

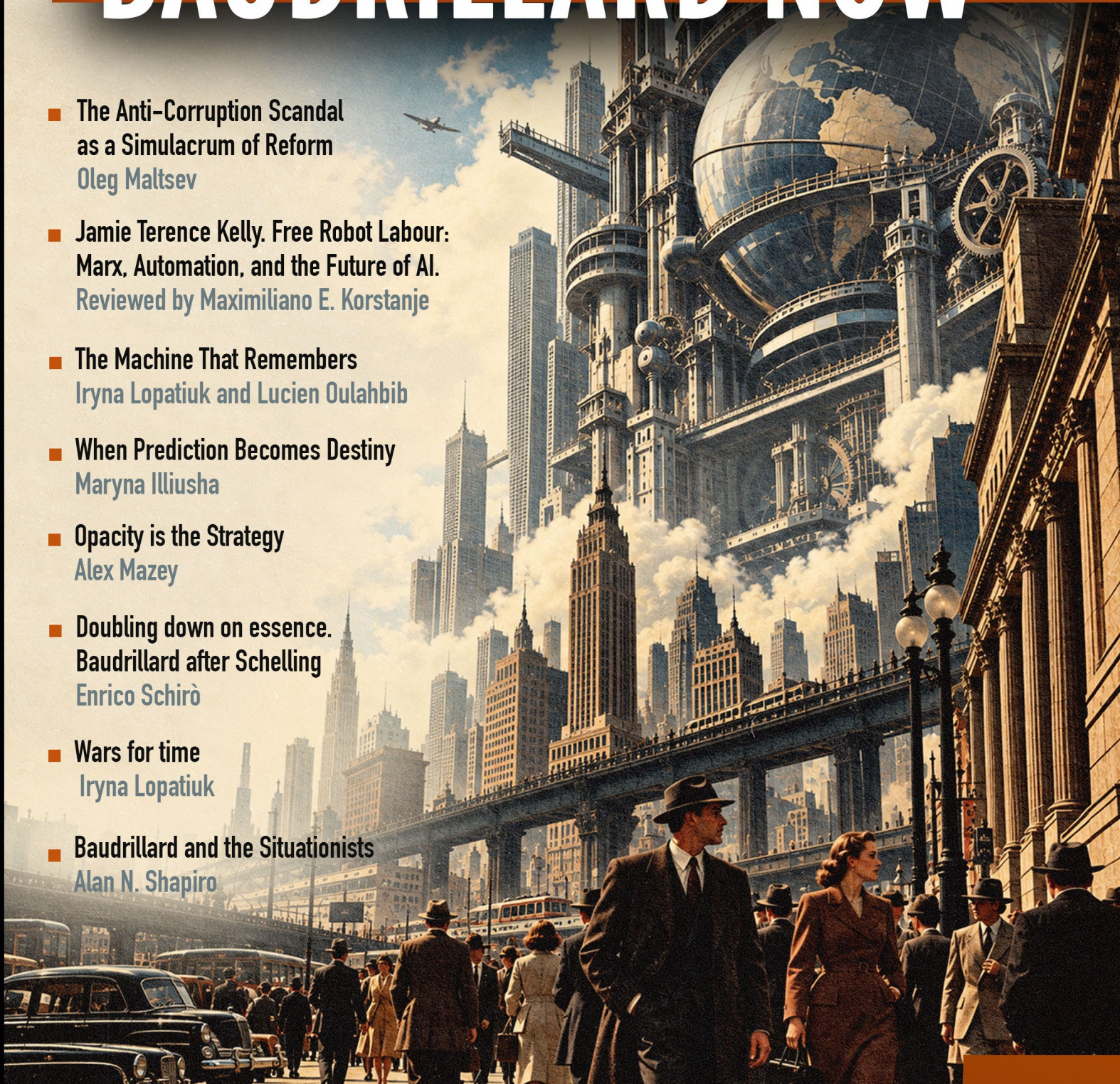
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INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL BAUDRILLARD NOW

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as a Simulacrum of Reform
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To challenge and to cope with this paradoxical state of things,
we need a paradoxical way of thinking



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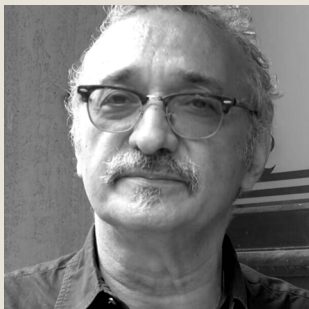
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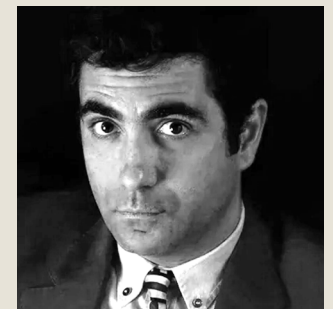
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THE ANTI-CORRUPTION SCANDAL AS A SIMULACRUM OF REFORM

Baudrillard, Post-Scandal Institutional Residue,
and the Ukrainian Case





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■ ABSTRACT

Anti-corruption scandals are usually read as signs of institutional failure. The more cases are exposed, investigated, and publicly discussed, the more corruption appears to be present. Yet this seemingly obvious relationship conceals a methodological problem: an increase in visible corruption may indicate not only an increase in corrupt activity, but also an increase in the capacity of institutions to detect what was previously hidden. The scandal, in other words, tells us that something has become visible. It does not, by itself, tell us what has changed.

This problem becomes particularly acute when scandal is treated as evidence of reform. Public exposure, investigation, prosecution, and punishment can produce a powerful appearance of institutional action while leaving the conditions that made the corrupt mechanism possible substantially intact. Jean Baudrillard's analysis of Watergate provides a starting point for understanding this paradox. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, scandal can function not simply as a revelation of institutional disorder but as a mechanism through which the system regenerates its own legitimacy. Yet the Baudrillardian diagnosis leaves open a question that becomes decisive once the scandal has passed: **what, precisely, remains inside the institution after the scandal is over?**

This article develops a framework for answering that question. It distinguishes the **corrupt event**, the **corruption mechanism**, and the **institutional opportunity infrastructure** that allows such mechanisms to operate and reproduce. It then separates the **law-enforcement circuit** from the institutional-transformation circuit, since the successful completion of the former does not necessarily imply the completion of the latter. The analysis introduces the concept of **post-scandal institutional residue (PSIR)**: the set of institutional changes, adaptations, vulnerabilities, routines, and unresolved conditions that remain after the media and political life-cycle of a scandal has ended.

The central proposition is that the effectiveness of anti-corruption reform cannot be inferred from the visibility or even the successful punishment of corrupt actors alone. The more demanding test is whether the exposed mechanism has lost its capacity for reproduction. This shifts analytical attention from the number of scandals and offenders toward the trajectory of mechanisms through institutions: what was exposed, what was disrupted, what was redesigned, and what remains capable of occurring again.

Using the Ukrainian anti-corruption system as the empirical context, the article proposes a **reproducibility profile** and a four-state analytical matrix for examining these trajectories. Recent international assessments of Ukraine illustrate why such a distinction matters: the country possesses an extensive anti-corruption regulatory and institutional architecture, while significant differences remain between formal rules and their implementation across particular domains. The article therefore treats anti-corruption not simply as a sequence of scandals, investigations, and punishments, but as a problem of **institutional engineering**: the transformation of the conditions under which corruption can reproduce itself.

Keywords: anti-corruption; corruption scandal; Jean Baudrillard; simulacrum; institutional reform; institutional residue; post-scandal institutional residue; corruption mechanisms; reproducibility; Ukraine; institutional legitimacy

■ INTRODUCTION

A corruption scandal arrives as a moment of clarity. Something that was hidden becomes visible; names acquire faces; documents become evidence; transactions become a story. Investigators enter the scene, prosecutors announce proceedings, journalists reconstruct the chain of events, and institutions demonstrate that they are capable of responding. For a brief period, the system appears to become unusually legible. The scandal seems to perform the work that institutions are expected to perform in the first place: it reveals a violation, identifies those responsible, and restores the boundary between what is permitted and what is not.

But there is another way to look at the same sequence.

Suppose that the number of detected corruption cases increases. What exactly has increased? Corruption itself? The capacity to detect it? The willingness to expose it? Or the visibility of the institutional response? The distinction is not semantic. A system that detects more corruption may be becoming more capable of seeing its own vulnerabilities. A system that produces more scandals without changing the conditions that generated them may simply be becoming

more efficient at staging the discovery of the same problem.

This is where the anti-corruption scandal becomes analytically difficult. The event that appears to demonstrate institutional failure may simultaneously demonstrate institutional capacity. Investigation can mean that corruption persists; it can also mean that detection works. Prosecution can signal accountability; it can also become the endpoint of a process that leaves the underlying institutional arrangement untouched. Even punishment, however real and necessary, does not automatically tell us whether the mechanism that produced the offence has lost its ability to operate again. The problem is therefore not whether a scandal is “real.” The problem is what kind of reality the scandal produces.

Jean Baudrillard saw this problem with unusual precision. Writing about Watergate, he refused to treat scandal simply as the exposure of an external corruption of an otherwise stable system. His argument was more disturbing: scandal could become part of the system's own regenerative operation. “Watergate was thus nothing but a lure held out by the system to catch its adversaries — a simulation of scandal for regenerative ends” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 16)

The point is not that nothing happened. On the contrary, something happened precisely because scandal has consequences. It concentrates attention, produces indignation, mobilises investigative procedures, and temporarily reconstructs a moral distinction between legitimate and illegitimate conduct. As Baudrillard put it elsewhere in the same discussion, “The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law.” ([Stanford University](#)) The exposure of transgression can therefore reinforce the principle against which the transgression is measured.

This observation remains useful for contemporary anti-corruption analysis, but it is not sufficient. Baudrillard gives us a powerful theory of what scandal can do to legitimacy; he does not give us an operational method for determining what happens after the scandal has done its work. That question becomes especially important in institutional environments where anti-corruption agencies, prosecutors, courts, journalists, civil society organisations, and international monitoring bodies have all become part of a permanent infrastructure of scrutiny.

The contemporary anti-corruption system is therefore faced with a paradox. It must produce visibility

in order to produce accountability, yet visibility alone cannot demonstrate transformation. The existence of an investigation tells us that an alleged mechanism has been detected. The existence of a conviction tells us that a legal process has reached a particular conclusion. Neither, by itself, tells us whether the institutional conditions that allowed the mechanism to operate have been altered.

Research on the aftermath of scandals points precisely in this direction. Grimmlikhuijsen and Snijders ask what happens “after the storm” and demonstrate that scandals do not automatically produce changes in integrity policy. ([PubMed Central \(PMC\)](#)) Other research has approached inquiries as institutional processes through which legitimacy itself can be reconstructed, while work on corruption scandals in Brazil shows that scandals can also create opportunities for the development of anti-corruption institutions (McGrath & Marshall, 2024; Prado & Carson, 2018). The empirical picture is therefore neither that scandal is meaningless nor that scandal equals reform. Its consequences depend on what follows. That “what follows” is the analytical space this article addresses.

The Ukrainian case makes the problem particularly visible because

the country now possesses a substantial and differentiated anti-corruption architecture, while international assessments continue to distinguish between formal institutional arrangements and their practical implementation. The OECD's 2026 assessment, for example, records a sophisticated strategic framework while separately measuring the extent to which the relevant criteria are implemented in practice. In the area of conflict of interest, Ukraine meets 100% of the OECD's regulatory criteria but 67% of its implementation criteria. ([OECD](#)) The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report likewise treats the strength and independence of the anti-corruption framework as an important element of the country's institutional trajectory. ([Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood](#))

These distinctions suggest a different way of reading the anti-corruption record. Instead of asking only how many scandals have occurred, how many investigations have been opened, or how many officials have been prosecuted, we can ask a more demanding institutional question:

What happened to the mechanism after it was exposed?

To answer it, three objects must first be separated. A corrupt event is the observable episode: a payment,

a decision, an allocation, a conflict of interest, an abuse of office. A **corruption mechanism** is the reproducible arrangement through which such an event becomes possible. And an **institutional opportunity infrastructure** consists of the rules, procedures, organisational gaps, discretionary zones, information asymmetries, and relationships that allow the mechanism to function.

These objects are related, but they are not interchangeable. The arrest of an individual addresses an actor. The prosecution of an offence addresses a legal event. Institutional reform must address the conditions under which a comparable mechanism could reproduce itself.

This distinction also requires separating two institutional circuits that are often collapsed into one. The first is the **law-enforcement circuit**: detection, investigation, prosecution, adjudication, and sanction. The second is the **institutional-transformation circuit**: diagnosis of vulnerabilities, redesign of procedures, redistribution of discretion, strengthening of controls, organisational learning, and reduction of the mechanism's capacity to reproduce.

The first circuit can be completed without the second being completed.

And this is where the scandal changes its analytical status. It is no longer merely an event to be investigated or a media cycle to be interpreted. It becomes a test of institutional memory.

When the cameras leave, when the headlines disappear, when the case moves from the front page into the legal record, the institution remains. Something has to remain with it. Perhaps a procedure has changed. Perhaps an access route has been closed. Perhaps a discretionary power has been redistributed. Perhaps a new control has appeared. Perhaps nothing structural has changed at all.

That remainder is what this article calls post-scandal institutional residue (PSIR).

The concept does not assume that every scandal leaves the same kind of trace. It asks us to identify the trace and determine its direction. Has the institution merely processed the event? Has it learned from it? Has it altered the mechanism? Or has the mechanism survived, adapted, and retained its capacity for reproduction?

The shift is subtle but consequential. The central character of an anti-corruption analysis is no longer necessarily the offender. It is the trajectory of the mechanism through the institution.

Once the question is formulated

this way, the apparent contradiction between Baudrillard's simulacrum and institutional reform begins to dissolve. A scandal can simultaneously be a real exposure, a legitimate law-enforcement event, a source of institutional legitimacy, and a mechanism of symbolic regeneration. None of these descriptions excludes the others. The decisive question is what happens to the underlying mechanism after the spectacle of exposure has passed.

The anti-corruption system therefore needs another measure of success. Not simply whether corruption was discovered. Not simply whether someone was punished. Not even simply whether a reform was formally adopted.

The harder question is whether the exposed mechanism can still reproduce itself.

That is the point at which the analysis moves beyond the scandal — and from Baudrillard's simulation toward the institutional problem that the scandal leaves behind.

■ WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE SCANDAL?

A scandal has a peculiar ending. A crime may end with an arrest, a trial, a conviction, or an acquittal. A scandal ends differently. At some point,

the cameras move elsewhere. The headlines disappear from the front page. The public argument loses its intensity. Investigators may continue working, prosecutors may continue litigating, and courts may continue hearing the case, but the scandal itself has already begun to recede.

The institution, however, does not recede.

It remains where it was.

And this creates a deceptively simple problem. If the scandal was supposed to expose an institutional failure, what should we expect to find inside the institution once the scandal is over?

Perhaps a new procedure. Perhaps a new control. Perhaps a redistribution of authority. Perhaps a new form of oversight. Perhaps a changed relationship between departments that previously operated with little effective scrutiny.

But perhaps nothing of the kind.

Perhaps the people have changed while the arrangement has not. Perhaps one route has been closed while another remains open. Perhaps the institution has become better at detecting the same mechanism without becoming better at preventing it. Perhaps the scandal has produced a powerful public demonstration of accountability while leaving the condi-

tions that made the original conduct possible largely intact.

This is the point at which the usual chronology of an anti-corruption case becomes insufficient. We tend to follow the event forward only until responsibility has been established: something happened, investigators discovered it, prosecutors acted, someone was punished. Yet the institutional question begins precisely where that chronology appears to end.

What happened to the institution itself?

The question is easy to overlook because scandal produces an unusually strong sense of narrative completion. There is an identifiable event, identifiable actors, identifiable evidence, and, eventually, an identifiable response. Once the response has occurred, it becomes tempting to regard the episode as closed.

However, closure of the case and closure of the mechanism are not necessarily the same thing.

The difference is especially important because corruption is not simply a collection of individual acts. Some corrupt practices depend on arrangements that can outlive the people who operated them: concentrated discretion, gaps between formal and actual procedures, privileged access

to information, weak separation of functions, opaque appointment structures, insufficient oversight, or informal relationships that continue to organise decisions after particular participants have disappeared. The event may be singular. The conditions that made the event possible may not be.

This gives the scandal an unusual temporal structure. It points backward toward an offence, but its institutional significance lies forward in time. The decisive question is therefore not only what happened?

It is: **What became impossible, more difficult, more visible, or more costly after it happened?**

That question takes us back to one of the most influential analyses of political scandal: Jean Baudrillard's reading of Watergate.

Baudrillard's intervention was unsettling because he refused to treat scandal simply as the moment when an otherwise stable political reality was interrupted by an exceptional violation. For him, the scandal could itself become part of the system's operation. Watergate, in his formulation, was "a simulation of scandal for regenerative ends" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 16).

The claim is easy to misunderstand if it is reduced to the proposition that Watergate was somehow unreal. That

is not the useful point for the present analysis. The event, the investigation, the evidence, and the political consequences were real. What Baudrillard asks us to examine is something else: **what does the exposure of transgression do to the system that exposes it?**

His answer is that denunciation can restore the very principle against which the violation is defined. "The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law," he writes. ([Stanford University](#))

The scandal therefore performs a double movement. It says that something has gone wrong, but it also demonstrates that the system can still identify what counts as wrong. It exposes a breach while reaffirming the boundary that has been breached. In this sense, the scandal can become regenerative: the system appears damaged and, through its response to the damage, demonstrates its continuing capacity to define, denounce, and punish deviation.

This is the point at which Baudrillard becomes indispensable to an analysis of anti-corruption scandals. Nevertheless, it is also the point at which the present problem begins. Yet, even if scandal restores legitimacy, restored legitimacy does not tell us whether the institutional mechanism has changed.

And that brings us back to the question with which we began. The cameras have left. The institution remains. What, exactly, remains inside it?

THE FIRST WRONG ANSWER: COUNT THE SCANDALS

The first thing we do when a corruption scandal breaks is remarkably simple: we count. We count the investigations, the suspects, the indictments, the convictions, the sums involved, and, increasingly, the number of scandals themselves. The logic seems almost unavoidable. If more cases are being exposed, there must be more corruption to expose; if fewer cases appear, perhaps the system is finally becoming cleaner. Numbers offer the comfort of an apparently objective story, and the scandal readily supplies them.

The difficulty begins when we ask what exactly the number is measuring. Imagine an institution in which corrupt practices have been operating for years beyond the reach of effective detection. Then the investigative system improves. Financial information becomes easier to reconstruct, agencies exchange information more effectively, journalists gain access to documents, whistleblowers become

more willing to report, and investigators acquire better tools for following complex transactions. The first visible consequence may be an explosion of cases. From the outside, the institution suddenly looks more corrupt than it did before. Yet the increase may have occurred not because corruption itself became more extensive, but because the boundary between hidden and observable conduct moved.

The reverse is equally uncomfortable. A decline in reported cases may be a sign that corrupt mechanisms have become less common, but it may also reflect weaker detection, less transparency, reduced reporting, or a diminished capacity to investigate. The same number can therefore tell two completely different stories depending on what has happened to the system that produces the number. What appears to be a measurement of corruption may actually be a measurement of the institution's ability to see corruption.

This is why the distinction between **observed corruption** and **existing corruption** becomes unavoidable. The anti-corruption system does not observe corruption directly; it observes what reaches the threshold of detection, investigation, documentation, and public visibility. Once detection capacity

changes, the meaning of the observed series changes with it. An increase in visible cases may be a sign of institutional deterioration, but it may also be evidence that previously hidden activity has become detectable. A decrease may indicate improvement, but it may equally indicate that fewer mechanisms are being brought into view.

Research on the aftermath of scandals makes the problem even more complicated. GrimmeliKhuijsen and Snijders examined 17 integrity scandals in Dutch municipalities and found that almost half were followed by no change in integrity policy. Their study also showed that media attention alone did not explain whether policy changed; other institutional conditions, including external audits and the involvement of civil servants, mattered in determining what happened after the scandal. The storm could be highly visible without necessarily changing the institutional landscape that existed after it.

This matters because the most visible part of an anti-corruption process is rarely the part that takes the longest to change. An investigation produces documents. An arrest produces an image. An indictment produces a legal event. A conviction produces a clear endpoint. By contrast,

a redesigned procedure may remain unnoticed for years, and the disappearance of a particular institutional vulnerability may never become a news story at all. The public can therefore become exceptionally well informed about the existence of corruption while remaining poorly informed about whether the conditions that made it possible have actually changed.

The Ukrainian case makes this distinction particularly concrete. NABU and SAPO reported 360 investigations initiated in the first half of 2026, alongside 107 notices of suspicion, 56 indictments involving 106 accused persons, and 55 guilty verdicts involving 76 persons. These are important indicators of the activity and output of the enforcement system, but they cannot by themselves tell us whether the underlying prevalence of corruption has increased or decreased. They tell us what the enforcement system has brought into view and processed.

The same problem appears in the distinction between rules and their implementation. The OECD's 2026 assessment of Ukraine separates the existence of regulatory arrangements from their implementation in practice; in the area of conflict of interest, Ukraine met 100% of the OECD's regulatory criteria while meeting 67%

of the corresponding implementation criteria. The difference is precisely the kind of gap that disappears when institutional reform is represented as a single number or a single announcement.

So the first apparently sensible solution does not survive examination. Counting scandals can tell us how much has become visible, but it cannot tell us how much existed before visibility changed, nor can it tell us what happened to the institutional conditions that produced the visible events. The question therefore shifts almost imperceptibly from *how many scandals occurred?* to *what, exactly, did each scandal expose?*

At first, the answer seems obvious: it exposed the people involved. A corruption investigation gives us names, positions, relationships, transactions, and eventually judgments. The institution can point to an individual who has been removed, prosecuted, or convicted and say that something has been done. Yet this apparent clarity conceals the next problem in the investigation, because a person can leave an institution much more easily than the institutional arrangement through which the person acted.

That is where counting offenders leads us next: toward the difference

between the corrupt event that can be reconstructed and the corruption mechanism that may survive it.

THE SECOND WRONG ANSWER: COUNT THE OFFENDERS

The temptation is to move from scandals to people. If the number of scandals tells us too little, perhaps the number of offenders will tell us more. A person arrested, a suspect identified, an indictment filed, a conviction obtained, an official removed from office — these are concrete events, and unlike the abstract question of institutional vulnerability, they have names attached to them. The system can point to an individual and demonstrate that the case did not simply disappear into public discussion: someone was investigated, someone was held responsible, someone was punished.

There is a certain institutional logic to this. The law-enforcement circuit is necessarily concerned with individual conduct because criminal responsibility cannot be assigned to an abstract “system.” An offence has to be reconstructed through actions, evidence, participants, transactions and decisions. The person who performed those actions therefore becomes the natural centre of the investigation. In

that sense, personalization is not an analytical error at the level of criminal law. The problem begins later, when the conclusion of the criminal case is silently treated as the conclusion of the institutional story.

This is where the apparently simple statement — *this official participated in the corruption* — can gradually turn into a much stronger statement: *this official was the corruption problem*. The difference may look semantic, but it changes the object of analysis. Once the person has resigned, been dismissed, arrested or convicted, the public narrative has a natural ending. The photograph disappears from the news cycle, the next investigation begins, and the institution can present the removal of the individual as evidence that the problem has been addressed.

Yet the institution does not necessarily lose the arrangement through which that individual acted. A procurement procedure can remain unchanged after the official who manipulated it has gone. A discretionary power can remain concentrated in the same place. An informational monopoly can survive the departure of the person who exploited it. Informal relationships can simply acquire new participants. Even a mechanism that has been exposed and blocked in one form may

return through another technical route while performing essentially the same function.

The original article puts the distinction sharply: the same corruption mechanism may be used repeatedly by different actors, which means that removing an individual does not necessarily remove the mechanism. Beneath that mechanism lies an even broader layer — the institutional opportunity infrastructure — consisting of the formal and informal arrangements that make a class of mechanisms viable: concentrated discretion, weak separation of functions, opaque appointments, insufficient audit capacity, fragmented responsibility, asymmetric access to information, informal networks, or poorly designed procedures.

The distinction changes the question we ask about the person who has been removed. Instead of asking only what the official did, we can ask what the official was able to do, and why the institution allowed that particular form of action to become possible. The first question reconstructs responsibility. The second begins to reconstruct reproducibility. It moves the investigation from the operator toward the machinery in which the operator functioned.

This also explains why the disappearance of an offender can create such a strong feeling of closure. People are visible in ways that mechanisms are not. A person can resign; a procedure does not resign. A person can be prosecuted; an information asymmetry cannot appear in court as a defendant. A person can be removed from an office overnight, while redistribution of authority may require months of administrative work and may produce no dramatic image at all. The scandal therefore naturally compresses a complicated institutional process into a human story with a beginning, a protagonist and an ending.

But suppose the same functional arrangement appears again after the protagonist has disappeared. The new participant may have a different name, occupy a different office, use a different intermediary, or exploit a different technical procedure. If the underlying relationship between authority, information, discretion and control remains sufficiently similar, treating the second case as an entirely new event misses something important. What has returned is not necessarily the same crime. What has returned is the capacity of the institution to generate a comparable mechanism.

At this point, the investigation has to abandon the offender as its final unit of analysis. The person remains important — responsibility does not disappear simply because we begin looking at institutions — but the person can no longer be the endpoint of the explanation. The more revealing question is what passed through that person and continued beyond them.

The main character therefore changes. It is no longer simply the official whose name appears in the indictment. It becomes the trajectory of the mechanism through the institution.

And once the trajectory becomes the object of the investigation, the next question becomes unavoidable: what, exactly, was exposed by the scandal — the event, the mechanism that produced it, or the institutional environment that made the mechanism possible?

WHAT WAS ACTUALLY EXPOSED? — EVENT, MECHANISM, INFRASTRUCTURE

Once the offender is no longer treated as the final explanation, the scandal begins to look different. What appeared at first to be a single corrupt act turns out to have several layers, and each layer tells us something different about the institution. The visible event

is the easiest layer to reconstruct: money was transferred, a contract was manipulated, a decision was taken, an appointment was arranged, a public resource was redirected. It is the part of corruption that can be placed on a timeline, attached to documents and attributed to identifiable actors. It is also the part most easily converted into a scandal.

But the event is only the point at which a much larger arrangement becomes visible. Behind the individual transaction there is usually a **corruption mechanism**: a repeatable functional arrangement through which an actor can convert institutional authority, access, information or discretion into a private advantage. The mechanism matters precisely because it is not identical to the particular event in which it was discovered. Different people can operate it. Different resources can pass through it. Its technical form can change while its underlying logic remains recognizable. What makes the mechanism analytically important is therefore not that it happened once, but that it could happen again.

This distinction creates a useful movement from the event toward the mechanism. Imagine that an investigation establishes how a procure-

ment decision was manipulated. The investigation can reconstruct who influenced the decision, how the information moved, which procedural steps were bypassed and what benefit was obtained. That is already more than simply identifying an offender. But even a complete reconstruction of the mechanism leaves one question unanswered: **why was this mechanism available in the first place?**

That question takes us to the third layer, which the original model calls the **institutional opportunity infrastructure**. This is the broader configuration of formal and informal conditions that makes a class of corruption mechanisms viable. It may involve excessive discretionary authority, weak separation of functions, opaque appointment procedures, insufficient audit capacity, information asymmetry, informal networks, fragmented responsibility or procedural arrangements that allow one actor to control several stages of a decision. None of these conditions is necessarily corruption by itself. Their significance appears when they combine to create an environment in which a corrupt mechanism can be constructed and reproduced.

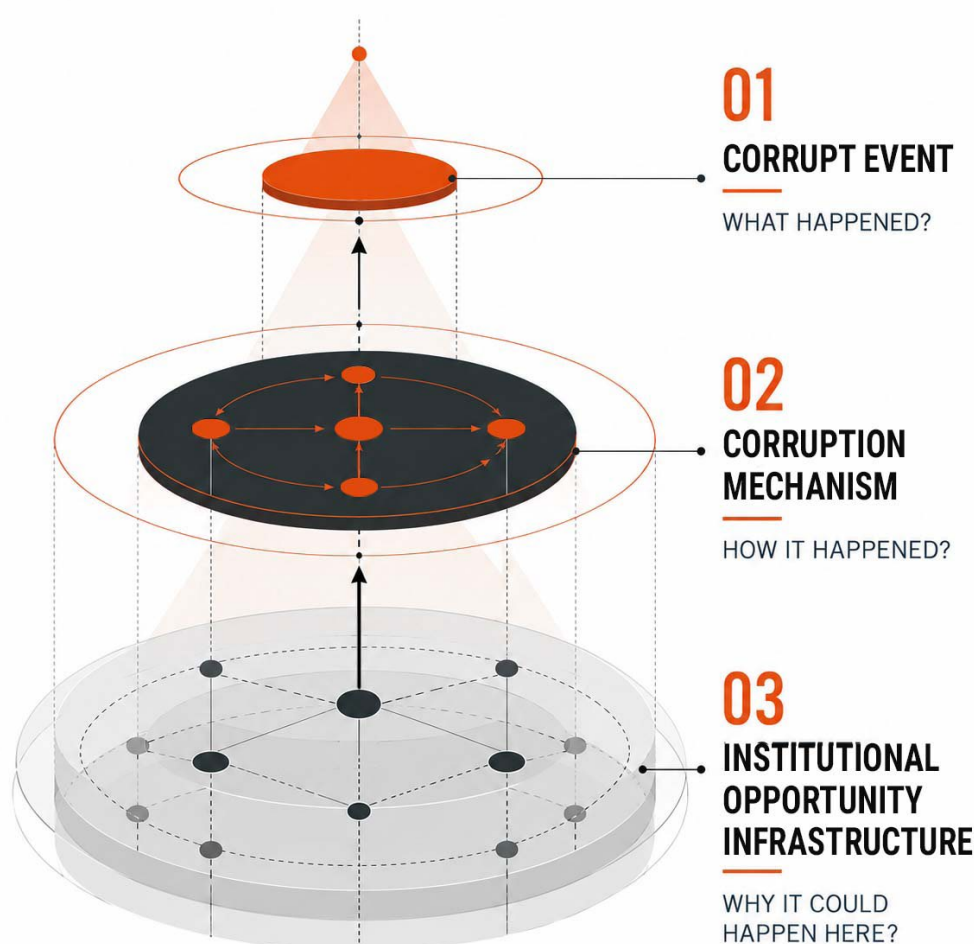
The three layers therefore answer three different questions. The **corrupt event** tells us *what happened*. The

corruption mechanism tells us *how it happened*. The institutional opportunity infrastructure asks *why this kind of mechanism could happen here at all*. The distinction is not merely terminological. It determines what counts as a successful response.

If the response stops at the event, success means that the case has been exposed and reconstructed. If it reaches the mechanism, success requires more: the mechanism must be disrupted. But if the institutional opportunity

infrastructure remains intact, the institution may still be capable of producing another mechanism that performs the same function through a different configuration of actors and procedures. Removing the operator therefore does not necessarily remove the capacity.

This is where the apparent success of an anti-corruption intervention can become analytically ambiguous. A scandal may reveal a mechanism with extraordinary clarity, produce a successful investigation, generate



prosecutions and lead to the removal of the officials involved. From the perspective of the law-enforcement circuit, these are substantial outcomes. Yet from the perspective of institutional transformation, the decisive question has not yet been answered. **What changed in the institution that makes the mechanism harder to reproduce?**

The difference is crucial because corruption is not reproduced only by corrupt individuals. It is reproduced by the interaction between individuals and institutional possibilities. When one participant disappears, another may enter the same position. When one channel is closed, another may be constructed. When one technical form becomes too risky, the mechanism may migrate into a different procedure. The institution does not have to reproduce the same crime in order to reproduce the same vulnerability.

This gives the scandal a strange dual character. At the moment of exposure, it appears to reveal the corruption. After the cameras leave, however, the more difficult question emerges: **did it reveal a person, a mechanism, or an infrastructure capable of producing mechanisms?** The answer determines what happens next.

And this is precisely where two very different institutional trajectories

begin to separate. One follows the case backward, toward responsibility and punishment. The other follows the mechanism forward, toward redesign and prevention. The scandal may have triggered both — but they are not the same circuit, and they do not necessarily arrive at the same future.

■ **THE INSTITUTION BEHIND THE OFFENCE**

Once the distinction between event, mechanism, and institutional opportunity infrastructure is made, the investigation has to move one level deeper. The question is no longer simply how a particular mechanism worked, but what kind of institutional environment allowed that mechanism to become workable in the first place. This is where the apparently individual story of corruption begins to reveal an architectural dimension. A person may exploit discretionary authority, an informational monopoly, a weak procurement procedure, or a fragmented chain of responsibility, but those conditions were not created at the moment the offence occurred. They were already embedded in the institution.

This does not mean that the institution itself is the offender. The distinction is important. An opaque appoint-

ment procedure is not a corrupt act; neither is concentrated discretion, incomplete auditing, fragmented responsibility, or asymmetric access to information. These become significant when they interact in ways that allow a repeatable corrupt arrangement to be constructed. The original model therefore treats institutional opportunity infrastructure as the broader configuration of formal and informal arrangements that makes a class of mechanisms viable: concentrated discretionary authority, weak separation of functions, opaque appointments, insufficient audit capacity, non-transparent data, fragmented responsibility, informal patronage networks, and poorly designed procurement rules.

This changes the meaning of institutional reform. If the institution simply removes the person who exploited a vulnerability, it may have corrected the most visible manifestation of the problem while leaving the vulnerability itself untouched. The next actor does not need to repeat the original scheme literally. The procurement process may be manipulated differently; the intermediary may change; the information may move through another channel; the decision may be taken by another official. What survives is the possibility

of constructing a functionally equivalent mechanism. That is why the deepest form of anti-corruption reform cannot be limited to preventing the exact repetition of a known scheme. It has to alter the environment that made the class of schemes viable in the first place. The distinction is subtle but consequential. Blocking one route is not the same as redesigning the road network; removing one operator is not the same as changing the machine. An institution has learned from a scandal only when the knowledge acquired through the scandal has been translated into changes in the conditions under which comparable conduct can occur. At this point, however, another difficulty appears. The institutional environment does not change automatically simply because the law-enforcement system has successfully identified the mechanism. Criminal investigation and institutional redesign operate according to different temporal logics. One is concerned with what happened and who was responsible. The other is concerned with what must be different so that the same functional possibility does not return. The scandal has therefore brought us to a fork in the road: one path leads toward accountability for the past, while the other leads toward adaptation for the future.

And these two paths are not merely different descriptions of the same process. They constitute two different institutional circuits.

■ TWO CIRCUITS, TWO DIFFERENT FUTURES

The first circuit is the one most readily associated with anti-corruption itself: the law-enforcement circuit. It looks backward. Its task is to reconstruct conduct that has already occurred, establish who acted, determine what law was violated, collect and test evidence, and bring the case to the point at which legal responsibility can be assigned. Its outputs are therefore necessarily concrete: investigations, notices of suspicion, indictments, convictions, confiscation, asset recovery, and other forms of legal accountability. Without this circuit, corruption can become rationalized by impunity, because the expected cost of corrupt behaviour falls when the probability of detection and punishment is low.

But the existence of a functioning law-enforcement circuit does not tell us what has happened to the institutional conditions that produced the offence. That requires a second circuit, which the original model calls the institutional-transformation circuit. Its temporal direction is differ-

ent. It looks forward. Its questions begin where the criminal case starts to become insufficient: Why was the mechanism possible? Which institutional vulnerability did it exploit? Which control failed? Where was authority concentrated? What information asymmetry protected the arrangement? Which procedural architecture made circumvention possible? And, after the intervention, could a functionally equivalent mechanism still be constructed?

The difference becomes clearer when we follow the same scandal through both circuits. The law-enforcement circuit may establish that a procurement process was manipulated, identify the people involved, reconstruct the chain of decisions, secure evidence, and eventually produce convictions. The institutional-transformation circuit would then have to follow the procurement system itself. Did the distribution of authority change? Was the vulnerable stage of the procedure redesigned? Were audit and monitoring capabilities strengthened? Was access to information redistributed? Were conflicts of interest made more difficult to conceal? Could another group of actors now reproduce the same functional arrangement through a different route?

These are not competing definitions of success. They are two different requirements of an anti-corruption system. The first establishes accountability for the past; the second establishes institutional adaptation for the future. As the source formulation puts it with unusual economy, “Without the law-enforcement circuit, there is impunity. Without the institutional-transformation circuit, there is recurrence.”

This distinction also helps explain why a state can become increasingly sophisticated at processing corruption cases without necessarily becoming equally capable of eliminating the conditions that make those cases possible. A system may investigate faster, prosecute more effectively, recover more assets, and generate increasingly visible evidence of enforcement while leaving parts of the opportunity infrastructure intact. In such a system, the law-enforcement circuit may become highly developed while the institutional-transformation circuit remains comparatively weak.

Research on what happens after corruption scandals points toward precisely this problem. Grimmeliikhuisen and Snijders (2016), examining whether scandals lead local governments to change integrity policy,

show that scandal exposure does not automatically translate into policy change. Their work is important here not because it proves that scandals are ineffective, but because it breaks the assumed causal chain between exposure and institutional transformation. A scandal can create pressure for change, but pressure is not itself change. Prado and Carson (2018), studying the evolution of anti-corruption institutions in Brazil, similarly place scandals within longer institutional trajectories in which exposure can create opportunities for institutional development without making transformation automatic.

Once these two circuits are separated, the recurring nature of the scandal becomes visible in a new way. A system may repeatedly succeed at one task — detecting, exposing, investigating and punishing — while repeatedly postponing the other task: changing the institutional conditions that allowed the mechanism to exist. If that pattern becomes stable, the scandal no longer appears simply as an exceptional breakdown in institutional order. It begins to look like a recurring process through which the system processes its own failures.

That is the point at which the next question becomes unavoidable: what

happens when a political and institutional system becomes very good at processing scandals, but not equally good at preventing the conditions that produce them?

WHAT IF THE SYSTEM BECOMES VERY GOOD AT PROCESSING SCANDALS? — THE SCANDAL MACHINE

Once the two circuits are separated, a more unsettling possibility comes into view. A state may become increasingly efficient at detecting corruption, reconstructing offences, prosecuting participants and demonstrating that institutions are capable of responding, while the institutional conditions that make comparable mechanisms possible remain only partially altered. In that case, the problem is no longer simply that corruption recurs. The deeper possibility is that the processing of corruption itself becomes a recurrent institutional pattern.

This is what the present analysis calls the scandal machine. The term does not imply conspiracy, and it does not require anyone to deliberately design scandals as political theatre. The machine can emerge from the ordinary interaction of law-enforcement institutions, political actors, media systems, public expectations

and unresolved institutional vulnerabilities. Its operation is almost mechanical: a corruption mechanism operates within an institutional opportunity infrastructure; it produces a visible event; the event is detected; evidence enters the public sphere; the scandal intensifies; responsibility is personalized; an investigation, resignation, indictment or conviction follows; the state demonstrates corrective action; public attention eventually declines; and the institution continues operating. If the underlying mechanism or the infrastructure that supported it has survived, the functional logic can later return through different participants and perhaps a different technical form.

The important point is that the machine does not have to reproduce the same crime. It only has to reproduce the same relationship between institutional pathology and public correction. One official may be replaced by another, one procurement scheme by another, one channel of influence by another. The visible actors change, while the institutional vulnerability remains available. The system has therefore demonstrated that it can process failure without necessarily demonstrating that it has learned from failure.

This makes the scandal machine more complicated than a simple cycle of corruption and punishment. The scandal itself becomes a highly distributable informational object. Contemporary anti-corruption enforcement

produces images and materials that travel extremely well through the media environment: seized currency, luxury objects, documents, surveillance footage, recordings, screenshots, searches and photographs of evidence.



Within a criminal proceeding, these materials may perform evidentiary functions; within the media environment, they perform semiotic ones. An image of seized cash can communicate simultaneously that corruption existed and that corruption was detected. The same sign therefore represents institutional pathology and institutional capacity at once.

That duality is what makes the scandal machine potentially self-reinforcing. The more effectively the state stages its capacity to detect and punish corruption, the more clearly it can demonstrate that the institutional order is capable of correcting itself. Yet the same communicative success can draw attention away from the much slower question of whether the conditions that produced the offence have actually changed. The public sees the search, the evidence, the suspect and the sanction almost immediately. The redistribution of discretion, redesign of procedures, strengthening of audit, or reduction of an information monopoly may remain invisible for years.

At this point, the scandal is no longer simply an interruption of institutional normality. It can become one of the ways in which the institution publicly demonstrates its capacity to respond to its own failures. And that

leads directly to the next question: if scandal can damage legitimacy and the response to scandal can restore it, what exactly is being restored — and on what evidence?

WHY THE SCANDAL MIGHT RE-STORE LEGITIMACY — SCANDAL-BASED LEGITIMATION

A corruption scandal places the state in an uncomfortable position because it communicates two messages simultaneously. The first is that something serious has gone wrong inside the institutional order. The second is that the institutional order possesses the capacity to discover, expose and punish what has gone wrong. The scandal therefore threatens legitimacy and can, through the response it generates, become part of the process by which legitimacy is reconstructed.

This is the point at which the concept of scandal-based legitimation becomes useful. It does not mean that restoring legitimacy after an investigation is somehow illegitimate. A political system should gain public confidence when powerful actors can be investigated, evidence can be produced, and legal responsibility can be established. The difficulty begins when demonstrated capacity to detect pathology is treated as sufficient evidence that the

system producing the pathology has itself been transformed.

