

# Baudrillard's Photographic Theory

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## Introduction

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) is only beginning to be referenced in the field of photography (see Richon, 2013; Coulter, 2020). The inclusion of a single paragraph entry on Baudrillard in Herschdorfer's (2015) *Le dictionnaire de la photographie*<sup>1</sup> is telling as to the problem this paper seeks to address. The brief Dictionary entry, from one of the most recent definitive reference books in photographic studies, is worth quoting in full because it captures the common errors and misunderstandings to date as to why Baudrillard is interested in photography, and what the purpose of his own photographs is:

*'Baudrillard, Jean (1929-2007) French sociologist and philosopher. Baudrillard's entire oeuvre displays his interest in the subject of the simulacrum and its relationship with reality. It was, therefore, perhaps only natural that he should turn his attention to photography, about which he wrote several books and which he also practised from the 1980s on. He believed that photography was 'pure simulation', completely removed from reality. As automatic recordings of the world around us, photographic images were only images, he argued; photography was a 'magic art', since it fell within the realm not of judgment, but of enthrallment. This paradoxical and intentionally polemic concept met with some success in the field of art criticism but remained marginal in any consideration of photography, since it constituted an aesthetic rather than a critical or hermeneutic act' (in Herschdorfer, 2018: 52-53)*

The three important ways in which the entry is misleading or mistaken will be corrected through this paper. First, with how Baudrillard's photographs are not considered as important: photography is just something 'which he also practised'. The theoretical reasons why Baudrillard is uncompromising in making it clear that he is not a photographer (professional or otherwise), not a part of photographic culture, but rather a maker of images (Baudrillard, 2004: 142) that serve to render the world more enigmatic and unintelligible, are ignored. There is no indication of how Baudrillard's photographs are *for* the Object, seduction, illusion, radical exoticism, the inhuman and the Other; and *against* the Subject, production, reproduction, meaning, representation, reality. Second, with how Baudrillard's photographs are assumed to only be examples of his recording of the world as simulacra and simulation: that Baudrillard was a producer of images that are no more than hyperreal snapshots akin to much of the photography he criticised during his lifetime. Indeed, this mistake has led to Baudrillard's writings being utilised by a range of different photographers as a means to illustrate, and add legitimacy to, their images. However, this habit is very misleading as to Baudrillard's true purpose because the photographers invariably conflate Baudrillard's description of simulation with his own position when for Baudrillard any hyperreal photograph isn't a photograph because it lacks the sovereignty of illusion. Third, with how the supposition that Baudrillard's photographs are 'aesthetic' rather than an integral extension of his radical thought and vision of his own 'strange world' (Zurbrugg, 1998) – where meaning is not forced on the image by the subject, but the object is fleetingly glimpsed as it shines forth unshackled from the weak yet totalizing reality of an integral reality which takes representation beyond reality – has consequences for missing Baudrillard's contrarian contribution to contemporary debates in photography studies around rebuking aesthetics, questioning representation, challenging simulation and cherishing the inhuman face of photography. In nuce, the full potential of Baudrillard's contribution to photography and photography as philosophy has yet to be detailed and consequently its repercussions are also yet to take full effect.

This inclusion of Baudrillard in Herschdorfer's Dictionary for the field of photography studies is to date unusual, a rare instance because Baudrillard is ignored or overlooked with editors tending to focus only on the 'usual suspects' of photography theory such as Walter Benjamin, John Berger, and Susan Sontag. The evidence seems to suggest that because Baudrillard's philosophy and theory of photography is nothing like those before him the purpose of his photographs is often lost on those trying to comment on them because they do not draw on, and run counter to, the ideas and frameworks of those who today have been canonised as the 'key thinkers' for photography studies. Indeed, whilst Baudrillard spoke of his admiration for Benjamin (Baudrillard, 1993a), and once had a heated exchange with Sontag (see Coulter, 2012), it is only his friend Barthes and his concept of the *punctum* – i.e. 'that figure of nothingness, absence and unreality' that is nevertheless 'at the heart of the image' and which 'lends it its magic and its power' (Baudrillard, 1999a: 139) – which significantly influenced Baudrillard's thinking (see Butler, 2003; Merrin, 2005; Coulter, 2020). Indeed, with a background in semiology there is scant interest in the history of photography in Baudrillard's writings, no reference to classic debates such as that between naturalism and constructivism, only fleeting references to the occasional famous photographer. Thus, Herschdorfer's Dictionary (2015, 2018) is important because at the moment it serves as almost an Archimedean point for understanding Baudrillard in photography studies. This is unfortunate not only because the Dictionary entry is misleading and mistaken but because that misunderstanding is only compounded by the dearth of up-to-date French, English and international commentary on Baudrillard's photography and his writings about photography.

Existing scholarship on Baudrillard and photography is limited in three main ways. First, there are brief comments and commentaries which may or may not be specifically focused on Baudrillard (e.g. see Toffoletti, 2010: 59-63; Cholodenko, 2005: 5-7, 2010: 155-157). Second, there are only a few substantial pieces (namely, Butler, 2003; Merrin, 2005: 138-149; Haladyn, 2016; Coulter, 2020) which whilst insightful tend to be limited in their thinking and ideas precisely because they only draw on a few of the most relevant publications from Baudrillard's oeuvre. Third, there is scant interest in placing Baudrillard's photographic theory in the context of key debates in the field of contemporary photography and visual studies.

