Jean Baudrillard and the Donald: Is Trump a Fascist or is He the Parody of Fascism?

Epistemology of True and False

The kind of media theory or media analysis which has been prevalent on the American political left for the past several decades operates essentially with an epistemology of true and false. Noam Chomsky has always been subtle and nuanced in describing the moral complicity of the intellectual class (and his own personal struggle to overcome that complicity) with abhorrent U.S. government policies such as the destruction of Vietnam in the 1960s or of Iraq in 1991. Yet Chomsky's commentaries on what the corporate liberal media reports on politics, current events, and world affairs are largely about exposing the lies that the news media tells and recounting the contextual and factual realities on the ground which they conceal. Chomsky only analyzes the entity called "the news media." He does not analyze the media as a whole – for example, entertainment TV shows, advertising, celebrity culture, or blockbuster movies. He assumes that an understanding of the news media or of the domain called politics or the public sphere can be accomplished without connecting the news media to the media in general in the overall situation of advanced capitalism. In classic works such as *Manufacturing Consent* (co-authored with Edward S. Herman and published in 1992) and *Media Control* (2002), Chomsky argues that the mass communications news media carries out the propaganda function of lying.[463] Powerful business interests which have a profit motive manipulate the media, which in turn manipulates and controls the citizenry. The truth that American foreign policy has the essential function of establishing governments around the world which are politically controlled by us and are friendly to big companies is concealed by the dissemination of falsehoods. The role of the leftist activist or journalist is to tell the truth about any given political conjuncture. Chomsky's work is extremely valuable, yet what is Chomsky's perspective missing?

In their war against Trump, the liberal political media – CNN and *The New York Times*, for example – take the same tack as Noam Chomsky in epistemologically framing their struggle with the fake billionaire as a battle between true and false, between facts and lies. Trump is constantly telling lies and *The Washington Post* is unmasking them every

day, keeping a list of them, setting the record straight. As of July 2020, Trump had told twenty thousand lies. It is no surprise that Chomsky and the liberal media share this same epistemology – they both believe in the philosophy and the historical project of the modernist Enlightenment: facts, science, truth, communication, rationality – these are allegedly the great achievements of the democratic West. Never mind that it was this same liberal media that helped Trump win the Republican nomination for President in the first place against sixteen other candidates in 2016. Trump merged the sphere of politics with shock jock Reality TV World Wrestling Federation media entertainment. He provided those liberal TV stations and websites with a new sensationalistic headline every day for many months. Since making money is their priority – and astonishment and titillation are the commodities they sell – the media loved it and made Trump their focus of attention.

Society of the Spectacle and Hyperreality

An alternative to the epistemology of true and false as a media theory – which is derivative of the assumption that Enlightenment rationality and the civilized discussion advocated by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* are going to save us – was offered by the French Situationist Guy Debord in his 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle*.[464] Let me state that my position is that we should seek a balance between the "modernist" commitment to "truth" and the "postmodernist" placing into question of that assumption. I do not want to reject rationality and truth, but I believe that new strategies are urgently required as well. Guy Debord was a neo-Marxist thinker attempting to comprehend how control over the lives of workers by capitalists expanded from the sphere of production to consumerism, everyday life, and the media culture of images and rhetorical language in the historical progression to advanced capitalism. With his concept of "the spectacle," Debord understood that the omnipresence of visual images institutes a world of both abstraction and passivity, a diminishing of what is "directly lived" and an increase in the autonomy and power of the images themselves.[465] Something becomes true – or more true than true – by virtue of having been said, or said charismatically, in the media. In the spectacle, "the liar has lied to himself." "In a world which is topsy-turvy," writes Debord, "the true is a moment of the false."[466] Social life undergoes the shift from being to having to appearing – bringing on the reign of appearances.

The media theorist and semiotician Jean Baudrillard developed Guy Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle even further into his theory of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality. Baudrillard's most celebrated book is his 1981 volume *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he famously wrote about the map preceding the territory, and about Disneyland existing to conceal the fact that all of America is Disneyland.[467] Simulacra are copies without originals. Semiotics (linguistics applied to culture) teaches about "the signifier" and "the signified," which together constitute the linguistic-cultural sign. In postmodernism, the signifiers (images and discourses) come to replace the signifieds (facts and references) of which the visuals and words are supposed to be the reliable and verifiable representations. Representation is surpassed by simulation. Words and images stand on their own and have no reference.[468]

The spectacle itself has become the main thing that contemporary society and economy produce. Consumer objects, architectural ambiences, and media artefacts all primarily have an abstract semiotic and signifying function. In "the system of objects," the physicality and definite location of objects gets subordinated to their participation in the "perfect circulation of messages."[469] The relationality of sign-objects to each other takes precedence over the specificity of each. All objects and media content enter an equivalence through their common belonging to the universal self-congratulatory communication system.

