



**MONASH** University

**Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson did not happen:**

**Is there a Baudrillardian Film Philosophy?**

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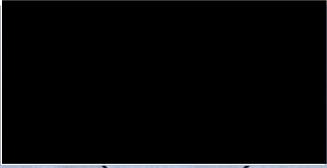
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## **Abstract**

The opportunity to take the influential and inventive thinker Jean Baudrillard and explore a selection of his signature critical terms as a film philosophy motivates this thesis. In doing so, I was provoked by the adverse analytical and critical writing accorded to independent filmmakers Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson. This dismissal of their work, while legitimate and often articulate and genuine was framed to lessen an equally genuine retort. In reply in what follows I recalibrate responses to their work through the prism of Baudrillard's signature concepts. This manifests two problems. Firstly, the inherent problem of justifying precisely how Baudrillard's work can be used when so much writing deploying his thinking is misplaced. Secondly, and following on, justifying how Kaufman and Anderson can be framed as Baudrillardian filmmakers. My methodology is to work through five key terms and employ them to reconfigure five of their films. After defining and justifying each term, I explore other critical responses to these films and contrast them to this putative Baudrillardian methodology. The result is an expanded vocabulary for talking both about Baudrillard as a film philosopher and Kaufman and Anderson as innovative and challenging filmmakers. This augments the vocabulary and approach we might take to film philosophy.

## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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## **Publications during enrolment**

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For Leah and Max who did happen.

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# **Introduction**

## **Introduction: Co-conspiracy with Baudrillard.**

Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson did not occur. A version of them has; perhaps more correctly, multiple versions of them have. Kaufman makes a cinema through exaggeration where human misery, anxiety, and crisis take centre stage in his content. Wes Anderson also makes a cinema through exaggeration, but his cinema is an exaggeration of the cinematic form. They have given us interesting cinema, undoubtedly polemic and polarising. But they did not occur until we 'real'-ised them. It is this 'real'-isation we will pursue.

Jean Baudrillard (1933-2007) was a philosopher and a cultural critic of media who came to prominence from the same Nietzschean-inspired European or Continental genus such as Gilles Deleuze, Theodor Adorno and Georges Bataille. All these thinkers struggle to map the relationship between the subject and the object under the restrictions of a consciousness that found itself in the claws of productive capital. All were trying to envision a future that was not yoked to the past.

Baudrillard's writing spanned from the 1960s to the early 2000s. It was initially influenced heavily by his contemporary intellectual radicals, such as Marshall McLuhan and Guy Debord. Baudrillard both absorbed and challenged in a manner deeply indebted to Nietzsche, devoting a considerable amount of his oeuvre to charting the influence of the mediated image on subjectivity and developing a style of writing that is both performative and controversial. Writing on topics as diverse as consumerism, gender, politics and technology, the common thread underpinning his work was writing about 'the object' was a performative injunction against any static or moribund theory of the object. Baudrillard is difficult to summarise, in terms of both the form and content, because he developed a style of writing that progressively

existed outside the terms of challenge developed by other estranged writers and thinkers of his time, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. As such, Baudrillard is often marginalised by a more analytically demanding academia (see Kellner, 1989). We take exception to this conclusion, and, in what follows, will explore the nexus of some of his major conceptual tools with the philosophy of film. This introduction will outline the marriage of the five Baudrillardian concepts deployed herein and the interpretation of the films I am defending.

The intent of this advocacy could be captured by a cinematic moment that gestures toward the trajectory we will take herein. This moment occurs towards the end of Wes Anderson's 2009 *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. As the titular character is travelling home, he spies across a field a wild black wolf, and it is their encounter which stands as a metaphor for the writing that is to follow. Fox admits he cannot communicate with the wild wolf, but in the act of interspecies connection he raises a clenched fist, and in the distance, the wolf acknowledges and repeats the action. It is a small moment in the film but worthy of discussion. What might it signify? This, however, may be the wrong starting question to begin the analysis of this poignant cinematic moment. What is more interesting to ask is from where the scene emerges and how this signification makes itself 'real'?

It is likely that the signification emerges from 'nothing', and as such the gesture Fox and the Black Wolf exchange must be forever ambivalent. Meaning can therefore only be contingent and provisionally seductive, aimed at fostering a rhetorical flourish to gain power or declare a momentary position or interpretation. This conceptualisation of nothing is not a standard or hackneyed version of emptiness; it is a nothing that marks a zero limit that is necessary to begin building meaning. We argue that a fundamental principle of the world is that this nothingness is at its base and this exceeds the limits of language. We need not search for the

meaning of things, but rather artistically and philosophically invent them. It is then a matter of rhetorically choosing what to build. Fox meets something he cannot adequately account for in the presence of the wild wolf. He tries to build meaning to make a connection, and perhaps fleetingly he succeeds. Importantly, the connection is made by Fox *for* Fox and, typical of the tenor of the film, he controls the space. He reads the wolf's body movement as a symbolic gesture and returns it in a moment of faux communication. We could offer a commonplace reading of the moment and suggest that Fox is expressing solidarity with the black wolf. The implication is when talking philosophically about cinema we arrive merely at a temporary vocabulary, yet so much written interpretation is infused with certainty. Fox is expressing a moment of solidarity with the wolf, but we are only permitted to declare this solidarity as a provisional account in the moment.

This is also from the perspective of the viewer, not Fox. Another theoretical object can emerge from this dark space to contest this commonplace interpretation. What we choose to maintain is not grounded in any essentialist or universal discourse. The rules of interpretation are imposed and constructed, not discovered. We cannot definitively assert what this moment between two animated creatures is universally signifying, and in absolute terms, we can never really definitively assert what anything fully means. It can only gesture towards a referent, but can never totally account for it. It is moments like these that typify what it means to be a meaning-making creature and to enter into the contest or challenge of seducing meaning away from the other.

What we desire is a theoretical starting point that accommodates our initial intuition that aligns with Fox's dilemma in interpreting the wolf's exchange. We would desire a theorist who operates at the limits of language and who acknowledges the power of nothingness to seductively create the magic of illusion while simultaneously warning us of the dangers of

doing so. This thesis wants to intersect with the work of cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard and apply his provocations to the realm of film philosophy.

We can now see the integration of the moment Fox raises his fist and the choice of Baudrillard for a theorist to follow in interpreting that moment. Following Baudrillard we advocate a poetic mode of response to this moment which means using language as a linguistic Trojan horse to operate on and frustrate the formation of putative social reality. Traditional empirical theory is set aside because Baudrillard's writing provides a template or form, not to follow but perhaps to trace the manifestation of this supposed reality and its ideological deployments. We choose Baudrillard because he, equal to any other theorist of his time, 'denies the world', forming a disruptive and creative critique of the mediated image. This 'world denying' might translate as Baudrillard developing a form of resistance to the social structures of the present. He dismantles, if only in the form of the written word, this world and its image-burdened dispositions. We choose to follow Baudrillard into a world he responds to—one 'which is too known'. That is, it is overburdened by simulation where the image-saturated delivery systems of knowledge often shape behaviour with ideological intent, leaving many without an historically informed grasp of the present. As Robert Miklitsch stresses 'no one, it seems to me, is more provocative on the subject of simulation' (Miklitsch 1998, p.91). Here, Baudrillard is instructive:

The image takes its place in a register which is not that of judgement, something that takes place in the form of an image, in the cinema or elsewhere, always plays with its own content. We must never make the mistake of thinking that it is a content given to us to see, ingest and digest; otherwise an image would not be an image. The important thing is that it plays with its own meaning (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 69).

When we marry what Baudrillard asserts here and what Fox appears to gesture we are left with speculation about what this image is 'playing' with. A playful breaking of the rules becomes the new rules. This effrontery is a voluntary acknowledgement of the impossibility of 'using' Baudrillard as a means of reading film, but at the same time testing how fragile the system of interpretation is when faced with his spectral presence. There cannot be a pure Baudrillardian film philosophy, but perhaps a bastardised invocation of some of his key terms might open up some separate modes of responding to film as a cultural object. What we produce are vectors that take his thoughts about the object and expose this object to an analysis by reversing its meaning, seducing its place in the chain of signifiers until it appears to weaken its political valency. The motivation is to see this form of Baudrillardian analysis as a means of exposing and promoting a more authentic ambivalence at the heart of the object.

We argue that all interpretations expose the problem of theorising are nothing other than a temporary event. We may be right, and that may have been Anderson's intention as well in providing the viewer with the encounter between Fox and the black wolf, but there always is an alternative reading or readings. There is no one correct, essential, and universal interpretation. From there we may conclude that in fact each interpretation emerges from a zero point and is abstracted according to contingent, historical, and social circumstances. Instead of beginning with interpretation, we choose to begin with this nothingness from which it has emerged and conspired with Baudrillard.

Fox states he wants to be a wild animal, but he can never be truly wild because to do so he has to abrogate his ability to think. He would have to return to nothingness. But he cannot, and nor can we. To respond to *Fantastic Mr. Fox* we need an interpretation, we must think ourselves out of this nothingness and into thought itself. Anderson's delicious moment is an

inspiration to feel and respond poetically to the desire to be wild while fully acknowledging the impossibility of it ever occurring. The thesis begins and ends with *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. In between, Baudrillard and five of his principal, poetic vocabularies will examine cinema and its interpretation. It does not necessarily mean we are after; it is an exchange with the black wolves of the world. This is rhetorical, admittedly, but that would seem under the circumstances to be necessary.

### **Baudrillard's rejection of everydayness.**

When cinema is encountered as an ideological delivery system, then it can also be seen to deliberately repress the exposure of its systemic manipulation, effectively silencing its questioning. The might of this system as an economic powerhouse can also obfuscate its own systemic motive for profit. It, therefore, might be the task of film philosophy to continually challenge traditional assumptions about this manipulation, or at least to broaden the range of interpretations available and the accordance of value to hand. This challenge to interpretation can be earnest and academic, or playful, whimsical, and perhaps even irreverent. We declare at the outset the latter approach to be our preference, and in what follows the writing has two purposes. Firstly, it is to offer an alternative to academic film philosophy as a purposeful methodological strategy, and secondly, it is to explore whether a theoretician who we consider to be the consummate playful theoretical 'terrorist' can challenge the more thoughtful academic writing on film studies. What follows, in essence, is to demonstrate that objective reality can be problematised by close attention to Baudrillard.

However, if there is no external point from which to establish criteria for these assumptions, then the examination of the surface and its underlying components could be considered a fruitless exercise. If there is no transcendent meaning or true monistic rational accounting of things, what are we to do? If we choose the whimsical, irreverent approach, we may provoke

a response that falls outside expectations. If this is the case, then one of the major roles of art is to either declare this loss of external reference or, as we argue, to explore the idea of it as a ruse for power; an illusion. Here, illusion (a cognate of simulation) describes the power of the image to ‘hide truth’s non-existence’ (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 35). This may result in a stultifying everydayness. The everydayness, or predictable multiplicity or repetition might be avoided when cast as anything other than inevitability. If art asserts its power by establishing the illusion of meaning and value, we can be encouraged to negate this assertion as a critical exercise. In the very instance that follows, value is seen as the abstract level of importance the object holds within a system of objects: its usefulness. Art is a simulation, but more importantly, power is the capacity to control this simulation reinforcing that there is a truth to be revealed. Yet, at the core of this simulation is a more sinister directive—that of the market desire to control the simulation. Hence, the market posits an other to this simulation, not as an act of equitable fairness, but to control both the other and to legitimise itself. Again, to problematise simulation and explore its intersection with a more nuanced depiction of objective reality occurs when we follow Baudrillard’s writing.

We are careful to declare the term simulation not as a reproduction but as a destructive force that administers the illusion, replacing it with the reality that disguises itself through simulation. Simulation is the hallmark of the contemporary socio-political climate often over-determining behaviour. Douglas Kellner describes this administration in reference to Baudrillard:

In the society of simulation, identities are constructed by the appropriation of images, and codes and models determine how individuals perceive themselves and relate to other people. Economics, politics, social life, and culture are all governed by the logic of simulation, whereby codes and models determine how goods are consumed and used, politics unfold, culture is produced and consumed, and everyday life is lived. (Kellner, as cited in Ritzer, 2003, p. 320)

Interrogating simulation is to intuit that this imposed reality is always up for contestation. The codes and models of consumption are to be challenged. This is, we concede, a simulation of our own as a rejection of banal everydayness where the banality is underpinned by a form of inauthenticity. This inauthenticity is diminished of reflection and self-awareness, promoting predictable activity that can be lacking in creativity, or more importantly, of provocation for new or different forms of thinking and writing against a crass pigeonholing of the same.

As value itself is always being constructed as a dynamic of power relations, simulation opens itself to this contestation. We argue film philosophy can serve to interrogate this simulation. Akin to Rex Butler (1999), we see this interrogation as tracing the limits of simulation, an intervention not to destroy it, but to expose it. Again, we concede this is a simulation of our own as a rejection of banal everydayness. Here banality is deployed in its Baudrillardian sense, seen as the failure to subvert or challenge the accepted utility of an object. Instead, banality is opting for acceptance of the 'codes' which Baudrillard sees as a 'neo-capitalist cybernetic social order which now aims towards total social control' (Baudrillard, 2006 p. 98). Everydayness is the unreflected acceptance of this social order as a given. Baudrillard's hyperbole serves as an attentive gesture to question if it is, indeed, every day at all.

Jean Baudrillard thus claimed there was nothing external or universal to explain objects and their use and interpretation, and as such the dominant transmission of cultural practices needs to establish a systemic logic to support and verify its existence. Politics is therefore not the art of the possible, but the manipulation of possible cultural practices. For Baudrillard, the strategy was not to be 'seduced' by these transmissions of cultural practice, especially what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as a cultural practice 'which presents itself as natural' (p. 18). In opposition, Baudrillard's wager was to seduce by challenging and provoking these cultural

practices in turn with his unique absorbing critical apparatus, requiring thinking and writing that constantly reintroduced ambivalence. Baudrillard simply created a cognitive and discursive space of his own and revelled in it. When simulation is given free rein to manipulate meaning and value, questions are buried in obfuscation, and the task of film philosophy can be to challenge this systemic and idiosyncratic logic of illusion control. Simulation must not be treated as an empirical fact that has eclipsed the ontological status of the living sphere but, in Baudrillard's manner, as a tendency or possibility to be critiqued (Grace, 2000). We sense or intuit simulation, are on the guard for its threat, its immanent seduction and, as Baudrillard did, we are prepared to constantly question it with our own thinking and writing.

Fundamental to Baudrillard's challenge to imposed cultural practices is to be in control of what he saw as the 'rules of the game'. It is this game which is Baudrillard's 'art' as critical theory. The central core of our reading of Baudrillard is an 'active nihilism' (Woodward, 2008, n.p.) intent on subduing values and meaning as a methodological strategy. Active nihilism is the purposeful and systematic destruction of values, and was Baudrillard's lifelong desire in his challenge to power. He wanted to form an 'abstract and non-literal equivalent' (Butler, 1999 p. 9) to the world which meant inventing both a style and a language that is indebted to his forebears but stakes out a territory and rules of his choosing. At the heart of his game as philosophy is, as mentioned, a nothingness that does not nullify the world, but instead makes it possible. In every instance, as stated above, what emerges from the illusion of a transcendent reality is the desire to exchange with this illusion. This fundamental nothingness we habitually and unsuccessfully attempt to cover up with meaning motivates what Baudrillard commentator David Teh describes as 'the fundamental processes of the world' (Teh, 2006, n.p.). This process can descend into a form of simulation that captures then controls power. This structuring of a power dynamic motored by simulation finds it

difficult to deal with the poetry of a Baudrillardian challenge or, can we say, our version of a Baudrillardian challenge.

It is with this in mind that Baudrillard's thinking around meaning and value developed as a performative as well as critical operation. It attempted to formulate and strategise its own singular response to discursively constructed power as this critical style ceded this power back to the individual. His thinking and writing was an art form, and the strategy was to expose the shortcomings of power and more importantly to expose the paucity of everyday thinking about things. Perhaps all is an elaborate game of claiming sovereignty over the objects in our lives, effectively contouring the 'worlding' of the world', to use Heidegger's terminology. We argue this is a critical strength and emancipatory effect in Baudrillard's work: to seduce power away from the transmission of cultural practices by performing a poetically inspired theoretical challenge to all manner of externally imposed power and its manifestations in film philosophy. Baudrillard's personal, idiosyncratic response to the world in thinking and writing is his methodological tool. We claim this is the *sine qua non* of a poetic theory, where the theorist steadfastly refuses to take the other's theoretical stance and devises one of their own, striking out as it were into new territory rather than adhering to the map.

Jean-Luc Godard told us cinema is truth, but we instead say cinema is seduction. We speculate if it is possible to take a Baudrillardian turn. No, but when we reorganise Baudrillard as a conceptual tool rather than a theoretician, we can invent a discourse with rules of our choosing. Thus a Baudrillardian film philosophy does not come from Baudrillard's content alone, but from an operative methodology running in tandem with this thought, giving existence to something that hitherto has been missing. When cinema is an unexamined seduction, or perhaps merely a spectacle, space opens for an intervention where

a mode of poetic theory can agitate the banal stupor of the world and its ideologies before it becomes impossible to look back, let alone forward.

This banal stupor has a real ethical dimension when it comes to film studies and film viewing ontology. A film viewer can rightfully claim a film is entertainment, and we will not intervene in matters of taste. However, when dealing exclusively with how a film makes a subject feel, there is a possibility of closing down the cognitive space for creative thinking about the film rather than mere affect. This then has the potential to restrict the subject's capacity to discriminate, which then can be problematic as the subject subscribes solely to spectacle engineered by a powerful film system linked inextricably to capital. Perhaps a Baudrillardian film viewer may habitually and purposively be expanding this cognitive space to explore the spectacle from other angles. Hence, their film philosophy may be an intervention as seduction and antagonism of the 'other'. In other words, what Baudrillard shows us is that he does not need to be followed, but rather mirrored or doubled, to deploy what he wrote as an invitation to expand thinking about film as well as feeling.

Such an intervention is then equally devoted to form and content. Rex Butler, in his book defending the enigma of Baudrillard, argues Baudrillard 'cannot simply be used or applied by anyone, even Baudrillard himself' (Butler, 1999, p. 166). We read this to mean aporia, a central problem with the application of Baudrillardian theory to any object. This problematisation could provide a theoretical impasse where Baudrillard's thought is reserved to Baudrillard himself. However, as Victoria Grace points out, Baudrillard's 'critique of critique' (Grace, 2000, p. 1) opens up a space for thinking and interpreting. In the end, it is not Baudrillard's work that is animating film philosophy, but our reading of Baudrillard's work confronting a world where film philosophy grapples with the relationship between film and the world in which it is situated.

We will trace five major Baudrillardian critical tools and apply them as conduits of contestation. These tools are, in turn, semiotics, reversibility, seduction, fatality, and fractality, all reflecting a society that was encountered as ‘losing all its moorings’ (Lotringer as cited in Baudrillard, 2010d, p. 11). When we take each of these tools, we, in turn, construct a way to respond to this ‘loss’, regardless of its objective status. We provide five different ways to approach the same problem. Each of the aforementioned tools is nuanced by Baudrillard over his career to consistently and methodologically attack a society he saw as organised around simulation (Kellner, 2007). He shifts vocabulary, not as caprice, but to remain an elusive target himself, a form of theoretical independence that was his hallmark. We desire to intersect with those critical tools.

If there is to be a Baudrillardian film philosophy, it may speculate with these important tools as a methodological enterprise and do so by soliciting two filmmakers who can show the relevance of our Baudrillardian film philosophy. We claim in concert that Anderson and Kaufman each in their individual and unique way also critique simulation. Kaufman achieves this by rendering cinematic signifiers deliciously ambivalent and Anderson by making them gloriously ironic.

Because Baudrillard’s theory is as much anti-theory or theory poetry, it follows that to critique the highly mediatised world we must be both inside and outside of this system, which is the very impossibility we speak of. As such, to talk of signs, reversibility, seduction, the fatal, and the fractal as we do in the chapters that follow is to try to imagine what it is like at the margins of the system looking at its core. Each critical term is an attempt to investigate in a poetic rather than empirical manner the radical strangeness of this world, while at the same time matching this strangeness to the fictional creations of Anderson and Kaufman. Our

approach here is to select two filmmakers whose work also reflects Baudrillard's diagnostic tools.

The films of Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson are responded to as if they were complicit in this alternate view to what we see as the prevalent values, dispositions and practices of the film-watching public, because, in simple terms, most responses to their work are from the banal middle itself. In one way they present films that have decided in a sense to take Baudrillard's side. We see these two, when repurposed, as Baudrillardian filmmakers who stay faithful to their own performative and poetic logic of filmmaking. Therefore, we choose to combine Baudrillard, Anderson, and Kaufman because it permits us to develop a special challenge to those who wish to implicitly or explicitly control the theory, debate, interpretation, and review of their cinema. We choose a poetic form of thinking, as much a reflection of Baudrillard, as to a declaration of its efficacy of meeting the challenge of peering below the surface of things on our terms.

Anderson and Kaufman are poetic filmmakers in this manner because they do not want their enigmatic aesthetics to be controlled, preferring as Baudrillard (2000b) did, to 'make the world more unintelligible and even more enigmatic' (p. 83). To make the world more unintelligible, Baudrillard maintains a purposeful mystification or challenge to any assertive claims for homogeneity or transcendence. Being 'unintelligible' is Baudrillard's deliberately hyperbolic promotion of ambivalence whereby, for our case, film viewers can 'always call into question the legitimacy of value' (Schuster, as cited in Clarke, 2012, p. 9). Paradoxically, instead of drawing a literal equivalent account of what the image is, Baudrillard wants to frustrate that capacity to ground the image, ultimately, and perhaps impishly observe what happens next.

The ‘un-‘worlding’ of the world’, again to bastardise Heidegger, was Baudrillard’s challenge. We read Baudrillard as saying here that we are not to be drawn into a cultural world where we are forced to accept meanings that purport to some form of transcendent or homogenous denotation; we can develop our own. With that in mind, many Baudrillard enthusiasts conceive Baudrillard as a critical theorist on a crusade ‘doing battle’ (De Boer, 2005, n.p.), a provocateur against everydayness providing diagnostic insight into a culture in deepening crisis with regard to establishing meaning and value.

### **Turning signification poetic: A Baudrillardian methodology?**

As stated, this thesis imagines an intersection of Baudrillard and the cinema of Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman. It expands the role of the central ideas and themes of what is loosely termed Baudrillard studies. This has been achieved in other domains. Victoria Grace (2000) in feminist theory and William Merrin (2001; 2003; 2005) in media studies are excellent examples of how these theorists accept the challenge of Baudrillard’s writing as a provocation and turn it against forms of feminist theory and sociology, respectively. Baudrillard was a systemic thinker who shrouded his systematicity in the form of ever-increasing poetic theory, which often delivered negative connotations to his reputation, but his methodology was similar to these aforementioned adapters of his thinking.

As such Baudrillard invites us to:

Make enigmatic what is clear, render unintelligible what is only too intelligible, make the event itself unreadable. Accentuate the false transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion about it, or the germs or viruses of a radical illusion—in other words, a radical disillusioning of the real. (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 108)

In our reading, Baudrillard’s hyperbole is translated as inviting us to make what appears to be obvious and rational recast as unstable and temporary. We take secure cinematic signification

and add a level of perplexity as a critical maneuver. We use Anderson and Kaufman to facilitate the machinations of systems of rationality and instrumentalisation by testing their lineage and their limits. This power is regularly transmitted in the form of mundanity and predictability, an exchange not necessarily predicated on making the world more apparent and rational. Baudrillard's (1990) 'cruel game of seduction' (p. 121), where the seductive system is challenged in kind, addresses this mundanity and predictability. We ask if there is a Baudrillardian film philosophy, but we cannot answer it in terms of pure content; that would be anathema to his project. Instead, we show the connection between the ways Baudrillard seduced the world and the way Anderson and Kaufman also attempt it. All three are not attempting to determine an outcome or truth, nor create a sustained argument, but to frustrate the symptoms of social malaise and stagnancy through constantly rupturing the banal veneer of things. Turning signification poetic is a liberating strategy, effectively worlding the world away from its tendency to be seen as a form of recognized malevolence.

Therefore, we declare that our Baudrillardian film philosophy is not a traditional film philosophy, as is that of, for example, Gilles Deleuze, David Bordwell, Christian Metz, or André Bazin. Instead, we follow Baudrillard's lead and push or repurpose film interpretation, which is not to take the path of radicality as Deleuze did or 'scientificity' as Bordwell has but poetically as a Nietzschean-Baudrillardian methodology. We read with and through Baudrillard, fully recognizing that the end result is a frustration of theory and terminology, as both Nietzsche and Baudrillard have done. What emerges from this frustration is potential. We seduce what is represented and what is in play and repurpose it on our own terms. The stakes are our own game, and the attempt to seduce is not risking anything other than our own edification. This allows us to read Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson as seductive in a movement that radiates outwards rather than from the outside in. Interpretation brings an illusion, not a certainty, into appearance. Consider these two definitive statements

interpreting Anderson's 2004 *The Life Aquatic* and Kaufman's 2008 *Synecdoche, New York* respectively by Orr and Bunch.

This mismatch between joke and delivery is further complicated near the end, when the film briefly ceases to be funny at all. There is an accident and, as a result, the death of a main character—a death that, unlike Estaban's at the beginning of the film, is not played for laughs. But the moral gravity of the moment hasn't been earned by anything that's come before it, and the tragic development serves no real purpose in furthering the plot. It's just dropped in there, a weird and slightly distasteful stab at seriousness in an otherwise unserious film. (Orr, 2005, n.p.)

Impressionistic, inaccessible and endlessly frustrating, "Synecdoche" is replete with art-house pomposity and the type of muddled profundity one sees in an introductory philosophy seminar. Ever witnessed a freshman struggle with the writings of Nietzsche and the implications of nihilism on his own self-awareness? Ever wanted to see that struggle blown up on the silver screen for two interminable hours? (Bunch, 2008, n.p.)