My extensive research – conducted around the world in libraries, archives, shops, and private collections – has sourced for the first time in Baudrillard Studies a range of previously uncited and unconsidered writings and photographs which whilst always available were difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to find and obtain as Baudrillard kept no bibliography of his writings and published on a global basis in several languages and often in quite obscure publications. Despite Baudrillard being one of the most famous and translated of contemporary French philosophers in the world it is a fact that many of Baudrillard's outputs that directly, let alone indirectly, concern photography have been missed out – not cited, referenced, discussed, or even acknowledged – of existing discussions by researchers and commentators who have simply not considered the totality and import of Baudrillard's photographs and writings that relate to photography. Many of Baudrillard's photographs (e.g. Baudrillard, 1988a, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2009, 2016; Bonnal, 1986; Dawei, 2012; Nouvel, 2010), interviews and publications about photography (e.g. see Baudrillard, 1975, 1994a, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2006a, 2006b; Burgoyne, 1998) have been overlooked both within Baudrillard Studies and elsewhere as scholars have relied heavily and almost exclusively on just a handful of essays and sections of text published in Baudrillard's books (Baudrillard, 1993b, 1998, 1999, 2001), one famous essay written in the early 1980s (Calle and Baudrillard, 1983), and those interviews pertaining to only a select few of his earliest photography exhibitions (Zurbrugg, 1997), as the sources for their scholarship.

To begin to address the stark paucity of research on what I think can be described as Baudrillard's photographic theory – because Baudrillard came to see his photography as theory and strove to produce photographs, not as illustrations, but as an invaluable part of, and extension to, his philosophy – this paper is outlined and detailed like a triptych, with each part a mirror of the other, so as to be nuanced in its explication of the purpose of Baudrillard's photographs as a part of his philosophy. The paper's structure also serves to convey an, albeit imperfect and abbreviated, chronological account of Baudrillard's development of photographic theory in the context of two key contemporary debates in photography studies about fake photography and non-human photography which are both considered to be quite different examples of simulationist photography. First, before we can detail and understand Baudrillard's interest in, and then later philosophy and practice of, photography it is necessary to appreciate the overall purpose of Baudrillard's philosophy as one which sides with the object. This is explained and contextualised in contemporary photography through a discussion of photographs as 'authentic fakes' by the controversial artist Alison Jackson to demonstrate how Baudrillard's photographs and interest in photography as philosophy is not to mirror, describe, be a part of, or even to subvert or critique hyperreality per se, but is rather an attempt to *glimpse the world beyond the real* to show how objects can eclipse the subject and resist the forcing of significations and meanings. Second, a recent theorisation of non-human photography by Zylinska (2017) is discussed as an example of how the ever more sophisticated simulation of digital

photography and other media stands in stark incommensurable contrast to the photography which Baudrillard admires for exposing the radical exoticism of the object (Baudrillard, 1993b). Third, the quantity of photographs published (Baudrillard, 1998, 1999a, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2009, 2016; Descoueyte, 2005; Dawei, 2012) and exhibited by Baudrillard around the world, before and after his death, is substantial but has attracted little discussion either in or outside of Baudrillard Studies. It is argued that this is most unfortunate given that Baudrillard's photographs are actually an important *supplement and extension* of his overall philosophy; because for Baudrillard the only photography that matters is *photography which is philosophy*: where 'it is the object which thinks us' (Baudrillard, 1999a: 144). Baudrillard's photography as a part of his anti-systemic philosophy which sides with the object is discussed through one of Baudrillard's overlooked final publications (Baudrillard, 2006b). This essay is considered for the first time to ascertain what, according to Baudrillard, the connection is between *his own photographs* and his philosophy.

### **'I'm not really a photographer'<sup>2</sup> : the Object**

Whilst Baudrillard's oeuvre of numerous books and other publications – that includes reviews, articles, poems, songs, interviews and photographs – seems incredibly varied and wide ranging the fact is that as a whole it is remarkably consistent and has one principal guiding theme: namely, Baudrillard's concern with stating a theorization of the '*object*': 'For me, object will have been the 'password' *par excellence*. I chose that angle from the beginning, because I wanted to break with the problematic of the subject. The question of the object represented the alternative to that problematic, and it has remained the horizon of my thinking' (Baudrillard, 2003d: 3; also see Baudrillard, 1990a).

In one of Baudrillard's final essays on *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (Baudrillard, 2007) he takes up the position of the 'object' – in the light of mediatisation, virtualisation, and the disappearance of the subject – to imagine a world without humans. A line of argument that can be traced back to his first book on *The System of Objects* (1996a) where Baudrillard began his theorization of the 'object system' and the general semiological process and logic for social integration in affluent consumer societies whereby because of the object system the real was to become no longer accessible due to the liquidation of all systems of reference (Baudrillard, 1994b). Such was the beginning of Baudrillard's aversion to capitalism through his 'systematic anti-system' (Zurbrugg, 1997: 2) that across all his works tracks the disappearance of the object and its appearance as image, sign, simulacra, simulation, hyperreality, integral reality.

All of Baudrillard's publications confirm his earliest intuition as to the weak reality of a reality based upon imaginary satisfaction through consumption and the system of objects. And it is because of his focus on the object and the increasingly questionable reality of the world from the outset that Baudrillard reverses one of the most famous philosophical questions, he turns Heidegger on his head to ask 'Why is there nothing, rather than something?' (Baudrillard, 2015: 187; also see Merrin, 2005). A Nietzschean manoeuvre – an active nihilism – intended to both simulate and challenge *the reality principle*: that is to say the invention of the reality principle – what Baudrillard considered to be *The Perfect Crime* (Baudrillard, 1996b) – through the systematic completion and overpowering of the world through technology and capitalism – the system of objects and consumer society – to eliminate all symbolic exchange, illusion, and enigma.

