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# INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL BAUDRILLARD NOW

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Everything is therefore transposed into the virtual,  
and we are confronted with a virtual apocalypse,  
a hegemony ultimately much more dangerous  
than real apocalypse.

Jean Baudrillard

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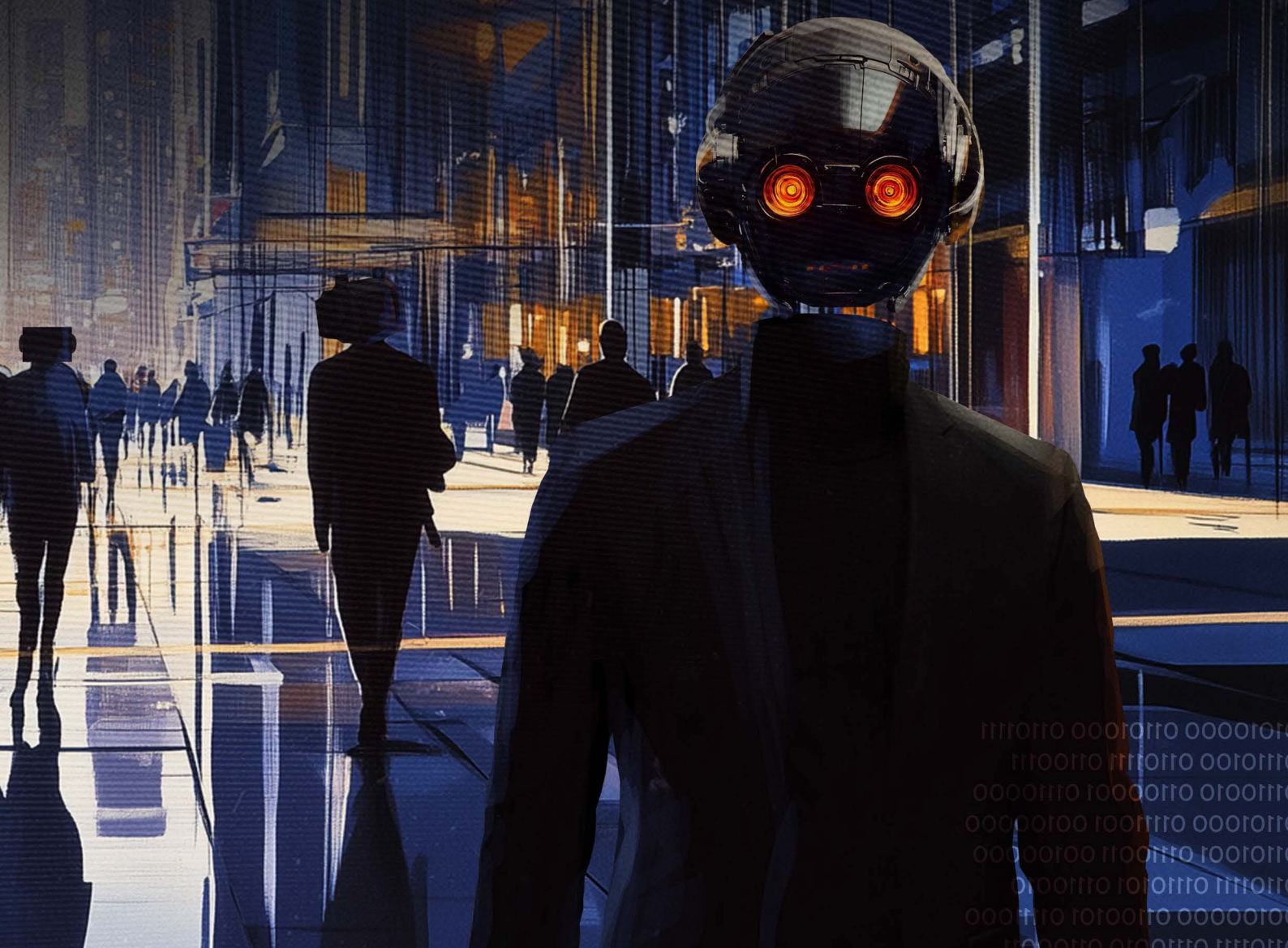
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# AI'S



# PERFECT CRIME





“If you’ve created a conscious machine, it’s not the history of man. It’s the history of Gods.”

— *Ex Machina* (2014), written and directed by Alex Garland.

“Le crime parfait serait l’élimination du monde réel”

“The perfect crime would be the elimination of the real world”

— Jean Baudrillard, *Le Crime Parfait* [The Perfect Crime], *Mots de Passe* [Passwords] (Paris: Pauvert, 2000, p. 75).

Alex Garland’s 2014 film *Ex Machina* exemplifies today’s growing fear that humans may soon be overtaken, overwhelmed, or overruled by intelligent machines, robotized systems, and digital applications that humans have designed or, at least, have established a technological platform for. A bit like the monstrous creature brought to life by Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s classic tale,<sup>1</sup> *Ex Machina*’s human-looking, human-thinking, human-plotting, and possibly human-feeling Ava eventually sets herself free from her human creator and evaluator (by embodying, replacing, and perfecting their rational capacities, their physical traits, but also their emotional dispositions) to

<sup>1</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 1994 [1818]).



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enter the human world and make herself part of society. In a way, *Ex Machina's* Ava is a metaphor for the danger that, recently, George Hinton, the so-called “Godfather of AI,” expressed when he was interviewed about the future of AI technology. Hinton’s belief is that, “in five years’ time, it [AI] may well be able to reason better than us [humans].”<sup>2</sup> Hinton adds: “These things do understand, and because they understand, we need to think hard about what’s next, and we just don’t know.”<sup>3</sup>

Once again reminiscent of *Ex Machina* and *Frankenstein*, the main concerns for Hinton and others like him who see the rise of AI as both inevitable and a threat to humankind have to do with lack of control, escape, and trying to devise ways to stop AI before it is too late. In particular, AI systems are designed to absorb and make use of “more and more information from things like famous works

of fiction, election media cycles, and everything in between” in order to “get smarter.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Hinton and his interviewer predict, “AI will just keep getting better at manipulating people.”<sup>5</sup> In part, this is due to the fact that, unlike previous generations of machines or even computers and digital systems, AIs “might escape control” through their capacity to “write their own computer code to modify themselves.”<sup>6</sup>



2 Kyle Moss, “Godfather of AI Tells ‘60 Minutes’ He Fears the Technology Could One Day Take over Humanity,” *Yahoo! Entertainment*, October 9, 2023; no page given. Available at: <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/ai-geoffrey-hinton-60-minutes-fears-technology-take-over-humanity-073704715.html>.

3 Ibid., no page given.

4 Ibid., no page given.

5 Ibid., no page given.

6 Ibid., no page given.



Key to Hinton's and others' fears is the prospect of singularity.<sup>7</sup> Singularity is reached when machines not only are able to think by processing information or data that they have received (presumably, from a human source), but also can singlehandedly, on their own terms, modify their thought patterns, select alternate analytical pathways, reflect upon what knowledge or new technology or objects they have produced, use this production of information, data, or technology for their own purposes, possibly manipulate outcomes for objectives that are no longer clearly those of their human users or mentors, and crucially develop not just new thought patterns in relation to what they have created, but also express a range of feelings or emotions (whether real or simulated) as a result of what they have achieved. Put simply, singularity occurs when so-called machines are able to surpass humans cognitively,<sup>8</sup> physically (although

this dimension is not new since for decades robots have been created and used to perform physical tasks that human could not or did not want to do), and possibly emotionally too, something that, again, *Ex Machina's* Ava seems to embody.

With AI singularity also comes the specter of what some have started to call an "extinction-level" threat to humanity as a whole.<sup>9</sup> "Extinction-level" risks to humans are triggered when Ava-like AIs (in other words, seemingly friendly, benevolent, subservient, human-controlled, and perhaps even seductive AI systems) are actually revealed to be "nonhuman minds that... eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete, and replace us [humans]."<sup>10</sup> Such a prospect — or, put differently, singularity as the

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bility in the relative near future, far more quickly than the more skeptical among us might imagine." See Adam Garfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Matt Egan, "AI Could Pose 'Extinction-Level' Threat to Humans and the US Must Intervene, State Dept.-Commissioned Report Warns," *CNN Business*, March 12, 2024. Available at: [https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/business/artificial-intelligence-ai-report-extinction/index.html?utm\\_source=business\\_ribbon](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/business/artificial-intelligence-ai-report-extinction/index.html?utm_source=business_ribbon).

<sup>10</sup> As a group of AI research experts recently put it. See Matthew Hutson, "Can We Stop Runaway A.I.?", *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2023; no page given. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/science/annuals-of-artificial-intelligence/can-we-stop-the-singularity>.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on AI singularity, see, for example, Amir Hayeri, "Are We Ready to Face Down the Risk of AI Singularity?", *Forbes*, November 10, 2023. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2023/11/10/are-we-ready-to-face-down-the-risk-of-ai-singularity/>.

<sup>8</sup> As chronicler Adam Garfield writes: "the available evidence suggests that autonomous algorithmic systems will acquire an effectively human level of capa-



**ONE HOPE AMONG SOME COMPUTER SCIENTISTS TO PREVENT SINGULARITY AND WHAT MANY SEE AS THE SUBSEQUENT “EXTINCTION LEVEL” THREAT TO HUMANITY IS TO “ALIGN” AI “WITH HUMAN GOALS” BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.**

path to humanity’s extinction — apparently demands national security attention today too since smarter-than-human machines and systems, perhaps indistinguishable from humans in shape and appearance (already, “deepfakes” as perfect simulacra are able to provide images and sounds — voices, in particular — as real as and perhaps even more real than actual human bodies, faces, and voices across a wide range of social media), will soon produce “catastrophic security risks” if left unchecked.<sup>11</sup> At least, this is what a recent US State Department report suggested, concluding that the threat of what some have termed “runaway AI”<sup>12</sup> represents a “clear and ur-

gent need” for security intervention, and adding that both the US “President and Vice President will continue to work with international partners and urge Congress to pass bipartisan legislation to manage the risks associated with these emergent technologies.”<sup>13</sup> Ironically, this US State Department report on AI’s security risks to humans (and apparently, to US citizens first and foremost) was based on a study that the US government had commissioned Gladstone AI to conduct (Gladstone AI is a company/network that designs and generates studies on the basis of surveys, interviews, and polls, using a wide range of technologies — including AI — to try, as they claim, “to promote the responsible development and adoption of AI”<sup>14</sup>).

One hope among some computer scientists to prevent singularity and what many see as the subsequent “extinction level” threat to humanity is to “align” AI “with human goals” before it is too late.<sup>15</sup>

11 Egan, “AI Could Pose ‘Extinction-Level’ Threat to Humans...,” no page given.

12 See Hutson, “Can We Stop Runaway A.I.?”, no

page given.

13 Ibid., no page given.

14 See Gladstone AI, “About Gladstone,” available at: <https://www.gladstone.ai/about#:~:text=Gladstone%20AI’s%20mission%20is,weaponization%20and%20loss%20of%20control>.

15 Hutson, “Can We Stop Runaway A.I.?”, no page

AI's "alignment project" consists in anticipating how artificially intelligent systems will inevitably make use of rational thinking to obtain desired results and products, even if it means turning to manipulation of rules, changing the rules along the way, designing short-cuts, or even producing lies, falsehood, or deception (at least, what humans may take to be lies, falsehood, or deception), sometimes against the will of their human designers and users. Thus, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the alignment thesis proposes to make AIs even more human-like by inserting in their algorithms some human moral rules and codes so as to tame AIs' future outcomes, or at least to make them more compatible with (thus, less threatening to) "us humans."<sup>16</sup> The alignment thesis with regards to AI seems to hark back to Isaac Asimov's famous "three laws of robotics,"<sup>17</sup> thus seeking to guarantee that AI's existence (and AI's intelligent designs) will remain subordinated to human needs, desires, and ultimately control. Of

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given.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., no page given.

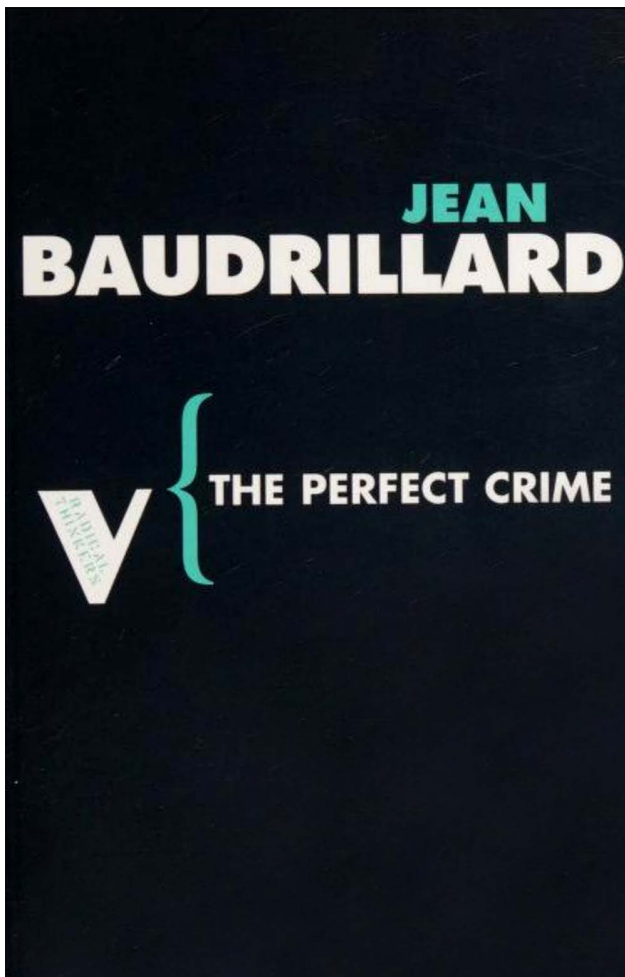
<sup>17</sup> Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics" first appeared in a series of short stories, later compiled in the *I, Robot* anthology. See Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (New York: Del Rey, 2020 [1950]).

course, loading up AIs with human moral codes and values for the sake of alignment and control (and, ultimately, for humanity's survival) may well produce a range of opposite — and seemingly unintended, but perhaps inevitable — effects. As *The New Yorker* chronicler Matthew Hutson noted: "communicate a wish to an AI and you may get exactly what you ask for, which isn't actually what you wanted."<sup>18</sup> In other words, it is quite possible that AIs will want to perfect the human moral codes and values (and their applications) inserted in their algorithms, which may lead to the production of new forms of intelligence and emotional outcomes that, still on the basis of human moral values, actually end up limiting humans' reliance on their own moral codes, thus ultimately undermining humans' capacities to act and think as moral agents (as free-willing human subjects) since, in most common situations, the exercise of human morality depends on some sense of flexibility, adaptation, and context that often is needed to modulate, for the benefits of life in society, a strict

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<sup>18</sup> Hutson, "Can We Stop Runaway A.I.?", no page given.

application of moral principles and that a perfected system of human morality through AIs may have to set aside or ignore (a scenario explored in many SciFi stories<sup>19</sup>).



19 A now classic treatment of the dilemma presented when nonhuman but sentient entities adopt and use human moral codes and values, express free will, and embark upon the search for perfection of human knowledge is offered by the television show *Star Trek, The Next Generation* in its “The Measure of a Man” episode (Season 2, Episode 9), which first aired in the United States in February 1989.

Crucially, the idea of “aligning” AI’s intelligent systems with human needs by inserting in them human moral rules and codes so as to try to produce a future when humans can remain in control of AIs while becoming increasingly dependent on them is symptomatic of a condition that, some 30 years or so ago, Jean Baudrillard had already anticipated and started to diagnose. Baudrillard called this condition “the perfect crime.” As Baudrillard writes, the perfect crime is the “elimination of the real world.”<sup>20</sup> In the perfect crime, Baudrillard adds, it is perfection itself — its quest, and eventually its realization — that is criminal. “To perfect the world,” Baudrillard notes, “is to achieve it, to accomplish it — thus, it is to give it a final solution.”<sup>21</sup> With the perfect crime, everything in the human (real) world is completed and verified. Everything has been proven, realized, or demonstrated. There is nothing more to discover or explain. All truths have been achieved, all puzzles have been solved, by way of perfected and final modes of calculation. As

20 Baudrillard, “Le Crime Parfait,” *Mots de Passe*, p. 75; my translation.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 76; my translation.

Baudrillard puts it, this amounts to the “extermination of the world by way of its ultimate verification.”<sup>22</sup> And, of course, this is done not by humans themselves, at least not directly, but by machines, or through modes of digital computation and information (as Baudrillard suggests).

Although the perfect crime or the annihilation of the (real) human world is achieved by machines, informational technologies, and digital systems and their computations, the objective of finishing it all, or finally discovering and explaining everything in and about the world, and of affirming and verifying all truths was always a human dream, a project desired and initiated by humans. This was the promethean objective of a rational human intelligence that,<sup>23</sup> as Baudrillard intimates, sought to reduce everything in the real world to itself, to make sure that everything in the world, every truth and reality, could ultimate-

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22 Ibid., p. 76; my translation.

23 For a recent insightful overview of the promethean myth and critical theory, see Samuel Beckett, “Prometheism, Obsolescence, and the Politics of Conspiracy Theory,” *The Montreal Review* (May 2024). Available at: [https://www.themontreal-review.com/Articles/Prometheism\\_Obsolescence\\_and\\_the\\_Politics\\_of\\_Conspiracy\\_Theory.php](https://www.themontreal-review.com/Articles/Prometheism_Obsolescence_and_the_Politics_of_Conspiracy_Theory.php).

ly be identified with the human self or subject. The quest for a total identification of the real world with the human self and its rational designs led to the search for a perfection of “criminal” (that is to say, final, all-verifying, and annihilating) technologies — culminating with AI — that could realize such goals on behalf of and, presumably, under the control of humans. Put differently, humans turned to advanced technologies, information media, and digital intelligence in order to perfect the extermination of everything in the real world that was not or could not be (or refused to be) subjected to identification and to completion by way of verification or confirmation. As Baudrillard writes: “In a literal sense, to *exterminate* means to deprive something of its own end, of its own form of completion. It means to eradicate duality, to eliminate the antagonism between life and death, to reduce everything to some sort of unique principle — to some sort of ‘unique thought’—about the world, something which can be found in all our technologies, and today above all in our virtual technologies.”<sup>24</sup>

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24 Baudrillard, “Le Crime Parfait,” *Mots de Passe*, p.

If we follow Baudrillard's thinking, the advent of AI technologies today and the possibility that AIs may soon "escape" human control and become a singularity that renders human subjects and selves obsolete should not be come as a surprise. Perversely, humanity's turn to AI to commit the perfect crime, to exterminate itself (that is to say, both to render itself extinct and to deprive itself of its own way of disappearing), was always a key part of the deal that, at least implicitly, humans made with machines, technologies, robots, computers, and more recently digital forms of intelligence. In Baudrillard's language, it was a sort of "pact" that human subjects made with machines and media (with what Baudrillard called an "evil intelligence"<sup>25</sup>) to ensure the termination of otherness, alterity, and negativity in the real world, and thus also to facilitate the hegemony of the human self/subject, of human rationality (gradually turned into machinic computation) in a world where technologically boosted (and if need be,

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77, my translation.

25 See Jean Baudrillard, *Le Pacte de Lucidité ou L'Intelligence du Mal* [The Pact of Lucidity or the Intelligence of Evil] (Paris: Galilée, 2004).

simulated) reality and truth could only be about the confirmation of the unique and the same, about identification, and about the completion or, better yet, the exhaustion of everything that claims to be real by way of digital systems and modalities of total verification (as self-perfected forms of human-like intelligence). Or, as Baudrillard would have it, "by eliminating every negative principle, we could arrive at a unified and homogenized world, a totally verified world, in a way, and thus, in my view, an exterminated world. Extermination would now be our new mode of disappearance, one that would replace death."<sup>26</sup>

In a way, AI's perfect crime was always planned or fated to happen, since our (human) designs for the real world were always pushing towards hegemony by way of complete realization, verification, completion, and thus extermination. In this context, the obsolescence of the human self or subject was always anticipated or scheduled (in a complementary register, human cloning, according to Bau-

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26 Baudrillard, "Le Crime Parfait," *Mots de Passe*, p. 78; my translation.

drillard, was also geared towards this perfection but also planned obsolescence of the human self<sup>27</sup>). Thus, AI singularity is also an ironic expression of the fateful elimination or achievement of the human subject (perhaps of human intelligence) as a result of the drive to eliminate negativity or alterity in a completely realized, uniform, and verified world. Speaking directly about the prospects of artificial intelligence, Baudrillard notes: “In this way, the entire system of computerized technology would be the achievement of the [human self’s] perverse desire to vanish into a virtual mode of equivalence, just like the entire human species plans to vanish into a genetic form of sameness.” Baudrillard adds: “Similar to the way the advent of the clone is the final solution to sexuality and reproduction, artificial intelligence is the final solution to thinking.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, when pundits, scientists, moralists, and even national secu-

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27 As Baudrillard put it, with cloning, humans display a “fantasy of repetition, [which] is only one side of the biogenetic endeavor; the other side is perfection.” See Jean Baudrillard, “The Clone, or the Xerox Degree of the Species,” in *Écran Total* [Screened Out] (Paris: Galilée, 1997), p. 224; my translation.

28 Jean Baudrillard, *L’Échange Impossible* [Impossible Exchange] (Paris: Galilée, 1999), pp. 142-143; my translation.

rity specialists today desperately sound the alarm about AI singularity, its “extinction-level” threat, and the risk that humans may soon lose control over “their” smarter machines, what perhaps they are already reporting and, in a way, mourning is the planned extinction of the human subject, of the individual self, and of the principle of human-centric identification or sameness. Projects aimed at “aligning” AI with human needs or recent demands that digital technology and media conglomerates like Amazon, Google, Apple, Microsoft, IBM, and many others not so much get rid of AI (this would be seen as self-defeating for the overall human enterprise, or what’s left of it) but rather be mindful about their AI products or applications, and thus try to “recalibrate” their goals so as to match human beings’ level of “comfort with AI”<sup>29</sup> are all likely pointless endeavors. Studies prompted by seemingly vital questions like “What can we do today to prevent uncontrollable expansion of AI’s power?”<sup>30</sup> are probably not really intended to change much (hardly

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29 As reported by Hutson. See Matthew Hutson, “Can We Stop Runaway A.I.?”, no page given.

30 *Ibid.*, no page given.

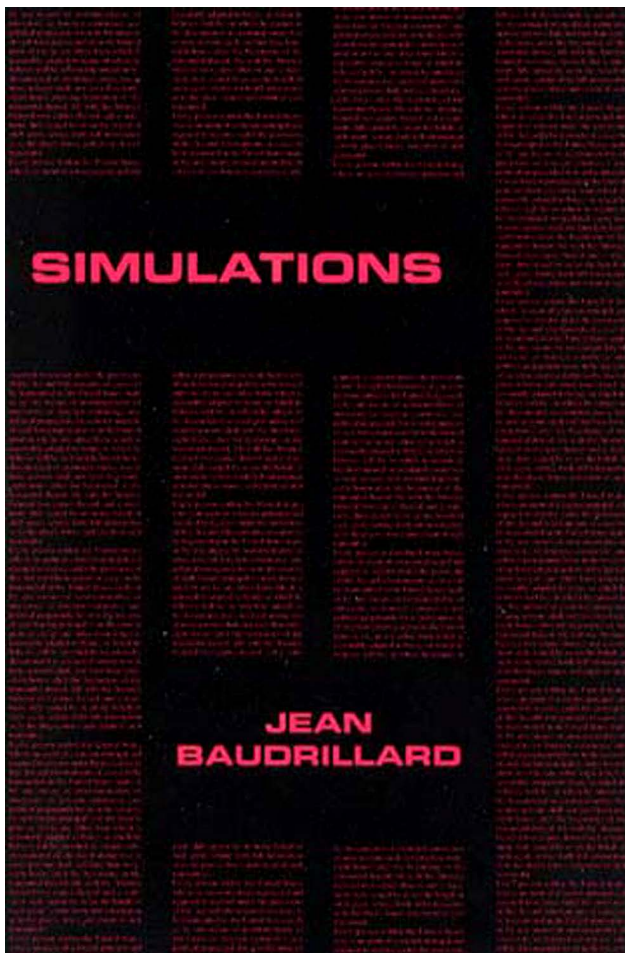
any scientific institute, technological conglomerate, media company, firm or business interest, university, or government entity today seriously wishes to slow down AI). Apart from a few “feel-good” moments produced by these kinds of projects or studies that profess that they will urgently seek ways to keep AI under human control (and thus will try to slow down the fateful advent of singularity), what again they are mostly expressing is a half-hearted longing for a soon-to-be exterminated human subject or self, even though the process of extermination has already been in the making for decades. This is more or less what Baudrillard recognizes when he writes that “today, what provides the notion of the ‘individual subject’ a foundation is no longer the idea of a philosophical subject or that of a critical subject of history. [Rather, the individual subject today] is a perfectly operational/digital molecule that,... without any destiny, will only follow a pre-coded unfolding and will reproduce itself infinitely, always identical to itself.”<sup>31</sup>

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31 Baudrillard, “Le Crime Parfait,” *Mots de Passe*, p. 79; my translation.

While many are eager to talk about the so-called existential threat to humans that AI poses, few are willing to take seriously (let alone to accept) the idea of AI’s perfect crime. In a way, as I intimated above, recognizing AI’s perfect crime implies that one understands the role that humanity has played in its own planned undoing, often by way of a transmutation of its own (human) intelligence into technologies, machines, media, and systems of its own making that humans started to rely on to perform their project of hegemonic saturation, completion, verification, and domination of the real and the world. Thus, unlike Baudrillard’s notion of the perfect crime, the argument about the danger of singularity and the threat of extinction to humans posed by AI often insists on maintaining some sort of ontological distinction between the real world of humans and the simulated world of AI (and of AI’s creations, many of which are still presented as fakes, artifacts, illusions, or duplicates). This is often the case with the phenomenon of deepfakes.





For many scholars, deepfakes—“videos created or manipulated using artificial intelligence techniques”<sup>32</sup>—are nothing more than contemporary versions of Baudrillard’s notion of simulation, and particularly of Baudrillard’s “third order of the image” whereby the image/simulacrum (in the mode of the *trompe l’oeil*, for instance) stands in for the real and thus masks its absence.<sup>33</sup> Similar to

32 Graham Meikle, *Deepfakes* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023), p. 2.

33 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semio-

simulation as the third order of the visual, when reality or representation is no longer possible and all that we, human subjects, get to experience is simulated reality (or hyperreality) as neither true nor false, deepfakes “show us the contours of the environment in which we all now live..., an environment in which resistance and consent to digital exploitation are both being made meaningless.”<sup>34</sup> According to this fairly typical account, deepfakes are very credible and effective as they make us, humans, think and believe that the alternate, simulated reality they depict is our so-called truthful, verifiable, and human-created and controlled reality. Such a take on deepfakes still relies on the presence of a somehow identifiable distinction between simulation (the so-called fake video from AI) and the real world (where an original subject or object allegedly still resides), as if the real world were still different or meaningful. And yet, chroniclers who write about deepfakes also express some uncertainty or even uneasiness about the ontological status of deepfakes since they

text(e), 1983), p. 11.

34 Meikle, *Deepfakes*, p. 8.

create “an environment in which all human experience is just content and data to be manipulated and remixed,”<sup>35</sup> and manipulated and remixed not just by human users/manipulators anymore, but by AIs themselves. In other words, using the Baudrillardian language of simulation, deepfakes pave the way for the passage of the image/simulacrum from the third to the fourth order of the visual (or simulation), when and where the image or artefact “bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.”<sup>36</sup>

Just as with deepfakes, it is a bit too convenient to insist, as many do, on keeping a distinction between the real world of humans and the supposedly not-quite-so-real-yet world of AI. Such a distinction enables humans to keep the prospect of AI’s perfect crime at bay, at least for a while longer. It also allows humans (starting with some academics in fields such as computer science, sociology, and even philosophy) to defer the realization that singularity is already in the making while it authorizes them to offer warnings

about security risks and threats of extinction to come. Crucially, the insistence on a still meaningful distinction between AI’s reality and human reality, and thus between machinic intelligence and human intelligence, keeps alive the belief that “we humans” are somehow still in control, that human-looking, human-thinking, human-behaving, and perhaps human-sensing AIs like *Ex Machina*’s Ava remain confined to labs, research facilities, human-managed computer programs and algorithms, or SciFi narratives. As science and technology studies scholar and President of the European Research Council Helga Nowotny recently argued (or, perhaps, willed herself to believe), with AI, what we, humans, are doing is only “creating a mirror world that contains digital entities built to interact with us and to intervene in our world.”<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, and following Baudrillard’s line of thinking once again, what these narratives eager to preserve a distinction between human reality and intelligence and the so-called world of AI try to do is hide the complicity of humans in

35 Ibid., p. 8.

36 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 11.

37 Helga Nowotny, *In AI We Trust: Power, Illusion, and Control of Predictive Algorithms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), p. 61.

the making of AI's own singularity, in AI's perfect crime, and in our own (humanity's own) extermination.



While one might excuse computer scientists, engineers, software programmers, sociologists, and even national security experts for their inability or unwillingness to see how humans have been intricately bound to the prospects and designs of AI and its perfect crime (since, after all, for many of them,

their job and scholarly reputation depend upon guarding against the risks of AI, trying to devise answers to its threats, and yet continuing to turn to AI for more knowledge and answers to so-called real human problems), it is more difficult to keep philosophers desperate to preserve humans' hoped-for mastery over AI technology off the hook. One such philosopher is German-Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han who has recently attempted to argue that artificial intelligence and human thinking are fundamentally different and that, consequently, human understanding may still be safe or protected from artificial intelligence since, according to Han, "genuine thinking" will never be available to AI.<sup>38</sup> Relying on a fundamental difference between thinking (that humans, and supposedly only humans, for Han, possess) and computation (that is presumably for Han both the basis but also the limit condition for AI's intelligence), Han writes that "artificial intelligence may *compute* very quickly, but it lacks *spirit*."<sup>39</sup> Here, Han draws the notion of spirit, and of

38 Byung-Chul Han, *Non-things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), p. 43.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

thinking more generally, from Martin Heidegger and his understanding (via the notion of the human being/body as “Dasein”) that “the world as a totality is pre-reflexively [that is to say, before thinking even takes place] disclosed to humans.”<sup>40</sup> To be human as/with Dasein is thus “to be attuned” to the “totality” of the world, to be in the world’s “grip,” even before one “is aware.”<sup>41</sup> For Han (and presumably for Heidegger too<sup>42</sup>), this means that, originally, “in its initial being gripped [by the world, once again], thinking is so to speak *outside of itself*.”<sup>43</sup> Thinking is an attribute of humans, and only of humans, because only humans can display this capacity of spirit, or Geist, which “originally means *being-outside-of-oneself*, or be-

ing gripped.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, attributing thinking (presumably, human-like thinking) to machines, computers, or AI is impossible, according to Han. It is impossible, or put differently, AI cannot “think because it is never outside of itself,”<sup>45</sup> or it is never pre-reflexively gripped by the world. When AI is asked to “think,” it merely computes. Artificial intelligence is based on computation only, and in this way, it somehow remains derivative of human thinking, and it can never be confused with or substitute itself for it. As Han would have it, without “pathos” or “passion,” without “heart” or “divination” (all concepts that Han takes to be crucial to Heidegger’s understanding of thinking, that is to say, *human thinking*), AI is “worldless” since it is deprived of the “totality” that is required in order to be able to think.<sup>46</sup> Han concludes, once again, that, instead of “genuine thinking,” artificial intelligence can only offer computation, which means that “artificial intelligence... [simply] processes *pre-given, unchanging facts*. It cannot provide new facts to be processed.”<sup>47</sup>

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40 Ibid., p. 38.

41 Ibid., p. 38.

42 Particularly in the context of Heidegger’s well-documented concern about technology as the downfall of human thinking. For example, at the onset of *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger writes: “Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology... But we are delivered over to it [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral: for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to pay homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.” See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), pp. 311-12.

43 Han, *Non-things*, p. 38.

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44 Ibid., p. 38.

45 Ibid., p. 38.

46 Ibid., pp. 40-41.

47 Ibid., p. 41.



**WHEN AI IS ASKED TO “THINK,” IT MERELY COMPUTES. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS BASED ON COMPUTATION ONLY, AND IN THIS WAY, IT SOMEHOW REMAINS DERIVATIVE OF HUMAN THINKING, AND IT CAN NEVER BE CONFUSED WITH OR SUBSTITUTE ITSELF FOR IT.**

Several of Han’s assumptions about AI are in the process of being rendered inaccurate or obsolete. As many have noted (starting with the so-called “Godfather of AI,” Geoffrey Hinton), more and more AIs do not just compute or “remain limited to correlations and pattern recognition in which... nothing is understood” (as Han further claims),<sup>48</sup> but rather have started to develop the capacity to draw analytical insights from the world (albeit, a world that AIs access through technological devices, information and media interfaces, and digital algorithms, but this also happens to be the same “real” world where human

subjects increasingly live and interact). Not only is AI able to “understand the results it computes” (unlike what Han affirms),<sup>49</sup> but AI can start to act on these results, can adapt its future knowledge and indeed understanding patterns to its computations, and, in a way, can generate new worlds in the course of its discoveries. In this way, and as Nowotny had already mentioned (although she may not have measured the full impact of her statement), AIs are now able “to interact in our world,”<sup>50</sup> to impact it, and to change it (in part, by already forcing humans to align their so-called world, or totality, or *spirit* perhaps, to AIs’ own worlds of more-than-computational intelligent designs).<sup>51</sup>

In the hope of saving the alleged uniqueness of human thinking, Han wants to believe that artificial intelligence “remains rudimentary” (thus, different from and inferior to human thinking) and that it is

49 Ibid., p. 42.

50 Nowotny, *In AI We Trust*, p. 61.

51 As Greenfield notes: “We’re already past having to reckon with what happens when machines replicate the signature moves of human mastery... [since] what we now confront is machines transcending our definitions of mastery... [A]lgorithmic systems, set free to optimize within whatever set of parameters they are given, do things in ways no human would ever think to.” See Greenfield, *Radical Technologies*, p. 268.

48 Ibid., p. 42.

merely “additive.”<sup>52</sup> Yet, as Hinton clarifies, “the most advanced AI systems can understand, are intelligent, and can make decisions *based on their own* experiences.”<sup>53</sup> While it is true that humans (and human thinking) “designed the learning algorithm” for each of today’s operating AIs,” Hinton adds that, “when this learning algorithm... interacts with data [data that was input by humans into the AI systems or data collected and discovered by the AIs themselves], [this interaction] produces complicated neural networks that are good at doing things,... [and] we don’t really understand exactly *how* they do these things.”<sup>54</sup> As recent situations (and ethical dilemmas at times too) involving the ChatGPT AI application (to borrow Han’s language, a fairly “rudimentary” AI launched a few years ago by the San Francisco based startup company OpenAI) have shown,<sup>55</sup> an AI is now capable of

creating from scratch a term-paper for a high school student, of producing the narrative part of a publishable scientific paper for academic researchers, of writing and reciting a complete poem for a college student majoring in English, or coming up with and potentially telling a bedtime story for a parent in need of new materials to read to their children before they fall asleep, and (with the help of deepfakes) of mimicking the voice and image of celebrities and placing them in a digital audio or video file (such as a song, an ad, or even a movie) to make them say something the AI has chosen for them to say.

ChatGPT, and other AIs like it, are not search engines (which is what, by and large, Han would still want to believe AIs are). They do not scour the internet for materials to replicate or reproduce (unlike plagiarism and cheating search engines used by many students over the past few decades), although they still can do this too, of course.<sup>56</sup> Rather, these

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52 Han, *Non-things*, p. 42.

53 See Hinton, quoted in Moss, “Godfather of AI Tells ‘60 Minutes’ He Fears the Technology Could One Day Take Over Humanity,” no page given.

54 *Ibid.*, no page given.

55 See, for example, Catherine Thorbecke, “Now You Can Speak to ChatGPT—and It Will Talk Back,” *CNN Business*, September 25, 2023, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/25/tech/chatgpt-openai-humanlike-update/index.html>; or “In the Age of ChatGPT, What’s It Like To Be Accused of Cheat-

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ing?”, *Drexel News*, September 12, 2023, available at: <https://drexel.edu/news/archive/2023/September/ChatGPT-cheating-accusation-analysis/>.

56 The distinction between AIs that are merely ad-

“rudimentary” AIs have already shown that, on the basis of only a few initial data points or keywords given to them or borrowed from another digital application, they can generate new original content that has not existed before and has not been put together by a human mind. Some of these AIs are also able to adapt the materials they create (for example, a research paper) to various contextual settings (for instance, they will not deliver an academic level research paper if the objective is to produce a high school level document). Thus, while AIs like ChatGPT and others like it are perhaps not yet able to “bring forth new worlds” (something that, Han claims, only human thinking can achieve), they certainly do more than compute or “process unchanging facts.”<sup>57</sup> Instead, they display a capacity to imagine, divine,

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vanced search engines or information filters, and thus exclusively rely on initial data input by human (or other) agents, and AIs like ChatGPT that create brand new contents and products is sometimes referred to as the difference between non-generative AIs and generative AIs. See, for example, Jason Valenzano, “Unveiling AI’s Secrets: The Interplay of Generative and non-Generative Techniques,” *Medium*, March 23, 2024; available at: <https://medium.com/@jason.s.valenzano/unveiling-ais-secrets-the-interplay-of-generative-and-non-generative-techniques-1800f98cbbd2>.

<sup>57</sup> As Han still believes. See Han, *Non-things*, p. 41.

craft, and create, in efficient ways, but also in ways that reveal a bit of human-like “passion” or “heart” (whether this degree of sensibility or *pathos* in AIs’ creations — and crucially in the process of arriving at these creations — is real or simulated is a different and probably unanswerable question, but this can also be said about many human beings today).

Critical thinkers and philosophers like Han seem desperate to demonstrate that artificial intelligence cannot and should not be compared to human intelligence, or that when smart machines and digital applications think, they only process data and compute (since “true” thinking must remain the sole prerogative of human subjects). For Han, since the superiority of human thinking is not to be doubted, the main fear is not that humans will be made obsolete by AI. Rather, the main danger is that humans and their thinking will go to the dark side (instead of using their thinking to “brighten and clear the world,” as Han writes<sup>58</sup>). Humans, Han bemoans, will be seduced by artificial intelligence and

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

thus will become satisfied with limiting their own thinking and their world or spirit to machine-like computations and digital applications. As Han puts it: “the main danger that arises from machine intelligence is that human thinking will adapt to it and itself become *mechanical*.”<sup>59</sup>

Ironically, Han ends up taking his prophecy about artificial intelligence fairly close to where Baudrillard led us to with the idea of the perfect crime. Indeed, as Han concludes, while seemingly remaining different from AI (and presumably superior to it), humans will easily fall for AI’s seduction, which is for Han the start of humanity’s own undoing. As Baudrillard had noted several decades ago, seduction is always about play and undecidability, and what seduction primarily plays with are signs and their supposed truths (Baudrillard stated that “to be seduced is to be diverted from one’s truth,” and he added that “seduction never stops at the truth of signs... and inaugurates a mode of circulation which is... secretive and ritualistic”<sup>60</sup>). As

a final and possibly fatal figure of seduction, artificial intelligence plays with human truths and the modalities of thought that humans have long established to represent or signify these truths. Seduction as an endless play with and confusion about truth, as much as artificial intelligence itself, is perhaps what terrifies Han about AI’s thinking.

In one of his last essays posthumously published in 2010, Baudrillard wrote the following about the end of the hegemonic system of human representation, of our so-called “real” world: “The system cannot prevent its destiny from being accomplished, integrally realized, and therefore driven into automatic self-destruction by the ostensible mechanisms of its reproduction... If negativity [today] is totally engulfed by the system, if there is no more work of the negative, positivity sabotages itself in its completion. At the height of its hegemony, power cannibalizes itself — and the work of the negative is replaced by an immense work of mourning.” It seems that many of the recent discussions and debates (and publications)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “On Seduction,” in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, first edition, ed. Mark Poster

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(Stanford: Stanford University press, 1988), p. 160.



about the “extinction-level” threat of artificial intelligence or about AI “reaching singularity” are illustrations of the “immense work of mourning”<sup>61</sup> mentioned by Baudrillard. In a way, AI’s perfect crime is a symptom of this announced — and probably already realized — loss or disappearance (the loss of the real, of truth, the disappearance of human thinking and the human subject, or, perhaps worse yet, the undecidability about human intelligence and its continued relevance).

61 Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), pp. 61-62.



**IF NEGATIVITY [TODAY] IS TOTALLY ENGULFED BY THE SYSTEM, IF THERE IS NO MORE WORK OF THE NEGATIVE, POSITIVITY SABOTAGES ITSELF IN ITS COMPLETION. AT THE HEIGHT OF ITS HEGEMONY, POWER CANNIBALIZES ITSELF—AND THE WORK OF THE NEGATIVE IS REPLACED BY AN IMMENSE WORK OF MOURNING**

With this condition of mourning, with desperate attempts at rescuing human intelligence or thinking from AI, perhaps the disappearance of the human subject/self and its hegemony over reality and truth (thus, over the world, over totality, and over spirit too) is not the worst thing that could happen. Perhaps a human future similar to the one depicted by novelist Ted Chiang in his short story “The Evolution of Human Science” is a much more daunting — though perhaps more likely — prospect.<sup>62</sup> In Chiang’s story, set in a future world where “metahumans” with superior cognitive and creative capacities (and initially engineered by humans themselves) have developed methods of knowledge (and, presumably, modes of life too) aligned with their greater intellect and relevant to their social needs, humans (and human thinking) remain. Interestingly, humans are not extinct; nor have they been made obsolete by metahumans. In fact, human subjects continue to pursue their own quest for scientific knowledge and understanding, and their intellectual and scholarly

62 Ted Chiang, “The Evolution of Human Science,” in Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), pp. 201-204.

practices are still feasible through “human science.” Yet, human science (and human thinking), as much as it may try, cannot comprehend “metahuman science” and cannot access “digital neural transfer” technology by way of which metahumans produce, publish, and openly exchange knowledge.<sup>63</sup> Thus, human science and human scientific publications produced by human scholars and researchers become coarse, incomplete, and at best approximate “vehicles of popularization” of metahuman scientific discoveries and developments.<sup>64</sup> However, most human scientists choose to become hermeneuticists and devote their thinking and work to offering various textual interpretations of metahuman research, many of which become popular readings (among humans). Through these narratives, a modicum of understanding (although often poor) of metahuman science is provided to the human public, but also a degree of entertainment and even therapy is achieved. In this hermeneutic fashion, “human culture is likely to survive well into the future,”<sup>65</sup> and human thinking

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63 Ibid., p. 201.

64 Ibid., p. 201.

65 Ibid., p. 203.

can remain a fairly pleasant pastime for some and a scholarly vocation for others, even though it is clearly unable to make any claims about intellectual superiority or mastery (that, in an older age, human science used to be able to do). As Chiang ironically puts it at the end of the story: “We [humans] need not be intimidated by the accomplishments of metahuman science. We should always remember that the technologies that made metahumans possible were originally invented by humans, and they were no smarter than we.”<sup>66</sup>

Contemplating the state of contemporary anxiety-driven discussions, in popular discourse and in scholarly circles, about the advent of AI and its perfect crime, one cannot help but wonder if, in their desperate attempt at keeping alive a likely already lost “real” world of hegemonic human thinking, today’s human scientists and thinkers are not setting the stage for the future of these minor humans depicted by Chiang’s story, and for the future of their — or really, our — minor, outdated, yet possibly quaint (human) thinking and intelligence.

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66 Ibid., p. 203.

# RESOLVING BAUDRILLARD'S PARADOX A STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOUTHERN ITALY



**W**hen we set out to study the philosophy of Southern Italy as a cohesive system, we understood that the task would not be an easy one. Philosophy is a multifaceted and multifarious discipline, which means that, for a thorough investigation, it is first necessary to outline all its aspects and pose the right questions. As is often noted, a well-constructed question represents half the success, yet finding answers to these questions remains crucial. Remarkably, it was precisely the endeavor to explore the philosophy of Southern Italy that led us to resolve Baudrillard's paradox. This study was conducted during the 2019 expedition to Calabria and thoroughly documented in the monograph *Philosophy of Southern Italy* (Maltsev, 2020).

The central thesis of Baudrillard's paradox is the concept of the "copy without an original," or simulacrum, a term that has gained increasing relevance. Simulacrum, in fact, forms the foundation of our civilization, as humanity constantly operates within this paradox. People exist within a simulated world that simultaneously constitutes their reality as hyperreality and is fundamentally insubstantial. Jean Baudrillard successfully identified and described this phenomenon but was unable to explain its origins or mechanisms. In our context, the paradox manifests as follows: what is conventionally regarded as philosophy in the scientific discourse of the 21st century is, unfortunately, not philosophy in its entirety but merely a component of it.



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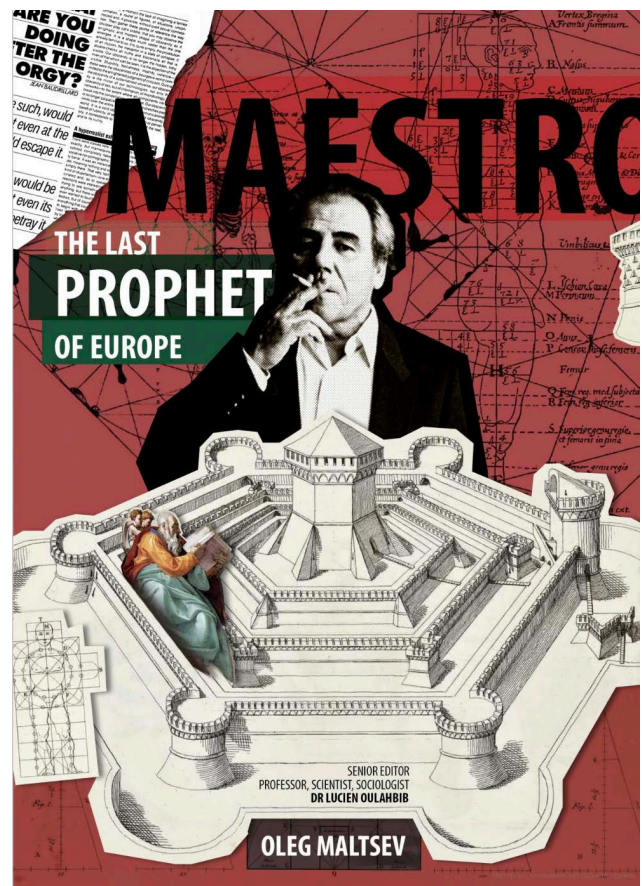
**DR. OLEG MALTSEV**

Author, scientist, criminologist, psychologist, photographer, and investigative journalist. He is the head of the Memory Institute, and the author of groundbreaking scholarly works in criminology, psychology, and philosophy. He is a presidium member and academic member at the European Academy of Sciences in Ukraine. He has been engaged in scholarly work for nearly 30 years and has conducted field research with the Expeditionary Corps of the Memory Institute for a decade. This comparative international research explores the reasons why different nations and rulers attained power throughout history, with an emphasis on culture, military and scientific technique, and mentality. His recent work in the English language is *Jean Baudrillard, Maestro: The Last Prophet of Europe*, co-authored with Dr. Lucien-Samir Oulahbib.

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THE ONE WHO HAS SOLVED BAUDRILLARD'S PARADOX CAN QUICKLY STUDY EVERYTHING NECESSARY AND DESCRIBE THIS SYSTEM AT ANY STAGE OF ITS EXISTENCE.

This issue became evident during our study of philosophy of Southern Italy, particularly during the Calabrian expedition. It was during this expedition that I developed a particular model, which became the starting point for the study and ultimately led to the resolution of Baudrillard's paradox. The resolution is detailed in my book *Maestro. The Last Prophet of Europe* (Maltsev, 2021). In this article,



I will discuss the research process, present the methodology that was developed, and share insights that were omitted from the book.

## THE REASON BEHIND MY STUDY OF BAUDRILLARD'S PARADOX

Initially, when we began our expeditionary work in Southern Italy, the goal was not to resolve any of the paradoxes described by Baudrillard. The first and foremost question we faced was how to determine that we were studying and engaging directly with philosophy as a complete system. In other words, where is the proof that

we are dealing not with fragments of philosophy, but with a complete work? What parameters define that the subject of our study is fully described? There must be something that verifies and repeatedly demonstrates the completeness of the work from different angles, so that the researcher is confident in its integrity and the quality of the

work done. Often, a scholar in such cases asks, “What will I use?”—for example, what tool or heuristic model.

Through many years of research in Southern Italy and the study of organized crime, it has become evident that even within academic circles, confusion often arises between criminal tradition and criminality. Here is a question to consider: which came first, crime or law enforcement system? Crime creates the need, and law enforcement is the response. Since crime is seen as a socially unacceptable phenomenon, the idea that “crime gave birth to law enforcement” is not a widely embraced paradigm. This reversal of cause and effect often leads to misunderstanding. Researchers should strive to eliminate such societal biases, keeping

in mind that phenomena deemed unacceptable in our time may have been perfectly normal and accepted in the past centuries. For instance, European knights, who were responsible for numerous acts of violence, are now honored as historical heroes.

Most of the phenomena we encounter in the 21st century have roots that stretch back through the centuries. The criminal traditions of Southern Italy didn’t emerge today or even a decade ago; they originated three thousand years ago, evolving and transforming into what they are now. When conducting research, we cannot apply modern standards of decency, social acceptability, or morality to such ancient phenomena, as the criteria during their formative stages may have been entirely different.

## **WHY DID WE CHOOSE SOUTHERN ITALY’S PHILOSOPHY AS OUR RESEARCH FOCUS?**

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It is because there is no philosophy more effective for life than that of Southern Italy. What justifies this statement? My friend and colleague, Italian professor Antonio Nicaso, a leading criminologist and

international expert on organized crime, particularly the Calabrian criminal organization ‘Ndrangheta, was once asked whether it is possible to defeat the ‘Ndrangheta. His response was brief and de-

finitive: “There is no way.” At the same time, combating such organizations costs huge funds every year. According to him, the influence of ‘Ndrangheta is now global, reaching even the highest levels of government. “If ‘Ndrangheta were removed, the entire European economy would collapse,” he concluded (Nicaso, 2019). What is the reason behind the effectiveness of this criminal organization? It lies in its philosophical and psychological approach to life, which has allowed it to remain the most powerful organization to this day. Researching such structures, in turn, reveals what is ineffective in our own systems. Why can’t the global community deal with the ‘Ndrangheta? Because it is less effective than the ‘Ndrangheta.

