

# **Baudrillard's Bastards: 'Pataphysics After the Orgy – Some Lessons for Journalists**

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Most thinkers write badly because they tell us not only their thoughts but also the thinking of the thoughts. – Nietzsche (1878), *Human, All Too Human*, Aphorism 188.

## **The Invisible Philosopher**

Let's start with the 'pataphysian himself:

- *The consumer "no more 'believes' in advertising than the child believes in Father Christmas, but this in no way impedes his capacity to embrace an internalized infantile situation, and to act accordingly" (1968/2005:182).*
- *"Information is directly destructive of meaning and signification" (1981b/1994:79).*
- *"The Gulf War did not take place" (1991/1995).*

From his earliest writings Jean Baudrillard has been a media provocateur of such Nietzschean brilliance that it has blinded many theorists to the depth and originality of his critique of the news business and television in the DisInformation Age.

In addition to smarting at his accurate and aphoristic barbs about current affairs production, mainstream media feels even stronger resentment at his dismissal of the industry's claims to be a major force in shaping public consciousness. For Baudrillard, scientific jargon, Wall Street, disaster movies and pornography have deeper impact on our imaginations than the news industry. Television and written media, he wrote in 1970, have become narcotic and tranquilizing for consumers in their daily servings of scary news and celebrity fantasies. Only 9/11, he later declared with his usual withering acerbity, has been able to break through the non-event barrier erected by media to the world (2001).<sup>1</sup>

To recognize the accuracy of Baudrillard's daily observations, therefore, it is no surprise that we need to turn to a financial statistician, Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Taleb declares: "The problem with information is not that it is diverting and generally useless, but that it is toxic" (2004/5:60). "Prominent media journalism is a

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<sup>1</sup> Three years after 9/11 this suggestion still enraged Richard Wolin. In the *New Republic*, Richard Wolin described Baudrillard as a left-Heideggerian "simply incapable of naturally appreciating the validity and the worth of democratic political institutions". What particularly irked Wolin was Baudrillard's remark that 9/11 obsesses the US imagination as "a glorious, long-awaited instance of wish-fulfilment [...] something the entire world had long dreamed of and desired" (2004). Steeped as we are now in the 2008 quagmire of US involvement in Iraq and fundamentalist Asia, this specification of superpowered wish-fulfilment no longer seems so absurd.

Wolin seems to need a course from writer Stephen Poole in purifying his coercive rhetoric and the terminology of democracy. In *Unspeaking* (2006) Poole notes: "Stalin [...] was the first Allied leader to name 'democracy' as one of the things for which the Second World War was being fought" (195). Still closer to the point we can cite Gilles Keppel, a Muslim scholar, writing in the same year as Wolin: "Today, the word 'democracy' [...] has negative connotations for a large swathe of the educated Muslim middle class [...] signifying a change imposed from without" (2004:293, as cited by Poole).

As if to put Wolin completely in the wrong (if anyone doubted it), the novelist Don DeLillo, sounding like a simulacrum of Baudrillard, has declared: "In a society that's filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act.... People who are powerless make an open theater of violence. True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to."

thoughtless process of providing the noise that can capture people's attention" (62). Taleb, indeed, goes beyond his "news is noise" theories to embrace some ideas worthy of Baudrillard himself, if the French philosopher had not said something very similar more than a decade before: "Journalism may be the greatest plague we face today – as the world becomes more and more complicated and our minds are trained for more and more simplification" (39). "Symbolism is the child of our inability and our unwillingness to accept randomness" (xl).<sup>2</sup>

Even Baudrillard's academic admirers, however, have tended to treat the French 'pataphysicist as a literary thinker of no great theoretical depth.<sup>3</sup> Scott Bukatman, for example, declares: "Baudrillard is quintessential cyberpunk" (1993:199). While crediting Baudrillard with "the most sophisticated postmodern critique of mass communication currently available" (1995:144), British academic Nick Stevenson immediately asserted he would "reverse many of his [Baudrillard's] key assumptions" (145). He describes Baudrillard's politics as arousing "little sympathy" (ibid.), while treating the philosopher's comments on documentary as fiction as "less plausible – dare we say absurd" (169). Mark Poster, editing a

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<sup>2</sup> As an indication of the solely symbolic meaning of 9/11 for Americans, Taleb notes that stock market movements in the 18 months after the attack were far smaller than before, though investors imagined they were very volatile (39). And of course one of Baudrillard's sallies was that if the market crashed we would never be sure (see 'Transeconomics' in *The Transparency of Evil* (1990/1993:26).