Publicity for a specific product is rarely successful – but this is not advertising's true purpose. Its function is the promotion of the entire system. Although "we may be getting better and better at resisting advertising in the imperative," writes Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, "we are at the same time becoming ever more susceptible to advertising in the indicative. Without 'believing' in the product, therefore, we believe in the advertising that tries to get us to believe in it."[470] Each product ad refers not only to the individual product that it is allegedly informing us about – it also refers to itself as ad, endorsing the wonder of advertising *per se*. Through the spectacular celebration or "radical visibility" of a single object or brand, it is the totality of objects and a universe made complete by brands that is promoted. In speaking of one single consumer object, advertising virtually glorifies all spectacle objects, including all other media images, semiotic signs, and the sense of abstract well-being that *ambience* generally promotes as a sort of mental attitude. Consumer society does not satisfy so-called *needs* (a concept of the abstract universal humanist economic model) but is rather a manipulation of signs. To become a consumer object or media message, the entity must first enter the universal sign-system.[471]

Baudrillard's third book was called *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972). Here he outlines his theoretical program of making a synthesis of Marxian political economy and a semiotic analysis of the language-like sign system of the cultural dimension of late capitalist society.[472] Most Marxists had previously considered the cultural dimension to be the mere derivative "superstructure" of the determining instance of the economy and the "relations of production." In *For a Critique*, Marx's political-economic theory of the "commodity-form" of "exchange value" in early production capitalism gets merged – and in a critical way – with a radicalization of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic semiotics in an original fusion critique of the sign-form in late consumer capitalism.

Baudrillard articulates the homology between Saussure's linguistic sign and Marx's commodity form. This unified "political economy of the sign" or analysis of the commodity-slash-sign form equals what Baudrillard calls "the code."[473] The real, the lived, the myth of an objective reality – they all become justifications or "alibis" keeping us from seeing the dominance of the simulation models. These so-called realities are "reality effects" (a play on the cinematic term "special effects"). To change registers slightly as an example, the signifier of the greatness of consumer culture or "America's prosperity" stands in for the concrete singularities of objects. The code of signifiers substitutes for references in the process of simulation. We live in the democracy of standards of living and signs of affluence – the republic of the automobile, the cheeseburger, the personal computer, and the home entertainment system. Happiness is the accumulation of signs of happiness.

The media have cut us off from "real access" to historical events. Everything that I know about the Holocaust, World War II, and the Vietnam War comes from Hollywood films about those events. Baudrillard cites an aphorism by Jewish German-language philosopher Elias Canetti from 1945, speaking about a certain point in history, when exactly this point is is unknowable, when history itself disappeared. Canetti writes: "As of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality, everything happening since then was not true; but we didn't notice."[474] In his essay on Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 blockbuster Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now*, Baudrillard writes that Coppola's masterpiece is the continuation of the Vietnam War by other means. "Nothing else in the world smells like that," says Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall). "I love the smell of napalm in the morning... It smells like victory." The high-budget extravaganza was produced the same way that America fought in Vietnam. "War became film," writes Baudrillard. "Film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology."[475] There is implosion or mutual contamination between film becoming Virtual Reality and War.

Donald Trump the Empty Signifier

Donald Trump is a product of this culture of postmodern "anything goes" images and rhetorical discourse. The mythology of Trump was born during the New York City gilded 1980s, the era of Ivan Boesky and Gordon Gecko greed and Wall Street insider trading. Donald Trump plastered the name Donald Trump everywhere he could. He of the golden toilet, he the playboy ladies' man, the casino owner, the entrepreneur of the opulence of the billion-dollar Atlantic City Taj Majal gambling and entertainment paradise-complex. He was a failed businessman and a gangster, but on Reality TV he played the ultimate glamorous billionaire whom many Americans admired and dreamed of themselves becoming. President Trump lies constantly, and his supporters believe all of it. For them, his charismatic speech has become more powerful than the democratic and scientific systems of true and false.

In two of his final texts – *Carnival and Cannibal* and *The Agony of Power* – written shortly before his death in 2007, Jean Baudrillard describes a newer "order of simulacra" which is the phase of irony, parody and "the carnivalesque."[476] Baudrillard upgrades his concepts of simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality into a cogent diagnosis of the self-parodistic stage of Western society. Simulation or hyperreality is no longer the artificial staging of a so-called reality by the models and codes which precede it. Simulation is now a farce, an immense irony, a masquerade, a funhouse-mirror distortion of the previous values and ideals of modernity: freedom, culture, truth, humanitarianism. "Every signification is eliminated in its own sign," writes Baudrillard in *The Agony of Power*, "and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality... Power is only the parody of the signs of power – the cannibalization of reality by signs."[477] The values of the West and of America degenerate into a caricature of themselves and devour themselves. This is Donald Trump.

