WINTER 2024
VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1
PRINT ISSN 2780-7274
E-ISSN 2728-3089

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL

BAUDRILLARD NOW

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>
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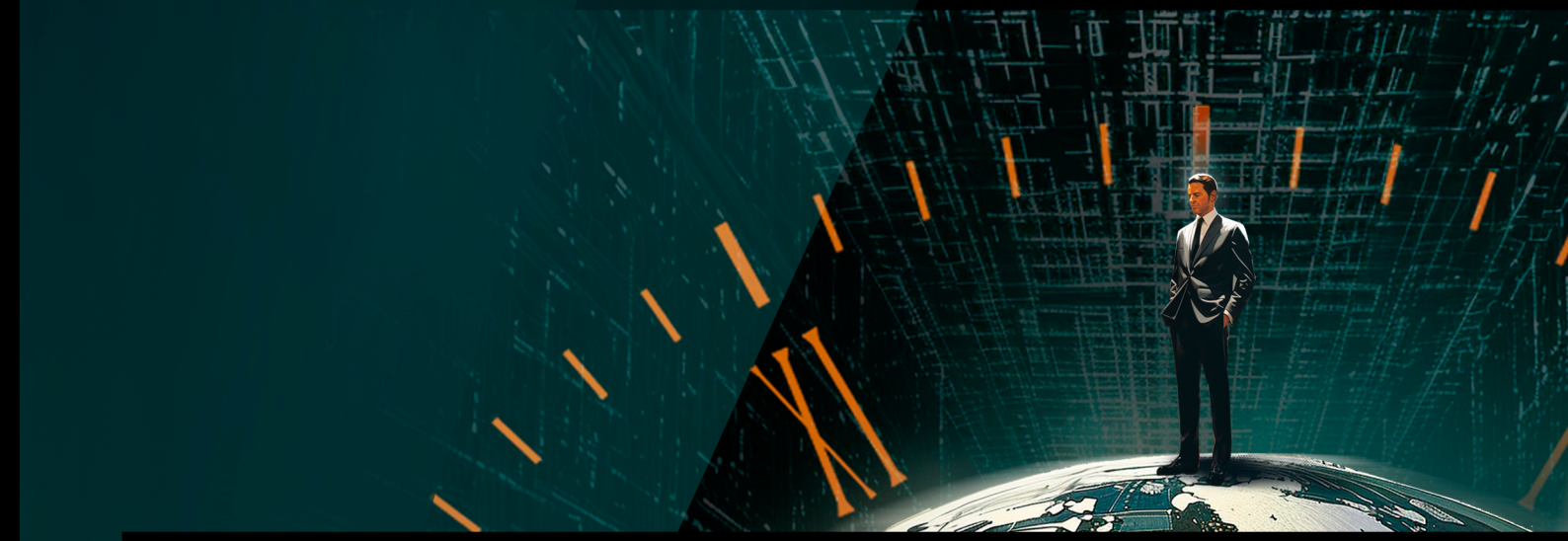

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> **Jean Baudrillard**

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Theory Fictions: Baudrillard in the Contemporary Moment

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In some of his later writings, Jean Baudrillard develops what he terms "theory fiction," or what he also calls "simulation theory" and "anticipatory theory." Such "theory" intends to simulate, grasp, and anticipate historical events, that he believes are continually outstripping all contemporary theory. The current situation, he claims, is more fantastic than the most fanciful science fiction, or theoretical projections of a futurist society. Thus, theory can only attempt to grasp the present on the run and try to anticipate the future. However, Baudrillard has had a mixed record as a social and political analyst and forecaster. As a political analyst, Baudrillard has often been off the mark. In an essay "Anorexic Ruins" published in 1989, he read the Berlin wall as a sign of a frozen history, of an anorexic history, in which nothing more can happen, marked by a "lack of events" and the end of history, taking the Berlin wall as a sign of a stasis between communism and capitalism. Shortly thereafter, rather significant events in 1989 destroyed the wall that Baudrillard took as permanent and opened up a new historical era.

The Cold War stalemate was long taken by Baudrillard as establishing a frozen history in which no significant change could take place. Already in his mid-1970s reflections, he presented the Vietnam war as an "alibi" to incorporate China, Russia,

and eventually Vietnam into a more rationalized and modernized world economic and political order (Baudrillard 1983: 66f), and in his book on the Gulf war he repeats this claim (1995: 85), thus failing to see the actual political stakes and reasons for the Vietnam war, as well as the significance of the struggles between capitalist and communist blocs.

For Baudrillard, the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York also symbolized the frozen history and stasis between the two systems of capitalism and communism. On the whole, Baudrillard sees history as the unfolding of expanding technological rationality turning into its opposite, as the system incorporates ever more elements, producing an improved technological order, which then becomes irrational through its excesses, its illusions, and its generating unforeseen consequences. This mode of highly abstract analysis, however, occludes more specific historical determinants that would analyze how technological rationality is constructed and functioned and how and why it misfires. It also covers over the disorder and turmoil created by such things as the crises and restructuring of global capitalism, the rise of fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, and global terrorism which were unleashed in part as a response to a globalized rationalization of the market system and to the breakup of the bipolar world order.

Baudrillard's reflections on the Gulf war take a similar position, seeing it as an attempt of the New World Order to further rationalize the world, arguing that the Gulf war really served to bring Islam into the New World Order (1995: 19). The first study titled "The Gulf war will not take place" was initially published a few days before the actual outbreak of military hostilities and repeats his earlier concept of "weak events" and frozen history. Baudrillard to the contrary, the Gulf war took place, but this did not deter him from publishing studies claiming during the episode that it was not "really taking place" and after the war asserting that it "did not take place." Although I have also argued that the "Gulf war" was a media spectacle and not a genuine war (see Kellner 1992), Baudrillard does not help us to understand much about the event and does not even help us to grasp the role of the media in contemporary political spectacles. Reducing complex events like wars to categories like simulation or hyperreality illuminates the virtual and high-tech dimension to media events, but erases all their concrete determinants.

And yet Baudrillardian postmodern categories help grasp some of the dynamics of the culture of living in media and computer worlds where people seem to enjoy immersing themselves in simulated events (witness the fascination of the Gulf war in 1991, the O.J. Simpson trials during 1994-6, the Clinton sex scandals, and various other media spectacles throughout the 1990s, the September 11 terror attacks in the early days of the third millennium), and the farcial presidential administration and failed presidential reruns of Donald Trump.

In *The End of the Illusion* (1994), Baudrillard attacks head-on what he sees as current illusions of history, politics, and metaphysics, and gamely tries to explain away his own political misprognoses that contemporary history appeared in a frozen, glacial state, stalemated between East and West, that the system of deterrence had congealed, making sure that nothing dramatic could henceforth happen, that the Gulf war couldn't take place, and that the end of history had occurred. Baudrillard unleashes his full bag of rhetorical tricks and philosophical analysis to attempt to maintain these hypotheses in the face of the dramatic events of 1989-1991, which he claims are in fact "weak events," that events are still on strike, that history has indeed disappeared. He continues to argue that modernity as a historical epoch is over, with its political conflicts and upheavals, its innovations and revolutions, its autonomous and creative subject, and its myths of progress, democracy, Enlightenment, and the like. These myths, these strong ideas, are exhausted, he claims, and henceforth a

postmodern era of banal eclecticism, inertial implosion, and eternal recycling of the same become defining features.

For Baudrillard by the end of the 1990s with the collapse of communism, the era of the strong ideas, of a conflicted world of revolution and universal emancipation, is over. Communism, in Baudrillard's reading, collapsed of its own inertia, it self-destructed from within, it imploded, rather than perishing in ideological battle or military warfare. With the absorption of its dissidents into power, there is no longer a clash of strong ideas, of opposition and resistance, of critical transcendence. With the embedding of the former communist regimes into the system of the capitalist world market and liberal democracy, the West no longer has an Other to battle against, there is no longer any creative or ideological tension, no longer any global alternative to the Western world.

Indeed, as Vladimir Putin has been attempting to resurrect the Old Soviet Union with his invasions of Crimea and Ukraine, and as a war rages between Israel and Palestine, with further wars in the Middle East threatening to explode, it is not clear whether new political configurations will emerge or not. History, as always, is unpredictable, and new phenomena can always appear that might bring about a new world order – or disorder and chaos.

Baudrillard celebrated the coming of the new millennium with a collection of essays on cloning, the end of history, and the disappearance of the real *The Vital Illusion* (2000). For Baudrillard (2000), cloning is connected to the fantasy of immortality, of defeating the life-cycle. Thus, its no surprise that cryogenics -– the freezing of dead human beings in the hope they might be regenerated in the future through medical advances -- is a booming global industry. Likewise, in a digital era, Baudrillard claims that history has come to an end and reality has been killed by virtualization, as the human species prepares itself for a virtual existence.

In *The Vital Illusion* Baudrillard reversed his complaint that the contemporary era was one of weak events, that no major historical occurrences had happened, and that therefore life and thought were becoming increasingly boring. Indeed, shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, Baudrillard wrote a paper "L'esprit du terrorisme" published November 2, 2001, in *Le Monde.* He argued that the assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon constituted a "strong event," that the attacks were "the ultimate event, the mother of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place." The "event strike," Baudrillard declared, was over and since this time he has continued to focus intensely on the dynamics and happenings of contemporary history.

Baudrillardian postmodern categories help grasp some of the dynamics of the culture of living in media and computer worlds where people seem to enjoy immersing themselves in simulated events

Hence, Baudrillard's thought has been reignited by 9/11 and the subsequent Terror War which demonstrate the continuing relevance of some of his key categories and that have produced some of his most provocative recent work. In the 9/11 attacks and subsequent Terror War, difference and conflict have erupted upon the global stage and heterogeneous forces that global capitalism appears unable to absorb and assimilate have emerged that have produced what appears to be an era of intense conflict. Ideological apologists of globalization such as Thomas Friedman have been forced to acknowledge that globalization has its dark sides and produces conflict as well as networking,

interrelations, and progress. It remains to be seen, of course, how the current Terror War and intensified global conflicts will be resolved.

In any case, Baudrillard had long written on terrorism and was focusing reflection on globalization when the 9/11 attacks occurred. He quickly responded with the *Le Monde* article, soon after translated and expanded into one of the more challenging and controversial books on the terror spectacle, *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Requiem for the Twin Towers* (2002a). For Baudrillard, the 9/11 attacks represent a new kind of terrorism, exhibiting a "form of action which plays the game, and lays hold of the rules of the game, solely with the aim of disrupting it. ...they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power". That is, the terrorists in Baudrillard's reading used airplanes, computer networks, and the media associated with Western societies to produce a spectacle of terror. The attacks evoked a global specter of terror that the very system of globalization and Western capitalism and culture were under assault by "the spirit of terrorism" and potential terrorist attacks anytime and anywhere.

For Baudrillard, "the speeches and commentaries made since September 11 betray a gigantic post-traumatic abreaction both to the event itself and to the fascination that it exerts. The moral condemnation and the sacred union against terrorism are directly proportional to the prodigious jubilation felt at having seen this global superpower destroyed."

Baudrillard perceived that the terrorists hope that the system will overreact in response to the multiple challenges of terrorism: "It is the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess".

The Bush administration (2000-2008) responded with an excess of unilateral militarism in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has made a "war against terror" the fundament of its domestic and foreign policy, and infamously declared that "you are with us or against us," in effect saying that anyone who did not support Bush's "war on terror" was aiding and abetting "the enemy" and terrorism itself. For many of us, the Bush administration did what Baudrillard said the terrorists would want them to do, in terms of overreaction to the 9/11 attacks that would melt the initial sympathy for the US and that would win recruits for the terrorists reacting against the excess violence and aggression of the US response. Immediately after 9/11, the French paper Le Monde headlined a commentary "Nous sommes tous les Americains," but after the rancorous debate over Bush's Iraq intervention, the US found itself alienated from longtime allies, facing a proliferation of new enemies, and engaged in what the Bush administration described as a new era of "war on terror," with no end in sight.

In Baudrillard's view, the 9/11 attacks represented "the clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself" and unfolded a "fourth world war": "The first put an end to European supremacy and to the era of colonialism; the second put an end to Nazism; and the third to Communism. Each one brought us progressively closer to the single world order of today, which is now nearing its end, everywhere opposed, everywhere grappling with hostile forces. This is a war of fractal complexity, waged worldwide against rebellious singularities that, in the manner of antibodies, mount a resistance in every cell."

Upon the initial publication of his response in French newspapers and its immediate translation into English and other languages, Baudrillard himself was accused of justifying terrorism when he stated in "The Spirit of terrorism": "Because it was this insufferable superpower [i.e. the US] that gave rise both to the violence now spreading throughout the world and to the terrorist imagination that (without our knowing it) dwells within us all. That the entire world without exception had dreamed of this event, that nobody could help but dream of the destruction of so powerful a Hegemon —-this fact is unacceptable to the moral conscience of the West. And yet it's a fact nevertheless, a fact that resists the emotional violence of all the rhetoric conspiring to cover it up. In the end, it was they who did it, but we who wished it (Baudrillard 2002a)."

Baudrillard defended himself from accusations that such reflections constituted a virulent anti-Americanism or legitimation of terrorism, claiming: "I do not praise murderous attacks -- that would be idiotic. Terrorism is not a contemporary form of revolution against oppression and capitalism. No ideology, no struggle for an objective, not even Islamic fundamentalism, can explain it. ...I have glorified nothing, accused nobody, justified nothing. One should not confuse the messenger with his message. I have endeavored to analyze the process through which the unbounded expansion of globalization creates the conditions for its own destruction" (Baudrillard 2002a)

Indeed, Baudrillard has also produced some provocative reflections on globalization. In "The Violence of the Global," he distinguishes between the global and the universal, linking globalization with technology, the market, tourism, and information contrasted to identification of the universal with "human rights, liberty, culture, and democracy." While "globalization appears to be irreversible [...] universalization is likely to be on its way out." Elsewhere, Baudrillard writes: "...the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already fading from the minds and mores, and liberal globalization is coming about in precisely the opposite form -- a police-state globalization, a total control, a terror based on "'law-and-order' measures. Deregulation ends up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions, akin to those of a fundamentalist society (Baudrillard 2002b).

Most theorists, including myself, see globalization as a matrix of market economy, democracy, technology, migration and tourism, and the worldwide circulation of ideas and culture. Baudrillard, curiously, takes the position of those in the anti-globalization movement who condemn globalization as the opposite of democracy and human rights. For Baudrillard, globalization is fundamentally a process of homogenization and standardization that crushes "the singular" and heterogeneity. This position, however, fails to note the contradictions that globalization simultaneously produces homogenization and hybridization and difference, and that the anti-corporate globalization movement is fighting for social justice, democratization, and increased rights, factors that Baudrillard links with a dying universalization. In fact, the struggle for rights and justice is an important part of globalization and Baudrillard's presenting of human rights, democratization, and justice as part of an obsolete universalization being erased by globalization is theoretically and politically problematical.

Before 9/11, in Baudrillard's musings of the past two decades, the global postmodern condition has been one of absorbing otherness, of erasing difference, of assimilating and imploding all oppositional or negative forces into a viral positivity and virtuality. That is, Baudrillard saw globalization and technological development producing standardization and virtualization that was erasing individuality, social struggle, critique and reality itself as more and more people became absorbed in the hyper and virtual realities of media and cyberspace and virtue culture. In his view, the positive and the virtual radiate throughout every interstice of society and culture, irradiating into nullity any negativity, opposition, or difference. It is also an era in which reality itself has disappeared, constituting the "perfect crime" which is the subject of a book of that title (1996) and elaborated in *The Vital Illusion* (2000).

Baudrillard presents himself here as a detective searching for the perpetrator of the "perfect crime," the murder of reality, "the most important event of modern history." His recurrent theme in his later writing is the destruction and disappearance of the real in the realm of information and simulacra, and the subsequent reign of illusion and appearance. In a Nietzschean mode, he suggests that henceforth truth and reality are illusions, that illusions reign, and that therefore we should respect illusion and appearance and give up the illusory quest for truth and reality. Certainly, the reign of Donald Trump and a slew of political liars throughout the world has confirmed Baudrillard's warning that truth and reality are disappearing in a new order of simulation and hyperreality, although the Revenge of the Real often force societies to Get Real! and Wake Up! Whether the rest of the 21st century is one of increasing Illusion, Error, and Catastrophe, or the human species wakes up and addresses the dangers of social, economic, political, and ecological crisis is a challenges facing the human species and which will determine our fate.

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The Fragmented Era is a Dead End for Humanity

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2

Baudrillard's "Fragments" vividly portrays the contemporary world as fragmented, encapsulating a distinctive era. This subject marks a conclusive juncture in the fundamentals of philosophy, sociology, and radical anthropology of Baudrillard. In my book with Lucien Oulahbib "Maestro: Last Prophet of Europe," I explore the core tenets of Baudrillard's philosophy, illustrating them with practical examples. I contend that the philosophy is particularly relevant for individuals striving to take responsibility for their lives in both the present and the future. Baudrillard's philosophy, akin to a distinctive "programming environment," serves as a unique language for electronic programming, allowing for versatile applications in programming various aspects of life.

What is unique in Baudrillard's philosophy compared to other exceptional ones in the world? Baudrillard is sober in his statements about what is happening now and what will happen. He is a prophet, unlike others. All other philosophers could be called "reasoners" because they only reason, but Baudrillard prognoses. His vision is exceptionally sharp and critical, which can be challenging for many to grasp. The reason for this is that people do not know what they want.

When posed with questions about their future, a majority of individuals may appear bewildered, as they often lack a clear understanding of what aspects they wish to explore or whether they even desire any knowledge about their future at all. Baudrillard does not focus on a particular personality's future, but he focuses on the common lot of "humanity as kin." Baudrillard deduced that virtualization is an experiment of humankind on humankind, which will end with its disintegration:

> *"... In these 'theory-fictions', the process of 'simulation' has mutated into an even more extreme process of virtualization (and indeterminacy), for which Baudrillard advances - at first playfully, but then with increasing force - the hypothesis that, because we are unable to bear the world of symbolic exchange (which is now transmuted into the more philosophical terminology of 'illusion'), our collective project of creating a virtual reality (in all its various forms, including such technical ventures as cloning) is to be understood as a suicidal project of termination of the human species."*[1]

Baudrillard acknowledged this reality, but at the same time, he hinted in every way so that people should stop conducting these experiments. Life should not be virtualized; otherwise, it leads to an extreme environment for people's existence. After all, when a person becomes, conditionally, "blind," "deaf," and "dumb," he does not understand what is happening to him and what might happen at any given moment. In such a case, is it progress!? Virtualization is an experiment but is not progress by any means.

> *"There is a 'softer' version of this thought, in which the whole of human life is presented as having become experimental, 'a limitless experimentation on human beings themselves."*

And when humanity experiments on itself, whether it will survive or not—it is an unfortunate experiment. That's why Baudrillard raises the question, and it is a Baudrillardian "transparency of evil." Basically, the scene itself (what is done on stage) does not correspond to what is done behind the scenes. When some "know what they are doing" but do not want others to "know" what they are doing...

> *"This is the state of simulation, a state in which we are obliged to replay all scenarios precisely because they have all taken place already, whether actually or potentially. The state of utopia realized, of all utopias realized, wherein paradoxically we must continue to live as though they had not been. But since they have, and since we can no longer, therefore, nourish the hope of realizing them, we can only `hyper-realize' them through interminable simulation. We live amid the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams which are now behind us, yet which we must continue to reproduce in a sort of inescapable indifference."*[2]

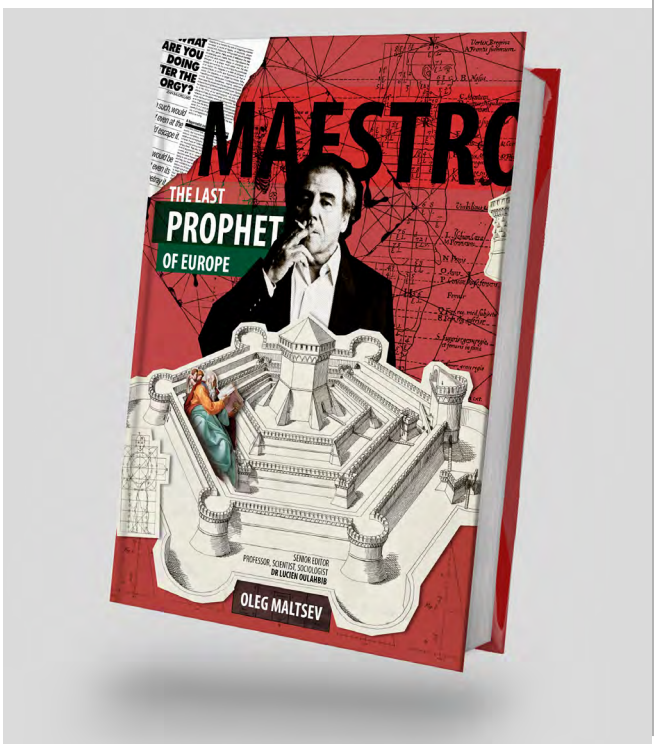
Hence, and from, the "transparency of evil" follows such a phenomenon as a "committed crime" which has no punishment. The existence of punishment is contingent upon the provisions outlined in specific sections of the criminal code or other applicable codes (e.g. administrative ones). And if this "act" does not

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

2. Baudrillard, J., & Benedict, J. (2009). *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena (Radical Thinkers)*. Verso.

fall under any article of the criminal code? If someone were to splash water from a glass onto somebody's face within the confines of their own home, it wouldn't be classified as hooliganism. However, if the same act were to occur in a public place, it would be considered petty hooliganism. The first could be perceived as an insult against the individual when examined through the lens of ethics and morality. This conditional example serves to illustrate that an individual might refrain from such an act in a public place, where the risk of punishment is higher. It highlights a scenario where a potential crime is committed in a manner that minimizes accountability, offering a basic illustration of a "committed crime." The essence is important: a person does everything so that it is impossible to punish him, but the action itself is criminal. No matter how perfect a criminal code is, people will find a way to commit a perfect crime.

> *"Are there extenuating circumstances to this crime? Certainly not, since these always have to be sought among the motives or the perpetrators. But the crime has no motivation and no perpetrator, and therefore remains perfectly inexplicable. This is its true perfection. Though admittedly, from the point of view of the concept, this is more of an aggravating circumstance. Though the consequences of the crime are never-ending, there is neither murderer nor victim. If there were either, the secret of the crime would be unmasked someday, and the inquiry concluded. The secret, in the end, is that the two are merged: 'In the last analysis, the victim and the persecutor are one. We can only grasp the unity of the human race if we can grasp, in all its horror, the truth of this ultimate equivalence' (Eric Cans)."*[3]



It is indeed possible to find a way for dealing with "criminals who are attempting to commit perfect crimes." We should remember Baudrillard's approach, though: a head-on collision with them does no good, but making them react in a way that causes them to "destroy" themselves will work (more details in Chapter 13 of *Maestro. The Last Prophet of Europe*). This necessitates a tactical approach guided by a distinct logic, given that it is uncommon for ordinary individuals to handle such types of criminals.

The continued existence of numerous criminal structures suggests that they have successfully executed "perfect crimes" without facing consequences. Killing a person is not a "perfect crime" because murder falls under the criminal code's disposition. But a "perfect crime" does not. The whole point is that the person ends up sitting in a restaurant, drinking coffee and smirking, because nothing can be done legally against him. Baudrillard excludes the necessity to wait for evidence because no matter how much evidence is presented, there is still

3. Baudrillard, J., & Turner, C. (2008). *The Perfect Crime (Radical Thinkers)*. Verso.

nothing you can do because the crime is "perfect"...

His book *The Perfect Crime* (2008) begins with the introduction of the "Murder of Reality":

> *`So, my friend, after the example of the Phoenicians, you charted your course by the stars?'*
>
> *`No,' said Menippus, `it was among the stars themselves I journeyed.' Given the mass of evidence, there is no plausible hypothesis but reality. Given the mass of evidence to the contrary, there is no solution but illusion.*
>
> *"This is the story of a crime - of the murder of reality. And the extermination of an illusion - the vital illusion, the radical illusion of the world. The real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion that disappears into integral reality.*
>
> *If the crime were perfect, this book would have to be perfect too, since it claims to be the reconstruction of the crime. Alas, the crime is never perfect. Moreover, in this grim record of the disappearance of the real, it has not been possible to pin down either the motives of the perpetrators, and the corpse of the real itself has never been found. And the idea that underlies this book has never been pinned down either. That idea was the murder weapon.*
>
> *Though the crime is never perfect, perfection, true to its name, is always criminal. In the perfect crime it is the perfection itself winch is the crime, just as, in the transparence of evil, it is the transparence itself that is the evil. But perfection is always punished: the punishment for perfection is reproduction."*[4]

Because a person kills the reality of people, he bears no responsibility. Those who fool people's heads, exterminate their reality—and they are not accountable neither before the law nor before people, deduces Baudrillard. The media serves as one of the levers and tools for killing reality. During the COVID-19 period in Germany, there was a point when it was argued that there was no longer an epidemic in the country. But the prior stringent measures imposed on everyone, including major entities like Lufthansa, resulted in losses exceeding 1.2 billion euros, pushing the airline and numerous other large German enterprises to the brink of bankruptcy. The private sector contended that the government should compensate them for their losses, asserting that the measures taken during the pandemic went against the constitution and violated human freedoms. Numerous instances exist in our world where different states employ various measures, often justified by citing a "threat to security". Viewed through Baudrillard's perspective, the focal points revolve around the concept of a "fascinating catastrophe" and the inherent "reversibility" within any system.

Time

What is the source of the "beautiful" life observed in the modern world today? **Fragmentary nature or geometric form of time**, or fractal ("fractal era" according to Baudrillard) comes from hyperreality, that is, from extreme environments and situations. Thus, an extreme environment is the environment of fragments.

To comprehend the concept of a "fragment," it is helpful to view it as a phenomenon. In more understandable terms, a fragment can be prototypologized as a situation. A life consisting only of situations is called fragmentation. However, the ensuing question is: What is problematic about it?

4. Ibid

The first characteristic of the fragment is its unexpectedness and extremity. The situation arises abruptly for an individual. Consider being unexpectedly placed in the pilot's seat of an airplane at an altitude of 10,000 meters, having never received education on aircraft operation. This serves as a vivid illustration of a complete surprise, impacting not only the person involved but also everyone aboard.

The second characteristic is the fatality of the fragment. There is no way we can refuse the situation (fragment). Unfortunately, Baudrillard Baudrillard examines this matter exclusively from the standpoint of the fragment itself. He does not situate an individual within it and simply explains what awaits the person in this fragment during such a fragmented era.

The third characteristic of the fragment is its spontaneity (the unwarrantedness of its occurrence). The fragment is not only unexpected but also spontaneous, embodying chaos and contingency This spontaneity adds to the complexity, as the cause lacks rationale, making it impossible to pinpoint the origin of these situations. Consequently, determining the appropriate course of action becomes unclear. In theory, addressing the cause to prevent recurrence would be ideal, but establishing the root of the problem is exceedingly challenging.

