

uses and *abuses*: Baudrillard, simulacra and America

hans varghese mathews

Even inverted, the fable is unusable: so Baudrillard laments as he prepares to exhibit the ‘precession’ of the simulacra which allegedly constitute postmodern America. The fable he relinquishes is told in Borges’ **Of Exactitude in Science**: in which, as Baudrillard recounts it, *the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly, and the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts*. Today, however, *it is the map that precedes the territory — precession of simulacra — that engenders the territory; and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map*. It is the real, and not the map, Baudrillard declares, *whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours: the desert of the real itself*. But he goes immediately on to insist that, *in fact, even inverted, Borges’ fable is unusable*.

The Precession of Simulacra was written in the early 1980s, and appeared in English a decade or so ago. The world conjured by Borges’ fable remains a usable foil to the *kosmos* of simulation Baudrillard seems to be probing; but following his turns with the terms “precession” and “simulacrum” seems already to require the divinatory skills of a cryptographer, however exhilarating reading him remains. Baudrillard appeared to anticipate the circumstance; and had resigned himself to it perhaps. The mobile front of lexical and syntactic reflex that distinguishes ‘cultural theory’ from cognate enterprises will have passed beyond him now: and he might sound antique, even, to the more advanced among the initiates of what has come to be called Theory simply. The anagogic interpretation of Baudrillard would be a continual project for his epigoni therefore; or so one imagines. I have no talent for divination, however, and shall not read Baudrillard as he seems to demand. But a reader should say what he supposes his author is about, nonetheless, whether or not he follows those doings very closely; and in **The Precession of Simulacra** Baudrillard attempts, I shall risk saying, to comprehend the sociopolitical *fact* of America *without committing a social science* around the monstrosity.¹ Attending thus to that supernal Demos was indeed *theoria* of a sort then, I shall suppose, whether or not the textual remains of such attending can be received as ‘theoretical’ at all now; and I shall eventually try and say why one should read him so.

The charge of intellectual imposture levelled at Baudrillard and other ‘high theorists’ of the time arraigned their seemingly loose way with a technical lexicon: simple parodies of which could not be recognized as such, embarrassingly enough, by the appointed custodians of cultural theory in America.² That the supposed exposure of Theory was staged just there, within the ‘clearing’ where the emergence of the simulacral was allegedly least impeded, might be thought a sufficiently mitigating circumstance now. Postmodern America may well be a ‘McWorld’ through and through, where everything is a ‘consumable’, and every consumable is always and

¹ The barb is Auden’s.

² I am referring, of course, to the spoofing of the journal **Social Text** by the physicist Alan Sokal.

already ‘canned’, and consumables are consumed just as their canning prompts. The accusation of imposture is serious, however, and should be met by anyone who at all values Baudrillard’s writing: especially when the corollary charge is that such authority as Theory possesses is the spurious effect, merely, of a way with words that neither cultural theorists nor their intended readers have much purchase on.

We shall shortly look at Baudrillard’s doings with terms borrowed from the sciences; but let me try to read Borges out first. **Of Exactitude in Science** ends Borges’ **Universal History of Infamy**; and having the story there suggests, of course, that the exactitude of the imperial mapmakers is itself an infamous thing. That a collection of examples is titled a universal history forces to mind the philosophers’ distinction between universals and particulars; and insinuates that there is as little *essence* to infamy as there is to ‘place’. The Platonic *eidōs* of infamy, were there one, would be as exiguous as the putative *eidōs* of the ‘places’ the geographer maps. Taken together, these considerations propose that attempting a complete history of infamy would be infamous: one could never properly organize the particulars one has assembled. That the fable is an effective coda tempts one to suppose that the ‘history’ Borges has concocted affords as ‘universal’ a grip as one can get on ‘infamy itself’ without doing something infamous: even though the ‘scraps’ Borges has assembled in his universal history must lie to the actual course of infamy much as the shreds of his egregiously complete map would lie to the ground it was meant to map.³