It is important to understand that it is Baudrillard's theorization of the object through his overturning of the traditional philosophical perspective based on the subject that explains his

philosophy and photography, not only his account of the problem of hyper or integral reality whereby his critique of the sign was also one of the real, reference, and use-value (Baudrillard, 1981). This is apparent from Baudrillard's theorisation of photography from the 1980s onwards – in published books such as *America* (1988b), *The Transparency of Evil* (1993b), *The Perfect Crime* (1996b) and *Impossible Exchange* (2001) – where Baudrillard concerns himself with the way objects appear and consequently began to see photography as an essential part of his philosophy and strategies against any theology of the image that claims to reveal the true nature of things. The pivotal text with regard to the inseparability of Baudrillard's photography and writing was his publication of the book *America*<sup>3</sup> (1988b). In an interview Baudrillard is clear as to his purpose: 'At first, *America* wasn't intended for publication ... I was just there travelling, writing and taking photographs for my own pleasure. It helped me in the search for a writing which would be more immediate, photographic or cinematographic, which would link up to another medium' (Quoted in Beard and McClellan, 1989: 62). The link or convergence between the photographic act and the process of writing, the development of a photographic theory, begins for Baudrillard with his travels in America, where – utilising a camera he was given on an earlier trip to Japan – he seeks a new way of theorizing hyperreality which does not add to anything, but rather inverts that system to reveal 'its hidden non-meaning, the Nothing which haunts it, that absence at the heart of the system, *that shadow running alongside it*' (Baudrillard, 2001: 149; my emphasis).

### ***More real than reality: inside the simulacrum with Alison Jackson***

Let's us turn now to the innovative photography of the artist Alison Jackson whose concern for our image-obsessed culture of doubles, copies and hyperrealism serves as the perfect counterpoint to explain how Baudrillard's photography does not seek to describe, capture, parody, double or replicate hyperreal culture: Baudrillard is not concerned with producing pictures of hyperreality like Jackson.

Jackson's (2007, 2016) work is about voyeurism, our need to believe, and simulation. She cleverly uses actors or employs lookalikes of celebrities and public figures to produce convincingly realistic paparazzi or documentary style photographs of the intimate, often salacious, imagined private lives of many of the world's most famous and infamous 'icons' or well-known individuals: Donald Trump, the British Royal Family, Marilyn Monroe, Kim and Kanye West, Elton John, David and Victoria Beckham, are but a few who feature in her works. Through studying the media and publicity industry created phenomenon of the 'cult of celebrity', Jackson seeks to explore the difference in contemporary celebrity culture between 'true' and 'false', 'real' and 'imaginary', 'original' and 'copy'. A premise that is nowadays blurred, confused, and uncertain so that likeness and fantasy can be mistaken for the real and the believable. Her work also rests on the more radical thesis about celebrity culture fascinating us simply because it is an invented reality: a *simulation* or hyperreality where the very definition of the real has become something entirely possible to reproduce. Indeed, it is her interest in celebrity culture as simulation which shapes Jackson's art. Her photographs, she contends, are not 'fake', or a stress-test of 'truth', but as 'real' as anything else in the strange hyperreal world of celebrity culture; the purpose of her photographs she says *is to actually replace the real, not create fakes*, there is no retouching, darkroom trickery or digital manipulation because Jackson's purpose is to *show reality*.

It is tempting to think that you are being tricked by Jackson's employment of doppelgängers in her photographs of 'Donald Trump', the 'British Royal Family', and 'Celebrities' (e.g. see Figure 1), to suppose that she wants you to suspend your disbelief, to be star struck and play

along with the spying and the voyeurism of peering around the corner of celebrity culture to see what is going on ‘backstage’ in the lives of the famous away from the public gaze. You may think that this is the motivation behind Jackson’s work, being portrayed not as images of complete fantasy, but often granted a patina of credibility through their connections and associations with pre-existing facts, rumours, assumptions, prejudices, and gossip. Perhaps her photographs of the uncannily styled actor ‘Donald Trump’ play to our desire to be swindled: to want to believe the scandalous rumours about the President’s extra-marital relationships that are reported in the gossip columns of newspapers and magazines; to believe that Donald Trump is an extreme racist who might associate with the Klu Klux Klan and credibly appear in a facsimile of one of photojournalism’s most famous photographs: ‘The Burning Cross’ taken in Wrightsville in 1948 (see Stepan, 2012: 72–73). However, as tempting as it might be for you to deploy such a reading of Jackson’s photographs, to assume that her photographs mirror the ‘real’ lives of celebrities or even simply depict your suspicions or fit the mental image you have about this or that celebrity, you would nevertheless be avoiding the artist’s claim that her photographs are not an imitation, distortion or exposé of celebrity culture.