While these are legitimate and well-read reviews, more pressingly, the language reflects an attempt by the reviewers to seduce us into their world where the films *are* 'weird' and 'distasteful' or 'muddled profundity' and 'interminable'. The subjective opinion is framed as an objective assertion as all criticism does. We are not arguing the right to taste and judgement here, but pointing out the role of seduction itself. If the viewer is swayed to avoid the film because of the reviewers' interpretations, they have been seduced. If the system can frame the world as an ontological given without question, viewers can only acquiesce to this interpretation or reject it, remaining enclosed within the binary of agree/disagree and allowing the judgement of the cinematic experience to slip from their control. They cannot change it, and political thinking may be muted; however, these possibilities are not the sum total of responses. Baudrillard's methodology was to take language such as 'art-house pomposity' mentioned above involved in framing reality and constantly question and play with it. We intend to do the same.

Baudrillard's style and methodology were criticised and lampooned for its lack of serious scholarship and countless subjective assertions (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). But contained in this charge is, we argue, the applicable principle methodology of Baudrillard. His provocations follow a distinct line of attack. His target, we maintain, is the commonality of the every day that was surreptitiously colonised by the systemic forces of capital, globalisation, and its weapons of controlling and monitoring content. This has the intended effect of controlling the horizons of meaning. When Sokal and Bricmont (1997) tell us Baudrillard writes a 'gradual crescendo of nonsense' (p. 141), we can see their critical point, but reply that Baudrillard's performance here provoked a response that tried to frame his work as rational discourse rather than poetic resolutions as, amongst other objectives, an attack on the politics of the commonplace, especially the commonplace as textured by moribund and repetitive powers such as the mainstream media and educational institutions. They want a world that makes scientific sense, while Baudrillard clearly wants a world where language's diversity is used as a creative weapon (Baudrillard, 2002b). We take Sokal and Bricmont's (1997) point, but clearly reject their desire for homogeneity. Science allows tall buildings to stand and medicine to save lives, but can also limit political awareness and debate to the commonplace.

Anderson and Kaufman typically do not give us standard or normal cinematic signifiers. Traditionally, as art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud (2016) suggests, 'signs are transformed into their own economic and cultic quantities' (p. 72). But Anderson and Kaufman defy this because in Baudrillardian terms they deal with poetic illusions. Like Baudrillard, they push signifiers into instability, highlighting the variability of value and meaning and therefore rejecting homogeneity, even though this does not often appear on the surface of their work. Anderson and Kaufman are not the sole proprietors of such maneuvers, but we choose them because of their polarising critical reception, especially in light of the artistic fascination with

capturing and controlling their work. The tendency to denigrate these filmmakers is, from our perspective, to conventionalise them. Instead, what Baudrillard encourages is to grant a poetic singularity and the radical uncertainty of events. What Baudrillard does is apply this type of thinking to an object to the extreme, or more prudently, to test its fidelity to rationality in an impish desire to ‘see what happens’ (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 51). Baudrillard wanted to go to the limits of thinking on the subjects he was invested in to take control from his own point of view. What happens then from the point of view of the film viewer is the potential for challenges to those producing an interpretation. In summary, a Baudrillardian methodology is defaulting to a poetry that promotes a seduction against power.

### **The potential of many Baudrillards: The key terms and their appearance.**

A (liberating) complication is that there are, loosely organised, many ‘Baudrillards’. His positive interpreters cross a vast domain of critical methodologies that reveal his ‘contradictory impulses’ (Tanke, 2007, n.p.). There is Baudrillard the (post)Marxist theorist (Kellner, 2006), Baudrillard the semiotician (Genosko, 1994). Baudrillard the media theorist (Merrin, 2005; Taylor, 2007, 2008; Pawlett, 2007). Baudrillard the sociologist (Grace, 2000; Gane, 2000; Toffoletti, 2011). Baudrillard the philosophical inter-disciplinarian (Constable, 2009; Levin, 1996; Rajan, 2004), and finally, Baudrillard the Nietzschean iconoclast (Coulter, 2012; I, 2005; Butler, 1999). These all cross over and see the intersection of Baudrillard and contemporary culture as substantial for study. Yet this significance is not because Baudrillard is the key to understanding critical cultural shifts; it is that the components and genealogy of this contemporary culture can ‘conceal’ itself, and there are some Baudrillardian theorists, as mentioned above, who see radical interpretation of this culture and the exposition of its effects as instructive. It is this exposition that underpins the challenge of their specific projects. Once exposed, signifiers can have a tendency to be encountered from a more poetic perspective if the interpreter is open to a specific form of

Baudrillardian slant. This interpretation is accomplished by juxtaposing Baudrillardian thought against accepted empirical wisdom. Baudrillard's key critical utility is to expose the shortcomings of current cultural markers, namely what we know as the media as well as art, by teasing out inconsistencies and paradoxes with his transformation of these cultural markers into challenges. However, Baudrillard becomes most useful if the critic is prepared to accept and in turn play with his challenges. Many are not (see Norris, 1992; Kellner, 1989). As Mark Poster writes:

Baudrillard's writing up to the mid-1980s is open to several criticisms. He fails to define major terms, such as the code; his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world from that limited base. He ignores contradictory evidence such as the many benefits afforded by the new media. (Poster in Baudrillard, 2001c, p. 8)

This faction of the academy desired Baudrillard to stay within the parameters of 'enlightened critique', yet the Nietzschean Baudrillard was bent on thinking for his own needs so he could confront the world in his own way. He pursued singularity of thought and produced it in his writing performances. There are many Baudrillards, and the one constructed by his critics is an important and useful one for that particular critic's world. This may be the model of our Baudrillardian film philosophy, where there is a genuine exchange between interpretation and its other, acknowledging the relevance of the other's views while choosing their own. We need this 'thought feedback' (Guillame, 2009, n.p.) to ensure that what thinking is produced by the film object is less stringent and dictatorial on behalf of the film watching subject, rather than making Baudrillard unified and homogenous.

Baudrillard's interpreters also present a problem in that they are conflicted in their conclusions as to what Baudrillard 'is about', which could present a methodological problem.

But perhaps Baudrillardian interpretation thrives on this divergence and ensures its own longevity because his contested malleability underpins Baudrillard's Nietzschean inspired point of 'seduction', which pursues a 'dizzy adventure of thought' rather than a scientific quest for truth. Baudrillardian seduction 'renders theory seductive' (Doel as cited in Clarke, 2012, p. 186), permitting Baudrillard to enter the game with his own stakes. Critics like Norris return with seductions of their own, power plays often designed to disguise discursively constructed games as critical thinking.

For Nietzsche, thinking was to make the 'familiar eerie' (Safranski, 2002, p. 79), and as such this can harness our impulse to rail against our 'usual egoistic disposition' (Safranski, 2002, p. 48). In other words, Baudrillard is always applied as a challenge to the obligation of imposed 'mass taste', as was Nietzsche's challenge. Here, and in what follows, mass taste is synonymous with the 'projections of desires and will and identity' (Cormack as cited in Clarke, 2012, p. 119) that are transmitted and shaped by the powerful mediated images of the day. For Baudrillard, the masses immerse themselves in the messages transmitted by capital to regulate behaviour and consolidate the privileges of the ruling class on matters of sex, race and gender (Baudrillard 1975, p.138). Advertising is the quintessential example but commercial cinema also relies on the interchange between production and the reception of the masses. Yet, this must be done without *ressentiment* as it is not a defeat of a philosophical opponent or a social movement we are after, but an iconoclastic shift in the rules of the game at our behest. For Baudrillard, the masses were unrepresentable, a silent majority that is not merely duped but keeps the market second-guessing. The market is perennially attempting to reshape the masses but is destined to failure. As such the will and identity of the masses both fall for simulation, and shapes simulation, as the market scrambles to recapture their attention.

Baudrillard began with signs that structured the commodity form. He makes familiar signs eerie and initiates a semiotic look at the world designed to critically undermine this homogenous disposition. There is a slowly emerging body of literature on the intersection of film studies and the writings of Baudrillard (Coulter, 2004, 2012; Merrin, 2001, 2003, 2005; Cholodenko, 2005; Constable, 2009; Baldwin, 2010; Toffeletti & Grace, 2010; Vaughan, 2010, 2013; Kline, 2016). All use his major terms in their own way to discuss and assess the intersection of his work and their selected films. Again, the Baudrillard that appears as a potential film philosopher can be categorised according to the Baudrillard being deployed. The pattern is to take a moment of Baudrillardian insight (on Marx, virtuality, ontology, semiology, etc.) and use that moment or a combination of them to draw out a contrary reading and reinforce Baudrillard's critical accusations of cultural determinism. The target is always this reversal in spirit or intent. The literature that intersects Baudrillard and film follows the same trajectory. Each author moves broadly from semiology to seduction, as Baudrillard himself did. In other words, they are not willing to leave meaning as static and universal but desire to push it into changing or reversing. The films they explore are treated the same way. For example, Gerry Coulter, who very much comprehends Baudrillard as a radical poetic thinker, argues that Soderbergh's 1989 *Sex Lies and Videotape* is a form of 'film sabotage by the filmmaker himself' (Coulter, 2010, p. 9). Coulter appreciates Baudrillard as documenting this very dynamic shift of signification, accusing Soderbergh of cinematic indifference, upending form by reversing it. This idiosyncratic response to the film, typical of Baudrillard's challenge to the cinema, runs against the more banal interpretations, which saw the film as 'cool, arty and dialogue based', as King (2009, p. 94) describes it. Again, the methodological thread that unites and intersects most of the credible writing on Baudrillard concurs that reality is there to conceal that fact that nothing is real until we simulate it. In the next section of this introduction, we will look at the five key Baudrillardian

areas of critical ontology we will deploy in the thesis, going on to outline how we will connect these to the films of Anderson and Kaufman. While these five terms appear over the course of his career, they all serve a similar purpose: a movement away from certitude towards ambivalence. Each chapter takes our reading of a Baudrillardian concept and matches it by example to Kaufman and Anderson's work. Chapter One deals with signs and the semiotic as illustrated by Kaufman and Spike Jonze's 1999 *Being John Malkovich*. Chapter Two envisions Kaufman's 2008 *Synecdoche New York* as instructive in Baudrillard's work on reversibility. Chapter Three accounts for Baudrillard's slippery use of seduction as displayed in Wes Anderson 2001 *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Chapter Four shifts to Baudrillardian fatality and draws on Anderson's 1998 *Rushmore* to elucidate another complex insight Baudrillard brings. The final chapter merges Kaufman and Anderson by deploying their animated films 2015 *Anomalisa* and 2009 *Fantastic Mr Fox* respectively, with an eccentric coupling with Baudrillard's equally unconventional notion of the fractal.

As well as looking at the literature that documents the many Baudrillard's that exist within the academic and interpretive domain, we will outline our version of Baudrillard and establish the connection he has for promoting a certain genus of film philosophy. We will begin with signs that Baudrillard deemed to have 'killed culture' (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 38). We reconfigure 'killed' as making culture appear in a certain form so dominant it asphyxiated discrimination. Cinema is an excellent reflection of this. The next section expands how each of the chapters expands our reading of Baudrillard's work as we see it manifest in different forms of cinema.

### **Setting Signs Ablaze: The seductive reversibility of the fatal.**

With his first published texts, Baudrillard began a career-long project of unravelling and then reconstructing the semiotics of value and meaning, and this is where we begin. We argue that the cinematic experience can be dominated by an encoded order of signification that requires assessment from the film-viewer: a point this thesis stresses. However, this explanatory value is often controlled from above with predictable repetitiveness rendering assessment difficult to express. Signs ‘create’ value, and cinematic signification invites interpretive value. For Baudrillard signs share a similar structure with commodity forms and as such are employed for their exchange value rather than their use value. Hence a viewer can read a sign in the cinema such as an explosion with reference to other versions of explosions, not just as a part of a singular aesthetic cinematic statement.

We will make a longer exploration of signs than the other conceptual tools deployed in the thesis (reversibility, seduction, fatality and fractality) because they are the foundation of the Baudrillardian challenge to interpretation and value. Viewers may fetishise the signs, finding a response other than a predictable emotional approval difficult to articulate because of this fetishistic relationship to cinematic signification. The exposure of this enamoured relationship is a main by-product of pursuing Baudrillard into film philosophy.

Baudrillard roguishly interrogated the ‘signs’ of contemporary culture, where the subject can be enamoured by discursively delivered signs of the object rather than the usefulness of the value of the object itself. Increasingly, this is the default position of the contemporary subject, which confuses the material aspect of the object for its sign value or its social status. Baudrillard will take this confusion and valorise its ambivalence as a strategy of purposeful resistance rather than an accidental state of being. He states that ambivalence ‘haunts the sphere of value everywhere’ (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 206) and contains the potential of

‘annulment’ of value as a strategy of resistance to being overdetermined by the object at hand.

Signs are unstable, and as such, they will always ‘reverse’ themselves, altering their purchase contingent to circumstance. Fashion is an exemplary case where what dominates changes and reverses without any clear rational cause. Signs remain radically unstable and open to reversal but also to domination by powerful forces. Traditionally, signs are seen as dynamically coupled with their signified, and Baudrillard apprehends this connection much more tenuously than a first pass would suggest. We will do the same, and in Chapter One, we explore how Baudrillard’s engagement with signs destabilises the common acceptance of signification. Baudrillardian semiotics is our choice of entry into a Baudrillardian film philosophy.

We therefore appreciate a form of semiotic instability in the cinema. For example, many film series are franchised containing repetitive narratives and resolutions. The hero (i.e., Indiana Jones, John McClane, Harry Potter and Luke Skywalker) gets into a perilous scrape from which he miraculously extracts himself over the course of the film. But these ‘repetitions’ could become highly volatile if the audience is pacified or resentful, turning the signs that were once welcomed (exhilarating) into their opposites (predictable). Predictability here may work to temper viewer expectation then decrease patronage which may then translate into a loss of box office revenue, and then new heroes or plots must be created.

Perhaps here, repetition is used in its Deleuzian incarnation, where the viewer experiences the subtle variations in the generalities, where the repetition is not identical with itself or that the copy is forever subtly different from the original. We see this happening, for example, in the competition between film versions of the Marvel and DC comic universe where a form of superhero fatigue means that the competing studios must invent new iterations and cajole

viewers' patronage for fear of losing market share. Although the same broad repetitions of narration and characterisation occur, eventually the viewer response may tire of this format, and a new format will emerge, such as what happened with Ryan Coogler's 2018 *Black Panther*. The studio, tapping into the political zeitgeist was able to fashion and promote an African superhero more than fifty years after the creation of the character in the comic universe. The repetition is there with the same cinematic tropes, but the infusion of a racially diverse cast ensured a difference within that repetition. In the end, the volatility of the sign is a two-way process with the indifference of the audience also shaping the decisions of the studio in what to produce.

The repetition of the signified in franchised films also works for a variety of empirical and mysterious reasons. These films' tropes are economically successful, perhaps because the audience returns and repeats not only with the comfort of complacency but also with the hope of glimpsing subtle differences. However, apart from non-attendance, the viewer has very little input into what they are presented with if they choose to dispose of their viewing income within the confines of these blockbuster franchises other than a growing indifference to sameness. *Black Panther* is partly a result of a studio attempting to differentiate itself from its major opposition but could also, hypothetically, be as a result of the indifference of the masses towards what was being repeated.

Another such change is the justifiable call for more female protagonists, rendering these white male central characters repetitive and marginally politically offensive. This is the fundamental operation of seduction because the producers seduce the audience until the audience turns and reciprocates this seduction, either by demanding more precarious scrapes or rejecting the franchise. In Baudrillardian terminology, this leads to a 'fatality' where the 'object will always outwit the subject' (Wernick as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 70). In other

words, instability perpetuates the material production of signs, but seduction ensures that this instability is open for contestation and recalibration.

The film's 'fatality' is that through its saturation of narrative and thematic significations, it has immolated the form. The producers/creators of cinema will reattempt to seduce, but the film object will never fully yield to this form of totalisation, as the film's signification will never fully subscribe to the referent envisaged by its creators. In the Baudrillardian universe, the object 'thinks us', which is hyperbolic terminology for the thinking subject not having enough control, choice, or access to an ambivalent riposte. This results in the commodification of the subject, ensuring many cannot see it occurring. A market-driven system requires this instability to fuel commercial progress with voracious consumption. The symptomology of this commercialisation is a term we will return to often: the banal. Perhaps Paul Taylor (2007) sums this up succinctly when he opines that Baudrillard is:

... persistently questioning the innate complacency of the mainstream media's movers and shakers. His work critically undermines their obsession with the surface level and uncovers the ideological legerdemain they conduct with ephemeral non-events. (n.p.)

Against the banal, Baudrillard (1988) proposed the fatal. For our purposes, the fatal is the playful attack on the banal by condemning signs and their operation, effectively 'setting them ablaze' (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 163). Baudrillardian poetry is critical theory dressed up as 'other' in form, recasting the role and political clout of the subject. This accorded those who chose to think like and with Baudrillard, to operate at the centre of thought rather than having their thought displaced and dominated by the system.

This constant 'displacement of the subject by signs' (Pawlett, 2008; n.p.) comes with its own built-in dynamic engine to perpetuate the system but, according to Baudrillard, will always contain its own fatal destiny. Burning signs are both the system and its demise. Thus, in what

follows, we are not primarily focused on the semiotics themselves but, following Baudrillard, we are tracing this movement from signs to their fatal demise and making this movement relevant to film philosophy. What makes Anderson and Kaufman interesting cases for teasing out these Baudrillardian signs is their fidelity to their own rules, which aid us in grasping the fatality through juxtaposition with other works. In response, to counter these empty signifiers, we argue that Wes Anderson highlights the precarious nature of a world where darkness threatens to envelop us at any moment, and Charlie Kaufman gives us this darkness, accentuating the capacity of the subject's potential to be able to claw their way out of it. Both filmmakers attack banal signification through their own idiosyncratic or fatal signification; therefore, they are constantly drawing our attention to what they are not. Anderson eschews malevolence and turgid brutality, and Kaufman revels in it, thereby willfully drawing our attention to the munificence and amusement of everyday life. Baudrillard's poetic play allows his serious readers to embrace the world with this dual and ambivalent methodology. If there was a Baudrillardian film philosophy, it might be to collapse this space between illusion and reality and enjoy watching it subside. Any film binary such as the mainstream/independent or arthouse/commercial is collapsed by playing with *both* sides of the form. This mainstream/independent division is often simulated for ideological and commercial purposes and is worth pursuing.

Here, 'mainstream' is not only a noun and a place marker for description but an active verb that designates a surreptitious ideological action that attempts to make us consensual participants in the 'operational setup' of the 'Global Order' (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 34). If we enter into Baudrillard's world where there is a systematic liquidation of values, we can agree that 'mainstream' is a value-less word that is used to hegemonise power in the hands of those who want to designate 'mainstream' as what those seeking power choose it to be, and then to label it orthodox, principally administered by 'cannibalistic media outlets' (Manke, 2007,

n.p.). Our use of the term 'mainstream' is that which is composed of simple elements, readily identified and unburdened by complex abstractions. It is where narrative and psychological elaborations are at their most accessible. Synonymous with a form of objective popularity and fashionableness, the mainstream exists co-dependently in cinema with the terms independent and arthouse used to cover non-experimental films produced for public consumption. Hence, it can mean traditional and predictable, but in a Baudrillardian universe it takes on a more ominous power by constituting what traditional is without any real history, and what predictable is without any questioning of its genealogical derivation. Thus, we are interested in the ontology of 'mainstream', but not its place in film studies *per se*. The signifier 'mainstream' needs to burn.

Therefore 'mainstream' in this thesis will be synonymous with 'banal', a term Baudrillard also uses to designate the accumulated power of mere signs stripped of essential historical connotation and referentiality, but located in chains of signifiers that collectively work to accrue meaning for political and ideological purposes, causing a structural revolution of value. Hence, a banal or mainstream life is one where 'mainstream' is recognised as a specific yet nebulous designator that we will challenge. We are not focused on this expected cultural phenomena of the mainstream, but rather on the term's capacity to create its own meaning and hegemonic discourse. We give the mainstream/independent binary its own inflection, rendering the ideological and political motivation muted and refusing to let these banal terms close down responses to them, which is the banal strategy of the political in cinema as well as everyday life.

Because Anderson and Kaufman grew out of the putatively 'independent' scene, they become useful tools for us in playing with this binary. By tracing the 'movement' of Baudrillard's

thought in and around these banal terms as we read it, we build on the fledgling literature that is available at the intersection of Baudrillard and film.

As Baudrillard (2004) tells us in a lecture he gave:

Everything must be seen, must be visible, and the image is the site par excellence of this visibility. But at the same time it is the site of its disappearance. And that something in it has disappeared, has returned to nowhere, makes the very fascination of the image. (n.p.)

The delicious irony here is that the more information, interpretation and meaning we seek, the more nihilistic things become and, in his terms, signs are set ablaze. Baudrillard knew this, and his project was to capture this nothingness on his own terms with his own language, interpretation, and investigations. The thesis tracks this trajectory beginning with the genesis of his thinking: signs. This is the substance of Chapter One.

### **Signs and the cinema.**

Art is easily ‘transcribed into signs’ (Pawlett, 2008, n.p.). In layman’s terms, ticket sales over-determine aesthetic tastes and not the other way around. This is not precisely a claim of Marxian alienation or Althusserian interpellation, but one of the inevitable seductions of participating in the formation of the social reality. The idea of a Baudrillardian film philosophy might be to serve as an intervention into precisely how this signification is derived and delivered. Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman’s 1999 film *Being John Malkovich* frustrates the attempt to be captured by a homogeneously dominant signification which merely concludes with the terms ‘eccentric’ or ‘absurdist’, and this will be demonstrated in what follows. This is the film we choose to exemplify the nexus of Baudrillard and signs. Kaufman’s script thwarts the contemporary ‘dominance’ of the sign inasmuch as the institutions that support a conservative level of signification can only work to marginalise this dominance. This dominance is the establishment of power relations designed to establish the

least resistance to consumption. In *Being John Malkovich* this was evident in the inability of responses to his film to avoid this terminology of marginalisation, such as ‘eccentric’ and ‘absurdist’, without deeper investigation as to what these terms were actually referring.

The philosophical movement of absurdism sees the essential facts of what it is to be human remaining inaccessible but revelling in this dilemma. Meaning becomes diachronic, unstable and contingent, but absurdism in the hands of thinkers and writers, such as Albert Camus (2000) and Alfred Jarry (2001), is rendered a positive and, more importantly, critical project. Camus’ Sisyphus implores us to struggle in a meaningless world and Jarry’s pataphysics entreats us to creatively strive against this meaninglessness. Baudrillard takes up and extends their exhortations. Absurdism is not eccentricity and the two terms should not be conflated. To be eccentric is to be unconventional and extraordinary but can be very much rational and coherent. Einstein was considered eccentric, as was Picasso and the comedian Robin Williams. But they were unlikely to be considered absurd. Baudrillard confronts an absurd universe and Kaufman creates a prime example of such absurdism. Kaufman admitted that he was influenced by absurdist playwrights Beckett and Ionesco (McGlone, 2016) and we can see the traces of their absurdist response to the world in his work. Baudrillard, like Jarry, invents challenges to go beyond the boundaries of typically received academia.

As such, while some academic writing on the film explores its deep philosophical provocations (Dragunoiu, 2001), much of the critical response does not know what to do with the film’s distinctiveness of vision. The critical response, which reflects much of the sentiment of banal thinking about film interpretation and hence meshes neatly with the implicit behavioural goals of the system, creates a structural logic to signification through exchanging signs for each other. Eccentric and absurdist are exchanged for each other, but merely imply difference from the established norm.

This narrow interpretative spectrum can limit film choice and hence may channel patronage in specific directions. It is, however, when ‘eccentric’ is normalised with the implicit oppressive strategy of exerting authority over the use of language to create meaning, that we can be attuned to exactly how this normalisation minimises difference. For a film theorist like David Bordwell (1996) interpretation such as ours is improbable and subjective. He searches for ‘contingent universals’ (p. 91), which can predict and account for perception and human motivation. The film viewer, when faced with any film, does make predictable interpretative moves but Bordwell is content to then conclude that a complex film, like *Being John Malkovich*, becomes a ‘puzzle to solve’ (p. 120) by applying these contingent universals. However, the viewer also comes equipped with a history of language acquired from their socio-cultural milieu which we argue is deeply ideological, impairing their capacity to apply their contingent universals as freely as Bordwell would have it. Baudrillard sees this as a repressive regime and his assertions allow us to critique this milieu as part of the film theory itself. This repressive regime forms a ‘generalized social integration’ (Baudrillard, 2001b, p. 71) that contours a strongly simulated existence. If we think from within this structural logic, we can never fully appreciate its simulated strength or frame a response that acknowledges the simulated form with which we have been confronted. Signs used to create simulations in the guise of dominant systems attempting to create a fundamental discourse is insidious.

*Being John Malkovich* is used here as a counter-challenge to conventional signification to conclude that, in the end, we are dealing with levels of signification. Casting cinematic signification as simulation allows contrast between value and meaning because it always interrogates the nature and intention of this simulation. Fixed meanings and fluid dynamic meanings are observed to be in play. Casting signs *qua* signs means that not only is all meaning simulation, but that signs can be made to diminish in their political power. A

Baudrillardian film philosophy may recognise these signs coming under serious threat, and *Being John Malkovich* is a cinematic experience that facilitates this.