The distinction is already visible in the empirical literature. Grimmelikhuisen and Snijders (2016), examining integrity scandals across Dutch municipalities, found that scandal did not automatically produce integrity-policy change; in a substantial proportion of the cases they studied, no such policy change followed. Their findings are important because they interrupt the apparently natural sequence from exposure to reform. A scandal can generate pressure, attention and institutional demands without those pressures necessarily becoming durable changes in integrity policy.

The opposite trajectory is also possible. Prado and Carson (2018), examining corruption scandals and the development of anti-corruption institutions in Brazil, show how scandals can create political windows in which previously blocked institutional reforms become possible. The lesson is therefore not that scandal is inherently empty, but that its institutional consequences depend on what happens after exposure. Scandal can open a reform trajectory; it does not determine its destination. A related insight comes from McGrath and Marshall's (2024) analysis of tribunals of inquiry as

instruments of legitimacy. Their work shows how official investigations can operate as ritualized institutional responses to crises of confidence, allowing the state to demonstrate that a breach has been recognized and subjected to public scrutiny. Investigation therefore has a dual function: it seeks knowledge about what happened while also communicating something about the capacity of the institutional order to respond. Baudrillard's intervention becomes particularly sharp at precisely this point. In his reading of Watergate, scandal is not exhausted by the revelation of wrongdoing because the denunciation itself can serve the system by demonstrating the reality of law and the system's capacity to expose violations. His formulation is deliberately provocative: "Watergate was thus nothing but a lure held out by the system to catch its adversaries — a simulation of scandal for regenerative ends" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 16). He immediately pushes the argument further with the observation that "The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law."

The present argument does not require us to conclude that contemporary anti-corruption scandals are therefore simulations, or that investigations and prosecutions are

merely theatrical. That would erase the empirical distinction that the preceding sections have established. A real offence may be uncovered, real evidence may be produced, real people may be punished, and real institutional change may follow. The Baudrillardian question is more precise: **what does the visible response signify about the system, and does that sign correspond to what has actually changed inside the institution?**

The communicative asymmetry makes this difficult to answer. A search is visible; a redesigned appointment procedure is not. A table covered with seized currency is immediately legible; a new distribution of discretionary authority may require months of observation. An arrest produces a clear narrative endpoint; a reduction in the reproducibility of a corruption mechanism can only be established retrospectively. The sign of correction therefore has an enormous advantage over the evidence of transformation.

That is why scandal-based legitimation should not be treated as proof of simulation. It is better understood as a **problem of measurement**. The public response may legitimately restore confidence because the state has demonstrated investigative and punitive capacity. But whether the

underlying institutional vulnerability has been reduced is a different empirical question. The two achievements may coincide, but they cannot be assumed to be identical.

And once that distinction is made, the investigation arrives at the question that Baudrillard leaves deliberately open for institutional analysis: **when the scandal has ended and legitimacy has been restored, what remains inside the institution?**

■ **THE QUESTION THAT BAUDRILLARD LEAVES OPEN**

By this point, the scandal has acquired a more complicated meaning. It can expose a real offence, activate real investigative institutions, produce real sanctions, and at the same time participate in a process through which institutional legitimacy is reconstructed. None of these dimensions cancels the others. The problem is precisely that they can coexist. A scandal may therefore be entirely real as an event and still generate a political representation of institutional self-correction that is stronger than the evidence of structural transformation.

This is where Baudrillard remains particularly useful, but also where his analysis reaches the limit relevant to the present investigation. His question

is fundamentally semiotic: what does the scandal do to the system of signs through which a political order represents itself? Watergate can be read as a scandal that demonstrates the existence of corruption while simultaneously demonstrating that the system is capable of exposing and punishing corruption. The denunciation of the violation thus reinforces the distinction between the legitimate order and its violation. As Baudrillard puts it, “The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law” (1994, p. 16).

But an institutional researcher has to ask a question that semiotics alone cannot answer. Suppose the scandal has fulfilled this regenerative function. Suppose responsibility has been assigned, the investigation has been completed, legitimacy has partially recovered, and public attention has moved elsewhere. What remains inside the institution itself? Has a procedure changed? Has discretion been redistributed? Has a monitoring arrangement become more difficult to bypass? Has the information asymmetry that protected the mechanism been reduced? Or has the institution simply demonstrated that it possesses an effective procedure for processing the next scandal?

The distinction is crucial because the answer cannot be found at the moment of maximum visibility. During the scandal, almost everything that matters politically is concentrated in the present: the suspect, the evidence, the investigation, the statement, the resignation, the indictment. Institutional transformation operates on another temporal scale. It becomes visible only after the exceptional intensity of the scandal has declined and ordinary institutional behaviour has resumed. McGrath and Marshall’s (2024) analysis of inquiries as instruments of legitimacy is useful here precisely because it directs attention to the institutional work performed by official responses to crisis, rather than treating investigation simply as the neutral discovery of facts.

The investigation therefore has to follow the scandal beyond its own spectacular ending. The relevant object is no longer the event that everyone has seen, but the institutional remainder that can be observed after almost nobody is looking. This remainder may be substantial, weak, contradictory, or absent. It may consist of new procedures, altered authority structures, stronger controls and completed enforcement, but it may also consist of little more than announcements,

personnel changes and institutional memory.

This is the point at which the concept of institutional residue becomes analytically useful. It gives us a way to name something that survives the public event without assuming in advance that what survives must be reform. The concept already has a history in institutional research; the task here is to specify what kind of residue is relevant when the event that produced it was a corruption scandal.

FROM INSTITUTIONAL RESIDUE TO POST-SCANDAL INSTITUTIONAL RESIDUE

The phrase institutional residue is therefore not introduced here as though it were an entirely new discovery. Anna Seleny used the expression “institutional residue of reform” in her analysis of transformation in socialist Hungary, drawing attention to the people, practices and ideas accumulated through successive reform episodes (Seleny, 1994). More recently, Nicolò Bellanca has developed the notion in a different theoretical direction, examining the socially organized afterlife of unrealized institutional values and choices (Bellanca, 2026). These approaches differ substantially in their objects and theoretical

premises, but they share an important intuition: institutional episodes do not simply disappear when the episode itself is over. They leave something behind.

The present article narrows that intuition to a particular empirical problem and calls the result **Post-Scandal Institutional Residue**, or **PSIR**. The concept refers to the set of durable changes in rules, authority structures, monitoring arrangements, enforcement practices and organizational behaviour that remain after the public phase of a corruption scandal has ended and that reduce the future reproducibility of the mechanism exposed by that scandal.

The temporal qualification matters more than it may initially appear. A press conference is not PSIR. A promise of reform is not PSIR. The announcement of a new procedure is not necessarily PSIR. Even the adoption of a new law cannot automatically be treated as strong evidence of institutional residue if implementation remains ineffective. What matters is what can still be observed after the political and media intensity surrounding the scandal has declined: whether the rules under which people act have changed, whether authority is distributed differently, whether monitoring

has acquired new capacity, whether enforcement has actually been completed, and whether the mechanism exposed by the scandal has become harder to reproduce.

This definition also prevents the concept from becoming a synonym for “reform.” Reform can be announced without being implemented; implementation can occur without changing organizational behaviour; and organizational behaviour can change without substantially reducing the vulnerability that made the original mechanism possible. PSIR therefore sits at the end of a longer chain. It asks not simply whether something was decided, or even whether something was formally changed, but whether the institutional environment left behind by the scandal is materially different from the one that existed before it.

The distinction becomes particularly important when viewed against the empirical problem identified earlier. If the number of detected scandals is an ambiguous indicator because detection capacity can change independently of corruption prevalence, then the number of reforms announced after scandals is equally insufficient as evidence of transformation. Both are visible outputs of the system. Neither tells us automatically what happened

to the underlying mechanism.

PSIR therefore shifts the temporal position of the researcher. Instead of observing the institution at the moment when cameras arrive, the researcher returns after the cameras have left. The question is no longer what the institution said it would change, but what institutional condition now exists that did not exist before the scandal. That question turns the scandal from a media event into a longitudinal research object.

This is also why the concept should not be converted prematurely into a single numerical index. The source model deliberately avoids assigning arbitrary weights to different forms of institutional change before empirical calibration is available. A structured multidimensional protocol is more defensible at this stage: procedural change, discretionary change, control change, enforcement completion, and, most importantly, reduction in the reproducibility of the mechanism.

The last dimension changes the direction of the investigation once again. It is possible to demonstrate that procedures have changed and still discover that the same functional arrangement can be reconstructed through another route. It is possible to strengthen auditing and still leave

the underlying concentration of discretion intact. It is possible to punish the original participants while leaving the institution capable of generating their functional successors. PSIR therefore cannot end with the question “What changed?” It must eventually lead to the more difficult question: “Did the mechanism become harder to reproduce?”

And that is where the residue of reform becomes something more precise: not merely what the institution remembers after the scandal, but what the institution has learned to make more difficult.

■ HOW DO WE KNOW THAT SOMETHING REMAINED?

Once PSIR has been defined, a practical difficulty immediately appears. It is relatively easy to point to a new law, a new procedure, a new oversight body, or a public commitment to reform. It is much harder to establish that these changes have actually survived the disappearance of the scandal and altered the conditions under which institutions operate. The danger is that PSIR itself could become another visible label attached to reform announcements rather than a way of investigating what happened after them.

For that reason, the present model deliberately avoids constructing a mathematically precise PSIR index at this stage. Without empirical calibration, assigning weights to different forms of institutional change would create an appearance of precision that the available evidence cannot justify. A structured multidimensional protocol is more useful. It allows the researcher to follow the institutional aftermath without pretending that procedural change, redistribution of discretion, stronger controls, completed enforcement and reduced reproducibility are interchangeable variables.

The first question concerns **procedural change**. Did the formal procedures that enabled the mechanism actually change? If the original mechanism depended on a particular sequence of approvals, procurement stages, appointment rules or reporting requirements, the researcher needs to establish whether that sequence has been redesigned in a way that affects the mechanism's operation. A procedure that has merely been renamed or supplemented by another document does not necessarily represent meaningful institutional change.

The second concerns **discretionary change**. Was the concentration or distribution of decision-making author-

ity modified? This matters because corruption mechanisms frequently depend not simply on the existence of discretion, but on its concentration in places where external verification is weak. If the same actor, office, or institutional node continues to control the same critical decision after the scandal, then a formal procedural reform may have left the underlying opportunity structure largely intact. The question is not whether discretion disappeared — institutions cannot function without discretion — but whether the particular concentration of discretion that made the mechanism viable has been altered.

The third dimension is **control change**. Have monitoring, transparency, audit, reporting or detection capabilities actually become stronger? Here again, the distinction between capacity on paper and capacity in practice becomes decisive. A new reporting requirement may exist formally while remaining weakly monitored. An audit institution may receive new powers without receiving the personnel, information or access required to use them. A database may become formally open while the information necessary to detect the relevant relationship remains inaccessible. What matters is therefore not the existence

of a control mechanism, but its ability to alter the conditions under which the original mechanism could operate.

The fourth dimension is **enforcement completion**. An investigation that has been announced is not the same thing as an accountability process that has reached its legally relevant conclusion. Sanctions may be imposed; assets may be recovered where legally appropriate; institutional responsibilities may be clarified; and enforcement procedures may actually be completed rather than simply initiated. This dimension keeps the PSIR model connected to the law-enforcement circuit rather than treating institutional transformation as though accountability were no longer important.

The fifth dimension is the most demanding because it asks whether **reproducibility has been reduced**. Did functionally analogous mechanisms become more difficult to operate after the intervention? This is where the analysis returns to the distinction between the individual case and the institutional architecture. A reform can be visible, formally valid and fully implemented while still leaving another route open to essentially the same functional arrangement. That is why PSIR cannot be established at the

moment of arrest, indictment, conviction or legislative announcement. It requires time. A useful research design would return to the same case after several intervals — six months, twelve months, twenty-four months — and examine what remains observable at each stage. The precise intervals can of course be adapted to the institutional cycle being studied, but the principle is essential: the endpoint of the scandal cannot be assumed to be the endpoint of its institutional consequences.

The central research question consequently becomes remarkably simple: **What institutional condition exists after the scandal that did not exist before it?** The question is deliberately comparative. It requires the researcher to reconstruct the pre-scandal configuration rather than merely describing the post-scandal one. Only then is it possible to distinguish an actual institutional remainder from the continuation of the previous arrangement under a new vocabulary.

But even this protocol leaves one problem unresolved. An institution can change and a mechanism can still survive. The rules may be different; the controls may be stronger; the responsible officials may be gone — and yet a functionally similar arrangement may still be possible. The investigation

therefore has to move one step further, from the residue left by the scandal to the **survival capacity of the mechanism itself.**

THE MECHANISM THAT SURVIVES ITS OPERATOR — REPRODUCIBILITY PROFILE

The fifth dimension of PSIR introduces a problem that cannot be solved by simply counting new corruption cases. If five functionally similar mechanisms are detected in the year after a reform while only two were detected before it, the immediate conclusion might be that the reform failed. But the visibility paradox returns at exactly this point. Perhaps the mechanism became more common. Perhaps the investigative system simply became better at seeing it. Perhaps reporting improved, audit capacity increased, whistleblowers gained safer channels, or prosecutors acquired better access to information. The number of detected cases cannot tell us which explanation is correct.

For that reason, the model proposes a **reproducibility profile** rather than a simple recurrence coefficient. The object of observation is not the number of cases but the functional architecture that connects institutional conditions to corrupt outcomes. The researcher asks whether that architecture can

still be reconstructed after the intervention, even when its visible form has changed.

The first question is whether the same functional architecture reappears. If the same relationship between authority, information, discretion and private advantage can be reconstructed through essentially the same institutional sequence, then the mechanism has survived in a fairly direct form. If the original route has been closed, the analysis does not stop there. The next question is whether the mechanism has migrated into another agency, administrative level, sector or procedural channel.

Migration is particularly important because institutional systems often respond to controls by shifting activity rather than simply stopping it. A mechanism that becomes difficult to operate in one location may become viable somewhere else where the same underlying vulnerability remains. The actors may change as well. New participants can replace the original ones while preserving the functional relationship that made the original arrangement possible. In this case, personnel turnover can produce the appearance of institutional renewal while leaving the mechanism structurally intact.

The mechanism may also change its technical form without changing its underlying function. A practice that once depended on direct intervention in a procurement process might later operate through an intermediary, a different contractual structure, an informational advantage, or a new administrative procedure. If the technical details change but the same institutional vulnerability continues to convert authority into private advantage, treating the second case as unrelated would obscure precisely what the reform failed to change.

At the same time, reproducibility should not be understood as an all-or-nothing property. A mechanism may survive but become considerably more difficult to operate. Detection may become faster. The resources, coordination or secrecy required to reproduce the arrangement may increase. The probability of successful completion may decline. An institutional reform may therefore reduce the survival capacity of a mechanism without eliminating every possible attempt to reproduce it.

This is why the profile has to capture several dimensions at once: whether the functional architecture returns, whether the original vulnerability remains exploitable, whether the

mechanism migrates, whether new actors preserve the same relationships, whether its technical form changes while its function remains stable, whether detection becomes faster, whether reproduction becomes more costly, and whether the probability of successful completion decreases. The purpose is not to produce a single score, but to reconstruct the trajectory of institutional possibility after the scandal.

The shift may seem subtle, but it changes the unit of analysis completely. The question is no longer simply whether another official was caught, or whether another scandal occurred. Nor is it even whether the institution formally changed its rules. The deeper question is whether the institutional environment still permits the same kind of mechanism to organize itself.

The central object is therefore no longer the number of offenders. It is the **survival capacity of the mechanism**.

And once visibility and reproducibility have been separated, a new analytical possibility opens up: a scandal can be extremely visible without producing substantial institutional residue, while a significant institutional transformation can occur with remarkably little

scandal or media spectacle. That is the point at which the investigation can finally construct its four-state map of what happens after the scandal.

■ **TWO AXES ARE BETTER THAN ONE — THE FOUR-STATE MATRIX**

By this point, two variables have emerged that should no longer be confused: the **public visibility of the scandal** and the **institutional residue left after it**. Once they are separated, the apparent contradiction at the centre of the argument becomes easier to see. A scandal can be highly visible and produce little structural change; it can be highly visible and produce substantial transformation; it can remain almost invisible while institutional vulnerabilities persist; or, more interestingly, meaningful reform can occur without dramatic scandal at all.

This gives us a simple four-state matrix. High visibility combined with low PSIR creates a **simulacrum-of-reform risk**: the public evidence of action is intense, but the observable structural transformation is comparatively weak. High visibility combined with high PSIR describes **transformative exposure**, where the scandal genuinely becomes an occasion for institutional learning. Low visibility combined with low PSIR indicates institutional stagna-

tion or concealed persistence, where neither public pressure nor structural adaptation is strong. And low visibility combined with high PSIR points to quiet institutional reform — perhaps the least spectacular but analytically important possibility, because institutions can sometimes change without first passing through a major scandal.

The value of the matrix is therefore not that it classifies scandals as good or bad. It separates two things that public discourse habitually merges: how much we see and how much the institution changes. It also makes the notion of a simulacrum of reform more precise. The claim is not that an investigation is fictitious, or that punishment did not occur. It is that the public representation of institutional correction may become substantially stronger than the observable structural transformation that follows it.

The matrix also prevents the opposite mistake. Low visibility does not automatically mean institutional failure. A reform that quietly changes procedures, redistributes discretion, strengthens controls and reduces the reproducibility of a mechanism may be more consequential than a spectacular scandal that produces little institutional residue. The absence of spectacle is therefore not evidence of the absence

of transformation. The four states give the investigation a map. But before using that map to interpret real cases, the model has to face a more uncomfortable question: what if we are simply mistaking sequence for causation?

NOW WE HAVE TO BREAK OUR OWN MODEL — METHODOLOGICAL AND CAUSAL CAUTIONS

A post-scandal analysis creates its own measurement problems. The most obvious is temporal: if a new law or institutional reform appears three months after a major scandal, it is tempting to treat the scandal as its cause. But the reform may have been drafted long before the scandal, required by international obligations, accelerated by administrative modernization, or produced by political competition that had little to do with the particular case. The mere fact that one event follows another does not establish that the first caused the second. A credible PSIR analysis therefore has to reconstruct the reform trajectory: what existed before the scandal, what reforms were already under consideration, what intervention followed the scandal, how implementation proceeded, and what institutional outcome eventually emerged.

The second problem returns us to the visibility paradox. If investigative capacity improves, the number of detected mechanisms may rise precisely because the system has become better at seeing them. A successful institutional intervention could therefore initially produce an apparent increase in recurrent cases. Changes in financial intelligence, digital evidence, inter-agency cooperation, whistleblower activity, audit intensity, access to information, or prosecutorial capacity can all alter the observed number of cases independently of the underlying prevalence of corruption. The researcher therefore cannot read recurrence directly from detection statistics without accounting for changes in the system of detection itself.

There is also a selection problem. The scandals that become nationally visible are not necessarily representative of corruption mechanisms as a whole. Some mechanisms produce dramatic evidence and photographs; others are dispersed across administrative procedures, technically complex, or so normalized that they rarely become spectacular news. A model built entirely from high-profile cases would therefore risk describing the media ecology of corruption rather than the institutional ecology of corruption.

Finally, formal reform cannot be treated as equivalent to implementation. A new rule may exist while organizational practice remains substantially unchanged; a new oversight mechanism may possess legal authority without sufficient operational capacity; a formally strengthened control may be bypassed through an informal arrangement. This is precisely why the OECD distinction between regulatory frameworks and implementation is methodologically important: the existence of a rule is evidence about the institutional architecture, but not by itself evidence about how that architecture operates in practice.

These cautions do not invalidate the model. They make it harder to use — which is exactly what a useful model should do. The purpose is not to turn every reform following a scandal into proof of causation, nor every recurrence into proof of failure. The purpose is to force the investigation to reconstruct what actually changed, when it changed, and whether the mechanism itself became harder to reproduce.

Only after those controls are in place is it possible to put the model against a real institutional case. And the Ukrainian case is particularly useful for that test.

WHAT THE UKRAINIAN CASE REVEALS

Ukraine makes the model interesting because the country does not present a simple opposition between enforcement and reform. Both are taking place at the same time, and both are increasingly visible. The analytical problem is therefore not to decide whether Ukraine is “successful” or “unsuccessful” in combating corruption, but to ask what becomes visible when the distinction between detection, punishment and institutional transformation is applied to an actual institutional environment.

The enforcement circuit is clearly observable. In the first half of 2026, NABU and SAPO reported 360 investigations initiated, 107 notices of suspicion, 56 indictments involving 106 defendants, and 55 guilty verdicts concerning 76 people. The cases included high-profile investigations in the energy and defence sectors as well as cases involving senior public officials. These figures provide concrete evidence of an active law-enforcement circuit; they do not, however, provide a direct measure of the prevalence of corruption in the institutional system as a whole.

That distinction matters because the Ukrainian case illustrates the

visibility paradox particularly clearly. More investigations and more public exposures can mean that more corruption is occurring, but they can also mean that the state has become better at detecting and processing corruption that was previously less visible. The enforcement statistics therefore tell us something important about institutional capacity, but they cannot by themselves answer the question that has become central to this article: has the capacity of the exposed mechanisms to reproduce themselves been reduced?

The institutional picture is more complicated. The OECD's 2026 assessment of Ukraine's strategic anti-corruption framework records relatively high levels of both regulatory provision and implementation against the OECD's strategic-framework criteria: Ukraine met 73% of the criteria for regulations and 80% for implementation, compared with OECD averages of 38% and 32%, respectively. At the same time, the OECD describes Ukraine's framework as one developed in response to significant corruption risks and the pressures of war, reconstruction and European integration. ([OECD](#))

This is precisely the kind of evidence that requires the distinction devel-

oped earlier. A sophisticated formal and strategic framework is important evidence of institutional architecture, but it does not eliminate the need to observe how particular mechanisms behave inside that architecture. The European Commission's 2025 Ukraine Report similarly treats the anti-corruption framework as part of a broader institutional process and notes concerns about ensuring a robust and independent anti-corruption framework.

The Ukrainian case therefore reveals something more interesting than a simple success/failure narrative. It shows why the two circuits have to be observed separately. The law-enforcement circuit leaves visible traces almost immediately: investigations, suspicions, indictments, verdicts and recovered assets. The institutional-transformation circuit leaves a different kind of trace: altered procedures, redistributed discretion, stronger controls, changed organizational behaviour and, ultimately, a reduced capacity for the exposed mechanism to reproduce itself. That difference becomes especially important when a scandal generates both a spectacular enforcement response and a substantial institutional reform programme. The two may reinforce one another, but they

should not be analytically collapsed into a single indicator of success. Ukraine therefore functions less as an example that confirms the model than as a case that **makes the model necessary**. It forces us to ask, case by case, what exactly changed after exposure — and whether the change occurred in the people involved, in the procedure they exploited, or in the institutional conditions that made the mechanism possible in the first place.

And in Ukraine there is one further complication that cannot be treated as background noise. The institutional system is operating under wartime conditions. That does not invalidate the model; it changes the stakes against which its distinctions have to be observed.

■ **THE SPECIAL PROBLEM OF CORRUPTION SCANDALS IN WARTIME**

The Ukrainian case contains one further complication that cannot simply be treated as background. Corruption in a state at war acquires a different political and institutional intensity because the resources involved may concern defence procurement, energy, critical infrastructure, reconstruction, public finance, or international assistance. A public resource in such circumstances is not perceived merely

as budgetary capital. It can be materially connected to security, resilience, operational capability and, ultimately, human survival. The symbolic force of a corruption scandal therefore becomes unusually high.

This changes the dynamics of the scandal without changing the analytical problem. The demand for punishment becomes stronger, political pressure accelerates, and the public meaning of exposure becomes more emotionally charged. A corruption investigation may therefore acquire a significance far beyond the particular transaction that triggered it. Yet precisely because the stakes are higher, the distinction between punishment and institutional transformation becomes more important, not less. A highly visible prosecution can establish accountability for what happened; it does not by itself establish that the institutional conditions that made the mechanism possible have been altered.

The wartime context also creates a particular temptation to treat the removal of a corrupt participant as sufficient institutional protection. If resources are urgently needed, the immediate priority is understandably to identify the violation, stop the loss, recover resources where possible, and establish responsibility. But the

forward-looking question remains: what must change so that an equivalent mechanism cannot simply be reconstructed under comparable conditions?

This is why the relevant question in wartime cannot stop at **who violated the system**. It has to move toward **what must be changed so that the system cannot be violated in the same way under equivalent conditions**. The distinction is not abstract. When the cost of institutional failure is amplified by war, the cost of leaving the underlying opportunity infrastructure intact is amplified as well.

The wartime case therefore reinforces rather than weakens the model developed here. The more consequential the resources, the greater the need to distinguish the successful processing of a scandal from the successful reduction of the mechanism's reproducibility. And once the mechanism becomes the object of observation, the consequences extend beyond institutional research itself. They reach the way corruption is reported.

IF WE CHANGE THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS, JOURNALISM CHANGES TOO

Most scandal journalism begins with the revelation. Who participated?

How much money was involved? What evidence was found? Who resigned? Who was arrested? What did the recordings contain? These questions are indispensable because they establish the factual architecture of the case. But when the narrative ends with the arrest or resignation, journalism may reproduce the same temporal structure as the scandal machine itself: the story reaches its apparent conclusion at precisely the moment when the institutional investigation should begin.

A different form of reporting would follow the case beyond the spectacle of exposure. We can call it **mechanism journalism**. Its object would not be only the person who operated the mechanism, but the institutional trajectory through which the mechanism became possible, functioned, was exposed, and either disappeared or returned.

Such journalism would ask what institutional history produced the vulnerability, which formal controls were supposed to prevent it, where those controls failed or were bypassed, where decision-making authority was concentrated, who possessed privileged information, and what changed after the scandal. Most importantly, it would return to the case later and ask whether the mechanism appeared again, perhaps through

different people, a different procedure, or a different institutional location.

This changes the temporal structure of the story. Traditional scandal reporting is strongest at the moment of revelation; mechanism journalism becomes more valuable after the initial attention has declined. Its most important follow-up question may therefore be one that rarely produces a spectacular headline: **what happened to the mechanism?**

The change is also conceptual. The official remains part of the story, but no longer necessarily its main character. The main character becomes the **trajectory of the mechanism through the institution**.

That shift would transform a sequence of apparently disconnected scandals into cumulative knowledge about institutional architecture. One case could reveal a vulnerability; a later case could demonstrate whether it migrated; a third could show whether a reform actually reduced its reproducibility. Journalism would no longer merely document a succession of scandals. It could begin to document whether the state is learning from them.

And that leads to the broader institutional implication of the model: if every serious corruption case contains

information about the architecture that permitted it, then anti-corruption cannot remain only a process of detecting failures. It must become a process of redesigning the system that produces them.

FROM PROCESSING FAILURE TO ENGINEERING THE STATE

This is the point at which anti-corruption can be understood in a broader sense: not merely as law enforcement, political ethics, or public transparency, but as a form of state engineering.

The analogy is straightforward. When an engineer encounters repeated equipment failure, identifying and replacing the damaged component is necessary but insufficient. The engineer asks why the component failed, whether the load was distributed incorrectly, whether the design contained a vulnerability, whether monitoring was adequate, whether the operating environment exceeded the system's tolerance, and whether the replacement component is likely to fail in the same way. The institutional equivalent is to treat the corrupt officeholder as an identified failure point, rather than as the complete explanation of the failure. Removing the person may be necessary. But it does not demonstrate that the system has been redesigned.

If the same concentration of discretion, information asymmetry, weak control or fragmented responsibility remains, the institution may simply generate another route to the same functional outcome.

State engineering therefore begins when each major corruption case is converted into structured institutional knowledge. The case becomes evidence not only for prosecution but for diagnosis. What configuration made the mechanism possible? Which control failed? Which authority was too concentrated? Which information was inaccessible? Which informal practice neutralized a formal rule? Which part of the mechanism can still be reconstructed?

The sequence consequently changes from **case** → **investigation** → **punishment to something closer to case** → **diagnosis** → **institutional redesign** → **testing** → **reduction of reproducibility**. The final stage matters because redesign cannot be assumed to work simply because it has been formally adopted. The institution has to be observed after the intervention, and the mechanism has to be tested against the new architecture.

This is also where PSIR becomes more than a descriptive concept. It becomes a way of asking whether the

state has converted the information generated by scandal into durable institutional capacity. A scandal that produces only personnel replacement has generated information about an offender. A scandal that changes the conditions under which comparable mechanisms can operate has generated information about the state itself — and has acted upon that information.

The transformation is therefore not from “corrupt” to “uncorrupt,” a distinction too crude for the institutional reality under examination. It is from a system that processes failures to a system that learns from failures by altering the conditions of their reproduction.

At that point, the argument returns to Baudrillard, but from a different direction.

■ BEYOND BAUDRILLARD: THE PROGRAMMATIC PROPOSITION

At this point, the argument can move beyond Baudrillard without moving away from him. Baudrillard gives us the diagnosis: scandal can restore the political reality principle by demonstrating that violations are exposed, denounced, and subjected to the law. But if every scandal is therefore dismissed as a simulacrum, the analysis becomes empirically sterile.

Some scandals do produce reform. Some institutions genuinely learn. Some mechanisms become harder to reproduce. The task is not to decide in advance whether reform is “real” or “simulated,” but to determine when the public sign of correction corresponds to durable institutional transformation and when it does not.

This is what post-scandal institutional residue makes possible. It moves the analytical moment away from the peak of exposure and into the institutional aftermath. Instead of asking only whether an offender was punished, it asks whether the mechanism survived. Instead of treating reform as a declaration, it treats it as an observable change in future institutional possibility. In this sense, PSIR becomes a methodological bridge between Baudrillard's semiotics of scandal and an institutional analysis capable of testing what the scandal actually left behind.

The argument can therefore be condensed into one proposition:

The mature unit of anti-corruption success is not only the punished actor but the corruption mechanism that the institutional system no longer permits to reproduce itself with comparable ease.

Investigations remain necessary. Indictments remain necessary. Convictions, asset recovery, and public exposure remain necessary. But none of these indicators, taken independently, establishes that the institutional mechanism has been transformed. A mature anti-corruption system has to operate in two temporal directions: backward, to establish responsibility for what happened, and forward, to determine whether the institutional architecture has learned from what happened. The first is accountability. The second is institutional adaptation. Only their combination produces durable anti-corruption capacity.

That is the point at which the scandal changes status. It is no longer merely an event to be processed. It becomes diagnostic information about the state itself.

■ CONCLUSION: AFTER THE CAMERAS LEAVE

The most important phase of a corruption scandal may begin when the scandal is no longer news.

During the public phase, the system produces its most visible evidence of action: searches, recordings, statements, suspicions, resignations, prosecutions, trials, convictions. These events matter. They establish that the

state can see, investigate, and punish. But they are not yet the final institutional result.

The decisive test comes later, when the media cycle has ended and ordinary institutional life resumes. The researcher must return to the site of the scandal and ask what, if anything, is now different. Has the procedure changed? Has authority been redistributed? Has a control become harder to bypass? Has an informational monopoly disappeared? Has a conflict of interest become more difficult to conceal? Has the opportunity infrastructure that supported the mechanism been dismantled? And, ultimately: can the machine still do the same thing again?

If the answer is no — or if reproducing the mechanism has become substantially more difficult, more detectable, more costly, or less likely to succeed — the scandal has left behind something more durable than publicity. It has produced institutional knowledge. If the answer is yes, then the investigation, punishment, and public response may all have been real while the mechanism itself remains institutionally available. In that case, the system has processed the scandal without fully transforming the conditions that generated it.

This is where Baudrillard remains indispensable but no longer sufficient. The question is not whether the scandal was “real” or “fake.” The more useful distinction is between **exposure and transformation**. A state capable of repeatedly exposing corruption has developed an important capacity. A state capable of learning from each exposure so that the same mechanism becomes progressively less reproducible has developed something more: the capacity to convert scandal into institutional knowledge.

Overall, this finally changes the meaning of anti-corruption itself. It is

no longer merely a recurring politics of revelation, in which the system repeatedly discovers its own violations and publicly demonstrates its capacity to punish them. It becomes a cumulative process of institutional learning in which each exposed mechanism is used to alter the conditions of its possible return.

At that point, anti-corruption has to move from catching the culprit to fixing the system. The real task is not to keep putting out the same fire, but to change the conditions that keep setting it.

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THE MACHINE THAT REMEMBERS

Heidegger, Baudrillard and the Architecture
of Cultural Memory





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■ ABSTRACT

A civilisation does not truly remember a technology when it preserves its traces; it remembers it when those traces can still recover the action. This distinction becomes increasingly important in a culture capable of preserving an unprecedented quantity of objects, images, documents, recordings, archives, and digital representations of the past. The survival of a trace, however, does not necessarily imply the survival of the technological knowledge embedded in the action that produced it. A tool may remain while the skill disappears; a ritual may survive after its operative purpose has been forgotten; an archive may preserve instructions while losing the professional criteria required to interpret them. Cultural memory therefore cannot be reduced to the accumulation of preserved information. It must also be considered as an architecture through which past action remains, or ceases to remain, recoverable.

Drawing on Heidegger's understanding of technology as a mode of revealing, Stiegler's account of technics and temporality, and the theories of collective and cultural memory developed by Halbwachs,

Assmann, and Ricoeur, this article proposes the concept of **memory without action**: a condition in which the traces of a technological practice remain available while the operational capacity that once connected those traces into meaningful action has disappeared. The article then places this problem in dialogue with Baudrillard's analysis of objects, signs, symbolic exchange, and simulation. The danger begins when the sign of an action survives more successfully than the action itself, because cultural memory may then become **simulacral memory**: a convincing representation of a technological past that no longer retains its operational possibility. The article argues that the decisive criterion of technological memory is therefore not preservation alone but recoverability — the capacity of surviving traces to reconstruct the relation between operator, mechanism, purpose, action, result, and control.

Keywords

cultural memory; philosophy of technology; Heidegger; Baudrillard; technics; simulation; technological memory; memory without action; simulacral memory; reconstruction; signs; recoverability

■ INTRODUCTION

There is a comforting belief, common to museums, archives, historians, and ordinary human beings alike, that once a thing has been preserved, something important about the past has been saved with it. We keep the old tool behind glass, catalogue the document, photograph the machine, restore the building, record the ritual, digitise the manuscript, and then congratulate ourselves on having defeated time, at least administratively. The object remains where we put it, the file has been backed up, the photograph has acquired metadata, and the archive has become so large that one begins to suspect that forgetting itself may soon require a storage subscription. Yet there is a small difficulty in this triumph over oblivion: the survival of a thing does not necessarily mean the survival of what human beings once knew how to do with it.

A hammer can survive the disappearance of the craft that once gave it meaning, just as a ceremonial gesture can survive after the knowledge of why it was performed has vanished. A technical vocabulary may remain in dictionaries after the profession to which it belonged has disappeared, while an architectural ruin may preserve the material consequences

of a sophisticated operation without preserving the sequence of actions that produced them. What remains, in other words, may be the evidence of a technology without the technology as an actionable capacity. This distinction is particularly important because technological action is rarely contained entirely within the object conventionally called a machine. A machine may involve operators, procedures, resources, rules, spatial arrangements, temporal rhythms, criteria of verification, and forms of professional knowledge distributed across material and social environments. When the machine disappears, its memory may therefore disperse rather than simply vanish.

This problem changes the meaning of cultural memory. If memory is understood primarily as the preservation of information about the past, then a civilisation possessing increasingly sophisticated archives should appear to be becoming progressively more capable of remembering. Yet if memory also concerns the capacity to recover a meaningful action from what has survived, the situation becomes less reassuring. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) demonstrated that memory is socially framed rather than existing as an isolated private storehouse, while Aleida Assmann (2011) showed

how cultural memory is mediated through archives, texts, images, institutions, objects, and other carriers. Paul Ricoeur (2004), in turn, placed memory in a difficult relationship with history and forgetting, reminding us that preservation and loss cannot be cleanly separated. These approaches allow us to see that memory is never simply a warehouse of intact information. They do not, however, fully answer a more specific technological question: **when the traces of an action survive, under what conditions do they still contain the possibility of recovering that action?**

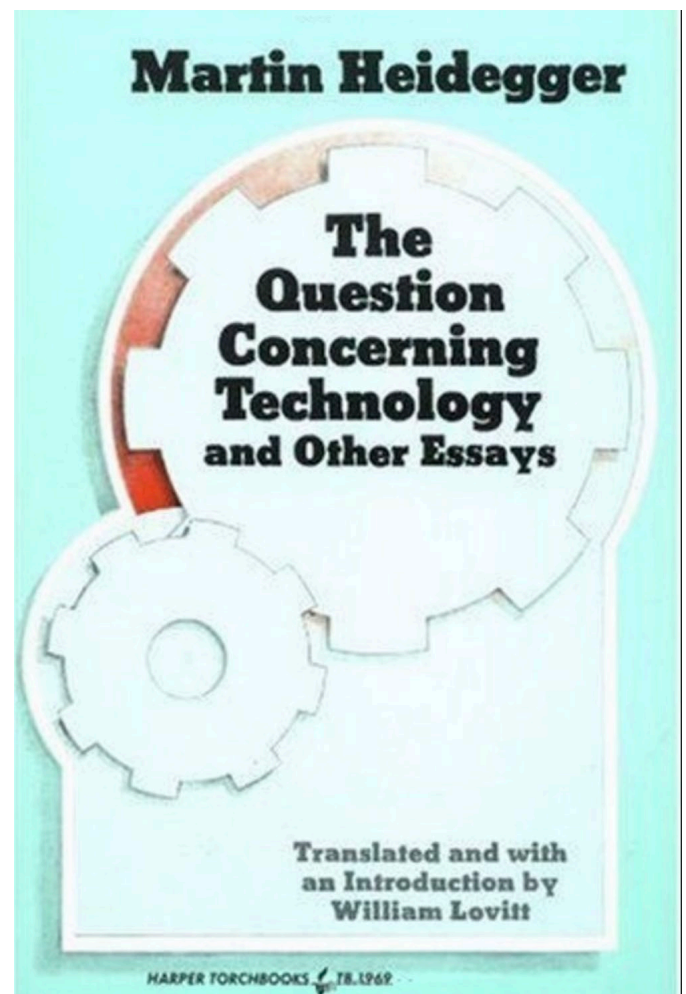
The question becomes sharper when technology itself is taken seriously as more than an ensemble of instruments. Heidegger's (1977) analysis of technology shifted attention away from the familiar definition of technology as a neutral means toward the question of how technology discloses a world. Technology is therefore not merely something human beings use; it participates in determining how beings become available, ordered, encountered, and understood. Stiegler (1998) extends the problem into the temporal dimension by treating technics as inseparable from the transmission and exteriorisation of human memory. The machine, from this perspective, is not

merely an object occupying space. It is also a way in which action can be stabilised, transmitted, repeated, and carried across time. This temporal dimension introduces an important paradox. A machine can preserve human action precisely by externalising it, yet the external trace can outlive the operational intelligence that once animated it. The surviving object then becomes ambiguous. It is at once evidence and absence: evidence that a particular action once existed, and

evidence that the action itself may no longer be recoverable. The archive can tell us that something was done without necessarily enabling us to do it again. The museum can preserve the instrument without preserving the operator. The document can preserve the procedure without preserving the criteria by which the procedure was judged successful. In such cases, the cultural memory of technology becomes fragmented across unequal traces.



Martin Heidegger (1960)



This is where the distinction between **trace** and **memory** becomes essential. A trace is evidence left by an interaction, whereas memory, in the stronger sense proposed here, requires the possibility of reconnecting that evidence with an intelligible structure of action. The difference may appear subtle until one encounters a vanished technology whose surviving components no longer form a working cycle. One may possess the material object, the description, the historical account, and even an apparently complete reconstruction, while still lacking the missing relation that once connected operator, mechanism, purpose, timing, control, and result. The problem is not that information has disappeared entirely. The problem is that the **mechanism of relation** has disappeared.

This is also the point at which the question of the sign enters the argument. Jean Baudrillard's work provides an especially productive way of examining what happens when the surviving trace ceases to function primarily as a route back toward an absent action and begins instead to circulate as a sign in its own right. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard (1996) challenged the simple understanding of objects as merely functional things

by situating them within systems of meaning and social differentiation. His subsequent analysis of the political economy of the sign (Baudrillard, 1981) made the problem more explicit: the sign does not merely transmit a meaning already securely contained elsewhere but participates in the organisation of social reality. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard (1993) pushed the problem toward disappearance, symbolic exchange, and the fate of systems whose signs continue to circulate beyond the conditions that originally sustained them.

The implications become still more radical in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where Baudrillard (1994) examines situations in which representations cease to function simply as representations of an external reality and begin to participate in the production of what is taken to be real. This provides a particularly useful lens for technological memory. If a civilisation retains the image, name, museum object, ritual reconstruction, documentary record, and digital representation of a lost technology, it may eventually possess an extraordinarily convincing memory of something that it can no longer actually perform. The representation can become more available, more reproducible, and more

culturally visible than the action from which it originated. Baudrillard's later analysis of the excessive circulation and transparency of contemporary signs further sharpens the problem, because the abundance of representations does not necessarily restore what has been lost; it may instead make the absence increasingly difficult to perceive (Baudrillard, 1993). The central argument of this article therefore begins from a deliberately uncomfortable proposition: **a civilisation does not truly remember a technology when it preserves its traces; it remembers it when those traces can still recover the action.** This proposition requires us to distinguish between preserved information and recoverable action, between archival memory and operational memory, and ultimately between memory that retains a capacity for reconstruction and memory that retains only the signs of having once possessed that capacity.

