Overview of Part Two

In Part Two, I argue that Baudrillard's thinking can illuminate the paradigm describing the current era which cultural theory calls hyper-modernism. I focus on the question "What is the relevance of the simulacrum and hyperreality to digitalization today?" There is a tendency for everything that we experience to become more and more virtual, including contacts among people. Experience is moving towards a Virtual Reality "Metaverse." VR and AR simulations are on the rise. There is a crisis of democracy or situation of post-truth. Hyperreality provides a deep explanation of post-truth. All these cultural trends have to do with an original thing getting substituted by its image, copy, statistical model, or code. They are all to be clarified through the simulacrum. I focus on the questions "how can the simulacrum be challenged?" and "what is the 'escape hatch' way out of hyperreality?" With the thought experiment that "everything is simulation," one gains access to new strategies for challenging the social-cultural order. Given the importance in hyper-modernism of informatic codes, a crucial arena for challenging the simulacrum becomes the transfiguration of software code. We should think with and after Baudrillard, upgrading his concepts for advanced digitalization.

How can I grow my own ("science fictional") thinking that elucidates the effects that digital media technologies have on society and our lives? How is my engagement with Baudrillard's thinking going to advance this project? The main questions that Baudrillard poses in his philosophy are how can one speak of a "new real" when all is simulation? and how can one speak of simulation when there is nothing outside it, no exempted location from which one may observe it, only an "outside" which exists on simulation's own terms? What Baudrillard identifies as "seduction" is defined as the enabling (or disabling) condition which makes simulation possible (or impossible). Seduction is that which encompasses, precedes, and exceeds simulation. Seduction is the difference between the original and the copy which simulation seeks to suppress in its attempt to represent or institute the regime of hyperreality.

Defining the Simulacrum and Hyperreality

The term simulacrum – meaning an image or semblance of something – derives from the Latin *simulare*. Starting with Plato, Western philosophy has regarded what it calls the simulacrum with suspicion. Thinkers associate the simulacrum with falsity, implying a dualistic opposition between truth and simulacrum. For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is what is "true." The simulacrum conceals the state of non-existence of conventional "truth." Karl Marx, for example, regarded "alienation" under capitalism as a state of un-truth which would be overcome by the "radical subject" or the activities and desires of the fundamentally non- alienated worker.[204] For Baudrillard, we are now in an era beyond that dialectic where the self has been absorbed into the ubiquitous images and "communication" networks. We live through simulacra.

The idea of reality was already a cultural construction – a construction of Western civilization. Our notion of "the real" was always already a simulacrum. This is what makes the operation of "the virtual" possible. "Reality" in our culture was always an illusion. This chimera was maintained by the clearly demarcated difference between "the real" and its representation. The media culture breaks down that difference. Hyperreality appears with the third order of simulacra. Now the proximity of "reality" to the models and codes which instantiate it, and on which it is dependent, leads to corruption. Reality and the image move into each other's spaces.

In hyperreality, there is an excess of images and limitless visibility. What disappears is the dimension of imagination that is linked to representation. This dimension maintains a salutary distance from "the real." With the media of a novel, for example, each reader deploys her imagination and own memories to form her mental picture of the story. There are as many versions of the story as there are readers. With the film adaptation of the novel, the story is fixed in a hyper-real way by the images selected by the director.

Images and discourses substitute for the "references" (posited by Saussure to be outside of discourse) for which they allegedly stand in.[205] The simulacrum and hyperreality are intimately entangled with the central objects of Baudrillard's investigation: the system of objects, the consumer society, television, shopping mall architectures, post-World War II America. Today hyperreality provides a deep explanation of post-truth in the hyper-modern crisis of democracy.

Thinking Hyperreality: From Rhetoric to Code

The concepts of the simulacrum and hyperreality are the basis for my investigation of digital transformation and the consequences for society and culture of advances in digital and virtual technologies. I situate my work as having an ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis these two classical ideas of philosophy and postmodern media and cultural theory. I both recognize the indispensability of these concepts for apprehending the postmodern world and the exigency of rethinking the simulacrum and hyperreality in the circumstances of digitalization.

Ironically, it has become clearer than ever before that we live in the middle of hyperreality. Baudrillard's theses were well ahead of their time. The simulation of almost any supposedly "real" thing is increasingly indistinguishable from what that signifier is alleged to represent. There is no original thing or origin of either "real" or copy. With Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, the physical world combines with digital images. Online experiences resemble more and more in their "look and feel" the offline world which was previously the most familiar. In VR, there is not just immersion (as was initially thought). There is intensifying interaction. Human and Artificial Intelligences unify. With the Brain-Computer Interface, we no longer mediate to networks and humans via devices but are neurologically connected or plugged in. During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the use of video teleconferencing software applications like Zoom accelerated exponentially. Participation in virtual environments while anchored from the grounding of my body is superseded by the surrogate of my avatar. The explosive growth of computer games as virtual worlds (like Fortnite and Minecraft) foreshadows the ubiquity of the game-like Metaverse.