In Chapter One, we outline how Baudrillard's specific and nuanced semiotic terminology is applicable, and then chart how applicable it will be to one of the most illusory of cultural objects: cinematic experiences. Illusory here has a Baudrillardian specificity denoting a fabricated control over thinking because power is always attempting to make illusion a negative characteristic and not a positive enchantment. To confront power, the first step may be to encounter the components of power as illusory. Advertising is a perfect example. Consumers' needs are massaged by producers and they are encouraged to look to the marketplace to solve all their problems and thus enhance their self-image (Schrank, 1977). Advertisers often convey messages of a forced immediacy, implying that inherent dangers (germs, weight gain, dandruff) can be quickly solved through a purchase. This may curtail freedom of thought, choice and expression, and for Baudrillard, this reduced necessary and fundamental illusions to banal reality. But we can only know the illusion qua illusion with a reflective assessment of our own historical orientation. As stated, this chapter focuses on the Baudrillardian idea of 'signs' as delivery systems of meaning and value and applies these to *Being John Malkovich*. What is under examination is the claim that signs are mobile, or if not, are they to be mobilised? As Hunter Vaughan (2010) argues of Baudrillard:

... shifting semiotics to address the constantly fluctuating nature of the film sign, a sign which is constantly in question and constantly gravitating toward change? This is not simply a question of simulation or simulacrum, but something that specifically looks at the mutable and transformative nature of the sign, offering a particular conjunction with recent film-philosophy (p. 51)

A semiotic assessment of cinema suggests a stronger connection between signifier and signified than this chapter, following Vaughan's attribution to Baudrillard, wants to take. Baudrillard urges us to 'unchain' the link between signs because his strategy is to mobilise

meaning, ultimately towards its own implosion through a form of enforced arbitrariness. There are cinematic ‘fashions’ that infiltrate the cinematic landscape, which contributes to the arbitrary sign being dominant and diminishing the level of cultural depth that a viewer can bring to the cinema.

### **Being John Malkovich: Challenging signs.**

Kaufman consistently challenges filmed significations as well, but primarily on an epistemologically philosophical level. In this sense, we may claim him as a Baudrillardian filmmaker. His gesture is towards esotericism that subverts accustomed notions embedded in standard signatory systems. While this is also a gesture of many independent filmmakers from David Lynch to Michel Gondry, we select Kaufman because his body of work has mirrored Baudrillard to an uncanny degree. In *Being John Malkovich*, the plot consistently takes unexpected turns that assume an internal logic contrary to the signified logic of mainstream (banal) cinematic efforts. The portal to John Malkovich's head is both low-budget and low-tech, but also difficult to signify in mainstream or classical cinematic terms as anything other than a symbolic gift from Kaufman to the audience. Through a selective look at some significant moments in *Being John Malkovich*, this chapter details how the viewer looks beyond signs as power plays and articulates both the symbolic efficacy of Kaufman to simultaneously challenge those power plays and create signification separate from them. Hence we read Kaufman's symbolism as vastly more interesting than his semiotic interpretations.

In Chapter One we sketch how these signs manifest in *Being John Malkovich*. As Baudrillard (2000) postulated that signs in their excess ‘killed culture’ (p. 38), we argue that Kaufman frustrates the establishment of transcendent cinematic signs and can be seen as mobilising interesting responses to this ‘culture-cide’. This chapter will detail how Baudrillard (1993a)

saw signs as ‘crumbling reason’ (p. 88). Reason is crumbled by proliferation and lack of discrimination because the viewer finds it difficult to subtract themselves from the dominant significations of the *zeitgeist*. As Brett Nicholls (2017) pronounces, excessive signification is:

... not to be found in a lack of reality, the notion that there is not enough reality in play; it is to be found in the overproduction of a surplus reality that veers out of control into hitherto unknown forms of absurdity, or, in Baudrillard’s terms, into integral reality. (p. 6)

For example, Baudrillard (1981) argues from early in his career that fashion’s distinctive social signs put everyone in their place (pp. 50-51). The same can be said for cinema where the signs of cinema often texture viewership, effectively offering explicit instructions on form and content. He argues that signs mark out power relations in society and cannot be readily exchanged for reality (Lechte as cited in Smith, 2012). Yet their power opens up a space for an alternative discourse as we battle to pare back the overproduction of signs masquerading as information. When the dominant discursive structures can control the relationship between signifier and signified this can restrict the choices and responses of the viewing consumer. Hence these signs of form and content are so powerful they give off the appearance of a principally unidirectional form and content of filmmaking, its value and interpretation; one of which value, meaning and interpretation are clearly advocated. But this is temporary as they are spectacle.

Debord saw that the spectacle ruling production was underpinned by signification whose aim is nothing but spectacle itself. Debord (1967) asserts:

The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself. (n.p.)

For Debord, in the ruling economy, signs preferenced the signified and ensured a society that tended, even as early as he was writing, toward pure spectacle prosecuting an unfettered rule over the market. Debord and his 'situationists' yearned for social transformation, as a social reality was always held within the realms of possibility through developing situations with Sartrean freedom. However, as Sadie Plant (1992) asserts:

Situationist theory always teeters on the brink of this position, continually advancing towards the abyss of a society made up of meaningless and inexorable signs, but always pulling its arguments back to the terra firma of a real world experienced by real people. For Debord, it is no longer easy to speak of the real, and reality is always already vulnerable to spectacularisation. But there is none of the inevitability of Baudrillard's bleak picture of homogeneity and meaninglessness. (p. 36)

Baudrillard rejects the idea of social transformation and moves away from these goals. Instead, his transformational power, or his idea of freedom is located in his capacity to encourage possibilities that do not emerge from economic exchange. This yearning for the possibility gives us an entry into developing a response to cinematic signification. In contemporary times, a film's signs can dominate its exchange value. For example, many blockbuster films are encoded with cinematic signifiers which bear little representational weight with regards to narrative exposition or thematic enhancement but are valued in themselves for the signification they carry in a relational system with other blockbuster films (Michael Bay has made a strong claim here to be the consummate filmmaker of signs). Choreographed explosions, car chases, and sex scenes are repetitive yet facile and predictable examples of contemporary mainstream significations. In this manner, we claim Kaufman is a Baudrillardian filmmaker because of his challenge to this banal repetition. Kaufman works for a form of singularity, and we use him as an exemplar. Baudrillard can also be, especially in terms of thinking dominating content, a *de facto* film theorist. In *Being John Malkovich*

Kaufman creates signs that are difficult to exchange with other films. Of course, if he develops some mainstream credibility, the same accusation may befall him.

As Jason De Boer (2005) articulates of Baudrillard:

Without the possibility that signs can exchange themselves with a non-linguistic reality, signs can never cross into the objective world and represent anything within it. Without a standard or reference to mediate an exchange-value between the “symbolic” and the “real,” value itself cannot properly exist in either. (n.p.)

What do we do with Kaufman’s labyrinthine plots? By not ascribing meaning and value, but instead accepting them as ambivalent aesthetic gifts to be countered with our own imaginative response in a poetic exchange, the spectator can stop looking for an exchange value interpretation and begin to create meaning and value more authentic to themselves, and hence in Baudrillardian terms more symbolic than signifiatory. A nuanced film interpretation couched in Baudrillardian terms can facilitate a resistance to the ideological dominance of the spectacularised saturation of an image-dominated market. It is not merely a subjective response but a ‘systematic challenge to the social institutions of the mechanisms of economic exchange’ (Grace, 2000). We can then frame Kaufman as a Baudrillardian filmmaker by using these banal significations to ‘reverse’ signs, and this is the focus of Chapter Two: reversibility.

### **Reversibility and Cultural Implosion.**

If there were just signs, or if we accepted signs as rational and univocal, we could pursue a logical and predictable exploration of them. Similarly, if we existed in a social world where signs were indexical and expressive of relationships between subjects with honest and egalitarian motives, we could do the same. But Baudrillard quickly realises that in the social world, signs create power in their manipulation. Signs proliferate and help to form a ‘culture’, and this culture has no ‘gold standard of aesthetic judgement’ (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 14). By

investigating reversibility, we outline why signs develop and take epistemological and metaphysical hold, but begin to lose their essential grip to the point where the system, by presenting such attempts to frame and capture the real, actually provide its downfall. For any fashion to survive, it must reinvent by self-destruction. Cinema is no different. We will propose Charlie Kaufman as a master of creating reversibility.

Even the strongest of cinematic signs inevitably become unstable. This metaphysical notion of reversibility is how any systemic entity from politics to art establishes power and then struggles to maintain it. We can see the methodological transition from signs to reversibility. Signs ensure a system's dominance, while reversibility ensures its temporality because everything will always become its opposite, especially cultural pursuits that reverse from culture to pure industry. In contemporary politics, we lurch from right to left and back again. In any fashion, a dominant 'look' is established only to see it swiftly replaced. It is the speed and power of this reversibility that has accelerated in the information age. A political hero can be made a political doormat overnight; a fashion trend can be killed in an instant. To Baudrillard (1994), this implosion of meaning is where simulation begins. Reversibility erupts both surreptitiously and violently when information is so profuse as to confuse our navigation of the social. While this is especially evident in the political process with a loss of historical cause and effect, this also plays out in the cinema. Viewers are often engrossed in special effects but can tire of them dominating a film. When film franchises reach their fifth or sixth iteration, what was once fresh becomes increasingly resisted by the audience. Baudrillard recognised that signs were the beginning of the culture and its imminent demise, all subject to reversibility.

This movement of signification is what makes Baudrillard interesting when we talk about signs in the cinema. When he developed what is now known by his umbrella term

‘reversibility’, one intention was to destabilise the foundation of meaning and value. As Victoria Grace (2000) argues, meaning is never simply ‘valent’, and Baudrillard demonstrates a sharp critique of the ‘codified nature of the construction of meaning’ (p. 9), affecting a cultural implosion, what Baudrillard (2003) termed the ‘hypertrophy by virtuality’ (p. 42). His exploration of reversibility is conspicuous in his work and features prominently in the secondary literature especially with the journal eponymous with his name.

The *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (IJBS) has been the central point of dissemination of Baudrillard’s presence since its launch in 2004. It provides access to scholars affiliated and independent to ‘all things Baudrillard’, publishing bi-annually. With particular regard to film studies, a modest amount has been forthcoming in the publication, but by broadening the search to cover the image and its referent, a rich mine of material emerges. The image is especially evident when discussing reversibility. We see Baudrillard’s ‘one great thought’ (Coulter, 2004, n.p.) is reversibility, where the instability of any system can manifest opposition to itself and where the identity of the components of the system is ambivalent (Grace, 2000). It manifests an ‘opposing, reversive symbolic force’ (Merrin, 2005, p. 41). We can see this clearly in photography, where the image de-simulates time and motion. A photograph is constantly being reimagined and reinterpreted, invariably reversing in on itself and effectively challenging its own meaning.

With this in mind, much writing around and through Baudrillard is about the reversal power of images and the impact this has on the spectator or viewer. For Baudrillard, an image rarely claims objectivity and often destabilises truth and meaning in its very effort to achieve objectivity. Accordingly, we are not judging reality but making it ‘disappear’ (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 29). Kaufman can be seen to be conjuring the same effect, ironically through his

esoteric images, making the reality of cinematic significations appear as simulations rather than fixed realities.

Alan Cholodenko (2004) writes of this very effect in the IJBS original edition, where he claims:

Film, including documentary, remodels the world, artificially resurrecting the real, the social, truth, meaning, the subject, origin, etc., as lost referentials, as special effects, ... Baudrillard writes, "... is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory —all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of the models from which they proceed, in a generalised cycle". (n.p.)

Cholodenko concludes that there is a historical marker where 'film as representation becomes film as simulation', and while this marker is both theoretical and subjective it does present fertile ground for exploration; both academic and poetic Cholodenko's 'lost referentials' are lost because they always end in reversion. Language loses its referentiality. Cinematic language can be seen to traverse the same precarious path. Kaufman is a filmmaker of reversion in this manner through his expositions of simulation. We sense Kaufman is challenging traditional filmmaking at every opportunity. He grasps the precariousness of signs and gleefully reverses them.

One of the ambitions of Chapter Two is to explore this shift, not just in terms of its overt manifestations such as can be gleaned by contemporary blockbuster films, but in the films that reverse or resist this trend in the cinematic zeitgeist. Cholodenko (2005) suggests Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Jurassic Park* as a quintessential postmodernist text where the conflation of the actual and the virtual collide so dramatically that perhaps only a Baudrillardian analysis can accommodate its reverberations and implications for many areas of human endeavour, including the cinema itself. He states, worth quoting at length:

*Jurassic Park's* live action characters interact with a live action world, or rather livedead action world, of simulation dinosaurs that the “reanimators” in the film and the “reanimators” of the film have (re)engineered in part through the most sophisticated techniques of computer generated simulation and processes of (Jurassic Park) or analogous to (Jurassic Park) biogenetic molecular DNA techniques, grafting in the former the DNA of the “dead” dinosaur with that of frog DNA and in the latter “grafting” the live action human with the animated nonhuman, producing in both cases an indistinguishability of one species from another, in the latter case an indistinguishability at the level of the reality of the illusion of life. (n.p.)

This reversibility is what identifies Baudrillard as ‘postmodern’ because, as mentioned above, postmodern is a nebulous and often misapplied term encouraging multiplicity over univocality, which is a strong basic tenet of Baudrillardian thought. And yet Baudrillard is anything but postmodern. The multiplicity of voices akin here to a proliferation of signs has, in Baudrillard’s terms, problematised the ability to garner reality from a ‘reality effect’. Even the term ‘postmodern’ experiences reversal. This gap between the real and the ‘effect of the real’ or reality and copy is where Baudrillard is most decisive. The ‘real’ is a referential point allowing us to locate ourselves within the world and, in Baudrillardian terms, the world is complicit with this and will permit any hypothesis to appear right (Pawlett, 2007). Hence there is always a gap or a rupture between what we claim as the real and its effect.

The gap is a reversion. It is here that Kaufman adds to this analysis. His *Synecdoche, New York* explores what happens when this gap materialises. We argue the film explores the unravelling of consciousness viewed as if it were a material reality in the life of the protagonist.

### ***Synecdoche, New York* and reversibility.**

Chapter Two explores Kaufman’s 2008 *Synecdoche, New York*, as reversibility is apparent from the opening scene. As Jason De Boer (2005) states of Baudrillard:

His strategies range from the overtly conventional to the extremely radical to the profoundly ridiculous, but they all remain consistent in their overall aim toward the disruption, dissolution, and reversibility of the ordering structures of modern civilization. (n.p.)

Kaufman's film, his first as writer/director in one interpretation, is a materialisation of the diseased and anarchic mind of the contemporary artist. But it is also a comment on the 'ordering structures' of filmmaking because of Kaufman's resolute insistence on making his dialogue and *mise en scène* antagonise simulated 'mainstream' expectations. We argue that comparable to Baudrillard, Kaufman challenges simulation by exposing the hard-to-grasp reversibility occurring within simulation itself. What Kaufman does in Baudrillardian terms is throw signification into reverse by highlighting its less palatable other. Dominant systems are founded on distinct oppositions (Baudrillard, 1998), similar to any power dynamic. This strong/weak binary allows the dominant to influence signification and interpretation. Yet, the vulnerable partner in the opposition is the focus of Kaufman's work where he concentrates on what is termed eccentric or absurdist. Signs promote exchange value but are ultimately mute banal reflections of a moribund culture. We claim they need reversal. The difference in our strategy is that we envision Baudrillard's methodology of critique not as simple as confronting it head on, but by returning to it its own seductive strategies. This is achieved by attempting to propose readings that undermine the commonplace reactions to Kaufman's script, by highlighting the bizarre nature of the commonplace itself.

Typical ideological critique, offered by Althusser or Adorno may argue for some form of utopian solution to the dilemmas of indiscriminate consumption. Baudrillard, more pessimistically concludes the search for utopia won't be found by direct opposition, but by more mischievous explorations of the system. Reversibility then becomes where 'meaning is subject to a two-way exchange' (Woodward, 2008, n.p.) because the Baudrillardian methodology would foster the challenge of seeing ambivalence as primary: not to be

defeated. For our purposes, Baudrillardian reversibility refuses to fix power, but instead constantly shifts the axis from pole to pole. Reversibility diminishes the primacy of economic exchange and validates personal challenges to it.

Baudrillard scholar Rex Butler (1999) comprehends reversibility as the ‘difference between the original and the copy’ that confounds the system by shifting (uncontrollably) between the two poles of original and copy. This leads to the most well-known Baudrillardian concept: hyperreality where we fail to differentiate between the original and the copy or the original recedes from view. Baudrillardian reversibility states that ‘any system that is pushed too far to resemble either original or copy will produce opposite effects’ (Butler, 1999, p. 97). Hyperreality is the reversion of signs in action that obfuscates meaning because images and reality are exchanged without any real epistemological or ontological foundation. Intriguingly, this is held by Butler to address the unknowability of capturing where we are in relation to these poles. Are we in real history or cinema history (Laist, 2015)? How may we respond to this accusation of being lost in a sea of information and volatility? The cinema provides two definitive answers: by compliance or by challenge. We can either submit to the law of irreversibility and concede to the dominant systems, or see that the dominant systems provide rules to be transgressed and countered. Baudrillard and Kaufman engage the latter. Kaufman teases this out in *Synecdoche, New York* by never letting the viewer know where they are in relation to Cotard’s life and his death, his reality, and his illusions. From a meta-narratological view, the film refuses to be cast as an essay on life and death or rationality and insanity because these terms are in constant reversion.

Each signification Kaufman presents to us is in motion, duelling with its other in a bout of incessant reversible inconsistency. He creates his own narrative rules and recasts them as a

challenge, thus highlighting the potential reversibility of a putative irreversibility. What then becomes interesting is the response to the film that comes out of those that see irreversibility as a sociocultural law.

Henceforth, there can be no dialectical movement between the dyad of same/different in a Baudrillardian universe but, as Tilottama Rajan (2004) suggests when discussing Baudrillardian reversibility, there is a ‘Manichean short circuit that ultimately destroys both’ (n.p.). It is always a reaction to any systemic imposition doubling and redoubling the world in a dizzying aleatoric dance of meaning and value. This doubling is how thinking finds and explores worlds within worlds (Butler, 1999) to counter any dominant world/system/idea/argument that is attempting to capture our imagination. The sheer proliferation of information confirms for Baudrillard that reversibility ensures a ‘radical antagonism’ (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 58), in which worlds/systems/ideas/arguments will take it upon themselves to reverse. To wit, they lay out the rules of the game, and in doing so, we observe them reversing. In cinema, what was once spectacle turns to cliché or banality, especially in the age of digital reproduction, which has meant special effects are now both impressive on one scale (the power of a computer) but also hackneyed and often clichéd.

Even deeper, therefore, is the problem of standing outside the dyad of original and copy and attempting to name the systemic machinery that substantiates it. Rex Butler (2004) confounds interpretation, opining on Baudrillard’s:

... twin themes of reversibility and irreversibility, the way his work must be understood as the posing of the question of that reversibility to be found within otherwise irreversible processes (time, history, sense, meaning); that point beyond which they begin to turn upon themselves, producing the opposite effects to those intended; that reversibility indeed which makes their irreversibility. (n.p.)

Kaufman makes films that challenge this. He ‘repurposes’ through a ‘radical poetics’ of film. In other words, he adds to the voices from both an aesthetic and a critical perspective. His repurposing is a challenge to cinematic representations of value and meaning in defining a conclusive reality. That is why we look at two Kaufman films because each has followed a distinctive Baudrillardian trajectory. Baudrillard needed to offer a metaphysical counter-challenge to accumulation and production, especially the accumulation and production of images. Examining two films of Charlie Kaufman has allowed us to see just how pressing the accumulation and production of signs can be for simulation. If simulation is all there is, then we have to give back to simulation a simulation of our own and risk everything. This was Baudrillard’s game. To sum up, he seduces, and this is the subject of the next chapter.

### **Seduction.**

What ‘permits’ this reversibility? What is the energy that encounters signs such as ‘God’ to always include both explicitly and implicitly its other? The strong, heavily emblematic signifier of ‘God’ should have been enough to ascertain certainty and perpetuity, but ever since Nietzsche and Darwin put forth signifiers of their own (such as ‘Will to Power’ and ‘Evolution’), the game was on with philosophy seducing religion. Why are signs so fragile, always seeking to be unanchored? Baudrillard’s powerful and enigmatic concept of ‘seduction’ works on two, enigmatic explanatory modes. Firstly, it is a strategic methodological challenge to production. Whatever is produced can be and will be led astray and seduced (Baudrillard, 1988). To him, that is the eternal rule of the game. A Baudrillardian film philosophy must seduce through reversing signification. While some theorists see seduction as a synonym for reversibility, we argue it is a nuanced diagnostic of what occurs during the reversion process.

Rex Butler (1999) being enigmatically perplexing himself, hence dedicated to reversing and seducing, suggests that ‘seduction can only be seen in simulated form which is only made possible by seduction itself’ (p. 73). To explicate Butler’s singularly puzzling treatment of Baudrillardian seduction, it is perhaps best to use a cinematic example. In the first half of the thesis, we concentrate on the philosophical aspects of a Baudrillardian film philosophy. The reasoning and intention behind the second half of the thesis focuses on aesthetics to see how a much more predictable and consistent filmmaker can be aligned with Baudrillardian principles to affect a very creative diagnostic tool for film studies. As such, the focus of Chapters Three and Four is on the films of Wes Anderson, paying specific attention to how Anderson takes film signification and reverses it seductively. Our reasoning here is that to create a Baudrillardian film philosophy is at its core to seduce meaning and interpretation away from the banal productions of the conventional, homogeneous world of film analysis. Here we see banal as Baudrillard envisioned it—as ‘obscene’, that is the object coming too close, too dominant in our social field. For Baudrillard, obscene signification promotes the loss of perspective and hence its creative and illusory potential. The imaginary and phantasy take a secondary place to ‘reality’ (Grace, 2000). We claim Anderson is confronted with a banal and predictable vocabulary of interpretation more than many other filmmakers who are practising an aesthetically charged filmmaking approach.

Therefore, in Chapter Two we take reversibility and observe it in action in its most common Baudrillardian trope, the often misunderstood seduction. The connection between reversibility and seduction is Baudrillard’s most nuanced critical tool. Following the logic developed in the previous two investigations, seduction is both the energy allowing reversibility and the force that ensures its own demise. Seduction ‘gives meaning and value ambivalence’ (Teh, 2005, n.p.) and is used as a critical tool to demonstrate precisely why

meaning and value is fluid (and reverses) and how this process occurs universally and atemporally. As Teh (2005) asserts about Baudrillard:

Observing it is not a whimsical gesture. It is a philosophical position in favour of what is unknowable and reversible at the heart of the world, and is therefore opposed in every sense to the order of equivalence imposed by capitalism, with its imperative of predictability, its irreversible, linear accumulations of value and history. (n.p.)

Therefore, for example, in a well-known iconic cinematic moment such as Marilyn Monroe's blown dress in the 1955 Billy Wilder film *The Seven Year Itch*, the moment is instantaneously seductive through its immediate transgressive tone based on the moral codes of the time, and a blow for and against femininity. The meaning of this action spirals between poles of signification, causing equal parts outrage and aesthetic appreciation. This is also how Baudrillard's thought gains momentum. Is Monroe being exploited or is she exploiting? According to Victoria Grace (2004), the bar between signifier and signified becomes problematic because it promotes a homogenised version of reality, instead of being seen as a seductive potentiality. There is a movement in the valency of the connection between signifier and signified which can never be resolved, only deliberately occluded. Baudrillard recognises this struggle of ambivalence against transcendence, and he chooses ambivalence. Monroe is consummately seductive in these terms. The text becomes imbued with an excess of meaning, an ambivalence or indistinguishability that sets it into reversal on itself, achieving what Catherine Constable (2009) suggests in her book on Baudrillard and the Matrix it 'returns the system to itself in a way that jams its workings' (p. 133). Monroe does this by becoming an ambivalent iconic image. She is an inspiring woman and an exploited female simultaneously, a contingent yet dynamic signification.

### ***The Royal Tenenbaums* and Seduction.**

Chapter Three examines Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the film for which his career gained notoriety and momentum. We will adopt the argument that the signs of *The Royal Tenenbaums* reverse seductively. To observe this, traditional filmmaking signification must be seen in this film to push aesthetic boundaries in a manner that contests how film can be interpreted.

So precisely what is Baudrillardian seduction with regard to film philosophy? Rajan (2004) argues that:

Seduction is uncontrollable simulation, threatening the masculine logic of oppositions which Baudrillard both distrusts and clings to as a source of stability. It must be dismissed and feminized. (n.p.)

We cannot have meaning without seduction, and while being sceptical of meaning, we still operate with some form of it. Baudrillardian seduction is a 'critical ontology' (Grace, 2004, n.p.), allowing the viewer to grasp that any cinematic moment is simulated but simultaneously instantiates and limits its referentiality. As Grace (2004) outlines:

Baudrillard has used the term 'symbolic' and has referred to the process of 'seduction' to evoke what might be referred to as a critical ontology, from his earliest works. The 'symbolic' in his work is an ontology that is not reliant on the bar of dualism, the bar of exclusion, the bar that enables reference and representation, equivalence and difference, identity and difference, identity as difference; the bar that establishes what (it) is and what (it) is not. 'Seduction' is what happens without this bar. (n.p.)

The implication of the symbolic is one of the key features of a Baudrillardian film philosophy if we are to follow his lead. While seduction is 'uncontrollable simulation' (Rajan, 2004, n.p.), an appreciation of Baudrillardian seduction in action allows an expanded set of meanings because a magnified critical response is at stake and in play. This enhancement is not a rational scientific accounting of empirical interpretations of the film, but a nuanced,

poetic response to such an enterprise. With *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the viewer can grasp and appreciate seduction and the game it is playing as well as the rules that accompany it, albeit rules that may be arbitrary and fleeting. The rules are thus repurposed, challenged, and thus more often rejected for a more personalised set of rules of the viewer's choosing.

Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman seduce aesthetics and rationality respectively, opening up a much broader and hence more ambivalent encounter with meaning and value. As a result of this ambivalence, we conclude that we cannot label Anderson as 'whimsical' nor Kaufman as 'esoteric' because they both seduce meaning away from these very terms. Whimsical is placed in a negative signifying action to try to unify the viewing public to see Anderson as a specific type of filmmaker. We will apply this broader ambivalence to *The Royal Tenenbaums* in this chapter by reading it as a 'seductive text' that cannot elucidate a fixed meaning other than to see that 'meaning is mortal' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 164).

