

15. Jean Baudrillard – Democracy Beyond Hyperreal Simulation

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Abstract: In the 1980s, Baudrillard regarded major democratic phenomena such as elections and even the fall of the Berlin Wall as “non-events”—empty performances or simulacra that prevent real, meaningful political change. In tune with his early analysis of consumer society, Baudrillard also points to the “democracy of social standing” whereby mere signs of freedom, equality and well-being abound to be consumed through the variety of goods and political parties on offer; all of which serve to hide the absence of democracy. In what he termed hyperreality, cultural models circulate; social and geopolitical events repeat themselves in an endless cycle.

In hyperreality, ideology criticism becomes senseless as it undermines and defies rational distinctions between fact and fiction, appearance and reality.

Given the limitations of Ideologiekritik in such a situation, I show how Baudrillard applies the tools of Nietzschean genealogy and specifically the latter’s critique of binary models. Genealogy exposes the contingency of any social structure and opens up possibilities within the perspective being addressed without directly rejecting it. Genealogical critique as practiced by Nietzsche and Baudrillard offers hypothetical perspectives, but it also appeals to and subsequently questions our own perspective. I thus emphasize that Baudrillard not only outlines the problematic of hyperreality, but he also offers a so-called ‘imaginary solution’ through his notion of symbolic exchange, which is grounded in principles of ambivalence and reciprocity instead of competition, mutual distrust and polarization.

Keywords: hyperreality, polarization, democracy, seduction, simulation, symbolic exchange

Introduction

Baudrillard provides a framework for understanding the crisis of democracy today, fueled by identity politics and (mis/dis)information¹ on social media. Baudrillard simultaneously offers an alternative, so-called “imaginary solution” to the crisis of democracy and the misinformation pandemic with his idea of symbolic exchange, which grounds politics in principles of ambivalence and reciprocity rather than mutual distrust and polarization. Polarization transforms political adversaries into perceived enemies, spreading animosity. This social sorting reduces interaction between opposing groups, normalizes incivility, and leads to the denigration of those with different perspectives.²

Baudrillard’s work demonstrates that it is not only institutional change that is necessary but also a transformed social relationship that embraces ambivalence and epistemic restraint.³ Democracy, in this vision, is not merely a system to be perfected but a shared practice. Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange is based on an alternative rationality that exposes power’s contingency and transforms polarization into communion. In the process, Baudrillard’s work reveals the hollowness of hyper-rational, inflated systems of thought and resists the mania for positivist, technological transparency.

¹ According to Cathryn van Kessel, Jason D. Manriquez & Kip Kline, misinformation is unintentional whereas disinformation is the intentional spreading of false information, see Cathryn van Kessel, Jason D. Manriquez & Kip Kline, “Baudrillard, hyperreality, and the ‘problematic’ of (mis/dis)information in social media,” *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 53:2 (2025): 250.

² For an analysis of the negative correlation between democracy and polarization see Patkós, V., & Plesz, B. “Does political polarisation undermine democratic accountability? Evidence from 28 European democracies,” *West European Politics*, 1–33 (2025).

³ Van Kessel et al. “Baudrillard, hyperreality, and the ‘problematic’ of (mis/dis)information in social media, 251 call for an appreciation of a “wobblier sense of reality” that can open up spaces that rely on the professional judgment of educators, “creating pedagogical spaces steeped in the ontological and epistemological humility that we are creating reality as we are experiencing it” (Ibid., 251). Van Kessel et al. take an “ontological” approach to be able to “defin[e].. and conceptualiz[e]... aspects of our lives that we might otherwise take for granted” (Ibid., 250). I agree that it is impossible to oppose “misinformation”, conspiracy theories, extreme views and polarization with logical solutions that assume that humans are predictable, and reality is stable (Ibid., 250). Building on Van Kessel, Manriquez et al., I take a genealogical approach as I also focus on the explicit and implicit power dynamics at play.