We have experienced these past four years – in the masterful showmanship of Donald Trump and his fanatic deplorable followers, in the full-scale replacement of politics

by Reality TV, in the tele-morphosis of the merger between Reality TV and everyday life – the disappearance of political substance into the fascination with the banality of insults (see Hannah Arendt's banality of evil) that is now the hallmark of the media-celebrity-gossip culture of obscenity which dominates American life and the online monopoly social media platforms.[478] Donald Trump is a successful "empty signifier." "The bigger he got as a name, the smaller he got as a person," recently said the former Trump Organization executive Barbara A. Res.[479] Trump is the ultimate simulacrum, the living demonstration of the rule of the signifiers over the signifieds. Fake is not a betrayal of authenticity. Trump is the most talented fake in the world. Lies are exciting. They set in motion their own forceful narrative. When Trump says something, it becomes true because Trump says it, and there is little that *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* can do about it. The institutional bases for consensus and legitimation of "the truth" have disappeared beneath the mountains of information and virtualization of discourse. The media culture in general paved the way for Trump. All of America is responsible for the disastrous situation in which we find ourselves.

From Simulation to the Grotesque and the Self-Parody

A not so well-known aspect of Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality is the way that he links the postmodern culture of media images to the motif of the grotesque in art, literature, and performance, as a cultural expression moves from parody to self-parody, as something becoming a parody or caricature of itself. We are living the historical phase of the self-parody of the revered values of Western civilization. Simulation takes a major step forward from merely "the hyperreal replacing the real" to the grotesque. We are on the fast track to what Baudrillard calls "carnivalization" and "cannibalization." Carnivals were historically very political – they were parodies made of the powerful by the oppressed. At festivals, the black African colonized dressed up monkeys in admiral suits and hats to parody the white colonizers.[480] In Cologne and in the Rhineland region of Germany, parody and mockery of the French and Prussian occupiers were at the center of the carnival tradition that began in the nineteenth century. But self-parody is something different. It occurs without conscious intention. It is like what Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, writing about the French coup d'état of 1851, when Marx famously said: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."[481] To avoid having to give up the Presidency, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte staged a self-coup to stay in power. He carried out Operation Rubicon on the anniversary of his uncle Napoleon's triumph at Austerlitz in 1805.

Self-parody sinks its unaware performer into debasement or abjection. America sank into abjection with the 2004 Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse scandal (Baudrillard wrote about Abu Ghraib in his 2004 essay "War Porn"[482]). U.S. Army and CIA personnel sent selfies to their friends and relatives from Saddam Hussein's infamous prison, now taken over by the occupying American power, smiling and saying cheese while standing next to prisoners whom they had just sodomized and tortured. Disneyland and the Americana culture of universal total simulation seem like harmless fun. Radical sim-

ulation is how America came to achieve hegemony over the world. America had no peers in its fabrication of fantasies and spectacles. Yet at what point does that become seriously perverse? Donald Trump is the embodied metaphor of that turning point. You want to be the world's only superpower through the image? Then you will bring yourself down by the endlessly looping video image and the image-playback.[483] After the tragic event of September 11, 2001, the video footage of the implosion of the World Trade Center twin towers was played back thousands of times again and again on TV in an endless loop, the eyes of the tele-spectators fixed to the screen in perverse fascination. Baudrillard detected a symbolism in the way that the two tallest buildings of the Manhattan skyline collapsed or imploded in a visually suicidal motion, seemingly responding in turn as a counter-gesture to the murder-suicides of the nineteen terrorists.[484] The carnival of the image is also the self-cannibalization by the image.

An important precursor of Trump playing the President on television and on Twitter was the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California in 2003. The elevation to a powerful political position of the Mr. Olympia bodybuilder and star of the Terminator series of science fiction films was a not-so-surprising caricature of democracy. Reagan the Hollywood actor and TV host of General Electric Theater had already been governor and President. Politics has been fully banalized into a game of idols and fans, the triumph of the celebrity culture.[485] Schwarzenegger would have certainly become President if not for the bad luck of an antiquated clause in the Constitution which disqualified him a priori on xenophobic grounds. As we are now witnessing the probable end of the Trump presidency – and thinking with Baudrillard – I contemplate the contempt for the rest of the world which the Trump supporters feel and express through their allegiance to him. Those who identify the most with the simulacrum of America take revenge symbolically for the envy and scorn which the rest of the world feels for the American simulacrum. America exercises its power in the world through its mastery of images. Yet a certain desperation seems to have now set in. The Trump phenomenon is the marriage of that showman grifter narcissist and the desperation of the MAGA throngs worried about losing their standing.