Jackson’s art and photographs aren’t about lifting the veil that perhaps shrouds the private lives of celebrities, nor are they about proving that the camera lies, about revealing that seeing is deceiving, or even that there is a blurred line where truth ends and lies begin. Rather her photographs are an unusual glimpse at celebrity because they are asking you to consider how in celebrity culture everything is ‘on show’, always already overexposed, immediate and immanent, to such an extent that there is no illusion, enigma, mystery, or scandal to be revealed. Her photographs are startlingly realistically staged affairs, carefully orchestrated scenarios that do not pretend that there is a ‘reality’ to critique behind them, there is no original real for these photographs, there is no exterior or ‘outside’ to the exhibited photographs beyond the bubble of celebrity culture. Jackson is not asking you to decode the photographs, for you to think of them as somehow political or ideological critiques of this or that celebrity, or to think of her photographs as seeking to unmask the ‘truth’ of celebrity culture, because her point is that it is the simulation itself, the culture of celebrity, that is obscene, and that the simulation that is ‘celebrity culture’ is immune to any obvious critique beyond social commentary precisely because it intrinsically throws into doubt any distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’, ‘true’ and ‘false’, or ‘original’ and ‘copy’. A celebrity world where there is no separation of image and world, of sign and referent, of signifier and signified, of abstract and concrete, or eye and world, disallows the opening of any critical space or gaze on the obscenity of celebrity culture.

Jackson’s photography is of a virtual concoction and performative flow of appearances not indexed to the truth. That said, it is not the meaning, but the performativity of her photographs that we need to look at, if we accept the contention that celebrity culture in an age of mass mediation is no more than a media construction. And doing that is hard, it is difficult to let go of the traditional habit of modern or enlightenment thought that above all wants and seeks meaning, demands that there be something more than just images, desperately wants to reject the idea that there is nothing (no truth, no real) waiting to be revealed behind images and representations, that needs to ‘analyse’ images to ‘find’ or manufacture meaning because it just can’t accept that images do not overlay the world but are that which the world lays on for itself. Jackson’s challenge to you is precisely this: can you question your belief in representation and verisimilitude? She argues that it simply does not matter that she utilises actors and lookalikes. The fact that they are not the ‘real’ subjects is not important so long as they look right precisely because she is showing you what you

already know – that it is the image, the ‘icon’, the ‘aura’, of any celebrity that is what is important and seductive about them.

Jackson’s photographs are not only funny and well-staged, not only designed to titillate the public and make you do a double take, but are also thought-provoking because they are a challenge to take the action of her photographs seriously. She is not imitating, feigning, counterfeiting, representing, explaining, or merely presenting celebrity culture, but is provoking us to consider the possibility that her photographs *are* the world of celebrity culture. It does not matter that her photographs do not, and are not intended to represent any actual event that has taken place, nor that will take place, precisely because her photographs have agency in-themselves, with nothing behind them they are not the causes or effects of actions, but are actions in their own right. Jackson’s photographs are a part of, not apart from, the cult of celebrity. The fabrication of her photographs absorbs the consequences of cause and effect and creates an ‘implosion of meaning’ that initiates simulation. Jackson’s spoofing of any celebrity only ever serves to make them yet more famous, to exist only more intensely in the public imagination, to get even more attention, to make them more real than real: that is to say, *hyperreal* and obscene.

In her brief ‘Artist Statement’ that accompanies her book *Private* (Jackson, 2016) on celebrity culture Jackson explicitly quotes Baudrillard as the inspiration for her photography: ‘My work is about simulation. Creating a clone or a copy of the ‘real’ on paper. It is not a fake, it takes the place of the ‘real’ for a moment. As Baudrillard puts it, simulation is different from feigning ... “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’”’ (Jackson, 2016: unpaginated). However, Jackson’s wit and parody of hyperreal celebrity culture is not the purpose of Baudrillard’s photography and philosophy. Jackson’s overexposure of the here-and-now of celebrity culture, her move to total transparency where nothing is private as a form of critique is not Baudrillard’s project. Indeed Baudrillard’s photographs are not about not making distinctions, about blurred lines and not wanting to, or being able to, distinguish the ‘real thing’; they are rather opposed to the generation of a real without origin, the hyperreal which he began to diagnose in the late 1960s as the code of social standing (Baudrillard, 1996a) whereby objects have value as signs involved in a process of reproduction. Whilst Baudrillard was fascinated by what repulsed him most – i.e. the inflation of signs, the extermination of values, media saturation, the exchangeability of everything – his photography, in contrast, seeks out the shadow part of the world: *the shadow that gives its contrast to the world*. With Jackson, inside the simulacrum, the images overshadow one another – Jackson’s is a world of fleeting icons: film stars, models, royalty, sports stars and so on who ultimately are of passing interest. Whereas for Baudrillard (2006b) it is the shadow that matters, not the endless profusion and reproduction of the image – the forced, productive, pornographic drive of our culture of signs – that Jackson so expertly displays.

### **Non-human photography**

Zylinska (2017: 3, original emphasis) has recently argued for ‘*a posthumanist philosophy of photography, anchored in the sensibility of what has become known as “the nonhuman turn”*’. Zylinska states how her interest in unmanned photography, recast as ‘nonhuman photography’ by situating it in the wider ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin, 2015) across the social sciences and humanities, is threefold. First *empirical*, with how an increasing number of photographs are now taken automatically – e.g. through CCTV, drone media, satellite, medical scanning technologies, traffic control cameras, Google Earth – ‘decoupled from human agency and human vision’ (Zylinska, 2017: 2). Second *socio-technical*, with how

photography has always been to some extent nonhuman entailing a mechanical element: ‘images involve the execution of technical and cultural algorithms that shape our image-making devices as well as our viewing practices’ (Zylinska, 2017: 2).

