insists, however, on uncertainty with regard to whether a machine is human or a human, machine-like, in an implosion of interaction that is enigmatic. Yet he still retains a theoretical commitment to the distribution of weakness as a sign of the human player, that in rare moments can be exercised by machines in a flash of irony or a choice of pleasure over performance. Baudrillard cited computer viruses as examples of such a taking of "malicious pleasure in amplifying, and even producing perverted effects, to overcome their [machines] finality." (*Xerox 4*)

Drivers, like wheels, are on their way to obsolescence, as Marshall McLuhan once advised (*Understanding Media* 220). Perhaps, then, it may be said that drivers are at least *subsidiary* within automotivi-

ty. Advances in battery technology place electric power at the apex of the steam and gasoline trajectories of engines. However, McLuhan (225), like Baudrillard, was not completely certain about the “electronic successors to the car.” And this uncertainty is still with us. Since robo-racing is still racing, is it possible to surmount racing, the privileged analytics of speed and time, and get beyond competition in order to enter a new ecology of circulation? Speed and time are basically properties of racing teams and treated like special goods. Micro-increments of time are shaved off of lap times and these can be purchased as part of the enabling technology that crystallizes them (*Consumer Society* 153). Time is a commodity and remain just that unless a formula for its liberation can be found.

consequences, but what non-optimal decisions autonomous vehicles might make in performing their driving functions. This is what fascinated Baudrillard in the case of the software that programmed Deep Blue: “this strategy of not going the full hog” (“Deep Blue” 162), which is to say, playing below its capacity, and embracing “accidental calculations.” This was once the sole purview of the human player, but if it passes over to autonomous machines, *play* may emerge from within its calculable parameters as a viable option. This would constitute a residual trace of the human. It is not a question of peak performance, but of the potential of underperformance, or calculation without purpose towards overcoming their pre-programmed finality. What might this entail in the case of robo-racing?

*Time is a commodity and remain just that unless a formula for its liberation can be found.*

### **The Driver Has Left the Vehicle**

Once a driver has left the vehicle, only a driver in code remains. Yet in this state, the software vulnerabilities of the coded driver become exploitable. Subversion of the software is perhaps the next step in re-identifying the humanness of the driverless robo-racer. Does this imply a rehearsal of the discursive construction of fear of a hacked device, in this instance a self-driving race car? Perhaps, as the assessment of cybersecurity risks in the autonomous vehicle sector is a growing field. However, Baudrillard steers us toward a more theoretically radical perspective on the question of machine intelligence. The worry is not about what pranksters might do, or what bully cars might do to self-driving vehicles, or even how hackers might take control of critical systems at crucial moments with dire

If the accident is everywhere, it is also in robo-racing. It would be found across the continuum of tracks, but given the recent history of the deployment of the DevBots, this is not yet likely. In Buenos Aires in 2017 a DevBot crashed into a wall on a street track during a test race, while the other DevBot swerved around and avoided a dog. It was less a race between hardware shells than a battle of two different artificial intelligence software packages. The management of accidents situates waste within consumerism, trapped within programming models. However, the Baudrillardian approach is to embrace mistakes, not to weed them out altogether. Bryn Balcombe, Chief Strategy Officer of Robo-race, is quoted to this effect: “This is the Turing test for AVs: to see if they can drive ‘as naturally as a human but without the mistakes.” (Belton) Regrettably, by



insisting on the elimination of mistakes, the symbolic role of the accident is ignored and the potential human dimension of underperformance in general, what might contribute to a machine's ability to pass as human, is thus diminished in being de-natured. One could even include in this category 'taking one for the team' by allowing a fellow member to pass them. This constitutes, according to Baudrillard, an "extermination" of the human by a surpassing of the negative in a perfected operationality (*Passwords* 62-3), at the very moment when it is needed more than ever.

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# Photography, Or The Writing Of Light by Jean Baudrillard

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The miracle of photography, of its so-called objective image, is that it reveals a radically non-objective world. It is a paradox that the lack of objectivity of the world is disclosed by the photographic lens (*objectif*).<sup>1</sup> Analysis and reproduction (*ressemblance*) are of no help in solving this problem. The technique of photography takes us beyond the replica into the domain of the *trompe l'oeil*. Through its unrealistic play of visual techniques, its slicing of reality, its immobility, its silence, and its phenomenological reduction of

movements, photography affirms itself as both the purest and the most artificial exposition of the image.

At the same time, photography transforms the very notion of technique. Technique becomes an opportunity for a double play: it amplifies the concept of illusion and the visual forms. A complicity between the technical device and the world is established. The power of objects and of «objective» techniques converge. The photographic act consists of entering this space of intimate complicity, not to master it, but to play along with it and to demonstrate that nothing has been decided yet (*rendre evidente l'idee que les*

<sup>1</sup> There is here a play on the French word «*objectif*.» «*Objectif*» means objective (adj.) and visual lens (subs.) at the same time.



jeux ne sont pas faits). «What cannot be said must be kept silent.» But what cannot be said can also be kept silent through a display of images.

The idea is to resist noise, speech, rumors by mobilizing photography's silence; to resist movements, flows, and speed by using its immobility; to resist the explosion of communication and information by brandishing its secrecy; and to resist the moral imperative of meaning by deploying its absence of signification. What above all must be challenged is the automatic overflow of images, their endless succession, which obliterates not only the mark of photography (le trait), the poignant detail of the object (its *punctum*), but also the very moment of the photo, immediately passed, irreversible, hence always nostalgic. The instantaneity of photography is not to be confused with the simultaneity of real time. The flow of pictures produced and erased in real time is indifferent to the third dimension of the photographic moment. Visual flows only know change. The image is no longer given the time to become an image. To be an image, there has to be a moment of becoming which can only happen when the rowdy proceedings of the world are suspended and dismissed for good. The idea, then, is to replace the triumphant *epiphany* of meaning with a silent *apophany* of objects and their appearances.

Against meaning and its aesthetic, the subversive function of the image is to discover literality in the object (the photographic image, itself an expression of literality, becomes the magical operator of reality's disappearance). In a sense, the photographic image materially translates the absence of reality which «is so obvious and so easily accepted because we already have the feeling that nothing is real»

(Borges). Such a phenomenology of reality's absence is usually impossible to achieve. Classically, the subject outshines the object. The subject is an excessively blinding source of light. Thus, the literal function of the image has to be ignored to the benefit of ideology, aesthetics, politics, and of the need to make connections with other images. Most images speak, tell stories; their noise cannot be turned down. They obliterate the silent signification of their objects. We must get rid of everything that interferes with and covers up the manifestation of silent evidence. Photography helps us filter the impact of the subject. It facilitates the deployment of the objects's own magic (black or otherwise).

Photography also enables a technical perfection of the gaze (through the lens) which can protect the object from aesthetic transfiguration. The photographic gaze has a sort of nonchalance which nonintrusively captures the apparition of objects. It does not seek to probe or analyze reality. Instead, the photographic gaze is «literally» applied on the surface of things to illustrate their apparition as fragments. It is a very brief revelation, immediately followed by the disappearance of the objects.

But no matter which photographic technique is used, there is always one thing, and one thing only, that remains: the light. Photo-graphy: The writing of light. The light of photography remains proper to the image. Photographic light is not «realistic» or «natural.» It is not artificial either. Rather, this light is the very imagination of the image, its own thought. It does not emanate from one single source, but from two different, dual ones: the object and the gaze. «The image stands at the junction of a light which comes from the object and another which comes from the gaze» (Plato).



This is exactly the kind of light we find in Edward Hopper's work. His light is raw, white, ocean-like, reminiscent of sea shores. Yet, at the same time, it is unreal, emptied out, without atmosphere, as if it came from another shore (venue d'un autre littoral). It is an irradiating light which preserves the power of black and white contrasts, even when colors are used. The characters, their faces, the landscapes are projected into a light that is not theirs. They are violently illuminated from outside, like strange objects, and by a light which announces the imminence of an unexpected event. They are isolated in an aura which is both extremely fluid and distinctly cruel. It is an absolute light, literally photographic, which demands that one does not look at it but, instead, that one closes one's eyes on the internal night it contains. There is in Hopper's work a luminous intuition similar to that found in Vermeer's painting. But the secret of Vermeer's light is its intimacy whereas, in Hopper, the light reveals a ruthless exteriority, a brilliant materiality of objects and of their immediate fulfillment, a revelation through emptiness.

This raw phenomenology of the photographic image is a bit like negative theology. It is «apophatic,» as we used to call the practice of proving God's existence by focusing on what he wasn't rather than on what he was. The same thing happens with our knowledge of the world and its objects. The idea is to reveal such a knowledge in its emptiness, by default (en creux) rather than in an open confrontation (in any case impossible). In photography, it is the writing of light which serves as the medium for this elision of meaning and this quasi-experimental revelation (in theoretical works, it is language which functions as the thought's symbolic filter).

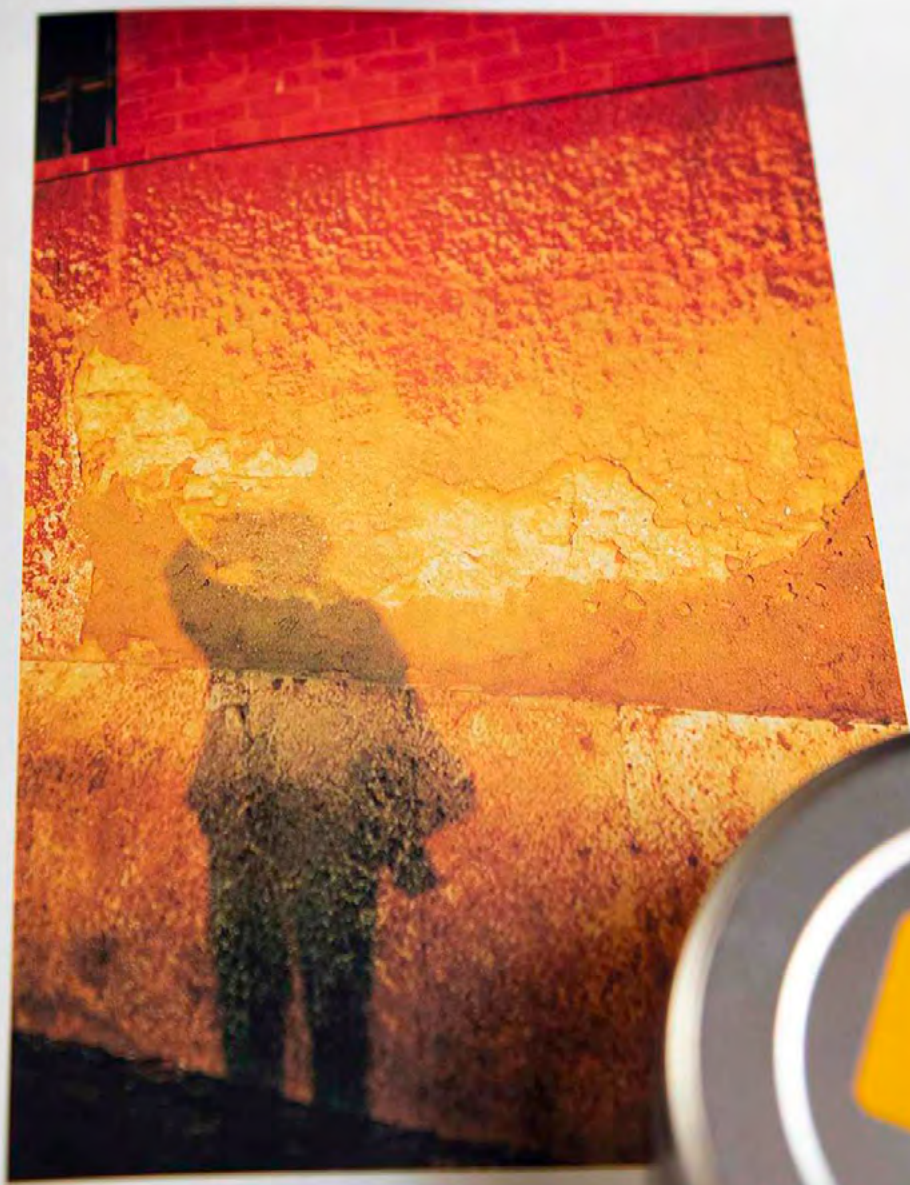
In addition to such an apophatic approach to things (through their emptiness), photography is also a drama, a dramatic move to action (passage à l'acte), which is a way of seizing the world by «acting it out.»<sup>2</sup> Photography exorcizes the world through the instantaneous fiction of its representation (not by its representation directly; representation is always a play with reality). The photographic image is not a representation; it is a fiction. Through photography, it is perhaps the world itself that starts to act (qui passe à l'acte) and imposes its fiction. Photography brings the world into action (acts out the world, is the world's act) and the world steps into the photographic act (acts out photography, is photography's act).<sup>3</sup> This creates a material complicity between us and the world since the world is never anything more than a continuous move to action (a continuous acting out).

In photography, we see nothing. Only the lens «sees» things. But the lens is hidden. It is not the Other<sup>4</sup> which catches the photographer's eye, but rather what's left of the Other when the photographer is absent (quand lui n'est pas là). We are never in the real presence of the object. Between reality and its image, there is an impossible exchange. At best, one finds a figurative correlation between reality and the image. «Pure» reality -- if there can be such a thing -- is a question without an answer. Photography also questions «pure reality.» It asks questions to the Other. But it does not expect an answer. Thus, in his short-story «The Adventure of a

2 This term is in English in the original French version.

3 An unsatisfactory translation of «la photo 'passe à l'acte du monde' et le monde 'passe à l'acte photographique'.»

4 Capitalized by Baudrillard in the French text.



1951 1952 1953





Photographer,»<sup>5</sup> Italo Calvino writes: «To catch Bice in the street when she didn't not know he was watching her, to keep her in the range of hidden lenses, to photograph her not only without letting himself be seen but without seeing her, to surprise her as if she was in the absence of his gaze, of any gaze...It was an invisible Bice that he wanted to possess, a Bice absolutely alone, a Bice whose presence presupposed the absence of him and everyone else.»<sup>6</sup> Later, Calvino's photographer only takes pictures of the studio walls by which she once stood. But Bice has completely disappeared. And the photographer too has disappeared. We always speak in terms of the disappearance of the object in photography. It once was; it no longer is. There is indeed a symbolic murder that is part of the photographic act. But it is not simply the murder of the object. On the other side of the lens, the subject too is made to disappear. Each snapshot simultaneously ends the real presence of the object and the presence of the subject. In this act of reciprocal disappearance, we also find a transfusion between object and subject. It is not always a successful transfusion. To succeed, one condition must be met. The Other -- the object -- must survive this disappearance to create a «poetic situation of transfer» or a «transfer of poetic situation.» In such a fatal reciprocity, one perhaps finds the beginning of a solution to the problem of society's so-called «lack

5 «L'Aventure d'un photographe,» in Italo Calvino, *Aventures* [Adventures]. Paris: Le Seuil, 1990. Calvino's *Adventures* (I Racconti in Italian) have been published in several different books in English. For example, «The Adventure of a Photographer» was published as part of Calvino's novel *Difficult Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), pp. 220-235.

6 Translation borrowed from Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves*, trans. W. Weaver, p. 233.

of communicability.» We may find an answer to the fact that people and things tend to no longer mean anything to each other. This is an anxious situation that we generally try to conjure away by forcing more signification.