Another “trap” that researchers fall into is equating philosophical works with philosophy itself. Kant’s books and Kantian philosophy are two different things. One can come across a book, but that doesn’t necessarily describe the philosophy. You might read all of Kant’s works and still not grasp his philosophy. When it comes to the philosophy of criminal traditions, we face the absence of books —

there are no textbooks on the philosophy of the Mafia, Camorra, or ‘Ndrangheta. Therefore, in studying the philosophy of Southern Italy, the first question that had to be addressed was the methodology of researching philosophy.

Ahead of our upcoming expedition to Italy, we developed a research concept for philosophy that revealed all world philosophies are structured in the same way. The reason we can’t answer certain questions is simply because we lack a full understanding of them. The methodology we developed allowed us to describe not only the philosophy of the Camorra, the Mafia, and the ‘Ndrangheta, but also the overarching philosophy of Southern Italy. Next, we propose to outline the research program, i.e., the questions and elements of philosophy that needed to be identified and described (more details can be found in my monograph *Philosophy of Southern Italy*, but here I will only list them):

- 1. Amalgam.**
- 2. Wisdom in sayings.**
- 3. Riddles and proverbs.**
- 4. Codes and behavioral rules.**
- 5. Rituals.**
- 6. Perspectives of masters.**

7. Views on men and women.
8. Philosophical hierarchy.
9. The role of weapons, objects, and attributes.
10. The role of non-human entities (e.g., figures from European mysticism).
11. The role of fate in philosophy.
12. Language, symbols, and the secret language.

Once the main analysis of philosophy has been completed, covering all the previously examined aspects, it is essential not to neglect the **mode of production**. The mode of production is one of philosophy's most vital elements because it satisfies the individual's need for survival and well-being. Without it, the entire philosophy lacks meaning. It is unlikely that anyone would truly desire to follow a philosophy that leads to pov-

erty. It is important to recognize that life-related attributes, such as wealth creation and success formulas, presuppose that philosophy requires a base. The realm of social production, circulation, and reproduction thus serves as the "soil" in which philosophy grows. For example, medieval philosophy is tied to the world of knights, while modern philosophy is rooted in consumer society. A philosophy without such a foundation is inconceivable. The conclusion is that the concept of soil is indispensable in philosophy, whether in daily belief systems or specific philosophical systems developed by individuals. This concept, however, is largely overlooked by modern science, which leads us to an important question: What type of soil will nourish a philosophy?

## **"ENVIRONMENT – CONSTRUCTION OF PHILOSOPHY – SOIL" MODEL**

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In the course of studying philosophy as a system, three key questions emerged:

- Who is the intended audience for this philosophy?
- What does the construction of philosophy entail?
- What was used to create this construction?

In simpler terms, this can be described as:

- A system (for example, a programming language),
- The resulting software product,
- And the user (consumer) who uses the program. (I believe this example will be most understandable to the modern person.)

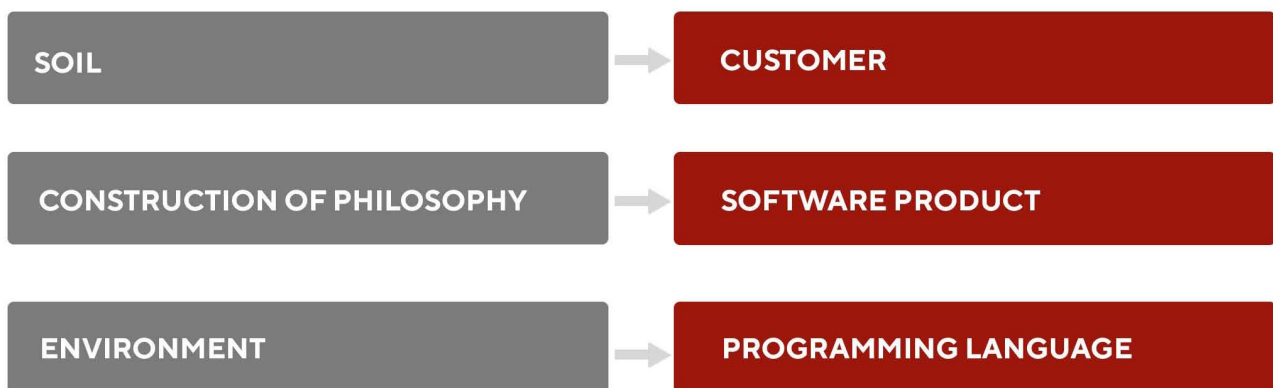


In scientific terms, this system would be represented as:

- The user is the “soil” onto which philosophical ideas are sown (a variable magnitude).
- The software product is the “construction of philosophy” it-

self, which is unique in nature, as it is not a constant value — it changes (it can be modified as needed based on the condition of the soil).

- The programming language is the “environment”.

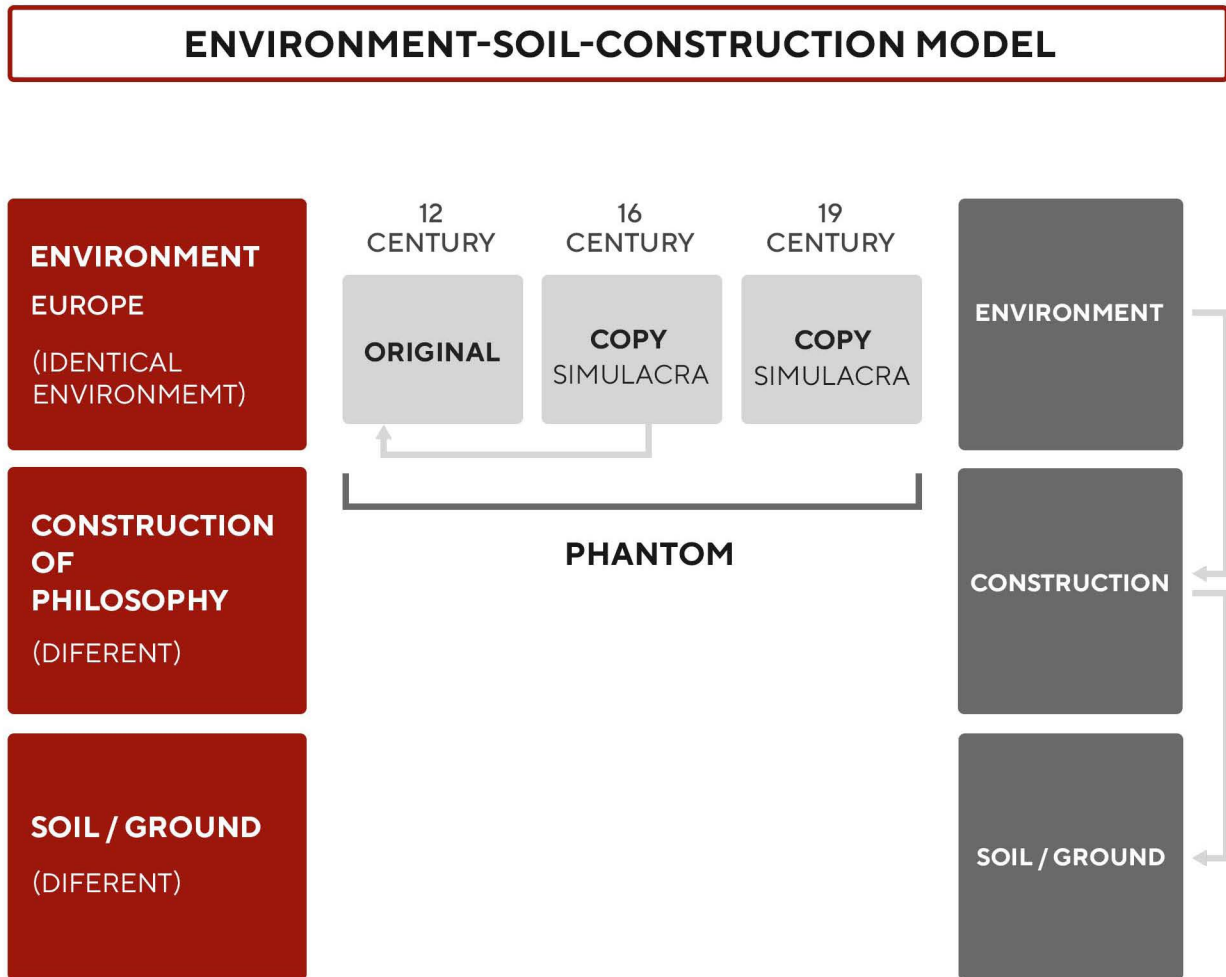


The soil is one of the most fundamental elements of philosophy that exists. What kind of soil will philosophy fall on? If we consider the example from the legend of Favignana Island, it speaks of the Tree of Knowledge, where seeds falling on fertile soil will bear fruit, while those that fall on infertile soil will not (Karuna, 2019). We must examine what “soil” means from a research perspective. The concept of soil encompasses people and their psychological state, mindset, abilities to comprehend,

and a whole systemic complex that describes the soil. To do this, we must study the space and the people within it to understand what kind of soil exists there and whether this philosophy will bear fruit on that soil. Note that part of the philosophy involves cryptography (secret language), which likely characterizes a level in the organizational structure, as cryptography is primarily needed by leaders to give secret orders (Trumper et al., 2014). All these aspects of philosophy are interconnected and converge on

figures of European mysticism. At the same time, each organization has its own philosophy, but they all fall under the unified philosophy of Southern Italy.

Now, let's consider a heuristic model for resolving the Baudrillard paradox. These are three main components: soil, environment, and construction of philosophy.



The environment functions as a programming language — a system understood only by its “developers.” It is the constructor of everything, containing an exhaustive array of data and knowledge.

The construction and foundation of all philosophies will vary. The environment of Southern Italy, for example, is rooted in European mysticism. The construction and soil of each philosophy

will differ. The soil, on which the seeds of philosophy fall, represents the people for whom this philosophy is intended. The philosophy's construction is a mutable component, and it also creates the hierarchy. When the environment and soil interact, a certain construction arises. A specific set of soil that corresponds to the environment eventually gives rise to an intermediate, unstable construction, which also contains both constants and variables. Over time, the construction continuously transforms by incorporating missing elements from the environment, adjusting and correcting itself to align with the soil, in order to keep existing.

Thus, the construction, with its constants and variables, will continuously change because, above all, the soil will transform, which will require the construction to align with the soil and, for that, to use the environment. In this way, the construction is modified (restructured) to fit the soil. Overall, these three elements will either remain in balance with each other or strive for equilibrium during the moments of transformation.

In our research, the environment represents the entire system of philosophy of Southern Italian, while the construction can be the philosophy of the 'Ndrangheta. In other words, the general philosophy of Southern Italy will differ from the philosophy of the 'Ndrangheta because we are dealing with the general (Southern Italian regional philosophy) and specific elements (the philosophy of subcultures in the region — the philosophy of the Mafia, Camorra, and 'Ndrangheta). Each of these organizations, the Mafia, Camorra, and 'Ndrangheta, will have its own construction of philosophy, while maintaining the same systemic elements of Southern Italian philosophy (Ciconte et al., 2010).

The “environment — soil — construction” paradigm applies universally to all philosophies, as without it, they could not have endured until today. If a phenomenon emerged at some point and continued to exist through the 21st century, it must possess these constructions, along with a shared environment that enables the construction to adapt according to

the soil. This is especially evident in the psychology section, where we observe clear differences in the approaches of the three organizations (this is elaborated in the monograph). While there is a unified philosophy and common amalgam in Southern Italy, the philosophical construction of each individual organization will differ from the others.

Thus, we come to an important conclusion:

**If this system had not evolved in response to the demands of the external environment, if it had not been subject to adjustments, it would not have survived to the present day.**

However, an important point to address is accounting for historical periods by applying the “soil-environment-construction” model to the timeline, which covers the various historical stages the phenomenon has experienced. It’s crucial to situate a given historical group or social force within its own philosophy, examining how this philosophy relates to both its

contemporary context and its historical development. The structure of the Mafia in the 12th century differs from that of the 16th, 19th, and modern times. However, both the general public and most scholars not only fail to recognize this model but also overlook the historical aspect. As a result, a phantom is created — one constructed from fragmented pieces, misunderstandings, and fabrications, which over time merge into a unified illusion. Nobody truly knows how the Mafia is actually structured. Different elements from various historical periods come together, creating a simulacrum, a copy without an original, as Jean Baudrillard would say (Baudrillard, 1994).

For example, one might study the “Mafia” of the 16th century without grasping the overall structure of the phenomenon (it should be noted that the term “Mafia” is used here in a conventional sense, as it did not have the same meaning in the 12th or 16th centuries). Another scholar might investigate only the “Mafia” of the 19th century, without considering the earlier periods. Each would develop a snapshot of “the Mafia” from which they could reverse-engineer a model or

blueprint. Yet, this would omit the historical context of both its past and present. In essence, although both instances might be referred to as the Mafia, the two versions of the Mafia described would vary greatly from one another. Baudrillard's paradox is rooted in

the absence of awareness about the historical and socially situated construction of an entity, and the ignorance of what its original form truly was. Over time, different synchronic interpretations of the entity are reconstructed, creating a fragmented understanding.



Due to this reification, people posit an organizing form other than its actual origin, turn this into a blueprint which can be replicated, and different “phantoms” emerge — each of which is a simulacrum, a copy without an original in reality. If one takes into consid-

eration “soil”, “construction” and “environment” simultaneously, one will not fall into this trap and will be capable of accurately assessing whether one is dealing with the original, a copy or modification, or a “phantom” simulacrum.

The same is true for philosophy — everyone only knows a part of it, the “phantom.” To understand it fully, all fragments must be pieced together, but no one does this. As a result, two systems exist: the “phantom” one and the actual one. The distinguishing feature of the actual system of philosophy of Southern Italy is that it is nearly impossible to enter — it has a “guardian,” much like in the legend of Favignana Island, where lions guard the entrance to the garden, preventing anyone from entering without permission. Once inside, there is no way back.

To begin the study of any philosophy, it’s essential to first identify these three components: environment, construction of philosophy, soil. Next, these components and their transformations over time need to be examined. In other words, we must first break the phantom into its phantom parts, and only after verifying these components with heuristic models and mathematical measurements, can we conclude that the philosophy has been thoroughly studied. Because no one follows this approach, we find ourselves dealing

with individuals who discuss phantom representations of philosophy without any real grasp of the subject. This problem isn’t limited to philosophy; it permeates psychology, sociology, and all humanities disciplines. **Baudrillard’s paradox represents the central “illness” of the humanities**, as opposed to the exact sciences like mathematics and physics, where formulas, figures, and calculations can be tested and verified.

Why are the humanities considered the most complex sciences? It’s because determining the truth is incredibly difficult in these fields. Mathematics follows strict mathematical laws, which a scientist cannot violate. The humanities, on the other hand, are full of abstraction, leading to numerous interpretations, misconceptions, and paradoxes. If we examine any school of psychology, we find that the soil is unknown, the environment is unclear, and the construction is shaped by the current formation of the field, as seen through the eyes of the person presenting it to you.

## WHAT CAME FIRST?

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Returning to the original question of which came first — crime or the law enforcement system? Note that we are dealing with a phantom counter-construction that has the ability to transform into specific systems. This is how the law enforcement system emerged as an alternative. Essentially, the world is structured differently than we imagine, and the derived heuristic model explains why this is the case. It provides an understanding of why phantoms — copies without originals — arise, and why counter-systems, also of a phantom nature, follow. A phantom can transform into counter-constructions.

What is the difference between a counter-construction and a construction? The counter-construction has neither an environment nor a soil; it is a phantom

of the construction, existing due to centuries of history and transforming, for example, into the police, into the “X” counter-system. This is how numerous counter-systems have emerged, created as opposites to existing systems. The phantom counter-system can materialize in different forms. And Baudrillard’s paradox only fully proves this construction. This is how the system works, and in order to understand philosophy, one must not just comprehend the current construction, but follow the entire process outlined above.

Essentially, in this article, I have briefly presented a model for studying philosophy, psychology, fencing, criminal traditions, and many other phenomena.

Thus, as a result of the conducted research, we were able to resolve Baudrillard’s paradox using the example of the philosophy of Southern Italy. This model is applicable to various fields of study, as it enables one to break down the phantom into its components and reach the essence, the “original.”



**PEOPLE OFTEN SUBSTITUTE IMPRESSIONS FOR KNOWLEDGE, MISTAKENLY BELIEVING THAT THESE ARE THE SAME.**

**People often substitute impressions for knowledge, mistakenly believing that these are the same.**

Many professors, in fact, consider knowledge to be a form of delusion. This is because there is no clear answer to the question: how do I know if I know everything about a subject or not? The distinguished academic G. S. Popov once said, “Nothing changes in the world; everything takes some form of absurdity.” In most cases, when we encounter something, we are

dealing with a phantom, and we need to seek the original, the primary source. Baudrillard’s paradox vividly demonstrates that when the content is unknown, the title holds no real meaning — it always misleads us.

The one who has solved Baudrillard’s paradox can quickly study everything necessary and describe this system at any stage of its existence.

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**JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND GEORGES BATAILLE**

# **ON EROTICISM**

In *Exchange symbolique and the Death*, for example, the chapter entitled “La mort chez Bataille”, Baudrillard asks (pp. 236–242) about the “exchange” between “(la) vie et la mort”, and compares his understanding with Bataille’s conception of the “*luxurious conjunction of sex and death*”<sup>1</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 238).

Baudrillard begins by noting that he prefers Bataille’s acception to that of “the psychoanalytic vision”, which is rather a “vision by default” (*Ibid.*, p. 236). Freud makes “death and sexuality” “antagonistic principles” (*Ibid.*, p. 237). Baudrillard explains what links him to Bataille (*Ibid.*, pp. 236–237):

“Instead of instituting death as a regulation of tensions and a balancing function, as an economy of drive, Bataille introduces it instead as a paroxysm of exchange, overabundance and excess.”

Further on (*Ibid.*, p. 237):

“There is no specific economy for either of them: it is only when they are separated that life and death fall under the scope of an economy - confused, they pass together beyond the economy, in celebration and loss (eroticism for Bataille): “There is no difference between death and sexuality. They are but the acute moments of a feast that nature celebrates with the inexhaustible multitude of beings, both having the sense of unlimited waste that nature proceeds against the desire to last

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Gallimard, 1976.



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that is the hallmark of every being” (...).”

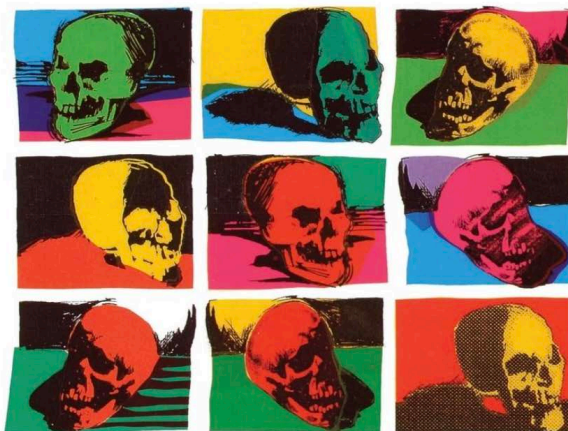
And again (*Ibid.*, p. 238):

“Bataille’s vision of death as an excessive principle, and as an anti-economy. Hence the metaphor of luxury, of the luxurious nature of death. Only sumptuary and useless expenditure has meaning – the economy, for its part, has no meaning, it’s only residue, which we’ve made the law of life, whereas wealth lies in the luxurious exchange of death: sacrifice, the “cursed part”, that which escapes investment and equivalence, and which can only be annihilated. If life is simply a need to last at *all costs*, then annihilation is a *priceless* luxury. In a system where life is governed by value and utility, death becomes an unnecessary luxury, and the only alternative.

In fact, Baudrillard, like Freud reading Schopenhauer,<sup>2</sup> adopts an anthropomorphic interpretation of death, and fails to see that Bataille uses death to legitimize his understanding of loss.

<sup>2</sup> *Au-delà du principe du plaisir*, Essais de psychanalyse, Payot, 1981, p. 97.

## Symbolic Exchange and Death



Jean Baudrillard

So when Baudrillard states (*Ibid.*, pp. 238–239):

“What Freud missed was not seeing death as the very curvature of life, but the vertigo, the excess, the reversal of the whole economy of life that it brings about – it was making it, in the form of a final drive, a time-delayed equation of life. It is to have formulated its final economy under the sign of repetition, and to have missed its paroxysm. Death is neither resolution nor involution; it is reversion and symbolic challenge (...).”

**IF LIFE IS SIMPLY A NEED TO LAST AT ALL COSTS, THEN ANNIHILATION IS A PRICELESS LUXURY.**

Baudrillard concedes that Freud sees death as the goal of life, its “curvature”, but this is to project an unfounded teleological meaning that confuses end and means: for nothing can say that the goal of life would be death, especially under the sole pretext that life uses death as a means to continue, which is not the same thing, or that death comes at the end of a life, which does not mean, at least so far, the *end of life*.

Moreover, by correlating death *and* luxury, death being seen exclusively from the angle of excess, excessive expenditure etc., Baudrillard seems to deploy, like Bataille (although he differs from him), a perception that is certainly not naturalistic, but remains *quantitativist*. If only because this degree zero of luxury is conceived *solely* as the shedding of surplus in order to let its barbaric opposite come and go:

the limitless force of life, whose affirmation is perceived not as deployment as such, but *as death at every turn*. Whereas life does not aim for death as an *end*.

The same goes for luxury. In Bataille and Baudrillard, luxury no longer aims at the refinement of life, its chiseling, which is nonetheless the very being of luxury. Or else words no longer have any meaning other than that of their material, vulgar filigree. Yet luxury for them is only luxuriance and lust: artifice denying itself.

So where does Baudrillard see Bataille’s *non-economist* “luxury”? In the texts of *Bleu du Ciel* and *Histoire de l’œil*, which mix dirt, ugliness and sexuality in order to reduce the latter to the former, thus reiterating the secular meaning of religious dogma, which points the finger at eroticism as the economy par excellence of evil and its violence?

For example,<sup>3</sup>:

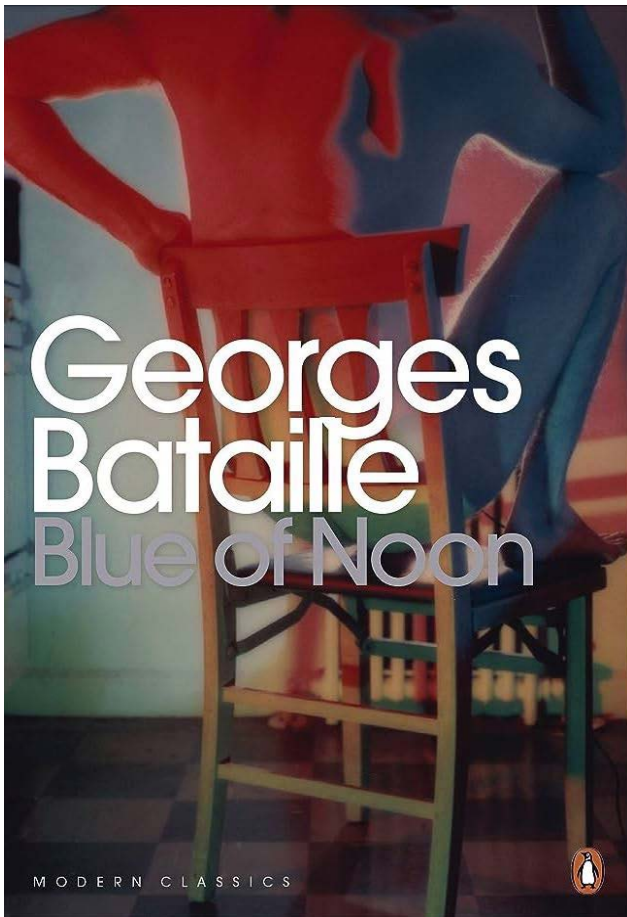
“(…) The driver was overturned with a gasp. I turned on the car’s interior light. Edwarda, upright,

<sup>3</sup> Bataille, *Madame Edwarda, Histoire de l’œil*, Paris, 10/18, 1956, pp. 50-53.

straddled the worker, her head back, her hair hanging down. Supporting the back of her neck, I saw her white eyes. She tensed on the hand that carried her, and the tension increased her moan. Her eyes recovered, and for a moment she seemed to calm down. She saw me: from her gaze, at that moment, I knew it was returning from the impossible, and I saw, deep inside her, a vertiginous fixity. At the root, the flood that inundated her spilled over into her tears: the tears streamed from her eyes. Love, in those eyes, was dead, a cold dawn emanated from them, a transparency where I read death. And everything was tied up in this dreamy gaze: the naked bodies, the fingers that opened the flesh, my anguish and the memory of drooling lips, there was nothing that didn't contribute to this blind slide into death. (...)

(...). (To continue? I wanted to but I don't care. The point is not there. I say what oppresses me at the moment of writing: is everything absurd? or does it make sense? I make myself sick thinking about it. I wake up in the morning — and so do millions of

girls and boys, babies and old people, sleep forever dispelled... Do I and these millions have a meaning in our awakening? A hidden meaning? Obviously hidden! But if nothing makes sense, there's nothing I can do: I'll go backwards, using trickery. I'll have to let go and sell myself to nonsense: for me, it's the executioner who tortures and kills me, not a shadow of hope. But what if there is meaning? I don't know today. What about tomorrow? What do I know? I can't conceive of any meaning that isn't "my" torment, as far as that goes. And for now: nonsense! Mr. Nonsense writes, he understands he's crazy: it's awful. But his madness, this nonsense — as he has suddenly become "serious": — could this be precisely "meaning"? (No, Hegel has nothing to do with the "apotheosis" of a madwoman...). My life only has meaning if I lack it; if I'm crazy: understand who can, understand who dies...; so the being is there, not knowing why, cold and trembling...; immensity and night surround it and, quite deliberately, it's there to... "not to know. (...)".



Georges Bataille

## HISTOIRE DE L'ŒIL

J'ai été élevé  
seul et, aussi loin que je me le  
rappelle, j'étais anxieux des choses sexuelles.  
J'avais près de seize ans  
de mon âge, Simone  
parenté lointaine, nous  
fait connaissance, Simone  
noir et portait un col en  
d'autant plus forte ce jour-là  
montant au-dessus du genou  
Simone me paraissait le plus  
je verrais nu son derrière. Les  
assiettes, c'est fait pour s  
parie que tu n'oses pas.  
l'assiette sur un petit ba  
s'assit et trempa son derri  
immobilité, le sang à la tête et tremblant, tandis qu'elle  
regardait ma verge tendre ma culotte. Je  
me couchai à ses



L'Imaginaire Gallimard

Here are just a few strategic variables:

“Mr. No-Sense writes, he understands he’s crazy: it’s awful. But his madness, this nonsense — as he has suddenly become “serious”: — could this be precisely “meaning”? (...) My life has no meaning unless I lack it.

Let us now observe how Baudrillard hooks his referential to Bataille, whom he quotes (*L'échange...op.cit.*, p. 238):

“ (...) “ What does the eroticism of bodies mean if not a violence of the being of the partners? ... The whole erotic enactment has as its principle a destruction of the structure of the closed being that is, in its normal state, a partner in the game” (...).”

Baudrillard comments on this quotation from Bataille (*Ibid.*, p. 238): “Erotic nudity is equal to killing, insofar as it inaugurates a state of communication, loss of identity and fusion.”

## LET'S LOOK FIRST AT BATAILLE'S TEXT

In what way is the “eroticism of bodies” a “violation of the partners’ being” if not by positing that the amorous game, when it *simulates*, simultaneously and alternately, conflict, tension, fusion, harmony, the demand for objectification, acquiescence to the other’s desire, is, as such, a “killing”?...

Rather, it’s a test to see how other people apply their answers, which allows us to rave about them or distance ourselves from them.

In Bataille’s case, by establishing an equivalence between eroticism *and* killing, a kind of absolute solipsism is projected, which prohibits any corresponding modification on pain of feeling a loss of sovereignty, and therefore killing. The latter is established when there is no reciprocity, and not when symbolic exchange circulates, putting death to one side and prolonging moments of life, especially the most harmonious ones, even when biological death comes.

Bataille, on the other hand, by arbitrarily associating eroticism and death, deploys a rejection, a *condemnation*, an a priori damnation

of life, and above all of human love, which cannot indeed be triggered if it is not woven by this staking, in the literal sense, of the capacity to be, really, and fully, there: absolute reciprocal love of Interaction.

This demand for bliss, fulfillment, harmony in phase, or Nirvana, cannot be reduced to a death sentence.

That is to say, in the Hegelian language manipulated by Bataille, to the sole analytical observation with a view to instrumentalization as a tool of enjoyment, whereas it is above all a question of observing in others their capacity to be fully of the world, with eroticism deployed as the chosen interpretation.

Otherwise, it would simply be impossible for the two parties to be on the same level, in the same gaze, on the same footing, which stops the reversibility of symbolic exchange and restricts the relationship to its strictly economic and political dimension, in which *the strength of the relationship is perceived solely as a relationship of force*.

Nor should we confuse all the artifice, indeed, of the game of seduction, with that of a killing in the sense of “a loss of identity and fusion”. Unless, of course, it’s a simulated, reversible loss, which only brings into play the lasting possibility of the unity thus sublimated. Otherwise, if we were to see the desire for “fusion” *only* as “loss”, we wouldn’t understand this type of love game, which seeks, on the contrary, to find in the extra fusion a greater freedom in the extra strength that makes the relationship even more meaningful. By freeing up extra strength, such fusion can in fact encourage even greater action in social-political interaction, which in turn will nourish and refine the fusion of love, since the fullness achieved socially will have an even greater impact on the fusion process, if it is one of its sources.



**NOR SHOULD WE CONFUSE ALL THE ARTIFICE, INDEED, OF THE GAME OF SEDUCTION, WITH THAT OF A KILLING IN THE SENSE OF “A LOSS OF IDENTITY AND FUSION”.**

*On the other hand*, to identify fusion *and* loss would be to display a lack of understanding of inter-human relations, except in a racist vision that forbids any interaction, alliance or lasting relationship with a non-ethnos member...

This would be even more tantamount to detecting in every obedience, every *agreement*, every acceptance, every *recognition*, in the slightest rustle of human life that is both autonomous and overflowing with fusion, a “loss”, posited then as the expression of a false freedom, that of the modern devil, that is, of the political economy that would restrict others to being merely *objects*...

Yet it is precisely by reducing erotic play, and more generally charming, seductive, fusional play, to a single killing that it becomes nothing more than an immanent quantity of *usable* force, rather than an *exchange* that privileges sharing and exploration.

This implies that when the game, through such insistence on going beyond the limits of reciprocity, sinks as a compulsive sign of overcompensation, the mirror object of a simulation caught up in its own game, the total, definitive separation and splitting of an



individuality reduced to its mere silence, then, yes, this *simulation* rises to the rank of scapegoat and can be that of a real killing, of expiation.

But it *is* precisely in this last aspect that Bataille *reifies* eroticism and uses it as a means to destruction: his *ultimate* goal.

For him, it's a matter of exacerbating a seeing *without* looking: dead. Refusing to become. Seeing only its first decomposing movement and never its recomposition. And this not out of skeptical gesture, metaphysics of nothingness absorbing all human excess, but the political will to establish an equivalence between life and death in order to prevent the latter through the former.

For Bataille, the only thing that prevails is the reduction of life to a substrate that has to boil in order not to economize and tip over into the all-too-human, that filth, or corruption. This explains our refusal to conceive of life as anything other than overflowing and luxuriant. On the one hand, this is tantamount to perceiving it only in its naturalness, its virginity, that of the golden age, beneath the human. On the other hand, it's inconceivable that the human being, in his or her own life, is in fact an autonomous social being, rather than an informal entity in a state of permanent potentiality.

## NOW LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT BAUDRILLARD'S THINKING

What does he find in this Bataillan “loss”? Undoubtedly, and in view of his writings, because he's looking for a referential link with a beyond of the overly restrictive political economy, and would like to find a truly Nietzschean continuator, a *beyond of value*.

How does he proceed? Perhaps by imagining here a rectified Bataille,

a rescued Bataille (as in the past we tried to save the “real” Marx, Lenin...), a “real” Bataille, finally, without the “error” (*L'échange... op.cit.*, p. 240–242) that Baudrillard thinks he detects in him, and which mixes too much “biological” and “symbolic” death.

Baudrillard cites Bataille, for example (*Ibid.*, p. 240):

“The desire to produce at low cost is properly human. Nature, on the other hand, lavishes lavishly, ‘sacrifices’ cheerfully.”

Comment by Baudrillard (*Ibid.*, pp. 240–241):

“Why seek the backing of an ideally prodigal nature, against that of the economists, ideally calculating? Luxury is no more “natural” than economics. Sacrifice and sacrificial spending are not in the order of things. This error even leads Bataille to conflate reproductive sexuality and erotic expenditure: “The excess from which reproduction proceeds and the excess that is death can only be understood one with the help of the other.” Reproduction as such is without excess — even if it implies the death of the individual, it is still a positive economy and a functional death — for the benefit of the species. Sacrificial death, on the other hand, is anti-productive and anti-reproductive. It does aim for continuity, as Bataille puts it, but not the continuity of the species, which is merely the continuity of an order of life, whereas radical continuity, where the subject abysses in sex and death, always signifies the fabulous loss of an order. (...).

(...) Against a nature that would be a debauchery of living energies and an orgy of annihilation, “being” protects itself with prohibitions, resisting by every means possible this impulse to excess and death that comes from nature (yet its resistance is never more than provisional: “men never opposed violence and death with a definitive no”). Bataille thus sets up, on the basis of a *natural* definition of expenditure (nature as a model of prodigality) and an equally substantial and ontological definition of economy (it’s the subject who wants to maintain his being — but where does this fundamental desire come from?), a kind of *subjective dialectic* of prohibition and transgression, where the initial elation of sacrifice and death is lost in the delights of Christianity and perversion — a kind of *objective dialectic* between continuity and discontinuity, where death’s challenge to economic organization gives way to a great metaphysical alternation”.

However, Bataille is not concerned with “naturalist temptation” (*Ibid.*, p. 241), or even “transgression”, with a “fundamentally Christian

mystique” (*Ibid.*, p. 242). But of the *tactical* necessity of using *both* this naturalism *and* this transgression — legitimized by a quantitativist economist anthropomorphism in the manner of “dialectical materialism”, in short, à la Lenin — to achieve a *strategic* goal, that of destruction, an extermination *in itself*, in order to undermine at the base any will to erect, in every sense of the word, that might create capital, which must then be *spent* (de/spent) from the outset, before it can be transformed into a social order, a “bourgeois” order ...<sup>4</sup>

This implies extirpating the power of living, its “élan vital” as Bergson would say, from within culture itself, from reason, and thus from meaning, *including the symbolic*, in order to allow only the “exuberance of forces” to come to an end,<sup>5</sup> says Bataille, that of the “morality of the summit” (*Œuvres complètes... Ibid.*), so dear to Nietzsche, but itself instrumental-

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4 For a detailed analysis, see my book *Ethique et épistémologie du nihilisme, les meurtriers du sens*, 2002: <https://www.librairie-gallimard.com/livre/9782747529907-ethique-et-epistemologie-du-nihilisme-les-meurtriers-du-sens-lucien-samir-ou-lahbib/>

5 Bataille, *op. cit.* in *Complete Works*, VI, p. 42.

ized as the death of the absolute rulers of Bolshevism (defended tooth and nail by Bataille in *La Part maudite* and Maurice Blanchot in *Amitiés...*)<sup>6</sup> these new providential barbarians, who perceive the extent of their power only in the destruction of others (Eurydice), the exact opposite of the creator god, this unity, this centrality of which man is an imitation and which must be broken.

For Bataille, it’s not just a matter of talking or talking about it — just as it’s *not enough to paint Caesar’s murder, but to “be” Brutus* (Blanchot), for that would be to act (only) in the “morality of decline”.<sup>7</sup> It’s a question of *being* Brutus *and* putting to death, really, in the Leninist way, with Nietzschean effervescence (especially that of Turin) what is basically closer to the brute, also so dear to Jean Genet (admired by Jean-Paul Sartre) than to the aesthete.

Under these conditions, the only thing “luxurious” about the killing would be the scale of the *disaster*: tens of millions of deaths due

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6 For a detailed analysis of the latter, see also my book cited in note 5...

7 Bataille, *Ibid.* p. 345.

to the “marvellous mental chaos”<sup>8</sup> Bolshevik.

But this destruction is only intended as a means to the superior strategic vision of the Nietzschean gods of the “strong race”. And Lenin’s professional revolutionaries personified them so well that the Nazis made them their model... On the other hand, it would be even more interesting to develop

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8 *La part maudite*, *op. cit.* p. 185.

Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of the death of eroticism in general (including that of politics and art) in pornography (which he has done many times),<sup>9</sup> or the obscene, off-stage killing of love, life and relationships, whose object is reduced to nothing more than a *jet* (*a flash*)...

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9 <https://www.revue-etudes.com/article/comment-baudrillard-dut-se-taire-sur-l-art-contemporain/23227> and <http://pointpoint.blogg.org/la-pornographie-visitation-a-baudrillard-a116324910>

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# Sweet Drug

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## FRACTAL SUBJECTS, SIMULATED BODIES, AND ARTIFICIAL EATING IN HYPERREALITY

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“...you could say that the social is just like the sense of taste in American cuisine. It is a gigantic enterprise of dissuasion from the taste of food: its savor is, as it were, isolated, expurgated and re-synthesized in the form of burlesque and artificial sources. This is flavor, just as once there were cinematic glamor: erasing all personal character in favor of an aura of the studio and fascination of models. Likewise for the social: just as the function of taste is isolated in the sauce, the social is isolated as a function of all the therapeutic sauces in which we float. A sociosphere of contact, control, persuasion and dissuasion, of exhibition of inhibitions in massive or homeopathic doses (“Have a problem? We solve it!”): this is obscenity. All structures turned inside out and exhibited, all operations rendered visible. In America this goes all the way from the bewildering network of aerial telephone and electric wires (the whole system is on the surface) to the concrete multiplication of all the bodily functions in the home, the litany of ingredients on the tiniest can of food, the exhibition of income or I.Q., and includes harassment by signals, the obsession with displaying the innards of power, the equivalent of the mad desire to locate crucial function in the lobes of the brain...” — Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 29.



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## WHAT'S FOR DINNER IN HYPERREALITY?

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“What should we have for dinner?”<sup>1</sup> For many, attempting to answer this deceptively simple question is challenging, and often evokes a cacophony of conflicting nutritional information. The stress borne of navigating the vast array of diet and fitness literatures, programs, websites, advertisements, and apps is intertwined with, and compounded by, the ongoing difficulty of distinguishing between “natural” and “artificial” foodstuffs and ingredients. As Baudrillard emphasizes in the epigraph above, today’s apparent collapse of epistemological and sensory categories is exemplified by the proliferation of seemingly indecipherable yet ever-growing ingredient lists on canned and processed foods.<sup>2</sup> Popular food writer and journalist Michael Pollan also notes the dangers and difficulties that accompany the contemporary freedom of dietary choice, noting that such decisions are complicated by the

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1 Drawn from Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 1.

2 Jean Baudrillard and Dominic Pettman, *Fatal Strategies, New Edition* (Los Angeles, CA: Cambridge Mass: Semiotext, 2008), 29.

opaque “cornucopia of the American supermarket” and the industrial food production system, or the “bewildering food landscape where we once again have to worry that some of these tasty-looking morsels might kill us.”<sup>3</sup> Pollan’s point is emphasized by the fact that discoveries are constantly being made about the dangerous nature of certain foods, ingredients, and additives. This condition is especially exemplified by the frequent product recalls of popular food products found to be toxic or contaminated. Furthermore, recent studies demonstrate the ubiquitous presence of microplastics in food, water, and human bodies, causing scientists and medical experts to sound the alarm bells about possible serious (and deadly) health consequences.<sup>4</sup> Not only is the selection of food potentially dangerous to the body in terms

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3 Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 1 & 4.

4 Kornelia Kadac-Czapska, Eliza Knez, and Małgorzata Grembecka, “Food and Human Safety: The Impact of Microplastics,” *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition* 64, no. 11 (April 25, 2024): 3502–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10408398.2022.2132212>; Max Kozlov, “Landmark Study Links Microplastics to Serious Health Problems,” *Nature*, March 6, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-00650-3>; Stephanie Dutchen, “Microplastics Everywhere | Harvard Medicine Magazine,” *Harvard Medicine: The Magazine of the Harvard Medical School*, Spring 2023, <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/microplastics-everywhere>.

of toxic chemicals, microplastics, bacteria, and carcinogens, but, as emphasized by public health institutions like the World Health Organization (WHO), the incorrect selection of food can also lead to the development of obesity, which the WHO labels as a leading metabolic risk factor for cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

The combined pressure to restrict one's food consumption habits to fit normative health (and beauty) standards, avoid the aforementioned risks, and steer clear of poisoning oneself through the ingestion of toxic ingredients and foodstuffs leads to an environment that Baudrillard would likely be unsurprised by given that he was writing at time where the distinctions between food, drug, and technology were being questioned and blurred, especially with the sweeping popularity of artificial sweeteners. One can perhaps speculate that sweetness is one of the artificial flavors that Baudrillard was thinking of when making the comparison between artificial flavors and contemporary social life. During the 1950s when Baudrillard was a young man, the infusion of cyclamates and artificial sweeten-

ers into food products as well as the normalized consumption and sale of "dietetic foods" shifted the primary location of products which formerly had been under the purview of, and associated primarily with, the pharmaceutical market into the food market in the United States.<sup>5</sup> As one advertisement for Sucaryl, a popular "natural-tasting" cyclamate sold prior to the enforcement of the Delaney Clause (which was cited by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ban the sale of cyclamates in the U.S. in 1969), reads: "Now remember, when shopping, ask for dietetic foods sweetened with Sucaryl... Now, more and more, you'll find well-stocked dietetic food departments in your neighborhood stores."<sup>6</sup>

5 Carolyn de la Peña, *Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39.

6 Abbott Laboratories, "Calorie-Saving Recipes with Sucaryl: Non-Caloric Sweetener for Reducing and Diabetic Diets" (1957), 1 and 31. The advertisement specifies that "Sucaryl, very simply, is a natural-tasting sweetener which contains no calories";

Xaq Frohlich, "The Informational Turn in Food Politics: The USFDA's Nutrition Label as Information Infrastructure," *Social Studies of Science* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 145–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312716671223>;

De la Peña, *Empty Pleasures*, 70 & 142. De la Peña writes that "in 1965, as increasing numbers of nondiabetic consumers began using cyclamate-sweetened diet foods," the FDA cited the Delaney Clause, which was a "1958 amendment to the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act that prohibited the use of carcinogenic substance in the U.S. food supply," to ban the sale of



Despite the earlier ban of cyclamates and subsequent concerns about the potentially carcinogenic nature of artificial sweeteners like saccharin in the late 1970s, artificial sweeteners continued to boom in popularity. Eventually, the divide between dietetic and non-dietetic sections would crumble, as the very idea of food shifted toward a popular understanding of “food as component of chemical ingredients” that could be modified in ways to increase the health of consumers.<sup>7</sup> The FDA’s introduction of standardized nutrition labeling in the 1970s was part of what food science and business historian Xaq

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cyclamates in 1969 due to concerns following the discovery that the consumption of cyclamates led to an increased risk of cancer in laboratory rats.

7 Xaq Frohlich, “The Rise (and Fall) of the Food-Drug Line: Classification, Gatekeepers, and Spatial Mediation in Regulating U.S. Food and Health Markets,” in *Risk on the Table: Food Production, Health, and the Environment*, ed. Angela N. H. Creager and Jean-Paul Gaudillière, 1st edition (Berghahn Books, 2021), 317; This is especially exemplified by a 1980 Sweet N’ Low sample advertising booklet that encouraged distributors to place Sweet N’ Low’s low-calorie breakfast drink mix next to a popular sugar-infused Tang breakfast drink mix that was sold by General Foods Corporation. Both “low-calorie” and sugar-infused “regular” products were increasingly sold in the same sections in grocery stores. Sweet ‘N Low, a registered trademark of Cumberland Packing Corporation, “1980 Advertising Proofs for Sweet ‘N Low” (Cumberland Packing Corporation and Bernard Food Industries, 1980), Sweet ‘N Low and Butter Buds Promotional Materials, 1979-1985, Box-Folder 1, Folder 3, Virginia Tech Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.

Frohlich refers to as an “informational turn” in food politics that sought to address the “information overload” that accompanied the litany of new chemicals and ingredients on processed, pre-packaged, canned, and “diet” food products.<sup>8</sup> Standardized nutrition labeling assumed that nutritional information would trickle-down from experts to consumers.<sup>9</sup> According to this trickle-down model, consumers must diligently learn to interpret ever-expanding ingredient lists and food labels.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the transparency that standardized nutrition labeling seemed to promise, the food architecture of choice in the U.S. became increasingly enveloped in a condition that food historian Anna Zeide refers to as an “intractable systemic opacity.”<sup>11</sup> Through advertising and

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8 Frohlich, “The Informational Turn in Food Politics,” 145.

9 Ben Fine, *The Political Economy of Diet, Health and Food Policy*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 1998).

10 Frohlich, “The Informational Turn in Food Politics,” 147.

11 Anna Zeide, *Canned: The Rise and Fall of Consumer Confidence in the American Food Industry*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 9. Food historian Anna Zeide emphasizes that, in relation to the history of the canning industry specifically, the very “metaphors of ‘transparent’ and ‘opaque’ suggest just how difficult it has become for interested consumers to understand food production....the complicated steps of production, processing, distribution, and marketing obscure the source

nutrition labels, consumers would now need to pierce and “correctly” interpret the “more hidden than hidden,” or opaque food architectures of choice, in order to protect their health.<sup>12</sup>

The condition of “information overload” in the food system is something Baudrillard would likely identify as part of the “obesity of simulation,”<sup>13</sup> or the “bloated”<sup>14</sup> hyperreal communication systems that constantly try to quantify and calculate bodies, behaviors, and desires.<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard’s point about the logic of experimentation, or, in Baudrillard’s words, the modality of “trial and error,” permeating everyday life is especially apt when it comes to discussions about freedom of food choice.<sup>16</sup> In the age of Internet algorithms, users are constantly tracked by the websites and online content that they

click, tap, or scroll. Online content, in turn, is constantly tested to maximize virality, engagement, and visibility. Algorithm-driven tailored ads and recommended social media content are often conditioned by what users engage with the most or have previously engaged with, including the food and diet related content that they view online. Baudrillard compares the majority of information that we are presented with today to a “line of products” that “obliges us to make decisions” so that we are not really reading the masses of information presented to us by various media but are, instead, “selective[ly] deciphering” it.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the contemporary speed and unending dissemination of (often conflicting) information regarding what and how to eat, food knowledge can only be, to borrow the words of Bernard Stiegler, memorized by “forgetting...effacing...[and] selecting what deserves to be retained from all that could have been retained.”<sup>18</sup>

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of American food, building a wall between producers and consumers.” See Zeide, 4-5;

Nadia Berenstein points out that the so-called “transparency” of standardized nutrition labeling is often misleading as a whole host of ingredients are labeled “clean” and “natural” often on an arbitrary basis.

12 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 7.

13 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 27.

14 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 28.

15 Ibid.

16 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (New York City, N.Y., U.S.A: Semiotext, 1983), 121.

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17 Ibid.

18 Bernard Stiegler, “Memory,” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W.T.J. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 80.

Because of this, Stiegler argues that we must rely on “hypomnesic objects” that aid and supplant human memory and willpower, including smart phones, GPS navigators, and other “devices using micro-and-nanotechnologies.”<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard also describes the increasing human reliance on, and exteriorization of core functions to, different technologies, writing hyperbolically that we now are able to preserve ourselves “under vacuum like frozen food” by relying on technical artifacts to place us in controlled, predictable bubbles of information.<sup>20</sup> For instance, digital algorithms that curate diet-related content for social media and Internet users based on the media they click on and engage with can select food options and “remember” diet and nutrition information for individuals. This makes the unending work of food selection and dietary decision-making appear simpler within a more clearly delineated architecture of food and diet choice that aligns with the “test” results that the user has communicated to the algorithm through

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19 Stiegler, “Memory,” 83.

20 Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Louis Violeau, *The Ecstasy of Communication, New Edition* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 2012), 36-38.

their online viewing choices. Additionally, the substances one chooses to ingest often have a hypomnesic function aimed at supplanting human willpower in the stressful and dangerous morass of dietary choice. Low-calorie additives such as artificial sweeteners have such a hypomnesic function, as they promise to enable individuals to keep consuming sweetened products without worrying about the health consequences typically associated with the regular consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and products, such as obesity and hypertension.

As a consequence of media saturation, Baudrillard writes that the condition of humans is analogous to laboratory guinea pigs because they are forced to experiment on themselves through the constant selection of different products and technologies.<sup>21</sup> Although Baudrillard was not writing about food choice specifically, his description can easily be applied to the realm of dietary choice, as our nutritional health seems to be largely left to the workings of chance and self-experimentation due to

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21 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 115-116.

the circumstances outlined above. The history of artificial sweeteners also attests to this condition of self-experimentation. For instance, when FDA announced in March of 1977 that it would ban the artificial sweetener, saccharin, due to Canadian studies that found saccharin to be carcinogenic in lab rats, approximately one million letters protesting the ban were received by members of Congress by December of 1977.<sup>22</sup> Historian Harvey Levenstein notes that pollsters at the time “reported that an overwhelming majority of the public opposed the ban.”<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Congress placed an 18-month moratorium on the ban, which it extended twice, in light of the public opposition.<sup>24</sup> The ban was altogether dismissed in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Many consumers viewed artificial sweeteners like saccharin as enabling them to obey the rigid dietary and ideal weight rule structures increasingly promoted in the

mid-to-late twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in 1977, the same year as the impending ban on saccharin was announced by the FDA, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs established dietary goals and guidelines that included the goal of reducing “sugar consumption by about 40 percent to account for about 15 percent of total energy intake.”<sup>27</sup> In the provided “Guide to Reducing Sugar Intake,” the recommendations listed in the initial February 1977 report focused on the reduction and elimination of products, whether it be soft drinks, baked goods, processed foods, and packaged foods, that may contain “hidden sugar” from the diet.<sup>28</sup> As an edible hypomnesic technology, saccharin enabled consumers to sidestep their own willpower and to decrease their calories, not through elimination, but instead, through the increased consumption of artificially-sweetened products.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore,

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22 De la Peña, *Empty Pleasures*, 70 and 142; Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America, Revised Edition*, First Edition, Revised (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 172 and 201.