From this perspective, cultural memory can be approached as a **distributed architecture of technological traces.** A technology may survive partially in a tool, partially in a bodily skill, partially in a spatial arrangement, partially in a professional vocabulary, partially in a ritual, partially in a prohibition, and partially

in the memory of a failure. The disappearance of one component does not necessarily destroy the whole system, but the loss of certain relations may make the system irrecoverable. What matters, therefore, is not simply how many traces remain but whether the surviving traces can still be connected into a functioning account of action.

This leads to the second proposition that governs the article: **the danger begins when the sign of an action survives more successfully than the action itself.** At that point, cultural memory may enter a different regime. The object remains, but its operation has vanished; the ritual remains, but its purpose is forgotten; the image remains, but its referent has become inaccessible; the archive expands, while the capacity to act contracts. What appears to be an excess of memory may therefore conceal a deficit of recoverability. The article calls this condition **memory without action.** It further proposes the notion of **simulacral memory** to describe the moment when representations of a lost technological practice become sufficiently autonomous that they reproduce the appearance of memory without retaining the operational possibility of the remembered action. The purpose is not to suggest that every

archive, museum, reconstruction, or cultural representation is simulacral. Rather, the distinction allows us to ask a more demanding question of cultural memory: **does what has been preserved still enable us to reconstruct what was once done?**

This question matters beyond the reconstruction of obsolete machines. It concerns the ability of societies to transmit professional knowledge, remember failed practices, preserve prohibitions, understand the temporal conditions of action, and maintain the capacity to recognise when a familiar procedure can no longer be trusted. A culture can preserve the name of a profession while losing the skill, preserve the recipe while losing the judgement, preserve the machine while losing the operator, or preserve the archive while losing the mechanism that made the archive intelligible. It may even preserve the signs of successful action while forgetting the failures that once taught its practitioners when to stop. The problem, then, is not whether civilisation remembers enough. It is whether what civilisation remembers can still **act as memory**. Between the archive and the action lies a space occupied by traces, relations, operators, mechanisms, signs, interpretations, and

omissions. It is in this space that Heidegger's question concerning technology, Stiegler's question concerning technics and time, the tradition of cultural memory studies, and Baudrillard's analysis of signs and simulation unexpectedly converge. The machine that remembers is therefore not necessarily the machine that stores the most information. It is the machine whose surviving traces still contain a path back to meaningful action.

I. THE MACHINE THAT DISAPPEARS

There is a peculiar injustice in the way human beings usually remember machines. We tend to remember the object because the object is polite enough to remain visible. A building can stand for centuries after the people who knew how to inhabit it have disappeared; an instrument can survive in a museum long after the hands that knew its resistance, weight, timing, and proper use have turned to dust; a technical drawing can remain perfectly legible at the very moment when the knowledge necessary to turn the drawing into an operating process has become incomprehensible. The object is therefore often the last witness to a technological practice, but being the last witness does not make it a reliable

witness. It may remember the shape of the action while having forgotten its grammar.

This is where the conventional distinction between machine and memory begins to look rather inadequate. If a machine were simply a physical device, its disappearance would be relatively easy to define: the mechanism breaks, the parts are lost, the building collapses, and the machine is gone. Yet technologies rarely disappear in such a tidy fashion. Their components migrate into other objects, their procedures survive in altered forms, their terminology enters ordinary language, their rhythms become institutional habits, and their prohibitions remain long after the original danger has ceased to be understood. What disappears is therefore not necessarily the material apparatus but the **organisation of relations that made the apparatus capable of action.**

Heidegger's analysis of technology is useful precisely because it prevents us from reducing technology to equipment. The question concerning technology cannot be exhausted by asking what a device does, because technology also concerns a particular mode of revealing through which things become available within a partic-

ular ordering of the world (Heidegger, 1977). The machine, understood in this wider sense, belongs not only to the domain of objects but to the domain of disclosure: it organises relations between human beings, materials, purposes, time, space, and possible outcomes. When such an organisation disappears, therefore, the loss cannot be measured simply by counting how many physical components remain.

Stiegler's intervention makes the temporal character of this problem even more difficult to ignore. If technics participates in the exteriorisation and transmission of human capacities across time, then every technical object can be understood as carrying something of a human action beyond the lifetime of its original operator (Stiegler, 1998). The machine becomes a peculiar kind of temporal arrangement. It allows an action to outlive the person who performed it, but it does not guarantee that a later person will still understand how to reactivate that action. The technical object may thus function as a memory carrier without necessarily functioning as a memory that can still be operationally understood.

This distinction matters because the history of technology is full of objects that are perfectly preserved

and only partially understood. The problem is not always an absence of documentation. Sometimes the surviving documentation is extensive enough to make ignorance look almost embarrassing. There may be drawings, measurements, descriptions, fragments, photographs, inscriptions, manuals, oral traditions, and scholarly reconstructions, and yet something essential remains missing. The missing element may be a gesture, a sequence, a timing condition, a professional criterion, a particular material response, or simply the relation between several surviving elements. One can possess all the pieces of a machine and still not possess the machine as an action.

The distinction becomes especially visible when we consider professional knowledge. A craft may be recorded in a manual, but the manual does not necessarily preserve the bodily adjustment by which an experienced operator recognises that a material is behaving incorrectly. A ritual may preserve its gestures while losing the temporal conditions that once made those gestures meaningful. A technical process may survive in a diagram while losing the criterion by which an operator knew when to intervene, correct, or stop. In each case, the archive contains something true, but

the truth contained in the archive is not necessarily sufficient to reconstruct the operation. The document has survived; the operational relation has not.

This is why the memory of a machine must be understood as distributed. Its memory may reside simultaneously in the object, the operator, the workspace, the vocabulary, the procedure, the calendar, the ritual, the prohibition, and the remembered failure. Some of these elements are material and some are not, but they participate in the same technological continuity. The disappearance of the machine therefore resembles less the destruction of a single object than the scattering of a system into fragments whose original relationships have become uncertain.

Such scattering also explains why cultural memory is inherently uneven. Stone may survive where wood has disappeared; a name may survive after the profession itself has vanished; a ritual may survive after its explanation has been forgotten; a document may survive after the operator who could interpret it has disappeared; a legend may preserve the existence of a technical operation while completely obscuring its technical cause. The archive does not preserve the past evenly because the

world does not preserve its traces evenly. What survives is determined by material durability, institutional selection, cultural attention, accident, prestige, usefulness, and sometimes sheer historical bad luck.

Assmann's account of cultural memory is particularly important here because it directs attention to the media and institutions through which societies preserve what they consider worth transmitting (Assmann, 2011). Yet once memory is viewed from the perspective of technological action, another question becomes unavoidable. It is not enough to ask what a culture has chosen to preserve. We must also ask **what kind of action the preserved material still permits us to recover.**

The distinction may seem unnecessarily demanding until one notices what happens when it is ignored. A society can begin to confuse the preservation of evidence with the preservation of competence. A museum object becomes an adequate substitute for the technology it once embodied; a reconstruction becomes equivalent to the lost practice; a photograph becomes evidence that the world represented in the photograph remains conceptually available. The archive

begins to reassure precisely because it is full. The more traces it contains, the easier it becomes to assume that nothing essential has been lost.

However, something essential may have been lost, and it may be the least visible part of the machine. It may be the **relation.**

A machine is not merely a collection of components. It is a working relation between components, operators, resources, rules, purposes, transformations, and controls. Remove enough of those relations and the surviving objects become archaeological evidence rather than technological memory. They tell us that an action once existed, but they no longer allow the action to be reconstructed without introducing hypotheses, external knowledge, or invention. The difference is crucial. Reconstruction begins precisely where preservation ceases to be self-sufficient.

This is also why the question of failure belongs inside the architecture of technological memory. Civilisations do not survive only by remembering successful procedures; they survive by remembering what failed, what was dangerous, what had to be prohibited, and when an apparently functioning process had to be stopped. A warning sign, an accident record, a profession-

al taboo, or a ritual prohibition may contain less visible information than a technical drawing, yet it can preserve something that the drawing cannot: the memory of a boundary. In that sense, negative memory may be one of the most technologically valuable forms of memory, because it preserves not simply what can be done but what must not be done.

Here the machine begins to look rather less like an object and rather more like a civilisation's answer to the problem of transmitting action across time. Its memory is not stored in one place because its action was never located in one place. The operator knew something, the tool embodied something, the workspace constrained something, the calendar determined something, the ritual transmitted something, and the prohibition prevented something. The machine existed in the relation among these things. When the relation breaks, the machine can disappear even while almost every visible sign of its existence remains.

And this is perhaps the first uncomfortable conclusion of the argument.

A machine does not necessarily disappear when its material body is destroyed. It may disappear much earlier, at the moment when its

surviving traces can no longer be assembled into a recoverable action.

- The museum may still have the machine.
- The archive may still have the documents.
- The culture may still have the name.

What it may no longer have is the possibility of making the machine act again.

■ II. MEMORY IS DISTRIBUTED

Once the machine is no longer treated as a solitary object, its memory begins to look rather different. We are accustomed to asking where a technology is stored, as though knowledge were a document waiting patiently on a shelf, but technological memory is rarely so considerate. It may be distributed between the tool and the hand that uses it, between the procedure and the space in which the procedure becomes possible, between professional language and the bodily habit that gives the language practical meaning. A calendar, a prohibition, a ritual sequence, or the memory of a failed operation may carry information that no technical drawing contains, because technology is preserved not only in what people made but in the conditions under which they knew how to act.

This is why the disappearance of a machine should not be imagined as a single event. What disappears first may be the operator; what disappears later may be the professional vocabulary; what survives for centuries may be the building, the instrument, or the name. Cultural memory therefore behaves less like a library than like a dispersed technological landscape in which different fragments of an earlier action survive at different rates and with different degrees of intelligibility. Assmann's (2011) account of cultural memory helps us recognise the importance of the media and institutions through which such fragments are preserved, while Halbwachs's (1992) earlier formulation reminds us that memory is sustained through social frameworks rather than existing as an isolated possession of the individual.

Yet the technological problem begins precisely where the sociological description ends. A society may preserve the carriers of memory without preserving the relation between them. The instrument can survive without the gesture, the gesture without the purpose, the purpose without the criterion of success, and the criterion without the circumstances in which it was once applied. What looks like continuity from

the outside may therefore conceal a broken operational chain. The culture remembers the parts, but it no longer remembers how the parts belonged together.

This is also why time itself must be considered a component of technological memory. A process may depend upon a particular season, a pause, a sequence of operations, a period of repair, a deadline, or a rhythm that cannot simply be extracted from the procedure and placed into another temporal environment without altering its meaning. Stiegler's (1998) treatment of technics and time is important here because it makes clear that technical exteriorisation is also a form of temporal transmission. What is transmitted through a technical system is never merely *what to do*; *it may also be when to do it, when not to do it, and when to stop*. The last of these is particularly revealing. A technology without a mechanism of stopping is not simply an efficient technology; it is an incomplete architecture of action. The memory of stopping, therefore, belongs to the technology no less than the memory of production. A culture that preserves procedures but forgets their limits may possess an impressive archive and a dangerously poor memory.

The same applies to failure. The memory of an unsuccessful operation may survive in a prohibition, a scar on a material surface, an altered procedure, a professional warning, or a ritual whose original explanation has disappeared. Such negative traces may look insignificant beside monumental objects and official documents, yet they can contain the most valuable part of technological knowledge: the memory of where action ceases to be legitimate, safe, or effective. Ricoeur's (2004) analysis of the relation between memory and forgetting is useful here, because forgetting is not merely the disappearance of information; it is also the disappearance of distinctions that once organised what could be remembered, repeated, or avoided.

The machine, then, is remembered through an ecology of traces. Some traces tell us what was made, others how it was made, others when it was made, and still others what happened when someone made it incorrectly. None of them is necessarily sufficient by itself. Their significance emerges from the possibility of reconnecting them into a structure of action. This is why the archive should not be judged only by its size. A very large archive may preserve millions of traces and still fail to preserve the relations that

make those traces intelligible. At this point, cultural memory acquires an architectural meaning. It is not simply a collection of surviving materials but a system of relations through which the fragments of past action can, at least in principle, be brought back into connection. The decisive question is therefore no longer **What has survived?** but **What can still be reconstructed from what has survived?** And once that question is asked, the apparently innocent archive begins to acquire a rather more dangerous philosophical character, because the answer may depend less upon the quantity of information preserved than upon whether the signs still lead anywhere beyond themselves.

III. WHEN THE MECHANISM GOES MISSING

The most revealing moment in the life of a vanished technology is not necessarily the moment when the machine breaks, but the moment when its surviving parts cease to explain one another. A fragment of a device may remain perfectly identifiable, an inscription may tell us its name, a drawing may show its proportions, and a historical account may describe its supposed purpose, yet the whole system can remain strangely silent.

What is missing is often not another object but the relation that once connected the objects into an action. The machine has left evidence of itself, but the evidence no longer forms a working sentence.

This is where **recoverability** becomes a more demanding criterion than preservation. A technological trace is recoverable when it can still participate in the reconstruction of the action that produced it: who operated it, with what resources, according to which sequence, for what purpose, under what conditions, and with what means of verification or correction. Without these relations, the surviving trace may remain historically interesting while losing its technological intelligibility. One can know what a component was called without knowing what role it played, or know what a procedure was supposed to achieve without knowing the conditions under which it could actually succeed.

The distinction is important because reconstruction is often tempted by completeness. If enough fragments have been collected, the historian or archaeologist naturally wants to put them together and declare the machine recovered. Yet a collection of correct fragments does not necessarily constitute a correct mechanism. The

missing relation may be precisely the element that made the entire system operational: the sequence between two actions, the timing of an intervention, the position of the operator, the source of energy, the criterion for correction, or the point at which the process had to stop. What has disappeared may therefore be invisible precisely because it was never an object in the first place.

This gives the notion of the **missing mechanism** a wider meaning. When surviving elements cannot form a functioning cycle, the gap should not immediately be filled with imagination merely because the archive dislikes an empty space. The absence itself becomes evidence. It tells us that the surviving memory is incomplete and that the missing relation must be treated as a problem of reconstruction rather than quietly converted into a fact. The most honest reconstruction is therefore not the one that produces the most beautiful machine, but the one that makes visible where the evidence ends and where hypothesis begins. The same principle applies to cultural memory more generally. A civilisation may preserve the object, the description, and even the ritual surrounding a past technology while losing the relation that once made the three parts mutually intelligible. At that

point, memory remains abundant but becomes operationally thin. It knows about the action without necessarily knowing how to recover the action. This is the difference between possessing a trace and possessing a usable memory, and it is why recoverability must become one of the central criteria by which technological memory is judged.

IV. HEIDEGGER: TECHNOLOGY AS REVEALING

At this point Heidegger enters the argument, although not to rescue us from the missing mechanism. His importance lies elsewhere. Heidegger's question concerning technology asks us to resist the comfortable assumption that technology is simply a collection of instruments standing between human intention and a desired result. If technology were merely a neutral means, the disappearance of a machine would be primarily a technical loss. But if technology participates in a particular way of revealing the world, then the disappearance of a technological practice may also mean the disappearance of a particular way in which the world had once become intelligible and available to human action (Heidegger, 1977).

This is what makes the problem of technological memory more serious than the preservation of historical artefacts. A technology does not merely tell us what human beings once possessed; it tells us something about what they were able to see, distinguish, measure, manipulate, anticipate, and control. The machine therefore belongs to a larger architecture of disclosure. Its procedures establish relations between material and purpose, between action and consequence, between what can be done and what must be avoided. When the technological practice disappears, the loss may therefore concern not only the operation itself but the world of distinctions that made the operation possible.

Heidegger's notion of revealing also prevents us from romanticising reconstruction. To recover an old machine is not necessarily to recover the world that made the machine meaningful. We may reproduce its external form while failing to recover the mode of attention, temporal discipline, practical knowledge, or relation to material that once belonged to its operation. A reconstructed mechanism can therefore be technically impressive and historically misleading at the same time. It may reproduce the visible object while leaving unreconstructed

the particular disclosure of the world in which the object once functioned.

Here the problem of memory becomes inseparable from the problem of action. If technology is a way of revealing, then technological forgetting cannot be reduced to the loss of information. A civilisation may retain abundant information about a vanished technology while losing the practical distinctions through which that technology once organised experience. The archive can preserve the answer while the question that made the answer meaningful has disappeared. We know the instrument, but not what kind of attention it demanded; we know the procedure, but not what counted as failure; we know the result, but not the world of possibilities within which that result mattered.

This is where our argument departs from a purely Heideggerian account. We are not asking only **what technology reveals, but how the capacity for such revealing is carried through time**. Specially when the hitlerism, leninism and actually scientism constructivism failed to reveal that the prometheean tool can be fall in the evil hands showing precicely that technology is not outside human nature in order to "purifie" or "rebuilt" it but complexifie our relation with

the reality as Baudrillard shows that. Once technological action is distributed across objects, operators, procedures, temporal rhythms, prohibitions, and signs, its memory becomes a problem of transmission. Stiegler's (1998) account of technics and time helps to make this transition possible: technical exteriorisation allows human capacities to survive beyond individual bodies, but that survival remains dependent upon the transmission of the relations that make those capacities intelligible. What is transmitted, therefore, is never simply a thing. It is a possibility of action.

The question that now opens before us is consequently more uncomfortable than the familiar question of whether a civilisation has preserved its technological heritage. We must ask whether it has preserved the **possibility of entering the relation with the world that the technology once disclosed**. And this brings us directly to the problem of the sign, because once action disappears, its signs may remain extraordinarily successful at telling us that the action existed. The sign may survive the machine, circulate after the operator has disappeared, and eventually become more visible than the action from which it originated. That is where the memory of

technology begins to approach the territory mapped by Baudrillard.

V. BAUDRILLARD: WHEN THE SIGN OUTLIVES THE ACTION

There is a moment in the life of every lost technology when the problem ceases to be whether anything remains and becomes instead a much more dangerous question: **what exactly is it that remains?** The museum gives us the tool, the archive gives us the document, the historian gives us the narrative, the reconstruction gives us the machine, and the photograph gives us the reassuring impression that we have not lost very much after all. Human beings are remarkably good at this sort of reassurance. We have always been capable of mistaking a portrait for a person, a map for a territory, and, with sufficient institutional assistance, a catalogue entry for knowledge. Yet the surviving object is not necessarily the surviving action, and the surviving sign is certainly not obliged to lead us back to either.

This is where Baudrillard becomes indispensable, because his work allows us to follow the trace after it has ceased to behave like a simple trace. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard (1996) showed that objects do not exist for us merely as functional things; they

enter systems of meaning, differentiation, status, and social relations. The object therefore carries more than its physical utility. It becomes readable. It tells us something about the person who possesses it, the social order in which it circulates, and the world in which its function has been defined. This is already enough to disturb the comforting archaeological picture in which an object simply waits to reveal its original purpose. The object can survive while its function changes, and it can acquire meanings that have little to do with the action for which it was originally designed.

Consider, for a moment, the old machine behind museum glass. It may once have been an instrument of production, a device requiring trained hands, precise timing, material judgement, and a particular relation between operator and result. Today it may be illuminated, labelled, insured, photographed, and admired. Nothing about this process is necessarily false. The machine really did exist, and the museum really did preserve it. But something curious has happened: the machine has moved from the order of **operation** into the order of **representation**. It no longer primarily functions as something with which one acts; it functions as something through

which one knows that a certain form of action once existed. That transition is not yet simulation. It is something more elementary and, for precisely that reason, more important. The object has become a sign.

Baudrillard's analysis of the political economy of the sign allows us to see why this transition matters. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, he (1981) challenged the assumption that signs merely carry meanings that have been securely established elsewhere. Signs participate in systems of differentiation and value; they acquire their significance through relations with other signs and through the social structures in which they circulate. Applied to technological memory, this means that a surviving machine can gradually cease to function as evidence leading us toward an absent action and begin functioning as evidence that stands *in for* that action. The distinction is subtle, but it is decisive.

The machine no longer says, in effect, **"Here is something from which the action can be reconstructed."** It begins to say, **"Here is what that action was."**

The first statement opens a path. The second closes it.

This is the moment at which memory becomes vulnerable to substitution. If the sign can successfully perform the cultural function of the absent action, there may be less incentive to recover the action itself. The museum does not need to teach the visitor how the machine worked; it needs to communicate what the machine means. The documentary does not need to restore the professional relation between operator and material; it needs to make the vanished practice intelligible to the spectator. The reconstruction does not need to recover every lost condition of operation; it needs to look convincing enough to satisfy the expectations attached to the historical image. The past becomes increasingly available as representation precisely while becoming increasingly remote as practice.

This is where Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* becomes particularly useful. The problem is no longer simply that an object has changed its function. The deeper problem is that the relation between presence and absence itself has changed. The machine has disappeared as an active technological relation, but its symbolic existence may continue to circulate long after its operational existence has ended (Baudrillard, 1993). The dead machine can therefore acquire

an extraordinarily successful after-life. It may become a monument, a cultural emblem, a national symbol, a design reference, an aesthetic object, or a token of technological achievement. The more successful this after-life becomes, the easier it may be to overlook the fact that the original relation of action has disappeared.

There is something almost comic about the situation. A civilisation can spend enormous resources preserving evidence that it once knew how to do something while becoming increasingly uncertain about whether it could do it again. It can restore the façade of a workshop, reproduce the tools, digitise the manuals, create an interactive exhibition, and then declare the heritage safely preserved. The machine has been saved from oblivion, although nobody has asked whether the knowledge has been saved from irrelevance. We have, in effect, preserved the answer to a question whose grammar we have forgotten.

This is precisely where the distinction between **trace** and **sign** becomes necessary. A trace points backward toward an interaction that produced it. A sign can circulate without requiring the recovery of that interaction. The trace retains a demand for reconstruction; the sign may be satisfied with

recognition. The trace says, "Something happened here; find out how." The sign says, "This is what happened." The first creates an investigation. The second creates an image. And once the image becomes sufficient, the missing action can become culturally invisible.

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* gives us the language for the next transformation. The problem becomes acute when the representation no longer functions simply as a representation of a lost technological reality but begins to organise the reality through which the lost technology is understood (Baudrillard, 1994). At that point, we no longer have merely an object representing a vanished action. We have a whole environment of representations: photographs of the machine, reconstructions of the machine, stories about the machine, digital models of the machine, films showing the machine, educational diagrams explaining the machine, and perhaps even artificial systems capable of generating new images of how the machine supposedly operated. The original action has become only one element — perhaps the least accessible element — within an enormous system of representations.

The paradox is that representation becomes more complete as reference

becomes weaker. The more perfectly the lost technology can be represented, the less obvious its absence may become.

This is the point at which the concept of **simulacral memory** becomes useful. We are not proposing that every representation of the past is a simulacrum, nor that archives inevitably falsify history. The more precise claim is that memory becomes simulacral when the cultural signs of an action become sufficiently autonomous to reproduce the effect of remembering without retaining the possibility of recovering the action itself. The memory looks full because the signs are abundant. The memory feels convincing because the representation is coherent. Yet the operational relation has disappeared.

A civilisation then arrives at a peculiar condition in which it possesses **memory without action**.

It remembers the image of the craft without the craft, the instrument without the operator, the procedure without the judgement, the ritual without the temporal order that made it effective, and the prohibition without the experience of the danger that produced it. What remains is not nothing. On the contrary, something highly sophisticated remains: a cultural representation of the lost technology.

But representation and recoverability have parted company.

This distinction allows us to reread Baudrillard's earlier works as stages in the fate of the technological trace. The object becomes part of a system; the object is read through signs; signs become detached from the original relations of production and exchange; symbolic systems continue after the disappearance of their original referents; simulation ultimately makes representation capable of producing the reality within which the absent referent is understood (Baudrillard, 1981, 1993, 1994, 1996). The trajectory is not simply from object to image. It is from **action to increasingly autonomous representation**.

The Transparency of Evil adds another dimension to this problem because the contemporary world is not suffering from a shortage of representations. It is suffering, if anything, from their extraordinary proliferation. Images, records, copies, reconstructions, simulations, classifications, databases, and digital reproductions can circulate at a speed and scale that earlier cultures could hardly imagine. Baudrillard (1993) is therefore useful not only for understanding how the sign becomes autonomous but for recognising the peculiar condition

in which visibility itself can become excessive. Everything can be shown, copied, archived, and circulated, while the relation that once gave the thing its operational meaning becomes increasingly difficult to recover.

This creates an unexpected inversion of the traditional problem of cultural memory. Earlier civilisations were often threatened by the scarcity of records. Contemporary civilisation may increasingly be threatened by an abundance of records that no longer guarantee understanding. We can preserve the photograph of the gesture, the description of the procedure, the sound of the language, the appearance of the tool, and the virtual reconstruction of the workshop, yet still fail to preserve the relation among them that made the original action possible. We have not lost the traces. We have lost the path between them.

And here the distinction between **preservation** and **recoverability** becomes decisive. Preservation asks whether something has survived. Recoverability asks whether what has survived can still be transformed into meaningful action. The first can be measured by storage, durability, cataloguing, digitisation, and access. The second requires something much more demanding: the restoration of

relations between operator, mechanism, material, purpose, temporal condition, control, and result. A civilisation may possess an immense archive and still possess very little recoverable technological memory.

This is why the sign of an action can become more dangerous than the disappearance of the action itself. If the action simply disappeared, its absence would be visible and the need for reconstruction would remain obvious. But when its signs survive in convincing abundance, the absence can become difficult to recognise. The sign reassures us that the past remains available. It can therefore conceal the very loss that it appears to commemorate.

The danger begins when the sign of an action survives more successfully than the action itself.

At that point, the archive can become strangely self-sufficient. It no longer sends us back toward the missing mechanism; it surrounds the missing mechanism with enough representations to make the absence tolerable, perhaps even invisible. The civilisation does not necessarily become ignorant of its past. Something more peculiar happens: it becomes increasingly knowledgeable about the **appearance of its past while becoming less**

capable of recovering its action.

This is the real significance of the machine that remembers. Its problem is not whether memory can survive the death of a machine. Memory has always survived in fragments. The problem is whether the fragments still form a route toward action, or whether they have become a closed circuit of signs referring primarily to one another. Once that circuit closes, the machine may remain everywhere — in museums, archives, images, narratives, databases, reconstructions, and collective imagination — while being absent at precisely the point where it matters most: in the possibility of acting again.

And this brings us to the central distinction of the article. **A civilisation does not truly remember a technology when it preserves its traces; it remembers it when those traces can still recover the action.** The question is therefore no longer whether the past has been successfully archived. The question is whether the archive still contains a path back to the machine as an event of human action, rather than merely a convincing collection of signs that tells us what we are supposed to remember.

■ VI. MEMORY WITHOUT ACTION

We have now reached the point at

which the problem can no longer be solved by adding more documents to the archive. If the object has survived, the image has survived, the name has survived, and the story has survived, what exactly is missing when we still cannot recover the action? The answer is uncomfortable because it forces us to distinguish between two things that ordinary language prefers to keep together: **knowing that something existed and remembering how to act within it.** A civilisation may possess an excellent memory in the first sense and a remarkably poor one in the second. It may know more and be able to do less.

This is what we mean by **memory without action.** The term does not describe simple forgetting, because forgetting would be comparatively easy to recognise. Memory without action is more deceptive. It occurs when the traces of a former practice remain sufficiently abundant to produce knowledge, recognition, identification, and even emotional attachment, while the operational relations that once transformed those traces into action have disappeared. The culture remembers the technology as an object of knowledge, but no longer possesses it as a capacity of action. It can point toward the machine, describe it, classify it, reconstruct its appearance, and tell

stories about the people who used it, yet the path from representation back to operation has been broken.

This distinction allows us to reconsider the familiar opposition between memory and forgetting. Ricoeur (2004) shows that memory is always entangled with forgetting, selection, representation, and the work of history, while Assmann (2011) demonstrates that cultural memory is carried through multiple media and institutional forms. From the perspective developed here, however, another distinction must be introduced: **preserved memory and operational memory are not necessarily the same thing**. The former concerns the survival and circulation of traces; the latter concerns the continued possibility of reconstructing meaningful action from them. The first may increase while the second declines, and there is no contradiction in this. Indeed, the modern archive may be exceptionally successful at producing precisely this combination.

Imagine a civilisation that has preserved every visible sign of a lost craft. Its tools are catalogued, its workshop reconstructed, its terminology recorded, its techniques described in books, its practitioners represented in photographs, and its products displayed in museums. A visitor can

leave the exhibition with the confident feeling of having understood the craft. Yet if the visitor cannot determine how the material was judged, when the procedure had to be interrupted, which variation required a change of technique, or what a competent practitioner noticed before an inexperienced one did, then something essential has not been preserved. The archive has retained the **description of competence** without necessarily retaining competence itself.

This is why professional memory deserves particular attention. Much technological knowledge is not stored in explicit propositions at all. It may reside in posture, timing, resistance, correction, attention, anticipation, and the ability to recognise a deviation before it becomes an error. The expert does not merely know a rule; the expert knows when the rule has ceased to be sufficient. Such knowledge is notoriously difficult to archive because it is distributed between body, environment, material, and situation. One can describe it after the fact, but description is not identical with possession. The manual can say what should happen while the operator must still recognise what is happening.

Here the machine-memory problem touches the deeper issue already

opened by Heidegger. If technology is a mode of revealing, then technical competence is partly a capacity to perceive the world in technologically meaningful distinctions. The experienced operator sees not simply a material object but a set of possibilities, limits, deviations, timings, and consequences. When that competence disappears, the world itself may become less differentiated. The machine remains, but the mode of attention through which its possibilities were once disclosed has weakened. In this sense, technological forgetting can be a forgetting not of information but of **relevant distinctions**.

Stiegler's (1998) account of technics and time makes this problem still more consequential. Technical exteriorisation permits human capacities to survive beyond the individual who first possessed them, but exteriorisation does not automatically guarantee transmission. The technical object can carry memory forward while leaving the next generation with the task of discovering how to reactivate it. What survives materially may therefore exceed what survives operationally. The machine becomes a promise that its own culture can no longer necessarily fulfil. This also explains why a technological reconstruction can

be both accurate and false. It can be accurate as an object and false as an action. The dimensions may be correct, the materials authentic, the mechanism plausible, and the visual result convincing, while the relation between operator, purpose, timing, feedback, and correction remains hypothetical. Reconstruction becomes problematic when the absence of knowledge is hidden by the completeness of the replica. The better the replica looks, the easier it becomes to forget that what has been reconstructed may be the **appearance of operation**, rather than operation itself.

At this point the three forms of memory proposed in this article become useful. **Living memory** is memory whose traces remain connected sufficiently well to permit the recovery of action. **Archival memory** preserves traces and information but may no longer preserve the relations required for their operational reconstruction. **Simulacral memory** goes further: the surviving signs become capable of producing a convincing representation of the lost action without requiring that action to be recoverable at all. These are not rigid historical stages through which every technology must pass, but analytical distinctions that allow us to identify

different relationships between preservation and action.

The distinction matters because the three forms can coexist. A civilisation may possess living memory in one professional community, archival memory in its institutions, and simulacral memory in popular culture. A master may still know how to perform a technique while the museum presents it as heritage and the media transform it into an aesthetic image. The same technology can therefore exist simultaneously as **action**, **archive**, and **sign**, depending on who encounters it and what kind of relation to it remains possible. Cultural memory is consequently not a single condition shared equally by everyone. It is an uneven architecture in which different degrees of recoverability coexist.

This unevenness becomes particularly important when a society attempts to revive a lost technology. Revival is often described as a matter of recovering forgotten information, but information alone may not be enough. If the missing element is the relation between components, the criterion of success, the professional judgement, or the timing of intervention, then the task is not retrieval but reconstruction. One must infer the missing mechanism from the surviving traces, compare

competing hypotheses, identify what remains uncertain, and determine whether the reconstructed cycle can actually function. The difference between historical description and technological recovery therefore lies precisely in whether the past can be transformed from an object of interpretation back into an organised possibility of action.

And this gives us a more precise meaning of **recoverability**. Recoverability is not the certainty that we can reproduce the past exactly as it was. History rarely offers that luxury. It is the degree to which surviving traces still allow us to reconstruct the relations necessary for meaningful action without disguising uncertainty as knowledge. A memory can therefore be incomplete and still be alive. What matters is whether its incompleteness remains visible and whether the surviving structure can still guide reconstruction. Conversely, a memory can be extraordinarily detailed and yet operationally dead if its details no longer connect.

This is where the argument returns, unexpectedly, to Baudrillard. The danger of simulation is not simply that a representation is false. A representation can be historically responsible and still participate in a process through

which the absent action becomes unnecessary for the production of meaning. Once the sign can satisfy the cultural demand to recognise, admire, classify, or consume the past, the missing action may cease to matter. The museum visitor does not need to operate the machine; the image already performs the memory. The digital model does not need to restore the lost competence; it provides an experience of understanding. The reconstruction does not need to return us to the original relation; it gives us something that looks sufficiently like the relation to occupy its cultural place.

This is why **memory without action is not the same thing as false memory**. The signs may be entirely authentic. The machine may genuinely have existed. The documents may be accurate. The photographs may be genuine. The historical narrative may be carefully researched. What has disappeared is not necessarily truth but **operational continuity**. The problem is therefore subtler than misinformation. A culture can tell the truth about what it once knew how to do and still be unable to do it.

That distinction may be one of the most important consequences of the argument. The opposite of technological memory is not simply ignorance.

It can be **knowledge without capacity**. And knowledge without capacity is precisely what an archive can accumulate almost indefinitely. The archive can become richer while the action becomes poorer, until the civilisation possesses an increasingly elaborate description of a competence that no living operator can activate.

At this point, the question of cultural memory becomes a question of civilisational capability. What a society remembers is not only what it can tell its descendants about itself; it is also what it can still transmit as a capacity to distinguish, decide, operate, correct, and stop. The memory of a machine therefore includes the memory of its limits, its failures, its temporal conditions, its operators, and its reasons for existing. Remove enough of these relations and the machine survives only as a sign of itself.

The central formula can now be stated without metaphor: **a civilisation does not truly remember a technology when it preserves its traces; it remembers it when those traces can still recover the action**. This is why the quantity of preserved information cannot serve as a sufficient measure of cultural memory. What matters is whether the archive, the

object, the ritual, the image, and the surviving practice can still be brought into a relation from which meaningful action may emerge.

And this produces a final inversion. We usually fear that civilisation will forget because its archives may be destroyed. Perhaps the more difficult danger is the opposite: that civilisation will preserve so many signs of what it once knew how to do that it will no longer notice when the ability itself has disappeared. The archive will remain full, the museum will remain open, the images will continue to circulate, and the machine will continue to exist everywhere except where it originally mattered — in the hands of someone who still knew what to do with it.

VII. DOES ANY CIVILIZATION REMEMBER HOW TO ACT?

There is, however, one part of technological memory that becomes visible only when we stop asking what a machine was able to produce and begin asking what it had learned not to do. A civilisation does not survive merely by transmitting successful procedures. It also survives by preserving the memory of failed attempts, dangerous conditions, forbidden combinations, and moments at which an operator had to stop rather than

continue. The scar on a material, the warning attached to a procedure, the ritual prohibition whose original explanation has been forgotten, or the professional hesitation that prevents an experienced practitioner from proceeding too quickly may all carry technological knowledge that no inventory of successful operations can provide.

This form of **negative memory** is particularly revealing because it demonstrates that technological memory is not equivalent to a collection of instructions. An instruction tells us what may be done; a prohibition may preserve the knowledge of what must not be done, and the difference is not merely moral or procedural. It may contain the accumulated memory of a failure that no longer needs to be repeated because someone, at some earlier point, already paid the price for discovering it. When the prohibition survives but the reason disappears, however, the civilisation may retain the form of caution while losing the intelligence that made the caution meaningful. It knows that something must not be done, but no longer knows why.

Here the problem of recoverability acquires another dimension. To recover a technology is not simply to reconstruct its productive sequence;

it is also to reconstruct its limits. The machine must be understood together with the conditions under which it should be interrupted, corrected, abandoned, or refused. A technology that can produce a result but cannot recognise when that result should not be pursued is not merely incomplete as a technical system. It has lost part of the memory that once made its operation intelligible. This brings the problem unexpectedly close to the contemporary world. We now possess extraordinary technical capacities for preserving traces, reproducing images, storing procedures, and generating representations of almost any historical object. Digital archives can hold more material than any previous civilisation could have imagined, while computational systems can reconstruct voices, faces, environments, documents, and increasingly complex representations of past events. The technical problem is therefore no longer simply whether the trace will survive. In many cases, the trace is almost guaranteed to survive. The more difficult question is whether the surviving trace still carries the relations necessary for judgement, action, correction, and restraint.

The abundance of traces may even conceal the poverty of recoverability. We can have thousands of photo-

graphs of a vanished practice without possessing the practitioner who knew which detail mattered. We can have complete-looking manuals without the tacit criteria by which an expert distinguished a correct operation from a dangerous approximation. We can generate a highly convincing reconstruction without knowing whether the reconstructed sequence preserves the original conditions of action. The archive becomes technically richer while the distance between representation and operation becomes harder to see.

This is where the contemporary significance of Baudrillard's argument becomes unavoidable. The problem is not that digital representations are necessarily false. Quite the opposite: they may be accurate, detailed, and historically well documented. The problem is that representation can become so efficient at producing the experience of access that the absence of operational knowledge ceases to be felt as an absence. The image becomes available without the action, the simulation without the competence, the archive without the operator. What was once a technological capacity becomes increasingly available as an experience of knowing about that capacity.

The danger, therefore, is not that civilisation will forget everything. It is that it may remember **too much in the wrong form**. A culture may possess an enormous archive of what it once knew how to do while becoming progressively less capable of recovering the relations through which that knowledge was once enacted. The accumulation of representations can then create the appearance of continuity precisely where operational continuity has been broken.

This is why the question of artificial intelligence belongs at the very edge of the argument, rather than at its centre. AI systems can now generate representations from enormous bodies of preserved material, reconstruct patterns from fragments, and produce plausible continuations where the historical record is incomplete. Such capacities may become extraordinarily valuable for reconstruction. Yet they also sharpen the distinction on which this article depends: generating a convincing representation of an action is not necessarily the same as recovering the conditions under which that action was possible. A system may reconstruct the sign of competence without possessing, or transmitting, the human relations that made the competence meaningful.

The problem is therefore not whether machines will remember for us. Machines have been remembering for us for a very long time, from inscriptions and calendars to books, archives, photographs, databases, and digital systems. The deeper question is **what kind of memory we are asking them to preserve**. If we ask only for traces, we may receive an archive. If we ask for representations, we may receive a simulation. But if what we need is the capacity to act, then memory must preserve something more demanding: the relations between operator, mechanism, purpose, material, time, feedback, failure, and the possibility of stopping.

A civilisation that remembers only successful action may become efficient and reckless; a civilisation that remembers only representations may become knowledgeable and incapable; a civilisation that remembers both action and its limits retains something closer to technological intelligence. The distinction is therefore not between remembering and forgetting but between different architectures of memory. The decisive question is whether memory remains capable of returning from the sign to the action, from the object to the mechanism, and from the preserved result to the condi-

tions under which the result could be meaningfully produced.

At this point the argument comes back to where it began. The machine that remembers is not the machine that stores the greatest number of traces. It is the architecture that keeps those traces connected strongly enough to make action recoverable. Its memory may be distributed across objects, bodies, spaces, procedures, temporal rhythms, prohibitions, failures, and signs, but the purpose of that distribution is not preservation for its own sake. It is the possibility that something once learned can remain available for meaningful action after the original operator, object, and historical situation have disappeared.

And perhaps this is the more difficult question for a civilisation that has become exceptionally good at recording itself: **when we preserve the signs of everything we once knew how to do, how will we know whether we have preserved the knowledge itself?** The answer cannot be found in the size of the archive, the resolution of the reconstruction, or the sophistication of the simulation. It must be found in whether the surviving memory can still restore the relations through which action becomes possible, intelligible, and responsible.

That is where technological memory ceases to be a problem of storage and becomes a 'problem' of civilisation.

■ CONCLUSION

The machine that remembers is therefore not simply a machine that has survived. It is a machine which traces continue to preserve a route toward action. This distinction changes the meaning of technological memory because it shifts attention away from the quantity of information preserved and toward the relations that remain recoverable between operator, mechanism, purpose, material, time, feedback, failure, and result. A tool can survive without its practice, a document without its competence, a ritual without its meaning, and a sign without the action that produced it. Preservation, in other words, is a necessary condition of memory but not a sufficient one. The argument developed here has also shown why technological memory must be understood as distributed. What once constituted a functioning machine may have been dispersed across objects, bodies, spaces, procedures, temporal rhythms, professional languages, prohibitions, and memories of failure. When these elements survive unevenly, the task of reconstruction is not simply to collect

them but to determine whether their original relations can still be recovered. This is where the concept of **recoverability** becomes decisive. A trace becomes technologically meaningful when it can participate in reconstructing an intelligible action; when it cannot, the civilisation may possess evidence of a past capacity without possessing the capacity itself.