The fourth characteristic of the fragment is its finitude. Each fragment has a distinct beginning and end. Fragments lack continuity, leading to numerous psychological traumas. The expressions such "you can't go back/you can't reverse time" encapsulate this idea. These "events" accumulate in life in substantial quantities, marked by irreversibility. The inability to repeat or change these moments creates a sense of loss, as they are gone beyond retrieval. In the context of modern life, dominated by these fragments in a fragmented era, individuals find themselves in a perpetual state of disquiet, marked by a sense of inevitable inferiority and fatalism. Baudrillard terms this fragment as a facet of fate.

Baudrillard's final observation regarding the fragment is its variability. Numerous versions of fragments exist, and even situations within the same category of events differ from one another. Each situation is non-replicable. Baudrillard underscores that experience, as an anthropological category, loses its relevance and ceases to exist. Essentially, individuals can no longer depend on past experiences. Baudrillard's depiction of fragments implies the end of the anthropological category of human experience.

> *The state of confusion generated is very interesting to observe: as the whirlwind approaches, the century is going into convulsions. We have, in a way, gone beyond the end. People want to hold on to their goals [leur finalité], but they're already beyond them. They're living wholly at odds with themselves. They're living in a mode that's no longer the traditional, representative, social, electoral mode. The sham nature of elections has reached an extraordinary pitch - and not just in the United States! And I don't know what could take the place of the representative system. Maybe nothing! It's the consecration of emptiness, the emptiness show!*

In the past, human prototypes were "rotating", but today, the rotation is happening at the level of system prototypes. Humans have essentially vanished, reduced to mere outcomes of prototypological system rotations. In essence, nothing is contingent on an individual. Humanity has come to an era

where a human does not play a role that he normally would have played. This establishes specific conditions, not for a regular person, but for a superhuman. Survival in this world demands a level beyond what an ordinary individual can master; it is no longer a habitat where an average person can thrive.

This is why in Baudrillard's view, the modern world of virtualization is an experiment on oneself that will lead to the disappearance of the human race. Those "screws" that were important earlier do not work any longer, because nothing is repeated. There are no repetitions, but spontaneity and fatality only. In fact, unbearable living conditions, not in the sense of households, but in self-sufficiency.

Experience allows a person to live and provide for himself. But in a fragmented era, there is no orientation system; it creates a deadlock even when a person thinks about trivial things like getting clothing and some food. In essence, individual finds himself alone; there is no one he can turn to. Therefore, Baudrillard writes that for these people, there is no God any more, he had disappeared a long time ago:

> *The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point. The first reflects a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance.*[5]

5. Baudrillard, J., & Glaser, S. F. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)* (33601st ed.). University of Michigan Press.

Humanity will face dire consequences if it persists in its current behavior and lifestyle. When discussing a super personality, a superhuman, there is a notable absence of answers regarding how to attain such a state. There is recognized prerequisite and demand for this, but no one gives a methodology. There is no methodology for forming (training) such a person and that's the whole point. A person cannot survive in these conditions without becoming a superhuman. At the same time, Baudrillard himself does not write anywhere that there is no methodology. He simply displays in his writings that there is a tendentious demand for this. Baudrillard indeed left a vast field of research for us. He started this way, showed the direction for conducting further studies and left. The choice is now ours – whether to pursue further exploration in this direction or to accept Jean Baudrillard's prognosis and await complete absorption by the fragmentary era.

In the present day, the social realm, particularly in the field of sociology, defies accurate description, echoing the sentiments articulated by Baudrillard.

> *"…in which case everything that has been contrived and staged in this "comedy of errors" of the social has never had any deep significance. Ultimately, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc."*[6]

These categories could have been used to describe the social, but as Baudrillard noted in his words, there is no social anymore. Correspondingly, there is no subject of sociological research, it has disappeared, and that's the problem. Therefore, this world can be described

6. Baudrillard, J. (1983). *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series)*. Semiotext(e).

only by other categories. In his view, what sociologists are studying today has disappeared too. They are working with virtual reality. Today, it is impossible to describe the social environment with mathematical functions, and science and sociological tools are incompatible.

Radical anthropology contradicts modern anthropology. Baudrillard highlights that the evolution of humanity has not kept pace; it neither adheres to nor will conform to anthropological laws. This is attributed to the significant transformations in the environment of human habitation, which have occurred both before and after the writings of anthropologists.

> *So, unable to locate an end, we strive desperately to pin down a beginning. Our current compulsion to seek out origins is testament to this: in the to this: in the anthropological and palaeontological fields we see limits being pushed back in time, into a past that is also interminable. My hypothesis is that we have already passed the point of irreversibility; that we are already in an exponential, unlimited form in which everything develops The End in the void, to infinity, without any possibility of reapprehending it in a human dimension; in which we are losing the memory of the past, the projection of the future and the possibility of integrating that future into a present action. We might be said already to be in an abstract, disembodied state where things continue by mere inertia and become simulacra of themselves, without our being able to put an end to them.*[7]

At the time they authored their works, they were concerned about the environment they lived in. But eras have changed several times, there was an economic one, informational era, and we are approaching a fragmented era. We are already witnessing humanity's struggle to effectively address global threats.

Jean Baudrillard is a distinguished philosopher, a sophisticated sociologist, and arguably the world's foremost anthropologist. His unique perspective integrates multiple scientific aspects and theories, leading to the singular, necessary, and precise conclusions about our current situation. His approach teaches a person to think in terms of other categories. Baudrillard creates that superhuman but on the intellectual level. In his view, if we do not stop this experiment, humanity is doomed. How do we do that? Baudrillard does not answer. He does not deny the experience, but he wrote that when the fractal era comes, it will be too late to change something. Baudrillard's fatalistic perspective centers on the belief that people will be unwilling to embrace change. There's no way out. As said by my mentor Viktor Pavlovich Svetlov, and implied by Jean Baudrillard, it is possible to organize a society with a worthy social environment only for a limited number of people.

> *"There is a positive fascination today with the virtual and all its technologies. If it genuinely is a mode of disappearance, this would be an - obscure but deliberate - choice on the part of the species itself: decision to clone itself, lock, stock and barrel, in another universe; to disappear as the human race, properly speaking, in order to perpetuate itself in an artificial species that would have much more efficient, much more operational attributes."*[8]

7. Baudrillard, J., & Agar, E. (2007b). *Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990–1995 (Radical Thinkers)*. Verso.

8. Baudrillard, J. (2011). *Passwords (Radical Thinkers)* (Second Edition). Verso.

Baudrillard discusses the advent of a new society and a new world. The essence of this notion, I believe, lies in the uncertainty surrounding the future appearance of this new society in the coming decades. This transformative process is anticipated to unfold over the next decade, possibly leading to the formation of a world in a somewhat altered state, fundamentally distinct from the present.

It could be that the judicial system, law enforcement agencies, and state security apparatus might cease to exist. From a legal standpoint, everyone could be deemed a criminal. Conversely, under a new set of laws drafted for the territory, these same individuals might be labeled as "noble and honest." Given the current conditions, akin to the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic and wars, a significant portion of the population may find themselves without a clear future. The ongoing and evolving nature of challenges suggests a perpetual and varied continuation of such disruptions.

Each individual bears responsibility for their own life. Baudrillard saw it as his duty to articulate the reality of the current situation, providing insights into what will unfold and how. At the same time, he asserted that a genuine society is distinguished by the understanding that choices are a private matter for each person.

> *"All the grand narratives of our individual consciousness - of freedom, will, identity and responsibility - merely add a useless, even contradictory, over-determination to our actions as they 'occur' To the effect that we are the cause of them, that they are the doing of our will, that our decisions are the product of our free will, etc. But our actions do not need this: we can decide and act without there being any need to involve the will and the idea of the will. There is no need to involve the idea of free will to make choices in one's life."*[9]

Therefore, I think Baudrillard did not state in his writings *what* we should choose. He didn't tell people what they should do because he thought that a normal society stands on three pillars. And choice is one of them. Having read Baudrillard's writings very closely, I wrote down five rules of the "silent majority," and one of them can be expressed as follows: "If you want to change something, it should only benefit us; otherwise, refrain from making any changes." The silent majority operates within these parameters, thinking in a manner that is not rational but rather wholly irrational. Sociologists often attribute irrationality as the main characteristic of the silent majority, where decisions may seem nonsensical, yet they inexplicably satisfy this silent majority.

The fragmented era is a dead end for humanity. And either humanity will develop for the better with the characteristics of genuinely capable personalities or it will be retransformed leading to a state of complete primitivism.

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

ONE ALWAYS FORGETS
THAT WHEN ONE SPEAKS
OF THE DANGER OF THE MEDIA
THE IMAGE CONSUMES THE EVENT.
THAT IS, IT ABSORBS THE LATTER AND
GIVES IT BACK AS CONSUMER GOODS.

Jean Baudrillard

BAUDRILLARD
NOW

Implosion Today

Dr. Gary Genosko
Author, Professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology

3

But nothing will halt the implosive process, and the only remaining alternative is between a violent and catastrophic implosion, and a smooth implosion, an implosion in slow motion.

Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, p. 61.

Implosion was coined by Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s to describe a technological tendency of information flow, accelerated communication, and networked integration. Implosion is contrasted with explosion, an earlier condition of print culture. The demands of constant intimacy and instantaneity are exacerbated under the influence of electric infrastructure and then emergent electronic media. Similar ideas of influential precursor economic historian Harold Innis are considered, along with Paul Virilio's interpretation of the concept as inertial. Finally, Virilio provides a bridge between the medium theorists (Innis and McLuhan) and Baudrillard; it is in the latter's sense of implosion as a catastrophe of meaning that the concept becomes for us today a process of pure fascination.

What is implosion?

Implosion is a technological tendency of information flow supported by increases in the speed of communication and degree of a historical period's electric and later electronic networked integration. Articulated by McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1964), it describes a centripetal movement inward in opposition to an explosive or centrifugal explosion outward. The purpose of this dichotomy is to overcome the following outdated distinction: the uneven geographic distinction between center and margin. McLuhan believed that in the electric age no place is marginal any longer. McLuhan's imploded world was a global village that displayed features of organic wholeness in a "total field of inclusive awareness" (1964: 104).

Margins are erased as centers proliferate under implosive conditions. Nowhere is marginal under highly networked maximal speeds of information circulation. Whether centers are everywhere also means that margins are nowhere and are no longer accounted for as political realities in terms of the power of colonialism, control of knowledge's flows, and even ownership of digital infrastructure by telephone companies and governments.

Electric implosion displaces mechanical explosion. McLuhan opposed visual and acoustic spaces. Visual space is a perspectival, sight-centered, fragmenting, homogenizing and bounded, the kind of perceptual universe based on mechanical and linear print. Whereas acoustic space is dynamically multi-sensorial, highly involving, post-literate, simultaneous, discontinuous, and intuitive. It is reawakened by electric technologies under implosive conditions.

Innis distinguished between media biases through either space-binding properties, the lightness and portability of paper, or time-binding properties, such as stone's durability and links to the sacred and tradition. The space-territory/time-tradition distinction had specific effects in different eras on social organization, the former invalidating the latter by delegitimizing tradition for the sake of technocentric values of immediacy and speed.

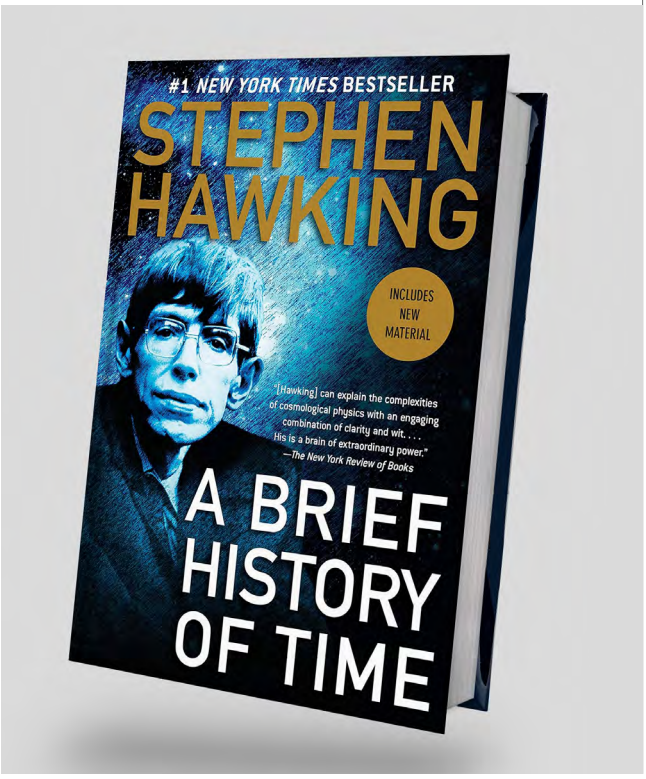
Media that emphasize space were for Innis explosive insofar as they encouraged the expansion of administration and trade, whereas time-based media were heavy, situated in a relatively inflexible and static space, embedded in specific architectures and in collective symbolic practices. In 1951, Innis wrote a "Plea for Time" against his culture's space-media bias so as to regain a balance that left unchecked sowed the seeds of instability and strife. McLuhan also sought to regain the values of time-based media, in presenting a newly minted version of what 'second' oral societies would look like in the electric age: a deeply participatory and interactive, contracted global village. McLuhan's Catholic humanist plea went beyond secular time into the realm of Pentecostal oneness and the sempiternal glance of angels as its transcendent reference point for instantaneous communication.

Implosion implies an intensive kind of awareness that arises from the friction created by pulling out distances and delays between components. Speed forces a reversal of explosion into implosion, and in this contraction the older form of expansionism is not erased, but persists as an irritant, an obsolesced form that nostalgists will find interesting (i.e., acceleration at the speeds of roads and railways). Both space and time are by-passed; McLuhan considered them to be "interfused.". In this condition, there

are no buffers and thus human association and its machine accompaniments, are disrupted in being put under the pressure of a constant, forced communication. Inclusivity creates problems.

The implications of implosion for chronopolitics have been analyzed by Paul Virilio in *Speed and Politics* (1986). An intensive temporality arises from the contractions of transportation, inertial vehicularity, the ascendancy of the arrival over the departure, and the juxtaposition of every place. Implosion threatens time for reflection, and thus the last war will be waged over automated decision-making with cataclysmic instantaneous results.

Unlike McLuhan, for Virilio, war, not love, is the result of an imploded world. Interfusion and inter-association do not improve the situation as McLuhan believed. For Baudrillard, meaning implodes the distinctions between sender and receiver and media and the real, leaving only fascination with its collapse. Implosion in this sense is closer to it physical manifestation in the demolition of buildings. When this concept is applied to the inner collapse, as in the implosion of meaning in the masses, meaning is engulfed and annihilated. In this sense implosion is an abyss, it displays black hole effects like gravitational attraction that ensures that light cannot manage to fully escape it, and hangs on the hole's boundary, as Stephen Hawking (1988: 100) put it in *A Brief History of Time*, "like the edge of a shadow – the shadow of impending doom." What is important for Baudrillard in this scenario is the neutralization of meaning, that is, of content, in favour of the medium which acts as "spectacle and fascination." (1983: 35) Fascination with the glaciation of meaning in the medium, Baudrillard thinks, is the destiny of implosion, and it may be seen today in the doom loops of ecosystem, economy, social media, collapse. Preference for the medium over the message allows fascination not only to function but to flourish like "allergies": the "implosion of the sign in fascination" (1983: 36) is intolerable for the hermeneut desperate for meaning, for the politician who wants to inspire the masses to act; for the sociologist who wants to protect the meaning of the social but also derive something from it.



Baudrillard thought of media in terms of the implosion of meaning and representation. He retains from McLuhan one important feature: that implosion as a dominant feature of our networked world follows from centuries of explosion, and is as a result always a "failure." Just as McLuhan looked to oral, pre-literate societies for a model of electric togetherness, Baudrillard, too, finds in "traditional" societies based around ritual processes a model for a non-catastrophic or what he calls "controlled implosion" (1983: 59). This idea exists because of the sustaining "ten-

sion" that fends off the appearance of a destructive explosive process. Similarly, in modern societies, survival hinges on the slow and steady explosive release of the energy (liberation, boom and bust cycles, acceleration); once this becomes uncontrollable, the knowledge of how to "curb and equilibrate" it becomes lost, it reverts to a catastrophic implosion (1983: 60). The introduction of a controlled implosion (and explosion) adds a nuance to these processes that are missing in McLuhan's account, and conceptually this approach echoes Félix Guattari's sense of experiments in the production of new kinds of subjectivities based on controlled chaoticisation (through the use of drugs, for instance) that danced round the rims of dangerous black holes, in the manner of light described by Hawking above. Is this a recipe for doom? How the question of control is answered is key, for it will either forestall or facilitate implosion. If, for Baudrillard implosion is inevitable, then the loss of control occurs no matter how carefully one attributes – and his target here is Guattari (and Deleuze) – to molecular elements of desire a capacity to ignite the release of energy in a massive explosion. But what kind of implosion? As a process it is inevitable, Baudrillard maintains (1983: 61), but it may be happening in "slow motion," even though transitions between explosion and implosion tend to be violent and catastrophic.

Today, this is our reality. We are in a *slow-motion implosion of climate change*, with some consequences occurring faster than others, and emission reductions, alternatives to fossil-fuels, various resilience initiatives, for instance, introducing an element of "control" in the worst-case scenarios. This forestalling of the inevitable is a process of *smoothing*, Baudrillard tells us, that makes, say, drought less deep; entails building climate smart infrastructure, averting crisis by various reductions, low-costs solutions, and a turn to renewables. From this perspective, every solution simply forestalls the inevitable, as the world lurches between the entrenched denialists and the instant gurus of sustainability.

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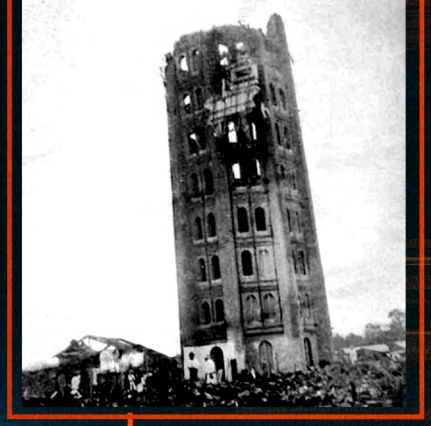

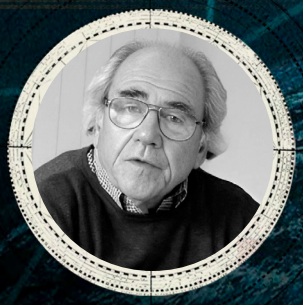

The Violence of the Global[1] by Jean Baudrillard

Translated by François Debrix

4

Today's terrorism is not the product of a traditional history of anarchism, nihilism, or fanaticism. It is instead the contemporary partner of globalization. To identify its main features, it is necessary to perform a brief genealogy of globalization, particularly of its relationship to the singular and the universal.

The analogy between the terms «global»[2] and «universal» is misleading. Universalization has to do with human rights, liberty, culture, and democracy. By contrast, globalization is about technology, the market, tourism, and information. Globalization appears to be irreversible whereas universalization is likely to be on its way out. At least, it appears to be retreating as a value system which developed in the context of Western modernity and was unmatched by any other culture. Any culture that becomes universal loses its singularity and dies. That's what happened to all

1. Initially published as «La Violence du Mondial,» in Jean Baudrillard, Power Inferno (Paris: Galilée, 2002), pp. 63-83.
2. «Mondial» is the French term for «global» in the original text.

those cultures we destroyed by forcefully assimilating them. But it is also true of our own culture, despite its claim of being universally valid. The only difference is that other cultures died because of their singularity, which is a beautiful death. We are dying because we are losing our own singularity and exterminating all our values. And this is a much more ugly death.

We believe that the ideal purpose of any value is to become universal. But we do not really assess the deadly danger that such a quest presents. Far from being an uplifting move, it is instead a downward trend toward a zero degree in all values. In the Enlightenment, universalization was viewed as unlimited growth and forward progress. Today, by contrast, universalization exists by default and is expressed as a forward escape, which aims to reach the most minimally common value. This is precisely the fate of human rights, democracy, and liberty today. Their expansion is in reality their weakest expression.

Universalization is vanishing because of globalization. The globalization of exchanges puts an end to the universalization of values. This marks the triumph of a uniform thought[3] over a universal one. What is globalized is first and foremost the market, the profusion of exchanges and of all sorts of products, the perpetual flow of money. Culturally, globalization gives way to a promiscuity of signs and values, to a form of pornography in fact. Indeed, the global spread of everything and nothing through networks is pornographic. No need for sexual obscenity anymore. All you have is a global interactive copulation. And, as a result of all this, there is no longer any difference between the global and the universal. The universal has become globalized, and human rights circulate exactly like any other global product (oil or capital for example).

The passage from the universal to the global has given rise to a constant homogenization, but also to an endless fragmentation. Dislocation, not localization, has replaced centralization. Excentricism, not decentralization, has taken over where concentration once stood. Similarly, discrimination and exclusion are not just accidental consequences of globalization, but rather globalization's own logical outcomes. In fact, the presence of globalization makes us wonder whether universalization has not already been destroyed by its own critical mass. It also makes us wonder whether universality and modernity ever existed outside of some official discourses or some popular moral sentiments. For us today, the mirror of our modern universalization has been broken. But this may actually be an opportunity. In the fragments of this broken mirror, all sorts of singularities reappear. Those singularities we thought were endangered are surviving, and those we thought were lost are revived.

As universal values lose their authority and legitimacy, things become more radical. When universal beliefs were introduced as the only possible culturally mediating values, it was fairly easy for such beliefs to incorporate singularities as modes of differentiation in a universal culture that claimed to champion difference. But they cannot do it anymore because the triumphant spread of globalization has eradicated all forms of differentiation and all the universal values that used to advocate difference. In so doing, globalization has given rise to a perfectly indifferent culture. From the moment when the

3. «Pensée unique» in French.

universal disappeared, an omnipotent global techno-structure has been left alone to dominate. But this techno-structure now has to confront new singularities that, without the presence of universalization to cradle them, are able to freely and savagely expand.

History gave universalization its chance. Today though, faced with a global order without any alternative on the one hand and with drifting insurrectionary singularities on the other, the concepts of liberty, democracy, and human rights look awful. They remain as the ghosts of universalization past. Universalization used to promote a culture characterized by the concepts of transcendence, subjectivity, conceptualization, reality, and representation. By contrast, today's virtual global culture has replaced universal concepts with screens, networks, immanence, numbers, and a space-time continuum without any depth.[4] In the universal, there was still room for a natural reference to the world, the body, or the past. There was a sort of dialectical tension or critical movement that found its materiality in historical and revolutionary violence. But the expulsion of this critical negativity opened the door to another form of violence, the violence of the global. This new violence is characterized by the supremacy of technical efficiency and positivity, total organization, integral circulation, and the equivalence of all exchanges. Additionally, the violence of the global puts an end to the social role of the intellectual (an idea tied to the Enlightenment and universalization), but also to the role of the activist whose fate used to be tied to the ideas of critical opposition and historical violence.

Is globalization fatal? Sometimes cultures other than ours were able to escape the fatality of the indifferent exchange. Today though, where is the critical point between the universal and the global? Have we reached the point of no return? What vertigo pushes the world to erase the Idea? And what is that other vertigo that, at the same time, seems to force people to unconditionally want to realize the Idea?

The universal was an Idea. But when it became realized in the global, it disappeared as an Idea, it committed suicide, and it vanished as an end in itself. Since humanity is now its own immanence, after taking over the place left by a dead God, the human has become the only mode of reference and it is sovereign. But this humanity no longer has any finality. Free from its former enemies, humanity now has to create enemies from within, which in fact produces a wide variety of inhuman metastases.

As universal values lose their authority and legitimacy, things become more radical.

This is precisely where the violence of the global comes from. It is the product of a system that tracks down any form of negativity and singularity, including of course death as the ultimate form of singularity. It is the violence of a society where conflict is forbidden, where death is not allowed. It is a violence that, in a sense, puts an end to violence itself, and strives to establish a world where anything related to the natural must disappear (whether it is in the

4. «Espace-temps sans dimension» in French.

body, sex, birth, or death). Better than a global violence, we should call it a global virulence. This form of violence is indeed viral. It moves by contagion, proceeds by chain reaction, and little by little it destroys our immune systems and our capacities to resist.

But the game is not over yet. Globalization has not completely won. Against such a dissolving and homogenizing power, heterogeneous forces -- not just different but clearly antagonistic ones -- are rising everywhere. Behind the increasingly strong reactions to globalization, and the social and political forms of resistance to the global, we find more than simply nostalgic expressions of negation. We find instead a crushing revisionism vis-à-vis modernity and progress, a rejection not only of the global techno-structure, but also of the mental system of globalization, which assumes a principle of equivalence between all cultures. This kind of reaction can take some violent, abnormal, and irrational aspects, at least they can be perceived as violent, abnormal, and irrational from the perspective of our traditional enlightened ways of thinking. This reaction can take collective ethnic, religious, and linguistic forms. But it can also take the form of individual emotional outbursts or neuroses even. In any case, it would be a mistake to berate those reactions as simply populist, archaic, or even terrorist. Everything that has the quality of event these days is engaged against the abstract universality of the global,[5] and this also includes Islam's own opposition to Western values (it is because Islam is the most forceful contestation of those values that it is today considered to be the West's number one enemy).

Who can defeat the global system? Certainly not the anti-globalization movement whose sole objective is to slow down global deregulation. This movement's political impact may well be important. But its symbolic impact is worthless. This movement's opposition is nothing more than an internal matter that the dominant system can easily keep under control. Positive alternatives cannot defeat the dominant system, but singularities that are neither positive nor negative can. Singularities are not alternatives. They represent a different symbolic order. They do not abide by value judgments or political realities. They can be the best or the worst. They cannot be «regularized» by means of a collective historical action.[6] They defeat any uniquely dominant thought. Yet they do not present themselves as a unique counter-thought. Simply, they create their own game and impose their own rules. Not all singularities are violent. Some linguistic, artistic, corporeal, or cultural singularities are quite subtle. But others, like terrorism, can be violent. The singularity of terrorism avenges the singularities of those cultures that paid the price of the imposition of a unique global power with their own extinction.

We are really not talking about a «clash of civilizations» here, but instead about an almost anthropological confrontation between an undifferentiated universal culture and everything else that, in whatever domain, retains a quality of irreducible alterity. From the perspective of global power (as fundamentalist in its beliefs as any religious orthodoxy), any mode of difference and singularity is heresy. Singular forces only have the choice of joining the global system (by will or by force) or perishing.

5. «Contre cette universalité abstraite» in French.
6. «On ne peut pas les fédérer dans une action historique d'ensemble» in French.