That the fate of Borges’ modest history should mirror the fate of the infamous map is an available irony only when *eide* can distinguished, if only in wish or fancy, from their instancing particulars: but Baudrillard’s simulacra appear to emerge through the reciprocal elision, as it were, of ‘appearance’ and ‘being’. One wonders now if Baudrillard has brought Borges on only to post a past: and to show thereby how ‘far out’ writing must go to assay a world become simulacral. Consider how Baudrillard places himself across his words, so to say, in **The Ecstasy of Communication**: *I must put myself, he says there, in the place of an imaginary traveller who stumbles upon these writings as upon a lost manuscript; and who, having nothing else to go by, attempts to reconstitute the society they describe.* One is now tempted to say that, however unusable to him Borges’ fabulations may have been, Baudrillard wanted his texts to refract simulacral America in the ‘universal’ way Borges’ history attempts; and perhaps his writing will survive in the just the way Borges’ map does: in arresting

³ Read so, Borges is not directing our attention to the sorts of practice we now call ‘science’. The story would be a poor joke were he doing so: as Naipaul, for instance, seems to suppose. Borges’ philosophical improvisations encourage one to think that the reading offered here would not have surprised him. On Baudrillard’s reading of Borges’ fable, the “imaginary of representation”, which the distinction between ‘the real’ and ‘the concept’ allegedly is, “simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographers’ mad project”. One hesitates to ascribe such powers to works of art: and a putative instance of a representation ‘engulfing’ a representandum, and ‘culminating’ at a seeming material limit, can hardly be thought to ‘engulf’ or ‘culminate’ the distinction between representations and representanda. Though I would much rather not treat either literary works or their interpretations as symptoms, I cannot resist doing so just now. Baudrillard’s ‘deep’ reading of Borges’ fable seems to complement a ‘surface’ reading that *picturises* it: a reading where the work *consists* in actively picturing to oneself whatever is narrated. Now the picture **Of Exactitude in Science** affords is ‘surreal’ enough: but to read Borges by picturing his words is to treat him as though his proper work would have been to annotate Dali. No reader who has any regard for Borges will surrender him to a vulgar Surrealism: which is an insidious form of kitsch, virally superscribing the imagination.

shreds which somehow or other ‘enact what he described’.⁴ That Baudrillard should have *performed* as he did seems to be what the more ‘radical’ among his admirers in McWorld prize, more than any understanding his words might afford them: and perhaps that is all the posthumous praise he would have wanted.⁵

But we must now consider whether or not Baudrillard’s ‘enactions’ are of a piece, merely, with the simulacral: whether or not they are ordinary instances, so to say, of that *indifferentiation of the active and the passive* allegedly induced by the mutual elision of appearance and being in the simulacrum. There is no easy answer to that: but the charge of intellectual imposture surely bears on the question, and we must take up the matter again. I ask the reader to go carefully through the extract from **The Precession of Simulacra** reproduced just below: in which, after a look at *the American TV verite experiment attempted on the Loud family in 1971*, Baudrillard intends to get at *the dissolution of TV in life, the dissolution of life in TV* without depending on *the analytical conception of the media as an external, active and effective agent*.

Now one must conceive of TV along the lines of DNA, as an effect in which the opposing poles of determination vanish, according to a nuclear contraction, retraction, of the old polar schema that always maintained a minimal distance between cause and effect, between subject and object: precisely the distance of meaning, the gap, the difference, the smallest possible gap, irreducible under pain of reabsorption into aleatory and indeterminate process whose discourse can no longer account for it, because it is itself a determined order.

It is this gap that vanishes in the process of genetic coding, in which indeterminacy is not so much a question of molecular randomness as of the abolition, pure and simple, of the relation. In the process of molecular control, which “goes” from the DNA nucleus to the ‘substance’ that it ‘informs, there is no longer the traversal of an effect, of an energy, of a determination, of a message. “Order, signal, impulse, message”: all of these attempt to render the thing intelligible to us, but by analogy, retranscribing in terms of inscription, of a vector, of a decoding, a dimension of which we know nothing — it is no longer even a “dimension”, or perhaps it is the fourth (which is defined, however, in Einsteinian relativity by the absorption of the distinct poles of space and time). In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of two traditional poles into each other: implosion — an absorption of the radiating mode of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative charge — an implosion of meaning. That is where simulation begins.

