

From Viral Implosions to Deserts of the Real

Introduction to the Special Issue “Total Screen: Why Baudrillard, Once Again?”

Katharina Niemeyer

Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

Magali Uhl

Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)

There is no separation any longer, no empty space, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unhindered. You enter your life as you would walk on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit.

(Baudrillard, *Screened Out* 177)

When we began to prepare the call for papers for this special issue, we mainly sought to recontextualize Jean Baudrillard’s controversial philosophical thinking in relation to an exhibition that we have been planning with colleagues at the University of Québec in Montréal (UQAM) since 2019. *ÉCRAN TOTAL/TOTAL SCREEN*, currently featured at UQAM’s Centre de design (ecrantotal.uqam.ca), initially intended to exhibit Jean Baudrillard’s photographic work and philosophy in dialogue with contemporary artists aiming to critically engage with our relations to screens in a world that has already been characterized—before the pandemic—by different types of ecological and social emergencies, as well as by an overwhelming presence of digital technologies and social media platforms in our everyday lives. While some time has

passed since the publication of the previous special issue of *MAST*, what Timothy Barker (2020) eloquently stated in his introduction to “Media, Materiality, and Emergency” connects on various levels with this current special issue:

The current global emergency brought about by the novel coronavirus pandemic now reconfigures the way vast swathes of the globe use communication media to relate to others, to remain insulated from the outside [...]. It therefore seems like a good time now to start asking questions about how the materiality of media is related to the emergence of catastrophic events, both in terms of the current global pandemic, the deep structural inequalities and racism that it has exposed, but also in terms of the climate crisis and other contemporary emergencies that we are still living with. (4)

The materiality of media in relation to current emergencies is more relevant than ever; the point of departure for the research and creations featured in both this special issue of *MAST* and in the *ÉCRAN TOTAL/TOTAL SCREEN* exhibition has been almost completely overrun by the ongoing pandemic situation. At the same time, the latter ironically captures and implodes in a nutshell the main concepts Jean Baudrillard already pointed out decades ago in his visionary texts (mainly in the sixties and seventies): that the near future will be characterized by simulation, virality, implosion, and surveillance; the loss of signs and significations in the growing production of artificial meaning; and the subsequent longing for *something else*. The French philosopher, who passed away in 2007, used to be a melancholic optimist, believing in the return of singularity without ever falling into a dualistic approach of what reality could have been or might be or will never be. In this sense, his ideas may offer a link between media as materials of simulation and as materials of retaining hope for a singular ‘real.’ Jean Baudrillard cannot be read and understood by interpreting all of his assertions and thoughts on

a primary semiotic level or degree of signification. He turned his own writings into a seductive simulation machine that still plays with our conceptions of reality. This is a proposition one can accept and flow with, refuse from the outset, or oscillate undecidedly between approval and disapproval.

As co-editors, we find ourselves somewhere in between, oscillating between our desire to push this simulation machine even further and our inclination to interrogate what place Jean Baudrillard occupies or could occupy in media studies, visual studies, and art theory today. How does his work—as both a philosopher and a vernacular photographer—continue to influence visual artists and other forms of media art? How can we confront his radical views with feminist, intersectional, queer, postcolonial, and other critical approaches?

Provocative, eclectic, ironic, playful, and anticipatory, Baudrillard's thinking propels both the image and the medium of photography—and that which evades them—into a dimension that inspires, questions, amazes, and disturbs: thirty years after 1991, when he argued that the Gulf War never happened (Baudrillard 1995) in an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the society of the image has deviated from an already-vanished reality; and twenty years after 9/11, when he referred to the destruction of the Twin Towers on live television as a symbiotic apex between experience and its image. His conception of the image, of its forms, and of its plasticity remain resolutely contemporary (Latouche). More powerful than its own presence in a reality that it renders less real and confined to endless media feedback, the image has become an event—and the event, an image.