The mission of the West (or rather the former West, since it lost its own values a long time ago) is to use all available means to subjugate every culture to the brutal principle of cultural equivalence. Once a culture has lost its values, it can only seek revenge by attacking those of others. Beyond their political or economic objectives, wars such as the one in Afghanistan[7] aim at normalizing savagery and aligning all the territories. The goal is to get rid of any reactive zone, and to colonize and domesticate any wild and resisting territory both geographically and mentally.

The establishment of a global system is the result of an intense jealousy. It is the jealousy of an indifferent and low-definition culture against cultures with higher definition, of a disenchanted and de-intensified system against high intensity cultural environments, and of a de-sacralized society against sacrificial forms. According to this dominant system, any reactionary form is virtually terrorist. (According to this logic we could even say that natural catastrophes are forms of terrorism too. Major technological accidents, like Chernobyl, are both a terrorist act and a natural disaster. The toxic gas leak in Bhopal, India, another technological accident, could also have been a terrorist act. Any plane crash could be claimed by any terrorist group too. The dominant characteristic of irrational events is that they can be imputed to anybody or given any motivation. To some extent, anything we can think of can be criminal, even a cold front or an earthquake. This is not new. In the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, thousands of Koreans were killed because they were thought to be responsible for the disaster. In an intensely integrated system like ours, everything can have a similar effect of destabilization. Everything drives toward the failure of a system that claims to be infallible. From our point of view, caught as we are inside the rational and programmatic controls of this system, we could even think that the worst catastrophe is actually the infallibility of the system itself.) Look at Afghanistan. The fact that, inside this country alone, all recognized forms of «democratic» freedoms and expressions -- from music and television to the ability to see a woman's face -- were forbidden, and the possibility that such a country could take the totally opposite path of what we call civilization (no matter what religious principles it invoked), were not acceptable for the «free» world. The universal dimension of modernity cannot be refused. From the perspective of the West, of its consensual model, and of its unique way of thinking, it is a crime not to perceive modernity as the obvious source of the Good or as the natural ideal of humankind. It is also a crime when the universality of our values and our practices are found suspect by some individuals who, when they reveal their doubts, are immediately pegged as fanatics.

Only an analysis that emphasizes the logic of symbolic obligation can make sense of this confrontation between the global and the singular. To understand the hatred of the rest of the world against the West, perspectives must be reversed. The hatred of non-Western people is not based on the fact that the West stole everything from them and never gave anything back. Rather, it is based on the fact that they received everything,

7. Baudrillard refers here to the US war against Afghanistan in the Fall of 2001 in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

September 11 attacks at the WTC
Explosion following the plane impact into the South Tower
(Public Domain)

but were never allowed to give anything back. This hatred is not caused by dispossession or exploitation, but rather by humiliation. And this is precisely the kind of hatred that explains the September 11 terrorist attacks. These were acts of humiliation responding to another humiliation.

The worst that can happen to global power is not to be attacked or destroyed, but to suffer a humiliation. Global power was humiliated on September 11 because the terrorists inflicted something the global system cannot give back. Military reprisals were only means of physical response. But, on September 11, global power was symbolically defeated. War is a response to an aggression, but not to a symbolic challenge. A symbolic challenge is accepted and removed when the other is humiliated in return (but this cannot work when the other is crushed by bombs or locked behind bars in Guantanamo). The fundamental rule of symbolic obligation stipulates that the basis of any form of domination is the total absence of any counterpart, of any return.[8] The unilateral gift is an act of power. And the Empire of the Good, the violence of the Good, is precisely to be able to give without any possible return. This is what it means to be in God's position. Or to be in the position of the Master who allows the slave to live in exchange for work (but work is not a symbolic counterpart, and the slave's only response is eventually to either rebel or die). God used to allow some space for sacrifice. In the traditional order, it was always possible to give back to God, or to nature, or to any superior entity by means of sacrifice. That's what ensured a symbolic equilibrium between beings and things. But today we no longer have anybody to give back to, to return the symbolic debt to. This is the curse of our culture. It is not that the gift is impossible, but rather that the counter-gift is. All sacrificial forms have been neutralized and removed (what's left instead is a parody of sacrifice, which is visible in all the contemporary instances of victimization).

We are thus in the irremediable situation of having to receive, always to receive, no longer from God or nature, but by means of a technological mechanism of generalized exchange and common gratification. Everything is virtually given to us, and, like it or not, we have gained a right to everything. We are similar to the slave whose life has been spared but who nonetheless is bound by a non-repayable debt. This situation can last for a while because it is the very basis of exchange in this economic order. Still, there always comes a time when the fundamental rule resurfaces and a negative return inevitably responds to the positive transfer, when a violent abreaction to such a captive life, such a protected existence, and such a saturation of being takes place. This reversion can take the shape of an open act of violence (such as terrorism), but also of an impotent surrender (that is more characteristic of our modernity), of a self-hatred, and of remorse, in other words, of all those negative passions that are degraded forms of the impossible counter-gift.

What we hate in ourselves -- the obscure object of our resentment -- is our excess of reality, power, and comfort, our universal availability, our definite accomplishment, this kind of destiny that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor had in store for the domesticated masses. And this is exactly the part of our culture that the terrorists find repulsive

8. «L'absence de contrepartie» in French.

(which also explains the support they receive and the fascination they are able to exert). Terrorism's support is not only based on the despair of those who have been humiliated and offended. It is also based on the invisible despair of those whom globalization has privileged, on our own submission to an omnipotent technology, to a crushing virtual reality, to an empire of networks and programs that are probably in the process of redrawing the regressive contours of the entire human species, of a humanity that has gone «global.» (After all, isn't the supremacy of the human species over the rest of life on earth the mirror image of the domination of the West over the rest of the world?). This invisible despair, our invisible despair, is hopeless since it is the result of the realization of all our desires.

Thus, if terrorism is derived from this excess of reality and from this reality's impossible exchange, if it is the product of a profusion without any possible counterpart or return, and if it emerges from a forced resolution of conflicts, *the illusion of getting rid of it as if it were an objective evil is complete*.[9] For, in its absurdity and non-sense, terrorism is our society's own judgment and penalty.

Originally published:
CTHEORY, an international peer-reviewed journal of theory, technology, and culture.

9. Emphasis in original text.

Baudrillard's "The Violence of the Global" Revisited: Comments and New Perspectives

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In 2002, one year after the 9/11 attacks, Jean Baudrillard wrote and published the essay "The Violence of the Global" in a short book titled *Power Inferno*.[1] Along with two other essays dedicated to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath, "The Violence of the Global" addresses the 1990s and early 2000s phenomenon of globalization (or "mondialisation," in the original French text) and offers a few reflections on the relationship between terrorism and the global (global politics, global culture, global exchanges, etc.). Baudrillard's "Violence of the Global" (heretofore referred to as VoG) presents four main related themes, each of which in turn extends some of the insights provided by Baudrillard in *Power Inferno*'s other essays and in some of his other texts written around the same time (for example, *Impossible Exchange* and *Paroxysm*[2]). These four themes are: globalization versus the universalization of values;

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Power Inferno* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), pp. 63-83. See also Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *C-Theory: Theory, Technology and Culture*, Vol. 26 (2003), available at https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/download/14558/5403?inline=1.
2. These are the English titles of these two volumes. See Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange Impossible* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), and Jean Baudrillard, *Le Paroxyste Indifferent* (Paris: Grasset, 1997).

virtual global culture and indifference; globalization as a new form of violence; and the global versus new singularities and terrorism. While all four themes are tightly connected, the question of the violence of globalization is the central concern around which the other topics gravitate. Moreover, the violence of globalization is an issue that remains relevant today, over 20 years after the publication of Baudrillard's essay, particularly among theorists who recently have written about neoliberalism and the neoliberal subject.

With regards to the relationship between globalization and universalization, Baudrillard affirms that "globalization appears to be irreversible whereas universalization is likely to be on its way out" (VoG, p. 26). Universalization, or the Enlightenment's dream of a universal spread of western values such as democracy, liberty, and human rights centered around the figure of an omniscient and omnipotent moral and rational subject, is disappearing just as globalization is taking over social, cultural, and economic life (mostly, as Baudrillard claims, via "technology, the market, tourism, and information") (VoG, p. 26). The simultaneous disappearance of one (universal values) and the predominance of the other (global exchanges and culture) is no coincidence since, as Baudrillard adds, "universalization is vanishing because of globalization" (VoG, p. 27) Or, put slightly differently, "uniform thought" has defeated "universal thought" (VoG, p. 27) So-called universal values now only exist as commodities, products, and objects/things meant to freely and openly circulate, be exchanged, bought, sold, speculated upon, and invested in (like any other "global product" such as "oil," or even "capital," says Baudrillard) (VoG, p. 27), and consumed or desired by customers the world over (human rights and democracy matter for their sign value just like a pair of Nike shoes, a BigMac, or the latest Taylor Swift album).

This opening reflection leads Baudrillard directly to his second point about global culture, which Baudrillard describes as a "perfectly indifferent culture" (VoG, p. 27) Global culture is not only uniform (the same everywhere), but it is also virtual. "Screens, networks, immanence, and numbers" (VoG, p. 28) define it and further eliminate concepts and the need to carve out a time and space for thought. Crucially, virtual global culture is indifferent. This means that, for Baudrillard, globalization gets rid of difference or otherness (or what elsewhere he calls "radical alterity"[3]) by way of sameness or uniformity of visual/virtual appearances, enhanced by technology, and made to stand for reality or real experience. But global culture also erases difference as a matter of spacing, distance, delay, non-equivalence, or distinction between object and subject, or between sign and concept. Whereas universal values relied upon concepts (and upon a necessary referential or representational distance between ideas/ideals and social, political, and cultural reality), the indifference of global cultural forms and products leaves us with a "space-time continuum without any depth" (VoG, p. 28). A total equivalence of signs and objects replacing values and concepts, an "equivalence of all exchanges", makes possible "the supremacy of technical efficiency and positivity, total organization, [and] integral circulation" (VoG, p. 28), all of which are for Baudrillard the main operations by way of which global culture takes over the social.

3. See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, "Plastic Surgery for the Other," trans. François Debrix, *C-Theory: Theory, Technology and Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 1-2, Article 33 (1995), available at https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/download/14654/5521?inline=1#:~:text=Starting%20with%20modernity%2C%20we%20have,matter%20of%20producing%20the%20Other. See also Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, *Radical Alterity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

This system of total equivalence and indifference that is global culture is also the precondition for a new form of violence—Baudrillard's third and arguably main theme in VoG—that seems to have no internal limits (external limits are beyond the point since globalization has erased otherness, the outside, and difference, or so it appears) and no checks and balances. The violence of globalization is a violence of positivity (VoG, p. 28). In global culture, everything must be positive and optimal. Globalization operates seamlessly, with maximum productive efficiency, by way of unfettered circulation through circuits and networks that ensure the high achievement of exchanges and the self-realization of human subjects as agents and products of the global system. While Baudrillard does not use the term, it is what many have called neoliberalism that he is targeting here.[4] Global culture is what other thinkers may understand to be neoliberal culture.[5] The human subject, who "no longer has any finality" (as Baudrillard writes) (VoG, p. 28) and becomes a reflection/mirror image (with no depth, no distance) of this global system, is what some may today theorize as a neoliberal subject.[6] And globalization's violence, in other contexts, may be translated as neoliberal violence.[7]

Similar to neoliberal violence, Baudrillard's global violence is without external enemies, at least in the classical sense of a friend versus enemy distinction (which historically, per Carl Schmitt,[8] among others, helped to draw clear boundaries around, but also limits to, social life, the political domain, and the use of violence). As we saw above, globalization has eliminated Enlightenment's belief in universal values and ideals. Furthermore, globalization (like neoliberalism) no longer has any competing economic, political, cultural, or even moral model of organization of life to deal with (not even socialism or communism anymore, which western enlightened ideas and policies defeated in the name of a now defunct push towards universalization). As a violence of positivity and efficiency that has done away with the notions of enmity and otherness, global violence turns inward but is also boundless. As Baudrillard bluntly puts it: "Free from its former enemies, humanity now has to create enemies from within" (VoG, p. 28). Indifferent, freed from the other, and in the name of positive, efficient, and uniform human subjects across the globe (globalization has seemingly removed geopolitical boundaries when it did away with enmity, although western Enlightenment's universal values already chipped away at political and territorial differences), global culture "tracks down any form of negativity" within itself (VoG, p. 28). Within globalized humanity, violence is on the lookout for the singular (not the different or the other, since it is convinced that it has eliminated it), for that which does not appear to adhere to uniformity (and thus could reduce the efficiency of global exchanges), and for that which threatens global life. Here, perhaps unwittingly, Baudrillard is tapping into a biopolitical or even necropolitical logic.[9] In the name of positivity, to constantly seek to optimize

4. See, for example, Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017). See also David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
5. See, for example, Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).
6. See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).
7. See, in particular, Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
8. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University pf Chicago Press, 1996).

global life, "conflict is forbidden" and even "death is not allowed" (VoG, p. 28). Conflict as a negative use of violence, death as the negation of life (perhaps even as its other, as different from life/living) must be subjected to positive violence, to a violence or "virulence" that works by way of expansion, propagation, and contagion, not by opposition or antagonism, and thus, to quote Baudrillard again, seeks to "put an end to violence itself" (VoG, p. 28).

The theme of globalization's violence is, once again, central to the essay. What in part makes Baudrillard's take on violence so important is that, indirectly or directly, it has influenced how other theorists have started to understand neoliberalism's violence (as I suggested above). One such theorist is Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han who, over the past two decades, has written quite a bit about neoliberalism and the neoliberal subject (the subject caught in globalization or global culture, which Han calls "hyperculture"[10]). In the introduction to his 2011 book *Topologie der Gewalt* (translated as *Topology of Violence* when it was published in English in 2018),[11] Han, without crediting Baudrillard, embraces the notion of a "violence of positivity" that, he argues, characterizes contemporary neoliberal societies and globalization. Han writes: "Today's society increasingly divests itself of the negativity of the other or the foreign. The process of globalization accelerates the dissolution of borders and distinctions" (Han, *Topology*, p. viii). Han adds: "Yet the depletion of negativity should not be equated with the disappearance of violence, since… there is a violence of positivity, which is wielded without enemy or domination" (Han, *Topology*, p. viii). In a manner that recalls Baudrillard's point in VoG, Han then asserts the following: "Violence isn't merely an excess of negativity; it can also be an excess of positivity, the *accumulation of the positive* [Han's emphasis], which manifests as overachievement, overproduction, overcommunication, hyper-attention, and hyperactivity" (Han, *Topology*, p. viii). Thus, for Han, "the violence of positivity is possibly even more disastrous than that of negativity because it is neither visible nor evident, and it evades immunological defense because of its positivity" (Han, *Topology*, p. viii).

Similar to neoliberal violence, Baudrillard's global violence is without external enemies, at least in the classical sense of a friend versus enemy distinction

What Han calls the late-modern or neoliberal "achievement subject" (as opposed to what Han takes to be the "obedience subject" of disciplinary violence and control that emerges out of Michel Foucault's work, in particular) (Han, *Topology*, p. ix) is a human subject that has been shaped by this violence of positivity which, both for Baudrillard and Han, seems to define globalization and global culture. In globalization, the neoliberal achievement subject is and must be free, and it cannot

9. See Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003). On biopolitics as necropolitics, see Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, eds., *Necrogeopolitics: On Death and Death-Making in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2020.
10. See Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022).
11. Byung-Chul Han, *Topologie der Gewalt* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2011).

be subordinated or subjected to anything "external to itself" (Han, *Topology*, p. viii). Thus, total internalization of the principles of global exchange and of the forms and signs of global culture are key. The achievement subject, in its actions, thoughts (or what passes for thoughts), occupations, and desires, merely replicates what, once again, Baudrillard calls the "technical efficiency and positivity" (VoG, p. 28) of the global system, or better yet, of neoliberalism. In this way, for the achievement subject, as Han and Baudrillard intimate, complete self-referentiality is realized. But so is violence, which has now become self-referential too.

Interestingly, in *Topology of Violence*, Han meaningfully expands upon and updates Baudrillard's point about globalization's violence. At the same time, however, he misreads Baudrillard or, at the very least, he exaggerates the discrepancy between his own theorization of contemporary violence and Baudrillard's analysis. On the side of expanding Baudrillard's argument, Han explains that the self-referential violence of the (achievement) subject of global or hyper culture needs to be understood as a matter of self-exploitation. Baudrillard seems to be on his way to reaching the same conclusion with regards to self-exploitation when he notes that the violence of the global calls for a humanity that looks for enemies within itself, within the limits of human life (where death itself is no longer allowed), and that does violence to any attempt at singularity or uniqueness (taken to be signs of a new internal "enmity"), even to the point where, paradoxically perhaps, it may end up producing inhumanity, or in Baudrillard's language, "a wide variety of inhuman metastases" (VoG, p. 28). In a way that reminds us of Baudrillard's initial point about globalization's eradication of universal values and concepts (democracy, human rights, freedom, etc.), Han adds that global (neoliberal) culture revives some of these values as signs, now deprived of conceptual depth or referential distinction, for the sake of an internal mode of violence that takes the form of the neoliberal (achievement) subject's self-exploitation. In particular, globalization/neoliberalism re-mobilizes freedom as a matter of compulsion and compulsive self-violence. Han writes that the neoliberal achievement subject, the subject that is meant to thrive in a context of positive and efficient globalized humanity, now "must be its own master [since] its existence is not governed by commands and prohibitions, but rather by freedom and initiative" (Han, *Topology*, p. 89). Yet, this seeming revalorization of freedom (a freedom which, once again, is now completely

Byung-Chul Han
Photo: ActuaLitté (CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

detached from any concept or ideal) is in fact a pathway towards the new violence, that is to say, the violence of the human subject onto itself, without any need for enmity or otherness. This is how Han puts it: "The imperative for performance transforms freedom into compulsion… [and thus] self-exploitation replaces exploitation of the other" (*Topology*, p. 89). Global violence invades the neoliberal subject as "the achievement subject exploits itself until it collapses completely" (*Topology*, p. 89). "Violence and freedom coincide," Han adds, thus "making violence self-targeting. The exploiter is the exploited" (*Topology*, p. 89).

Han further suggests that the self-exploiting and self-destructive violence of globalization/neoliberalism may seem to operate by way of contagion or virulence, thus slowly but surely destroying human subjects' "immune systems" and their "capacities to resist," as Baudrillard indicates (VoG, p. 29). But Han, once again updating or embellishing Baudrillard's argument, does not believe that contagion or virality are key anymore. Han notes that, today, "Baudrillard's theory of virulence has lost its argumentative stringency" (*Topology*, p. 92).[12] This is because, as Han helpfully explains, "our era," unlike what Baudrillard appeared to think at the turn of the century, "is not a viral one" (*Topology*, p. 92), or at least it no longer is predominantly the case some 10 to 15 years after the publication of Baudrillard's essay (when Han wrote *Topology of Violence*). Instead, today's era of neoliberal/globalized violence has seen a replacement of global virulence with a generalized sense of what Han calls burnout. Contemporary "exemplary illnesses are not viral… but rather psychic ailments, such as burnout, hyperactivity, and depression, which are caused not by viral negativity but rather by excess positivity and the violence of positivity" (Han, *Topology*, p. 92).

While Han's update about the positive violence of neoliberalism and globalization is useful (since today's neoliberal achievement subject, in the name of maximum positivity and efficiency, is asked to "exploit itself until it burns out"[13]), Han's critique of Baudrillard's notion of the viral or virulence misreads or misunderstands Baudrillard too. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual occurrence as, in much of his work, Han is often drawn to Baudrillard's thought and style (including what one might call the challenge or more accurately the *défi*—a French word that connotes the notions of challenge, but also of dare and defiance—that is characteristic of Baudrillard's writing[14]). And yet Han often appears as if he must up the ante vis-à-vis Baudrillard, perhaps upstage him by coming across as more daring or defiant than Baudrillard himself. This compulsion leads Han to some careless moments,[15] one of which is on display in the above quotation

12. Han bases this critique of Baudrillard's "theory of virulence" on Baudrillard's text, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, which, both in its English and German (*Der Geist des Terrorismus*) versions, contains the three essays found in *Power Inferno*, including "The Violence of the Global." See Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003). Han also targets portions of Baudrillard's book *The Transparency of Evil*. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993).
13. As Han adds in another essay. See Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 47.
14. On this point, see François Debrix, "Jean Baudrillard," in Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams, eds., *Critical Theorists and International Relations* (London, Routledge, 2009), p. 54.

where Han reads Baudrillard's reference to the viral as an exemplification of negative violence when, in fact, in VoG as well as in other texts,[16] Baudrillard is clear that viral violence or virulence is about a violence of positivity. Han repeats the misreading of Baudrillard elsewhere when, quoting an interview that Baudrillard gave to journalists of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* in 2002 in which Baudrillard was asked about contemporary wars and the seeming disappearance of war fronts, lines of demarcation, and battle lines, Han claims that Baudrillard does not grasp the fact that wars today take place without enemies (in the classical sense of the friend versus enemy discussion mentioned above). Mischaracterizing Baudrillard's point, Han writes: "Baudrillard does not recognize that the new world war [global war, neoliberalism's war on and by the human subject itself] takes place *without an enemy*… one is *at war with oneself* [today]." Han continues: "Owing to the lack of negativity, enmity becomes *self-referential*… [and such a] war without enmity wouldn't be ended by the victory of one party over the other, but only by global collapse, *global burnout*" (*Topology*, p. 93). Han concludes his (mis) reading of Baudrillard: "The entire system would overheat until it imploded. *Implosive* violence is at work here" (*Topology*, p. 93; all emphases in the above quotations are from Han).

What Han describes in the above quotations about Baudrillard's analysis of war and violence in the era of globalization is actually the opposite of what Baudrillard states in VoG and in other essays, as was mentioned above. A war or violence without enmity is what Baudrillard discusses in VoG, a global war or violence which, again, is not about negativity anymore (since it has been purged by global culture), but about positive efficiency, optimization of

15. One of these misreadings takes place when Han brings up Baudrillard's point on the "disappearance of history" in Baudrillard's essay "The Millennium or the Suspense of the Year 2000." Han wants to argue that today's proliferation of information has led history to be transformed into something Han calls "atomized time," a time when "events… whizz around without direction." See Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), p. 17). Instead of building his view of "atomized time" on Baudrillard's insights from the "Millennium" essay that Han references, or from some of Baudrillard's reflections in, for example, *The Illusion of the End* (where Baudrillard writes that "every political, historical, and cultural fact possesses a kinetic energy which wrenches it from its own space and propels it into a hyperspace where… it loses all meaning") (Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994], p. 2), Han argues that Baudrillard's reading of history or of the historical event as "an ever more perfect simulation [of] the original" eradicates history and prevents Baudrillard from grasping the point that history today returns as a proliferation of "atomized" bits (or indeed events) that proliferate in all directions. See Han, *The Scent of Time*, p. 17. But this last point is in fact very much what Baudrillard suggests is happening to history (or the simulated return of historical events) today. On this specific point, there is in fact very little disagreement between Han and Baudrillard. Either Han is unable to capture the irony present in much of Baudrillard's writing and phrasing, or he is eager to embellish or even insert some analytical discrepancies vis-à-vis Baudrillard, perhaps to ensure that he is not read as a theorist who merely reprises or paraphrases Baudrillard's insights (which clearly Han is not, but his repeated insistence on distancing his thought from Baudrillard's on several issues where they in fact converge often comes across as an odd compulsion). Han displays a similar tendency to wish to exaggerate theoretical disagreements when he engages Michel Foucault's notions of biopower and the biopolitical subject. On this topic, see Caroline Alphin and François Debrix, "Biopolitics in the 'Psychic Realm': Han, Foucault, and Neoliberal Psychopolitics," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2023), pp. 477-491.

16. See, for example, several of Baudrillard's essays and interviews with Sylvère Lotringer in Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010).

exchange and forms (and of human subjects too), virulent contagion of effects, and, as Han rightly notes, more and more about burnout today. Interestingly too, Han's point above about the system possibly collapsing, not as a result of negativity, enmity, or antagonistic forces, but rather through overheating or implosion is in line with Baudrillard's thinking on the matter. In fact, the last theme explored by Baudrillard in VoG, that of the possible emergence of a "singularity of terrorism" (VoG, p. 29) as a (no longer negative, no longer dialectical) challenge to globalization and its violence, speaks directly to Han's concern with positive violence.

In a typically provocative or defiant manner, Baudrillard writes that globalization's victory is not an absolute guarantee, no matter if it has vanquished universal values or if it is the only modality of production (and domination) of social life today. While "globalization has not completely won" (VoG, p. 29), any negation of global culture, any external enmity, or any antagonistic force vis-à-vis globalization is, once again, not a possible option anymore. There are, Baudrillard claims, rather vaguely, rising "heterogeneous" forces of reaction, revisionism, or even rejection that seemingly have given up on globalization, or on the "global techno-structure" (VoG, p. 29). These revisions, reactions, or rejections can even be "perceived as violent, abnormal, or irrational" (VoG, p. 29). Yet, they do not amount to any sort of traditional antagonism, to an external opposition, or indeed to an "anti-globalization movement" (for Baudrillard, so-called anti-globalization movements are part of the global system as they merely seek to "slow down global deregulation") (VoG, p. 29). Rather, these reactions or rejections to global culture spring from globalization itself. They are the products of it, are internal to it, and, in a way, can be seen as violent abreactions to the system's own violence.

These abreactions to globalization and its violence are what Baudrillard calls "singularities." Singularities "are not alternatives," Baudrillard affirms (VoG, p. 29). In fact, singularities are "neither positive nor negative" (VoG, p. 29). While they react to and reject the positivity of the system, and the positivity of violence too, they do not come from outside the system. Nor do they offer an alternate model of social life or reality (or different positivities that, in a dialectical manner perhaps, would arise from a great initial negation). As abreactions to or even "excesses" (as Baudrillard calls them) or outgrowths of the global system, singularities seek to undo the system and its techniques and networks from the inside. Their purpose is to contribute to "the collapse of the entire system," as Han usefully clarifies (*Topology*, p. 94). Put differently, singularities operate by way of what Han calls "implosive violence," and their objective is to lead globalization (or neoliberalism, for Han) to a point of

implosion where and when the system will eventually crumble onto itself. Han uses the term "destructive tensions" (*Topology*, p. 94) to try to capture these self-generated, internal challenges to globalization or neoliberalism. Baudrillard, as noted above, prefers to label them singularities. Yet, on the question of how the global neoliberal system and its violence may be defeated, Baudrillard and Han are not far apart.

