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Hypochondria: Theatrics of Alienation

Hipocondria: Teatralização da Alienação

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Abstract

Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal celebrates that we have moved beyond the age of metaphysics where the real was the standard of imitations. Now imitations have become more real than the reality they imitate. Baudrillard's position emerged from critical theory, but maintained that, along with the age of metaphysics, we had moved beyond the "dramas of alienation." In many of Baudrillard's works, it seems that exploited people are in effect playing the role of alienated in society. I offer a deconstruction of this dangerous position by relying on literary analyses of Molière's final play, The Hypochondriac, and Dan DeLillo's novel, White Noise, as well as Denis Guénoun's work on the political implications of theater. This deconstruction of Baudelaire's hyperreal reveals the promise of an aesthetic phenomenological political critique.

Keywords: Baudrillard. Molière. Alienation. Hyperreal. Critical theory. Guénon.

Resumo

A noção de hiper-real de Jean Baudrillard comemora o fato de termos ultrapassado a era da metafísica, em que o real era o padrão das imitações. Agora as imitações se tornaram mais reais do que a realidade que imitam. A

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posição de Baudrillard surgiu da teoria crítica, mas sustentava que, junto com a era da metafísica, havíamos ultrapassado os "dramas da alienação". Em muitas das obras de Baudrillard, parece que as pessoas exploradas estão, de fato, desempenhando o papel de alienados na sociedade. Ofereço uma desconstrução dessa posição perigosa com base em análises literárias da peça final de Molière, O Hipocondríaco, e do romance de Dan DeLillo, Ruído Branco, bem como do trabalho de Denis Guénoun sobre as implicações políticas do teatro. Essa desconstrução do hiper-real de Baudelaire revela a promessa de uma crítica política fenomenológica estética.

Palavras-chave: *Baudrillard. Molière. Alienação. Hiperreal. Teoria crítica. Guénon.*

Introduction

Jean Baudrillard has embarked upon a new direction in social criticism. It emerges from traditional Marxist critique, which remains poignant in spite of its economic reductionism. Like the critical theorists before him—Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, etc.—Baudrillard recognizes both promise and peril in the very diagnosis of alienation. The usual task of critical theory is to qualify the account of alienation—to determine some critical perspective that can reinvigorate social *praxis* by somehow disclosing the insidious mechanisms of capitalism that pacify existence. People in post-industrial societies are suffering from an alienation of which they are mostly unaware.

The physicians and metaphysicians of post-Marxist thought have reveled in their diagnosis of this obscure illness. However, Baudrillard's new wave of critical theory seems to veer sharply from these other positions. The irony of his position is that it tends to show that social criticism *per se* is impossible. We seem to have moved beyond realpolitik to become hyperreal and trans-political. Rather than indicate a malignant illness of which society is unaware, Baudrillard seems to tell us that the illness Marxists have diagnosed is actually hypochondriacal. Calling attention to alienation merely allows one to play the role of being sick.

I want to argue that Baudrillard is correct to point out problems with the notion of alienation. In Marx, there is a humanistic nostalgia for a natural state from which we have been alienated. Furthermore, Baudrillard is correct to indicate that there are difficulties in forming critiques unique to our post-industrial society that are not accounted for in Marx' account—and perhaps not in any post-Marxist accounts. So we need to consider, in Baudrillardian fashion, whether the notion of alienation itself is simply a form of hypochondria. However, hypochondria is itself an illness. And forming the question of alienation in terms of hypochondria will allow us to show that, as clever and compelling as Baudrillard's analysis is, his notion of the hyperreal presupposes a notion of the real that intrudes and encroaches upon the hyperreal. I think that he is wrong that no critique is possible. I think that human suffering is abjectly real. And I think that it is incumbent upon us to care for those who suffer rather than succumb to a pretentious and self-indulgent cynicism.

I will argue for my position by first recalling some details of the problem of alienation, and showing the merits of Baudrillard's critique of these positions. Then I will turn to a brief analysis of Molière's play, *Le Malade Imaginaire,* in order to reveal some aspects of hypochondria, and especially to reveal a critical space that demands response, which I believe questions the relevance of Baudrillard's position.

Civilization and its Discontent

Alienation is an expression of discontent with the forces that shape society. Of course, Marx' 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* offers one of the clearest and most detailed statements of alienation [*Entfremdung*] in his works. He depicts four aspects of alienation: (1) the alienation of the worker from the product; (2) the alienation of the worker from the means of production; (3) alienation from our nature; and (4) alienation from one another. (Marx & Engels, 1955, p. 96-112)[1]. Here, we are primarily concerned with the latter two.

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[1] I am following Marx' discussion in the section "*Die entfremdete Arbeit,*" in: Karl Marx *und* Friedrich Engels, <u>Kleine Ökonomische Schriften</u>, *Deitz Verlag,* Berlin, 1955, p.96-112. All translations in this essay are my own unless indicated.

The third aspect of alienation is that we are estranged from our nature, or from our own "species-being," as Marx called it. Unlike Baudrillard, Marx does seem to posit a natural state of human existence that has been perverted by the onset of capitalism. Indeed, Marx describes the alienated creature that capitalism creates as "a part" [*ein Teil*]—a mere thing in nature—a part or a thing as opposed to the species-being we should be. (Marx & Engels, 1955, p. 103). As we become alienated, we become mechanical parts, mere *things*. The diagnosis of alienation is the first step toward relieving the conditions that prohibit us from being all we could be.