Third *artistic* and *activist*, with how nonhuman photography has been involved in ‘Capturing the End of the World’, automatic photographic documentation of the fragility of the human habitat is we are told ‘helping us imagine a better tomorrow and better life for ourselves. *In its conjoined human-nonhuman agency and vision, photography thus functions as both a form of control and a life-shaping force*’ (Zylinska, 2017: 2, original emphasis). In Zylinska’s (2017: 51) definition nonhuman photographs are not *of* (e.g. depopulated expansive landscapes), *by* (e.g. taken automatically by machines or geology (fossil imprints)), or even necessarily *for* (e.g. a QR code taken for machine communication) humans.

Writing about and in the wake of James Balog’s unmanned environmental photography (see Zylinska, 2017: 1) – and his award winning film *Chasing Ice* of 2012 on glacier retreat as the most visible evidence of climate change – Zylinska’s claim is that nonhuman photography is a way of eschewing an anthropocentric view of the world, that Balog’s photographs are not just an environmental warning, a means of *looking forward to the end of the world* (cf. Baudrillard et al., 1989), but also a glimpse of *the world as it would be without humans*. In other words, implicit in Zylinska’s thesis of nonhuman photography is that the more nonhuman a photograph is – the more there is a trace of the nonhuman in any photograph – the closer that photograph is to capturing life without intercession, of achieving the impossible dream of capturing ‘things in their pure evidence’ (Baudrillard, 2006b: 14). Zylinska (2017: 63, my emphasis) couldn’t be clearer on this point: ‘rather than contribute to recent jeremiads about photography and its supposed loss of authenticity and materiality, or its visual excess and self-involved banality, I argue that it is precisely through focusing on its nonhuman aspect that *we can find life* in photography’.

Now, it is easy to critique Zylinska’s claims that Balog’s non-human photography and films – as a kind of aesthetically compelling ‘scientific objectivity’ – is ‘finding life’ by capturing the world in its pure evidence without intercession. Balog’s is after all just another form of reportage photography which – through multiple photographs and film – goes far beyond the single ‘telling’ image; and whose authority is the implicit faith many have that the weight of images of this type convey a notion of the truth or reality of an event or process when it is accompanied by a narrative: the narration here is to convince you that glacial sublation equals catastrophic climate change. This faith in the veracity of Balog’s photographs and film makes them a powerful tool for shaping, informing and manipulating public opinion. Balog’s agenda, opinions and failings are overlooked as here ‘seeing is science’ despite the fact that what is produced are only glimpses that may or may not provide a distant insight: photography is ‘statistical’ forgetting how it is produced through the act of selective curation.

Zylinska’s appeal to non-human photography is up-to-a-point little more than taking one-side of a classic debate in the history of photography:

On the one hand there are those for whom photography is a tool for self-expression and aesthetics. A focus on the ‘I’ behind the lens, a concern with what the photographer is saying through photographs as an expression of either his or her motivations, passions, interests, beliefs and aspirations; or what is found that fascinates, moves, intrigues, angers or amuses enough to be photographed. This is the argument that photography is about the subject, the photographer as artist, which of course is a large part of the history of photography and the many attempts by photographers to emphasize the unique properties of photography and the



photographic process so as to raise the field as a whole to be seen as comparable to ‘high art’ with aesthetics and a process of creation such as literature, sculpture or painting.

On the other hand there are those who contend that photographs simply ‘record the real’, so called ‘straight photography’ where photography is unmanipulated, which is essentially Zylinska’s position with regard to explaining non-human photography as a putative realism, a faithful reproduction of ‘life’. Non-human photography speaks to photography as a practice that is driven by equipment, not even technique; the photographer as an artist or ‘author’ is rendered redundant and invisible to the process of automatic light writing. The photographic process is simple with no need to go beyond the surface and the original subject of the photograph; no need to halt at the surface of the photograph to consider the intentions and message of the photographer.

For Baudrillard the two main traditions of photography are flawed. Subjectivity is naïve. Objectivity is ideological because it pretends to be neutral like science. However, the fact of the matter is that Zylinska’s (2017) theorisation of non-human photography as a non-anthropocentric recording of the world is unknowingly a part of another debate – one which is a primary concern of Baudrillard’s photographic theory: *the simulation problem*. Indeed, Zylinska’s (2017) advocacy of non-human photography is to reduce photography to no more than the definition of simulation *par excellence*: ‘If only you could see what I have seen with your eyes’ said the replicant Roy in Ridley Scott’s (1982) *Blade Runner*. Despite Zylinska’s focus on post-humanism and the ‘non-human turn’ as the basis for her theorisation of non-human photography Zylinska makes no reference or citation in her book to Baudrillard – or even Deleuze (see Massumi, 1987) – and hence no reference to those before her who have attempted to tackle the problem of the simulacrum: *the simulation trap*.