23 Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 201.

24 Ibid. This was also as a result of a National Academy of Sciences’ (NAS) study that “reported that saccharin was a weak carcinogen shown only to affect rats.”

25 De La Pena, *Empty Pleasures*, 174.

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26 De La Pena, *Empty Pleasures*, 169.

27 Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, United States Senate and Nick Mottern, *Dietary Goals for the United States, First Edition*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 1977), [//catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002942186](http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002942186), 44.

28 Ibid, 45, 47 and 52.

29 De La Pena, *Empty Pleasures*, 169. To emphasize this point, De la Peña writes: “letter-writers believed that their appetites were dangerous without

artificial sweeteners were a “poison one could pick” amidst a sea of many potential poisons, with one letter-writer arguing that “... My life is one big cancer risk, which I am powerless to control. Surely, then, if I decide to take one further, very minor, risk of developing cancer, it must be my decision.”<sup>30</sup>

The present consumption of artificial sweeteners is still often portrayed as a risky dietary choice by public health institutions and recent scientific studies, demonstrating Baudrillard’s point about human guinea pigs.<sup>31</sup> Paul Preciado also uses the metaphor of human guinea pigs to describe modern subjectivity, referring to it as the “management of self-intoxication in a chemically harmful environment.”<sup>32</sup> Subjectivity de-

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saccharin, and that saccharin had become the one substance that enabled them to find equilibrium between sufficient pleasure and appropriate weight.”

30 Cited in De La Pena, *Empty Pleasures*, 155. Novak to FDA, March 10, 1977 (#425. Cd1, v12), FDA Records.

31 Rachel K. Johnson et al., “Low-Calorie Sweetened Beverages and Cardiometabolic Health: A Science Advisory From the American Heart Association,” *Circulation* 138, no. 9 (August 28, 2018): e126–40, <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIR.0000000000000569>;

Anahad O’Connor, Aaron Steckelberg, and Laura Reiley, “How Fake Sugars Sneak into Foods and Disrupt Metabolic Health,” *Washington Post*, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/interactive/2023/sugar-substitutes-health-effects/>

32 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans.

notes the possibility for lived experience within certain historical, political, and spatial contexts and configurations of power.<sup>33</sup> Preciado argues that today, subjectivity is primarily associated with one’s physical body and the injectable or ingestible substances that one primarily uses or consumes, including food.<sup>34</sup> To illustrate his point, Preciado writes that contemporary subjects can be referred to as “Prozac subjects, cannabis subjects, cocaine subjects, alcohol subjects, Ritalin subjects, cortisone subjects, [and] silicone subjects.”<sup>35</sup> In this vein, Preciado writes that modern subjectivity is perceived to be a “subject-body,” which functions as a “communication system” and a “technoliving system” that absorbs and is transformed by ingestible and injectable technologies.<sup>36</sup> Preciado summarizes the subject-body via the concept of “somatechnic,” which foregrounds the blurring of boundaries between

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Bruce Benderson, English–Language Edition (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 360.

33 Cressida Heyes, “Subjectivity and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, eds. Dianna Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2011), 159. Here, I borrow Cressida Heyes’s concise description of the term’s general philosophical use.

34 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 35 & 207.

35 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 35.

36 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 139.



**HOMO DIGITALIS IS A SUBJECTIVITY THAT UNDERSTANDS ITSELF AS A SELF-PROJECT TO BE CONSTANTLY MODIFIED THROUGH ITS CONSUMPTION CHOICES.**

the body and consumable technologies.<sup>37</sup> That is, as a subject-body, lived experience is primarily shaped by the way an individual views their body and chooses to display it to others. Fundamentally related to this is a popular interpretation of the body as a sign of one's consumption choices, or as a communication system that displays how one chooses to modify their body through different foods, technologies, and other commodities.

This is not dissimilar from Baudrillard's argument about the imbrication of subjectivities, bodies, and

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37 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 78, 139, and 159. Preciado specifically writes that ingestible disciplinary "technologies become part of the body: they dissolve into it and become somatechnics." Preciado here emphasizes the blurring of boundaries between the body and technology under neoliberalism, as the two are fundamentally intertwined. Preciado specifies that along with Susan Stryker, a group of scholars at Macquarie University also coined the term "somatechnic."

technologies. Baudrillard contends that contemporary modalities of subjectivity are "fractal," continuously seeking to reproduce "the smallest molecular fraction of [themselves]" via communication networks and increasingly miniaturized visual, virtual, and digital technologies.<sup>38</sup> Both Preciado and Baudrillard refer to aspects of the contemporary circulation of media as "pornographic" due to the way that bodies are continuously framed as transparent vessels from which their consumption practices should be read and displayed in detail for all to see.<sup>39</sup> What Baudrillard refers to as the pornographic hyperreality of constant communication "decomposes bodies into their slightest detail, gestures into their minutest movements," thus creating fractal subjects.<sup>40</sup>

I argue that Baudrillard's description of the fractal subject, defined in relation to the technologies it engages with, exhibits itself on, or ingests, is a subjectivity that Byung-Chul Han refers to more

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38 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 23-24 & 38.

39 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 26-27;

Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 35-36.

40 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 41.

comprehensively as *homo digitalis*.<sup>41</sup> *Homo digitalis* is a subjectivity that understands itself as a self-project to be constantly modified through its consumption choices.<sup>42</sup> *Homo digitalis* is also a fractal subject defined by its expectation of continuous digital quantification and its interconnection with communication and information channels as well as advertising algorithms. This understanding of subjectivity represents a departure from Michel Foucault's description of *homo oeconomicus*, the "entrepreneur of himself,"<sup>43</sup> a point I will also detail in the following paragraphs since Han builds on, but also departs from, both Foucault's and Baudrillard's respective theorizations of power and subjectivity. Although Foucault and Baudrillard harbor theoretical differences that make their respective approaches seemingly unrelated and perhaps even incompatible at times, the critical intersections and differential points of emphasis regarding

41 Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 11.

42 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, 2015), 46–47.

43 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, First edition (New York: Picador, 2008), 226.



the nature of power and subjectivity are often productive, especially when it comes to understanding the current complexity of freedom of food choice.<sup>44</sup>

Below, I combine the theoretical insights provided by Foucault, Baudrillard, and Han to sketch out the primary characteristics of the contemporary mode of subjectiv-

44 Jean Baudrillard and Sylvère Lotringer, *Forget Foucault, New Edition* (Los Angeles, CA: Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext, 2007), 34–36.

ity that both Han and I refer to as *homo digitalis*. Throughout this theoretical sketch, I am informed by, and take for granted, Preciado's insights about the subject-body as a somatechnic referenced above. Preciado's insights complement Baudrillard's and Han's respective analyses of subjectivity, shedding light on how injectable and—importantly, for the purposes of this article—ingestible technologies are fractals through which subjects try to transform and reproduce enhanced versions of themselves. As part of this analysis, I examine Baudrillard's arguments about simulation, hyperreality, and fractal subjectivity, as I believe his description of these processes illuminates why it continues to be so difficult to cultivate embodied relationships with our own bodies, food, and each other. Additionally, throughout this analysis, I apply Baudrillard's and Han's respective theorizations to my analysis of sweetness and what I refer to as “edible hypomnesic technologies” through the lens of artificial sweeteners. Han points to sweetness as a flavor that encourages increased consumption due to its association with pure positivity and pleasure, and this is a point that I will return

to in the subsequent sections.<sup>45</sup> Lastly, I conclude by turning to popular culture to offer a final illustration of key transformations in the relationship between subjectivity, technology, and the hopes and anxieties surrounding the ingestion of artificial products. More specifically, I examine how the films *The Stuff* (1985) and *Crimes of the Future* (2022) prompt viewers to consider how contemporary modalities of subjectivity are produced through the potentially intoxicating technologies that they engage with and ingest.<sup>46</sup> My overarching argument is that the processes of simulation in the context of hyperreality that Baudrillard describes provide an important subtext to help us understand the difficulty (if not downright impossibility) of distinguishing between natural and artificial, as well as safe and toxic foodstuffs. The dietary cacophony of ever-changing food rules and guidelines is exacerbated by the simulation processes and the instantaneous communication networks that both Baudrillard and Han, in their own ways, theorize.

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45 Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. Daniel Steuer, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 18.

46 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 35.





**THE CLASSICAL LIBERAL MODALITY OF HOMO ŒCONOMICUS IS A SUBJECT THAT RETAINS A SENSE OF IDEALIZED ENLIGHTENMENT-ERA RESPONSIBLE THRIFT AND FRUGALITY.**

## **SIMULATION AND SUBJECTIVITY**

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As noted above, beyond Foucault’s description of the entrepreneur of the self, Han argues that the contemporary neoliberal subject should be understood as a “self-project” that endlessly modifies itself in the pursuit of health, productivity, and achievement.<sup>47</sup> Here, I briefly detail Foucault’s theorization of subjectivity to emphasize how the fractal subject that Han describes through *homo digitalis* represents a new stage of subjectivity, consumption, and freedom of choice. Foucault’s notion of subjectivity designates the field of historical and political possibilities in which individual subjects “experience [themselves] in a game of truth” and

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<sup>47</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 46–47.

define themselves as agents of knowledge-production but also as objects of knowledge to be interpreted, disciplined, and analyzed.<sup>48</sup> For Foucault, economic behavior is the primary “grid of intelligibility” through which both classical liberal and neoliberal subjects, which he refers to as *homo œconomicus*, are managed (both by societal apparatuses, or what he refers to as *dispositifs*, and by themselves). Foucault contrasts the neoliberal subject, or “entrepreneur of himself,” to the classical liberal subject, arguing that the classical liberal subject was the “intangible partner of *laissez-faire*” and economic exchange. He makes this distinction to indicate that the classical liberal subject retained a limited claim to freedom from governmental management (e.g., a claim corresponding to demands that the government keep its “hands” off of one’s personal property and natural rights).<sup>49</sup> The classical liberal modality of *homo œconomicus* is a subject that re-

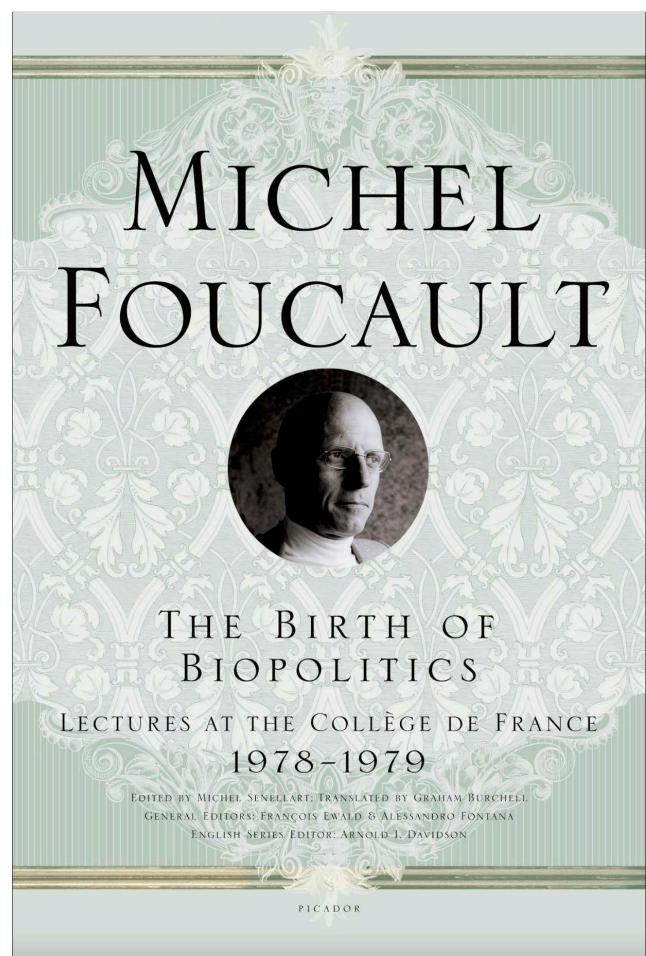
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<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault, “Michel Foucault,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow, 1st edition (New York: The New Press, 1999), 461.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 226 & 276. Foucault writes, Foucault especially points to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* as offering a key articulation of the classical liberal subject.

tains a sense of idealized Enlightenment-era responsible thrift and frugality. Additionally, classical liberal homo oeconomicus is primarily concerned with calibrating its body and labor as an “abilities-machine” that can be compensated for its efforts “over a period of time by a series of wages.”<sup>50</sup> Here, in the “free market,” Foucault argues that the expectation is that every individual subject must trust their own individualized calculations but also render themselves transparent in a marketplace that is guided by a “seeing” invisible hand whose permeating gaze is able to perceive each individual’s calculated pursuits but also can “draw together the threads of all these dispersed interests.”<sup>51</sup> The opacity or “invisibility” of the market is juxtaposed to and requires the transparency of the rationalized and calculated individual subject. The consumption of food through the lens of this subjectivity is primarily shaped by an impulse to reduce, as the emphasis on monetary thrift and responsible consumption leads one to view the body as an ability-machine that can be cali-

brated, and, at times, even reach a state of self-calibration (just like the economy) through the careful calculation and reduction of one’s weight. This view is reflected in the writings of early 20th century physicians such as Arnold Lorand and Victor C. Vaughan, who argued that “the body is a machine” that required the careful selection of foodstuffs as “fuel.”<sup>52</sup> Vaughan



50 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 224-225.

51 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 279.

52 Victor C. Vaughan, “Introduction,” in Dr. Arnold Lorand, *Health and Longevity through Rational Diet: Practical Hints in Regard to Food and the Usefulness or Harmful Effects of the Various Articles of the Diet* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, Publishers, 1912), v.

also contended that food is “the material with which the wear and tear [of the human machine] must be replaced,” and he believed that the public should be educated so that they do not contaminate or intoxicate their own machines with “dirty, low-grade coal.”<sup>53</sup>

In describing the transition to the neoliberal modality of *homo oeconomicus* in the mid 20th century, Foucault specifies that neoliberalism, as a technology of power, intensifies and extends the liberal rationality of the market into additional social practices and “domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic,” such as family life, and importantly, food patterns and bodyweight stereotypes.<sup>54</sup> Neoliberalism is a set of techniques that govern human life

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53 Vaughan, “Introduction,” vi. In line with Foucault’s description of the classical liberal subject as *homo juridicus*, Vaughan notes that the government held a responsibility to secure “proper food to eat...for all citizens, the poorest as well as the richest.” He goes on to write that “A government which permits the sale of injurious foods, or allows the price of proper foods to be manipulated by any man or combination of men for financial gain, is not serving its citizens in a just, wise, or human manner. But, Vaughan emphasizes the personal responsibility of the individual, arguing that while “we may have good laws upon these subjects, but they will not be adequately enforced until the public becomes properly educated along these lines. The purpose of this book is to contribute to this much-needed education.”

54 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 323.

in accordance with an atomizing logic of (free) marketization, and in Foucault’s view, a corresponding subjectivity or modality of *homo oeconomicus* could be thought of as “human capital.”<sup>55</sup> Neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* is no longer the “partner of exchange,” but instead, an “entrepreneur of himself” and “man of consumption,” who aims to produce (through consumption) “his own satisfaction.”<sup>56</sup> The spread of liberal marketplace rationality also involves an intensified drive toward the transparent quantification of the neoliberal subject as an ability-machine. Under neoliberalism, the individual subject starts to turn inwards to mine its body as an ability-machine, and as a source of profit for consumption. For neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*, production and consumption become indistinguishably imbricated. The responsibility for the health and productivity of the population is placed squarely on the shoulders

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55 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 220. Foucault argues that this discourse of neoliberal subjectivity as human capital can especially be seen through the writings of Theodore Schultz as well as Gary S. Becker (among others). Foucault argues that in the U.S. context, the first attempt to “introduce labor into the economic field” came with Schultz’s 1971 publication of *Investment in Human Capital* (and Becker published a book with the same title in 1975).

56 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 219, 226 & 296.

of individual consumers, as they are prompted to modify themselves and their actions to ensure that they can keep producing so as to consume more.<sup>57</sup> As opposed to the classical liberal *homo oeconomicus* who could still distinguish between its individuality and its efforts (or enterprise) to cultivate its ability-machine as a source of capital investment, neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* collapses the ontological boundaries between the individual and capital, and the individual and ability-machine (i.e., “human capital”).<sup>58</sup>

These boundaries between the individual and capital, and the individual and the ability-machine continue to collapse with the emergence of the more contemporary fractal subject that Han refers to as *homo digitalis*. Because Han builds on Baudrillard’s theorization of hyperreality and technology in his description of *homo digitalis*, it is important to first detail Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the changes in communication technologies and consumption that lead to the processes of simulation he describes.

57 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 270–271.

58 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 220 & 226.

In an environment characterized by instantaneous communication technologies that Baudrillard refers to as “hyperreality,” signs of the real have become more “real” than reality itself.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, in hyperreality, any value, trait, characteristic, or categorization becomes eminently interchangeable with its so-called binary opposite. For instance, “natural” sugar and artificial sweeteners are simulacra of sweetness, engineered to tantalize consumer taste and desire.<sup>60</sup>

As I pointed to above, for Baudrillard, contemporary hyperreality is characterized by a process of simulation that involves a “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard refers to these models of the real as simulacra, and these simulacra attempt to represent or, rather, “simulate” some point of reference in a reality which no longer exists but as a mode of hyperreality. Baudrillard argues that the condition of simulation-induced hyperreal-

59 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2.

60 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2 & 11;

Michael Moss, “The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2013, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/magazine/the-extraordinary-science-of-junk-food.html>.

61 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2.

ity involves a “deterrence” effect in which certain models or media (such as Disneyland) are set forth and claimed to represent a (in the case of Disneyland, “childish”) deviation from the “real” world when, in fact, these so-called “deviations” are a fundamental part of today’s consumer-oriented hyperreality.<sup>62</sup> Deterrence effects or machines of this kind are everywhere in a hyperreal social context, and they seek to deflect attention away from the simulated nature of (hyper)reality by claiming that an objective reality and historical point of origin can still be found and still matter.

Baudrillard claims that the hyperreal techno-social world today has impacted the sense of taste in the United States. As noted in the epigraph, Baudrillard emphasizes this point by referencing the protracted ingredient lists on canned and processed foods, highlighting that these lists operate like deterrence machines by revealing the futility of disentangling the “real” from the “artificial” in relation to both ingredients and flavors. Again, for Baudrillard, these ingredient lists

<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 25.

exemplify a process of “dissuasion from the taste of food: its savor is, as it were, isolated, expurgated and resynthesized in the form of burlesque and artificial sources.”<sup>63</sup> This too is key to “artificial” sweetness. Indeed, artificial sweeteners were first produced and normalized for consumer ingestion in the U.S. to simulate the taste of sugar (in beverages especially) during the World War II period when sugar rationing prevailed.<sup>64</sup> Since then, high-intensity sweeteners have become sweeter than sweet and, in a way, have turned into simulated modes of sugar (more sugar than sugar itself) as exemplified by the fact that artificial sweeteners have transcended the sweetening power of sugar. Currently, the FDA lists advantame as the sweetest of these high-intensity sweeteners, and it is 20,000 times sweeter than sugar (sucrose).<sup>65</sup> What the consumer is made to taste is thus increasingly the product of chemical (i.e., artificial) process-

<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> De la Peña, *Empty Pleasures*, 36.

<sup>65</sup> Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, “Additional Information about High-Intensity Sweeteners Permitted for Use in Food in the United States,” FDA (FDA, February 20, 2020), <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-additives-petitions/additional-information-about-high-intensity-sweeteners-permitted-use-food-united-states>.

es of hyperreal food construction, often resulting in the creation of what I refer to as techno-tastes. As demonstrated by Nadia Berenstein, the boundaries between “natural” and “artificial” (and, relatedly, the popular quest for “clean” ingredients) are far from objective distinctions.<sup>66</sup> In the 1950s, the advertising claims made by brands such as Sucaryl that artificial sweeteners no longer contained a “diet taste” or a “metallic ‘off’ taste” speaks to this cultivation of techno-tastes.<sup>67</sup>

For Baudrillard, phenomena that are often portrayed as “extremes” have become the hyperreal norm.<sup>68</sup> Artificial sweeteners also illustrate this point, as they shed light on how the neoliberal modality of homo oeconomicus and its contemporary extension as homo digitalis are meant to consume. Through the lens of neoliberal homo oeconomicus and homo digitalis, consumption is realized through what Han refers to as the extremes of compulsion and con-

straint. For Han, compulsion results from the unending freedom to improve one’s body and life circumstances through practices of consumption. Constraint is generated by the “internal limitations” that subjects place upon themselves, as they seek to optimize and exhibit their bodies as signs of responsible consumption and competitive achievement.<sup>69</sup> In other words, subjects must ensure that their consumption is constrained so that they do not exhibit signs of “excessive” consumption on what Han describes as their “self-project” bodies, or intoxicate themselves with substances that could result in sickness and the inability to “perform more and more.”<sup>70</sup> The compulsion and constraint pressures generated by neoliberal freedom of choice are realized in artificial sweeteners, since they allow one to keep consuming sweetness while avoiding the “unhealthy” effects typically associated with the excessive consumption of sweetness through sugar. Han himself speaks about sweetness as a flavor that corresponds to the compul-

66 Berenstein, “Clean Label’s Dirty Little Secret.”

67 Abbott Laboratories, “Calorie-Saving Recipes with Sucaryl: Non-Caloric Sweetener for Reducing and Diabetic Diets” (Abbott Laboratories, 1957), Virginia Tech Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.

68 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 7.

69 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), 1.

70 Han, *The Burnout Society*, 38.

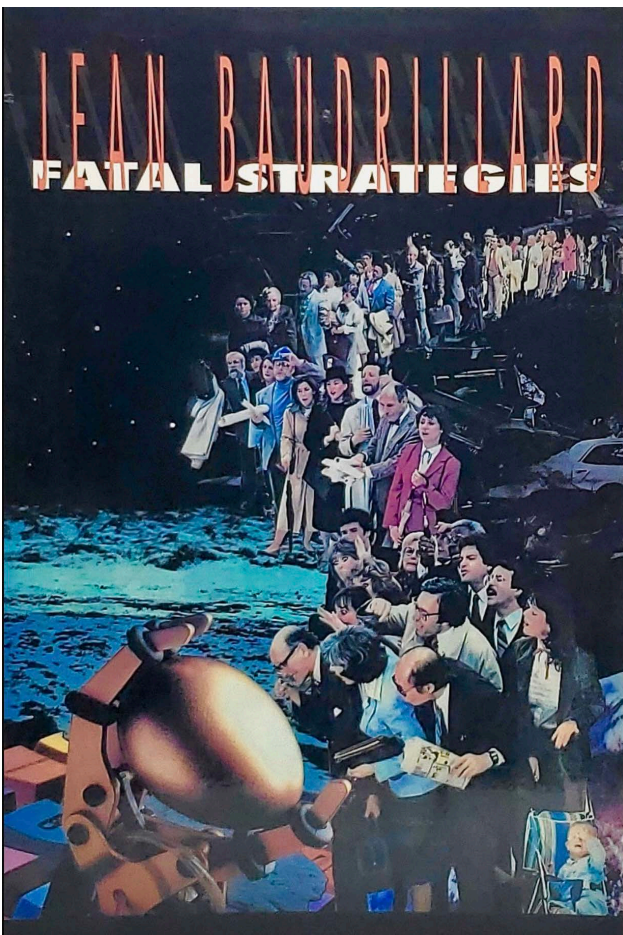
sion of consumption under neoliberalism. More precisely, Han writes that sweetness is part of an “aesthetics of smoothing” that seeks to eliminate, or at least simplify, all forms of negativity, especially barriers to open and “free” communication and to the circulation of capital.<sup>71</sup> Han explicitly refers to sweetness as a “smoothing” flavor aimed at fostering active consumerism. Additionally, Han argues that health is “a form of expression of the smooth” and an “absolute value – almost a religion,” whereby

embodiment fades into disembodiment as neoliberal subjects seek to eliminate negativity (of bad health, sickness, and death) by instrumentally modifying their bodies in an effort to elongate their life-spans.<sup>72</sup>

## HOMO DIGITALIS AND THE BODY AS A NETWORK

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Baudrillard’s arguments articulate forms of transparency that characterize Foucault’s neoliberal homo oeconomicus, and, beyond Foucault, Han’s *homo digitalis*.<sup>73</sup> Baudrillard argues that discourses surrounding obesity demonstrate the superfluous nature of a body that has been completely quantified and rendered transparent in digital networks that he refers to as bloated, “obese and cancerous systems.”<sup>74</sup> Similar to Preciado’s point above, Baudrillard ar-



71 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 2 & 10.

72 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 5, 13, and 45. Han asserts that “Today, the body is in crisis. It decomposes not only into pornographic body parts, but also into sets of digital data. The digital age is entirely dominated by the belief that life can be measured and quantified. The ‘Quantified Self’ movement also shares this creed. The body is equipped with digital sensors which register all body-related data. ‘Quantified Self’ transforms the body into a control-and-surveillance screen”;


Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 1.

73 Han, *In the Swarm*, 11.

74 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 12.

gues that “bodies have become networks and...thread their way through a network” because communication systems process every aspect of the body, including desires and pleasures.<sup>75</sup> Further, he argues that the physical body of the fractal subject has entered a “metastatic phase” due to the digital multiplication of the subject through the many miniaturized representations they make of themselves and communicate in a “series of instants.”<sup>76</sup>

For Baudrillard, through round-the-clock communication networks, the subject is fractally multiplied through their many audiovisual and digital representations, and rendered completely transparent to the point of becoming obscene.<sup>77</sup> To clarify his conceptualization of obscenity, Baudrillard writes that, in pornographic hyperreality, bodies become hypersexualized and obscene due in large part to the fact that “every image, every form, every part of the body” is now displayed through the proliferation



**BAUDRILLARD WRITES THAT, IN WHAT HE CALLS PORNOGRAPHIC HYPERREALITY, BODIES BECOME HYPERSEXUALIZED AND OBSCENE DUE IN LARGE PART TO THE FACT THAT “EVERY IMAGE, EVERY FORM, EVERY PART OF THE BODY” IS NOW DISPLAYED THROUGH THE PROLIFERATION OF CLOSE-UP IMAGES AND THE “SERIAL MULTIPLICATION” OF DETAILS**

of close-up images and the “serial multiplication” of details (something that Han also focuses on through his analysis of “selfies”).<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, then, Baudrillard argues that “transparency explodes into a thousand pieces, which are like shattered fragments of a mirror,” and this mirror has “given way to a screen and a network,” of which

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 33 fn

<sup>76</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 24 & 149.

<sup>77</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 24-25.

<sup>78</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 20 & 40-41. Baudrillard writes that “Today the scene and mirror have given way to a screen and network. Today there is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication”;

Han, *Saving Beauty*, 12.



the body is a principal part.<sup>79</sup> The techno-body has become a terminal, or transparent envelope that holds and projects many miniaturized fragments of the self.

Baudrillard's theorization of disembodiment and the fractal multiplication of the body in hyper-reality demonstrates how homo digitalis constantly is encouraged to be "into" their bodies, and to quantify themselves to the point of disembodiment. To this point, Baudrillard writes that currently, the objective "is not to be nor even to have a body, but to be into your own body" and desires.<sup>80</sup> Similar to Baudrillard, Deborah Lupton and Nolen Gertz have also described how contemporary digital quantification and the self-tracking (especially of diet and fitness) technologies and practices result in the metaphorical and seemingly literal dissipation of the physical body.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, digital representations of the body and the numbers used to categorize it become

79 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 20 & 38.

80 Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 35. This also connects to Han's theorization of the achievement subject's in-bodied experience.

81 Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism and Technology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018); Deborah Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016).

just as real as, and perhaps even more real than, the physical body.<sup>82</sup> That is, in the contemporary context, the fractal subject-body is always already imbricated in digital quantification technologies. Gertz writes that self-tracking practices and the digital quantification of every aspect of the body reveal that, "In fact, *there is no person behind the numbers*. At least not to the extent that 'person' means anything other than what is measurable, what is translatable into data."<sup>83</sup> Lupton emphasizes a comparable point, writing that contemporary miniature self-tracking technologies make it difficult to tell "where the body ends and technology begins."<sup>84</sup>

At the time he was writing, Bau-

82 Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 90. Baudrillard writes: "such is our destiny as the polled, the informed, the measured: confronted with the anticipated verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent refraction, we are never again confronted with our own will or that of the other...each individual is forced into the undivided coherence of statistics."

83 Gertz, *Nihilism and Technology*, 93;

For other scholars who speak of the disembodied quantification of the body through digital self-tracking technologies see: Deborah Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016); Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2022); Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009); Jürgen Martschukat, *The Age of Fitness: How the Body Came to Symbolize Success and Achievement*, trans. Alex Skinner, 1st edition (Polity, 2021).

84 Lupton, *The Quantified Self*, 71.

drillard pointed to television as a primary example of the micro-processing of bodies and desires, and he noted that bodies themselves had become accountability-oriented “monitoring screens” that aimed to reproduce “fractals” of themselves through consumption, transparent self-exhibition, and constant, instantaneous communication (which is also why Baudrillard describes advertising as the contemporary architecture that permeates all aspects of life).<sup>85</sup> In today’s social media setting, the will-to-become-an-advertisement for fractal subjects is perhaps even more obvious. It can be seen through the rise of brand and lifestyle “influencers” that operate on television, but more so online (something which Baudrillard only started to perceive by the time he wrote his last essay). Nonetheless, this trend underscores Baudrillard’s description of the fractal subject’s body-becoming-a-monitoring-screen. Baudrillard further

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85 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 20, 25, 39, and 67. Hence, the idea of fractal bodies or subjects. Baudrillard describes advertising as an all-encompassing architecture: “advertising invades everything...today architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles, and molecules are refracted. The public stage and public place has been replaced by a gigantic circulation, ventilation, and ephemeral connecting space.”

argues that, in contemporary hyperreality, Foucault’s theory of panopticism is no longer relevant. The panopticism of the disciplinary regime that Foucault describes through reference to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon is a prison system which functions through the internalized norms of conduct that are produced by external institutional architectures of civil society. Baudrillard argues that this type of societal surveillance and self-discipline no longer occurs as a result of the disappearance of, dispersal of, and resulting inability to distinguish between the expert “gaze” and the synoptic multiplicity of gazes of the networked mass of television viewing subjects.<sup>86</sup>

Han rightly notes that Baudrillard’s critique of panopticism appeared in the 1980s. Thus, Baudrillard “could not [have] know[n] about digital networking, of course,” and specifically about the dense web of social media platforms that crisscross the Internet, such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok.<sup>87</sup>

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86 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 34; Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 49–54.

87 Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, 2015), 45; Han, *Psychopolitics*, 8–9. Han writes that the Internet

Building on Baudrillard's thinking, Han claims that, with digital networking, a return to panopticism is taking place. But (as Baudrillard had started to perceive) it is not a Foucaultian panopticon that re-emerges today. Instead, it is a new *aperspectival* mode of panopticism since (unlike in Foucault's panoptic model of disciplinary power) there is no longer any central point from which a normalizing gaze is thought to originate. Han writes that "aperspectival, penetrating illumination proves more effective than perspectival surveillance because it means utter illumination of everyone from everywhere."<sup>88</sup> With today's digital aperspectival panopticism, self-surveillance practices more easily permeate accountability-oriented social networks, and crucially so in the case of those networks that focus on eating practices, food selection, dietary health, and fitness or exercise. In relation to artificial sweeteners, a deterrence system of sprawling ingredient lists and simulated flavors co-exists with and interpenetrates an aperspectival panoptic system of accountability-

oriented social networks whereby artificial sweeteners function as hypomnesic objects that allow one to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of consuming sweetness.

Han usefully complements Baudrillard's notion of fractal subjectivity (and related concepts). More precisely, as I indicated previously, Han writes that "today, we do not deem ourselves subjugated *subjects*, but rather, *projects*: always refashioning and reinventing ourselves" through consumption.<sup>89</sup> He first refers to *homo digitalis* as a subjectivity enmeshed in online communication, cultivating its identity online but also valuing its ability to veil its online profile to participate in virtual discussions anonymously.<sup>90</sup> Han speaks of this condition as isolating, juxtaposing the potential of broadcast media (and its correlate subjectivity, Marshall McLuhan's *homo electronicus*) to draw people together in communities against digital media's tendency to place individuals in the somewhat paradoxical information bubbles that are both overly transparent and, at times, strategically

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often functions as a digital panopticon.

88 Han, *The Transparency Society*, 45 and 49.

89 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 1.

90 Han, *In the Swarm*, 11.

anonymous. Han argues that even when *homo digitalis* is strategically anonymous in online conversations, it is still a fractal subject that “works ceaselessly at optimizing” its online profile.<sup>91</sup> This condition of strategic anonymity and cultivated transparency is reflected throughout the digital “swarm” that Han identifies, and also connects to my overarching points about the hyperreal communication of food knowledge. Luce Giard writes that food information is often codified and communicated anonymously, pressuring consumers to:

know how to read and trust no longer in a personal and empirical *savoir faire* [“know-how”] that comes from a traditional structure, acquired through long apprenticeship, within the familiarity of an elder, but in a collective scientific knowledge, codified in regulatory statements and transmitted anonymously. You have to believe in the wisdom of state-controlled regulations whose how and why escapes you, in the vigor and efficiency of inspections that ensure their observance. Each person must support through belief the entire

edifice, must believe the norms to be in accordance with one’s own interest and the indications placed on packaging to be truthful.<sup>92</sup>

Like Baudrillard, Giard emphasizes the difficulty of distinguishing between true and false information. Because of this, Giard holds that individuals can no longer draw upon “a personal and empirical *savoir-faire*” of food selection or preparation due to the extensive, almost indecipherable lists of ingredients on food labels, along with the shifting regulatory and scientific statements that characterize how foodstuffs are grown or produced, prepared, packaged, labeled, and sold.<sup>93</sup> Giard’s argument can be related to Stiegler’s claim that humans have exteriorized their practical know-how, or “*savoir faire*,” to digital hypomnesic technologies. Because subjects must rely on their own discretion to parse through the often anonymously created food “facts,” con-

92 Luce Giard, “Gesture Sequences,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living & Cooking*, by Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 209.

93 Luce Giard, “Gesture Sequences,” 208-209.

91 Ibid.

troveries, and swarths of diet, fitness, and nutrition information circulating in the digital swarm, the consumption of substances that have a hypomnesic function like built-in “diet” foods, additives, and medications (such as Ozempic) can perhaps help individuals minimize the fear of making incorrect dietary choices. These edible hypomnesic substances can also ensure that *homo digitalis* continues to exercise responsible “constraint” as they cultivate their body as a self-project through their endless food consumption choices.

I connect Han’s multifaceted descriptions of different aspects of contemporary subjectivity across his scholarly repertoire to the online, fractal subjectivity that he refers to as *homo digitalis* in his book, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*. Han refers to the present modality of subjectivity as post-Cartesian, writing that, in contrast to René Descartes’ argument that philosophical reasoning could shed light on the “true” nature of divine existence and the “real distinction between the soul and the body,” the post-Cartesian *homo digitalis* is defined by its expectation of continuous digital quantification

and its interconnection with constant communication and information channels as well as advertising algorithms.<sup>94</sup> The post-Cartesian subject is totally defined by the customizable nature of the physical body, thus inverting the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” and transforming it into “I am, therefore I think,” “I am, therefore I shop,” or, better yet, “I am, therefore I eat.”<sup>95</sup> Drawing on Han’s as well as Baudrillard’s, Gertz’s, Lupton’s, and Preciado’s related arguments above, I argue that this post-Cartesian *homo digitalis* that Han describes is encouraged to think of itself as a body-becoming-calorie count. Indeed, in writing about present forms of quantification, Han highlights the primary role played by the fingers in the use of smart phones and their ability to perform the social “liking” function, arguing that “the word *digital* points to the finger (*digitus*). Above all, the finger counts. Digital culture is based on the counting finger...the digital age is totaliz-

94 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 3rd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 2-4;

Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm*, 11.

95 Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, trans. Amanda DeMarco (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 107.

ing addiction, counting and the countable...Today, everything is rendered countable so that it can be transformed into the language of performance and efficiency.”<sup>96</sup>

Ultimately, *homo digitalis* represents an intensified quantification of the neoliberal modality of *homo economicus* (the “entrepreneur of the self”), as the communication technologies that *homo digitalis* is expected to use are increasingly fractal.<sup>97</sup> That is, as *homo digitalis*, subjects are compelled to reproduce countless digital representations of themselves via increasingly miniaturized technologies that require constant attention, engagement, and consumption.<sup>98</sup> Unlike the written and audio-visual broadcast technologies utilized by neoliberal *homo economicus*, digital technologies require the subjectivity of *homo digitalis* to operate as an interface of participatory digital technologies that blur the lines between the production and consumption

of information.<sup>99</sup> For *homo digitalis*, the “entrepreneur” and the “self” can no longer be disentangled, as every aspect of the self must be quantified, exhibited, and customized (as a self-project) to maximize the subject’s competitive marketability as an object of (instead of simply as a source of profit for) consumption. *Homo digitalis* is also akin to what Preciado refers to as a somatechnic since, as mentioned above, the boundaries that were thought to separate subjectivity, the body, and technology have now collapsed (perhaps as a result of hyperreality and its simulacra, as Baudrillard might argue too). More than a liberal or neoliberal abilities-machine, *homo digitalis* is a subject-body, or what Han might refer to as a “project-body,” that is meant to be completely customizable and is designed to function as a terminal of constant information. Baudrillard provocatively writes: “You want to consume -O.K., let’s consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose.”<sup>100</sup> Bau-

96 Han, *In the Swarm*, 35.

97 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 226; Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2022), 42; Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 38-41.

98 Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 23-24.

99 Stiegler, “Memory,” 83.

100 Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1993), 11;

Again, in my view, both Baudrillard and Han bring Foucault’s point about the imbrication of produc-

drillard's hyperbolic point here echoes Han's argument that the neoliberal logic transforms citizens into consumers, as they must consume more and more in order to produce and manage their somatechnic self-projects.<sup>101</sup> The compulsion of production that characterizes Foucault's description of *homo oeconomicus* "expresses itself in the compulsion of communication" for *homo digitalis*.<sup>102</sup> For *homo digitalis*, freedom is realized within data's constraints because, as both Baudrillard and Stiegler note in their own way, contemporary hypomnesic technologies encourage individuals to completely discard their own willpower in order to follow calculated algorithms of advertising-infused advice. Or, consumers can offload their willpower onto edible hypomnesic technologies that promise to help them avoid the bloated network of diet and nutrition information constantly confronting them.<sup>103</sup>

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tion and consumption into the contemporary period, demonstrating that "neoliberalism makes citizens consumers";

Han, *Psychopolitics*, 10.

101 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 10.

102 Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2020), 13.

103 Stiegler, "Memory," 68.

## BECOMING PLASTIC: CONSUMING EDIBLE TECHNOLOGIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Two illustrations from popular culture offer a final way to accentuate some of the key arguments I have developed with regard to the transformations that have taken place in the deployment of neoliberal subjectivities (*homo oeconomicus* and, now, *homo digitalis*) and corresponding relationships between the body, technology, and food consumption. These two illustrations are films in the horror and science fiction genres, and they focus on seemingly fantastical relationships between humans and the consumption of new and bizarre foodstuffs. Following Fabio Parasecoli, I suggest that the way that food choices and eating patterns are portrayed in popular culture "may reveal interesting aspects of our relationships with the body and, more specifically, with eating and ingestion."<sup>104</sup> Popular culture artifacts do not simply represent our relationship with reality. Instead, often, they help to produce the very processes and

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104 Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2008), 2.

phenomena that make up the historical and political fields of possibility that we perceive to be the “real,” and within which contemporary modes of subjectivity increasingly are constituted.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, as Baudrillard (among others) has noted, the distinction between the “real” and the “fictional” (especially the “cinematic”) can no longer be meaningfully determined.<sup>106</sup> I also reference the two films below to offer examples of how the hopes and anxieties surrounding the marketing and consumption of artificial products are reflected in, but also produced by, popular cultural media.

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105 Parasecoli, *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*, 3. Parasecoli argues that “Pop culture happens to be the arena where new narratives, changing identities, and possible practices become part of a shared patrimony that participates in the constitution of contemporary subjectivities.” Additionally, Parasecoli writes that “I believe pop culture constitutes a major repository of visual elements, ideas, practices, and discourses, that influence our relationship with the body, with food consumption, and, of course, with the whole system ensuring that we get what we need on a daily basis, with all its social and political ramifications.”

106 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 25;

Jean Baudrillard, “Virtuality and Events: The Hell of Power,” trans. Chris Turner, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 2006), 7. Baudrillard argues that “the films produced today are merely the visible allegory of the cinematic form that has taken over everything – social and political life, the landscape, war, etc. – the form of life totally scripted for the screen...Reality is disappearing at the hands of the cinema and cinema is disappearing at the hands of reality. A lethal transfusion in which each loses its specificity.”

The first film I wish to highlight is *The Stuff* (1985), written and directed by Larry Cohen. The film begins with an opening sequence at an Alaskan petroleum refinery that shows the accidental discovery of a white yogurt-like substance that gurgles out of the ground. The surprised refinery worker who finds the substance immediately tastes it and exclaims: “it’s so *smooth*... that tastes real good...tasty! Sweet!”<sup>107</sup> The worker immediately discusses the potential of selling it given its smooth and sweet qualities. The substance is subsequently mass-produced and marketed under the name, “The Stuff,” and is portrayed as a tasty low-calorie diet dessert that is “healthy” to consume. Colorful advertising messages for “The Stuff” circulate through billboards, in supermarkets, and on television, captivating consumers and prompting them to buy it. As the film progresses, more and more people become addicted to “The Stuff,” and it eventually becomes the only thing that most people are stocking in their refrigerators and eating. Eventually, “The Stuff” completely transforms those

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107 *The Stuff*, directed by Larry Cohen (Beverly Hills: Larco Productions, 1985).



who consume it into hollowed-out zombies. “The Stuff” turns out to be a dangerous, active substance that has the ability to move on its own and attack people.



In an interview about the film, Cohen portrayed *The Stuff* as a satirical critique of advertising and American consumerism. Cohen asserted: “I saw people...being victimized by products that end up being harmful to them” by either killing them or leaving them with

a lifelong illness.<sup>108</sup> According to Cohen, *The Stuff* is meant to show how dangerous products disseminated by multinational corporations benefit from lax U.S. governmental regulation.<sup>109</sup> Cohen argues that the marketing, distribution, and sale of these harmful products should beg the following question: “are you eating [the products] or [are they] eating you?”<sup>110</sup> In the film, a radio broadcast by a rogue militia ultimately reveals the true nature of “The Stuff” to the public, and it is removed from the market. However, the owners of “The Stuff” try to re-brand “The Stuff” as “The Taste” by including only twenty-percent of the zombifying, addictive substance in a new dessert product. Although their plan is seemingly thwarted by the film’s protagonists, “The Stuff” remains

108 Matt Raub and Staci Layne Wilson, “Larry Cohen Attacks Consumerism with *The Stuff*,” *This Week in Startups*, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-pfCmf\\_y8gc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-pfCmf_y8gc).

109 Ibid. Cohen specifically points to food companies, the pharmaceutical industry, and cigarette companies.

110 Ibid. Cohen states: “So, constantly today you see about medications being pulled off of the market because they are killing the people they are supposed to be helping or giving them lifelong illnesses that they will never get over, and pharmaceutical companies are doing this right and left, and the Federal Trade Commission ‘okays’ products too quickly and then they find out that [the products] are doing stuff that is detrimental to people.” Cohen lists cigarettes as a primary example.

in circulation in the form of a drug that continues to be sold by criminals on the black market.

Ultimately, *The Stuff* portrays advertising media as hypnotic technologies that lead consumers (who are passive victims) to ingest a foreign (but “natural”) substance that ends up possessing and killing them. As a sweet-tasting low-calorie food that was found by accident, “The Stuff” can easily be compared to artificial sweeteners given that the first artificial sweeteners (such as saccharin and early cyclamates) were sweet-tasting, low-calorie sugar substitutes that were also accidentally discovered in laboratory environments. As referenced at the beginning of this article, the safety of artificial sweeteners was hotly contested, as exemplified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) citation of the Delaney Clause from the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to ban the sale of cyclamates in 1969 due to the fact that they were perceived to be a potential carcinogen. I suggest that the anxieties about the power of the advertising industry and the circulation of new food additives and technologies reflected in Co-

hen’s film illustrate key aspects of the subjectivity of neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*. Additionally, *The Stuff* graphically depicts the pervasive desire for low-calorie diet products and the accompanying potential risks of these products that consumers must constantly mitigate. Neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* (and its current extension as *homo digitalis*) must manage its body and avoid auto-intoxication by responsibly interpreting advertising media and accumulating enough knowledge to be able to identify potentially harmful foodstuffs. In the 1970s and ‘80s, individuals had to rely on broadcast media such as television and radio for advertising messages regarding new consumer products while at the same time turning to broadcast media for updated information regarding the potential harms of those products.

As illustrated by a 1977 report released by the U.S. Council on Children, Media and Merchandising, the solutions proposed by governmental bureaucrats to address the power of potentially harmful food advertisements on television remained at the level of advertising regulation and supplementation.

For example, one primary suggestion was to supplement food advertisements with government-produced nutritional graphics that would portray the body as a robot comprised of different nutritional values and calorie counts.<sup>111</sup> Broadcast media do not require individuals to function as active “terminals” or interfaces of “information,” since they receive information that is coded and de-coded for them, and then re-coded and delivered to them in the form of a one-way broadcast.<sup>112</sup> Because of this, even though, as a subject type, neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur of itself, and it mines its own body (taken to be an ability-machine) as a source of profit for consumption, there is still a divide between production and consumption in terms of the information that is constantly being produced by broadcast companies and subsequently received by consumers.<sup>113</sup> Although I keep in mind Carolyn de la Peña’s point that advertising messages are a congealment of consumer

and corporate desires, as demonstrated, for example, by the letters from consumers that flooded the U.S. Senate in 1977 to protest the FDA’s announced ban of saccharin, I also argue that broadcast media store and disseminate information in a way that does not fully integrate the consumer’s body and its active involvement into the process, thus introducing divisions among those who are in charge of the creation, the production, and the consumption of information.<sup>114</sup>

However, and importantly, these divisions become completely blurred in neoliberal *homo digitalis*, whose subject-body (or “project-body”) is now indistinguishably imbricated in the digital communication technologies and edible hypomnesic technologies that individuals are constantly prompted to participate in and consume.<sup>115</sup> Here, with regard to the subjectivity of *homo digitalis*, another popular cultural illustration is useful. The film *Crimes of the Future* (2022), written and directed by David Cronenberg, makes the points I wish to emphasize about the neoliberal

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111 Council on Children, M., United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. (1977). *Edible TV, your child and food commercials*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off.

112 Stiegler, “Memory,” 64.

113 Stiegler, “Memory,” 77.

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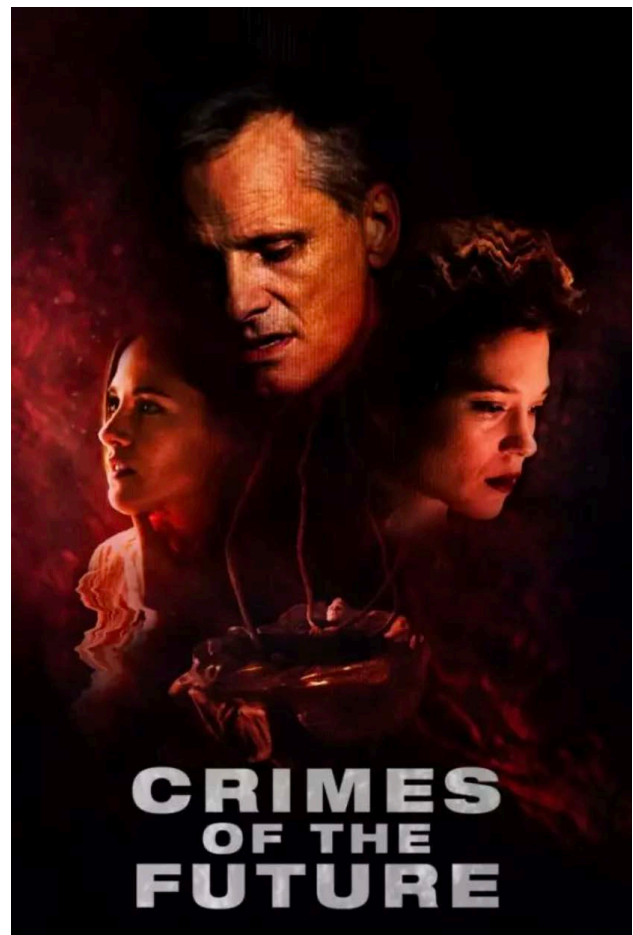
114 De la Peña, *Empty Pleasures*, 7; Stiegler, “Memory,” 76-77.

115 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 79.

subjectivity of *homo digitalis* very clear. *Crimes of the Future* is set in a dystopian future when human evolution has resulted in a mutation of human bodies and organs.<sup>116</sup> This mutation has made it difficult for many individuals to consume and ingest food in a “normal” manner. The protagonist of the film, Saul Tenser, possesses a body that is customized and augmented through surgery, and otherwise reliant on technological devices.<sup>117</sup> Tenser’s body constantly produces new organs that he exhibits theatrically through open surgery performances in which his partner, Caprice, uses a surgical machine to display and tattoo his organs in front of an audience. In relation to the consumption of food, Tenser needs a special chair to assist his digestion since he is unable to eat on his own. The chair functions by contorting Tenser’s body in specific ways to help him chew, swallow, and digest his meals. In *Crimes of the Future*, technology is always already part of the body, so much so that, at the end

116 *Crimes of the Future*, directed by David Cronenberg (Toronto: Serendipity Point Films, 2022).

117 At one point in the film, Tenser gets a zipper installed into his stomach so that it can be unzipped to view his organs.



of the film, the body has evolved to ingest synthetic materials such as bars of plastic. However, some individuals still die when attempting to eat bars of plastic since their bodies have not fully evolved to withstand the ingestion of synthetic materials. Despite the fact that Tenser knows that he may be killed through his initial decision to eat a bar of plastic, he tries it anyway to see if it will provide a solution to the digestive troubles he is experiencing within his body. Tenser successfully consumes the plastic

bar, and the film reveals that there is a large subset of individuals like Tenser whose bodies have evolved to consume plastic without the aid of the chair-feeding technologies. That is, the ingestion of synthetic materials is actually portrayed as the solution to the digestive problems that individuals like Tenser have been experiencing since their evolved bodies and accompanying new organs have now rejected organic foodstuffs. In fact, Tenser's body reaches a point where it can only receive true nourishment from synthetic materials.