Clearly, humans occupy a unique place in Nature for Marx. This existential place has value not as a precious object, but some intrinsic value transcending the realm of objects. Marx describes capitalism is a perversion of Nature. When humans are treated as things, just so Nature is rent asunder, and we are alienated from our own species-being. Of course, this is to assert a fundamental humanism, which is not without its own problems.

The fourth aspect of alienation follows from the third: if we can be seen as mere parts in Nature in our alienated state of being, we are unable to treat one another in a manner worthy of our unique human condition. Due to this perverse state, we are inclined to treat one another as objects, as means to an end rather than to see one another as sharing a common species-being.[2] Incidentally, given Marx' scathing remarks about idealism, it is ironic that Marx would reify Kant's doctrine of a "*kingdom* of ends."

Baudrillard offers us a new twist on this account of alienation. And let me say that I think Baudrillard has described our situation very well—and that is what is so troubling about his thought. Marx described a progression where capitalism would create a society so alienating that eventually it would crumble. He thought that the alienation that reduces people to things, makes products out of them, reduces the political and ethical value of human interaction to a calculus of exchange-value, would surely create a competition among its alienated constituents that would bring about the ruin of such a society. In short, Marx thought that capitalism would consume itself. Now, perhaps we live in the hyperreal, where alienation is just another product to be consumed.

All thought is situated thought. So the diagnosis of alienation itself emerges in an alienated context. Even the observation of the misery and abject objectification resulting from the abusive ways we treat one another must be seen as contingent and indeed compromised thought. The diagnosis of alienation cannot escape its status as a product of the very situation it purports to critique. The promise is compromised: Marx sells well!

Two monstrous questions arise. What if it is our nature to be alienated from our nature? What if we are alienated from alienation—denatured? Not only do I mean, as Sartre implied, that we are alienated from any fixed, essential nature and that our only nature is indeterminate.[3] Moreover, we must ask now whether we may speak of a nature that is alienated from its own propensity to become alienated? Perhaps we are mired in a *specious*-being. But how might this have happened?

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[2] Alain Badiou has said as much in his beautifully crafted little book, *D'Un Désastre Obscur*: Speaking of the contemporary social proclamation of the death of communism, Badiou says, "*Je tiens la mort pour un fait, une attestation d'appartenance sous-jacente à la plasticité neutre de l'être naturel*." (Badiou, 1998, p. 10). ["I hold the death as a fact--an attestation of appurtenance adjacent to the neutral plasticity of natural being."] It is the plasticity of natural being that has resulted in the elimination of the communal aspect of human existence. This is manifest as a symptom: the misunderstanding of the death of communism.

[3] Cf. *L'être et le néant* and *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*—I have in mind passages where he says that we are what we are not, and we are not what we are; and his dictum that existence precedes essence.

Simulacra and Simulations

In his essay "Simulacra and Simulations," Baudrillard adumbrates four stages of development of the relation of the image and the real as we move, or have moved, from reality to hyperreality, from representation to simulation.[4] Now it is important that Baudrillard is not writing a history here any more than Rousseau or Nietzsche were asserting that society began or values arose in a specific way. After all, Baudrillard is careful to say that "these *would be* the successive stages of the image." So we must attend to these stages as strategic myths—a dialectical dialectic. This represents an important departure from Marx, however, as we have already seen. We will return to this matter shortly when we consider the political implications of Baudrillard's position.

Baudrillard says we begin with the representative idea of *sacrament*. Here, the image "is the reflection of a basic reality." Again, Baudrillard is not asserting that we once actually had an unalienated pure state prior to our own where we were one with the world. Nor is he asserting that we ever actually lived in such a way that images were held to be strict representations. Nonetheless, the story goes like this: once upon a time, images had discrete, real references. This seems to be some sort of Fregean wonderland.

Stage two presents the evil twist that the image always falls short of its task and inadequately represents reality. Baudrillard calls this kind of self-conscious and distorted representation *malefice*. Here, the image which is intended to represent the real actually masks and perverts it in the very process of representation. If representation is our only access to reality, and if by that very process of representation we alienate ourselves from reality, we are doomed to seek the solace of a new order of priests. Heidegger's dictum that every disclosure of Being is at once a closing-over of Being, if taken epistemologically rather than ontologically, is redolent of this malefice.

The third stage Baudrillard describes "marks the decisive turning point" in its departure from the previous two. Here, in the relation he calls *sorcery*, the image represents reality only in the sense that it marks the absence of reality. The image merely "plays at" being an appearance. Here one becomes conscious of the uselessness of representation and abandons all metaphysical relations between image and reality. Since, effectively, there is no reality, there ensues a crisis of the use or value—or even use value—of the images. Perhaps this is akin to what Derrida called the "ghost town" of structuralism, where the image can be said to represent only insofar as it marks a site of signification.[5]

Finally, the fourth stage of *simulation* arises from this crisis. Here Baudrillard describes images "that bear no relation to any reality whatsoever." Untroubled by reality, these simulations "are their own pure simulacrum." Finally, we have reached a hyperreality, where images can be exchanged freely, where images are produced without regard to their relation to reality because they have displaced any concern for reality. Baudrillard sometimes celebrates his own diagnosis of the depravity of our condition, but to be fair, he sometimes indicates that he recognizes the danger of this condition. "Simulation is infinitely more

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[4] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, éditions Galilée, 1981. In the next few paragraphs I will follow closely Baudrillard's discussion on p. 16-17. The English translation is available in: "Simulacra and Simulations," in: Mark Poster (ed.), Selected Writings, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988. p. 170-1.