The philosopher's writings certainly illustrate the force of his visionary view of a society that followed his death in 2007, and whose vision has nevertheless encompassed the dominance of simulacra, transparency and hyperreality, the injunction of computer code, the

virality of communications, and the implementation of artificial intelligence—each of which are profound present-day issues that permeate his work from beginning to end. Although it refers to such events, this special issue does not wish to ‘commemorate’ the war in Iraq or the attacks of 9/11 even if these are the conceptual, and historical benchmarks within which the texts of this special issue unfold. Also, if Baudrillard’s philosophy was supposed to be irrelevant after his death in 2007, it nevertheless persists and resurfaces in the criticism of our present time (Leonelli; Smith). Rereading his work, it is remarkable that “these texts never cease to amaze by their extraordinary ‘topicality’” (Latouche 18), especially with regard to the supremacy of images in a society that has become a “total screen” (Baudrillard, *Ecran Total*).

From animated gifs of design objects to selfies taken in front of architectural works, from visual shots of drones to Instagram's ‘stories’ or ‘snapshots’ of a reinvented everyday life, to all the forms of visual recognition made possible by artificial intelligence, imagery is at the core of today’s social experience (Szendy; Mirzoeff). Flowing through our lives, cutting across from one end to the other, images merge and interact with one another (Gumbrecht; Manovich). However, the behavior of images concerns their auratic force too (Alexander et al.; Marin), their capacity to reveal a social situation, a cultural prism, or a singular experience, as well as their agency as artefacts in public space (Mitchell). This raises questions both about the possibilities of our emancipation and of restriction, (self-)surveillance, and manipulation (Peraica; Alexander et al.).

In the current context of COVID-19, it seems premature to exclusively concentrate on the pandemic as a central theme of this special issue; however, it would be equally inadequate to ignore it in light of Baudrillard's systematic and sometimes debatable reflections on virality and its relationship to disaster and chaos. In fact, he perceived the individual as “the chosen

terrain for viruses and viral diseases, just as computers become the chosen terrain for electronic viruses (...) For viruses resist and proliferate as soon as they have free space” (Baudrillard, *Écran Total* 11). Moreover, it is crucial to take a critical look at the screen, which, since the early spring of 2020, has become our (almost) only communicative interface with the world: national and international news, shopping, domestic and social activities, sports and online games, as well as the consumption of fiction on various platforms, to name a few examples. This is especially relevant, considering that we invest our professional, private, and social lives in the screen, including our most intimate moments—but also, and most importantly for this special issue, our creative moments and artwork.

The following special issue can therefore be understood as a way to engage in updating or re-introducing Baudrillard’s philosophy from a ‘pandemic standpoint,’ as well as a provocative essay collection that challenges the philosopher’s ideas within the current political, social, and cultural debates. While each article may be read individually, they are also entities entangled within discourses of similar concepts or topics and that deal with specific philosophical territories of thought. This issue opens with an interdisciplinary analysis by William Merrin—media theorist and established commentator on Baudrillard—on the relevance of the philosopher’s thought for understanding the issues at stake in the current digital revolution, particularly the explosion of selfies. The hyperreality which, even ten years ago, characterized the inflation of the ‘real’ world through material excess and endless escalation, has now been supplanted by a digital *hyporeality* in which the expansion of personal reality has become the driving force. As the self absorbs the world, the world loses its referential capacity. Merrin thus invites us to observe this reversal in identity politics and encourages us to reflect on the interment of the real—both event-driven and historical—under

the personal experience of digital documentation. The latter is also the focus of the second contribution. Interrogating the self through the prism of spiritual illusion and shifting from simulacra to simulation, Leona Nikolić addresses, through her experimental installation *Soli*, the proximity that we maintain with smartphones and the way in which bonds are woven between the self, screen interfaces, and spiritual desire. With *Soli*, the selves are placed inside one another and bear witness to the same confusion between reality and imagery that Baudrillard identified. Accentuated by today's personal devices, this confusion ultimately points each of us back to our own solitude, but also toward constant self-surveillance. The question of transparency (that of the self), already playfully apparent in Nikolić's artistic work, is brought into sharper focus with the third contribution.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point for a new urban topology, Cera Tan Ying Jing's article questions the technologies of contact-tracing and proximity-tracing and revisits the Baudrillardian concept of transparency. Reducing private life to a common code, transparency for Baudrillard concerns the flattening of behaviors and desires that become shared information. The TraceTogether technology, which the author examines in the context of Singapore (where she is conducting her research), makes it possible to visualize the hot spots of the pandemic through the movements of bodies and their interactions in urban space. If the private domain is what makes a person unique, how can we guarantee this promise in an epidemiologically transparent society, despite its embeddedness within the social contract? Can we envisage a democracy based on a measurement tool? For the author, the COVID-19 episode marks the tipping point into a world where the surveillance of bodies is the very condition of its cohesion: its biopolitics. Also situated within the international context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amanda Hill's contribution further explores the 'homely,' or, the