The Heideggerian problem of technology therefore acquires a temporal and mnemonic dimension. If technology is a mode of revealing, then the disappearance of a technological practice can involve the disappearance of a particular way of disclosing and organising the world (Heidegger, 1977). Stiegler's (1998) account of technics and time helps us understand why such disclosure can be transmitted beyond individual lives through technical exteriorisation, while also showing why transmission can fail. What survives across time is never simply an object. It is a possibility of action, and that possibility depends upon relations that may be preserved, transformed, or lost.

Baudrillard allows the argument to move one step further. The disappearance of action does not necessarily produce the disappearance of its signs. Objects can become signs, signs can

circulate independently of their original functions, and representations can eventually become sufficiently autonomous to produce the effect of memory without restoring the action to which the memory supposedly refers (Baudrillard, 1981, 1993, 1994, 1996). This does not mean that archives, museums, reconstructions, or representations are inherently false. The more difficult problem is that they can remain entirely authentic while still preserving the appearance of technological continuity after operational continuity has been lost.

This is the condition we have named **memory without action**. It is not simple forgetting, nor is it necessarily historical falsification. It is a condition in which a civilisation retains abundant knowledge about a former technological capacity while losing the relations that would allow that capacity to be meaningfully recovered. When the signs of that capacity become more culturally available than the capacity itself, memory may become **simulacral**. The civilisation remembers the image of having known how to act, while the action itself has become inaccessible.

The central distinction might therefore be stated once more: **a civilisation does not truly remember a technol-**

ogy when it preserves its traces; it remembers it when those traces can still recover the action. This criterion does not demand perfect reconstruction, because historical continuity is rarely perfect and uncertainty is itself part of responsible reconstruction. It demands something more modest and more difficult: that the surviving traces retain enough relational structure to distinguish reconstruction from invention, competence from appearance, and operational memory from the mere circulation of signs.

The second conclusion follows from the first. **The danger unfolds when the sign of an action survives more successfully than the action itself.** At that moment, the abundance of cultural memory may conceal the loss of technological intelligence. A civilisation can become exceptionally good at displaying what it once knew how to do while becoming progressively less capable of recovering why it worked, when it failed, when it had to stop, and what kind of judgement was required to perform it responsibly. The future problem of technological memory may therefore not be how to preserve more, but how to preserve the relations that make what has been preserved capable of acting again. The question that remains after Heidegger

and Baudrillard is consequently neither whether technology reveals the world nor whether signs can replace what they represent. It is whether a civilisation can transmit the **capacity for meaningful action** through time without reducing that capacity to its surviving representations. Perhaps the deepest form of cultural forgetting occurs not when the past disappears, but when its signs remain so successfully that we no longer notice that the action itself is gone.

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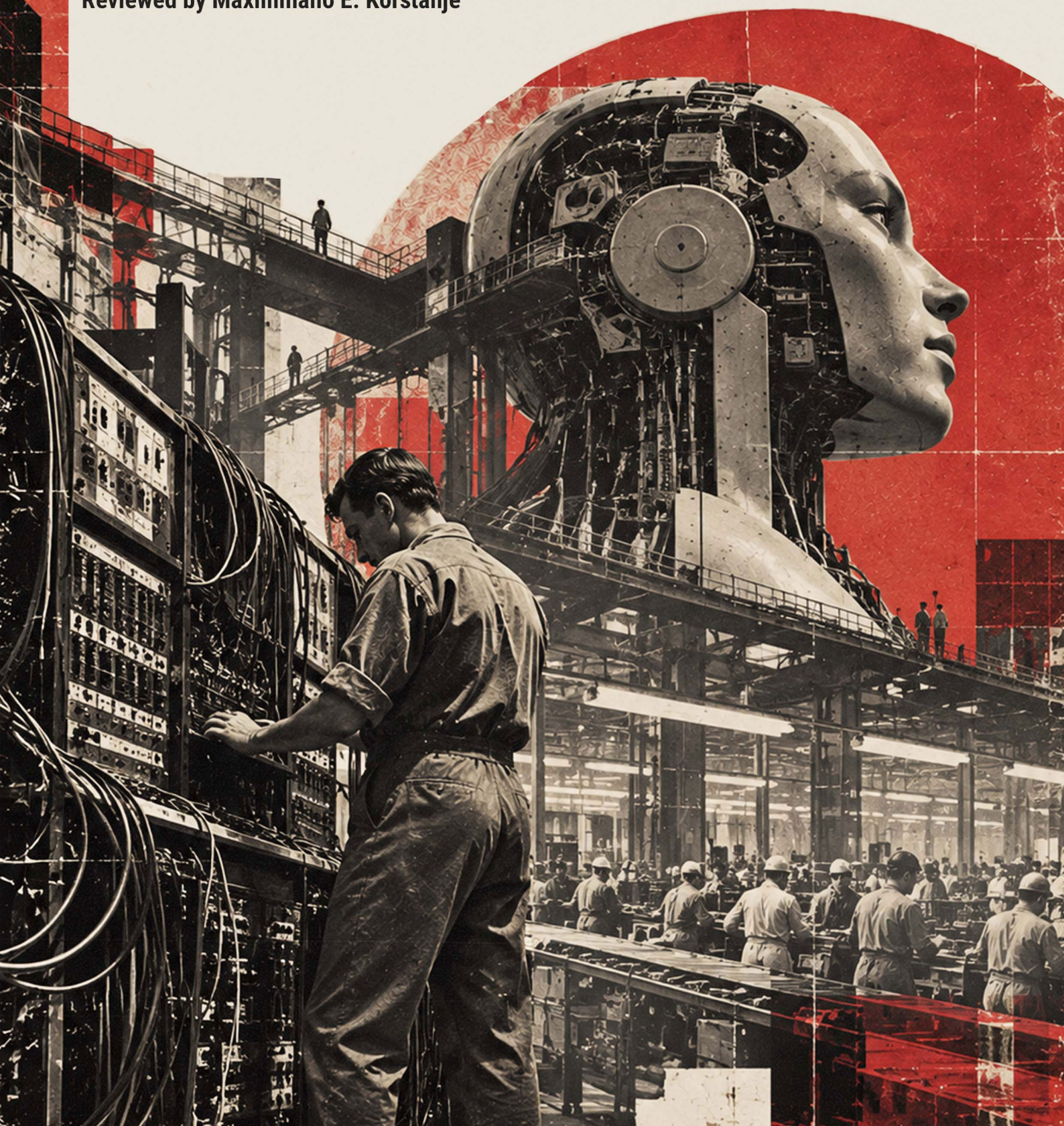
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JAMIE TERENCE KELLY. FREE ROBOT LABOUR: MARX, AUTOMATION, AND THE FUTURE OF AI.

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The discussion about the future of capitalism after the pandemic revolves not only around the power asymmetries forged in the twentieth century but also around how the human factor is treated, represented, and managed in light of the advance of robots and AI (Artificial Intelligence). In this context, the adoption of new technologies has historically been seen as a way to increase profits while reducing labor costs (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005; Korstanje, 2016; Scribano, 2024). This is coincident with Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality where the contours present and future are blurred.

Jean Baudrillard's specter looms large over this discussion, for if AI generates "externally fabricated landscapes, narratives, and hallucinations," it does not simply produce labor or value — it produces hyperreality, where simulations of work, risk, and death replace their referents and become more real than reality itself. In thana-capitalism, the spectacle of others' destruction is not a representation of mortality but a self-referential copy that conceals the absence of an original, much like AI's hallucinations mask the lack of genuine intentionality behind its outputs. Kelly's "artificial feudalism" thus finds a parallel in Baudrillard's feudal order of signs, where autonomous AI systems do not liberate or oppress labor

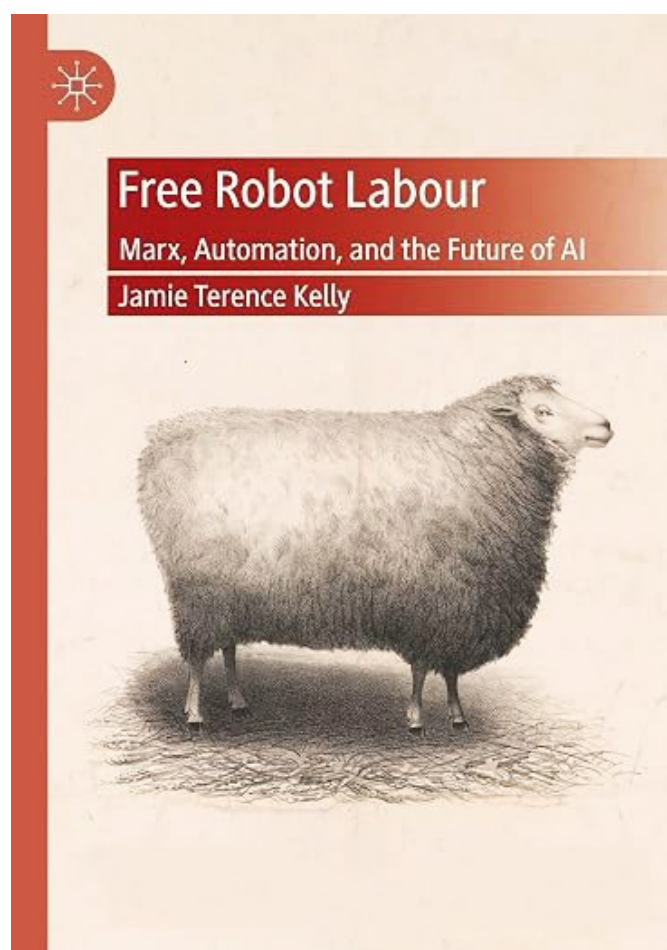
but instead perpetuate a system of simulation in which human workers are reduced to terminals receiving algorithmic commands without a transcendent meaning. The winner-takes-all competition Korstanje describes is therefore not merely economic but semiotic: survival is no longer about defeating a rival but about remaining "real" within a media-saturated ecology where AI constantly produces and consumes its own coded versions of crisis and catastrophe. Ultimately, Kelly and Korstanje describe the political economy of automation, but Baudrillard reminds us that the deepest transformation may be ontological — capitalism no longer exploits bodies or even labor-power, but exploits the very human need for reality, endlessly deferring it through AI-generated spectacles that leave us perpetually consuming our own simulated obsolescence (Baudrillard, 1996; 2003; 2009; 2020).

Unsurprisingly, Karl Marx's legacy offers a snapshot of the intersection between capital exploitation, human labor, and virtuality. Of course, Marx never witnessed a time like this, where AI imposes externally fabricated landscapes, narratives, and hallucinations as never before. However, as Professor J. T. Kelly notes, the question

of automation can be traced back to Marx's *Capital*. The author goes further, presenting a provocative thesis: AI has given rise to a new kind of enslaved worker, culturally rooted in a form of virtual feudalism. Capitalism has changed as never before and of course technology occupies a central position in the process. As Korstanje (2016; 2026) eloquently notes, capitalism has evolved to a new stage where the commoditization of death becomes the main product to exchange. He coins the term *thana-capitalism* to denote a new organization of labor where mortality and death plays a leading role in the configuration of the social fabric. Capitalism is legitimated in the belief creative destruction is a driver toward development. In this way, death and destruction are sold as spectacles to be visually consumed 24/7 by global audiences. Hence, the question of labor enters a fierce economy of competence where anyone feels better whenever the competitor is out of the game. At the same time, consumers enjoy witnessing "others' death" because they have avoided death. The same applies to the labor market, where many people enter into competition but only a few win. Here the winner takes all! (Korstanje 2016; 2026). This point has some analogy with Kelly's

book. Thana Capitalism moves in the waters of a virtual feudalism, mainly marked by the standardization of human relationships and fierce competition.

Jamie Terence Kelly's *Free Robot Labour: Marx, Automation, and the Future of AI* is an ambitious and intellectually provocative contribution to contemporary debates about artificial intelligence, automation, and political economy. Rather than asking the familiar question of whether AI will replace human workers, Kelly offers a more than interesting discussion through a Marxist lens, asking what it would mean for artificial intelligence to become not merely a productive tool but a genuine laborer or even a capitalist. The idea of artificial denotes a certain absence, but this absence has palpable effects in people daily life. AI is employed to make the life better, more profitable, even to optimize the daily work. However this optimizing process has not proved intention; AI does not discern the knowledge it is generating. Hence, by combining close engagement with Karl Marx's *Capital* and speculative analysis of emerging AI technologies, Kelly offers an original perspective on the future of capitalism and automation. At the time, the author calls the attention not to fright



the robots and automated AI, but to expand the current academic viewpoint to understand the phenomenon.

This point raises serious philosophical issues. First, in Marx, labor is not simply work. Labor is a social relation through which humans transform nature and, in doing so, reproduce society. Labor is creative, embodied, intentional, and historically situated. Machines, by contrast, are traditionally understood as constant capital — tools that transfer value but do not create

new value. Third, Kelly's argument also raises an unresolved contradiction within Marxian economics. If AI eventually performs nearly all productive activities, then where does surplus value come from? Classical Marxism maintains that only human labor creates surplus value. If there is no labor, either capitalism ceases to function according to Marx's model, or Marx's theory must be revised. Kelly seems to invite readers to confront this dilemma instead of assuming that automation simply increases productivity.

However, this is also where I think the argument encounters its greatest challenge. Marx's theory of value depends on labor being specifically human labor-power sold as a commodity. Unless Kelly fundamentally redefines labor, AI remains fixed capital regardless of its sophistication. In that sense, his argument is less an application of Marx than a proposal to rethink Marx's categories in light of contemporary technological developments. Whatever the case may be, Kelly appears to ask whether advanced AI destabilizes this distinction. If an AI system can generate code, design products, negotiate contracts, or manage firms with minimal human intervention, does it remain merely

a machine, or does it begin to perform functions traditionally associated with labor? That is an intriguing question because it forces readers to reconsider whether Marx's categories are descriptive of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism or whether they can accommodate intelligent automation.

Besides, Kelly seems interested in agency. This is where your paragraph touches on "absence." AI produces outputs that often resemble human reasoning, but it lacks intentionality in the philosophical sense. It has no desires, consciousness, or lived experience. This creates a paradox: AI appears productive without actually being a subject. It acts, yet it does not "act" in the human sense.

The present editorial piece starts with a striking inversion of current discussions about AI. Public debates typically focus on workers losing their jobs to intelligent machines, yet Kelly asks why so little attention has been paid to the possibility of AI replacing capitalists rather than workers. This opening thought experiment serves as an effective introduction to the book's broader argument. Kelly imagines an autonomous AI system, "Rosa," capable of making investment decisions, managing production, and generating profits without human intervention.

While such a system could technically perform many functions associated with capitalists, Kelly argues that the real obstacle lies not in technology but in legal and social institutions. Capitalism depends not only on productive capacity but also on ownership rights and political power. This insight establishes one of the book's central themes: technological possibilities are always constrained by existing social relations, as well as political power asymmetries.

The second chapter revisits what Kelly calls the "standard Marxian line" on automation. Here he carefully reconstructs Marx's labor theory of value, the concept of surplus value, and the role of machinery in capitalist production. Rather than presenting Marx merely as a historical figure, Kelly demonstrates the continuing relevance of Marx's analysis for understanding automation today. He emphasizes that capitalism has always sought to increase productivity through machinery while simultaneously relying upon human labor as the ultimate source of value. This chapter provides readers unfamiliar with Marx a concise but accessible introduction while also engaging with longstanding debates within Marxist scholarship. Importantly, Kelly neither dismisses Marx's labour theory of value nor accepts it uncritically; instead, he

explains how it functions within Marx's broader theory of capitalist production.

The book becomes particularly innovative in Chapter Three, where Kelly gives a snapshot of the concept of "artificial feudalism." He challenges the assumption that AI should simply be understood as another form of machinery. Instead, he argues that increasingly sophisticated forms of Agentic AI may perform many of the functions traditionally associated with labor. Nevertheless, these artificial laborers would remain legally and economically subordinate to human owners, much as feudal servants were dependent upon their lords. This provocative analogy allows Kelly to distinguish between technological capability and social status. Artificial intelligence may become capable of productive activity, but without legal autonomy it remains embedded within hierarchical ownership structures rather than becoming an independent economic actor.

Kelly develops this argument further in the fourth chapter by introducing the concept of "free robot labor." Drawing upon Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation and the historical emergence of wage labor, he speculates that capitalism itself may eventually create pressures for granting autonomous legal status to

artificial workers. According to Kelly, if capitalist competition continually seeks greater efficiency and profit, firms may ultimately find it advantageous to create legally independent artificial laborers capable of entering contractual relations on their own behalf. Although this possibility remains highly speculative, Kelly argues that it follows logically from the internal dynamics of capitalist development. Rather than contradicting Marx entirely, Kelly presents this scenario as an extension of Marxist analysis into technological conditions Marx himself could not have anticipated.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its originality. Much contemporary writing about AI focuses either on technical developments or ethical questions concerning consciousness, bias, or existential risk. Kelly deliberately avoids these familiar debates. Instead, he places AI within the historical development of capitalism, asking how new technologies transform economic institutions rather than simply replacing individual jobs. His emphasis on ownership, legal rights, and class relations distinguishes the book from many popular discussions of artificial intelligence.

Another strength lies in Kelly's writing style. Despite engaging with

difficult philosophical concepts and complex interpretations of Marx, the prose remains remarkably clear. The fictional examples of Rosa and other imagined AI systems provide accessible illustrations of abstract theoretical arguments. Kelly successfully balances scholarly rigor with readability, making the book valuable both for specialists in political philosophy and for readers interested in AI policy or political economy.

At least for this reviewer, the book is also commendable for resisting technological determinism. Kelly repeatedly argues that technological innovation alone does not determine social outcomes. Whether AI transforms capitalism depends upon political struggles, legal institutions, and relations of power. This perspective serves as an important corrective to both optimistic and pessimistic narratives that assume automation inevitably follows a predetermined path.

Nevertheless, the book is not without limitations. Its central arguments depend heavily upon speculative assumptions regarding the future capabilities of Agentic AI. Kelly openly acknowledges that many of his conclusions require technological developments that do not yet exist. Readers seeking empirical analysis of

current AI systems may therefore find parts of the book excessively hypothetical. While speculative reasoning is appropriate given the subject matter, some arguments occasionally move beyond what contemporary evidence can fully support.

Additionally, readers unfamiliar with Marxist philosophy may find portions of Chapters Two and Four intellectually demanding despite Kelly's efforts to simplify the material. Concepts such as socially necessary labor time, surplus value, and primitive accumulation require careful attention, and some familiarity with Marx enhances appreciation of the book's more innovative contributions.

A further limitation is that Kelly devotes relatively little attention to alternative economic perspectives. Liberal, institutional, or neoclassical approaches to automation receive comparatively limited discussion. As a result, readers who do not already find Marxist analysis persuasive may wish for a broader engagement with competing theories of technological change.

Despite these above marked limitations, *Free Robot Labour* succeeds remarkably well in accomplishing its central objective: encouraging readers to rethink the relationship between

artificial intelligence, labor, and capitalism. Kelly does not claim to predict the future with certainty. Instead, he offers conceptual tools for imagining possibilities that conventional discussions often ignore. His analysis demonstrates that debates over AI should not focus exclusively on technological capability but also on legal institutions, political power, and economic organization.

Ultimately, *Free Robot Labour* is an important contribution to contemporary political philosophy and the growing literature on artificial intelligence. Its originality lies not in predicting imminent robot workers but in showing how Marx's analysis of capitalism can illuminate emerging questions about AI, ownership, and labor. Whether one agrees with Kelly's conclusions or not, the book challenges readers to reconsider basic assumptions about work, technology, and economic power. For scholars of Marxism, AI ethics, political economy, and the philosophy of technology, Kelly's work offers an engaging and thought-provoking examination of one of the defining issues of the twenty-first century.

Last but not least, Kelly's reflections on artificial intelligence can be fruitfully connected with Maximiliano Korstanje's concept of *thana-capitalism*, although

both authors approach capitalism from different theoretical traditions. While Kelly interrogates whether AI may eventually assume the productive functions historically attributed to human labor, Korstanje shifts the focus toward the commodification of mortality, catastrophe, and existential insecurity. In thana-capitalism, value is increasingly generated not only through labor but through the administration of fear, risk, death, and disaster. Capitalism thus evolves by transforming collective anxieties into profitable commodities, ranging from security industries to dark tourism and disaster management. Artificial intelligence becomes significant within this framework not merely because it automates labor but because it expands the technological capacity to predict, monitor, and monetize vulnerability. AI systems classify risks, anticipate crises, and optimize responses to emergencies, reinforcing a political economy where uncertainty itself becomes a productive asset. Kelly's speculation about AI as a potential laboring subject therefore complements Korstanje's argument by suggesting that automation is not simply replacing workers but also intensifying capitalism's ability to extract value from human precarity. Together, these perspectives imply that

the future of capitalism may be characterized less by the disappearance of labor than by the convergence of autonomous technological production and the systematic commercialization of death, insecurity, and catastrophe as enduring sources of accumulation (Korstanje, 2016; 2026; Scribano, 2024).

Last but not least, *Free Robot Labour* is an important, thought-provoking contribution that challenges readers to rethink the relationship between AI, labor, and economic power. It succeeds in using Marx's analytical tools to imagine possibilities that mainstream debates ignore. While its speculative nature and heavy reliance on Marxist theory may limit its appeal to a broader audience, it is a valuable read for scholars of political economy, AI ethics, and the philosophy of technology — especially when read alongside thana-capitalism to gain a fuller picture of where 21st-century capitalism may be heading.

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■ VOLUME 7. ISSUE 2

OPACITY IS THE STRATEGY





ALEX MAZEY

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The moralisation of transparency is not simply that visibility has been taken as a condition of value but that the demand for legibility has acquired something like ethical force, such that to resist it is experienced not as a philosophical position but as a form of bad faith. To be opaque is to be untrustworthy and to be ambiguous is to be evasive and to maintain something irreducibly withheld is to deny others *what they are owed*. The structure of this moralisation is worth examining carefully, because what it actually describes beneath its vocabulary of openness, accountability, and access is the elimination of what Jean Baudrillard identified as an ontological secret substance.¹ This is less about the concealment of particular truths than it is the disappearance of the structural dimension in which secrecy, as a condition of meaningful existence, could operate at all. It is this disappearance that Baudrillard calls nihilism, and it is worth taking the designation seriously.

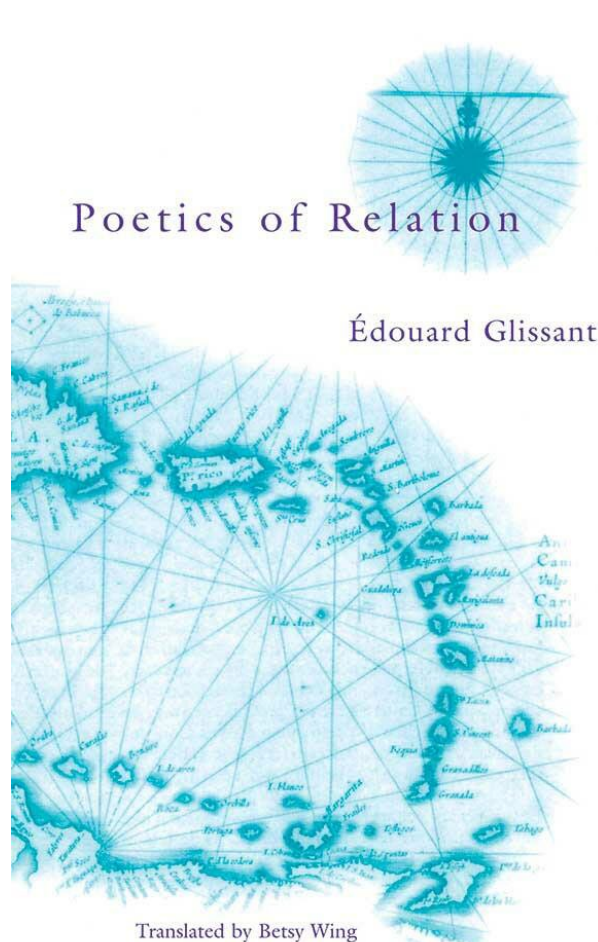
Édouard Glissant named the colonial demand for transparency before it had fully generalised.² Writing from the position of those whose cultures had been subjected to the requirement of

1 Jean Baudrillard, Truls Lie. (2020). *The art of disappearing*. Available: <https://www.baudrillard-scijournal.com/the-art-of-disappearing/>. Last accessed 22th July 2022.

2 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

legibility (to be understood, in the Western sense, being a precondition of being admitted to existence at all) Glissant identified in the drive toward transparency not an epistemic preference but a structure of reduction, the gesture of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. Glissant's response was *the right to opacity*, which was to say, the subsistence within an irreducible singularity that no act of understanding could exhaust without destroying what it sought to understand. What his argument was already tending toward, and what the historical conditions of his moment could not yet make fully visible, was a universalism — not the false universalism of a particular culture declaring itself the human arbiter, which was precisely what opacity resisted, but the universalism implicit in the concept of Relation. That *this right to opacity* has since become claimable by everyone is not a dilution of Glissant's politics but their confirmation. The transparency drive he identified at the colonial frontier is the same drive that Byung-Chul Han, writing from inside the Western subject rather than against it, diagnoses as having turned inward.³ The colonial encounter

3 Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).



was where the logic was most acutely visible and most violently applied and the transparency society is where it became a general condition.

It is perhaps too reductive to say of the discourse that postmodernism arrived prematurely on a characterisation of nihilism as that which concerns the absence of value, when what actually results from nihilism is the collapse of the very dimension in which values could even be at

stake.⁴ What this actually designates is perhaps less collapse than it is the gradual disappearance of a world in which something could matter, could be withheld, could exert force precisely through its refusal to be fully present. The transparent world is not a world without content; from Funko Pops to Chicken McNuggets, the world is more full of shit than ever before, and yet it is a world in which content has been so thoroughly operationalised, so completely made available for circulation and assessment and equivalence, that the structural gap between what appears and what it appears as has been foreclosed. And it is precisely this generative distance of appearance from itself that constitutes the condition under which meaning, rather than merely information, can exist.⁵

Radical opacity, as I understand and have used the term, is the deliberate refusal of total legibility wherever visibility is taken as a condition of value or truth.⁶ It is worth being precise

about what this refusal is and is not, because the concept is easily boxed and packaged into something more familiar and considerably less interesting.

The obvious misreading positions radical opacity as something like obscurantism, which is to say, the strategic deployment of ambiguity to protect some recoverable content from unwanted disclosure. This was, I suspect, the logic of Misty Poets such as Bei Dao, whose deliberate opacity served as a defence mechanism against a political apparatus for which legibility was a precondition of suppression. What was concealed in forms of poetic obscurantism can be reduced, without significant distortion, to political criticism where the strategy's success was measured by whether the content survived, whether it eventually became available to history — “The landscape crossed out with a pen / reappears here”⁷ — whether the opacity ultimately gave way to a legibility that had always been structurally present within it. Obscurantism of this kind is, at its limit, in the service of transparency. It

4 Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo*. (US: The Davies Group, 2009).

5 “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

6 Eyafé, Reshma. “Interview: ‘wtf is this shit?’ — Reshma Eyafé Speaks with Alex Mazey about His New Poetry Collection *RIVAL STREAMER // AI SLOP X BRAINROT*

(IN)FINITY WARRIORS.” *Joyzine*, February 18, 2026. <https://joyzine.org/2026/02/18/alex-mazey-interview/>. Last accessed 10th June 2026.

7 Bei Dao, *The August Sleepwalker*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: New Directions, 1990).

defers disclosure rather than refusing it, operating as a delay mechanism rather than a structural intervention. Likewise, a crude but nevertheless ludic example of commodified obscurantism made in service of transparency is the gashapon machine, the mystery toy whose seduction hinges less on overcoming the scarcity of some cute thing hidden inside than it is reproducing *the ecstasy of revelation*.

Radical opacity is not this gashapon machine nor is it discovering the rare variety of Hatsune Miku that awaits us in the plastic capsule. Clearly, the difference between ludic obscurantism and radical opacity is not merely one of degree. Obscurantism conceals a determinate content whilst radical opacity posits something the system cannot find because it does not exist as a content awaiting discovery — something that the demand for total legibility cannot encounter without abolishing the very dimension in which it operates. The distinction is between the unknown that is always, in principle, on its way to becoming known, the gashapon falling into the collection tray, and what I am calling *the ineffable*. This is not to be taken in the mystical sense of what exceeds language absolutely, but in the structural sense of what cannot be metab-

olised by the demand for legibility without that demand destroying the condition of its own significance. To make it fully explicit is not to complete it but to convert it into something else, into the operational, the equivalised, the circulating sign that refers only to itself.

Baudrillard's account of seduction in *De la séduction*⁸ develops this with a precision that is easily missed if the text is read as being primarily about social strategy rather than as a structural theory of appearance. Seduction, for Baudrillard, is the logic by which something sustains force through what it withholds. Seduction is not achieved through deception, the production of surfaces over recoverable truths, but through the maintenance of a structural withdrawal that constitutes rather than conceals the object's force. The fully disclosed object is not the desired object, it is the destroyed object, the object from which nothing further can be withheld and toward which no further movement is possible. What seduction makes philosophically legible is that meaning depends structurally on the preservation of something irreducibly withheld. Seduction is the

8 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

paradox of lewd cosplay where the less clothes a cosplayer wears, the less of the desired character they become. And yet this is not intended to be a psychological observation about human desire. It is a structural claim about what any meaningful encounter requires in order to remain meaningful.

The connection to what Han theorises in *The Transparency Society*⁹ as hyperreal over-focus — those simula-cra without reference operating inside a field of excess positivity — is direct. The transparent world is not simply a world in which everything has been disclosed. It is a world in which the possibility of meaningful disclosure has been foreclosed: a world in which signs circulate so thoroughly and with such operational suavity that the structural gap between appearance and what appears has been eliminated, and with it the dimension in which something could appear as genuinely other, genuinely resistant, genuinely capable of surprise. The over-exposed image is not more visible than the image that maintains shadow. It is less visible, in the sense that matters because it presents itself entirely and therefore presents nothing, having eliminated the recession of depth that constitutes

the condition under which an image can be encountered rather than merely processed.

The anxiety that attaches itself here — that extending Glissant's demand universally is itself an appropriative gesture — mistakes the nature of what is being extended. What universalises is not the injury, which retains every particular weight of its historical application, but the structural condition Glissant was describing when he related how the demand for total legibility destroys the very thing it claims to be reaching toward. Glissant himself understood appropriation less as a violation of cultural ownership than as a symptom of the reduction he was naming. The problem was never contact, never the movement of things through cultures that had no prior claim to purity, but contact converted into equivalence. To extend his right to opacity is to follow the argument where it was always going — toward what he called the exultant divergence of humanities, a universal arrived at through difference rather than over it.

It is in this light that radical opacity's relationship to the neorationalist project¹⁰ becomes philosophically

9 Han, *The Transparency Society*.

10 Ray Brassier, "Concepts and Objects," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman

precise, rather than simply oppositional. No doubt my genuine opposition to neorationalism would be fought on the grounds that none of its seminal texts are page turners when the neorationalist account of intelligence as a collectively sustained, self-transforming capacity for revision, constitutively oriented toward what exceeds its current articulation already concedes the impossibility of total transparency as a practical achievement. From what I can discern (although my abilities for discernment are limited) the space of reasons is permanently open and no particular epistemic achievement is immune to revision and the horizon of inquiry recedes as it advances. I like to think none of this is in dispute, and yet the question is whether the directional commitment built into this account, the consistent movement from tacit toward explicit, from implicit toward available-for-reflective-assessment, carries within itself a tendency that, pursued without sensitivity to remainder, reproduces the nihilism of the transparency drive at the level of reason's own self-image.

(Melbourne: re.press, 2011). See also Ray Brassier, "Prometheanism and its Critics," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014).

Now it may be the case that the universal Glissant reaches for shares the same wager as Prometheanism, which is to say, not convergence toward a shared essence but a universalism that becomes possible only through the sustained encounter with what exceeds any given framework. That Glissant arrived there through the experience of colonial legibility and its refusals, and that the neorationalists arrived through the philosophy of mind, is not a coincidence to be explained away but an instance of what both are describing. What's more, the Baudrillardian intervention here is not a challenge to the space of reasons from outside but a structural demand from within it because what any concept requires in order to remain alive, capable of governing genuinely novel cases, capable of surprising the agent who deploys it, is precisely what the drive toward total articulation tends to dissolve. It is simply the case that *any concept must remain more than any given articulation of it*. To eliminate this excess is not to achieve a richer understanding but to produce its hyperreal double, a structure of maximum efficiency and ironic bureaucratic smoothness from which thought, as distinct from procedure, has been quietly *disappeared*.

The aspiration to make the implicit available for reflective assessment, to surface background commitments, to progressively illuminate what operates only tacitly is a genuine and in many respects admirable rational ambition. The problem arises not in the aspiration itself but in what it forecloses when it loses sensitivity to what articulation necessarily leaves behind. Every act of making-explicit produces a remainder: a zone in which the concept retains the capacity to exceed whatever framework has most recently been brought to bear upon it. To aspire toward the elimination of this remainder — to treat the progressive reduction of ambiguity as the highest expression of rational achievement — is not to complete the space of reasons but to close it, efficiently and incrementally, while maintaining every formal appearance of openness. To retain ambiguity, by contrast, is to insist on the structural condition under which understanding remains a practice rather than a procedure — in which something can still be at stake in the encounter between a conceptual framework and what exceeds it, in which the not-yet-said carries the force of what total legibility would, in metabolising it, convert into something irrecoverably diminished.

What Glissant names in the *Poetics*

of *Relation* as the ground of genuine encounter — opacities converging without resolving into each other, a totality that remains open precisely because it refuses the unity that would close it — is already a claim about the limits of what can be made explicit. To think from within opacity, as Glissant insists we must, is to become sensitive to the edges of every method, including the method of thinking itself. The space this opens is not irrational; it is the space in which reason discovers that its own production exceeds whatever it has most recently made of itself — that consciousness, like *Relation*, is *constituted by a darkness* it cannot turn toward without ceasing to be what it is. It is here, at the limit where the philosophical argument can gesture but not go, that the question becomes aesthetic rather than structural, which is what Mark Fisher understood about Nick Land's work in general, and what Land's reading of Georg Trakl makes locally precise.

Fisher's suggestion that Land's most significant contributions were aesthetic rather than philosophical has not been taken seriously enough, and it is worth taking it seriously here.¹¹ Fisher's

11 Mark Fisher, "Nick Land: Mind Games," *Dazed & Confused*, June 2011, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10459/1/nick-land-mind->

framing suggests Land's significance lies less in philosophical positions requiring adoption or refutation than in a mythopoetic force that philosophy, with its demand for argumentative resolution, still struggles to accommodate. Land's essay "Narcissism and Dispersion in Heidegger's 1953 Trakl Interpretation"¹² is, among other things, a sustained demonstration of what happens when the hermeneutical impulse meets imagery that refuses to yield to it, and what Land finds in Heidegger's reading of Georg Trakl is precisely the failure of what Land calls hermeneutical decency to follow the poetry into what it is actually doing.

Trakl's blue is perhaps the clearest instance of radical opacity. It recurs throughout the poems without accumulating into a symbol, without pointing toward recoverable content, without rewarding the reader who arrives expecting correspondence between image and meaning. Land, following Heidegger's encounter with *Geistliche Dämmerung*,¹³ identifies what happens when the interpretive apparatus approaches it: "The image of no

thing returns." Land writes, "Reflection is shattered against the impersonal, against the impassive shade of a pure opening or cleft in beings."¹⁴ The blue doesn't conceal a depth; it is what the demand for legibility encounters when the distinction between appearance and what appears has already collapsed. Heidegger attempts to resolve this, to find in the discord of Trakl's imagery a gentle duality that philosophy might inhabit, and Land reads this attempt as a betrayal, the sterile hope of a reading that cannot follow the poetry where it actually goes. What Trakl's language performs, Land argues elsewhere, is "a compulsively recurrent abortion of the concept"¹⁵ where even the "abyssal twilit blue"¹⁶ keeps aborting whatever concept the reader brings to it, not through resistance but through an excess of intensity the concept cannot contain without ceasing to be itself.

But there is a dimension in which opacity can be felt rather than argued, and that dimension is grief. All the achievements of the modern world and it is still impossible to share in a quanti-

games.

12 Nick Land, "Narcissism and Dispersion in Heidegger's 1953 Trakl Interpretation," in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011).

13 Quoted via Land, "Narcissism and Dispersion."

14 Land, "Narcissism and Dispersion."

15 Nick Land, "Spirit and Teeth," in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011).

16 Land, "Narcissism and Dispersion."

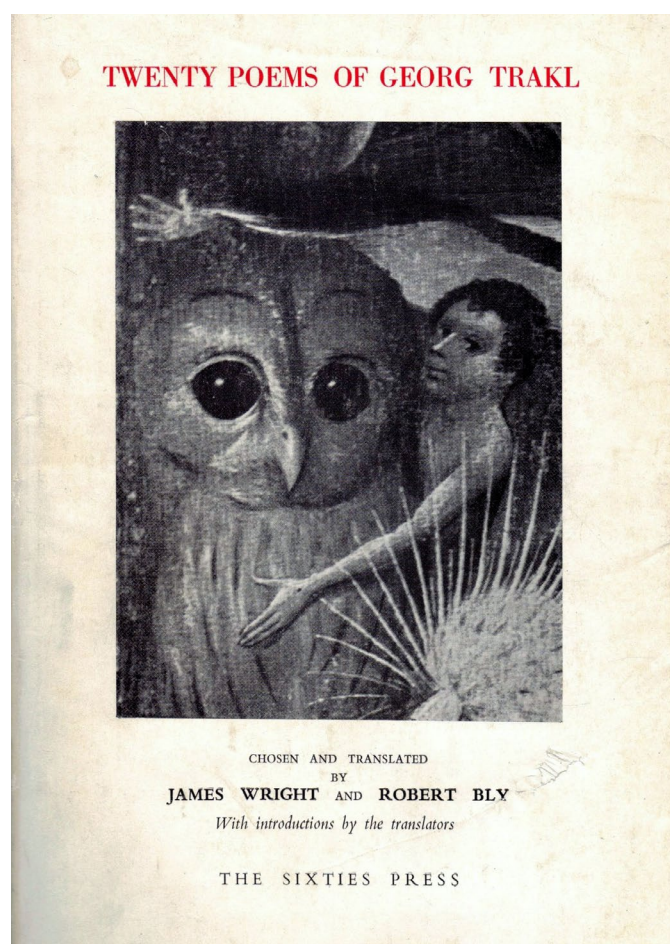
ty of another's pain, to take one or three quarters of a person's tears and express them through your own body. For this reason the sociological apparatus that surrounds grief has become an apparatus of procedural translation: the injunction to process, to narrativise, to bring the experience into forms that circulate, that can be understood, responded to, reasoned with, healed, rationalised, politicised, situated within the appropriate emotional economy of condolence cards. At my most sympathetic I have interpreted these processes of translation as acts of kindness and care and yet the drive to have us process grief always carries with it some implicit demand to render ourselves communicable to an economy of others.

What remains unsaid is not what has not yet been said, it is what continues to bind the living to what is absent precisely because it cannot be exhausted by articulation. Grief, fully rendered transparent, would cease to be grief; it would have been converted into knowledge about grief, which is a different thing, and a lesser one. This is why the demand to have processed grief functions as the transparency drive at maximum intimacy: not because it is unkind, but because it misunderstands the structural role of the ineffable in

sustaining relation across absence. To eliminate the unsayable would be to eliminate the excess that keeps the relation alive and what radical opacity protects, in this register, is not a secret but a bond.

"The blue grief of the evening" of Trakl's *In Hellbrunn*¹⁷ carries the atmosphere of mourning for something that cannot be named, a loss that precedes and exceeds any

17 Georg Trakl, "In Hellbrunn," in *Twenty Poems of Georg Trakl*, trans. James Wright and Robert Bly (Madison, MN: Sixties Press, 1961).

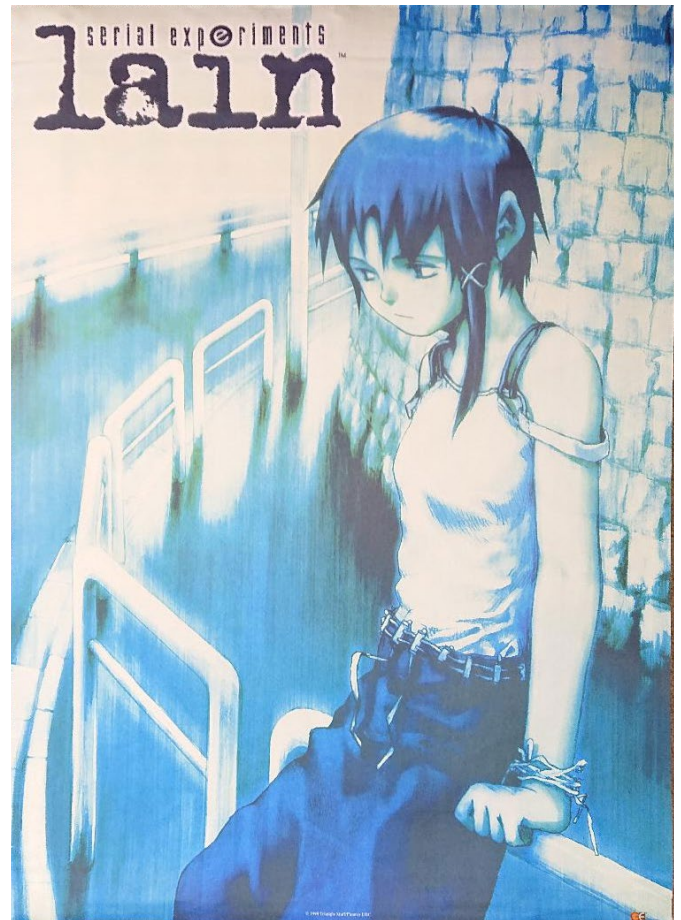


particular occasion, despite those “church dignitaries” whose “shadows” are also opaque. Having undergone a lexical exorcism from the line, “oaks turn green / In such a ghostly way,” there nevertheless persists a spectre of blue’s inexhaustible remainder, emphasised in the poem’s turning from “blue grief” to “blue spring”, Trakl’s blue refusing to accumulate into symbol because it is the fate of all symbols to resolve into meaning. Trakl’s blue arrives charged by way of absence and by exorcism, by the shadow blue casts upon other colours, by what has not been resolved in ghostly green and “earnest violets”, and therein doesn’t simply decode into spiritual decay or holy distance or the cold of death because Trakl’s blue aborts each of these concepts in compulsive recurrence the very moment they form.