Han sees the rise of "destructive tensions" as a result of burnout, hyperactivity, and overheating, or what Han considers to be "psychic" (Han, *Topology*, p. 92) or even "psychopolitical"[17] characteristics of the global or neoliberal achievement subject, which Han generalizes to the operations of the system itself. At the level of the system, destructive burnout as a mode of positive or perhaps implosive global violence takes various forms. In passing, Han mentions the "climate and environmental catastrophes" (*Topology*, p. 94) which, Han explains, are the outcomes of the hyperactivity or overheating of the global neoliberal system, its culture, and its violence. For Baudrillard, in VoG, the implosion of globalization is (or rather will be) the result of terrorism, its singularities, and the destructive tensions terrorism unleashes. This is how Baudrillard reads the 9/11 terrorist attacks.[18] Arising out of the "excess of reality" of global culture (or, put somewhat differently, out of the way the West has managed to transcend—but also defeat—its universal ideals and values with globalization), terrorism is "the curse of our culture" (VoG, p. 32), a curse that will ultimately lead to "our" global culture's implosion. Here, to explain the "evil" or "cursed" dimension of terrorism and its implosive violence, Baudrillard has recourse to the notion of the "symbolic order" (VoG, p. 29), something he has mentioned several times before (for example, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, originally published in French in 1976[19]). Even before globalization took hold, when the enlightened West sought to conquer the real (of/in social and political life) by way of its so-called superior values, ideas, and ideals, the West had to cast away the symbolic realm (or the "traditional order" where and when it "was always possible to give back to God, to nature, or to any superior entity by means of sacrifice," as Baudrillard puts it in VoG, p. 32).[20] Yet, the symbolic order, Baudrillard claims, was never completely buried, and it also never was placed outside of or external to western universal values either. Baudrillard locates contemporary terrorism in the realm of the symbolic. And Baudrillard understands contemporary instances of terrorism as both an outgrowth or excess of the west (including the west's previous ideas and policies) and as a resurgence or revenge of the symbolic domain as that realm of exchange, life, and violence that both universalization and globalization sought to repress, but never fully managed

17. Han, *Psychopolitics*, p. 21.
18. Here and in the other essays in *Power Inferno*, Baudrillard reprises an often-made argument that the terrorist challenges to and against the United States on and after 9/11 were led or supported by terror/terrorist groups and movements that previously had been used and even recruited by the west (and the United States) in its wars and other antagonisms against the USSR, communism, etc. (for example, the Taliban in Afghanistan who, in previous decades, were taken by the West and the USA to be "freedom fighters").
19. See Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange Symbolique et La Mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
20. This point by Baudrillard is somewhat reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno's understanding of the dialectical work and violence of Enlightenment thought (which cast itself, although never fully or successfully, in opposition to myth or magic) as they argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s first essay. See Max Horkheimer and Thedor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-34.

to. Thus, the symbolic in the form of terrorism returns as the "accursed share"[21] of western culture (now turned into global culture) or as an abreaction to the global system at the very moment when this system is getting into overdrive and perhaps is increasingly running out of control (as Han suggests).

Notwithstanding Han's attempt at distancing his theorizations from Baudrillard's reflections,[22] Baudrillard's thought on the violence of the global and on the return (via terrorism) of a no longer repressed implosive or symbolic violence is key to Han's take on neoliberal violence. Baudrillard's analysis in VoG helps us to understand Han's argument, which Han has repeated in much of his writing over the last 10 to 15 years, about what he calls (or, like Baudrillard, what he incants as) "the imminent implosion of the [global/neoliberal] system" (*Topology*, p. 94) As noted above, neoliberalism is often the term that is used these days to name a series of social, political, economic, and cultural processes and transactions that, similar to the way Baudrillard understands globalization, seek to achieve and maintain a form of power or a hegemony that relies on uniformity, optimized productivity, maximal efficiency, positivity, and often violence. Like Han, many scholars who today write about neoliberalism, the neoliberal subject, and neoliberal violence would do well to read (or re-read) Baudrillard, starting with his VoG essay. After all, when Baudrillard mentions "the despair of those whom globalization has privileged" (VoG, p. 33) and diagnoses "our own submission to an omnipotent technology, to a crushing virtual reality, [and] to an empire of networks and programs that are probably in the process of redrawing the regressive contours of the entire human species" (VoG, p. 33), is he not previewing the language of several contemporary critics of neoliberalism?[23] Baudrillard's examples, his choice of terminology at times, and his insistence on conjuring up the specter of the symbolic may seem a bit dated or off-the-mark to some theorists today (starting with Han, perhaps). Yet, to others, Baudrillard's reflections on the global and its violence may well be prophetic, offering a vision of perhaps even more "absurd" or "non-sensical" (VoG, p. 33) outcomes of globalization.

21. The "accursed share" is Georges Bataille's concept, which Baudrillard periodically borrows throughout his work, for example, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. 1* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
22. One should note though that, contrary to Baudrillard, Han does not bring up terrorism as a violent excess or outgrowth of global culture, neoliberalism, or even the West. Nor does he feel the need to invoke the notion of the symbolic.
23. It is the case whether these critics describe neoliberal globalization as the implementation of a "pervasive atmosphere" of "capitalist realism" on a global scale (Fisher), as the dawn of a "cognitive capitalism" designed for the "globalized world economy" (Moulier-Boutang), or as a the setting up of a smart and "global technical system" that "hegemonically serves a hyper-entropic functioning that accelerates the rhythm of the consumerist destruction of the world while installing a structural and unsustainable insolvency, based on a generalized stupefaction and a functional stupidity" (Stiegler). See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), p. 16; Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), p. 47; and Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society, Volume 1: The Future of Work* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), p. 15).

Baudrillard and the Forgetting of Death as a Challenge

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6

Death, a central subject in metaphysics, has become a concept that modern humans strive to exclude from their consciousness and daily life. Unlike classical man, who accepted death as a part of life, modern man finds it an uncomfortable topic to confront. Instead of fearing death, there is a tendency to trivialize or mock it. Adorno, considering death as 'true dignity,' attributes the contemporary human tendency to ignore death to a loss of hope in an afterlife and the bleak misery of the present. He argues that in the modern world, where living beings are reduced to outputs of the social system, death has been domesticated and degraded, rendered absurd by the culture industry's lens. The culture industry and modernity have eroded and distorted death's imagery, reducing the corpse to merely a stage prop resembling a human but devoid of essence.

Expanding on Adorno's discourse, Baudrillard suggests that humanity, indifferent to death as to its own members, is a form of 'dead' humanity. He observes that contemporary culture expends enormous energy to dissociate life from death. In his view, death, now portrayed as 'not scary,' 'fun,' and 'glamorized,' occupies a different role in our era. In the modern age, death is transformed into a simulacrum through cinema and TV, while funeral homes

present the deceased as 'smiling,' 'more alive than before,' and 'seemingly communicative.' Baudrillard argues that modernity, rooted in image and imitation, objectifies death by cloaking it in the hues of life. He asserts that death, in the guise and function of a naturalized, 'fraudulent,' and 'idealized' simulacrum, is assimilated into modernity and circulates among the living.

According to Baudrillard, who characterizes death as a 'contradiction,' 'reversal,' and 'symbolic challenge,' death induces chaos in modern capitalist societies due to its inability to be symbolically exchanged. He posits that through the symbolic—an act of exchange that nullifies the real and dissolves the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary—life and death are relegated to the realm of the imaginary. Death, seen as a threat to life and rendered futile, is also assimilated into contemporary news systems as a form of 'metastatic death.' It is transformed into information, its meaning predetermined and integrated into news systems and films. Baudrillard argues that this process not only artificializes death but also detaches life from its inherent truth, engulfing it in 'artificiality.' Life, amidst phenomena and objects labeled as 'polluting,' 'sensitive,' and 'outdated'—specific to modern man and times—and within a technological environment and culture characterized by overproduction, is estranged from its original essence. This leads to the creation of an artificial 'death' environment.

Baudrillard observes a historical shift in the placement of graves: initially located within homes, they were later moved to cities, and in modern times, as the dead became marginalized, they were expelled from urban spaces. He notes that in contemporary societies, the dead, being removed from daily life, are cast out of the city, effectively vanishing from public view. Baudrillard further comments on the modern handling of death, stating, 'Necropolises of death, which are not where they are supposed to be, are white spaces free from all kinds of human noise, with basements and halls filled with computers.' This statement suggests that death, traditionally a tangible and visible part of life, has become obscured in the digital age, lost amidst TV and web networks, and relegated to sterile, technology-filled environments.

The philosopher argues that there is a scientific endeavour to nullify death, but this alone is insufficient; there's also an effort to erase death from contemporary life. This erasure is facilitated through social media, where sharing photographs with dying relatives does more to devalue and erase the meaning of death than to acknowledge it. Death is transformed into a spectacle, detached from its true essence. Baudrillard, who passed away in 2007 and thus did not witness these specific social media trends, described the modern approach to death by stating, '...It is both the only way of sharing death specific to the modern world and a way of dying that no one is absolutely interested in.' This statement captures his perspective on the unique, yet disinterested, manner in which death is treated in the modern era.

Baudrillard, viewing life and death as two inseparable truths, considers life as a value, while death represents the reproduction of time as a general equivalent. He perceives death not as a separation or regression but as a reversal and a symbolic challenge. For Baudrillard, death serves as a reminder of both life and mortality, and he identifies the desire to eliminate death as the primary reason for the loss of meaning in life and human existence. Echoing Heidegger,

he believes that death is what imparts meaning, unity, integrity, and functionality to life.

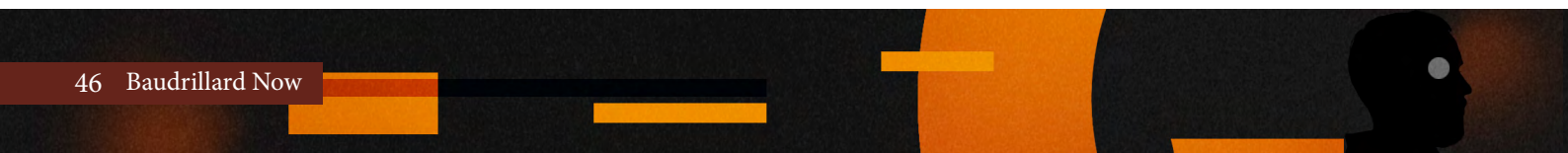
Baudrillard asserts that a system distancing itself from death inevitably distances itself from life over time. He notes that while primitive societies with a symbolic exchange order maintained a symbolic exchange relationship between life and death, the capitalist order of modern societies has severed this relationship. Exchange has been reduced to mere objectification, and death has been objectified. He argues that life, in losing all its vitality, has become akin to death. Despite modern society's efforts to banish death from life and 'kill' death, Baudrillard contends that the system we live in is pervaded by the scent of death.

Death is transformed into a spectacle, detached from its true essence.

Analyzing the concepts of 'the dead' and 'death' within what he calls 'an existing dead order' of simulation, Baudrillard observes that in modern societies, death and the dead are increasingly marginalized. He notes that while specific spaces are designated for the insane, criminals, and the 'normal,' no program, time, or space can be anticipated for the dead, as society is at a loss about how to handle them. This dilemma was starkly evident during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, as seen in countries like Italy, where the capacity of crematoriums was overwhelmed, necessitating the transportation of the dead to facilities in other cities or countries. Furthermore, the rise of 'green funerals' or 'human composting' in the USA since its legalization in 2019, touted as an environmentally friendly alternative to burial and cremation, reflects this ongoing struggle to find appropriate ways to deal with death.

Baudrillard also comments on the diminishing significance of the soul-body duality on a materialist basis and the impact of the 'death of God' or its declaration, which he believes has led to a weakening in the meaning of humanity. He references Nietzsche's proclamation 'God is dead' and develops an original discourse on God's position within the order of simulation. Nietzsche's foresight that 'the death of God has already begun to cast its shadow over Europe' influences Baudrillard's view of the Western world. He envisions a world where even God is simulated, religion is reduced to visual technology based on images, and icons replace divine power, leading to a space where the 'metastases of the death of God' are experienced through the subversion of values. In Baudrillard's perspective, God, content with his own death's metastases, has perished in the world of simulation, where the loss of truth renders the existence of a true God impossible.

In Baudrillard's concept of a world of simulation—a technically perfect 'golden age' unworthy of God's glory but indicative of his death—reality or truth has morphed into allegory. In this world, God has not only disappeared, but even the question of his existence is obscured. Modern man, confronted with the reality of God's absence, has assumed the responsibility of navigating a world where values are inverted in the wake of God's death, and the immediate verification of God, unattainable in another realm, becomes a focal point. In this technically perfected world, where



truth is allegorized, Baudrillard suggests that the 'dead' God is omnipresent, and churches have been erected to conceal this death. In the hyper-modern world, these 'churches' are social media platforms and chat rooms, where awe is pursued and actions are executed.

Baudrillard posits that we are in an era where the archaic man, who embalmed his corpse to assert his divinity, has been supplanted by the modern man who, despite advancements in medicine, feels no need for such practices. Modern man abandons the pursuit of immortality as a challenge to God, yet paradoxically seeks a different form of immortality through life extension or integration with machines. The quest for eternity shifts from the afterlife to the present world, fostering the belief that heaven and eternity are attainable in this life. Furthermore, we are witnessing a time where people not only resort to 'human fertilization' techniques but also aspire to merge their minds with machines (artificial intelligence) in a quest for immortality.

Baudrillard highlights the growing disconnect between life and death and the shift of control over death from divine to human hands, leading to changes in the forces determining human mortality and introducing uncertainty about the nature of human death. This uncertainty is amplified by the transformation of human beings through advancements in science and technology, such as artificial intelligence, genetics, biotechnology, and molecular biology, fuelling the desire to alter human destiny. Baudrillard articulates this uncertainty with the following statement: 'The only certainty is that we have lost the thread of our own shroud on the scales of death. We now live in an extraordinary period of waiting and suspension, symbolized by nuclear power. As objective hostages to a terrifying god, we remain unsure about the event or accident that will ultimately seal our fate, and who will be responsible for it.

One More Spiral in the Simulacrum: Jean Baudrillard's Games with Reality

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7

Reality has passed completely into the game of reality.
Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)

I. Introduction

While Baudrillard's theory of simulacra famously argues that it is no longer possible to make a meaningful distinction between representation and reality, these distinctions are concurrently evoked in the process of their cancellation. In this essay, I argue that an engagement with ontological levels acts as the absolute value of Baudrillard's argument, performing an explanatory function. Despite his assertion that the contemporary condition is characterised by one-dimensionality (immanence, exposure, an absence of secrecy), Baudrillard constantly uses geometrical imagery: a vocabulary of dots, circles and bubbles. Such imagery retains the inside-outside dialectic that Baudrillard ostensibly negates. This principle is also evident in Baudrillard's discussion of physical architectures, particularly in America, which acts as his exemplification

of hyperreality. Contemporary American architectures including Disneyland and the Bonaventure Hotel are conceived in terms of play – yet, if such structures participate in Baudrillard's blurring of game and reality, their physical features retain a distinction between inside and outside which conserves the 'reality principle'. Accordingly, I propose that Baudrillard's writing reveals a distinction between ontological levels from a local perspective while asserting their global equivalence, where Douglas Hofstadter's strange loop offers a way of reconciling paradoxes in Baudrillard's rhetoric. Following on from this, I propose that reading Baudrillard through a lens of 'fiction' rather than 'theory' provides a further means of accounting for his contradictions, since theory and fiction solicit distinct rhetorical expectations. As fiction, his texts provide spaces for testing and hypothesising ideas, prioritising evocation over affirmation. The compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing lies partly in the *idea* of ontological distinction, whether affirmed, negated, or simply played with through experimental rearrangement.

As indicated by this article's epigraph, the concept of game is inextricably associated with ontology (and, in addition, spatiality) in Baudrillard's thought, providing a crucial lens for this discussion. This association does not begin with Baudrillard; the relationship between games and ontology is a key feature of cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), one of the first extended studies of play. In his book, Huizinga identifies an important feature of play as its spatial demarcation:

> *The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)*

Here, Huizinga implies that play takes place on a distinct, representational level of existence: that play as an activity holds the same ontological relation to the 'ordinary world' as a theatrical play. While Huizinga gave multiple examples of playgrounds, from temples to screens, the terminology of the 'magic circle' has persisted, as evident in books on game design (such as Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*). As elaborated later in the essay, such geometrical imagery, with its attendant spatial dialectics, both informs and manifests ontological conceptualisations in Baudrillard's thought.

Recent decades have seen an increased interest in the relationship between Baudrillard's work and games; in 2007, a special issue on Baudrillard and Game Studies was published in *Games and Culture,* titled 'What if Baudrillard was a Gamer?'. This collection comprises a range of approaches, including readings of Baudrillard's writing style as a game, applications of Baudrillard's ideas to digital games, and considerations of what 'game' means in Baudrillard's writing. Alexander Galloway's essay in the collection, titled 'Radical Illusion (A Game Against)', proposes that games are the single thing that Baudrillard wrote most about, more so than other topics including symbolic exchange and simulation (p. 376). At the same time, Galloway acknowledges Baudrillard's vague use of the term, remarking:

> *By the end of his life, games and play had metastasized, infecting the entire corpus of his thought, so much so that game came to be a synonym for world, or for life, or in a very general sense for the ontological plane itself. (p. 376)*

An example of the application of 'game' to 'the ontological plane itself' is evident in *Paroxysm*, where Baudrillard calls writing a 'game, in the sense that it's the *invention* of another, antagonistic world' [italics mine] (p. 32). Yet Galloway argues that Baudrillard cancels out the ontological distinctness of games suggested by theorists such as Huizinga. Instead, he contends that Baudrillard

> *would never claim that there is a second reality that exists against normal life, precisely for the reason that 'normal life' is always already a 'second reality' from the get-go. […] The real is play. The 'virtual' is emphatically not the gamic for Baudrillard; it is this world that is the game. The magic circle is part of the here and now. (pp. 377–78)*

mentative space. Ontological distinctions comprise the pivot around which Baudrillard's argument turns in a methodology where the evocation of a concept becomes more significant than its assertion or negation.

II. The Absolute Value of Ontological Levels

The opening of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) illustrates Baudrillard's methodology. He begins by evoking the Borges fable where cartographers 'draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly' (p. 1). However, in the second paragraph, Baudrillard inverts Borges's parable, famously suggesting that the 'territory no longer precedes the map', but 'the map […] precedes the territory' (p. 1). He vividly describes how 'today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there' (p. 1). Yet despite the declarative tone of the second paragraph, which inverts the first, Baudrillard's third paragraph performs a further inversion: 'In fact, even inverted, Borges's fable is unusable' (p. 1). Both paragraphs are then replaced by a third assertion:

> *it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and another, that constituted the charm of abstraction. […] No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its*

If the world is already a game, already a second reality, then the distinction of the magic circle no longer holds. There is no longer a boundary to distinguish game from non-game.

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However, I read this argument against the grain, focusing on the fact that Baudrillard's comment that 'Reality has passed completely into the game of reality' (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 74) conjures a distinction between game and non-game in the process of implying that this distinction has collapsed. The real game is, perhaps, the interaction between reality-as-game and reality-as-non-game: the plurality of envisioned ontologies that emerge in Baudrillard's hypothetical argu-

> *concept. […] The real […] is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (p. 2)*

While the content of Baudrillard's writing abolishes the dialectic of positive-negative, as he argues that the real 'no longer measures itself against an ideal or negative instance' (p. 2), this is rhetorically expressed through a methodology of assertion followed by cancellation. Indeed, the language of this paragraph is striking for its negativity, with the almost incantatory repetition of 'no longer' and 'no more'. The condition of simulation, which has theoretically surpassed the poles of 'is' and 'is not', is described in terms of what is not. If the distinction between levels of reality has been dissolved, these levels are still present in the expression of their abolition, acting as a methodological means of performing the evolution of a concept.

This reliance on negativity is acknowledged by Baudrillard. Describing simulation, he remarks:

> *In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, […] a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: implosion – an absorption of […] positive and negative charge […]. That is where simulation begins. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 31)*

A 'negative form' is necessary in order to articulate the collapse of the distinction between positive and negative, as simulation is approached through a vocabulary of paradox and deferral. Baudrillard goes on to adopt a language of inexpressibility when describing how 'simulation is of the third order, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond rational distinctions upon which the whole of the social and power depend' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21). Reinforced by the rhythm of a rhetorical triad, the language of 'beyond' suggests that Baudrillard's articulation of simulation is a stepping stone towards something that defies the conditions of expression.

Still, Baudrillard is also aware of the persistence of the negated concept; if the era of simulation involves 'a liquidation of all referentials', this is accompanied by 'their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21). Referentials are simultaneously absent and present: artificially resurrected, they participate in A phantasm of ontological distinction. Similarly, in the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Baudrillard describes how

> *each configuration of value is seized by the next in a higher order of simulacra. And each phase of value integrates the prior apparatus into its own as a phantom reference, a puppet reference, a simulated reference. (pp. 2-3)*

If the reference does not exist, the *idea* of the reference exists in 'phantom', 'puppet' and 'simulated' states. When Baudrillard outlines the orders of simulacra from the Renaissance onwards, he describes the story of stucco, which transforms distinctions into 'a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent for all the others' (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, p. 52). While on one level (material) there is equivalence, on another (representational) there is distinction. The *idea* is retained, even if its actuality is insisted against: distinction is displaced to a more abstract plane, becoming geometrical rather than material. A further example of this increasingly abstract but persistent

distinction is in *Forget Foucault*, where Baudrillard alludes to 'the institution of spatial perspective versus "real" space in the Renaissance', where the former 'is only a simulation of perspective' (p. 21). Again, the principle of perspective is retained, even if it ceases to exist in concrete form.

This principle can be considered the 'modulus' of Baudrillard's thought. In mathematics, the 'modulus' describes the absolute value of a term, ignoring whether it is positive or negative: for instance, the 'modulus' of negative twelve and twelve is twelve. Along these lines, Galloway remarks: 'Mathematically speaking, Baudrillard's is the "absolute value" of the dialectic' (p. 381). Baudrillard reinforces this idea in 'Radical Thought', where he remarks:

> *Ultimately, it is not even a disavowal of the concept of reality. It is an illusion, or in other words a game with reality, just as seduction is a game with desire (it brings it into play) and just as metaphor is a game with the truth. (p. 54)*

Rather than avowal and disavowal, Baudrillard's purpose is defined as bringing an idea into the argumentative field. Here 'game' and 'play' are used to describe the process of interacting with a concept or theme rather than affirming or negating it. Conceived in terms of play, theory becomes a tool rather than a truth. Baudrillard thus asserts that 'the value of thought lies not so much in its inevitable convergences with the truth as in its immeasurable divergences from the truth' ('Radical Thought', p. 53). The relationship is prioritised over the assertion, as the negative value of the thought is equivalent to its positive value.

Considering the modulus of Baudrillard's terms provides a means of addressing his contradictions, which emerge in, among other areas, his comments on games and ontology. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, he makes reference to 'the great game of simulacra, which makes things appear and disappear' (p. 71). However, at the end of the text he envisions the era of simulation as follows: 'What if the modern universe of communication, of hyper-communication, had plunged us, not into the senseless, but into a tremendous saturation of meaning entirely consumed by its success – without the game, the secret, or distance?' (p. 103). In the same text, the 'game of simulacra' contradictorily coexists with the simulacral absence of game. Simulation constitutes a game because, in Baudrillard's terms, nothing is at stake. Yet simulation is not a game because it has no distance, no alternative ontology, participating in a condition of immanence where everything is simultaneously present and exposed. In this spirit, Zygmunt Bauman observes that Baudrillard's words

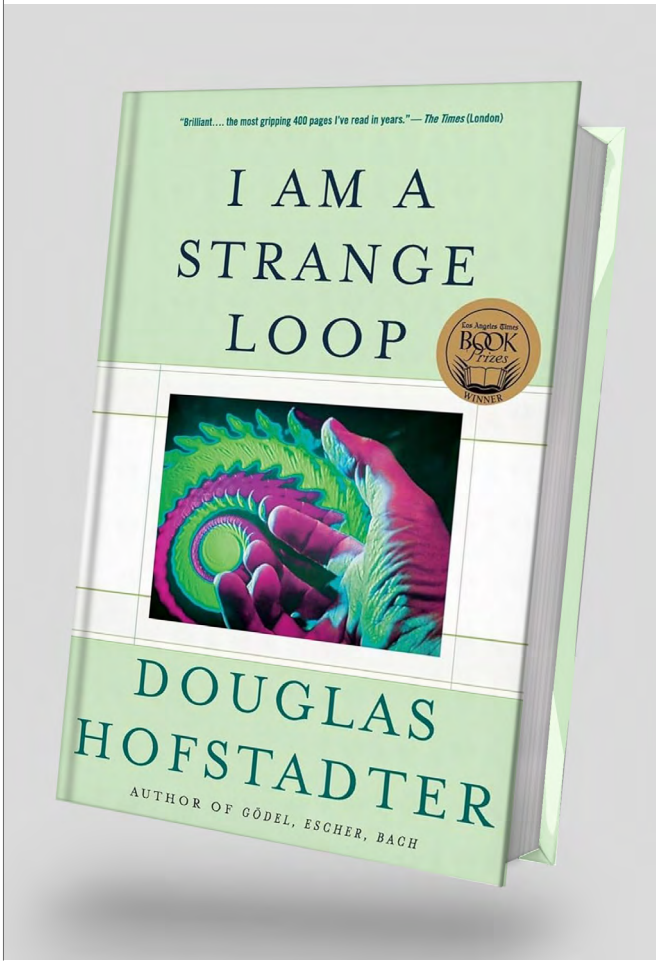
> *create a world in which they may dissolve, […] a universe of meaning in which their own, private meanings, having done their job, are no longer identifiable, merging into a universe of experience that cancels meanings it cannot, and wishes not, to absorb. (p. 22)*

Accordingly, different features of 'game' are drawn out in each context of its use, as play forms a floating principle with which simulation is always interacting.

Yet another way of accounting for Baudrillard's internal inconsistencies is through the figure of Douglas Hofstadter's 'Strange Loop', or 'tangled hierarchy'. Hofstadter describes how 'The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started' (p. 10). This is visualised in, for instance, the drawings of Escher, as 'each local region of Escher's *Ascending and*

Descending is quite legitimate; it is only the way that they are globally put together that creates an impossibility' (*Gödel, Escher, Bach*, p. 21). Baudrillard himself evokes such patterns when discussing how 'All the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion' (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 18), where the Möbius strip also exhibits local distinction and general equivalence. Similarly, in *Cool Memories II*, Baudrillard describes how: 'At Disneyland in Florida they are building a giant mock-up of Hollywood, with the boulevards, studios, etc. One more spiral in the simulacrum. One day they will rebuild Disneyland at Disneyworld' (p. 42). While a local juxtaposition between the mock-up Hollywood and 'real' Hollywood suggests that the former is a second-order representation of the latter, from afar the two become equivalent: in the order of simulation, there is no original, only a replication of models. Yet in Baudrillard's own language, the mock-up Hollywood is a 'spiral' in the simulacrum, indicating a relative distinction. A spiral is a rich geometrical figure; extending the circle into a third dimension, it is comprised of levels which are locally distinct but, if the spiral continues infinitely, phenomenologically equivalent. From a top-down perspective, a spiral is indistinguishable from a circle, but when viewed from the side it extends into space. Such perspectival multiplicity encapsulates the flexibility of Baudrillard's concepts, which change shape depending on the angle from which they are perceived. This sense is bolstered by his reference to spirals in *Revenge of the Crystal*, where he identifies theory as 'game': 'as narrative, as *spiral*, as concatenation' [italics mine] (p. 23). The spiral, like the strange loop, performs a kind of optical trick, changing shape depending on perspective.