Democracy: Beyond the True and False

In his book *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction*, Alan Shapiro claims that “[t]here is a crisis of democracy or situation of post-truth.”⁴ In this article, I argue that the crisis of democracy is rooted in a polarization of perspectives, and specifically in the binary opposition between the true and the false. I concur with Shapiro that Baudrillard’s hyperreal sphere of cyberspace in a society of simulations explains the crisis of democracy. Shapiro defines Baudrillard’s key concept of hyperreal simulation as having “to do with an original thing getting substituted by its image, copy, statistical model, or code.”⁵ In my view, any definition of the simulacrum must, above all, make clear that Baudrillard is not nostalgic for an original or lost reality or truth.⁶

Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard rejects the idea that there can be one account of truth that corresponds with the way things are in themselves, “independently of the mediation of perspectives by relations of willing.”⁷ When claiming in the Final Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* that philosophy must, for the first time, confront the question of the “value of truth,” Nietzsche decides to analyze “truth” within a complex social and political system.⁸ Furthermore, in his essay “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,”⁹ Nietzsche overthrows the Platonic dualistic and hierarchical ordering between truth and the false, illusion and reality, by regarding the “pure drive towards truth” as an effect of de-

⁴ Alan Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction: Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism* (Digital Society, 2025), 16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For Baudrillard simulation “refers to something deep but calculable in the real construction of actual technical, practical or social ‘spaces.’ Simulation is not so much an attempt to resemble something in ‘appearance’ as to *reassemble* it from ‘within’, algorithmically.” See Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard. A Study in Cultural Metaphysics* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall Europe, 1996), 191.

⁷ Christopher Allsobrook “Contingent Criticism: Bridging Ideology Critique and Genealogy” in *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche’s Legacy for Political Thought*, edited by Herman W. Siemens and Vasti Roodt (De Gruyter, 2009), 703.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University, 1999), 143.

ception.¹⁰ In the process, Nietzsche reverses Plato's affirmation of the supersensuous as a standard of truth, and he problematizes the value of truth without simply privileging appearances, illusions, or the "false."

Likewise, Baudrillard stresses the undecidability between appearance and reality in simulacra. What Baudrillard calls simulation is not simply a false copy;¹¹ it is a process that consists of coded signs that refer to other signs within a model, not to an external referent or reality. The concept of simulation involves the disappearance of reality behind (its) signs as well as an internally generated "effect" of reality. Baudrillard's hyperreal world of simulation reassembles the real in the form of exclusively and universally determining codes of signification. The code permits opposition and alternation, but it is a pre-coded opposition, a pre-coded otherness.

Baudrillard relinquishes a view of truth as a timeless, stable ideal and focuses on the problem of binary oppositions, especially the one between the true and the false, with no appreciation for nuance and ambivalence. It is this appreciation that Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange brings to hyperreality and simulation.

Before we come to this symbolic alternative¹² to codified hyperreality, it is important to return to Shapiro's analysis¹³ that our current situation is characterized by "a crisis of democracy," which is fueled by "the emotional and ideological atmosphere of the polarizing 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' structured by the social media platforms."¹⁴ In this situation, there can be no neutral "spokesperson" capable of invoking "the truth" and inhabiting an "outside" position relative to simulation.¹⁵ Simulations are "filter bubbles" because both involve a self-referential world, producing "reality effects"—a "hyperreality." Simulation is a system of differences in which one cannot speak of something

¹⁰ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," 143.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: Continuum, 2004). See also Vanessa Freerks "Nietzsche's Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum," *The Sofia Philosophical Review* Vol. XII, No. 2. (2019): 33-56.

¹² For Shapiro, in order to challenge the simulacrum we need to transfigure the software code and update Baudrillard's critique through "creative coding." Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture*, 205- 319.

¹³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

“outside” the system.¹⁶

Baudrillard takes up the challenge of describing simulation when it is not possible to compare it to anything else. To understand the full scope of this challenge, we need to emphasize that Baudrillard makes a theoretical link between structural linguistics and simulation. Structural linguistics requires that we disregard the connection between language and reality; it presents a theory of meaning as determined differentially. Structural linguistics does not merely present us with a new theory of language; rather, it describes the social reality of late modernity. As a result, society moves from a “capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order.”¹⁷ The immanence of the code has taken the place of transcendent models (“God, Man, Progress, and even History”).¹⁸

“Life is now ruled by the discontinuous indeterminism of the genetic code, by the teleonomic principle [...] Finality is there in advance, inscribed in the code.”¹⁹

In the same way that language has codes or models that systematize communication, and just as cells contain genetic codes (DNA) that structure experience and behavior, society operates according to codes and models that organize human life. Hegarty explains that Baudrillard speaks of the general “code” that replaces the quasi-Marxist term “the system,” as the code is what drives the system.²⁰ Control is based upon codes (not powerful individuals or interest groups), and programming becomes the principle of social organization. The model of the code is DNA, which invisibly programs various directions and constrains individual behavior. It is subject to aleatory combinations and variations mixed with other social and environmental phenomena.²¹

¹⁶ Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 24.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, translated by Ian Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 59; italics in the text.