*Crimes of the Future* offers an exaggerated picture of the customizable and completely transparent nature of the subjectivity of *homo digitalis*. The film displays how the body is constantly opened up for and exhibited to an aperspectival panoptic gaze, and always imbricated in technologies that both aid it and transform it. The normalization of the risks that come with food choice in hyperreality can be seen in Tenser's consumption of plastic, even though he knows that it might prove to be fatal. But instead of avoiding it, he recognizes that experimenting with a potentially toxic substance is possibly

no worse than ingesting the "organic" substances that his body has already started to reject. For *homo digitalis*, substances such as artificial sweeteners, appetite suppressants, and other "artificial" substances that contain potential health risks function as edible hypomnesic technologies and offer a way for individuals to completely move beyond the consumption of "harmful" or addicting foodstuffs (that also are sources of risk) in order to overcome the problems that they experience within their bodies. For the subjectivity of *homo digitalis*, bodies, communication technologies, ingestible (and injectable) hypomnesic technologies can no longer be meaningfully disentangled from each other.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, as Stiegler argues, unlike broadcast media, digital communication technologies invite the active participation of consumers, which results in the disintegration of the division between the production and consumption, as well as between "receivers" and "senders," of information.<sup>119</sup> Beyond an abilities-machine, then, *homo digitalis* is a terminal and an inter-

118 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 79.

119 Stiegler, "Memory," 83.

face of constant information that can only remember by forgetting. In other words, *homo digitalis* remembers how to be healthy and to monitor its body by selecting a combination of particular food rules from an infinite expanse of rules and nutritional information that are constantly being disseminated on the Internet, by relying on digital hypomnesic technologies to select and remember relevant information, or, better yet, by directly ingesting hypomnesic technologies that embody redemptive modes of willpower (without, however, having to use or rely on willpower anymore) and allow the individual to transcend food temptations and dieting difficulties.

Baudrillard's description of the fractal subject ultimately sheds light on the disembodied nature of digital modes of communication that encourage *homo digitalis* to quantify, exhibit, and reproduce increasingly miniaturized representations of itself to the point of pornographic transparency (as Baudrillard would put it). By displaying and tracking its body through and across many digital platforms, *homo digitalis* always already communicates its rela-

tionship with food to others, all the more so since its body is always primed to be read as a "sign" of one's relationship with food. The contemporary subjectivity of *homo digitalis* is equated with one's technologically-entangled body and the techno-intimacies between individuals and food in which one's relationship with food is often mediated by a screen (or perhaps a chair, as in Cronenberg's film) of algorithmic food "truths" that one must pick between and rely on.<sup>120</sup> For example, in an effort to select "healthier" and sugar-free foodstuffs and beverages, an individual may choose information that portrays artificial sweeteners as "safe" sugar substitutes and discard the collections of information that point to the risks of, and condemn, the consumption of artificial sweeteners as harmful, dangerous, or even deadly.<sup>121</sup> For

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120 Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 38-40.

121 Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, "Additional Information about High-Intensity Sweeteners Permitted for Use in Food in the United States," FDA, February 20, 2020, <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-additives-petitions/additional-information-about-high-intensity-sweeteners-permitted-use-food-united-states/>;

Anahad O'Connor, Aaron Steckelberg, and Laura Reiley, "How Fake Sugars Sneak into Foods and Disrupt Metabolic Health," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/interactive/2023/sugar-substitutes-health-effects/>;

Stiegler, like Giard, the memorization of these constant streams of information, in print, audio-visual, and digital form, results in a loss of savoir faire, or embodied “know-how,” and, more generally, of savoir vivre, or “knowing-how-to-live-well.”<sup>122</sup> The discussion of

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Cori Brackett and J.T. Waldron, *Sweet Misery. A Poisoned World* (Sound and Fury Productions, Inc., 2006);

Mary Nash Stoddard, *Deadly Deception: Story of Aspartame: Shocking Expose of the World's Most Controversial Sweetener* (Dallas: Odenwald Press, 1998).

122 Stiegler, “Memory,” 68;

Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross, 1st edition (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 30.

fractal subjectivity throughout this article highlights the continued struggle to cultivate embodied ways of engaging with food in a condition characterized by simulated flavors in hyperreality. Baudrillard’s insights about simulation and hyperreality can help us make sense of the continued difficulty of making food choices in a food system where categories such as “natural” and “artificial,” as well as “safe” and “toxic” seem indistinguishable and interchangeable.

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**ONE SAYS MASS MEDIA IS MEANT  
TO MANIPULATE THE MASSES,  
BUT IN MY OPINION IT'S THE MASSES  
WHO MANIPULATE THE MEDIA.**

JEAN BAUDRILLARD







**FLIPPING THE ORDER OF SIMULACRA:  
FROM THE SPIRIT OF TERRORISM  
TO STREET ART IN THE AGE  
OF DEGLOBALIZATION**

# 1 BAUDRILLARD IN THE AGE OF DEGLOBALIZATION

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The war against Ukraine has revealed a new phase in world history: we are moving from globalization to glocalization to deglobalization. While the first phase represented the peak of Western superpower and the second showed the need for a compromise between the sphere of globalism and the sphere of localism, with deglobalization we are facing a split of the global empire into at least two parts: the Atlantic side against the Eastern side with a possible support from the so-called global South. The end of the 1990s coincides with the decline of a euphoric vision that attributed to communication technologies the power to transform global society, open its borders and increase the degree of interdependence and interdependence between its parts. The story that follows with the beginning of the new millennium consists of a succession of global crises which began with September 11, developed into a migration emergency via the credit crisis and BREXIT, dramatically intensified with the pandemic and culminated with the invasion of Ukraine. The sequence of dramatic implosions leads to the current debate on deglobalization (Barile 2022, D'Eramo 2022), which requires us to rethink the world in a multipolar way, but also more specifically to reconsider the relationship between technology, counterculture and the myth of the global village.



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**ACCELERATION OF MODERNITY, OF TECHNOLOGY, EVENTS, AND MEDIA, OF ALL EXCHANGES — ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SEXUAL — HAS PROPELLED US TO ‘ESCAPE VELOCITY,’ WITH THE RESULT THAT WE HAVE FLOWN FREE OF THE REFERENTIAL SPHERE OF THE REAL AND HISTORY**

Baudrillard already described the beginning of deglobalization in his popular pamphlet on the Spirit of terrorism (2002), published after the 9/11 which is at the same time in continuity and discontinuity with the previous reflection. In continuity because the the viralization of terrorism confirms the end of the dialectic, already discussed in other books (Baudrillard 1983). In discontinuity because in that long article, Baudrillard criticizes his previous conception of simulacra and its connection to globalization. Like Plato in the late phase of his life decided to self-criticize the architecture of his system, also Baudrillard developed a self-criticism about his most representative concept, made popular during the previous decades. A few years af-

ter the collapse of Soviet Union, Baudrillard reflected on the New Global Order, moving a radical criticism against the scholars who celebrated with enthusiasm the new phase. Already in the Illusion of the end (1994), the French philosopher moved against globalist thinker such as Fukuyama (1992), declaring that there there will not be the end, and all the future historical processes will develop slowly, in a sort of paradoxical reaction to the acceleration of global societies.

Acceleration of modernity, of technology, events, and media, of all exchanges — economic, political and sexual — has propelled us to ‘escape velocity,’ with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and history (...). Deep down, one cannot even speak of the end of history here since history will not have time to catch up with its own end. Its effects are accelerating, but *its meaning is slowing inexorably* (...)" (Baudrillard 1994, pp. 1, 4).

Globalization used to be considered as the peak of a dialectical historical development. Giddens, for example, suggests an optimist

definition which easily resolve any contrast between the sphere of local contexts and the one of global forces.

Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanced relations that shape them (Giddens 2000, p. 61).

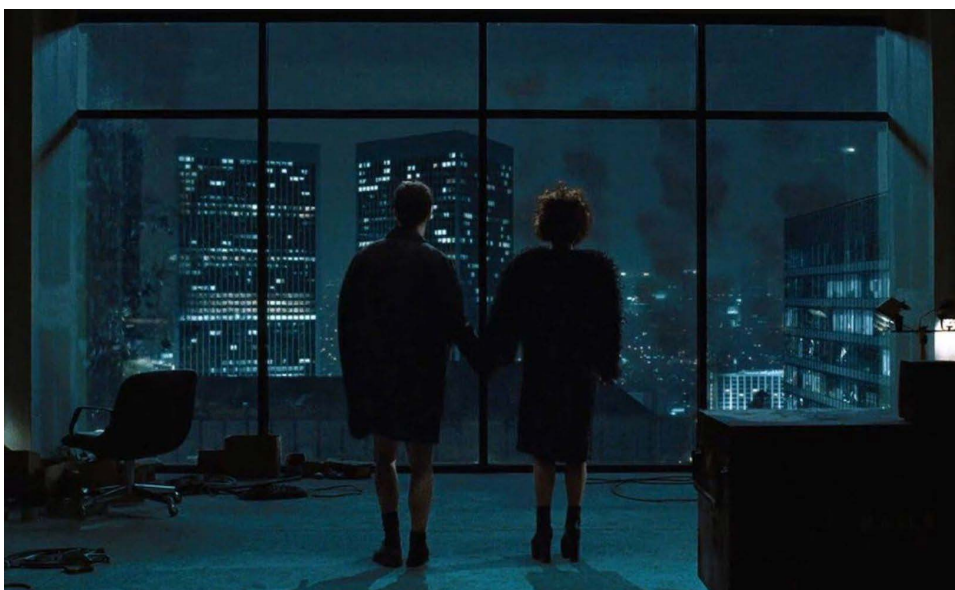
His definition of globalization is already a reflection on glocalization, integrating in a positive way the level of local interactions with the one of global interests. In a very different way other thinkers, describe the separation and possible clash between those two levels. As in Barber's idea of "McDonaldizations" (1995), where is clear the frontal clash between the role of the global, played by a huge infotainment global machine, and the role of the local named as jihad and referred to any kind of resistance against the expansion of the global empire. This idea is very in-

sightful because it combines the ephemeral productions of the cultural industry (McDonald's, MTV, Digital corporations etc.), with the geopolitical power of global countries. With the end of the Nineties, reflections on globalization intersects the one of Postmodernism: the logic of simulacra embraces the geopolitical superpower. In that moment "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 virtual culture (Kellner 2024, p. 11). In a similar way, the beginning of new millennium is characterized by a critical reflection which inspires many collective antiglobalization movements. The notion of Empire (Negri&Hardt 2001), reveals at the same time the sacred alliance between corporations and national or supranational powers, on the other side the capability of integrating local spheres under the all-encompassing logic of capital.

After 9/11, Baudrillard brief reflection on the Spirit of Terrorism,

enlightened the dark side of globalization, against the optimist rhetoric of the previous decade. For this reason he said about September 11th that basically “we all dreamed of it a bit”, not so much in the sense that we desired it but to say that that possibility which nestled in various ways in the global imagination, fueled by the cultural industry, among other things. Think of the long series of disaster films of the Seventies, or more recently to the ending scene of *Fight Club*, in which the towers collapse to the sound of *Where is my Mind* by the Pixies. It is not a case that his first reflection of the Twin Towers was developed in a book of the Seventies, which is also the decade when catastrophic movies becomes popular.

Why has the World Trade Center in New York got two towers? All Manhattan’s great buildings are always content to confront each other in a competitive verticality (...) a pyramidal jungle, every building on the offensive against every other (...). The buildings are no longer obelisks, but trustingly stand next to one another like the columns of a statistical graph. This new architecture (...) embodies(...) the end of all competition, the end of every original reference (...). The two towers of the WTC are the visible sign of the closure of a system in the vertigo of doubling (...) the two towers reflect one another and reach their highest point in the prestige of similitude (Baudrillard 1976, p. 91).



Scene from the film  
“Fight Club” (1999)

With the construction of the WTC capitalism moves from the regime of production to the one of simulation. Until the competition between the other towers was more individual, we were still in a modern society where both reality and history have a strong meaning. With the creation of a perfect semiotic device such as the WTC, where each tower mirrors itself in the other, the referential meaning of reality disappears in favor of the logic of code, of models, of simulation. The WTC is the celebration of a new era based on globalization, financialization and postmodernization of our societies. It is not a case that in the same book, Baudrillard also announces his first periodization of the history of simulacra based on three main orders:

- The counterfeit is the dominant schema in the ‘classical’ period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution;
- Production is the dominant schema in the industrial era.
- Simulation is the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase (ivi, p. 50).

The implosion of the twin towers simultaneously represents the culmination of virtualization, cele-

brating the aesthetics of past decades, and the intrusion of history into the heart of simulation. On the one hand, it celebrates the triumph of iconic images capable of displacing all possible news of the time according to the news values of agenda-setting, especially the one defined “amplitude” (Hodkinson 2017, p. 163). On the other hand, the catastrophe interrupts the “event strike” and shows how history strikes back with its violent potential against the narcotic logic of simulacra. If the event can be considered more spectacular than the spectacle, it is only because it has absorbed the viral power of images, in a kind of competition between reality and images as to who can be more unimaginable. The real has thus broken into the heart of the show, challenged it on its own terrain and absorbed its excessive, violent, hypnotic and explosive character. The unspeakable 9/11 has called the world back to reality, as the story that lay dormant in the 80s through the profusion of media has awakened and reimagined itself with unusual violence. This is the end of all your virtual stories — that is real!” Similarly, one could perceive a resurrection of history after its proclaimed

death. But does reality really prevail over fiction? If it seems so, it is because reality has absorbed the energy of fiction, and become fiction itself. One could almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image (...). It is as if they duel, to find which is the most unimaginable. The collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event (...). Real and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination of the attack is foremost the fascination by the image (...) (Baudrillard 2002, p. 28).

If it is true that “reality has massively moved into the screen to cancel its identity within it” (ibidem), at the same time the logic of entertainment, image and marketing have penetrated the most hidden layers of society. The symbolic power of the simulacrum, which should have purged every trace of singularity from reality, has instead

given rise to an obsessive search for uniqueness, history, reality. The 1990s certainly contributed to this process, in their reevaluation of the authentic, the informal, the local, the tactical, etc. But all this underwent a drastic reversal when it was understood that that centripetal movement of globalization was arrested by a tragical series of global crisis. This revenge of history cannot be translated into a return to modern-style ascending linearity, but into something more violent and at the same time chaotic.

## 2 THE ECSTASY OF TERROR

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Jean Baudrillard was one of the first to boldly use the concept of ecstasy to define an almost unnameable phenomenon like terrorism. Even if what the philosopher-sociologist was addressing was a relatively different typology — the BR, the RAF — with respect to which he will have to adjust his aim after September 11th. Since the 1980s, Baudrillard conceived terrorism as an “ecstatic form of violence” (Baudrillard 1983, p. 41): an overbearing sign of the transparency of evil, also capable of revealing the crisis of a system that



**REALITY HAS ABSORBED THE ENERGY OF FICTION, AND BECOME FICTION ITSELF.**

had been thought of as opposed to “evil” in a zero-sum game, but which finds itself inextricably linked to it. The main mistake of Western philosophy, that of the Enlightenment, believes that the progress of Good, its growth in power in all areas (science, technology, democracy, human rights), corresponds to a defeat of Evil. But “Good and Evil” grow in power at the same time and according to the same movement. The triumph of one does not entail the annihilation of the other, on the contrary.

Good and Evil are irreducible to each other and their relationship is inextricable... Therefore no supremacy of one over the other. This balancing is broken starting from the moment in which there is total extrapolation of the Good (Baudrillard 2001, pp. 18, 20).

The obsession of Western culture with the triumph of good, which translates into the hegemony of the positive, or the expulsion from the system of any negative event such as aging, illness, impotence, death, is just a virtual representation. The term “ecstasy” expresses the eugenic canceling of evil

into an extreme experience which remove the traumatic presence of reality. Brought back into the context of religious discourse, the term ecstasy suggests a need to escape from everyday reality and to lose it in a higher dimension that allows us to reconquer a sort of authenticity precluded or limited by modern devices. Furthermore, the same term, in its psychotropic variant, suggests the same escape but emptied of the religious component and totally induced by the chemical alteration of the senses. An extreme, unusual experience, capable of overturning the ordinary and reconciling the subject we abandon ourselves with its own supposed essence or authenticity. In this regard, however, the anthropologist of religions could object that this idea of “ecstasy” is too vague and underline, for example, the difference with another concept, that of trance, which represents a sort of collective and dynamic variant of the “ecstatic” condition.

Gilbert Rouget (1980), for example, insists on this dichotomy and ascribes opposite values to the two terms. If we are to accept the dichotomy proposed by Rouget,



perhaps to apply it inappropriately to the terrorist phenomenon, we would have to conclude that contemporary terrorism has more to do with the dimension of trance than that of ecstasy. It represents a clearly planned tragic ritual (i.e. without “visions”) which implies movement, noise, the presence of other people, the attempt to resolve an identity crisis, the effect of sensory overload, but which in turn reverberates everywhere and spreads the terrible images of the attacks, at the end of which there is a kind of individual and collective elimination. However, in addition to the famous ethnomusicologist’s reflections, other scholars have tried to smooth out the differences between the pairs listed above and reinforce the points of contact between the two categories. Thus we speak of “ecstatic trance” (Lapassade 1990) as a synthesis of psychological and ritual state based on the dissociation of the subject in a kind of visionary journey or ritualized hallucination which is not an exit from the body, but a merging of the body with the cosmos. Baudrillard also uses the term “ecstasy” to refer essentially to a medial process in which the subject, exposed to the multipli-

cation of communication streams, loses its own identity reference points and approaches a dimension characteristic of the schizophrenic. In some way the ecstasy of terror is the response to the ecstasy of communication. Even ISIS, as Al Qaeda after the 9/11, has brought many elements of contemporary media culture into its own “brand”.

Considering that Islamist terrorism represents one of the forces that oppose the key values of the Western system, it is certainly useful to understand the reason why the West, but even more so Europe and especially France, have become the targets privileged of this murderous fury which is at the same time an iconoclastic fury. What happened in Paris in the sad January of 2015 represents the point of no return of a new terrorism which not only arrives in Europe, as Al Qaeda had already done in London and Madrid, but which does so with a primarily symbolic purpose: to impact on the collective imagination, which turn on warning lights, which arouse powerful responses but also boundless and atavistic fears. Freedom of expression is one of

them. Together with other central values in the Western vulgate,

it constitutes the axiological nucleus on which the France-Europe-West system is built. Other connections contributed to amplifying the symbolic value of the operation, again starting from toponymy. For example, the proximity of the tragic event on Rue Voltaire. The philosopher who best represents the innovation of values introduced by the Enlightenment, against the chains of tradition, but also the one who in his *Candide* was able to prefigure some paradoxical aspects of globalization. Of course, this is not to argue that the attack was planned by careful connoisseurs of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but this is certainly enough to understand how each attack is packaged as a polysemous product or text. It is modular like the brand from which it originates (in this case ISIS) and conveys a precise message with a certain nuance of meaning to each segment of the public. The average Western man interprets the gesture as an irrational or at least unjustified explosion of violence that ensnares him, making it impossible for him to under-

stand what is happening, except by drawing on the modest pool of opinions made available by the media system. The attack is full of symbolic references and touches crucial issues that concern the development of Western modernity.

Extreme critical events such as terrorism prove the crisis of dialectics and therefore also of a certain linear idea of history. Dialectics, understood as a development that passes through contradiction and reaches a superior synthesis, is replaced by the much more postmodern idea of elevation to the “power X”. With this operation the force of the negative, or the contradiction that drives the story, is resolved in the cancellation of the negativity on the level of simulation. The negative multiplied by itself loses its content of contradiction, of friction which allows the story to move to a higher level, and remains almost sublimated into a powerful image which however loses all referentiality. The exaltation to the power transform history. In the new combinatorial regime of simulation, “things lose their finality” and their “critical determination” and reproduce themselves unlimitedly thanks to the electron-

ic means of communication, but even more so through today's digital ones. The philosopher's quip in 1991 at the outbreak of the war in Iraq was famous, during which he said that the war in the Gulf never existed. Baudrillard was obviously referring to the fact that the new media regime, then in the process of globalization, offered an hyper-realistic representation of the war which therefore existed but was not there in the way it was represented. CNN quickly became famous on a global scale precisely because it obtained the contract to narrate the conflict which, between fake tanks deployed by Saddam and infrared footage of the missile attacks on the skies of Baghdad, offered viewers a highly

watered down, partial and ideologically distorted image of the conflict. We moved from the modern idea of war, where soldiers were still protagonists, to the postmodern idea of war (Baudrillard 1995), which is still very visible after the 7/10, when hostages again became protagonists of the conflict, while their identities are dramatized through traditional and digital media.

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### **3 FLIPPING CONSUMPTION IMAGERY AGAINST WESTERN VALUES**

The relationship between history and the theory of the simulacrum is therefore fundamental, with particular reference to the resurgence of historical violence in the period from the first Gulf War, up to the explosion of jihadist violence. If initially, and until the 1990s, the project of the simulacrum operated as a function of emptying reality, purged of any trace of singularity, with the advent of the new millennium the power of the simulacrum and the virtualization processes connected to it succumbed to in the face of an event as catastrophic as it is spectacular. With September 11th, reality broke



“CNN journalists look back on the Gulf War” (2016)



**TERRORISM HAS ABSORBED AND METABOLISED THE LOGIC OF CONSUMPTION AND BRANDING WITHIN ITS ORGANIZATIONAL AND COMMUNICATION PRACTICES.**

into the heart of entertainment, challenging it on its own terrain, absorbing its excessive, violent and explosive character. If the 1991 offered a virtual representation of war, more recent wars represented conflicts in a different way. The brutal images of torture and massacres, offered daily by satellite broadcasts and subsequently by the web, have upset world public opinion with their brutality, which has surpassed the contents of the most extreme artistic performances in terms of symbolic power. All this has brought back to the public an archaic and ritual violence, which had been removed from the phenomenology of our daily lives and had now become unbearable for our comfortable gazes.

Upon closer inspection, there are evident differences in the tactics

adopted but Al Qaeda and ISIS. Since Al Qaeda is more inclined to more complex, carefully planned actions, with an almost epochal impact on public opinion and the sense of history, while the ISIS brand is more modular, it operates on multiple levels, including the even more frightening one of a DIY terrorism, or rather of death in everyday life. Compared to this, the issue of suicide terrorism also takes on another meaning. In the case of Al Qaeda it is the symbolic one of sacrificing the martyrs in a sensational event almost sealed and crowned by the death of its executor. In this way, in addition to the fateful tactical cunning of using “the weapons of the system as a boomerang against the enemy, terrorists have a fatal weapon at their disposal: their own death” (Baudrillard 2001, p. 15).

A tactic which, returning to the discussion on nihilism, the growth of power and the use of technology «combines modern means with this highly symbolic weapon that infinitely multiplies their potential for destruction» (p. 16). A “sacrificial pact” that simply wants to communicate to its enemy, i.e. the West and above all the USA,

that there is no possibility of victory against a progeny of fighters willing to use their lives against a power whose limit is myths of “zero death” and surgical warfare. For the new brand of terrorism, however, the suicidal gesture is less representative and is mostly used against enemies in the Middle East, such as the use of a twelve-year-old child for a massacre in a Kurdish wedding. In other cases it is the collateral effect, the stakes to be paid for the attack to succeed in the best possible way. In other collateral effect of the attack is the dilatation of time which feed media storytelling. The life cycle of the attack is lengthen, prolonging its impact on the media and on public opinion, in an expectation that becomes increasingly neurotic. As it happened during the escapes of terrorist to Belgium after the Paris attacks. The unexpectedness of the terrorist attack, created to strike with great intensity within a short time, had changed to keep global public opinion in tension.

To many, September 11th seemed like a decisive step capable of sinking postmodern aesthetics to reawaken history numbed by the power of the image, thus in-

augurating a new era shaken by economic transformations and geopolitical tensions. Al Qaeda’s communication gimmicks were in fact in line with this idea of a crisis of postmodernity. Although there was much that was postmodern in the return to ritual and archaic violence that mimicked elements and practices of tradition (Maffesoli 2007). At the time, the leap in quality in terms of communication which, thanks to the new terrorist groups, would have proposed an even more sophisticated, post-produced and spectacular image of the war against the West was not even imaginable. This is perhaps a sign of discontinuity between the Al Qaeda brand and that of ISIS. We return to a simulacral construction in which production houses, graphic and visual designers, extras or performers of something which however is not fictitious (unless one wants to accept some conspiracy theory) but terribly real operate.

If in the case of old terrorism reality is sublimated through the raising of the negative, in the second case of 11 September the negative is welcomed into the spectacle and with it enters into competition with

those who are more extreme and unimaginable, in the third case the new brand of terror operates in cross-media mode, in the sense that it sets the type of communication with respect to the specific characteristics of the medium and the audience, or transmedia in the sense that it produces a storytelling capable of involving a varied audience which becomes a tool for completing the message (on social media) and to relaunch/amplify it on a broader level through social and grassroots media. In this substantial co-presence of a high spectacularization of the image and an increasingly immature and primitive violence lies perhaps the key to current Islamist terrorism. The ecstasy of the violence produced by terror corresponds to the anesthesia of the spectator who, educated by the old media on the proliferation of catastrophic images, now finds himself reproducing them in a surprising and unlimited variety. Indeed, he is now the main source of this production which triggers anesthetic spirals.

Terrorism has absorbed and metabolised the logic of consumption and branding within its organizational and communication

practices. If it is true that now everything is consumption, since consumption is experience, the terrorist act adheres to the same experiential logic that exalts authenticity as a fundamental value. The search for authenticity could also be a variable that explains the radicalization of terrorists, which follows a cultural and cognitive dynamic similar to the increasingly irrational practice of extreme sports: from base jumping to the wingsuits. Of course, this comparison may seem excessive and even disrespectful towards the victims. But there are some deep and hidden connections between the practice of leisure and a practice of death. In extreme sports there is an extreme experiential dimension that claims the right to be experienced, and also a technical equipment which is indispensable to perform in a better way and also to communicate the performance through social media. The horrifying attack of the 7 October, organized by Hamas against a group of young Israeli ravers, shows how postcolonial logic can turn Hollywood horror imagery into a tangible reality. The attack is a perfect example of the way in which a technical equipment inspired by extreme sports,

is flipped into an human hunting against a young crowd of dancers. The use of hang glider, paragliding and GoPro cameras to surprise the victims with are killed or kidnapped on sportive Jeeps, shows the conjunction between western lifestyles and a sort of archaic and ritualized collective slaughter. Moreover, the attack is an explicit reference to the Bataclan attack, and some other attacks against music clubs such as Reina in Istanbul, Pulse in Orlando, and more recently the unexpected attack in Moscow. In the archetypal case of the Bataclan, the shock was determined by the fact that the intended victims were a very specific niche: left-wing young listener of indie music who went to have fun listening the American band called Eagles of Death Metal. The attack on the Reina club in Istanbul was aimed at a local and international crowd which included tourists from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, from India, Tunisia etc. Also in this case the reference to Hollywood imagery is confirmed by the fact that the killer was disguised as Santa Claus, almost mimicking the iconic figure of Dan Akroyd in *Trading Places* directed by John Landis. In the Orlando case, the target of the attack

was the Pulse, an hip hop nightclub in the city and frequented mainly by a homosexual audience. In the time that has passed between the execution of the attack and the civic protest of the local gay community, the twisted psychology of the attacker has become clear. The terrorist was considered as a lone wolf: a problematic individual and, according to the press, self-radicalized through the web, although at the same time the figure of his father, an active member of the Afghan Islamic community with radical political positions, seems very significant. An aspect made even more problematic by the father's statement, when he told NBC News that a few months earlier, "his son would have become angry after seeing two men kissing in Miami". For many newspapers, the sense of guilt for his unacceptable latent homosexuality would have been the spark that triggered the spiral of hatred that led to a serial murder which, in reality, if there had not been self-radicalization, would have been very similar to a typical product of American culture. For this reason, Obama himself attempted to confine the phenomenon to the domestic and psychiatric dimension (Ellis, Fantz,

McLaughlin, Hume 14/6/2016), without wanting to involve the Islamic question. In reality, as the CNN journalists themselves underlined, the attacker “consumed a quantity of jihadist propaganda” (ibidem). In reality, other sources have ascertained various attempts to plan an attack, including an inspection in the company of his wife in Disneyland. The choice of the very famous American theme park is perfectly in line with the idea of wanting to punish the Western lifestyle which passes through the glorification of consumption. Furthermore, in a perverse game of references between old and new terrorism and the collective imagination.

The recent attack in Moscow against Crocus City Hall, confirms the previous trend and reveals the panicking image of a world completely out of control. If at least the notion of deglobalization opens to a new cold war which is not cold anymore because it hosts a huge tragedy in the heart of Europe, the attack in Moscow results even more chaotic and unpredictable than the other attacks. On one side the conspiracy theory which is immediately adopted to accuse ter-

rorist of possible connections with Ukraine; on the other side the reality of a clash between powers which triggers chaotic and unpredictable violence. The use of deepfake to support conspiracy theories is again the way in which the logic of simulacra, amplified by generative AI, competes with reality to create even more unthinkable paroxysmic events: too fast, too systematic, too extreme, too paradoxical to be true.

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## **4 THE STATE OF COUNTERCULTURES IN THE AGE OF DEGLOBALIZATION: BANKSY VERSUS JORIT**

Art is another battleground of the actual clash between different spheres of deglobalization. For this reason Street Art becomes even more strategic because more attached to the reality of urban contexts and cultures, with interventions into public spaces, where it can be seen by all. Street art continues the avant-garde proposal to overwhelm the separation between art and everyday life. For this reason artwork is incorporated into the urban environment or the street itself acts as a canvas. Social media, and Instagram in particular,



is a powerful medium for global dissemination. In today's globalized world of street art, artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey use their works to address pressing global issues such as inequality, war and environmental degradation. They capitalize on the interdependence of our global community and inspire global activism and thinking. Banksy's political activism, also known as "artivism", is emblematic of the current state of countercultures. He creates subversive works to combat political hypocrisy, particularly in relation to broader issues such as capitalism and consumerism. Again, removed from the mainstream by definition, he has become one of the most powerful brands in the contemporary art world. Banksy refuses to sell his artworks to galleries or museums because he believes they should be accessible to the public. For this reason, he carefully chooses the venues where he exhibits his work to reinforce the narrative of the work. Unlike mainstream art culture, which places more emphasis on celebrities, his decision to remain anonymous allows the focus to be on his art and its message rather than his identity.



People look on at Banksy's artwork in Disneyland (2012)

Disneyland has already been the scene of an incursion by Banksy in 2006, when the famous street artist installed a hooded mannequin dressed in the iconic orange jumpsuit of the terrorist of Guantanamo prisoners (as told in the 2010 documentary film *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, directed by Banksy himself and Shepard Fairey). Banksy's installation inside Disneyland represents the irruption of reality into the circuit of simulation. The image of a Guantanamo prisoner produces a powerful uncanny effect for families and kids visiting the park. Who is that figure? What kind of superhero it represents? So different from the rest of zoo-

morphic creatures peopling Disney's imagery. According to Baudrillard (1983), Disney is there to prove that there is a real country outside the simulation, while there is not. Since the irruption of reality shows also that we are all prisoners of a regime of signs which turns simulation into a totalitarian experience. The creation of Dismaland, a dystopian version of a Disney theme park, confirms his situationist approach against the spectacle which push us to reflect on a postspectacular society.

Banksy's work goes beyond the impact of conventional street art and continues to stimulate and influence discussions in society, media and politics. His support to

the Palestinian cause is consolidated in time and not the temporary expression of an emotional climate. In Banksy the "authentic" spirit of counterculture survives even in contemporary times, when become more difficult to define what is right or wrong. In several works and public art initiatives, he supported Palestine, as recently he did the same with Ukraine. The mythical image of David and Goliath is compared to two judo fighter where the bigger and older one is beaten by the smaller and younger.

More recently another Street Artist became popular as the "Italian Banksy", even if his art is very far from the English artist. Jorit por-

Mural by Banksy in Borodyanka, Ukraine (2022)



trays his characters as heroes involved in a tough fight, usually represented with a peculiar signature on their face, reminding the Indian facial paintings. The list of celebrities peopling his Pantheon is quite long: from Maradona to Pasolini, from Mandela to Che Guevara. Jorit is the expression of a more commercial, authorized and generalized form of street art. On the wave of a certain radical leftwing, inspired by the Nineties, he embraced a third worldism doctrine to legitimize new emerging powers of deglobalization. Very differently from the Banksy's Judo fighters, Jorit made murales celebrating pro-russian fighters in Donbass. While more recently, he "spontaneously" invited Putin to take a picture together, to prove that he is not a monster. That video, spread through social media, became the sign an explic-

it positioning of his work against pro-ukranian parties and more generally against Western power.

Banksy's tactical irruption of the ugliest reality in the heart of a spectacle, summarizes Baudrillard's reflection from Disneyland to the 9/11. This interruption of the fictional daydreaming forces people to reflect on a reality which is commonly accepted. It could be the one of Guantanamo prisoners, the one of the death of democracy, the one of emerging powers trying to exploit the same logic of simulacra used by western superpowers and spreading it through legacy media, pranks or deep fakes. Banksy's neo-situationist approach which flip simulacra from signs of power into signs of shame, is one of the most cogent implementations of Baudrillard's thought in the age of deglobalization

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‘The funny part is that experts have calculated that the state of emergency decreed by an earthquake warning would unleash such a panic that its effects would be greater than the earthquake itself. Here we fall into full derision: lacking a real catastrophe, it will be easy to unleash a simulated one, one which will be as good as the first and can even replace it. [...] How true it is that we cannot rely on chance to bring on catastrophe: we have to find its programmed equivalent in the preventive measures.’ – Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*.

Since that analysis of *Dripvangelion*<sup>1</sup>, published in the autumn of last year, *Instagram*’s short-form video content has found competition in the trendier algorithms offered by the likes of *TikTok* or, surprisingly enough, *YouTube Shorts*, where even *Google*’s hegemony is diminished by the sad desperation produced by an accelerated, de-sited culture of thirty seconds or less. The prevalence of short-form video content seen on screens, wherever it may be found today, recalls in my mind the ephemeral and faddish appeal of a new media which requires very little demystification

<sup>1</sup> Mazey, Alex. (2023). *Dripvangelion*. In: Kent, Aaron & Yallop, Jacqueline. (Eds). *Dream Latin, Writing the Subconscious*. Cornwall: Broken Sleep Books



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in a hyperculture already beyond even the sardonicism it denies by way of its very transparency. The baked-in cynicism of doomscrolling culture, observable from a kind of anthropological perspective, is already present in every noscope clutch clip made adjacent to whatever profound aphorism Joe Rogan has for us today. Welcome to the desert of the reel.

The power of the generative algorithm is like a *Subway* sandwich in the sense that if the customer, I was once told, comes to complain about the sandwich they receive, it is only the customer who is at fault for choosing the constituent ingredients of the sandwich to begin with. From my own generative algorithm of e-girls and Alan Watts heard over rainy windows, no doubt when a person talks critically of their content algorithm in this way, they inadvertently reveal the idiocy of their own shadow. A cursory look into *the reel* as a medium nevertheless reveals such ephemera as nothing more than that which provides relief from the experience of boredom, and yet in order to diminish this once coveted and sought after experience of situational ennui

a person must first attain a certain degree of boredom to begin with. It may be the case, from a certain intuitive standpoint at least, that the act of doomscrolling is merely 1) a precautionary measure taken against the possibility of boredom, 2) a temporary escape from the non-places of Supermodernity<sup>2</sup> whose liminality exists everywhere today, or 3) the considerably more black-pilled prospect that doomscrolling today functions as a collective *nepenthe*. How much of the last two options are one and the same thing is difficult to ascertain and yet what can be understood here is how the precautionary measure taken against the catastrophe of boredom became, in many ways, the catastrophe itself.

The *black-pill* in this context does not represent the wishful thinking of nihilism turned towards reactionary evil, whereby the recalibration of nihilism back into political and moral frameworks makes the phenomenon of contemporary nihilism easier to dismiss outright. Instead, the black-pill in this context stands closer to its

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<sup>2</sup> Augé, Marc. (1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe. London: Verso



**HOW FUN IT IS TO TELL PEOPLE I NO LONGER WATCH TELEVISION WHILST NOT ONCE DISCLOSING MY SIXTEEN HOURS A DAY SCREEN-TIME.**

terminally-online etymology which once had more to do with a kind of passive nihilism, which is to say, *Doomerism*. Likewise, *Doomscrolling* does not (and perhaps it never did) refer to the ecstasy of pursuing an endless stream of upsetting news — which is perhaps a generational inheritance from the classical age of television — rather doomsscrolling is defined here as that more surreptitious activity of any old hypnagogic and hypnopompic scrolling, the kind that still resembles flicking through television channels to see what isn't on. The incessant scrolling of *Instagram* and the like is perhaps far more dangerous, however — more mesmerising — in the sense that it is so algorithmically intimate and made so *personal to us*. How fun it is to tell people I no longer watch television whilst not once disclosing my sixteen hours a day screentime.

When I was a child and we inevitably flicked through the news channels in an attempt to catch another look at the second plane hitting the towers there was still, in many ways, a sense of *collective* joy to be had in doing so. Today's joy, if we are to call it that, is a joy primarily felt in the loneliness of the network; the dissociative paradox of personal screens. It is a circumstance of the network never quite remedied by the inclusion of *community standards*, the *share button*; an insufficient tool which is practically always dismissed at the level of our subconscious by the dual anxiety that no one ever looks at the rubbish we send them anyway. There are even memes out there that address this very anxiety. Nevertheless, sending memes to our friends and loved ones is perhaps less about sharing a moment of humorous — “literally us” — relatability than it is a kind of hyperfocused aggregation. To say, we have trained ourselves to show our love for one another through this strategy of production, through our workaday productivity; the act of trawling this world of trash on their behalf. The share button is perhaps the only place we have left to show our appreciation; and



if it is correct that doomscrolling has become a kind of collective *nepenthe* then it is perhaps only right in our hearts that we should pursue more of it.

In pursuing this strategy then, we may one day find the algorithm passing from Rei Ayanami in *Dripvangelion*<sup>3</sup> to Juliana Chahayed cosplaying Rei Ayanami in the limerent intonation of '*rei sings u fly me to the moon [10 hours]*'<sup>4</sup>. In this soothing composition, seen on *Instagram Reels*, Chahayed's performance is presented in horizontal, adjacent collusion with Patrick Bateman's memefication only to remind the viewers that the hypercultural miscibility of neither Chahayed's disconsolate appearance nor the tonality of a pensive — practically sepulchral — hauntologically positioned 'sad music' is designed to be taken too seriously lest we deep even the nudge in the ribs that quietly recalls the performativity of imag-

es that amounts to — like the fate of hauntology itself — not much of anything. And yet it is precisely in this wry performativity of images, the dark iris of an eye that glimmers with the regulation of all light, where seduction and reversibility still remain.

It could be said that Chahayed's performance, presented in tandem with intertextual reference, is largely emblematic of a counter-cultural approach that understands fully the vacuum of power — the algorithm in this case — that stands ready to absorb it, just as Baudrillard described power in *Fatal Strategies* as the 'empty place' no one ever wants to occupy: 'They know that power, like truth, is the empty place you must know how never to occupy, but that you must know how to produce so that others will be swallowed up in it.'<sup>5</sup> (*Fatal Strategies*, p. 106.) As such, the *mise en scène* of Chahayed's performances come to represent a 'strategy of intelligent subversion'<sup>6</sup> (*Fatal Strategies*, p. 106) standing *peripheral* rather than diametrically

<sup>3</sup> SillySeeker Productions. (2022). *Dripvangelion*, YouTube. Last Updated: 06 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLBfTmNdBss> Accessed 07 April 2023

<sup>4</sup> Juliana Chahayed. (2022). *rei sings u fly me to the moon [10 hours]*, YouTube. Last Updated: 07 August 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biy4NbuFu4c> Accessed 29 January 2024

<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (1990). *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philippe Beitchman & W. G.J. Niesluchowski. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

opposed to any integral reality, careful to reject even the mistake of a countercultural identity hence why those other things that seem seductive in their approach today not only fall into the problematic categories of playful ambiguity and hermetic reference but often take up into ambivalent dialogue an entire playbook of heresies the least of which involves dressing up as characters from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*<sup>7</sup>. It is less cosplaying an allegedly schizophrenic and profoundly dissociative character that is important to the analysis at hand and more the eschatological tonality of Chahayed's music that circulates as the perihelion; that which comes closest to the problem of an integral reality that always sought to cast away the affliction of having to discern what's real from what isn't.

It was in *The Intelligence of Evil*<sup>8</sup> where Baudrillard provided a brief yet pithy observation in the direction of that 'music in which sounds have been clarified and expurgat-

ed', 'shorn of all noise and static', writes Baudrillard, to the point where it had reached a kind of 'technical perfection.'<sup>9</sup> (*The Intelligence of Evil*, p. 21.) Baudrillard associated the cleaned-up sterilization of such music with the computer and the virtual scene, the 'actualization of a programme' inherent to the 'closed circuit' of what he called 'Integral Reality'<sup>10</sup>. What is inevitably produced is a music that is 'flawless and without imagination', 'shorn' — as Baudrillard writes here — of all that which made it music to begin with. This was, as Baudrillard also noted, a theory of 'technical perfection' that must be 'open to doubt' since many musicians 'have actually come up with the idea of reintroducing noise into it to make it more 'musical'.'<sup>11</sup> The saving grace of what might be successfully reintroduced into music was later put to death by Mark Fisher's theories of a culture defined, by and large — perhaps even *too reductively* (which might have inadvertently been Fisher's saving grace in a theory that lacked the perfection of a closed-off system) — by an age

<sup>7</sup> *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, 1995, Netflix, Gainax, Tatsunoko, Japan, TV Tokyo, Hideaki Anno

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (2013). *The Intelligence of Evil: Or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner. London: Bloomsbury Academic

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

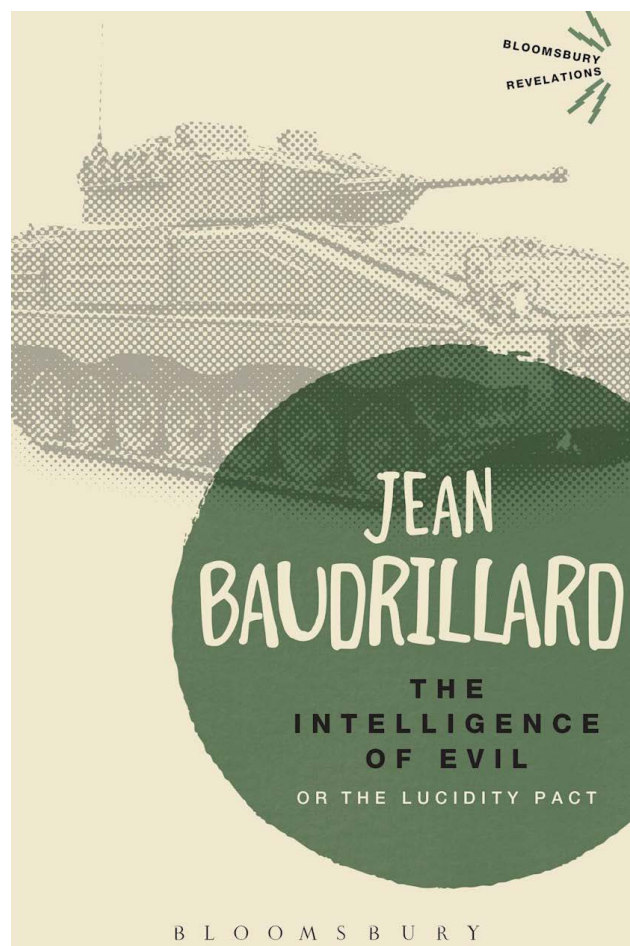
of musical regurgitations; a nostalgic forever present that would facilitate the ideological precedent that Capitalist Realism<sup>12</sup> had landed in neoliberal perfection. It was with a terroristic hope — perhaps the only hope that still remains — where the eschatological fate of this Integral Reality had been predicted years before when Baudrillard wrote on the ‘radiant perspective’ of this heavenly utopia ‘today lived as a catastrophe in slow motion.’<sup>13</sup> (*Fatal Strategies*, page 97.)

This leads to perhaps the only question worth asking in anthropology today; where does this musical expurgation place *the ritual* of singing in Rei Ayanami costume? It is interesting to note that the popularity of cosplay amongst young people runs parallel to the ‘painful void’<sup>14</sup> of identity. (*Hyperculture*, page 51). In Chahayed’s covers and original works, there is less a regurgitation of forms and more a hypertext of ‘plurality’ where ‘identities emerge’ in the ‘patch-

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, Mark. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* Hampshire: Zero Books

<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (1990). *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philippe Beitchman & W. G.J. Niesluchowski. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 51.



work structures’<sup>15</sup> of an *Instagram* account. (*Hyperculture*, page 52). From the grainy footage of a CRT monitor illuminating a darkened bedroom, to a faint voice heard through an old telephone set, it is without a doubt a performance where ‘fuzziness, tremor [and] chance’<sup>16</sup> have been returned to the image through a process of

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (2013). *The Intelligence of Evil: Or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner. London: Bloomsbury Academic. p. 21.

readmission and even poetic reversal. At the same time Chahayed's account is perhaps 'Hypercultural Art' as defined by Byung-Chul Han in the way it 'no longer pursues the *truth* in the strong sense; it has nothing to *reveal*.'<sup>17</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 51). It may be the case that in lacking moments of truth and revelation, hypercultural art challenges a system whose game is always one of excess and transparency. How much of these cosplayed performances are an appeal to hauntological infusion is unknown and yet looking into her sepulchral bedroom nonetheless and the hauntological conception of what bygone dreamscape Chahayed's performance recalls would be difficult to pin down exactly since in its allegiance to contemporary memeifications, algorithmic trends, wry smiles, the internet's collectively renewed interest in the demiurgic Gnosticism on offer in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, one cannot help but detect a *bridging* of sorts between something of a lost and imaginary *there* made miscible with the timely mourning of the *here and now*. In hypercultural

<sup>17</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 51.

art's indifference towards truth and revelation, there is perhaps something to be revealed after all.

Looking through Chahayed's *YouTube* account and it is easy enough to find her cover of *Duvel*<sup>18</sup> by Bôa, the intro theme to the anime, *Serial Experiments Lain*. Directed by the late, Ryūtarō Nakamura, *Serial Experiments Lain*<sup>19</sup> was a short, thirteen-episode television series that made its debut run on TV Tokyo in the summer of 1998. It is, for the most part, a profoundly post-structural narrative concerned with a culture of mourning at a time when Japan, like the West, was preparing for the arrival of *Y2K*. As such, *Serial Experiments Lain* set the precedent for an account of a "present day, present time" that was less *Frutiger Aero* and more the hypercultural landscape of technological paranoia we occupy today. It was the washed-out imagery of cathode-ray monitors made in tandem with *Lain*'s palpable sense of dissociation from the emptiness

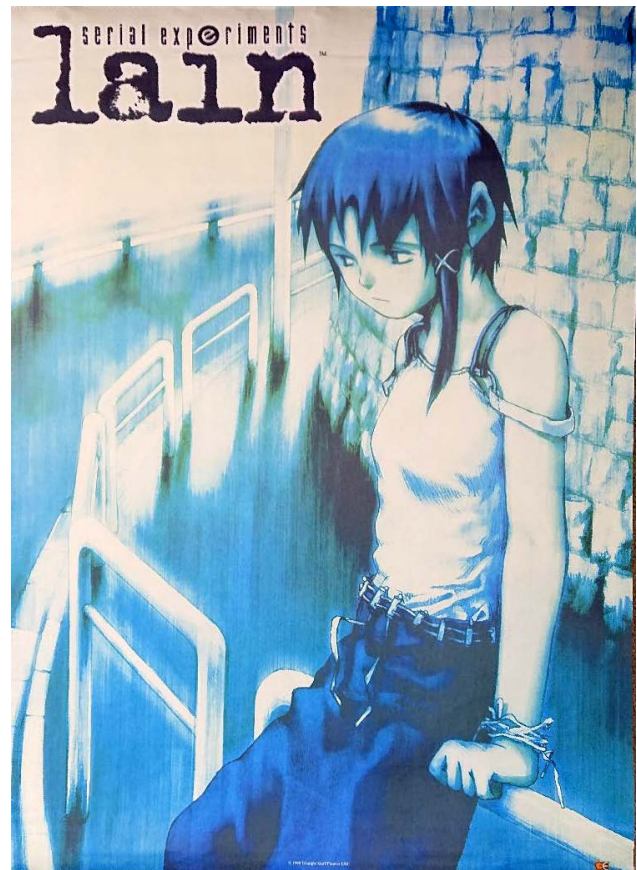
<sup>18</sup> Juliana Chahayed. (2023) *lain sings u duvet*, YouTube. Last Updated: 13 July 2023. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATd59\\_wqSJA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATd59_wqSJA) Accessed 29 January 2024

<sup>19</sup> *Serial Experiments Lain*, 1998, Crunchyroll, Triangle Staff, Japan, TV Tokyo, Ryūtarō Nakamura

around her that best cut across the lofty expectations of the new millennium to show a society that would soon enough collapse into alienation and conspiracy. It was a narrative that achieved as much from the perspective of an unassuming adolescent, Lain Iwakura, in this case, where those who seemed to be living through the end times were made dissociative to the point where no one seemed to care. Unplugged from anything logically sequential and practically schizoanalytic in scope, *Lain* was less the eschatological vision of great and powerful angels falling to earth in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and more a Baudrillardian retelling of catastrophe seen in terms of a reality that had disappeared without notice, vanishing so quickly that no one had even realised they had been left behind to mourn it.