Christopher Norris remarks that it is 'impossible for Baudrillard to present his case without falling back into a language that betrays the opposite compulsion at work' (pp. 377–78). And yet, this 'opposite compulsion' is often the opposite of the collapse of opposites. Baudrillard's language betrays a reliance on opposites in order to deconstruct them, participating in the paradoxical rhetoric of immanent criticism, aware of its linguistic limitations but unable to surpass them. As discussed above, Baudrillard's contradictions can be approached by taking the 'absolute value' of the objects he simultaneously affirms and negates, suggesting a conception of theory based on interaction rather than assertion. At the same time, his strategy of articulating ideas through the sequential process of evoking, affirming, and then negating suggests that scale must also be taken into account: the local perspective of his writing is distinct from the global perspective. As represented by strange loops, which are



related to Baudrillard's own vocabulary of spirals and Möbius strips, local distinction coexists with global equivalence. Taken in isolation, the second paragraph of *Simulacra and Simulation* would contradict his overall thesis. Understood within a wider frame of reference, it provides an illustration of a methodology that conceives of concepts as tools rather than truths: stepping stones towards a perspective which is enacted rather than affirmed. This strategy is elucidated through a closer consideration of Baudrillard's geometrical vocabulary, elaborated in the next section.

III. Dots and Bubbles: Baudrillard's Phantom Dimensionality

As suggested by his discussion of stucco, Baudrillard's world contains simulated architectures: one-dimensional spaces whose three-dimensionality is a *trompe l'oeil* illusion. This is linked to his identification of a condition of immanence. In *Revenge of the Crystal*, Baudrillard remarks that his work is in line with recent trends in the search for 'an immanence of things', aligning himself with Deleuze (p. 19). His most extensive discussion of immanence is in *Ecstasy*, where in the text's opening he comments that 'There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication' (p. 12). Baudrillard goes on to suggest that 'the distinction between an interior and an exterior […] has been blurred in a double obscenity' (*Ecstasy*, p. 20). The cancellation of the distinction between interior and exterior recalls Galloway's thesis that Baudrillard's writing on games eradicates the magic circle. What Baudrillard calls the 'ecstasy of communication' is an 'over-proximity of all things' (*Ecstasy*, p. 27), a vacuum without space or distance, with 'all functions abolished into one dimension' (*Ecstasy*, p. 23).

And yet, Baudrillard's references to depth, surface, interiority, exteriority, proximity, space, distance and dimensions emphasises how his concepts are grounded in spatial dynamics. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he suggests that the disappearance of the distinction between reality and simulation is precisely *because* of the disappearance of distance, indicating a correspondence between embodied experience and conceptual configurations: 'there is no imaginary except at a certain distance' (p. 121), where, as the order of simulacra progress, there is a tendency 'toward the reabsorption of this distance, of this gap that leaves room for an ideal or critical projection' (pp. 121–22). In an interview titled 'Games with Vestiges', he describes how there is

> *no longer any transcendence of judgment. There is a kind of participation, coagulation, proliferation of messages and signs, etc. You are no longer in a state to judge, and no potential to reflect. You are taken into the screen, you are a gaze-simulacrum. This is fascination. It is a form of ecstasy. (p. 85)*

This inability to 'reflect' further elucidates Baudrillard's methodology: since theory cannot fulfil its etymological function of observation, it must instead function through participation. Nevertheless, Baudrillard's insistence on the vanishing of space is concurrent with a persistent rhetorical evocation of space. His language is infused with spatial, geometrical terminology: a vocabulary of dots, circles and bubbles, which respectively correspond with one-dimensionality, two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. His conception of immanence relies on the evocation of theoretical distance in order to express its dissolution as spatiality continues to perform a phantom function.

The primary figure which maintains three-dimensional space in Baudrillard's rhetoric is the sphere. Despite *Ecstasy*'s insistence on the one-dimensional vacuum, the text is suffused with a language of bubbles. At the beginning, Baudrillard describes the subject's integration with their object of use through the example of the automobile: 'The vehicle […] becomes a bubble, the dashboard a console, and the landscape all around unfolds as a television screen' (*Ecstasy*, p. 13). The key to this process is the term 'becomes', 'devient' (*L'Autre*, p. 13), implying a temporal distinction: we *enter* a world in which there is only one dimension, its alternative inaccessible but theoretically and historically extant. Later in *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard remarks:

> *each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, […] in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity. (p. 15)*

Baudrillard's metaphysics is constantly alluding to *physics*, as the astronaut comparison engages a material metaphor. An astronaut only experiences weightlessness with the equipment of the spacecraft and the atmosphere of space, and Baudrillard's terminology of bubbles similarly retains a hypothetical outside. The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' (*Ecstasy*, p. 14) is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.

In 'Prophylaxis and Virulence', an essay in *Transparency and Evil*, Baudrillard discusses the 'Boy in the Bubble', referring to an American child born in the 1970s with severe immunodeficiency. The boy was kept alive in a sterilised, transparent, spherical chamber. In *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard suggests that such a 'vacuum-sealed existence' is representative of his contemporary social condition:

> *To each his own bubble; that is the law today. Just as we have reached the limits of geographic space and have explored all the confines of the planet, we can only implode into a space which is reduced daily as a result of our increasing mobility made possible by airplanes and the media, to the point where all trips have already taken place; where the vaguest desire for dispersion, evasion and movement are concentrated in a fixed point, in an immobility that has ceased to be one of non-movement and has become that of a potential ubiquity, of an absolute mobility, which voids its own space by crossing it ceaselessly and without effort. (Ecstasy, p. 39).*

What is striking about this description is that it describes an implicit transition from bubble to vacuum, culminating in a state where 'each individual is contained in one hyperpotential point' (*Ecstasy*, p. 41). The bubble *contains* the vacuum: the abolition of inside and outside is itself enclosed inside a defined system. As in the above example of the automobile, this shift is indicated by the term 'become': 'Our very brain, our very bodies have *become* this bubble, this sanitized sphere, a transparent envelope in which we seek refuge' [italics mine] (*Ecstasy*, p. 39). The scheme of transcendence underpinning the Platonic cave is not absolutely dispensed with. Probing the intricacies of Baudrillard's spatial rhetoric, one might hypothesise that, if the subjects now inside the 'bubble' could be equipped with the correct apparatus – if their eyes or antibodies *could* cope with the external environment – they could 'transcend' to a reality outside the metaphorical cave. Dimensionality is theoretically conserved.

Several critics have challenged Baudrillard's conception of immanence on spatial grounds; Katherine Hayles notes that 'Baudrillard would no doubt object that hyperrealism is not about transcendence but precisely its opposite – an immanent world that is only surface' ('Response', p. 4). Hayles argues against this, critiquing Baudrillard's reading of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* by arguing that the 'drive to transcend physical limitations' is evident in the signs of flight dominating the text, where 'desire' is not absent but reconfigured (p. 5). Commenting on the performative quality of Baudrillard's writing, she continues that 'The realm that Ballard sees beckoning to us from the margins, Baudrillard places at the center and inflates to consume the whole' (p. 5). Hayles thus sets Baudrillard's own reflections within a wider spatial framework, similarly suggesting that Baudrillard's depiction of a world without a distinction between inside and outside *itself* has an outside. David Porush, in 'The Architextuality of Transcendence', also reacts against Baudrillard's implication that imagination and transcendence will be 'sterilized' in hyperreality, arguing that transcendence can be both preserved and enhanced ('Response', p. 6). Porush defines transcendence as a process of revelation or explication, citing as an example the ancient architecture of the Temple of Solomon with its 'successive layers mediating between the populace and the holy scrolls, including curtains, doors, layers in the ark itself, veils, walls, tapestries, more walls, rooms, more doors, courtyards, further systems of walls' (p. 6). Here, transcendence is embodied architecturally through concrete structures comprising levels and layers. Rather than alluding to a metaphysical transition, Porush's transcendence describes a process of spatial disclosure.

Yet Baudrillard implies that even such spatial disclosure is no longer possible, identifying the contemporary condition as one of 'visibility, the total disappearance of secrecy. […] There is no longer any ontologically secret substance' ('The Art of Disappearing', p. 187). This applies equally to architecture: 'today our only architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles, and molecules were refracted' (*Ecstasy*, p. 20). The implication is that the architecture of the screen has no levels, no secrets, only a flat circulation of states. And yet, are there no 'secret' spaces in simulated architectures? Is there absolute visibility in the navigation of password-protected websites, and in the unlocking of new areas or abilities in video game levels? The development of digital technology corresponds with developments in the capacity to simulate space; video games, for instance, have progressed from two-dimensional text games to increasingly complex three-dimensional representations. The principle of depth is carried over, constructed through virtual rather than physical materials.

The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.

In sum, Baudrillard might assert that transcendence is not possible in a world where everything is exposed, but enclosing this exposed world within the temporally-defined boundaries of a specific context or culture, figured as a bubble, retains the idea of transcendence in a rel-

ative sense. Moreover, even within virtual architectures, the principle of transition and disclosure persists, enacted on a more abstract plane.

IV. Architectures of Play

Moving from theoretical to physical architectures in Baudrillard's writing involves a move to America, which, for Baudrillard, is frequently held as the embodiment of hyperreality. In *America* (1989), he describes America as 'neither dream nor reality' but 'a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved' (p. 28). He continues to suggest that 'the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values' (pp. 28–29). Indeed, the 'truth of America' observed by a European will also be a different 'truth' to that perceived by an Asian, African or Australian – not to mention the vast variety of perspectives contained within these continental generalisations. Nevertheless, this description again encloses hyperreality inside the bubble of a specific system, temporally and geographically bound. Baudrillard implies that, through another cultural perspective, it is possible to step outside the system of simulation and observe it – at least, to the extent allowed by the limitations of one's own vantage point. America provides Baudrillard with a case study in simulation, and he identifies a particularly gamic quality in American architectures from Disneyland to the Bonaventure Hotel.

One of Baudrillard's most striking and frequently-cited examples of simulation in *Simulacra and Simulation* is Disneyland: an explicit place of play. Disneyland, like America overall, provides the 'perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra' (p. 12). Baudrillard remarks:

> *It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 12)*

'Play' as applied to illusions and phantasms refers to movement: interactivity and rearrangement. Disneyland is a world composed of worlds, containing the subsections of Pirates, Frontier, Future World, and so on. At the same time, these worlds are defined as equivalent to the world that contains them, the distinction lying only in scale ('miniaturized'). Challenging Baudrillard's insistence on equivalence, Hayles comments that

> *Every existing simulation has boundaries that distinguish it from the surrounding environment. Disneyland sports a fence, dense hedges, and acres of parking lots. Only when these boundaries do not exist, or cease to signify that one has left the simulation and entered reality, does the dreamscape that Baudrillard evokes shimmer into existence. ('Response', p. 3)*

Yet Baudrillard's argument is that, recalling the strange loop, these boundaries provide only local distinctions. He contends that, *despite* physical demarcations, the quality of America's Disneyland is the same as the quality of America:

> *Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order*

> *and to the order of simulation. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 12)*

The boundaries are serving a purpose, but that purpose is 'saving the reality *principle*' [italics mine] (*Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 13). They maintain the idea of distinction: the absolute value.

At the same time, this local distinction is precisely the locus of attraction; Baudrillard himself has admitted that the crowds are drawn to the 'miniaturised' and the 'microcosm'. They are attracted to the principle of moving between representational levels: more abstractly, to the specific *point* at which the Möbius strip twists, or to the shift provided by the individual Penrose step. This observation does not contradict Baudrillard's claims so much as identify a nuance in his insistence on equivalence. Baudrillard's own rhetoric reveals that the game lies not so much in Disneyland itself, but in the localised transition between ontological levels. If reality had 'passed completely into the game of reality', there would be no more game, but retaining the idea of a boundary correspondingly retains the idea of a game, here expressed through a geometry of embedded (miniaturised) worlds.

A second American architecture discussed extensively by Baudrillard is the Bonaventure Hotel, which he also interprets as an architecture of play. Brian Gogan, in *The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange*, notes the contrast between Baudrillard's description and that of Fredric Jameson:

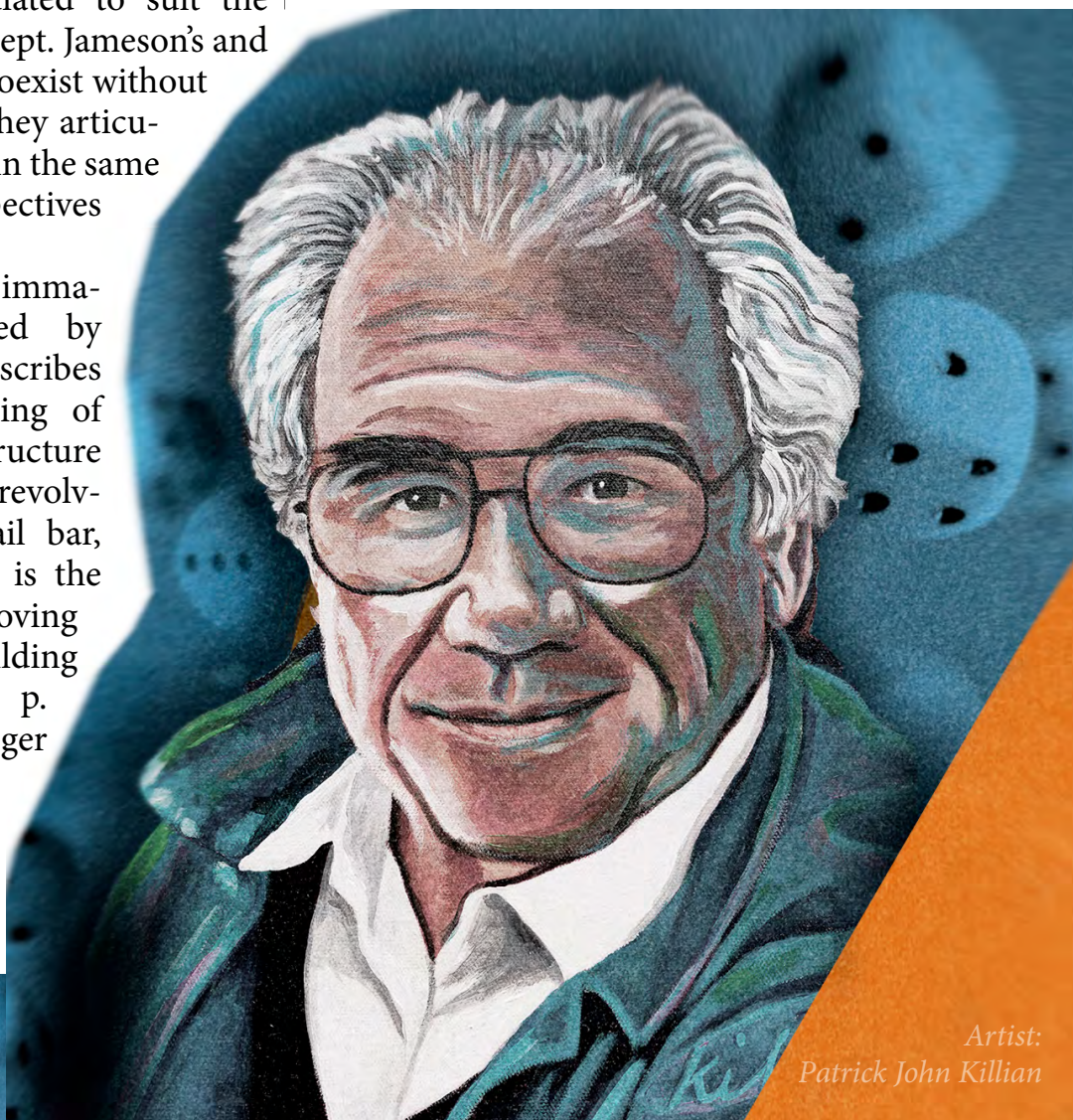
> *Whereas Jameson's treatment commences at the hotel entrances […] and eventually ascends to the rotating cocktail lounges perched atop the hotel […], Baudrillard's treatment begins at the cocktail lounge […] and descends in an attempt to find the hotel's exit […]. Jameson, on the one hand, understands the hotel as a transformative and transcendent space – one that gives humans a new view […] and one that requires new perceptual capacities […]. Baudrillard, on the other hand, understands the hotel as an 'internal refraction' that lacks mystery […]. (p. 23)*

Whether the hotel is understood through a scheme of immanence or transcendence depends on the way that each theorist chooses to descriptively navigate it. In Jameson's discussion, each element of the architecture is successively revealed through a progression inwards and upwards: entrances, gardens, glass skin, lobby, towers, cocktail lounge ('Bonaventure', pp. 11–16). He emphasises the role of escalators and elevators in stimulating a radical 'spatial experience: that of rapidly shooting up through the ceiling and outside, along one of the four symmetrical towers', finally reaching the revolving cocktail lounge in which one is 'rotated about and offered a contemplative spectacle of the city itself' (p. 15). This movement, which involves surpassing a physical boundary of enclosure (the ceiling), generates an experience of transcendence. At the same time, Jameson notes a qualitative suppression of depth: 'a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed […] without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume', where 'the suppression of depth observable in postmodern painting and literature' is achieved in an architectural medium (p. 14). This implication of immanence is accompanied by an explicit expression of transcendence, as 'this latest mutation in space […] has finally succeeded in *transcending* the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself' [italics mine] (p. 16). One transcends spatial systems in the movement through architectural levels, while this space is saturated with a sense of

immanent presence, where this saturation in turn transcends a subject's cognitive sense of location. The two conditions interact through the interplay between the physical and the phenomenological.

Contrastingly, Baudrillard begins his account with a short sentence: 'The top of the Bonaventure Hotel' (*America*, p. 62). The sentence's lack of subject exemplifies the immanent participation that Baudrillard emphasises as a feature of the hotel. By choosing to begin at the top, he negates the possibility of ascension, and his disorientation in failing to find an exit ('you cannot get out of the building itself' (*America*, p. 63)) bolsters his insistence on immanence. Yet Baudrillard has rhetorically performed the feat of being *already inside* the architecture by deliberately omitting description of the entrance. Since to be already inside the building is not physically possible, this is to instigate a rhetorical magic trick. Translated into a textual medium, architecture is manipulated to suit the framework of each concept. Jameson's and Baudrillard's accounts coexist without contradicting because they articulate different paths within the same space – different perspectives of the same object.

Baudrillard's immanence is accompanied by playfulness as he describes the disorientating feeling of perceiving the metal structure at the top of the hotel revolving around the cocktail bar, before realising that it is the bar's platform that is moving while the rest of the building remains still (*America*, p. 62). Drawing on Roger Caillois's four categories of play, this description corresponds to *ilinx*, or vertigo, whereby 'one produces in oneself, by a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder' (p. 12). Baudrillard goes on to identify something suspiciously gamic in this structure: 'Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and hallucinogenic, is this post-modern architecture?' (*America*, p. 62). He goes on to address Jameson's observation that 'the Bonaventure aspires to be a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city' ('Bonaventure', p. 12) by remarking: 'Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it' (*America*, p. 62). Both Jameson and Baudrillard suggest that the hotel is self-contained; like the magic circle of a game, it is a complete and detached space. However, this implies that, if there is no inside-outside *within* the hotel, there is an outside *outside* the



Artist: Patrick John Killian

hotel. Baudrillard's immanence is relative to a certain systematic configuration because he cannot theoretically abolish the structure of physical space. It could be argued that physicality is irrelevant here, as Baudrillard is discussing something more subtle and perceptual. Yet throughout this essay I have aimed to illustrate how the physical and metaphorical inform each other. As Jameson noted in his description of the elevator's upward motion, the physical vertical movement facilitated by the hotel's features, and selectively ignored in Baudrillard's description, enacts an experience of revelation and discovery. The architecture of the hotel is linguistically manipulated by each critic, making immanence relative.

In sum, Baudrillard's writing depicts Disneyland and the Bonevanture hotel as ludic worlds where the distinction between inside and outside is theoretically negated but materially present. This local distinction, I have argued, is a point of attraction and can stimulate a sense of play. The significance of local transition is also implied in *Paroxysm*, where Baudrillard comments on the relationship between America and Europe: 'with us, everything is always philosophical – even the glorification of appearances against depth […]. Over there, even theory *becomes* once again what it is: a fiction' [Italics mine] (p. 82). The terminology of 'becomes' suggests that the transition between a culture of philosophy and a culture of fiction can be transformative and revelatory. Along these lines, explicitly conceiving of theory as fiction has implications which will be unpacked in the following section.

IV. Theory-Fiction

Baudrillard's style is frequently characterised as compelling but unclear, lacking solid argumentative infrastructure. Mark Poster suggests that his writings are open to several criticisms: 'he fails to define his major terms, such as the code'; 'His writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate'; 'He totalises his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims' (p. 83). Christopher Norris articulates a similar ambivalence:

> *so long as we don't read too carefully he can thus carry off the performative trick of conjuring away with one hand those same criteria (truth, reality, history etc.) which he then summons up with the other for purposes of contrastive definition. (p. 379)*

He goes on to conclude that Baudrillard is 'thoroughly inconsequent and muddled when it comes to philosophising on the basis of his own observations' (p. 379). According to the above, Baudrillard's flaws can be summarised as imprecision, confusion and contradiction. As Norris points out, there is a sense of a *trick* in his rhetoric: something that cannot be grasped, performed behind the scenes, deliberately misleading and resisting clarification.

Still, Baudrillard anticipates these charges. In *Paroxysm*, he remarks: 'I am aware of the paradoxical rhetoric in my writing, a rhetoric that exceeds its own probability. The terms are purposefully exaggerated' (p. 186). Perhaps one way of accounting for these paradoxes and contradictions on a rhetorical level is to treat Baudrillard's texts as fiction. There is precedence for this from both Baudrillard and his critics. Regarding the latter, Guy Bellavance, in an interview with Baudrillard, introduces *The Fatal Strategy* as a work of '*sociology fiction*' (*Crystal*, p. 15). Similarly, Hayles comments that 'Baudrillard is as skilled a fiction writer as Ballard, Dick, or Lem', where his works do not only 'describe the implosion into simulation' but 'enact it by systematically eliding the borders that

mark the differences between simulation and reality' ('Response', p. 5). She mentions the 'high' described by her students after reading Baudrillard, categorising his writing with 'performative texts' (p. 5). This 'high' points to the compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing, which corresponds with the attraction to the local transition between levels of representation.

Fiction functions according to different rhetorical expectations to theory. As suggested by Hayles, Baudrillard's ideas are performed rather than described, enacted rather than elucidated. Along these lines, Gogan identifies a 'performative dimension' (p. 13) to Baudrillard's aphoristic writing. Conducting a detailed analysis of aphorisms, he outlines how 'the aphorism leaves open the possibility that the world maintains its suprasensibility – that is, a fundamental position above human sensibility' (pp. 136–37). The aphorism 'maintains the mystery of the world' (p. 137) – a mystery which has, Baudrillard asserted, also disappeared. Indeed, Gogan concludes that 'Baudrillard's use of the aphorism genre performs appearance and disappearance at the same time' (p. 138). The practice of holding contradictions simultaneously in play can be performed by fiction, which, as postmodernist fiction exemplifies, is under no obligation to resolve paradox.

What fiction provides for Baudrillard is a space of hypothesis. In *Paroxysm* he explicitly comments that his exploration of what happens 'after the demise of different things and truths' can only be performed 'through the use of thought experiments' (p. 186). Fiction acts as an exploratory space that allows objects to be experimentally rearranged in different configurations. Accordingly, in the Bellavance interview Baudrillard acknowledges that

> *the concepts I use are not exactly concepts. I wouldn't insist on their conceptual rigour: that would be far too constricting […]. You can play around with them. But that isn't frivolous or mundane; it is very serious in my opinion. It is the only possible way to account for the movement of things. (Crystal, p. 23)*

The reference to 'movement' is associated with the etymology of play in both English and French. In English, the word's primary OED definition is 'Exercise, brisk or free movement or action'; in French, *jeu* encompasses 'free movement' as well as play and games in its span of definitions (definition 8, Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary). This is the sense foregrounded by Derrida when discussing the play of substitutions in 'Structure, Sign and Play', although the ludic aspect is also simultaneously evoked. In Baudrillard's interview comment above, the sense of play as movement is defined against the implied stasis of rigorously defined objects. Play describes

a methodology as well as an activity, performed with a purposive intent which seeks illumination through interactivity. When Bellavance asks if Baudrillard is saying that 'theory ultimately has the right not to be true', he responds 'Absolutely, the right to play or to be radical' (*Crystal*, p. 24). If truth is something fixed and unchanging, play is, contrastingly, moving and evolving. Play does not affirm because affirmation is static; instead, play 'brings more intense things into being' (*Crystal*, p. 24). Again, the absolute value of an idea takes precedence over affirmation and negation, where bringing into being is prioritised over the question as to whether the object brought into being is 'true'.

an attempt at shifting the conversation, a means of suggesting that 'We need to have many ways of expressing theory' (p. 24). In his own words, Baudrillard's writing both *is* and *is not* fiction: fiction is affirmed and negated at the same time, drawing attention to the term's absolute value.

Fiction forms a world in the way that a game forms a world, suggesting another ontology, while at the same time this reality is attached like a Möbius strip to the reality from which it was created – and, from afar, can be seen as the same reality. Baudrillard explores this in *Paroxysm*, where he comments: 'Let's say that we manufacture a double of the world which substitutes itself for the world, we

The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.

The sense of fiction as hypothesis is made explicit in *Cool Memories II*, when Baudrillard comments:

> *Fiction? That's what I do already. My characters are a number of crazy hypotheses which maltreat reality in various ways and which I kill off at the end when they have done their work. The only way to treat ideas: murder (they kill concepts, don't they?) – but the crime has to be perfect. This is all imaginary, of course. (pp. 21–22)*

Fiction allows for this theoretical violence because it takes place within a magic circle: a world without stakes. Here, characters can be dead and alive at the same time, since the significance lies is the *modulus* of their existence. At the same time, in *Revenge of the Crystal* Baudrillard qualifies that 'the aim is not exactly fiction as such', implying that his use of 'fiction' is simply

generate the confusion between the world and its double' (p. 43). To employ another metaphor, these multiplied 'worlds' float around each other and interact, a strategy summarised by Baudrillard in 'Games with Vestiges': since one is 'entirely within systems', one 'plays off and through the commutations of the systems themselves' (p. 94). The purpose of inventing theoretical 'worlds' is to generate friction and energy through the interaction between them. This is through a mode of relation that is eccentric rather than concentric; in 'Radical Thought', Baudrillard describes radical thought as a game that is 'eccentric to the real, ex-centred from the real world' (p. 54). Similarly, in *Paroxysm*, he suggests a shift from dialectical thinking to 'what is ex-centred, eccentric' (p. 43). Whereas concentric circles are a series of circles that all have the same centre, eccentric circles are interlinked but have different centres.