But there are only a few images that can escape this desire of forced signification. There are only a few images that are not forced to provide meaning, or have to go through the filter of a specific idea, whatever that idea might be (but, in particular, the ideas of information and testimony are salient). A moral anthropology has already intervened. The idea of man has already interfered. This is why contemporary photography (and not only photo-journalism) is used to take pictures of «real victims,» «real dead people,» and «real destitutes» who are thus abandoned to documentary evidence and imaginary compassion.<sup>7</sup> Most contemporary photos only reflect the «objective» misery of the human condition. One can no longer find a primitive tribe without the necessary presence of some anthropologist. Similarly, one can no longer find a homeless individual surrounded by garbage without the necessary presence of some photographer who will have to «immortalize» this scene on film. In fact, misery and violence affect us far less when they are readily signified and openly made visible. This is the principle of imaginary experience (*la loi de l'imaginaire*). The image must touch us directly, impose on us its peculiar illusion, speak to us with its original language in order for us to be affected by its content. To operate a transfer of affect into reality, there has to

7 I use the term «real» (in quotation marks) in front of victims, dead people and destitute to render Baudrillard's term «en tant que tels» (which literally means «as such»).



be a definite (resolu) counter-transfer of the image.

We deplore the disappearance of the real under the weight of too many images. But let's not forget that the image disappears too because of reality. In fact, the real is far less often sacrificed than the image. The image is robbed of its originality and given away to shameful acts of complicity. Instead of lamenting the relinquishing of the real to superficial images, one would do well to challenge the surrender of the image to the real. The power of the image can only be restored by liberating the image from reality. By giving back to the image its specificity (its «stupidity» according to Rosset),<sup>8</sup> the real itself can rediscover its true image.

those who choose to rape the real (viol du reel). The desperate search for *the* image often gives rise to an unfortunate result. Instead of freeing the real from its reality principle, it locks up the real inside this principle. What we are left with is a constant infusion of «realist» images to which only «retro-images» respond. Every time we are being photographed, we spontaneously take a mental position on the photographer's lens just as his lens takes a position on us. Even the most savage of tribesmen has learned how to spontaneously strike a pose. Everybody knows how to strike a pose within a vast field of imaginary reconciliation.

But the photographic event resides in the confrontation between the object and

*It is perhaps not a surprise that photography developed as a technological medium in the industrial age, when reality started to disappear. It is even perhaps the disappearance of reality that triggered this technical form. Reality found a way to mutate into an image.*

So-called «realist» photography does not capture the «what is.» Instead, it is preoccupied with what should not be, like the reality of suffering for example. It prefers to take pictures not of *what is* but of *what should not be* from a moral or humanitarian perspective. Meanwhile, it still makes good aesthetic, commercial and clearly immoral use of everyday misery. These photos are not the witness of reality. They are the witness of the total denial of the image from now on designed to represent what refuses to be seen. The image is turned into the accomplice of

<sup>8</sup> Possibly Clement Rosset, author of *La Realite et Son Double* (Reality and Its Double), Paris: Gallimard, 1996; and of *Joyful Cruelty: Toward a Philosophy of the Real*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

the lens (l'objectif), and in the violence that this confrontation provokes. The photographic act is a duel. It is a dare launched at the object and a dare of the object in return. Everything that ignores this confrontation is left to find refuge in the creation of new photographic techniques or in photography's aesthetics. These are easier solutions.

One may dream of a heroic age of photography when it still was a black box (a camera obscura) and not the transparent and interactive space that it has become. Remember those 1940s farmers from Arkansas whom Mike Disfarmer shot. They were all humble, conscientiously and ceremonially standing in front of the camera. The camera did not try to

understand them or even catch them by surprise. There was no desire to capture what's «natural» about them or «what they look like as photographed.»<sup>9</sup> They are what they are. They do not smile. They do not complain. The image does not complain. They are, so to speak, caught in their simplest attire (dans leur plus simple appareil), for a fleeting moment, that of photography. They are absent from their lives and their miseries. They are elevated from their miseries to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their destiny. The image is revealed for what it is: it exalts what it sees as pure evidence, without interference, consensus, and adornment. It reveals what is neither moral nor «objective,» but instead remains unintelligible about us. It exposes what is not up to reality but is, rather, reality's evil share (malin genie) (whether it is a fortunate one or not). It displays what is inhuman in us and does not signify.

In any case, the object is never anything more than an imaginary line. The world is an object that is both imminent and ungraspable. How far is the world? How does one obtain a clearer focus point? Is photography a mirror which briefly captures this imaginary line of the world? Or is it man who, blinded by the enlarged reflection of his own consciousness, falsifies visual perspectives and blurs the accuracy of the world? Is it like the rearview mirrors of American cars which distort visual perspectives but give you a nice warning - «objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear»?<sup>10</sup> But, in fact, aren't these objects farther than they appear? Does the photographic image bring us closer to a so-called «real world» which is

in fact infinitely distant? Or does this image keep the world at a distance by creating an artificial depth perception which protects us from the imminent presence of the objects and from their virtual danger?

What is at stake (at play, en jeu) is the place of reality, the question of its degree. It is perhaps not a surprise that photography developed as a technological medium in the industrial age, when reality started to disappear. It is even perhaps the disappearance of reality that triggered this technical form. Reality found a way to mutate into an image. This puts into question our simplistic explanations about the birth of technology and the advent of the modern world. It is perhaps not technologies and media which have caused our now famous disappearance of reality. On the contrary, it is probable that all our technologies (fatal offsprings that they are) arise from the gradual extinction of reality.

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**Originally published:**

CTHEORY, international, peer-reviewed journal of theory, technology, and culture (2000-04-21).

<https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14605>

This article was translated in Miami, March 31, 2000.



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9 In English in the French text.

10 In English in the French text.



# Chambers of the past and future. The simulated worlds of Baudrillard, Cyberpunk and the Metaverse

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The renaming of Facebook to Meta at the end of 2021 has sparked and updated discussions about the potential for a future where humanity increasingly operates, works, plays, and lives within the metaverse. In this article, I aim to illustrate through a specific example that the conception of virtual worlds, as represented by the metaverse, is an amalgamation of theoretical considerations and topoi from Jean Baudrillard's work with cyberpunk literature. Cyberpunk authors have used Baudrillard's theoretical concepts to shape virtual worlds, which have then been perpetuated and expanded upon in both popular culture and academic discourse.

These ideas have had a profound impact on societal visions of future virtual worlds, shaping their semantics and significance.

Baudrillard's ideas were widely regarded as the vanguard of subversive contemporary social sciences in the discourse on postmodernism. His views on the drastic transformation of modern society were embraced by both academic circles and the artistic avant-garde and gained him the reputation of a postmodern prophet. Of particular interest were Baudrillard's writing strategies, which blend aesthetics and materials from diverse fields, resulting in texts that vacillate between literary and scientific styles, eroding the boundaries



between theory and fiction. But despite Baudrillard's theoretical and discursive subversion, some critics in the 1980s began to argue that his works lacked new ideas since the 1970s. They claimed that the French philosopher had been recycling his previous ideas rather than genuinely developing his concepts. Douglas Kellner notes in this regard:

“For some years, Baudrillard was cutting-edge, high-tech social theorist, the most stimulating and provocative contemporary thinker. But in the early 1980s, Baudrillard ceased producing the stunning analyses of the new postmodern scene that won such attention in the previous decade. Burnt out and terminally cynical, Baudrillard has instead churned out a number of mediocre replays of his previous ideas [...] Baudrillard's travelogues, notebooks, theoretical simulations, and occasional pieces fell dramatically below the level of his 1970s work, and it appeared to many that Baudrillard himself had become boring and irrelevant, the ultimate sin for a supposedly avant-garde postmodern theorist.” (Kellner 1995, 298)

It is noteworthy, that during the exact period when Baudrillard's creativity seemingly began to decline, the first works of cyberpunk science fiction appeared. Whereas my discussion of cyberpunk literature here pertains to a particular corpus of works authored by a group of writers who assembled in Austin, Texas in the late 1970s. This literature represented a revolution in science fiction writing, led by authors such as Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, Greg Bear, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, and Pat Cadigan. The group criticized the science fiction of their time in the fanzine *Cheap Truth* and in the preface of the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades*, which could be seen as

the cyberpunk manifesto – the discursive foundation for a newly emerging movement. Similar to Baudrillard, the authors of cyberpunk literature traversed the previously separated domains of philosophy, social sciences, literature, natural sciences, and media culture, attempting to capture the rapid changes of their present.

At the time, many critics regarded the works of Gibson, Sterling, Cadigan, Shirley, Bear, and Shiner as some of the most remarkable and intriguing engagements with contemporary media culture. As I argued before, Cyberpunk literature should even be regarded as an important companion to media theories, both as a means of artistic expression and as a method of knowledge production, including its theorization (Gözen 2012). So it is not surprising that this new type of science fiction was immediately declared a prominent literary trend of the present, both in academic and artistic circles, and was subsequently recognized as avant-garde and innovation in the field of speculative visions. According to Douglas Kellner, “these texts produce one of the most impressive bodies of recent writing on the fate of hypertechnological society since Baudrillard's key texts of the 1970s” (Kellner 1995, 298). Timothy Leary, on the other hand, assigns a philosophical significance to the texts of cyberpunk writers that is comparable to the importance Mann, Tolstoy, and Melville held for the industrial age (Leary 1996, 56). Brian McHale, who has explored the mutual influence of postmodern literature, science fiction texts, and poststructuralist theorizing, also positions cyberpunk literature prominently within this framework (McHale 1992, 244f).

It is especially notable that in cyberpunk literature many motifs and themes

resonate with Baudrillard's work. A Baudrillard-oriented reading of cyberpunk literature reveals that the principal categories of hyperreality, simulation, and implosion are not only evident in numerous narratives but are also omnipresent as symbolic representations. Authors such as Gibson, Maddox, and Bear not only incorporated Baudrillard's ideas into their stories but also expanded and developed them. It is worth noting that these interpretations and extensions of Baudrillard's ideas were recognized by media theory and influenced it. Baudrillard views such interaction as symptomatic of a postmodern discourse, in which previously distinct cultural and societal phenomena implode and create something new (Kellner 1995, 301). In this regard, Scott Bukatman, a film and media scholar, emphasizes that:

“And so Baudrillard, the students of chaos, the cyberpunks, and others have constructed a master-narrative, one grounded in the centrality of human intention and perception, which has the cumulative effect of inaugurating a new subject capable of inhabiting the bewildering and disembodied space of the electronic environment – the virtual subject.” (Bukatman 1993, 118)

Both Baudrillard and cyberpunk authors depict societies where all types of boundaries have collapsed, including those between different cultures, biology, technology, and particularly between reality and simulation. New technologies have dramatically transformed the body and human experience, with the perception of reality now permanently interlaced with simulation. Despite Baudrillard's literary style and his numerous references to contemporary issues, politics, and media culture, his descriptions of simulation remain largely abstract. Conversely, cyber-

punk authors present worlds where the human existence is persistently surrounded by simulations. Characters interact with artificial intelligences, androids, cyborgs, virtual personalities, and simulated realities. The portrayed figures themselves are often artificial forms of existence, with such depictions varying significantly among the different authors.

In this context, an example that stands out is the novel “Eon” from 1985 by Greg Bear, wherein an asteroid from a parallel universe enters our own and is examined by humans during the turn of the millennium. The asteroid, which has been hollowed out, contains several artificial chambers that represent the abandoned living spaces of a future humanity. These chambers contain future cities from different epochs, and the changing decor and architecture of the cities demonstrate how simulation has progressively advanced and displaced reality. Through the lens of these chambers, Bear exemplifies various stages of simulation.

In one of the final chambers, Bear depicts a society where digitalized minds exist within a computer called “City Memory”. Nonetheless, people still have the option to live beyond the city's memory. The external environment, outside of the virtuality of the city computer, is a featureless space onto which landscapes, homes, objects, and weather conditions are projected. To navigate within this simulated space beyond the computer simulation, individuals create bodies that often bear little resemblance to a natural human form. Should any harm come to this body, the brain contained within it is equipped with an implant that records all experiences and memories. Thus, in Bear's novel, virtual reality constitutes the absolute simulation of a bodiless and disembodied present,



which remains unbreakable even with the intentional creation of a material body. The convergence of genetics and semiotics gives rise to self-generating humans of the future, the perfect simulacrum. The flawless simulation of digital and future humans uploaded into a body highlights that the physical opposition between illusion and truth has given way to playing with reality. Bear's radical interpretation of Baudrillard's dictum of self-referential signs demonstrates that the human, based on digital bits and bytes, has merged into an infinite circulation of self-referential signs, becoming a model without origin and hence a sign in and of itself.

In one of the earlier future cities, advanced media technologies enable the contemporary humans in "Eon" to immerse themselves in a virtual world that creates a simulation of the abandoned city and its inhabitants, which is indistinguishable from reality:

"She called up a student's basic guide to the second chamber city.

In an instant, Alexandria surrounded her. She appeared to be standing on the portico of an apartment in the lower floors of one of the megas, looking down on the busy streets. The illusion was perfect—even providing her with a memory of what "her" apartment looked like. She could turn her head and look completely behind her if she wished—indeed, she could walk around, even though she knew she was sitting down.

She spent half an hour in Alexandria, observing the clothes the people wore, their faces, their hair styles and expressions and ways of moving." (Bear 1985, 275)

The degree of overlap between Greg Bear's 1985 descriptions and the 2022 META advertising campaign video "Education in the Metaverse" is remarkable.

[Video: Education in the metaverse:](#)



Screen shot from the video "Education in the metaverse"



The two works not only present similar scenarios, but even the physical movements Bear describes appear to have been incorporated into the clip. Both depictions of simulation-based virtual worlds reveal a high degree of implosion in the sense of Baudrillard, as space and time collapse. As the description in Bears text, the footage presented in the clip portrays a future that has not yet occurred in the recipient's reality, and may never do so, yet it insists on presenting it as past history. Consequently, it constitutes both a genuine model and an illusion, in which truth vanishes behind simulation. The media-mediated reality overlays sensory experiences perfectly, as illustrated by the description of the divergent experiences of real and simulated space and body. It is evident that the simulated worlds advertised by META, aimed at their practical implementation, have strong links to the worlds of cyberpunk literature that rely on Baudrillard's theories. This ultimately suggests that the incorporation, refinement, and theoretical exploration of Jean Baudrillard's ideas through cyberpunk literature continue to shape current conceptions and designs of technologies, which we anticipate will influence our future.