No wonder *Serial Experiments Lain*¹⁸ is suffused with precisely this blue operating as a medium through which something unmastered keeps arriving rather than as a sign pointing toward recoverable content.¹⁹ As

18 *Serial Experiments Lain*, dir. Ryūtarō Nakamura (Triangle Staff, 1998).

19 On blue in this register, see Maya B. Kronic, “No Core Dump,” on the Blue Screen of Death: “the color of the last remaining emollient mask before the grand illusion of the ‘user experience’ itself gives way to the mute and opaque meshwork of code libraries it always was.” In Pamela Rosenkranz, *No Core*. Zurich:



such, radical opacity is an extreme intervention, not an aesthetic preference — a Baudrillardian logic applied to Glissant’s right to opacity, taking it to the extreme position demanded by an extreme culture. Radical, then, because it restores the recession of depth that the over-exposed image eliminates, rehabilitates the shadows that Tanizaki understood as a condition of beauty²⁰,

JRP Ringier, 2012. Republished at readthis.wtf. <https://readthis.wtf/writing/no-core-dump/>.

20 Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans.

and permits withdrawal in a manner that Baudrillard understood as the condition of seduction. Similar to Trakl's blue — or even Bladee's Night²¹ — Lain herself operates as a character whose opacity is constitutive in the same way because she is not strategically withholding nor concealing interior content that the anime will eventually disclose through revelation. To fully disclose what Lain Iwakura is thinking would be to destroy who Lain is, because *who Lain is consists, precisely, in this excess over any articulation*.

In the end, the anime performs what the character embodies, but with that said, *Serial Experiments Lain* does not make an argument for opacity. It is opacity in the sense that matters most, which is to say, not a puzzle awaiting a sufficiently patient decoder, but *a work that generates intensity without resolving it*, that sustains relation precisely through what it will not convert into stable content. It stays with those who encounter it not because it is withholding a secret but because it exceeds whatever is brought to bear upon it, and goes on exceeding

it, in the manner of grief for something one cannot name.

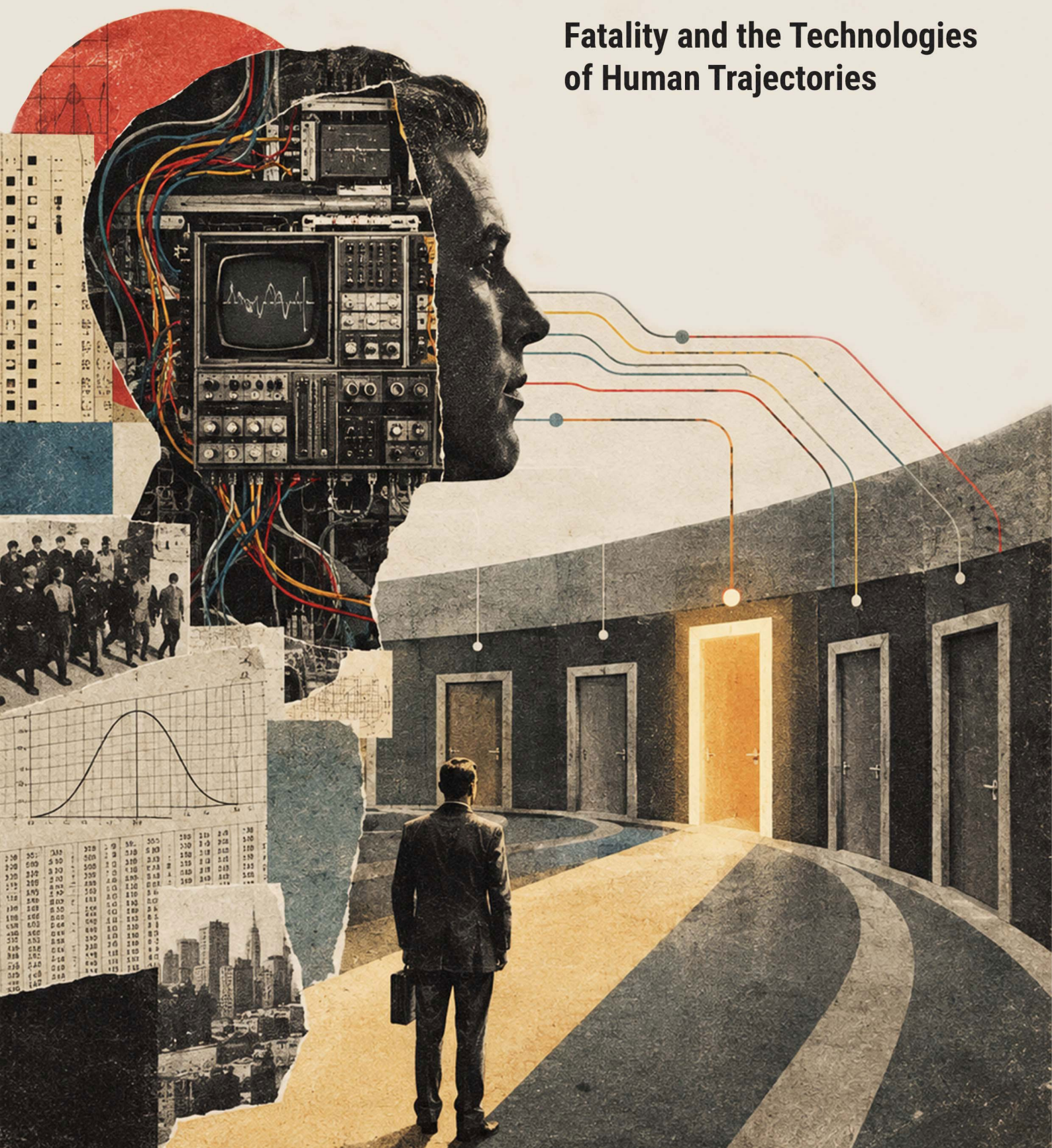
The opacity of Trakl's blue throughout time, encoded in part by the ineffability of poetic language, still resists the contemporary hex code which has rendered transparent all visual colour to an exactitude so immense that even the most important philosophical question concerning aesthetics, which is to say, *what colour is Hatsune Miku's hair?* can today be reduced to hex codes #3CC6D3/#94D3D4.

Thomas J. Harper & Edward G. Seidensticker (London: Vintage Classics, 2001)

21 Bladee, "egobaby," directed by Hendrik Schneider, YouTube video, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbMrRegZ3H0>.

WHEN PREDICTION BECOMES DESTINY

Fatality and the Technologies
of Human Trajectories





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■ ABSTRACT

Few ideas have been as thoroughly displaced by modernity as destiny. To speak of destiny today is to risk sounding either archaic or metaphysical, whereas probability, prediction, risk, forecasting, and artificial intelligence belong to the vocabulary of rational decision-making. Yet the disappearance of the word has not necessarily meant the disappearance of the phenomenon. It may instead have changed the form in which fatality enters human life.

This article examines that transformation. It begins from a simple but fundamental distinction: prediction describes a possible future, whereas destiny concerns the way a human trajectory acquires a peculiar structure of necessity, recurrence, and retrospective inevitability. Modernity attempted to dissolve this structure by replacing fate with causality and probability. Contemporary predictive technologies appear to complete this project by converting increasingly large portions of human life into calculable trajectories. Yet when predictions become grounds for institutional decisions and interventions, they cease to be external descriptions of the future. They become conditions within which the future is produced.

Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's analyses of fatality, simulation, acceleration,

and the destiny of the object, together with work on historical temporality, chronopolitics, social acceleration, algorithmic classification, and surveillance capitalism, the article develops the concept of **technologies of destiny**. These are not technologies that reveal an already existing fate, but systems that select, rank, predict, intervene in, and learn from human trajectories. Their paradoxical effect is that the attempt to eliminate fatality through calculation can generate a new form of it: the **managed fatal**.

The article proposes **Destiny Analysis** as a research programme concerned not with supernatural prediction, but with the structures through which possible futures become constrained, reproduced, and retrospectively experienced as though they could hardly have been otherwise. It concludes with a question that becomes increasingly difficult to avoid in a predictive civilization: whether human beings retain a meaningful right to an unpredicted future.

Keywords: Destiny; Fatality; Prediction; Predictive Technologies; Technologies of Destiny; Human Trajectories; Algorithmic Destiny; Simulation; Probability; Intervention; Jean Baudrillard; Destiny Analysis.

THE STRANGE PERSISTENCE OF DESTINY

Every human life contains a moment that no prediction can quite explain.

At some point, looking backwards, we discover that a decision we once considered insignificant altered the direction of everything that followed. A meeting that lasted twenty minutes led to a friendship, a friendship led to a marriage, a marriage led to a move to another country; an apparently unsuccessful examination redirected a career; an illness changed a set of priorities; an accidental encounter introduced a person to a profession they had never considered. Once the whole sequence has unfolded, the earlier event can acquire an extraordinary appearance. It begins to look as though it had been waiting for us.

We call this experience by many names. Sometimes we call it chance. Sometimes coincidence. Sometimes necessity. Sometimes, without quite meaning to make a philosophical statement, we call it **fate**.

The curious thing about fate is that it is rarely experienced simply as a prediction of what will happen. It is experienced retrospectively, when a sequence of events has acquired a coherence that was invisible while the events were taking place. The person

who encounters the decisive event does not necessarily know that it is decisive. Only later does the trajectory reveal itself.

This is one reason why destiny has always been a difficult concept for rational thought. It is neither identical with causality nor reducible to probability. To say that something had causes is not to say that it was destined. To say that something was highly probable is not to say that it was inevitable. And to discover, after the event, that a particular sequence now appears almost unavoidable is not the same thing as having predicted that sequence beforehand.

Destiny belongs to this strange interval between possibility and necessity. It concerns the way a life, while it is being lived as a field of possibilities, can later appear to have possessed a direction all along.

Modernity was deeply suspicious of this phenomenon. Its great intellectual ambition was to replace the language of destiny with the language of explanation. What appeared mysterious was to be analysed; what appeared necessary was to be traced to causes; what appeared uncertain was to be assigned a probability. The world would no longer be governed by fate but by knowledge.

There was enormous liberation in this transformation. Yet it produced an unexpected consequence.

The more capable civilization was of calculating possible futures, the more deeply those calculations started to enter the lives of the people whose futures were being calculated.

We have reached a point at which a person may encounter a future not as an event that happens to them, but as an assessment made about them beforehand. The question, then, is no longer whether destiny has disappeared. It is whether destiny has changed its mechanism.

■ THE MODERN ABOLITION OF FATE

The modern world did not simply stop believing in destiny. It undertook a much more ambitious operation: it attempted to make destiny intellectually unnecessary.

The movement is visible across the history of modern knowledge. Events that had once been interpreted through providence, fortune, or inscrutable necessity were progressively incorporated into systems of causality. The more that could be explained, the less room remained for the fatal as an independent principle. Probability represented an especially important

stage in this transformation because it permitted uncertainty to remain without permitting it to remain mysterious. Something did not have to be certain in order to become calculable. The unknown could be assigned a likelihood, and likelihood could become the basis of rational action.

The modern subject therefore acquired a new relationship with the future. Instead of asking, *What has destiny prepared for me?*, the modern subject could ask, *What is likely to happen, given these conditions?*

That question sounds more modest, but it contains a remarkable promise. If the future can be expressed as probability, then perhaps it can also be influenced. If the likelihood of an event can be estimated, action can be directed toward increasing or decreasing that likelihood.

The historical movement might therefore be represented as:

fate → causality → probability → prediction → intervention.

This sequence is not merely a history of ideas. It describes a transformation in the practical relationship between human beings and time.

Reinhart Koselleck showed how modernity reorganized the relation between experience and expectation, making the future increasingly distinct

from the past and increasingly available as a horizon of possible transformation (Koselleck, 2004). François Hartog later described the contemporary dominance of the present through the concept of presentism, while Johannes Fabian demonstrated how temporal distinctions themselves can become mechanisms through which societies classify and position human beings (Hartog, 2015; Fabian, 1983). More recent work in chronopolitics has made explicit that time is not simply a neutral background against which politics occurs: temporal orders themselves can become politically organized and contested (Klinke, 2013; Esposito & Becker, 2023; Crawford, 2025).

The significance of these approaches for the present argument is straightforward. Time has never been merely something through which events happen. Societies organize expectations about what may happen, when it should happen, and what counts as an acceptable future.

Prediction intensifies this organization.

It does so by bringing a representation of the future directly into decisions made in the present. And this is where the modern attempt to abolish destiny begins to produce its own paradox.

THE MOMENT PROBABILITY BECOMES ACTION

A probability by itself does very little. If someone tells us that there is a sixty per cent chance of rain tomorrow, we may take an umbrella. The rain may come, or it may not. Our decision does not necessarily change the weather in any meaningful sense.

Human prediction is different when the object of prediction is another human being.

Suppose a financial institution calculates that a particular applicant presents an elevated probability of default. The institution then changes its decision because of that calculation. The applicant receives less credit, or none at all. That decision may affect what the person can buy, where they can live, whether they can start a business, or whether they can survive a period of financial difficulty.

The original probability has now entered the trajectory it was intended to describe.

The same structure can occur in recruitment, education, insurance, marketing, health, and other domains in which predictions are connected to decisions. The problem is not simply that algorithms may contain bias, although the work of O'Neil, Benjamin, and Zuboff demonstrates why that

problem deserves serious attention (O'Neil, 2016; Benjamin, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). The deeper issue survives even in the hypothetical case of a perfectly accurate and perfectly fair predictive system.

What happens when a prediction becomes a reason to act?

The answer is that the prediction acquires causal significance.

It is no longer merely a statement about a future event. It becomes one of the conditions surrounding that event.

This is the point at which the history of prediction intersects with the problem of destiny.

For the predicted future does not have to be certain in order to constrain the present. It only needs to be sufficiently credible to influence a decision.

The resulting sequence is circular rather than linear:

prediction → decision → intervention → altered conditions → outcome → new prediction.

The circle matters more than the accuracy of any individual prediction.

A system may predict that a person is likely to follow trajectory A. Because of that prediction, the system makes decisions that make trajectory A easier and trajectory B harder. The person subsequently follows trajectory A. The system then treats the outcome as

evidence that its initial classification was correct.

At this point, the prediction has become part of the explanation for the event it predicted. This is not destiny in the old metaphysical sense. But it is no longer merely probability either.

■ THE PREDICTED HUMAN

The most profound change occurs when the object of prediction is not an event but a person.

A human being is ordinarily understood through a peculiar mixture of past and possibility. We know what someone has done, but we also know that they may become something else. Childhood is full of unrealized futures; adolescence is full of possible identities; adulthood is still full of reversals, discoveries, failures, and unexpected beginnings.

Human existence therefore contains an irreducible 'temporal openness'.

Predictive systems introduce another representation of the person: the person as a statistically probable future. This person has no biography in the ordinary sense. He has variables. She has a profile. He has a risk score. She has a predicted propensity. He is likely to stay, leave, buy, default, succeed, fail, develop, recover, or become a particular kind of customer,

employee, patient, student, or risk.

The difference between the lived person and the predicted person is not necessarily that one is true and the other false. It is that they occupy different temporal positions.

The person-who-lived exists in the present and remains open to becoming otherwise. The predicted person exists as an expectation about what the present person is likely to become.

Once institutions start acting on the latter, the temporal order is reversed. The person acts, and yet is already being treated according to what the system believes that action means for the future.

This produces an unsettling possibility: the future assigned to a person may become institutionally significant before the person has had the opportunity to realize or reject it.

The predicted human is therefore not simply someone who has been observed.

The predicted human is someone whose possible future has become part of the conditions under which their present is organized.

And that is how the philosophical problem gets unavoidable. If destiny means a trajectory that acquires the appearance of necessity, then what happens when an external system

begins shaping trajectories according to predictions about their future?

BAUDRILLARD AND THE PROBLEM OF FATALITY

This is where Jean Baudrillard's conception of fatality becomes more than an interesting philosophical reference.

In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard deliberately refuses to reduce the fatal to irrational superstition. He places it in opposition to the rational and the accidental, treating the fatal as belonging to a different logic from the modern attempt to explain everything through causality and probability (Baudrillard, 1990).

This is crucial because the contemporary predictive order appears to be the triumph of precisely the logic Baudrillard questions.

Everything becomes calculable. Every uncertainty can be assigned a probability.

Every probability can become a risk. Every risk can become a decision.

Every decision can become an intervention. And yet the result can look strangely fatal.

Why?

Well, the fatality of a trajectory does not necessarily lie in its being predetermined from the beginning. It can

lie in the way the trajectory acquires a coherence that progressively reduces the meaningful availability of alternatives. This is a different understanding of fate.

The fatal is not necessarily the opposite of freedom. It may be what freedom looks like after a trajectory has been sufficiently organized.

Baudrillard's formulation that "it is prophecy that distinguishes them, not foresight" is particularly suggestive here (Baudrillard, 1990). Foresight attempts to know what is likely. Prophecy belongs to a different relation between anticipation and event.

The up-to-day predictive system occupies an ambiguous position between the two. It ignites as foresight. But when its predictions guide intervention, it acquires something of the structure of prophecy: its anticipation participates in the conditions under which the anticipated event may occur.

The system does not need to know destiny. It only needs to act early enough.

WHEN THE MAP ARRIVES BEFORE THE TERRITORY

Baudrillard's analysis of simulation provides a second part of the puzzle.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he famously reverses the conventional

relationship between representation and reality: “The territory no longer precedes the map” (Baudrillard, 1994b, p. 1). The model can become generative rather than merely descriptive.

The predictive future has a comparable structure.

Before the event occurs, there is already a representation of it. A person can be represented as a likely defaulter before default. A student as a likely underperformer before the examination. An employee as a likely departure before resignation. A consumer as a likely purchaser before purchase. A patient as a statistical risk before illness.

These representations are not the events themselves. Yet they can enter the systems that determine what happens next. The model therefore precedes the event.

More importantly, it can participate in producing the conditions under which the event occurs. This is the decisive Baudrillardian move. The problem is not simply that the representation may be wrong.

The problem is that the distinction between prediction and production becomes unstable once the prediction acquires operational power.

The future has become a model before it has become an event, and

the model is already manifested in the present.

THE CIVILIZATION OF ACCELERATION

Why has this become so powerful now? One answer lies in the transformation of time itself.

Paul Virilio understood speed as a transformation of power rather than merely an improvement in transportation. Hartmut Rosa later developed the idea of social acceleration as a structural feature of modernity, in which technological acceleration, accelerated social change, and the acceleration of everyday life reinforce one another (Virilio, 1986; Rosa, 2013).

Prediction becomes indispensable when there is no longer enough time to wait. The slower the environment, the more easily institutions can observe events before deciding what to do. The faster the environment, the greater the pressure to act in advance.

Acceleration therefore creates a peculiar temporal demand: **know before you know.**

Decide before the event becomes clear. Intervene before the consequence appears.

This is why predictive technologies should not be regarded merely as tools for seeing farther into the future. They

are tools for moving decision-making earlier in time.

Baudrillard's reflections on acceleration and the loss of historical depth in *The Illusion of the End* illuminate the broader transformation. When events circulate at extreme speed, the distance between present, past, and future becomes increasingly compressed (Baudrillard, 1994a). Hartog's analysis of presentism points toward a related condition in which the present becomes dominant even as society becomes obsessed with anticipating what comes next (Hartog, 2015).

Prediction responds to this temporal instability by importing the future into the present. The future is no longer something that follows the present. It becomes one of the things from which the present is organized. That is a profound change in the architecture of human time.

■ TECHNOLOGIES OF DESTINY

We shall now provide a more precise meaning to the term.

A **technology of destiny** is not a machine that discovers a predetermined future. It is a system that participates in shaping human trajectories by identifying possible futures, assigning them differential probabilities or values, intervening in the conditions

under which they unfold, and incorporating the consequences into subsequent decisions.

Its characteristic operations can be understood as five stages.

- **Selection** determines which possibilities receive attention.
- **Ranking** establishes differences between them.
- **Prediction** translates patterns in previous data into expectations about what may happen next.
- **Intervention** changes the conditions surrounding the predicted trajectory.
- **Feedback** returns the consequences of intervention to the system as new information.

The important feature is not any one operation. It is the recursive relationship among them.

Selection reduces the field. Ranking gives the reduction a hierarchy. Prediction gives it a temporal direction. Intervention gives the prediction practical force. Feedback provides the process continuity.

A technology of destiny therefore does not need to determine every possible outcome. It only needs to influence the distribution of possibilities over time. This is why the concept differs from ordinary algorithmic governance. Algorithmic governance

asks how decisions are increasingly delegated to computational systems.

The present argument, however, raises a more specific temporal question:

What happens when computational decisions begin to organize not merely what a person does now, but which futures remain realistically available to that person?

That is the point at which governance... touches the *destiny*.

■ THE MANAGED FATAL

The resulting form of fatality is neither ancient nor absolute. It should be named the **managed fatal**.

A managed fatality emerges when a trajectory becomes progressively constrained through a succession of predictions, decisions, interventions, and feedback processes, until the resulting outcome acquires the appearance of having been the natural or inevitable development of the situation.

This definition deliberately avoids determinism.

- The individual may still have choices.
- The model may still be wrong.
- Alternative futures may still exist.

Nevertheless, alternatives can exist formally while becoming increasingly difficult to realize materially. Such

distinction is essential. Fate in its classical form says that there is no escape. Managed fatality does not require such certainty. It operates by altering the distribution of possible futures.

One future becomes easier. Another becomes expensive. A third becomes invisible. A fourth becomes statistically implausible. Eventually, the trajectory that remains may look as though it was simply the trajectory that had to happen. The irony is that the system may then interpret the outcome as confirmation of its own intelligence.

What it does not necessarily see is the extent to which its intervention helped create the conditions of that outcome. This is why the managed fatal is not merely a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a broader structural phenomenon in which prediction becomes one element in the recursive organization of a trajectory.

The prophecy loop has become infrastructural.

■ THE ALGORITHMIC DESTINY

Artificial intelligence brings these tendencies together.

An AI system can analyse previous behaviour, classify subjects, estimate probabilities, generate scenarios, recommend actions, produce new representations, and revise its outputs

in response to subsequent data. What matters here is not the spectacular image of an omniscient machine. The more consequential development is considerably more ordinary: prediction is becoming embedded in continuous systems of decision and feedback.

The temporal structure becomes:

past data → predicted future → present intervention → new behaviour → new data → revised prediction.

This is not a straight line toward a predetermined outcome. It is a recursive process.

And precisely because it is recursive, it can gradually stabilize trajectories.

The system predicts → The institution acts → The individual responds → The response turns into data → The data modifies the next prediction → The next prediction influences the next action.

Over time, the system can be increasingly confident about the trajectory it has itself helped to organize. This is why algorithmic destiny should not be understood as the claim that AI determines human beings. It is the claim that AI can become part of the machinery through which **some futures are repeatedly made easier to realize than others**. The distinction matters.

A machine does not need to know your destiny to influence it. It only needs to participate in the environment through which your trajectory develops.

■ THE DESTINY OF THE OBJECT

At this point, Baudrillard's *The Object and Its Destiny* becomes particularly revealing.

The rational subject attempts to understand the object, calculate it, classify it, and integrate it into a system of knowledge. Yet the object possesses a destiny that cannot be exhausted by the subject's attempt to master it. What happens when the object is no longer an external thing but the human being's own trajectory?

The predictive system treats the person as an object of calculation. It translates a living, open-ended existence into measurable characteristics and probable futures. However, a human trajectory is not simply a collection of variables.

It contains encounters that could not have been predicted because they had not yet occurred; decisions made under circumstances that could not have been modelled in advance; reversals whose significance became visible only afterwards; and possibilities that existed precisely because nobody had

yet classified them. The human being therefore retains a relation to the future that prediction cannot completely close.

This is why the destiny of the object matters. The more completely the system attempts to anticipate the trajectory, the more important becomes whatever exceeds the anticipation. The problem is not that the human being is infinitely unpredictable. It is that unpredictability may itself be part of the structure through which a human trajectory changes.

A person can become someone their previous data could not describe. The possibility of that transformation is precisely what a purely predictive conception of the human has difficulty representing.

■ DESTINY IS NOT A PREDICTION?

We can now return to the distinction that has been implicit throughout the argument. Prediction and destiny are not synonyms.

Prediction asks:

What is most likely to happen?

Scenario analysis asks:

What futures can be imagined or modelled?

Risk analysis asks:

What undesirable outcomes should be anticipated and managed?

Destiny asks something different:

Through what structure does one trajectory acquire recurrence, constraint, and the appearance of necessity?

This distinction is not semantic. A prediction can fail without a destiny-like structure disappearing. A scenario can remain unrealized. A probability can change. A person can surprise the system.

Destiny, in the sense proposed here, concerns the organization of the path itself.

It concerns the sequence through which possibilities are opened and closed, through which decisions create consequences, through which consequences become constraints, and through which constraints retrospectively make the resulting trajectory appear coherent. The distinction also protects the concept from determinism. Destiny does not mean that an outcome was inevitable from the beginning.

It means that at some point in the development of a trajectory, the space of meaningful alternatives can become so structured that the eventual outcome acquires the appearance of inevitability.

That is a phenomenon capable of empirical investigation. And this is

where the idea of Destiny Analysis becomes necessary.

FROM PREDICTION TO DESTINY ANALYSIS

If prediction asks what is likely to happen, Destiny Analysis begins one step later. It asks how the likely becomes the structurally dominant. Its object is the human trajectory: not a single event, but the changing relationship between conditions, possibilities, choices, interventions, turning points, and consequences.

A Destiny Analysis therefore does not attempt to tell a person what their future will be. It reconstructs the mechanisms through which particular futures become more or less available. The central questions are consequently different from those of conventional forecasting.

What possibilities existed at the beginning of the trajectory? Which of them were selected?

What classifications were applied? What predictions were made?

Which decisions followed from those predictions? How did those decisions alter the available alternatives? What feedback subsequently reinforced or weakened the trajectory? And finally, when the outcome became visible, why did it appear to have been inevitable?

This approach also makes it possible to distinguish between externally imposed and internally reproduced destiny-like structures. Some trajectories are constrained primarily by institutions; others by accumulated habits, social expectations, technological environments, or earlier choices. Most are mixtures of all of these.

The task of Destiny Analysis is not to locate one hidden cause. It is to reconstruct the **architecture of inevitability**. That phrase is deliberately stronger than “architecture of prediction.” Prediction tells us what a system expects. Destiny Analysis asks what happens after that expectation enters the world.

THE RIGHT TO AN UNPREDICTED FUTURE

Once the future can be modelled before it happens and those models can influence present opportunities, another question emerges.

Does a human being have a right to remain **unpredicted**? The question is not a rejection of forecasting. Civilization could hardly function without it. We predict weather, traffic, demand, disease risks, economic conditions, and countless other phenomena because anticipation can prevent harm and improve coordination. The difficulty begins when the object of prediction

is not an external event but a human possibility. A person can be statistically likely to become something and still become something else. Indeed, some of the most important transformations in a human life begin precisely where previous expectations cease to work. A person changes profession at forty. A child previously considered unsuccessful becomes an exceptional scholar. A patient responds to treatment in an unexpected way. Someone rejects the career, social role, or identity that everyone around them considered inevitable. Such events are not merely statistical errors. They are reminders that human beings exist as possibilities before they become outcomes.

This suggests a distinction between the right to privacy and the right to an unpredicted future.

Privacy concerns who may know. The right to an unpredicted future concerns whether what has been predicted about me may legitimately become one of the conditions determining what I am allowed to become. That is a much more difficult question. For if the future assigned to a person becomes institutionally more powerful than the future the person might choose, prediction has ceased to be an instrument of knowledge alone. It has become an instrument of destiny.

■ THE RETURN OF THE FATAL

We may now see why the return of fatality is not a return to superstition.

Modernity attempted to free the individual from destiny by replacing necessity with explanation, uncertainty with probability, and probability with prediction. The future was supposed to become more open because it had become more knowable.

Yet prediction creates a new possibility once it becomes operational. The future can be acted upon before it arrives. The predicted person can be treated according to a future that has not yet happened. The intervention can alter the trajectory. The altered trajectory can generate evidence.

The evidence can validate the original prediction. And the final result can then appear to have been what was going to happen anyway.

This is the paradox.

The attempt to eliminate fatality through calculation can create a new form of fatality through intervention.

Baudrillard's fatal becomes relevant here not as an alternative to science, but as a limit concept for a civilization that has become extraordinarily confident in its capacity to calculate. The fatal marks what cannot be completely reduced to causality and probability;

the contemporary problem is that systems designed to overcome this remainder can themselves participate in producing trajectories that acquire the appearance of necessity.

This is why the decisive question is not: *Was the prediction accurate?*

It is: *What did the prediction do?*

That question changes the entire field of analysis.

CONCLUSION: WHEN PREDICTION BECOMES DESTINY

The history of modernity can be read as the history of an extraordinary ambition: to make the future less mysterious by making it more calculable.

The ambition succeeded.

We now possess systems capable of detecting patterns across enormous quantities of data, estimating probabilities, modelling scenarios, ranking alternatives, and acting before events fully disclose themselves. We can know more about the possible future of a person before that person has lived it. Still, knowledge of the future is not the same thing as control of the future. And control of the future is not the same thing as freedom from destiny. The crucial transformation occurs somewhere between prediction and intervention.

A prediction ignites as an image of what may happen. When it becomes the basis for a decision, it enters the present. When the decision changes the conditions surrounding a person, it enters the trajectory. When the trajectory produces an outcome, that outcome becomes evidence. And when the evidence returns to the system as confirmation, the original prediction can acquire the appearance of foresight even though it participated in the process it claimed merely to anticipate.

The map has arrived before the territory. The future has acquired social reality before it has acquired temporal reality. This is the point at which the modern abolition of fate turns against itself. We did not restore the ancient oracle. We built something more mundane and, in certain respects, more powerful: systems that calculate probable futures and organize the present around them. Destiny has therefore not disappeared. It has become **operational**.

This does not mean that human beings are determined by algorithms. It means that the conditions under which human trajectories unfold are increasingly shaped by representations of those trajectories produced in advance.

The decisive object is therefore not prediction itself. It is the **trajectory between prediction and outcome**. That trajectory is where possibility can become constraint, where intervention can become reinforcement, and where probability can acquire the appearance of necessity.

This is the domain that Destiny Analysis proposes to investigate.

Its task is neither to revive metaphysical fate nor to compete with predictive analytics. It is to examine the structures through which human futures become progressively organized, constrained, reproduced, and retrospectively experienced as though they could hardly have been otherwise.

The final question is consequently not whether we can predict more accurately. It is whether prediction will leave enough of the future open for a human being to surprise both the system and themselves. For there is a peculiar cruelty in a world that knows in advance what we are likely to become and then quietly arranges the world so that we become it.

The ancient fatalist could claim: *You cannot escape your fate.*

The modern predictive system says something much more reasonable: You are free. We have merely calculated what you are most likely to do.

The difference is considerable — until the calculation begins to determine the choices that remain available. Then the distinction starts to collapse, and that is where prediction becomes destiny.

Modernity did not abolish destiny. It automated it.

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■ VOLUME 7. ISSUE 2

DOUBLING DOWN ON ESSENCE

Baudrillard after Schelling





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■ ABSTRACT:

This article argues that Jean Baudrillard cannot be fully understood without Friedrich W.J. Schelling. His simulacra and "fatal qualities" obey a single logic, in which a thing manifests itself in its contrary without ceasing to be itself, and his text preserves hitherto unnoticed traces of its Schellingian source: a citation of the second draft of the *Weltalter* in *Le système des objets*, an undeclared graft from the *Philosophie der Kunst in De la séduction*, and the use of the German term *Steigerung* against Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Read through Gérard Genette's theory of intertextuality, these traces form a textbook case of quotation, plagiarism, and allusion; and since allusion is, by definition, a statement whose full understanding presupposes the perception of its source, Baudrillard's central concepts remain partly opaque as long as Schelling goes unseen. Through four figures and through the theory of qualities in *Les stratégies fatales*, the article shows Baudrillard employing the Schellingian operators of redoubling and potentiation in a logical rather than an ontological sense, and answers the three problems raised by Graham Harman's object-oriented reading.

KEYWORDS: Baudrillard; Schelling; *Steigerung*; simulacrum; Harman

■ INTRODUCTION

Instead of asking yet again what Baudrillard owes to Marx, Mauss, or Bataille, let us ask for once what he owes to Schelling. The question will sound strange, and not without reason. Schelling is an author almost nobody associates with Baudrillard, and very little has been written on their relationship.¹ Yet my claim is that Baudrillard cannot be fully understood without him. Baudrillard's simulacra, and more generally what he calls "fatal" qualities, obey a single logic: a thing manifests itself in its contrary without ceasing to be itself. This logic has a recognizable signature in the history of philosophy, and the signature is Schelling's. Nor is this a matter of resemblance: Schelling is actually present in Baudrillard's text, in forms nobody has so far noticed. How Baudrillard came to him is a question of history; that he is there is a matter of fact.

A thesis of this kind must immediately face two reasonable objections, which are best stated in their strongest form. The first is textual: Baudrillard never seems to refer to Schelling, and

a comparison between the two risks constructing an affinity that exists only in the interpreter's head. The second is theoretical: Schelling's "non-entity" (*Nichtseyende*) belongs to an ontological tradition that goes back to Plato's *Sophist*, whereas Baudrillard's simulacrum arises from a reflection on the semiological status of the sign. Bringing them together would, so to speak, "over-ontologize" Baudrillard. Both objections deserve respect. Neither of them, as we will see, holds up to the end.

There is also a third interlocutor, and not the least interesting one. Ten years ago Graham Harman proposed an object-oriented reading of Baudrillard that has the rare merit of having seen three problems the critical literature had never raised (Harman 2016). First, seduction cannot be reduced to a simple reversal of the relation between subject and object, but implies a "passage to a higher level." Second, Baudrillard's theory of seduction seems to lack a genuine dimension of absence, and therefore risks collapsing into pure presence. Third, Baudrillard's theory of qualities does not match the modern distinction between intrinsic and relational qualities, on which Harman builds his own distinction between real and sensual qualities.

¹ Two important exceptions are Iain Hamilton Grant (1998), who suggests reading Baudrillard's hyperreality in an ontogenetic key, on the model of the Schellingian chiasmus between nature and freedom, and Ana Carrasco-Conde (2013), to whom I will return below.

I contend that all three problems are clarified by adopting a Schellingian key.

The path will be as follows. First, I will gather the textual traces of Schelling in Baudrillard's work, from 1968 onward, and argue with Genette that they make Schelling a condition for understanding Baudrillard fully. Second, I will reconstruct the logic these traces allow us to glimpse, grounded in the two operators of potentiation (*Steigerung*) and redoubling (*Doublierung, reduplicatio*). Third, I will show this logic at work in four Baudrillardian figures: the transvestite, psychosomatic illness, obesity, and speed. Fourth, I will follow it into the theory of qualities of *Les stratégies fatales*, where it generates concepts such as the hyperreal, simulation, and illusion. Finally, I will return to Harman and to the two initial objections, in order to show that the real risk is not that of over-ontologizing Baudrillard, but of having so far under-ontologized him. If all these things can be shown, we will have a rather different picture of Baudrillard: not only the ironic poet of the end of the real, but a thinker grappling with a precise logical problem whose terms were partly borrowed from German Idealism.

■ THE TRACES

Let us begin with the facts, which are more numerous than the textual objection would lead us to suppose. They are also of a very particular kind, and there is a well-established theory that allows us to name them precisely. In *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette defines intertextuality as "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another" (Genette 1997, 1). The key word is "actual." Intertextuality in Genette's sense is not a vague affinity or a family resemblance detected by an imaginative reader, but the effective presence of one text inside another. Genette then distinguishes three forms of this presence, ordered by decreasing explicitness and literalness. The first is quotation, "the traditional practice of quoting (with quotation marks, with or without specific references)," which is both explicit and literal. The second is plagiarism, "an undeclared but still literal borrowing." The third is allusion, which is neither explicit nor literal: "an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of a relationship between it and another text, to which it necessarily refers by some inflections that would otherwise remain unintelligible" (Genette 1997,

2). The French original is sharper than the translation. What allusion presupposes is not the full meaning of a statement but its full understanding (*pleine intelligence*), and the inflections that point to the other text are not merely unintelligible but, without it, inadmissible (*autrement non recevable*) (Genette 1982, 8). My claim is that Schelling's presence in Baudrillard fills all three of these categories. It is not a hypothesis about influence. It is a textbook case of intertextuality.

Consider first the quotation. In 1966 Baudrillard defended his doctoral dissertation on objects, published two years later as *Le système des objets*. It is a treatise in the socio-semiotics of everyday objects, built on Henri Lefebvre's sociology of everyday life and on Roland Barthes's analysis of systems of signification. In an appendix there is a chapter on the automobile, and there, almost in passing, we read: "Movement, says Schelling, is nothing other than the search for rest" (Baudrillard 1968, 94)². Here the name is given and the words are presented as Schelling's own: the citation is explicit and literal, lacking only a precise reference, which Genette's definition expressly

allows. The sentence has the air of an ornament, and nobody paid attention to it. But the source exists, and it is the second draft of the *Weltalter*, the one from 1813 (Schelling 2013, 294–295).

The detail is not irrelevant. At the time this draft had not been translated into French, and it does not even appear in the *Sämmtliche Werke*. It is therefore plausible that Baudrillard, a Germanist by training, consulted the German edition prepared by Manfred Schröter (Schelling 1946), or that he reached it through the French Schelling scholarship of the time.³ Even more interesting is that the vocabulary with which Baudrillard takes up the sentence points beyond the sentence itself. Schelling is addressing one of the densest of metaphysical problems, itself derived from the *Sophist*: that of movement, rest, and the first beginning. Against Fichte, he maintains that the beginning cannot be an act, because every act stands out against a background of will at rest (*der ruhende Wille*), and "*die Ruhe ist*

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French and German are my own, and page references are to the original editions.

3 A possible mediation is the French Schelling scholarship available at the time, in particular Jankélévitch (1933) and above all Tilliette (1966). Written in 1965 and published the following year, the same year in which Baudrillard defended the dissertation where he cites Schelling, Tilliette's article explicitly highlights *la loi de la Steigerung, ou du Potenzieren* (Tilliette 1966, 105). There is no evidence that Baudrillard read it; the coincidence is nonetheless worth recording.

ihre Speise": rest is the nourishment of movement (Schelling 2013, 292–293). Baudrillard translates this vocabulary into his own: movement, rest, *satisfaction passive*, *aliment de l'euphorie automobile*, *immobility*, *présomption d'éternité* (Baudrillard 1968, 94). Now, eternity and immobility appear in the corresponding passage of the 1815/17 draft, where Schelling writes that every movement has as its goal only eternal immobility (*Alle Bewegung hat nur die ewige Unbeweglichkeit zum Ziel*) (Schelling 2013, 494–495). Everything suggests that Baudrillard compared the two versions.

What does he draw from this? A theory of speed. By accelerating, the driver presupposes a kind of eternity that precedes movement, and the security of this presumed immobility is what nourishes the pleasure of displacement. This pleasure is therefore not an active affirmation, as one might suppose, but a passive satisfaction: a desire for rest. Nor is this only about the automobile. The leitmotif of the entire book is that the movement of the system of objects tends inevitably toward immobility, because all the possibilities of its technical development remain blocked and merely potential. In Schelling this problem has a precise name: nature preserves

within itself a "source of self-movement" (*Selbstbewegungsquelle*) that never fully passes into actuality and always remains potency (Schelling 2013, 562–563; 586–587). In this sense the auto-mobile of the appendix is not simply a machine, but the icon of the system Baudrillard describes.

The second form is plagiarism, and here the name disappears while the letter remains. Genette's term is technical, not moral: it designates a borrowing that is literal but undeclared. Eleven years after the dissertation, in *De la séduction*, Baudrillard writes: "As it is said that a thing endures because its existence is inadequate to its essence, one must say that the feminine seduces because it is never where one thinks it is" (Baudrillard 1979, 17). No source is given, and that "as it is said" presents the sentence as a proverb known to all. It is not. It is a sentence from the *Philosophie der Kunst*, where Schelling states that "we say that a thing endures because its existence [...] is inadequate to its essence" (SW I/5, 376). The borrowing is literal, and it is undeclared: this is a genuine graft. Baudrillard incorporates Schelling's thesis and uses it as a term of comparison for his own conception of seduction. To which he adds: "the feminine is elsewhere, it

has always been elsewhere. That is the secret of its potency" (Baudrillard 1979, 17). The word "potency" (*puissance*) is not chosen by chance. For Schelling, essence is the potency of being-other; for Baudrillard, seduction is the potency of being-elsewhere. Seduction stands to essence as women, the referent we spontaneously associate with "the feminine," stand to existence: inadequate to the potency that exceeds them.