question of the interior—namely how hyperreality and banality have taken over people’s everyday lives during quarantine by entering their homes through television. The TV series *Homemade* (2020) is presented as a case study to demonstrate the prevalence of the banal in the fictional through the remediation of the social, cultural, political, and economic realities that the various protagonists of the series encounter. Each episode is, thus, a transposition of a slice of daily life within quarantine. *Homemade* dissolves all boundaries between reality and its representation and blurs the distinction between art and the banal by exposing banality as a common and shared experience. Considering the work of Cera Tan Ying Jing and Amanda Hill in tandem, one can see how the banal not only penetrates the outside as well as the inside of our walls, but also establishes itself on our screens as an external mediator, enabling it to penetrate our privacy. In this transparency of banality, the intensity of the pandemic catastrophe becomes crystallized, just as Baudrillard had anticipated as early as 1996 (2002 for the English translation): so extreme phenomena serve, in their secret disorder, as prophylaxis-by-chaos against an extreme escalation of order and transparency. That catastrophe, the true catastrophe, does, thanks to them, remain virtual. If it did materialize, that would be the end (Baudrillard, *Screened Out* 7).

While the pandemic does not pose the same social problems as—or at least cannot be compared so easily to—an act of war or political violence, the features of the disaster run through these phenomena as a structuring matrix where fiction produces, underlines, and sustains the banality, as well as the memory of disaster itself and its imaginary alterations. The 9/11 disaster, a total catastrophe in which the image became an event and the fiction a ‘reality’—similar to certain fictions concerning epidemics elsewhere—became this central *event-monument* whose imaginary and fictional productions merely trivialize the repressed

materialization in a continuous loop. Likewise, the world of fiction occupies a significant place in the sixth contribution.

Referring this time to a Marvel blockbuster that reconstructs the events of 9/11 at the moment in question, Loraine Haywood offers an analysis that intersects Baudrillard's interpretation of the destruction of the Twin Towers with its filmic mediation in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Here, the author examines how the towers have penetrated the collective imagination thanks to images, particularly cinematographic ones. According to her, the impregnation of the psyche is achieved through narration as much as through the architecture of the towers, which are understood here as objects that are 'stuck to us' (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 36) and that we cannot get rid of because they represent us. Baudrillard's thesis thus becomes prophetic: trapped within the spirit of terrorism, the Twin Towers represent the West, its economy, its culture, its commerce, and its dominance, remaining, therefore, a part of our imaginary—of our imaginary objects.

It is precisely the concept of the object that is at the center of the next three reflections, which diverge greatly in terms of epistemological perspective, but which are based on questions about the concepts of seduction and spectacle.

Shifting to the French context of the 1970s and 1980s, the following contribution proposes to consider Baudrillard's legacy as a practitioner of photography in terms of his theses on simulacra and the importance he attributed to the system of objects in which photographs are inscribed. To support her argument, Olga Smith highlights the sometimes contradictory links between the philosopher's theory and his practice, analyzing them in relation to the works of artists of his time: Sophie Calle and the duo Pierre and Gilles. What ultimately connects these three photographic practices is an assumption that real actions and media events are

intertwined with consumerist culture and the lure of spectacularization, thereby echoing theories of simulacra.

Returning to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its sanitary measures, Jeff Heydon is interested in the massively televised media incident of the use of sex dolls to fill empty seats during a Korean soccer match in May 2020. For the author, it is not so much the sexual nature of the dolls that is discussed as it is the dependence on a stable media universe whose coherence is based on the fidelity of its representations. Baudrillard, as the author notes, demonstrated that the process of duplication is a means of extracting ourselves from reality. Consequently, the fear and anxiety produced by the pandemic was addressed by a performance in which humans, replaced by synthetic artefacts, were no longer required to function.