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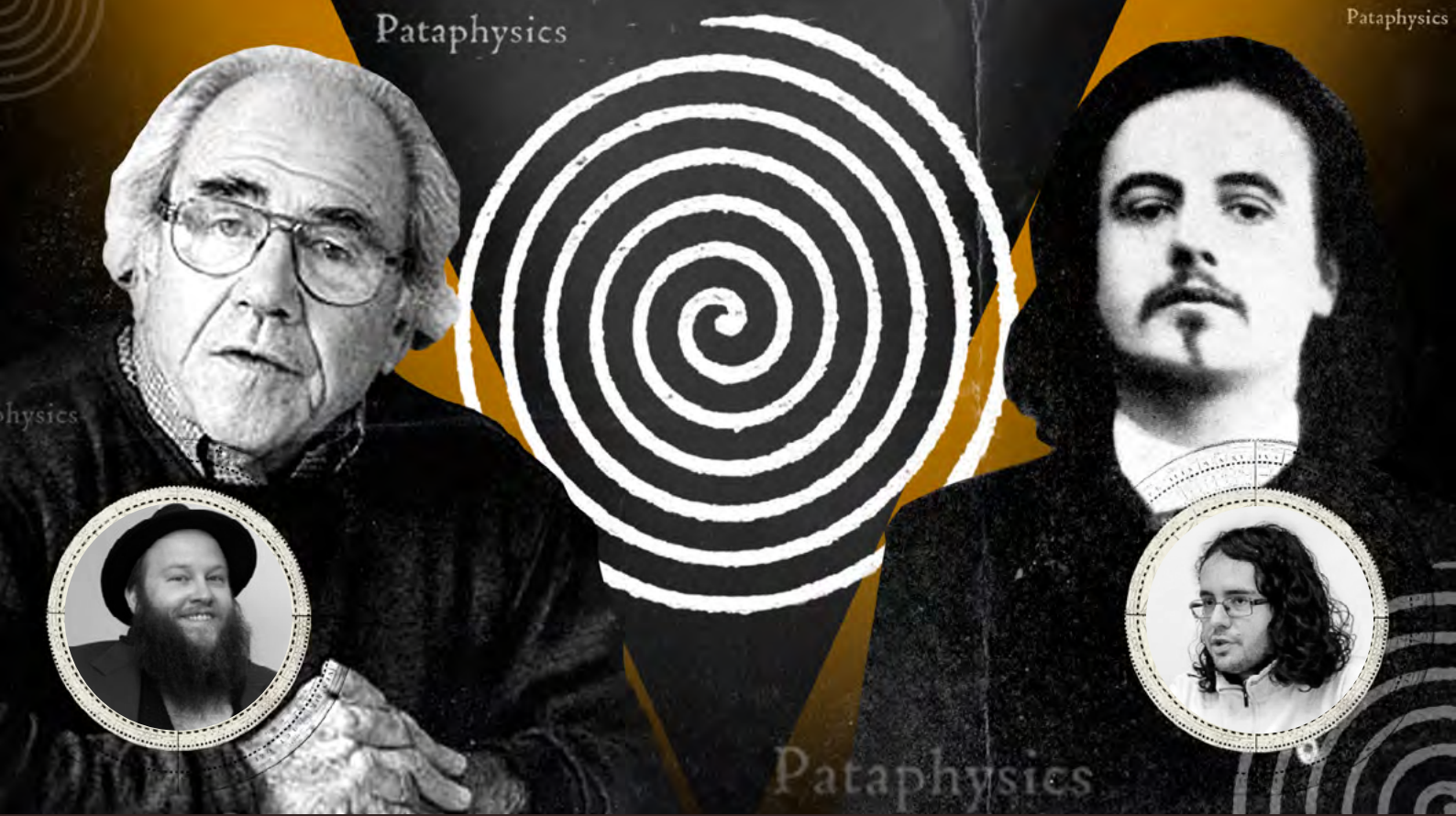
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**WE ARE NO LONGER IN  
A LOGIC OF THE PASSAGE  
FROM VIRTUAL TO ACTUAL  
BUT IN A HYPERREALIST LOGIC  
OF THE DETERRENCE OF THE  
REAL BY THE VIRTUAL.**

*Jean Baudrillard*







## Baudrillard as Pataphysicist: Unknowledge Production for the Pluriverse

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7

What is Jean Baudrillard, if not the hypertrophy of theory? After the French theorist's turn away from the sociologizing tradition from the 1970s onwards, ironic overflow becomes the predominant characteristic of Baudrillard's work. We may entertain the following seductive thesis: what if the end of history, with its concomitant fatalism, also made possible the unconditional liberation of simulations through the hyperreal creation of concepts? A demonstrably pataphysical reading could give new meaning to the much-criticized apolitical "fatalism" of Baudrillard's later work. Our point is the following: having left behind the genre of social critique, what if

Baudrillard's later works ought to be read performatively? As Florian Cord highlights, "it was Alfred Jarry's proto-Surrealist anti-philosophy of 'pataphysics' (...) that was to provide Baudrillard with a model for the kind of delusional stance he was calling for"<sup>1</sup>. Baudrillard indeed declared on one occasion that "the only strategy against the hyperrealist system is some form of pataphysics"<sup>2</sup>. However, in our view Baudrillardian pataphysics is not so much

<sup>1</sup> Cord, Florian (2017) *J. G. Ballard's Politics. Late Capitalism, Power, and the Pataphysics of Resistance* (Berlin: De Gruyter), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (2005) *The Intelligence of Evil. The Lucidity Pact*. trans. Chris Turner (New York: Berg), 45.



a critique as a performative “outdoing” or “overdoing” of hyperreality. Rather than merely presenting yet another biting social critique of “capitalist” alienation, these texts can be read post-ironically, as performing the very acceleration and explosion of the simulated hyperreal they represent. The Late Baudrillard, if such an entity indeed exists, would be theory-in-overdrive, an affirmation of simulation. We are always already within the sphere of pataphysics<sup>3</sup>. But what precisely does this mode of “unknowledge production” entail, and how does it connect to Baudrillard’s work?

To the best of our existing knowledge, the phrase “pataphysics” is a vernacular word introduced into discourse by Alfred Jarry,

Faust-like figure, who “trolls” his listeners and readers alike) invites us to think of the universe as an indeterministic system, where the sole rule is the prevalence of exceptions. Inverting the scientific method of induction, Dr Faustroll/Jarry invite us to think in a radically different manner: “pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions”. (21) If one were to think that this diverges from science, one would be quite mistaken, for conventional science too builds laws from “correlations of exceptions”. (22) Far from being a mere pseudoscience, pataphysics is a rigorous method of world-building. While the literary value of Jarry’s works is questionable at best, replete with plot-holes (clear evidence that the author lost the plot

*“Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments”*

a French Symbolist playwright, prankster and hack. The most succinct definition of this neologism is provided in Jarry’s *Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysicien* (*Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*), a travesty published after the premature death of its author from alcohol-fuelled vagrancy. In this novel, we find the following definition: “Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments”<sup>4</sup>. Instead of induction, pataphysics strives for a methodological affirmation of originality, non-linearity and an empiricism centered around exotic situations. The strange Doctor Faustroll (a Doctor

<sup>3</sup> Orthographically, pataphysics should actually be written as *pataphysics*, but for the sake of simplicity, let us remain with the more common usage.

<sup>4</sup> Jarry, Alfred (1996 [1912]) *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*. trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change), 22

frequently), the science of exceptions is far from a myopic or useless. Guarding against any revival of epistemic security, let us delve deeper into pataphysics and its applicability to plural unknowledge production.

Above all, it must be emphasized that, despite its deceptively parodistic appearance, pataphysics deserves serious treatment. As David Teh explains in a truly remarkable and enlightening piece, regarding Jarry’s relationship with scientific framings of reality, “Jarry neither breaks these framings apart, nor dismisses them; instead, he overproduces them, ultimately showing how easily they can be brought into existence. For the point of pataphysics is not to invalidate the sciences, but to affirm for them a much wider validity”<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, there is an intimate connection

<sup>5</sup> Teh, David (2006) “Baudrillard Pataphysician”, <https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/baudrillard-pataphysician/>

between science fiction, pataphysics and Baudrillard's work. Following Teh, we may describe the latter as a "sociology fiction". The point of pataphysics is not a negation or, worse, parody of science, but rather the extension, deformation and overproduction of scientific concepts, to the point wherein their explosion leads to a new illumination of social reality. Pataphysics is concerned with extremity, exceptions that signify absences underlying the self-evacuating empty spectacle of (post)history. Any messages that is not radical fails to register the absence of change. The absence referenced by pataphysics is the information overload signifying the outlines of surrendered, immune-compromised contemporaneity. A superficial reading would associate the following Baudrillardian description of the early 90s in negative terms, as a dystopia of viral and virtual proliferation/s:

"In these transparent, homeostatic or homeofluid systems there is no longer any such thing as a strategy of Good against Evil, there is only the pitting of Evil against Evil — a strategy of last resort. Indeed, we really have no choice in the matter: we simply watch as the lesser evil — homeopathic virulence — deploys its forces. AIDS, crack and computer viruses are merely outcroppings of the catastrophe; nine-tenths of it remain buried in the virtual. The full-blown, the absolute catastrophe would be a true omnipresence of all networks, a total transparency of all data — something from which, for now, computer viruses preserve us. Thanks to them, we shall not be going straight to the culminating point of the development of information and communications, which is to say: death". These viruses are both the first sign of this lethal transparency and its alarm signal. One is put in mind of a fluid travelling at increasing speed, forming eddies and anomalous countercurrents which arrest

or dissipate its flow. Chaos imposes a limit upon what would otherwise hurtle into an absolute void. The secret disorder of extreme phenomena, then, plays a prophylactic role by opposing its chaos to any escalation of order and transparency to their extremes<sup>6</sup>.

Transparency is the contexture of what Baudrillard calls "transpolitics", the meaninglessness of the political realm generated by self-deceptive pragmatics<sup>7</sup>. But pataphysics does not concern itself with merely registering the regrettable nature of the proliferation of extreme phenomena. Let us read Baudrillard's words in greater detail. Theory-in-overdrive does not position itself on the side of the heroic Subject struggling to emancipate itself from viral agents, simulacra and transparency. Within the contemporaneity of post-history, the only method available is that of mutual neutralization. Baudrillard's pataphysical hypertheory is itself a performative affirmation of symbolic overproduction, a prophylactic chaos preventing the "escalation of order and transparency", preventing the implosion of discourse into negation. No, Baudrillard is definitively not a nihilist, for that would be too boring. Baudrillard is a Discordian, a thinker who thrives upon, and produces in turn, chaotic menageries. These texts do what they represent. No longer is external critique possible. We ourselves are components of positive feedback loops, text generators of surfaces "Today there is no longer transcendence, but the immanent surface of the development of operations,

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (1993 [1990]) *The Transparency of Evil. Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso), 68.

<sup>7</sup> We are kidding ourselves if we believe that we have the power to change society according to any preconceived plan or ideal. Blühdorn, Ingolfur (2007) "Self-description, self-deception, simulation: a systems-theoretical perspective on contemporary discourses of radical change." *Social movement studies* 6.1: 1–19.

smooth surface, operational, of communication. The Faustian, Promethean period of production and consumption yields to the Protean era of networks, to the narcissistic, equally Protean form of branching, contact, contiguity, feedback, and generalized interface”<sup>8</sup>. Or, to paraphrase Jarry, one could say that the era of hyperreality is a *Faustrollian* Aeon.

Baudrillard’s vision of arrested transparency emphasizes the crucial, indeed unavoidable role evil (opacity) plays in keeping contemporaneity dynamic. No evil, no acceleration: “The principle of Evil is not a moral principle but rather a principle of instability and vertigo, a principle of complexity and foreignness, a principle of seduction, a principle of incompatibility, antagonism and irreducibility”. (107) Indeed, for the pataphysician, transparency and opacity are unavoidably interconnected. Witness the following marvellous description of a crystalline liquid island in one of Jarry’s ravings: “The island’s surface is of still water, mirror-like (it was natural that the islands should appear to us as lakes, during our navigation over dry land); and one cannot imagine a ship sailing through it, unless in the manner of a ricochet skimming the surface, for this mirror reflects no ripples, not even its own”. (Jarry 49) Lacking the mystery and seductiveness of opacity — an appearance that culminates in its very disappearance — one could never even communicate anything resembling a semblance. Baudrillard’s work from the 1980s onward is filled with pataphysical references, in both explicit and implicit forms. Extreme phenomena and exceptions allow for, and indeed demand, an intensified Science, a discourse without compromises that foregrounds unknowledge. Evil is revers-

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (2008 [1993]) *Fatal Strategies*. trans. Philippe Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 91.

ibility, and as such, provides for change, alternation, modification. It is the “trans” in transitivity. As Baudrillard explains, “When the hypothesis of intelligence ceases to be sovereign and becomes dominant, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes sovereign. A stupidity that might be said to be a sort of higher intelligence, on the verge of a radical thought — that is to say, beyond truth” — is this not as accurate a summary of pataphysics as any other? (Baudrillard 2005, 179) Our era is replete with worries concerning the spread of fake news, misinformation and other misnomers. No information is entirely false: within hyperreality, all differences, whether empirically grounded or otherwise, matter, insofar as they make a difference. Pataphysics, far from the gratuitous production of nonsensual statements, is in fact about becoming able to “glimpse the whole island through its transparency”. (Jarry 49) For the pataphysical gaze, the object itself commands attention, above and beyond its visibility.

In some quarters, Baudrillard has been accused of “a hatred of the human.”<sup>9</sup> Against these accusations, Teh explains that “Baudrillard renounces” not “the human, but rather humanism and anthropocentrism. (Siding with the object is neither ethical, nor metaphysical. It is pataphysical.)”<sup>10</sup> For

<sup>9</sup> Kellner, Douglas (1989) *Jean Baudrillard. From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. (Cambridge: Polity), 165.

<sup>10</sup> This particular aspect of Baudrillard’s work, its emphasis on the object beyond anthropocentric conceits, has proven valuable for Object-Oriented-Ontology. As Graham Harman, philosopher and metaphysician elaborates, “Baudrillard observes that what seduces us about a thing is its weakness rather than its strength, and in this he is surely correct”. Harman, Graham (2005) *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Objects* (La Salle and Chicago: Open Court), 139.; see also King, Matthew James (2019) “Object-oriented Baudrillard? Withdrawal and symbolic exchange.” *Open Philosophy* 2.1: 75–85.



us, the seductiveness of the pataphysically perceived object lies in its very opacity and inaccessibility: “to seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak (...) We seduce with our death, our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us”<sup>11</sup>. Pataphysics is the intensive science of conceptual creation<sup>12</sup>. The problems which compel philosophers to create arrive from outside, from the object which seduces through its interobjective inherent unavailability. A frustrated advance, generating the reaction which is conceptual creation, such is the external constraint which resonates with new elaborations of thought: “free and savage creation, therefore, but not, especially not, ferocious, not defining that with which it deals as a prey to be attacked. The point is not to

relativity theory alongside Albert Einstein and Émile Meyerson explained long ago, “no rigorously invariable solid exists. The geometrical axioms are therefore neither synthetic a priori intuitions not experimental facts. They are conventions. Our choice among all possible conventions is guided by experimental facts; but it remains free, and is only limited by the necessity of avoiding every contradiction”<sup>14</sup>. As compared with standard science, pataphysical intensive science is merely more extensive when it comes to the scope of its own delimitations. One may measure with any unit one pleases, provided the system of measurement is internally consistent. “At the winter solstice the atmospheric sonority drops from a eat’s cursing to the buzzing of wasps and bumble-

*Instead of Truth and Falsehood, or Good and Evil,  
Baudrillardian pataphysics measures in terms of inertia  
and acceleration. Mass is the fatal shadow  
of evacuate substance.*

declare war on the conventions that bind us, the habits that enable us to be characterized. Instead, it is merely to place on the same level that is, in-adventure — all of our judgments”<sup>13</sup>. (Stengers 27) Conventions, after all, are at root arbitrary signs. This is the case even within standard modes of science. As Henri Poincaré, one of the proponents of

<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (1990 [1979]) *Seduction*. trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives), 83.

<sup>12</sup> As Manuel DeLanda emphasizes, “concepts (...) are not to be thought of semantically, but literally as state or phase spaces, that is, as spaces of possibilities structured by singularities and defined by their dimensions or intensive ordinates” DeLanda, Manuel (2002) *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London and New York: Continuum), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Stengers, Isabelle (2011 [2002]) *Thinking With Whitehead. A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), 27.

bees and the vibration of a fly’s wing”. (Jarry 57) The pataphysical extends conventions, extracting utility while rendering a compelling image of the arbitrariness of the abyssal (w)Hole.