<sup>3</sup> 'pataphysics – "The science of imaginary solutions, as defined (and spelled) by Alfred Jarry in his novel *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll* (Deeds and opinions of Doctor Faustroll, 1911). It is described by Jarry as extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics.[...] Baudrillard revives Jarry's 'pataphysics to describe the work of military planners and the inexorable build-up of sophisticated weapons-systems that are designed not to be used (1983)." – David Macey (2000:291) In *Fragments* (2001) Baudrillard speaks of 'pataphysics as an "esoteric parenthesis" in his life (15). Baudrillard's essay on 'pataphysics can be found at <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=569> in a translation by Drew Burk, a student at EGS.

selection of Baudrillard's writing, complains of "the totalizing quality" of his language (1988:5).<sup>4</sup>

Such insistence on the surface elements of Baudrillard's thought enables commentators to escape confrontation with his real challenges to Hegelian, Marxist and Freudian preconceptions: what kind of Synthesis determines our lives if the Antithesis no longer has any discernible relation with the Thesis? How does dialectic operate without an opposing term? What claims can we make to conscious purpose in organizing our lives when we admit that everything is determined by the subconscious?

Baudrillard's answers, plainly inspired by Nietzsche, Benjamin and Bataille,<sup>5</sup> are found in his scattered writings. But his conscious decision not to explain how he arrived at his conclusions has made him an invisible philosopher – hardly surprising when the death of the real in modern society has annihilated philosophy's historic opponent. Baudrillard rarely leaned on his peers as a crutch for his ideas. At one point after an EGS seminar, JB said that he had read a lot of Nietzsche when young but now could hardly remember any of it (pers.comm. 2002). It was typical of his sly humor. Too bad for you if you missed his Nietzschean allusions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In an amazing display of an editor's misunderstanding, Poster declares later in the introduction: "He fails to define his major terms, such as the code; his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world from that limited base. He ignores contradictory evidence..." (ibid.7). Readers might like to consider how much of this could also apply to Nietzsche. See Baudrillard 2004 for his rejection of pessimism charges.

<sup>5</sup> In *Fragments*, he notes the occurrence of Bs among the influences on his life.

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard took his top academic exam (l'agrégation) in Nietzsche's writings (2001:9).

## You are the Event

*My books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery ... I've never presented such explorations as revealed truth. – Marshall McLuhan (1969: 236).*

As a result of his refusal (like Nietzsche or Bataille) to give us a single, overarching exposition of his ideas (as Wittgenstein once thought he was doing with his *Tractatus* but then changed his mind, just as Baudrillard did with *The System of Objects*), we are left with a series of brilliant apothegms (as Wittgenstein came to think was the only way to do philosophy). Baudrillard's notes on the 'inhuman, all too inhuman' often seem uncanny in their prescience. To take an essay from 1981, for example, that could be read as a commentary on television today:

Rather than creating communication, [information] exhausts itself in the act of staging communication... 'You are the event.' More and information is invaded by this phantom content...a circular arrangement through which the desire of the audience is staged, the anti-theater of communication, which, as one knows, is never anything but the recycling ...of the traditional institution...Immense energies are deployed to hold this simulacrum at bay, to avoid the brutal desimulation that would confront us in the face of the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning (1981b:80).

Baudrillard did not need to watch 'reality' shows or modern politics on display in order to diagnose television's insidious invasion of our fantasy lives.

As a result, he rarely wrote about television, which 50 years after its mass dissemination, has in fact produced little worth writing about – certainly nothing to match the films of Orson Welles, Maya Deren or Jonathan Weiss's *Atrocity Exhibition* (see below), works of art that have changed our perspective on what the moving picture can do and how the movie can relate to people in society. Nor has the Web (as distinct from video games) produced masterpieces of the kind that change our relations with each other (the Internet begat email which begat spam and the Web begat the computer virus). Google is a child that grew into a monster, and Second Life, as the joke goes, suffers from even worse kinds of exploitation than the first one.

We can appreciate how far Baudrillard outdistanced his rivals by comparing him with Raymond Williams, who, judging from the number of references to his work, is generally considered the profoundest modern communication theorist in a sociological mode. The disparity is so glaring that I have relegated the Williams text on the relation between base and superstructure to a footnote, since it surely must make most readers desperate for Baudrillard's sense of style.<sup>7</sup> And in fact, Baudrillard's major standpoint since 1981 (explained in *Simulacra and Simulation*) is

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<sup>7</sup> In a 1973 essay on Marxist base-superstructure ideas, Williams underlined that "communication and its material means are intrinsic to all distinctively human forms of labor and social organization" (50) and inveighed against "accommodation with the bourgeois concept of mass communications" as well as commodified interpretations of the relationship between base and superstructure, rather than treating these aspects as dynamic (52-53). But the point of the essay by Williams was to challenge McLuhanesque interpretations of media development. This is how he made his point:

"Historically changing means of communication have historically variable relations to the complex of productive forces and to the general social relationships which are produced by them and which the general productive forces both produce and reproduce" (50).

that it is no longer possible (and certainly makes no sense) to differentiate between the two, since the superstructure has swallowed up whatever was material or real in the base.