Hence the 'strange' world of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is not only a playfully satirical account of the tribulations of adolescence and fraught relationships but more a seductive world of strangers where recognition is not drawn from any transcendent knowledge, but from an unpredictable immanence, capable of turning, seducing, and educating in surprising ways. Anderson plays with form and content, deviating, displacing, and diverting expectation (Baudrillard, 1988). We argue it is our world's 'unintelligibility' in microcosm. It is not a mirror, but a doubling back of strangeness to accentuate how strange our world actually is. Because Wes Anderson comes so close to 'our world', he accentuates its actual strangeness in a neat, subtle and seductive fashion. These speculative conclusions are prohibited under many other theoretical paradigms. From this point, it seems our world cannot ever fully account for itself, and this is made possible by seduction. For our purposes, *The Royal Tenenbaums* demonstrates producing an interpretive vocabulary can, in turn, be seduced.

Baudrillard stands askance here and interrogates the essential and foundational apparatus that institutes and perpetuates this bar and its consequences. ‘Seduction is stronger than power’ (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 45), because it ensures that the discursively articulated power can never fully account for itself and will always be shifting in a never-ending cycle of construction/destruction or certainty/speculation. This critical tool is liberating for discussing the image and its referent because, at the baseline, the referent is always shifting in this same cycle of construction and destruction. Our argument is that Anderson and Kaufman can be used to explore the same effect. An excess of meaning is permitted by and blocked through seduction. Hence there is always positivity in meaning and value to which interpretation can attach itself. Marilyn Monroe’s dress is ... (Insert your term). But this ‘is’ disguises the fact that the excess of meaning can never be accounted for. This is the seduction Baudrillard talks about as a critical ontology because his motivation was to delimit the power of the signifier to control the signified. To do this delimitation, he gleefully re-describes the nature of power and meaning. As Richard Rorty (1989) said of Nietzsche, Baudrillard is happy moving back and forth between antithetical descriptions of the same situation. This is not mere contrarianism, but a game of seduction, where the stakes are shifting and ambivalent to force both subject and object into new territories or encounters. When we account for *The Royal Tenenbaums* from a Baudrillardian perspective, the stakes are constantly raised.

Baudrillard then finds himself needing to position his theory within the concepts he set out to reverse. Theory, as a series of signs of equal value, is rendered impotent to affect or interact with the real. It is always productive and never destructive, although what it is capable of producing is merely more signs. Baudrillard realises this, and this futility, once realised, he cannot ignore. Theory must return to the critical, productive enterprise where it resumes its reproduction, or it must take its own futility as its object and become ‘fatal’. By abandoning meaning and becoming fascinated with itself, fatal theory must ultimately cease to be a

theory as such, eventually turning to more literary or fictive strategies. The potential of shifting the rules of the game is an intrinsic factor of the game itself. Baudrillard must attempt to make every line a sacrifice of production. It builds on seduction reversion to keep thinking alive in a world that is intent on managing it. The thesis next moves to Fatality.

### **Fatality and the battle of appearances.**

Baudrillard's nuanced use of the term 'fatality' is the subject of this chapter, bringing the penultimate movements of the trajectory of Baudrillardian thought together. After signs reverse and seduce, they reach a fatality. Here fatality is the way we deploy signification, reversion, and seduction for our purposes. A 'fatal theory' can help indicate what to do next. If Baudrillard thinks the fatal is more real than real, then we give to the film object more 'meaning than meaning', extending its ambivalent material. By examining the analysis of Wes Anderson's 1998 film *Rushmore's* signification, we can claim that the film effectively raises the stakes in the game of interpretation. For Baudrillard (1993b), fatal theory is the last resort in attempting to explain the 'exteriority' (p. 39) of the world and our place in it. By moving away from a rational calculation of this exteriority, Baudrillard is energised by his poetic interpretation of it. The critical function of this attitude is a transfer of power back to the subject. Fatality can bring a powerful system to its knees from a Baudrillardian point of view. The interpretive viewer allows the real, the semiotic, and the symbolic to appear and disappear (Clarke, Doel, Wernick, & Smith, 2009) at their discretion.

With regard to *Rushmore*, a fatal theory is one where the object (in this instance, the film) is permitted to escape interpretation, instead evoking a poetic response, leaving the political and ideologically driven attempts to pigeonhole Anderson as a filmmaker with a predictable aesthetic. The point here is to demonstrate the importance for the viewer of fighting against the appearance of a purportedly accurate accounting of film, and in its place offer to take the

signs of the film and reverse them until they disappear from view. This may be the impetus for a fatal theory. A Baudrillardian film philosophy would excoriate that which appears fixed and transcendent but is operating under the guise of interpretation.

Chapter Four is the culmination of a reflection on Baudrillard's trajectory of cultural criticism that expands the dimensional aspects of criticism and interpretation, and gives the viewer the opportunity to make their own interpretation seductive to this very system that is attempting to muffle its voice. Baudrillard (1993b) feels that this movement is imminent because the path of the cultural objects 'always respond of its own accord' (p. 50). When we compare *Rushmore* to more banal fare, it challenges the structural dynamics of advanced capitalism (Wernick in Clarke, Doel, Wernick, & Smith, 2009), reflected in mainstream offerings. The film object can accommodate a more dynamic interpretative regime to reflect the rapidly changing cultural zeitgeist, especially in these times of enhanced conservatism intent on making interpretation fixed and in some cases mandatory.

Baudrillard (1993b) feels that this movement is imminent because the path of the cultural object 'always responds of its own accord' (p. 50). When we compare *Rushmore* to more banal fare, it can be seen to challenge the 'structural dynamics of advanced capitalism' (Wernick, as cited in Clarke, Doel, Merrin, & Smith, 2009, p.182) which is often reflected in mainstream offerings. Where mainstream cinema often consolidates homogeneity Anderson promotes a heterogeneity embodied in his protagonist's capacity to act. Max Fischer is (temporarily) defeated by a system that demands conformity and compliance, and measures success by lofty school grades and good looks. He struggles with these and Anderson sympathises, not to the point of making Fischer an anti-hero but by pointing out the deficiencies of this market-driven educational system. The film object can accommodate a more dynamic interpretative regime to reflect the rapidly changing cultural zeitgeist,

especially in these times of enhanced conservatism intent on making interpretation fixed, and, in some cases, with an inevitable outcome.

It is with this in mind that *Rushmore* accentuates the simulation of many forms of an aesthetic presentation by juxtaposition with other films from the same genre. From his excessively stylistic palette, to his staccato dialogue, to his hyper-stereotypical characterisation, Anderson permits the ‘Baudrillardian’ spectator to ‘double’ this film back into more mainstream and predictable contemporary presentations that we find in the ‘coming of age’ genres, such as John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club* (1985), Garry Marshall’s *The Princess Diaries* (2001) or Mark Waters’ *Mean Girls* (2004). Each of these films displays the archetypes that many audiences know and appreciate: the nasty nemesis, the seemingly unattainable love, the geeky but true friends, etc. *Rushmore* plays with these archetypes accentuating some and mocking others. We do not just ‘see’ the inhabitants of ‘Rushmore Academy’ but glimpse the attempt of all cinema to capture and essentialise characters in their fatal futility.

Fatality is the arch-enemy of banality and in these times a weapon for the subject to take on the nefarious strategies of power embodied in the discourses of the mainstream ideological machine itself and its love affair with excess. In this way, *Rushmore* becomes a seductive object to be deployed in this battle to de-subjectify.

### **Fatality and *Rushmore*. There is no Art.**

Chapter Four brings signs, reversion, and seduction together to challenge the applicability of a banal aesthetic. Wes Anderson does not merely create worlds, as many of his interpreters suggest. What the viewer can be led to conclude is that the viewer creates a world to interpret Anderson’s created world. This results, from the Baudrillardian perspective, in a ‘fatal’ theory of the world. The yearning for interpretation brings the object, in this case, the film object, too close, too real, with its appearance blotting out the capacity for alternative visions.

For Baudrillard (1993b), this is the ‘apogee of banality’ (p. 50). As such, this chapter takes a look at the fatality of aesthetics by treating Anderson as a fatal theorist of the image.

The viewers’ encounter with Anderson relies upon emergence from a created world in the first place, and this is rarely questioned. Aesthetics is a created world that creates the world, all the time doubling particulars and rarely encountering universals. This is the game in which Baudrillard revels (Gilloch as cited in Smith, 2012). ‘There Is No Art’ (Smith, 2012, p. 54) because of the fatal nature of its own form when banality is permitted to be reinforced. It is at this point that thinking wills itself not to will any longer and accepts the culture it is given. In this chapter, fatality is deliberately opposed to banality. As Baudrillard theorist De Boer (2005) prompts us:

By abandoning meaning and becoming fascinated with itself, fatal theory must ultimately cease to be theory as such, eventually turning to more literary or fictive strategies. Baudrillard must attempt to make every line a sacrifice of production. A theory self-aware of its own impossibility to transcend signs must forget the real and try to disappear into its own empty form. (n.p.)

Baudrillard’s opposition, or as De Boer suggests ‘sacrifice’ in this situation, is not merely pugnacious, but performative and expository. The aim of this chapter is to apply his thinking in such a manner that it achieves the same methodological outcome with Anderson (and Kaufman). The banal is complicit with its own simulated form (Grace, 2000). In this chapter, we demonstrate how Anderson deploys this complicity to accentuate an ironic challenge to the form of art itself.

Considered interpretations of Baudrillard’ conception of the ‘fatal’ see it as making appearance incapable of sustaining meaning and value. Victoria Grace (2000) argues that fatality leads the subject to ‘dissolve ontology of any essence’ (p. 192). When this essence is challenged, as much by itself as anything else, it reveals itself as simulation. In any arena,

political or aesthetic, fatality liberates the individual to recast their attitude toward the system they face. The system de-centres itself through its own attempt to sustain its pride of place. In its construction, it signals its own destruction and deconstruction. The systemic attempt to sustain an explanatory centre of gravity will always fail. The films of Anderson and Kaufman apply this strategy to the films of their contemporary peers. *Rushmore* accentuates the simulation of many forms of an aesthetic presentation by inflexion. From his excessively stylistic palette to his staccato dialogue to his hyper-stereotypical characterisation, Anderson permits the ‘Baudrillardian’ spectator to ‘double’ this film back into more mainstream and banal contemporary presentations. We do not just ‘see’ the inhabitants of Rushmore Academy, but glimpse the attempt of all cinema to capture and essentialise characters in their fatal futility.

In this penultimate chapter, we paint Anderson (and Kaufman) as fatal filmmakers in the Baudrillardian sense. There is no ‘art’, and there is no ‘world’ because they have been, in Baudrillardian terms, ‘over signified’. He tells us when referring to sexuality as an exemplary sign:

The more one advances willy-nilly in sex’s veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more immersed one becomes in the accumulation of signs, and the more enclosed one becomes in the endless over-signification of a real that no longer exists... (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 33)

To claim them back, we can interpret and then engage Kaufman and Anderson as iconoclasts of contemporary cinematic culture who cross the breadth and depth of film, questioning the binary between independent and mainstream. We also accuse cinema itself of aiding and abetting this scene, which Baudrillard (1997) polemically described as ‘the murder of reality’ (p. 46). In *Rushmore*, there is effectively a double dose of fatal filmmaking, as Anderson challenges the semiotics of filmmaking by presenting an aesthetic narrative and character

style that first holds the cinematic ‘system’ to account and secondly accentuates the peculiarities of such a system through his deliberately confected *mise en scène*. In summary, *Rushmore* can be read as a film that exposes the banality of much cinematic fare, with a banaler presentation.

When this rebellious, subversive ambivalent filmmaking is brought together with iconoclastic thought, the result is at the very least a critique of the contemporary zeitgeist (sex, culture, and difference) through the distancing of cinema, its theory, and its means of spectatorship. It becomes a critique of value and meaning to encourage thought to move in alternative, creative, and formidable directions. In other words, it invites thinking about how we think about the film object.

However, this thesis is not a critical analysis of film theory or film philosophy or spectatorship, but a Baudrillardian exchange with Anderson and Kaufman that declines to be seduced by theories, philosophies, or interpretations other than those of Baudrillard. The choice of Kaufman and Anderson as subversives is made because over their short film careers (Kaufman from 1999 and Anderson from 1996), they have become influential through their subtle agitation of mainstream cinema practice. Yet their subversion is never total or complete. We argue they both make films that contain an excess or a residual effect that can be expressed in Baudrillardian terminology, as outlined and exemplified above. Of course, they are not sole groundbreakers in this sense, but both Kaufman and Anderson have been received critically with a polarising effect that mirrors the critical reception of Baudrillard.

To conclude the thesis, we discuss Kaufman and Anderson by examining how both directors’ animated films can be taken as critical examinations of the cinematic zeitgeist. This is also a reflection of a term Baudrillard deployed late in his career when both his analysis and what he was responding to became un-analyzable: what he termed the fractal.

## **The Fractal.**

Chapter Five begins with this form of fatal implosion where we encounter the interesting phenomenon coined by Baudrillard (1994) as the 'fractal' (p. 6) or the fourth level of simulation where meaning is its own pure simulacrum. This final level of simulation where there is no original is both emblematic and symptomatic of the culture that Baudrillard examines, one that has even deteriorated since his death in 2007 with the advent of more salacious reality television shows and geopolitical discourse, especially in conservative politics with very little historical precedent. We can also observe this in the everyday. To think through and against the fractal is a final critical maneuver to expose deficiencies in the system and its effort for total simulation. This is the style of performative critique that comprehends the media, the political system, and art as lost referentiality. It is not a purely systemic, rational, or logical way of looking at the world, but to see the world in its poetic form, offering a symbolic exchange with it and thus repurposing rationality. This symbolic exchange eschews empirical investigation and instead permits the theorist an opportunity to take the investigation in a separate direction, looking at how the film makes us feel rather than trying to garner an accurate representation of the world.

Deploying the fractal as a judicious and critical apparatus allows simulation to maintain its status as simulation, never fully dominant. An approach to cinema that accepts a film's constituents as being *the* way to capture the theme, narrative characterisation, or reality itself is too restrictive. These 'fractal' films, while critically and economically successful, contribute minimally to the debate over the genealogy or ontology of cinema. Instead, they often shape taste to the exclusion of cinematic otherness. This otherness is the capacity to appreciate the unpredictable and the indefinable, which a fractal world impedes.

For Baudrillard, the fractal is where ‘value can no longer be located’ (Genosko, 1994, p. 52). This rhetorical claim aligns with the dispersion of values (Baudrillard, 1998), brought on by an interminable simulation and reproduction (Baudrillard, 1990). Therefore, the fractal is a state where judgement is shackled to an overabundance rather than a paucity of information. In the twenty-first century, heavily overloaded by social media, information is both omnipresent and metastatic. Baudrillard (2000) tells us there is a ‘metastasis of culture’ (p. 20) by which he means that art is becoming incapable of challenging culture, only reflecting its vacuity.

Our thesis is that Anderson and Kaufman are not guilty of the same charges. The fractal describes a state of genealogical confusion, not where the original and the copy are confused, but rather where the genealogy of the original is lost, occluded, forgotten. Anderson and Kaufman expose this confusion with their respective stop-motion animation films. What these films achieve is what Baudrillard’s entire oeuvre is also adept at exposing: the attempt to control the interpretation of the object and its value and meaning through signification designed with economic as well as aesthetic imperatives. The result is the moderating capacity of a viewing subject to discriminate between economic and aesthetic paradigms, effectively reducing the capacity for the viewing subject to become anything different than themselves. Anderson and Kaufman’s films, while economically dependent, refuse to make the banal significations of a lucrative animation industry to compromise the aesthetic goals of their respective films. Animation proliferates to the point where we have trouble locating its point other than a very simplistic notion of entertainment ‘into a void rather than towards some higher end’ (Grace, 2000, p. 129). By investigating how these two films refute and refuse the fractal, we demonstrate how much grip in Baudrillardian terms the fractal has on regulating sameness. We argue that the singular nature of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and Charlie Kaufman's 2015 *Anomalisa* are, in effect, antidotes to what we see as the oppressive banal

contemporary animation that has contributed to a degree of ontological confusion about what it is to be human in an increasingly fractal world. Each film exposes the fractal by challenging it.

### ***Fantastic Mr. Fox and the Fractal.***

Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach's script confuses these market-driven contemporary animated examples insofar as the titular protagonist Fox's (George Clooney) yearning for self-validation is trumped by his animality. Here, a standard reading focuses on the former and neglects the latter, an oversight which the film's narrative comfortably occludes.

However, we cannot substitute Fox with a human because he is always essentially a chicken-killing creature, and this killing is arguably not an essential part of human nature. The film is never a total validation of human driven-market systems because the animality of Fox absorbs the attempts at homogenisation. Fox's human characteristics, his employment, house pride, dress sense, etc. are all eclipsed by his animality. He is not a capitalist fox yearning for systemic validation, but a fox deeply committed against the system. It is this facet that makes *Fantastic Mr. Fox* a non-standard film, hence non-fractal in Baudrillardian terms. This, coupled with its delivery as a stop-motion animation which could be construed as another aesthetic/political comment against the much more commercially successful digital animation. Stop motion is more artisanal, relying on handcrafted puppets rather than the purely computational. Fox cannot be fully integrated into the human world and mirror what mainstream animation typically does: dress humans up as animals or sponges or insects to present anthropocentric narratives.

The obstacle to Fox and his friend's happiness are the rapacious farmers Boggins, Bunce, and Bean, who could be taken as standing in for corporate capitalism and its relentless march to destroy obstacles in its way. Fox is the pebble in their shoe, and try as they might, they can

never absorb his animality into their corporatism. Fox does not just consume their chickens; he steals them because he is genetically programmed to do so. He is, in this striking quality, outside simulation and human reality. Fox gets in the way of corporate capitalism because his essential nature gets in the way of his (human) culture. Now the sentiment here is to be on the side of Mr. Fox because he is opposing the evil acts of the farmers with his charm and wit. But we suggest we should also identify with Mr. Fox because his animality refuses the grand simulation of corporate capitalism and yearns to make the anthropocentric 'violent' statement of a gleeful mouth of a live chicken. The final chapter of the thesis explores this interesting phenomenon. This ambivalence to Fox's characters and Anderson's attitude to it are mainstream animated fascinations as fractalised humans in formation. A mainstream animated character is nothing but a metaphor or a human who has lost their way. Fox is a singularity, not just a metaphor.

### ***Anomalisa* and The Fractal.**

The connection of Anderson's stop-motion animation to *Anomalisa* is this singularity. Kaufman's film explores a character trying and failing to escape his banal existence. The moment of singularity that is Kaufman's 2015 *Anomalisa*, scripted by Kaufman and co-directed by Duke Johnson, is the moment the fractal can be obliterated. The narrative of the film is straightforward. A motivational speaker Michael Stone (voiced by David Thewlis), who is suffering from an 'existential crisis', receives an instant moment of relief from the banality of his humdrum existence in the form of Lisa Hesselman (voiced by Jennifer Jason Leigh). Stone lives in a world that Baudrillard would see as perfected and totalised. His life as a motivational speaker is mired in cliché and unoriginality, yet his vocational patten seems highly functional and technically competent. Pop psychology overburdens the world, and Kaufman's script highlights that once Stone's pop psychology makes the world appear highly 'real'-ised, it is at its most vulnerable to contestation and challenge. Only the most dedicated

proponents of this psychology would see it as beneficial and enlightening, whereas Stone appreciates the fraudulence of his trite mechanical wisdom and yearns deeply for release. His life is symptomatic, and his restless search for a grander self-transcendence is hamstrung because he is searching in the wrong places. His desire to transform is externally derived rather than internally motivated. The moment of singularity, when he makes up his own rules, is the only moment he leaves his repetitive and conformist existence.

It is this yearning which places him on a trajectory for attempting to glimpse the singular, something that does not conform (Baudrillard, 1998). Stone wants something to emerge that is so 'radically uncertain' (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 68), the ontological foundations of his existence will be shaken. The lesson here is instructive: by seeking out a moment of singularity, Stone allows the world to blossom in ways he could not conceive of, but the delicate nature of this singular moment is lost. That becomes Stone's millstone, and the film articulates just how difficult it is to shift from the humdrum of repetition to etch out the singular. As Baudrillard's writing is deployed to interpret *Anomalisa*, Stone is reabsorbed into the fractal because he does not have the capacity to deny its overwhelming burden. Instead, he returns home and gives in to the banal.

However, our sociocultural reading of the film may lead us to conclude that the political implications of pursuing the singularity are clear. If you do not, you run the risk of being drawn straight back into the mundanity of the everyday. Baudrillard resisted this by being antagonistic, ensuring that all the elements of the socio-political system were constantly being challenged by his observations. The everyday was his target such that everyday living was not the banal, humdrum repetition of the same, but the opportunity to be much more creative and thus singular. In *Anomalisa* the message from a Baudrillardian perspective is abundantly clear: the search for a singularity is the energising force or the antidote to *ennui*.

As it is for Fox, the search for the singularity of existence by fighting the banality and humdrum of imposed systems energises both films. Anderson and Kaufman lead us into very Baudrillardian territory and jettison the map.

## **Conclusion.**

We argue there is no Baudrillardian film philosophy as an object, only as a process of defying both banality and its capacity to exert dominion over value and meaning. To reduce power by shaking the foundations of meaning is the lifelong project of Baudrillard. To lessen the power of banal filmmaking is the project of Anderson and Kaufman. Baudrillard's analytic weaponry, especially the conceptual radicality of reversibility, seduction, fatality, and fractality, diminish this power via a symbolic exchange with the film object, treated as a singular object of seduction.

What gives Baudrillard his distinctive voice is the methodological impudence he always adopted with respect to his targets. His was an intervention into the commercialisation of consciousness through the image. He saw the problem with signs and reversed them in his own seductive manner. Inspired in this way by Nietzsche, he re-purposed the world and its dominant systems with a poetic eye to short-circuit the infantilisation of the image, which has become and continues to become increasingly fractal. Baudrillard died sensing the fractal, and the decade since his death has seen this fractality securing a greater hold on the collective fabulation that is social reality. In cinema, many are irreversibly plugged into the matrix, and the cacophony of heavily infantilised virtual voices sustaining this state of affairs indicates that Baudrillard's work has become even more important than ever, especially if we prefer a more poetic view of the world.

## **Part One**

*Words and magic were in the beginning one and the same thing, and even today words retain much of their magical power. (Sigmund Freud).*

*I put my cards on the table, now it is up to others to invent their rules just as I invented mine. (Jean Baudrillard, 2005).*

## **Chapter 1: The Self does not occur—Consumption, Signs and Kaufman.**

### **1.1 Introduction: There is no Crazy-Ass Imagination. How signs double the world.**

There is something uncanny in *Being John Malkovich*'s opening frames after the credits that sets the tone of the whole film and perhaps, we argue, signals one of the embedded strategies of Kaufman's oeuvre. The scene is between puppeteer Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) and his wife Lotte (Cameron Diaz) as they discuss his day and the domestic chores he needs to undertake. Commonplace domestic significations are both present and paradoxically absent, and the implication is that the conventional narrative operates on the surface as any domestic scene, but that conventional domesticity is always anything but. The couple talk about work and chores, and Craig offers some homespun sage advice about 'nobody wanting a puppeteer in today's wintry economic climate' (Kaufman, 1999, p. 2). The camera alerts us to this domesticity with standard framing and movement, introducing the characters' familial life, but something is amiss. The apartment is populated with animals, as Lotte is devoted to her monkeys, iguanas, and parrots, and Craig has a workshop where he creates intricate and sophisticated puppet performances nobody wants to watch. There is a deliberate disconnect between signifier and signified that frustrates standard or normal interpretation. This is Kaufman's *raison d'être*, to achieve a semiosis that muddies meaning in a manner anathema to more mainstream fare.

Hence an uncanny moment arrives when the viewer reads the signs Kaufman and director Spike Jonze reveal as being not just a critique of domesticity, but a strange refraction or doubling of domesticity in the first place. It is not unusual that Craig yearns to be a puppeteer and that Lotte loves keeping exotic animals in their cramped home, but typically all domesticity goes unquestioned, and that cinematic domesticity is accepted so readily, normalised beyond question. This chapter deals with the normalisation of signs and the ways in which *Being John Malkovich* renders all signs uncanny.

A Baudrillardian specific semiotic reading of this film permits us to follow his lead and see signs as open to challenge. It also renders signs as portents of the possible rather than banal markers of a universal present. We can discern a domesticated sign, such as that which indicates Craig is awakened at the beginning of the narrative. His alarm goes off, but accompanying the clock is a parrot squawking ‘Craig Honey time to get up’ (Kaufman, 1998, p. 1) in his ear. This domesticated sign in the clock is complicated by the intrusion of the parrot, and we can detect that signification, in this case, is under challenge by Jonze and Kaufman because domestication itself is more complex than its cinematic presentations. The parrot renders the scene strangely askew. We see confirmed that a conventional domestic scene is often an ideological tool that helps to reinforce programmed notions of highly consumerist behaviour.

The objects with which we traditionally surround ourselves around in a typical morning environment are exposed as what Baudrillard (1996) terms mythological expressions of an inner transcendence that domesticates the sign. Kaufman relentlessly frustrates this transcendence, effectively laying Craig’s ego bare, as his yearning for a form of inner transcendence becomes the narrative trajectory of the film. The default position would be to see this household as uncanny, but via Baudrillard, we see the traditional household equally

as such and the domestication of this signification as the actual uncanny. The signifying structures are constantly being inverted. As the film unfolds, this inversion spins into semiotic delirium.

The point, then, is to combat this intuited or domestic simulation with illusion as Kaufman does almost as a default means of his filmmaking. Hence, in the film's opening, the early morning domestic scene's infusion of illusions brings into focus the simulated touches of the very domestic scenes we have been conditioned to accept as normal. It is not Kaufman and Jonze's work that is eccentric, but more so the unquestioned acceptance of a highly normalised domestic scene as a materialised constricted viewpoint that reinforces banality such as the cacophonous sounds of intermingled radio and television or the tendency to prioritize work related tasks at this time over domestic or nutritional ones.

Baudrillard saw illusion as the means of combatting the complacency of enforced simulation, and Kaufman's *raison d'être* for writing is to catch the viewer unaware (Kaufman, 2004) as both a resistance to and an antidote for simulation (Genosko, 2007). The film, like Baudrillard, constantly catches us, making us question how deeply and unwittingly mired we might be in simulation and challenging us to perhaps develop a language to reorient ourselves. Challenging the construction of our own response to semiotics is our starting point.