If Baudrillard's thought is eccentric to the real, then it is does not precisely align with the real but somehow overlaps with it. There is no shared point between subject and object, between theory and world, but a sideways relationship – something that allows *friction*, because the mapping is not precise.

In response to the 'game of reality', then, Baudrillard suggests a 'game *with* reality' [italics mine] ('Radical Thought', p. 54), putting forward a conception of theory which does not pretend to be above its object of description but is, instead, knowingly equivalent. He remarks: 'it is not enough for theory to describe and analyse, it must itself be an event in the universe it describes' (*Ecstasy*, p. 99). In a condition of immanence, theory cannot pretend to be outside the system it is attempting to define. Accordingly, its etymological definition of *theoria*, as observation, gives way to *fiction*, as fabrication. It is no longer a window but an object, something opaque rather than transparent. In Baudrillard's writing, reality seems to be composed of a series of equivalent worlds, where the world of fiction is no less real than the world of non-fiction, but another floating and equivalent plane which interacts with the other floating and equivalent planes – and, through this interaction, generates illumination.

Reading strange loops into Baudrillard's disaffirmation of distinctions between representations and realities does not necessarily contradict his arguments – as, in his own words, Baudrillard eschews the dialectic by anticipating that theory has a 'right not to be true' but instead 'play' (*Crystal*, p. 24). Through this article, I hope to have shown that local distinctions in simulacra coexist with global ontological equivalence, performing explanatory work and revealing a transformative potential in the moment of transition. In the same vein, one-dimensional immanence coexists with a simulation of depth that maintains abstract but functional distinctions. Viewing Baudrillard's writing through a lens of fiction sets his paradoxes in a context of experimentation and hypothesis, where an idea's 'absolute value' takes precedence over conclusive assertion. Baudrillard both affirms and disaffirms that reality is a game. He both affirms and disaffirms that simulacra are a game. In formulating such compelling contradictions, he is inviting both readers and critics to play.

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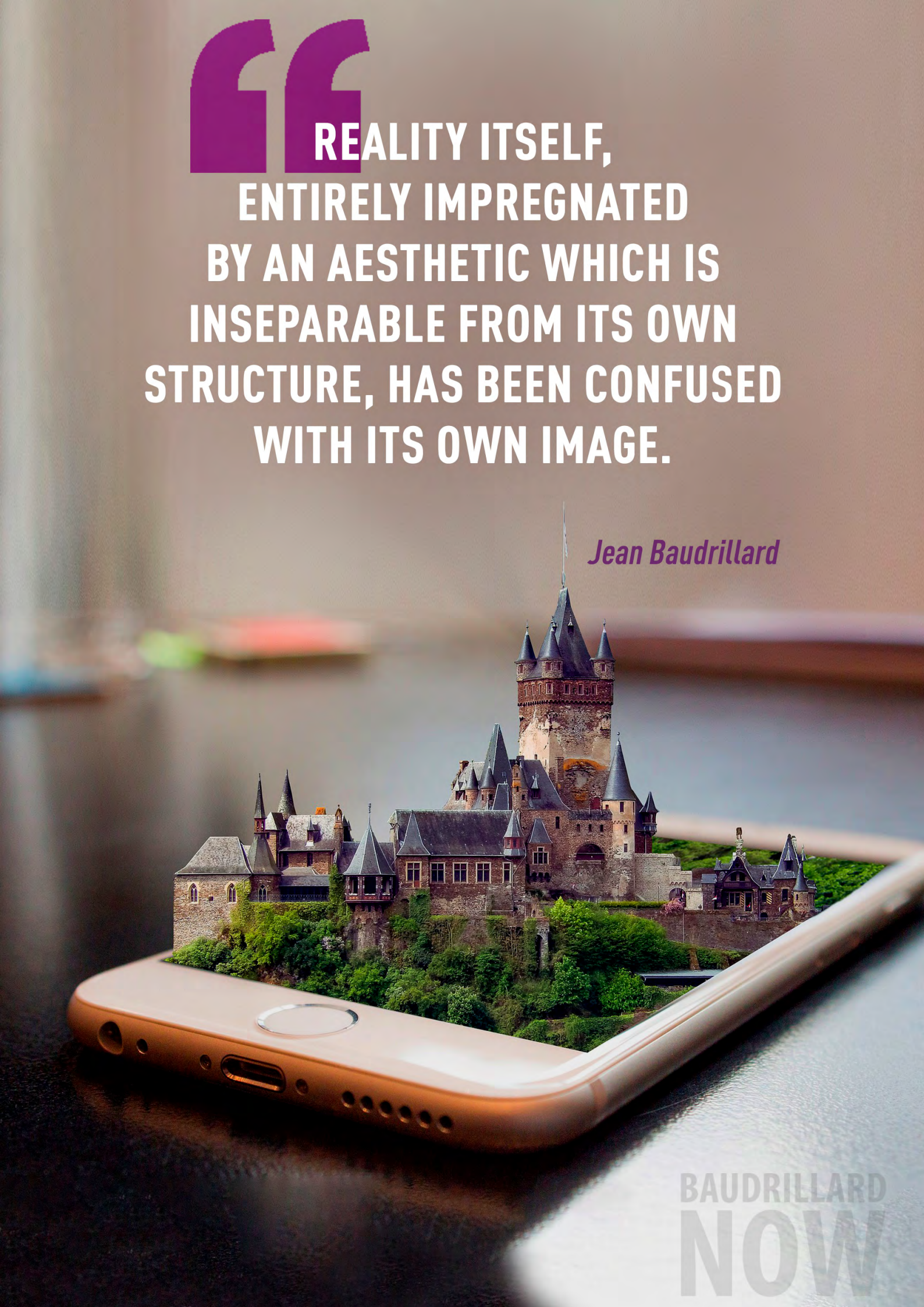

REALITY ITSELF,
ENTIRELY IMPREGNATED
BY AN AESTHETIC WHICH IS
INSEPARABLE FROM ITS OWN
STRUCTURE, HAS BEEN CONFUSED
WITH ITS OWN IMAGE.
Jean Baudrillard
BAUDRILLARD
NOW

Baudrillard's Spirit of Terrorism: A Generation Z Perspective

James Wolf Masson
Senior at Syosset High School, recipient of numerous academic awards

8

At the very beginning of his controversial essay first published in *Le Monde* on November 3, 2001, *L'esprit du terrorisme,* Jean Baudrillard cites the Argentinean writer Macedonio Fernandez's belief that the world events of the last years of the millennium were on "strike." Baudrillard writes, "when it comes to symbolic events on a world scale—that is to say not just events that gain worldwide coverage—but events that represent a setback for globalization itself—we had none" (2013, p.3). With the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Baudrillard declares, as if he is relieved, "Well, the strike is over now. Events are not on strike any more" (2013, p. 3). He suggests that the attacks represent "the absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place" (2013, p.3).

Baudrillard goes on to argue that the unimaginable collapse of the World Trade Center towers held more symbolic power than its physical impact. He opines, "It is probable that the terrorists had not foreseen the collapse of the Twin Towers (any more than had the experts!), a collapse which – much more than the attack on the Pentagon – had the greatest symbolic impact" (2013, p. 6). In Baudrillardian terms, the attacks were a kind of

"hyperreal" act of violence that exposed the limitations and contradictions of the global order. They were a form of "counter-violence" that exposed the underlying violence and terror of the global system, and that they revealed the limitations and contradictions found within the West and its capitalist culture. Baudrillard posits:

> *"When global power monopolizes to this extent, when there is such a formidable condensation of all functions in the technocratic machinery, and when no alternative form of thinking is allowed, what other way is there but a terroristic situational transfer? It was the system itself which created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation. By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the Other to change the rules" (2013, p.7).*

Baudrillard is suggesting that the spirit of terrorism is a response to the hyperreal world dominated by the West where reality is presented as a series of images and simulations. For the French philosopher and sociologist, the act of terrorism cuts through the simulacra of the media making an impact on reality. The spirit of terrorism challenges the dominance of the West by employing violence to upset the established order and create fear and uncertainty. Terror is used as an effective strategy and the only means available to marginalized groups seeking to counter Western hegemony. This highly controversial analysis has caused many to stop short of accusing Baudrillard of praising the collapse of the towers and giving the terrorists a type of moral superiority (see, for example, Wolin, 2004 and Merrin, 2005).

My contemporaries, Generation Z (Gen Z for short), also colloquially known as zoomers, representing anyone born in the 1997 to 2012 time period, might be a bit more simpatico with Baudrillard. This is not to say that we would accept his philosophical ruminations as the gospel according to John. Rather, it implies that we would be better equipped to understand him than those of past generations. This understanding of Baudrillard derives in part from growing up as a generation surrounded by terror. A fellow Gen Z-er sums it up best: "My fellow Gen Z-ers are so used to war and thoughts of terrorism that it's just second nature. Throw in domestic terrorism, gun violence and school shootings that we've been exposed to since grade school, and the childhood innocence that previous generations may have felt never really existed for me and most of my friends" (Yarrow, 2021). Yes, to be sure, other generations have had periods of tranquility free from traumatizing domestic events. The 1950s often call the Golden Age of America comes to mind. Zoomers, however, know only a world where the talk of nuclear conflict and impending world war (or for Baudrillard, a Fourth World War brought about by 9/11 attacks) is common occurrence and a real possibility.

Generation Z is also the first generation to have easy access to the ubiquitous Internet taking to it so to speak like a duck to water. As a result, Gen Zers are dubbed the "iGen" generation, a shortened descriptor for internet generation. The statistics on their online usage are astounding. For example, 99Firms, the website that creates marketing surveys on the digital word, reports that Gen Zers spend 74% of "their free time online and 66% report using more than one device connected to the internet at a time. … As digital natives, most of the Generation Z population spends at least one hour online every day. According to Generation Z statistics, screen time across multiple screens – smartphones, tablets, laptops, desktops, and TVs – is estimated at 8 hours" (Vuleta, 2023).

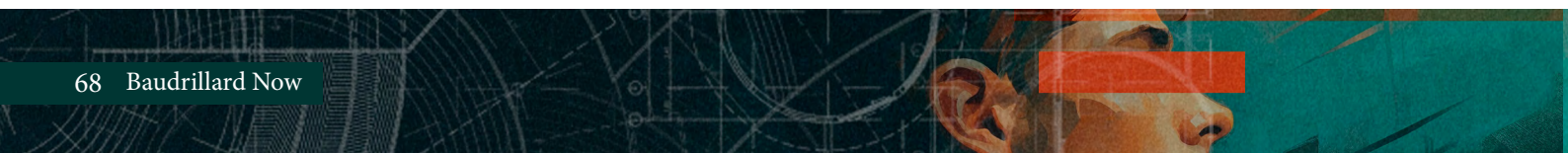
Gone are the early morning or late night treks to the card catalogs of libraries relied upon by past generations. For Generation Z, smartphones are the new card catalogs. Ypulse, a company that specializes in youth market research and insights, states: "Their [Gen Z] digital connection began at earlier ages than Millennials, making smartphones one of their first screens and Gen Z a truly mobile-focused generation. Having grown up with these tools at hand, most have never known a time when they didn't have a world of knowledge at their fingertips" (2022). Ypulse found that (1) 12 is the average age Gen Zers received their first smartphone compared to their parents which received theirs at 17 and (2) 79% of Gen Zers claim they can't live without their smartphones vs. 70% for their parents (2022).

Smartphone apps like Tik Tok and Instagram enable Gen Zers to witness and learn in real time about global events oftentimes from others with contrarian viewpoints. Being weaned on the Internet makes Gen Z the most global of generations. These encounters and relationships facilitated by digital media contribute to an understanding of the concept of good and evil that differs from that of our parents. The latter's view of morality shaped and guided their thinking of the world and all the events preceding and succeeding the destruction of the Twin Towers. Our understanding of morality might be more in line with that of Baudrillard as expressed in his *Spirit of Terrorism*.

There Is No Absolute Morality

Entering the world five years after the attacks on the World Trade Center did not free me from feeling the impact of the destruction of the towers. Waiting on long airport lines, full body scans, and the occasional intrusive pat-downs were routinely experienced as our families made their way to Disneyland, the popular vacation venue that Baudrillard once described as an example of "hyperreality." Airline travel, with its restrictive security protocols and the actions of sometimes officious Transportation Security Officers, served as a constant reminder to our elders of the attacks and how they had changed their lives. Gone for them were the halcyon days of airline travel when a classic red Victorinox Swiss Army Knife could be safely tucked away in your pocket. Sadly these bucolic times are no longer possible. As a Gen Z put it, "I have never known what it's like to go through airport security without taking my shoes off and my laptop out of my bag" (Yarrow, 2021).

Like all children of past generations, we zoomers were trained up to believe that there were "good guys" and "bad guys." In the post-9/11 global landscape, we were told these good and bad guys were represented by us and Islamic terrorists, respectively. Little thought was given to trying to ferret out the actual cause of the 9/11 attacks and what might be our collective culpability. It was simply easier to conceptualize good and evil in terms of absolutes populating different ends of a moral continuum that helped us tell right from wrong. The digital media of my generation had wholeheartedly embraced and reinforced this simplistic dichotomous perspective with cartoonish portrayals of the personas of villains and heroes. The antagonist always harbored an evil plot that was often portrayed as taking over the world and capturing the rather sweet and demure damsel. The good-natured protagonist's duty was scripted to thwart the villain's plan and thereby save the day. Repeated exposure to this narrative reinforced our beliefs about what is morally right and wrong. Lessons learned were



then applied to the world around us as we navigated our way towards maturity, but wait, there's more. Much more!

The decade in which many of my generation entered their impressionable adolescent years also coincided with the media's new found fascination and portrayal of the "anti-hero." The latter being the protagonist that has clear flaws but still portrayed as the "good guy." These key players may not act in a solely moral way, but the audience is mandated to look past their transgressions because they are fighting for a cause that we all can get behind. Consider the American TV drama series "Game of Thrones" which first aired in 2011 and seen throughout the world. This extraordinarily popular show features families that vie for control over the fictional lands set on the continents of Westeros and Essos. The show is known for its many complex and diverse male and female anti-heroes. Take, for example, the quite lovable anti-hero Bronn, a swashbuckler with a heart of gold. The latter is offset by Bronn's smug demeanor and lack of empathy. There is also the lone wolf Arya Stark, a young girl who has fought her way through so many difficult situations where others would have crumbled. She isn't the hero many people make her out to be. She has a deadly, vengeful streak in her capable of committing violent acts to benefit others. Bronn and Arya Stark contribute mightily to the show's popularity and that speaks volumes about how the anti-hero is welcomed and celebrated in today's society.

This new appreciation of nuance found throughout our expanding digital age extends to the villain as well. Villains now commit wrongdoing because the environment around them compelled them to do so rather than behavior mandated by their genetic makeup. In Jungian terms, these personas appeal to the public more because they are a better representation of reality. In a recent survey of 2,011 U.S. adults representing the different generations, more than half surveyed said they watched a television series or movie just for the villain. And a quarter of those respondents preferred the villain over the hero. By a wide majority (69%), the Gen Zers polled attributed their preference to villains' complexity. They (i.e., 49%) also preferred villains-turned-heroes more than any other grouped surveyed (Research, 2022).

People are neither entirely good nor entirely bad and the antihero or misunderstood baddie is a true reflection of this reality. How often is it said, "let him who is without sin cast the first stone." This often quoted allusion to an utterance of Jesus in John 8:7 should hold additional meaning for our generation as it is reflected subliminally throughout our media that we constantly use. Moreover, Baudrillard

lectures us about this in his essay when he addresses the agathokakological nature of things: "We believe naively that the progress of Good, its advances in all fields (the sciences, technology, democracy, human rights) corresponds to a defeat of Evil. No one seems to have understood that Good and Evil advance together, as part of the same movement" (2013, p. 10). Baudrillard is telling us in somewhat ecclesiastical terms, if you will, that we are all imperfect beings and that casting stones is counterproductive.

The Gen Zers nuanced perspectives described and illustrated above gives us an antinomy of sorts that muddles a distinct continuum that moves from moral to immoral that was an important mainstay of past generations. For Gen Zers, it becomes increasingly harder to distinguish who the protagonist and antagonist are by purely viewing their separate perspectives, something Baudrillard suggests and supports when waxing philosophical on Good and Evil: "No one seems to have understood that Good and Evil advance together, as part of the same movement. The triumph of the one does not eclipse the other – far from it. In metaphysical terms, Evil is regarded as an accidental mishap, but the axiom, from which all the Manichaean forms of the struggle of Good against Evil derive, is illusory. Good does not conquer Evil, nor indeed does the reverse happen: they are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated" (2013, pp. 10 - 11). Thus, creating a situation where we as the third party must choose a side while being cautiously sympathetic to the other's cause. Since this new way of thinking has been thrust upon my generation from a young age, it has been our default way of viewing conflicts within and outside of fiction.

Where's Baudrillard?

It is well known that today's media has a tendency to editorialize tilting politically to either the left or the right. Media companies such as POLITICO and academic institutions like Florida Atlantic University have studied and documented the difference (Byers, 2013; Galoustian, 2021). Some have even created "media bias charts" to show political lean and credibility of news organizations (Sheridan, 2021). One only has to tune into the Fox News Channel and MSNBC on any given night to see the tilt in real time (Wemple, 2013). Suffice to say that no matter the extent of the tilt, a tilt does exist and its obvious. It is well documented as well that the tilt that has existed on campuses has increased (Magness, 2019). It should come as no surprise that Wikipedia, the most widely used source of information in the world, has a well-defined left-wing bias (Tezuka and Ashtear, 2020).

Given this state of affairs, it is somewhat puzzling why Baudrillard's *Spirit of Terrorism* is not better known. After all, the political left who editorialize in the media are quick to blame society for the actions of the criminals that are plaguing are major cities. One would think that Baudrillard's suggestion that terrorism is the only means available for marginalized groups seeking to counter Western hegemony would at the very least be in play.

Can Baudrillard's absence within the media and the classroom be related to his works being written in French? As with all translated works, nuances and subtleties of thought may be lost. His work often alludes to specific historical and cultural contexts that better resonate with European readers. His writing style is often abstract requiring familiarity with sociological and philosophical concepts. This

complexity will often deter those outside of academic circles from engaging with his work. Additionally, his work is deeply rooted in post-structuralism and continental philosophy which is better appreciated in European intellectual circles. In the Anglosphere, the philosophical tradition is more influenced by analytic philosophy which focuses on language and logical analysis. These differences will no doubt contribute to barriers to widespread dissemination of ideas across regions.

All the above aside, Baudrillard's absence in America and prominence in Europe better relates to differences in the ways that the 9/11 attacks were viewed? Consider, for example, that in Europe the attacks were mostly attributed to political and social factors stemming in part from American foreign policy initiatives whereas in the United States the focus was on the brutality of the event and the enormous loss of innocent lives. The ways in which citizens and politicians reacted to the attacks are also illustrative of a stark difference. Cleary, Americans demanded retribution and military action while Europeans stressed the need for international cooperation and diplomacy. These distinct differences contributed to an "intellectual gag rule" of sorts on anything Baudrillard contributing to our nescience of his writings.

Let None of His Words Fall to the Ground

My introduction to Baudrillard came at my grandfather's home when I picked up a copy of the *Spirit of Terrorism* lying on a table in the living room. After thumbing through a few dog-eared pages, I was hooked. Before leaving, I asked my grandfather, "Pop Pop, can I take this book home to read." "Sure James, and let me know what you think of Baudrillard?" Ergo, the rai·son d'ê·tre for my thoughts in this essay. Incidentally, you might be thinking, What was a copy of Baudrillard doing on my Pop Pop's living room table?" Well, he's a university professor specializing in global terrorism studies. The bulletin board in his office is festooned with clippings and papers related to his work. Books on terrorism are found throughout his house.

Now that you know how I came to know Baudrillard, let me make some observations. To begin, even though Baudrillard did not directly engage with my generation, passing away in 2007, his ideas and concepts can still offer some valuable insight into the culture and social dynamics that characterize Generation Z. Consider, for example, his suggestion mentioned earlier in this paper concerning the spirit of terrorism. As you might recall, he suggested that it was a response to the hyperreal world dominated by the West where reality is presented as a series of images and simulations. This suggestion is certainly relevant to the digital nature of my generation and our immersion in a word shaped by social media, virtual realities, and online interactions. Baudrillard's critique of the hyperreal world with its blurring of reality and simulation should resonate with our generation as well since we are maturing in a digital world with the distinctions between real and the virtual can be ambiguous. While Baudrillard's work predated the existence of my generation, and his debatable reasoning for the destruction of the Twin Towers aside, his concepts and analyses can be applied to explore the culture, social, and technological dynamics that describe Gen Z.

Baudrillard's expressions on morality as discussed earlier in this paper are very much inline with that of my contemporaries. The way he approaches and relates the agathokakological nature of things in

somewhat ecclesiastical terms sheds light as to how Good and Evil advance together. In our digital world, his analysis helps us better understand todays continuum that moves from moral to immoral and is represented in how today's media portrays its heroes and villains. The absolute morality of past generations is no longer in play and Baudrillard can help Gen Zers understand why. In fact, not only does my generation's view of morality differ but studies have found that Generation Z are the most likely to say morality changes over time (see, for example, Earls, 2018).

In Samuel 3:19, it is said that the LORD stood by Samuel as he matured, and protected Samuel's words from falling to the ground. Here is my take away from the verse: It's possible for one's communication, one's sayings, to be protected from destruction or being ignored. Ignoring Baudrillardian analyses in a digital world is a mistake. With this in mind, I would hope that Generation Z does not let Baudrillard's words fall to the ground.

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The Supreme Illusion of Real Time as the Limit of All Accelerations

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9

Give up yourself unto the moment, the time is now.
Give up yourself unto the moment Let's make this moment last.
Moloko, *The Time is Now.*

Introduction

The reflection on Real Time represents the culmination of a theoretical investigation and, moreover, the most significant testament that Jean Baudrillard has left us. Upon closer inspection, one of the fundamental trajectories followed by his philosophical discourse is the transition from the centrality of space (Barile 2012) – from the "System of Objects" (1972) to Disneyland in "Simulacra and Simulations" – to that of time. In addressing this question, Baudrillard exhibits an interest typical of an epistemologist. In contrast to M. McLuhan, who was much more fascinated by the subatomic physics of Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, the French philosopher expresses himself mostly as an attempt to construct a sort of relativistic socio-anthropology.

Furthermore, his considerations on the technological domination of time remain very relevant, certainly much more so than the vulgate in the nineties that cele-

brated the emancipatory qualities of new media. This perspective still lingers in public debate as a legitimization of globalist power based on neoliberal ideology, a situation that worsened following the financial crisis of 2008. It was only then that it became clear to everyone how the logic of real-time was embodied not so much in the myth of connectivity but primarily in the financial penetration into daily life and the uncompromising valorization of every experience.

In this article, I will reconstruct a brief history of social acceleration by referencing the work of Jean Baudrillard and other authors frequently cited by him. I will then focus on Baudrillard's definition of Real Time and its permanence in contemporary academic debate.

Dromology and social acceleration

Societies affected by technology are engaged in a linear movement of spatial expansion and simultaneous physical multiplication of exchanges. This process reaches full maturity in the historical phase commonly known as modernity. This term typically denotes a moment of rupture with the logic of an era in which tradition and the past served as constant points of reference for people's conduct. In other words, premodernity is considered a phase lacking a defined historical perspective, preventing the present from being inscribed in an orderly and regulated sequence of events. Therefore, modernity represents an instance of liberation and acceleration of social systems toward an upper limit that, for a long time, could not be surpassed.

According to the philosopher, "all modernity has had as its objective the advent of this real world, the liberation of men and real energies, aimed towards an objective transformation of the world, beyond all the illusions with which the 'critical analysis has fueled philosophy and praxis" (Baudrillard 1996, p. 69). The Hegelian concept of "ascension" could be conceptualized as a theoretical model anticipating and legitimizing the thrust that science and technology have subsequently applied to modern societies. This liberation occurs in terms of a progressive technicalization of daily practice, driven by an increasing ability to manipulate time. The strength of technology, coupled with a dynamic and universalistic vision of history offered by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, has propelled Western societies not only to break the chains of tradition but also to progressively overcome every friction and obstacle that everyday life poses against the logic of the obsolescence of commodities (Baudrillard 1976; Heller 1981). However, the liberating force of technology in modernity is still relative, as well as the acceleration it imparts to social systems. Baudrillard almost formulates an equation regarding the relationship between history, modernity, and reality, which we could summarize as follows: modernity=history=reality.

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 1994).

As emphasized in "For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality..." (1999), it is impossible to conceive a clear contrast between reality and the imaginary. In fact, Baudrillard notes, "believe we are forcing the world with technology but through technology it is the world that imposes itself on us. And the surprise effect of this reversal is truly considerable" (ibid, p.107). The joint process of worldliness and the temporalization of collective experience has profoundly influenced our concept of reality. The exponential increase in social mobility is part of a linear and upward historical perspective that continually grapples with the friction imposed by reality, with the goal of overcoming it. The speed of this narrative is relative, constrained by a certain limit. It is the speed of

industry and machines that, while reducing, still maintains the separation between places and times. Consequently, the cult and the associated specter of speed have, in a sense, paved the way for the affirmation of an entirely different feeling. To explore the relationship between technology and speed, Paul Virilio (frequently cited by Baudrillard) introduced the term 'dromology'—the science of speed. This concept gained traction with advancements in optics starting as early as the tenth century and culminated in the seventeenth century in a radical revolution that Virilio labels the 'logistics of perception.'

rise to a world previously foreign to everyday experience. Overcoming the distance between different places has dismantled space-time barriers, and the extension of perception has suggested ways to bridge the gap between the far and the near, eventually leading to the definitive elimination of distances. This process reached full maturity with the diffusion of motor vehicles, which, even in the early twentieth century, were approaching today's average speeds (Kern 1995). As McLuhan observed at the time, 'the intensification of traffic due to the advent of money and roads had put an end to the 'static' tribal condition

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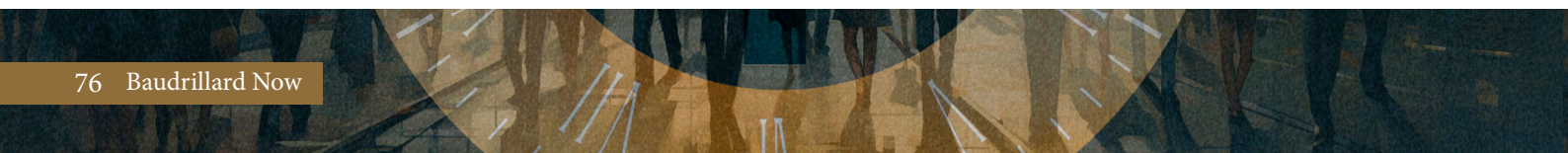
The moment they appeared on the scene, the first optical devices (Al-Hasan ibn al-Haitam aka Alhazen's camera obscura in the tenth century, Roger Bacon's instruments in the thirteenth, the increasing number of visual prostheses, lenses, astronomic telescopes and so on from the Renaissance on) profoundly altered the contexts in which mental images were topographically stored and retrieved (…). The telescope, that epitome of the visual prosthesis, projected an image of a world beyond our reach and thus another way of moving about in the world, the *logistics of perception* inaugurating an unknown conveyance of sight that produced a telescoping of near and far, a *phenomenon of acceleration* obliterating our experience of distances and dimensions (Virilio 1994, p. 4).