**Four-Dimensional Man: JB, JGB, JLB, JLG  
– Baudrillard, Ballard, Borges, Godard**

The implications of Baudrillard's thought for journalistic practice, if any news managers are reading, can be examined from four dimensions. The most neglected part of his philosophy relates to photographs. In characteristic style, Baudrillard was dismissive of his abilities here, claiming that photography enabled him to escape from philosophy (pers. comm. 2002). This should put up a red flag to anyone who remembers that 'pataphysics offers only imaginary solutions. His words and practices are worth examining further, not least because he said: "What I bemoan is the aestheticization of photography, its having become one of the Fine Arts..." (139).

Similarly, we can learn from his spiritual brother, the "science fiction" author J.G. Ballard, whose imagination is in 'pataphysical relation with reality (and each wrote regularly about the other). Ballard offers a Baudrillard moment when he has a psychiatrist say in *Super-Cannes*: "Shopping is the last folkloric ritual that can help build a community... along with traffic jams and airport queues" (2000:18).

The third dimension in which to consider Baudrillard's lessons for journalism is through the works of Jorge Luis Borges, who pointed out that writers create their own ancestry of predecessors, while a genius changes the way we look at other authors.

While Borges carefully documented in fiction the ways in which imagination creates the world, Baudrillard has shown us how the material world recreates our imagination, throwing us back into the Borges fictions with a fresh appreciation of their inevitability.

Finally, the fourth dimension, time, takes us to Baudrillard's relations with someone who seems never to have acknowledged an intellectual father (though lots of uncles): Jean-Luc Godard. The celebrator of B-gangster movies, brainless science fiction films, the American musical and the romantic comedy, Godard is in fact obsessed by the emotional power of the documentary. Even his science fiction parody *Alphaville* was as much a documentary of contemporary Paris as Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967). As Baudrillard recognized, the sci-fi terrors of contemporary life come from its systems not its objects.

Each of these artists are Baudrillard's bastards, in the same way that humanists and "politicians of hope" are Voltaire's bastards.<sup>8</sup> They may not acknowledge themselves as children of their putative father but we can see the likenesses, the inherited qualities, the struggle for some to escape from his influence – and the way they can make us think anew about the originator.

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<sup>8</sup> This was the title of John Ralston Saul's stimulating book on "the dictatorship of reason in the West" (1992), which treats the Enlightenment project as a Baudrillardian system as pernicious as religion in its fantasies of rationality.



### Photography: The World as Fact and Hallucination

*It is the object which sees us, the object which dreams us. It is the world which reflects us, it is the world which thinks us. – Jean Baudrillard (1999:142)*

The most powerful photographic images, at least in Western culture's reception of them, are hallucinatory rather than documentary or 'artistic' (Robert Capa's Spanish Republican Soldier "at the moment of death", Dorothea Lange's Okie family, Walker Evans's Alabama sharecroppers, the Saigon police chief shooting a suspected VietCong, the Abu Ghraib prison tortures, to name some obvious examples). Rather than offering knowledge or insight, the most that "professional" photos achieve (Cartier-Bresson, Ansel Adams) is an extreme intensity of surface that makes their subjects almost unseeable at the same time as they become iconic. That is why the factual conditions under which horror photographs were taken and the motives of their photographers as well as the motives of viewers provoke so much (apparently permanent) controversy and puzzlement: the spectator is implicated simply by looking and must seek consolatory justifications for regarding the pain of others.

That is also why the problem of photography cannot be solved by technology or philosophy. It depends neither on technical means nor rationality. Therefore, when Baudrillard said he used photography as an escape from philosophy, from thinking, it

was not dismissive of photograph's powers, as his essay accompanying a catalogue of his 1985-1999 photos makes clear:

The photograph isn't an image in real time...Photography produces a kind of thunderstruck effect, a form of suspense and phenomenal immobility that interrupts the precipitation of events" (1999:134). "The dramatic quality of the photographic image comes from the subject's resolve to impose itself in its discontinuity and immediacy" (132). "Photography conveys the state of the world in our absence. ...The best photographs... are of those people and things for whom the other does not exist, or no longer exists – primitive peoples, down-and-outs, objects (136).