Everywhere, in no matter what domain — political, biological, psychological, mediatised — in which the distinction between these two poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation, and thus into absolute manipulation, not into passivity, but into the indifferentiation of the active and the passive. DNA realizes this aleatory reduction at the level of living matter. Television, in the case of the Louds, also reaches this indefinite limit in which, vis-a-vis TV, they are neither more nor less active or passive than a living substance is vis-a-vis its molecular code.

We shall return to Baudrillard’s putatively ‘an-analytical conception’ of Television presently. Grant for the moment that *vis-a-vis TV* the Louds *are neither more nor less active or passive than a living substance is vis-a-vis its molecular code*. One must

⁴ The phrase is attributed to an Alan Cholodenko: who is said to have used it in an essay titled “The Logic of Delirium, or The Fatal Strategies of Antonin Artaud and Jean Baudrillard”. Cholodenko is quoted by a David Teh in an essay titled **Baudrillard, Pataphysician**, which I found in a recent issue of the **International Journal of Baudrillard Studies** (Volume 3, Number 1, January 2006).

⁵ Baudrillard enjoyed in America a celebrity he never had in France; and we have already noted that, as a radical admirer puts it in the latest issue of the **International Journal of Baudrillard Studies**, he took America for a ‘privileged site of the simulacral’. That a theorist should be applauded as a performer is a negligible irony, one can only suppose, in the *koine* that English has become.

now ask if the evocations of ‘science’ here give us any more purchase, than the preceding sentence itself does, on the Louds’ putative condition: one must ask if such evocation has, at all, helped us ‘conceive of TV along the lines of DNA’. One way of proceeding here is to consider whether or not all the talk between Baudrillard’s opening and his close above will secure or advance our understanding of any one, more than any other, of the following propositions.

- Vis-a-vis TV the Louds are neither more nor less active or passive than a living substance is vis-a-vis its molecular code.
- Vis-a-vis TV the Louds are neither more nor less active or passive than speakers of a language are vis-a-vis its grammatical rules.
- Vis-a-vis TV the Louds are neither more nor less active or passive than human persons are vis-a-vis patterns of neural firing in their brains.

Let me note again that the question here does not concern the truth or plausibility of these putative theses: but their import, rather, for our understanding of Television. Baudrillard’s technical animadversions do not seem to secure or improve our grip on any one of these propositions, more than any other: and he has failed, one must conclude, to *conceive* of Television ‘along the lines of DNA’ as he considers ‘the dissolution of TV in life’ and ‘the dissolution of life in TV’. More damagingly, one begins to suspect that the effect of the ‘science’ in the writing here, if not its intent, is to enlist readers in a chorus: to make them chant along, as it were, rather than think. The charge of imposture presumes intent, of course; but, regardless, the corollary imputation, that the intended readers of cultural theory are prey to words merely, is now hard to resist.⁶

The usual defense is that Theory appropriates for its own purposes the technical lexicon it is charged with misusing. A recent enthusiast commends Baudrillard’s “creative repurposing (some might say abuse) of the language and concepts of science and technology”: which are said to “exchange disciplinary propriety for catachresis and illegitimacy”.⁷ To force upon the discourse of any science an ‘exchange of propriety for illegitimacy’ would be a feat. The circumstance that their alleged appropriations are entirely inconsequential for the canonical employment of the technical lexicon, however, seems never to worry cultural theorists. One wonders then if they are actually appropriating terms from the sciences: or using homonyms of such, merely, in ways that writers of advertising copy would best follow. Such suspicions will only grow when one considers how our enthusiast proceeds to credit Baudrillard. The uses to which Baudrillard puts the terms he allegedly appropriates “seek no validity beyond the aptitude of metaphor” apparently; but all the same, “he bolsters their currency as emblems of the society that generated them”: and in doing so Baudrillard is said, moreover, to exhibit “his impiety towards the taxonomies of official knowledge”. I shall not insult the reader by detailing the discursive naivete displayed here; and I have chosen an egregious example. The natural habitat of our theorist is the anglophone artworld: whose personnel may well be described, in Baudrillard’s phrase, as a conjuration of imbeciles. But the circumstance that he is loose on the pages of a journal assembled by a cultural theorist tenured in Canada is telling: the custodians of Theory in the