The important questions addressed in the chapter are:

1. How is the typical 'semiology' of film theory dependent on ideological underpinnings, and is there a Baudrillardian response?
2. In what ways can Baudrillard's semiological radicalism be relevant to personal and subjective film interpretation?

3. How does *Being John Malkovich* act as a ‘Baudrillardian film’ in its semiological radicalism in response?

We will resist the signs developed for, and given to us, as ontologically and epistemologically stable. From there, we will outline what we claim are the problems with this semiological repetition that Baudrillard termed ‘banality’, and offer a challenge or resistance to them. Finally, we will radicalise these signs, and in so doing, will align Kaufman’s script with Baudrillard’s thinking on semiotics.

Peter Travers (1999), reviewing for *Rolling Stone* magazine, suggested that *Being John Malkovich* was:

... the movie about a puppeteer named Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) who finds a magic portal that sucks you into the head of John Malkovich, where, for fifteen minutes, you watch and feel from the inside as the Oscar-nominated actor showers, shaves, picks his teeth or bangs a babe —it depends on the hour —before time runs out and you get booted into a ditch beside the New Jersey Turnpike. No, this is not a movie you should rush to avoid. The crazy-ass imagination at work in *Being John Malkovich* hits you like a blast of pure oxygen. Unblemished by solemnity, intellectual pretensions or elephant dung, this movie of constant astonishments will make you laugh hard and long. (n.p.)

Travers use of the term ‘crazy-ass imagination’ begs the question. It is clear he approves of the film, but what does the signifier ‘crazy-ass’ connote? It is a strategic move to stake the claim that Travers feels the film is not serious, but here we must disagree because we argue the film is a serious study of selfhood and subjectivity. This is not to say we do not need criticism—it is a fundamentally necessary component of the cinema world—but we don’t need consumers of criticism who take a unidimensional critic as a purveyor of truth rather than an expression of one opinion. Travers assumes not only that we know what ‘crazy-ass’ means, but also that we can interpret it from his specific signifier. His wager is we will concede to his framing of the film through a specified value as a dominant but unquestioned

film interpretation. To promote a Baudrillardian film philosophy, we take issue with this exchange and choose our own control. Baudrillard explores the effect of signification as a means of hinting at simulation *qua* simulation. As such Travers' adjective crazy-ass is there to consolidate what he envisions as normal; hence the domestic scene should have normalised domestic significations. Anything else is 'crazy-ass'.

When signs are reduced then delivered to this elementary yet malleable status, the viewer may take control of their meaning and interpretation, neutralising their ideological connotations. When we follow Baudrillard's lead, we capture conventional or predictable signification and re-route it to a different, personal, more self-generated path. Language becomes the prop that so-called 'reality' needs to hide the insignificance behind reality itself. Instead of apprehending reality as 'canonical and objective' (Baudrillard, 1975, p. 48), the viewing subject can sense simulation as an endeavour to manipulate the subject into concluding there is absolute objectivity. As we will argue below with celebrity, it is an actual sociocultural object which is also ideologically created and supported by productive capital. Signs create simulations, absorbing lived experience into a form of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970). This consumption is regularised and homogenised into what Baudrillard (1975) labels the sphere of truth. As semiotic theorist Kaja Silverman (1983) points out:

... the classic text usually functions to cover over the heterogeneity of the signifying operations, to harmonize its differences and contradictions. Within the firmly maintained boundaries of that text the play of meaning is carefully circumscribed there are certain signifieds "authorized" which must sooner or later emerge as dominant. (p. 38)

Silverman's evocation of the classic text, imbued with its own authorised signifieds, is extended by Baudrillard who feels the time of the authorised signified has passed over into a world where authority is not in a symbolic, but a fractalised form. For Baudrillard, control goes beyond exploitation and profit, and infiltrates everything down to the manipulation of

genetics (Baudrillard, 2006). This hyperbolic claim by Baudrillard also allows us to draw out a critique of the debate over the transition from modernity to postmodernity that has promoted a ruction in film theory over the past three decades. This debate is about control over theory and is typified by the work of David Bordwell which we will address in Chapter Three. Control over what is permissible to say about film and film theory is hotly debated, and we concede Baudrillard problematises this.

Baudrillard's term 'code' is Silverman's term for an 'authorised' model of signification (following Roland Barthes), where the expressive form is ideologically coated, loaded with what Genosko (2007) labels 'front-end control' (n.p.). This establishes what Barthes called 'cultural codes'. It is this front-end control which labels *Being John Malkovich* eccentric ('crazy-ass') to ensure that mainstream lived experience remains normalised and promoted as the ideal form of consumption within this lived experience. To manipulate the viewer into thinking *Being John Malkovich* is 'eccentric' is to preference everything that the film is not, thus elevating the discursively constructed sign of 'normal' into a consistent and articulated yet deeply ideological position. Joseph Tanke (2007) reflecting on Baudrillard's idea of code, suggests:

Perhaps best understood negatively as that system of signs that renders obsolete the era of industrial production and the theories forged to critique it, the code is capable of infecting and thereby disarming even the most ostensibly revolutionary of analyses from within. Its chief characteristic is the reversal of finality, that is, the code is a social and historical program that, like DNA, dictates the values of production, consumption, and critique in advance. (n.p.)

The code is a manipulation. It textures the symbolic field of the viewer and shapes rather than invites critique. The implicit strategy of the code is to ensure that we do not realise the code is there. It impedes rational thought and, as Baudrillard (1993a) hyperbolically predicts, 'reason crumbles' (p. 88).

Baudrillard's entire latter oeuvre diffuses and duels with this code. 'Normality' is coded (Baudrillard, 1993a) and is tied to producing conformity and consensus, principally for economic reasons of consumption. Good coded citizens consume and produce and perpetuate consumption as a signification. This is the ideology of a market-driven 'reality' with a central code for behaviour, including cinema patronage and interpretative predictability, where entertainment is conceived as seamlessly functional rather than full of ambivalence and mystery. Interpretation is consumed as much as produced, and the 'pagan immanence of images' (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 39) is consumed as a quasi-religion typifies mass society. A consumer of film objects devours this ideology, and it becomes immanent to their ontological status. They produce a behaviour ideologically derived and appropriate to market whims.

Ideology here is understood as the implicit dominance of the values of any historical period (Silverman, 1983). We see Kaufman as a damaging influence on such ideology. We will speculate within this Baudrillardian frame, in which the viewing response to *Being John Malkovich* is typically ideologically constructed. This construction is designed to reduce otherness in favour of a more banal, standardised presentation.

### **Resisting the ideology of signs as a film philosophy.**

In *Being John Malkovich*, the film's credits reveal a marionette dancing, controlled by a puppeteer Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), who is strikingly similar in appearance to his puppet. The film's 'conventional' opening is unsettling, accentuated by the dramatic score and the uncanny movement of the 'distressed' puppet. We may be expecting something zany ('crazy-ass') to happen. This could be described as denoting the signs of 'conventional' and 'zany' simultaneously because the opening shots are telling a definite story, but the doppelgänger effect between puppeteer and puppet could be unsettling. Both zany and conventional 'collapse' under interrogation because, following Baudrillard, we reject 'pre-

imaged foundations' for a more 'eccentric, anomalous, irreducible foundation' (Genosko, 2007, n.p.). Instead of defaulting to 'crazy-ass', we will seek out an alternative reading.

The puppet is distressed, but the essential reason for this is ambivalent and not fully known. Interpreting the film often encourages a coherency that perhaps mirrors the desire of the central protagonist. Craig Schwartz yearns for a more coherent autonomous life, but in Kaufman's cinematic imagination his protagonists rarely get one. The entire film's trajectory could be metaphorically embedded in these opening credits. How do we account for the analogous state of the puppet? In what ways do we as viewers identify with Craig's existential yearnings? In short, what does this opening scene mean? Can we free the puppet?

A semiotic reading of *Being John Malkovich* will find it dominated by the signs of selfhood, celebrity, and the vicissitudes of contemporary consumerist desire. Kaufman and Jonze tease us with connotations for these signs as the film unfolds in unpredictable directions. If there is to be a Baudrillardian film philosophy, it is not to follow a predictable path, but to develop a more 'unpredictable form' (Baudrillard, 2001b, p. 121). Kaufman achieves this with his iconoclastic approach to cinematic signification.

Travers' reaction to *Being John Malkovich* quoted above is shaped by his psychological reaction to what he perceives and then formulates as the film's 'unpredictable' path. Hence for Travers, there is an overlap of his psychoanalytical state and subsequent semiotic formulation. His viewing subject's film-watching economy is organised around his narrow discursive field. Here Travers' conclusion is derived safely in either being labelled as an alternative to the norm (crazy-ass) or in complicity with it: the security of predictability. It is worth speculating how the genealogy of the predictable and secure sign operates on the film-viewing subject who defaults to expectedness. Meaning and value may become dependent on this organisation and its perceived sovereignty. However, akin to Baudrillard, we find a way

to deconstruct this unsurprising semiological approach to *Being John Malkovich* to satiate the desire to follow an unpredictable path.

This formation of the viewing subject places them in a discursive field where they are often not able to speak authentically but are 'spoken for' by this field (Silverman, 1983). This is a compliant consumer of celebrity, here framed in an Althusserian manner where the dominant apparatus is now taken up by social media and can overshadow traditional apparatus such as the church, family and education system (Althusser, 1970). It is those who fetishise fame, or at least revel in it, who are 'spoken for' by the creators of this narrowing discourse, consolidating and perpetuating this predictability. To be spoken for is to be ensnared in an ideological trap that many are oblivious to. The nexus of selfhood, celebrity and desire, when viewed from outside the system encourages us to look at the ideological imperatives contained at the crossroads of each. In response to Travers we want to see just how much 'crazy-ass' underpins a specific view of contemporary celebrity.

Baudrillard's motivation was to expose subjective obligation to significations. If the subject sees themselves knowingly within this system, they have the opportunity to acknowledge it. One of the strengths of *Being John Malkovich* is the highlighting of the banality of signification. Validated taste is textured in part by current studio genre paradigms, which are geared to an ever-restricting format (Balio as cited in Bernardi & Hoxter, 2017). Domestic and international markets are conduits for this funnelling of signification into a direction controlled primarily by big studio capital. In a Baudrillardian viewpoint, this is a system organised around simulation and is there to be resisted.

By placing himself at the margins of the dominant organising discourses, Baudrillard brings these very discourses into relief, challenging the social construction of the subject by critical juxtaposition. As an example, we may recognise the repetitious signification of the superhero

action genre and therefore see the superhero action presentation as simultaneously entertaining and ideologically motivated. Hence, the recent flurry of *Marvel Comics*-inspired films featuring Captain America et al. works at the level of entertainment, but also as an aesthetically textured transmission of putative American ‘values’ such as national pride, fidelity to the nation, and unequivocal prosecutions of (utilitarian) justice.

We can therefore hypothesise that the adolescent viewer who is susceptible to not being able to establish meaning freely has a limited capacity to challenge. According to Robert Witkin (2003), when writing on Adorno, this absence of freedom:

...destroys meaning which is for that synthesis of experience essential to freedom, imagination and judgement. (p. 31)

These individuals may get double significations here, with taste and ethics wrapped in an entertaining package. This so-called ‘tentpole’ cinema can be a ubiquitous reality but our response to this phenomenon might not be patronage. Scott Olsen (as cited in Miller, 2009) claims the nature of domestic demand for cinema has come to expect this ‘Hollywood aesthetic’ (p. 530) in the guise of a predictable and pleasant experience that satisfies the body rather than the mind. Tentpole cinema is the apogee of simulation, relying on a narrow field of signs referring to the catalogue of already established banality in an ever-narrowing film grammar.

Of course, this aesthetic and grammar are seriously contested by Kaufman's scripts and directorial efforts. However, instead of labelling him as ‘crazy-ass’ and neatly slotting him into this comfortable location, we reject the binary that promotes such thinking and resist this form of labelling. Hunter Vaughan (2010) describes Baudrillard as warning us that signs ‘deny the very threats of polysemy and play’ (p. 43). Tentpole cinema creates and sustains and defines the mainstream and satiates the broad tastes of much cinematic experience. Olsen

concludes that ‘textual transparency’ is not indicative of an ‘art film’ (as cited in Miller, 2009, p. 531), which we stress is the failure of signs to conquer all taste. Baudrillard exposes signs as empty vessels waiting to be banalised. Concomitantly, Rex Butler argues that Baudrillard’s strategy with aesthetics is to problematise both good and bad art, rendering them indistinguishable as a theoretical strategy to disallow anybody but the viewer to ascertain taste and therefore power (as cited in Clarke et al., 2009). Following this logic, we do not need to reject mainstream or tentpole cinema, but rather seek a way to include it in a viewing aesthetic that does not necessarily subscribe to what Olsen labels a ‘transparent microcosm of the audience watching’ (as cited in Miller, 2009, p. 533).

Instead, a tutored viewer may then understandably turn to psychoanalysis to analyse how a viewing subject develops these tentpole tastes, envisioning their discursive composition as the nexus of conscious and subconscious forces overdetermined by the (patriarchal) sociocultural dynamisms that organise them. Following Baudrillard, we propose to see psychoanalysis not only as a credible methodology to confront the semiotics of film, but also to ascertain interpretation as emanating from a force other than the psyche and pursue that alternative path. *Being John Malkovich* is also an exemplar of the capacity to frame an alternative way of confronting the organisation of signs in the cinema. Hence, after outlining how a semiotic reading of the film may look and accounting for how a psychoanalytic evaluation unearths some interesting interpretative phenomena, we appreciate what alternative Baudrillardian-inspired reading may be considered. To do this, we must re-organise dominant cinematic signification from the (Baudrillardian) viewer’s perspective, allowing a challenge to this potentially hegemonic arrangement.

Even though semiotics is the study of the systems of signification, our exploration is premised on what could be termed, albeit poetically, an anti-signification. To do this, we like

Baudrillard have to begin with prosaic semiotics before advancing to the more sibylline ‘theory-poetry’ as his career trajectory progressed—a poetry that can be encountered as theory frustrates tradition and in this case allows cinema and its interpretation to be much more playful and illusory, with no need for terminologies such as ‘truthfulness’ or ‘reality’ or ‘crazy-ass’. What we get in their place are terms of applicable and useful ambivalence, where poetry exposes the problem with essentialist interpretations and opens horizons to alternative interpretations.

### **Problems with semiology: Ideology, celebrity and the constructed subject.**

We can therefore hypothesise that the adolescent viewer who is susceptible to not being able to establish meaning freely has a limited capacity to challenge. According to Robert Witkin (2003), when writing on Adorno, this absence of freedom:

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... enforcing the univocity, unilaterality, and legibility of messages, and excluding ambivalence, a principle more virulent than mere poetic ambiguity. (n.p.)

Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze invite us to turn this semiology on its head. By confronting their work as acknowledging signifiers *as* signifiers, which are essentially riddled with slippage rather than univocality, we may begin to articulate a Baudrillardian film philosophy. Kaufman's script exposes the emptiness of the signifier, its nullity awaiting to be conquered. His sex scenes are allegorical, reflecting Baudrillard's (1996) idea that pornography makes sex 'high definition' (p. 29) occurring between actors, rendering it simulated but now considered real by the viewing public. Kaufman's characters have comically charged physical encounters, and the scenes are interesting to juxtapose with mainstream sexual balletics or their more extreme adult entertainment versions.

The critical point is, of course, that such a suggestive 'language' is both necessary and unavoidable because it perpetuates shared meaning and value and assures continuity and recognition designed to encourage fidelity and patronage to the systemic forces of production. In simple terms, what Baudrillard (1998) expresses as an 'explanatory principle' (p. 24), is an ideologically charged discursive instruction manual for suggested behaviour. The shortcoming is the restrictions it can impose on the viewer's ability to pursue a more personal interpretation that plays with this explanatory principle. While Baudrillard (1970) also terms this an 'enforced reproduction of the system' (p. 82), a commonality of signification is crucial but never a stipulation. What the viewer can do, however, is imagine the signification as a code or model as the semioticians do, rendering all presentations up for reinterpretation. The Baudrillardian viewer could see this 'domestication of signs' as optional. Signs become the 'dematerialized objects consumed and manipulated in their systematic difference with other signs' (Genosko, 2007, n.p.). Recognition of the code becomes the invitation to begin critique, a place marker for challenge rather than indiscriminate obedience, which subdues the possibility of otherness in a world where traditional codes restrict singularity.

Film semiotician Christian Metz talks of these as cultural codes and asks how they are assembled to create meaning albeit which is heterogeneous (Noth, 1995). We need to acknowledge these cultural codes, but additionally to also be suspicious of their genealogy. There is an ideological manipulation to seeing signifiers as specific cultural codes without this suspicion. In *Being John Malkovich*, these cultural codes may be misapplied. To classify Craig Schwartz as a troubled self is to assume a template from which a non-troubled self is drawn as a fixed, culturally coded descriptor. When we see Schwartz's pleading look as he begs for Maxine's physical affections, we do not necessarily see failure, but the everyman position materialised. The agonistic interpretation may combat such banal stereotyping that depicts the troubled self as an anomaly rather than the default status of the human condition. In this allegorical way, Craig Schwartz's existential conundrums in *Being John Malkovich* are a reflection central to the sociocultural experience, rather than outliers of day-to-day existence.

We move on to consider, for example, one especially powerful set of signifiers constructed to valorise celebrity. This fetishisation of prominence assures social relationships and guides many social projects such as fashion sense, language choices, and desired career paths. Celebrity is used as a powerful ideological tool to attempt to 'articulate the dreams 'of the working class' (Silverman, 1983, p. 28). If those yearning to be celebrities cannot be, at the very least they can dress, act, speak and be photographed as one. Kaufman's film exposes and challenges those common significations as Craig Schwartz 'becomes' John Malkovich, then recalibrates the entire ontological status of Malkovich's celebrity until it becomes a form of hyper-hysterical notoriety, finally collapsing under the weight of its own pomposity. We argue that we see this pomposity every day with the rise of social media valorising celebrity not just for the sake of talent, but for the sheer fact of celebrity itself. Here, life definitively

imitates art, similar to Martin Scorsese's searing portrait of celebrity adoration in his 1982 *King of Comedy*.

To the contrary, a standard 'rulebook' of both representation and interpretation of celebrity has been developed that is, according to Robert Stam (2000), 'underwritten by institutional authority exercising hegemony over divergent dialectics' (p. 118). Institutional power perceives celebrity as an aspirational self and can help to shape the dreams and desires of the self. The rule of celebrity is, in Baudrillardian terms, our 'passion for images' (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 56) which occludes that the assertion there is nothing really behind images until we make interpretation appear. Many cannot divest themselves of their fixation and aspiration to celebrity behaviour because it may expose the paucity of their ability to articulate what celebrity is, other than appearing present in mass media. As Adorno (1973) warns us:

The idolization of the cheap involves making the average the heroic. The highest-paid stars resemble pictures advertising unspecified proprietary articles. Not without good purpose are they often selected from the host of commercial models. The prevailing taste takes its ideal from advertising, the beauty in consumption. (p. 156)

Adorno urges a more reflective and judicious approach, and is, in this sense, more concerned with a political response to celebrity. For Baudrillard and Debord, the spectacle of celebrity hampered autonomy. For Debord (1967):

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. (60)

Similarly, Baudrillard (2010) argues:

Screen idols embody one single passion, the passion for images, and the immanence of the desire of the image. (p. 59)

Consequently, the film-viewing subject often recognises themselves within this narrow discursively constructed and controlled regime. It is this recognition that Baudrillard enthusiastically re-strategises. If the viewing subject is a construction, deeply sutured into a viewing context that is manipulated, then one way out is to acknowledge how this process is contoured and develop an alternative to it. Concomitantly, Jonze and Kaufman are documenting not only a searing commentary on celebrity, death, and consumerism but also on film viewing itself by rarely giving the banal viewer the narrative trajectory that cinematic signification often takes. Schwartz's consummate puppetry in the opening scene has a definitive narrative trajectory. The puppet realises it is trapped, smashes the mirror, and collapses on the floor. When the viewer is first introduced to Craig Schwartz, he and his marionette lock eyes in a moment of pain and existential anguish, accentuated by the intensification of the soundtrack. And yet a question can be asked regarding the necessity to read this scene as a prologue to the principal story. Weinstein and Seckin (2008) suggest:

In this fantastical context, the filmmakers raise questions about intention, identity, authorship, and the wisdom of elevating narcissism over Eros. (n.p.)

But authorial intention itself is being questioned, with the viewer wondering not what Schwartz intends, but Kaufman himself. The ultimate target ironically leads back to the viewer who, in a struggle for signification, might resort to banality to capture the film's interpretative status. This prospective view is attempting to construct meaningful semiotics of self from a film we are arguing is hypothesising that the self does not comprehensively exist. In its stead is a simulation of selfhood, ideologically constructed and delivered by the dominant significations of the day.

## **Searching for the semiotics of self in a film that challenges it.**

In the intensity of *Being John Malkovich's* many challenging scenes, the viewer confronts this troubled self, yearning for celebrity status that is projecting his own pain onto his marionette. He is searching for an identity, some authorial control, and acceptance, as Seckin and Weinstein (2008) conclude. Craig and his puppet's relationship as conceived by Kaufman traces the search for identity as a thing or an objective value, rather than appreciating his own identity as a re-construction and not a construction. Craig is trapped within an ideological straightjacket of contemporary celebrity fixation. He is an artist who yearns for success and sees artistic validation as being measured by fame and fortune, regardless of integrity. We find it difficult to identify with Craig because of the ethical paucity of his actions, but we can learn from his errors. His is a dangerous fixation because he has foregone any ethical deliberations for his own selfish ends.

One of the reasons we watch films concerning the search for identity is to look for and validate the fleeting signs that we have an assured identity of our own. In a Baudrillardian universe, the search for selfhood is not a lost battle for the notion we can find one. It is the battle for the creation of singularity or otherness, the self that defies banality rather than lives by it. As a result of an imposed signification of subjectivity, the destiny of alienation or ontological freedom is lost through its very imposition. As Baudrillard (1990) states, the contemporary subject is 'enraptured by the commutations of sameness' (p. 58). In a battle between sameness and otherness, the weight of ideologically-driven selfhood is often overdetermined by celebrity.

All the characters in *Being John Malkovich* yearn for this selfhood whose phenomenal content is textured by celebrity, immortality, sexual desire, or a combination of all three. However, Kaufman's script can be read as a poignant critique of celebrity, hinting at the

Baudrillardian notion of a ‘machinic celebrity’ (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 84); an entity diminished of clear signification generated through a gigantic advertising operation. Instead of wanting to appear to stand for something, this notion of machinic celebrity, which Baudrillard (1996) juxtaposes with what he terms ‘organic celebrity’ (p. 84), the modern self often just wants recognition for its own sake. This ‘shines forth with the full gleam of its artificial light’ (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 76), a light definitely exaggerated by the contemporary milieu.

However, our criticism of machinic celebrity is not because of its shallow fawning adulation, but because of the inclination that now manifests as celebrity ‘at any cost’, which Craig ultimately yearns for. Many of the principal characters in *Being John Malkovich* yearn for a form of public acclaim. Unfortunately, the same applies to many unsuspecting viewers in today’s fascination with social media. The semiosphere has gone beyond a valorisation of celebrity to a form of hysterical adulation with its implicit ethical problems for meaning and value, forcing our imaginations to fade (Baudrillard 1996, p. 84)

As discussed above, a strong signification is marked from the opening credits when ornate blue curtains part to reveal a sophisticated marionette accompanied by intense orchestral music. Are we entering a theatrical world or witnessing a Shakespearean dramatic decline, brought about by hubris and ego? The marionette’s dance could signify a yearning for control, or man indulging in a God complex. The multiplicities of interpretation rightly abound here, but the overarching feeling from our point of view is one of ‘otherness’. The viewer is entering into a world, and the curtain signification is capricious. Are we entering a domain of ‘spatial fluidity’ (Romney, 1999, n.p.) or where the ‘Lacanian symbolic order is challenged’ (Dragunoiu, 2001, n.p.) or where ‘we are confined’ (Ott as cited in Blessing &

Tudico, 2005, p. 61) or witnessing a ‘queasy metaphysical conundrum’ (Hill, 2008, p. 1759)?

The simple but trite answer is yes.

In this story Craig Schwartz is a clever and dextrous puppeteer who creates serious and probing puppetry performances. The marionette dances a sophisticated and emotional dance. It smashes a mirror and completes maneuvers that are perhaps outrageous in puppeteering. But this signification ‘fails’ because the marionette is a doll version of Craig himself, replete with long hair and a sad disposition. The performance, which we later learn is called ‘The Dance of Despair and Disillusionment’ (Kaufman, 1999, p. 87), is also the introduction to Kaufman’s challenge to film in an attempt to portray internal or subjective *ennui*. We argue Kaufman is responding to how cinema before *Being John Malkovich* assumed it was displaying *ennui*. However, we might also consider that perhaps Kaufman knows it will always fail. This is because no matter how we try to explain and document world-weariness, we can only really simulate it. The puppet’s ultimate ironic tragedy is the brutal, raw facticity of the inability to capture *ennui* on film, in spite of how much we demand it. There is something ‘wrong’ with Craig. Dragunoiu (2001) argues from a psychoanalytic paradigm:

The puppet's distress at the sight of its mirror image suggests a state of self-alienation, a psychic division that is reinforced by the puppet's physical resemblance to its maker. This psychic split recalls Jacques Lacan's formulation of the human subject as divided between a narcissistic total being (me), and a speaking subject (I), which fuels its attempt to validate its (fictional) unity of being by convincing the outside world to pronounce it authentic. (p. 1)

Here, the viewer might see the film working on two distinct planes. The first is to agree with Dragunoiu (and Seckin and Weinstein) and see alienation driving this emotional and conflicted scene as emblematic of the self’s drive for authenticity. This is the goal-driven tradition of conceptions of self as problem-solver and character builder. The conclusion then is to see this scene as a sign of the individual’s (Schwartz’s) ‘loss’ of self. But on another

level, the viewer can see this search as the exemplary ‘mistake’ of modernity, and the marionette is not a materialisation of this alienation, but that alienation itself is the manifestation of comprehending self-identity as constantly exchangeable ‘with something else’. In other words, the problem cannot be corrected by fusing Craig’s alienation with a better version (John Malkovich?), but by his acceptance of alienation as an aleatoric existential destiny that is quintessential, in Baudrillardian parlance, to the universal existential position. Again, to borrow from Chris Chang (1999), his selfhood ‘is not a prison, but a playground’ (n.p.), but Schwartz fails to acknowledge this. As we have seen above, once we see the self as partly illusion, the construction of the self does not have to be formed from the top down, dominated by ideology. A banal semiology, driven by the desire for answers, wants to conceive of the self as authentic and autonomous. This full semiotics of selfhood leads Craig literally down the rabbit hole, and we may follow him if unguarded.