At one point he speaks of "the hallucination that should properly inhabit the image" (139) and how he approached taking a photograph and his avoidance of manipulation ("any touching-up, second thoughts or staging assumes an abominably aesthetic character") (133). He states: "The object must be fixed with an intense, immobilizing space. It is not the object of the photograph who must pose, but the photographer who must hold his breath in order to create a blank region in time and in his body. But who must also refrain mentally from breathing, and empty his mind, so that the mental surface is as virgin as the film...There is in this an enchantment which one can also find in playing – the enchantment of passing beyond your own image and being delivered up to a kind of fatality. It is you and it isn't you who are playing" (134). "Photography is obsessive, temperamental, ecstatic and narcissistic in character" (133).

The result: “In the best of cases, you can, when you have looked long and hard at such a photograph, forget that you took it” (146). All this is a long way from the experience of most news photographers, for whom the subject is given (and often does not ‘demand to be photographed’). The hallucinatory projection onto the subject comes from the society that demands the photograph as an experience. As a result, many of the most famous photos from Matthew Brady’s US Civil War photos to Dorothea Lange’s mid-Western sharecroppers in the 1930s were carefully staged for effect as well as aesthetic clarity, as Susan Sonntag’s books on photography have remarked. They had nothing of the selfless absorption of play in their making.

Baudrillard proposes a different approach, a search for photographic practice that would show the world in our (the observer’s) absence. Leonard Retel Helmrich, a Dutch-Indonesia documentary filmmaker (born 1959) and pioneer of “single shot cinema,” has tried to go part of the way along this route by designing equipment that minimizes his obtrusiveness in the scenes he is filming. However, he determines his camera movements by his interest in the particular aspect of the scene he is shooting.

In his use of photography, Baudrillard would have us go further: the “intense, immobilizing” moment would be the photographer’s as well as the object. The photographer’s empty mind would produce a photograph that he could not have deliberately taken.

Baudrillard’s own photographs show the theory in practice, or the practice that led to the theory. The best offer an image the camera has not “seen” before. At the

same time, the technical control that professionals admire is missing: focus, depth of field, color balance, even framing are left to chance.

### **J.G. Ballard: The Suitcase in and out of the Movies**

*“Everyone says there’s too much violence on TV but secretly they want more”. – J.G. Ballard, Essays for the New Millennium (1994:192)*

*Hijackers “are generally poor linguists [...] They prefer not to understand what is going on around them, so they can impose their own subjective image upon the external world – a trait common to all psychotics”. – The Atrocity Exhibition (1969/93:100)*

Baudrillard and Ballard haunt each other’s work. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard hails Ballard’s *Crash* as “the first great novel of the universe of simulation” (119), and points to the similarity with Borges (“but in another register”). For his part, Ballard offers a sly homage in his technological fantasy *Super-Cannes* (2000): “...the young French waitress [...] wore jeans and a white vest printed with a quotation from Baudrillard” (88).

Like Baudrillard, JGB hops from one ‘pataphysical exploration to the next, so that his stories often read like the fictionalization of a Baudrillard essay. Take this mix of titles from Ballard and Baudrillard: *The Disaster Area*, *The Concentration City*, *The Great American Desert*, *The Electrographic Dream*, *The Subliminal Man*, *California*

Time, the Impossible Man. Who wrote which title? It could be an academic trivia question.<sup>9</sup>

Ballard shares Baudrillard's recognition of the place of the desert in the American psyche (*AE* 140) and observes: "Deserts possess a particular magic, since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time. Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time. [...] Modern shopping malls have much the same function" (1969/1993:138).<sup>10</sup>

J.G. Ballard is an intensely visual author but the clearest projection of his ideas can be found in the faithful (some say overfaithful) 2001 film adaptation by a much younger artist, Jonathan Weiss (born 1964), based on Ballard's 1974 condensed novels (reprinted with introductions in 2001). Just as *Crash* (made into a film by David Cronenberg) documents Ballard's imaginative confrontation with the sudden, catastrophic death of his wife (of pneumonia, though, not in a car crash as *Kindness of Women* fantasizes),<sup>11</sup> *Atrocity Exhibition*<sup>12</sup> attempts to record imaginatively the world of the late 1960s. To quote from his fictionalized essay on the period about a character of the time: "Like so many others at the end of the 60s, that

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard's 'condensed novel' *The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As A Downhill Motor Race* is an echo of 'pataphysics pioneer Alfred Jarry's *The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race*. Gilles Deleuze wrote of Jarry as an unrecognized precursor to Martin Heidegger, the ultimate critic of technology (all texts available as <http://www.pataphysics-lab.com/sarcophaga/>).

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard writes of the US desert in *America* (1988): "You are delivered from all depths there -- a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points."