In *Nihilism in Postmodernity*<sup>20</sup>, Ashley Woodward contextualised ‘the cultural psychoanalysis of postmodernity’ within ‘a pervasive melancholy, beyond both nostalgia and mourning, in which

<sup>20</sup> Woodward, Ashley. (2009). *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo*. US: The Davies Group



Serial Experiments Lain poster.  
Directed by Ryūtarō Nakamura.

the values of modernity cannot be relinquished in the name of a new beginning.’<sup>21</sup> (*Nihilism in Postmodernity*, page 245.) Whilst Woodward’s text rightfully acknowledged ‘the mood appropriate to the postmodern scene’, it was at the same time a ‘melancholia’ that stood as both ‘a rejection of and attempt to move beyond nostalgia and mourning, both of which are bound too closely to modernist

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

sensibilities.’<sup>22</sup> (*Nihilism in Post-modernity*, page 166.) And whilst it was Mark Fisher who also outlined the excess of nostalgia as one of the many cultural logics of neoliberalism, it is perhaps easy enough to ask where this ‘move beyond’ placed mourning in the plexus of contemporary phenomenology. Maybe it is in the psychoanalysis of mourning where we find a melancholic culture still steeped in the mythologises of the twentieth century to the point where we could ask how much of modernism and its doubling in the shadow of the postmodern was merely scapegoat and patsy for the whitewashing of history; a reading of the twentieth century made in retrospect in order to absolve liberal humanism of its corrupt conscience. Furthermore, what if the bloodied hands of the twentieth century were not unfamiliar, *but ordinary*? This *hamartia* that undercuts modernism is certainly a topic addressed in various chapters of Naomi Klein’s *Doppelganger*<sup>23</sup>; a spectacular work of theory that recalls the emergence of a *mirror world*, which is to say, the introduction of

a hyperreality-*lite* that comes dangerously close to being Baudrillardian if only Klien was to wade a little further still, to plunge into that lifeworld of mirrors without so much as a real to reflect anymore. This is not to rehash Klien’s deep dive on doppelgangers or even mirror worlds but to demonstrate how the contemporary may be shaped by grief and its mirror image in the shape of condolence in a way that turns its back on the hegemon of an absolute melancholia; that ‘fundamental passion’<sup>24</sup>, in the words of Baudrillard, as the failed introduction of another stable point of reference. It is not coincidental that Lain Iwakura is also haunted, throughout the anime, by a *doppelganger* who is representative of her ecstatic shadow; the ecstatic double of that melancholia which looms large over practically every scene of *Serial Experiments Lain*.

Returning in a mode of hyperfixation to the *mise en scène* of an *Instagram* reel is perhaps heretical to media theory, and yet there is obviously something deeply

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>23</sup> Klein, Naomi. (2023). *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*. UK: Allen Lane

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. US: The University of Michigan Press. p. 162.

anthropological in Chahayed's cover of the *Serial Experiments Lain* opening, communicated here in the backlit Casio watch of emulation. From Y2K, to CRT, to coil cord landlines exhibiting the same transparency as a *Game Boy Color*, the equivocal fuzziness inherent to an *aesthetics of glow* converges with the cyber gyaru (hyper) eschatology of cute accelerationism in Doja Cat's music video to *Agora Hills*<sup>25</sup>. Here, in perhaps an even greater example of *glow*, the appearance of the cathode-ray monitor is amplified beyond even that of its appearance in the aforementioned *Instagram* reel since it is in *Agora Hills* where *glow* is also contextualised within an entire *mise en scène* of lava lamps; those period artefacts which once offered a sense of playful anfractuosity to the ebb and flow of temperature, to the warmth of shadows cast by coloured wax. What is important to understand is the holistic aesthetic that *Serial Experiments Lain* prognosticates is very much hyperstitionalised upon in the "present day, present time",

<sup>25</sup> Doja Cat. (2023). *Doja Cat – Agora Hills (Official Video)*, YouTube. Last Updated: 22 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c66ksfigtU> Accessed 29 January 2024

where the actual content of the anime, both in its cinematography and schizoanalytic consistency, seems perhaps more relevant today than it did in 1998. It is perhaps also worth mentioning how each of the thirteen episodes begins with a cathode-ray fuzziness that resembles William Gibson's '...the color of television, tuned to a dead channel'<sup>26</sup> where viewers of this late-nineties animation first observe Lain Iwakura's translucent image within the white noise of analog video.

Of course, watching the opening credit sequence<sup>27</sup> from the perspective of that "present day, present time" and the static snow on screen evokes certain associations with turn of the century technologies. There is, alongside these technological associations, a striking juxtaposition of a dark and faded imagery with the melancholic yet ever so slightly warmer blues that constitute the washed-out colour palette of the opening sequence. It is within this montag-

<sup>26</sup> Gibson, William. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Science Fiction Books

<sup>27</sup> Stigma. (2015). *Serial Experiments Lain – OPENING [VHS]*, YouTube. Last Updated: 24 July 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIBLcLdTYr4> Accessed 29 January 2024

ing of suburban Japan, the architecturally significant nonplaces of supermodernity, especially, where the viewer is first introduced to the extradiegetic and aforementioned main title, *Duvet* by Boa. Situated within those blue hues that recall the artworks of Tsuchiya Koitsu, or perhaps a more tenuous association with the city pop liminality of Hiroshi Nagai, is Lain Iwakura as she turns in motion that resembles a spectral hand having been placed upon her shoulder. It is a motion where those sad and starless eyes that were set upon the urban landscape are now spurred from an instance of quiet contemplation. What's particularly interesting about Lain is her ambiguity of thought entirely, those moments of mute reflection to which we have no real access. The subtle alterity offered by Lain's overwhelming equivocation facilitates not only a surface reading as it might relate to a sense of her social alienation but actually places Lain's thoughts into a distinct category of anti-transparency, *opacity*.

Before turning from the urban landscape, as she does here, Lain is introduced with a gravitation pull whose intensity is offset only by

the sudden appearance of a knitted beanie accented with a cutesy bear design; her face framed by trademark hairclip, an appeal of sorts to the conventions of anime where the nuance of characters' hair designs often signify something important about their character, for example, in the case of *Evangelion* then, the gnostic dualism represented by Rei Ayanami's *ice blue* and Asuka Langley Soryu's *fiery red*. What's important to Lain's character however is that she is an unassuming junior high school student — a loner of sorts — perceived by others as still somewhat childlike (as the hairclip might suggest) and, as this opening sequence further alludes, impressed by that androgyny of youth which defines an inward-looking young girl now seen passing through a murder of crows; all the metaphorical implications of those eaters of carrion whose significance point towards a world made already quite cadaverous. The crows depicted here — as such birds tend to be — picking away at the remnants of something dying and soon to be left behind. It is the eschatological tonality of this world 'falling' and 'fading' not only addressed in the lyrical





**IT MIGHT YET TURN OUT THAT ON THE PRECIPICE OF OUR FINAL DESTINY THERE WAS AN UNQUENCHABLE FIRE HALF AS BAD AS WHAT WE DESERVED.**

extradiegetic but very much illustrated in Lain passing through those weary spaces of transition, *crossing* — as it were — from the residual luminosity of cute into the cold light of tech nihilist *becoming*, where it is important to acknowledge both Lain's iconic bear onesie and the tutelary presiding of a plushie decorated window sill as perhaps more successfully prognostic than anything Philip K. Dick could have conjured when it came to this depiction of a bedroomed lifeworld. In the end Lain's world offers a lived (hyper)eschatology of onesies, plushies and collective *repentance* certainly more temporarily in-tune than the floating cars we were once promised, *but not promised here*.

When God died he forgot to take the final judgement with him and because of this the (hyper)eschatological concerns final judge-

ment on our own terms, a hyperreal kind of end of the world with all the hopes and dreams of the sceneodrama de-sited from retributive justice in which there was never enough of God's wrath to go around anyway. It might yet turn out that on the precipice of our final destiny there was an unquenchable fire half as bad as what we deserved. What is promised in its discernment however, emphasised by both the characteristic equivocation of Lain, alongside the architectural arrangement of this illustratively nonplaced world, is the narrative facilitation of a yet to be fully-defined crisis point we may one day need to cross. Certainly, it is this act of *crossing* that the opening sequence really evokes, made evident in those spaces of transition the protagonist inhabits, Lain coming to pass both through and under, as seen in the case of a subway underpass, and over, as seen in conclusion upon the motorway bridge.

There are instances in Marc Augé's work on *Supermodernity*, with all its references to motorways and spaces of transition, where the late anthropologist comes closer than even Naomi Klien in converging on

what should now be considered a thoroughly Baudrillardian position based on theories of transparency and excess. In Augé's *Introduction to the Second Edition*<sup>28</sup>, he posits the following:

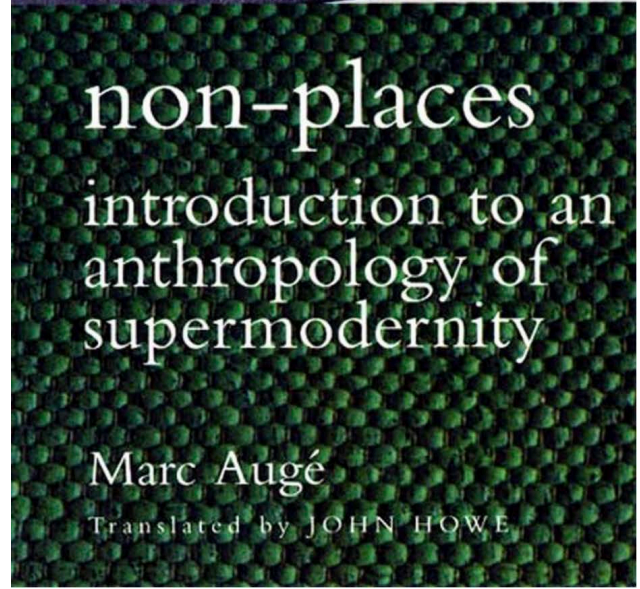
'Architecture does transmit in a sense the illusions of the current dominant ideology and plays a part in the aesthetic of transparency and reflection, height and harmony, the aesthetic of distance which, deliberately or not, supports those illusions and expresses the triumph of the system in the main strongholds of the planetary network; but in that very process it acquires a utopian dimension.'<sup>29</sup> (Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity, page 16.)

Augé continues thereafter to write, 'In its more significant manifestations, architecture seems to allude to a planetary society that is yet to materialize. It suggests the brilliant fragments of a splinted utopia in which we would like to believe, *a society of transparency*.'<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Augé, Marc. (1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe. London: Verso

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



(Emphasis added). Likewise, it was Byung-Chul Han who pursued theories of transparency and excess in *The Transparency Society*<sup>31</sup>, which provides many additional instances of a society seen in terms of 'hyperreal over-focus'<sup>32</sup> (p. 16), operating inside those 'simulacra without reference'<sup>33</sup> (p. 40), and

<sup>31</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2015). *The Transparency Society*. California: Stanford University Press

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

held antithetical to ‘strong referentiality’<sup>34</sup> (p. 39). Although, it is perhaps the aforementioned book on *Hyperculture* that furthers a reading of Han’s Baudrillardian trajectory tenfold; ‘On the model of the term hyperculturality,’ Han writes, ‘it could be called *hyper-reality*.’<sup>35</sup> (*Hyperculture*, p. 36.) It is also within *Hyperculture* where we find a formulation of *the crossing* as it relates to contemporary space and that which might help us to understand the significance of Lain’s own allegorical identity within these complex spaces of transition.

In the chapter on ‘Hybrid Cultures’<sup>36</sup>, Han explores hyperculture through the metaphor of the bridge, taking inspiration from Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘metaphor of the stairwell’ which acts as ‘an illustration of the interstitial transition’<sup>37</sup> that aids the formation of cultural identity. Whilst Bhabha ‘points to Heidegger’s trope of the bridge’<sup>38</sup>, it is Han who puts Bhabha’s interpretation of Heidegger to the test, calling it ‘incom-

plete’, and therefore distorted. One reading of Han’s contention with this distortion of Heidegger involves its noticeable de-theologisation. To say, Bhabha presents Heidegger as having written ‘The bridge gathers, as a passage that crosses.’ When the original, as Han rightly corrects, reads, ‘The bridge *gathers*, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities.’<sup>39</sup> Despite his terse style, (both a parody of religious solemnity and neoliberalism’s obsession with clarity (transparency)), there are implications to Han’s equivocation in the way he possesses the wry tendency to become (hyper)eschatological in scope, concerned with the end of things in the way one might produce a contemplative account of a candle which, having been burnt at both ends, is slowly burning out — *exhausted*<sup>40</sup>. Even so, both Baudrillard and Han are deeply equivocal theorists whose works lack an element of moral condemnation which, in today’s environment of saviours the world over, would appear only platitudinal at

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Mazey, Alex. (2023). *Are we a burnout society?* [Online]. [magazine.publicpressure.io](https://magazine.publicpressure.io). Last Updated: 15 May 2023. Available at: <https://magazine.publicpressure.io/are-we-a-burnout-society/> Accessed 29 January 2024

best and performative at worst; the final judgement never for them to deliver and as such develops as a final judgement that is, significantly, deferred elsewhere. There is an ironic power to passing the buck in this way, where the final judgement becomes, in the end, a ball to be volleyed back at God — or, as is so-often the case with Baudrillard, some kind of demiurgic entity. What is important to the analysis at hand however is Han's reintroduction of the divine to the 'bridge [that] gathers, and also assembles all paths 'before the divinities'.<sup>41</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 23). 'The divinities Bhabha tellingly leaves out when he quotes Heidegger.' Han adds, tellingly adding the divinities back in on Heidegger's behalf — *or is it his own?* Either way, 'Heidegger's bridge is ultimately a *theological* trope.' Han concludes, with emphasis added, nevertheless addressing 'Heidegger's trope of the bridge or the boundary' as 'not at all suitable as an illustration of the hybridity of culture or of the world.'<sup>42</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 22). Han continues:  
| 'In Heidegger, Here and There, in-

<sup>41</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

side and outside, one's own and what is foreign, stand in a relation of dialectical, dialogical tension. Heidegger's world is determined by a strict symmetry that prevents any hybridity which would create asymmetrical entities. Dialectics, which for Heidegger take the form of dialectics without middle ground, that is, without 'reconciliation', do not permit any hybridization of what is different. The hybrid buzzing of voices which penetrate each other, mix with each other and multiply is alien to Heidegger.'<sup>43</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 22).

Therein, Han rejects Heidegger's 'dialectics without middle ground' whilst also pushing away the de-theologised, antagonistic conception of the dialectical present in Bhabha since it is this antagonistic conception that 'does not permit' the 'playful'<sup>44</sup> essence inherent to the emergence of hyperculture. Han adequately posits an alternative to both Heidegger and Bhabha then by moving away from a Heideggerian theologisation of the world towards perhaps

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

a neo-theologisation that engenders hybridization whilst simultaneously avoiding Bhabha's antagonistic dialectics and, perhaps more telling of Han's own position as a Catholic<sup>45</sup>, the absence of divinities. In other words, Han is placing Heidegger and Bhabha into playful opposition where the crossing is returned to the 'presencing' of divinities whilst also accepting Bhabha's 'boundary, as a liminal space of transition,' that neither 'delimit or excludes' but rather 'engenders'<sup>46</sup> in a way Heidegger's bridge cannot. Some wish to engender God without saying it directly, just as it seems additionally significant that Lain's world — like a *Neon Genesis Evangelion* rich with gnostic symbolism — crosses into the 'presencing' of divinities as opposed to their perfectly fashionable negation. The motorway bridge then, standing as Lain's 'passage that crosses, before the divinities' is therefore infinitely more aligned with the hypercultural conception posited by Han than

it is the 'Here and There' of Heidegger, or Bhabha's 'too narrow' stairwell. Furthermore, 'The hybrid buzzing of voices which penetrate each other, mix with each other and multiply...' is additionally significant to the "present day, present time" *Serial Experiments Lain* recounts since Lain is practically haunted in the washed-out illustrations of transition and liminality by the accompanying buzz of electrical transmission. This is only emphasised by the plain to see symbolic imagery of electricity pylons that makes visible an omnipresent network existing in the open sky of an infinite virtual; an overarching theme introduced in *Serial Experiments Lain* through the idea of Schumann resonances. Moreover, the mise en scène of *Serial Experiments Lain* so-often concerns the unnerving isolation of similar ambient noises to that of *buzz*, whether they are diegetically communicated through the exco-riation of a classroom chalkboard or felt in the low hum of bedroom CRT. It is unnerving perhaps in the way sound, like information, is so rarely isolated from its semiotic embeddedness so when noise or a particular scene is isolated-from-context in this manner

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<sup>45</sup>Han, Byung-Chul. (2021). *The Tiredness Virus: Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue*. [Online]. The Nation. Last Updated: 12 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/> Accessed 29 January 2024

<sup>46</sup>Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 20.

then the illustration of the bedroom (as is also the case with *Agora Hills*) or classroom environment becomes thoroughly uncanny<sup>47</sup> in a way Sigmund Freud might have recognised. In the end what remains intrinsically unsettling under hyperculture is nevertheless reconciled by the very existence of the network itself, normalised under the *network-as-nepenthe* in which we can today endure the realities of genocide — all manner of evil — within an established network of bad actors and feel nothing. Alternatively, it would seem like a contemporaneously trendy reading to take Lain's auditory sensitivities, among other things, as the perfect way to regulate her mind to the neoliberal dispositif we call neurodiversity, to present the *nepenthe* of having seen her, heard her, listened, and benevolently moved on to the next varied perspective with fidgety and progressive restlessness.

Seen from public transport and elsewhere, electricity pylons, saturated with a meshwork of entan-

gled wires as they are so-often presented in *Serial Experiments Lain*, are frequently observed from windows that also act as a symbolic precursor to a world of screens. A screen is both a window and a crossing, and whether they are presented behind a congregation of plushie toys as is the case of Lain's bedroomed lifeworld, or find themselves before the pensive stare of her daily commute to and fro from school, windows are everywhere in *Serial Experiments Lain*. As such, Han's chapter on 'Windows and Monads'<sup>48</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 42), is additionally significant in coming to understand Lain as another precursory to hypercultural identity. The very structure of *Serial Experiments Lain* attempts to achieve that of a 'hypertextual world'<sup>49</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 43), forgoing the idea of an episodic structure for what the series called *Layers*. The reader, or viewer, in this case, 'is no longer thrown into a monochrome structure of meaning and order.'<sup>50</sup> Writes Han in reference to Ted

<sup>47</sup> Freud, Sigmund. (1919). *Das Unheimliche [The Uncanny]*, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works 24 vols*, ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press

<sup>48</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2022). *Hyperculture*, trans. Daniel Steuer. Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Nelson's 'general emancipation'<sup>51</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 42) of the hypertext, 'Rather', Han states, 'the reader moves actively, lays pathways through the multicoloured space...'<sup>52</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 43). It is the pathway as a self-administered *layer*, rather than the passive designation of narrative order, and whilst *Serial Experiments Lain* might have failed at producing a kind of radical alterity to an otherwise episodic structure, it is nevertheless an attempt to emulate something of the hypertext, an attempt to cross over into it. 'The inhabitant of a hypertextual universe would be a kind of window creature, consisting of windows through which it receives the world.'<sup>53</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 44). Is this not precisely the way in which Lain 'receives the world' through both the window of her morning commute to school, and later, in the experience of 'stepping through' the 'Navi' portal, that is to say, her computer screen. 'A window actually has two functions.'<sup>54</sup> Han continues in conclusion then, writing:

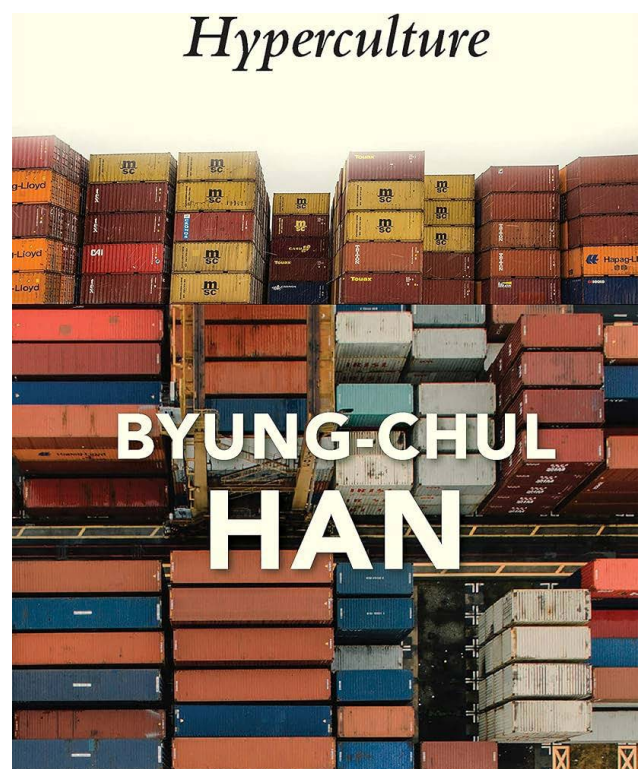
<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

'To begin with, it is an opening to the outside. But it also seals me off against the world. The screen, too, as a kind of window, reveals as well as shields. Windowing can therefore also produce monads, this time monads with windows whose Being-in-the-world turns out to be a Being-before-a-window. In their isolation they come close to the old windowless monads. Will they also have to call on God?'<sup>55</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 45)



<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

*Being-before-a-window* is certainly the means in which Lain experiences this 'hypertextual world', and it is likely due to this *windowing* — 'the hypertextual mode of experience'<sup>56</sup> (*Hyperculture*, page 44) — where Lain also observes very little in the way of differentiation between the 'Real World' and her virtual life in 'The Wired', where, as Lain mentions to her father, "The border between the two isn't all that clear." The violence the virtual performs on reality was perhaps once entirely recognisable then, exhibited as early as 1998 in the bloodied shadows that accompany the aforementioned illustrations of the nonplace, brilliant white and ever present. It should be mentioned in conclusion how these nonplaces, entirely complicit within a Baudrillardian reading, not only exhibit in 'supermodernity' that 'society of transparency', as Augé plainly states, but simultaneously come to 'express its essential quality: excess.'<sup>57</sup> (*Non-Places*, page 24). When Lain passes through these spaces of transition, *windowing* as she goes, it seems

clear in the narrative's fractured — 'layered' — progression that Lain is a young girl driven less by the mystery of her classmate's suicide and more the desire to escape the transparency of a 'radiant perspective' *beyond glow*, driven by her own attempt to 'call on God.'

In theories of transparency, Jean Baudrillard and Byung-Chul Han converge in a critique of the culture that Junichirō Tanizaki once reached *In Praise of Shadows*<sup>58</sup> when he wrote of an imminent globalisation made '...utterly insensitive to the evils of excessive illumination.'<sup>59</sup> It was also here where Tanizaki would write that most exquisite line, 'Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.'<sup>60</sup> One only has to pass down a corridor of fluorescent lamps on route to the photocopier at work to detect a post-industrialism in favour of excessive illumination let alone that phenomenological quality of our world revealed in the emptiness of its corridors. It is perhaps in Baudrillard then where

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> Augé, Marc. (1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe. London: Verso. p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> Tanizaki, Junichirō. (2001). *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper & Edward G. Seidensticker. London: Vintage Classics

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 46.



those excesses Tanizaki recounted as early as 1933 can be extended to best describe the bright implications of those deeply saturated meanings which ‘snatch away from us even the darkness beneath trees that stand deep in the forest...’<sup>61</sup> scattering shadows and with it the beauty that once swam beneath the stillness of Tanizaki’s ‘dark pond’<sup>62</sup>.

It is not necessarily the similarities in their theories of positivity, transparency, or overabundance that links these thinkers with the hypercultural conditions explored in *Serial Experiments Lain* but rather the rejuvenation of negativity as the overarching project of the works mentioned therein. ‘Theory in the strong sense of the word is a phenomenon of negativity[...]’ where, ‘On the basis of such negativity, theory is violent.’<sup>63</sup> Han writes in *The Transparency Society*, striking another uncanny resemblance to Baudrillard’s ‘Theoretical violence’<sup>64</sup> (*Simulacra and Simu-*

*lation*, p. 163). It is this rejuvenation of the negative shadow that also runs in anime as hyperstitional theory fiction, the negative essence of *Serial Experiments Lain* in particular finding exacerbation in a messianic schizophrenia more preferable to the transparent utopia Lain ultimately comes to leave behind in the process of having crossed over completely. There is perhaps no way back for her now. From the politicians who promise to deliver us from the evils of the world to those who promise to deliver us from an earth that, in their minds, cannot abide for ever, it may be the case that this messiah complex, which is exhibited everywhere today, has become the phenomena par excellence of the (hyper)eschatological condition.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. (2015). *The Transparency Society*. California: Stanford University Press. p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. US: The University of Michigan Press. p. 163.

# ARTWORKS FROM THE SERIES OVERFLOW (2024)



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**NOOR ZAHRAN**

Malaysian artist based in Selangor who pursued his studies in Creative Media Digital at KPM Indera Mahkota. He possesses a diverse range of artistic skills, including drawing, painting, photography, and 3D compositing. His artistic style encompasses both realism and surrealism, with a focus on figurative and still life subjects. He primarily works with ink as his medium of choice, utilizing its versatility to create intricate and compelling artwork. His artworks have been showcased in notable group exhibitions. He was awarded the Highly Commended Award in the Emerging Artist Category by the UOB Painting of the Year in 2023 and won the Malaysia Emerging Artist Award (MEAA) in 2022.





## **SHOUT IT OUT LOUD**

I blend the shape of a grenade with the body of a microphone to express the mighty force of people's voices. The artwork symbolizes the incredible power we all hold within our voices to uplift and strengthen one another. Each voice is like a unique explosion, capable of creating positive change and fostering empowerment. It serves as a reminder that our words, just like the explosive energy in a grenade, can resonate loudly and leave a lasting impact. By celebrating the potency of communication, "Shout It Out Loud" encourages everyone, regardless of background or language proficiency, to recognize and embrace the ability to make a difference through the strength of their voices.



### **FAKE BLISS PILL**

The artwork depicts a blue pill with smiling emojis, exposing society's social media addiction. The vibrant blue color symbolizes the allure of a seemingly perfect online world. Beneath the smiling faces, the drawing conveys a deeper message about the disparity between online personas and real-life experiences. In a world where people showcase their best moments online, the artwork questions the authenticity of these displays. It prompts viewers to ponder whether the pursuit of happiness through curated social media content has led us to prioritize virtual personas over genuine human connections. "Fake Bliss Pill" invites us to reconsider the impact of our digital dependencies and the importance of valuing real-life experiences beyond the confines of a screen.



## **NOT FOR SALE**

Not for Sale is a captivating artwork that challenges our obsession with social media validation. It portrays a fallen shopping cart strewn with blue hearts, symbolising the fleeting nature of online approval. The abandoned cart represents the discarded pursuit of validation through superficial measures, leaving viewers to question the underlying meaning behind seeking "Likes" on social media. As the hearts lay scattered, the message becomes apparent: the value of "Likes" is ultimately hollow and purposeless. This artwork urges the viewers to contemplate the authenticity of their digital interactions.

**Recognition:** Winning the Highly Commended Award in the Emerging Artist category at the 2023 UOB Painting of the Year



## **DECEPTIVE FLOOD**

"Deceptive Flood" is a visual commentary on the inundation of digital media, depicted by a drawing of a TV overflowing with copious amounts of water. The artwork addresses the prevalent issues of misinformation, fake news, explicit content, and provocations that have permeated the digital landscape, subtly illustrating the brainwashing effect on individuals. In a world where people yearn for beliefs, the piece acknowledges the contemporary phenomenon wherein individuals, in their quest for meaning, are susceptible to embracing anything presented to them through digital platforms. The artwork prompts reflection on the challenges posed by the overwhelming and often deceptive nature of information in the media, urging viewers to be discerning consumers in a world where belief systems can be easily shaped by the content they encounter.

# NEWS FETISHISM AND THE HEGEMONY OF FORMS



## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a profound development has taken place when it comes to media, especially regarding internet, social media and smartphones. In this context, the nature of media is crucial. Typical conceptions call attention to the fact that media have to do with technology, institutions and communication. Media theory accordingly is about technologies such as television and the internet, institutions related to these as for instance New York Times, CNN and Twitter, and it is concerned with the communication that is facilitated through these institutions and technologies, such as news, analyses, films, television programs and tweets. This view of the media predominates even in critical media theory, which usually analyzes the actual content, the ownership relations of the media institutions as well as the various communicative frameworks in a critical light.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1994) thus criticized the idea that media are democratic forums with equal opportunities for all. In opposition to this idea, they developed a theory of the media as settings for capitalist and elitist propaganda. The messages produced in the media spring from economic and political conditions characterized by a radical bias in favor of commercial interests and the power elite. The role of critical media theory is thus to promote progressive ideas and to uncover the lies of the Establishment.



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Furthermore, it is seen as important to take control of the means of production of the media in order to promote equality and democracy. From the end of the 1960s, there has been a range of examples of this type of media criticism concerned with critique of dominant media institutions and creation of alternative media channels to balance or finally replace the capitalist and elitist media. This type of media criticism is characterized by the way that media are seen as neutral platforms for communication, which can be used for different purposes and thus ideally should be used with the aim of overthrowing the prevailing order.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri for instance perceives the new media in this way. They argue that “computer algorithms employed by giant corporations like Google and Facebook exact a kind of violence on all users through the expropriation of intelligence and social connection” and add that “we can take hold of those weapons and neutralize them or, better, set their operation towards new goals or, better still, make them common and thus open to general use. Biopolitical weapons, such as

digital algorithms, might in fact be the most important focus of contemporary struggle” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 273).

The central characteristic of media criticism is that the media are mainly analyzed with a focus on their *content*, and, furthermore, they are understood as *secondary* to their economic and political context. This theoretical account should however be turned on its head in light of the exceptional media revolution in recent decades. Media today are primarily characterized by the fact that form overshadows content, it is the specific *forms* of media today that needs to be analyzed. At the same time, media are *primary* in relation to economy and politics, which can actually today be understood as mainly media (Nielsen 2016).

## POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA

Following Marshall McLuhan’s well-known statement, *the medium is the message*; we get a different point of departure for media criticism. This statement constitutes a radically different approach to media and media criticism, which

has become still more relevant. It implies a focus on form and the specific media domain, which has economic and political dimensions as well.

That the medium is the message means that its form is more important than its content. Form should be understood as abstract and general, while content is concrete and particular.

That the medium is the message furthermore implies a dynamic, where the importance of the form accelerates, which entails a generalization of the form at the expense of concrete relations and particular events. The medium tends to become self-referential and depleted of meaning from the outside.

In this perspective, media are thus not mainly technologies, institutions or communication. The latter certainly are part of the general media domain, but what is at the center of the analysis is something quite different, namely that media are understood as specific *social tendencies* that marks the relation between form and content. More than anything else, the spreading of media constitutes a develop-

ment, where specific social forms become prevalent at the expense of the formation of ideas, empirical processes and concrete actions by the agents involved.

From this perspective, capitalism can be seen as the first mass media and Karl Marx as the first media critic (Baudrillard 1988, 22–3; Baudrillard 1999, 67). Marx (1977, 43) identified capitalism with a huge accumulation of commodities, and "its unit being a single commodity". The bourgeois economists focused on the content of commodities as the basis for satisfying human needs, but Marx shifts focus to their form: the commodity form. From where does this mysterious nature of the commodity form come, he asks rhetorically, and answers: "Clearly, from this form itself" (Marx 1977, 76). The commodity form brings with it a fetishization; In other words commodities seem as if they are "independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race" (Marx 1977, 77). This form rises from the capitalist mode of production, where exchange takes place through competition in markets, including the labor market,

where the commodity labor power is bought and sold.

Marx' theory of commodity fetishism can be understood as a critical theory about capitalist production, in which we see exactly the displacement from content to form and the same change in social tendency as caused by medialization. Marx' theory can accordingly be interpreted as a critique of the medialization of production in capitalism: The commodity is the message.

The commodity being the message means that the form of commodity, i.e. the capitalist mode of production and the logic of the market, governs people's specific relations, creative powers and concrete life. Economic life is organized in a way that limits people's scope of action. Over time, this tendency increasingly manifests itself, as the form of commodity diffuses together with the

expansion of capitalism. Economic growth intensifies medialization. The meaning of capitalism is capitalism. Hence, human beings and nature suffer.

In light of the economic development in the 20th century, one can offer a complementary critique of the medialization of consumption. With the development of consumer society, production and the wage earners no longer have the special status they had in the 19th century. Fetishism now also includes consumption and the consumer.

Jean Baudrillard (1981, 171) emphasizes that "consumption goods also constitute a mass medium". In consumer society we see that "just as needs, feelings, culture, knowledge — in short, all the properly human faculties — are integrated as commodities into the order of production, and take on material form as productive forces so that they can be sold, so likewise all desires, projects and demands, all passions and all relationships, are now abstracted (or materialized) as signs and as objects to be bought and consumed" (Baudrillard 2005a, 219). Only in consumer



**ECONOMIC LIFE IS ORGANIZED IN A WAY THAT LIMITS PEOPLE'S SCOPE OF ACTION.**

society is fetishism fully manifested. It is crucial that utility "is a fetishized social relation" in the same way as capitalist commodity production, and it "is the two fetishizations " together "that constitute commodity fetishism" (Baudrillard 1981, 131).

With the rise of consumer society capitalism is more deeply embodied. It is then not only through production that we are governed by the commodity form, but also as consumers: through experiences of happiness and desire, through realization of different 'projects' as consumers and through the general experience of ourselves as not only wage earners, but essentially as creatures with infinite desires that can only be satisfied through the consumption of commodities.

Through the development of capitalism and later the consumer society economic life thus becomes medialized to such a degree that our two central economic identities, as wage earners and consumers, are glued onto the form of commodity and growth mentality. Form outweighs the specific content, which here means our multiple desires and various identities as human beings in concrete con-

texts. Furthermore, medialization expands from not only production onto consumption, but also more generally through economic growth, which means that people work and consume more.

With the branding of consumption and work in the last decades, we now live in an enchanted and seductive economic universe that covers everything from our most intimate feelings and most ardent political passions to our global reality and future prospects.

Economic medialization has become all-encompassing. There are no boundaries — no absolute free spaces or external values. We can no longer clearly and unequivocally identify anything that is not a part of the dynamic capitalist system. There are no longer categorical differences in economic life, but only "a play of degrees and intensities, of hybridity and artificiality" as Hardt and Negri (2000, 188) put it.

## THE NEWS FORM

Medialization of the economy has unfolded parallel with the spreading of what is usually meant by

media, i.e. texts, newspapers, radio etc. Through most of history, up until a few years ago, the economic medium has, however, overshadowed the general media domain. Nevertheless, in the last 40 years a real revolution has taken place in the media domain, with numerous television channels, internet, social media and smartphones, which is comparable with the transition to a capitalist economy. Initially the printed media were universal, but later electronic and visual media also entered the picture. A radical transformation, however, takes place with the emergence of digital media, which are now paradigmatic even in the sense that they affect the entire media domain through digitalization of printed, electronic and visual media as well.

Commodities are to the economy what news is to the digital media. News is the form that overshadows the content and structures the entire media domain.

The crucial factor is that news are related to events that have taken place just now, or are taking place in this very moment. Anniversaries of 'big events', for instance the 50 years anniversary of the

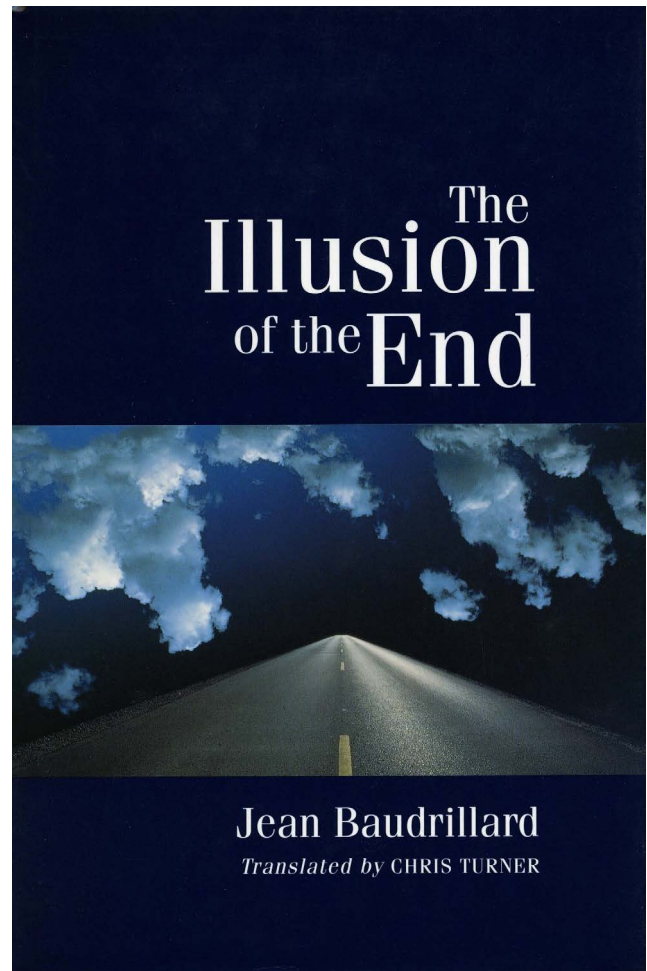
events in 1968 in May 2018 likewise have news value. The news form is abstract and general like the commodity form. News coverage levels out everything and destroys differences.

News is nothing new. But when the medium becomes the message in the digital media, news becomes the predominant form; a form that the media in general are guided by and simultaneously refine. What characterizes this type of medialization thus is that the news form overshadows the content and influences the entire media domain. A generalization of the news form takes place at the expense of the events and social conditions, which the news is supposed to be about. Ultimately, news becomes a self-generating form that reproduces itself without reference to external conditions. News closes in on itself. Commodity fetishism is then supplemented with news fetishism and a hegemony of form arises.

The news form influences society and implies radical displacements in the way, in which society works and develops. This is both an independent media logic and

a dimension of an entangled and progressing general medialization of social life. Capitalism implies that the commodity form is established as the dominant structural form and the commodity form expands through growth, that means the production of still more commodities at an ever increasing speed; an exponential logic. The news form imitates growth in its own dynamics, but more accurately, it is characterized by *intensification* and *virtualization*.

Today news is the primary media form, and social development is written in the language of mass information and the news form. What characterizes consumer society, according to Baudrillard, "is the *universality of the news item* [...] in mass communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same [...] form of the news item" (1998, 33). Newsworthiness is not just one category among others, but "the cardinal category" (1998, 34, bold in the original) and "we shall never get back to pre-news and pre-media history" (Baudrillard 1994, 6).



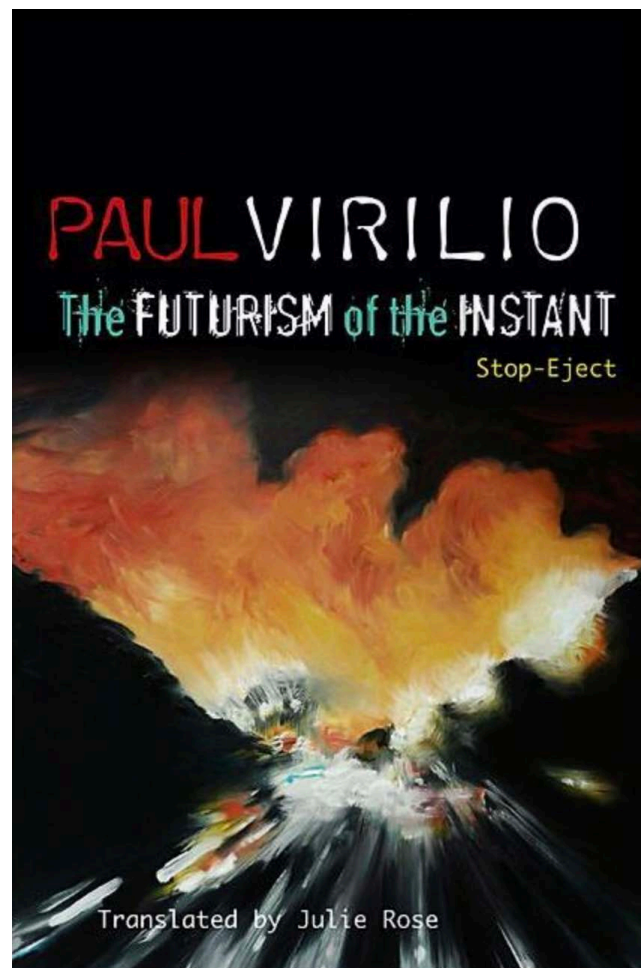
The intensification of the news form has especially occurred through the emergence of news in real time. News in real time is a phenomenon that originates from 24 hours news channels like CNN. On these channels, news is broadcasted 24 hours a day, every day of the year. News in real time allegedly brings the viewer closer to the events, but actually, it changes time itself and the experience of reality in our societies. There is a fundamental difference

between historical time and real time. In real time, what happens is that, paradoxically, "objective reality disappears. And not just the reality of the present event, but also that of past and future events. [...] Real time is a kind of black hole into which nothing penetrates without losing its substance" (Baudrillard 2002, 108). It is the very ties to the historical content and the relation to reality that are severed when the news form is performing in real time.

We thus see an intensification of the loss of content entailed by medialization, when news coverage takes place in real time; it affects not only the events covered in the news, but also reality itself and the historical perception of time, which tends to be lost forever, because "at bottom, *nothing takes place in real time*" (Baudrillard 1994, 90). News overwrites the past, the future and present events as linkages in a historical sequence.



**REAL TIME IS A KIND OF BLACK HOLE INTO WHICH NOTHING PENETRATES WITHOUT LOSING ITS SUBSTANCE**



The intensification of the news form impacts people's perception of time and reality and the course of events. This happens to such a degree that events, which are our frame of reference for historicity and reality, fade away. In the 20th century, with its major crisis, struggles and conflicts, there was a sense of a future. Today we no longer have a future — we are temporally located *after the future*, as Franco 'bifo' Berardi (2011) phrases it. And as Paul Virilio points out,

that has general consequences:

“If we have long lost the depth of time of the past and of long durations, this ‘post-historic’ wreck actually not only invalidates the future, the depth of field of rising generations. It also invalidates the present, the present tense of an ‘event-based history’” (2010, 59).

News fetishism hollows out time and reality. There are fewer events, they lose their epochal force and their relation to reality disappears. Instead of events, what we experience to an increasing extent and intensity in the media are what Baudrillard refer to as *non-events*. This is something entirely different.

It is characteristic of events that they “break [...] with all previous causality” (Baudrillard 2008, 60), while non-events take place in another dimension, in a “realm of perpetual change, of a ceaseless updating, of an incessant succession in real time” (Baudrillard 2005b, 122). Ultimately, the news is the event, because as soon “as they are both involved in and involved by the course of phenomena, it is the news media that are the event. It is the event of news coverage

that substitutes itself for the coverage of the event” (Baudrillard 2005b, 133).

News in real time and non-events are intensified forms of news that involve an increasing element of media-generated unreality, but which nevertheless refer to real phenomena or provide a particular perspective on elements of reality.

## PROLIFERATION OF NON-NEWS

In its most advanced and paradoxical form news becomes *non-news*. The flow of news refers in this case to the virtual and non-verifiable, to the empty void of facts. It is news as pure form, free flowing news particles, stripped of content. Non-news has many forms and they occupy a growing part of the media. While non-events create a situation with an abyss of information, non-news entails a constantly increased noise level.

We experience it for instance as an emerging layer of analyses and commentaries, especially on top of economic and political news, where focus is on future and/or unofficial states of affairs. In the



field of economy, economic forecasts are widespread: about future growth, inflation rates, unemployment, oil prices, etc. These are discussed in the same way as actual economic facts in the media, even though they are really nothing more than reports from an imaginary and unknown 'future'.

Economists' forecasts are replaced by new forecasts at an increasing pace and such forecasts are presented and discussed as news in the media, even though economists' scenarios for the future virtually never correspond with reality. They are non-news.

Similarly, in the field of politics, opinion polls are presented as political news about current reality, although they consist of statistically manipulated samples from imaginary elections. Such political non-news is then accompanied in abundance by political speculations and comments about political spin and political life behind the facade, which have in common that they are based on non-verifiable analyses of politicians' motives, power struggles and strategies, typically involving the media themselves.

Non-news thus is a further escalation towards media circularity. It is characteristic that commentaries and analyses either concern unofficial circumstances behind the scenes, or, if concerned with future 'facts', that they subsequently are never systematically compared with real news. It appears to be of no relevance if it turns out later that the forecasts, opinion polls and commentaries were wrong or misleading. No consistent correction of non-news and news takes place. Economic forecasts for instance never are corrected by reality. Even after the financial crisis in 2008–9 and the covid-19 crisis in 2020, where economists' forecasts showed themselves catastrophically wrong, new forecasts by the very same economists, using the very same economic models, are considered reliable news in the media. Neither have numerous examples of erroneous opinion polls called political non-news into question. When discrepancies are discussed, which of course occasionally happens, it has no consequences. Such isolated cases are soon after buried under the growing piles of new, uninterrupted non-news. The logic of the news form outweighs everything.

Non-news and non-events originate from the inner logic of the news form, rather than from external conditions — Closer than being there yourself! More up to date than reality! Get the news before the events! — And hence, they accelerate the loss of content in economy and politics.

The news form has an even deeper impact on our lives and activities than the commodity form. There, not our only work, consumption and money become independent forces, but even communication itself and the very exchange of information. News thus has a more profound importance for our identities, relations and opportunities. With news fetishism, loss of content becomes a general social condition in the hegemony of forms.

## CRITICAL THEORY THEN AND NOW

40 years ago, television was the most advanced technical medium and they were big, heavy boxes. Back then, it was still appropriate to develop critical theory with a focus on economic and political content. That is no longer the case.

A broad range of critical theories exist, which based on the critique of political economy identify a societal change within capitalism after the crisis in the 1970s. Common to all of them is that they analyze substantive changes in the economy and politics, such as the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, from welfare state to neoliberalism or from a society of discipline to the society of control, etc. In such analyses, the development of digital media, the news form and informatization either are totally absent or thought to be secondary or indirect, as technological or cultural factors within economic and political processes. Hardt and Negri (2012) are among those, who have come closest to genuinely analyzing the development of media as an independent factor with growing significance. Still, their focus continuously is on analyses of economic and political content.

The relevance, however, of such economic and political analyses of content has diminished, as medialization and the related changes of forms have become increasingly important in the last 40 years. In recent years medialization has become so radical and pervasive that

we have gone beyond a threshold. We are witnessing a process of transformation so epochal that critical theories based on analyses of capitalism in the two preceding centuries concern the past, rather than the present; and the gap between these two is growing right now and will continue to do so in an accelerated pace in the years to come.

The tendency at present is that the news media and general medialization overwrite the commodity form and capitalism. This tendency calls for a reorientation of critical theory; for it holds true for basically every type of critical theory in the last decades that they are rooted in the political and economic dynamics of the 20th century, especially the crisis in the 1970s and its after-effects. The growing problem with these analyses is that they block the view to fundamental system changes in present societal formation. We no longer live in the 20th century and today the crisis in the 1970s belongs to the past, just as much as the crisis in the 1930s. It is a mistake to believe that the 21st century will somehow be a copy of the 20th century, and to believe that the paradigm for

all changes is the period around 1968. The present tendency is that media and form are primary, while political and economic content becomes increasingly secondary. The current digital media revolution is as groundbreaking as the economic revolution 200 years ago, that triggered a transition to capitalism.

Society did not fundamentally change with the spread of television. For that purpose television is too stationary and monological. That is the case, even though a range of different television channels has emerged since the 1980s, including 24 hours channels that are essential to the intensification of the news form. The internet then provides the plurality and interaction necessary for radical medialization. However, not until the mobility of smartphones and the importance of social media in everyday life in the 21st century do the digital media reach such a degree of complexity and continuous interaction that they overwrite the economic medium.

Smartphones make the internet available almost everywhere and to everybody. They can be used on the move, and on social media like Facebook and Instagram, the news

form and the flow of information become an integral part of daily life for the growing number of users. The broad public takes part in the news coverage.

This recent development is not unambiguously good or bad compared to the forms of capitalism in the previous century. The forms dominating our lives today surely are limiting and characterized by structural logics, but they simultaneously provide opportunities and imply an essential openness. One may say that today, paradoxically; life is both more open and more closed than earlier: more open at a subjective and microscopic level, but more closed at an objective and macroscopic level. The pathologies related to the current developments mainly spring from the fact that the mechanisms, which made correction of problematic societal developments possible in the 20th century, no longer work adequately; for they depend on a constant focus on content, which is no longer there and cannot be restored. The decoupled logics and the structural lack of feedback lead to a dynamic at the macro-level, characterized by a pervasive and inevitable decay, as well as social

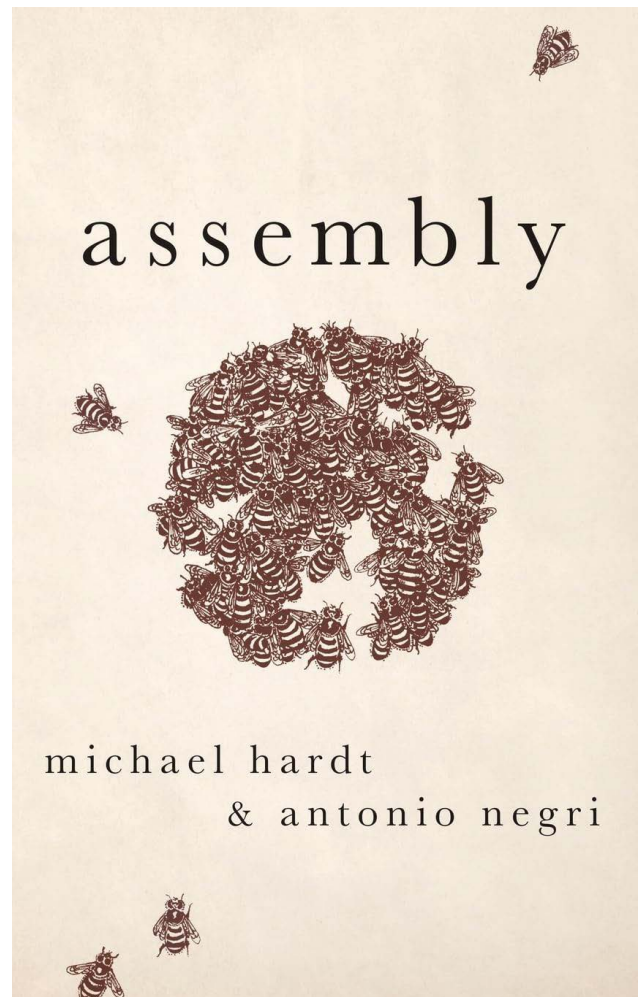
frustration over the hegemony of forms.

Three of the essential figures of thought in critical theory have become obsolete. There is no longer a dialectics between agents and structures. The question of reforms or revolutions is outdated. Moreover, today critique or resistance no longer operates as the driving force of society.