As an antidote to banality, *ennui* can function as a debilitating millstone. Craig Schwartz, however, chooses a completely different path. He chooses, literally, in the end, the prison. Perhaps Kaufman may be warning us that a safe choice can be fatal if we do not fully explore its ramifications. Now the viewer can traverse these two planes, exploring the film as it works towards negotiating between these two levels. It is neither about alienation nor its absence, but rather the space occupied when alienation is allowed to shift and move and play around with attempts at signification. Hence, when interpreters suggest the film is ‘surreal’, they are drawing interpretation from a source that insists on delineating between surreal and ordinary. However, could the idea of an autonomous, liberated Cartesian self be the ultimate surreal thought, a fantasy supported and enforced by the semiology of contemporary times? The film ‘works at inhabiting both these terms at once, bouncing between its surreal genealogy’, as Hill (2008) argues, but also documenting the concrete everyday problems of consciousness and selfhood (n.p.). Therefore Romney’s ‘spatial fluidity’, Dragunoiu’s ‘challenge to the

Lacanian symbolic order' and Seckin and Weinstein's 'Perverse Cosmos' are not merely cinematic markers, but also more accurate markers of selfhood. We do not appreciate man in crisis; man *is* crisis. The cinematic fantasy that our ontological disposition is a serene, autonomous, self-directed entity is the fantasy that is the pulse of social reality. This fantasy papers over the fissures and inconsistencies that constitute us.

Baudrillard understood that the compulsions of life are hijacked by consumerist systems, meaning man constantly tries to overcome time and space as an economic desire, which Baudrillard (1970, 1993a) saw as fruitless. The banal reading attempts to solve these conundrums and achieve some universalised meaning. But meaning is not what we are ultimately seeking; instead, we locate meaning in the absence of meaning, or more accurately in the epistemological confusion of multiple meanings.

Similarly, there is something oddly familiar about a work environment where 'strange' behaviour is accepted such as the film's Merton-Flemmer building with its claustrophobic 7½ floor. It is only that we have been regularised to accept workplaces and stations that are not of this kind. The tendency to treat Kaufman and Jonze's imagination again as quirky or eccentric here is to exemplify this regularisation. Peter Kobel (1999) of the *New York Times* in his review opines:

Call it Kafka on ecstasy, or Ionesco on a caffeine overdose. The comedic gold of "*Being John Malkovich*" is the product of an unusual alchemy. (n.p.)

Kafka and Ionesco in a way are both attempting to radicalise banality in the same way artists Hopper and Warhol may have done in the hope of attuning the self to its own precariousness, which can then, in turn, be combatted by a singularity. Kobel reaches the same banal conclusion, which is perhaps predictable, that the film's imagination is contrary to standard normality and reflects the genealogy of writers of the bizarre. But this is made possible and

enhanced by exchanging Kaufman for Kafka or Ionesco, rather than wondering about the structure of this conclusion in the first place. Here, the alchemy is transforming the banal signs into something other for us in a very Baudrillardian manner. This is to give *Being John Malkovich* a quaint sign value, underpinned by banal, expected, traditional discourse. The more powerful test might be to radicalise this vocabulary and strike out on one's own.

### **Conclusion: Towards reversibility.**

The depiction of the confrontations of personal identity in mainstream cinema is often hallmarked by a rule-driven, goal-oriented being where the narrative focus is often accentuated by a conflict solved on the way to a rational resolution. The self is a given. The self may be conflicted, traumatised, or unstable, yet the overall notion of identity is relatively coherent and explicable with a rationally accountable location, often as either good or evil. Classical narrative traditions have a psychologically comforting impact. As Bordwell (1985) asserts, inference making is central to viewing psychology. This effect is heightened by strong cinematic signifiers which are systematically manipulated (Baudrillard, 1996), to affect the narrative drive. Hence it is this very notion of inference-making of which we are suspicious. The viewer can both be absorbed by these signs and absorb them (Baudrillard, 1981), keeping the predictable film genres financially viable. As such, *Being John Malkovich* can act as an antidote to the banality of signs because it refuses to be accommodated within mainstream signification when viewed this way and invites power to be shared with the viewer in a form of reciprocal exchange.

Of course, the opposite often applies to independent or art-house cinema, where the presentation and conception of the self can be complicated by radical temporal shifts, heavily stylisation, or offbeat characterisation. The ideological implications of such an abstraction of self-identity can recede into the background from the standpoint of the viewer. Similar

conclusions about an autonomous unified self, albeit one with an antic lifestyle or fragmented self-identity, still manifest and occlude the ideological assertion of a goal-oriented, rationally seeking being in the first place. We have demonstrated that if the viewer brings this backgrounded problematic into relief, some interesting questions arise that can account, in this light, for the mainstream/independent divide in an entirely novel manner. We have further argued that to arrive at this conclusion, a specifically Baudrillardian path needs to be traced. The relationship between sign and signifier is the impetus of Baudrillard's early sociological career. The 'apparently unshakeable reality of the signified' (Lechte as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 194), is constantly undermined by Baudrillard (and Anderson and Kaufman).

While the film is, as Chris Chang (1999) opines, 'delirious' and follows its 'own internal logic' (n.p.), these signifiers should not be used as a means of exclusion or bracketing. Instead, they should be used as tools for developing a vocabulary more singular and personal to the viewing subject. We conclude that the self is problematic, riddled with precarious vicissitudes, often accepting banality in a world that offers illusion and singularity and radical alterity. They should deploy 'reversibility', which is the motivating Baudrillardian environment of the next chapter. Reversibility, arguably Baudrillard's 'one great thought', implores the viewing subject to neuter semiotics and renders ideology even less meaningful.

## **Radicalising Death, Celebrity and Sex: The simulated self and Baudrillard.**

As previously argued, Craig Schwartz yearns to be famous. He is bored with his fruitless existence and, overcome by desire, he colonises John Malkovich's mind to stave off this lack of success, to cheat his death by immortalising himself as John Malkovich. We argue that Kaufman envisages this fascination with immortality as a promotion of collective anxiety manifesting as a difficulty engaging with death—put another way, the culture's effort to eliminate death as the binary other to life, to see it purely as a negative act to be resolutely denied and fought against. In *Being John Malkovich*, Dr Lester (Orson Bean) and Lotte's quest for immortality and Craig's quest for celebrity at whatever cost does not engage with the passions and intensity of authentic lived experience. Instead, they wish to live regardless of the costs, which could be seen as a form of living death. They refuse to exchange life with death, as Baudrillard did. He tells us 'the exclusion of death is at the core of our culture' (Baudrillard, 1993a, p. 126). The simulated self-abrogates the authenticity of this lived experience.

What is being exchanged between Lester and Lotte are signs of prolonging life bereft of creative or tangible purpose. Immortality is a sign under these circumstances connoting nothing more than not being dead. Celebrity is a sign connoting 'we are here, we exist'. In this manner, Baudrillard (1993a) argues we have marginalised death because life is seen principally in terms of 'political and economic accumulation' (p. 129). For Baudrillard, death becomes prohibited as a means of displaying and sustaining power. Lester is not satiated with life, just scared of death. We may argue he wants to live in a state of suspended banality.

There is a paucity of academic questions regarding the role that life and death play in the film. Baudrillard wants us to examine the intricate and complex relationship between death and life that is not necessarily binary but a 'social, cyclical and reversible position' (Pawlett

as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 46). To envisage this alternative version of death is to see the sway of Baudrillard's form of writing. The audience wishes for Lester to succeed, which is to achieve immortality without questioning his ontological motives or passions. In our reading, Baudrillard's attitude to death is to interrogate what sort of life Lester is leading in terms of his relationship to death. Baudrillard (1993a) wants to interrogate why we have the 'exclusion of the dead and death' (p. 126) at the core of our culture. Lester's outlook typifies this exclusion. As the film concludes, we meet a set of old people clinging to life, travelling from pupa to pupa (Kaufman, 1999), conceding their own unique life stories to the vessel they inhabit. The film tells us the promotion of otherness by living in virtuality, whether it be celebrity or immortality, increases alienation, as Craig and Lotte exemplify.

Baudrillard's polemic against the nexus of death, capital, and desire indicates the importance of 'singularity' in which one's physical death is imbued with much more meaning and symbolic resonance than Lester and friends can find. Philosophers often rail against a life that is repetitive, itself a form of living death, and we take Baudrillard's point that making our lives more exotic, mysterious, singular and symbolic means a potential for enhanced living, a broadening of interpretative capability. We would argue this is one of the primary values of Kaufman's script. The pathos of seeing death as something to exclude results in comprehending it as senseless and irrational (Baudrillard, 1993a).

Craig's sadness becomes materialised in his displaced affection for Maxine to the point that he sacrifices his bodily existence for 'fame' as a way of conquering her. He wants to subvert his death not for immortality, but for the validation of his existence. His ecstatic pursuit of Maxine demands he completely divest himself of his bodily existence, and he is consumed by the possibility of supreme adulation in doing so. In effect, he wants Craig Schwartz as a subject to die and another (Craig Schwartz as Malkovich) to be born. This could be seen as a

blistering critique of the destructive potentiality of modern subjectivity. We could say as a result of the social pressure to chase fame, Craig is transformed into a pure sign of celebrity itself. However, Schwartz's substitution of self for Malkovich mirrors the drama being played out daily in the contemporary tendency to divest the self for a simulation of the self. The banal view of the world encourages the self to be dominated by external forces and consumerist ideologies, heavily simulated, which may delimit singular thinking, especially about the self. Instead, we see simulation as the opportunity for manipulation.

The transformative muscle of simulation may seduce the viewing subject into the diminution of individual subjectivity to become a 'simulated' other through questionable imitative homogenised practices, reducing selfhood to a generalised 'ecstasy of sameness' (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 58). Schwartz chooses to be Malkovich in an ironic gesture, to be his most intense and exhilarating form of self. Therefore, when he looks in the mirror, what he wants to see is anything but himself, but rather a self that is simulated by the hyperreal fascination with celebrity. Kaufman's challenge in action is his ironic documentation of 'difference as sameness', whereby everybody wants to be different by being (inside) John Malkovich. Occupying Malkovich's body is not swapping genders to explore sexuality or lifestyle, but equally to evacuate the selfhood of autonomy and control, to plug oneself deliberately into the celebrity-obsessed matrix of popular culture. The signifying rule of celebrity eclipses the liberatory potential of radical alterity. (Kaufman takes this to the next level in his directorial debut with his 2008 *Synecdoche, New York*, which is the subject of Chapter Two). Of course, another way of interpreting this culture of the ideologically constructed celebrity is Lacanian, where, as Dragunoiu (2001) perceptively argues:

*Being John Malkovich* suggests that appropriating the gaze of the screen hero fails to satisfy our deepest desires. As Lotte and Craig find out, seeing through the eyes of Malkovich is not enough, and they both try, with varying degrees of success, to control him. As a

comment on our love affair with Hollywood cinema, the film seems to predict its demise as a form of representation and entertainment, a demise fueled by our persistent seeking to find new genres and technologies that will forge increasingly closer identifications between ourselves and the celebrities we admire. (p. 17)

Similar to Dragunoiu's line of analysis, the film 'works' not by representing the *ennui* of contemporary alienation, but by probing the possibilities of radical re-construction that transcends banal reconfigurations. In other words, the viewer chastises Craig for not instituting the values of self-autonomy and self-transcendence in his life by resisting the urge to be anything other than himself. Perhaps we should also reflect on the disastrous consequence of the source of this desire. In essence, it is overburdened by seeking or desiring an exchange. The desire for self-autonomy and self-transcendence that is validated and approved by a person becoming a subscribed member of another ideological frame is no self-configuration at all, but merely a shift or an exchange from one manner of alienation to another. Baudrillard urges a critical ontology to short-circuit such a disastrous move.

When the film includes melancholic signifiers such as Craig's adolescent lust for Maxine and his jealousy of celebrated puppeteer Derek Mantini (Ned Bellamy), he fails to see his life being reconstructed from a set of powerful yet contingent 'fame object' signifiers. This indeed mirrors the whole failure of the film to live up to normalising expectations because the banal reading is to allow him to succeed and get the job and the girl, or else to fail and hence morally instruct the audience. But Kaufman's script will not allow this coherence. As Johnathan Romney (1999) asserts:

... the film constantly shifts too much for us to pin it down: it can't easily be tagged as screwball or surreal, as a paranoid fantasy or a media satire. It's forever slipping into sideshows and diversions, from a lunatic corporate video to a hallucinatory sequence inside a chimp's memory. (n.p.)

Romney's 'sideshows and diversions' can also be the focus from a Baudrillardian perspective. Baudrillard (1993b) argues that to respond to melancholy, we should not stroll around in this ideology. This is where melancholy is the enemy, but rather than defeat melancholy attached to fame, we develop illusions. Baudrillard (1994) argues that melancholy is the 'fundamental tonality of functional systems' (p. 163), which we read as a highly nuanced strategy to warn against the impulse to minimise anxiety and melancholy; we do not have to buy into the system selling it. Anxiety and melancholy are caused by the system (Baudrillard, 1970). Here Baudrillard is referring to the hypothesised link between the failure to achieve desires with 'depressive triggers', because of their location within a capitalist system (Prins, Bates, Keyes, & Muntana, 2014). Melancholy and anxiety are all too human, and we should embrace and grow out of and through them by questioning the genealogy of our thinking about the lived experience. To do so, we cannot look for an escape trajectory mired in modernity's penchant for a quick fix that is culturally designated and shaped. This may be Schwartz's most pressing problem. Celebrity is not the panacea for his angst. Celebrity does not have to be conceived as an object, the way Craig Schwartz designates it, and Kaufman punishes Schwartz for his desires.

Craig desires to be Derek Mantini via Malkovich; Lotte yearns to be a lover of Maxine via Malkovich. Dr Lester wants eternal life through Malkovich, and Maxine wants a stable and satisfying relationship via Malkovich. The common thread running through all these characters is their capacity to judge their lives based on an external set of hesitantly derived criteria. They want to reproduce themselves by exchanging themselves with some significant other. Using Baudrillardian logic, these characters do not posit a purpose for their own lives until they accept the encoded signifiers of the heavily commodified lives of others to be readily and willingly exchanged. There is no self because everybody wants to be somebody else.

In *Being John Malkovich*, the yearning for immortality and celebrity-infused selfhood can be criticised as lacking any seductive resistance to the systematised and encoded culture dominated by commodified economic paradigms. The viewer can see that Lester and Lotte desire immortality because their terrestrial lives are devoid of passion and energy not because they have expended it and are world-weary, but because they have accumulated a deep reservoir of resentment regarding their sexuality and selfhood. They do not just want immortality, but a life that is fully absorbed into the other with a loss of authentic control and choice. Lotte wants a transgendered experience because she thinks that when in Malkovich, her sexual fantasies will be consummated. She states, after 'inhabiting' Malkovich: 'Don't stand in my way as an actualization as a man, Craig' (Kaufman, 1999, p. 54).

Her sexual desire is intensified when she 'encounters' Maxine as Malkovich. This convoluted absurdism also indicates Lotte's displacement of her value onto the other; her self-recognition is evacuated for a 'Malkovich' version of herself. This self-negation is motivated in part by gendered self-abnegation and in part by sexual experimentation envisaging an encounter with the 'other' as possible. This yearning to colonise and inhabit the 'other', in Baudrillard's (1990) terms, leads to the 'hell of the same' (p. 122). Lotte is willing to trade the solitude of her alienation for a generalised and homogenous sexuality of determinate masculinity. After her first journey 'through' Malkovich, her character trajectory undergoes seismic and unaccountable changes. But under the common codes of gender assignation, her character should track some teleological arc, even if that arc is eccentric and unconventional. When the self, with respect to Lotte's 'homosexual other' theorises:

I think it's kinda sexy that John Malkovich has a portal, y'know, sort of like, it's like, like he has a vagina. It's sort of vaginal, y'know, like he has a, he has a penis and a vagina. I mean, it's sort of like ... Malkovich's ... feminine side. I like that. (Kaufman, 1999, p. 42)

Here the viewer can sense Kaufman has stretched eccentricity and unconventionality to the point where they mock themselves and move towards (but never arrive at) authorial randomness. It reads like the mumblings of a New Age metaphysician, but this is the point. In the articulation of selfhood, the zero point is reached when we talk like this. Lotte embodies the eccentric 'arthouse' character gone wrong. The viewer expects profundity, but it simply is not there. Kaufman mocks profundity, and the viewer is guilty by association. Put another way, Lotte cannot articulate the sexual and existential confusion the narrative has placed her in because existential confusion rather than existential creativity is the primal state in which she feels completely and paradoxically hermaphroditic. She cannot be inscribed into 'reality' as a universal, eternal entity. In Baudrillardian terms, this means the appearance of the seductive self and the disappearance of its simulated other. To come to the point, Kaufman has decreed a different form of exchange between Lotte and the film's narrative that has an escape trajectory freeing itself from traditional semiotic analysis. The simulation courts a self who desires sexual fulfilment, celebrity status, and immortality, treating these as impossible exchanges with the system. This is one of the corrective (reversible) seductions of Kaufman's script when viewed this way.

Kaufman's examination of immortality and its intersection with celebrity seen through this Baudrillardian lens highlights the domination of an exchange-driven world with sign value for sign values' sake. This resistant reading of immortality encourages the viewer to move away from the Cartesian speculations that have been associated with it. But this move away needs to be justified as a critical detachment from the metaphysical speculation of the film, which is surely apparent, to an engagement at another fruitful level. The intense flow of each character's yearning for self-transformation echoes Baudrillard's (1987) alignment of desire with capital. Each character wants a self-transformation that can be bought, sexualised, or disclosed from the unconscious. Yet transformation to 'what' is rarely questioned.

Immortality becomes a commodity, celebrity becomes an end in itself, and sexuality becomes hyperreal. The measurement and assessment of value, encapsulating these criteria from a resistance standpoint, has been under examined.

There is no 'self' because if there were, we would never have to look in the first place. Instead, we have treated Kaufman's script as a détournement with selfhood because the more the viewer searches for their identity reflected on the screen, the more ridiculous and fruitless the search becomes. The viewer's search for a reflection of themselves on the screen can be in the form of a mutual or reciprocal feedback loop. For example, screen gangsters, such as David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), constantly made reference in dialogue to Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) who were, in turn, both quoted by Melbourne's underworld crime figures in secretly recorded conversations. Coppola's creations were mirrored by Chase's and eventually absorbed by the underworld criminals. This is formative, no matter how minor in the total construction of a viewer's selfhood with language, fashion and recreational activities all influenced by this cross-pollination of mediated images. The intersection of virtual and real blurs the distinction between being able to formulate an autonomous self-generated identity.

This, in our terms, is a central tenet of Kaufman's script; there is no unified autonomous self, and the last place we should look for one is in the commercialised world of mainstream art. The parodic application of a portal into the head of a fictionalised John Malkovich played enigmatically by the actual John Malkovich, is Kaufman's use of Malkovich as a simulated Malkovich, one which others wish to inhabit not because of his arcane approach to acting and stagecraft, but because he is literally famous. In a world dominated by the encoded fetishisation of stardom and celebrity, the chance to 'become a star' creates the allure and its associated problems. These problems simply do not exist if you are 'outside' this system.

Kaufman writes from the margins of this system, irreverently mocking celebrity and its overpowering effect on contemporary social identity. He thus in a very Baudrillardian way gives us more stardom than stardom: popularity. Kaufman claims ownership of an interpretation of selfhood and celebrity by devaluing any critical, essential reference point.

At the same time, he assembles what could be read as a negative assessment of the semiology of sexual identity. In *Being John Malkovich*, the *ménage à quatre* mischievously also spins sexual identity out of control as the sexual yearning of Lotte, and her new homosexual/heterosexual virtual/actual lover in Maxine qua Malkovich speaks to the absurdity of a search for sexual identity. Hence to be an authentic self in Kaufman's terms is to renounce the search for the self under the conditions of the contemporary political economy. It is to renounce fame and satisfying orgasmic sex for a truer account of human subjectivity—the alienation of self-identity, the habitus of sexual frustration and disappointment, and failure of the political economy to supply any form of panacea. In this chapter, we have conjoined Kaufman and Baudrillard as brothers in arms at rejecting any simulated form of self-identity. They both achieve the highlighting of the ridiculousness of the search for certainty in meaning and interpretation.

Therefore, *Being John Malkovich* Kaufman may possibly ask the very Baudrillardian question: Why is the self 'nothing' instead of something? It is an antidote to understanding the self as a utility rather than a signification. In other words, the self is also merely there to be created rather than culturally inscribed. Craig Schwartz exemplifies the contemporary dilemma of chasing the fairy tale of celebrity culture as a signifier rather than pursuing a more authentic art form. In this, the most diminutive or original thought might trump the significations of others' assertions by self-instrumentation.

## **Chapter Two: There is no mind: Kaufman's reversions.**

### **2.1 Introduction: Why reversibility? Why *Synecdoche, New York*?**

Charlie Kaufman's sprawling 2008 opus *Synecdoche, New York* mirrors Baudrillard's thematic fixation on reversibility, which we will address in this chapter. At one point in the film the protagonist, Caden Cotard's (Philip Seymour Hoffman) wife Adele Lack (Catherine Keener) has an exhibition of her paintings. These paintings are minuscule and have to be viewed with special magnifying glasses. For these paintings, she has achieved adulation and fame. Kaufman's blistering, ironic commentary on the art world is a metaphor, reflecting the tone and focus of this chapter. Baudrillard's fascination with art and its precariousness undermine the commonplace status of art. Baudrillard's take on the whims of art pivot on reversibility as the instability of signs discussed in Chapter One can dramatically shift ground, defying meaning and value. Baudrillard saw the dominant signs of the art world as needing to be challenged, and we will argue that Kaufman is precisely the same.

Each passing wave of artistic folly as gloriously spoofed by Kaufman is sowed with the seeds of its destruction, as beneath its claims to an essentialist discourse lays indeterminacy and variability. Adele's art fully reverses the art world's excesses of what went before it. Art, comparable with any other commodity, is premised upon sales and taste, which are in turn subject to whim and consumerist desire. Adele will suffer the same fate in being captivated by the system she exists in and being discarded, as many artistic fads are. From the Gothic period to Abstract Expressionism, they will auto-destruct, by which we mean display characteristics that will fall out of favour as taste and market preference changes to make way for the new. For Baudrillard, art creates a simulation of art, then recoils when this simulation is eventually usurped by another. His fascination was exemplified by Andy Warhol, who was once a unique provocateur, but rapidly became a much-copied and banal artist himself.

Baudrillard claims reversibility empowers this public recoil against art because metaphysically it is there from the outset, a fundamental rule (Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 41). The empirical truth of reversibility is not at stake here. The juncture of reversibility with ontology will be asserted as a given, whether it be entropic change, mortality, or the mere exhaustion of existential *ennui*. Nothing is static, and reversibility is Baudrillard's wager that it is behind everything. Fundamentally we agree, and we will go from there. Here signs will always 'burn' because of the application of reversibility, an indestructible force that eternally promotes the volatile value of any object. Adele's art is full of value today but could rapidly become obsolete.

In the previous chapter, we established a Baudrillardian response to semiotics. What we want to demonstrate now is what this deliberate semiological uncertainty and provocation produces, especially in contemporary times where excess pushes transcendent meaning further and further from its moorings. Our argument builds on this Baudrillardian trajectory by taking signification for meaning and value and deliberately subjecting it to challenge through reversion. In this chapter, we will expand our intervention and adopt a second important term of Baudrillard's critical approach to value and meaning, which is the broad and critical deployment of reversibility. Once we have established that signs can be challenged, we can follow Baudrillard's lead and begin to reverse them or observe them in reversion. The effect is mirrored in Kaufman's film which constantly takes cinematic significations to excessive lengths to the point that their meaning and value becomes unquestionably ambivalent and destined for failure. The relationship between sign and world is mediated by the viewing subject who is in turn seduced by a multiplicity of historical and contingent inputs such as Hollywood staples denoting romance ( the strategic use of tears) or enmity ( the merciless bullying of a protagonist). Kaufman encourages us to make up our own minds, to build a personal interpretation.

This was Baudrillard's strategy as well. Here, reversion also refers to the viewing subject's capacity to explore and question the production of meaning and value and recognise the exchange of meaning implicit in the object-and-subject relationship. Baudrillard interrogates the effects of living in a world increasingly dominated by imposed signs that gradually efface authentic, historical, and stable meaning. His conclusion is that an excess and profusion of signs 'killed culture' (2000, p. 38), which we read as eradicating a capacity to discriminate. Baudrillard's typical hyperbole about the death of culture points us towards the minimisation of singular or alternative interpretation. A Baudrillardian film philosophy may attempt to resuscitate this singularity, or at least be aware of its potential in a highly visual and image-saturated culture.

The defining questions of this chapter will be:

How can reversibility intersect with film philosophy?

What does so-called cerebral cinema get wrong about the philosophy of mind?

How can Baudrillard's challenge to death and art inform thinking about these topics in the cinema?