Instead of Truth and Falsehood, or Good and Evil, Baudrillardian pataphysics measures in terms of inertia and acceleration. Mass is the fatal shadow of evacuate substance. Intensive, or better yet, extended science deals with the “black spots” unavailable to regularized, empirical and conventional knowledge registers. This phrase denotes, among other meanings, a place where road traffic accidents tend to be concentrated. As a paper on “black spot

<sup>14</sup> Poincaré, Henri (1905) *Science and Hypothesis*. trans. George Bruce Halsted (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Walter Scott Publishing Company), 50.

analysis” points out, “although no universally accepted definition of a black spot or black zone is given, these locations” can “be described as high risk accident locations”<sup>15</sup>. If standard science is about measuring relative probabilities, then non-standard intensive science (pataphysics) relates how the improbable can come to coincide with the definite. Differently put, the adherent of the pataphysical strategem searches for the implausible explanations, those that stretch credulity, at considerable risk of plunging into explicitly conspiracy theoretical idiotism. For the pataphysician, this gamble is worth taking<sup>16</sup>. J. G. Ballard for instance, another of the 20th century’s pataphysically oriented writers, recounts some doubts surrounding the circumstances of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, a legendary (non)event in North American pop culture: “The assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, raised many questions, not all of which were answered by the Report of the Warren Commission. It is suggested that a less conventional view of the events of that grim day may provide a more satisfactory explanation”<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps

<sup>15</sup> Guerts, Karolien and Wets, Gert. (2003) “Black Spot Analysis Methods: Literature Review”, 5, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=a3e-4397b86458573e69ed50381f21cb31a584018> We may refer to J. G. Ballard’s novel, *Crash*, which contains extensive pataphysical reflections.

<sup>16</sup> The conspiracy theorist and the detective are, after all, twins. Wilson, Eric (2021) *The Republic of Cthulhu* (New York: Punctum Books), 150. Both are driven with a passion for revealing truth, even at the expense of truth and integrity. Their very passion for truth is their downfall. Thirsting for the intelligible real, they are unable to accept the inherently obscure idiotic horror of the human condition.

<sup>17</sup> Ballard, J. G. (1973) “The Assassination Of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As A Downhill Motor Race”, <https://evergreenreview.com/read/the-assassination-of-john-fitzgerald-kennedy-considered-as-a-downhill-motor-race/>

it was merely a race gone horribly wrong<sup>18</sup>. The pataphysician, while running the risk of authoring idiocies, seeks to occupy the position of learned or, better yet, studiously *unlearned* theoretical idiocy, deliberately pursuing the unconventional, the extraordinary, the extreme. As Erasmus already demonstrated, achievement of unknowledge requires almost certainly more expenditures of cognitive energy than studious development of intellectual self-cultivation. Realizing that “all mankind are fools” is a weighty, burdensome task<sup>19</sup>. Once subjected to the ordeal of enculturation, the subject is compelled to reflexively go beyond its condition, favoring uncertainty and ambiguity over fixed knowledge claims.

The illusion of transparency is refracted by crystallized inpotentialities. Pataphysics “is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics (...) extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics”. (Jarry 21) Beyond generality, outside the universal, “the devil Plural is born”. (60) As Andrew C. Wenaus points out, pataphysics is a theatrical gesture, for Jarry was above all else a playwright. Far from being an exclusively subjectivist pasttime though, pataphysics “need not be projected outward toward some kind of” theatrical “presence on the stage”<sup>20</sup>. Rather, the pataphysician elaborates a self-referential or recursive methodology as a new object of seduction, which nonetheless generates real externalities. The text, in other

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hugill compellingly argues for a structural similarity between Ballard’s short story, “The Assassination Of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As A Downhill Motor Race”, and Jarry’s *Supermale*, which similarly recounts a race. Hugill, Andrew (2012) *Pataphysics. A Useless Guide* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Erasmus (1913) *The Praise of Folly*. trans. John Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 174.

<sup>20</sup> Wenaus, Andrew C. (2021) *The Literature of Exclusion. Dada, Data, and the Threshold of Electronic Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books), 114.

words, externalizes and constructs itself as a novel object, seducing author and reader alike. Objects themselves are replete with meanings. As Bishop Mendacious explains to Dr Faustroll, “if lobsters are dirty and non-depilated, it is perhaps a proof that they are free. A nobler fate than that of the can of corned beef which you carry on a ribbon round your neck, doctor navigator, like the case of a pair of salted binoculars through which you like to scrutinize people and objects”. (Jarry 66–7) The proto-Dadaism of these sentences belies the novelty of the associations they mobilize. As a matter of fact, the proposed correlation between dirtiness and liberty is far from implausible. The lobster has not yet been cleaned, whereas the corned beef, hygienically treated, is rendered artificially fit for human consumption, and thereby somewhat impoverished in its being.

Or is it? Reversibility plays tricks upon us. The pataphysician Baudrillard would say that we ourselves are not unlike the canned beef, packed tightly into overpopulated cities, pacified, and enjoying our state of domestication. Within the dehistoricized universe of post-history, change is obscenity, while the obscurity of evil poses a challenge to the transparency of information in a universe emptied of events. The transparency and obscenity of space in the promiscuity of networks: this is how society and the masses relate to one other, the latter being an obscene and transparent, but also empty elaboration of the former. In the era of meaninglessness, sociology fiction is used to construct meanings from arbitrary conventional signs. For Baudrillard, writing a chapter of *The Illusion of the End* entitled “Pataphysics of the Year 2000”, the “mass” is the final product, the Last Man, the revenge of the object upon the subject, the remainder that obstinately perseveres in the aftermath of alienation: “it is the product of the hyper-

density of cities, commodities, messages and circuits. It is the cold star of the social and, around that mass, history is also cooling. Events follow one upon another, cancelling each other out in a state of indifference. The masses, neutralized, mithridatized by information, in turn neutralize history”<sup>21</sup>. Far from being dejected, however, we should be grateful for the silent majorities. They are the blackspots, so to speak, preventing the complete, polyphonic implosion of reality into devastation, destruction, capitulation. Rather neutralization than crash, better incompleteness than the truly apocalyptic “end” to all history. Baudrillard, and here we must address a frequent misunderstanding surrounding the pataphysical theorist’s work, does not seek a return to some pre-simulational authenticity or authentic historicity. As Baudrillard makes clear in a fascinating digression on music, “excessive high fidelity casts radical doubt on music”, but “we shall never get back to pre-stereo music (except by an additional technical simulation effect)”. (6) The way out is not by attenuation, but rather via accentuation, exacerbation and acceleration<sup>22</sup>. Instead of

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (1994 [1992]) *The Illusion of the End*. trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge and Malden: Polity), 3.

<sup>22</sup> This evolution of musical genres alluded by Baudrillard was already underway in the 1990s. Lo-fi music goes beyond the hi-fi sound, but only in the form of a new elaboration of sonoral simulation. Bizarrely, Jarry seems to have anticipated this development:

“Some women propose the name: “Atari.” Others: “Fei.”

The L. W.: “No! (Pedal. Two quaver-rest,) Lo-ti (B-F, pedal, organ note).”

The L. W.: “Henceforth (ped. ped.) let him be named Lo-ti.”

All surrounding him: “It is the moment of baptism! (RATHER SOLEMNLY).

In the land of songs, In the land of loving (crotchetrest), Lo-ti (E flat, e, crotchet-rest, cresc.), Lo-: (e) ti (E flat) shall be your supreme name (SIC)”



educating or enlightening the passive silent majorities, the pataphysician stands in awe of the neutralizing capacities of these con-creted subjectivities: “the masses function as a gigantic black hole which inexorably inflects, bends and distorts all energy and light radiation approaching it: an implosive sphere, in which the curvature of spaces accelerates, in which all dimensions curve back on themselves and “involve” to the point of annihilation, leaving in their stead only a sphere of potential engulfment”<sup>23</sup>. There can be no question of education, merely a performative inundation of the text by inertial massification. The pataphysician recognizes, through unknowledge, that “two signs cancel each other out or impregnate each other, and there results simply their progeny, which becomes egg or zero, all the more identical because they are contrary”. (Jarry 108)

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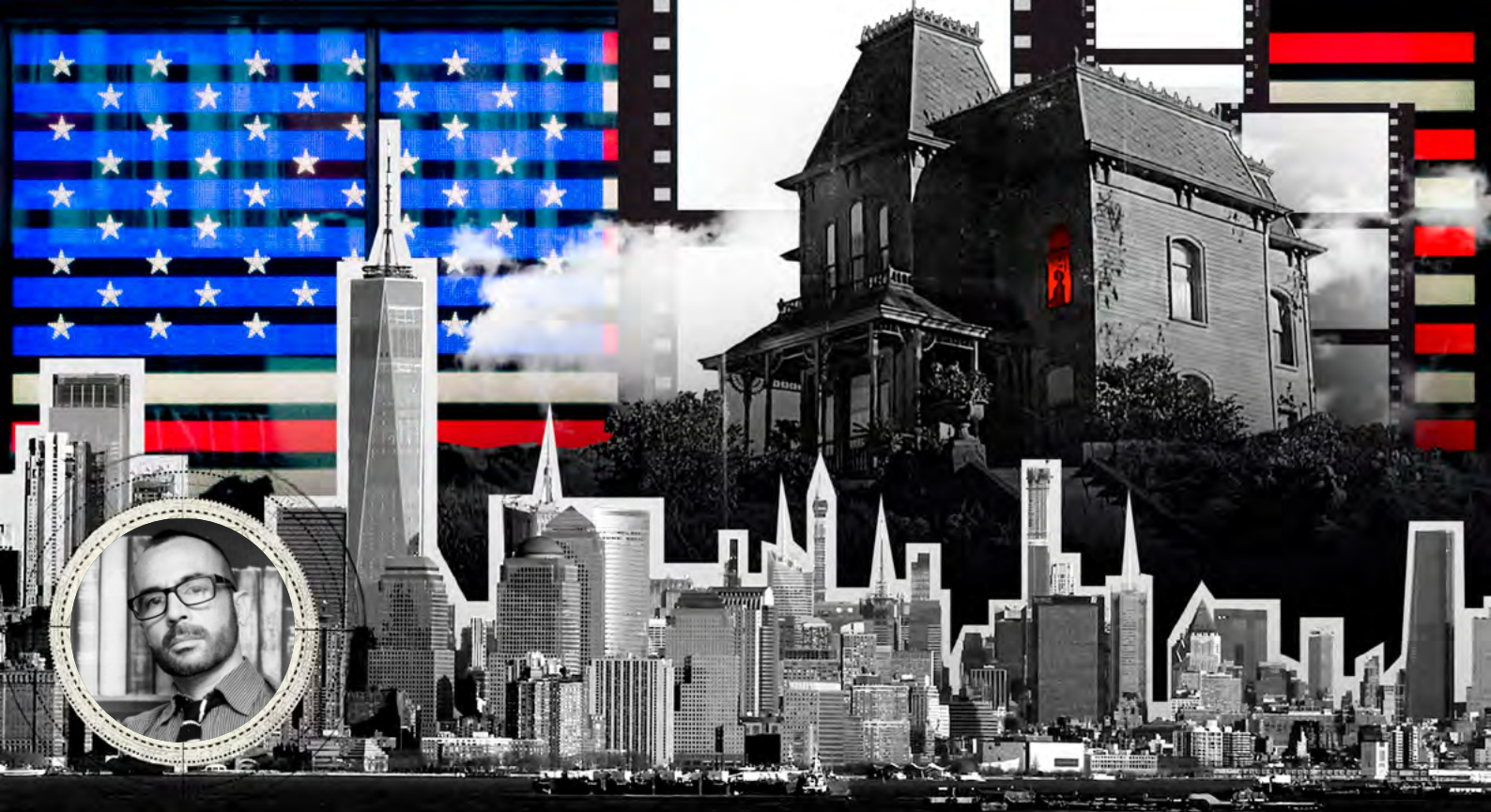
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# The Old House on the Hill: an American Gothic Landmark of Social Displacement and Estrangement in *The Addams Family* and *Psycho*/ *Bates Motel*

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## Abstract

Since its independence from Britain, US culture has established a clear connection to Gothic architecture thanks to its tendency to reconstitute Gothic landmarks on its land. Jean Baudrillard claims in *America* that: “One of the aspects of [the Americans’] good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc.” Unlike European Gothic, American Neo-Gothic from the Gilded Age finds

many of its expressions in isolation. This article seeks to explore from the theoretical perspectives of reconstitutions, displacement, and social estrangement how this phenomenon translates to the narrative continuum of the ‘old Neo-Gothic house on the hill’, a collective imaginary shared by and projected in *The Addams Family* and Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, as well as its recent prequel *Bates Motel*. This house is more than a Neo-Gothic building in decay; rather, it is the headquarters of an entire social minority. At the same time, it is the only territory in which such society can function.



When the wooden roof of the World Heritage Cathedral Notre-Dame of Paris burned accidentally in the spring of 2019, a deeply shocked American public, amongst other Western audiences, rushed to display on social media their personal and emotional attachment to this historical Gothic French landmark. Within hours, millions of dollars in donations had been wired to the French government for reconstruction of the Medieval roof. Why would a country, with no Gothic building ever constructed on its land during the Middle Ages, show such a tremendous dedication to the partial loss of the Parisian cathedral? In the United States, this strong sentimental connection to—and fascination for—what is essentially Medieval art and architecture embodied in the Gothic complexity started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once the Neo-Classical preference of the Founding Fathers started to fade out in the construction process of the American metropolis. The Gothic architectural challenges to Europe, such as the Cathedral of Learning and the Heinz Chapel on the University of Pittsburgh campus, became a common sign of extreme wealth, but this trend also affected the construction of private homes.

In order to fully grasp why America loves to reproduce Gothic architecture, we might find a starting explanation for this enthusiastic response to the European Gothic by Americans in the writings of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's cultural theory focuses on the birth and particularities of US culture and its relation to the rest of the Western world; as Maria Beville underlines, "From a perspective influenced by the theories of Baudrillard, Gothic post-modernist works may be seen as manifestations of 'the spirit of the terror' and their metonymical structures, as the symbolic 'event' of terror which has

the potential to destabilize hegemonic systems of order" (199). In his 1997 text *America*, Baudrillard wrote that "[one] of the aspects of [the Americans'] good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc." (41). The impact of Gothic architecture during the High Middle Ages does not escape this rule in this fundamental feature of American culture. Perhaps the counterpart to the architectural breakthroughs that the United States has always sought to emphasize in its urban centers is precisely the reconstitution of the "old" accompanied by the voluntary decay of the buildings to echo the erosion of the Gothic in Europe; in other words, a Neo-Gothic structure that would look too *neo* would not look *Gothic* enough. Therefore, the decay and the erosion are often conceived along with the construction, or become part of the design itself.

Amongst other American *restitutions*, the United States is a country very keen on medieval architecture, reproducing it on numerous occasions. However, these structures lack truly Gothic authenticity, due to America's Western history beginning with the religious migrations during the European Renaissance, a time period marked by its desire to replace Gothic features in architecture and art in general. Rather, Gothic architecture can only be a reminder of the pre-Reformation Catholic hegemony ruling over Western Europe, which is still deeply embedded in America's cultural values and ideals in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the American fascination for Gothic buildings—particularly in contrast to the Hispanic Central and South Americas,

that have fewer Gothic reconstitutions, preferring in general but not exclusively to embrace Baroque architecture, from Mexico to Argentina—continues into the present, with several waves of British and American architectures adapting the Neo-Gothic to another kind of construction: the “old house on the hill,” or an isolated, private estate symbolic of displacement and estrangement that voluntarily projects the Neo-Gothic aesthetics unto the passerby.