<sup>11</sup> David Pringle has attempted to separate fact from fiction in this book at [http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb\\_pringle\\_kindness.html](http://www.rickmcgrath.com/jgballard/jgb_pringle_kindness.html)

<sup>12</sup> I have omitted the definite article to distinguish it from the novel.

ten-year pharmaceutical trial, she thought of the media landscape as a life-support system, force-feeding a diet of violence and sensation into her numbed brain” (2000: 215). “Thermonuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an uneasy realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. The death of feeling and emotion has at last left us free to pursue our own psychopathologies as a game” (226).

The film *Atrocity Exhibition* takes us inside this world, and it is not a game. In the same way that Maya Deren’s experimental movies project phantasies onto film in the same, time-jogging style as dreams, *Atrocity Exhibition* purports to assemble sequences shot by a doctor who is desperately uncovering the links between the paradoxes of his world. “Sooner or later,” Ballard writes, “like everything else, science is going to turn into television” (235).

In the meantime, the media do not provide a life-support system but rather confuse and overturn our familiar ways of assembling meaning from experience (see Steven Poole later in this section on the Guantánamo torture camp and ways of treating prisoners).

The Abu Ghraib photos treated the abominable as commonplace, images to share with friends and potential accomplices. The protagonist in *Atrocity Exhibition* is alone. His photographs result from the opposite experience: “Using a series of photographs of the most commonplace objects – this office, let us say, a panorama of New York skyscrapers (the World Trade Towers), the naked body of a woman, the

face of a catatonic patient – he [...] *extracted* the elements of time.<sup>13</sup> The results were extraordinary. A very different world was revealed. The familiar surroundings of our lives, even our smallest gestures, were seen to have totally altered meanings" (197/1993:6/2001).

In this world, sex can be reduced to a suitcase of props (echoes of Peter Greenaway), atrocity becomes an aesthetic act,<sup>14</sup> the psychiatrists are haunted by the suspicion that their patient is saner than they are, and a map of a nuclear blast seems to promise an understanding of its rationality, if only we could learn to read the coordinates right.<sup>15</sup>

Weiss himself points to the disturbing effect of seeing documentary footage outside its context: "There is a very special psychological effect that comes from using decontextualized real footage, even after our little reality TV epidemic. When you view plastic surgery footage, or car crash simulations with dead bodies, outside the context of a documentary or program on that subject, the result is entirely different from watching the same material with a narrator droning on. The archival footage I used in *Atrocity*, which required months of searching in US government archives, brought another level to the film, one that could not have been achieved in any other manner" (ballardian.com).

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<sup>13</sup> In his essay on photography Baudrillard speaks of a photograph (in contrast to video) standing outside time.

<sup>14</sup> "The atrocity exhibition was more stirring than the atrocity" (1994:176).

<sup>15</sup> Many critics of Ballard ignore his 'pataphysical surrealism, as evidenced by the discussion of the film *Atrocity Exhibition* at <http://www.ballardian.com/weiss-atrocity-exhibition-review>.

How few 'reality-based' programmes attempt to present what a subject sees (as distinct from that person's viewpoint).<sup>16</sup> Fewer still confront the world whose philosophical implications Baudrillard spells out. Over 25 years ago, Baudrillard wrote: "It is useless to fantasize about state projection of police control through TV...TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself. There is no need to imagine it as a state periscope spying on everybody's life – the situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other" (1981a:48).

Ballard follows up the same thought in the new millennium: "Freedom. A giant multinational like Fuji or General Motors sets its own morality. The company defines the rules that govern how you treat your spouse, where you educate your children, the sensible limits to stock market investment. The bank decides how big a mortgage you can handle, the right amount of health insurance to buy. There are no more moral decisions than there are on a new superhighway. Unless you own a Ferrari, pressing the accelerator is not a moral decision, Ford and Fiat and Toyota have engineered in a sensible response curve. We can rely on their judgement, and that leaves us free to get on with the rest of our lives. We've achieved real freedom, the freedom from morality" (*Super-Cannes* 2000:95).

Ballard has also remarked: "The visual space we occupy doesn't actually coincide with the external world" (200), while Weiss has cited Andrei Tarkovsky's phantasmagorical *Mirror* as a reference for making his film.

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<sup>16</sup> Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2008) declares itself as a fictional documentary. See Sanford Schwartz (2008).



Some artists are trying to repair this disconnect between our visual experience and the external world. Michael Moore's movies offer a road-show version of a subject's experience of the recalcitrant world. But no philosophically serious issues are tackled. Michael Moore's visual space (as presented) and the external world coincide in his movies. It is frightening enough – the auto town that goes bust, the striking bookstore workers who have to meet interviewers in the dark, the soldiers aware they are sent to Iraq to die for a policy no-one outside government seems to support, and life-long workers whose health care and benefits are worse than they could get free in Cuba.