Springtime for Hitler

For a long time, some Jewish theologians thought that showing images of the Holocaust should be taboo since the event was the ultimate unrepresentable evil. Photography theorists have sometimes argued generally that historical truth cannot be depicted through visual images. Similarly, it was thought that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s were so morally reprehensible that parody or comedy or jokes about them should be taboo. In the 1967 film *The Producers* by Mel Brooks, bankrupt Broadway producer Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel) needs to stage a musical that is guaranteed to be a flop to carry out a complex scam to save himself from financial ruin. Bialystock hits upon the apparently ingenious idea of producing a musical comedy about Hitler and the Nazis. It will be in such bad taste that the show is guaranteed to be panned by the public and the theatre critics and to close in disgrace on opening night. Yet to Bialystock's astonishment, the show is a smashing success. The Broadway public finds *Springtime for Hitler* to be the funni-

est thing in the world. Adolf Hitler is unintentionally brilliantly parodied by deranged ex-Nazi Franz Liebkind. Due to the unexpected triumph, Bialystock now paradoxically faces financial ruin and even prison.[486]

Is Trump a fascist or is he the parody of fascism? Here is my answer: he is the parody of fascism. Yet he is also the self-parody of America and, at one step removed, of the celebrated values of the West. Trump is the self-parody of the most hyper-mediatized culture in the world: the culture of consumerism and shopping mall "no-place" ambient spaces; television and advertising; the media- and image-saturated society of the spectacle; and the hyper-real fantasy aesthetics of Disneyland. As both the parody of fascism and the self-parody of the post-World War II so-called American way of life, as the synthesis of both (self-) parodies, Donald Trump has brought us to the precipice, to the edge of the cliff, to the spot from where we are now standing and staring down into the abyss.

Classical fascism works on the Führer principle and a strong and stable set of beliefs. There are territorial claims, hard nationalism, and theories of race. For Trump, these aspects become variable and "anything goes." He changes his mind every day and has no goals or agenda other than greatness and freedom. The energetic force of fascism persists, but without fixed ideological reference points. This parodies fascism since absolute truth is transferred to the double-system of the empty self-referential signifiers and the arbitrary signifieds. Trump's "parody of fascism" and Trump's "real" fascism – his destruction of America and his danger to the entire world – have merged into a monstrous combination.

Serge Latouche Remembers Baudrillard

With his first three books criticizing the media and consumer society, Baudrillard made such an intense and favorable impression on his French readers, that, according to French economist and leading thinker of the ecological "degrowth" movement Serge Latouche in his recent French-language book *Remember Baudrillard* (Latouche chose an English-language title), Baudrillard was elevated to the status of THE STAR of the French leftist (*gauchiste*) intellectual-academic scene in the early 1970s.[487]

Baudrillard was a chief and frequent contributor to the ascendent architecture and urban studies journal *Utopie* and to the journal of the Pompidou Cultural Centre *Traverses*.[488] He was introduced to the art and design world as a prominent speaker and manifesto writer at international design conferences in Aspen, Colorado in 1970 and in Kyoto, Japan in 1973. Baudrillard was the keynote speaker at the colloquium convened by Latouche at the University of Lille in June 1974 entitled "Economic and Symbolic Practices."

After the publication of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in 1976, Baudrillard abandoned the academic discipline of sociology in favor of a self-questioning "patasociology" (as he and fellow professor at the University of Nanterre Jacques Donzelot called it[489]), declaring in his 1978 essay *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or the End of the Social* that many of the principal objects of scientific investigation of that field – society, the social, the masses – do not exist independent of the observer.[490] They are rather self-fulfilling prophecies or simulation-projections of the wish of sociologists that they should exist.

Baudrillard's "fall from grace" from his status as a highly respected leading figure of the French intellectual left occurred following the publication in 1977 of his small book *Forget Foucault* where he criticized central concepts of both Michel Foucault (power) and Gilles Deleuze (desire), who at the time were emerging as the two most significant and often referenced philosophers of the "post-Marxist" intellectual and academic left (both in France and worldwide).[491] With his polemics against Foucault and Deleuze, Baudrillard damaged his reputation.

Yet just a few years later, Baudrillard made a surprisingly big splash globally and in some of the English-speaking countries (the US, the UK, and Australia) with his ground-breaking 1981 text *Simulacra and Simulation*, a work that became so famous that it eventually appeared visually and literally as a hollowed-out book in the blockbuster 1999 Hollywood film *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowski siblings.[492]

Latouche cites *The Consumer Society* and other early books of Baudrillard as pioneering and "precursor" texts (*malgré lui*) of *degrowth* (a term originated by André Gorz in the 1970s) and reproaches Baudrillard for his alleged failure to embrace the ecology movement. The absence of the ecological dimension, according to Latouche, constitutes a serious blind spot in Baudrillard's system of thinking. Latouche is undoubtedly right – for the most part.