In addition to this fascination for a time period this country’s history has not experienced, it is often shocking for the continental European visitor to the United States to contemplate the level of isolation some Americans choose to live in. Baudrillard echoes this idea, noting that “It may be that the truth of America can only be seen

presence and heritage.

Offering myriads of self-sufficient properties built on a virgin land, far from urban centers and in direct contact with wildlife, the United States nonetheless still makes a conscious architectural statement about its European identity and ties, whether it is in the architecture of the Gothic, Baroque, Victorian or Tuscan styles. Such is a mark of conquest and colonial imposition that stands in isolation and solitude in order to provoke fascination. As Gaston Bachelard suggests in the *Poetics of Space*, “We are hypnotized by solitude, hypnotized by the gaze of the solitary house; and the tie that binds us to it is so strong that we begin to dream of nothing but a solitary house in the night” (36-37). In the case of “old houses on the hill” in the United States, the hypnosis serves two very different

*“Old house on the hill,” or an isolated, private estate symbolic of displacement and estrangement that voluntarily projects the Neo-Gothic aesthetics unto the passerby.*

by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values” (27). Although it is not uncommon to find isolated buildings in Europe, they seldom seek to project architectural originality. Conversely, Americans have entertained the need to reconstitute, and therefore displace, Gothic projections in an effort to compile and reunite all the architecture from Europe in the wildest places of their virgin territory, as can be observed on the Las Vegas Strip, a concentration of exaggerated constructions in the middle of the desert. Indeed, the United States has always had a different approach toward architecture since its founding as a nation after declaring independence from Britain, a country with a heavy Gothic

but meaningful functions: the first, as a means to make the beholder dream about a history that never was, and the second, to demonstrate the settlers’ desire to replicate and perpetuate a European historical thread, a physical reminder of the effects of the European colonizing presence during various points in their history. To state this more simply, the house simultaneously projects two pasts: one idealized, and the other of its actual colonized past. These old houses, in spite of this paradox, bear a responsibility to project historical continuity, hence the need for a narrative *continuum* in American fiction.

Yet these ambitious projects, often a two-story mansion with a central winding staircase leading up from the foyer and a front façade tower, dark wood frames,

and Neo-Gothic stained glasses are difficult to maintain for both technical and financial reasons. They were not built to withstand the test of time, but rather to project one's wealth on a façade by way of Baudrillardian simulation. Consequently, their decline echoes the displacement of social classes as the country continues its progression through late-stage capitalism, as well as in the estrangement of minorities through this process. Not all historic houses have had the chance to be restored and updated with lasting materials, and many have fallen into disrepair. In Robert Bloch's 1959 novel *Psycho*, the old house on the hill is perceived as such by Marion Crane, the first victim of Norman Bates:

At first glance she couldn't quite believe what she saw; she hadn't dreamed that such places still existed in this day and age. Usually, even when a house is old, there are some signs of alteration and improvement on the interior. But the parlor she peered at had never been "modernized"; the floral wallpaper, the dark, heavy, ornately scrolled mahogany woodwork, the turkey-red carpet, the high-backed, over-stuffed furniture and the paneled fireplace were straight out of the Gay Nineties. There wasn't even a television set to intrude its incongruity in the scene, but she did notice an old wind-up gramophone on an end table. (32)

Contrary to what Baudrillard would suggest in his *Consumer's Society*, this space does not want to reproduce the "networks of objects" of the early 1960s, which consists of "no longer relat[ing] to a particular object in its specific utility, but [rather] to a set of objects in its total signification" (27). We can arguably add that the unaltered setting Marion observes in

the Bates' parlor is a manifesto of anti-consumerism. The image of the decaying old house has served cultural needs to signify the deranged, the marginal and the socially estranged, or those who can bear living without updating or upgrading in the spirit of Capitalism, such as recluses and the freaks who refuse an economy of constant consumption, desires, traditions and feasts often observed in a bourgeois culture. Thus, the decaying building inhabited by the socially marginalized has a second life that is much more fascinating in the cultural, literary and cinematographic expressions of the United States.

Of all these landmarks marking a fallen age of prosperity, the properties from the American Gothic, or more accurately the Neo-Gothic Gilded Age of the Gay 1890s, are the most representative of hegemonic power, positioning these structures—and the people who owned them—against those suffering from psychosocial deviations and dysfunctional families living on the outskirts. This recalls similar hegemonic structures of Gothic Paris, insofar as these buildings and their implied socioeconomic status was in direct opposition to the *Cour des miracles*, a community of beggars, thieves, heretics and prostitutes in Gothic Paris living *extra muros*, or outside of the city's walls. Yet the Neo-Gothic style that emerged in the United States at the turn of the twentieth-century proved paradoxical for Gilded Age millionaires, as even those who were building enormous fortunes would not always leave sufficient funds behind them. With heirs often incapable of maintaining a house made of fine and somewhat ephemeral materials, the majority of these houses were left to perish or be passed along to lower-class inhabitants who would find satisfaction in owning a symbol of status, even as an outdated structure they had no capacity



to renovate. Yet some families fought their best to keep the symbolic house built by their ancestors, in spite of the financial hardship, just in case another Gilded Age would arrive for them to have the capacity for restoration. Without a second Gilded Age, however, these houses fell only further into disrepair, allowing for the American imagination to flourish. The result—an American fascination for ghosts inhabiting these spaces of past glory—permitting for property values to be maintained or even increased. In the meantime, the American fascination for ghosts inhabiting these spaces of past glory has often maintained a certain level of value for the property at stake. Similarly, “ghost tours” have proven to be very lucrative touristic attractions in certain historic homes or neighborhoods, not only for the dwellers, but also for any by-passer; in effect, the decayed mansion is a landmark of social periphery. Some Americans deliberately choose to live there, while others can contemplate these isolated buildings as a visual representation of marginalization both past and present.

Further, the geographical location of the estranged “old house on the hill” is often, and by definition, purposefully odd. Whether the urban zone has never reached the land on which it is built, or whether the Neo-Gothic mansion was voluntarily built on a land where the city could never possibly arrive, its position is never easy to locate on a map, and it draws its haunting character from its difficult access, usually reinforced by high gates, hilly terrain and/or staircases. In a rarely urban context, it will be found in a dead end, perhaps through a dark alley, and always with a mysterious horizon as its minimalist background. The qualities afforded from its downward-spiral, mystic vertical façade—in both a physical and metaphor-

ical way—rises from the feeling of an unreachable/forbidden territory it projects from the outside, and somehow obligates the viewer to venerate with emotions similar to the ones provoked by Gothic churches. According to Misty Jameson, “[t]he gothic has often been employed by writers desiring to expose the excesses of religion, particularly the utopic impulse that can, in radical forms, lead to a desire for destruction” (316). Displaced from its historical context, the old Neo-Gothic house on the hill therefore becomes for popular culture a three-dimensional symbol of the dystopic Freudian Death Drive embedded in the social tissue.<sup>1</sup> According to Baudrillard,

the alienated human being is not merely a being diminished and impoverished but left intact in its essence: it is a being turned inside out, changed into something evil, into its own enemy, set against itself. This is the process Freud describes in repression: the repressed returning through the agency of repression itself. (190)

This mansion thus becomes the space where society begins its dysfunction, providing a path to delirium and madness, while also serving as a refuge from the frantic consumerism that has invaded the rest of the nation. It only takes one small group of dissidents to make such statement.

The implications of the American fascination with the “old house on the hill” are only further reinforced through fictional productions, such as *The Addams Family*

1 The Freudian interpretation of the Death Drive (*Todestrieb*) initially introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is linked to the religious allegories in Freud’s later work *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

or the several representations of the Bates Motel, both fascinating examples of the American Neo-Gothic narratives. What would the Addams Family, whose decaying old mansion is the most visible statement of their mission to be an anthesis of the system, represent to an American society that relies so heavily on cookie-cutter consumerism? Likewise, what theatrical value would the Bates Motel have if it weren't an addition to the older home up on the hill behind it, on the outskirts of prototypical small-town America? Although these two buildings both pertain to unrelated fictions from different genres, the Neo-Gothic signifies the same social estrangement

the second half of the twentieth century, the old house on the hill appears in the collective unconscious as the unseemly evidence of social failures: where there used to be an apparent accumulation of wealth, we now find what Baudrillard equates to the *ghost towns*, that is, the *ghost people*. The inherited decaying mansion, the *ghost house*, has to be haunted or inhabited by freaks: their presence hides any evidence of, and participation in, the simulations of a consumer society.

The *Addams Family* and the *Psycho/Bates Motel* American archetypes of marginal citizens inhabiting the "old house on the hill" have a rather complex relation-

*The Gilded Age mansion becomes through its visible decadence the space of that alternative microcosmic society that doesn't follow the rules of social order and consumerism and, by and large, those of a Capitalist structure.*

for these two fictions: the decaying old house becomes the living space of the freaks. Without a doubt, the Addams are freaks by choice, tradition, and free will to reject the hegemonic models; the Bates are questionable when it comes to evaluating their degree of free will in inhabiting the space, but they benefit from psychological consequences of traumatic circumstances. Thus, the Gilded Age mansion becomes through its visible decadence the space of that alternative microcosmic society that doesn't follow the rules of social order and consumerism and, by and large, those of a Capitalist structure. Ironically enough, their very construction was indeed motivated by Capitalist ostentation, but their uchronic characteristics progressively turn them into landmarks of dissidence against the economic system in place in the United States since its foundation as a nation. By

ship to capitalist consumerism. While the Addams are somewhat living a systematic and antithetic workless lifestyle, they can survive thanks to an underground bottomless treasure whose origin is never explained, but dates back to the Middle Ages and was also displaced. As the original 1964 television show opening credit soundtrack claims, "their house is a museum where people come to see'em", and they do collect remains of a historical past, often more Medieval and projecting tastes for an era when the Inquisition reigned over European Catholicism. Heirs to non-Christian antagonist figures for U.S. Puritan society and subsequent rejects of society in U.S. History, the apparent frugality symbolized by the same clothes the Addams' always wear rests on another kind of capitalist behavior: the collection of historical objects and furniture that were

never American but completely European. But this infinity of unexplained wealth is what protects them from popularity and social obligations; despite being alienated by society, they can continue to live their dream of symmetric opposition to the consumer society. When Charles Addams creates this atypical death-driven family in the 1930s, in an era when Freud's ideas influence artists of all kinds and nationalities and the West is about to enter a time of unprecedented carnage engineered by collective Death Drives, the Gilded Age has already shown signs of irreversible decay. Yet Americans were entering in a post-WWII fever of procreation and suburban materialism that would last until the present day. What could be funnier than the home of Gomez and Morticia for a young couple recently in debt and equipped with the latest generation of electronics? A fantasy, an escape, a negative picture? What could be more reassuring than their offspring, Pugsley and Wednesday, for a *baby-boom* culture that would place children at the marketing center of all family life and home economics? The 1950s and the 1960s, in particular, strived for those symmetrically opposed marginal figures in order to understand their mechanical reproduction.

The Neo-Gothic Gilded Age imagery in decay was also a reassuring reflection, since in the aftermath of WWII, Americans were led to believe that the suburban consumerist middle-class model was the greatest economic system that had ever been established in world history. By implicitly guaranteeing that every member of American society could have access to this model if they were willing to submit to interest rates and accept debt as the norm, while never revealing that the space they would inhabit could ever be truly

owned, the rhetoric proved to be effective to the masses. Indeed, consumerist middle-class Americana would keep them safe from both the raging nineteenth-century Capitalism of the great family dynasties who took charge of the economy during the industrial revolution, such as Carnegies, the Mellons, the Morgans or the Rockefellers. These self-made empires sought to revive the feudal imagination through their taste for the Neo-Gothic in the construction of skyscrapers as well as country mansions, even though they had seen a great majority of their grandparents entrapped in the working class during their entire existence.

Later on and well into the twentieth-century, in the context of the growing threat of erasing social difference that Communism represented, Charles Addams creates his own displaced and estranged family dynasty at the beginning of the Cold War, and soon after *The Addams' Family* premieres in a decade marked by the tensions between Capitalist societies and the Communist bloc. Along with *The Addams Family*, other 1960s sitcoms such as *Bewitched* and *The Munsters*, emphasized through a negative reflection the preferences for a consumerist lifestyle via a very simple mechanism: create scenarios which present anything deviating from the "normal" as being foolish, laugh at the freaks, and do well in believing in the consumerist mentality.

"Sic Gorgiamus Allos Subjectatos Nunc," the historic family motto emphasized by Morticia Addams to her brother-in-law Fester in Barry Sonnenfeld's 1991 feature-film about the estranged family, reflects this opposition to the Consumerist model promoted worldwide by US society since World War II. It also echoes an awareness of the Hegelian Master/Slave



dialectic and a common will to reverse its dynamics, as the subdued become the masters of their own game living in the autarky of the old house. The phrase's somewhat Medieval/Gothic translation into English, "we gladly feast on those who would subdue us," points to a political message on the part of a family who has shown resistance to the imposed models since the very colonization of the future United States by the Founding Fathers. They are projecting that they have lived on the land according to their own rules, not those of the American Constitution, Republic and Democracy. Yet this motto is also a "reconstituted" Latin, once again echoing the "stubborn determination" defined by Baudrillard to pretend a historical past that never existed. The fake Latin of the Addams reflects the illusory nature of their demarcation from the rest of society, as well as their partial failure to live in total autarky and anti-consumerism.

Their reconstituted historical landmarks, associated with the Addams family's mission to resist the norms since the seventeenth-century, are next to the old house on the hill in their family's private cemetery, and stand as a constant reminder of their post-existentialist philosophy of marginal American freaks. The house is more than a Neo-Gothic building in decay; rather, it is the headquarters of an entire social minority. At the same time, it is the only territory in which such society can function, and the Addamses can only have extremely limited interaction with the outside world in their voluntary estrangement. For the outside viewer, this territorial restriction means more than isolation, as it also signifies potential island fever or even claustrophobia. Speaking more to this idea, Jameson adds that "Gothic claustrophobia is now part of postmodern paranoia, the fear

of enclosure within some type of vast, impersonal system" (318). Nonetheless, this necessary claustrophobia is the *sine qua non* condition for estrangement to signify resistance in the visual standing of the old house on the hill.

But this still does not resolve why the Neo-Gothic, an aesthetic movement driven from the late Medieval trend of the Gothic itself, is such an archetypal force on the American collective imaginary. "Neos" are usually indicators of complexes, such as can be witnessed by the Neo-Classical macro-visions of Napoleon Bonaparte, the Corsican soldier who turned himself into a reincarnation of Emperor Julius Caesar and therefore promoted Neo-Classicism. Yet Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City was not built between the fourteenth and fifteenth-centuries, and Neo-Gothic buildings also have this capacity to denounce this complex or envy of a nation who wants to cope with a deficiency. Making the Neo-Gothic space a limited territory for the resistant freaks, and provoking claustrophobia in the observing public, are two potential resolutions to the obvious complex in question. In the progression toward postmodernity, the American Gothic—in itself a contradiction—has turned to signify rebellion and rejection of the hegemonic norms.