While the paradigm in which the logistics of perception develops is primarily Newtonian, its impact on daily life somehow foreshadows the remarkable revolution we have experienced with the advent of electronic media first and then digital media. This is because, since then, technological advancements have given

(as Toynbee defines the nomadic culture of hunter-gatherers)' (McLuhan 1997, p. 40). However, the Canadian mediologist was perhaps one of the first to understand that the opposition between a static past, generating a sedentary culture, and a dynamic present, producing a culture of mobility, is a bold simplification. The growth in the intensity of a given process, when it reaches its limit point, results in a reversal into a condition opposite to the one from which we started. It is the logic of the saturation point that manifests itself 'when all available resources and energies have been expended in an organism or structure,' and it is at this point that 'a sort of reversal of the pattern' occurs (ibidem). Thus, while social acceleration has marked the decisive detachment of 'modern times' from the referential orbit of a stationary past, the excess of this movement has propelled the social system beyond its own limit, towards a new dimension of stasis.

Turbulence and postmodernity

The concept that Baudrillard adopts to indicate the outcome of the social acceleration imposed by technology is the still



overall 'Newtonian' one of turbulence. It signifies how, in a late modern phase, the linear concatenations that had characterized modernity begin to break down. The sense of reality, previously defined within a precise framework along the trajectory of social systems' acceleration, now starts to falter. In purely physical terms, it can be stated that the reality effect exists only in a system with relative speed and continuity.

Just as long as it took for our species to pass them through the filter of the material abstraction of the code and calculation. Having been real for a while, the world was not destined to remain so for long. It will have taken only a few centuries to traverse the orbit of the real, and be very rapidly lost beyond it. In purely physical terms, we may say that the reality effect exists only in a system of relative speed and continuity. In slower societies – primitive ones, for example – reality does not exist; it does not "crystallize," for want of a sufficient critical mass.... In societies which are over-rapid, like our own, the reality effect becomes hazy: acceleration brings a jostling of causes and effects, linearity gets lost in turbulence, and reality, in its relative continuity, no longer has time to happen (Baudrillard 1996, p. 45).

The process of physical acceleration, translating into ethical-social emancipation, reaches its extreme and tends to reverse into its opposite. This perspective highlights the utility of an agonistic thought capable of grappling with an increasingly paradoxical and hyperbolic reality. Baudrillard employs various rhetorical figures to illustrate this extreme stage, with 'metalepsis' (Baudrillard 1993) standing out. This term denotes how turbulence disrupts the linear concatenations of modernity, inverting causes with effects. We now confront the limits of scientific reflection, as the reversibility of causes and effects, means and ends, reality and the imaginary, introduces the theme of the science of imaginary solutions—Pataphysics. Baudrillard draws on the dramaturgy of A. Jarry to update it in its postmodern version. Medical and organic metaphors, such as the paroxysmal stage, triumph as well. This term indicates the moment when a disease manifests all its excrescences, revealing the deepest essence of reality precisely when it is about to be overcome. Another metaphor, hysteresis (ibidem), illustrates the reverse movement—the resistance of reality persisting in a world infected by virtuality, akin to nails and hair continuing to grow on the body of a corpse. The transition from modernity to postmodernity, unwillingly witnessed and championed by Baudrillard, underscores the paradoxical nature of the acceleration/stasis relationship.

If the Baudrillard of the seventies and eighties insisted on the intensification of exchanges and the increasingly rapid permutations of signs in a new symbolic regime that moved from production towards simulation, that of the nineties came to define the the asymptote towards which all the relative speeds of exchanges within the social system are directed. This supreme limit is precisely real time, a notion that the philosopher dissects once again through the philosophical translation of physical reasoning. This is a problematic formulation right from the words used to define it given that, despite its "real" being, it represents a supreme and definitive illusion: the effect of a suppression of the boundary between the subject and the object, the emitter from recipient, the actor from the event it produces.

Real Time as limit of accelerations

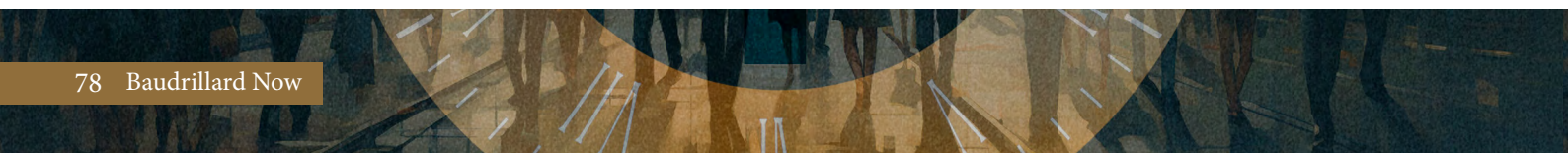
Real time: "instantaneous proximity of the event and its double, in information. Proximity of man and his action at a distance [...]" (Baudrillard 1996, p. 36).

Technology, and particularly its ultimate product—information, serves as the primary architect in neutralizing the distance that separates causes and effects, agents and actions. It also contributes to the suppression of what is commonly referred to as reality. Real-time, therefore, represents the pinnacle of nihilism of technology. After centuries of modifying social perceptions of time, technology manages to completely transform its nature. Baudrillardian analysis, when delving into something as fundamental as the nature of time, takes on Heideggerian traits. The polemical objective consistently revolves around the cybernetic conception of life, which sacrifices the illusion of the world—embodied this time by deferred time, a time of difference—to instead extol the purely artificial time of immediacy, proximity, and promiscuity among all subjects and events. While Heidegger, influenced by humanistic residues, argued against information sciences for reducing "man to a simple disturbing factor in cybernetic calculation" (Heidegger 1993), Baudrillard raises the stakes considerably. His concern revolves around the ontological game between an illusion striving to preserve the dimension of the secret, and probably the symbolic, and a technique that aims to reveal and operationalize every facet of life.

Moreover, embracing the epistemological suggestion of Baudrillard, while for Heidegger, cybernetics represents nothing more than the continuation and fulfillment of the techno-science project, our perspective identifies a disjunction between science and technology. Relativistic physics, based on the ultimate limit of the speed of light, more effectively preserves the ontological status of the illusion of the world than cybernetics. If Einstein's relativity holds true, asserting that nothing can travel at a speed higher than that of light, a time interval—however infinitesimal—will persist between an event and its image (its double), between a subject and an object, and between an emitting station sending the signal and a receiving one. This is precisely why Baudrillard emphasizes that our existence is always deferred. In contrast, the supreme illusion of real-time, fueled by technology, aspires to a kind of total insulation where all events are close and transparent to the human gaze.

The objective illusion is the physical fact that in this universe no things coexist in real time – not sexes, stars, this glass, this table, or myself and all that surrounds me. By the fact of dispersal and the relative speed of light, all things exist only in a recorded version, in an unutterable disorder of time-scales, at an inescapable distance from each other. And so they are never truly present to each other, nor are they, therefore, `real' for each other. The fact of this irremediable distance and this impossible simultaneity, the fact that when I perceive this star it has perhaps already disappeared -- a relationship which can be extended, relatively speaking, to any physical object or living being -- this is the ultimate foundation, the material definition, so to speak, of illusion. (…) `Real' time does not, therefore, exist; no one exists in real time; nothing takes place in real time -- and the misunderstanding is total. (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 52-53).

The notion of an almost Manichean contrast between the world of nature and techno-science rests on the premise that our existence is consistently "deferred," and immediacy is merely an artifact. In fact, time, presumptuously defined as 'real,' does not genuinely exist; as Baudrillard puts it, "no one exists in real time, nothing takes place in real time: the misunderstanding is total" (p. 58). Everything we perceive in this moment is already past. Deferred time, endorsed by Einsteinian relativity, serves to maintain a delicate balance between the two ontological levels of reality and illusion. On the contrary,



real-time as cybernetic time blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, granting significant power to virtuality and the simulacrum. This perspective starkly contrasts with Maurizio Ferraris' (2012) idea of riding the new realism as an intellectual counter-trend post the fall of postmodernism. Ferraris staunchly advocates for the separation between epistemology and ontology, insisting that "what is in front of us cannot be corrected or transformed through the mere use of conceptual schemes" (p. 48). According to him, not only are all philosophies of language obsolete, but even science itself examines a reality beyond the mere phenomenology of everyday life. In this light, Baudrillard's relativistic conception of time might seem too profound or abstract when compared to plausible ontological explanations for what we could term the middle-world. Conversely, the apparent alliance between science and illusion gains support from the peculiar and paradoxical developments in contemporary physics, particularly those attempting to reconcile quantum physics with general relativity. Figures like S. Hawking (1996) propose the concept of "imaginary time" as the true substrate of phenomenological reality. If, indeed, real time is nothing more than a supreme fiction produced by technology, the imaginary time of physics, perpendicular to Newtonian time, emerges as the "real" time.

One can conceptualize ordinary, real time as a horizontal line, where the past lies to the left, and the future to the right. However, there exists another dimension of time in the vertical direction, known as imaginary time. Although not the kind of time we typically experience, it is, in a sense, just as real as what we conventionally term as real time (Hawking 1996, pp. 92, 203).

Presentation between science and technology

The paradoxical fate of the disjunction between science and technology lies in the semantic dystonia of the categories "real time" and "imaginary time." These terms, used to denote phenomena opposite to their literal meanings, paradoxically converge in their definition of the same phenomenon: a non-time that simply is, devoid of any flow. There exists a tacit agreement between philosophers and scientists in celebrating this perpendicular, synchronic, dilated, and eternalized time. With the system's generalized acceleration driven by diffusion and total circulation, society has seemingly entered a meta-historical dimension. Here, the compression of space/time manifests in the fateful process of presentification, a concept cherished by postmodernists. In other words, the paradox described has already been outlined in previous pages. However, in this instance, the dynamism/stasis relationship moves beyond the symbolic dimension, where it was previously relegated as a metaphor. Instead, it surfaces in the pragmatic sphere of experienced reality. The psychological and cultural condition of individuals experiencing real time mirrors that of the schizophrenic, as Baudrillard frequently emphasized, particularly since the late 1980s when he declared:

The schizo is deprived of all scene, open to all in spite of himself, and in the greatest confusion. (...) What characterizes him is

"One can conceptualize ordinary, real time as a horizontal line, where the past lies to the left, and the future to the right. However, there exists another dimension of time in the vertical direction, known as imaginary time."

Stephen Hawking

less his light-years distance from the real, a radical break, than absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness of things, defenseless, with no retreat; end of interiority and intimacy, overexposure and transparency of the world that traverses him without his being able to interpose any barrier. For he can no longer produce the limits of his own being, and reflect himself; he is only an absorbent screen (Baudrillard 1990, p. 69-70).

Until the nineties, many authors were tempted to view the process of presentification as the definitive arrival of advanced societies—a time propelled towards the "speed of no return, which definitively distances it from history" (Baudrillard 1993). It seems as if history had taken a decisive leap from the regime of transcendence—specific to the Christian vision but surviving in the ascending linearity of modern history—towards a state of total immanence (Magatti 2010). This realization echoes what Abruzzese had envisioned, particularly in the cultural landscape of the nineties: "In cybernetics, the possibility of seeing, just behind the collapse of the historical languages of modern civilization, the birth, or rather the liberation, of a new dimension is announced". Anthropological version of living, of a new culture, a 'new entity' (Flichy), "not transcendent but immanent to social processes" (Abruzzese 1996, p. 29). This accomplishment owes much to what David Harvey (1993) critically termed as "space-time compression," whose dissemination through the media facilitated the so-called presentification of experience. However, this process, deemed desirable from a certain liberal or neoliberal perspective, unfolds within its own negation, or in a significant impasse that perilously traverses contemporary history. This catastrophic point was already thematized in a booklet dedicated to the fate of social acceleration, which, nearing the end of the millennium, would be reversed into its opposite in a McLuhanian fashion. It's worth noting that, before delving into the recent critiques of algorithmic reason, Pierre Levy was notably enthusiastic about the advantages promised by real time, seeing it as leading to a genuine anthropological mutation.

Einstein's theory of relativity is evidently the daughter of the space-movement of goods, as evidenced by the thought experiences that illustrate it: clocks, elevator trains, space shuttles, one after the other, in speed ratio...Sustained flow: zero storage cancels the territorial game on the

future and duration. The deferral vanishes in the zero interval of the industry as in the live with the media. Finally, real time in the sphere of telecommunications and information technology designates the immediacy of transmission, calculation and response, the processing and instant presentation of information. On the horizon of accelerations, in the eye of the cyclone of speeds, real, immobile time moves the space-time of goods. Real time is the reality of the time of commodities, its entelechy, its ideal: a time no longer sequential but parallel, no longer linear but point-like, a time of simultaneity, the limit of accelerations (Levy 1998, p. 179) .

Pierre Levy concluded the entire decade of the nineties with a compendium of Baudrillard's formidable intuition, utilizing an interpretation borrowed from relativistic physics. Here, too, Levy explores the concept of an anthropology of the limit, particularly the acceleration of what he terms the "space of goods." However, unlike Baudrillard's approach, Levy's stance leans toward an almost mystical-philosophical orientation. He aims to reconstruct the history of communication as a procession of phases leading to the advent of collective intelligence. This substantial euphoria, aligning with the techno-enthusiastic tendencies of the time, was partially later denied by Levy himself. It stands in stark contrast to the disillusioned and prospective gaze of Baudrillard, whose desperate criticism managed to capture the interest of both technophiles and technophobes. For this reason, Baudrillard's vision has traced a trajectory that, more or less explicitly, other theorists have taken up. Their goal is to refine intellectual weapons to counter the increasingly overwhelming process of globalization imposed by neoliberal ideology.

Towards a neo-critical conception of real time

Since the nineties, Franco Berardi (Bifo) has been engaging with Baudrillard's work from a radical left and neo-critical standpoint, evident in works like "Mutazione e cyberpunk" (1993). In this text, he extensively elaborated on themes such as the cognitive exploitation of the subject by semio-capitalism, information overload known as "hype hermeticism," and psychopathology as a product of the techno-media system or as an escape route from it. Berardi frequently revisits these themes, challenging a pillar of Marxist conception. As the new millennium unfolds, Bifo's criticism gradually shifts towards the issue of the financial exploitation of time while maintaining a Deleuzian and Baudrillardian framework. Baudrillard, in Berardi's interpretation, anticipates a trend that has become prevalent over the decades: simulation alters the relationship between subject and object, placing the subject in the subordinate position of one who is subject to seduction rather than the active agent.

Consequently, the entire problem of alienation, repression and the resulting discomfort dissolves [...]. The info-cratic regime of Semiocapital bases its power on overload, accelerates semiotic flows, makes information sources proliferate until they reach noise white of the indistinguishable, the irrelevant, the indecipherable [...]. The hyper-stimulation of attention reduces the capacity for critical sequential interpretation, but also reduces the time available for the emotional processing of the other, of the other's body and of the other's speech, which seeks to be understood without being able to do so (Berardi 2007).

Baudrillard's meticulous examination of the regime of simulation results in the depletion of the Marxian concept of alienation in terms of analytical utility, primarily due to a substantial reversal of function between the subject and the object. Simultaneously, the phenomenon of information overload, characterized by an unconditional increase in information stimulation and exchanges, engenders a pervasive pathology that becomes the average condition of individuals in the era of semio-capitalism. The hyper-stimulation generated by information overload gives rise to a novel form of control, wherein

the system not only diminishes the critical abilities of subjects but also impairs their relational and affective skills (ibidem). Advancing the critique of the neoliberal vision, Geert Lovink contributes significantly, evident in his chapter titled "The Colonization of Real Time." Lovink, a friend of F. Berardi, is among the few interpreters of Baudrillard who actively engages in updating these reflections for the era of the so-called web 2.0. He incorporates various quotations from your work in the exergue of different chapters of his book. While many of Baudrillard's "critical" positions may seem overcome by the participatory and neo-communitarian quality of social media, Lovink's perspective seeks to identify elements of dissonance hidden beneath the surface of new enthusiasm. These elements reintroduce new forms of alienation. An example of this phenomenon is what is often perceived as the manipulation of time and, more notably, a new wave of "information overload" (Lovink 2012, p. 37), leading to the fateful "Carr effect." This label highlights the dysfunctions of a culture dominated by the logic of multitasking, impoverished by an economy of distraction, and increasingly reliant on short, immediate information with minimal in-depth analysis.

Standing in front of Wave's "blackboard", it feels like sitting on the bank of a river, watching the current flow. It is no longer necessary to ask questions to the PC and then dive into the archive. The Internet as a whole is now real-time, attempting to approximate the disorder and complexity of the real social world. However, what is one step forward involves two steps back in terms of design. Just look at the awkward design of Twitter, which is reminiscent of the first ASCII coded emails and text messages on a cell phone from 2001. To what extent is this an intentional special effect? The HTML style with its sloppiness and typos may not be a technical imperfection, but rather a symptom of the infinity of the Eternal Present in which we are caught (Lovink 2010, p. 30).

According to Lovink, "real time" primarily signifies the lack of time to attend to either the style or content of communication. What was once considered a substantial background noise fueling counterculture aesthetics, like lo-fi, has now become a mainstream phenomenon for a global audience. Even Twitter, under a different name, once aspired to be impassively "Faster than the real time" (Keen 2012). However, by definition, nothing can be faster than immediate communication. From Lovink's viewpoint, real-time communication is associated with the aesthetic of imperfection because there's no time for post-production. The simplicity of low fidelity, at times sloppy or childish, becomes a useful tool for retaining users who feel at ease in a less intimidating world, more within their reach, and ultimately open to improvement (or worsening) by the users themselves.

Lovink also discusses with particular enthusiasm the equivalence between the capitalist valorization of daily micro-time and that operated by finance. In his words, "like finance, the media industry is exploring the possibilities of maximizing added value by exploiting nanoseconds. But unlike hedge funds, this is technology for everyone. Profits grow only if the colonization of real time unfolds on a planetary scale" (ivi, p. 29). Lovink's work illustrates how Baudrillard's legacy remains significant even in an era where technology seems to have undergone substantial changes, becoming more ambiguous, amphibious, and tactical than in the past.

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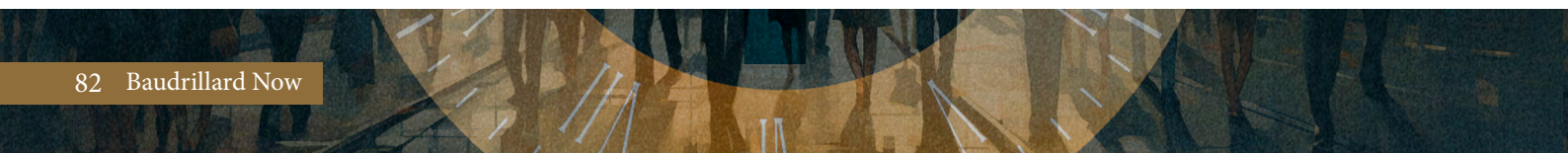

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Conspiracy Thinking: Towards an Ambiguous Theory of Photography

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10

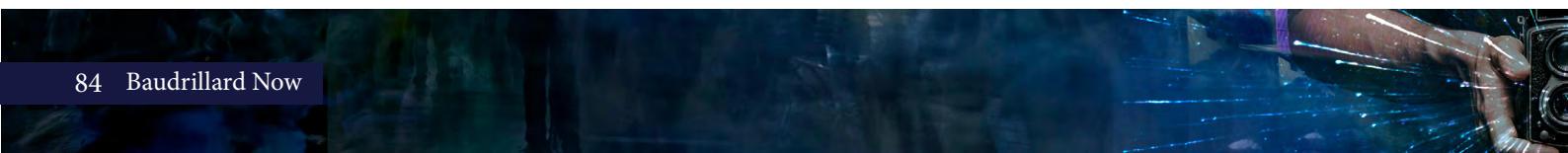
Exercise: Take a picture of someone wearing a tinfoil hat.

Framing statement: In his 1927 story "The Tissue-Culture King," Julian Huxley wrote about a machine designed for mass telepathy, built as an experimental mind control apparatus to help control a growing population.[1]

To protect themselves from the radiating influence of the telepathic broadcast, the inventors of the machine wore aluminum hats, specifically designed to protect their minds from the voice of the apparatus, and by extension from the commands of algorithmic surveillance. The story has since been taken up by conspiracy theorists, psychologists and media scholars as an example of the possibilities and dangers of living in a technologically-mediated world in which the boundaries between truth, persuasion, and passionate falsities have become (perhaps purposefully) blurred.

What is perhaps the most compelling thing about a tinfoil hat, however, is not

1 Julian Huxley, "The Tissue-Culture King," *Amazing Stories*, 2:5, 1927, 451-459. https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v02n05_1927-08_017/page/n1/mode/2up



the truth or falsity of the claim that it protects the mind. Much more interesting is the possibility that it by wearing such an accessory one claims one's mind as one's own. It seems a silly thing to say, but in a world filled with advertising, marketing, and propaganda, the mind may be a more contested site than we think. Literally. The idea of the tinfoil hat then stands as a metaphor for psychological precarity, acknowledging a certain vulnerability of mind that might otherwise be taken for granted. If only influence could be so easily avoided. While there is no certain way to reconcile the layers of conspiracy, spectacle and conjecture that surround the tinfoil hat as an apparatus and a metaphor, one way to keep the inquiry alive is to simply engage with the metaphor itself.

Guidelines:

This project asks participants to engage with the story of the tinfoil hat, with particular attention to the ways in which the hat becomes a metaphor for social and technological engagement. To participate, take a photograph of a person wearing a tinfoil hat. Think about the different parts of the picture—the location, the shape of the hat, the light (and other frequencies) that are touching your subject—and how those variables might represent some of the metaphoric power of the concept.[2]

2. An archive of images contributed to this project can be found at www.tedhiebert.net/tinfoil.php. Ongoing submissions accepted.

Photo: Brandon Kan, Tinfoil Hats, 2021.

Tinfoil Hats

Five men stand in a room, connected by tinfoil tubes. Well, four men stand in a room connected to a fifth man who stands in the center, a provocative center of attention. There are few signs to indicate whether he is speaking or listening but one thing is sure—his demeanor shows signs of labor and intention. He is connected and so are those sat around him, and however they are connected, it is on purpose.

Something interesting happens when the connections we nurture and sustain with others are literalized, made hyper-evident as literal connections that come with material attachment and consequences. It can seem to mistake hard wires for the soft or the wet but what if relationships and connectivity and network signals of broadcast and receive were taken literally as things in the world—as actual and tangible and material points of connection and interchange? This is an image about community and channeling and attunement and trust and power and empowerment and more.

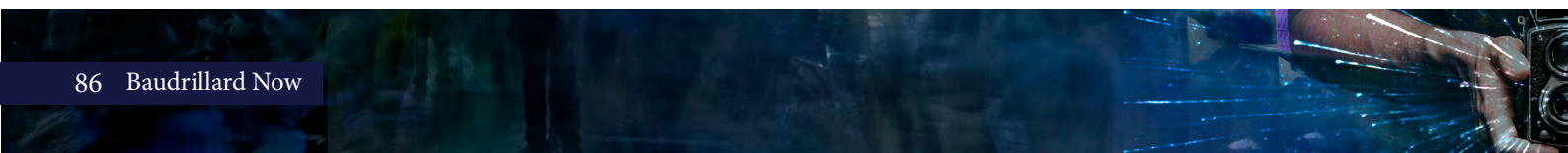
And I stop, caught in the feeling that I am also somehow connected to the image. Are these tinfoil wires contained within the image or are they metaphors in some way for my relationship to this situation too? I look at the picture again and I feel sucked in—like there is some kind of conceptual attraction that keeps me engaged in the possibility that I too am part of this network. Or maybe its just desire—a social network given visual form in such an eloquent way as to make me want to also sign up or sign in, to be registered, or simply to be seen.

Yet as soon as I say this to myself I am back on the outside—unseen. Private thoughts are being shared, collective worlds are being generated. And I am on the outside, watching, but not quite noticed. I know the story of tinfoil as a way to block signals but I'm caught here by what seems to be exactly the opposite fantasy—a world in which technologies of blockage are creatively re-channeled towards the formation of relationships and community.

It might just be a performative joke—a picture staged for the camera—but I don't think so. And whether the tinfoil is just a prop or an actual technology here is maybe a nuanced and not-so-important distinction since the connectivity of the situation speaks more loudly than any particular informational content one might project onto the moment. More important than what they are saying is their capacity for speech—and more important than what they might be communicating is the fact that they seem connected, and I by contrast seem to be a disconnected but interested observer. Caught on the outside of someone else's secret.

Attunement

In 2005, a group of graduate students at MIT—Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor and Noah Vawter—ran a series of frequency amplification experiments on tinfoil hats, looking to see whether the rumblings of conspiracy theorists had any truth to them and if aluminum foil could really provide a shield between the mind and the world of electronic signals looking to harvest private thoughts. In theory, the aluminum foil creates a rudimentary Faraday cage around the brain, capable of deflecting predatory scans and other forms of mind control, a theory that provides some explanation for how a ridiculous fashion accessory might actually serve a serious purpose. To do so they built three different varieties of aluminum hats, put them on, and proceeded to scan the hats as well as their own brains for frequency modulations as they blasted their heads with various electronic signals: sweeping



ranges from AM radio to RFID, television to radar, microwaves to cellular, communication satellites to government exclusive frequency bands, and using a high- end network analyzer and a directional antenna to measure and plot the results. [3]

In an interesting plot development, the study found that wearing a tinfoil hat actually *does* serve to protect the head from a significant number of frequencies, particularly those in the range of radio waves (which is curiously the frequency band also talked about by Huxley in his story). This wasn't the only discover they made, however—ironically, these aluminum headpieces also seemed to amplify certain *other* frequencies—those associated with exactly the bandwidths most feared by conspirators—allocated to government agencies and mobile phone corporations:

> *For all helmets, we noticed a 30 db amplification at 2.6 Ghz and a 20 db amplification at 1.2 Ghz, regardless of the position of the antenna on the cranium. ... Conclusion: The helmets amplify frequency bands that coincide with those allocated to the US government between 1.2 Ghz and 1.4 Ghz. According to the FCC, These bands are supposedly reserved for "radio location" (ie, GPS), and other communications with satellites. The 2.6 Ghz band coincides with mobile phone technology*[4].