From a Baudrillardian perspective the non-human photography of Zylinska (2017) is all about pure simulation. This is for two interrelated reasons. First, Zylinska’s focus is on digital cameras and realistic technical perfection which is problematic because with the digital image the real has no way to disappear because it has already disappeared. Only the discontinuous analogical photograph isolates, fragments, details and depletes the object so that only the analogical with the ‘suspense of the negative’ retains the moment of disappearance whereby ‘This slight displacement gives the object the magic, the discrete charm of a previous existence’ (Baudrillard, 1997a: 30). Second, Zylinska (2017) includes the moving image as an essential part of non-human photography. However, restoring dimensions to the photographic image ‘outline, motion, emotion, idea, pathos, meaning, desire – as a way of doing better, of getting closer to reality (i.e. merely improved simulation)’ is, says Baudrillard, ‘a total nonsense where images are concerned. This is where technology falls into its own trap’ (Baudrillard, 1993b: 154). That is to say that the more there is a focus on the absolute highest definition and realistic perfection of the image, ‘the more the image’s power of illusion is lost’ (Baudrillard, 1997b: 8). For Baudrillard photography is not about recording and preserving; photography is about the disappearance of the object and its appearance as image. Indeed, Baudrillard’s photographic theory inverts that of Zylinska (2017) because *for Baudrillard the more non-human photography is the less it ‘finds life’* because ‘Only the inhuman is photogenic’ (Baudrillard, 1990b: 158; my translation).<sup>4</sup>

When Baudrillard (1993b; Delahaye and Baudrillard, 1999) argues that only the inhuman is photogenic this does not mean that he is advocating photography that is inhuman in the sense of being cruel, barbaric, and deliberately lacking in human qualities of compassion and mercy. It is also not quite what Azoulay (2008: 11) contends either. Azoulay (2008) supposes

that '[T]heorists – such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Susan Sontag – who bore witness to a glut of images were the first to fall prey to a kind of “image fatigue”; they simply stopped looking. The world filled up with images of horrors, and they loudly proclaimed that viewers’ eyes had grown unseeing, proceeding to unburden themselves of the responsibility to hold onto the elementary gesture of looking at what is presented to one’s gaze’. Whilst Baudrillard is critical of photojournalism (see Baudrillard, 2017) and the profusion and proliferation of images through contemporary media as a part of the machinery of hyperreality; it is important to note that it is also the case that Baudrillard does regard some photographs as exceptional: the statuesque photographs of native North American Indians (Baudrillard, 1993b); Mike Disfarmer’s mid-twentieth century photographs of Arkansas farmers (Baudrillard, 1999b); Luc Delahaye’s (Delahaye and Baudrillard, 1999) surreptitious photographs of strangers on the Paris Metro in 1995 and 1997 are remarkable for Baudrillard because the people in the photographs are not brought into psychological focus, lacking introspection they remain unknown, unknowable, Other, and consequently stand out from the irrepressible flow of images usually afforded by the automaticity of the camera because they ‘retain all their seductive power before the camera’ (Baudrillard, 1993b: 152).

### **Baudrillard’s Photographs**

The two primary means by which Baudrillard’s photographs have been presented to the academic community and wider public has been through two book collections and dozens of exhibitions of his photographs around the world.

There are two principal published book collections of Baudrillard’s photography; both were published at the end of the millennium (Baudrillard, 1998, 1999a).<sup>5</sup> These volumes are cited in discussions of Baudrillard’s photographs, but the books were published two decades ago and are now known to be far from the complete picture of Baudrillard’s photographic theory (writings and photographs). The two books are partial in three important ways. First, they do not include all of Baudrillard’s photography – not even all his already published and exhibited photographs (e.g. Baudrillard’s photographs from his trips to America with his first wife Marité Bonnal are missing (Bonnal, 1986)). Second, they only include two of Baudrillard’s articles about photography and do not even reference all the other pieces on photography by Baudrillard that were available at the time of publication (e.g. Baudrillard, 1988c). And third, Baudrillard does not discuss his own photographs in the essays that are included in these main books. Thus, because the purpose of Baudrillard’s own photographs is not explicitly stated in the two main reference collections of his photographs it is no surprise that those examining, analysing, interpreting, and commentating on Baudrillard’s photographs have tended to reach some odd conclusions.

Baudrillard’s photography has been widely exhibited. The first major solo exhibition of Baudrillard’s photographs was in Paris in 1992, with numerous other subsequent exhibitions not only in France but across the world<sup>6</sup> However, mirroring the lack of academic commentary about, and explanation of, Baudrillard’s photographs the visitors to all these exhibitions of Baudrillard’s photographs have received scant explanation as to how Baudrillard’s photographs are a part of his philosophy – as evidenced in the pamphlet guides (e.g. see Baudrillard, 1994a; Zurbrugg, 1998, 2000; Dawei, 2012) and articles (e.g. Burgoyne, 1998; Wang, 2012; Linnert, 2016) that have accompanied a handful of his photographic exhibitions. There are three reasons for the lack of explanation as to the purpose of Baudrillard’s photographs:

First, many photographers and artists addressing the culture of the image have cited Baudrillard's philosophy and claimed that it is relevant for guiding and understanding their own photography when, in fact, their photography – invariably pictures of hyperreality – is what Baudrillard set himself *against* through his unique contribution to philosophy and photography which sided with the object rather than the subject as a fulmination against the simulacrum. In many ways this confusion is similar to the 'Simulationist' artistic movements which attempted to 'visualise' Baudrillard's writings in the 1980s. However, the detailed case study in this paper is included because it is unusual in that Jackson makes a *knowing* incorporation of Baudrillard as a reference into her photography precisely because she seeks to show how the simulacrum has no outside, that her photography is *inside the simulacrum* whereby only a reality that already resembles a photograph is captured. Jackson is not claiming that Baudrillard would be interested in her photography as such – Baudrillard's admired photographers such as Luigi Ghirri (e.g. see Ghirri, 2018) and Sophie Calle (Calle and Baudrillard, 1983; see Swinnen, 2010: 216) – but is rather contributing to a key debate in contemporary photography: 'Can images be more real than reality?' (Howells and Negreiros, 2015: 132–134).