[5] Cf. "Thus, the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture." (Derrida, 1978, p. 5).

dangerous [than transgression and violence] since it always suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation*." (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 23 / 1988, p. 177). And, at any rate, this is where Baudrillard introduces hypochondria as a metaphor for simulation: "to simulate is to feign to have what one has not." (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 13 / 1988, p. 167).

A Probability Excess

Dan Delillo (1985) has brilliantly depicted this situation in his novel, *White Noise*. The *law* is that each individual is the sum total of his or her data. "No man escapes that." (Delillo, 1985, p. 141). The data are compiled in a network of computers covering every aspect of one's life—genetic data, personal data, medical data, police-and-hospital data, etc. (Delillo, 1985, p. 141). These computers are used to simulate catastrophes of one sort or another. Then one day, a train accident results in the release of a toxic gas cloud over much of the city where the protagonist lives. Fleeing citizens are gathered together at a shelter on the edge of the city. One by one, they are interviewed and asked for data about how long they may have been exposed to the deadly gas. Note the relation between law, simulation, and reality in this scene from the novel, as a technician at the shelter interrogates the protagonist.

> "That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important."
>
> "Short for simulated evacuations. A new state program they're still battling for funds for."
>
> "But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."
>
> "We know that. But we thought we might use it as a model."
>
> "A form of practice? Are you saying you saw the real event as a chance to rehearse the simulation?"
>
> "We took it right into the streets."
>
> "How is it going?" I said.
>
> "The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words, we're forced to take our victims where we find them. We didn't get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real…." (Delillo, 1985, p. 138).

Ah—the disappointment of settling for the real. Just as the hyperreality of the data in a science of probabilities displaces the life of the individual in the story—and in examining rooms today—the hyperreality of the simulation becomes the value standard whereby the real event is measured. There is, after all, a certain untidiness to reality. Reality is marred as a "probability excess."

"The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true." (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 13 / 1988, p. 166) Or, as I have said elsewhere, "The truth be told, there is no truth to tell." (Davis, 1992, p. 242, n. 98).

Baudrillard's *Maladie*

The postmodern condition is a pathological condition insofar as we are no longer able to tell when we are being ironic. Like his predecessor Rousseau, Baudrillard is concerned that all possibility for social and political critique has been eradicated as society consumes itself. And in the end, his voice becomes very strange—it moves from being critical, to deeply pessimistic, and finally ecstatic.

His critique seems to emerge in several stages over the course of his career. First, by attending to the structure and function of signs in society, he describes in amazing detail and precision how the *status quo* is maintained—how the possibility of critique vanishes as this stranglehold on signification is maintained through a coding mechanism. Thus he revisits the economic reductionism of Marxism with his linguistic analytic to reveal much about that pacification of existence that Marx did not adequately account for in his vision of how capitalism consumes itself. Next, Baudrillard develops the ideas of simulation and the hyperreal to account for the linguistic shift beyond referentiality. Then Baudrillard consistently and brilliantly applies these limitations to his own critique, acknowledging that he is not writing from some extra-human perspective, but from within the saturated social malaise he depicts. But this honesty is painful, and applies to all other social critique as well. This results in a pessimism and cynicism. Finally, this cynicism eventually becomes an ecstasy, as the ability to offer even this critique is impaired. We shall see where all of this will lead him.

Baudrillard's ideas entice, mollify, and mortify. His pessimistic social diagnoses seem disturbingly accurate at times. Yet there are times when he seems to smugly celebrate this condition—and it will not do to beg the question by saying that he is being ironic. This is an insufficient answer, since the very conditions under which irony can be discerned have been called into question. What is wrong with Baudrillard?

Douglas Kellner, who also reads Baudrillard from the perspective of the critical theory school "in the spirit of T. W. Adorno,"[6] offers some very direct criticism of Baudrillard's work after the mid 1980's. He describes Baudrillard as "a neo-aristocratic sign-fetishist…who fails to project any positive alternatives to the current theory of simulations." (Kellner, 1989, p. 199). Kellner thinks that Baudrillard has become a parody of himself, "transpolitical, transparent in his biases, assumptions, and positions, which are endlessly repeated and recycled, without much political energy, passion, or direction." (Kellner, 1989, p. 200). Kellner goes so far as to use Baudrillard's own self-description to describe Baudrillard as "the buffoon of dissidence." (Kellner, 1989, p. 200). Seemingly, Kellner's take on Baudrillard is that his concern with sign-play has diverted him from any positive political agenda and relegated him to a kind of schizoid self-indulgence. Kellner offers no sympathy for Baudrillard's *maladie* in his own caustic dismissal. "Poor Baudrillard! The theorist of the new order ends up suffocating just when he is about to reveal his trajectory to and beyond the year 2000." (Kellner, 1989, p. 207). In the end, Kellner makes his judgment even more explicit. "In political terms, this is what I believe Baudrillard's project comes down to ultimately: capitulation to the hegemony of the Right and a secret complicity with aristocratic conservatism." (Kellner, 1989, p. 215).

I want to be clear that I am as alarmed as Kellner with the insufferable celebration of suffering one sees implied in the cynical and ironic rhetoric of Baudrillard. However, I think that Kellner's outburst is patently unfair and really misses the mark—perhaps an attempt to make his own mark….

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[6] See Kellner, 1989, dedication page. This seems a bit self-congratulatory.