²⁰ Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), 55.

²¹ For Baudrillard, the cellular form of power does not contain any revolutionary principle at all. It is precisely on the most microscopic level of the molecular, the DNA code dominates and controls behavior. See Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, translated by Nicole Dufresne (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007b), 47.

“After the metaphysics of being and appearance, after energy and determinacy, the metaphysics of indeterminacy and the code... Digitality is its metaphysical principle (Leibniz’s God), and DNA its prophet... it is in the genetic code that the ‘genesis of simulacra’ today finds its completed form.”²²

In the order of simulacra, the model and its internal system of relations (which are cybernetically controlled) generate phenomena. The new operational formation is run by the machinery of the question-and-response process. The order of control is buried “in the depth of the ‘biological’ body,” in “black boxes where all the commandments ferment.”²³ This is the era of cellular programming, of molecular emission of signals:

“Whether it is prison cells, electronic cells, party cells, or microbiological cells we are dealing with, we are always searching for the smallest indivisible element... even space is no longer linear or unidimensional but cellular, indefinitely generating the same signals like the lonely and repetitive habits of a stir-crazy prisoner.”²⁴

From the biological to the carceral, at this locked-in (“cell”-ular) level there is no transcendent purpose or meaning. All that is recognized is the arbitrary mix of elements in this cellular, reflex world—everything is ready to be decoded. Binary combination is the framework; the mode of decoding it is through the zero and the one (0/1). Baudrillard refers to Jacques Monod as the “strict theologian” of this era.²⁵ Social theory must now be reconsidered in view of genetic programs. For Baudrillard, the digital code and its dual form regulate society. This code serves as the blueprint for processes of simulacra.

The code tries to embrace contingency, variety, and unpredictability. There is, however, no independent, external real, but rather a real that emerges only as an effect of the code. This is a world of simulated “tests” and programmed differences. Polls, elections, consumer purchases, and so forth are all part of a system of binary regulation stabilized by two political

²² Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; italics in the text.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59; Baudrillard plays with the (French) acronym for DNA: ‘ADN’ and ‘ADoNaï’ – the latter means God in Hebrew.

parties, two opposing classes, two (or more) choices at every moment. "Public" and "opinion" are, for Baudrillard, simulation models, as is their combination ("public opinion"): we see the "impossibility of obtaining a non-simulated response to a direct(ed) question."²⁶

Responses are structured within a binary system of affirmation or negation: every advertisement and poll is a test to which one responds. Through the selection among alternatives on offer, individuals are absorbed into a coded system of similarities and dissimilarities of identities and programmed differences. Different political parties, products, lifestyles, and so forth are intended to deter demands for radical social change. For Baudrillard,

"duopoly is the completed stage of monopoly. It is not that a political will (State intervention, anti-trust laws, etc.) shatters the market's monopoly: any unitary system, if it wants to survive, must find a binary regulation ... power is only absolute if it is able to diffract into various equivalents, if it knows how to divide in order to become stronger."²⁷

As a symbol of this stabilized society of simulations, Baudrillard refers to the Twin Towers of the New York World Trade Center (WTC):

"The two towers of the WTC are the visible sign of the closure of the system in the vertigo of doubling, while the other skyscrapers are each of them the original moment of a system continually surpassing itself in a perpetual crisis and challenge."²⁸

Two supposedly dominant poles (0/1) maintain a self-regulating, self-reproducing system. Oppositional, outside, or threatening elements to the system are functional parts of a society of simulation. They are mere "alibis" that only enhance social control. Digitization and cybernetic control are a universalizing cultural power because they reduce the concept "opposite" to a pure form without content, comparable to exchange value. The ones and zeros are an irresistible general medium of equivalence.²⁹

In the next section, I scrutinize how this polarization operates on

²⁶ Ibid., 67.