⁶ The founding text of anglophone cultural theory itself prompts the suspicion: consider Empson’s remarks, at the beginning of **The Structure Of Complex Words**, on Raymond Williams’s **KeyWords**.

⁷ One finds this in the already mentioned **Baudrillard, Pataphysician** by David Teh.

anglophone academy seem no less naive than our curator of catachreses.⁸ All told, one begins to suspect that anglophone cultural theorists are not able, in fact, to collectively appropriate to their advantage the language of the sciences; and their doings with technical terms may only exhibit some particular ‘indifferentiation of the active and the passive’ which distinguishes the simulacral among possible social worlds.⁹

We had begun our excursus into Baudrillard’s ‘enactions’ by asking whether or not these were of a piece, merely, with the simulacral; and the example of his anglophone epigoni might indeed suffice to answer that question as well as it can be.¹⁰ I have so far taken the words “simulacra” and “precession” as useful and pertinent ones: in characterizing America and the McWorld it spawns, particularly, and I shall continue to do so. Now it may be that all Baudrillard has managed to do with these words, all told, is mark off in some way the egregious fact of postmodern America: in and for itself, so to say, or magnified in and through McWorld. But before I hazard pronouncing on that let me turn again to the alleged exposure of Theory precipitated there, by a simple parody that cultural theorists domiciled in McWorld could not detect. The case for the prosecution here seems to have been gathered into a book titled **Intellectual Impostures**, authored by our parodist together with a like-minded censor.¹¹ In ‘exposing’ the high priests of Theory their larger intent was, it appears, to rescue science from misrepresentation: principally by their acolytes in McWorld, as it happens. The interested reader may follow the ‘Science Wars’ that ensued in America. But Baudrillard may surely remain a neutral party here: one need not *contest* the representations of their doings that evangelists of Science proffer as one gets one’s bearings in their simulacral world.

Let us take up **The Precession of Simulacra** again. A reader new to Baudrillard will be puzzled by how the words “simulacrum” and “real” careen about each other here, barely observing the proprieties of ordinary usage. To get ourselves around the bar of common sense we must put ourselves back a quarter of century or so in time, and accompany Baudrillard to Disneyland: to be greeted there by Mickey Mouse. I cannot guess how many of his anglophone readers would now feel, and how forcibly, that *Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country and all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland*. Baudrillard promulgates this startling ‘theorem’ some way into a section titled **The Hyperreal and The Imaginary**; but the reader who looks around there for logical support will be disappointed. The notions of the simulacrum and the real are conspicuously entangled here, and one must tease them apart. To do so we could return to a prior section titled **The Divine Irreference of Images**, and attend to *the successive phases of the image* isolated there:

it is the reflection of a profound reality
it masks and denatures a profound reality

⁸ At the risk of offending the reader for good I am going to inflict on him one last sample of what passes with these praeceptors. “The cosmogenic backdrop of Big Bang theory furnishes Baudrillard’s oeuvre with an aleatory instability”, Theorist Teh declares, “the inescapable possibility that the tables will turn”. That the editors of **Social Text** were so easily fooled does not seem, anymore, to have been an ‘escapable possibility’.

⁹ I do not mean to impugn the intelligence of individual theorists here; but to point, rather, to the discursive situation they collectively perform within. The interested reader may consult Francois Cusset’s considerations on ‘French Theory’ in America.