Baudrillard remarks, in his brief forward to *L'autre par lui-même*, that his task in looking over these assembled texts in the volume "puts me in the position of an imaginary voyager who fell upon these writings like a lost manuscript and who, necessitated by the documents, is forced to reconstruct the society that they describe." (Baudrillard, 1992, p. 10). He is well aware of the practical implications of his work. But in an age of strategies and masks, his honesty about being a member of the society he is criticizing is at once refreshing and disturbing, as are the subsequent limitations of any critical thought he might evoke.

> What if reality dissolves under our eyes, not into nothing, but into the more real than real? (the triumph of the simulacrum)?…What if there would be no more fractures, lines of flight, and ruptures, but a whole and continuous surface, without depth, uninterrupted? And what if all that was neither enthusiastic nor desperate, but fatal? (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 89-90).

In his recent work, *Le Pensée Radicale* (2000), Baudrillard seems even more pessimistic. Here he addresses the central question of this essay, whether radical thought is possible today. And he deliciously affirms that it is possible, but that it produces a consciousness that is "hopeless and happy." (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 23). Critique is defined in terms of negativity, but there are no negative terms left since people have been seduced into a superficial happiness (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 22-23).

And this carries over into Baudrillard's most recent analysis of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The attack, as seen on the endlessly repeated tape loops on CNN, is hyper-real—a non-event. Baudrillard points out that the hegemonic powers of the *status quo* determine the meaning of the attack in terms of an economy that is inescapable (Baudrillard, 2001).

> The absolute rule, that of symbolic exchange, is to render that which you have been given—never less, always more. The absolute rule of thought is to render the world as it has been given—unintelligible— and if possible a little more unintelligible, a little more enigmatic. (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 27).

So the meaning of the attack is reduced to obfuscating polar terms that forestall a real event. The world is neatly divided into the "good guys" who are fighting "an axis of evil." Obviously, when he refers to the attack as a "non-event," Baudrillard is not claiming that the attacks did not happen at all, or that the thousands of people did not die—and I say this in spite of his tendentious and hyperbolic rhetoric. But he is claiming that the world is structured such that even a horrific attack such as this cannot exceed the meaning given it by the materialist, capitalist paradigm in which it transpired. It is coded and marketed. The trade towers are replaceable with towers of light. A bidding war ensues for the project of constructing a memorial, taller, more real than real.

So while it is tempting to scorn Baudrillard for ignoring the blight of human suffering, and castigate him for subverting genuine efforts to aid and assist those individuals who suffer at the expense of others, one must admit that he is correct in criticizing the all-too-comfortable unctuous liberal self-righteousness that pervades academia today, at least in the United States. When I read Kellner's indictment of Baudrillard and his conclusion of what must happen instead, I worry that Kellner and his ilk underestimate the seriousness of the problem.

> This constitutes a major failure and aporia of [Baudrillard's] project, since the Right has been hegemonic in the United States, Britain, and many other countries over the last decade, including his own France, despite the French Socialists' efforts, which Baudrillard totally scorns, without offering any insight into

the difficulties in constructing socialism in neo-capitalist countries. Against Baudrillard's indifference and cynicism, I would suggest that a major task for critical social theory today is a critique of conservative ideology and politics in order to prepare the way for a renewal of the Left. (Kellner, 1989, p. 215)

From what perspective is this scathing critique written? If Baudrillard is disturbing to contemporary liberal thinkers, perhaps it is because of his impiety. Baudrillard has claimed that social critique is a pseudo-critique that ensures that no real critique could occur. If you want things to stay the same, the best thing to do is sell people the illusion of the possibility of change. Baudrillard has refused to don their priestly gown for the ritual ceremony of social pseudo-critique. Or even worse, he has donned their robe and defiled it.

One way of reading this is that there is an honest self-deprecation in Baudrillard's critique that acknowledges his own complicity in this pseudo-critique even in disclosing that the liberal critical perspective is untenable. And I do think there is something to this. The cynicism is intolerable and counter-productive; but is borne of resignation and weariness, I think.

Also, Baudrillard discloses a pernicious humanism in Marx' account of alienation. As we have seen above, Marx thought that alienated consciousness was reduced to a thing that is a mere part of the world. By contrast, he believed that we could achieve a class-consciousness that could overthrow the alienating conditions of capitalist society, transforming the class-consciousness beyond the limits of class to a pure and free consciousness. This would be the beginning of history for the realization of humanity. So Marx thought that humans are destined to become—and perhaps once were—free, unlike mere parts and things, odds and ends, means and ends, in the world. This clearly sets human being above the materiality of its own existence. So material existence is reduced to the value of human existence, which is a fine definition of idealistic humanism. Ironically, it seems to disregard the emphasis on materiality that Marx claimed he had to correct Hegelian idealism. But then, this was the same problem Marx located in Hegel's critique of Kantian idealism…

But back to our main line of thought: if this liberal line of criticism is untenable, and if there is something to Baudrillard's shocking account, what is wrong with Baudrillard? What is his *maladie*?

Farce and Signification

Marx said that "History reproducing itself becomes farce. Farce reproducing itself becomes history." (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 8). Molière's play, *The Hypochondriac* [*Le Malade Imaginaire*], thus provides a fine place to understand Baudrillard's *maladie*.

The story is, at first glance, innocuous enough. Argan, the hypochondriac, can think of little else except his health. He is preposterous and pathetic in his constant concerns over an endless series of treatments. These treatments, of course, are actually more to justify and validate his state of being ill than to cure the illnesses he feigns and for which they are ostensibly prescribed. But that is just the point—his illness *is* this preoccupation. And this infection spreads to all aspects of life, including every aspect of his monetary and familial affairs.