²⁷ Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 69.

²⁸ Ibid., 70.

²⁹ Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard. A Study in Cultural Metaphysics* (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall Europe, 1996), 177.

an individual and technical level toward subjectification and the making of subjects.³⁰

Personalized Polarization

In this section, I focus on the microlevel of polarization and how the digital code operates in subject formation. In his book, Shapiro points to the centrality of “personalized advertising” as a key aspect of digitization:

“The shift from mass advertising to personalized advertising provides key insights into the paradigm shift in the media generally from the pre-digital to the digital phase. Prior to digitalization, advertising was a non-personal marketing message not directed at any individual.”³¹

As a parallel to how social media platforms appeal to the personal level, we can look at Baudrillard’s early text *Consumer Society*. In this text, Baudrillard analyzes how early forms of mass advertising “interpellate” individual consumers into joining the consumption cycle.³² Baudrillard makes it clear, already in his analysis of “personalization” in consumer society, that consumers “are swayed by the fact that ‘they’ [advertisers] are sufficiently concerned to want to address us, to show us things, to take an interest in us.”³³ Like a protective mother, advertisers are attentive and have solutions to problems. Advertising suggests who one can become.

³⁰ Baudrillard’s concept of personalization can be paralleled to Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” which as the “conduct of conduct,” involves the formation of *subject positions* in discourses, processes of *subjectivation* in governmental power practices, and the constitution of ourselves as *ethical selves* in self-technologies. See Tania Murray Li “Governmentality Anthropologica,” *Canadian Anthropology Society*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2007): 275; 276.

³¹ Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture*, 155.

³² According to Louis Althusser, all ideology interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. A police officer shouts “Hey, you there!” and we answer the call to become a subject. See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, translated by G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014).

³³ Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, translated by Benedict James (New York: Verso, 2005), 185.

“The abundance of products puts an end to scarcity; the abundance of advertising puts an end to insecurity. The worst thing possible is to be obliged to invent one’s own motives for acting, for preferring, for buying. The individual in such circumstances is brought face to face with his own misapprehensions, his own lack of existence, his own bad faith and anxiety.”³⁴

Baudrillard ironically chronicles the various expressions of concern of advertisers for their crippled consumers and how they are “committed to the idea of happiness – to YOUR happiness.”³⁵ What is particular to consumer society is the construction of individual “difference” through the object system. For Baudrillard, advertising maintains the whole system of imposed differentiation—the choice of coded differentials by which individuals are integrated into the system. The available variety offers “personalization” so that individuals define themselves in opposition to other individuals.³⁶

The consumer system is grounded in the idea that the consumer has a choice and the freedom to choose. Advertising seeks to represent the explosion of this freedom as we are “given” advertising, so it is “the most democratic of products, the only one that is ‘free’ – and ‘free’ to all.”³⁷ Consumers “personalize” themselves according to their choice of brands. Consumers construct a “personality,” “a synthetic individuality,” through the manipulation of “marginal differences” that constitute the sign system.³⁸

Differences are systematically produced in tune with an order that absorbs and combines them all as identifying signs. Signs are substitutable for each other, so there is no more tension between them. As a result, the whole culture becomes a combinatorial machine.³⁹ This construction of a “personality” through consumption is only possible because “there is no one there – no person. This ‘person’ ... is absent, dead,

³⁴ Ibid., 186.

³⁵ Ibid., 184.

³⁶ William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard. Against Banality* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16.

³⁷ Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 187.

³⁸ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 88.