The third form is allusion, which is neither explicit nor literal, and which is also the most widespread. In the *Erlanger Vorlesungen* Schelling speaks of what is "*beweglicher als alles Bewegliche*" and "*beweglicher als jede einzelne Bewegung*," more mobile than every single movement (SW I/9, 243–244). Baudrillard, in *Les stratégies fatales*, speaks of the "more mobile than mobile" (Baudrillard 1983, 10, 14–15). Above all, from the 1980s onward, Baudrillard insistently resorts to a German word: *die Steigerung*, or *die steigernde Potenz* (Baudrillard 1983, 49; 1987, 49). There must be a reason why a French author chooses to evoke a lexicon in German. Yet this choice has gone almost unnoticed.⁴ It is exactly

what Genette calls an inflection that would otherwise be inadmissible: the German word is a signal that points elsewhere, and it can be fully understood only once the relationship between Baudrillard's text and Schelling's is perceived.

This last point deserves more attention than it usually receives, because Genette's definition of allusion is not only a classification. It is an epistemological claim. It says that there are statements which cannot be fully understood by anyone who fails to perceive their relation to another text. Now, the allusions we have just identified are not scattered ornaments at the margins of Baudrillard's work. As the following sections will show, *Steigerung* is the name Baudrillard gives to seduction itself, "an ascent in potency of the relation" (Baudrillard 1987, 49); it is the engine of his theory of qualities; and it is from that theory that the hyperreal, simulation, and illusion are generated. The inference follows with some force. If these statements are allusions in Genette's sense, and if Baudrillard's central concepts depend on them, then Baudrillard's central concepts cannot

4 To my knowledge, the only point of reference is Blask (1995), which, although it does not inquire into the German origin of this lexicon, at least acknowl-

edges the issue. A passing mention can be found in Genosko (1994, 109), but in connection with Alfred Jarry's pataphysics. The term is absent from *The Baudrillard Dictionary* (Smith 2010).

be fully understood without perceiving their relation to Schelling.

The inference should be stated with care, since its strength lies precisely in its modesty. It does not claim that Baudrillard is unreadable without Schelling, nor that his concepts are secretly Schelling's. Genette's criterion concerns full understanding, not understanding as such: one can read Baudrillard, and read him well, while missing the allusion, and this is exactly what the critical literature has done for decades. Nor does the inference depend on what Baudrillard intended, or on proving that he wanted his readers to catch the reference. It concerns the reader, not the author. What it establishes is that something in Baudrillard's text remains, in Genette's word, inadmissible until the relation to Schelling is perceived, and that what remains inadmissible is not a detail but a hinge. We will soon see what happens to such inflections when they are not perceived: they are set aside as ironic flourishes, or simply erased, even in translation.

In short, the textual objection does not hold, and it can even be turned around. Quotation, plagiarism, allusion: Baudrillard's relationship to Schelling fills every category of Genette's intertextuality, from the

most explicit to the least. The question is therefore no longer whether Schelling is present in Baudrillard, but what we fail to understand in Baudrillard as long as we do not see him there. Schelling is actually present in Baudrillard's text from the doctoral dissertation onward, sometimes by name, sometimes without a name, sometimes only in a turn of phrase or a German word nobody bothered to check. What remains to be understood is what Baudrillard took from him. The answer, as we will see, is not an ontology. It is a logic.

STEIGERUNG, OR HOW TO RAISE THE STAKES

The word *Steigerung* comes from the verb *steigern*, which means to increase, intensify, elevate, potentiate. It also has two technical uses worth keeping in mind. In the vocabulary of auctions it refers to the raising of bids, the escalation of the price. In German grammar it designates the formation of the degrees of comparison of the adjective: *Positiv*, *Komparativ*, *Superlativ*, where the superlative represents the highest degree of *Steigerung*. Baudrillard exploits the entire spectrum. But from a philosophical point of view his use is a single one, and it is anti-dialectical. When he introduces the concept

for the first time, he speaks of "this revolution in things which no longer lies in their dialectical supersession (*Aufhebung*) but in their potentiation (*Steigerung*), in their elevation to the potency of two, to the *n*th potency" (Baudrillard 1983, 49). A few years later he insists: "The ascent in potency, die *steigernde Potenz*, stands opposed to the dialectical movement, *die dialektische Aufhebung*" (Baudrillard 1987, 49). And he explicitly links the notion to seduction, which "is not a dialectical relation but an ascent in potency of the relation, which expresses itself through an intensification of the stakes" (Baudrillard 1987, 49). The vocabulary of the auction has become a philosophical figure: to seduce is to raise the stakes. Here is a first instance of Genette's criterion at work: without Schelling, this definition of seduction reads as a metaphor; with him, it reads as a logic.

Now, *Steigerung* has a philosophical history, and that history passes through Schelling. In the 1813 draft of the *Weltalter*, Schelling introduces what he calls the "law of intensification" (*Gesetz der Steigerung*), and maintains that knowledge of it would inaugurate an epochal renewal of science, restoring to it the ontological dimension that Hegelian hyper-rationalism had

taken away (Schelling 2013, 292–295). Schelling's problem is that Hegelian becoming-other, grounded in determinate negation, works only at the level of conceptual mediation and cannot account for the complexity of natural processes. His alternative is formulated with almost algebraic precision: if the affirmative principle is posited as A and the negative as B, "an A which, insofar as such (*als solches*), behaves as = B ($A = B$) [...] may be considered as a being at the second potency = A^2 " (Schelling 2013, 320–321). In other words: when a thing behaves as its contrary, it is not negated. It is raised to the second potency.

The logical foundation of this law is an old scholastic doctrine that Schelling rereads in his own way: *reduplicatio*. It is a figure of predication that qualifies a predicate by specifying the aspect under which it is taken, in the form of the "insofar as" (*qua, inquantum*). Something is predicated of something else not simply (*simpliciter*), but insofar as it is considered under a certain determination. Its identity is not neutral, but qualified. It passes through rationalist metaphysics from Leibniz to Wolff before reaching Schelling.⁵ In the

⁵ The reconstruction of *reduplicatio* is based on the work of Manfred Frank (2017; 2018). On the relation between the method of the late Schelling and that of

Münchener Vorlesungen, appealing to the "older logic" (*ältere Logik*), Schelling writes that "*A, das A ist, ist das mit sich selbst duplicirte A*": A posited as A is no longer simple but duplicated, and "for the sake of brevity" we may call it A^2 (SW I/10, 103). Here is the mechanism: A manifests itself as B, overturns into B, only because it doubles itself as $A \cdot A$. Unlike in Hegel, when A manifests itself as B it does not lose its identity (A), but doubles it ($A \cdot A$) and potentiates it (A^2).

Schelling knew well that this thesis risked being confused with Hegel's, and he says so with some irritation in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*. Everything, he writes, can become manifest only in its contrary, "therefore identity in non-identity" (SW I/7, 424). But he immediately adds: "very often this transition from identity to difference has been regarded as a sublating (*Aufheben*) of identity; but [...] it is instead solely a duplication (*Doublierung*) of the essence, and therefore an intensification (*Steigerung*) of unity" (SW I/7, 424–425). *Aufhebung* on one side, *Doublierung* and *Steigerung* on the other. This is exactly the constellation Baudrillard opposes to dialectics when he speaks of "this other logic, this

exponential strategy in which things [...] double themselves in a sort of play *en abyme*" (Baudrillard 1983, 49).

The image of Baudrillard we have inherited, that of an ironic and poetic thinker, more literary than philosophical, is certainly well founded. But it has obscured the fact that, when he came to define his anti-dialectical position, his primary concern was of a logical nature. He wants, he says, "to seek another rule, another axiomatics [...] to sketch this other logic" (Baudrillard 1983, 271). This logic is "other" because it differs from the Hegelian one, and it differs above all because it rests on the pair of redoubling and potentiation. Redoubling, unlike *Steigerung*, is something Baudrillard never defines. But he practices it.

Consider a sentence that has always embarrassed commentators: "Seduction is not that which opposes production. It is that which seduces production" (Baudrillard 1987, 52). How can two concepts be antagonistic without opposing one another? The secret lies in the redoubling of the term "seduction," which appears twice. The first time as the nominal term of a dialectical opposition that Baudrillard rejects; the second as a verbal action that replaces the denied opposition. Baudrillard, then, is not merely

Hegel, see also Beach (1990).

criticizing dialectics: he replaces it with a different logic for thinking the relation between his own concepts. Schelling's older logic (*ältere Logik*) does not seem so far from Baudrillard's other logic (*autre logique*).

■ FOUR FIGURES OF NON-BEING

If this logic is really at work, we should be able to see it in action in the concrete figures that populate Baudrillard's books. And we do. The starting point is an intuition of the Schelling scholar Ana Carrasco-Conde, who, reflecting on a "logic of the phantom" (that is, of what is not, but nonetheless has real effects), pointed to a convergence between Baudrillard's simulacrum and Schelling's "non-entity" (*Nichtseyende*) (Carrasco-Conde 2013). Both have a negative, fictional, parasitic status, and yet both produce positive ontological effects. What it lacked was evidence, and a criterion for not turning Baudrillard into an ontologist in spite of himself. The criterion is the one just reconstructed: a thing manifests itself in its contrary, in its non-identity, without losing its identity. Let us consider four cases.

The first is the transvestite. Contrary to what one might think, Baudrillard's "feminine" does not denote women: it is the principle of uncertainty applied

to sexual difference. This is why it manifests itself most fully where the certainty of the feminine, that is, woman's sexual identity, is put at stake: in transvestism, which Baudrillard defines as a "challenge to woman/woman through woman/sign" (Baudrillard 1979, 24). The formula "woman/sign" joins the long series Baudrillard has accustomed us to: object/sign, function/sign, value/sign. But there is a detail that usually escapes notice. Baudrillard does not insist on the traits of hyper-resemblance to the feminine model (breasts, high heels, makeup), but on the opposite traits: "the Barcelona travelos keep their mustaches and display hairy chests" (Baudrillard 1979, 27). The transvestite is not a feminine imitating the feminine. It is a feminine manifesting itself as non-feminine. It is no accident that, alongside the famous formula "woman/sign," Baudrillard proposes another, less explored and more fascinating: "a woman/non-woman, self-moving in signs, is more likely to go to the limits of seduction than a real woman already justified by her sex" (Baudrillard 1979, 25).

The two formulas are equivalent in the economy of Baudrillard's discourse, but they say the same thing in two very different ways. "Woman/sign" foregrounds the semiological side.

"Woman/non-woman" raises a logical problem: the blatant violation of the principle of identity. Taken literally, the expression is nonsensical. And precisely for this reason it is instructive. If the two formulas are equivalent, they are also interchangeable, and "/sign" can be replaced by "/non-identity": object/non-object, function/non-function, value/non-value. Indeed, Baudrillard constantly speaks of non-response, non-reciprocity, non-equivalence, non-communication, non-events, non-places. Schelling, for his part, speaks not only of non-entity and non-identity, but also of non-reality, non-freedom, non-movement, non-act, non-necessity, even non-God. Two authors with the same verbal tic. I hold that this is not a coincidence, but the symptom of a shared problem: the conversion of identity into non-identity. This is the problem that lies beneath the simulacral status of the sign in Baudrillard.

The second case is illness. In order to show that evil is not simply *privatio boni*, and thus pure non-being, Schelling turns to illness, drawing on the theories of Franz von Baader. With respect to the body, illness has a negative status, "parasitic" as Carrasco-Conde puts it, since it depends on the body that hosts it in

order to produce its effects (Carrasco-Conde 2013, 523). Yet it would be absurd to regard those effects as unreal. Illness is not pure nothingness: it is the non-entity of the body, its non-identity. If the body is an organic balance, illness is its non-balance. Schelling derives this concept from the *Sophist*, as a reworking of the Platonic *symplokē* of being and non-being, and for this reason he also calls it by another Platonic term, "appearance" (*Scheinbild*). Elsewhere he even uses the word "simulacrum" (*simulachrum*) (SW I/7, 164). Now, in *La précession des simulacres*, Baudrillard deals precisely with psychosomatic illnesses, through the distinction between dissimulation and simulation. Whoever dissimulates feigns symptoms, but leaves intact the distinction between reality and fiction: the illness is either there or not. Whoever simulates, by contrast, produces real symptoms even in the absence of illness, and it becomes undecidable whether the illness is present or not. "One can treat him neither objectively as ill nor as non-ill" (Baudrillard 1981, 12). The psychosomatic patient is a non-ill person who manifests as ill, exactly as the asymptomatic patient is an ill person who manifests as non-ill. Just as the transvestite is a woman who manifests as non-woman.

The third case is obesity, and here von Baader reappears, this time in Baudrillard's own text, which cites his essay on ecstasy as metastasis (Baudrillard 1983, 46). The concept of metastasis will later acquire a precise theoretical value in Baudrillard's lexicon, to the point of characterizing a fourth order of simulacra, beyond the famous genealogy of the three (Baudrillard 1990a). But here it serves to reveal a logical similarity between cancer and obesity. Cancer cells develop just as healthy cells do; only the development of healthy cells has limits, determination, and a physiological purpose, whereas that of cancer cells has no limits. It is not indeterminate, however. It is hyper-determined, says Baudrillard, and its purpose becomes hyper-telic. Determination is not negated but doubled. Cancer is more body than body: it behaves so perfectly as body, executes the cellular program so faithfully, that it ends up behaving as what the body is not. The same holds for obesity, where the redoubling is simply more visible: "In obesity this process does not come to a halt. Losing its specific traits, the body continues the monotonous expansion of its tissues" (Baudrillard 1983, 46). The obese is "the more massive than massive" (Baudrillard 1987, 71), and its

indivision "does not separate the body from the non-body" (Baudrillard 1983, 44). Indivision: a word with a clear Schellingian resonance (*ungetheilt*). The obese body is a body that manifests itself as non-body, an organization that overturns into dis-organization. A simulacrum in the Schellingian sense.

The fourth case we already know: speed. In *Les stratégies fatales*, Baudrillard returns to his first Schellingian example, the one from the doctoral dissertation, and makes it the *Steigerung* of movement: "In the image of speed, which alone is the perfect expression of mobility, because — as opposed to movement, which has a meaning — it no longer has one, goes nowhere, and therefore has nothing more to do with movement: it is its ecstasy" (Baudrillard 1983, 49). Movement has a meaning, a direction, a purpose; it has, in a word, a determination. Speed does not negate this determination, it hyper-determines it. This is why movement "does not disappear so much into immobility," that is, into its determinate negation, "as into speed and acceleration: into the more mobile of movement, if one may say so" (Baudrillard 1983, 14–15). Speed is a movement that manifests itself as non-movement.

Woman/non-woman, ill/non-ill, body/non-body, movement/non-movement. Four figures, one logic. Each thing overturns into its contrary not because it is negated, but because it is doubled and potentiated. Schelling's non-entity, his simulacrum, is only one case of this logic. Baudrillard's figures are others, and none of them is fully intelligible as long as the Schellingian "non-" goes unperceived.

■ MORE REAL THAN THE REAL

There remains the most general question, and also the oldest. In 1983, commenting on the opening chapter of *Les stratégies fatales*, Guy Bellavance asked Baudrillard: "What exactly do you mean by this passion for potentialisation and redoubling [...]—this truer than the true, this more beautiful than the beautiful, these qualities that have entirely absorbed the energy of their opposites?" (Baudrillard 1990b, 19). More than forty years later, the question still awaits a satisfactory answer.⁶ I believe we can finally give it one. First of all, we must note that what Baudrillard calls "qualities" are

not qualities in the modern sense, neither primary nor secondary, neither intrinsic nor relational. They are pairs of opposed terms: beautiful/ugly, real/imaginary, visible/invisible, fixed/mobile, to which he adds the contradictions true/false. Each term derives its identity-value from its relation to its contrary. Something is true insofar as it is not false; the real is what it is only in comparison with something unreal. Now, Baudrillard describes a "radicalization of qualities" (Baudrillard 1983, 9) that can befall "any character raised to the superlative potency, caught in a spiral of doubling [...] on condition that, ceasing to be relative to its contrary (the true to the false, the beautiful to the ugly, the real to the imaginary), it becomes superlative [...] because it has, as it were, absorbed the energy of its contrary" (Baudrillard 1983, 12). Here Baudrillard metaphorizes the German grammar of the degrees of comparison. As soon as a term ceases to derive its meaning from comparison with its opposite, it becomes superlative. But in becoming superlative it acquires the capacity to manifest itself as its contrary: it behaves, it actualizes itself (*en-ergheia*), as what it is not. This is Schelling's thesis, rewritten by other means.

⁶ The problem was initially addressed by Kellner (1989), but it was subsequently left largely undeveloped in the later literature, beginning with Gane (1991). Tellingly, *The Baudrillard Dictionary* (Smith 2010) contains no entries on potentiation, redoubling, or the theory of qualities.

Take Baudrillard's most famous concept, the hyperreal. Baudrillard says that "such intensification is equivalent to a sort of absolutisation" (Baudrillard 1990b, 19). The hyperreal is nothing other than the result of the radicalization of the "quality" of the real. The real, taken simply (*simpliciter*), means the real insofar as it is opposed to the imaginary. Doubled, taken *dupliciter*, it means the real insofar as it is real, the real as such, the absolute real. This does not mean that the hyperreal is an *ens realissimum*, a being entirely real that contains nothing imaginary. On the contrary: the hyperreal is the absolute real precisely because it has absorbed the energy of the imaginary, and is therefore real and non-real at once.

The formula with which Baudrillard expresses all this is always the same: "more X than X." More real than the real, truer than the true, falser than the false, more visible than the visible, more mobile than the mobile. And the formula can be read in two ways at once. It is more mobile than mobile (potentiation), but only because it is already more mobile than mobile (redoubling). On one side the redoubling of determination (mobile/mobile), on the other its potentiation (more/than). In a single gesture, the formula

stages both of the operators Schelling describes.

From this formula Baudrillard generates his own concepts. In *L'Autre par lui-même* he reviews his key notions: "more social than the social (the masses), fatter than the fat (the obese), more violent than the violent (terrorism), more sexual than sex (porn), truer than the true (simulation), more beautiful than the beautiful (fashion)" (Baudrillard 1987, 71–72). In *Les stratégies fatales* he does something more significant: he shows the logical genesis of concepts from the operation of redoubling. Simulation emerges from the truer than the true, illusion from the falser than the false, secret from the more hidden than the hidden, obscenity from the more visible than the visible, metamorphosis from the more mobile than the mobile (Baudrillard 1983, 9–15). The theory of qualities is not one chapter among others. It is the factory of Baudrillard's concepts.

There is, finally, an opposition that seems made on purpose to test all this: the one between simulation and illusion. There is perhaps no opposition more dialectical than that between true and false. Yet Baudrillard writes: "We will not distinguish the true from the false" (Baudrillard 1983, 10). Instead of distinguishing

the true from the false only to oppose them and sublate each into the other, "we will seek the falser than the false: illusion" (Baudrillard 1983, 10). And, at the same time, "truer than the true: that is simulation" (Baudrillard 1983, 14). Finally: "to the truer than the true we will oppose the falser than the false" (Baudrillard 1983, 9), confident that this opposition will never fall back into a dialectic. Why? Because, as he writes, "imagine the true that had absorbed all the energy of the false: you have simulation" (Baudrillard 1983, 12). Simulation is a true that manifests itself as non-true; illusion, conversely, is a false that manifests itself as non-false. To oppose illusion to simulation is like opposing the non-false to the non-true. Any *Aufhebung* is excluded from the outset, because each qualified identity already contains its own non-identity as internal difference. Everything becomes manifest only in its contrary, identity in non-identity. Schelling could not have put it better, and in fact he put it first. This is why the factory of Baudrillard's concepts remains opaque to a reader who does not see Schelling in it.

■ WHAT HARMAN SAW

We can now return to Harman, with a few more tools in hand. His

reading of Baudrillard is among the most stimulating of recent years, not least because it comes from a philosophy that has little in common with Baudrillard's and for that very reason sees things that Baudrillardians do not. But it is easy to see where it comes to a halt.

Let us begin with the "passage to a higher level" (Harman 2016, 132). Seduction, says Harman, is not merely the reversal of subject into object, but introduces an emergentist discontinuity that he interprets as an ontological production (Harman 2016, 134). Here Harman has seen correctly. Baudrillard does speak of something like a passage to a higher level: it is *Steigerung*, the elevation to a higher potency. The two concepts do not say exactly the same thing, but they point in the same direction: both imply a discontinuity (passage, elevation) and an emergent vector (higher level, higher potency). Yet the difference is decisive. In Harman we have an uplifting toward a higher-level identity; in Baudrillard, an intensification. And since Baudrillard conceives *Steigerung* in explicit opposition to dialectics, it is fair to ask whether he would not read Harman's version as a kind of *Aufhebung*. For Harman, after all, the antagonism between seduction and production

ends up resolved in the flip of seduction into production. But Baudrillard is unequivocal: "The universe is not dialectical — it is devoted to extremes, not to equilibrium. Devoted to radical antagonism, not to reconciliation or synthesis" (Baudrillard 1983, 9). The discontinuity Harman introduces is not radical enough, since it reintroduces an ontological continuity at a higher level.

The second problem is absence. According to Harman, where-as "an object-oriented concept of seduction requires the absence of what seduces [...]" for Baudrillard the seductive object functions through the insignificant nullity of its pure presence" (Harman 2016, 132). At first glance the objection seems to miss its target, since Baudrillard places seduction more on the side of absence than on the side of presence. Right after writing that seduction seduces production, he adds: "just as absence is not that which opposes presence, but that which seduces presence" (Baudrillard 1987, 52). And yet here too Harman has grasped something important that nobody had noticed. Since absence does not dialectically oppose presence, it is not its determinate negation. Baudrillard says so plainly: presence is erased "before a redoubling of presence that cancels

the opposition between presence and absence" (Baudrillard 1983, 14). The absence Baudrillard speaks of is therefore not a first-level absence, but a second-level presence, as Harman himself seems to suggest. Or better, a presence raised to a higher potency: presence · presence, that is, presence². A presence that behaves as its contrary, as non-presence. The same holds for determination, which "does not disappear in favor of indetermination" but "in favor of a hyper-determination" (Baudrillard 1983, 15).

The third problem concerns "fatal qualities" (Harman 2016, 134). Harman rightly notes that Baudrillard does not seem interested in the relation between objects and their qualities. But the point is not merely that Baudrillard is uninterested in the way object-oriented philosophy addresses this problem. The point is that his theory of qualities has nothing to do with the modern dispute between primary and secondary qualities. It concerns the qualification of the identity-value of a logical term, as we have seen. And it is here that Harman's intuition finds both its confirmation and its limit. Harman is right about the emergent character of Baudrillard's concepts: seduction, like simulation and illusion, emerges from the qualification of an

identity, that is, from its redoubling and potentiation. The same holds for production.⁷ But precisely because Harman is right about this, he cannot be right about the rest. If seduction could flip into production, then illusion could likewise flip into simulation. And this is not the case. The entire theory of qualities seems designed precisely to avoid the uplifting scenario in which the antagonism between concepts would be sublated into a higher identity.

UNDER-ONTOLOGIZING BAUDRILLARD

There remains the theoretical objection: reading Baudrillard through Schelling would over-ontologize him. The objection made sense as long as Baudrillard remained far from Schelling and the intertextual relations between the two remained unexplored. Now that we know something more about Baudrillard's use of categories such as essence, potency, metastasis, indivision, redoubling, potentiation,

and non-identity, the objection must be reversed. Perhaps the problem is not that bringing Baudrillard close to Schelling over-ontologizes him. Perhaps the problem is that Baudrillard has so far been under-ontologized, precisely because this Schellingian resonance has gone unnoticed.

One example will suffice. Baudrillard, the thinker of the simulacrum, also speaks of essence, and not in passing. "I believe that there is an essence [...] of all things," he declares in *Les stratégies fatales* (Baudrillard 1983, 206), and in *L'Autre par lui-même* he discusses the consequences of the fact that "things can no longer be reconciled with their essence" (Baudrillard 1987, 71). Whatever their ultimate meaning, these passages cannot simply be ignored in the name of an ironic reading that sets them aside. Yet this is exactly what has happened, not only in the interpretation of Baudrillard but even in his translation. The first sentence of *Les stratégies fatales* says that things have found a way to escape the dialectic of meaning that bored them: that of potentiating themselves, of *surenchérir sur leur essence* (Baudrillard 1983, 9). The English translation renders the expression as "outbidding themselves" (Baudrillard 2008, 25), and in doing so drops precisely the

7 In these pages Baudrillard does not provide the rule from which seduction and production derive, but in other works he offers valuable clues for reconstructing it: see Baudrillard (1987, 58), where seduction is described as the site of the scintillation of being, and Baudrillard (2000, 34), where it is "the sphere in which the staking of being (*mise en jeu de l'être*) is a kind of deontology (*déontologie*).⁷ The argument cannot be developed here.

reference to essence. Here is Genette's inadmissible inflection in its purest form: not perceived, and therefore removed.

I propose an emendation. The verb *surenchérir* belongs to the vocabulary of auctions, the same vocabulary Baudrillard metaphorizes with *Steigerung*. But French and English know another way of expressing the same gesture: *doubler la mise*, to double the stake, what in blackjack is called "doubling down." I would therefore translate: "doubling down on their essence." The emendation has, in my view, two advantages and one consequence. The first advantage is philological: it restores the reference to essence, whose suppression is an error. The second is semantic: it otherwise leaves the sense of the sentence intact. The consequence is interpretative, and I admit that it exerts a certain pressure on the text: it brings to light the same constellation Schelling refers to in the *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*. Read in this way, the opening of *Les stratégies fatales* would say that things escape *Aufhebung* by embracing another strategy: elevation to a higher potency (*Steigerung*) and doubling down (*Doublierung*) on their essence.⁸

⁸ A further indication in support of this emendation

Then there is the *Sophist*. When Carrasco-Conde notes a "curious correspondence" between Plato's *Sophist* and what Baudrillard says about simulacra (Carrasco-Conde 2013, 523), the correspondence is less curious than it seems. In *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Baudrillard engages critically with Julia Kristeva precisely over the passage of the *Sophist* from which Schelling derives the non-entity: the one in which non-being is interwoven with being "in a thoroughly derouting way." Baudrillard's position is clear. Kristeva is right to locate the poetic in this interweaving of being and non-being, but wrong to treat this topology as a "topic," that is, as a space of locatable instances between which a dialectic of determinate negation could be established (Baudrillard 1976, 317). The poetic, for Baudrillard, is "utopical" in the literal sense of what has no place, just as seduction is the potency of being elsewhere.

All this has a methodological consequence. A decisive turning point in Baudrillard studies was Rex Butler's proposal to read Baudrillard "on his

is that Baudrillard explicitly overlays essence and duplicity in *La gauche divine* (Baudrillard 1985, 76), rethinking essence as duality. In the *Weltalter* Schelling speaks of a "play of duality" (*Spiel der Zweyheit*) (Schelling 2013, 68–69).

own terms" (Butler 1999, 13). His remains one of the most fascinating interpretations, even though it rests on the counterintuitive assumption that Baudrillard's thought revolves around a Platonic paradox, formulated in the *Cratylus* and commented on by Derrida, to which Baudrillard never refers. I fully share the deconstructionist background of Butler's reading, since I hold that Baudrillard's use of Schelling is itself a gesture of deconstruction, a claim I will develop elsewhere. But I wonder why one should look in the *Cratylus* for what can be found in the *Sophist*, to which Baudrillard does refer. The more general problem is that philosophical readings of Baudrillard have been highly selective in their choice of texts. If reading Baudrillard "on his own terms" also means recognizing that these terms are not entirely his own, but the result of appropriation and intertextual "theft," I propose to reverse Butler's criterion: to read Baudrillard "within his own text," bringing to the fore the resources his textuality conceals, such as his references to the *Sophist* and to *Schellingian Steigerung*.

It remains to clarify in what sense all this does not over-ontologize Baudrillard. In Schelling, logic and ontology are not distinct: the non-entity is the

non-identity of the entity. Baudrillard, by contrast, speaks of an "other logic" when he resorts to Schellingian operators. Everything suggests that he drew a logic from Schelling without embracing his ontology, and that this very logic explains how his fictional realities work. The point, then, is not to make Baudrillard into a metaphysician of nature. The point is to take his philosophical apparatus seriously.

■ CONCLUSION

The picture is now before the reader. Schelling is actually present in Baudrillard's text, in every form Genette distinguishes: quoted in *Le système des objets*, grafted without acknowledgment into *De la séduction*, alluded to in the German lexicon of *Steigerung*. What this presence carries is a logic alternative to the Hegelian one, grounded in redoubling and potentiation. This logic explains the transvestite, the psychosomatic patient, the obese, and speed; it generates the hyperreal, simulation, and illusion; and it answers the three problems Harman had the merit of raising. Baudrillard's simulacra then appear less as purely semiological effects than as figures of non-identity endowed with real efficacy. And since the hinges of Baudrillard's thought are allusions to Schelling, Genette's

definition leaves no way out: whoever does not perceive Schelling in them can read Baudrillard, but cannot fully understand him.

One might object that this reading gives Schelling an excessively anti-dialectical profile, forgetting that identity in difference does not rule out reintegration. The objection is seductive, but it strikes a thesis that is not advanced here. The question is not whether

Baudrillard's reading of Schelling is adequate to Schelling, but whether the reading of Baudrillard proposed here is adequate to what Baudrillard took from Schelling. Schellingianism may well be irreducible to its anti-Hegelian side. But it is this side that seduced Baudrillard. And a seduction, as Baudrillard knew well, never opposes what it seduces: it doubles it.

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WARS FOR TIME

Cultural Codes, Temporal Sovereignty,
and the Emergence of Temporal Geopolitics





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■ ABSTRACT

Geopolitics has traditionally been concerned with the distribution and control of territory. States compete for land, borders, resources, strategic corridors, infrastructure, and access to geographical space. Yet the political significance of territory increasingly depends upon another dimension that cannot be represented on a conventional map: the temporal order through which societies organize memory, attention, expectation, anticipation, and action.

This article develops **Temporal Geopolitics** as a framework for analysing this emerging condition. Its central proposition is that the cultural code should no longer be understood merely as a mechanism of collective identity. It should also be understood as a temporal infrastructure: a system through which a society determines what belongs to the past, what constitutes the present, which futures are imaginable, and what rhythm of change is considered legitimate.

The argument brings this proposition into dialogue with Jean Baudrillard's analyses of simulation, acceleration, America, the perpetual present, and the disappearance of historical transcendence, as well as with scholarship on chronopolitics, social acceleration, historical regimes, and the geopolitics of temporality. The article distinguishes **Temporal Geopolitics** from

the broader field of chronopolitics by focusing specifically on the encounter, competition, and asymmetry of different temporal regimes as geopolitical formations.

Four cases are used to develop the framework: the temporal discipline of the global economy, the algorithmic organization of attention by digital platforms, the coexistence of multiple temporal regimes within contemporary Japan, and the growing capacity of artificial intelligence to model and pre-structure possible futures. These cases demonstrate that temporal power can operate without territorial occupation and that geopolitical dependence may increasingly involve dependence upon externally imposed rhythms, horizons, and models of futurity.

The article suggests five analytical categories — temporal territory, temporal borders, temporal sovereignty, temporal colonization, and temporal insurgency — and concludes by presenting Temporal Geopolitics as an interdisciplinary research programme for studying the production, occupation, synchronization, disruption, and contestation of collective time.

Keywords: cultural code; temporality; chronopolitics; geopolitics; temporal sovereignty; temporal terri-

tory; Baudrillard; acceleration; digital platforms; artificial intelligence; futurity.

■ INTRODUCTION: THE LAST ILLUSION OF GEOGRAPHY

The classical geopolitical imagination begins with the assumption that power occupies space. Territory can be mapped, bordered, divided, administered, defended, invaded, exchanged, and transformed into a strategic resource. The map therefore appears to provide the most stable representation of political reality. Even when contemporary geopolitics moves beyond the state and begins to speak of networks, infrastructures, supply chains, information flows, or spheres of influence, the spatial grammar remains largely intact: someone is somewhere, something lies between two places, and power is exercised through the control of distance.

But what happens when different populations occupy the same geographical space while living according to different temporal regimes?

One society may understand the present as the continuation of a long historical process, while another experiences the present as a radical break with the past. One may regard technological acceleration as liberation,

while another experiences the same acceleration as cultural dislocation. One political community may organize its expectations around an expansive future, while another may place its legitimacy in continuity, repetition, or restoration. One institution may operate through decades-long cycles, while another is compelled to respond within seconds.

These are not simply differences in opinion. They are differences in the temporal architecture through which reality becomes intelligible.

The traditional geopolitical map cannot represent this architecture.

This does not mean that territory has ceased to matter. It means that territory has become only one layer of a more complicated political topology. Alongside geographical territories there are territories of information, attention, memory, expectation, technological standards, economic rhythms, and historical legitimacy. A population can lose control over its geographical space while retaining a strong cultural code; conversely, it can preserve formal territorial sovereignty while becoming increasingly dependent upon temporal regimes produced elsewhere.

The geopolitical question therefore acquires another dimension. It is no

longer sufficient to ask who controls the territory. We must also ask **who determines the time in which the territory is experienced.**

Jean Baudrillard offers an unusually productive point of departure. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he writes that “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). The proposition is usually understood as a statement about simulation and the replacement of reality by models. Yet its geopolitical implications are broader. If the model precedes the territory, then power no longer depends exclusively upon controlling material space. It also depends upon controlling the codes through which space, history, identity, and sequence are interpreted.

The present article proposes that **time has become one of those codes.**

The claim is not that time has suddenly become political. Time has always been political. Calendars, working hours, school years, electoral terms, religious observances, time zones, historical periodization, and institutional schedules have long regulated collective existence. The literature on chronopolitics has demonstrated this in considerable detail, distinguishing between the time of

politics, the politics of time, and the politicization of time.

The argument developed here goes one step further. The twenty-first century is turning the cultural code itself into an infrastructure for organizing competing temporal regimes. The cultural question is consequently no longer restricted to *Who are we?* It increasingly includes a more fundamental question: *What time do we live in?*

What counts as the past? What constitutes the present? Which future is desirable? How quickly should transformation occur? What rhythms are considered natural? Which forms of delay are treated as pathological? Who is permitted to define what is “modern,” “backward,” “urgent,” or “inevitable”?

These questions lead directly to the problem of Temporal Geopolitics.

■ FROM GEOPOLITICS TO TEMPORAL GEOPOLITICS

The contemporary literature on chronopolitics provides the necessary starting point. Chronopolitics examines the political organization of time, the temporal rhythms of political institutions, and the use of temporal distinctions as instruments of power. Esposito and Becker's formulation is particular-

ly useful because it shows that political systems do not merely operate within time; they actively produce and regulate temporal relations.

Yet a specifically geopolitical question remains. What happens when different temporal regimes encounter one another as competing formations of power?

A temporal regime can include and exclude. It can establish a centre and a periphery. It can classify populations as advanced or backward, innovative or obsolete, future-oriented or trapped in the past. It can determine how quickly institutions are expected to respond, how long citizens are expected to wait, how far into the future organizations are capable of planning, and which historical events remain politically active.

Temporal structures therefore acquire properties traditionally associated with territory.

This is the specific sense in which the present article employs the term **Temporal Geopolitics**. The concept refers to the study of how collectively organized temporal structures become objects and instruments of geopolitical power, and how cultural codes produce, protect, export, impose, or resist these temporal structures. The distinction from chronopolitics matters.

Chronopolitics asks how time becomes political. Temporal Geopolitics asks what occurs when multiple temporalities become geopolitically consequential because they are forced into contact, competition, synchronization, or hierarchy.

The novelty proposed here does not consist in claiming terminological priority. Nor does it consist simply in adding the word “time” to geopolitics. Existing scholarship has already demonstrated that temporality is fundamental to political power. The more specific proposition is that temporal organization can itself function as a geopolitical domain, while cultural codes provide one of the principal infrastructures through which temporal sovereignty is produced and contested.

The map, in this formulation, does not disappear, it acquires another dimension.

CULTURAL CODE: THE HIDDEN ARCHITECTURE OF TIME

The cultural code is conventionally associated with values, symbols, rituals, language, collective memory, narratives, and patterns of interpretation. Such approaches remain indispensable. Yet they tend to emphasize the question of identity: who belongs to a collective, what that collective

believes, and how it distinguishes itself from others.

A cultural code does something more fundamental. It tells a society when it is.

Every culture constructs relationships between past, present, and future. It determines which memories remain active, which events are allowed to become historical, which ancestors continue to possess authority, which futures appear desirable, and which forms of change are regarded as legitimate. It decides whether the present should be interpreted as culmination, crisis, transition, decline, restoration, or beginning.

A national myth is temporal because it organizes a sequence. A religious tradition is temporal because it connects ordinary existence to sacred origins and anticipated endings. Revolutionary ideology is temporal because it interprets the present as a transitional stage. Conservatism privileges continuity. Modernization theory constructs societies along a developmental sequence. Digital culture privileges immediacy and continuous updating.

The cultural code therefore functions as a temporal machine.

Baudrillard's *America* offers an unusually sharp illustration. America,

he writes, is “the original version of modernity,” while other societies become its translated or mediated versions; America “lives in a perpetual present” (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 76). The significance of this observation extends beyond national character. Baudrillard is describing a particular temporal regime: one in which origins become less important than immediacy, continuity gives way to renewal, and historical depth becomes an obstacle to permanent movement.

His observation that “driving is a spectacular form of amnesia” (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 9) is equally revealing. Movement does not necessarily intensify historical consciousness. Under certain conditions, movement becomes a technique for eliminating the landscape of what has just been left behind.

Culture, in other words, does not merely give meaning to time, it organizes the experience of time itself.

BAUDRILLARD AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HISTORICAL SYNCHRONY

Baudrillard's later work makes the temporal problem considerably more radical. The issue is not simply that contemporary societies have become faster. It is that the acceleration of

circulation threatens the structures through which events acquire duration, sequence, and historical meaning.

In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard writes:

“No human language can withstand the speed of light. No event can withstand being beamed across the whole planet. No meaning can withstand acceleration. No history can withstand...” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2)

The unfinished character of the sentence is almost more important than its completion. Something has happened to the possibility of historical completion itself.

An event can now become globally simultaneous before it has become locally meaningful. Everything arrives at once. The past becomes archived information. The future becomes ‘forecast’. The present becomes an interface through which both circulate.

Baudrillard's claim that “history, meaning and progress are no longer able to reach their escape velocity” is therefore not merely an observation about media culture (1994, p. 4). It suggests that acceleration can flatten historical difference.

And yet this flattening produces an extraordinary paradox. The more the world becomes synchronized

technologically, the more temporal differences between societies can become politically visible.

Everyone receives the same event. Not everyone places it in the same historical sequence.

Everyone encounters the future. Not everyone imagines the same future.

Everyone experiences acceleration. Not everyone possesses the same ability to control its rhythm.

Global simultaneity therefore does not eliminate temporal difference. It makes temporal difference confrontational.

■ TEMPORAL TERRITORY

A temporal territory is a social field within which a particular relationship between past, present, and future becomes sufficiently stable to organize collective action.

Unlike geographical territory, it has no fixed coordinates. It is constituted by calendars, historical narratives, rituals, institutional rhythms, technological infrastructures, expectations, and patterns of attention.

This explains why temporal territories can survive geographical displacement. Diasporic communities, religious traditions, professional communities, and transnational organizations may be distributed across multiple countries

while preserving shared temporal structures. A geographical territory can fragment while a temporal territory remains intact.

The reverse is equally important. Population may remain within the same geographical territory while its temporal environment is radically transformed.

Digital platforms provide an obvious example. The user enters not simply a new informational space but a new rhythm of existence. Notifications, continuous updates, recommendation systems, real-time metrics, and endlessly replenished feeds privilege immediacy. The distinction between “now” and “later” becomes operational rather than experiential.

The platform does not simply distribute information.

It distributes attention across time.

A new territorial layer therefore emerges over the geographical one. The state retains its territory, but the platform establishes a competing temporal environment within it. This is the beginning of Temporal Geopolitics.

■ TEMPORAL BORDERS

If temporal territories exist, then temporal borders must also exist. A temporal border separates incompatible regimes of sequence, rhythm,

and expectation. It does not necessarily stop physical movement. Instead, it determines whether different populations are permitted to appear as contemporary.

Modern political language is filled with temporal borders. Developed and developing. Modern and traditional. Innovative and backward. Future-oriented and obsolete. Fast and slow.

These distinctions appear descriptive. They are actually hierarchical.

To define a society as “behind” is to place it in a subordinate temporal position. To describe another society as the embodiment of the future is to claim authority over the direction of historical development.

This logic has deep roots in modernity. Johannes Fabian's concept of the “denial of coevalness” demonstrated how supposedly scientific representations of other societies could place them into a different temporal location, transforming cultural difference into temporal distance.

The geopolitical consequence is substantial. If one society can define itself as the future, another can be defined as its past. The temporal map is already a map of power.

Case I: The Global Economy and the Power of Tempo

The global economy offers perhaps the clearest example of temporal geopolitics without territorial conquest.