Argan has denied the marriage of his daughter, Angélique, to her lover, Cléante. Instead, his intent is for her to marry Thomas, the son of a doctor—presumably to save a bit of money, given his constant need of medical attention. Argan states that he would see Angélique sent to a nunnery if she resisted his arranged marriage. Eventually, Argan's brother, Béralde, tries to solve the problem by tricking Argan into believing that he could become a doctor. That way, there will already be one in the family, and perhaps Angélique's problems can be solved. Argan is berated by his servant, pitied, ridiculed, and taken advantage of, until the

final glorious scene where Argan is proclaimed a "doctor" himself, and thus he is able to validate his own status as an invalid.

The story is more complex, however, when we attend to two reflexive moments. First, it is fitting that Argan [please note—played by Molière himself] refers to Molière as a scandalous playwright in Act Three, Scene Three. Here, Argan's brother, Béralde, has said that doctors were "among the stupidest of men," and says that he wishes he could have lifted Argan's spirits by taking him to see a play by Molière on this subject." (Molière, 1998, p. 126). Argan [Molière] proclaims Molière to be impertinent. Argan [Molière] says that he thinks it is a scandal that Molière should be able to offer criticism of doctors. Argan says that when Molière is dying, he should not be offered any medical treatment. "I would say to him, `Die! Die! It serves you right for making fun of the medical profession.'" (Molière, 1998, p. 127).

Also, the final scene is a play within a play. Béralde conspires with the others to allow Argan to believe that he can simply go through some fake ceremony and thus become a doctor (Molière, 1998, p. 138-140). He tells the others, "We'll have a little play this evening. The comedians have made a pleasant little interlude about the ceremony of becoming a doctor, with dance and music. I want us all to take part in the play, with my brother in the lead role." (Molière, 1998, p. 140). And they go through with the bogus ceremony. Argan believes he is now a doctor, and allows Angélique to marry Cléante. And they all live improbably and perhaps happily ever after.

These moments of reflexivity are very important, and become even more involved when we consider the historical situation of the play. When I said above that in the course of this discussion "I will conduct a literary analysis of the play," I meant to consider not only the play itself, but the play within its historical context. I dare to make the apparently grandiose claim that this philosophical [or literary, or historical] analysis of a seventeenth century play could do something relevant. And this word *relevant* is itself interesting for our purposes. Derrida has remarked upon the significance of this term, a variant of the verb *se relèver*, which, in French, connotes "rising again," and is useful in trying to make sense of dialectical notions of progress of the sort described by Hegel and Marx, among others. So to be *relevant* is, first, to be *actualized* in this moment here and now. Secondly, it also has the critical or negative connotation of being in an ongoing process of development. It comes from somewhere and is going somewhere—literally rising from the past. Both senses of the term are important for what I want to claim, eventually. For I want to claim that philosophy must be relevant, and that the symptom of Baudrillard's *maladie*, as he denies the possibility of critique, is that it is hence *ir-relevant*. Of course, this is not much of a charge to him, since his claim is then, in my terms, that *all* of philosophy is irrelevant. But an analysis of the various reflexivities in Molière's play, in its historical situation, can point us in the right direction to see that his bitter cynicism is unwarranted.

Molière wrote, directed, and starred in this play, as was his usual practice. But there is something very unique and sublime about the historical context of this play. As Molière wrote his play, he knew that he was dying of consumption. And he actually died immediately after the fourth performance of the play, on February 17, 1673. One can imagine the scene of the audience rolling in the aisles, laughing hysterically at the play, as they perceive Molière to be hyperbolizing the coughing fits of a hypochondriac, while he is

literally dying before their eyes.[7] Molière gave the performance of his life—a dying man playing the role of a man whose sickness is to pretend to be sick. The obvious inverted reflexivity is moving and important.

Now let us reconsider the aforementioned two moments of reflexivity in light of the historical situation. First, the scene that Molière has Argan castigate Molière gains more depth. Molière knew he was dying, and had been chronically ill for most of his life. He developed a profound distrust and contempt of the medical profession that enjoyed the social status of great authority, while pretending to know more than it did while (literally) leeching money from the public. Molière sarcastically attacks the stupidity of those who uncritically trust doctors of the age. So, he is using the performance of his play to make a social criticism of medical profession. And this criticism is intricately related to these reflexivities insofar as they show the generation of a critical space.

Next, Molière dialectically invites the audience to become self-conscious of the social critique by setting Argan's ceremony within the reflexive setting of a play within a play. The actors and audience have decided to attend a play, just as the characters in the story have done. Let us consider a few of the intricacies of this phenomenon—and we will only scratch the surface.

Going to the theatre creates the aesthetic transcendence Edward Bullough described anemically as "aesthetic distance." But his rudimentary geometry may disclose a very complex figure upon further examination. For the distance is not the one-dimensional space of actor and audience that demarcates the line of criticism—the difference between *scène* and *salle*; nor merely the two-dimensional space of theatre and society that creates the flatspace of a predicted critique already mapped out; nor even the three-dimensional space of dialectical critical opposition, but a four-dimensional space where critique is alive but contingent—one "that is destined to die."[8]

Let us consider the situation from a phenomenological standpoint. What is it for the characters to agree to participate in a play? They agree to bracket the world they normally inhabit—their identities as Béralde, Angélique, and the rest are suspended, put out of play—resulting in a phenomenological reduction: the appearance of a new world where their identities are fashioned as examiners who confer the title of physician. Moreover, their identities in these new roles are melded together univocally in a chorus, clearly a historical allusion by Molière to the Greek chorus, which provided the narration and often expressed the will of the people.