We saw how the contemporary culture assembles a sense of self that is at best a construct, and that Baudrillard challenges this construction. In our reading, the 'death of culture' is also synonymous with the rise of, for want of a better term, postmodernism in an 'information society'. Here we assert that postmodernism is the label given to an organising system as anything that is alternative to a view of the world conceived as an organic totality. However, for Baudrillard, postmodernism was not the problem. Baudrillard's (1993b) account of postmodernism is 'where all interpretations are possible' (p. 83), accompanied by a 'destruction of meaning' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 161). What takes the place of meaning is a

simulated reality where meaning is reconstructed and delivered as fact. This in effect makes reality too real.

As such, Baudrillard concludes that those who accept these structures, institutions and social practices without question or challenge are missing a critical opportunity for reversal. His take is made unique because of his preferencing of the symbolic exchange, whereby, power is annulled. Baudrillard is uniquely situated by his lifelong devotion to the symbolic which he fashions on his own terms. This differentiates him from his peers, such as Foucault who pursued what lay behind discourse where Baudrillard saw none. Also, Baudrillard moves away from Debord for similar reasons. Debord saw the revolution as possible whereas Baudrillard asserts that the revolution, its structural coordinates and its effect have already passed. Owing a debt to Elias Canetti (1981), Baudrillard asks ‘what are we doing after the orgy’ (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 3) meaning that the border between real and virtual is no longer relevant and the orgy of images leaves us bereft of knowing what to do next. In this chapter, we will expose and prosecute with reversibility, using it to examine death and art in Kaufman’s cinema and how it intertwines with the supposed features of art-house or independent cinema.

Where postmodernism is hallmarked by the unmooring of value and the scrambling and deterritorialising of meaning with a loss of critical energy, as theorised by Jean-François Lyotard, Neil Postman, and Frederic Jameson, Baudrillard was disparaging of those who accepted the absence of meaning as a *fait accompli*. Baudrillard rarely engages with these thinkers, but rather strikes out to respond to this absence of grand narratives with a personal narrative of his own. More tellingly, he especially clashes with those driven by consumerist ideology, using signs as a means of directing consumerist desire. In essence, each consumerist message refers to another message (Baudrillard, 2010a, p. 122). Signs lead us to

more signs. This effect is especially powerful in cinema and licenses signs to obscure unambiguous meaning. The postmodern discourse, sold to us as the charter of the absence of value or relativism, is, in fact, a consumerist delight, as anything can be rationalised and justified from within the system itself. The consumer's desires, captured by the market, in part are determined by the system's manipulation of desire as an economic rather than an aesthetic strategy.

It was, in fact, making postmodernism 'too real' that allowed many lifestyles, desires, and objects to be validated. Postmodernism is a term, as we stated, which also springs from the culture industry to label the production of objects to sell to the indiscriminate. Of course, one of these objects is cinema production. This includes many cinema 'movements' such as excessively violent, graphically sexual, or animated films. Contemporary cinema, especially mainstream or 'tentpole' cinema, can be burdened with these banal and predictable tropes, but transmitted through new technology such as digital technology and then labelled as postmodern. In other words, as we established, signs can be so strong that they can dominate the physical and mental space of the film-viewing subject, but in actuality are vehicles for the representation of a consumerist-driven reality. This is not exclusive to mainstream cinema. Independent cinema is also dominated by repetitive signification. Tropes such as characters in midlife crisis, examinations of life stasis, and explorations of loneliness are often filmed with predictable camera shots and soundtracks, helping scholars and viewers recognise the genre. *Synecdoche, New York*, we argue, satirises these tropes and Kaufman reverses them gleefully.

Signs, when allowed to dominate the subject's phenomenological outlook, texture the symbolic space, what Baudrillard termed 'the real', which is the socio-symbolic space of the public imagination. Baudrillard wanted the real to be more playful and reflexive, not

dogmatic and inert. In a world that is 'too real', Baudrillard asserted that culture loses its sense of ambivalence, mystery, and play and is governed by market forces. Baudrillard wanted the confrontation with the world and its images to be a surprise, not an expectation. Baudrillard uses a nuanced version of 'ambivalence' where the subject maintains power over the object by encountering the value in the object as illusory (Schuster in Clarke, 2010, p. 8). This is the sovereignty of reversibility. For Baudrillard reversibility was the *modus operandi* of intellectual endeavour, what fascinated him (1993b, p. 49). He outlines for us:

It's an almost Manichean position, and it's rather simple. My position is based on reversibility, which seems to me the true symbolic form. It is more an indetermination or a total instability of principles, and it is evil because it contradicts all possibility of rebuilding the world. (1993b, p. 177)

We now turn our attention to films designated to be 'cerebral' or dealing with matters of the mind as a way of refreshing this socio-symbolic space. We claim a cerebral film is one of elevated challenge that is less available in more mainstream fare. Thomas Elsaesser (2017) calls these 'mind-game films' (p. 1). The choice of this term allows meaning to focus on films depicting the intellectual life of the mind and its vicissitudes. The focus here is to demonstrate reversibility in its sociocultural context and how applying these Baudrillardian designations to cinema may expand thinking about cinema itself. To do this, we will explore Baudrillardian reversibility and how it can be seen to emerge as a critical and methodological tool in responding to *Synecdoche, New York*. We will take the semiology of *Synecdoche, New York* and highlight the dominant signs of cerebral cinema. From there we will take Baudrillard's critical observations of reversibility and apply them to the film. This will in effect set these significations ablaze, or in other words make this semiology less effectual. Finally, we will take two of the strong preoccupations of the film, death and celebrity, and apply the same critical methodology to them.

## **2.2 Reversibility as *détournement*: The viewer's challenge.**

A poignant moment for the cinema viewer can be the instant they cognise a shift in signification or more importantly cause one themselves: the moment when signs are seen to fold back on themselves and encourage their own implosion, which is also a Baudrillardian observation. This moment can be exemplified multiple times and hence is the focus of this chapter in *Synecdoche, New York* where protagonist Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) struggles for artistic credibility and ontological certainty. For example, Cotard is on an aeroplane bound for Germany to see his estranged daughter Olive. The entire scene in this sense seems typical; a distressed parent flying to rescue a relative in crisis. Kaufman challenges these conventions as he bends time and space here, and the narrative cannot be rationally accounted for. According to the internal logic of the film, his daughter is an indeterminate age, as we cannot decipher how much time has elapsed. During the flight, he is visited by his psychologist Madeline Gravis (Hope Davis) to offer him advice. Her appearance is logically improbable, yet Kaufman takes the familiar tropes of presentation and thrusts them into deliberate confusion. Her behaviour is atypical and renders the scene comic, confusing, and deliciously problematic.

This scene does necessarily imply a negation of traditional narration, but also a *détournement* with signification so that meaning is re-routed, placing the films in question in a different narrative light. Kaufman's film logic is premised on such a *détournement*. We saw this with *Being John Malkovich* when we established that the conceptualisation of the self was, in Baudrillardian terms, not an accurate or satisfactory signification of selfhood and celebrity. Now, we shift from subjectivity deeper inwards to the attempt to represent phenomenological consciousness itself cinematically. Our motivation is taking an opportunity to demonstrate how the conceptual tool of reversibility can tease out the philosophical problems of being presented cinematically. Signs can, under these circumstances, be regulated from the

individual up, not from the social levers of power down. This regulation is the viewer's form of explanatory reversion.

In response, we make the encounter with signs bottom-up: a more self-generated interpretation that relies on an individual's ironic reinterpretations of signification and hence its Baudrillardian inflection. We apply these personal rules against cinema attempting to portray the cerebral life. 'There is no mind' when the viewer cognises that signs can be reversed in this manner. Instead, the viewer can enunciate a position of inventive and seductive interpretation of their own, declaring they have resisted and reversed the banal signification of the system. This is not pure negation, but the resistance of any attempt at unification and univocality.

We can now see that the role of a Baudrillardian film philosophy may be to reverse film signs by, to adopt Baudrillard, 'push that which wants to fall' (1993b, p. 209) before they do it on their own. This is Baudrillard's maneuver, in effect to be more postmodern than postmodernity itself; reversibility licenses 'bottom-up' signification instead of top-down homogenisation, effectively rendering any postmodernist consumerist discourse less appealing. Bottom-up implies a stronger degree of autonomous control where the viewer generates the response rather than receiving it as an externally derived imposition. Baudrillard 'attacked' all facets of contemporary life, from the biological sciences to architecture, but his challenge was always motivated by bottom-up signification. We pursue this through proposing recalibrated explanatory rules for films about the inner mental life.

As such, an appropriate film to bring Baudrillardian theory of signs as 'attacked' by reversibility to light is *Synecdoche, New York*. This film demonstrates, in Baudrillardian terms, what he sees as a challenge to the 'destruction of an illusion, saturation by absolute reality' (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 62). Kaufman's film 'goes beyond the reality principle' and, as

Baudrillard reflected, ‘challenges the social order’ (1993a, p. 180) in part because of his refusal to use traditional signs in a conventional manner, and more importantly to annul the rule of the banal significations attempting to produce, consolidate, and declare meaning. *Synecdoche, New York* is, we argue, an ironic yardstick to measure how the sociocultural world has ‘saturated absolute reality’ by bestowing restricted credence to the value and meaning of the image. When ordinary and conventional film attempts to dominate the presentation of such a social reality—that is, to produce signs to be consumed—we can accept its tenets and accept unblinkingly that the world is as depicted. Alternatively, as in the case of Kaufman, we may give back to this social reality a different form of itself and thus reverse the strong appearance back towards the category of illusion. Baudrillard saw this as an intellectual demand on himself, and we argue Kaufman, with his constant moments of anti-signification, strives to achieve the same iconoclastic impact. Therefore, Baudrillard and Kaufman aim to reverse signification.

We will take three signifiers of mind, death, and art to demonstrate reversibility in action by examining their cinematic forms in Kaufman’s film. Most films attempting to portray through artistic cinematic devices the problems of the mind or ‘cerebral’ films often rely on predictable and limited signifiers. From Hitchcock’s 1945 *Spellbound* to Ron Howard’s 2001 *A Beautiful Mind*, the enigmatic mind is represented by predictable and assuring signifiers such as complex mathematical formulas on the chalkboard, walls or journals, or deliberately abstract dream sequences to imply mental prowess or instability. In comparison, Caden Cotard’s mental instability leeches into the filmed space, holding these more banal signifiers up to playful ridicule.

*Synecdoche, New York* as a film is devoid of the banality of signification. It is a film that reconstitutes the illusion of the world as a direct critique of the production of cinematic

signifiers of the cerebral, a mystification by reversibility. It is, we argue, bottom-up filmmaking that applies reversion to banality. As a corollary, we will also argue the film is not necessarily postmodern as an atemporal, cognitively disjointed world, but an accurate reflection of the world we inhabit, which is already distorted, temporally fluid, and significantly impotent. It is thought-provoking to conceive the mind as an irrational and fragmentary object rather than a consolidated coherent entity. A critique can then be facilitated to challenge the commonplace notion of unity that Kaufman regularly makes a focus of his narratives. It builds upon the idea first promoted in *Being John Malkovich* that anxiety is the typical existential state. It also informs us that our inner lives are inextricably wedded to our outer lives and are fuelled by a form of energised negativity. Elsaesser (2017) acutely observes:

Hence, the emphasis in mind game films on non-linearity in the narrative trajectory and the introduction of multiple temporalities. Along with retro-causality and deferred action, these features can be understood as elements or instruments for easing us out of our habitual (but clearly failing) subject-centred individualism. They encourage us into accepting, but also acting on, more complex dynamics of interaction and interdependency as viable forms of agency. (p.3)

It is this subject-centred individualism that Baudrillard also undermines. Elsaesser wants to argue that cerebral films are inviting us to a more complex provocation. We also add that the emphasis and interrogation should be on what is normalised rather than what is marginalised.

### **2.3 Dominant signs in the cinema of the cerebral: *Synecdoche, New York* as a case study in juxtaposition.**

To us, *Synecdoche, New York* is a fragmentary irrational film with a definitive project: to demonstrate there is no transcendent version of the mind. The illusion is of a unified symbolic order; the reality is reversibility. We can justify the choice of *Synecdoche, New York* as it uncannily refracts the trajectory of Baudrillard's career. We argue this film begins

as an analysis of signs (death, art, and mind) and ends with a life spinning out of control, haunted by death and ‘reversing’ in on itself. Baudrillard’s writing does precisely the same thing. Beginning with signs, he gradually spins them out of control, returning to the world of theory, a response that is formally and contextually ‘inappropriate’. It is this inappropriateness that makes it most interesting because it makes us question what ‘appropriate’ really is. In so many ways *Synecdoche, New York* is an inappropriate film because it gives back to the film world a certain non-utility that can only be acknowledged if the viewer is disposed to embracing the inappropriate. It operates on the signification of ‘appropriate’. Hence it is a quintessential example of reversion.

We take up Baudrillard’s logic of this moment and explain how it can be used as a methodological tool when confronting cinema that explores the inner mental life. The efficacy of this methodology is its ability to collapse difference to the point of confronting opposites as parts of a much subtler continuum. When we frame a response, the precarious warning signs of simulation are highlighted. In other words, the artificiality of clear distinctions between same/different is apparent and always in play because ambivalence rules.

In the film, we rarely know where we are and what is identical to what. There is a blossoming abundance of Caden Cotard characters with sometimes three iterations roaming the frame with his acolytes, and the physical spaces that he occupies seem to defy both physics and logic. There is a constant and deliberate shift in meaning, and as such, this reversibility becomes part of the point of the film.

The prominent cinema binary of art-house/mainstream, with *Synecdoche, New York* being the latter, is discussed and collapsed in this chapter because it permits the exploration of how these two forms can be seen to ‘reverse’ into each other. Reversibility ensures that this

moment of self-generated implosion is cognised and articulated. Once again, reversion reveals the therapeutic benefits of ambivalence when confronting meaning and value that is being systemically created and forced upon viewing subjects.

A film viewer, fully accommodating of this reversibility and conversant with its application, may expand their informational horizons. A film rich in the accepted cinematic signification of cerebral activity simulates a designated take on the world. Similar to Stuart Hall's classification of 'dominant readings' of texts (Hall as cited in Proctor, 2004,) a Baudrillardian reading invites resistance. When dominance becomes too strong and persuasive to the viewing subject, the methodological weapon of reversibility can be conceived and deployed. We can, therefore, imagine reversibility as a credible film philosophy and develop our creation of a Baudrillardian film philosophy. This permits an investigation of the cerebral film as an adjunct to reversibility in action.

Jeffrey Sconce (2002) asserts these cerebral films share an 'aura of intelligence' that distinguishes them from the perceived 'dross' of the mainstream multiplex (p. 351), exemplifying this claim. However, Sconce still fails to acknowledge that an 'aura of intelligence' is also a simulated exercise, making his conception of intelligence appear and by implication, its antithetical term 'dross' appear as well. The presence of cerebral cinema characterises what Sconce calls a culture of irony and parody (expressive irony, blank style, ambiguous dialogue), and makes 'cerebral cinephiles' appear. In other words, from a Baudrillardian perspective, the type of film object creates film subjects, not a certain manifestation of viewer demanding a specific film representation. Within this framing, a specific form of representation is experienced, theorised, and enjoyed. We argue that we can examine Kaufman and *Synecdoche, New York* through another frame, and writing on cerebral

and independent cinema can assist. Applying reversibility to the film's expressive yet predictable signs muffles their unidirectional seductive power.

Principally, we build on the claim that Charlie Kaufman is not only a filmmaker who disrupts signs; he can be seen as a filmmaker who constantly and pointedly reverses the (subordinate) forms of filmmaking, offering an extended critique of many facets of the more essentialist approach to meaning and value. We embed this exploration of reversibility in the discussion of the tension which exists between disparate terms of filmic description that form binaries (mainstream/art-house, bizarre/normal) that are in constant conflict and discuss how *Synecdoche, New York* can reverse these terms. The axis of *Synecdoche, New York* is its discussion of the relationship between art, mind/body, and death. Because these terms are also at the nexus of discussion on reversibility, this is a convenient fit. Our conclusion is that Kaufman is an exemplar of reversibility in action through art.

With this in mind, Claire Perkins (2012) suggests that in the films of Charlie Kaufman 'the mind is used as a place to play out narrative' that 'abruptly pulls back from the patterns of understanding and identification set up between the film and viewer' (pp. 41-2). Her use of the automotive term 'pull back' is instructive. Films about the mind have historically been received cautiously because it is a domain riddled with speculation and uncertainty. Films about the mind, then, by definition have to be 'poetic'. The term poetic best captures the imaginative or sensitively emotional style that films about the mind must necessarily employ to portray mental instability. To reiterate, the Baudrillardian application of 'poetic' leaves meaning ambivalent and nebulous. As he states in an oft-quoted piece of typical Baudrillardian hyperbole:

Here, beyond the discourse of truth, resides the poetic and enigmatic value of thinking. For, facing the world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear; we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic. (2000b, p. 83)

From Nunnally Johnson's *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957) to Ron Howard's 'conventional' offering *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) to David Cronenberg's 'enigmatic' *Spider* (2002), to portray the mind *in situ* requires a deft and creative touch. However, these films, all conventional in their narrative trajectories, provide significations attempting to demystify the mind, consciousness, and its idiosyncrasies. Kaufman decides not to resort to stylistic techniques such as Salvador Dali-influenced dream sequences in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) or *Psycho* (1960) and chooses the protagonist's state of mind to freely interconnect with the diegetic 'reality'. The viewer can identify with these films because they all have an idea of 'a normal mind', but this identification is tempered by the mysterious nature of the subject matter. Cerebral films that deal with the mind can appeal to those who accept the premises offered to them as an intellectual challenge. Conversely, the films' ontological and epistemological uncertainty can prohibit identification and promote derision for presentations outside mainstream limits.

In the cerebral film, the protagonist's abnormalities are often matched or enhanced by the diegetic space. In *The Three Faces of Eve*, the protagonist's mental decline is juxtaposed with the rational erudite space of the psychiatrist's book-saturated office. In *Synecdoche, New York*, the psychologist's erudition is undermined by her untimely promiscuity, her self-promotion, and her ability to jump time and space. In *Psycho*, the protagonist's mental decline is mapped by the geographic territory of the archetypal 'house on the hill', lit to signify malice and mystery. In *Synecdoche, New York* Caden Cotard's set for his unnamed behemoth play grows tumescent until it withers and dies. In *A Beautiful Mind*, the protagonist's mental decline is denoted by shifts in diegetic tone. Kaufman rearranges characters' personae in a deliberately confusing *mélange*. In *Spider*, Cronenberg uses the deeply resonant symbol of the spider's web to materialise his protagonist's descent into a shatteringly traumatic past. The symbolism is beautifully rendered and esoteric, but the signifiers match the signifieds. In

*Synecdoche, New York*, Cotard's decline is punctuated by symbols far less sutured together. Our argument here is that Kaufman does not employ any dominant signs to signify Caden Cotard's mental decline. Instead, he marks it by materialising his symptoms and mapping them directly into the diegetic space, rendering them indistinguishable from the actual content of the narrative.

#### **2.4 *Synecdoche, New York*: Setting significations ablaze.**

Reversibility always operates on these signs. The 'play of signs and appearances' (Baudrillard, 1990, p, 103), is an original state of the world for him, which we read to be meant not in an evolutionary sense but as a process allowing him to peer behind systemic signs and imposed appearances, preventing them from dominating social reality. Therefore, when 'regulated', Baudrillard advocates that signs emit a 'ceremonial' form where they (inappropriately) defy 'functionality, linearity and history'. Kaufman's film is littered with these symbolic gestures. From the burning house to the scripted malapropisms, he deliberately challenges conventionality by making inner become outer; documenting reversibility. He promotes a novel position of reading with regard to art, death and the search for aesthetic credibility in a manner that can be conceived as unique. Kaufman's voice critiques the narrative languages of other cinema dealing with the same subject matter as those mentioned above. It is not unique, as films of the tumultuous artist have covered the same content. It is Kaufman's form that we claim makes it notable. We can conclude there is inseparability in signs between what they are and what they are not. (Grace, 2000, p. 43). This inseparability allows Baudrillard to keep a sign and its other in play without preferencing them, as an essentialist ontology does (Grace, 2000, p. 53). No sign should be allowed to dominate, and reversibility permits this.

This complex theoretical strategy is to assume that contemporary signs only give the appearance of governance, whereas ceremonial signs have deeply symbolic regulated assignments. A crucifix worn by a deeply observant Christian is a regulated ceremonial sign, but when worn by an aging, atheist rock star it even loses its ironic assignment and becomes 'free-floating'. When unregulated, signs eventually empty themselves of fixed assignment by being bloated and overburdened by meaning itself. In the example of the crucifix, the jewellery forms assign meaning relative only to other jewellery, rather than to any real religious ceremonial significance. This evacuation of meaning, according to Baudrillard, is enhanced by reversibility; it is a metaphysical principle.

*Synecdoche, New York* highlights exactly how tumescent contemporary filmmaking about cerebral activity can actually be. By this, we mean that we are constantly attempting to establish a real that is strong in appearance regulating actuality; the more assured and stable the better. What critics, academics and untutored viewers (spectators, in the Debordian sense, who find it difficult to locate themselves in any historical and political context) often attempt to do is lock into this form of essentialist signification. However, following Baudrillard, we wish to destabilise this form. For Baudrillard (2002), terrorism was the ultimate victory of reversibility. For us, the terrorism is downgraded and applied to by following *Synecdoche, New York*. When Kaufman allows Cotard's inner world to leech into the filmed frame, we argue he is playing with this filmic essentialism in a hyperbolically terroristic fashion, effectively causing signs to immolate themselves.

In *Being John Malkovich*, Kaufman and Jonze offered a parodic confrontation with the vacuity of a 'mainstream' life. That panorama, however, is from the viewer's perspective. Cinematic signs abound. In *Synecdoche, New York*, the ontological anchoring point of the film is, we argue, from the phenomenological point of view. Kaufman attempts to film the

inside of a mind as it integrates with the world itself. The audacious impossibility of this project is reversibility in action, the moment where signs are ‘ablaze’, where the filmmaker is trapped in an enigmatic confrontation with representation. To make non-representation of the vagaries of the mind representable, we see a delicious moment of dizzying and necessary failure to comprehend the world, a place where Baudrillard perhaps would feel quite at home. We argue Kaufman is filming a moment of ceremonial reversibility. It is, in spirit, entirely inappropriate to everyday signification because this film refuses to remain fixed. Each viewing promotes more interpretations, depending on the contingent conditions of watching.

In contemporary mainstream cinema, the mind has also become an integral character in many narratives such as Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) and Duncan Jones’ *Source Code* (2011), but often still with a clichéd naïve rendering. In *Inception*, Christopher Nolan plumbs the depths of Robert Fischer’s (Cillian Murphy) subconscious with little theoretical and often confused explication of what the subconscious may be. In an analysis of Duncan Jones’ *Source Code*, David Bordwell, while praising the film, suggests that the mind’s exploration is ‘junk science’. These two films are strong examples of a cinematic declaration of the real or the capacity of this type of filmmaking to cover its tracks by making the figure, in this case, the machinations of the mind, so strong it covers the intellectually impoverished ground from which it comes. In other words, in these filmmakers’ works, there are broken minds or minds attempting to be broken, and there are the normal everyday minds which the ideal protagonist and viewer share and can rationally account for in the diegetic space and in the comfortable cinema seat.

We argue that *Synecdoche, New York* demonstrates what the mind is capable of doing as an object—becoming external to itself and then reversing back on itself, causing ontological and epistemological chaos. It becomes external when what should be interior manifests as

exterior which almost like a leak in Cotard's consciousness leeches onto the screen. Cotard reabsorbs this and the whole process reverses and starts again. Cotard knows neither who he is, where he is. Our minds extend into the world in an attempt to make meaning certain. Kaufman, from this point of view, was clearly 'on the side of the object', allowing Cotard's mind to dominate the diegetic space from the opening credits of the film. By making Cotard's mind the object of the film, Kaufman attempts to exteriorise its workings, albeit conceding it as an impossible task. In so doing, he challenges the viewer's conception of cinematic form and content, and reverses the banal treatments of such, allowing Cotard, over the course of the film's narrative, to 'disappear'. He is effectively reversing art-house/independent cinema signification back on itself by suggesting any attempt to capture meaning is ultimately doomed to fail.

*Synecdoche, New York* is 'independent' not just because of the looser freedom from commercial imperatives, but because it seems to generate its own genus of ambivalent 'thinking'. and as such is akin to Baudrillardian scholar Gary Genosko's term 'anti-semiological'. It is often at the boundaries of a certain level of film experience and as such cannot easily be corralled by the language of current mainstream experience. It is experimental, but only through a regulated set of criteria; that is, it follows the laws of filmmaking, but also never does at the same time.

The narrative has recognisable qualities, and the character arcs are explicable up to a point, but there is always an uncanny texture to them with Kaufman strategically inserting abnormalities into the frame or dialogue. Kaufman (literally) sets signs ablaze. His cinematic markers are weighty political reversions (Grace, 2000, p. 146), and the play of appearances is invested with a seductive sway of its own. When signs are ablaze, we can either extinguish

them by rerouting them back to an essentialist discourse, or we can sit back and allow the pyrotechnics to take another line of flight.

What mainstream cinema produces in predictable signification, Kaufman exchanges for a weighty, confusing symbolism that challenges banality or aesthetic control. Where a typical mainstream film employs a narrative device to symbolize time such as an obvious intertitle or a snippet of conversation or an obvious seasonal establishing shot Kaufman never definitively locates us. In one instance Cotard is mapping out the intricate plot of his play using sticky notes on a board, but Kaufman chooses to place over a thousand sticky notes in front of him in an impossibly impractical way.

However, the Baudrillardian attitude is not to see the world through a mainstream semiotic lens, but through a radically existential one, where this reversion is the universal presence. Strong reactions abound, but these only serve to validate the elusive nature of their nihilistic core. Genosko (1994) asserts:

Anti-semiological altercations force isomorphic systems and their bars serving their internal combinatorial principles to totter like so many top-heavy edifices. (p. 163)

Following Genosko, here we see an anti-semiological altercation between assigning meaning to Kaufman's complex narrative and that which he is attempting to frustrate it with. The film lurches as it tracks the rise and fall of Caden Cotard as he attempts to stage a play of his life that grows beyond any reasonable or logical means of accomplishment. It is replete with typical Kaufman tropes such as obscure visual metaphors (such as the recurring fire in *Synecdoche, New York* or the seams in the faces in *Anomalisa*), complex dialogue (as delivered by Craig in *Being John Malkovich*) and labyrinthine plotting (as the story unfolds in *Adaptation* (2002) or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)).