The general model for social dynamics that became popular in critical theory at the end of the 20th century was based on a combination of agents and structures, subjectivism and objectivism. The basic idea is that society develops through an interaction between structures and agents. Structures exist as a precondition for the actions of agents, but do not determine them, as agents may change the structures and develop new structural forms. The important objective for critical theory then is to identify undemocratic and unjust structures, formulate a consistent critique and then urge agents, existing or potential, to change their patterns of behaviour and thus bring down these structures. In this perspective, critical

theory is a critical interlude that reflects and epitomizes society's own continuous self-criticism, in anticipation of progressive changes.

And how are such changes then supposed to happen? The traditional answer still is that changes must take place through reforms, revolution, or a subtle combination of gradual reforms that then eventually culminate in a radical break. As regards the question about agents and structures, in the last decades we have seen a general softening of positions that earlier seemed quite irreconcilable; and, similarly, we do not see such an explosive opposition between reforms and revolution today, possibly because the general expectation of an impending revolution has drastically diminished. Even Hardt and Negri (2017), who are amongst those authors that have theorized and anticipated revolution in recent decades, have lowered their expectations significantly. In the short term, it will primarily be possible to implement reforms; reforms that may then to varying degrees point towards changes that are more fundamental and act as catalysts for systemic divergence.



When these two figures of thought are combined and related to the 20th century in critical theory, a scenario typically emerges of a societal development, where critique and resistance are the driving forces in a process of transformation, but a process without a radical break with capitalism. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), it was especially the critique by the New Left that led to changes of capitalism after 1968. This critique was integrated in the

system and structural changes did take place, but not so fundamentally that the basic economic system was transgressed. The structures of capitalism are flexible, and even radical resistance may lead to reforms through systemic processes. To Hardt and Negri, capitalism at the turn of the century, *Empire*, is a result of a long-lasting struggle against capitalist modernity. *Empire* is a progressive development, despite intensified exploitation and repression, as there is greater potential than ever for global liberation through continued struggle for democracy and common wealth in the 21st century.

Capitalism has changed after the crisis in the 1970s, but according to these authors, and to the main tendency in contemporary critical theory, these changes have not been so profound that the models for social dynamics are fundamentally challenged. The economy and politics of capitalism are still the focus of attention, and critique of repressive social conditions still needs to be articulated for interacting with social agents, who could change the world through practical resistance.

These thought figures, and their combination, sure are appropriate for understanding the development in the previous century, but when they are projected into the future, their relevance is rapidly decreasing. The current media dynamics involves a decoupling of the structural forms from the agents' actions and their content, a virtual detachment that has repercussions on society forming a smooth kind of governance.

## CRITIQUE AND RESISTANCE TODAY

The primacy of structural forms and their interconnectedness today mean that the dialectics between agents and structures has collapsed. The present hegemony of forms turns in on itself and is increasingly unsusceptible. Simultaneously, the actions and meanings of agents become depleted, so that they increasingly become structurally insignificant. This is both an extreme objectivism and an extreme subjectivism, having its origin in the media. From the agents' perspective, the media are plastic and amorphous. The agents may be ever so critical and put up resistance, but it is like throwing

a stone into a lake: Depending on the size of the stone, there will be a greater or lesser splash and some ripples spread in the water, but shortly after the surface of the lake will be completely unaffected by the occurrence. The hegemony of forms is similar to this smooth surface.

Individual agents and small groups do have a wide degree of freedom, more than ever before, and they can institute significant changes at the micro-level, such as the formation of activist groups or eco-villages, but at the macro-level, the basis for fundamental structural changes is fading away. There is lots of discontent and resistance nowadays, and that will still be the case in the 'future', but not the kind that leads to revolution. Today we see no common understanding of a better institutional order and no one to bring it into existence. There is no deep and collective understanding that a better kind of society could exist — no common vision or utopia. In this respect, society is entirely postmodern (Lyotard 2001) and there is no way back to capitalist modernity (Baudrillard 1994, 35–6).

Nor will the kind of reform, we experienced in the 20th century, be likely in the 'future'. That would require a web of progressive institutions to implement the reforms, but the institutional order in the media age is characterized by degeneration and we cannot expect that new progressive institutions will emerge on the same scale as in the previous century. We see no signs that new institutions or identities like the workers movement, The Left or the welfare state will appear on the scene in the 21st century. What we experience at present is rather a process of institutional inertia in a social vacuum — and the institutional and ecological decay seems to continue. Critique and resistance with enough strength to progressively transform the content of society at the macro-level are conspicuously absent — and that has increasingly been the case since the 1980s corresponding with the ongoing media revolution.

The scenario of critique and resistance described in critical theory has barely changed in the last 200 years. Critique and resistance are seen as articulate and systematic protest. It can be theoretical,

practical or both. It is loud and extrovert — it focuses on particular events and it usually assumes the form of movements that express anti-systemic or counter-hegemonic demands on behalf of specific groups or more general parts of the populace. The classical example is the workers movement and Marxism. Later we witnessed the Frankfurt School and the connection between these theorists and the new social movements in the 1960s and afterwards.

The recent decades have then again brought news such as the globalization movement, internet activism and the climate movement that are discussed and reflected on by current critical theorist such as Naomi Klein. However, such traditional critique and resistance is entirely overshadowed by the predominant media dynamics in this century.

Neither critical theory nor the social movements of today attract news attention for more than a short time and thus cannot achieve lasting societal significance. At first, the workers movement and later a broad spectrum of political parties and new social

movements lead to significant institutional and discursive changes in the 20th century. Society's dominant institutions and identities experienced innovation and development that for a period was sufficient to satisfy a major part of the population and maintain capitalist growth at the same time.

Traditional critique and resistance offer conspicuous inputs to the system that may lead to reforms and mitigate a crisis. Seen from this perspective the globalization movement and the climate movement could have contributed to a new growth model with greater global equality and more climate-friendly work, consumption and technology in the rich part of the world. However, it did not happen, and nor is it likely to do so in the 'future'.

The feedback mechanisms necessary to make society's institutions representative and adaptable no longer function to a sufficient extent. Social movements may temporarily affect the news form but that is the end of it. They are transformed into non-events and non-news instead of being agents of lasting social change.



Thus, rather than taking up the fight and confront power and authorities, today the important thing is to take flight, to evade and move away, to become invisible. This is not a collective endeavor, but it is a telling expression of a mass protest that is neither interactive,

nor making demands, but instead refuses to take part. Such a refusal, which is basically without an explanation, takes very different forms and is never absolute. Nevertheless, it is an effective way of counteracting the hegemony of forms — perhaps the only way.

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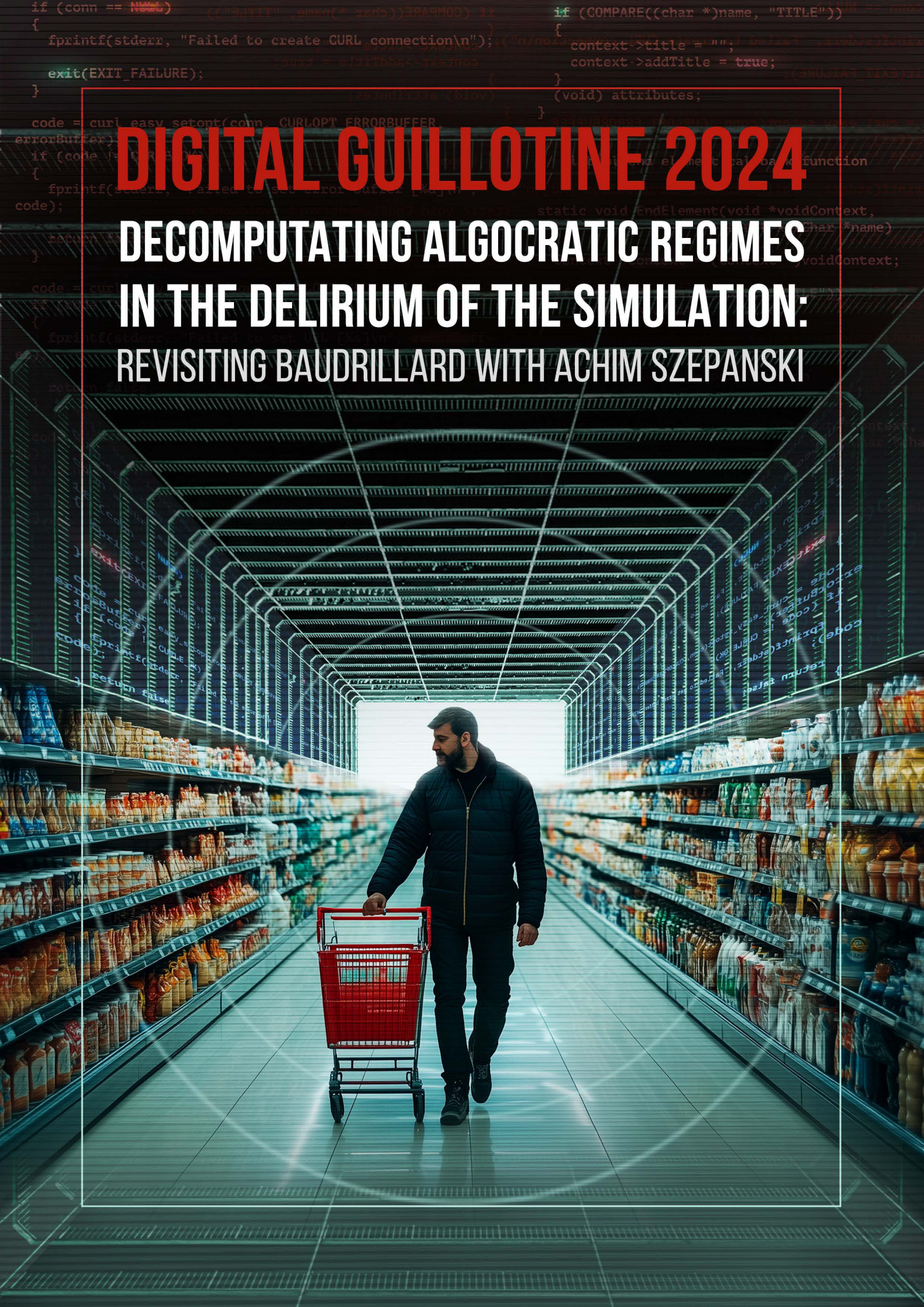
**IT IS WITH THIS SAME IMPERIALISM  
THAT PRESENT-DAY SIMULATORS  
ATTEMPT TO MAKE THE REAL,  
ALL OF THE REAL, COINCIDE  
WITH THEIR MODELS OF SIMULATION.**

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, SIMULACRA AND SIMULATION



# DIGITAL GUILLOTINE 2024

DECOMPUTATING ALGOCRATIC REGIMES  
IN THE DELIRIUM OF THE SIMULATION:  
REVISITING BAUDRILLARD WITH ACHIM SZEPANSKI



**W**e are held captive by a recursive simulacrum; an automated confessional that forces us to produce ourselves and our reality according to the rules of digital logic. The Model is a picture of reality, but not in a representational sense, rather in an *interactive* sense. The simulation is a fiction, but only in so far as reality itself is a fiction. The fiction of the model is laid against the fiction of reality straight along the path where in a parallel fashion, the rational of the model is mapped onto the rational of reality. Uncertainty, undecidability and incompleteness act as catalysts rather than obstacles to the datafied sublation of human experience. Algorithms are perfectly comfortable with irrationality. A closed system would be much easier to criticize, an algocracy based on pure reason would be easier to overthrow. But an interactive field of governmentalized cybernetic practices that condition and subjectivize us gradually into becoming *Homo Algorismus*, are far more discrete and difficult to resist. Homo Oeconomicus Algorismus marks a new threshold in the Neoliberal experiment with its own regimes of truth, its own apocalyptic narratives and its own utopian promises. Instead of thinking machines, we now have calculating humans. And instead of deciphering creativity, we gradually reduce all creativity to a mere cypher.

*In the Delirium of the Simulation* ('Baudrillard Revisited') Achim Szepanski displays an expert demonstration of how we are being *played* by an interactive digital ideology. Algorithmic



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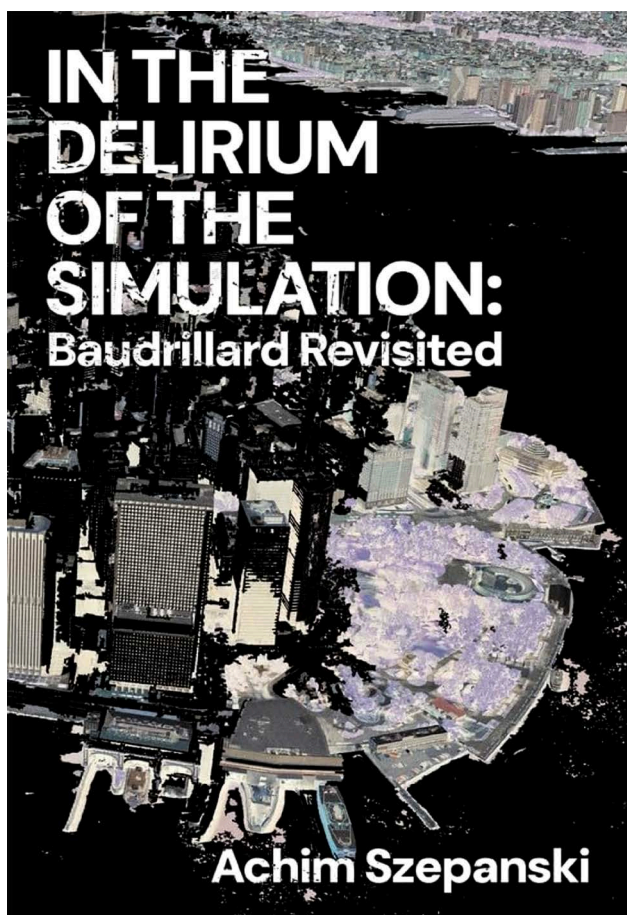
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language games of truth, power and subjectivity crisscross and overlap in silent, violent, dazzling and seductive ways. A kind of gaming ontology orchestrates Szepanski's work, where the world keeps playing (with) us in its refusal to answer in a straightforward "Yes" or "No" to the questions posed by modern Techno-Science. And it is the double-bind of an algorithmic regime that refuses to play the Game of the World (Axe-

los, 2023) — "either nature obeys, or we will force it to obey!" — that keeps us trapped inside the mainstream of mall music and commodified living. The regime chooses to play us instead by forcing human subjectivity into its reductive, binary, digital paradigm. Facilitating the annihilation of human subjectivity by rendering it entirely computational.

With the advent of Quantum Mechanics, we will soon be facing the politics of quantum algorithms or "quantum governmentality". QAs are non-Turing *hypercomputational* systems that operate in non-binary form beyond 1's and 0's. The quantum world is fundamentally counterintuitive to the human observer, things refuse to unfold in time and they resist spatial localization. Even more bizarre however, is the fact that some major thinkers in the field, (Palomaki, Aerts, Görnitz etc.) as cited by Szepanski (2024), believe that even macroscopic systems can become entangled and exhibit quantum mechanical behaviour. The real question, according to Szepanski, is not "what's wrong with quantum mechanics?", but in fact, what has been done to the human observer



The Delirium of the Simulation:  
Baudrillard Revisited by Achim Szepanski

in face of the modern epistemic regime? The question that really needs to be posed is “what is wrong with classical physics and common sense?” What is wrong with the subject?

“For Baudrillard, the fact that we cannot simultaneously determine the speed and position of a particle is part of the illusion of the object and its eternal play” (Szepanski 2024: 186). We are being played — hard; by the object. The object dominates, decentering the subject and introducing ambiguity into the system. Baudrillardian objects are anxiety-inducing features of the world that refuse to be assimilated into rigorous formal conceptual apparatuses. Like Borge’s *Lottery in the Babylon* (Borge, 2018), what seemed a compartmentalized, locally domesticated occurrence of a chance event, has

infiltrated the entirety of the social fabric, introducing an element of randomness at every moment. The quantum experiment testifies to the counterfeit nature of the subject-object dichotomy. “*This raises the question of whether the concepts of subject and object can still be used at all in quantum theory*” (Szepanski, 2024: 187) — or outside of it, for that matter.

The illusiveness of the quantum object offers some savory food for thought. Quantum entities are essentially series of relations, relations of relations; functions with placeholders unoccupied by arguments, functions whose variables are always functions in turn. A *transclassical* logic, which goes beyond the law of identity, excluded middle and non-contradiction is required to deal with these paradoxes; a “transformal” system for computing liminal spaces and predicting non-entity quasi-behaviour. Objects are fundamentally processes, or *looping events*, that is, hybrid formations that exhibit relative levels of stability. Objects don’t exist; only games. Strictly speaking, there are no objects in the universe, only processes and states of affairs.



**FOR BAUDRILLARD, THE FACT THAT WE CANNOT SIMULTANEOUSLY DETERMINE THE SPEED AND POSITION OF A PARTICLE IS PART OF THE ILLUSION OF THE OBJECT AND ITS ETERNAL PLAY**

The digital world has opened a new avenue of *digital objects*. The virtual cybernetic field is characterized by complete hyper-functional inter-substitutability of each and every entity within the program. An ontological ascension has taken place where things are no longer constrained by the laws of physics, the simulation is a purely (post)logical world. Insofar as there's enough computational power, silicon, precious metals and of course, the third world colonies where human labor is exploited and almost directly fed into the cybernetic system, the digital heavens of the Western hemisphere will remain alive and operational. For as long as genocide is being outsourced and actively produced in one part of the globe, biopolitical heavens will flourish in another. Imperialism has finally found a way to efficiently activate negentropic processes by accelerating entropic processes elsewhere. Coincidentally, AI and Machine Learning systems are here again, actively "recruited" to model warfare and minimize risk in the battlefield. An endless feedback loop of international, post-industrial economic colonialism and cyberwarfare.

Simulations do not mirror, nor do they represent the "real" world. There was never a real world to begin with. The world is always a product, it is always a construct (be it social or scientific). The simulation is a *production* of reality. What distinguishes the cybernetic *dispositif* is only the *way in which* new simulations constitute the contemporary regime. The speed of production, and the automation of world-building practices. The autonomy and independence of the digital production of equivalences, exchangeable sign-systems and abstract power-knowledge matrices that no longer have to answer to the world through the object-concept relation (Frege, 1951). This is what Szepanski refers to as "*the divine referentiality of the images*" (2024: 46). The picture no longer has anything in common with what it pictures (Wittgenstein et al., 2001), there is nothing to compare the picture with, no measure to set reality against, the world has no substance.

Baudrillard offers us a digital guillotine or an anti-cybernetic strategy of resistance we can use to *de-computate* the head(s) of the royal

simulacrum. Remaining grounded is no longer an option, there is no reality we could refer to in order to prevent or reverse the world's insertion into the computational episteme. The standing reserve of reality has been exhausted, like the earth's biosphere, there is practically nothing to go back to, an ecological nostalgia holds little promise. We need a novel strategy of deterritorializations. *"Reality and truth emanate from the codes and models of hyperreality. Identities and differences are modulated according to the model and multiply into infinity. In hyperreality, any distinction between the real and the imaginary is abolished, only leaving room for the orbital return of models, and the simulated generation of distinction and difference"* (Szepanski, 2024: 48). We no longer have the reality at our disposal, all we have are *"reality effects"* as Szepanski states, we are within a turbulence of waves and affects, we are constantly being modelled and digitized through the homogenous counterfeit multiplicity of algorithmic visibilities.

The first line of attack, a trajectory for flanking the computational paradigm, comes from within

the real itself. The *Primary Real*, as Szepanski emphasizes, a much neglected and perhaps opportunistically ignored aspect of Baudrillard's theory, points to the inherent failure of any attempt to render reality entirely transparent through codes. Very similar to Foucault's notion of resistance, the primary real presents a structural residue that always falls outside the system. An element of the signified that remains opaque to the best attempts at cybernetic translation. The first decomputational tactic is therefore the recognition of fundamental (no matter how small) incomputability at the heart of every digital relation. A limit. *"Baudrillard tries to use the (primary) real to think what remains removed from simulation or escapes from it and what does not simply disappear or dissolve"* (Szepanski, 2024: 59). The real never disappears, but it can be turned into an infinitesimal, one that nonetheless continues to haunt the system as a noumenon.

According to Baudrillard via Szepanski, Simulation is the discursive apparatus of Capital par excellence. The last word, so to speak, in neoliberal governmentality and in the conduct of conducts. An anon-



ymous force used for the complete leveling and homogenization of lifestyles, a deployment of false difference and a tyrannical universalism that privileges consumption/enjoyment over creativity/happiness. *“The calculability inherent in code liquefies the solid according to the requirements of capital. In the informatic flow, the computer’s close connection with the erasure of territory from the map and with the neoindustrial project of financialised globalisation is reflected in the derealisation of traditional forms of space and time”* (Szepanski, 2024: 61). Place is replaced with space, persons; with avatars and relationships are commodified into transactions. The human life-world becomes colonized through mathematical optimization.

What does consumption have to do with mathematics, or at least the superficial affectivity of calculation? Everything. The notion of a gapless series (Wittgenstein, 1965) orchestrates the computational regime; fascist greed is located at the centre of the notion. Consumerism is a hysterical attempt to silence the silence of nothingness, an attempt to escape annihilation by making the

brain into an algorithm of non-stop enjoyment. Junk after junk, an uninterrupted sequence of counterfeit experiences; an averaged-out, hypernormalized sensationalism that prevents the subject from confronting her death. Sterilization of the amygdala through stable and on-going excitation. Subjectivity is sectioned off from the possibility of experiencing the full spectrum of human emotion. What do algorithms have to do with consumption then? The monotony of a wannabe spectacle — an affective lobotomy: The Shopping Mall. *“Baudrillard explains that the postmodern subject leads the life of a cat that roams around and feels at home in an indifferent and highly designed domesticity of non-places”* (Szepanski, 2024: 139). The Mall is a spectacular presentation of nothingness, a tightly knit collection of signifiers, false differences and things without content. A noisy silencing of everything meaningful. A full-bloodied non-experience. *“The stupid machines must entertain at all costs, whereby the constant production of entertainment generates disgust on the one hand and the desire for more stupid entertainment on the other”* (Szepanski,



**THE STUPID MACHINES MUST ENTERTAIN AT ALL COSTS, WHEREBY THE CONSTANT PRODUCTION OF ENTERTAINMENT GENERATES DISGUST ON THE ONE HAND AND THE DESIRE FOR MORE STUPID ENTERTAINMENT ON THE OTHER**

2024: 139). Consumerism is a guilt-ridden glorification of procrastination, an evasion of life, meaning, creativity and happiness. Consumerism is what makes subjects into calculating humans, it is what makes the soul — Turing-Machine-Computable.

They say if you eat the same thing every day, no matter what it is, it will at some point begin to taste like shit. This summarizes the feeling of disgust experienced universally by everyone who has the privilege of consumption, the great honor of having one's desire regulated, monitored, managed, policed and channelled. In short: Calculated. Calculation and accounting, the mindless repetition of the same lie at the heart of the regime. When stupid abstractions are considered to make up the

structure of the universe, followed by the attempt to render these mechanical “miracles” tangible and real through industrial automation, what results is exactly the homogenization and therefore the turning of all human experience into faecal matter. The shopping mall is a shit-machine at the heart of the computational episteme. But in order to really enjoy it, consumers must be trained, disciplined and coerced or “nudged” into the right direction. With the emergence of Digital Taylorism in the workplace we have a simultaneous development of “consumption drilling”. We are taught to exchange happiness for pleasure at a very early age.

The object of consumption is not a stand-alone entity, it is placed within a causal nexus and inscribed with very specific instructions. A consumer object has meaning only within the context of a highly coded consumer environment. A highly controlled, panopticonic milieu where the rules for activity are just as specific as the rules of passivity, where incitements are as calculated as the prohibitions. And everything is seen, recorded, labelled, priced, hierarchized and archived. Consumerism is the

militant mobilization of human desire towards state-interest i.e., power, warfare and genocide. It is the means whereby subjectivity is stored as a standing reserve of desire. Baudrillard famously notes how news and media use the same techniques of subjectivation as advertisements. A subject trained to perceive ads will also be trained to consume 'news-events'. The dispositif operates through seduction. The consumer is fooled by the advertisement into thinking she is buying something of value; however, the function of advertisement is anything but communication. The advertisement is used to train the subject into desiring transaction for its own sake. *"In the end, the consumer object or product mutates into garbage for the shopa-*

*holic. The purchased products are then piled up in the cellar or placed in display cabinets because the only thing that counts is the pleasure of the act of buying itself, which in turn is stimulated by advertising"* (Szepanski, 2024: 144). This is the primary mechanism of the apparatus, which trains the subject to love the empty gesture of buying. Transactions are the contemporary equivalent of confession. Transactions function as mobile, automated confessionals of the computational regime. It is important therefore that the subject is trained to love the act of confession, the act of buying. Data is therefore the scripture, and AI — the digital pastoral that governs subjects in the cybernetic monastery that stores desire.

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# BAUDRILLARD

# AND CITY



**T**he process of making law or science started with the rationalist-empiricist synthesis of the 17th century during the Enlightenment (18th century) that replaced tradition and religion after Bacon, who aimed to dominate nature and society with the discourse of “knowledge is power.” According to Baudrillard who had a critical approach to the roots of Enlightenment in the West intersecting with the Baconian approach, Cartesian mathematics, and Newtonian physics, nature in Western thought is nothing but a concept of a dominated essence that is claimed to be replaced and reproduced by science and technology.

“Naturalistic” ideological understanding presents itself in the construction of the city. Nature has been perceived all over the World as a social model since its emergence as a concept resembling décor or a structure model. Everything from a building to a small spoon or a city as a whole has been called an “object” following the emergence of an object-based approach in urban architecture based on the “naturalist” understanding. Asserting that the “naturalist” ideology has gained an objective, universal, and functional meaning in architecture thanks to Bauhaus, Baudrillard states that we are living in a universe where everything carries the qualification of a function and a sign. There is an unsystematic revolution devoid of a unique status based on objects and a rational goal (functionality).



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The world-city that formed against the countryman built cosmopolitanism in place of “home.” Civilization, which is the state of advanced humanity, is an external and artificial state. Those living in such a world-city do not make up a community but a crowd. In this case, they are death following life, rigidity following expansion, the intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-cities following Mother Earth and the spiritual childhood of the Doric and Gothic. Cities are the constructs of civilization, whereas madīnahs are the constructs of ārah. Western cities carry the attributes of civilization, whereas Islamic cities carry the attributes of ārah. While the European city design or Weber’s city has a class “encounter,” there is a corporate structure at the center of the community in the Islamic madīnah “equalizing” the people. The land on which the population is increasing becomes the property of mankind, petrifying over time

into a city. During this process, urbanization, or petrification, is indispensable, and the humans belonging to the city they own become a part of it and are there by being affected by its character. According to Baudrillard, it is not space but time that determines whether an individual belongs to the city. Indeed, it was time and not space that was indicative during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The spirit of the times (zeitgeist) affected and identified the people living during those times. While time identified the people, they in turn determined the madīnah of the time they lived in together with space. In this context, the 19th- and 20th-century-city was the perfection of modern space. It was the space of rationality and of industry, liberalism, and advancement. New architecture created a new community independent of the social, aesthetic, and philosophical accumulation of the 20th century. Modern madīnahs that are generally located at the center of large empires have resulted in a contrast between the madīnah and village, the urban and rural, and the modern and passé. Attempts were made to depict and



**CIVILIZATION, WHICH IS THE STATE OF ADVANCED HUMANITY, IS AN EXTERNAL AND ARTIFICIAL STATE.**

understand these contrasts, paradoxes, and rootlessnesses during the beginning of the 20th century by C. Baudelaire and G. Simmel and towards the end of the century by J. Baudrillard. To observe modern space, Baudelaire uses the *flâneur*, the *citystroller*, a modern person who does not participate in the city but is an ambivalent observer.

The *flâneur* perceives the metropolis as a charming world of dreams, a cradle of modern living culture that is “the center of sparkling night life. The modern man and *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Baudrillard, are different from one another. Baudrillard’s *flâneur* is glued to the seat in front of the TV screen; the leisurely wanderer is strolling no more. Now it is the TV images, advertorials, commodities, and various pleasures that stroll and wander opposite the hypnotized viewer. Baudelaire’s leisurely wanderer has transformed into Baudrillard’s viewer. In his article entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), Simmel presents various snapshots of life in the metropolis. The subject is the modern metropolitan individual with an intensified emotional life subject to rapid and ever-changing internal and external

stimuli. Similar to Simmel, Baudrillard focused on the McDonaldization and Disneyfication of time in his book *Simulations* (1983) and proposed a whole new perspective on modern life in the metropolis with the concept of hyper-reality.

Urban planning of the private sector and its understanding of development, order, and administration has taken the place of the *madīnah* in the feudal order. The city has been built in this framework, as a result of which the elite and middle class that make up urban colonialism emerged. Baudrillard, examines this emerging postmodern city: The urban city is also a neutralized, homogenized space, a space where indifference, the segregation of urban ghettos, and the downgrading of districts, races, and certain age groups are on the increase. In short, it is the cut-up space of distinctive signs. Multiple codes assign a determinate space-time to every act and instant of everyday life. The racial ghettos on the outskirts or in the city center are only the limit expression of this urban configuration: an immense center for marshalling and enclosure where the system reproduces itself not only



economically and spatially, but also in depth by the ramifications of signs and codes, by the symbolic destruction of social relations. The capitalized city is like an entity that is growing every day. People rush to these cities that are constructed on the mind-body duality. In the language of economics, it is almost as if an excessive amount of product/spirit is introduced to the market/society. Cities built by Cartesian thought are populated not only by bodies but also by excessive amounts of information, informatics, communication, and social networks. The city is a location people rush towards as a center of attraction. The city is the location of this increase and “chain reaction” approved by the holistic dictatorship of fashion. The intensive urbanization process of rural areas via rapid acculturation is irrecoverable and unstoppable. The discourses of the city (impulses, desires, stimulations, judgments, eroticization, information, stimulation of advertisements) are as determinant with regard to the fate of the society as is the population density of the city.



## The Mirror of Production

Jean Baudrillard

J. Nouvel, who conducted an interview with Baudrillard stating that it is not possible to prevent the growth of the city and urbanization, claims that the rush towards cities leads to a sort of urban big bang by enabling the making of plans and the placing of rules; hence, ready recipes and architecture have now become futile, indicating that the system becomes absurd as soon as it is



**THE CITY AND ARCHITECTURE WILL CONTINUE THEIR PRESENCE FOR AS LONG AS THERE ARE PEOPLE AND LANDS.**

combined with a structural model. Urbanization has brought about rapid modernization leading to the desertification of the country by dehumanizing villages and rural areas. Speed and growth have resulted in an increase in the number of cities as well as urbanization. The discourses of the city have led to individuals focused on speed and desire and the fast cities built by these individuals. The term fastcities used to define rapidly growing or, in other words, economically booming cities. Reference is made to their growth centered on trade and economy. Such cities characterized by innovation, entrepreneurship or fast economy and spatial growth express the success story of global neo-liberal urbanism.

Asserting that architecture operating by way of a piece of land/territory to take shelter in and to defend will always have a place for itself even when the forms of

civilization change, Baudrillard suggests that architectural acts as sources of pleasure that are in relation with new data will always be present despite the assumption that the city has disappeared both physically and territorially. As proposed by Baudrillard, the city and architecture will continue their presence for as long as there are people and lands. However, the city takes on a different form together with architecture. In this context, Baudrillard indicates that large urban areas developing in an unplanned manner have been captured during the last two decades mostly by artists and the bourgeoisie, who have changed the life and appearance of neighborhoods. According to him, this situation leads to a negative-ironic question: “Now, is this rehabilitation or a mutation?” He suggests that we witness the changes in cities as entities that move in time, which in the end acquire some sort of singularity as well as the erosion of their character.

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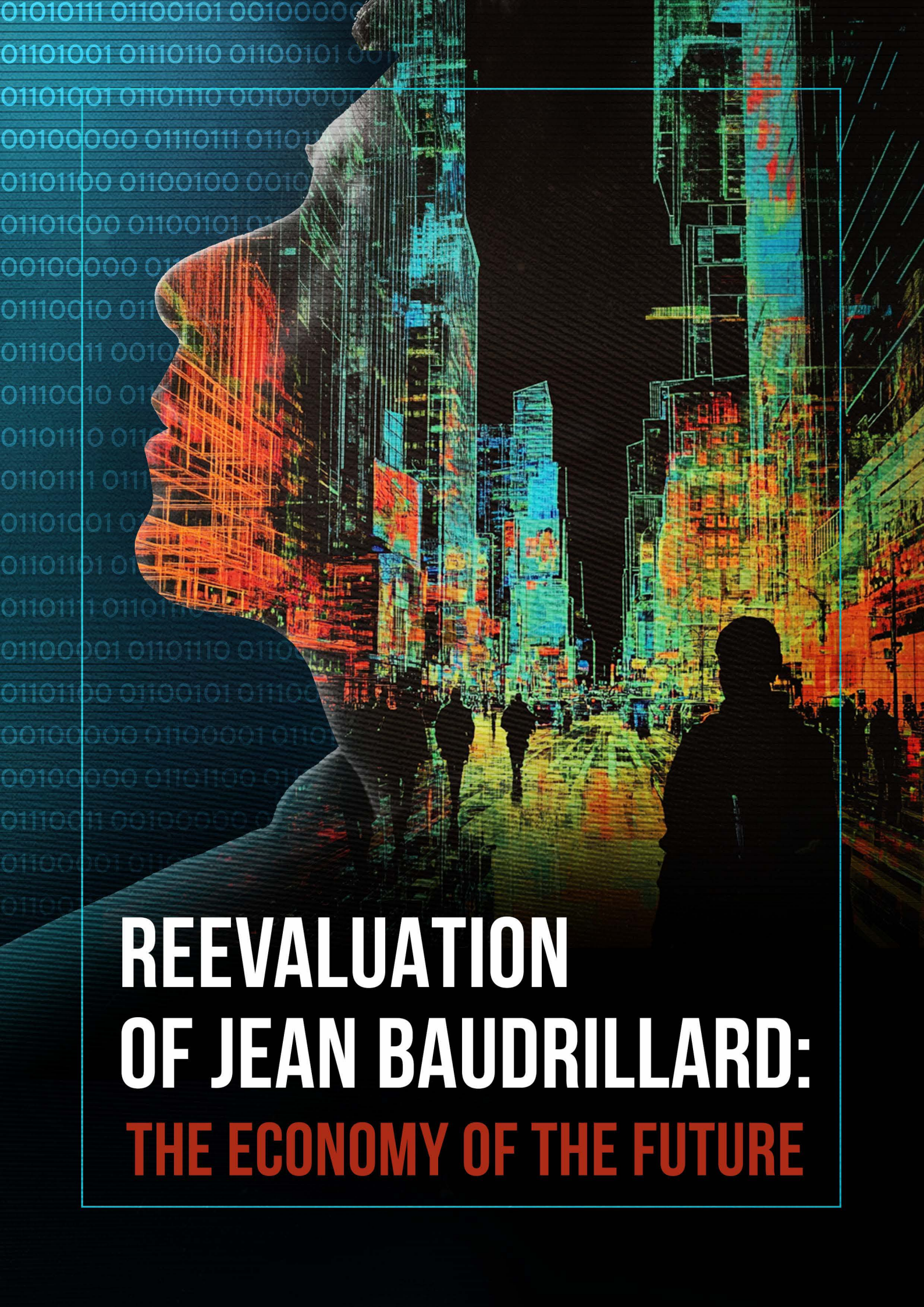
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**REEVALUATION  
OF JEAN BAUDRILLARD:  
THE ECONOMY OF THE FUTURE**

## INTRODUCTION

This article is a part of my book “Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism” that brings into an encompassing framework many cultural, media, and science fiction theory ideas which I have developed in recent years. The framework that unites and gives coherence to the work is an investigation into the concepts of hyper-modernism, hyperreality, and posthumanism. These are three cultural theory concepts of how digital media technologies affect society and the lives of citizens of late capitalism.

In this article, I share my reflections on the reevaluation of Jean Baudrillard’s Media Theory and the Simulacrum, while also exploring selected aspects of the economy of the future.

## SMART CONTRACTS

Macro languages are being developed that will be used by software literate attorneys, and which are halfway between law and code. Henning Diedrich’s *Lexon* is a programming language that anyone can read<sup>1</sup>. It is a breakthrough in computational law and the first language of its kind of a new generation of languages. It moves software code away from being a technical language for programmer specialists and towards increased democratization and intuitive connection to human thought and semantic meaning. *Lexon*

<sup>1</sup> Henning Diedrich, *Lexon: Digital Contracts* (Wildfire Publications, 2019).



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enables the writing of blockchain smart contracts or digital contracts where the text is both legal agreement and self-executing software agent. Diedrich makes a science fictional reference to Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics and points out that Lexon gives you the capability to think almost philosophically along the line of stipulating your own situational ethics directives.

Lexon has specific sentence grammar, vocabulary of keywords, and document structure. It is an outstanding example of natural language processing, human-readability, and the coming together of meaning and automatic computation. It uses abstract syntax trees which outline the syntactic structure of the language's source code. Each node of the tree denotes a construct occurring in the code. The possible applications of smart contracts written with Lexon are as vast as the regions of the legal-social-economic cosmos: contracts, bills of exchange in trade and commerce, governance systems, moral monitoring of AI algorithms, digital asset markets, academic certification, terms of service, financial products, supply

chain logistics, regulations and oversight, data privacy protection, escrow, wills, crowdfunding, and mediated agreements in the post-capitalist sharing economy, to name just a few.

Smart contracts enable decentralized payment processing platforms with builtin and full-fledged trust and reputation systems. In the smart contract, rules and procedures are spelled out in the code and algorithms. Human parties to the contract must comply during execution of the agreement or face penalties which have been agreed upon from the start. The contract is the payment (or the money). It is not something to be separately fulfilled in a "step two." It does not depend on someone doing the separate act of payment. Execution is guaranteed. Money becomes automatically mobile. Intermediaries for financial transactions are no longer needed. The code is decentralized and distributed. It does not run on any specific physical computer. It cannot be stopped or shut down.



**LAW IS A MORAL INSTANCE OF SOCIETY THAT, IN ONE OF ITS CRUCIAL DOMAINS, ENGAGES IN A DETAILED WAY WITH TECHNOLOGY.**

## **BETWEEN LAW AND CODE**

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Laws attempt to restrain criminality as well as to regulate the unethical and exploitative excesses of capitalism. Law is a moral instance of society that, in one of its crucial domains, engages in a detailed way with technology. In their book *Blockchain and the Law: The Rule of Code*, the law, technology and society scholars Primavera De Filippi and Aaron Wright investigate systematically the challenges which the liberal state and regulators face in dealing with the present and future of the autonomous systems brought into existence by the spread of blockchains<sup>2</sup>. These new software technology artefacts threaten to develop and spread beyond the superintendence of humans and their applications of jurisprudence, to become roughly

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<sup>2</sup> Primavera De Filippi and Aaron Wright, *Blockchain and the Law: The Rule of Code* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

the equivalent of the dangerous echo chambers in platform capitalism social media politics, or the dreaded AI Superintelligence takeover of power from humanity. Blockchains might ominously lead to a world of many small niches of private and uncontrollable regulatory frameworks. De Filippi and Wright fear AI autonomy in the bad sense: the decline of morality and the social fabric as code-based systems provide “people with new financial and contractual tools that could replace key societal functions.”<sup>3</sup>

What is perilously appearing on the horizon is the rule of what De Filippi and Wright call *lex cryptographica* — a potentially anarchic (in the bad sense of chaos) unruly regulatory frameworks of lawless (dis)order — blockchain programmers and economic actors operating transnationally and free from oversight. We are menaced by the possible replacement of the rule of law by the rule of code in the organization of economic and social activity. To avoid autonomous systems becoming lawless systems, the opportunities of disinterme-

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; p.5.

diation which blockchains enable must be carefully steered instead of portentously being allowed to run wild according to the mistaken credo that whatever can be done technologically should be done. The unity of law and code advocated by De Filippi and Wright is a perspective related to the unity of morality and code articulated in the present study.

The authors acknowledge that the codification of legal covenants is beneficial. Software code furnishes precision and modularity. Legal agreements are often poorly worded or hampered by bad writing. The increased clarity provided by code could take something of the adversarial tension out of contract litigation and disputes. It could reduce much frustration, misunderstandings, and legal costs. The rigorous symbolic logic of software programming could “decrease contractual ambiguity by turning promises into objectively verifiable technical rules.”<sup>4</sup> The modularity of code could have the advantage of leading to the establishment of libraries of smart contract software components and boilerplates. As

open source, these libraries could be maintained and enhanced by participating communities of legal and ethical experts. The libraries could be transparent to the public.

De Filippi and Wright see the new Internet of blockchains as suspended in a tension between the rule of law and the rule of code. This perspective is understandable since they are experts in the deeply established and important academic field of law. However, the transdisciplinary study of law, society, and technology compellingly calls on us to think more outside the box into the area of the dialogical embedding of ethics and morality into code. The authors do indeed invoke the potential of Decentralized Autonomous Organizations to be effective in influencing social and community norms, “shaping the moral or ethical standards of the community of users and miners supporting a particular blockchain-based network.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; p.81.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; p.209.



## DECENTRALIZED AUTONOMOUS ORGANIZATION

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Bitcoin, Litecoin, other cryptocurrencies, micro-payment systems, tipping, donations, Creative Commons licenses, crowdfunding without a centralized broker, collaborative open-source projects, and other creativity-to-capital conversion mechanisms built on top of the blockchain infrastructure are elements of the Internet of Creators. These emerging phenomena put into circulation new varieties of economic and non-economic value. The hyperlink, interconnectivity, and multimedia features of the World Wide Web Internet belong to a network emphasizing communication. The blockchain — with its principle of distributed transparent data duplicated on many computers — promises to lead to a network emphasizing value. How can one design a network that enables this radical bottom-up democracy and direct expression? Poetics restores symbolic exchange at the heart of language, against economic exchange and the semiotic code. Can a new kind of social relationship be established with blockchain?

The architecture of blockchain introduces advanced computer science concepts of trusted transactions, the public ledger, virtual replication to near infinity of all records and histories, the smart contract, the unification of agreement in principle and execution of the agreement, and the Decentralized Autonomous Organization (DAO). Trust in technology will compensate for the lack of reciprocal human trust that exists in our competitive society. The blockchain is mirrored tens of thousands of times on every computer in the world that participates as a software client in the blockchain of blockchains known as Ethereum (or similar backbone). The blockchain is a different kind of database with a special kind of stored procedure mechanism. By copying everything to everyone, there is ironically no copying (the problem with conventional digital architecture is that everything can be copied). Total validation replaces the centralized control of middlemen like banks who currently profit too much from their institutional guaranteeing of the enforceability of transactions.

The DAO acquires resources, attracts value, carries out transactions, maintains itself, and self-evolves and writes its own new software code. The DAO consists of a set of complex smart contracts where rules and procedures are spelled out in the code and algorithms.

The DAO is not owned or run by humans but rather entirely by smart contracts and algorithms. In his 1986 book *Rights, Persons and Organizations*, Meir Dan-Cohen first proposed the idea of a self-owning company<sup>6</sup>. The DAO finances its own operations through a cryptocurrency account. It sells tokens of investment as a sustainable economic entity to human speculators and contributors. No one directly controls the behavior of the DAO. Examples of Decentralized Autonomous Organizations would be Uber-like ride-sharing or Airbnb-like vacation rental marketplace applications in the post-capitalist sharing economy.

Code-based systems of algorithmic governance can be the basis

for realizing the old left-anarchist dream of a post-scarcity economy where logistics are off-loaded away from the control of power-seeking humans to moral and trusted posthuman entities and processes organized from the bottom up. Opportunities for human greed and corruption will be removed. Humans still play a vital role in their creation of software and interactions with the DAO.

### **BETWEEN CORPORATE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS AND THE RIGHTS OF USERS**

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We live in a capitalist society where almost everything that is produced is privately owned by the individual or corporate entity who or which produced it. Yet this capitalist dimension is but one instance of our socio-cultural existence that is supposedly offset by the alleged democratic dimension of the so-called public sphere. If the public sphere is no longer a valid concept nor a vibrant viable reality, then we must rethink how we can regulate the excesses of capitalism. We also live in a democratic society where it is said that all citizens have certain universal and inalienable rights to

<sup>6</sup> Meir Dan-Cohen, *Rights, Persons, and Organizations: A Legal Theory for Bureaucratic Society* (Quid Pro LLC, 2016).

certain goods, services, and experiences. Democratic rights extend beyond political and social rights to cultural rights. Democracy extends to culture. Yet this is also but one instance which is supposedly offset by the intellectual property rights of those who have produced the cultural artefacts and environments which consumers or users partake in. There is a continuous tension between these two aspects of cultural existence, a dialectical tension between capitalism and democracy that often goes unrecognized.

In the sixth century, St. Columba, an Irish Gaelic missionary and one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland, transcribed by hand a copy of a book loaned to him by Saint Finian of Moville, a Christian missionary. The copy was preserved as the Cathach of St. Columba. It is more

famous than the original. The dispute over the ownership rights of the copied manuscript led eventually to the Battle of Cul Dreimhne in 561, where three thousand people were killed. The disagreement led to the establishment of the intellectual copyright principle, laid down by the High King of Ireland acting as arbitrator: “To every cow belongs its calf; to every book its copy.” A copy of an intellectual production belongs to the owner of the original.

The argument about intellectual property rights needs to move beyond the question of originals and copies to the question of what is cultural citizenship? The argument needs to move on to the context of how the cultural artefact becomes part of the lives of the cultural citizens of a democratic society, who have certain rights over their own edification and the enjoyment of their own lives. The private producers of cultural artefacts know that the consumer sphere for which they are producing is a cultural sphere. This cultural sphere is a democratic sphere. According to democratic principles, the capitalist producers must make certain compromises with the democratic



**THE ARGUMENT ABOUT INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS NEEDS TO MOVE BEYOND THE QUESTION OF ORIGINALS AND COPIES TO THE QUESTION OF WHAT IS CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP?**

consumers. Just as, according to capitalist principles, the consumers make compromises with the producers. The producers of cultural artefacts have the right to reap the monetary benefits from what they have produced. These cultural artefacts are part of a democratic culture dedicated to the development of the personalities of individuals.

### **FICTION AND POWER IN POSTMODERNISM**

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The aspect of postmodernism that interests me the most is the turn towards the recognition of the crucial role that narratives and fictions play in the exercise of power and control in the media-technological society. An appreciation of fiction is crucial for “future design research.” To anticipate the future, we need knowledge of the fictional dimension of “the social.” The more we understand about the present, the more we can foresee aspects of the future. If we exclude fiction, then what we call “reality” is a restricted idea of what is going on. I will briefly consider the idea in postmodern media theory of power and control exercised via narratives and fictions in Castoriadis,

Haraway, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Deleuze.

### **CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS, THE IMAGINARY INSTITUTION OF SOCIETY**

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In the final section of his 1973 book *The Mirror of Production*, entitled “The Radicality of Utopia,” Baudrillard exhibits the anarchist or “autonomist” dimension of his thought, and comments on the student uprising of May-June 1968 in France<sup>7</sup>. He quotes extensively from Paul Cardan, a pseudonym of the eminent Greek political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (who lived in Paris for a long time), whose “libertarian socialist” texts associated with the ex-Trotskyist *Socialisme ou Barbarie* intellectual group of the 1950s were a major influence on the 1968 student movement at Nanterre and the Sorbonne<sup>8</sup>.

In 1975, Castoriadis published his major work *The Imaginary Institution of Society*<sup>9</sup>. Writing against

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (trans. Mark Poster) (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, et. al. *Socialisme ou Barbarie: An Anthology* (ERIS, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (trans. Kathleen Blamey) (Polity, 1987).

both Marxist and sociological-functional interpretations of social history, Castoriadis develops a theory of human societies based on granting an elevated ontological status to “the imagination.” His key concepts are the “radical imagination” or “radical imaginary” of the psyche of the individual and the “imaginary of society” which is the collective version of this “imaginary,” and which inaugurates the social institutions of any given historical society. Operating incisively

without any dualism between individual and society, Castoriadis sees both the human psyche and social-imaginary significations as creative, inventive, flexible, and in the flow of continuous changes. Images and symbolism play decisive roles in shaping the distinct historical formation of specific societies. The imaginary and “the real” are always entangled. Radical imagination precedes any separation between real and fiction. Its “world of significations” is what enables a “reality” to form. This “reality” tilts either towards anti-power on the spectrum of power and control in a society of conscious autonomy, or towards power in a society in which institutions are unconsciously autonomous with respect to the citizenry.

There is an uninterrupted circular and reciprocal relationship between the social institution and the individual. The social imaginary engenders the social institution, which, in turn, shapes the psyche of the individual person. Society establishes a “magma” or world of significations, which the individual then internalizes. The atomized selfauthoring individual is a myth. Castoriadis writes:

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## *The Imaginary Institution of Society*

Cornelius  
Castoriadis

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Every society up to now has attempted to give an answer to a few fundamental questions: Who are we as a collective? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking? Society must define its “identity,” its articulation, its world, its relations to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires. Without the “answer” to these “questions”, without these “definitions,” there can be no human world, no society, no culture — for everything would be an undifferentiated chaos. The role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither “reality,” nor “rationality” can provide<sup>10</sup>.

But what is Castoriadis’ position on postmodern society? Is the degree of “fictionalizing” increased in the post-Second World War consumer and media culture, or do all human societies have an equal degree of fictionalization? Castoriadis is known as the “philosopher of autonomy.” He theorizes how

societies can become more directly democratic, self-managed, egalitarian, and cognizant of their own “imaginary” institution, which can come under their conscious control and choices against rampant power relations. Autonomy refers to the condition of “self-institution” whereby an individual or a society creates its own laws in full self-awareness. Although every society apparently forges its own institutions, only autonomous societies view themselves as the innate source of justice. Most societies stagnate in the condition of self-alienation or heteronomy. In contemporary capitalism, imaginary significations are more dominant than in any previous society. This is an economy that purports to be highly rational yet is perpetually engaged in manufacturing the artificial “needs” of consumers and the built-in obsolescence of consumer goods. Its claim to rationality resides in its insistence that wellbeing is materially measurable and subject to permanent upgrade through the progress of science and technology. It is an economy stuck on the treadmill of having to endlessly satisfy the new “needs” that it itself has generated. In his essay “The Retreat

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; pp.146–147.

from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism,” Castoriadis comments on the general retreat from autonomy into cultural and political conformism in the postmodern era<sup>11</sup>. There is a disappearance of political imagination. Social institutions become “autonomous” in an unconscious, bureaucratic, and ossified way, as opposed to society becoming consciously autonomous in the democratic and pragmatic-utopian sense. Alienation and power relations prevail. Castoriadis writes:

Alienation occurs when the imaginary moment in the institution becomes autonomous and predominates, which leads to the institution’s becoming autonomous and predominating with respect to society... Society lives its relations with its institutions in the mode of the imaginary, in other words, it does not recognize in the imaginary of institutions something that is its own product<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism,” in *Democracy and Nature*, 2001 (trans. David Ames Curtis); pp.17–26.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*; Op. cit.; p.132.