> **Musician:** I'd like this student to recite us
>
> How he'd cure appendicitis.

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[7] Although, according to at least one historical account, the audience was aware that all was not well with Molière. Cf. the lengthy and informative historical introduction by Peter Nurse: Molière, *Le Malade Imaginire*, Oxford University Press, London, 1965, pp.44-5.

[8] Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*, where he implies that our world is moribund. Cf. also Martin Heidegger, "Time and Being": "True time is four-dimensional." (Heidegger, 1972, p. 15). Cf. Heidegger's account of how temporality, human existence, and finitude are related in *Sein und Zeit*.

Argan: Primus give some laxitiva

Rhubarb, sennapods suprema

Douche the colon irritata

Lastly, purge con enemata

Chorus: Bene, bene respondere

In nostro docto corpore

Bene, bene respondere

Actress: What heals chronic emphysema

Whooping cough and scarlet fever?

Argan: Primus give some laxitiva

Rhubarb, sennapods suprema

Douche the colon irritata

Lastly, purge con enemata

Chorus: Bene, bene respondere

In nostro docto corpore

Bene, bene respondere. (Molière, 1998, p. 109-110)[9]

This phenomenological analysis reveals how the audience witnesses the characters transformed into a univocal assembly. Of course, the audience has already tacitly given consent to participating in such transformations by choosing to attend Molière's play. They were willing to accept the univocal role of audience in the play, which involved a similar epochē. [Of course, the univocity is a contentious cacophony, thank God.] Now the audience is invited to be transformed anew and play a role, to echo the chorus, to join it, mocking Argan, obliquely demanded to participate in a critique that goes well beyond poor Argan to the

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[9] I relied on this creative and very loose translation for this passage only since it is composed of pseudo-Latin and broken French, and the meter is as important for the humor as the content.

Rev. Filos. Aurora, Curitiba: Editora PUCPRESS, v. 37, e202532314, 2025

12/19

medical profession *tout court*. This is possible through a phenomenological reduction to the essence of the play.[10]

Indeed, the entire phenomenon of the play is rampant with these transformations. What is it for Molière to play this part? What is he doing? Many things! To play a part, an actor must disappear, much as the theatre disappears before the rapt attention of the audience and actors. The actor's identity as actor must disappear as the transformation occurs and the new meaning emerges (Guénoun, 1992, p. 41 *& passim*). But so does the identity of the audience. For they are no longer sitting or standing in a theatre, they are *there* in pathetic Argan's house, just as the actor Molière is *there*. And, in the play within a play, the place again is transformed. Molière as Argan is *there* in the ceremonial conferring of the degree, which does not take place in Argans's house, but in an allusive public space, *there*.

But where are these *play-spaces*?[11] Where is it that we refer to when we say "*there*"? Argan's house has disappeared. The theatre has disappeared. The identities of the characters, the actors, and the audience have disappeared. So where is all of this happening? Of course, it is in the theatre. Who are these people? Obviously, actors and audience—but never again as they were before they were pulled out of themselves. They are and are not the people who began the process. They are and are not in the theatre, in Argan's house. They have been invited to adopt a reflexive transformation that allows them to get outside of themselves while remaining themselves—we are speaking of the phenomenological event of transcendence.[12]

The transcendence is always incomplete, and this is not a failure. Indeed, it is the essence of the creation of a critical space and precisely what makes it eventful. If the transcendence were complete, the participants would have no "home" to bring their newly acquired perspectival understandings.

Molière must be Molière for this to work. He must have the reputation as a writer of farces for him to carry off the reflexive and indirect, and hence funny, effective and poignant self-criticism, when Argan decries Molière's penchant for criticizing the medical profession. He must be the man dying for Argan's caustic remarks about wishing his suffering and death for this all to work. He must be embittered and suffering from the prescribed treatments as much as the illness for his role to work. He must be terminally ill to play Argan perfectly, since the significance of this role is social and political. He must be the one who originally did not want to write farces, but failed miserably at writing tragedies, which were held in much higher esteem. This is because he is enacting his own tragedy, sacrificing himself to his art, compromising his original vision in such a way that transformed the role of farce, and indeed of theater in general.[13]

So Molière must be Molière, Argan must be Argan for the play within the play, the audience must be the audience, and each individual must be the individual who chose to assemble as audience. This residue of the transformation is a dynamic sort of foundation or *ground* for the transcendence we have described. It must

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[10] This is not to imply that no further bracketing or reductions are possible. Merleau-Ponty taught us that the impossibility of a any complete reduction was phenomenology's greatest teaching.

[11] I want to thank Edward Casey for pointing out to me that Bruce Wilshire has done some important work developing his own original notion of a play-space. When I wrote this essay I was unaware of Wilshire's work, which bears a similarity to my own notion, but is developed in a very different context.

[12] I think that the better philosophical term to use here is Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility. The explication of this idea will have to be the subject of another paper.

[13] I want to thank Calin-Andrei Mihailescu for pointing out that E. M. Cioran has an analysis of Molière's career that bears some similarity to my own, though it is developed in a very different manner and context.

intrude into the transcendence for the transcendence to have transcendent meaning. Thus this play-space is a critical space because there is a *play-ground*. *Le Malade Imaginaire* in its entirety is a play within a play. And the art of theatre is a play within a play of French society, etc. Each play requires a "playground." That ground is malleable, reflexive, intrusive, and dialectical. And this is the beginning of our response to Baudrillard.