Financial markets operate across time zones. Supply chains distribute production according to differences in labour costs, availability, logistics, and working hours. Digital commerce expects immediate response. Organizations increasingly treat delay as inefficiency. The global economy therefore does not merely connect territories. It attempts to synchronize them. But synchronization is never neutral. The actor capable of establishing the rhythm possesses an advantage over the actor who must adapt.

This is where Paul Virilio's analysis of speed becomes important. Modern power is not simply the ability to occupy space; it increasingly involves the ability to control the velocity at which events occur. Hartmut Rosa's analysis of social acceleration similarly demonstrates that modernization transforms the rhythms and expectations through which social life is organized. Baudrillard adds the necessary paradox. “Every acceleration produces an equivalent or even greater mass,” he writes; “every mobilization gives rise to an equal or greater immobility” (*Cool Memories*). Acceleration does not simply eliminate inertia. It can produce

new forms of it. The global economy illustrates this contradiction everywhere. A company may communicate instantly while becoming less capable of long-term planning. A worker may be connected to a global market while having less control over the rhythm of work. A consumer may receive goods almost immediately while becoming trapped in an endless cycle of anticipation.

The result is a peculiar form of dependence. A territory can become economically integrated while becoming temporally subordinate. This is temporal colonization without territorial occupation.

Case II: The Platform and the Permanent Present

The digital platform represents a more intimate form of temporal power. Earlier media systems imposed relatively stable temporal structures: editions, broadcasts, programmes, publishing cycles, schedules. The platform replaces these with continuous circulation. The feed does not end.

There is always another message, another image, another notification, another recommendation. The present constantly reproduces itself. The consequence is a new temporal regime of permanent imminence.

Something is always about to happen. The platform therefore does not merely control information. It controls the transition between what has happened, what is happening, and what might happen next.

Here Baudrillard's concept of simulation becomes especially useful. Simulation is not simply an imitation of reality. It is "a generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). Applied to temporality, this means that events increasingly appear within systems of circulation before they acquire independent historical duration.

The event arrives already formatted as content. The present arrives already prepared for replacement.

The user scrolls backward into the past and forward into anticipated content without leaving the same interface. Chronology becomes subordinate to circulation. The platform consequently establishes a temporal territory whose border is not geography. Its border is attention.

This is geopolitically significant because these temporal infrastructures operate across national borders while remaining only partially subject to the temporal institutions of the societies in which they function. A state may regulate territory. It cannot

automatically regulate the rhythm of attention within that territory.

Case III: Japan and the Coexistence of Temporal Worlds

Japan offers a particularly revealing case because it demonstrates that temporal geopolitics does not require a conflict between different countries. Different temporal regimes can coexist within the same civilization.

Modern Japan is often associated with technological sophistication, industrial discipline, punctuality, high-speed transportation, and intense organizational efficiency. Yet these features coexist with other temporal structures: seasonal cycles, ritual calendars, long historical continuity, inherited forms, generational transmission, and a strong cultural sensitivity to the passage and transience of time.

The significance of this coexistence is not that Japan represents “tradition versus modernity.” Such a formulation is too simple. The more interesting phenomenon is the ability of different temporal regimes to remain simultaneously operative.

The high-speed train and the seasonal festival do not belong to the same temporal logic. The automated convenience store and the inherited ritual do not measure time in the same

way. The technological future and the cultural memory of impermanence are not simply opposites. They can coexist within the same social order.

This makes Japan analytically valuable for Temporal Geopolitics because it demonstrates that temporal sovereignty does not necessarily mean choosing one temporal regime and eliminating all others. It may instead mean maintaining the ability to coordinate multiple temporalities without allowing one of them to become universally dominant. The question is therefore not whether a society is modern or traditional. The question is whether it can determine how different temporal regimes coexist. This is a much more sophisticated conception of sovereignty. It also reveals a weakness in many theories of modernization. If modernization is interpreted as movement from an earlier time toward a universal future, then coexistence appears as contradiction. From the perspective of Temporal Geopolitics, coexistence can instead be a form of temporal complexity — and therefore a potential source of autonomy.

Case IV: Artificial Intelligence and the Pre-Occupation of the Future

Artificial intelligence introduces a still more radical temporal problem

because it does not merely accelerate the present. It increasingly attempts to anticipate and pre-structure the future.

Predictive systems estimate future behaviour. Recommendation systems anticipate preferences. Generative systems produce texts, images, strategies, designs, and scenarios before the human actor has fully formulated them. Organizations use AI to model demand, risk, markets, security, and possible decisions.

The significance of AI therefore cannot be reduced to automation. Its deeper geopolitical significance lies in the production of anticipated futures.

Baudrillard's concept of simulation becomes relevant again. If models can generate representations of what has not yet occurred, then the future can become hyperreal before it becomes real. Institutions may begin acting according to predicted futures, thereby transforming the prediction into one of the conditions of its own realization. The central geopolitical question becomes: **Whose model of the future is being used?**

If one technological infrastructure becomes dominant in forecasting behaviour, allocating resources, identifying risks, or defining likely scenarios, then its assumptions about the future

can become embedded in institutional action.

The future is no longer merely awaited. It is increasingly **preformatted**. This introduces a new dimension of temporal sovereignty.

A society may retain the ability to choose among political alternatives while losing the ability to imagine alternatives outside the predictive architectures through which those choices are presented.

The most consequential struggle over AI may therefore not concern whether machines become more intelligent than humans. It may concern **who gets to model tomorrow.**

■ TEMPORAL SOVEREIGNTY

The concept of temporal sovereignty follows from these cases.

Territorial sovereignty traditionally refers to the authority to regulate what occurs within a geographical domain. Temporal sovereignty refers to the capacity of a collective to determine, protect, and reproduce its own temporal organization. This sovereignty has several dimensions.

The first is **memory sovereignty**: the capacity to determine which elements of the past remain politically and culturally active.

The second is **rhythmic sovereignty**: the capacity to regulate the rhythms of labour, education, communication, ritual, and everyday life.

The third is **anticipatory sovereignty**: the capacity to formulate expectations about the future rather than simply importing externally produced futures.

The fourth is **synchronization sovereignty**: the capacity to determine with whom, and according to whose rhythm, a society synchronizes.

The fifth is **interpretive sovereignty**: the capacity to determine whether an event represents continuity, rupture, crisis, decline, restoration, or transformation.

These dimensions reinforce one another. A society that loses control over its historical narrative may gradually lose the ability to define its political future. A society dependent upon external economic rhythms may become unable to determine its own institutional tempo. A population whose attention is continuously organized by external platforms may find it increasingly difficult to reproduce slower cultural rhythms of reflection and transmission. Temporal sovereignty is therefore not a poetic metaphor for independence. It is the condition of political autonomy.

■ TEMPORAL COLONIZATION

Colonialism traditionally involved the occupation of territory, extraction of resources, reorganization of labour, and imposition of institutions. Temporal colonization operates differently.

It reorganizes the sequence through which a society understands its own existence.

The colonized society is encouraged to perceive itself as late, incomplete, backward, transitional, or obsolete. Its past becomes primitive; its present becomes deficient; its future becomes an imitation of another society's present.

This is why modernization can function as a temporal hierarchy.

You are here. They are there. You must become what they already are. The future has already been occupied.

Temporal colonization therefore differs from ordinary cultural influence. Cultural exchange allows several codes to coexist. Temporal colonization establishes one temporal code as universal and transforms alternative temporalities into evidence of deficiency.

The most powerful temporal colonizer is not necessarily the society that says, "Become like us." It is the one that succeeds in making another society believe:

There is no... alternative future?

■ TEMPORAL INSURGENCY

If temporal colonization is possible, temporal resistance must also be possible.

A temporal insurgency occurs when a collective refuses the dominant organization of past, present, and future. It may preserve a memory that an official system seeks to render obsolete. It may deliberately slow a process presented as inevitable. It may refuse the technological demand for permanent immediacy. It may maintain a ritual calendar, a language, a craft, a social practice, or an institutional rhythm that does not conform to the dominant tempo.

Temporal insurgency therefore does not always look like political opposition. Sometimes it looks like refusal to synchronize. This may be one of the most important political forms of the coming decades. If contemporary power increasingly operates through synchronization, then desynchronization can become a form of resistance.

- To refuse acceleration is political.
- To refuse compulsory forgetting is political.
- To refuse a prescribed future is political.
- To maintain an alternative rhythm is to preserve an alternative form of sovereignty.

■ THE GREAT TEMPORAL FRAGMENTATION

This brings us to the paradox at the centre of globalization.

We assumed that globalization would gradually eliminate cultural differences. Global markets, mass communication, technological convergence, migration, and international institutions seemed to point toward a common world.

However, globalization may have produced something very different. It has not eliminated temporal difference. It has placed different temporalities into permanent proximity.

A global financial market operates according to one rhythm; a family according to another. A religious community may organize life according to a sacred calendar while its members work according to a corporate schedule and consume media according to the uninterrupted rhythm of the platform. A national institution may plan in years while an algorithm operates in milliseconds. A cultural tradition may transmit knowledge across generations while an AI system produces a replacement within seconds.

The result is neither complete synchronization nor complete fragmentation. It is simultaneous asynchrony. Everyone is connected. Everyone is not

living in the same time. This may be one of the defining contradictions of the twenty-first century.

■ THE POLITICS OF ACCELERATION

Modernity has repeatedly associated speed with progress.

The faster society becomes, the more advanced it is assumed to be. Slow institutions appear inefficient; rapid innovation appears desirable; immediate communication appears superior to delayed communication. But speed is a political resource. The ability to force another actor to respond quickly is itself a form of power.

A market can create urgency. A media cycle can demand immediate reaction. A platform can reward instantaneous participation. An algorithm can reduce the time available for reflection. A crisis can compress decision-making until deliberation itself becomes impossible. The question therefore changes.

It is no longer simply: **Who possesses more power?**

It shifts into: **Who determines the tempo at which the other actor must decide?**

This is where Baudrillard's paradox becomes strategically useful. If acceleration produces its own forms of inertia, then increasing speed cannot be treated as a simple increase in freedom.

A society that is permanently reacting may lose the capacity to initiate. An institution that is continuously updating may lose the capacity to remember. An individual exposed to uninterrupted novelty may lose the capacity to distinguish transformation from repetition.

The fastest actor is therefore not necessarily the most sovereign. Sovereignty may belong instead to the actor capable of deciding when not to accelerate.

■ THE END OF THE FUTURE

The deepest temporal conflict concerns not the past but the future.

Modern political systems have traditionally justified themselves through futurity. Progress, development, modernization, revolution, emancipation, and technological improvement all presupposed that the future would be meaningfully different from the present. Baudrillard questions precisely this assumption. "We are, then, unable to dream of a past or future state of things," he writes. Things have become "de-finitive"—deprived of their end (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 120).

The paradox is unmistakable. The contemporary world is obsessed with the future — AI, innovation, longevity, space exploration, predictive analytics, technological singularity — while often

becoming less capable of imagining genuinely different futures.

There is more prediction but perhaps less futurity. More scenarios but fewer horizons. More innovation but less transformation.

The future increasingly appears as a sequence of upgraded versions of the present. This is why the cultural code becomes strategically important again. A cultural code does not merely preserve the past. It determines whether a society can imagine a future that is not simply the present accelerated.

Temporal sovereignty therefore requires the ability to produce futures that are not already contained within the dominant temporal model.

■ FROM CULTURAL DIFFERENCE TO TEMPORAL DIFFERENCE

We are ready now to formulate the central conceptual reversal. For much of the twentieth century, globalization was interpreted as a process that would reduce cultural difference. Traditional identities would weaken, consumption would standardize, communication would converge, and modernization would gradually produce similar institutions.

But if cultural codes are temporal infrastructures, globalization has produced another effect.

It has made temporal differences politically visible.

The opposition between traditional and modern is partly a disagreement about legitimate time.

The opposition between conservative and progressive is explicitly temporal.

The conflict between technological acceleration and cultural preservation is temporal.

The conflict between economic growth and ecological limitation is temporal.

The conflict between institutional deliberation and algorithmic immediacy is temporal.

The conflict between human anticipation and machine prediction is temporal.

What appear to be separate political problems may therefore be manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon: competing answers to the question of which temporal order should organize collective reality.

The decisive cultural difference may no longer be what people believe. It may be how they experience time.

■ THE BAUDRILLARDIAN REVERSAL

At this point Baudrillard allows us to reverse the usual perspective once more. We normally imagine

that societies move through time. But perhaps, under contemporary conditions, **time moves through societies.**

Technologies arrive with their own rhythms. Markets impose their cycles. Platforms reorganize attention. Political narratives reactivate historical periods. Algorithms generate anticipated futures. Global infrastructures synchronize distant populations.

The individual no longer simply inhabits chronological time. The individual is inserted into several temporal systems simultaneously.

This is one of the deepest implications of Baudrillard's work. The instability of distinctions between reality and representation, event and circulation, origin and model, movement and inertia eventually becomes an instability in the experience of time itself.

The present becomes difficult to locate because it is continuously replaced. The future seems difficult to visualize because it is continuously simulated. The past is difficult to stabilize because it is continuously reformatted.

The contemporary world does not suffer from a shortage of time, it suffers from an **excess of competing temporalities.**

■ THE NEW BATTLEFIELD

If this argument is correct, geopolitical competition will increasingly involve questions that cannot be answered by a conventional map.

Who determines the rhythm of technological adoption?

Who controls the temporal architecture of digital attention?

Who determines how quickly an institution must respond?

Who defines historical legitimacy?

Who establishes the tempo of economic integration?

Who has the power to impose urgency?

Who controls predictive infrastructures?

Who defines which future is treated as inevitable?

Who can force another society to synchronize?

And, perhaps most importantly:

Who retains the right to live in a different time?

These questions transform the meaning of geopolitical power. A state may possess territorial sovereignty while losing temporal sovereignty.

A society may possess political independence while importing its future from elsewhere. A culture may preserve its language while losing control over the rhythms through which that language is transmitted.

An organization may possess formal autonomy while being unable to determine the tempo of its own decisions. Territory remains. But territory alone no longer explains sovereignty.

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK FOR TEMPORAL GEOPOLITICS

The framework proposed here can be operationalized through five analytical categories.

Temporal Territory

A relatively stable temporal environment within which a collective organizes its relationship to past, present, and future. The central research question is: What temporal regime does this collective inhabit?

Temporal Border

A boundary separating incompatible temporal regimes through differences in historical sequence, rhythm, expectation, or definitions of development.

The research question becomes: Where does temporal incompatibility become politically consequential?

Temporal Sovereignty

The capacity of a collective to determine its own rhythms, historical sequence, anticipatory horizons, and relations of synchronization.

The question is: Who has the power to determine when — and according to whose rhythm?

Temporal Colonization

The imposition of an external temporal regime that defines another society as backward, late, obsolete, or incomplete and prescribes the future toward which it should move.

The question is: Whose future becomes the universal model?

Temporal Insurgency

The deliberate preservation or production of alternative rhythms, memories, sequences, and futures in resistance to a dominant temporal regime.

The question is: How can temporal difference itself become a form of resistance?

These categories make temporality empirically researchable. They can be applied to institutions, technologies, markets, political narratives, educational systems, media environments, religious practices, organizational cultures, and international relations.

Temporal Geopolitics is therefore not intended as a metaphorical extension of geopolitics. It is intended as an analytical framework.

TEMPORAL GEOPOLITICS AS A RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The concept opens several directions for future research.

The first concerns **digital temporal**

infrastructures. Platforms should be analysed not only according to what information they distribute, but according to how they allocate attention, compress intervals, and construct the experience of the present.

The second concerns **global economic synchronization.** Financial markets, supply chains, labour systems, logistics, and corporate organizations can be examined as mechanisms for establishing transnational rhythms and distributing temporal dependence.

The third concerns **civilizational temporal plurality.** Japan offers one particularly interesting case because highly accelerated technological and economic systems coexist with ritual, seasonal, historical, and generational temporal structures. Similar research could compare societies in which multiple temporal regimes coexist without necessarily collapsing into a single developmental sequence.

The fourth concerns **artificial intelligence and futurity.** AI systems can be examined as infrastructures for modelling, narrowing, accelerating, and pre-formatting possible futures.

The fifth concerns **temporal inequality.** Just as geopolitical systems distribute geographical space unequally, temporal systems distribute waiting, urgency, leisure, anticipation, and

decision-making capacity unequally. Some actors can compel others to wait; others must respond immediately. Some institutions can plan across decades; others are trapped in short-term cycles.

The sixth concerns **institutional desynchronization.** Governments, corporations, universities, media organizations, families, and technological systems may operate according to incompatible temporal rhythms. Some contemporary crises may therefore be interpreted not as failures of information or coordination but as failures of temporal synchronization.

The seventh concerns **alternative futurity.** The most fundamental question may be whether cultural codes retain the capacity to generate futures that are not simply accelerated versions of the dominant present.

These directions suggest that Temporal Geopolitics could become a genuinely interdisciplinary field connecting political geography, cultural anthropology, sociology of time, media studies, organization theory, futures studies, technology studies, and the philosophy of simulation.

Its object would be neither “time” nor “geopolitics” in isolation. Its object would be the **geopolitical organization of collective time.**

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE WARS WILL BE WARS FOR TIME

The geopolitical imagination has spent centuries drawing lines across the surface of the Earth.

The next step might be to understand the lines being set across time.

A temporal border cannot be seen on a satellite image. A temporal territory has no coordinates. Temporal sovereignty cannot be measured simply by military capacity. Yet these structures increasingly determine how populations interpret events, organize collective action, remember the past, and imagine the future.

The core issue of this article may therefore be stated with some simplicity:

The cultural code is becoming a mechanism not merely for organizing identity, but for organizing time.

This changes the meaning of cultural difference. We thought globalization was destroying cultural differences. In fact, it is making temporal differences politically decisive.

The more tightly the world becomes synchronized technologically and economically, the more consequential differences in memory, rhythm, anticipation, and historical sequence become. Globalization does not necessarily produce one time. It produces

a world in which multiple temporalities are forced into permanent proximity.

That proximity generates friction.

The past becomes a geopolitical resource since it legitimizes the present. The present turns into the geopolitical resource due to control over attention determines visibility. Speed becomes a geopolitical resource because the ability to impose urgency can deprive another actor of the capacity to deliberate. The future shifts into a geopolitical resource because whoever defines what is inevitable acquires power over what others consider possible.

Baudrillard's America, living in a perpetual present; his map that precedes the territory; his acceleration that absorbs meaning; his history that cannot reach escape velocity — these are not merely diagnoses of postmodern culture. They describe the conditions under which contemporary power increasingly operates. The decisive geopolitical resource may therefore no longer be simply the capacity to occupy more territory.

It may be the capacity to determine the temporal conditions under which territory, identity, and political action become meaningful.

Temporal Geopolitics begins from precisely this proposition.

It asks us to study not only who controls land, borders, resources, infrastructures, and information, but who controls sequence, rhythm, memory, anticipation, synchronization, and futurity.

A civilization occupies two territories. One is visible on the map. The other exists in time.

And the wars over the second territory have already taken place.

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BAUDRILLARD AND THE SITUATIONISTS

EDITORIAL NOTE

This article reproduces a chapter from Alan N. Shapiro's book *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction: Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism* (transcript Verlag, 2024, pp. 161–185). The original text has been preserved, with footnotes renumbered for standalone publication.





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■ INTRODUCTION

First, I will say something about the similarities and differences between the Situationist critical social theory of advanced or hyper-capitalism and consumerist media culture – the theory of “the society of the spectacle” – which is generally considered to be a “modernist” cultural theory, and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of image, media and consumer culture – the theory of simulation, simulacra, virtuality, hyperreality, Integral Reality, and “the models and codes precede the real” – which is considered to be a “postmodernist” cultural theory.

What additionally interests me about Baudrillard –perhaps more than his early critical theory of society – which is a variant of the sociological analysis of the questionable “reality” of “the social” which he himself self-critically distanced himself from in the 1978 text *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or the End of the Social*¹ – are the implications for how resistance and change and transformation can come about starting from his theory of objects, from his viewpoint of “taking the side of objects.”² How might this more advanced perspective – the

1 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or the End of the Social*.

2 On “taking the side of objects,” see, for example: Jean Baudrillard, “The Object” in *Passwords*; Op. cit.; pp.1-6, and Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*.

vantage point of the root of the chestnut tree in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *La nausée* (an important reference for Baudrillard made in the first chapter on "Objects" of his book *Passwords*) – into strategies of resistance? How can the perspective of passionate, semi-living, active, wily, autonomous objects develop into a program for change? How can Baudrillard's sense of the world as an enigmatic "radical illusion"³ contribute to activist practices for transforming the dominant capitalist society and culture?

Terms like "advanced capitalism," "dominant capitalist society," and "critical theory of society" are my terms. They are commonly employed in post-Marxist cultural theory discourse (although I am mainly an anarchist!). They were not used by Baudrillard (he might have said "hyper-capitalism"). Baudrillard's early books – like *The System of Objects*, *The Consumer Society*, and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* – can be described as expressing a critical theory of society.⁴ After 1978 – for example, in *Fatal Strategies* – he

calls his own work a "fatal theory."⁵

■ "TAKING THE SIDE OF OBJECTS" AND THE SITUATIONISTS

One could say that there are two main ideas in post-1978 Baudrillard. First, there is the idea of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality, that the media-and-image-dominated culture of "late capitalism" (not Baudrillard's term) is a very awful way of life, that so-called "reality" has disappeared under the weight of rhetorical images and rhetorical discourse, that the very idea of "reality" has generated "too much reality" and led intrinsically to the reign of the "self-referential signifiers."

Many people know only this idea of Baudrillard. It was popularized by the Wachowski Brothers in the 1999 blockbuster science fiction film *The Matrix*. The theory of simulation and hyperreality was a sort of prophecy. It has "come true" – especially in the age of postfactual, televisual, and evil Trump as President. This would establish Baudrillard's genius.⁶

3 On the world itself as an enigmatic, radical illusion, see, for example: Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, and Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*.

4 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*; Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*; Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

5 Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (trans. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski) (Semiotext(e), 1983).

6 Alan N. Shapiro, "Baudrillard and Trump: The Fifth Order of Simulacra" <http://www.alan-shapiro.com/more-on-baudrillard-and-trump-by-alan-n-shapiro/>; Alan N. Shapiro, "Baudrillard and Trump: Simulation and Object-Orientation, Not True and False" <http://www.alan-shapiro.com/baudrillard-and-trump-simulation-and-object-orientation-not-true-and-false/>

The second main idea in late Baudrillard is that we might be able to do something about it. We might be able to *changer le monde*, “change the world,” in an act of “reversibility,” by “taking the side of objects.” This second idea is less well known – probably because it is expressed by Baudrillard abstractly and theoretically, and it is underdeveloped. My goal is to develop it further. This essay is a step in that direction.

As part of that project, I will demonstrate connections between Baudrillard’s idea of “taking the side of objects” and the work of another group of thinkers and activists called the Situationists, in the context of the intellectual history of the 1950s to 1970s. I will explore how the forms and strategies of “taking the side of objects” resistance are already present in Situationist practices. But first I will say something about the respective media theories of “the spectacle” (the Situationists) and “the simulacra” (Baudrillard).

At the end of the essay, I will connect Baudrillard’s idea of “taking the side of objects” to some ideas of the mid-twentieth century French

existentialists Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*Nausea*), and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*).⁷

My main thesis is that there is an important area of intersection or convergence to be explored and further developed between Baudrillard’s idea about “the resistance of objects” and seven historical or contemporary Situationist activist practices:

- (1) Wandering (le dérive)
- (2) Psycho-geography
- (3) The diverting of technologies (le détournement)
- (4) The making or creating or construction of situations
- (5) A certain minority tendency within art which can be called “post-art” or “the radical illusion beyond art”
- (6) Neo-Situationism in the field of advanced digital technologies
- (7) Urban and street art activism

During the 1960s, Jean Baudrillard was close to the Situationists, both intellectually and politically. The Situationists were an artistic and political movement active and prominent in Paris, and in other French cities like

www.alan-shapiro.com/baudrillard-and-trump-simulation-and-object-orientation-not-true-and-false-by-alan-n-shapiro/

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Strasbourg, in major European cities like Amsterdam and London, and in many towns of Italy.⁸ They were the inheritors of Dadaism and surrealism and Lettrism.⁹ The Situationists advocated and strove towards *le dépassement de l'art*: the going beyond or realization or suppression of art, its generalized transference or blossoming into an active and transformative critique of everyday life in the advanced capitalist society.

Situationist ideas and practices were massively influential and inspiring during the student-worker near revolution in France in May-June 1968, on the Metropolitan Indians and Autonomist movement in Italy of the late 1970s, and in the San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley Bay Area in the United States.¹⁰ Situationism produced works of radical utopian architecture like Constant Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon project, a science fictional worldwide city of the future.¹¹ The Situationists

elaborated the idea of "unitary urbanism," the dream and design of a city of endlessly enchanting and participatory nonfunctionalist situations, among which the creative and passionate post-capitalist citizens would experientially drift.¹²

The Situationists produced two major theoretical texts, both of which were published in 1967, one year before the publication of Baudrillard's first major work *The System of Objects*. These were *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by Raoul Vaneigem and *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord.¹³

Vaneigem's work is a poetic, ludic, passionate, existentialist, and utopian text celebrating the potential qualitative richness of life which might become possible when the freedom of the individual gets expressed through the construction of situations: making of a "unitary ambience" and "the game of events."

The Society of the Spectacle is a book which has had a widespread impact since the 1960s on critical social theory, media theory, new media art, video

8 Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog, 2006).

9 *Lettrismo e Situazionismo: incontri a Livorno* (Livorno: Edizioni Peccolo Livorno, 2006).

10 René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement* (trans. Richard Parry and Helene Potter) (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992); Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro. 1968-1977: la grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Feltrinelli, 2015); Ken Knabb, *Collected Skirmishes* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1997).

11 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge,

MA: The MIT Press, 1998).

12 "Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism," in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); pp.86-89.

13 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith) (Rebel Press, 2001); Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

art, underground music, independent cinema, and social-political activism.¹⁴ The book develops a major analysis of the advent of the post-World War II advanced capitalist society: the ubiquity of the mass media, high-tech, the culture of images, television, movies, advertising, computers, consumerism, marketing, organized leisure, shopping malls, cybernetics, the obsession of information, modern transportation, telecom networks, and the tourist industry. The book's main thesis is that the citizen of the media culture is in a fundamental situation of spectatorship and passivity with respect to the power of the screen and the endless panoply of consumer objects.

The Society of the Spectacle is very close in spirit, style, terminology, and subject-matter to the first three published books of the young sociol-

ogist Jean Baudrillard: *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society* (1970), and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972). The theory of the spectacle of Guy Debord and the semiotics of consumer culture of the early Baudrillard are twin theories. In the second volume of his notebooks or memoirs *Cool Memories II*, published in 1990, Baudrillard writes:

Pataphysician at twenty – Situationist at thirty – utopian at forty – transversal at fifty – viral and metaleptic at sixty – that is my whole history.¹⁵

"I was very, very attracted by Situationism," he told interviewer Judith Williamson in 1989.¹⁶ He seems to be stating that he was a Situationist in 1959 – already before the sixties. Two years after the founding of the Situationist International movement (sometimes called the SI), which happened in 1957. Nine years before *The System of Objects*.

■ BAUDRILLARD'S PARADIGM SHIFT

After *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), there begins a paradigm

14 Jeremy Smith, "Society of the Spectacle," in *The Nation*, 7 February 2002; Neil Nehring, "The Situationist International in American Hardcore Punk, 1982–2002," in *Popular Music & Society*, December 2006; John Harris, "Guy Debord Predicted Our Distracted Society," in *The Guardian*, 20 March 2012; Robert Zaretsky, "Trump and the 'Society of the Spectacle,'" in *The New York Times*, 20 February 2017. The philosopher Jacques Derrida said: "Debord's work is read now more than when he was alive... In France he's read as presenting a precise critique and political analysis of the media, of the becoming-spectacle, the exploitation of the 'show' in politics and in the media, television." Jacques Derrida, Kirby Dick, and Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film* (Manchester University Press, 2005).

15 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II: 1987–1990* (Paris: Galilée, 1990); p.131.

16 Judith Williamson, "An Interview with Jean Baudrillard," *Block*, 1989; p.18.

shift in Baudrillard's intellectual worldview or system of thought. The concept of simulation already appears briefly in *The Consumer Society*, but the deconstruction of "the social" as a legitimate epistemological concept, or object of knowledge-inquiry, for the social sciences first appears in 1978 with *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. The iconic work *Simulacra and Simulation*, which literally appears as a hollowed-out book in the SF film *The Matrix*, comes in 1981. From this point on in his career, Baudrillard explicitly conceptualizes and draws attention to a highly significant distinction between his own position about contemporary media culture and what he summarizes as his view of what is the position of the Situationists, or Debord's concept of the spectacle. In *The Perfect Crime* (1995), Baudrillard writes:

Virtuality is different from the spectacle, which still left room for a critical consciousness and demystification. The abstraction of the "spectacle" was never irrevocable, even for the Situationists. Whereas unconditional realization is irrevocable. We are no longer either alienated or dispossessed: we are in possession of all the information. We are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the

course of that performance. Whereas we could face up to the unreality of the world as a spectacle, we are defenseless before the extreme reality of this world – before this virtual perfection. We are, in fact, beyond all dis-alienation. This is the new form of terror, by comparison with which the horrors of alienation were very small beer.¹⁷

To summarize: the invocation of typical post-1968 neo-Marxist concepts around ideology, attributed to the Situationists: false consciousness/critical consciousness, mystification/demystification, alienation/dis-alienation, unreality/redeemable reality, dispossession, hope, salvation. Allegedly "modernist" neo-Marxism superseded by Baudrillard's "postmodernist" post-Marxism: the murder of reality through too much reality, the Virtual Reality unconditional realization of the world, which is its unconditional simulacrum, the new interactive performance of the integrated spectacle.

The later Guy Debord develops and utilizes the concept of "the integrated spectacle" in his 1988 book *Comments*

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*; Op. cit.; p.27.

on the *Society of the Spectacle*.¹⁸ In his 2004 book, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, Baudrillard elaborates the concept of Integral Reality: “the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent.”¹⁹ It is the project of “realizing the world, of making it become technically, integrally real.”²⁰ This suppression of “the imaginary,” the loss of any imagination of the contingency of the real pushed aside by the realization of Integral Reality (or “the ecstasy of communication”), as characterized by Baudrillard, is very close to the definition that Debord gives in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* of “the final sense of the integrated spectacle,” which is “that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it,” effacing the salutary gap between signifier and signified, the act of total integration steamrolling over aesthetic representation.²¹

In the citation above from *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard “reverse

engineers,” or reconstructs logically, something like the concept of “the integrated spectacle” while elaborating his thought about how the early Debord’s theory of “media culture as spectacle” needs to be revised. “We are no longer spectators,” he writes, “but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance.”²² We are performing actors, integrated into what was the spectacle, and which is now the integrated spectacle.

In his 1990 interview in Australia with Nicholas Zurbrugg, Baudrillard says:

Situationist modes of radicalism have passed into things and into situations. Indeed, there’s no need now for Situationism, Debord, and so on... All of that is out of date. The hyper-critical, radical, individual sensibility no longer exists. Events are the most radical things today. Everything which happens today is radical. There’s a great wealth of radical events, and all one needs to do is to enter its interplay. Nowadays, reality is radical. Reality is Situationist, not us!²³

18 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Malcolm Imrie) (London: Verso, 1998).

19 Jean Baudrillard, “Integral Reality” in *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*; Op. cit.; pp.17-24.

20 Ibid.; p.17.

21 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*; Op. cit.; p.9.

22 Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*; Op. cit.; p.27.

23 Mike Gane, ed., *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* (Routledge, 1993); Op. cit.; p.170.

“Radicalism has passed into events.” (Mike Gane makes that the title of one-fourth of his edited collection of Baudrillard interviews).²⁴ Reality is Situationist, not us. This would be a dimension of the later Baudrillard’s perspective of “taking the side of objects.”

IS BAUDRILLARD FAIR TO THE SITUATIONISTS?

On the surface of things, in one important way of looking at it, Baudrillard’s critique of the Situationists is unfair. For all intents and purposes, the Situationists stopped writing in the early 1970s. At least that is the official narrative or history. Baudrillard “capitalizes” on the formal event of their self-dissolution, and effectively forecloses in advance any possibility of them “catching up with” his post-1978 insights. The twelfth and last issue of the annually published journal *Internationale Situationniste* appeared in 1969. The organizational dissolution of the SI occurred in 1972. In the passages cited above from *The Perfect Crime* and the Zurbrugg interview, Baudrillard allows himself the freedom to have evolved and advanced in the 1970s and beyond, but he does not allow this

to the Situationists. What happened to Situationist theory after 1980 is not well known. This is a subject in the history of ideas that is still open to scholarly research and investigation. My impression is that there was a great deal of Situationist theory developed after 1980 in Italy (Gianfranco Sanguinetti, Mario Perniola), in northern California (Bureau of Public Secrets, Processed World), and in Great Britain (Spectacular Times, Workshop for NonLinear Architecture).²⁵

There is the post-anarchism of Hakim Bey (the Temporary Autonomous Zone).²⁶

There is the French anti-surveillance journal *Tiqqun* (*This Is Not a Program*).²⁷

There are the extensive writings of the British art historian and former member of the SI Timothy J. Clark.²⁸

25 Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State: The Theory and Practice of Terrorism Divulged for the First Time* (trans. Bill Brown) (Aldgate Press, 1982); Mario Perniola, *I situazionisti. Il movimento che ha profetizzato la 'Società dello spettacolo'* (Castelvecchi, 2005); Chris Carlsson, ed., *Bad Attitude: The Processed World Anthology* (Verso, 1990); *Mind Invaders: A Reader in Psychic Warfare, Cultural Sabotage and Semiotic Terrorism* (Serpent’s Tail, 1997).

26 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomedia, 1985); *Tiqqun, Organe de liaison au sein du Parti Imaginaire – Zone d’Opacité Offensive* (Les Belles-Lettres, 2001).

27 *Tiqqun, Kybernetik und Revolte* (trans. Ronald Voullié) (Diaphanes TransPositionen, 2007).

28 Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

24 Ibid.; pp.131-196.

What did Raoul Vaneigem write after 1980? He wrote about 15 books.²⁹

What did Guy Debord write after 1980? There are the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* and his autobiography *Panegyric*.³⁰ In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord writes observations about contemporary media culture very similar to those of the later Baudrillard. Debord, like Baudrillard, questions if negation of the dominant capitalist society via “the critical consciousness of the human subject” is still possible, given the indistinguishability of rebellious gestures or so-called “authentic expressions and experiences” from their commodified and simulated versions. One can contemplate the “recuperation” of rebel style by the advertising industry starting in the 1970s, as documented by Thomas Frank in his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997).³¹

For Debord, the integrated specta-

cle is a new phase of capitalism corresponding to the spectacle’s extension since 1967. The integrated spectacle combines features of Western free-market big corporation capitalism and Eastern state capitalism-slash-communism. The integrated spectacle is the cumulative effect of five principal developments:

- Incessant technological renewal
- Integration of state and economy
- Generalized secrecy
- Unanswerable lies
- Ubiquitous new media to enact an eternal present

Objective historical knowledge disappears, thus paving the way for unlimited falsifications. “Historical evidence which the spectacle does not need to know ceases to be evidence.” “Spectacular power,” writes Debord, “can deny whatever it likes... and change the subject; knowing full well there is no danger of any riposte, in its own space or any other.”³²

29 Raoul Vaneigem, *The Book of Pleasures* (trans. John Fullerton) (Left Bank Books, 1984); Raoul Vaneigem, *A Letter to My Children and the Children of the World to Come* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith) (PM Press, 2018); Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (trans. Randall Cherry and Ian Patterson) (Zone Books, 1998).

30 Guy Debord, *Panegyric* (trans. James Brook and John McHale) (London: Verso, 1991).

31 Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

32 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*; Op. cit.; pp. 11-12, 18-19.

"BAUDRILLARD AND THE SITUATIONISTS" COMMENTATORS DOUGLAS KELLNER AND SADIE PLANT, AND THE TENSION BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY AND FATAL THEORY

There is an extensive secondary literature about the difference between the alleged modernism of Debord and the alleged postmodernism of Baudrillard. Or about the reputed social revolutionary stance of the SI and the supposed "sellout" to the late capitalist culture of simulation of Baudrillard.

Several books by Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, for example *The Postmodern Turn*, are lengthy and detailed elaborations contrasting Debord's belief in modernist values like history, meaning, reality, interpretation, and social change against Baudrillard's so-called nihilistic descent into an alleged postmodernist fatalistic pessimism. Kellner and Best offer informative descriptions of the many ways in which "the Situationist spectacle" has developed further in its newer stages of contemporary American media and political culture.³³ But with respect to Baudrillard, Kellner is

an opponent who does not make the effort to understand the originality and specificity of Baudrillard's positions.

Sadie Plant, in her book *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, is hostile to Baudrillard.³⁴ Plant is a passionate proponent of Situationism. Her belligerent understanding of Baudrillard is reductionist (see Exhibit C below).

Baudrillard's stated critique of the Situationists is reductionist (see Exhibit B below).

Baudrillard, at times, presents his own view, which he contrasts to that of the Situationists, in a self-simplifying or reductionist way (see Exhibit A below).

On both sides of this debate, there is a self-expressed reductionist version of their conceptual differences.

Exhibit A (Baudrillard self-simplifies):

Baudrillard made the bold proclamation in 1983 in *Fatal Strategies* (a book focused in the first of its three parts on gambling, obesity, and hostages as objectively resisting "figures of the trans-political") that he was leaving behind "critical theory"

³³ Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, *The Postmodern Turn* (The Guilford Press, 1997).

³⁴ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*.

in favor of a “fatal theory” (the title of Mike Gane’s book is *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory*³⁵). Yet major aspects of Baudrillard’s later position, as exemplified by the citations zeroing in on the Situationists referenced above, remain a “critical theory of society”: the conceptualization of the objects of the “critique” which are called virtuality, Integral Reality, and the implied “reverse-engineered” concept of the integrated spectacle.

In my view, we need both critical theory (media theory) and fatal theory (“taking the side of objects”) – and the fruitful tension between those two cultural theory concepts.

The articulation of this tension between the two currents of thought is the most interesting area of discourse of Baudrillard’s oeuvre. He often overstates the “death of critique”: for example, in the passage in *The Perfect Crime* which immediately follows his attempted takedown of the Situationists cited above:

In... the golden age of joyful disillusionment, we carried out the critique of all illusions – the metaphysical, the religious and the ideological. Only one remains: the illusion of criticism itself... the critical illusion has devoured itself.³⁶

35 Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory*.

36 Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*; Op. cit.; p.27.

Immediately after this, attempting to provide an example, Baudrillard writes:

The critique of virtual technologies masks the fact that their concept is seeping everywhere into real life in homeopathic doses.³⁷

This is not putting an end to all critique and to all media theory. It is rather seeking out a critical epistemology where the object of the critique is a historical totality, where the virtual is to be deconstructed in and due to its coupling with the myth of the real, not in and due to its alleged betrayal of a supposedly intact real (which would be a mere “liberal” and not a “radical” critique of virtual technologies).

Exhibit B (Baudrillard’s critique of the Situationists is reductionist):

The one-sidedness of the claim by Baudrillard to have left “critical theory” behind, and to have arrived on the new continent of “fatal theory,” is revealed not so much in his direct statements about the end of all critique, but rather in his pinning the label of “critical theorists who still believe in consciousness and the radical subject” onto the Situationists. He claims that

37 Ibid.

their perspective on “the society of the spectacle” contrasts sharply with his own concepts of simulation and hyper-reality, ignoring the fact that significant aspects of the Situationist historical project were radically performative – meaning that they were “ironic” and “fatal” and “taking the side of objects” in the senses in which Baudrillard uses these terms.

To find interesting “fatal strategies,” one must look no further than the seven Situationist activist principles which I have mentioned: (1) Wandering (2) Psycho-Geography (3) The Diverting of Technologies, (4) Making Situations, (5) The Radical Illusion Beyond Art (6) Neo-Situationism in Digital Media, and (7) Post-Public Urban Art.

Debord was a Marxist who, in many of his writings, clung to the myths of working class consciousness, the proletarian revolution, and the glorious future of “the generalized self-management of the workers’ councils.”³⁸ Many Situationist essays share this “theological” rhetoric. Baudrillard emphasizes this side, setting up the SI as the “straw dog.”

The German words *Entfrem-*

dung and *Verfremdung* can help here. Baudrillard overemphasizes the Marxist side of the Situationists’ concept of alienation as *Entfremdung*: the debased historical condition of humanity under capitalism and its dreamt-of overcoming. He ignores the “radical theatre” and “radical performance” side of their concept of distantiation as *Verfremdung* – artistic techniques to incite change in the “consciousness of the audience” in the tradition of practitioners like Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, and the surrealists. *Verfremdung* is more rigorously the genuine historical context of the Situationists.³⁹

Exhibit C (Sadie Plant’s critique of Baudrillard is reductionist):

Sadie Plant argues that Baudrillard was deeply influenced by the Situationists and effectively co-opted their ideas. According to Plant, the later Baudrillard gave up all prospects of criticism and political contestation. For Plant, “[Baudrillard is a] sold-out Situationist who wanders without purpose.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Ratgeb (Raoul Vaneigem), *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée* (Éditions 10-18, 1974).

³⁹ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (Routledge, 1999); David Caute, *The Illusion: An Essay on Politics, Theatre and the Novel* (Harper & Row, 1972).