³⁹ Ibid., 104.

swept out of our functional universe.”⁴⁰

The creation of a synthetic identity is based on a pre-established range of choice (determined by the digital code), and it is at the root of our current polarized positions. In modern society, differentiation and competition (*concurrence*) are central to the personalization process. In consumer society, the individual is disciplined by a new ideological obligation to enter consumption by trying out the latest gadget. An obsessive new “universal curiosity” develops into the fear of missing the latest fashion, something new.⁴¹ This structure cannot be recognized by individualist assumptions regarding the nature of the consumer, for it is a “social fact;” yet it is realized on an individual basis, so the consuming mass does not have a collective existence.⁴² Consumers are fragmented and unorganized.⁴³

The consumption of sign value is based on a meaningful “totality” that is unreachable.⁴⁴ Here we see that Baudrillard’s work provides a further theoretical link between structural linguistics and consumer society. Even if it is accepted that “personality” or “referentiality” is only an illusion generated by the machine of language, as Baudrillard, following Nietzsche, maintains, the situation is transformed by the “liberation” of signifiers, which do not even have an illusory referentiality. For Baudril-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 88; italics in the text.

“c’est précisément *qu’il n’ y a personne*” - lost in translation is the ambiguity Baudrillard plays with here in French between ‘*une personne*’ (a person) and ‘*personne*’ (nobody) in Jean Baudrillard *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 125.

⁴¹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 81.

⁴² Baudrillard describes consumption in Durkheimian terms as “collective behaviour” something “enforced, a morality an institution” and a whole system of values.” (George Ritzer, “Introduction,” *Consumer Society* by Jean Baudrillard (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 4; Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 79).

⁴³ “Just as ‘the People’ are glorified by Democracy provided that they remain the people (and do not intervene on the political and social stage), so consumers are recognized as enjoying sovereignty (Katona speaks of the ‘powerful consumer’) so long as they do not attempt to exercise it on the social stage. The People are the workers, provided they are unorganized. The Public and Public Opinion are the consumers, provided they content themselves with consuming.” (Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 87). Originally in English from George Katona, *The Mass Consumption Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The translator cannot identify the page of this citation.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 224.

lard, following Nietzsche, the operation of language governs rational thought processes, and it is this which underlies personalization (and later simulation). In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche emphasizes the power of language to seduce us into accepting all kinds of meta-physical presuppositions, such as the division between subject and object, cause and effect, and he asks us to question our grammatical habits. As Baudrillard puts it:

“The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply indefinitely; indeed they must multiply in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded on lack.”⁴⁵

Sign value always delays satisfaction by referring the process of consumption to another object/sign in the system. Charles Levin rightly brings attention to the “attenuation of the affective dimension of social life [...] this functional stripping of the object world also erodes the subject’s capacity to ‘mean.’ The semantic dimension no longer emerges from the body because everything in relation to which it might emerge is already a plenitude: a ‘construction,’ a ‘production,’ an ‘effect.’”⁴⁶

As already mentioned, the consumer system that Baudrillard describes is not “other-worldly” in relation to the sensuous world of becoming. In Baudrillard’s view, with the advent of consumer society we have reached “the end of transcendence.”⁴⁷ Baudrillard dedicates a separate section to the “End of Transcendence,” a phrase he borrows from Marcuse.⁴⁸ The consumer is “immanent in the signs he arranges.”⁴⁹ According to Baudrillard:

“in the generalized process of consumption, there is no longer any

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Metaphysics*, 179.

⁴⁷ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 191.

⁴⁸ For more on alienation and the influence of Marcuse on Baudrillard see Douglas Kellner, “Critical Theory, Commodities and the Consumer Society,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1, 3 (1983): 66-83, and Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the crisis of Marxism* (London and Berkley: Macmillan and University of California Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 192).

soul, no shadow, no double, and no image in the specular sense. There is no longer any contradiction within being, or any problematic of being and appearance. There is no longer anything but the transmission and reception of signs, and the individual being vanishes in this combinatory and calculus of signs.”⁵⁰

In consumer society, advertising, for instance, “absorbs and regurgitates the seemingly radical forms of avant-garde; thus a piece of art that attempts to challenge the whole system of aesthetics can be used to advertise some ... haircare product.”⁵¹ The avant-garde is neutralized as style, fashion, or trend in advance, which means there is no point in even trying to (artistically) challenge any system.⁵²

This analysis is in tune with so-called “prosumer culture,”⁵³ whereby individuals are positioned as both producers and products. Within “spectacle-dominated economies,”⁵⁴ everyday life becomes an ongoing performance and staging of one’s individuality, preferences, as well as one’s group affiliation. Digital capitalism absorbs critique by re-configuring agency into performance, binding subjectivity to the imperatives of circulation and marketability. It transforms oppositional identities into consumable performances, marketable personas, thereby reinforcing the structural dynamics it challenges.⁵⁵ Baudrillard’s view of

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Richard Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.