In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard zeroed in on the fetishism of the consumable object and the false abundance of consumerism.[493] The so-called abundance of the society of growth exists only through the spectacle of the accumulation of commodities. The critique of the consumption of objects begins with the critique of the supposed universal "naturalness" of "needs" and their satisfaction as the basis of the "universal model" of all possible economic systems espoused by "bourgeois" economic theory and its justifications of capitalism. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard extended his critique to Marx for the latter's "religion" of production, in other words, growth.[494]

Latouche reproaches Baudrillard for not placing the ecological destruction of the planet at the center of his thinking, but rather focusing on depicting a sort of collective suicide of the human species by transhumanism and its hyper-technological values. We are witnesses to global warming, the melting of the polar icecaps, the destruction of old-growth forests, oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, polluted water in the Berkeley Pit, threats to the Great Barrier Reef, loss of biodiversity, and the extinction of many species – including the human species under the accelerating force of technological transhumanism.

It is not clear if Baudrillard has no ecological perspective or if he wants a more radical ecological consciousness than that currently in circulation. He criticizes the existing ecology movement for humanizing, sentimentalizing, and abstracting nature. He wants nature to be seen as savage and more "radically other." In the essay "Maleficent Ecology" in the book *The Illusion of the End* (1991), Baudrillard writes: "The virtual produces the real as its waste-product. No ecology – no benevolent ecology – can do anything to stop it. It would take a maleficent ecology."[495] Latouche even misreads the meaning of the title of this essay as a disparaging of the ecology movement, whereas Baudrillard clearly intends the phrase as a description of the kind of alternative ecological movement that he would like to see develop.

The emphasis in Baudrillard on *the image* can shed much light on the phenomenon of what today is called "greenwashing." This time it is about a different meaning of the term *image* – advertising or public relations image. Latouche ignores this dimension of the ecological catastrophe completely. It is well known that large companies and governments seek to enhance their PR *image* by advertising themselves as avid promoters of ecological values and the noble changes they are undertaking in their business models for "sustainability." Greta Thunburg is not only justifiably angry about climate change and the failure of big corporations and states to take consequential action – she is also angry about the "greenwashing" or empty signifiers uttered in the rhetorical discourse and self-praising claims of these powerful institutional actors.

In *The Illusion of the End*, Baudrillard criticizes a certain apocalyptic discourse surrounding ecology, energy, and the environment. His critique is certainly a one-sided and somewhat misguided position. Perhaps the challenge is to make a synthesis of what he says and of the discourse of catastrophe that he criticizes. The discourse that warns of coming catastrophe covers up that the drastic destabilizations of "the real" and time have already happened. In "The Reversal of History," he writes of time running in reverse and the "end of linearity."[496] The future "no longer exists." Time in hyper-modernism is turbulent, like a film played backwards. There are ubiquitous time-distortion patterns like recurrence and retroactivity.

In the essay "Catastrophe Management," Baudrillard asserts that the disaster of the "end of history" is "managed" by apocalyptic Hollywood films (like Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2012)) with their discourse of the impending "real" catastrophe which covers up the across-the-board "virtual" catastrophe which has already taken place.[497] In "Maleficent Ecology," Baudrillard writes that our industrial and urban hyper-concentration converts nature into *le reste*.[498] With our massive postmodern architectural construction projects, we render the environment as a residue. With transhumanism – the idea that an immortal successor species to humanity is on the way, as soon as the technological "singularity" or "superintelligence" is reached – humanity treats itself already as a residue or survivor. The discourse warning of the ecological catastrophe is, in one sense, a reflection of the wider discourse of permanent emergency of the dominant society. As a literary trope, Baudrillard prefers anastrophe to catastrophe. In rhetoric, anastrophe is a figure of speech involving an inversion of a language's usual word order. The German anthropologist Dieter Claessens has generalized anastrophe as a counter-term to catastrophe, meaning a change for the better.[499]

Another important recent work is *Le Livre dont Jean Baudrillard est le héros* by Emmanuelle Fantin and Camille Zéhenne.[500] The German electronic musician and philosopher Achim Szepanski recently published *In the Delirium of the Simulation: Baudrillard Revisited*.

Biosphere 2: The Artificial Paradise of Nature

Biosphere 2 is the enclosed artificial simulation of a natural environment in the Arizona desert which Baudrillard wrote about extensively in *The Illusion of the End*.[501] Biosphere 2, according to Baudrillard, is the desperate project of a desperate humanity faced with

its own extinction, the obsessive mania to create an artificial paradise of so-called nature and so-called reality, given that both of those nostalgic referents have already disappeared.