Amongst the Halloween symbols that invoke the Gothic, the "old house on the hill" is a *leitmotiv*, and people will often opt for a reconstitution of this ambiance for the American version of the feast of All-Saints. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, a considerable portion of American consumerists seek to become a freak: a Frankenstein monster, an Addams or a Bates, or whomever else can reconstitute Gothic imagery. Yet this atmosphere, so familiar to the Addams or the Bates during the remaining 364 days of the year, is a one-night only affair

for all others. Calling on Mikhail Bakhtin's conclusions on re-establishment of social order through carnivalesque reversals in *Rabelais and His World*, the freaks are revered as the royal figure for a brief moment that reaffirms social hierarchy. Power is stabilized through such projected inversions. Without any ostentatious evidence of religious beliefs in the space, occasional visitors are struck by the ongoing carnivalesque nature of the space. Entering the old house on the hill is not only a challenge to the established norm, it requires a total acceptance of its inversion. Social hierarchy is voluntarily perceived upside-down, as it is normally accepted during carnivalesque events such as Halloween. The Gothic imagery also serves as an *ekphrasis* on the High-Middle-Ages collective imagery of the crowning of the fool; that is, bringing the lowest element of society to the top of the power ladder, just for ephemeral aesthetic pleasure, and eventually reaffirmation of the current order.

In the old house on the hill, the space is not only carnivalesque in its quotidian existence, it is also anti-chronological. The landmarks of the passing time are purposefully arranged in reverse. Everything becomes a negative print of the present normal consumerist society. The Gilded Age mansion is filled with objects from different time periods placed in odd juxtapositions of random collectibles, which only make sense within the reactionary educative syntax of the family. Whether it is the Addams or the Bates, it is based on a rejection of the present, the future and the technological revolution. Also, both houses project a similar taste for taxidermy, another reverse-the-course-of-time hobby that Norman Bates practices in the basement as therapy for his rather chronological tendency to turn live women

into cadavers. The Addams children are raised in the midst of this ordered chaos. The house is a sanctuary in which they can be raised against the grain, play with torture instruments or practicing taxidermy instead of exercising or playing with a live animal. These stuffed corpses whose expressions are threatening serve as indoor gargoyles for the Addams family as well as for the Bates mother-son tandem and, by and large, fulfill the same purpose of frightening the occasional visitors as they would on the walls of Gothic cathedrals, with the exception that they do not point to the existence of the Inferno in the afterlife, but rather to the acceptance of infernal conditions in the present reality of America.

Ultimately, this sanctuary is also a sacred place for an alternative education, even though the children all go to public schools and have daily interactions with hegemonic norms. Wednesday, Pugsley, and Norman are raised in the Neo-Gothic spaces their parents have conserved and cured for them as safe haven from consumerist and technological invasion from the outer world. No television is ever to be seen in the Addams mansion, ever. The addition of this invasive commodity in the Bates' 1920s living room, when the mother Norma starts to date Sherriff Romero, an alpha male who brings a brand-new big flat screen in the living room once he moves in the old house, triggers Norman's rage against his new stepfather. The only noise allowed in the old room are the piano and the gramophone when mother and son live together. The musical instrument of the organ is also very central to the Addams's daily routine. While the Addams are stuck in a self-invented historical past, the Bates have chosen to start afresh in a house filled with furniture from the first half of the twentieth century, connecting

the Victorian era to the pre-WWII. The Addams's and the Bates's old mansions stand, in this sense, as bastions against the baby boom of the 1940s and 1950s. They refuse to participate in the demographic growth as well as the consumerist attitudes. The apparent extravagance of the old house is a façade for an extremely frugal lifestyle in both cases. Nothing is wasted, and most components are recycled or restored; very rarely is money spent to "update" anything in the interior space.

Ultimately, the old house on the hill is a deeply feminine and maternal space. Even though it has a clearly phallic façade with its common central tower, the central element that holds the Neo-Gothic building together and gives it its ideological coherence is the central staircase, and this keystone element of the house is clearly the practiced space of the mother in the family, whether it is Morticia or Norma. Both extremely attractive, sensual, and sexual women characters in these fictions, they project a sense of the abnormal from the point of view of the consumerist sexual guidelines for women. Far from the standards of beauty imposed by the surrounding consumerist present, these two female figures cultivate a style of their own, pointing to an atemporal historical past that never was. They embody and offer a definition to what an American Neo-Gothic woman would be, to a certain extent: Morticia for her appearance and family values, Norma for her determination to raise Norman in the margin of the present cultural modalities of corrupted exterior space. The whole prequel of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the A&E series *Bates Motel*, is precisely based on focusing on the character of "Mother," Norma Bates, left unexplored in both the 1960 movie and the novel by Robert Bloch who inspired

the British director. Vera Farmiga, the series' executive producer and producer as well as its lead actress, emphasizes in most interviews she has given about *Bates Motel*<sup>2</sup> that from the perspective of this three-layered position she occupies in the show, the importance of placing the mother figure is at the very core of the old house. While Norma's project to isolate her son from the potential dangers of the outer world seems completely unreasonable at first, and presents itself as the very origin of Norman's pathology, the viewer progressively sympathizes with this anti-consumerist attitude and the need to return to a safe haven such as the old house behind the motel. The disparity of architectural styles between the old house and the motel reflects the same disparity between the generational conflicts at the roots of Norman's psychosis with women, based on his incapacity to leave the house representing earlier generations, and by and large the building that represents his mother's womb. Norman's most emblematic and first victim across narrative iterations, Marion Crane (interpreted by Janet Leigh in 1960, Anne Heche in 1998, and Rihanna in 2017) feels a strong attraction to the old house on the hill as she admires it from Norman's office down at the motel, seemingly perceiving its female nature beyond its phallic façade. As Diane Negra proposes regarding Norman's connection to the maternal space, "the male protagonist's connection to feminine values is intended to serve as the narrative explanation for his murderous impulses" (195). In the prequel *Bates Motel*, his decision to commit suicide in the house with his mother—and

2 Particularly in the following interview to Carolina Chocano from *The Cut*: <https://www.thecut.com/2017/04/interview-vera-farmiga-and-kerry-ehrin-of-bates-motel.html>



using the house as the very instrument for their shared deaths—is his only solution to return to a pre-natal state, in the womb of his mother. Consequently, I would argue that the house is, across the whole narrative continuum of *Psycho* to *Bates Motel*, the very catalyst of Norman's connection to his tragic murderous impulses: it is simultaneously what causes, reactivates, and appeases his mental condition and its pathological outcomes.

The comic *Addams Family* paradigm, with a Halloween 2019 release of an animated version returning to the original drawings of their creator Charles Addams, also emphasizes the matriarchal nature of the old house on the hill. Obviously not

digging as profoundly in the psychology of its characters as *Psycho/Bates Motel*, it offers a systematically negative reflection of American society, insofar as viewers are supposed to contemplate the relativity of their own values and find inspiration for proper social conducts in its antithesis, a common feature in many TV series since World War II. As discussed previously, the Addams's withdrawal from the world is partial since they maintain minimal contact with the external world; however, their isolation begins once they have all returned from their daily occupation. Yet they function as the counter-example to what American culture needs in the construction of language systems, symbols



Figure 1. House by the Railroad. Edward Hopper, 1925  
(Public Domain)

and laws, or what would correspond to its Super Ego (Freud), its order of culture (Lévi-Strauss) or its Symbolic Order (Lacan) in the theoretical approaches from anthropology and psychoanalysis. And although Hitchcock was not a director of comedies, he certainly appreciated and shared a lot of the projected negative values his friend Charles Addams had drawn. They both understood what the post-WWII re-visitation of Freudian psychoanalysis implicated for the world of fiction and the role that a socially estranged family could play from the periphery of an old house.

The British filmmaker Hitchcock and New-Jersey-native Addams were not only intimate friends, but also drew a common fascination for the old Gothic mansion on the hill. Charles and Alfred might have taken two different paths and came from two distinct continents and cultures, yet there was something comic in the tragedies of Hitchcock just as much as there was a high level of tragedy at the very center of Addams's comic drawings; in fact, two of those drawings were owned by Hitchcock (Davis 27). Also at the center of their shared imaginary and mutual admiration around the old Neo-Gothic house was a photograph by Edward Hopper titled *House by the Railroad* from 1925 (Figure 1). What is striking and common to all three copies of the old house (Hopper's, Addams's and Hitchcock's) is their common lack of background. Trees, stairs, or gates always appear in the foreground, emphasizing the distance between the viewpoint from below and the house up on the hill. However, nothing but an occasional moon or other celestial object ever appears in the back, always suggesting an emptiness, a void, and ultimately a frontier or borderline of existence. This big empty lit sky in Hooper's original photography,

as well as in its many derived paintings, is precisely what fascinates every viewer.

The caption of the edited volume quoted in Figure 1 points out that the *House by the Railroad* photography projects "melancholy and lonel[iness] rather than menac[e] and evil", but this is very questionable since the house, in both comic and tragic expressions alike, is precisely the very locus where all these emotions come together and become indistinguishable. Robert Bloch definitely perceived this function of the old house when he imagined it for the formation of his character Norman Bates. A pioneer of tragi-comic science-fiction, Bloch found inspiration for his masterpiece *Psycho* in the *fait divers* dealing with dissociative identity disorder of serial killer Ed Gein. However, this local news from Plainsfield, Wisconsin did not involve an old Neo-Gothic Gilded mansion standing alone on a hill, but rather an isolated farm ruled by a Christian fundamentalist mother. Bloch himself insists on the originality of his character and his unusual space of residence:

Thus the real-life murderer was not the role model for my character Norman Bates. Ed Gein didn't own or operate a motel. Ed Gein didn't kill anyone in the shower. Ed Gein wasn't into taxidermy. Ed Gein didn't stuff his mother, keep her body in the house, dress in a drag outfit, or adopt an alternative personality. These were the functions and characteristics of Norman Bates, and Norman Bates didn't exist until I made him up. Out of my own imagination, I add, which is probably the reason so few offer to take showers with me. (19)

According to this same disclaimer logic, the old house on the hill did not exist until Charles Addams, Robert Bloch,



Alfred Hitchcock, and others who followed the narrative continuum of their respective stories (Gus Van Sant for his sequels of *Psycho*, Vera Farmiga for the prequel *Bates Motel*, Barry Sonnenfeld for the 1991 version of *The Addams Family*, all the way to Conrad Vernon and Greg Tiernan with the 2019 animated remake of the *Addams Family*) made it up. The connection between the Gothic imaginary and the merging of comedy and tragedy is, of course, hardly a recent phenomenon, having had anterior expressions in fictional works, most notably in the Romantic period. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, it reaches a new dimension in the locus of the old house on the hill, becoming a universal cliché as well as part of a global collective unconscious. After the experience of two world wars, American culture has a need for more spaces of tragicomedy such as the old house on the hill: melancholic, isolated, frightening, and wicked. The two narrative continua identified here are indeed part of a greater continuum, as their creation paralleled the development of new theoretical approaches around intertextuality in the second half of the twentieth-century.<sup>3</sup> We could easily imagine a contemporary scenario where Norman retreats in the basement to work on his stuffed animals while Wednesday and Pugsley are chasing each other with his knives around the motel; where Norma and Morticia rearrange the collection of Victorian objects around the living room; and Gomez is locked in his office writing and posting fake news all over the internet. And this scenario depends on the old house, outside of which all of these characters completely lose their essence and purpose.

<sup>3</sup> Especially in the proposals of French structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers, such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

Four years after the publication of *America*, Jean Baudrillard returns to the debate with *The Transparency of Evil*, in which he opens with the claim that “[w]e live amid the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams which are now behind us, yet we must continue to reproduce in a sort of inescapable indifference” (4). In this sense, I want to argue in conclusion that the social displacement of the Addams and the Bates families in their popular fictional expressions, from the 1930s to the present, reflects the cultural estrangement of an entire nation reproducing Gothic phantasies and imagery. As an American *reconstitution* of a historical past that never was, the collective unconscious is invited to familiarize itself with a sample of freaks who have chosen to isolate themselves in an alternative lifestyle on the margin of the known world antithetic to the majority, and in a structure in decay, or not built to last long to say the least. We will never know what is beyond the old house on the hill because its depictions never allow it; we only know they have chosen to live on this geographical and psychological edge. Isolationism is an essential component of the American culture, with its roots and finds in the old Neo-Gothic house on the hill as one of its most poetic metaphors—indeed, it is a metaphor that will always depend on the quick recovery and reconstruction of the Gothic landmarks back in Europe.

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**JUST AS WORLD DRIVES  
TO A DELIRIOUS STATE OF THINGS,  
WE MUST DRIVE (SLOWLY)  
TO A DELIRIOUS POINT OF VIEW**

*Jean Baudrillard*







# The metaphor of the black hole: from mass society to the contemporary dystopian imagery

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I met Jean Baudrillard in the late 1990s at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, where he was having a show of his photographs. I was a student, writing my thesis greatly influenced by the books of the French scholar, however, his presentation left me a little baffled. The escape towards the analogue dimension, towards the ability of photography to recover the moment of the shot, seemed to me a rearguard operation compared to the formidable reflections on the digital that I had found in *The Perfect Crime* (Baudrillard 1996). The first issue of *Duellanti*, an Italian film magazine, reports my discussion with the scholar, to whom I asked a question in the

Q&A phase. How come, from the elaboration of a theoretical competitive thinking, aiming to be faster than the digital, do we now move on to a rearguard phase in an attempt to recover the authenticity of the analogical dimension? After a long answer, I was able to meet my myth and converse with him for a few minutes. My question was the result of a more extensive elaboration of Baudrillard's thought on the relationship between communication, science and philosophy, which concerns the metaphor of the black hole.

Already in the text *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* or *The End of the Social* (Baudrillard 1983), the author fixes some



key points, which will then be taken up and pushed towards their more logical consequences in *The Illusion of the End* (1994), with respect to which this text stands in a complementary relationship. The philosopher almost seems to grasp the paradox according to which mass society asserts itself precisely when the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm enters a crisis. Thus, in spite of a positivist sociology from which the idea of a society, of a market, of mass media derives, our vision is much more complex. The myth of an objective observer, the atomization of individuals, social physics, economic and technological determinism, etc., are all examples of the attempt to apply an obsolete paradigm to a phenomenon, which in terms of complexity, competes with or surpasses the physical ones, which is an aspect that even the classical sociologists, from A. Comte to T. Parsons, had understood. Baudrillard's ability lies in playing with a substantial ambiguity of the term 'mass' which, on closer inspection, is suspended between a corpuscular and a wave dimension. Thus, from the first chapter it is clear that the term 'mass' does not indicate so much a mechanistic quality of the social, but above all an electromagnetic conception. The masses do not so much express a tangible concreteness, as in the expression "critical mass" that insists on the fact that there is something rather than nothing. What characterizes them is their "making mass", or the way in which they absorb "all the electricity of the social and political and neutralise it forever" (p. 2).

In this lies the great relevance of Baudrillard's thought, not only in his challenge to the Newtonian paradigm but also in the idea of overcoming a materialist conception of the masses, to examine its "electronic" transformation, almost in

the wake of McLuhan (2001), to whom Baudrillard in other texts often refers. With the difference that, if the latter was decidedly more fascinated by the progress of quantum physics, so much so that he often quoted Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, Baudrillard goes more in the direction of astrophysics, as if to found a new relativistic anthropology. The notion of black hole is very current today. For example, the splendid philosophical film *Interstellar* by Christopher Nolan (2014) managed to overturn it into an eschatological and positive metaphor. Or more recently in *Decadence: Life and Death of the Judeo-Christian Civilization*, by Michel Onfray (2017), the black hole is examined as a vitalistic conception instead. On the contrary, in Baudrillard's text, 'mass' is introduced almost as a neutral category. In fact, it does not reflect the social, an incorrect expression because "it still evokes an idea of full substance"; on the contrary it reflects "the masses function as a gigantic black hole which inexorably inflects, bends and distorts all energy and light radiation approaching it: an implosive sphere, in which the curvature of spaces accelerates, in which all dimensions curve back on themselves and 'involve' to the point of annihilation, leaving in their stead only a sphere of potential engulfment" (Baudrillard p. 9). The author deepens this discourse in subsequent texts, from *Simulacrum and Simulations* to *The Other Seen by Himself*, in which schizophrenia is depicted as a sort of black hole of the subject, and similarly later in *The Illusion of the End* and in *The Perfect Crime*. The black hole is therefore not merely a metaphor for the death of the social, but perhaps represents its most proper fulfilment.