⁵² Ibid., 128.

⁵³ The term prosumption was coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 and refers to a combination of production and consumption. See George Ritzer, “Prosumer Capitalism,” *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol. 56 (2015): 413-445.

⁵⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). Debord’s concept of “the spectacle,” refers to the omnipresence of visual images which leads to a world led by abstraction, a diminishing of what is actively and “directly lived” as well as an increase in the autonomy and power of images themselves. In a further development, the spectacle becomes generalized and infiltrates into everyday life, a situation Debord refers to as the “integrated spectacle” as developed in his later work *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. As Debord puts it, at this stage, “the spectacle is mixed into all reality, and irradiates it.” Guy Debord *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), 9.

⁵⁵ Gregory Swer, “Frankfurt School - the musical!: Shock Treatment and the Eros of online civilisation,” *Acta Academica* Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, 57 Issue 2 (2025): 9.

consumer society thus anticipates contemporary platforms where

“counter-discourse ... establishes no real distance... Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation... Our magic is white... it is the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no other myth than itself.”⁵⁶

For Baudrillard, consumer society is about the play of abstract signs and manipulated appearances (and the destruction of ambivalently charged symbolic meaning). We are involved in the empty play of advertising signs (play as in chance and play as in the pre-recorded piece of information, music, movies). Consumer society offers only a systematically unfulfilling and limitless play of pre-coded signs and pre-fabricated networks of appearances.

It must be foregrounded that the network of appearances circulating in the digital media environment is not neutral; the digital media environment actively configures the perceptual, affective, and interpretive structures through which individuals experience the social world. Opportunities for expression and participation now unfold within systems characterized by commodification, algorithmic governance, and an intensified shaping of subjectivity.⁵⁷

It is thus possible to parallel Baudrillard’s outline of “personalization” in consumer society with the way contemporary media shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and express themselves. In the process, cultural experiences are reorganized. Rather than functioning as neutral intermediaries, these media platforms actively negotiate the formation of meaning, the rhythms of attention, and the possibilities of subjectivity.⁵⁸

Similar to Baudrillard’s analysis of consumer society, digital platforms promote immediacy, novelty, and personalization; they fragment aesthetic experience and restrict the horizon of critical reflection. In this cultural landscape, interpretation is increasingly guided by automated systems, which diminishes the potential for sustained, reflective encoun-

⁵⁶ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 196; italics and bold in the text.

⁵⁷ Timmer et al. “Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy,” *Acta Academica*. Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, Vol.57, Issue 2 (2025): 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

ter.⁵⁹ Digital technologies mediate contested narratives, produce opposing subject positions, and mobilize deep historical traumas to uphold polarized interpretations of current events, thereby making the conflict unresolvable.⁶⁰ The conditions of the digital age affect the public sphere through algorithmic sorting, fragmentation, and the circulation of propaganda. The effects of surveillance capitalism⁶¹ thus promote algorithmic insularity, polarization, and antagonism. Algorithms circumvent scrutiny, furnish selective information to individuals, expose users to conspiracies, ideologies, and myths through channeling, and enable the creation of inflammatory content by robots, “bad actors,” and “troll farms,”⁶² which threaten civil order and democratic processes.

Symbolic Alternatives to Polarization

When we take a Baudrillardian approach to these concerns in the digital media sphere, the solution to the strict binary opposition of the digital code (and the subsequent polarization of perspectives) will not be addressed by technological innovations, regulations, or additional resources. The point lies in social relationships (or in the social logic). A social relationship (and a social logic) based on symbolic exchange is required—one that is not grounded in endless competition and antagonism among signs, but in ambivalence and reciprocity.

Bearing in mind the above, I do not agree with Christian Fuchs’s⁶³ analysis of Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange, as he claims that the latter reduces communication to “money” and “commodity exchange.” As Pawlett explains, however, “what is exchanged is not a

⁵⁹ Timmer et al., “Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy,” 8.

⁶⁰ Anthony Collins and Ahmad Jamal, “Say no genocide”: discursive constructions of violence and identities around Gaza,” *Acta Academica* Special issue: Critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, Vol.57, Issue 2 (2025): 10.