Biosphere 2, writes Baudrillard, is "the artificial synthesis of all the planet's systems, the ideal copy of the human race and its environment."[502] Baudrillard's critique of the ecology movement is not a rejection or ignoring of concern for the fate of the planet but is rather a plea for a more radical ecology, a so-called *écologie maléfique* consistent with his Nietzschean positive valuation of the term "evil" which recurs throughout his philosophical system, and which counterweights the term "good" in the Nietzschean "genealogy of morals."[503] He would like to deepen ecology with an ethics of "radical alterity," which means both the recognition of a more savage and truly *other* nature and a media philosophy analysis of (the mainstream version of!) Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence as the primary system of the catastrophic replacement of the life-and-habitat-sustaining "vital illusion of the world."[504]

The physical-environmental destruction of the planet is the most horrible yet secondary effect of the primary (mainstream version of the) VR cloning of existence and the AI cloning of intelligence. Just as the Persian Gulf War of 1991 (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*) was primarily a television war of images which produced the death and physical destruction of Iraqis and Iraq as its most horrible side-effects – secondary "reality-effects" or "fresh meat" data input for the "VR game" from the perspective of the TV viewers of the VR system.[505]

The mainstream meaning of the term "environment" is its artificial resurrection. Biosphere 2 invests heavily in this experimental Bio Art microcosm, a cloned copy of the world. It contains seven different ecosystems and all the planet's climates, recreated in a combination Walt Disney and techno-scientific style, housed in a geodesic steel-and-glass structure, including an ocean, a savanna, and a virgin rain forest. Visitors to the Arizona theme park of the Earth in miniature come to watch the eight astronaut-like inhabitants go through the daily routine of their two-year sentence: a zoological garden of the artificial survival of our species.

The 2020 film *Spaceship Earth*, directed by Matt Wolf, brings together archived material and recent interviews with former participants to document the 1991 Biosphere-2 project. The film itself is excellently made. Its title is taken from the 1969 book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* by the visionary futurist, systems theorist, and popularizer of the geodesic dome R. Buckminster Fuller.[506] A geodesic dome is a hemispherical architectural structure shaped as a geometric polyhedron. We learn in the movie that the Biospherians were also inspired by the 1972 science fiction film *Silent Running*, starring Bruce Dern. In that SF narrative, all plant life on Earth has become extinct yet an environmental ecology in miniature has been preserved in greenhouse domes attached to spaceships near Saturn.

From my perspective, what becomes apparent from this cinematic tribute is the lack of intellectual clarity of the Biosphere-2 undertaking with regards to the question if they were seeking to help the Earth's endangered ecosystem by "getting close to nature" or if they were, in fact, damaging the planetary habitat by replacing or simulating it as an artificial copy. There is confusion if the dream of colonizing other planets embodies the idea of saving human existence or rather fleeing from it by doubling it as simulacrum.

As one of the former stakeholders excitedly expresses it in an interview, they wanted to "launch humanity into an extraterrestrial evolutionary trajectory." They visualized a long-term colony off the planet.
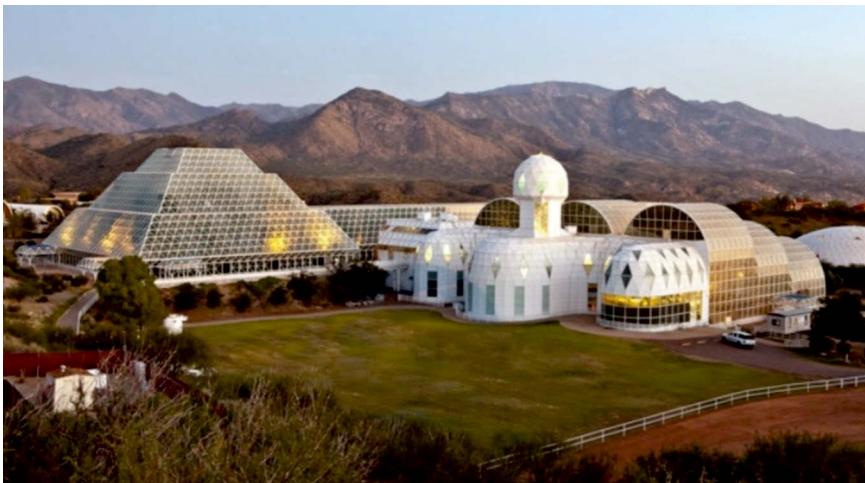
Biosphere Two

As the film amply documents, Biosphere-2 was an American media spectacle and a global media event. There was extensive coverage on local (Arizona), national, and international TV news programs. TV commentators compared the event to the Apollo missions that went to the moon. They waited for a blastoff. The project participants were contradictorily lauded as "protectors of the planet" and "pioneers blazing a trail for outer space." As the eight scientist-adventurers open the door to enter the domed vivarium at the spectacular start of their two-year stay, they race from being seen by the TV camera outside to staring into the next available TV camera closest to the inside of the door. Their "sustainability survival" experiment begins in its first moment with the media gaze upon them. The process of selecting the eight Biospherian finalists from among a larger group of candidates was just like a Reality TV game show. A contest or competition, judged by project leader John P. Allen, was held to choose the winners. Each candidate had a minute in front of the camera to self-advertise as the best candidate, like a beauty pageant. The "green" and "space exploration" installation became a tourist attraction of trendy ecological entertainment, complete with t-shirts, a Visitors' Center, and mud wrestling among the scientists.