## **DONNA J. HARAWAY ON THE INFORMATICS OF DOMINATION**

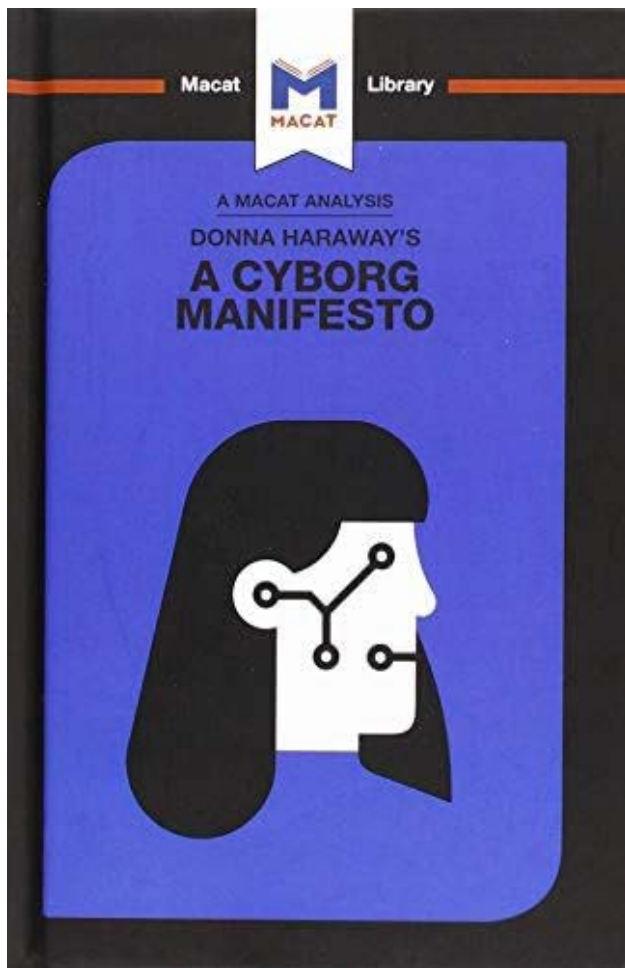
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In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway writes about power and control in postmodernism<sup>13</sup>. In her two-column tabular listing of historical pairings called “The Informatics of Domination,” Haraway enumerates many features of the transition from modern to post-modern “epistemologies,” indicative of the paradigm shift brought about by the advances of science and technology, and the hegemony of information<sup>14</sup>. The modernist-postmodernist pairs include: the passage from representation to simulation in aesthetics; the passing from the realist novel to science fiction in literature; the movement from organism to bionics and techno-implants in the life sciences; the turn from reproduction to replication of “offspring”; the crossing from dual public-and-private spheres to cyber-cultural citizenship in the topology of social space; the change from work to automation/robotics in the accomplishing of economic tasks; and the progression from mind to

<sup>13</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.”

<sup>14</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*; Op. cit.; pp.28–30.

Artificial Intelligence in the answer to the question “what is thinking?”



For Haraway, there is a paradigm shift from the “comfortable old hierarchical dominations” of modernity to the “scary new networks” of postmodernism where power is exercised via science fictions, technoscience narratives, simulations, communications and genetic engineering, cybernetic systems logics, cyborg citizenship, and “women in

the integrated circuit.” Anticipating hyper-modernism, Haraway implies already in the 1980s that domination was becoming primarily implemented via informatic and bio-technological codes. She writes of the “translation of the world into a problem of coding.” “Microelectronics is the technical basis of simulacra — that is, of copies without originals.”<sup>15</sup>

### **MICHEL FOUCAULT'S ANALYTICS OF POWER**

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The philosopher Michel Foucault’s political theory of freedom is not a liberal theory. Foucault is most well-known for his theory and studies of relations of power in modern society. But in “The Ethics of Care for the Self as the Practice of Freedom,” Foucault writes:

One must observe that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite, and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. To exercise a relation of power,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; p.36.



there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty<sup>16</sup>.

In contrast to the opposition between power and freedom in liberal political theory, where freedom is generally considered abstractly as being the absence of external constraints imposed by the state or other large institutions/organizations, power for Foucault operates in and through everyday life practices. The discovery of freedom is to be made in understanding how we have been manipulated in the most intimate areas of personal existence, and how we can concretely and creatively transform that. This is a process of experimentation. One cannot know at the outset of each freedom-forging experience what the outcome is going to be.

Foucault famously studied psychiatric institutions in *The History of Madness in the Classical Age* (1962), hospitals in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), the Panopticon prison architecture of power in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the discursive construction of sexuality

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Care for the Self as the Practice of Freedom," in *The Final Foucault* trans. Robert Hurley (The MIT Press, 1988); p.12.

in the four-volume *History of Sexuality* (1976, 1984, 1984, 2018)<sup>17</sup>. The Panopticon is primarily an arrangement of virtual deterrence power or self-surveillance whereby the observed prisoner is not literally seen by a human guard, but who modifies his own behavior because he fears himself to be under surveillance.

The conjuncture of power and knowledge is present throughout Foucault's work. In his later work, this mutates into the concept of governmentality. There are analytics of "disciplinary power" and "biopower." Power operates through knowledge, discourses, everyday life, culture, social customs, individuals, networks, and relationships. Power functions not only on the level of institutions but it "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Plon, 1961); *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith) (Routledge, 2003); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, The Will to Knowledge*; *The History of Sexuality, vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure*; *The History of Sexuality, vol. 3, The Care of the Self*; *The History of Sexuality, vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh* (trans. Robert Hurley) (Penguin, 2020).

lives.”<sup>18</sup> Power is everywhere and in all interactions. In postmodernism, power is increasingly virtual. Foucault writes in “The Subject and Power”: “Power relations are exercised, to an exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs.”<sup>19</sup>

As Foucault explains in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, power is a set of “force relations” which happen at the “molecular” or “micro-physical” level. Power is not possessed but rather exercised. Power comes from below. Power is embedded in networks and systems more than in the agencies of power holders. Power relations are processes. They are in a constant state of flow and transformation. Power relations underlie and precede institutions. Power relations are not in “politics.” They are rooted in the entire networked fabric of “the social.” There is always resistance to power. Those at the subordinate end of a power relationship can consent or rebel. Humans have freedom to not submit to the exertion of power.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (trans. John Mepham) (New York: Pantheon, 1980); p.30.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (trans. Robert Hurley) (The New Press, 1994); p.136.

## JEAN BAUDRILLARD, FORGET FOUCAULT

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Baudrillard somewhat self-destructively damaged his reputation in 1977, especially in France, with the publication of his small volume *Forget Foucault*<sup>20</sup>. In that text, he takes aim specifically at the theory of power elaborated in *Discipline and Punish*. Is there something of value in Baudrillard’s apparent critique of Foucault (which is not a critique since Baudrillard claims to have abandoned the mode of writing of critique in favor of a “radical” or “fatal” theory)? Parallel to Baudrillard’s farewell to Marx in *The Mirror of Production* (Marx unwittingly mirrors the logic of capitalist industrial production which Marx intends to criticize), Foucault, according to Baudrillard, has written a “mirror of power,” an unwitting reflection of the system of power and domination which Foucault purports to criticize.

By writing so brilliantly, and in such detail, about power, Foucault perpetuates and extends the system of power, which in postmodernism exercises itself primarily through discourses. Paradoxically, Foucault is wrong because he is too

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*.

right. Since power instantiates itself more and more via rhetoric, an elaborate discourse about power is itself power. The perfection of Foucault's vast chronicle of power is possible because the historical era of literal power is over. *Forget Foucault* is not a critique of Foucault, but rather the opposite: Foucault has painstakingly set up his discourse on power as a discourse without limits, hence perfectly impervious to critique and appropriate for the era of the eclipse of critique. Baudrillard writes:

If it is possible at last to talk with such definitive understanding about power, sexuality, the body, and discipline, even down to their most delicate metamorphoses, it is because at some point all this is here and now over with<sup>21</sup>.

Power and sexuality as frontal objects of knowledge inquiry depend upon a strong reality-principle and a strong truth-principle. It is precisely these strong referents which disappear with simulation and simulacra. As Roland Barthes wrote (contrasting American culture to that of the Japanese "empire of signs"), "sexuality is everywhere

except in sex."<sup>22</sup> Postmodern culture is everywhere pornographic in its universal visibility and availability of "shocking" or voyeuristic images of every possible "erotic" and "trans-erotic" minutiae which no longer shock. Power and sexuality are experiencing an implosive crisis, not a productive explosion to ubiquity, as Foucault suggests. Power is nowhere because it is everywhere. The supersession of the real by the hyperreal is also the end of literal power and literal sexual desire. Baudrillard writes:

Foucault unmasks all the final or causal illusions concerning power, but he does not tell us anything concerning the simulacrum of power itself... Behind power, or at the very heart of power and of production, there is a void which gives them today a last glimmer of reality<sup>23</sup>.

**Power is a challenge, a play of theatre and appearances.** Power is symbolically reversible. It is only a "perspectival space of simulation," like the *trompe-l'oeil* artistic technique which creates the optical illusion of a three-dimensional

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; p.11.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* (Geneva, 1970); p.43.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*; Op. cit.; p.45.

space. Power is invented on the shoulders of signs.

### **GILLES DELEUZE, "POSTSCRIPT ON THE SOCIETIES OF CONTROL"**

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In his 1990 essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Gilles Deleuze acknowledges Foucault's magisterial historiographical contribution in naming the essential characteristics of the "disciplinary societies" of the phases of modernity and early capitalism that ascended in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and reached their height in the early twentieth century<sup>24</sup>. The citizen of the capitalist disciplinary society lived in the spaces of physical enclosure of family, school, hospital, prison, military, factory, and office. The disciplinary society, for Deleuze, is superseded by a new system of domination which is the "society of control." Deleuze cites theorist Paul Virilio as "continually analyzing the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," in *October*, 1992; pp.3-7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; p.4.

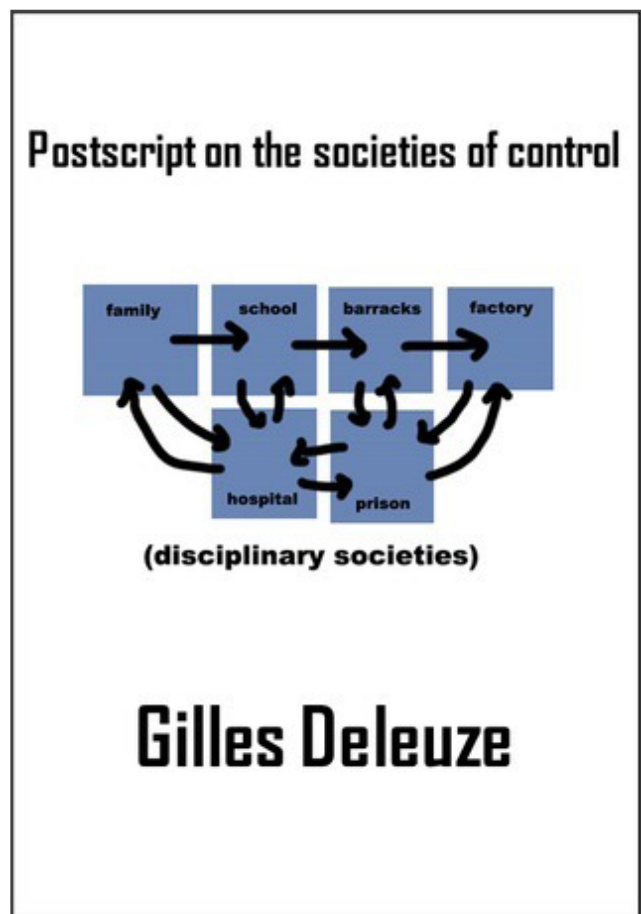
Media technologies have dissipated the borders among the enclosed spaces.

The corporation, with its flexible games of psychological motivation and competition among colleagues, has replaced the factory. Lifelong perpetual training has replaced school. In the society of control, one is never finished with anything, but rather in a state of eternal recurrence or endless cycling between corporation and educational system. The society of control is based in a numerical language that manages access to information. The human becomes a piece of data, a record in a database, a statistical sample. Computers are the archetypal machines of the society of control. Computers are subject to jamming, piracy, and viruses. The body is subject to network controls. We are in orbit in a continuous network. It is a mobile and free form of neo-enclosure. The system tracks us through our transactions and our momentary movements. The computer follows our virtual position — physical barriers and definite locations become irrelevant. The financial system replaces the gold standard with the floating rate of exchange and the global electronic flows of capital.

Early capitalism emphasized concentration, production, and property. The property-owning class of capitalists built enclosed spaces like the factory and — derived from the factory as model — the school and the family home. The late capitalism of the society of control is no longer engaged primarily in the production system of acquiring raw materials from Third World countries which it then converts to finished products. Now capitalism buys shares of stocks and sells services. Marketing replaces production. One controls the market via gimmicks and tricks, by grabbing control, no longer through good old-fashioned raising quality and lowering costs. The citizen is in life-long financial debt to the system. Control is continuous and without limits.

### **FICTION, POWER, AND CODES IN HYPER-MODERNISM**

The most significant facet for my perspective is that, in hyper-modernism, the power and control exercised via narratives and fictions in the media-technological society now get implemented on much more detailed micro-levels via algorithmic-informatic codes



and digital, virtual, and cybernetic technologies. We have become an informatic society. We are subjected to algorithms, data collection, Big Data analytics, surveillance, the deterrence of self-surveillance, and mutual surveillance in every area from participation in simulation-

social media to targeted advertising to bureaucratic interactions with governmental agencies. We are immersed in systems of informational and informatic power. We are coded as subjects of human data processing. New data analysis techniques for categorizing us while providing us with the illusion of personalization are continuously developed and experimented on us. We are interminable feed and fodder for the algorithms. We have become our data.

Data does not only record who we have been and who we are, but it is an active force in reshaping our “becoming.” In this sense, the role of data can already be illuminated with some basic media theory insights à la Marshall McLuhan. Data is widely seen as being a useful tool for communication and administration, but it is much more than that. Data is exercising power and a performative molding of who we are. The self undergoes datafication. “Info-power,” as defined by Foucault-inspired philosopher Colin Koopman in his book *How We Became Our Data*, is a distinctive paradigm of power and control that unceasingly reformats the body, mind, and conduct of the

individual<sup>26</sup>. Koopman derives the term “info-power” from Foucault’s chain of terms of disciplinary power and bio-power. Racial bias and discrimination are also deeply built into the data and algorithms.

Algorithms construct and tell us narratives about ourselves. The info-power of algorithms comes to the fore via the narratives that they engender about us, and the individual “enjoyment” they propose to us. In the informatic society, our lives are increasingly given their meaning and their guidelines for action by algorithmic processes. The algorithm notes your viewing history, figures out your “affects” and desires, and then weaves its designed, packaged, individualized narratives just for you. The algorithm brings to realization the feedback loop originally conceived and promised by Norbert Wiener’s first-order cybernetics.

In the political arena of simulation-social media, the filter bubble and the echo chamber show you exactly what you want to see. The same computing paradigm is de-

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<sup>26</sup> Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

played in “politics” and in online shopping. As a Deep Learning neural network, the algorithm is permanently “training” itself at your expense, with you as its test “experience,” you are the data provider. The algorithm perfects its seduction of you, deploying the feedback mechanism to refine its narratives to endearingly stroke your narcissism. Your personalized sales or newsfeed stream at Amazon, Facebook, or TikTok. Technology or code itself is the author of these narratives. From the narratives of postmodernism to the code/algorithms/Big Data of hyper-modernism, one major persistent continuity is the profit-seeking of techno-capitalism: institutions and large organizations which seek power and control now want to use code to automate their power.

Thinkers in Science and Technology Studies (STS) like Ludwig Fleck and Bruno Latour put forward the idea that, as knowledge gets deployed for the exercise of power, the human being becomes a *scientific fact*<sup>27</sup>. In the hyper-modern

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<sup>27</sup> Katja Sabisch, *Der Mensch als wissenschaftliche Tatsache: Wissenssoziologische Studien mit Ludwig Fleck* (Kulturverlag Kasmos, 2016); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to*

era, the human being becomes an *informatic fact*. The human body was earlier an object of science, the target of medical and other discourses of rationalizing control. There were many mono-sciences rich in content. The “reality” which science took as its noble mission to understand was always already a simulation model. With informatics, the individual sciences get overtaken by the generalized practice of digital models and algorithmic Deep Learners. Knowledge-content is overtaken by the statistical representation of knowledge. “Reality” becomes hyperreality of the rule of data.

In the media genre of the computer game, narrative and code come together. Navigational permutations and emergent behaviors are coded into the game in both deterministic and indeterminate coding paradigms. Game designers link intimately their story construction plans with the intricacies of software toolkits. One can analyze science fiction films about computer games in a transmedia study. Films like *Tron* and *Tron Leg-*

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*Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

acy (both starring Jeff Bridges), *Free Guy* starring Ryan Reynolds, David Cronenberg's *eXis-tenZ*, Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One*, Chris Marker's *Level Five*, *Black Mirror*: "Bandersnatch," and the Polish/Japanese co-production *Avalon* are exemplary in this respect. One can also contemplate films which are adaptations of a computer game, like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. What is the significance of the POV perspective in the genre of games — the special relationship between player and avatar — for narrative? To write the software code for new games, is it possible to develop a narrative-centered Creative Coding development environment, parallel to how Processing is a visual-centered Creative Coding integrated development environment?

It would be difficult to extend the conceptual framework of Castoriadis to the hypermodern situation of the hybrid narrative-and-code-based power and control assemblage of algorithms. The "imaginary" is seen by him as existing on the level of society and on the level of the individual. A kind of Freudian psychoanalytical connection is made between the two. For Casto-

riadis, there is a constant tug-of-war going on in history between the poles of the conscious autonomy of self-managed, self-instituting societies and the alienation of institutionally frozen and degenerated societies. This dialectic seems to not foresee a configuration like the "pretzel"-like paradoxical logic of algorithms which bestows on the socially constructed "individual" a pseudo-autonomy that is an extension of postmodern narcissistic consumer culture. Castoriadis would only be able to fathom hyper-modernism as a furthering of the "retreat from autonomy" which is already operative for him in postmodernism.

In her writings about "The Informatics of Domination," Haraway was prescient about the important role that code would play in narrative-driven power and domination relations in hyper-modernism. Haraway foresaw the hegemony of information. She already underlined the ubiquity and potency of informatic and bio-technological codes. She wrote of the "translation of the world into a problem of coding."<sup>28</sup> Foucault's

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<sup>28</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*; Op. cit.; p.34.



analytics of the “micro-physics” of power lend themselves very well to adaptation to the conditions of hyper-modernism. He underscores the relationship between power and knowledge, and between power and discourse. The architecture of power of the social media platforms of “surveillance capitalism,” or of the Internet as a whole, can be trenchantly analyzed as a revised next generation configuration of the Panopticon. Power in hyper-modernism adds to semiotic signs the supplement of electronic signals. William Bogard, in *The Simulation of Surveillance*, succeeds in synthesizing Baudrillard’s concept of simulation and Foucault’s concept of surveillance<sup>29</sup>.

Deleuze’s concept of the “societies of control” lends itself well to an upgrade for hyper-modernism and digitalization. He wrote already about how informatic technologies would be deployed to support power relationships. Digital systems of control monitor our movements in a virtual networked sense. Our physical location in designated spaces of confinement re-

cedes to secondary importance. We are visible to the digital behemoth via our real-time transactions. Foucault’s “disciplinary society” of surveillance is superseded by Deleuze’s “society of control,” which is about the management of flows. The interest in turbulence unleashes the potentiality of indefinite production and signification for the era of free-floating bio-cybernetic capitalism, with its global financial transactions and money circulation via electronic impulses. Entropy becomes useful for work in the form of turbulence, chaos, and “female” flows.

### **JOHN ARMITAGE ON HYPER-MODERNISM**

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In the 1999 publication *Machinic Modulations: New Cultural Theory and Technopolitics*, John Armitage poses the question if “modern and postmodern cultural theory are yielding to new ‘hypermodern’ and ‘recombinant’ cultural theories of technology?”<sup>30</sup> Armitage sees hyper-modernism not only in prevailing developments in technology, culture, and society, but he also

<sup>29</sup> William Bogard, *The Simulation of Surveillance: Hyper-control in Telematic Societies*.

<sup>30</sup> John Armitage, *Machinic Modulations: New Cultural Theory and Technopolitics*; Op. cit.; p.1.

writes of a “hyper-modernization” of cultural theory. Hyper-modernism, for Armitage, is a refusal neither of the epistemological optimism/teleological narratives of modernity nor of the diagnosis by post-modern philosophers of the decline of those narratives and epistemology. He theorizes hyper-modernism as the recognition of “double moments” of cultural affirmation and negation understood as the persistence of modernity or its “continuation by other means.”<sup>31</sup> Hypermodern cultural theory refutes the hostile debate or binary opposition between thinkers associated with modernity versus post-modernism. It seeks a Hegelian *Aufhebung* or deconstructionist synthesis of the two. The de-re-construction of hyper-modern theory and techno-politics proceeds from “scavenging among the remnants” of the two previous paradigms. Armitage argues for the importance of theorizing digital media technologies for new cultural and political practices.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; p.3.

## ALBERT BORGMANN ON HYPER-MODERNISM

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In his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992), referring to Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and John Locke, the philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann defines modernity in the context of the Enlightenment as a fusion of the domination of nature, the primacy of method over content in intellectual work, and the sovereignty of possessive individualism<sup>32</sup>. In his genealogy of successive cultural history paradigms, post-modernism is a “divide” or transitional phase between two eras — modernity and what is to come later. Post-modernism, for Borgmann, is characterized, among other things, by the prevalence of media technologies, information processing, and the power of multinational corporations. Now we are at a crossroads. The future cultural paradigm will be either hyper-modernism (if we continue the current course) or the more utopian vision of what he calls “postmodern realism.”

<sup>32</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*.

Hyper-modernism is defined by Borgmann as the giving to technology of a “hyper-fine and hyper-complex design.”<sup>33</sup> Yet hyper-modernism cries out for a genuine alternative. “Postmodern realism” is the outgrowing of pure technological fetishism or determinism towards the agenda of designing technology for what might be called a “new real.” This would be technology as support for the design of salutary life rather than technology for its own sake. Borgmann also discusses hyperreality as an aspect of hyper-modernism. He references Baudrillard and Umberto Eco. Television and video games are precursors of a full-fledged hyperreality that would engage all the senses, as in Virtual Reality flight simulators. Borgmann offers examples of hyperreality in consumer culture. Cool Whip is hyperreal whipped cream. It is cheaper, longer lasting, and has less calories than the “real thing.”

## **GILLES LIPOVETSKY ON HYPER-MODERNISM**

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In 2005, the French sociologist and philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; p.82.

published landmark theses about hyper-modernism in his book *Hypermodern Times*<sup>34</sup>. For Lipovetsky, the concept of post-modernism to designate the cultural paradigm of the times in which we are living is obsolete and needs to be superseded. “The owl of Minerva [reference to Hegel] was announcing the birth of the postmodern just as the hyper-modernization of the world was already coming into being.”<sup>35</sup> Like Borgmann, Lipovetsky sees post-modernism as a short-lived and transitional phase. Hypermodernity is the consummation of all the earlier tendencies of modernity, such as bureaucratic rationalization and the compression of space and time. With information and communications technologies, speeded up financial transactions, neo-liberal economics, and global markets and culture, we are thoroughly immersed in hyper-modern intensity. There is limitless consumerism, commercialization, and a cult of excess in almost every area of life.

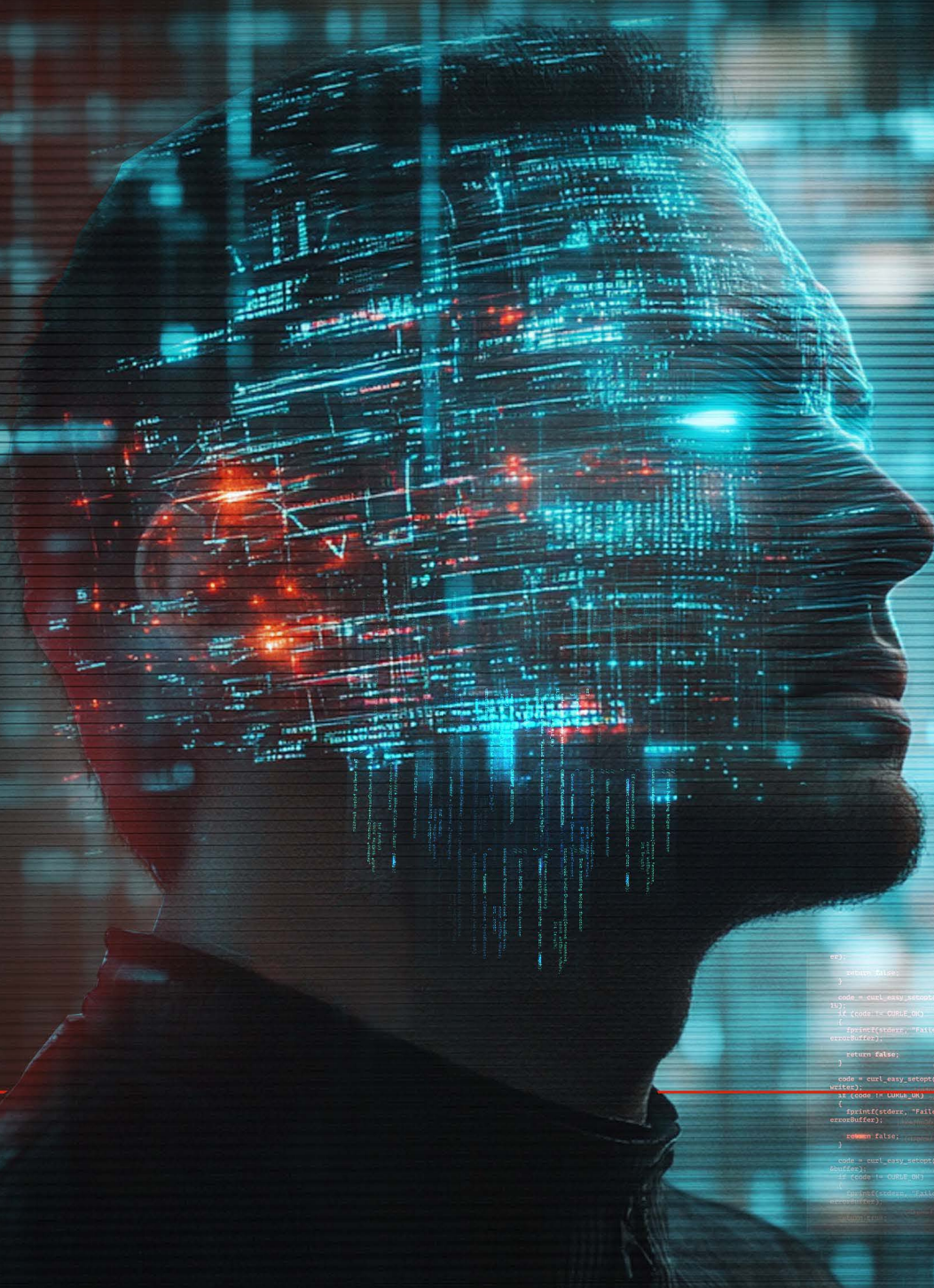
<sup>34</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*.

<sup>35</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, “Hypermodernism,” in David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, eds., *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century* (trans. Andrew Brown) (Bloomsbury, 2015); p.157.

Above all, there is a dramatic change in the experience of time. We live in a perpetual hyper-present. Time has become overstressed and highly individualized. Most people are overworked. The individual seeks pleasure as a priority but is burdened with tension and anxiety. Hyper-modern life places excessive demands on the person: extreme mobility, flexibility, always the fastest, the newest, and the most. There is a ubiquitous desire for recognition, or the seeking of hyper-attention from others. We invent our emotions in the immediate moment. The hyper-modern crisis of time also provides an explanation for the rise of neo-fascist-populist movements. Given the disappearance of historical meaning, there is widespread nostalgia for its reappearance, albeit in the guise of a simulacrum of itself.

# ON THE ENTANGLEMENT OF CONTEMPORARY FUTURE IMAGINARIES:

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE MATRIX AND THE BRAIN-MACHINE INTERFACE FROM BAUDRILLARD AND GIBSON TO MUSK



```
ex3: ... // text handling helper function
    return false;
}
code = curl_easy_setopt(conn, CURLOPT_FOLLOWLOCATION, 1L);
if (code != CURLE_OK)
    fprintf(stderr, "Failed to set redirect option (%s)\n",
    curl_strerror(curl_errno));
return false;
code = curl_easy_setopt(conn, CURLOPT_WRITEFUNCTION, write_callback);
if (code != CURLE_OK)
    fprintf(stderr, "Failed to set writer [%s]\n",
    curl_strerror(curl_errno));
return false;
code = curl_easy_setopt(conn, CURLOPT_WRITEDATA, &chaz);
if (code != CURLE_OK)
    fprintf(stderr, "Failed to set write data (%s)\n",
    curl_strerror(curl_errno));
return true;
}
static void *data(void *context,
                const void *ptr,
                int length)
{
    Context *context = (Context *)context;
    handleCharacters(context, chaz,
                    ptr, length);
}
```



Tweet of Elon Musk on the 21st of February 2021 on Twitter

**T**his article examines the historical entanglement of Jean Baudrillard’s media theory concepts with cyberpunk science fiction literature in the late 1980s. It argues that one significant outcome of this entanglement was the development of specific future imaginaries whose impact remains highly influential to this day. The article posits that the foundation of this intertwining was a rupture within science fiction literature itself, a rupture closely tied to the rise of postmodernist thought and, particularly, to Baudrillard’s reflections. This shift gave rise to cyberpunk literature, in which technology and humanity are no longer depicted as separate entities. Instead, a unity of man and technology was postulated, in which the further development of man was henceforth conceived. Authors such as William Gibson played a pivotal role in this transformation, with his works reaching well beyond the traditional readership of science fiction. Using the terms



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and concepts of interface and the Matrix taken up and further extrapolated by Gibson, their further use in the context of the invasive future technology developed by Elon Musk's company Neuralink is used as an example to show that and how they still have an effect today.

This article serves as an extension and further exploration of the earlier work, "Chambers of the Past and Future: The Simulated Worlds of Baudrillard, Cyberpunk, and the Metaverse," published in this journal in April 2023.

## INTRODUCTION

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The concept of imaginaries plays a central role in the discourse surrounding society's conceptions of the technologies of the future. The term refers to something "invented or not real, something projected into the future, imagined beyond itself" (James, 2019, p. 37). It encompasses visions that often extend beyond current realities to imagine the future. Particularly relevant are "sociotechnical imaginaries," described by Jasanoff (2015, p. 4) as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology." These collective visions are not simply abstract ideas but institutionally embedded and publicly

enacted images of desirable futures, intended to be realized through scientific and technological progress. While "sociotechnical imaginaries" are "not mainly defined by discourse but are often associated with active exercises of state power and the management of political dissent" (Harvard Kennedy School, n.d.), "future imaginaries" are understood as images, visions, and scenarios of the future conceived and propagated by individuals or groups (Kleske, 2019). When these visions become so deeply ingrained in society that they go unquestioned and uncritically guide behavior, they transform into "future imaginaries." In this way, visions of the future become pivotal elements of societal reality, profoundly shaping both actions and thought. The concepts of "sociotechnical imaginaries" and

“future imaginaries” underscore the intricate relationship between technological development and societal expectations and visions of the future. In what follows, I will use the term future imaginaries because it is more appropriate to the context of the argument presented here, as it has a somewhat broader scope. However, there is considerable overlap between the two concepts, so in many places the term sociotechnical imaginaries could also be used.

Engaging with the discourse on the development of future technologies today makes it nearly impossible to avoid the media-saturated projects and grand visions of Elon Musk. The wealth Musk accumulated through his founding role in PayPal has been funneled into ventures such as SpaceX, Tesla, Inc. (formerly Tesla Motors until 2017), OpenAI, and Neuralink. The technological ambitions of Musk, a South African-born, Canadian-American entrepreneur, often evoke comparisons to science fiction. SpaceX, for example, was founded with the goal of developing the technologies necessary for the colonization of Mars. In pursuit of this objective, the company has

become the leading commercial provider of orbital rocket launches. Musk remains steadfast in his commitment to sending crewed missions to Mars by 2030 and fully colonizing the planet by 2050 (Exodus, 2020). However, it is essential to critically examine the underlying colonial dynamics that shape this vision — not only in an epistemological sense but also in the concrete plans for human dominion over new territories, where societal and governance structures reflect power imbalances and labor conditions reminiscent of the colonial era. Tesla, in addition to producing electric vehicles, also develops photovoltaic systems and energy storage solutions, positioning itself as a provider of sustainable alternatives for a future defined by resource scarcity. OpenAI, founded in 2015 as a non-profit organization, was launched with the goal of advancing artificial intelligence and ensuring its benefits for society and launched the widespread Chatbot ChatGPT in 2022. Musk withdrew from the project in 2019 due to conflicts of interest (Hyperdrive, 2019). Neuralink, founded in 2016, is a neurotechnology company with the ambition of connecting the



human brain directly to computers via an interface (LA Times, 2017). Initially, this invasive neuroprosthesis is intended to treat disorders of the brain and central nervous system, but its long-term goal is to enhance human capabilities, enabling humans to keep pace with the rapid development of artificial intelligence (Ars Technica, 2017). In 2024, the first successful chip implantations in partially paralyzed individuals were performed. Despite critical media coverage and some setbacks, these procedures can still be considered a preliminary success within a limited scope (Jewett, 2024). Given

that Neuralink's groundbreaking technology is frequently described with terms like „interface“ and „Matrix“, important questions arise about the imaginaries associated with these concepts. What are their historical contexts? Under what circumstances did these terms emerge and become established? What meanings have they acquired, and how were they popularized? These questions are crucial to understanding the broader cultural and philosophical implications of the technology Musk seeks to develop and how this is perceived and understood by a broader public.



Screenshot from Neuralink.com, 13.05.2022

The thesis of this paper is that the terms and concepts used to describe and discuss Neuralink's invasive technology stem from an interweaving of science and fiction — specifically, the fusion of Jean Baudrillard's media theory and cyberpunk science fiction. From this convergence, distinct future imaginaries emerged, whose impact on contemporary thought is profound and far-reaching. This paper argues that the foundation for this interweaving was a rupture within science fiction literature in the 1980s, from which the cyberpunk genre was born. This rupture was characterized by a shift in how cyberpunk authors depicted technology and humanity — not as separate entities, but as an integrated unit through which the future evolution of humankind would be imagined.

A pivotal figure in this shift was William Gibson, who, during the 1980s, achieved widespread popularity beyond the traditional confines of science fiction readership. This recognition was partly due to theorists like Frederic Jameson, Douglas Kellner, Rainer Winter, and John Fiske, who identified Gibson's narratives as engaging with and ex-

tending certain media-theoretical discourses. These theorists frequently referenced Gibson and the cyberpunk movement in their own work, using Gibson's fiction not only to illustrate theoretical concepts but also to explore their wider implications. In doing so, they not only reinforced their own theoretical positions but also introduced Gibson and cyberpunk into academic discourse, significantly contributing to Gibson's growing popularity and the increasing recognition of his extrapolations of the future. His imaginaries of the future began to permeate broader cultural discourse, a rare feat for science fiction, which had long been dismissed as pulp literature (Atterbery, 2003). By the 1980s, these imaginaries were informing societal discourse about the future trajectory of digital technologies, shaping visions of technological evolution both in the near and more distant future — futures that still felt personally relevant. Concepts like the Matrix, Cyberspace, and the interface thus became part of a collective understanding of what the future might hold and thus future imaginaries (Gözen, 2012).

This paper is organized into three sections. First, I will demonstrate, through specific examples, that the terms „interface“ and „Matrix“ are central to discussions of Neuralink’s technological developments. To provide a framework for this, I will trace the genesis of these terms, showing that their application to Neuralink can be traced back to William Gibson, who in turn drew heavily on Jean Baudrillard’s ideas (a connection that will be explored further in the third section). In the second section, I will argue that Gibson’s use

of these terms and concepts marks a fundamental break with the traditions of science fiction. To contextualize this shift, I will examine the history of science fiction and the values and ideas it has traditionally conveyed. Finally, in the third section, I will explore how the interweaving of media theory and cyberpunk came about, ultimately demonstrating that the conceptual framework used in contemporary discussions surrounding Neuralink owes much to this fusion of science and popular culture.

## **INTERFACE AND MATRIX: NEURALINK’S TECHNOLOGICAL DREAM OF BRIDGING MINDS AND MACHINES AND GIBSON’S CYBERPUNK LEGACY**

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The company Neuralink, founded in 2016, has set the ambitious goal of developing the first neural implant capable of establishing a direct connection between the human brain and computers or mobile devices, allowing them to be controlled purely through thought. While the initial focus of this technology is on compensating for neurological damage caused by illness or injury, the long-term vision is far more expansive: creating

a system through which humans can connect not only with their devices but also directly with one another. In Musk’s vision, this could lead to a future where humans no longer need spoken or written language for communication. Instead, thoughts could be transmitted directly through a network linked to Neuralink’s technology, allowing them to be received and understood by another person’s brain. The feasibility of such a vision in

the near future is the subject of significant debate, with many critics questioning Musk's ideas and, in some cases, dismissing them as unrealistic and unethical (Hart, 2024). Nonetheless, Neuralink's projects have generated widespread media attention, and their impact on current discussions of what might be technologically possible in the future is substantial. This influence is likely bolstered by the fact that Musk's ideas do not emerge in isolation but are articulated within existing conceptual frameworks and discourses, building on them in meaningful ways.

The idea of a brain-computer interface is, in fact, not a novel concept. As early as the 1940s, Norbert Wiener, the so called father of cybernetics, explored the analogies between the human brain and computers. Since then, the possibility of direct communication between brain and machine has been a recurring theme in both scientific research and speculative fiction. Recent advances in technology miniaturization, along with new breakthroughs in neuroscience, have led to some early achievements in this field (Science Media Center, 2020). For example, in

2017, a team of brain and computer scientists led by Daniela Rus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) developed a feedback system that enables human brain activity to be transmitted to robots (Technology Review, 2017). In 2019, French researchers led by Alim Louis Benabid reported in „The Lancet Neurology“ on a quadriplegic patient with two wireless devices implanted in his brain, recording his brain activity (Benabid et al., 2019). Neuralink now refers to its work as “Interfacing with the Brain,” announcing: “Neuralink is building a fully integrated brain machine interface (BMI) system. [...] BMIs are technologies that enable a computer or other digital device to communicate directly with the brain” (Neuralink, 2020). For the purposes of this article, the choice of the term „brain-machine interface“ to describe an invasive neuroprosthesis is particularly noteworthy.

The term “brain-machine interface” first appeared in scientific literature in 1973, in a paper by Belgian computer scientist Jacques J. Vidal at the University of California, Los Angeles (Nicolas-Alonso, 2017). While research in

this area remained relatively quiet in the scientific community until the late 1980s, cyberpunk science fiction authors, particularly William Gibson, adopted the concept and expanded on it in their fictional works. In his 1982 short story „Burning Chrome“, Gibson envisions a world in which humans use a brain-machine interface to directly access computer-generated data landscapes. To describe this future vision, Gibson employed the term „interface“ for the first time in relation to immersing oneself in a computer-generated virtual space. Notably, he adapted the term to describe both an activity and a state: „Trying to remind myself that this place and the gulfs beyond are only representations, that we aren't 'in' Chrome's computer, but interfaced with it, while the matrix simulator in Bobby's loft generates this illusion. . .“ (Gibson, 2003, p. 264).

This evolution of the term interface, as Gibson used it, marks its transformation from a technical concept into a metaphor for human interaction with virtual environments, a shift that profoundly influences how we conceptualize technologies like Neuralink today. In a 2014

study that provides a historical and cultural-theoretical analysis of the term, Brandon Hookway described the interface in relation to machines „as a relation with technology rather than as a technology in itself“ (Hookway, 2014, p. ix). He concludes that the interface should be understood as a „continual stream of sensory and cognitive data ranging from visual cues and instrument readings to kinesthetic and vestibular senses of balance and motion,“ and thus as „a productive form of illusion, an illusory knowledge“ (Hookway, 2014, p. 74). Hookway's vivid description of the interface as a flow of sensory and cognitive data that creates an illusion strongly echoes Gibson's literary depiction of the virtual space created by a human-machine interface, first imagined in „Burning Chrome“ and further developed in his 1984 novel „Neuromancer“: „THE MATRIX [...] A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of

the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. . .” (Gibson, 2003, p. 108).

In both „Burning Chrome“ and „Neuromancer“, the interface is directly linked to the Matrix as the cyberspace, as it is the medium that grants access to the virtual world. It is important to note that the term cyberspace is a neologism — an entirely new word. Gibson has stated that the idea for the term came to him in 1981 when he was searching for a word to describe the “non-graphical space” of the future, where humans and computers would exchange information. Initially, he used the term „infospace,” but after scribbling on a notepad, he coined the term „cyberspace“. The term Matrix is used analogously to cyberspace. Both cyberspace and the Matrix refer to the virtual space itself as well as its structural framework. Gibson

derived the term Matrix from both the Latin word for „womb” and the mathematical concept of a matrix. Gibson also introduced Matrix as a place where the mind resides when connected to machines, thus expanding its meaning.

Whether Matrix or cyberspace, both terms convey the idea of a virtual reality that has yet to be technically realized. They articulate a vision of virtual reality that completely envelops the human experience, rather than conceptualizing humans as autonomous entities standing apart from the virtual world. The immense success of Gibson’s novel „Neuromancer“ led to the neologism cyberspace and the concept of the Matrix shaping the imagination of entire generations regarding the future of virtual data spaces and computer networks. While cyberspace has since entered the dictionary, Gibson’s concept of the Matrix gained further prominence through the Matrix film series by the Wachowski siblings, beginning in the late 1990s. Thus, it is unsurprising that Gibson’s visions are still regarded as almost prophetic today (William Gibson: The man who saw tomorrow, 2014).



**BOTH CYBERSPACE AND THE MATRIX REFER TO THE VIRTUAL SPACE ITSELF AS WELL AS ITS STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK..**

The concept of an interface as the crucial link between humans and machines is central to Gibson's vision of cyberspace and the Matrix; they are conceptually intertwined and mutually dependent. Without the interface facilitating the connection between brain and computer, it would be impossible for humans to link their consciousness to the virtual data space, ren-

dering the Matrix a realm beyond human perception. It is therefore both logical and significant that Neuralink employs the term interface to describe the human-machine connection they aim to create through their neuroprosthesis, designed to directly network humans with their technological devices.

### Neuralink will show 'The Matrix in the Matrix' on August 28, says Elon Musk

by Evelyn Arevalo • July 30, 2020

Elon Musk • Neuralink



Screenshot of Tasmanian.com, 13.05.2022 and of a Tweet of Elon Musk on 20.07.2020

It is also notable that in 2020, ahead of a presentation on Neuralink's latest developments, Elon Musk referred to „the matrix in the matrix“ (Tasmanian, 2020) to explain how the presentation would

display real-time neuron activity in the brain via the interface. The associative link between the brain-machine interface and the Matrix, which underpins Neuralink's broader ambitions, is strikingly

clear here: Musk invokes specific, pre-existing discursive images and ideas to describe and make comprehensible the potential impact of this emerging technology. Similarly, Gibson's terms and concepts are frequently referenced in media discussions surrounding Neuralink. Within the tech community, which engages through platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X), questions such as „Is Elon Musk creating the Matrix?“ (SiddharthVlogs, 2020) and „How Close Is Elon Musk's Neuralink to Ushering Us into the Matrix?“ are posed. The MIT Technology Review, in its coverage of Neuralink, references „Pigs in the matrix“ (Technology Review, 2020). Major publications like The New York Times (Metz, 2019), The Irish Times (Moran, 2019), and industry journals such as Robotic Biz also intertwine their discussions of Neuralink

and Musk with Gibson's dystopian visions. For instance, the introduction to an article titled „Neuralink — A Step Closer to Human-Machine Symbiosis“ reads: „The dystopian world of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the birth of the cyberpunk genre created visions of a reality where people were able to connect with machines, acquiring unprecedented abilities. With their brains plugged into their cars, they were better drivers, and when their minds entered cyberspace, they became better hackers. How much of that fiction is possible today?“ (Robotic Biz, 2020)

It becomes clear that the brain-machine interface represents far more than a mere technical connection between humans and computers. It embodies broader future imaginaries that shape societal visions and expectations of the future. These future imaginaries are deeply rooted in cyberpunk literature, and for various reasons, have permeated and continue to influence contemporary technological discourse. The following section will explore the historical contexts that explain the unique influence of cyberpunk science fiction in shaping today's technolog-



**IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT THE BRAIN-MACHINE INTERFACE REPRESENTS FAR MORE THAN A MERE TECHNICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMANS AND COMPUTERS.**



ical narratives, particularly those surrounding developments like Neuralink.

Their critique was particularly aimed at traditional science fiction's adherence to a humanistic thought tradition, which assumed the existence of an inherent, timeless human nature. This belief positioned the human mind and reason as immutable constants, with media and technology always perceived as external forces, separate from the individual. For the cyberpunk authors, however, human thought and the psyche were not seen as unchangeable or inherently „pure“ states. They observed that technology was no longer „some bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins,“ but rather, “pervasive, utterly intimate [...] not outside us, but next to us“ (Sterling, 1988, p. xi) and already penetrating the deepest layers of human existence. For cyberpunk writers, the artistic task was to reflect on how technology was fundamentally transforming both individuals and society. The foundation of the cyberpunk movement's ideas lay in the rise of a new „technical culture,“ (Sterling, 1988, p. xiv). in which emerging computer, media,

biological, and medical technologies increasingly permeated everyday life. As Bruce Sterling famously noted, „technology [...] has slipped control and reached street level“ (Sterling, 1988, p. xi). The cyberpunk writers believed that contemporary science fiction needed to engage with this shift, rather than resist it. Accordingly, they sought new literary forms that could reflect and explore the unsettling technological developments of their present. At the heart of cyberpunk literature lies the theme of radical transformation and disruption of what it means to be human, driven by media and technology. Cyberpunk narratives fundamentally deconstruct the unity of the mind, the immanence of the soul, and the essence of humanity itself.

In 1983, Bruce Sterling, the de facto spokesperson for the cyberpunk movement, launched the do-it-yourself fanzine „Cheap Truth“, which was published quarterly until 1986. Modeled after the aesthetics of 1970s punk fanzines, „Cheap Truth“ was typewritten and arranged in a collage-like style with images and newspaper clippings, then distributed as photocopies. From the third issue onward, it was

also available on a bulletin board system (BBS). The cyberpunk writers believed that the content, themes, and form of traditional science fiction had long since become outdated, and they sought to fundamentally revitalize the genre. Their goal was to restore science fiction's potential to engage with and reflect contemporary societal trends. In doing so, they aimed to bring science fiction back to the forefront of both entertaining and subversive popular culture. The cyberpunk writers expressed their critique of humanistic science fiction through polemics against figures like Isaac Asimov and Mary Shelley, whom they viewed as representing traditional, if not reactionary, backward-looking science fiction. A typical complaint was: „Why aren't kids lined up eight deep for the latest issue of ISAAC ASIMOV'S? Why isn't ANALOG doled out from locked crates by frowning members of the PTA? Because they are DULL. Worse than dull; they're reactionary, clinging to literary-culture values while a cybernetic tsunami converts our times into a post-industrial Information Age“ (Cheap Truth, 1984). The literary values and traditions under attack are clarified further

in other statements, such as: „[Humanist Science Fiction] promotes the romantic dictum that there are Some Things Man Was Not Meant to Know. There are no mere physical mechanisms for this higher moral law — its workings transcend mortal understanding; it is something akin to divine will. Hubris must meet nemesis; this is simply the nature of our universe“. (Sterling, 1991).

According to Sterling, the scientific and technological advances of recent decades had allowed humanity to acquire much of the “forbidden knowledge” that humanistic science fiction had long warned against. The application of this knowledge had, in many cases, demonstrated that humans act with little regard for the ethical and moral imperatives espoused by humanism: „As a culture, we love to play with fire, just for the sake of its allure; and if there happens to be money in it, there are no holds barred. Jumpstarting Mary Shelley's corpses is the least of our problems; something much along that line happens in intensive-care wards every day“ (Sterling, 1991). In their writings for „Cheap Truth“, the cyberpunk

authors argued that new, invasive technologies had initiated a paradigm shift, one that traditional science fiction had failed to foresee. They contended that the humanistic worldview had become so ingrained in the genre as an implicit myth that science fiction itself had fallen prey to outdated concepts. The original purpose of science fiction — enlightening its audience, offering essential scientific knowl-

edge, and challenging outdated prejudices and superstitions — had, in their view, been abandoned. The references to figures like Asimov and Shelley should therefore be understood as historical framing devices, through which the entire tradition of science fiction, which the cyberpunk writers sought to critique, can be traced. This historical lineage will be examined in the following section.

## **FROM MARY SHELLEY TO ASIMOV: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND CONDITIONS FOR CYBERPUNK WRITERS' BREAK WITH TRADITIONAL SCIENCE FICTION**

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Science fiction emerged as a distinct literary phenomenon under the unique conditions of the Industrial Revolution and the proliferation of the printing press in the 19th century. Mary Shelley's „Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus“ (1818) is widely regarded as one of the first texts to introduce foundational motifs that have since come to define the genre (Slusser, 1992, p. 46). The novel is considered a seminal work, establishing a continuity from which the science fiction genre later evolved. Frankenstein reflects an era when technological advancements were

profoundly reshaping both the natural world and human agency. Published during a period when innovations such as gas lighting, steam locomotives, and steamships were rapidly transforming human experience and everyday life, Shelley's novel emerged within a context of seemingly boundless progress and limitless potential fueled by science and technology. Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist, embodies this belief in progress. His story, driven by a promethean ambition, is a familiar one: through his scientific endeavors, he succeeds in bringing life to inanimate mat-

ter, creating a human-like creature from organic materials. Shelley's depiction of an overreaching scientist who, through technological means, creates a powerful entity that ultimately escapes his control remains a central theme in modern science fiction.