⁶¹ Shoshana Zuboff exposes how the democratic and utopian promise of the Internet of the 1990s has given way to the platform capitalism of monopoly corporations like google, facebook, and amazon which move towards a totalitarian model of total control via algorithms, Big Data, personalized advertising, see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

⁶² On the role of how troll farms or institutionalized groups interfere in politics see Almog Simchon, William J. Brady and Jay Van Bavel, “The Troll and the Divide: The language of online polarization,” *PNAS Nexus*, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (2022).

⁶³ Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2016), 185.

commodity or ‘value’ as such but a status and role, and there remains, Baudrillard insists, ‘an element of reciprocity.’”⁶⁴ In symbolic exchange, the object is not tied to a general equivalent or a code of “value”; symbolic exchange even involves the “extermination of value.” For Pawlett,⁶⁵ Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange is a site of resistance and defiance at both the socio-economic level and the level of language and writing.

The principle of symbolic exchange, according to Baudrillard, operates at the level of words and meanings. “Poetic language” sacrifices or exterminates linguistic value; it suspends and annuls the fixed, referential meaning of word-signs. Symbolic or poetic language is a non-expressive, anti-discursive “beyond” of the economy of signification. It is immanent, not transcendent. Within the symbolic operation, words do not signify or represent; signs are cancelled or “sacrificed.” The ordered, regulated separations between signifier and signified, as well as sign and referent, are dissolved into ambivalence by poetic resonances that operate on both sides of the binary opposition simultaneously.⁶⁶

Beyond poetic and linguistic examples, in *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard discusses symbolic exchange in relation to feudal social systems, and he argues that the master–slave binary becomes a “symbolic relation”⁶⁷ because neither position is abstracted or autonomous and there remains “an element of reciprocity.”⁶⁸ The relationship is one of domination, but not alienation or exploitation, because the slave is not objectified. Both the slave and the master are obligated to fulfill a role.

Baudrillard does not claim that the relation is fair, equal, or just. Symbolic relations are not equal, since “equality” is a property of an individualized or autonomous unit in an abstract or integrated system. Baudrillard admits that slave trading, which he defines as slavery within a market economy, offers no such element of reciprocity. Baudrillard redefines the concept of alienation to refer to the individual’s self-conception as, ultimately, a source of labor. We learn to see ourselves as economic value and internalize the master–slave dialectic by becoming

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, translated by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 95; Pawlett, *Baudrillard: Against Banality*, 35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

⁶⁶ Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 198–205.

⁶⁷ Baudrillard *Mirror of Production*, 93.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 95; Pawlett, *Baudrillard: Against Banality*, 35.

our own master and our own slave, which becomes our psychological dynamic.⁶⁹

Baudrillard's overall position on the rupture from primitive to modern society is that the fundamental characteristic of the latter is the loss of spontaneous, reciprocal, and symbolic human relations. Baudrillard claims that "symbolic exchange" prevailed during medieval and feudal times. At this time, signs were restricted in number, and their function was not arbitrary:

"Each [sign] retains its full value as prohibition, and each carries with it a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons."⁷⁰

Before the Renaissance, signs (Baudrillard is referring here to signs of distinction such as clothing and power insignia) were rigidly fixed because signs were bound to a social order of caste, rank, or role: "There is no fashion in caste society, nor in a society based on rank, since assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility."⁷¹ This is the world of "transparent signs," a "strong symbolic order."⁷² "Let's be under no illusions, this order has existed, and it was a brutal hierarchy, since the sign's transparency is indissociably also its cruelty."⁷³ Yet the "transparency" of the symbolic order does not entail an unmediated real with direct access to truth.⁷⁴

Overall, Baudrillard depicts symbolic exchange as a play of exchanges, challenges, and appearances with no overarching problem of "reality." Life is accepted as an illusion, with no pretense of finding the natural scientific relationship between signs and what lies beyond the ef-