Second, it has been incorrectly assumed that Baudrillard's photography is merely illustrative to his philosophical writings. Consequently, there is a lack of academic explanations to guide curators and professional reviewers and critics as to the purpose of Baudrillard's photography. For example, in the pamphlet guide for the exhibition of his photographs in Lyme Regis Baudrillard is reported by the famous writer John Fowles to have commented that his photographs are 'invaluable adjuncts to his more strictly philosophical work' (Zurbrugg, 2000: unpaginated), but there is no explanation as to why Baudrillard thinks his photographs are indispensable, completing and enhancing his philosophical thought.

Exhibitions of Baudrillard's photographs fail to explain how they are more than just a photography exhibition leading to misinformed or merely suggestive reviews. For example, Linnert (2016) reviewed the exhibition of Baudrillard's photographs at Château Shatto in Los Angeles for *Artforum International*. Linnert's review misinterprets Baudrillard's photographs in four ways. First, through an aesthetic description of his photographs: '*Sainte Beuve*, 1987: A vacant armchair upholstered in red velvet is framed against a blank white wall seemingly under bright, studio lighting. A crimson sheet is draped over the chair, pressed into its corners and crevices perhaps by the weight of a now departed sitter. Despite the fabric's contrasting shadows and sinewy lines, the armchair lacks visual depth, instead registering as a flattened array of curvilinear gradients' (Linnert, 2016: 282; see Figure 2). Second, by interpreting Baudrillard's photographs as pictures of hyperreality: '*Rio*, 1995: A traffic light and shrubbery are tightly cropped in front of a wrinkled poster showing a coral-orange palatial façade decorated with crown molding, ivory balustrades, and Corinthian pilasters. The scene's spatial dimensions are destabilized to the extent that the poster appears a simulacrum of sorts' (Linnert, 2016: 282). Third, in supposing that Baudrillard's photographs are not taken by caprice (cf. Baudrillard, 1997c) but are complicit with the simulacrum: 'As records of an open shutter, and less so as artistic meditations, these prints refocus attention on what possessed the thinker to take on the photographic medium, to stoke the inferno of images devouring the world ... Baudrillard's photographs can be read as ... memory images, *as the erasure of chance* with each snapshot, as aesthetic charm levelled with banality-and vice versa' (Linnert, 2016: 282; my emphasis).

In contrast to Linnert is a review of the Leicester exhibition of Baudrillard's photographs by the art critic Adrian Searle (1998) who, whilst also focusing on the aesthetics of Baudrillard's

photos, is at least suggestive as to their philosophical purpose. Searle notes the form of Baudrillard's photographs:

*'He might balk at calling them art, but Baudrillard's sense of composition is highly formal: symmetrical compositions, a sturdy use of diagonals – the struts of a barnacle-encrusted pier, the slant of fire escape stairs – help these become more than just amateur snapshots' (Searle, 1998: 27)*

Indeed, Searle's focus is on form and especially content, but he does sense that there is something more in Baudrillard's photographs, a connection to his philosophy:

*'A crashed car, the door prised half open, drowns in a lake. Another car, an inverted reflection in an Amsterdam canal, hovers amongst duckweed and water lilies. There's a tourist shot of a blue fishing boat and a blue wall at the seaside in Portugal, a Luminist souvenir of the Niagara Falls, peeling stucco in Brisbane, a tilted image of blue bowls and coloured marbles on a table top, a patch of sunlight on the ivy clad steps of the garden at the Medici Villa. Puddles of light, and the photographer's own intervening shadow in a room with a billiard table. The photographer's aesthetic, like his theory, is one of disappearances' (Searle, 1998: 27, my emphasis)*

Searle picks up on the importance of disappearance as an aesthetic in Baudrillard's photographs:

*'Baudrillard's photos are wistful, elegiac and oddly haunting. They are like movie stills of unregarded moments. The human presence is there, even in its absence. In the photographs, nothing much happens, yet the world is here, all the same. A man walks away from the sea, a couple sit in the sun against a wall'*

Indeed, Searle notes that in Baudrillard's photographs 'There's a certain fondness for the world, which comes through almost in contradiction to the razzmatazz surrounding Baudrillard's thinking' (Searle, 1998: 27).

Third, because it is only in the final writings of Baudrillard on photography – those which have been neglected and overlooked – that Baudrillard explicitly discusses his own photographs in relation to his own philosophy. And it is this explicit discussion which is

instructive as to Baudrillard's actual purpose of developing a photographic theory whereby his photographs are an invaluable extension of his philosophical works:

*'The parade of shadows – mine on the ochre wall or on the straw palisade, those of the persons walking past the wall of the Recoleta, or the chairs placed in the Luxembourg Gardens – all this theatre is like the reflection of a previous world where we were still mere shadows, a crepuscular golden age where mankind had not yet thrown itself towards the brutal light of the real world, towards this contemporary desert where all shadows succumb to artificial light and virtual reality, and where overexposed bodies have become translucent'* (Baudrillard, 2006b: 16; see Figures 3 and 4)

Indeed, in concluding 'The writing of the shadows' Baudrillard (2006b) explicitly states how his photography is not, even as an astute observer of surfaces, about photographing hyperreality. Nor are they about the exotic or otherworldly, Baudrillard has no truck with spiritual or religious matters (cf. Walters, 2012). Baudrillard is not interested in invisible worlds, only the strange world of appearances and disappearances. Baudrillard states that:

*'I would like to link, from an almost anthropological perspective, the shadow and the photographic image. The shadow is also a symbolical extension of the human being that does not depend on their will. Just as the shadow is an independent projection of our will, the most original, the most heart breaking images are ghostly projections, closest to this primitive scene, furthest from human intervention'* (Baudrillard, 2006b: 16)

Bate (2016: 114) observes that 'Like Plato, Baudrillard is highly suspicious of images' and that 'in his [Baudrillard's] later life he published his own photographs, which arguably support this scepticism'. Here we can see the half-truth of Bate's observation because whilst Baudrillard is suspicious of images it is not because he shares Plato's philosophy. In making reference to the shadow and the photographic image Baudrillard perhaps invokes Plato's *The Republic* (2003) and the famous simile of the cave. But if relevant at all it is only because Baudrillard's photographic theory renders Plato's parable redundant in an age of integral reality. For Plato the shadows on the cave wall – the world of appearances – are illusory; whereas for Baudrillard the world's illusoriness is precious, evidence that the murder of the real – to produce the world as simulation – was not a perfect crime. The world remains enigmatic, unintelligible and beyond representation because the real cannot be written or photographed, cannot fully pass through appearances: it is precisely because *representations are their own reality* that photography – like writing and theory – is fictional: the object always outwits the subject because it surpasses the subject's understanding (Baudrillard, 1983).

Often Baudrillard's photography appears to be of cities in entropy: 'walls, windows, stucco, and peeling paint: lyrical biopsies of urban exfoliation. Not so much evocations of events within the city, these are images of the city as *event*, aglow with what he identifies as photography's "stunning clarity"' (Zurbrugg, 1998: unpaginated). Indeed, the event is what Baudrillard looks to in his photography because the event is where the symbolic is not transgressive or immanent to simulation but is singular and shines forth from the weak reality of reality: 'the singularity of the instant outside of its interpretative context, at the point where things have no meaning – or do not yet have meaning – but appear all the same' (Baudrillard, 1997c: 39). In nuce, Baudrillard's photographs are not attempts to achieve the impossible dream – the perfect simulation – of capturing the object without intercession, but rather serve to enable Baudrillard to glimpse a parallel world that is slipping away in the face of an integral reality which is almost all encompassing and wants more than anything to impose meaning on the world. Baudrillard's photography like his radical thought is a provocation. Baudrillard's photography, as with his writing, serves to 'measure the angle of incidence on those events of a parallel world with which a perpetual confrontation is going on' (Baudrillard, 2003d: 92); his photographs are testament to showing how the simulation of the world is not perfect, and are a strategy for focusing attention on the fundamental enigma and unintelligibility of a world which escapes a definitive meaning. Reality it too obvious to be true.

## Figures



Figure 1: Trump with Miss Mexico (© Alison Jackson, 2016)



Figure 2: Jean Baudrillard: Sainte Beuve, 1987 (© Marine Baudrillard)



Figure 3: Jean Baudrillard: Punto Final, 1997 (© Marine Baudrillard)





Figure 4: Jean Baudrillard: Luxembourg, 2003 (© Marine Baudrillard)

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### Endnotes

1 – Published in English as *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Photography* (Herschdorfer, 2018).

2 – See: Leith W (1998) ‘I’m not really a photographer’, *Life: The Observer*, February, 12–17

3 – *America* (Baudrillard, 1988b) published by Verso featured photographs from Richard Misrach’s ‘Desert Cantos’ series, not photographs by Baudrillard himself.

4 – This sentence appears in English translation as: ‘Only the non-human is photogenic’ (Baudrillard, 1993b: 153). However, this is a translation error because the original French reads: ‘Seul l’inhumain est photogénique’ (Baudrillard, 1990b: 158).

5 – The later tri-lingual – in French, English and German – book (Baudrillard, 1999a) contains an additional essay by Baudrillard on ‘It is the object that thinks us...’, but contains fewer photographs: 90 photographs – strangely only 88 are listed in the catalogue (Baudrillard, 1999a: 216–217) compared to 92 photographs in the first French collection (Baudrillard, 1998). The photographs collected in both volumes are largely the same and contain all the photographs in Zurbrugg (1997).

6 – A minor exhibition took place in Paris in 1986. Exhibitions: Venice (1993); Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne (1994; Baudrillard, 1994a; Zurbrugg, 1997); Rio de Janeiro (1996); Tokyo (1997); Leicester (1998; Zurbrugg, 1998); Graz (1999); Lyme Regis (2000; Zurbrugg, 2000); Auckland (2001; Byrt, 2001); Sydney (2001); Paris (2001); Moscow (2002); Siena (2003; Baudrillard, 2003c); Kassel (2003–2004; Baudrillard, 2003b); Izmir (2004); Karlsruhe (2004); Seoul (2005; Baudrillard, 2009; Descoueyte, 2005); and continued after his death: for example, Lianzhou (2010); Guangdong (2012; Dawei, 2012); Macau (2013); Taipei (2014); Los Angeles (2015–2016; Baudrillard, 2016); Oxford (2018),

Shanghai (2019). Baudrillard's photographs have been exhibited in many of the world's most prestigious venues such as the International Festival of Photography in Arles, (France), the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (Germany), the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris, the Färgfabriken in Sweden, the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane (Australia), the Daelim Museum in Seoul (Korea), and more recently at Lianzhou Festival and Cafa Art Museum in Beijing (PRC).

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