The term hyperreality has been reintroduced into the mainstream discussion as describing technologies. The fact that Baudrillard wrote about hyperreality long before these technologies existed already makes a crucial point vividly. It highlights the insight that hyperreality is cultural before it is technological. Today's technological implementation of hyperreality is, on the one hand, a continuation of the consumer and media culture that was established in the pre-digital world of the first decades following the Second World War.

Yet, on the other hand, there is indeed a break between postmodern analogue hyperreality and its contemporary hyper-modern incarnation. Hyperreality is not only implemented by the "rhetorical" dimension of images and discourses decoupled from their "references" of truth and fact and "the real" which would be outside of the signifying system. Hyperreality is now implemented by code. It is implemented by algorithms and Artificial Intelligence Deep Learning and Big Data. Hyperreality can no longer be apprehended primarily by semiotics or classical media theory. Understanding of and active engagement with the simulacrum requires a trans-disciplinary informatics that is both critical and creative. In many ways, the ground must shift from a theory of images to a theory and practice of code.

Baudrillard's Importance for the Future

In the first essay of Part Two, entitled "Baudrillard's Importance for the Future," I explicate Baudrillard's key concepts of the simulacrum and hyperreality. I go through and expound upon his genealogy of the "five orders of simulacra." I state my position in the controversial debate surrounding Baudrillard. I make exegeses of his books *The System of Objects*, *The Consumer Society*, and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.[206] I clarify his concepts of symbolic exchange and the gift economy as outlined in his book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.[207] I engage with the important secondary literature study by Rex Butler called *Jean Baudrillard: The Defense of the Real*.[208] I comment on Baudrillard's diagnosis of digitalization as "interactive performance" in *The Ecstasy of Communication*.[209] I

consider Baudrillard's relationship to the philosophy of René Descartes as fleshed out in *The Evil Demon of Images*.[210] I write about the science fiction story "The Nine Billion Names of God" by Arthur C. Clarke, to which Baudrillard refers throughout his *oeuvre*.[211] I study the topic of poetic resolution in Baudrillard's thought. I comment on other hyperreality theorists like Daniel J. Boorstin and Umberto Eco.[212] I unpack Baudrillard's importance for the future.

Baudrillard and the Situationists

In "Baudrillard and the Situationists," I comment on the relationship between the idea of hyperreality (and simulation and simulacra) and Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle."[213] Debord's analysis of media-intensive culture in late capitalist societies deeply influenced Baudrillard's conception. Debord was a principal figure of the Situationists, a movement of radical artists, architects, writers, and political activists prominent in Europe from the 1950s to the 1970s. I investigate how both Baudrillard and Debord updated their concepts for the digital era. I explicate Baudrillard's idea of "taking the side of objects" and connect it with Situationist post-art activist practices for challenging hyperreality. I link "taking the side of objects" with three texts of 20th century existentialist philosophy: Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.[214]

I draw a connection between the resistance of objects or the world as an enigmatic "radical illusion" and practices that transform the dominant capitalist culture of the simulacrum. I elucidate seven Situationist practices: wandering or the drift (le dérive); psycho-geography; the diverting of technologies (le détournement); the making or creating or construction of situations; "post-art" or "the radical illusion beyond art"; neo-Situationism in the context of digital technologies; and urban and street art activism. I present an example of the application of Augmented Reality during the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City in 2011.

Baudrillard and Trump

In "Jean Baudrillard and the Donald: Is Trump a Fascist or is He the Parody of Fascism?," I explain the phenomenon of Reality-TV-billionaire-turned-President-of-the-United-States Donald Trump deploying Baudrillard's concepts of simulation, simulacra, hyperreality, and "telemorphosis." Trump represents the full-fledged takeover of politics by Reality TV. I argue that the epistemology of true and false, or facts and lies – largely the assumption underlying the discourse of the liberal media such as CNN and the *New York Times* – is insufficient for explicating Trump, and that a different epistemology of hyperreality would lay the groundwork for explaining much more. In a sense, something becomes true because Trump says it. In hyper-modern media culture, fake and authenticity exist in a complex paradoxical relationship. Hyperreality also illuminates the more general phenomenon of post-truth. There is a crisis of democracy intensified by the emotional and ideological atmosphere of the polarizing "echo chamber" and "filter

bubble" structured by the social media platforms. Consensus agreement about facts, truth, and science are weakened. The spokesperson of the liberal media invokes "the truth," believing herself to thereby inhabit an "outside" position to simulation.

I focus on two texts written by Baudrillard shortly before his death in 2007: *Carnival and Cannibal* and *The Agony of Power*.[215] He writes about a new "fifth order of simulacra" which is the self-parodistic stage of Western society where, as exemplified by Donald Trump, the values of the West and of America decline into a caricature of themselves.