¹⁰ Given his eclipse among the French themselves: and, continuing the figure, considering the Atlantean longitudes of his meridian splendour.

¹¹ The authors are the aforementioned Sokal and a fellow physicist named Jean Paul Bricmont.

*it masks the absence of a profound reality
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.*

These are theses essayed on sacred images: hence the word “profound”. When posing them to the ‘profane’ image one may discount “profound” if one wishes; and the first and the fourth of Baudrillard’s phases are the pertinent ones here. Consider next the relation ‘is an image of’ that obtains between visible givens. This relation is ordinarily not reflexive: nothing is an image of itself. But the simulacrum emerging as a phase of the image, *in so far as it is an image*, would entirely be an image of itself: and as such a ‘being’ that subsists in ‘appearance’.¹² How fugitive one’s understanding of the phrase “subsists in appearance” is, as an epithet for any possible thing, depends on one’s theoretical appetite: on just how willing one is to defer the empirical instancing of terms to the formal elaboration of their interrelations. But we do have examples of a sort to hand. Risible as it sounds put it so, and ontologically exotic as they become when they are so regarded, Mickey Mouse and his fellows in Disneyland are beings that subsist in appearance; and if one’s sense of reality refuses existence to such, one might turn instead to Andy Warhol, who came tantalizingly close to a being that subsisted just so. At any rate, Baudrillard seems to claim that postmodern America as well is a social world subsisting in appearance: and, moreover, that Disneyland *exists to conceal the fact that the real is no longer real*. Disneyland exists, that is to say, in order to conceal the alleged circumstance that America, which once subsisted otherwise, now subsists in appearance.¹³

Glossing the word “simulacrum” so extends the primary sense the word had acquired in English by the 19th century: by suggesting that whatever ‘brute matter’ simulacra require for their existence will barely constrain the ‘pure’ appearances they are. Considered as subsisting in appearance, simulacra *are* exactly what they *seem*: which is presumably why Baudrillard insists that *the imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false*. He goes on to say that Disneyland is *a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp*: and that seems a sufficient initial example of the putative ‘precession’ of the simulacral.

I trust that these exercises have provided some purchase on what Baudrillard takes simulacra and their precession to be; but these notions are meant to comprehend rather more than such examples suggest. The most ‘successful’ among the models that the social and behavioural sciences produce, for instance, seem to be simulacra for Baudrillard; we shall consider the matter again presently. To note it again, I cannot guess at how many readers would have gone along with him as he traced simulacra and their precession through America a quarter of a century ago; and I imagine that fewer now would.¹⁴ Anglophone Indians would largely demur, one thinks: willing and able as they generally have been to reshape themselves in and for McWorld. But those who have endured social life in postmodern America as decided strangers might well agree with Baudrillard; and they need not have been

¹² I cannot resist pointing here to an uncanny parallel between simulacra so conceived and the putative ‘picture-objects’ sought by Synthetic Cubism: of which their makers could have claimed that they not only are just what they seem, but *seem* just what they *are* as well.

¹³ I had ventured to say above that Baudrillard’s simulacra emerge through the reciprocal elision of being and appearance. That is how the real seems to have become simulacral for Baudrillard; but considered in themselves, and without regard to their genesis, simulacra would subsist in appearance.

¹⁴ I would have been loth, certainly, to regard my American teachers as beings subsisting in appearance: but I comfort myself with the thought all of them would have come of age much before the advent of the postmodern.

welcomed into Disneyland by Mickey or Minnie to suspect that, considered as social and political animals, postmodern Americans stand to their forebears somewhat as these 'first citizens' of Disneyland stand to merely actual mice.¹⁵