The cult leader John P. Allen began to recruit idealistic hippies from the famed Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco to his spiritual and activist closely-knit community in the late 1960s. The group was searching for meaning in life and wanted to do theatre, art, business, and science all at once. They founded the Theater of All Possibilities. In the interviews, some former members confess that they would have done anything that Allen might have asked them to do. He is described as "tempestuous,

big time." Video clips of the theater rehearsals show Allen pushing actors violently and ritualistically to the ground. To their credit, the group had a strong awareness of the imminence of global warming, climate change, and the danger of destruction of the Earth's environment. At the interdisciplinary "Man, Earth and Challenges" conference which they organized in 1981, they announced their quest for "sustainable living on Earth." Their financial backer was the Texas investment management billionaire Edward P. Bass, who believed the enterprise would achieve long-term profitability via future outer space spinoffs.

The initial two-year mission inside Biosphere-2 failed due to a runaway greenhouse effect. The balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide went way out of whack. The oxygen deficit made it difficult for the inhabitants to breathe. They were threatened with possible brain damage. Crops took longer to mature, or they failed completely. Food became scarce. They were all losing weight rapidly. They looked emaciated. They were suffocating and starving. Animosity towards John P. Allen grew. He controlled which experts on the outside they were allowed to talk with via their telephone link. John wanted God-like power. By 1994, the Biosphere-2 project was discredited when it was discovered that the managers had violated the self-sustainability principle by secretly installing a "CO_2 Scrubber" device to remove CO_2 from the inside atmosphere. It was also detected that they were pumping in liquid oxygen.

Reality TV and Baudrillard's *Telemorphosis*

On December 14, 1957, a few days after accepting the Nobel Prize, Albert Camus gave a lecture at Uppsala University, Sweden called "Create Dangerously." In the transcript of this lecture are comments by Camus anticipating Reality TV and *The Truman Show*:

> What is more real, for instance, in our universe than a man's life, and how can we hope to preserve it better than in a realistic film? But under what conditions is such a film possible? Under purely imaginary conditions. We should have to presuppose, in fact, an ideal camera focused on the man day and night and constantly registering his every move. The very projection of such a film would last a lifetime and could be seen only by an audience of people willing to waste their lives in watching someone else's life in detail.[507]

Compare Jean Baudrillard writing in *Simulacra and Simulation* about the 1973 Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) first ever Reality TV show "An American Family," featuring the Loud family and the separation and subsequent divorce of Bill and Pat Loud:

> This family came apart during the shooting: a crisis flared up, the Louds went their separate ways, etc. Whence that insoluble controversy: was TV responsible? What would have happened if TV hadn't been there?... The producer's trump card was to say: "They lived as if we weren't there." An absurd, paradoxical formula – neither true nor false: but utopian. The "as if we weren't there" is equivalent to "as if you were there."[508]

In his essay "Telemorphosis" – on the media genre of Reality TV – Baudrillard, referring to a TV show called "Loft Story" (the French equivalent to "Big Brother"), identifies in the narrative structure of this kind of broadcast the "total telemorphosis of society."[509] In the promiscuity of screens everywhere and society's endless image-feedback of itself, there is a mania of banality and insignificance, a "maximum exaltation" of the ordinary person, celebrating his or her "minimal qualifications." The fascination with the "container" and "desert island" settings reveal a compulsive attraction to confinement and sensory deprivation. In the SF film *The Truman Show*, the hero is telemorphosed, but all the other actors/participants are as well – accomplices and prisoners in the same hoax.

The Truman Show: "The Last Thing That I Would Ever Do is Lie to You"

Truman Burbank – played by Jim Carrey – is under surveillance by television cameras twenty-four hours a day within the framework of a carefully choreographed Reality TV show that is watched by billions of voyeuristic viewers all over the world. Truman lives inside a vast Hollywood studio erected as an enclosed dome that is so large that it can be seen from outer space. There are five thousand cameras observing him, and more added all the time. It is not the totalitarian state permanently watching us, as in George Orwell's novel *1984*. It is all of us watching each other and watching ourselves. The high-tech engineering studio of *The Truman Show* can simulate the brightness of day and the darkness of night in Truman's world. It can control weather conditions. Truman is the only person in the world who does not know that his life is a TV show, who naively believes that he is living a *real life*. As a child, Truman was adopted by a corporation. He was born and has lived his every waking moment on the television screen. Like everyone in postmodern society, he understands nearly nothing of the effects that the media have on him (us). We are all Truman. We cannot distinguish what is real and what is media. Although Reality TV as a genre has been sold to us as being more "authentic" than the traditional scripted narrative show, Truman acts as the perfect television character, talking in slogans and cliches – but with an added Jim Carrey layer of self-irony: "Good morning, and in case I don't see ya – good afternoon, good evening, and good night."