The implosion process which is intrinsic to the nature of mass, which is once

again an analogy with Marshall McLuhan (2001) who first spoke of the implosion of the Electronic Galaxy, is therefore accelerated, intensified by the entropic action of technology and consumption. Faced with this challenge, sociology itself is put in check, since it first postulates the mass as one of the key concepts through which it carries out its analysis of the social. If “sociology [...] survives only on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death” (p. 4). From sociology to political science the step is short. The hypothesis

tion where not only the political becomes volatilised, but where the social itself no longer has any name. Anonymous. *THE MASS. THE MASSES*” (p. 19). As can be seen, there is a certain representation of the masses, which today we consider outdated, such as precisely the question of anonymity which today is instead replaced by an exasperated protagonism of leaders, voters, consumers, etc. However, the overall picture that is built is still useful. To reaffirm the topicality of this approach, we can follow two trajectories.

The first is that of information and its dissemination, which is an aspect that is not addressed systematically here as

*The goal of the politician is to use information to rescue the silent majorities from their own silence, to free their energy to “do the social”.*

of a substantial passivity of the mass with respect to a manipulative activity of power (p. 13) is equally misleading. If until the Renaissance the politician stages a sort of self-referential game that mimics the machines of the theater and perspective, in his absence of a truth, with the French Revolution the politician “inflects himself, in a decisive way [...] he loads himself with a reference social, the social invests it” (p. 15). At that point the people, the will of the people, appears on the theater of political representation. Thanks especially to liberal and socialist thought which postulates “a dissolution of the political at some point of history” (p. 18), the social turns out to be the real winner of a dispute which, however, also inaugurates its own decline. Thus the “the energy of the social is reversed, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities specificity is lost, its historical quality and its ideality vanish in favour of a configura-

tion in other texts but only hinted at. As the attempt to “bombard” the inert mass of the social to probe it (thanks to polls), activate it, get it out of its proverbial indifference, is bankruptcy. It refers to a “dialectic of meaning” (p. 10) that does not take hold of the object in question, which is neither object nor subject. The goal of the politician is to use information to rescue the silent majorities from their own silence, to free their energy to “do the social”. It is also a question of structuring the masses “by injecting them with information” (p. 25). This process produces a sort of “fission” of the social by the violence of the media and information. Beyond an unscrupulous use of concepts borrowed from various registers, such as that of emulsion or precisely fission, and while exaggerating with the clichés derived from an old mediological reflection (bombing and injection in *Bullet Theory* style), here Baudrillard poses a

fundamental question that he will develop better in his later works. Information, which by its nature performs a negentropic function or a reduction of entropy (physical, social, media, etc.), is transformed into a means of further production of disorder at a given moment.

The relevance of this discourse is cyclical. It recurs every season in which new media proliferate. More recently, in the age of social media, Baudrillard became a direct reference for scholars analyzing the process of saturation and multiplication of layers in the daily experience (Hodkinson 2016), and also the process as colonization of real time determining a sort of temporal implosion (Lovink 2012).

Even today, with the inflation of apps that perform any function, there are artificial intelligence systems that would like to simplify consumption and that mainly have the task of learning from the data extracted from the specific consumer who interacts with them. All this continues to produce a hypertrophy that breaks down and reassembles the mass. The masses are satisfied with being a mass, or rather with being a “good conductor of information” (p. 28) but in doing so they decompose and implode into tribes, in the multitude, in hyper-individualism, in neo-narcissism, and the like. If the scientific metaphor anticipates some aspects of contemporary information, the sociological one reflects on an even more obsessive issue for us today: the relationship between mass and people. In fact, there has been talk of a mass of peasants when they have never represented a mass (p. 5). Nor the mass of workers. But the mass “has no sociological reality. It has nothing to do with any real population, body or specific social aggregate” (p. 5). In light of the current

transformations, which decompose mass society into an increasingly demassified, disintermediated and customized system, Baudrillard’s analysis can still provide us with valuable insights. When we reflect dialectically on the overcoming of the masses by the new populist people, we forget that the masses already exercised this tendency to reject the schemes proposed by a first attempt at Enlightenment rationalization (subject/object, institutions, equivalence of voters, etc.).

Following this abstract way of thinking, we find an unlimited sum of equivalent individuals: 1 + 1 + 1 - such is the sociological definition - but somehow neutralized, that is to say neither one nor the other. There is no longer any polarity between the one and the other in the mass. This is what causes that vacuum and inwardly collapsing effect in all those systems, which survive on the separation and distinction of poles (two, or many in more complex systems). This is what makes the circulation of meaning within the mass impossible... (p. 6).

For this “black box of all referents” (ibid.), even the referendum which would like to indicate the very substance of the demos “has replaced the political referent” (p. 20), thus falling back into the game of simulation. As if the masses, who resisted the impact of information, at a certain point absorb the simulation virus themselves. The author anticipates here a reasoning that he will re-propose in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, after 9/11, when he explains the fact that reality has become more extreme and spectacular than Hollywood, with the idea that it has absorbed the virus of spectacularization. The process of disarticulation of the mass, which in hindsight is already completely contained



in its intrinsic qualities, is exacerbated by the transition from general media to digital ones. The philosopher also identifies the crisis point of the old tools that guaranteed the leaders of the masses the ability to test the pulse of public opinion: “now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation. They no longer have a referent in view, but a model” (p. 20). The same disintermediation that today indicates the great discontinuity between old and new politics seems here to be the technological implementation of an atavistic resistance of the masses against the sociological and politological attempts to reduce them, assimilate them, tame them through stable conceptual grids, or to decompose them and absorb them into institutional subjects and intermediate bodies such as parties, trade unions, and organizations.

In this book a brilliant idea is sketched out which will then be taken up again, as I anticipated, in *The Illusion of the End* and more recently in *The Agony of Power* (2010). I am referring to that Larsen Effect, which indicates that “the excessive proximity of the event and its diffusion in real time generates undecidability, a virtuality of the event which strips it of its historical dimension and subtracts it from memory. We are immersed in a generalized Larsen Effect. Wherever there is this promiscuity, this collision of poles, there is mass” (Baudrillard 2010, p. 47). In the same book, Baudrillard identified reality shows as the agents of confusion between existence and its double. It is therefore in the space-time junction of the nineties that the theses prepared elsewhere by Jean Baudrillard are realized. In it the decline of the mass regime takes place and the still not entirely clear beginning of a new regime of demas-

sification and post-spectacularization.

The black hole is also one of the fundamental concepts on which science fiction has reflected as an access channel to parallel dimensions. It indicates a phenomenon of an astrophysical nature but, already in John Wheeler’s scientific formulation, it expresses a communication problem. To identify a black hole, it is in fact necessary for a beam of light to be able to cross its border, called the “event horizon”, and thus testify to the very existence of the object from which it emanates. Therefore, the black hole is only negatively recognizable as a place of non-communication, or as a place that is unable to communicate its own existence. In the black hole hypothesis, the mass of a star grows steadily until the energy that fuels it is depleted. The mass, at that point, collapses on itself. In a situation of infinite density, the temporal deformation is maximum, which is a direct function of the gravity of a body and therefore of its mass. Thus, in the vicinity of a star, the time warp is greater than that of Earth. When a star reaches its maximum expansion and consumes all its fuel, it implodes due to the massive weight of the matter that composes it.

In gravitational collapse the star contracts and its density tend towards infinity. If the spatial contraction of the star exceeds the Schwarzschild radius which delimits the event horizon, the density becomes infinite, thus also the gravity and with it the effect of time warping. The star thus turns into a black hole and reaches the end of time. According to Stephen Hawking, if an astronaut were to enter a black hole, they would immediately reach the region of the end of time (Hawking, 2016).

Like the astronaut in the psychedelic final sequence of *2001 A Space Odyssey*, the cybernaut, immersed in the infinite

habitual spaces of information, has all of his time horizontally. Time is spatialized in the sense that it has a merely positional value, as Einstein's relativity also teaches, in overcoming the classical distinction between time and space. The black hole is also the apogee or terminal stage of a star's entropy. If a certain allusion has been made to this object of astrophysics in various science fiction films, in the last few years it has become a narrative device for developing new dystopian tales.

R. Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) staged the hallucinated experience of a young American teenager in the 1980s, whose delirium crosses and superimposes some daring astrophysical theories on black holes and presumed parallel dimensions. Therefore, schizophrenia as a socio-cultural

reality has been brightly investigated by Baudrillard in several books. As when he states that "...the schizophrenic is not, as generally claimed, characterized by his loss of touch with reality, but by the absolute proximity to and total instantaneousness with things", this "overexposure to the transparency of the world" (Baudrillard 1988, p. 27) is very similar to the experience of a user overwhelmed by the saturation of information in the digital world.

If *Donnie Darko* plays with the scientific metaphor, *Interstellar* (2014) elevates the film story to the rank of a definitive theory on science and the ends of humanity. Philosophy of science, catastrophe theory and an investigation into human nature that moves far beyond the modest objectives of the social sciences, are the theoretical

*The black hole is also one of the fundamental concepts on which science fiction has reflected as an access channel to parallel dimensions*

phenomenon that comes into contact, in the imaginary dimension, with other discourses pertaining to different scientific domains, but also as the very product of the integration between these systems. Today we are faced with a new paradox: first science and then technology have shown the emptiness of the universalistic claim of the mechanistic and positivist paradigm. If science has disassembled that model by demonstrating the profound discontinuity of space-time, whose nature changes as multiple variables change, technology has profoundly transformed that apperceptive system thanks to the potential of digital simulation, interactivity and telepresence. The schizophrenic illumination and its relationship with the new paradigm of

tools through which Christopher Nolan builds a new totally secular eschatology. At the center of the work is the crisis of our time which deprives human beings of their place at the center of the universe. At first it presents the idea of the ghosts that haunt the childhood of Cooper's daughter, the legacy of an archaic conception to which the grandfather does not deny a certain support. Then the film reveals instead the hypothesis of the aliens that the small group of NASA scientists could have guided humanity towards salvation. The crisis of our time is both related to values and practice. A post-growth society has totally disowned the underlying value system of industrial society to focus on a return to land and blood. Even aerospace

companies, which had celebrated the superiority of the United States and the West, are reinterpreted in the mode of an anti-development denial that teaches students an alternative truth about history: NASA's companies were just an expensive expedient to symbolically win confrontation with the USSR. As in the desperate scenario narrated by the film *The Road* by John Hillcoat (2009), here too an indefinite environmental catastrophe hits the planet destroying the last agricultural reserves while sandstorms make the air unbreathable. Just with that sand will be written the message that allows you to discover the launch base from which the company will start. Micheal Caine, accustomed to the best dystopian stories from *Children of Men* by Alfonso Cuarón (2006) to *Inception* by Nolan himself, this time plays the part of a scientist in search of the formula that allows you to control gravity and therefore time. He devises two rescue plans for the human race: Plan A involves the evacuation of American citizens to an earth-like planet; plan B instead the simple repopulation of the same planet through cryogenization and assisted reproduction. Therefore, according to him, the goal is not "to save the planet but to leave it". His daughter, who leaves with Cooper and two other members, is the practical demonstration of a law which, although borrowed from a large-scale New Age, represents the very foundation of all reality. Love, which connects beings years away in space-time, is the fundamental law of the universe of which gravity is simply the translation into functional and communicative terms. The law of attraction meets Newton and Einstein but the director's vision moves to a higher analytical level, far beyond a simple new age pantheism. While the space station goes through the space-time tunnel

(the wormhole), her hand meets that of an entity that according to scientists inhabits a five-dimensional universe and that almost greets her on the journey to the other end of the universe. The long sequence on the exploration of the planets only serves to dramatize the spatial distance and the time dilation so that an hour spent in the vicinity of the black hole corresponds to countless years spent on earth. As Baudrillard stated years ago:

A certain type of slowness or deliberation (i.e. a certain speed, but not too much), a certain distance, yet not too much, a certain liberation (the energy of rupture and change), but not too much -- all these are necessary for this condensation, for the signifying crystallization of events to take place, one that we call history -- this type of coherent unfolding of causes and effects we call the real (Baudrillard 1996).

In the relativistic experience of a black hole, the sense of reality and the sense of history simultaneously collapse. The proximity to the horizon of events almost serves to train Cooper's gaze on the things of men, but above all of his loved ones and therefore of himself. The video with the synthesis of his son's 23-year history enjoyed in a few hours condenses an enormous emotional mass in a short moment. *Inception* also explored the dilation of time through the introspective dimension of limbo: the deep sleep in which time reaches its maximum dilation. Compared to that world explored through introspection, in which oneiric worlds were built through dream design, here we have an inverse movement: the exploration of the infinitely vast that comes to grasp the very depth of being through a perfect fusion between physics,



technology and psychology. The mission is driven by an evolutionary scheme, not only to find a favorable environment for the continuation of the species but also the idea that, precisely at the moment closest to death, human beings can find the energy to overcome danger. The whole mission was planned from a clear and simple idea: we need to think as a species and not as a sum of individuals. A concept that tragically reveals itself when Morph reveals to the crew members the terrible lie that moved the whole expedition: the non-existence of plan B. There is no return to earth after the exploration. The mission is a lifeboat for the pioneers of a new world. The random element precipitates events towards the unpredictable. To save Amelia, Cooper disengages from the ship and plummets into the black hole, violently reaching the end time region. A sort of extreme serendipity for which what was until then conceived as the element of disturbance to the accomplishment of the mission - due to the fact that the very high temporal deformation increased the time lag, the crew's action time and that of the earth which was inexorably falling towards catastrophe.

Cooper's heroic gesture is rewarded by the serendipic revelation that demonstrates the veracity of Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin's maxim: "Where the danger is greater, salvation is greater". If some theories on black holes claimed the impossibility of crossing the event horizon without being torn apart by infinite gravity, Cooper has this experience that allows him to extend his perception to an additional dimension, as in the case of the square in Abbot's novel *Flatland* that experiences the three-dimensional sphere in its two-dimensional world (coming to hypothesize the existence of  $n$  dimensions). Cooper too must understand how to operate in a

condition in which space-time is arranged in front of him in layout of a library made of a huge number of strings. On the other side is his daughter in different stages of her development. There is he himself who is about to tell her about the departure into space. There is the watch that has left them and which becomes the communication tool precisely because gravity is the sum force that crosses the universe and connects its most remote parts. But gravity is only the physical and communicative manifestation of an even more essential force, which holds distant things together. Cooper's discovery is mind-blowing. It was he himself who dropped the books in the apparently haunted library, as well as touched Amelia Brand's hand as they passed through the wormhole; it was neither ghosts, nor aliens, nor God. The next stage in the development of humanity occurs in the pure immanence of the universe, in the ability of mankind to go beyond the limits of space-time.