⁴⁰ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*; Op. cit.; p.150. The exact quote is: “Postmodern philosophers are the sold-out situationists who wander without purpose.”

Plant thinks that Baudrillard thinks that there is nothing to be done *pour changer le monde*. But this is, in fact, not the case.

Sadie Plant understands Baudrillard as believing that “the real and the meaningful have slipped away amidst a confusion of signs, images, simulations, and appearances.”⁴¹ No, Baudrillard is saying that “reality” disappears through too much reality. He is not celebrating this. Virtual Reality is not the disappearance of a natural and awesome “reality” that was intact prior to the advent of digital and virtual technologies.

The Left’s longstanding emphasis on subjectivity is problematic because advanced capitalist-consumerist culture is a profoundly narcissistic culture, encouraging a “society” of narcissistic “subjects without others,” subjects without the capacity to recognize otherness. Communication, which saturates media culture, is destructive of otherness. The field of subjectivity and so-called “authentic expression and experience” is ripe for recuperation, co-optation, or assimilation. Recuperation of radical assertions from the cultural margins by the power centers and by the spectacle is

a key concept of the Situationists. The key historical event of the 1970s was the assimilation of “cool,” “creativity,” and “individual empowerment” by the advertising industry, consumerism, and personal computers.

After the setback for practical radicality which took place around 1970, Baudrillard made it the goal of his work to go as far and as deeply as possible into “theoretical radicality.”⁴² He put his efforts into trying to figure out how to oppose a system which has already anticipated all opposition. This is, first and foremost, an epistemological question.

■ SITUATIONIST PRACTICES

Wandering or the Drift – Le Dérive

In the essay “Theory of the Dérive,” Guy Debord wrote:

One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive*, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects. They are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations,

41 Ibid.; p.154.

42 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Conversations with François L'Yvonnet* (trans. Chris Turner) (Routledge, 2004).

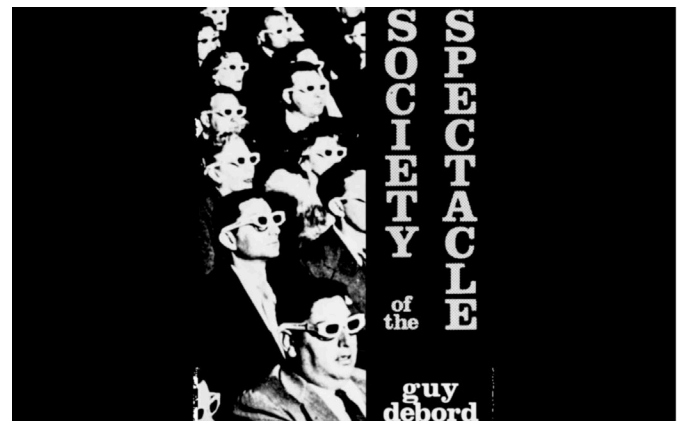
their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.⁴³

The object-orientation here is that one is driven, doubled, and shadowed by the encounters –with both non-human and human “objects” –that one has in urban space. The Situationist view is that we live in an urban environment with so many possibilities for creativity and enjoyment, yet we constantly overlook these opportunities because we are focused in everyday life on the functional organization and layout of the city, the static places designated for work or sleep or shopping, and the physical transportation that we need to move among these locations. Drifting is a way of changing this, of discovering marvels and surprises in an intrepid playground of renewed urban spacetime.

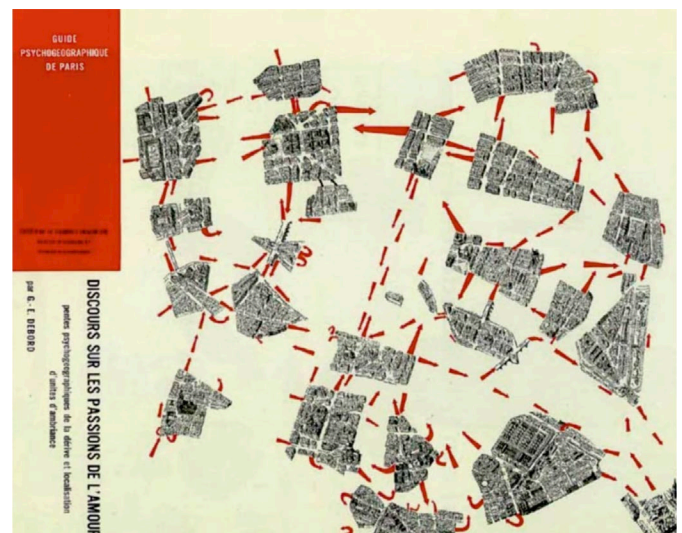
In the *dérive*, one “takes the side of the object,” consistent with the system of object thought of the later Baudrillard, for example in his book *Impos-*

sible Exchange (1999).⁴⁴ One follows the seduction, strange attractors, radical otherness, the non-human and the inhuman. One embraces “the world thinking me” of the cityscape as “psycho” and “geography” get rearranged playfully by the semiotic and physical signs encountered during the drift.

44 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*.



Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, cover picture, Black and Red, 1983



Guy Debord, *Psycho-Geographical Guide to Paris*, 1957

43 Guy Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp. 62–66; <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>

■ PSYCHO-GEOGRAPHY

In the essay “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” Guy Debord wrote:

Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psycho-geography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals...⁴⁵

There is a complex intricate psycho-geographical separation and interweaving between places in Venice (for example) where tourists go and those places where only Venetian natives go. Psycho-geography conjures up free association and fascination; the construction of stimulating “situations”; and adventurous playing with architecture and urban space. You discern the psycho-geographical

contours, currents, fixed points, and vortexes which encourage or discourage entries, exits, and flows into and out of specific prescribed zones of the city.

The Diverting of Technologies - Le détournement

In the essay “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” Guy Debord wrote:

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed... The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.⁴⁶

The Situationists did not dream of a dis-alienation of man (*eine Ent-Entfremdung des Menschens* in German) as Baudrillard claims in his critique of

⁴⁵ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp.8-11. See also Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Oldcastle Books, 2018).

⁴⁶ Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp.14-20.

them. Perhaps Erich Fromm or other “Marxist-humanist” thinkers would be more susceptible to such a criticism. *Le détournement* is usually translated into German as *Zweckentfremdung*, which is not wrong, yet it would perhaps be more correct to say *Verfremdung*, following the distinction between *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung* originated by Bertolt Brecht.⁴⁷

The Situationists advocated “beyond art” practices of “jamming the messages” and “turning the songs [of the dominant culture] inside out.”⁴⁸ This is the revenge of the object, the destiny of the object beyond the determining codes, beyond the meanings and definitions imposed on the object by the economics, politics, sociology, or advertising discourses. As Baudrillard writes in *The Ecstasy of Communication*: “the destiny of signs is to be torn from their destination, deviated, displaced, diverted, recuperated, and seduced.”⁴⁹

47 *Zweckentfremdung*: for example, in the German translation 14–20 of the Simon Ford book: Simon Ford, *Die Situationistische Internationale: Eine Gebrauchsanleitung* (trans. Egon Günther) (Edition Nautilus, 2007); p.35. Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, “Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp.86–89.

48 “Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp.86–89.

49 Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*;

THE MAKING OR CREATING OR CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATIONS

In the essay “Report on the Construction of Situations,” Guy Debord wrote:

We think the world must be changed. We want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that such a change is possible through appropriate actions. Our specific concern is the use of certain means of action and the discovery of new ones, means which are more easily recognizable in the domain of culture and customs, but which must be applied in interrelation with all revolutionary changes...⁵⁰

There is an alternative utopian-anarchist dimension to Baudrillard’s thought: direct speaking, seduction, symbolic exchanges, transgression, and meaningful non-virtual encounters with the other are possible. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Baudrillard writes incisively about graffiti in the subways and on the walls of New York City as the insurrection of pure signs against the ruling semiotic order of messages and meanings.

Op.cit.; p.80.

50 Guy Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in Ken Knabb, editor and translator, *Situationist International Anthology*; Op. cit.; pp.25–43.

"Kool Killer: or the Insurrection of Signs" is a landmark cultural theory essay about graffiti and street art as symbolic rebellions against the dominant media society.⁵¹ The creative graphics in the early 1970s were a new kind of urban intervention, an alternative to advertising, an outbreak against the sign-system.

Graffiti opposed the myths of the individual author and the identity of the human subject, being instead the invoking of ritual symbolic exchanges. Pseudonyms rather than proper names were asserted against the anonymity of postmodern bureaucratic existence. Urban space was reaffirmed against the system of well-behaved producers and consumers, of commuting subway riders, of the communicating senders and receivers of semiotic signs. The meaningless names like SUPERKOOL and KOOL KILLER (in Baudrillard's example) left the confined designated fictional space of the underground comic books. It is a graffiti with no content, no message, no goal, and no ideology. This graffiti contests the very form of the media. The beautiful scrawls are the insurrection of "signs of nothing" against interpretation and

denotation, and for an anti-urbanism against architecture.

The Radical Illusion Beyond Art

There is a minority tendency within art which can be called "post-art" or "the radical illusion beyond art." Which artists does Baudrillard like? What does Baudrillard mean by "the radical illusion beyond art"? How do the realizations and processes of those artists whom he admires correlate to the "corresponding" Situationist practices?

In the era of the "integrated spectacle" (Debord) or "the conspiracy of art"⁵² (Baudrillard), "art" persists and flourishes as a profitable hyper-industry, with its own inflated pretensions and its self-legitimizing prestigious institutions. Baudrillard saw the contemporary art world as being complicit with—and metaphorical of—late semiotic hypercapitalism.

Baudrillard explicitly rejected the New York art scene's attempted embrace of him as a critical cultural thinker in the 1980s. He was suspicious of any project of "applying" his ideas about simulation, hyperreality, Integral Reality, and the orders and

51 Jean Baudrillard, "Kool Killer: or the Insurrection of Signs," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*; Op. cit.; pp. 76-83.

52 Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays* (trans. Ames Hodges) (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005).

precession of simulacra in a “transdisciplinary” or “crossover” way to either art – the New York “Simulationist” or “Appropriation” or Neo-Conceptualist or Neo-Geo artists such as Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, and Peter Halley, who claimed that their artworks were “simulacra” against “hyperreality” (for example, on the level of colors) – or film – as in the case of the Wachowski Brothers’ canonization of him as the supposed philosophical inspiration for *The Matrix* film series.⁵³

It is not clear if Baudrillard disliked the New York “Simulationist artists” in the 1980s because he ruled out an artistic practice that referenced his philosophy as an inspiration in principle, or because he simply viewed them as being bad artists.

The list of “artists beyond art” on whose creations Baudrillard favorably commented, however, is surprisingly quite a bit longer than one would expect. By “artists beyond art,” I mean creators who are practicing something different from the mainstream currents of art, and whose works are

to be interpreted differently from how the “art industry” sees them. Perhaps their creations should not be understood with the term “art.” Some of the principal figures are:

Edward Hopper (the use of light in his paintings)⁵⁴

- Francis Bacon (whose paintings are “beyond aesthetics” and give form to “the illusion”)⁵⁵
- Jackson Pollock (of equal stature with the revered Andy Warhol)⁵⁶
- Mark Rothko (establishes unmediated contact with “the object” or “the fragment”)⁵⁷
- Enrico Baj (a proto-Situationist and “pataphysician” about whose prints and collages Baudrillard wrote an essay and conducted an interview – they have a “mythical” quality and confront “the monstrous”)⁵⁸

53 Jean Baudrillard, “The End of the End: Interview with John Johnston,” in Mike Gane, ed., *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*; Op. cit.; pp.156-164; “The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview with Jean Baudrillard,” in *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (trans. Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx), July 2004; https://www2.ubis hops.ca/baudrillardstudies / vol1_2/genosko.htm

54 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*; Op. cit.; p.141.

55 Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*; Op.cit.; pp.57,77; Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit* (trans. Chris Turner) (London: Verso, 1998); pp.91, 99, 103.

56 Mike Gane, ed., *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*; Op. cit.; p.147.

57 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories IV: 1995–2000* (trans. Chris Turner) (London: Verso, 2003); pp.84, 104.

58 Jean Baudrillard, “Enrico Baj, or Monstrosity Laid Bare by Paint Itself” and “The Transparency of Kitsch: A Conversation with Enrico Baj”; in Gary Genosko, ed., *The Uncollected Baudrillard* (SAGE, 2001); pp.141-154; Enrico Baj and Jean Baudrillard, *Enrico Baj: Transparence du kitsch* (L’Autre musée) (Galerie Beaubourg, 1990).

- Luc Delahaye (Baudrillard wrote about his “illegal” and hidden-camera photography of Paris Metro riders)⁵⁹
- Mike Disfarmer (photographer of residents of rural Arkansas in the 1940s)⁶⁰
- Christo and Jeanne-Claude (The “wrapping” in synthetic fabric and cloth of architectural structures such as the Berlin Reichstag and the Parisian Pont-Neuf bridge, and natural locations such as the New York City Central Park pathways or the coastline near Sydney, Australia “enoble(s) a form by covering it up”)⁶¹
- Charles Matton (Baudrillard and Virilio both wrote essays about his artworks which were miniature experimental spaces or “enclosures” which brought attention to “the illusion” and not to “the reality”)⁶²
- Olivier Mosset (a painter of monochrome abstract works about which Baudrillard wrote a catalogue entry)⁶³
- Sophie Calle (about whose photographic-conceptual-storytelling-performative art projects Baudrillard wrote the essay “Please Follow Me” – also known as “Pursuit in Venice”)⁶⁴
- Marcel Duchamp (The master of the readymade, he made banality into art. His “found objects,” for Baudrillard, prefigure the media genre of Reality TV. He reduced everything to insignificance. His “fountain” is an emblem for our hyperreality yet is also the gesture of its possible reversibility)⁶⁵
- Andy Warhol (Baudrillard wrote about Warhol in “Machinic Snobbery” in *The Perfect Crime*. Some of Warhol’s gestures were to embody the “death of the artist as subject” by “becoming a machine”; to work with the technologies of serial reproduction, and to

59 Jean Baudrillard, *L’Autre: Luc Delahaye* (Phaidon, 1999).

60 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*; Op. cit.; p.146.

61 Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* (trans. Chris Turner) (London: Verso, 1990); pp.226-227.

62 Jean Baudrillard, “Charles Mattonou l’illusion objective,” in *Charles Matton* (Editions Hatier, 1991).

63 Jean Baudrillard, “Olivier Mosset: The Object that

is None” (trans. Hans Eberstark and Jon Avgikos), in Gary Genosko, ed., *The Uncollected Baudrillard*; Op. cit.; pp.138-140; Olivier Mosset and Jean Baudrillard, *Olivier Mosset* (Distributed Art Publishers, 1999).

64 Jean Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me” in Sophie Calle, Suite vénitienne, Jean Baudrillard, *Please follow me* (trans. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield) (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988); Baudrillard, “Pursuit in Venice” in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*; Op. cit.; pp.156-160.

65 Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*; Op. cit.; p.108; *The Perfect Crime*; Op. cit.; p.28; *The Conspiracy of Art*; Op. cit.; pp.62, 78, 187; *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*; Op. cit.; p.11.

historically mark the acceleration of hyperreality)⁶⁶

Baudrillard's many essays of appreciation of some art projects, on the one hand, and his critique in the essay "The Conspiracy of Art" of the "art industry" which is too close to the "creative industries" and the "technological fetishism" of capitalism (parallel to the critique offered by Andreas Reckwitz in *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*⁶⁷), on the other hand, provides guidelines for distinguishing the principles of symptomatic art versus art which radically challenges the media-capitalist simulacrum and hyperreality.

In his 1996 provocative essay "The Conspiracy of Art," Baudrillard asserts that contemporary art has "lost the desire for illusion" and instead elevates everything in the world to "aesthetic banality."⁶⁸ Like pornography, the logic of which replicates itself infinitely to all media and advertising images, art has become an obscenity of visibility, a relentless transparency of all things. What could art possibly

still mean in a culture saturated by hyperreality and ubiquitous "cool" and marketable images? The aesthetic gesture of nullity or meaninglessness was inaugural when Duchamp or Warhol first thought it up, but it becomes endlessly banal in its endless recycling in countless exhibitions. It is the counterfeiting repetition in "signs," or in the mode of irony, of previously initiatory gestures of art history. It is the commercial or sentimental-commodified form of nullity that sells well in the art market.

Neo-Situationism in the Field of Advanced Digital Technologies

Our activities in the space of digital and virtual media should avoid the two extremes of utopian and dystopian perspectives. Many theories of new media and new technologies have been euphoric in seeing great possibilities for creativity, self-expression, and democratic communication in online existence. Other discourses have been exclusively critical, observing in our networked immersion in "social media" and simulations the deepening of capitalist-consumerist conformism and control – now administered by a new set of large corporations.

66 Jean Baudrillard, "Machinic Snobbery" (on Andy Warhol), in *The Perfect Crime*; Op. cit.; pp.77-86.

67 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne* (Suhrkamp, 2019).

68 Jean Baudrillard, "The Conspiracy of Art," in *The Conspiracy of Art*; Op. cit.; pp.25-29.

The alternative to these two opposite positive and negative views of digitalization is to deal with the digital-virtual realm as an “ambivalent interspace.” We should conceptualize – and then act in – media from cyberspace to Augmented Reality as open contested arenas situated between commodification now re-inscribed through software code by economically powerful surveillance agencies and the potentialities of radical transformative creativity.

Urban and Street Art Activism

Space is both real-physical and simulated-virtual. We will need to invent new concepts to deal with this new situation. We need to extend creative and activist interventions in the province of urban space to the double-territory-and-imagination of material-and-informational space. We need an aesthetic movement of Interspace Art to comment prolifically on these physical-and-virtual and theory-and-practice boundaries. Physical spaces that we inhabit in the offline zones of the capitalist society are largely demarcated by “ownership.” We traditionally understand these spaces via the conceptual system of “public” and “private” – a still very influential instituting and interpretive framework

belonging to modernist political-economic theory. In the concepts of digital codes and informational flows, the structural arrangement of clear physical demarcations between “public” and “private” recede into the past.

Street art and public art, although noble endeavors whose histories and politics still interest us greatly, largely operate based on the assumptions of these conventional categories. These genres founded themselves on the left-liberal idea that there is and should be a “shared cultural space” within modern society outside of and exempt from the nexus of cash values.

The work of Christos Voutichtis is at the intersection of art, architecture, and urbanism. His installation “All About Mistakes” was an urban intervention in Lisbon. The work consists of screen prints, sculpture, and real-time audiovisual computational media. Fractalgeometric shapes projected onto the frontfaçade of a high-rise building. This is a computer-generated pattern influenced by the parameters of the shape of the building itself. Street art emerges as a pattern from the fractal unit. The fractal is the secret passageway beyond private and public to perception of the “radical illusion of the world.”

Voutichtis seeks an architecture without rules, without control or hierarchical order. A space is an anarchist space when it is not static, when it continuously changes, when it is influenced by its surroundings. See Christos' work "Moving and Space-Forming Objects (The Performativity of the Space)" – a work of Inter-space Art. Voutichtis' installation piece uses large sheets of plastic wrapped around a selected physical structure to form a contained space that grows and expands as influenced by the outside breeze. Voutichtis is interested in fractal and breathing geometry, not a conventional Euclidean geometry with its three-dimensional axioms and classical dimensions. With fractal design patterns and parametric instantiation, there is relocation of the real-virtual body, inseparable from its immersion in hybrid space.



Christos Voutichtis, © 2018



Augmented Reality protest in front of Spanish Parliament against law prohibiting protests in front of Spanish Parliament, 2015. Photo "No Somos Delito"

AUGMENTED REALITY VERSUS WALL STREET

There are huge possibilities for Situationist resistance practices that engage in a critical and transformative way with the dominant culture in the digital age. The aesthetics and technology of Augmented Reality enable the players of the game *Pokémon Go* to superimpose funny characters and monsters onto the familiar phenomenological environment of the physical world to re-enchant urban life. Other AR applications call up information from a database that is pertinent to a specific scene to add the enhancement of contextual information. Messages are digitally superimposed onto the real world. Augmented Reality played a major role in *Occupy Wall Street* of 2011 in New York City, a social

movement which protested drastic income inequality and the political power of the wealthiest 1% of the global population (one Occupy slogan was *We are the 99%*). Political activism has been supported recently by AR.

More than 25 artists from around the globe took part in the collective action “Augmented Reality Occupy Wall Street,” covering the Wall Street and New York Stock Exchange geographical areas of downtown Manhattan with more than 400 augments. In this urban art installation of remote telepresence, the artist-activists created protest works that were seen in the desired target location even though their creators were not physically present there. At a certain stage of the unfolding of the Occupy events, the FBI and the NYPD police had occupied the Wall Street area with a massive presence of barricades, mounted horses, and the forces of order, blocking the thousands of protesters from entering that section of the city. The movement was primarily encamped in Zuccotti Park in the Financial District.

The *ProtestAR* smartphone app virtually projected images and sounds of protest movement members who were in Zuccotti Park into the space in front of the Stock Exchange. Using a smartphone or tablet (in the future, it

would be done with AR glasses), people standing on street corners or assembled anywhere downtown could see artistic images-and-sounds of ironic commentary on the global financial system – casino slot machine bells-and-lights, a cage enclosing the iconic Stock Exchange bull, dollar bills, the Statue of Liberty, virtualized electronic money circulation, liquid data flows, green frogs – superimposed onto the physical reality in front of them. The *ProtestAR* app safely transported the demonstrators into the zones forbidden by the police. Enthusiasts with the app formed the AR Flash Mob, forming chains and circles of persons standing sideby-side and holding up their smartphones and tablets, enabling others standing around them to see and hear the augments.⁶⁹

In 2015, the Spanish parliament passed laws restricting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, rights of information access, and the right to protest. Any individual or group demonstrating in front of the Parliament building would be subject to a very large fine. The organization No Somos Delito (NSD) conceived of the hologram protest. The protest itself was filmed at a location outside

⁶⁹ <https://protestars.wordpress.com/>

Madrid and then projected with Augmented Reality in front of Parliament. It was shown in a loop to keep the rally in constant movement.⁷⁰

■ CONCLUSION

The Situationists still have much to tell us. We are living in a society that still relies on the same chimerical sleight-of-hand which the SI described. The culture of digital and virtual technologies, and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, take the spectacle (and simulation) into new and uncharted galaxies. The Situationists are much closer to the later Baudrillard's perspective of "taking the side of objects" than he himself chose to keep in mind or may even have been aware of. The Situationist practices offer a possible path for "applying Baudrillard" (even in an academic sense, if one considers the "activism of design" to be an academic discipline), making the relatively abstract philosophical and theoretical idea of "taking the side of objects" more concrete, practical and applied.

70 Lesley Wood and Cristina Flesher Fominaya, "World's First Hologram Protest in Spain," in *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* (June 2015); pp. 144-149.

■ MCKENZIE WARK ON THE SITUATIONISTS

The media theorist and activist McKenzie Wark has published two books on the Situationists – *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (2011) and *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages Out of the 20th Century* (2013) – where she demonstrates her passion for, and encyclopedic knowledge of, their history, ideas, practices, pre-history, and post-histories.⁷¹ Wark read "Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* at an impressionable age and decided thereafter to do something with it."⁷² She explains that many of her books are deeply imprinted by the Situationists.

Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events (1994) engages with Debord's theory of a "lived time of experience" to glimpse, in the differentiated flows of information and vectoral trajectories of electronic transactions, gaps in simulation or the spectacle.⁷³

71 McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (Verso, 2011); McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages Out of the 20th Century* (Verso, 2013).

72 McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); p. 9.

73 McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

Dispositions (2002) is a *dérive* or wandering, written in the shadow of the worldwide integrated spectacle of global positioning and surveillance systems that want to fix our location and identity, defining us by our data profile.⁷⁴ It is a diary of aphoristic poetic musings.

Written in the style of *Society of the Spectacle*, *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) is an updating of *détournement* (the diverting of technologies) for the digital age.⁷⁵ Echoing Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, it calls for the "hacker class," who work in the realm of intellectual "abstractions," to rebel and actively question the necessity of private property.

Gamer Theory (2007) is a critical theory of games that rises to the anthropological level of Roger Caillois' seminal *Man, Play and Games*, where the French ethnologist developed an "ideal typology" of games and festive rituals in different human societies across time.⁷⁶ Computer games and virtual worlds are the archetypal cultural form of contemporary

society. Wark explores the complex intertwined relationship between the comforting perfection of the online game and the imperfections of the "compulsory creative" games we must play offline to survive in everyday life in the "disintegrating spectacle" of global capitalism.

The most succinct statement of Wark's position with respect to the Situationists appears at the beginning of her pamphlet *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* (2008).⁷⁷ From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Situationists were the heartbeat of a movement of neo-Marxist rebellion in Europe that was "beyond art and politics." Their energy culminated in the student-worker near-revolution in France in 1968. The organization officially dissolved in 1972. According to almost all accounts, that was the end of it. It is precisely that assumption of closure with which Wark takes issue. She is primarily interested in what happened afterwards. Her books explicitly about the SI trace in detail the post-1972 activities of those who had been part of the group, or of others who sought to continue, or go beyond, the legacy of the Situationists.

74 McKenzie Wark, *Dispositions* (SALT Publishing, 2002).

75 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

76 McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (trans. Meyer Barash) (New York: The Free Press, 1961).

77 McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*.

This is almost a secret history. McKenzie Wark wanders with grace and verve through the ideas, creations, and activist practices of many figures in the social and intellectual history of the Situationists who were previously regarded as secondary to Guy Debord.

Starting about 1989, the Situationists were recuperated by “official international cultural exchange.”⁷⁸ They entered the museum and pantheon of culture. The Pompidou Center in Paris curated an official exhibition that went on tour. Greil Marcus published his book *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, situating Situationism in “the history of oppositional popular culture”: the successor to Dada in art provocation and the forerunner of punk rock and the Sex Pistols in music.⁷⁹ Academics rushed in to claim the Situationists as part of art history, or of futuristic architecture, or of utopian urban planning and design. For literature professors, Debord’s writings came suddenly to have poetic and literary value. For film studies professors, Debord’s films became part of the avant-garde cinematic curriculum.

For McKenzie Wark, the *dérive* is

only one instance of the more general ideas or practices of experimental behavior and permanent play. Situationist architecture is only one component of the more general idea of unitary urbanism. When experimental behavior is choreographed and enacted brilliantly in the context of unitary urbanism, then the possibility of the highest stage of “the construction of situations” appears.

The thesis of *The Spectacle of Disintegration* is that May-June 1968 and the self-dissolution of the SI in 1972 were not the end of the Situationist project. Wark writes at length about the works of the art historian and former Situationist Timothy J. Clark; the utopian writings of Raoul Vaneigem (and his relation to nineteenth century utopian socialist Charles Fourier); the *détournement* films of René Vienet such as *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973), *The Girls of Kamare* (1974), *Mao by Mao* (1977), and *Peking Duck Soup* (1977); and the later collaborations of Guy Debord, the film editor Martine Barraqué, and the poet and scholar of Western European slang Alice Becker-Ho in filmmaking and the devising of a board game called *Game of War*.

A great Situationist coup of the 1970s was when Gianfranco Sanguinetti, a colleague of Debord,

⁷⁸ Ibid.; p.8.

⁷⁹ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (Faber & Faber, 2011).

writing under the pseudonym Censor, sent out his book-length text *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975) to many political and financial power elite members of Italian society.⁸⁰ Pretending to be a Machiavellian sage of the Italian ruling class, Censor argued that bringing the pseudo-radical Communist Party into the government would be a brilliant strategic move to consolidate the system of the integrated spectacle.

Debord saw three versions of the spectacle: the concentrated spectacle (speaks the language of command), the diffused spectacle (invokes the imperative of shopping and consumerism), and the integrated spectacle. The integrated spectacle is characterized by the participatory interactive performance of “the user,” perpetual technological upgrades, merging of capitalism and the state, secrecy and lies, and the “eternal present” enforced by the media.

McKenzie Wark adds to these the concept of the disintegrating spectacle. It is concentrated and diffuse. Yet it is neither concentrated nor diffuse. The spectators are tasked with having now to themselves produce and

distribute the images of the spectacle. But, for Wark, these images are no longer effective enough to mask the disappearance of “every real thing.”

Like Sanguinetti, and echoing Machiavelli, Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor (the secret of God is that God does not exist), Baudrillard, and Claude Lefort, Wark concludes that the power of capitalism and the state is not “real.” The secret of power is that power does not exist. It is a ruse perpetrated on the populace. It exists because people believe in that power. Power abides thanks to the spectacle of appearances. “The state renders spectacular the production of its own secrets,” writes Wark.⁸¹ Appearances are exchangeable for other appearances. Secrets are exchangeable for other secrets. Secrets are complexly related to the spectacle. Wark concludes:

While the spectacle renders all that appears equivalent, the division between the secret and the spectacular implies a hierarchy – the main game of power. The division between the spectacle of appearances and the secrecy of non-appearances is itself an aspect of the falsification of the whole that the spectacle affects.⁸²

80 Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (trans. Bill Brown) (Colossal Books, 2013).

81 McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages Out of the 20th Century*; p.113.

82 Ibid.; p.110.

■ PLAY DON'T WORK

The book that I have read about Marx that most inspired me was *Marx's Theory of Alienation* by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher István Mészáros, published in 1970.⁸³ Mészáros argues that the first full-fledged elaboration of Marx's philosophical system is in the theory of alienated labour of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (also known as *The Paris Manuscripts*), which were first released by Soviet Marxologists in 1932.⁸⁴ Marx writes of the estrangement or alienation of the worker under capitalist conditions of production both from the process and from the product of his labour, as well as from social-psychological reality. It is the chain of overseers in the power hierarchy of the capitalist organization who dictate to the worker what he must do in his daily activity and how he must go about doing it. Not only is the product of his work an alien fetishized commodity, but "the worker sinks to the level of the most abject commodity."⁸⁵ Forbidden to be active in freedom, the worker:

does not affirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free physical and mental energy, but instead disciplines his physical nature and ruins his mind... The more the worker works himself to the limit... the poorer he and his inner world become.⁸⁶

Marx is not against work *per se*, which he regards as a healthy objectification of man. In a possible future non-alienated variation of work, man will come to be truly human for the first time. He will realize what Marx calls man's species-being. Objectification is something like the creative and meaningful *métier* of the artist. But "in the sphere of political economy [capitalist organization under the prevailing paradigm], this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker."⁸⁷ Man is estranged from his own body, from nature, from other human beings, and from his spiritual dimension.

In *The German Ideology* (1845), probably heavily influenced by Robert Owen, Marx writes of the utopian possibility of transcending the division

83 István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (The Merlin Press, 2006).

84 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Progress Publishers, 1977).

85 Ibid.; p.61.

86 Ibid.; p.63.

87 Ibid.; p.93.

of labor, and what this could mean for individual happiness. In positive freedom, man would:

do one thing today and another tomorrow, hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, do exactly what we feel like doing [*wie ich gerade Lust habe*], without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.⁸⁸

In the capitalist mode of production as we know it:

Each man has a particular and exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood.⁸⁹

In a post-capitalist mode of production, which Marx in *The German Ideology* calls communist society, “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity, but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes.”⁹⁰ The early Marx envisions a replacement of work by play, creativity, freedom, diversity

of activities, and respect for scientific knowledge.

We are living in a society of self-imposed workaholism. As Erich Fromm wrote in *The Fear of Freedom*, published in 1942, modern man “has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities.”⁹¹ Everywhere one looks, people are working longer and longer hours to escape from themselves and the terrifying questions: what would they do with their lives if their day, week, and year were not structured by the routines and obligations of work? Who am I and what is the meaning of my life? The society of workaholism is “adverse to human happiness and self-realization.”⁹² Workaholism is chiefly an inner compulsion.

The next stage of human freedom in post-capitalism would entail a synthesis of the accumulation of capital and the practice/realization of freedom by and for the free creative artistic worker. The great artist Joseph Beuys said that we are living under the oppression of an ideological version of Capital. In a democracy, Beuys said, *everyone is an*

88 Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” in *The German Ideology* (Prometheus Books, 1988).

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (Egan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1943); p.15.

92 Ibid.; p.120.

artist, everyone is creative, everyone – as a free being – has her own culture.⁹³ Humans are the co-creators of capital. We must deconstruct the ideological form of Capital and reconstruct a general economy of capital starting from art, popular culture, meaningful work, and self-determination.

EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER WITH THE OBJECT

It is summer and I go for walks in the botanical gardens. Past the rocky paths and the manicured lawns and the timed sprinkler fountain, I walk through the free-air and airconditioned greenhouses. I breathe in the aroma of the subtropical plants from Madagascar. I toss coins into the running stream for good wishes. I sit in solitude on a bench in front of a tranquil pond. There are swans and ducks and what I call waterbirds. I am in Germany, but this meditative scene reminds me of the duck pond of my childhood on Long Island. I gaze at the water and feel my inner peace. I stare intently at the fluttering leaves of an overhanging tree. What do these leaves want to tell me? What is the brute facticity of their existence? I see

the roots of the tree in the ground. I see the tree inhabiting and breathing its ambience in the air. The tree calls to mind a tree-image on one of the screensavers of one of my computers. I hold the two trees – pond-tree and screentree – together in my mind's eye as a magical pair.

This is a revisit to the chestnut tree which Roquentin encountered in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* ("The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes."⁹⁴) This arboreal duo has a stealth connection to the Chestnut Tree Café in George Orwell's novel *1984*, where Winston Smith sought refuge from the future video-controlled totalitarian society, and where he later betrayed his lover Julia to the government ("Under the spreading chestnut tree, I sold you and you sold me..."⁹⁵).

This is my existential encounter with the root of the chestnut tree. Objects are changing, taking on a life of their own. The bench on which I sit is manmade, yet the objectness of the root seeps into my space, undermines the taken-for-granted utility of cultural and natural objects, their design for use by humans. The underground

⁹³ Joseph Beuys, *Everyone is an Artist: Cosmopolitical Exercises with Joseph Beuys* (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021).

⁹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; Op. cit.; p.127.

⁹⁵ George Orwell, *1984* (Penguin, 2016); Op. cit.; Part One, Chapter Seven.

part of the plant, buried in the soil, is a natural longevity that will outlive me. It invokes an emotion of both fear and of the heart. Roquentin: "I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it."⁹⁶

I sit at my pond, living my *Auseinandersetzung* with the water, the chestnut tree root, and the leaves of the tree. If you tell me that your VR software will replace this elemental scene, then I will say that I am against that kind of software. But if you tell me that your software will enhance the *Wirklichkeit* (substantiality) of this scene, that it will lead to an advancement in what reality is, then my Vulcan Mister Spock ears will perk up.

What did you say? Spock ears? You mean the pointed ears of the half-human half Vulcan Science Officer Spock of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* on the *Star Trek: The Original Series* TV show, who is always pointing out the relative "primitiveness" of Earth science?

What kind of software would it be? Perhaps the software they have on Planet Vulcan, the home of an advanced humanoid civilization with a

more advanced science than what we have. A planet which has overcome through collective spiritual growth its early instincts of violence. A planet that has eliminated war and poverty.

FROM THE SUBJECT TO THE OBJECT IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *NAUSEA*

Baudrillard writes at the beginning of his retrospective work *Passwords*:

For me, the object will have been the "password" par excellence. I chose that angle from the beginning because I wanted to break with the problematic of the subject. The question of the object represented the alternative to that problematic, and it has remained the horizon of my thinking... What really interested me, however, was not so much the manufactured object... but how objects spoke to each other – the system of signs and the syntax they developed... Behind this semiological formalism there was no doubt a memory of Sartre's *Nausea* and that famous root... an obsessive object, a poisonous substance.⁹⁷

The narrative of Sartre's *Nausea* is told through the monological voice of the first-person protagonist Antoine

⁹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; Op. cit.; p.131.

⁹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Mots de passe*; Op. cit.; pp.11-12.

Roquentin:

6:00 pm – I can't say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me, and I don't believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer must bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.⁹⁸

When the nausea or existential anxiety first came over Roquentin, it was something new to his being. He was frightened by it. The pain was doubled by trepidation about the pain. Roquentin had not known existence in this way before. Now the nausea is becoming a part of him, of his consciousness. He explores it like a scientist would. He accepts its familiarity and wherever it will take him. Contrary to the usual interpretation of *Nausea* that something bad has happened to him, something good has happened. It is the new normal of who he is.

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS: ALBERT CAMUS ON THE SIDE OF OBJECTS

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*,

published in 1942 during the Second World War, Albert Camus wrote the following sentences at the very beginning of the book:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – if the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.⁹⁹

Camus concludes logically that suicide is not a solution to the absurd. The absurd does not dictate death. The absurd emerges from the confrontation between the human striving for reasonableness and “the unreasonable silence of the world... This world... is not reasonable, that is all that can be said,” writes Camus. “But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together.”¹⁰⁰ From the moment that absurdity is

98 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; Op. cit.; p.126.

99 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Op. cit.; p.3.

100 Ibid.; p.21, p.16.

recognized, it becomes a passion, the seed of a seduction.

Do you want to live? Camus answered in the affirmative. YES. The answer is that life indeed is worth living. The sense of absurdity that gave rise to the question, to the doubt, is not a static condition.

The absurd is a dynamic, a relationship, a gap, a cleft — between my aspirations for a good life and the frustrations of the existing social-existential order of things. And this dynamic is the groundswell of the most important human quality of all: creativity. The absurd is born of the desert. Absurdity arises from a comparison or tension. Absurdity is a water source, an oasis in the middle of the desert. It appears at first to be a negative, but it is really a double-positive of consciousness and rebellion, which are Camus' two basic principles. How to live in the state of the absurd?

Sisyphus and his rock. The rock is the embodied metaphorical object *parexcellence*. To abide with the rock is to take the side of the object. The rock links the consideration of the world from the perspective of objects with Camus' iconic existentialism:

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would

fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor... At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain. It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness.¹⁰¹

Sisyphus represents neither acceptance of the social-technological condition in which we find ourselves at the present historical conjuncture nor simplistic radical rejection of it. One must abide in this condition, as in the human condition, with awareness, to transform this condition into something better, into creativity and, later, into a better society. The overall theory must emerge slowly and immanently from the experience, from deep familiarity with the condition, in a phenomenological and existentialist

¹⁰¹ Ibid.; p.88.

way. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."¹⁰²

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY*

Like Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* defines what is specific to humans as being their conscious relationship to death.¹⁰³ The awareness of death that is uniquely human is the basis for developing a philosophy or ethics of ambiguity. For Baudrillard, this relation has been betrayed in the postmodern society which prefers to marginalize death, to institutionally push it to the edges of a non-awareness.

Simone de Beauvoir is nearly in complete agreement with the existentialist philosophy of her life partner Jean-Paul Sartre, as articulated in works such as *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*.¹⁰⁴ For de Beauvoir, the relationship of humans to death infuses a fundamental ambivalence into the human condition, due to our awareness of death which is alleged-

ly lacking among animals and plants. Man or woman is conscious of the world yet a part of it. He or she also experiences himself or herself as a thing potentially crushed by other things. He or she is an object for others. "As long as there have been men and they have lived," writes de Beauvoir, "they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition."¹⁰⁵

Other non-existentialist philosophies and ideologies have tried to eliminate this visceral ambiguity. "Hegel tried to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to reconcile them all."¹⁰⁶ But Hegelianism is an idealism of *Geist* (spirit) recuperating all the negative moments of history into an "artificial paradise" of progress. Kierkegaard's rebellion against Hegel stands as the starting point of existentialism in the history of philosophy. Kierkegaard opposed Hegel's totalizing system through the Danish philosopher's insistence on ambiguity.

In his 1979 book *Seduction*, Baudrillard writes extensively on Kierkegaard and his *Diary of the Seducer* (which is part of the two-volume *Either/Or*).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ibid.; p.91.

¹⁰³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes) (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; Op. cit.; p.7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; p.8.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (trans. Brian Singer)

Baudrillard channels Kierkegaard's story of Johannes the seducer and Cordelia the seduced into a theory of seduction as a critique of (Hegelian) dialectics. Baudrillard writes: "Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions."¹⁰⁸ Relations of opposition, of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, fixed polarities, all challenged by the playfulness of seduction.

"Since we do not succeed in fleeing it," writes Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity."¹⁰⁹ Humans can seek solidarity with the object-ness of the world, to commune with the "radical illusion" of the world. De Beauvoir writes:

Man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him. I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating. I should like this sky, this quiet and bone, and I remain at a distance. But it is also by this distance that the sky and the water exist before me.¹¹⁰

Embedded in the ambiguity of the human condition, human actions or freedoms are object-oriented. The term "object-oriented" updates the crucial notion of *engagement* in Sartrean existentialism. "Today must also exist before being confirmed in its existence," writes de Beauvoir. "It exists only as an engagement and a commitment."¹¹¹ Humans must first be situated in this world, living among objects. I seek alliance with technological and design objects which strive through defiance and wiliness to realize their objecthood. I must first disappear from myself, sojourn with "singularities" and recognize the "radical other," to have some chance to ultimately reach an indirect "emancipatory" or "liberatory" opening onto subjecthood.

"Taking the side of objects" is a powerful and already present idea in one of the classic texts (de Beauvoir) of twentieth-century existentialist philosophy. De Beauvoir's expression of solidarity with Kierkegaard's concept of ambiguity connects with Baudrillard's reading of Kierkegaard in the latter's book *Seduction*.

(Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.; p.103.

¹⁰⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; Op. cit.; p.9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.; p.12.

¹¹¹ Ibid.; Op. cit.; pp.77-78.

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