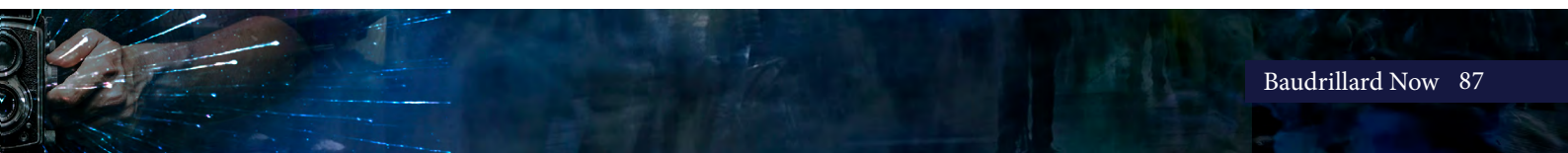
Admittedly, this study reads as much as a graduate student prank as it does a serious gambit of science—the kind of wonderful play that someone with access to advanced technology might engage just because the opportunity presents itself. And while results seem unambiguous, the question of how one engages (or dismisses) the results might vary widely. For myself, I find especially compelling the idea that the tinfoil hat may actually amplify specific frequencies of signal associated with GPS and cellular data—frequencies much more important to the 21st century than those radio waves that concerned Huxley and others. And I don't care if it's true or not—it's the idea of taking the experiment seriously that catches my attention most seductively, as if to turn conspiracy theory into a participatory form of active and purposeful thinking.

Conspiracy thinking? Isn't that what happens when I test an absurd hypothesis only to find that the device worn to protect myself against government mind-readers actually instead seems to make my thoughts more accessible to a technical surveillance system? And isn't it just a perfect reversal for an age in which the destiny of privacy is to be shared online in those most familiar of social media spaces where profiles are populated by vulnerability—intended perhaps for peers and loved-ones but unapologetically harvested by corporate bots for the purposes of remarketing and data accumulation. **Tinfoil Hats** starts as a refusal but becomes a form of attunement, a broadcast amplifier for new forms of digital being.

An excess of privacy

The destiny of privacy is to be shared—otherwise it would not be a thing—a truly private form of privacy would have to content itself with the incommensurable constraints of subjective living. Thus things private belong not to the order of data but to the category of secrets. Importantly, secrets need not be true or even shared to hold their power—their seductive sway has most to do with the perception of incommensurability withheld, a teasing

3. Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor, Noah Vawter, "On the Effectiveness of Aluminum Foil Helmets: An Empirical Study," 2005. Accessed 1/2023 via Archive.org at https://keys-duplicated.com/~ali/helmet/
4. Ibid.



or a challenge that operates at the level of a promise. This promise, according to Jean Baudrillard is the operational logic of digital culture, bypassing the order of communication by engaging directly with the hyperreal—the more real than real that is bound not to informatic accountability but to the secrets I tell myself, bound to the integrity of simulation.[5] But, perhaps, secrets also operate at the level of what philosopher Johnny Golding calls "radical mattering," disregarding information as the impact factor of interpersonal exchange.[6] Beyond the reality of the situation, relationships form and experiences are shared, despite the seemingly solitary nature of a world governed by the principles of secrecy.

The provocation:

What if Johnny Golding's theory of "radical mattering" were adopted as a horizon of accountability for the post-modern, in general, and the hyperreal, in particular—not by resolving them but by making friends with the predictive logics so seductively rendered by Jean Baudrillard? This would be to betray Baudrillard by exactly not acknowledging the distinction between the simulation and the real and instead siding in favor with the immediacy of relational engagement.

The short form:

Johnny Golding is a political philosopher who examines questions of identity, technology, and art with an eye to charting strategies for creating futures differently or otherwise. For me, Golding's conceptualization of "technologies of otherness" are paramount to my seduction with her thought—strategies for rethinking a relational approach to philosophical living, inflected by the eloquent concepts of radical mattering, and friendship.[7] Thinking through and beyond the post structural categories of

5. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, Brian Singer, trans., London: MacMillan, 1990, 7.
6. Johnny Golding, "The Courage to Matter," in *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft*: *The Future of Knowledge Systems,* Johnny Golding, Martin Reinhardt and Mattia Paganelli, eds., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 452.
7. Sue Golding, "A Word of Warning," in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, Sue Golding, ed., London: Routledge, 1997, xii-xiv.

Photo: Andy Miah. (CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

deconstruction and difference, Golding seeks ways to mark difference as a new form of philosophical accountability, making difference matter as the true horizon of living in a deconstructed world.[8] In this, and against theories of enlightened knowledge or redemptive understanding, I take Golding as a prophet of attunement, a thinker of relational politics for the ways that engagement and encounter turn into experiences that matter—a sort of philosophical UX for an age of predictive living.

Jean Baudrillard is French philosopher perhaps best known for his theories of simulation and the hyperreal and his argument that in digital times it no longer makes sense to think about the real.[9] Baudrillard, from my perspective, might also be the philosopher most responsible for the popularization of "post-truth"—a hallmark of postmodern thought and (for different reasons) the bane of contemporary 21st politics. But for me, the seduction of Baudrillard's thinking has nothing to do with truth; for me the question always comes back to the stakes of the experiential moment. The seduction of the virtual only matters within a horizon where something like life is nonetheless still happening, true or post-truth, or not. In this, Baudrillard for me is the last and best of the postmodernists, insisting that the horizon of technological living is not one of logic but of seduction and calculated gambles.[10]

What I am proposing then is to take seriously Baudrillard's declaration of the end of the real while insisting on Goldings politics of identity and lived experience as the necessary conditions of lived encounter.[11] Privacy—overrated or not—is the key currency of digital living, not bound to data points or verified information but to the power of affective sways and seductive interaction. Privacies surround us at all turns, on social media, in the news, in the paparazzi trends of the day—all vying for attention, often exaggerating, amplifying or disregarding the question of the real altogether. And within this circulation of simulation and simulacrum what matters is not the promise of truth but of—strange as it might seem to suggest—the promise of connectivity, maybe even the possibility of friendship.

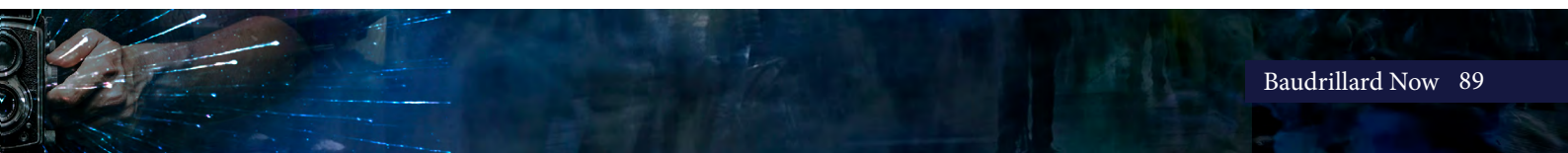
The conspiracy of the real

Reality is dead says Jean Baudrillard, not because it has vanished but because of an excess—there is too much reality, too many realities, multiplied and conflicting and conjectured and imagined and staged and simulated. So many realities that the very idea of a reality principal has ceased to be meaningful in any significant way.

> *Let us be clear about this: when we say that reality has disappeared, the point is not that it has disappear and physically, but that it has disappeared metaphysically. Reality continues to exist; it is its principle that is dead.*[12]

But how is it that reality can continue to exist without a principle that makes it possible? That multiple realities can co-exist means that despite appearances to the otherwise, there is no longer a singular horizon of accountability through which reality might be seen or apprehended. That is seems otherwise-for Baudrillard—is more of a conspiracy than a relation, ren-

8. Ibid, xiii.
9. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, Christ Turner, trans., New York: Berg, 2005, 17, 27.
10. Baudrillard, *Intelligence of Evil*, 87.
11. Golding, "A Word of Warning," xiii.
12. Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 18.



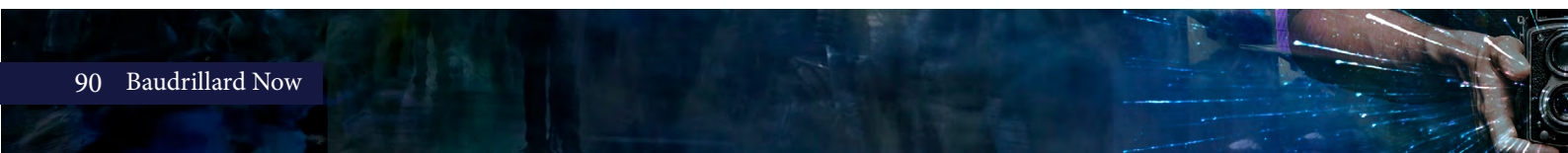
dered and sustained by the ecosystem of technical ideology and virtual solutions. "The simulacrum is not that which hides the truth but that which hides the absence of truth."[13] And thus is born the post-truth era, out of the impossibility of any singular truth to which all lived realities can be held accountable. The conspiracy to end all conspiracies—what could be more insidious than to replace the very concept of reality itself with a technical construction called reality?

Now, I have always loved Baudrillard for his particular mode of succinct but ambiguous articulation, an observation that concepts reverse themselves when taken to extremes. His politics of philosophy work in service of a "production of vertigo."[14] Like intelligence: "When the hypothesis of intelligence cease to be *sovereign* and becomes *dominant*, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes soverign."[15] Like the real—rendered redundant by the proliferation of post-truth truths, requiring new modes of consent to be formed.[16] Like the image too—made ubiquitous to the point where all vision becomes accountable to the photograph. But it also strikes me that there is another version of this story, in which the disappearance of dominant modes of truth-saying and a skepticism towards the smooth and impenetrable logic of evidence-based argument, actually might serve as mechanisms for a different sort of world-building. For, when the real is replaced by the real, the consequence is the counter-intuitive conclusion that realities can be replaced, not just by a technical double but by whatever idiosyncratic version of the story can be lived in a sustainable way. For I'm caught by the fact that—despite the disappearance of the real—I still wake up in the morning, autopilot my days, have some semblance of something that might be called experience, if not existence. And it's at that most mundane level of subjective living that I continue to find the highest stakes of Baudrillard's thought—the moment where instead of an argument to be believed, his ideas become a challenge to reconcile with the lived moment.

13. Ibid, 32.
14. Ibid, 215.
15. Ibid, 179.

What is left is no longer the idea of truth but that of a sustainable (personal or collective) narrative—what matters is not the reality of the situation but the community that forms around it. For, if we gamble against truth and reality—in their dominant and full-spectrum, technical forms—a strange sort of permission opens up to rethink the world, indeed to create the world differently. It might be called a simulacrum but it is no less lived for the fact that it cannot be comprehensibly reduced to documentation and evidence. It is a gamble but perhaps the only alternative to the smooth operations of technical logic

16. "When truth and reality were made to take lie-detector tests, they themselves confessed to not believing in truth and reality." Ibid, 87



is to install a double, a metaphysical secret agent that wagers itself not on evidence but on something else. Not intelligence (in the informational sense) but intelligence (in the espionage sense).[17] Not conspiracy but a form of conspiring, a post-simulation imagination that posts simulations precisely because to double the world at least opens it up to options, to differences, to alternatives. That they are not real is only a problem if one still believes in reality—that they might be imaginary is only a problem if one does not believe in the materiality of the imagination. Baudrillard calls it a "lucidity pact":

> *What binds us to the real is a contract of reality. That is to say, a formal Werner's of the rights an duties attaching to reality. But what we long for is a complicity and dual relation with beings and things—a pact, not a contract. Hence the temptation to condemn this contract—along with the social contract that ensues from it. Against the moral contract that binds us to reality we must set a pact of intelligence and lucidity.*[18]

If Baudrillard's lucidity pact is to be taken seriously, what it amounts to is a purposeful attempt to live within the simulation—which is to say a gamble on the complexity of collectively formed and material living rather than an essentialist refusal of technological context. Thus, To Baudrillard's "lucidity pact" I would add an emphasis, on what he calls "complicity and dual relations" requiring that this pact be made not only with oneself but with others. Against inherited realities, a conspiring to re-make them differently. It is not an argument. It is a commitment—a pact or gamble coupled with an intent to hold ideological space and duration. Less a metaphysical proclamation and more a form of dwelling.

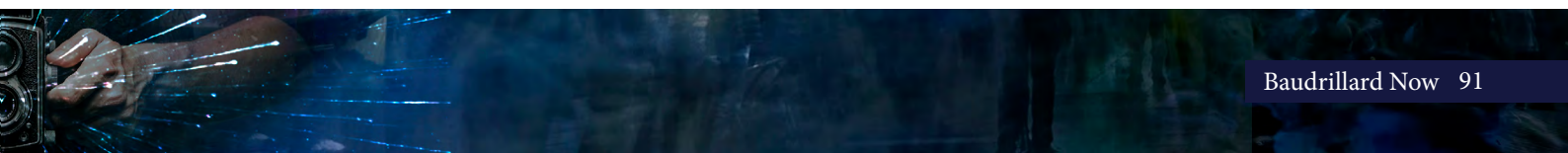
17. Ibid, 47-49.
18. Ibid, 45-46.

Van Goph's right ear

Baudrillard was a better philosopher than he was an artist but there is one of his pictures that I always loved—*Sainte-Beuve*—an image of an old chair draped in red fabric that had clearly been inhabited in an extended ways such as to leave an imprint of the body that occupied it.[19] In some ways it's a ghost story but I think perhaps more importantly it's a picture of something ambiguous but still present because of, and despite, the vanished body. In this picture I see hope—that even within the lucid simulation of existence, marks are left, relationships made, impressions formed. For me, it's an image of dwelling, of space held and life lived and space occupied by bodies, changing or impressing upon the world around them in some ways. And it makes me realize that even algorithms change through their interactions with me—customized as they are to receive many facets of input. Virtualities adapt in response to my patterns of inhabitation. That my actions in the world—real or not—might leave impressions of this sort is an interesting kind of thought. Without knowing whether there is any truth to the idea or not, I want to believe that this was Baudrillard's chair, and maybe that's why I like to dwell on it too—not exactly sitting on the chair, but on the image, in a way that somehow sustains its inhabitation.

I'm stuck on the idea that dwelling is important because seems to be all that is left when the world of appearances is reduced to post-truth simulation. Dwelling is also one of philosopher Johnny Golding's "eight technologies of otherness" which act as strategies for thinking otherwise in an age of prefabricated ideas and solutions—thinking against reason because reason no longer reasonably represents the complexity of lived nuance. She asks:

19. Jean Baudrillard, *Sainte Beuve,* 1987. Giclée print on cotton paper, 90x60cm.



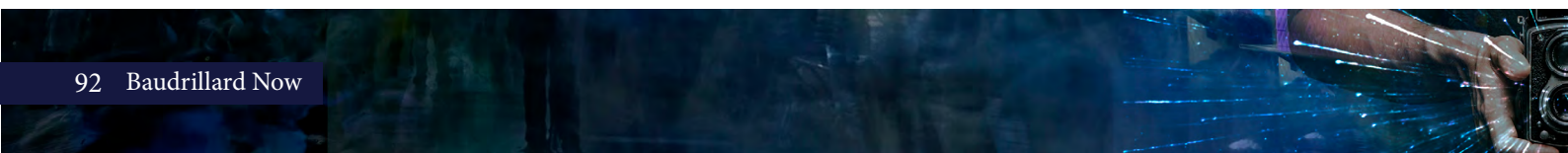
> *What if it were to be admitted that the usual, empty phrases - like to the so-called 'deep and violent cut' of meaning, truth, death, indeed identity itself: the 'who are we' and 'what are we to become' f science and of life - have collapsed under their own bloodless, sexless weight of self-reflective reason?*[20]

Golding's critique is aimed at the generic construction of identity and the ways in which dominant ideologies foreclose on the possibilities of difference and otherness. For Golding, "self-reflective reason" is not the solution but part of the problem, and there is a "certain something" needed to negotiate the resulting terrain to expose the friction between selves and their self-reflective constitutions, lived realities that stand somehow against the total simulations of Baudrillards virtual prophecies.[21] Her solution is to propose a different order of technology, not anchored in digital its at all but rather "eight technologies which are themselves nothing more or less than relations, 'techniques,' or techno (in Foucault's sense): the everyday strategies we use, wittingly or no, to make all the we-selves into me-selves."[22] Conceptual markers of different ways to constitute meaning, Golding proposes curiosity, noise, cruelty, appetite, skin, nomadism, contamination and dwelling as anchor points for thinking the materiality of self in an age of virtual, digital, and ideological simulacrum.

Dwelling for Golding is not a rigid concept but one that links concepts of home to those of attention, asking us to understand the stakes of thought for how it links place to care, commitment to comfort, and to the absolute uniqueness of the moment—suggesting dwelling as a way of thinking about inhabited time as a way of celebrating difference: "'difference' [as] something to be grasped, invented—that is to say inhabited—in all its glorious manifestations, productions, changes without recuse to a totalizing picture of reality.[23] But to inhabit differently is also to attend to difference in an attentive kind of way: to see differently, or in Golding's case to hear differently. Less about seeing the picture and more about listening to what isn't there anymore. Golding suggests another metaphor of absence, not an inhabited chair but "Van Goph's right ear" for situations like these, calling back to the story of the self-tormented artist who violently cut his ear in a desperate attempt to call out to the world.[24] In this story, Golding finds a form of phantom phenomenology that decries tools of technical apprehension in favor of other ways of empathizing with the world: "no lie (nor truth): only the radical geography of a fiction, continuous in all its dis-continuity.[25]

> *"When the hypothesis of intelligence cease to be sovereign and becomes dominant, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes soverign."*
> *Jean Baudrillard*

20. Golding, "A Word of Warning," xii.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid, xiii.
23. Johnny Golding, "Fractal Philosophy (and the small matter of learning how to listen): Attunement as the Task of Art," in *Code Drift: Essays in Digital Culture*, Arthur & Marilouise Kroker, eds., Victoria: CTheory Books, 2010.
24. Ibid.
25. Sue Golding, "Curiosity," in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, 23.



Yet something bothers me in this: an aversion to celebrating the pain of others. It is a space that is not mine to claim, unless it is first shared intentionally. But in an interesting twist, it turns out that Van Goph actually cut his left ear, not his right—and the self-portrait that Golding meditates upon is a reflection painted by the artist looking at himself in a mirror. It's important because the painting makes it public, and Golding's reference to the "right ear" makes it clear that she is speaking about the ear of the painting—not the ear of the man. It may seem like a minor distinction but for me it matters greatly. The representation gives permission to engage, to adopt the ear as metaphor—indeed to listen. This ear is one we are thus invited to put on (to inhabit, through his painting), listening in different ways, as a result. Following Golding then, I put on Van Goph's lost ear as if it were a mask or a filter for hearing (or exactly not-hearing) the world differently.

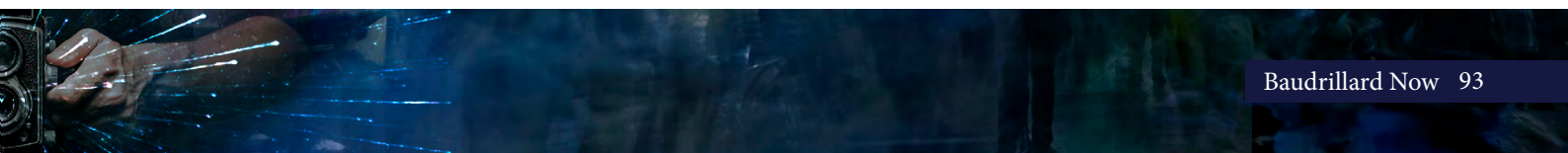
Horseplay

The idea of dwelling on a painting or an image may not be the most intuitive line of thought, given that both visual forms share the pretense towards a directional bias that casts the viewer as a passive recipient of a finished object. Yet, the push against the status of finished objects is what sustains the stakes of engagement—otherwise there is no reason to engage. However, such a move away from a representational analysis of the image is, by necessity, to adopt a relational posture towards the camera, some form of dialogism or reciprocity that can acknowledge the beginnings of a new story being told. It is a political gesture in that it refuses pre-established truths or meanings and instead prioritizes relationships and context, subjectivities, ambiguities, with all the mess and vertigo such a repositioning entails.

In a beautiful essay on her personal relationship with a horse, Johnny Golding meditates on what it means to construct friendship across species boundaries, emphasizing that relationships of this sort are built on a form of engagement that unseats the dictates of logic and common sense in ways that— at times—can seem almost magical.[26] Friendship, for Golding, involves (among other criteria) a "certain kind of attunement, a certain kind of reaching out, a certain kind of response, a certain kind of respect, and a certain kind of play."[27] But most importantly, friendship cannot be made in isolation[28]: no more categorical differences (between human and animal, perhaps also between human and image) but a mode of engagement that plants itself firmly in the generative spaces of new kinds of story-telling, and thus new forms of truth-making,, "to invent anew by supposing 'it could be otherwise' and then figuring out what and how this 'otherwise' might become real alive, take root and flourish."[29]

Now I'm not sure that Golding would appreciate my desire to link her experience with Manhattan (the horse) to the that of the camera, the tinfoil hat or conspiracy, but I like to think that she would appreciate the spillage from conspiracy thinking to the idea of conspiring with others towards a different iteration of the future. At stake, for me, is the framework for building friendships, community, allegiances, which—erroneous or not—is generative of a certain possibility for realigning thought

26. Johnny Golding, "Friendship," in Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 267.
27. Ibid, 262.
28. Ibid, 263.
29. Johnny Golding, "The 9th Technology of Otherness: A certain kind of debt," London: Royal College of Art Research Repository, 2013, 6.



in relationship and response to the circulations of technical living. Conspiring together towards different forms of lived encounter.

But think about that in the context of photography. What if a photograph was a horse? It might be Trojan if that helps make it easier to imagine., but I actually think it's more powerful if it's actually just a horse—an actual horse that one might actually ride if—like Golding—one were able to build enough trust and reciprocity to make it viable to do so. It takes effort. And at stake is the idea of riding an image, of actually having to attune and adapt to a picture—perhaps by considering photography through the lens of animal studies, or indeed as an object of friendship, inflected deeply by the imaginary but accountable to the care that makes the relationship matter.

> *Friendship is neither a gift bestowed nor an object of contemplation. Quite the reverse, friendship entails an economy of logic and gift exchange built of a wholly different order, imbued with a certain kind of attunement (listening), a certain kind of reaching out (event), a certain kind of response (-ability), a certain kind of respect (fullness), and a certain kind of play (-time), all diffractively generated without a single string attached. It is strictly born from the senses, and more than that, from a kind of exquisite, erotic, inhabited logic of the senses. … It [friendship] only exists as an entangled encounter of embodied exchange.*[30]

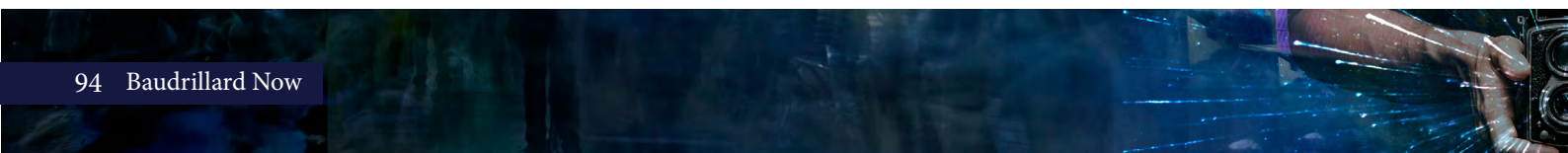
No first-causes; just awkward co-existences until some kind of common territory can be built. Golding calls it "horseplay,"[31] a kind of "superpositional empathy"[32] that "enables a certain mindfulness to emerge, one that sidesteps reason without being unreasonable, one that sidesteps logic without being illogical."[33] From this perspective photography is a muddy practice, not one tasked with clarifying the image of the world but of making more ambiguous the circulations of relational engagement

Conspiracy Thinking

Don't take my word for anything in this essay—it could all be a conspiracy and I could be complicit in the circulation of an imaginary solution to the challenge of paradox in a digital age. But whether my word is good or not is not what is at stake since there is really nothing radical in words. Instead, its the relationships that words are capable of forming that matter—that "radically matter"—as artifacts in a system of affective and post-truth circulation. "You tell the stories you need to believe," says novelist Rebecca Brown, and I think she's right.[34] Though, in the same breath, I ask myself what it means to say she's right and realize it's a story I need to believe. And I like the idea that I might conspire with an image towards a different story than it might tell on the surface—not a didactic re-accounting of an inherited world but a collaborative re-telling of a future world apprehended in the blurry peripheries of vision. The kind of story that one can't see if one looks directly at it, but which manifests more presently when seen out of the corner of one's eyes, felt more than seen, intuited more than evidenced.

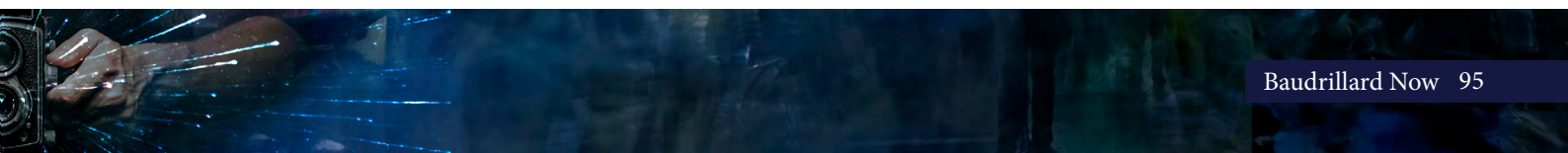
Tinfoil hats, as a participatory project, is a constructed photographic moment but it is also a request to engage in a moment of self-reflective ambiguity—asking what stories we need (or want) to believe. Whether there are invisible sig-

30. Golding, "Friendship," 262.
31. Ibid, 267.
32. Ibid, 272.
33. Ibid, 266-267
34. See, Rebecca Brown, *You Tell the Stories You Need to Believe,"* Chatwin Books, 2022.



nals blasting me from the sky is not what is at stake. It is more about posture—a question of whether I see room for myself to act as a co-conspirator of the futures being shaped and sustained around me. **Conspiracy thinking** is a creative strategy for post-truth community building. Such communities may tend towards ambiguity since they are not premised on deductive argumentation or clearly annotated lines of documentation. In such acts of conspiring, one moves away from the photograph as a marker of a historical moment and towards ambiguous new constellations of relational possibility. "The peculiar role of photography is not to illustrate the event, but to constitute an event in itself. … to do so it must also remain in a sense a stranger to itself."[35] It's as easy as putting on a tinfoil hat.[36]

35 Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 99.
36 This essay is an excerpt from the monograph *Photographing Ambiguity*, forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press.



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