Along the lines of the previous two, the American series *Stranger Things* offers an even more commercial, everyday and pop definition of the concept of black hole. Especially the first season can be summarized by the formula: *Donnie Darko* + *Interstellar* + *Videodrome* = *Stranger Things*. In the American province of the eighties, pervaded by TV and new consumption, three (or four) boys come across absurd events determined by the opening of a gate (closed in the second season by Eleven's telepathic powers) due to secret experiments that have opened the doors to a parallel dimension. In other words, somehow the black hole is translated and grafted into the territory and into everyday life, in its horror and terrifying variant. The upside-down is an essential dimension that surrounds and completes physical and daily reality and that can be

understood by the young protagonists through the interpretation of the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game.

If in *Interstellar* the imaginary even comes to develop a model of black hole which will then be taken up by physicists to deepen their research, in *Stranger Things* the imaginary of Dungeons & Dragons is the map itself that allows you to interpret roles, structures and ontologies of the upside-down. For this reason, the character Joyce Byers (who is the mother of one of the boys) is initially stigmatized as insane (as in *Donnie Darko*), precisely because she begins to see something that others do not see. The upside-down keeps everything connected, so much so that inside it both the monster and the victims can communicate remotely (like Copper in the black hole with his daughter). The mother recognizes that her son sends her discreet messages through the interference of the electricity grid, which will allow her to draw the very map of the upside down with a sort of handcrafted infographic. In *Stranger Things II*, the astrophysical conception of the upside down, which was already previously explained by the science professor with the image of the sheet folded in two and pierced by a pencil, precisely a wormhole, joins the systemic-quantum one which instead tells a sentient system (an organism) capable of communicating the geolocation of enemies in real time to the monsters that inhabit it. If *Interstellar* and *Stranger Things* overturn the dystopian dimension in a happy ending, in *Donnie Darko*'s ending we understand how dystopia has no end, indeed it has already been completely realized previously. We can add another "tyranny" to the ones analyzed by Mike Watson (2019), after the 1) horror-magic tyranny of the Upside Down, and 2)

the technological tyranny of the military apparatus; the most powerful is 3)

The tyranny of brands and commodities in the Eighties, the age that I call "profusion" according to another concept elaborated by Baudrillard in the second half of the Seventies (1998).

A circular relationship is established between the level of social transformation of time and that of its imaginary projection in which technology acts as a commutator between scientific formalizations and the everyday. Media representation in this way works at the same time as a mirror and a shaper of the social reality (Hodkinson 2016). The relativistic notion of blocked time, discussed by Baudrillard as a consequence of the digital transformation, affects both the imaginary, which represents it in the ways indicated, and the society that is transformed on the basis of it.

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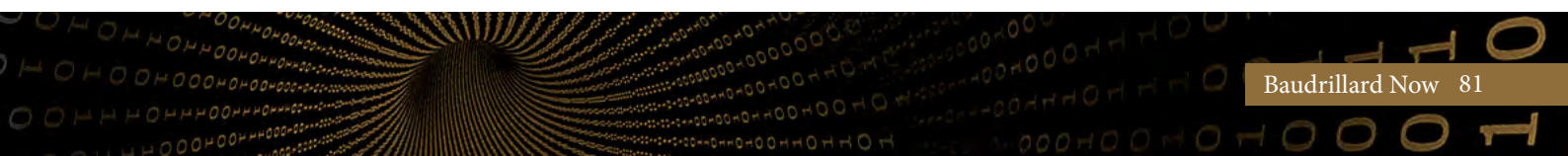
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# Simulacrum

Inspired by Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*

Noor Zahran

Malaysian artist specialized in ink drawing



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**Why did you title this series of artworks *Simulacrum*? What inspired you to create them?**

The title of the series is derived from the word 'Simulacrum' where it represents a person or thing. Most of my artwork is done in a realism style; realism is an example of artistic simulacrum, where a drawing is produced by copying a picture where the picture is also a copy of the real thing. I got the inspiration for this theme from the book *Simulacra and Simulation*

by Jean Baudrillard. After I tried to read and study the book, I found out that Jean Baudrillard has a few similarities with my works on how we see modern society. He tried to describe the relationship between reality, symbols and society, in particular the significations and symbolism of culture and media involved in constructing an understanding of shared existence. The artwork that I display in this theme are the adapted truths that are subject to various interpretations and changes.

**What do you want to say to people through your works? What is the main message?**

Visual elements can create a story that generates emotions, making audiences remember more of what they see and feel. Drawing is also independent of any language, which means it serves to communicate without the need of verbal response. My works have a specific mode

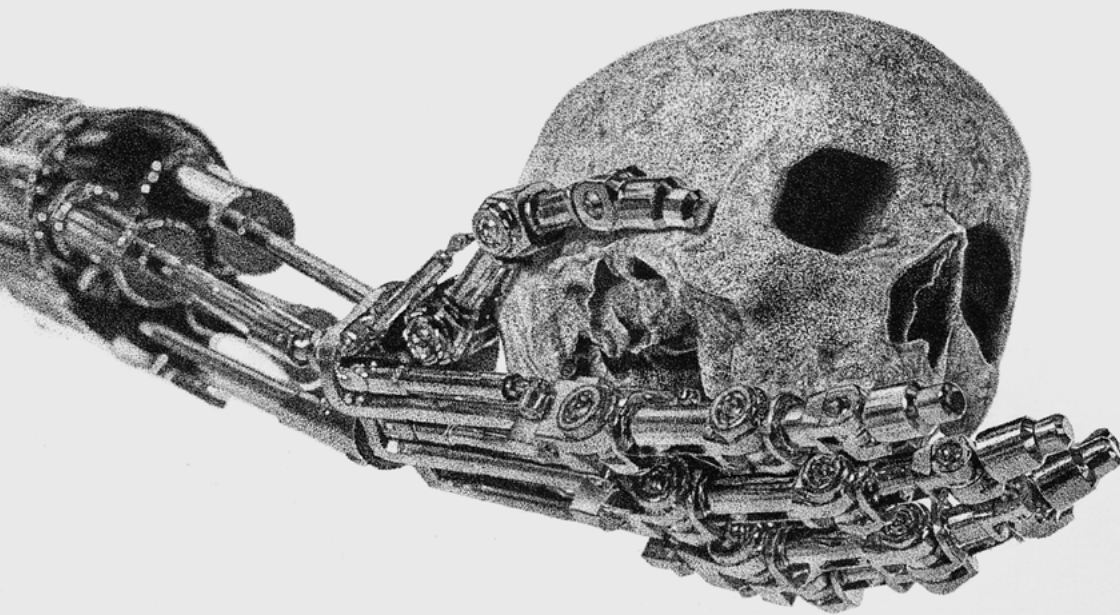
and style depending on the story I am trying to convey. The main message in my works is to open people's eyes to how we should see and admit to our faults of the past and moving on to trying to become something better. I tried to include an enormous amount of satire in my art to bring people's attention to a different side of truth, the one we tend to ignore, and carry educational value to the people.



### **Modern Snacks**

The smartphone bitten in this artwork is symbolic of the snack for which it is designed to make you addicted to them and eat over and over. Snacks are delicious, extremely convenient, and nearly impossible to put down. The same goes for the psychological manipulation by the manufacturing company. Many consumers are trapped and often follow their internal urges to keep switching new phones despite spending so much money that they are willing to go into debt.



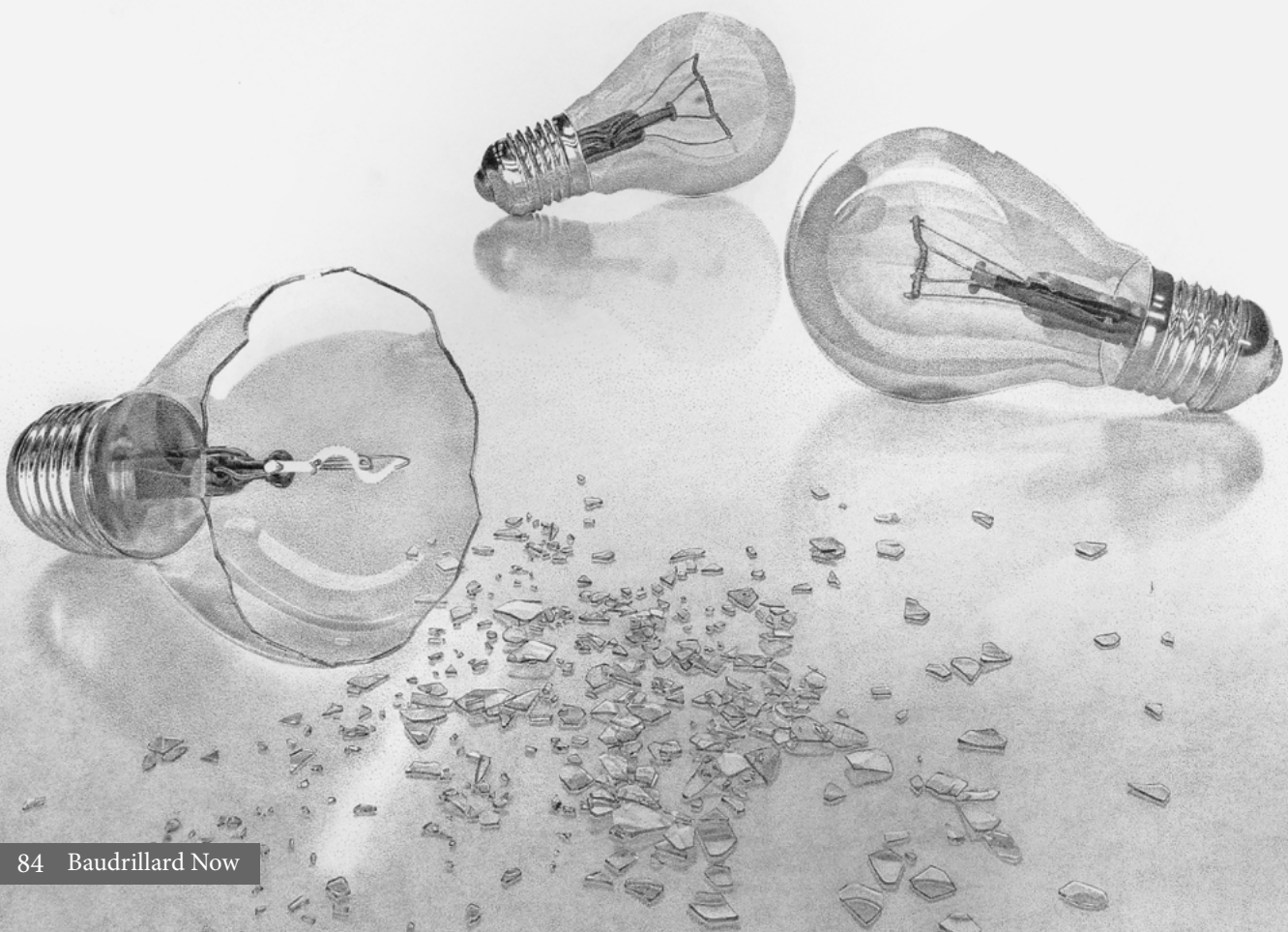


### **Transition**

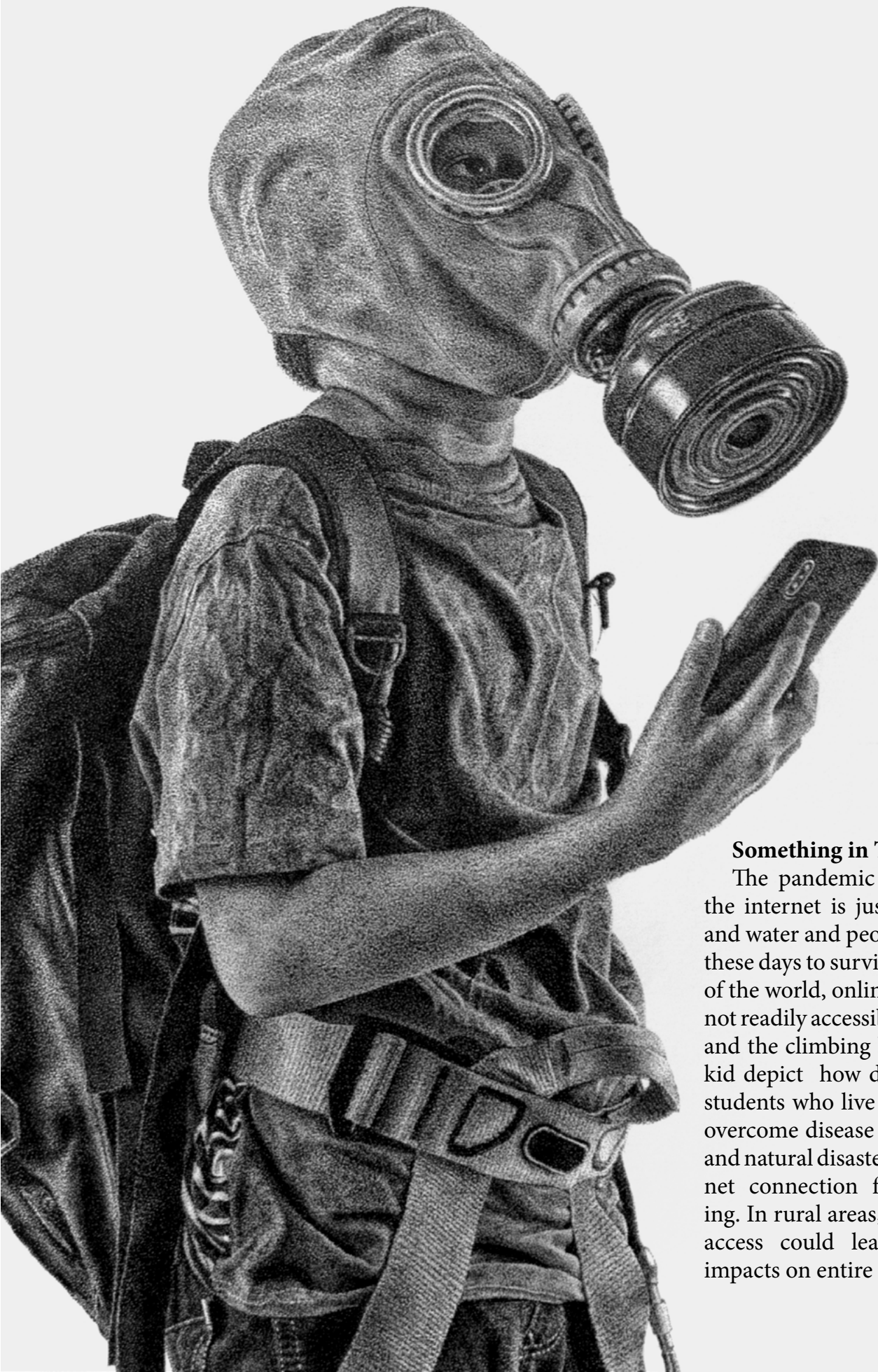
Behind the benefits of AI, there are many real threats that are harmful to human life like privacy violation, deepfake, voice cloning and automatic weapons. All of these fears boil down to the fact that we just don't know where AI is going and how soon it will take us. Technology makes surprising and unusual leaps and bounds in ways we never think it will.

### **Wake Up**

“Dreams are only dreams until you wake up and make them real.”







### **Something in The Air**

The pandemic has shown that the internet is just like electricity and water and people really need it these days to survive. In some parts of the world, online learning is just not readily accessible. The gas mask and the climbing belt worn by the kid depict how difficult for some students who live in rural areas to overcome disease outbreaks, wars and natural disasters to get an internet connection for online learning. In rural areas, gaps in internet access could lead to economic impacts on entire communities.



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