Similarly, Hunter S. Thompson produced a figure as demented as Ballard's *AE* protagonist, but demands that we assent to his delusions.<sup>17</sup> Tom Wolfe has exploited the modern novel's documentary potential – but only with a relentless attention to surface. We must turn to France and Chris Marker (*Sans Soleil*, *Letter from Siberia*, etc.) to find any documentary work reflecting so determinedly a sensibility that tries to make images speak with the authority of individual experience, though this takes him from Iceland to Japan and back in search of meaning. As Marker proposes in *Immemory*, memory can be considered as geographical rather than simply temporal.

The echo is of Borges, the poet of maps, mental and physical. Jonathan Weiss recalls a comment by Ballard in *The Atrocity Exhibition* that the media

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<sup>17</sup> In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), classified as fiction.

landscape of today is a map of our current psychological territory, and remarks: "The way we live life today, we have lost the territory" (director's commentary to the film).

### Jorge Luis Borges: Maps without Territories

*La ville, c'est une fiction. – Godard, Letter to Freddie Buache (1982).*

Borges makes regular appearances in Baudrillard's books, always with approval: "Borges was part of my...imaginary bestiary," he notes (2001/2003:16). As far back as *The Precession of Simulacra* (in 1981:1) JB notes the Borges fable of the map that covers the territory exactly, if only to note that "today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. [...]It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory –*precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory".<sup>18</sup>

It was Borges who gave us the stimulating idea that each writer makes us aware of unacknowledged predecessors (1951, in 1999:364). In addition to offering 'A New Refutation of Time' (1944, in 1999:315-332), Borges confesses that for him as for Baudrillard, Nietzsche was a god (1937, in 1999:179). At the same time the master schematizer insists: "Reality is neither symmetrical nor schematic" (1938, in 1999:183). "Is there anything less like beauty than perfect symmetry?" he declares.

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<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard often shows familiarity with the obscurer corners of the Argentinian's works. In conversation, the specialist in simulacra without referents cites Borges for the mirror people who appear in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1967-9:67-8) about to revolt against being forced to ape the humans on this side of the looking glass, and suggests we inhabit a perilous world of "the emperor monopolizing everything in his image" (1997/1998:100).

In his first book, *Le Système des Objets/The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard writes of the cerebral hypochondria of cyberneticians in their obsession with the absolute transmissability of information. JLB's stories are, similarly, about systems of objects described with this hypochondria of the mind in which the map and its narrative territory (the story) are created equal. His images, like Baudrillard's after he had abandoned the safe but neurotic comforts of academic objectivity, provide a literary equivalent of the optical illusion.<sup>19</sup>

Reading Borges through Baudrillard, we can appreciate how many maps of modern society create the territories they depict, from the War on Terror to the US Presidential contest, from the drama of Wall Street to the life of Paris Hilton, from psychiatric labeling to our mental images of the cities in which we live – all expressions of 'pataphysics at its most insistent.

The journalistic lessons to learn from reading Borges via Baudrillard – that maps exist without any territory except those they themselves bring into being – are limited only by the system and technology. In lieu of a television channel devoted to exposing such hyperreality, one can envisage programs that deconstruct fashionable ideas. For example, we might note adaptive explanations of evolutionary growth (see Lewontin 2008:40) or present Stephen Jay Gould's criticism of Darwin's "idealized metaphor" (Lewontin's phrase) of evolution as an "insensibly graded series" of changes (ibid.:41).

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<sup>19</sup> The most Godardian of commercial film directors, Bernardo Bertolucci, made *The Spider's Strategem* (1970) from the Borges story *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero*, which exploits the idea of human societies as fictional constructs.

More substantially, media programmers could subject Freud to analysis as “one of the most subtle of our many attempts to use reason in a ‘magical’ rather than in a scientific manner” (Webster 1993:4). Freud’s transformation of his failures into achievements, fueled by the baleful influence of Ernst Haeckel’s speculative ‘fundamental biogenetic law’ (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny) and his messianic ambition, remains a more than historical curiosity, a fundamental misdirection that still has not entered the psychoanalytic mainstream (ibid.: 229).