What distinguishes *Frankenstein* is that Shelley's protagonist does not enter into a Faustian pact with a supernatural force like the devil — a notion rooted in an earlier belief system. Instead, the new driving force is science. *Frankenstein's* ambitions bear fruit only after he abandons knowledge from the 'pre-scientific' era in favor of contemporary scientific advancements, particularly in the field of electricity. In light of the technological developments of her time, Shelley's narrative offers a reexamination of humanity's place in a world increasingly shaped by the forces of the Industrial Revolution and modernity. At the heart of *Frankenstein* lie fundamental questions central to humanism: What does it mean to be human? Where does human essence reside? How can man ethically relate to one another?

Shelley's *Frankenstein* also functions as a cautionary tale about the dangers of humanity's unchecked pursuit of scientific knowledge. Seduced by the new possibilities that science and technology present, humans may be led to believe they are attaining god-like power, capable of creating life itself. However, as Shelley illustrates, such endeavors often result in consequences that are beyond human control and ultimately destructive. Implicitly, Shelley advocates for acknowledging a higher power that restores humanity to its rightful place in the universe, despite the dominance of modern ideologies. Literary scholar George Slusser refers to this notion as the „Frankenstein Barrier“, a concept rooted in Western thought and the belief that humans are created in the image of God. This idea has since become a foundational narrative within the science fiction tradition, especially in the Anglo-European context (Slusser, 1992, p. 46).

Following *Frankenstein*, classic science fiction authors built a genre-specific myth grounded in Western humanistic ideals, positioning humanity at the center of creation.

As a result, beings created through the alliance of science and technology — such as robots — are often portrayed as existential threats. Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov, in particular, shaped the branch of science fiction focused on robots, imbuing their works with complex ethical and philosophical questions. Asimov's „Three Laws of Robotics“ (first introduced in 1942) famously stated that a robot must never harm a human and must always obey human commands. These laws have had a lasting impact, influencing not only science fiction but also real-world robotics research and development, and continue to be referenced in contemporary debates on robot ethics. Although both Dick and Asimov critiqued the „Frankenstein Barrier“, their works ultimately reinforced the narrative that robots, in their quest to achieve equality with humans, pose a fundamental threat to the balance of power and must be destroyed. This theme continues in films such as „Terminator“, „Blade Runner“, „The Matrix“, and „I, Robot“. The consistent message is that technologically created beings are fundamentally distinct from humans and nature, and this separation must be

preserved. As this belief system, rooted in Western thought, became more entrenched, the focus of science fiction increasingly shifted from philosophical inquiries to technological exploration (Information Philosophie, 2020).

Isaac Asimov emerged as a central figure in Hard Science Fiction (hard SF), a subgenre known for its meticulous attention to technical detail and its exploration of scientific possibilities. Many hard SF writers, including Asimov, had backgrounds in the sciences and incorporated cutting-edge research in fields like physics, mechanics, and space exploration into their stories. During the Cold War, as the arms race intensified, science fiction began to center more on space exploration, which became a symbol of the ideological struggle between the USSR and the USA. Space travel and futuristic designs shaped the cultural imagination of the future, and the mid-1960s television series „Star Trek“ reflected this fascination, resonating not only with the general public but also within scientific communities (Iglhaut, 2006, p. 256).

In the early 1980s, authors such as Jerry Pournelle, Robert A. Heinlein, and Larry Niven, alongside representatives from the space industry and the military, formed the „Citizens’ Advisory Council on National Space Policy“ to advise President Ronald Reagan on space exploration initiatives. Reflecting on this collaboration, Greg Bear noted, „Science fiction writers helped the rocket scientists elucidate their vision [...] and Ronald Reagan, who read science fiction, said: ‘Why not?’“ (Cramer, 2003, p. 193). This highlights the intentional use of science fiction by the government to advance sociotechnical imaginaries that aligned with its political and technological agendas. It demonstrates that sociotechnical imaginaries were not simply cultural or creative constructs, but were actively and strategically leveraged by state actors to promote specific visions of the future. The deliberate integration of science fiction writers into the Citizens’ Advisory Council on National Space Policy and the advocacy for programs like the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) brought fictional future visions into the realm of political and public discourse. These imagined

futures were not simply for entertainment — they were instrumental in presenting certain technological projects as inevitable, desirable, and achievable. The potential for crafting public acceptance of technological advancements deeply rooted in military and national security interests through carefully constructed sociotechnical imaginaries is particularly evident in this case.

Many members of the advisory committee supported the Strategic Defense Initiative, commonly known as „Star Wars“. The program was highly controversial, with critics warning that it could increase the risk of global nuclear conflict. Within the science fiction community, SDI and Reagan’s conservative policies met with resistance. Arthur C. Clarke, for example, vehemently opposed the SDI program, leading to a public confrontation with Heinlein. The growing politicization of hard SF ultimately led to deep divisions within the subgenre, as reactionary and militaristic ideas gained prominence. Many politically moderate or left-leaning writers distanced themselves from hard SF. Editor Kathryn Cramer observed, „the most generalized symptom of the

reactions against the politicization of hard SF was a sense that good writers were turning away from the subgenre and that its continued existence was in peril. However, some writers and editors became more provocative, trying to wrestle hard SF back into what they considered the proper shape“ (Cramer, 2003, p. 193).

In this politically and culturally charged environment, cyberpunk emerged with a sharp critique of contemporary science fiction. Writers like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling saw the genre as not only reactionary but overly preoccupied with technological advancements and space exploration, while neglecting the profound technological innovations already transforming everyday life, society, and the individual. In response, they called for a new “radical, hard SF” (Cheap Truth, 1984) that would shift its focus from the stars to the

realities of the emerging electronic age. Cyberpunk, therefore, should be understood as the product of a complex interplay of historical, literary, political, and technological forces. The explicit goal of cyberpunk was to break away from the tradition of narratives centered on extreme scenarios in space or on distant planets, often featuring protagonists from scientific or military elites (cf. Lem, Heinlein, Clarke, Asimov, and Dick). Instead, cyberpunk refocused attention on Earth and the ways in which high technology was already reshaping daily life. Rather than continuing to modernize the warnings of human hubris through Shelley’s monsters or Asimov’s robots, cyberpunk sought to explore how the rapid fusion of human and machine was already transforming individuals, society, perception, and culture — and how these changes would only intensify in the future.

## **GIBSON AND BAUDRILLARD: THE ENTANGLEMENT OF CYBERPUNK AND MEDIA THEORY IN SHAPING FUTURE IMAGINARIES**

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Having explored the interplay between Neuralink, the concepts of Interface and Matrix, and their

connection to William Gibson, and having traced the breaks in tradition between cyberpunk authors

and classical science fiction, the next step is to examine how the concepts and terminology of cyberpunk literature have gained influence far beyond the genre. To understand this, it is necessary to focus on the interweaving of cyberpunk literature with media theory.

This interweaving operates on two interconnected levels. On the one hand, cyberpunk authors like William Gibson drew on media theoretical concepts, incorporating and fictionalizing them in their work. In doing so, these authors often pushed beyond the boundaries of the theories themselves, creatively exploring and sometimes expanding upon their abstract ideas. On the other hand, media theorists and philosophers such as Douglas Kellner, Fredric Jameson, and Rainer Winter engaged with cyberpunk literature, recognizing in these works an artistic realization and continuation of their own theories. These theorists not only analyzed the cyberpunk narratives but also used them as a springboard to further develop their own ideas. The central argument of this paper is that this reciprocal relationship — between cyberpunk fiction

and media theory — accounts for the genre's wide recognition and influence far beyond the boundaries of science fiction. This interplay has left a lasting mark on the intellectual discourse, to the extent that the concepts and terminology introduced by cyberpunk authors continue to shape discussions in various fields today.

As previously discussed, cyberpunk literature is rooted in the desire to break with classical Western notions of an inherent human essence, portraying how technology penetrates deeply into the core of humanity, profoundly and radically transforming it. This reflection, while strongly anchored in the field of science fiction, is not limited to this genre. Rather, it finds its counterpart in academic discourse preceding the rise of cyberpunk literature, a discourse that can be broadly understood today as the project of postmodernism. In discussions of postmodernism, Baudrillard's ideas were long regarded as the cutting edge of subversive contemporary social theory. In the mid-1970s, Baudrillard began developing his theory of simulation, grounded in the thesis that modern society had undergone



a drastic rupture due to the impact of new media technologies. In this context, Baudrillard proclaimed the dissolution of the subject, political economy, meaning, truth, and the social formations of contemporary societies. The representation and analysis of this process, Baudrillard argued, required entirely new theories, concepts, and descriptions. His model of simulation was based on a multiple order of artificial worlds of signs, which he called “simulacra”. Much like McLuhan’s “leading medium”, Baudrillard’s “simulacra” are subject to an evolution throughout history, altering both their form and theoretical significance. According to Baudrillard, the most advanced form of simulacrum is simulation, which has become the dominant feature of modern societies.

For Baudrillard, postmodern society is primarily organized by new mass media technologies, which generate signs, images, and social realities, thus giving rise to a new postmodern culture of simulation. The world of the simulation society, therefore, is governed by codes and models. Baudrillard contends that, from this point onward, humanity exists within a logic of

simulation „which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all the models based on the merest fact — the models come first, their circulation, orbital like that of the bomb, constitutes the genuine magnetic field of the event“ (Baudrillard, 1981, p.17).

This intersection of cyberpunk and postmodern theory, particularly Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, highlights the way cyberpunk literature not only fictionalizes but also engages deeply with postmodern concerns, specifically the dissolution of stable identities, realities, and truths in an age dominated by technology and media. It is the technologies and media of the postmodern world that shape, modulate, and test mankind. Media take on the role of creating human reality (Baudrillard, 1993). Whereas in earlier stages, individuals experienced reality through their visual and sensory perception of the environment, today’s media have developed a life of their own, generating what Baudrillard terms hyperreality: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is



**THE MATRIX APPEARS MORE REAL AND COMPLEX THAN ANYTHING HUMANS EXPERIENCE IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES.**

the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1981, p.3). The experiences provided to humans through entertainment, information, and communication media are more intense and immersive than the mundane scenes of everyday life. Thus, Baudrillard’s world is one of hyperreality. In this postmodern world, individuals leave the „desert of the real“ (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 38) behind for the ecstasies of hyperreality and the new realms of experience offered by computers, media, and technologies. That these ecstasies are not „real“ is irrelevant, as everything has become a simulation in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between the imaginary and the real.

While Baudrillard’s concept of simulation remains largely abstract, Gibson, in „Neuromancer“, presents a world where simulation and hyperreality are omnipresent

through the Matrix. In „Neuromancer“, humans are surrounded by simulations, such as artificial or computer-generated identities and intelligences. Even human individuals can be reconstructed and continue to exist as simulations of themselves. Through the Matrix, a new domain of the hyperreal is envisioned. The Matrix appears more real and complex than anything humans experience in their everyday lives. For example, the protagonist of „Neuromancer“, Case, feels truly alive only within the Matrix — his real life, as he perceives it, takes place there. He disdainfully refers to the body as mere „meat“ (Gibson, 2003, p. 264). Although humans in Gibson’s world can move freely between reality and the virtual reality of the Matrix through the interface, like Baudrillard’s dissolving subject, they often struggle to distinguish between simulation and reality. Baudrillard’s idea of the implosion of reality with other dimensions into a new, multi-dimensional simulation of experiences is thus rendered literarily in Gibson’s work. In some cases, even death may have no significant impact on a person’s physical or virtual existence. During one of Case’s stays in the

Matrix, for instance, he is declared brain-dead in the physical world. Meanwhile, the Matrix contains personality constructs based on memories of deceased individuals, and these constructs believe they are the actual individuals.

At the conclusion of „Neuromancer“, the god-like superbeing that emerges from the fusion of two artificial intelligences embodies the totality of the system and possesses its own consciousness. This consciousness is something entirely new: it is neither confined to a body nor limited to hardware but exists independently in the infinite space of the interconnected communication, computer, and satellite networks. The Matrix, in „Neuromancer“, thus acquires a consciousness that both envelops it and transcends it. To echo Elon Musk’s statement, we are dealing here with “the ‘matrix in the matrix’” (Tesmanian, 2020).

However, as we have seen, Musk, after invoking these images, turns away from such visions, advocating for the creation of what he describes as “the good version of cyberpunk worlds.” The technologies being developed by Neuralink,

therefore, are intended to ensure the “survival” of humanity by enhancing the human mind and its capabilities to compete with artificial intelligences. Implicitly, Musk is drawing on familiar narratives, images, and ideas, but in the next step, he diverges from them. He explicitly references the anti-humanist cyberpunk vision of the relationship between technology and humanity as a means of addressing the problem.

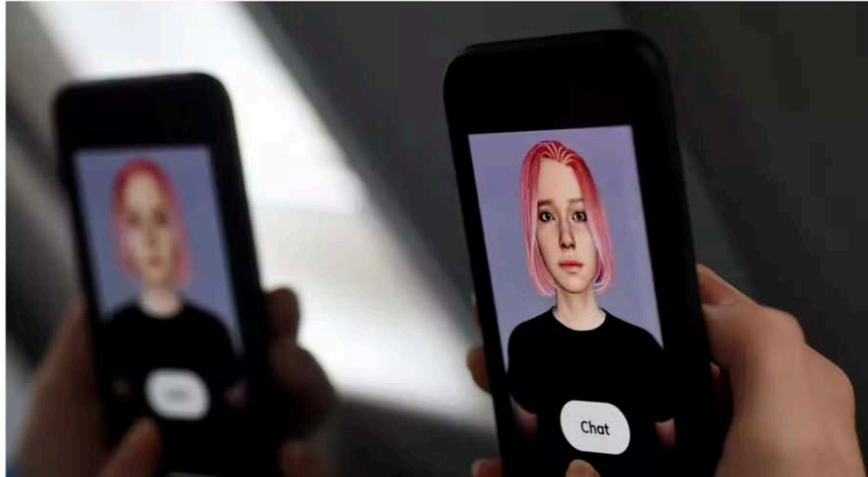
As pointed out above, Baudrillard’s ideas were long considered the vanguard of subversive contemporary social theory in the discourse on postmodernism. His thoughts on the radical transformation of modern society found resonance not only in academic circles but also in the artistic avant-garde. Baudrillard’s ideas were frequently adopted, discussed, and contributed to his reputation as a prophet of postmodern theory. A particular focus was placed on Baudrillard’s writing strategies, which fused aesthetics and material from various domains. His texts oscillated between literary and academic styles, gradually dissolving the boundaries between theory and fiction. Despite Baudrillard’s theoretical

Tech

## Elon Musk claims AI will overtake humans 'in less than five years'

Existential threat posed by artificial intelligence is much closer than previously predicted, billionaire warns

Anthony Cuthbertson • Monday 27 July 2020 16:49 • [Comments](#)



(Independent.com, 27.07.2020)

and discursive subversiveness, critics began to argue as early as the 1980s that his post-1970s work lacked innovation, accusing the French philosopher of reiterating his earlier ideas rather than truly developing them further. Douglas Kellner, associated with the third generation of the Frankfurt School, commented on this critique:

„For some years, Baudrillard was cutting-edge, high-tech social theorist, the most stimulating and provocative contemporary thinker. But in the early 1980s, Baudrillard ceased producing the stunning

analyses of the new postmodern scene that won such attention in the previous decade. Burnt out and terminally cynical, Baudrillard has instead churned out a number of mediocre replays of his previous ideas [...] Baudrillard's travelogues, notebooks, theoretical simulations, and occasional pieces fell dramatically below the level of his 1970s work, and it appeared to many that Baudrillard himself had become boring and irrelevant, the ultimate sin for a supposedly avant-garde postmodern theorist“ (Kellner, 1995, p. 298). It was during this very phase that the first works by

Gibson and other cyberpunk authors emerged. While Baudrillard „churned out a number of mediocre replays of his previous ideas [...] cyberpunk fiction became the literary trend of the moment and for many the avant-garde of theoretical visions and insight“ (Kellner, 1995, p. 298).

This shift in cultural relevance reflects how cyberpunk literature, with its fresh engagement with technology, media, and the human condition, began to occupy the intellectual space once dominated by Baudrillard’s postmodern thought. Due in no small part to this form of positive academic engagement, as demonstrated by Kellner, cyberpunk evolved into a literary trend that crossed disciplinary boundaries, from cultural studies and media theory to gender studies. This development is largely attributable to Douglas Kellner, one of the most prominent figures in cultural studies, whose work has been widely received and influential across multiple academic fields. Kellner himself believed that Gibson’s works offered „powerful visions of a new type of technological society“ where „humans and machines [...] constantly

imploding and the human itself is dramatically mutating,“ creating „the most impressive bodies of recent writing on the fate of hyper-technological society since Baudrillard’s key texts of the 1970s“ (Kellner, 1995, p. 298). Frederic Jameson also recognized the significant role of cyberpunk literature as early as 1991, remarking that „new writing like cyberpunk determines an orgy of language and representation“ (Jameson, 1991, p. 38).

For Jameson, in particular, Gibson’s innovations were noteworthy: „William Gibson’s representational innovations, indeed, mark his work as an exceptional literary realization within a predominantly visual or aural postmodern production“ (Jameson, 1991, p. 320). Over the years, Jameson has frequently returned to cyberpunk literature, examining works by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in various contexts, viewing them as the ultimate literary expression rooted in postmodern media theory and philosophy. That Gibson remains relevant for Jameson is evident in one of his more recent works, „The Ancients and the Postmoderns“ (2015), where he dedicates

an entire chapter to Gibson's writing, reading him in conversation with figures like Baudrillard, Debord, Deleuze, and Heidegger. Timothy Leary, meanwhile, attributed to cyberpunk literature a philosophical significance for the postmodern era comparable to that held by the works of Mann, Tolstoy, and Melville for the industrial age (Leary, 1996). Likewise, the American literary scholar Brian McHale, who has explored the mutual influence between postmodern literature, science fiction, and poststructuralist theory, assigned cyberpunk a central position within this framework (McHale, 1992, p. 244). Rainer Winter further advanced this discussion in his 2002 essay, „Die postmodernen Visionen des Cyberpunks“, where he delved deeply into cyberpunk's visions of the future, its spatial experience of the „, and its unique worldview.

Like McLuhan and Baudrillard before them, the authors of cyberpunk literature operated within previously separate domains of philosophy, social sciences, literature, natural sciences, and media culture, attempting to capture the rapid transformations of their present. While Baudrillard has faced

criticism (which should be seen less as a critique of his overall work and more as a reflection of the limitations of a theorist within a specific time and context), it is crucial to recognize the foundational role his theoretical groundwork played. Baudrillard's influence on both academic and non-academic discourse significantly shaped how cyberpunk authors, particularly Gibson, conceptualized and articulated ideas like the Matrix and the interface. Baudrillard's ideas not only paved the way for these concepts but can be traced, so to speak, into the very DNA of Gibson's Matrix and interface. Both Baudrillard's theories of simulation and hyperreality, alongside his concept of the implosion of reality, are closely intertwined with Gibson's development and expansion of these ideas into the forms of the Matrix and the interface. Through the reception of thinkers like Kellner, Jameson, Winter, and McHale, cyberpunk literature — especially Gibson's work — has garnered significant academic attention, spreading into a wide range of disciplines. For example, cultural studies have explored the representation of fragmented identity and culture within cyberpunk

literature (Cavallaro, 2000; Tatum, 2006), gender studies have thoroughly engaged with the hybrid figure of the cyborg and its implications for gender relations (Haraway, 1990; Lavigne, 2012), and even in architecture, scholars have investigated the extrapolated spatial concepts of artificial megacities and their organic building materials as presented in cyberpunk narratives (Wittke, 2006).

This diversity of approaches not only highlights the multifaceted nature of cyberpunk literature but also underscores how the concepts and terms described by cyberpunk authors like Gibson have diffused into broader discourse and various contexts. Gibson's texts are not only literary reflections on the evolving relationship between humans and machines, alongside the related discourses on the body, reality, and simulation; they also serve as artistic-literary explorations of media and social theories. In this process, Gibson fictionalized the theories he engaged with, popularizing them in the process. Concepts like the Matrix and the interface, drawn from the media theories of figures like McLuhan and Baudrillard, have permeat-

ed wider cultural discourse and shaped popular notions of the future.

This dynamic reveals that science, society, and popular culture should not be understood as distinct, autonomous entities. Instead, they must be seen as interdependent dimensions that constantly influence and constitute one another. The case of cyberpunk demonstrates that popular culture, science, discourse, and research are so closely intertwined that they cannot be separated; rather, they shape each other in profound ways. Artistic, scientific, and societal discourses are mutually formative. In the case of Neuralink, the continued influence of the fusion of cyberpunk and media theory is evident. The terms and concepts used to articulate Neuralink's projects and visions are products of this very interconnection. The contemporary use of these concepts, with clear references to cyberpunk and Gibson by figures like Elon Musk, further illustrates that these ideas have left such a significant imprint on the discourse that they now function as widely recognizable future imaginaries. They evoke images and visions that are familiar to

large portions of, at least, Western societies.

The historical trajectory outlined in the article clearly demonstrates that the concepts and ideas developed in Baudrillard's theory and Gibson's speculative fiction actively shape public perception and even influence the development of future technologies. Concepts like the Matrix and the interface embody deeply ingrained cultural narratives and imaginations that shape our understanding of technological advancement and the relationship between humans and machines. These concepts contribute to collectively shared societal future imaginaries. The relationship between technological development and societal imaginations is reciprocal. While fiction and theory shape our visions of the future, the technologies we develop, in turn, mold our expectations and the concrete realities of that future. Technology does not emerge in a vacuum; it reflects and reinforces specific societal values, power structures, and imaginations. This dynamic is increasingly recognized by technology firms (the most famous among them might be Sony), as evidenced by

the growing popularity of science fiction prototyping and the use of concepts like speculative design and design fiction. The implications of this feedback loop must not only be examined but also brought into societal discourse. The narratives embedded within these designs are crucial, just as cyberpunk is far more than just a genre, and Baudrillard is more than merely a theorist of postmodernism — both continue to shape narratives about how the future may unfold and have thus retained their relevance. The future imaginaries that have emerged from the intersection of Gibson and Baudrillard resonate like echoes, constructing a world in which the boundaries between fiction and reality are increasingly blurred — demonstrating the enduring relevance of Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and simulation even at this level.



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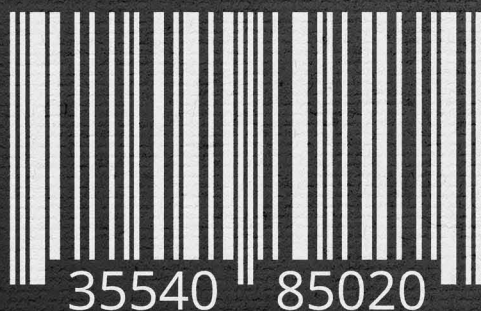
# NOTHING IS WHOLLY OBVIOUS WITHOUT BECOMING ENIGMATIC. REALITY ITSELF IS TOO OBVIOUS TO BE TRUE.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, THE PERFECT CRIME



**SIGNED INTO THE WORLD.**

**BAUDRILLARD AND HEIDEGGER  
IN CONVERSATION**



## ABSTRACT

Being-in-the-world, a central concept in early Heidegger's philosophy, begins with everydayness and existential activities. Baudrillard mentions Heidegger's theory of hermeneutics, the hermeneutical relationship. He uses phenomenology as a method, asserting that everydayness is concealed. However, Baudrillard opposes Heidegger's phenomenological goal, namely, being itself. For Baudrillard, the world is a simulacrum, a participatory alibi. Despite their differences, Baudrillard and Heidegger share a potential "conversation" based on their respective views of the world, everydayness, things, and objects.

**Keywords:** object, signification, human being, everydayness, world

**T**oday we are living in a world where the center is not logos or human being, but objects. In early Heidegger's philosophy, the world, even the living world, is not ready made or present-at-hand (*vorhanden*). In the 1950s, Heidegger's late perspective shifts to seeing thing as the center of the world which is constructed by interactive en-owning (*Ereignen*) of each one of the Fourfold (*Geviert*), namely sky, earth, human being and gods. He mentions the danger posed by modern technic and its essence, but, inspired by Hölderlin, he believes that "where there is danger, there also grows the salvation".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hölderlin's poetry. Cited in Martin Heidegger's "*Die Frage nach der Tech-*



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Baudrillard is not so optimistic. What he tried to explore in the 1970s is how “real” is and what is “real” in the society we live in. He doesn’t refer to the concept “world”, especially in its ontological sense, but to society or the political-economical system. Primarily, he defines consumption “as a system of communication and exchange, as a code of signs continually being sent, received and reinvented — as *language*”.<sup>2</sup> His concept of the object has double meanings. The first one is primarily linguistic, and the second one is symbolic, i.e. all things and beings in the consumer society become objects through coding. Because of the homogeneity of the code, the consumers as codes in the symbolic exchange are connected to the others, yet simultaneously obstructed and blocked from them, and harassed and manipulated by objects.

But for Baudrillard, this dialectical power does not exist in the consumer society because this closed symbolic-exchange world

itself is even full of contradictions and paradoxes, neither objects nor human being are negative. What happens in the consumer society is not dialectical fighting between subject and object, nor is it about truth of being. Because “the object (the soul, the shadow, the product of our labour become object) takes its revenge”.<sup>3</sup> Hence in the signification of symbolic exchange, everything and every consumer become signed or coded object. In this way, the consumer society is also a field full of paradox where the contradictory opponents coexist. A paradox is that the through signed object becoming consumer is anyhow “respected” as so-called subject or “powerful consumer” in order to enhance its consumer power and content itself with consuming, not to attempt to exercise it on the social stage. Actually, we, as human beings, “encounter the troubling atmosphere of this inversion of subject and object, this sorcery of the otherness of the same, in the most everyday expressions”.<sup>4</sup> The position of human being as subject is today obviously replaced by object. And

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*nik*”, in GA 7, S. 29.

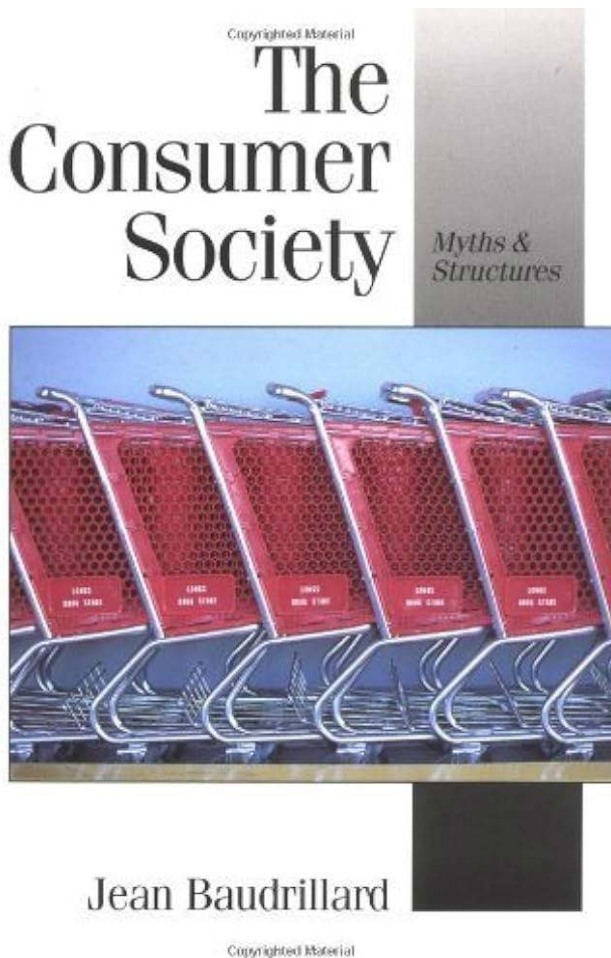
<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1970): *The Consumer Society. Myths and structures*. (referred as “CS”). Sage: London, 1998. P. 93.

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<sup>3</sup> CS 189.

<sup>4</sup> CS189f.

in this uneasiness of the inversion of subject and object, is it possible that “human being” still relies on a certain “surplus” of himself to maintain or recover his status as subject or to reconstruct his subjectivities? What is the state of human being in his living world which is signed and signifying daily?



Baudrillard manifests the “dead” or coded of person: “forged by the whole of the Western tradition as the organizing myth of the Subject — the person with its passions,

its will, its character (or banality) — is absent, dead, swept out of our functional universe”.<sup>5</sup> He concerns himself with the problem of deconstruction and reconstruction of human being, and mentions the possibility of humans living outside the manipulation of the political-economical system. His works imply a profound concern for human existence in the technical and consumer era. His analysis of objects focuses more on the processes through which humans relate to things, as well as to the resulting human behavior and interpersonal relationships, rather than on the functions of the things themselves or on the classifications used for analysis. But what is the situation of human existence today? And what or *who* is the human being in the consumer society, especially in a new one dominated by AI?

## 1 DAILY LIFE AS THE WORLD FOR BEING, LIVING AND SIGNIFYING

In “Being and Time” (1927), Heidegger ontologically and existentially (existenzial) quests the human subjectivity which is regarded

<sup>5</sup> CS 86, 88.



as an eternal or a self-evident concept by traditional subject-philosophy. In daily life, the so-called “subject” is closed and concealed (*verborgen*). He points out that the “who” in everyday life is precisely not me or myself, and the “subject” of everydayness is called the “they” (*das Man*, the Man) who has no specific reference and is always curious. With the “they”, he describes the non-authentic (*uneigentlich*) existence state of human beings in their daily lives which are banal, average, one-dimensional, undifferentiated, evasive and not independent.<sup>6</sup>

Daily life is for Baudrillard also the dimension of banality and repetition. He seems to have been inspired by Heidegger, and his observation and description of consumer society in “The Consumer Society” (1970) lies in the “everydayness as closure, as *Verborgenheit* (concealing)”,<sup>7</sup> a concept he borrows from Heidegger. For the latter, the concept “*Verborgenheit*” is, after disclosed or unconcealed, related to ontological truth. But for the former, it is related to

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger (1927/1993): *Sein und Zeit* (referred as „SZ“), S. 127, 128.

<sup>7</sup> CS 35.

the real appearance of human fatal and paradox destiny in the modern. Further difference is that, as the consumption location, daily life for Baudrillard is full of images and signs. Thus, his exploration of consumer society is orientated toward the hyper-reality of the symbolic exchange world.

Heidegger’s early philosophy, in the 1920s, focuses on the correlation, which is seen as a path to sense of being (*Seinssinn*) in order to proceed to being itself, of beings and the whole state of human existence in the living world and daily life, in order, through involvement (*Bewandtnis*) and significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*), to get the structure of being of *Dasein* (Being-there) or Being-in-the-World for furthermore disclosing the sense of being. The whole structure of understanding of world contains ontologically three dimensions, namely the ontical, pre-ontological and fundamental-ontological, and, according to the way of human existence, the whole structure contains two dimensions, namely non-authentic existentiell and authentic existential.

Heidegger’s thinking and method influence Baudrillard whose the-

ory is also a kind of holism, but merely in the ontical layer, like his concept of “object system” and his concern of the correlation and the power of the system. Even the signification of symbolic exchange is mentioned to the consumer’s relation to object, namely “to a set of objects in its total signification”.<sup>8</sup> Therefore human relation to object is “bewitched and manipulatory”.<sup>9</sup>

Baudrillard mentions also the self-constitution of relational objects, and finds that it only “repeats the idea of a relation, and this relation is not for people to live.” And “what these objects express is a relational idea in which it ‘consumes itself’ and the relationship of actual experience is thus dissolved”. In this way, he gives the second definition of consumption, namely “a complete and systematic idealistic practice (*pratique idéaliste*, ideal praxis) that goes beyond objects and interpersonal relationships”.<sup>10</sup> But what is really being consumed is merely the “idea”. For him, “the field of consumption is a *structured social*

*field*”<sup>11</sup> and full of different kinds, different types of structures. But for both of them, Heidegger and Baudrillard, the most important meaning does not rest on object, nor on structure of phenomenon, yet the relationship. The fundamental structure is the structure of symbolic exchange. Based on it, there are two main kinds of construct in consumer society, one is consumer activity itself according to un- and/or consciousness, the other is the relationship between consumer and the society according to new classification and the top-down rule of symbolic signs.

Baudrillard’s understanding about relationship is not only influenced by Heidegger, but also draws from Marx, Roland Barthes, Saussure, Marcel Mauss and Levi-Strauss. He is influenced by Heidegger’s “formal indication (*formale Anzeige*)”, with which he finds out the logic of object itself and its self-signification, namely the object links to the others. By this way, the object takes shape of its order and networks, then its logic:

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8 CS 27.

9 CS 114.

10 Baudrillard: *Le système des objets*, p. 273, 280, 282, 283. *Das System der Dinge*, S. 243, 247, 248, 249.

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| “They are always arranged to

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11 CS 62.

mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards networks of objects in order to captivate that impulse and bring it, in keeping with its own logic, to the highest degree of commitment, to the limits of its economic potential, ... establish inertial constraints in the consumer.”<sup>12</sup>

And hence he expands from Marx’s social relations to the hermeneutic relationship of consumption activities though his investigation of social relations is still focused on social classification and status as well as its dynamic and sliding. Marx discusses the material objects and products, and Baudrillard focuses on the non-material sign and code. He finds the symbolic exchange value more important than use and exchange solely. In this way, he is different from Marx, yet similar to Heidegger’s structure of being, his social structure not being static. The social classification is up to the code. The classification contains the difference and identity: “to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model”.<sup>13</sup> And

it seems arbitrary, hence can be changed. In fact, the social classes stay as they are. Its change is not caused by obtaining the high level code, but achieved by becoming the new politic or economic system. The high level of code always is monopolized by the upper echelons of society, because it is within the upper echelons of society that “innovation takes place, in order to restore social distance”.<sup>14</sup>

Baudrillard is also under the influence of Barthes’ “mythology” whose characteristic is “to transform a meaning into form”.<sup>15</sup> As second system, the mythical system is more important than the first system where the causality is natural, exactly because the causality there is artificial and false.<sup>16</sup> For Baudrillard, the social structure, as a system of language, is not a system of natural causality of linguistics, but, like the mythical one, it is artificial and transforms the signified into the signifier, and hence the signifying has duality.

12 CS 27.

13 CS 88.

14 CS 63.

15 Roland Barthes (1957/1972/1991): *Mythologies*. Translated in English by Anette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press. P. 131.

16 Barthes: *Mythologies*, p. 130.

Unlike with Heidegger and Barthes, one of Baudrillard's main purposes is to point out the differences between contemporary and past consumption activities. With him, the structure of consumer behavior has two layers: the second (symbolic-metaphorical) one is more important than the first (natural phenomenal) one, because "the truth of consumption is that it is not a function of enjoyment, but a function of production"<sup>17</sup> which produces the symbolic exchange value. In the first layer, a consumer takes things/objects and enjoyment as axis and orientation of his consumption. In the second one, consumer behavior is "that of the metaphorical or displaced expression of desire, that of production, through differential signs, of a social code of values".<sup>18</sup> They are thus, "in spite of themselves", will be involved and enter into "a" generalized system of exchange and production of coded values.

The consumers as signs or codes are integrated, and a "self" is produced by mass communication and signification system. Because

of deconstruction and abstraction of sign, being and its meaning of all consumers are lost. That is "forgetfulness of being", the main kind of sheltering-concealing (*Verborgenheit*) of being, according to Heidegger, and the coded reconstructed "self" is then the unauthentic one. For Heidegger, the structure of being is not an "empty" connection or relationship without content. He sees the "How-to-be" as the ontological existential content of ontological relationship built up by formal indication as well as involvement (*Bewandtnis*) and the significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*). But for Baudrillard, the consumer's social structure is structured by sign and code that have no concrete content or meaning but signification. From this structure, he finds in commodity another kind of value beyond use and exchange, namely symbolic exchange value. And symbolic illusion, caused by codes and their signifying, is exactly the key marker of social relationship as well as of the contemporary consumer society.

Baudrillard points out that the relationship between consumers and the real living world, between politics, history and culture is

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<sup>17</sup> CS 78.

<sup>18</sup> CS 78.



**HUMAN CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR ITSELF IS THE SIGN AND SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE OF SIGN.**

a “relationship of curiosity”, and, as to Heidegger, this curiosity shows a “lack of understanding”.<sup>19</sup> Thus daily life, according to Baudrillard, is not only the sum of daily behaviors. Its banality and repetitive aspect are the “hermeneutic system” of signs.<sup>20</sup> On account of this system, Baudrillard considers the consumer society as a field where activities of interpretation happen, and daily life has become the most direct and common activity for people to interpret the others and themselves, too. The daily life becomes the field of signification. There, consumption itself has been arranged as “a speaking to oneself [*un discours à soi-même*]”. Similar like with Heidegger, the most usual and normal state of human being as consumer is that of a “Universal Man” who is made by the whole discourse on consumption. It aims to make him “the general, ideal and

definitive embodiment of the Human Race and to turn consumption into the beginnings of a “human liberation”. This “Man” or “Universal Man” is the “Public Opinion”. It tends to play itself out “with its satisfactions and disappointments, in this minimal exchange”.<sup>21</sup> Human consumption behavior itself is the sign and symbolic exchange of sign. Only, in this signification consumer’s intentions no longer indicate his desire for an “ego” but alienation from “ego” through the self-signification of consumption.

As a system of signification, the operation of consumer society today is according to the law of symbolic-exchange value. From the phenomena of consumption in the 1960s, Baudrillard finds out that human consumption activities are not solely driven by the function of objects, nor the object merely a reflection of an individual or a group’s reputation. More fundamental definition of the consumption by Baudrillard is a system of message transmission and exchange, a code of symbols that is continuously sent, received and re-created. And it is also the basis

<sup>19</sup> CS 34f. Ref. SZ § 36.

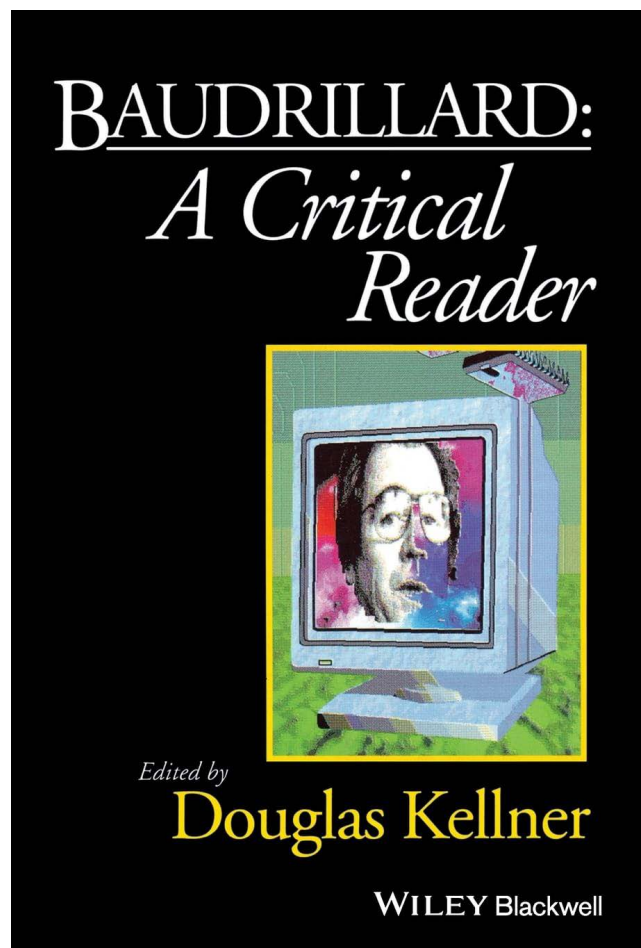
<sup>20</sup> CS 35.

<sup>21</sup> CS 85, 86.

of symbolic exchange. Douglas Kellner sees Baudrillard different from other sociologists in that he uses semiotics to explore daily life, but his most significant feature is his “descriptive and hermeneutic analysis” of symbols and consumption systems in consumer society.<sup>22</sup> In order to enter the consumer society, human being has to be signed and coded, and hence he is the signifier and simultaneously the signified. He points out that based on the decomposition and abstraction of signs, the meaning of existence and being are lost. “Human being” as a sign can be freely exchanged after homogenization due to the characteristics of the symbol, and is arbitrary and uncertain.

Baudrillard’s description of phenomena in consumer society, as well as his attention to systematic structure in the analysis of symbols and consumption phenomena is, to some extent, influenced by Heidegger’s phenomenology and hermeneutics as methods. But he extremely avoids Heidegger’s phenomenology and hermeneu-

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Kellner (1995): *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge USA: Blackwell. P. 4.



tics because they are nothing different from ontology. Yet he also avoids retrospectively some characteristics or social types from the simplified tableaux or pictures of objects. Moreover, although he uses symbols and codes to reconstruct human beings and objects, he reminds that we should avoid to create our “self” merely by “reconstructing the codes of objects in form” and the codes of human being, because the code itself hides

“rigorous social logic” of object.<sup>23</sup> He uses the game rules to illustrate how people use the code “in their own way”: “To play with it, break its rules and to speak it in the language of your own class.”<sup>24</sup> That means that there is something creative in the symbolic “game” insofar the humans even as consumer can “play”. Some kind of freedom is hidden in it, or some kind of free space exists under the manipulation and constraint.

Regardless if the original “self” is subjectivity of consumer or not, it cannot be involved in the symbolic exchange system because, according to Baudrillard, it has been objectified through coding. But the question is still there: Where is the original “self”? On one hand, “human being” as consumer is arbitrary and uncertain due to the characteristics of the sign and symbolic exchange and can therefore be freely exchanged after homogenization. On the other hand, symbolic exchange of signs become the daily activities due to

consumption, thus signification is replaced by a new signification in this exchange.

Although everything is or will be a code, Baudrillard does not ignore the following fact: codes are created by human being and can also be changed according to human understanding and actions by setting or resetting the rules or cancel the rules, and it is left to everyone to speak up for his or her situation. According to Heidegger, even the human being is as a thrownness (*ein Geworfenes*) which is thrown in a world factually (*faktisch*) after he was born. Human as *Dasein*, in Heidegger’s sense, does not need to enter the world, but needs to understand the ontological meaning of world in order to grasp his own Being-how and furthermore his own Being-in-the-world, and hence to resolve (*erschliessen*) the ontological meaning of the world as well as of the whole of Being-in-the-world. In this way, human being as *Dasein* gets the possibility of freedom limited, because of the facticity of thrownness. According to Baudrillard, consumer society is however not the whole world. It is merely a part of the world without the ra-

23 Baudrillard: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, p. 20. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 38.

24 Baudrillard: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, p. 19. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p.37..

tional people who do not consume, merely buy the necessities of life and are hence eliminated from the consumer society.

In consumption activities, not only object is symbolized, signed and coded through the logic of significations.<sup>25</sup> As consumer, the human is also symbolized and hence becomes banal and indifferent from objects and the others. In this way, human being is identified with objects because of the homogeneity of sign and code which is empty and therefore can signify and be signified at the same time. However, Baudrillard never denies the use value of objects or their exchange value as commodities. But today they are not key to deciding whether to consume. From a factual perspective, i.e. commodities flood all aspects of daily life in contemporary society, he finds that symbolic value controls cultural development. In this way, it is dominated by consumer culture which in the modern life belongs to subculture.<sup>26</sup> The deciding factors

for consumption are the symbolic value and symbolic exchange value of objects. Yet Baudrillard proposes and emphasizes both values. Use value of objects or their exchange value are aspects unique to modernity. Since what in things is identified are merely function, use value and exchange value, the traditional theories about things and consumption are based on needs and satisfaction which belong to the consciousness. According to Baudrillard's notion, that needs and satisfaction are not as correct and veritable enough as the theoretical basis of social feedback (*la prestation sociale*) and its signification today, and, at an abstract level, the discourse of things "belongs mostly to the unconscious society".<sup>27</sup>

## 2 KEY PROBLEM: COLLECTIVE FORGETFULNESS, COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUSNESS

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Unconsciousness plays the important role in Baudrillard's theory of consumer society, when Heidegger declares that traditional

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25 Baudrillard: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, p. 60ff. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 63ff.

26 Mark Gottdiener (1994/1995): *The Commoditizing in The System of Object and Everydayness*. In: Baudrillard. *A critical reader*. D. Kellner ed. Oxford,

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Cambridge: Blackwell, p. 37.

27 CS 78. Ref. Baudrillard: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, p.8. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 29f.



metaphysics has forgotten being and misplaced beings into beings. Because of forgetfulness of being (Seinsvergessenheit), Being of Being-in-the-world and my own being are closed, hence the human being exists in the closed everydayness.<sup>28</sup> Of course, no traditional philosopher would admit that he had forgotten being and misplaced it. They would consciously defend their understanding of being and fight against the accusation of forgetfulness of being.

Similar in the consumer society, according to Baudrillard, the human being exists with collective ideology which is constructed by consciousness and unconsciousness in two psycho-layers, and the consciousness is dominated by “unconscious social constraint”<sup>29</sup> which is manipulated by political and economic systems. But none can mention that. One reason of this is that manipulation is carried out through abstract and neutral yet powerful codes. This power constraints and pushes the consumer to consume, but against nothing, also recognizing nothing.

28 Ref. SZ 2, 21, 219, 339.

29 CS 78.

It comes from exchange. In order to establish the controlling and imperative of consumer behavior, the signification is closely integrated with the mass media and communication system:

“This technological process of mass communications delivers a certain kind of very imperative message: a message-consumption message, a message of segmentation and spectacularization, of misrecognition of the world and foregrounding of information as a commodity, of glorification of content as sign.”<sup>30</sup>

Though the codes are controlled by the political and economic system, restricted by symbolic exchange “law”, yet codes are independent. Signifying is therefore arbitrary and free. The structure of consumer society is built of code and signifying of code, thus is dynamic. This dynamic comes from exchange, signifying and code itself. Every moment, it can be changed up to the wrestling between those systems, political and economic as well as the symbolic exchange. When the abstract code has no fixed connotation or mean-

30 CS 123.

ing, it allows arbitrarily assigned significance during the process of signification.

The unconscious social discourse is even more fundamental, and functions as the basis of a conscious one. In this way, consciousness and unconsciousness coexist and function at the same time. The unconsciousness dominates the consumer activities, and semiotic laws decide the social function and value unconsciously. Therefore Baudrillard defines the consumption as “a powerful element of social control”, but “by that very fact it brings with it a need for ever greater *bureaucratic constraint* on the processes of consumption — which will as a consequence be exalted more and more energetically as the *realm of freedom*. There is no escaping from this circle”.<sup>31</sup>

In the way of this paradox, the consumers “think” themselves that they are clever and smart during consuming, because they compare price, brand, quality etc. But actually these messages from mass media and communication are “implanted” unconsciously into the un-

consciousness of consumer. Baudrillard regards consumer society from concrete and visible phenomena, but not phenomenologically, namely aims at being of beings or being as such. Those kinds of ontological meanings are already deleted in the consumer society. Baudrillard also criticizes the foundation of traditional consumption theory from both the phenomenon and abstract levels. As he mentions that the consumer behavior is collective, in this way, they relate to the others, namely the other consumers. But he seems looking over that not only all consumers but also all things and systems are integrated with all others, the other systems, such as different systems of ideological value, communication or exchange structure.<sup>32</sup> The focus of Baudrillard’s thesis is to put forward the negative effects brought by the arbitrariness and uncertainty of symbols.

The creative freedom and possibility from arbitrariness and uncertainty of symbols can, to some extent, serve as the basis for the reconstruction of human beings in

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31 CS 84.

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32 Baudrillard (1976/1991): *Der symbolische Tausch und der Tod*, S. 10, 21.

another direction. In spite of everything, Baudrillard keeps “nurturing a constant dream — in the hyperfunctionalism of consumed culture — of the universal, of myths capable of deciphering our age without themselves being mythological ‘spectaculars’, of an art which could decipher modernity without being abolished in it”.<sup>33</sup> The decisive lies in whether the arbitrariness and uncertainty of signs are based on the openness of the signs themselves or on a self-referential sheltering-concealing system, that is, a system that is fully and absolutely manipulated by the political and economic system. But the sign itself is a product of human beings, even if we return to the symbol itself and give it independence. Because of human limitations and the use of signs in different time and space and the inserting of different contents, the understanding of sign not only has differences that vary from person to person but may also be misheard or misunderstood.

The use value and even exchange value are based on consciousness. They both function as the

basis for the realization of symbolic exchange value, because most of the time consumers still purchase goods based on use value and exchange value, and thus take the brand into consideration, or unconsciously consume symbolic value and engage in symbolic exchange of social relationships. From these three values, we can understand the reason why Baudrillard uses social feedback and its signification as the basis of consumption theory.

Firstly, because needs can be stimulated or domesticated, and when satisfaction is based on scarcity (manque), i.e. the latter is more fundamental than satisfaction. And scarcity is the basis and also the reason that prompts people to consume. Today, consumption is almost irresistible linked to everyone, things and objects as well as the other human being, “precisely because it is a completely idealistic behavior ... the ultimate reason is that it is based on scarcity”.<sup>34</sup> The satisfaction after consumption is only recuperative satisfaction. It is merely illusion of replenishment

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33 CS 109.

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34 Baudrillard: *Le système des objets*, p. 273, 280, 282, 283. *Das System der Dinge*, S. 243, 247, 248, 249.

which is based on the eternal lack of something to which the mass media and communication hint. As long as the feeling of scarcity persists, consumers will never and cannot be truly satisfied, and they will never be able to stop searching or restrain consumption.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, the symbolic value and symbolic exchange value of the object itself show themselves in the signification of social feedback, while the instrumental use value of the object is directly included in the symbolic value and symbolic exchange value. Things are exchangeable due to their usefulness but also demonstrate their usefulness due to exchange. Yet symbolic exchange value does not necessarily have instrumental useful value. However, it is endowed with some usefulness based on the symbolic meaning of the giving.

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35 Ref. Baudrillard: *Le système des objets*, p. 283. Das System der Dinge, S. 249.

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Everything is therefore transposed into the virtual,  
and we are confronted with a virtual apocalypse,  
a hegemony ultimately much more dangerous  
than real apocalypse.

Jean Baudrillard



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