⁶⁹ In the Second Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses the process of "internalization." and how the transition to a peaceful, sedentary society with its limited space leads to a devaluation of the instincts: instincts are no longer outwardly discharged, but turn inwards, and Nietzsche insists that this is the origin of "bad conscience." For Nietzsche (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 57) the "prospect of an animal soul turning against itself" is a "puzzling, contradictory and momentous [*Zukunftvolles*]" event.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 50.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Transparency involves "trans-appearance" and a "phenomenology of absence." Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Image," translated by Paul Foss. *Art US*. Foundation of International Art Criticism. Summer. Vol. (2008): 43.

fects they create. Signs are crucially not referential and not arbitrary:

“The arbitrariness of the sign begins when, instead of bonding two persons in an inescapable reciprocity, the signifier starts to refer to a disenchanted universe of the signified, the common denominator of the real, towards which no-one any longer has the least obligation.”⁷⁵

Arbitrary signs offer a “simulacrum of symbolic obligation.”⁷⁶ They are abstract, referential presentations of it. In conceiving of “the world,” on the one hand, and the representational exchange of signs on the other, world and sign are separated: the sign and the referent. The link between sign and referent is one of convention, whereby signs represent the object. In symbolic exchange, this separation is not meaningful. The consumption of sign-value is based on a meaningful “totality” that is out of reach.⁷⁷ Baudrillard claims that the consumption of sign-value becomes “a totally idealist practice.”⁷⁸

In his analysis, Christian Fuchs⁷⁹ says that Baudrillard argues “that the economy and production are material, whereas culture and consumption are ... immaterial... Separating mind from matter, as Baudrillard does, cannot adequately explain the world’s origin and development.” According to another critic, however, the “systems” that Baudrillard discusses do “not unfold in the manner of a Platonic realm of pure, immutable Forms.”⁸⁰ Baudrillard does not use the terms “system” or “code” as “rational abstractions” or “universal structures existing independently of material social reality,”⁸¹ as Fuchs seems to suggest. The discourse of sign value is one of “unity in variety: the unique, the universal and the uniform all at once.”⁸² The system is part of the universe of particular things or signifiers. “The object and the sign are bound within this self-regulating cultural system.”⁸³

Against the strict separation between the material and the immate-

⁷⁵ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 50.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 224.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁷⁹ Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2016), 183.

⁸⁰ Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Metaphysics*, 46-47.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 47.

⁸³ Ibid., 48.

rial, Baudrillard proposes symbolic exchange. Unlike modern consumption, which seeks to be universal, symbolic exchange does not involve the external manipulation and separation of abstract signs. Capitalist political economy isolates objects from their cultural meaning and subjects them to a specific (and therefore non-ambiguous) abstract code of signs, whereas symbolic exchange is ambivalent. Baudrillard argues that “primitive societies” engage in symbolic communications: the signifier, signified, and referent are all united in the act of communication. In symbolic communication, “signs include [...] words that [are] attached to referents and [are] uttered in a context that holds open their possible reversal by others.”

In capitalist exchange, signs are detached from lived relations, and this makes possible their endless combination and recombination in a limitless process of integration. Consumer society is characterized by differentiation and competition, which contributes to the sense that there is never enough. Signs even replace lived relation; they present a coded version of lived (symbolic) relation—one that is controlled and less threatening.

Concluding Remarks

Baudrillard does not idealize an ambivalently charged symbolic society against the strict binary oppositions of digital society. His notion of symbolic exchange is a fictionalized, speculative, imaginary solution that serves to encourage a reevaluation of values by proposing a different perspective. Far from being a static ideal, Baudrillard’s reference to symbolic exchange acts as a contrast to a (simulation) model of human relations; it resists polarizing practices, bureaucratized solicitation, and identity politics.

Hyperreality is about the play of abstract signs and manipulated appearances (and the destruction of ambivalently charged symbolic meaning). We are involved in the empty play of signs that offers only a systematically unfulfilling and endless play of pre-coded signs and pre-fabricated networks of appearance. The digital age thus affects the public sphere through the promotion of personalization, algorithmic insularity, and antagonism, which threaten democratic processes. Against such hyperrational, inflated systems of thought, I emphasized how Baudrillard’s notions of symbolic exchange and seduction resist the obsession for positivist, technological transparency by embracing ambivalence, communion, and epistemic restraint. As opposed to a merely formal model of democracy, Baudrillard’s alternatives are above all a spontaneously shared and lived reciprocal practice.