Let us return to Baudrillard's considerations of *TV verite*: which appears to nicely exhibit just how Television brings about a 'collapse into each other' of 'subject and object'. Baudrillard's 'an-analytic' conceiving of Television would amount to regarding such collapse as the outcome of processes which are automatic and sui generis: processes as little directed by any external agency as, for instance, the seeming self-transcription of those functional sequences of nucleic acids which are called genes. If we pursue the analogy, such as it is, the Louds would have stood to their 'coding' much as biological organisms allegedly stand to their genes. The peculiar subjects-and-objects they would have become as they were played out by Television, so to say, would now have to be seen as 'phenotypes' that manifest some 'genotype': and as such they may have been 'neither more or less active nor passive than living substances are vis-a-vis their molecular codes'. But, to note it again, nothing Baudrillard says will help us conceive of TV as DNA particularly: nothing he says advances our understanding of Television past the entirely generic notion of 'a process not directed by any external agency'.¹⁶

Condensing out a theory from the electric flow of Baudrillard's text will be difficult; and recruiting the lexicon of science to that task will not at all advance the work. One wonders if one should try to do so at all, actually: perhaps Baudrillard is just the 'performing' theorist his radical admirers take him to be, valuable for how his hyperbolic gesturing might direct attention to the singular workings of America, and of the McWorld now radiating from it. Consider, for instance, his characterization of *TV verite* as *the liturgical drama of a mass society*; whether or not reality shows today are such, regarding their American originals so illuminates, however fitfully, the singular social world they appeared in; the phrase successfully assays that world. But pursuing its suggestion methodically is unlikely to yield us any more 'light' than it already does; and the circumstance that Baudrillard's most penetrating theses on postmodern America will likewise not bear methodical elaboration is why one should read him as I have suggested: as trying to comprehend the fact of America without committing a social science. That Baudrillard finally abjured the sociology he was educated into provides an initial reason, of course, to read him so; and that he looked askance at quantitative methods, which anglophone social and behavioural science has aggressively developed, is a further reason to do so.

But there would be costs to refusing method: one has to wonder, for instance, how suggestive or illuminating Baudrillard's ways with the terms "simulacrum" and "precession" will remain as America mutates away from the postmodern condition he had encountered it in. There are more immediate dangers as well. We had noted that the models of reality a science produces may come to be simulacra for Baudrillard. Now the modelling of the social by an institutionalized science might well reshape the social world which models commence from: if only because any institutionalized representing of the social world will enable 'objective'

¹⁵ That postmodern Americans should have 'outgrown' their forebears just so is a grotesque parody of the apotheosis Eisenstein had 'dialectically' foreseen for them under the tutelage of Disney.

¹⁶ We have been accustomed since Darwin to regard the organic world as evolving just so: and Darwinians may be as agnostic as they please about putative mechanisms of organic evolution.

assessments of the efficacy or justice of social arrangements; and such representing, considered as a social practice itself, is therefore apt to become a mode of praxis, in which the representing and the reforming of what is represented are complementary processes. To the extent that successful models of the social world reshape the ground they build upon, they may be regarded as ‘simulacra precessing the real’. How rapid and pervasive such reshaping has become may distinguish postmodern from modern America; but that circumstance would not particularly abash social scientists there, one suspects, since they largely see their disciplines as instruments for the making of policy by the State. Understood thus “the precession of simulacra” threatens to become an embarrassingly generic phrase: until we remind ourselves that Baudrillard’s simulacra subsist in appearance and, being exactly what they seem therefore, are neither true nor false. So the term “precession” must point to how models that reshape what they model become ‘exactly what they seem’ and hence ‘neither true nor false’: as perfect and transparently functioning machines would be.¹⁷ Now, however they may gloss successful models of the social world as machines and ascribe to them the character of being neither true nor false, a proper task for cultural theorists looking at America as Baudrillard does would be to characterize the norms of objectivity that prevail within the social and behavioural sciences there, and to examine how subscription to such norms is secured within these discourses; and to then construe and assess the social costs of securing an objective representation of the social world in the particular polity that America is.¹⁸ Such costs would have summed over time to finally effect *the liquidation of all referentials, and their artificial resurrection in a system of signs of the real substituted for the real* that postmodern America is on Baudrillard’s terms; and the requisite construal and assessment of social costs will allow such a characterization of their cumulative effect.¹⁹

Considered thus, the theoretical task facing Baudrillard’s inheritors is a daunting one; and I should note that Baudrillard’s American epigoni seem not see their work so at all. As cultural theorists the programme they seemingly prefer, rather, is to “devote more effort to investigating what the masses are concerned with” through “the study of contemporary popular culture”; in order to discern, for instance, whether or not the American masses “actively engage with

¹⁷ Baudrillard initially characterizes simulacra as ‘detering every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.