At the very least, a recognition of the failure of many social concepts to even attempt to match reality should empower journalists to treat all such labeling with skepticism. The challenge is to turn this perception into a visual program exposing the fictions that constitute the cities of our mind (given that the Web and small publications have the theoretical power to provide writers with a platform for their work). The pitfall lies in the often noted response of the system to critics: today the system routinely assimilates criticism and celebrates it as an example of modern society’s openness. Journalists are free to point out that the promised “surgical strikes” in the 1991 Gulf War were rareties since only seven percent of the ordnance dropped on Iraq could be accurately targeted (Poole 108). They may note that for Guantánamo camp’s commander, suicides by detainees form an “act of asymmetric warfare” (ibid. 248). But in what we might call assimilative modernity, criticisms can be noted and ignored, so that soon even the critics cannot stand to repeat them for fear of seeming repetitive (even though the reality does not change).

**Godard: Invisible Cinema(s)**

*Lucky Luke,*<sup>20</sup> *Lucky Jean-Luc.* – Jean-Luc Godard, *Meeting Woody Allen*  
(1986)

One answer to the problem of making film a dynamic medium for ideas can be found in the work of the Lewis Carroll of modern cinema, Jean-Luc Godard. Though he made his fame as a creator of unusual fictions (*Breathless* – 1960, *Contempt* – 1963, *Pierrot Le Fou*– 1965, *Weekend* –1967 among them), Godard has conducted a parallel – and in many ways, more interesting – career as a maker of documentaries and pseudocumentaries. The latter in particular (*Deux ou trois chose que je sais d'elle* – 1967, *One Plus One* – 1968, *British Sounds* – 1969, *Numéro Deux* – 1975) testify to his abiding interest in the hybrid form of essay-fiction, though all his ‘commercial’ films have been intertextual in organization, with Godard himself often breaking the frame of the story or ‘reality’ presented.

Without doubt his magnum opus in the pseudocumentary essay is *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1998), eight linked meditations on cinema as fiction and as fact. Godard’s biographer Colin MacCabe describes it as “a genuinely new way of presenting history” with “extraordinary force” (MacCabe 2005:299). His technology of overlays, allowing “the eye to negotiate for itself” in watching the screen (ibid.), is remarkable enough. It can be matched by the work of Dziga Vertov (Godard was part of the ‘Dziga Vertov’ group of revolutionaries in 1968) or by Orson Welles’s *F for Fake*,

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<sup>20</sup> Lucky Luke is a cartoon cowboy popular in French.

another director who is a regular reference, in this film made at the same time as *Histoire(s)* (MacCabe 2005:313-4).

Just as remarkable is Godard's *mélange* of fact and fiction. In the first film of the series Godard "juxtaposes an Elizabeth Taylor smile from George Stevens's *A Place in the Sun* with footage of the Nazi concentration camps. On the soundtrack, Godard relates how Stevens was one of the first to film the camp depicted, and he analyses the force of Taylor's smile in terms of Stevens's desire to celebrate life after this experience of death" (ibid: 299).

In fact, this points to the underlying theme of the series as it reveals itself gradually through an apparent celebration of cinema's power: the historic failure of the conventional movie industry to deal with the reality of death camps before or since, despite its power over the imagination. Godard publicly refused an honor from the New York Film Critics' Circle, citing nine aspects of American cinema he had failed to influence – and topping the list was his failure "to prevent Mr Spielberg from reconstructing Auschwitz" (ibid.:327).

Godard clearly envisages what he sees as limits to documentary fiction. Pseudo-documentary, by contrast, does not disguise its fictional nature and makes its appeal not to 'truth' but to the imagination, and the major challenge to the imagination he sees as the violence in the world. For example, *Made in USA* (1966) presents a hallucinatory kaleidoscope of the terrors of a world given over to violence and repression, matched only by Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

The juxtaposition of violence and imagination is characteristic of 'pataphysics, as Baudrillard's application of the philosophy has shown. It is no accident that the Beatles' song about a serial killer "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" (from *Abbey Road*) mentions Joan, a student who "was quizzical / studied 'pataphysical science in the home" (Beatles 1986).<sup>21</sup>

MacCabe notes the importance of montage – the basis of much of the Beatles' songwriting appeal – to Godard's theory of film ("the foundation stone" and "the way forward", 2005:314). In the words of Pierre Reverdy, which he has often quoted in the past 25 years (McCabe 314): "The image is a pure creation of the mind, it cannot be born from a comparison but comes from the bringing together of two distant realities...An image is powerful not because it is brutal and fantastic, but because the association of ideas is distant and true" (1927:30, translation slightly changed).<sup>22</sup> *Histoire(s)* demonstrates that the powers of montage have hardly yet been tapped.

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<sup>21</sup> British 'pataphysicist Kevin Jackson reports: "A recent biography of Paul McCartney discloses that he well knew what 'pataphysics was when he bunged that reference into "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" – he'd been a fan of Jarry's Ubu plays since he heard one broadcast on the Third Programme some time in the mid- Sixties" (2003).