Events, Playgrounds and Institutions

Denis Guénoun's L'exhibition des mots describes theatre as involving a "reassembly of spectators." (Guénoun, 1992, p. 07).[14] This word, *rassemblement*, is fascinating. It has the connotation of putting-together, a gathering, with overtones of seeming [*semblant*]. And what else is theatre? But it gets even better than this. For Guénoun alludes here also to an *assembly*, and he tells us that this gathering in theater has a *political* aspect insofar as this reassembly is fundamentally related to a political assembly. But he is not pedestrian enough to reduce the value of theatre to the political. The assembly, then, is not a fundamental reality that the reassembly of theatre represents.[15] It is the creation of a new space—a play-space—that involves a ground for the political, the place or identity that provides a "home" or a "subject" for transcendence, what I am calling a *play-ground*.

Guénoun playfully writes the political parenthetically in the subtitle and in the text (Guénoun, 1992, p. 07).[16] He is investigating the political aspects of theatre, alluding to how the political figures into theatre as divergence rather than representation in the form of metaphysical adequation.

> This is the (political) idea of the theater: to reassemble the city, to publicly reunite in the agitation of its desire for community, to invite it to sit in place of the political assembly in order to open the political to a thing other than itself (Guénoun, 1992, p. 54).

This reassembly must not be seen as the imitation of the political assembly. Theater is not *like* the political. It is precisely in the manner that it is *unlike* the political that it *is* political—instituted in a new sense.

> The opening of the assembly must be to lead the community to consider the fundamentally non-political of the political. To lead it to observe that the political does not have its foundation in itself, but that it is the respondent to another thing…. The political is not its own proper horizon, and it is to work at its indignity that encloses it in the consideration only of itself, without which it would never open to this thing other than it, which inscribes it and summons it (Guénoun, 1992, p. 53-54).

So, the gathering together—the assembly—of theater is an institution of the "we" of the community capable of *praxis*. And it is so precisely insofar as it manifests a mundane space—the play-space—where the event of transcendence occurs. This "we" is a reassembly in the sense that there is a reality—an assembly—that inevitably intrudes upon it, and which is necessary to make the transcendence meaningful. And this

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[14] Cf. my translation of this essay: Denis Guénoun, *The Exhibition of Words* [A translation of *l'Exhibition des mots*, Éditions de l'aube, Marseille, 1992]. In: *Phenomenology, Humanities, and Sciences*, v.5, n.1, p. 68-82, 2024.

[15] In a conversation with Guénoun, he surprisingly told me that he worried there were allusions to a transcendental political assembly, and that his more recent work on theatre—just appearing—tries to avoid that. I think that everything would depend upon how one construes the role of the transcendental. So long as it is not *a priori* and necessary, I do not see why a transcendental grounding is improper—but that may be a new use for the term *transcendental*.

[16] "une idée (politique) du théâtre"

assembly manifests itself in concrete political praxis that is only possible due to the critical space of the sort we see in the above described play-space, though of course it need not be theatre alone that provides this reflexive, critical space.

Baudrillard seems to imply that the drama of alienation is over, that no critique is possible, that such transcendence is impossible. In his terms, then, the symbolic exchange demanded by society preclude any event of transcendence because the difference between terms that allows new meaning to emerge has been virtually eliminated.

Specifically about theatre, he would say that there is no reality that intrudes in the economy of the hyperreal. We see a play. We simulate the values of the characters. But the characters were defined to simulate the values of the public. So there is no appreciable difference that would eventuate critique. Art imitates life, life imitates art, and imitation no longer has an origin. According to Baudrillard, simulation is where life and art become indistinguishable—a discrimination to which we have become indifferent.

Alain Badiou has remarked that the "we" of political *praxis* has vanished, due to the self-proclaimed victory over communism by capitalist-parliamentarian regimes that co-opt terms like "freedom" and "rights" to justify the exploitation of the many by the few (Badiou, 1998, p. 10). Yet it is clear that Badiou is not resigned to cynicism, but stating the immense challenge of reconstituting this critical space in the wake of the spread of a market economy.

Baudrillard states, "The singularity of the event, that which is irreducible to its coded transcription, and to its production [*mise en scène*], that which makes an event very simply, is lost." (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 167). This is why he describes our current situation as "trans-historical" and "trans-political." Whereas Badiou states that "each event is an infinite proposition, in the radical form of a singularity and a supplement." (Badiou, 1998, p. 11)[17]. One important place that Badiou and Baudrillard disagree is over the possibility of this supplement being generated. Baudrillard's fatalism is manifest in that he thinks the status quo has established such a hegemony that the supplement is impossible. Everything is meaningful, so nothing is meaningful… Thus, philosophy is unable to generate its critical distance—it is always a product of its time and situation. Alienation is merely a useful construct to preclude attention to the real.

The question is not one of a passing political trend, but is *existential* and political. Can a political regime establish itself so that it changes the nature of our existence? Another way of expressing the differences between Baudrillard's and Badiou's positions is that they may differ even insofar as Baudrillard asserts that events no longer can take place. Whereas alienation was an undisclosed disease for Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers before him, Baudrillard sees it as a ritual exchange in the hyperreal that has no real meaning. The allure of the hyperreal is too great, he thinks, to allow for the intrusion of reality. Instead, alienation is a strategic construct to maintain the status quo by feigning differences necessary for the pseudo-event of transcendence we have described.