In a departure from the dialogues of serial production and reproduction, Camille Zéhenne proposes instead to revisit Baudrillard's theory of seduction. In her video montage, she intertwines archival images, found photos, period films, and video excerpts from a famous interview with Baudrillard, playing on his pronounced taste for reversion. The artist thus abstracts herself from any epistemological hierarchy between the present sources, as well as from any domination of one episteme over another. She establishes new associations and equivalences to encourage thinking about queer and heterosexual sexualities with Baudrillard, while at the same time mocking him.

Meanwhile, Kathleen Ryan and David Guignon's reflections and analyses confront the difficult and polemical questioning of the relationship between Baudrillard's philosophy and feminism, and moreover, the matter of transsexuality (Toffoletti). In her article, Kathleen Ryan employs simulacra to examine the historical image of a woman, Rosie, who participated in the war effort ("We Can Do It!") and which, through contemporary reappropriations, has become a

feminist icon. The revivals of the poster, which consecrate women's empowerment, are linked to their source by the reiteration of emblematic elements of the original, but by reinterpreting the initial sign open up toward more contemporary expectations—notably those of a more inclusive intersectional feminism. As such, the use of the icon-image has a performative effect as it expands the meaning of the simulacrum.

To extend this reflection, we might ask ourselves: How can Baudrillard participate in feminist theory today? Does feminism not contradict his own theory, since it paradoxically reflects the hyperreality and simulacra that he never ceases to criticize? This is what David Guignon suggests by questioning the ambiguous relationship that the philosopher's thought has with feminist, trans, and more broadly anti-oppressive theses. By engaging with the feminist queer theorist Sara Ahmed, Guignon recognizes that it is necessary, in an anti-oppressive logic, to abandon Baudrillard, but only in a Baudrillardian sense, that is, as a response to his own project, an invitation.

To avoid unceremoniously concluding this issue, we join Levi Jackson, in the footsteps of Baudrillard's *America* (1988), in a slow journey across the desert by car. The ensuing video follows, to the letter, the philosopher's road trip, tracking down his observations which remain mostly intact as if preserved from the passage of time and the open space of the desert. Baudrillard's and Jackson's respective experiences and obsessions merge, exacerbating the fascination produced by the landscapes and inciting a mirage—that of finding in this quasi-ritual repetition the presence of the philosopher, and of these commentators, in the dust and sand that settle over their paths.

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Katharina Niemeyer is a media theorist, professor at the School of Media (Faculty of Communication) at the Université du Québec à Montréal, and director of CELAT-UQAM (Centre de recherche Cultures-Arts-Sociétés). Trained in the cultural sciences and media archaeology and philosophy at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (Germany), as well as in communication sciences at the University of Lyon (France) and at the University of Geneva (Switzerland), her research focuses on the relationships between media and (digital) technologies, temporalities, memory, and history. She recently co-edited the book *Nostalgies contemporaines: médias, cultures et technologies*, published in 2021 by Presses universitaires du Septentrion. She is a member of the editorial board of the journals *MAST* (The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory) and *Memory, Mind & Media* (Cambridge University Press). Niemeyer is also an associate member of CRICIS (Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la communication, l'information et la société) and co-founder of the International Media and Nostalgia Network. Email: niemeyer.katharina@uqam.ca.

Magali Uhl is a full professor at the Department of Sociology at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and a research member of CELAT (Centre de recherche Cultures-Arts-Sociétés). Her research aims to examine societal transformations through the prism of contemporary culture and art. Based on contemporary artworks and artistic practices, she elaborates issues related to subjectivation, memory, and the body by analyzing their evolution and their effects on society and, more specifically, on the city and its experiential spaces. As

the head of the “Visual Studies and Methods” group of the AISLF (GT02, Association internationale des sociologues de langue française), and as a member of CIREC (Centre de recherche-cr ation sur les mondes sociaux), the role images play in understanding social and prospective approaches are at the centre of her research, which aims to enrich visual sociology by developing proposals that combine research and creation. Since 2017, she has been conducting visual sociology work on post-industrial neighbourhoods in several Canadian cities including Montr al and Vancouver, the results of which have been published in the form of a book (2017) and as articles—most recently in *Visual Studies* (2021). Email: uhl.magali@uqam.ca.