<sup>22</sup> As might be expected, his theory of montage spills over into his scripts. In their discussion on art in *The Old Place* (1999), Godard's partner Anne-Marie Miéville cites a story by Borges (claimed as a pataphysics relation by pataphysicians: see <http://michaelhalm.tripod.com/id91.htm>). Michael Joseph Halm points out that in pataphysics: "Opposites neither cancel each other out nor exist statistically as contraries[...]. Nor are their differences resolved in a dialectical analysis. Rather, they shuttle back, forth, and around in an open-ended spiral (gidouille)" (ibid.).

## Conclusion: Baudrillard in the Digital World

*Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermonuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials co-exist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudoevents, science and pornography – J.G. Ballard (1984: 96)*

In the essay that introduced us (and the makers of the 1999 blockbuster film *The Matrix*) to ‘the desert of the real’ (1981b:1), Baudrillard declares: “The era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials. (...) substituting the signs of the real for the real, (...) deterring every real process via its operational double” (ibid.:2). How he interprets this situation with regard to the media is spelled out in a 1985 essay: “What characterizes the mass media is that they are opposed to mediation, intransitive, that they fabricate noncommunication – if one accepts the definition of communication as an exchange, as the reciprocal space of speech and response, and thus of *responsibility*”.<sup>23</sup> It seems obvious that Baudrillard did not think the Internet and cellphones were any reason to change this assessment in succeeding years – and nor should we, when see how The Drudge Report trades in unsourced and unchecked rumor, and political decision-making takes its cues from anonymous mobs of bloggers.

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<sup>23</sup> ‘The Implosion of the Social in the Media, 1985, in Poster 1998:205)



In *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), Jean Baudrillard states clearly what he means by describing the modern world as being “after the orgy” – succeeding the range of liberations in public and private lives that have failed to bring freedom (3): “Now all we can do is simulate the orgy, simulate liberation... we are obliged to replay all scenarios precisely because they have already taken place, actually or potentially” (3-4, translation slightly modified). What this means for media Baudrillard had already spelled out a decade earlier: “The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real, and it can no longer be said that the latter is distorted by it” (Baudrillard 1981b:54).

This apparent pessimism has led a number of critics (Stevenson and Mark Poster among them)<sup>24</sup> to classify Baudrillard alongside conservatives such as Neil Postman and Alan Bloom or William H. Gass (“The information highway has no destination, and the sense of travel it provides is pure illusion” – Gass: 2006). Baudrillard himself rejects the label, arguing that finding a way to work within hyperreality is more important than theoretical positioning. This paper points to a number of directions that critical media practitioners can take, through new practices of photography and filming, deconstruction of the mental maps imposed on events by politicians or ‘the system’, and engagement with the challenge of creating a cinema of ideas through revived techniques and technology.

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<sup>24</sup> See Poster 2001:136.

All Baudrillard's bastards cited here are notable for their sceptical attitude towards society's technology, like their master.<sup>25</sup> The most adventurous, Jean-Luc Godard, fills *Histoire(s)* with images of himself at the electronic typewriter and mechanical video editor, which few film-makers now use. The youngest, Jonathan Weiss, has been criticized (to his annoyance) for situating *Atrocity Exhibition* in the 1960s with references to Marilyn Monroe, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan rather than Britney Spears, Madonna or George Bush. Neither Ballard nor Borges have shown any interest in the digital revolution as compared to the psychological impact of the total technological society. Baudrillard himself was notable for his lack of interest in the gadgets of his age. Even the camera came to him by chance (pers. comm. 2002).

In fact, this distance from the objects of his age confirms Baudrillard's prescience rather than his ignorance. It suggests that the challenge is not just related to media but stems rather from the system which the technology has introduced and on which it depends. In this lies the opportunity for those embedded in media culture to find a different way out. As Baudrillard told European Graduate School students in an open discussion: "Theoretical discourse [...] is never pessimistic or optimistic, it's just a form. The salvation is in the form, not the content, even when you say even the most pessimistic things. The content may be pessimistic or nihilistic, but the form, if it succeeds, is never either one, it is a transfiguration of the content" (2002).

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<sup>25</sup> Baudrillard confessed in 2002: "I don't use the Internet, I'm technically, physically not able to use it" (2002). But with 800 websites devoted to him, as EGS Programme Director Wolfgang Schirmacher pointed out, he had no control of their content. "It's not a compliment, I am a hostage on the Internet," Baudrillard pointed out.

*“What are you doing after the orgy? That is a question. There is no answer” (Baudrillard at the European Graduate School, 2002).*

## **About the Author**

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