Baudrillard loves the model of hypochondria as simulation, though he does not explicitly extend it to an account of alienation as I have here. Such a model is useful in pointing out the complexity of the situation beyond the traditional accounts of alienation. It is a contribution to critical theory insofar as it qualifies the Marx' account of alienation. However, I think that part of the allure of this model, and of the hyperreal in general, is the great danger of hypochondria. Again, hypochondria is an illness! Is it as real an

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[17] Of course, this is fully developed in his masterful *L'Être et événment* (1988).

illness as the illnesses it feigns? My point is that it is so very dangerous an illness because one can no longer tell whether one is pretending to be sick. But contrary to Baudrillard, it also provides us with a way to see how the real intrudes into the hyperreal. We have already seen it in the analysis of the play. The critical distance, the divergence, the transcendence occurs when we reassemble to play the role of audience or actor, and in our example, this reflexivity creating a play space for difference to emerge occurs many other times. The crucial response to Baudrillard lies in understanding the reality of the play-ground.

Now I must achieve resolution here only by mixing the theatrical and medical metaphors of the analysis. In hypochondria, we play a role of being sick, and thereby create a play-space. But hypochondria itself as a disorder implicates a play-ground which is the identity of the afflicted individual—the sickness creates a supplement of individuality. The very notion of the hyperreal makes reference to reality, albeit not a constant, *a priori* ground, it is nonetheless a ground—what I have called a play-ground. All of this points out how fragile, contingent, and malleable what we call reality is. But it does not deny this reality, it invokes it.

It might help to introduce the terminology of the institution to see how this changing, shifting, enigmatic play-ground can be understood to be sufficient. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in a prescient course in 1954-55, described the role of the institution in public and private history. His notion of institution is remarkable, insofar as it is self-effacing and productive. That is, there are two dimensions of the institution: the instituted-institution and the instituting-institution. The establishment of the instituted-institution as a recognizable institution at the same moment summons its own critique, simply by its stasis. This calls forth the active instituting-institution.[18]

He speaks of actions, and how we relate individual meanings to a shared context. He describes this as a failure if one approaches it as a purely personal project, since history will then be an "empty intuition" of the other, when in fact history allows for "the enrichment of the action." However, while he acknowledges that there is a sense of an "inside" and "outside" of the action, he does not collapse these into traditional subject and object. He says that while the outwardness of the action enriches the action, one never has the pure fact, since there are both being and non-being in the world. He describes a destruction in history. Merleau-Ponty is talking about something more insidious than a destructive clearing away of the error, or even the source of error, an attitude; he is saying that the destruction is intrinsic to the understanding of history.

So Baudrillard is right insofar as he indicates very well how the hyperreal changes reality. The play changes the actors and spectators. But this transient ground is the ground of political praxis, and I think immediately describes how reality intrudes. The reflexivity I have described in the play-space is destructive, and the play-ground I have described is a construct. Therefore, critique is not only possible and meaningful in these events of transcendence—in the destruction of emergent established institutions, it is inevitable.

The intrusion of the real must not be some disguised realistic metaphysical appeal. I am not saying that Baudrillard is wrong about the hyperreal because there is something immutable outside the process of the hyperreal that disrupts the process he describes. Indeed, I think that he is right about the malleability and the fragility of the real. However, the production of the hyperreal itself creates an institution of the real. That is, it institutes the real insofar as it depends upon the indiscernibility of reality—indeed, *realities*!

The discovery of the hyperreal complicates the situation but does not resolve it. Hyperreality is the situation where we take a construction to be indistinguishable from what was once considered its original.

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[18] Merleau-Ponty, 1954-1955. I am following the general orientation of this account in this and the following paragraphs.

So long as virtual reality is considered as virtual reality, it is not hyperreal. When, in a sense, it becomes more real than real, it displaces the original reality. This is a convoluted logic. But there is surely something to it. If the construction were to be a perfect copy of the real, it would not displace it, but reify it through the tired metaphysical ideal of adequation. Only by *exceeding* the reality of the real can the construction become a viable alternative reality. But then, contrary to Baudrillard, it has produced the destruction necessary for critique, the clearing of the play-space.

Baudrillard thinks that this destructive clearing results only in the permanent obliteration of the difference between *salle* and *scène* [the place of the audience and the stage]. And it is clear that this is the end of the difference necessary for critique.

When everyone becomes an actor, there is no longer any action, any scene. [It is] the end of the aesthetic illusion (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 200).

However, to claim that the hyperreal has displaced the real once and for all is to deny its status as hyperreal: *for it must be real and must not be real* if it is hyperreal. At any rate, it seems to me that we cannot use this as an excuse to say that no critique is possible. To do so is merely valorized bad faith.

We are neither optimists nor pessimists when we combine Shakespeare and Ortega y Gasset: "All the world's a stage," but "there are no longer any protagonists left, only the chorus." Perhaps, but we see the possibility of a protagonist's desperate cry emerging from the univocity of the chorus because of the reflexivity of the opening of a critical space in the event of transcendence. We hope for protagonists because we care. For centuries, philosophers have talked about the world; the point *remains* to change it.[19]

Data availability statement

The main focus of this article is contributions of a theoretical or methodological nature, without the use of empirical data sets. Therefore, in accordance with the journal's editorial guidelines, the article is exempt from being deposited in SciELO Data.

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[19] I would like to thank the audiences at Aalborg University, Denmark, Lock Haven University, USA, and Sunderland University, England for suggestions that I incorporated into the essay. I am also especially indebted to Ed Casey and Cynthia Willet for their caring feedback as I wrote the essay.

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18/19

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