¹⁸ An example of ‘cost’ here would be the criterial rather than evidential uses of psychometry in America: consider, for instance, how the ‘intelligence quotient’ circulates as an objective measure among the populace there. My essay on the ‘mathesis’ of intelligence had touched upon this in the first issue of Phalanx. To my mind the discipline of econometrics, considered as a mode of praxis in democratic polities particularly, would most clearly exhibit the social costs of securing objectivity: especially when such polities have become ‘enterprise associations’ almost entirely, and are only exiguously ‘civil associations’. Such social costs would be incurred, for example, by how ‘freely’ the State uses the measures of the econometrician to pursue ‘the development of resources’: and such ‘freedom’ of action would be secured in democratic polities by certain protocols, as it were, of objectivity. But the extensive and inventive mathematization econometrics has undergone makes such assessment of cost very difficult. Anyway, the aggressively empirical cast of social science in America, which distinguishes it from the dominant modes of European social theory, would have decisively shaped the contour of objectivity there: to the extent that empiricism is the ‘natural’ cognitive attitude in democratic polities which make a fetish, at once, of both competition and equality.

¹⁹ Baudrillard elsewhere sums up postmodern America as *a world completely catalogued and analyzed, then artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real; a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real.*

contemporary life” in a way that “replaces politics”.²⁰ The ‘politically silent’ mass whose culture is to be studied supposedly “transmits and accepts all information. In the consumer preferences and demands detected within the mass we find all leanings and wants. Thus, the mass that contains traces of everything is in the end not intelligible to those wanting to objectify it” : as orthodox social scientists presumably do. As “the silent majorities contain a bit of everything, they are like a material in a laboratory that contains all elements and, thus, an unknowable, unclassifiable, and uncategorized lump.” One fails to see how theoretical investigation here can evade vitiation by this alleged circumstance, however successfully the investigators manage to not ‘objectify’ their subjects: unless the process of ‘study’ involved is ‘empathetic performance’ of some sort, and a faithful record of such performance its product. I doubt very much, however, that the singular polity that America is can be comprehended by attending to the habits of its consuming masses: the manners and professional customs of those who ‘objectively’ monitor the masses and their doings, rather, are the matters of moment here. Coming to grips with America requires the proper construal as ‘cultural forms’ of the social and behavioural sciences as they are practised by the orthodox there; and cultural theorists rummaging through ‘popular culture’ are unlikely to comprehend how ‘the land of the brave and the home of the free’ became the grave of the Occident.²¹

Just such an end to what had seemed at its inception the best of all political worlds, formally considered at least, requires sustained and imaginative attention: especially from those whom McWorld is rapidly surrounding. But even those fortunate enough to be living elsewhere just now might want, given the seeming imminence of environmental catastrophe on a planetary scale, to seriously consider the ‘scientific’ transmogrification of America: as a mirror, however dark, to the Purgatory the world must become when Science steps forth fully armoured to save the Earth. Perhaps the dazzling turns of Baudrillard’s precessing simulacra will divert reluctant sinners even then; one hopes, anyhow, that the manifold exactitude of Borges’ fabulations, however otherworldly and unusable they may by then have become, will still solace his readers.

Hans Varghese Mathews is an editor of Phalanx

²⁰ I have taken all this from **Rethinking the Political: Taking Baudrillard's “Silent Majorities” Seriously** by Jason Lindsey, which appeared last year in the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies (Volume 4, Number 2, July 2007).

²¹ The sentiment is Susan Sontag’s; and Baudrillard found in postmodern America *the murder of every symbolic form accompanied by its hysterical, historical retrospection.*