Truman's wife and his best male friend are actors faking him out every day. They are live performers in the show. His wife Meryl behaves like a Disneyland animatronics character who just stepped out of a 1950s Sears shopping catalog. Marlon has been Truman's best buddy since childhood. In on-screen advertising interviews for the show, Marlon assures the worldwide audience that "It is all true, it's all real. Nothing here is fake." Meryl declares: "My life... is the Truman Show." The show's creator and director Christof comments: "We've become bored with actors giving us phony emotions. We are tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. There is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards."

Truman's home Seahaven Island is better than real life. It is the hyperreal copy or recreation of the perfect 1950s American suburban community. Its resemblance to perfect-living Disney communities in Orlando, Florida is unmistakable. It is a copy of a copy, and at the same time *more real than real*. Truman is a prisoner in paradise. Despite the constant discursie invocations of "the real," simulation and hyperreality have become the

obvious goals of existence in Seahaven Island. "Seahaven is the way the world should be," says Christof. There is a frantic proliferation of signs of "the real" to mask the absence of reality. All of America is television, cinema, Virtual Reality, and an immense spectacle.

Truman dreams of traveling around the world, to faraway places like Fiji, and having adventures. But he is unable to leave water-surrounded Seahaven due to being psychologically crippled by a phobic fear of water. He developed aquaphobia after his father apparently died in a boating accident. It was a staged death. Constant radio broadcasts on the local station warn of the dangers of leaving the comforts of one's hometown and the chaos of the outside world. The producers of the show have manipulated Truman's life and psyche very badly. They faked his father's death and they got rid of the girl whom he loved.

In a crucial close-up scene on a pier after hitting golf balls aimlessly into the water, Marlon assures Truman of his loyalty and honesty as his best friend. "I would never lie to you. I would gladly step in front of traffic for you, Truman. And the last thing that I would ever do is lie to you." Tears are welling up in the eyes of both pals. From his microphone in the control studio to Marlon's hidden earpiece, Christof is telling the dialogue to the actor, feeding him his lines. It is the biggest whopper of all time, yet it is not a pure lie. The relationship between true and false, between truth and lies, the simulacrum or hyperreality of this moment, has a complex structure. In the "post-truth" culture, there is a paradoxical synthesis of authenticity and lies.

Truman begins to suspect that "something is going on." A light fixture falls from the sky. Raindrops fall only on his head. He espies a camera crew behind an elevator door. He overhears a radio transmission while in his car that describes precisely where he himself is driving. In the final climactic scene, Truman escapes on the small *Santa Maria* sailboat, no longer afraid of the water. As Truman becomes increasingly aware of the fakeness of his life and his prisoner status, Christof becomes more and more desperate to come up with tricks to keep him from leaving. Truman's departure will be the death of the show. Truman sails until his boat strikes the wall of a painted sky. He has reached the edge of his cosmos.

My Two Key Differences from Baudrillard

I have two key differences from Baudrillard. First key difference: For me, the most crucial area for research and reflection about simulation, the simulacrum, and hyperreality is not the diagnosis of that postmodern and hyper-modern cultural situation for its own sake. To assert that "everything is simulation" is irrationally obsessive and not empirically valid. The advantage of the hypothesis of simulation is rather the ways that new challenges to, or contestations of, the hegemonic techno-cultural system that we call simulation are made visible by the assertion of the simulacrum. The epistemological stance is the key. What is pivotal is the idea that "everything is simulation" – the very idea that was so anathema to Baudrillard's critics, that was too "totalizing" for them. My focus is on the question of which new resistance and transformation practices and strategies are enabled by the epistemological bearing. Baudrillard himself moved somewhat towards

that emphasis with his concepts such as seduction, the "radical illusion of the world," and "taking the side of objects."

Second key difference: We now exist fully in the cultural circumstance of digitalization – of digital, virtual, and cybernetic technologies and their effects on the lives of citizens of late capitalism. It is not sufficient anymore to criticize or oppose or lament this conjuncture, as Baudrillard often, in his tone, appears to be doing. We must operate within the situation of the digital. There is a happy coincidence between these two key points of my divergence from, or going beyond, Baudrillard. We can look for ideas and projects of resistance to hyperreality and the simulacrum in the context of radical technological praxis and Creative Coding.