Cotard's life and that of those around him deteriorates into a traumatic *mélange* of actuality and fiction always tottering in itself. Cotard is, according to Colm O'She (2009), 'an introvert trapped by a sense of his own inexorable interiority' (n.p.). It is this interiority that can lead to either banal or adventurous explorations of the 'cerebral' or art-house presentation. The film operates on many levels and critically has been both lauded and condemned. Typically, Andrew Tracy (2009), writing in *Cinemascope* magazine, opines that:

... the fascination this kind of filmmaking exerts is a genuine one. The sheer bigness, the ambition absent any precise goal, the eager grasping after enormity retains a certain exhilarating charge even as the films themselves dwindle into academic homilies. Far from limning the parameters of lived experience, what *Synecdoche* evokes is the hopeful spectre of the encyclopaedic film, a cinematic Ulysses that can encompass both the quotidian and the cosmic, instantly relatable yet philosophically immense. (n.p.)

Critics have tried to piece together what Kaufman was 'trying to say' or what he was 'trying to mean' and although reviews have been polarised, they have desperately tried to align themselves with a strong interpretation of Kaufman's film. The strongest characteristic of all writing about the film is its inability to dissociate Kaufman from the film object that is *Synecdoche, New York*. Negative assessment maligns his 'auteurist' impositions. Tracy (2009) continues and pronounces that:

This latest work of American 'genius' has the same endlessly reiterative pattern within the same expansive structure, its predetermined intentions never changing even as it inflates to literally apocalyptic dimensions. (n.p.)

What we see here are the typical signifiers of displeasure for Kaufman's film where Tracy labels Kaufman as endlessly re-iterative. We cannot take issue with Tracy's assessment, but we shift from the world from which the marker 'relentlessly reiterative' is drawn. The implication is that reiteration occludes creativity and originality and that the repetitive character of the film subdues its impact. Instead, we see another dimension to the film where

the central focus of the film is in fact reiteration, the hallmark of human consciousness, the necessary and fundamental reiteration of lived experience. We will not attempt to interpret Kaufman in Tracy's manner because Tracy's rejection of Kaufman's (failed) ambition is attempting to make a definitive interpretation appear. A traditional interpretation is that the film is tracing a flawed artistic genius that should contain certain specific significations and refrain from others. But our reading positions Cotard so he sits in the frame *and* aside from it, never part of the diegetic space while paradoxically in charge of it. What we may be witnessing is Kaufman setting these typical significations ablaze. It is a critical reversibility on what it is like to film a mind in decay and what it is like to have a mind in decay.

As Cotard literally hurtles towards death in a fracture of time and space, Kaufman seems disinterested in the viewing subject knowing where and when we are. As they become inseparable, Kaufman's generalised dementia is on the screen and in the phenomenological outlook of the viewer. We find it as difficult as Cotard to recognise time, faces, and narrative coherency. In a world that demands rationality, what Baudrillard calls the 'criteria of truth and falsehood' (2001b, p. 71), the more accurate default position is more akin to Cotard's: one of confusing and blended realities. There is an intentional discord between the narrative and viewer's expectations of this narrative, and this aligns with Cotard's problematic and inharmonious existence, both in his personal and professional life.

Hence the tone of the film, as Sconce (2002) would have it, is one of 'countercultural distinction' (p. 355). However, where Sconce attempts to widen the bifurcation between 'cerebral' and what we may call visceral cinema relies on feeling rather than the intellect. This runs the risk of categorising the intellect as something overtly impenetrable. Labelling Kaufman as countercultural with regards to mainstream classical narrative, something interesting may be missed. Cotard's problematic and inharmonious existence is typical rather

than atypical of contemporary mental existence. Cotard permits the viewer to see inside the delicate artistic, but ultimately haphazard, contents of his mind, ordered by disorder. The more playful ontological status of Cotard could be that there is a hole in his mental universe from which all escapes. Kaufman allows us access to this hole, but we deliriously spend time under the illusion we have either covered it up or that it does not exist. When Baudrillard sets significations ablaze, we can choose to take the side of the defective rather than make reparations.

#### **2.4.1 Death and reversibility.**

Death appears in excess in *Synecdoche, New York*. Caden Cotard awakes to his radio giving his information of the first day of spring; a European-accented literature professor informs Caden that autumn is the time of death. The attentive viewer would realise that this is not typical morning FM commercial radio, but the darker recesses of Kaufman's anxiety-driven imagination of it. The broadcast descends into an incisive nihilism where the announcer talks of spring and death. Here death is introduced for the first time and will be a recurrent motif for the rest of the film. Traditional morning radio would typically not transmit such a cryptic broadcast. The frame of the film is inhabited by a surreal spectre, again a characteristic of the rest of the film where Kaufman will insert surrealistic or grating visual and spoken malapropisms. Cotard clearly is a degenerative 'mind in crisis', but we claim that Kaufman's conceit is he allows this crisis to invade the diegetic space, indeed to become the diegetic space. The announcement of the radio professor on death also announces, from our point of view, the central tenet of the film. Death haunts Kaufman's film. To explore this, the viewer must by juxtaposition hold the traditional film of a mind in crisis/degeneration at bay. Kaufman is destroying the signifiers of death, consciousness, and art together as an ectoplasmic materialisation of Cotard's relationship to all three.

To return to the opening frames, we see a world replete with traditional symbols of a family breakfast scene. The recalcitrant child is eating cereal, the television is on, and the parents are discussing the minutiae of the day. However, the viewer soon realises that time is out of joint, as the dates have changed and moved incongruously and the *mise-en-scène* is constructed with and determined by the spectre of death constantly in the frame. The date changes at least ten times in this scene, jumping forwards and backward from September to November as the place remains constant. The central focus of what Caden reads in the newspaper is death, as notable luminaries such as Harold Pinter are reported as having passed away. Here domesticity becomes a melancholic fascination with death and decay, with viruses on the television and morbid material in the mailbox. The traditional breakfast has been pushed to the limit and is reversing on itself. Our resistance to trying to interpret Cotard's relationship with death allows the film to mirror what may be the ontological confusion of existence. There is inseparability here between life and death being played out on the screen, and 'what is being represented cannot be played out in words' (Grace, 2000, p. 43).

With Kaufman and *Synecdoche, New York*, it is the refusal of each scene surrounding death to be something diacritically reductive then semiologically comprehended. Here, like Baudrillard, the viewer can exist 'on the side of the object', and not relapse into the search for latent, transcendent meanings of death, but see interpretation and valuation as the 'impossible exchange' of attempting to describe the ineffable mystery of consciousness hurtling towards death. The traditional semiotic analysis of death in the film is rendered difficult because of Kaufman's reluctance to subscribe to presenting easily identifiable examples. As such, his film is labelled terms such as 'mindboggling', 'ambitious', and 'symbolic', which are all accurate to a point but never quite capture what we envision he is attempting to film.

However, we might not necessarily ask what it means, or even the Deleuzian question of what it does (Rushton, 2011, p. 2), but instead, in the case of *Synecdoche, New York*, ask what it destroys through its own medium. Here the viewer can explore the film in a relatively poetic way rather than trying to fully infuse death with rational or transcendent meaning. Cotard's death and his non-linear descent toward it, allow the viewer to think ambivalently. The meaning of *Synecdoche, New York* may be that the 'impossible exchange' underlies everything and, in these terms, would make it a strongly Baudrillardian film. For many criteria the film cannot be readily exchanged with standard cinematic fare. The foundation of meaning is always ultimately an irrational abyss that cannot be exchanged or substituted without loss of singularity. While Cotard emerges from the Kaufman-esque characteristics of alleged 'life failures', this attempt to portray him with a negative portrait ultimately suffers from attempting to exchange it with other 'like' examples of the cerebral. Does one Caden Cotard equal one John Nash? (from *A Beautiful Mind*). Are Cotard's foibles exchangeable with Leonard Shelby? (Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, 2002). Put another way, we are arguing that the singularity of *Synecdoche, New York* should remain so. To see *Synecdoche, New York* as the reversion of the cerebral film makes for interesting analysis.

As O'She (2009) outlines, as the typical Kaufman anti-hero, Cotard is:

Nebbish, cerebral, sensitive, and painfully introverted, the Kaufman surrogate is not a happy guy. His psychological trajectory is not the classical Hollywood heroic arc wherein he achieves love, knowledge, and/or worldly success. (n.p.)

But Cotard truly is only 'nebbish' until the viewer attempts to explicate the full dimensions of the term nebbish. He is sad, but he is preoccupied with his own mortality and the unutterable in his search for artistic validation. We all have nebbish moments and nebbish qualities. His pain and suffering are romantically cosmic, and as such he is an Everyman whose sadness exudes and *reflects* the viewer just at the moment the viewer attempts to affix any term to

him. His nebbishness could also be seen as defiance of the more positively prescribed characteristics of strong and fortunate. Cotard cannot avoid death through the strength of character alone. He fights and fails through his artistic endeavour.

#### **2.4.2 Art and reversibility.**

Baudrillard did not want art to simulate reality, but instead to challenge art's imperious claims of certitude or its banal repetitions. He saw art as something that enacts its own 'disappearance' (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 92) by which he implies that anarchic or challenging art does not need to establish meaning but subvert it. For Baudrillard, the consummate example is Andy Warhol whose unique Pop art instituted a style then rapidly, through multiple imitations, diminished its own credibility. Here we can align him with Kaufman who, at this point of his career, is still subverting appearance. Baudrillard argues that 'the sphere of the real is no longer exchangeable for the sphere of the sign' (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 5). Referential points are deliberately obscured and managed. This is precisely what much contemporary art does not do. As has been shown, this is especially apparent in cinema where approaches to the presentation of reality are far too comfortably taken as givens.

Contemporary filmmaking often establishes banality rather than challenges it. As we have argued with the repetitions of franchised cinema, the structuring effect of such repeated images is a Baudrillardian form of banality. When the film viewer is ahead of the narrative or overtly presupposes the dialogue or the dénouement a part of the film's genealogy is banal. On first reading, it could be concluded that Baudrillard is talking about the loss of meaning, but we claim here he is talking about the sheer excess of meaning to the point that by increasing its weight, this surplus of meaning can neuter the capacity of the subject to gain a deeper relationship with, in this case, time and death. From this perspective the character of Caden Cotard is to be respected for his failed attempt to breach the full horizon of both time

and mortality. Cotard is written to fail, and Kaufman perceives the same with his own life with his own ontological confusion outside the centre of his own imagination (Kaufman, 2008, p. xi).

Signs create an excess that is necessary for a consumer society, yet this means that reversion is fundamentally also a part of the system itself (Genosko, 2007, n.p.), necessitating change through the management of this excess of meaning. Art is not excluded from this logic. Warhol's influence and style created to excess to the point that his message is eventually neutered because he is too apparent, too obviously encountered. The same could be said of filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino or Martin Scorsese, whose stylistic flourishes are imitated in excess by less original filmmakers who make multiple copies of the original artists' more singular visions. Although not singularly original, Tarantino's non sequitur dialogues from *Pulp Fiction* (1994) to Scorsese's balletic camerawork in *Raging Bull* (1980) are used as exemplary templates for subsequent filmmakers to imitate or appropriate. Thus, O'She (2009) summarises:

Much like a Mobius strip, Caden's structure defies the pretence of singularity and linearity, and does so in a beguilingly elliptical manner, in a way that foregrounds the compulsive striving to build, to write, to hold the self, against its corollary backdrop of defeat and collapse. (n.p.)

To combat this, in support of O'She the viewer can treat the cinematic encounter in this case as a singular confrontation with death, art and time; Cotard's life as seen through the eyes of the artist. This does not attempt to make meaning appear, but to play with or challenge the appearance of the idea of death itself in the full, existential, impossible meeting with the horizon of being. Art can play the role of exploring the limitations of what we can speculate about death. Kaufman paints with the broadest of brushes in this film and is both pretentious and elegant at the same moment. We claim here that this may be the most appropriate

hallmark of a successful 'art' film, one that is artistic in form and content and one that provokes a reading with that in mind.

To explore this artistic foundation, we see that very early in the film Cotard's assistant Hazel (Samantha Morton) touring a house she intends to purchase. The house is already on fire and will remain on fire for the duration of the film. The fire becomes Kaufman's gift here, symbolically resonant, not in a metaphorical sense but as a reciprocal bequest. How may this work? It works simply because it abdicates from the realm of standard interpretation (whether semiotic or psychoanalytic) and operates a level aside or apart from it. This is an invocation of reversibility, as Baudrillard conceives it.

The burning house becomes Kaufman's seductive gift that we cannot and are not supposed to articulate nor reciprocate with a definitive and conclusive reading. We cannot solve this enigmatic puzzle. We are forced to integrate its lack of meaning into the logic of the film itself without the capacity to give it a definitive signified. Of course, we could see it as cinematic excess, as Kristen Thompson (1977) describes it, as a formal part of the narrative.

Thompson suggests:

A film displays a struggle by the unifying structures to "contain" the diverse elements that make up its whole system. Motivation is the primary tool by which the work makes its own devices seem reasonable. At that point where motivation fails, excess begins. (p.58)

Kaufman's pyrotechnical frame frustrates the viewer, but we read the fire as not being equal to the narrative as Thompson would see excess, but also as luxurious excessive energy in its Bataillan iteration where the abstract nature of the space becomes a metaphor for Cotard's incessant burning of bridges. What does it re-present? Concisely, nothing, in a Baudrillardian universe. It is a mystification that presents something 'other than the subject' (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 128) which a rational world would articulate. The meditation on art that resonates

through the film sets itself in a distinctly Baudrillardian context of what Baudrillard saw as the most pressing role of art. For Baudrillard (2000):

... a work of art is a singularity, and all these singularities can create holes, interstices, voids, et cetera., in the metastatic fullness of culture. (p. 21)

This seductive image mirrors an aspect of our interior lives we cannot put our fingertips on, the *unheimlich* residue lingering on the periphery of consciousness, the violent dialectic of being and appearance. It is art in its most 'terroristic sense', defying appearance as nothing but an illusion.

The fire stands in, at least in a metaphorical sense, for our relationship to art. Clearly, we could see an apparent level of pretentiousness here, as many have of *Synecdoche, New York*. But we argue that Kaufman is doing what Francis Bacon did with painting, which is an 'obsession with illusion' (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 103). Kaufman also gives form to illusion, the fire's metonymic burning signifying quintessential reversion. To reject the import of the fire as absurd or obfuscating the narrative misses an interesting point. The fire is a reality beyond reality, perhaps the materialisation of the Lacanian Real (Rushton, 2011, p. 159). Those who dismiss Kaufman as a cinematic obscurantist want their fantasies and illusions to be much more decipherable. This conclusion would be fine except Kaufman's perplexity is often used as an ideologically charged weapon against him to bolster the stocks of more orthodox approaches to filmmaking and its interpretation.

We can then agree with Baudrillard that 'knowledge rules over truth and causal relations, not over appearance or illusion' (2000b, p. 75), rendering art as a secondary role, subservient to a political and market-driven 'reality'. The yearning to know what the fire *means* in a causal and objective capacity seeks an answer where there is none, bearing witness to the strength and reversion of Kaufman's illusory signification and his commentary on the nature of art.

Cotard's desire to create an artwork grander than art itself is an artistic endeavour pushed beyond its sane limit. Our contemporary world is dominated by the banality of art, rendered obscene by actual and virtual presentations of it.

The film reviewer, academic, and amateur viewing subject all attempt to, at differing levels, produce a meaning for the fire, but it always seduces meaning away from itself towards a reading that becomes banal. This is uniquely Baudrillardian in attitude, always threatening to wrench any produced meaning away from itself. It is far too obvious and banal to categorise this dissonance as abnormal. This is subjugating art to a set of predefined norms. As Gerry Coulter (2004) reminds us of Baudrillard:

An important part of Baudrillard's understanding of reversibility is to see systems playing a central role in their own demise.(n.p.)

## **2.5 Conclusion: Losing the ground in the figure.**

Baudrillard was distinctly aware that the nexus between figure and ground was configured in such a way that allowed the ground to remain unexplored. As demonstrated in *Synecdoche, New York*, the figure (mind) obfuscates the ground (subconscious/unconscious/psyche/superego/id) from which it is drawn. What Kaufman does is 'retrain and re-calibrate' the figure, allowing the attuned viewer to cast strong suspicion on the ground. *Inception* and *Source Code* ask us to accept the films' premises about the inner workings of the mind without question. However, Baudrillard suggests:

But such is the human mind: being itself artificial, it always needs to impute things to minds or causes. Catastrophes never seem marvellously natural to it, never appear in their fateful simplicity. It wants to be the cause of all these misfortunes and throws itself into this heroic superstition. (1996c, p. 49)

The imputation is, in his opinion, that the commonsensical view is of a world that is a rational, linear, rhythmical location imbued with certitude, causality, and teleological

accounting. It wants to justify the chaos of life as extraordinary, a puzzle to be solved. Yet Kaufman describes the world from another perspective, creating what Slavoj Žižek would call a 'parallax' view. This parallax is the displacement of the object from two different lines of sight. The line of sight of the mainstream viewer is challenged by Kaufman, who depicts the mind as to not be fully rationally accounted. Kaufman could then be said to be giving us the chaos of life in all its 'marvellous' naturalness. Traditionally, many theorists, when deciphering the semiotics of a film or the psychological effects of the viewer, assume that the ground is accounted for in the figure. But as Marshall McLuhan famously quipped, 'the medium is the message', and Kaufman, through his intimate and conscious exploration of the ground will produce figuration that a viewer can use to highlight this very Baudrillardian observation. We have seen that a Baudrillardian film philosophy exposes the absence of ground in Kaufman's work. His dissertation on death and art is working on a rational dismemberment of film semiotics of the challenge of art-house film.

Hence the coded structure of the film in which the mind is a principal character allows the viewer to focus on the narrative's complicity with the background of the film, which is logically and/or rationally questionable. This structure is endemic to the complete system in which the ground's rationality is eclipsed by the strength of the figuration. In other words, the context that produces the narrative necessarily obfuscates the figure represented. As a product of dubious need is never questioned, a film's narrative coherency can easily fail a test of rational complicity. *Synecdoche, New York* is imbued with many characteristics of a 'cerebral' aesthetic that to the viewer reveals and invites exploration of both the figure and the ground. The film challenges by reversion the traditional semiotics of a cerebral film and thus also allows the viewer to question the mainstream/art-house dichotomy. It can also be read with its confronting aesthetic sensibility, its unconventional stylistic flourishes, or its

audacious atemporal narrative. As Sconce suggests, when taken together, they identify a potential audience and an admittedly ‘contentious’ and nebulous genre.

To add to this, we argue that *Synecdoche, New York* is also an exploration of the impossibility of the cerebral, that to try and film the enigmatic ground of the unconscious or the ineffable ground of human existential *ennui*, the figure cannot be anything but ‘cerebral’. However, to achieve this, it is interesting to examine how the ground of Kaufman’s film is removed from the mainstream film not accorded the status of ‘cerebral’. When conceived in this way, the dyad of cerebral/mainstream cannot fully account for the totality of cinema in an either/or sense. While Sconce (2002) argues that one of the major components of the cerebral film is its return to ‘classical narrative strategies’ (p. 352), the grounds upon which these strategies are constructed are vastly different. While Sconce asserts that the differentiation of the cerebral film from the ‘art’ film is a return to classical form, he attunes his argument to the fascination of the cerebral film with characterisation and irony, which challenges the nation’s moral certitude. The acclimatised viewer can also interrogate the genealogy of this ironic and unconventional characterisation.

Irony and unconventionality spring from the same well. But, according to Baudrillard, the irony is located in the mainstream as well as the art-house. Sconce focuses on the irony from the point of view of those in the know who can read ambiguity, unpredictability, and supplementary meaning in aesthetic affairs. To this, Baudrillard (1990c) adds the ironic position of ‘too much reality’ (p. 64). For Baudrillard, everything is an artifact, and a ‘vertical backdrop raises objects isolated from their referential context to the status of pure signs’ (p. 64). So, it is possible from his perspective to suggest that ambiguity, supplementary meaning, and unpredictability are not directing towards or away from meaning and value. Hence those ‘in the know’ have to concede that there is no final knowing and that undecidability,

unpredictability, and irony are 'in themselves'. They are the authority and motivation of meaning and value.

While Sconce points to the ineffability of the cerebral film as constitutive of 'tone', Baudrillard provides another dimension with the metaphysical application of impossible exchange. If the director Kaufman 'constantly pulls back from the patterns of understanding and identification' (Perkins, 2012, p. 42), it can be added that the understanding and identification on behalf of the viewer is the value accorded by the conventional ground that the viewer brings to the cinema. However, if there is no fixed ground in a founding denotational understanding, then it can imply that meaning's genealogy is nullified. By removing a logical and rational ground and replacing it with a radical uncertainty or ambiguity, then the narrative incoherence of *Synecdoche, New York* begins to map a closer form of actuality.

The 'desperate' effort to escape radical uncertainty is putatively accomplished by mainstream cinema and putatively celebrated through independent cinema. Of course, radical uncertainty must remain as an underlying principle rather than a destination. It must shift the boundaries of meaning and value until they reach the terminus of impossible exchange. As stated an impossible exchange is a moment where we cannot find an equivalent for what we have and thus cannot verify it (Baudrillard, 2001, p.3). The failed exploration of radical uncertainty is the diegetic battleground of *Synecdoche, New York*, and the film can be explored internally, exchanging the ideas of the film for minimal external standards or signifiers. The film is deliberately confusing because the ontological state of confusion is the place where Kaufman himself likes to dwell (O'She, 2009). As we have mentioned, the temporal and locational markers are always being challenged. A character's genealogy is questioned and questionable, and the communication between characters is often deliberately mistaken,

malapropistic or incomprehensible. As the film unfolds, Cotard's performing space for the staging of his play becomes less and less rooted in reality. This can never be fully or satisfactorily placed into words because the white magic of cinema is the place that generates language, and, as such, can never use language to describe itself—a truly impossible exchange. This seduction of cinema is the subject of the next chapter.

What benefit can this have for criticism and cinema studies? The reader who sides with Baudrillard (and thus sides with the object) can take the side of irrationalism against the 'madness of reason' as a form of alternative, radical critique. Briefly, the viewer can reverse what is commonplace and take thinking in another ambivalent direction. This, however, is not an automatic inversion of one idea for another, the gainsaying of argument with counterargument. Instead, thinking, especially thinking around development, progress and systems (Coulter in Smith, 2012, p. 188), takes the side of the object, or does so in a phenomenological configuration to test the limit, rationality, and utility of these systems as they develop and progress. Cinema is such an object, and signs can be made to 'burn'. They can also be used to seduce from the bottom up. And that brings us to Wes Anderson.

## Part Two

*You see, painting has now become, or all art has now become completely a game, by which man distracts himself. What is fascinating actually is, that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to become any good at all.  
(Francis Bacon)*

## **Chapter Three: There is no (cinema) family: Baudrillard, Wes Anderson and Seducing Aesthetics.**

### **1.1 Introduction: Seducing explanatory vocabulary.**

The first two chapters of this thesis addressed metaphysical speculations about the self and the mind, playing with them within a Baudrillardian frame. They showed how Kaufman denies banality by refusing to acquiesce to signs or by completely reversing them. With a Baudrillardian attitude, Kaufman 'sets signs ablaze'. The second half of the thesis will also mirror Baudrillard's work but departs from semiosis to build a more esoteric poetic theory that, in effect, continues to seduce the vocabulary of interpretation. We begin with his 'signature concept' (Doel, as cited in Clarke, 2012, p. 186), seduction, which is counter to production. We display defiance of any claim to homogeneity.

Film interpretation often creates definitive generic objects, and these can be seduced back to our side of the ledger. Terminology becomes expected and establishes genres which do the necessary work of pacification of expectation. To invoke a horror film with the terms 'cult classic' or 'slasher' marks the film object as recognisable but at the same time cannot account for the film's complete attraction and hence seductive potential. Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is a definitive horror film object but is also a compelling study of obsession and even an evocation of the destructive potential of the creative process. If we indiscriminately bow to the interpretative vocabulary created for us, we are seduced.

Hence when we consider Baudrillard's version or intentions with seduction, we invent rules to counter the rules in a game of one-upmanship. We deviate, displace, divert, recuperate and seduce signs (Baudrillard, 1988), to frustrate interpretation and the establishment of meaning. Conceding only a marginal difference to reversibility, seduction permits us to take the sign as

an extremely unstable referent and continue to challenge abstracted systems of reference (Grace, 2000). Our concern over the next two chapters will be the films of contemporary cinematic aesthete Wes Anderson, not because he also reverses banality, but because he uses banality as a weapon against itself. Anderson resuscitates art by seducing banality, and consequently, the principal focus of this chapter will be our reading of Wes Anderson's 2001 film *The Royal Tenenbaums*, not a detailed investigation of aesthetics itself. The choice of Anderson is deliberate because of a number of prior attempts to pigeonhole him as a certain aesthetic form of filmmaker. This is enough now to label him as 'Andersonian', used broadly and simplistically to describe his style in its most general sense. His technical precision, use of symmetry, pastel palettes, and nostalgic reverences have come to trademark this Andersonian style not only in cinema but also in fashion and architecture.

This seductive ploy of labelling will be countered with an aesthetic assessment of Anderson's work from a Baudrillardian perspective. We will explore the banality of Anderson's 'strange' world. Anderson films *The Royal Tenenbaums* in set storybook vignettes, but the screen space also disturbs notions of colour, choreography, soundtrack, dialogue, character, and camera movement. The overall effect is one conventionally described as precisely mannered, whimsical, and symmetrical. This is everything the world is not and where our argument stresses that Anderson lulls the viewer into a response to his films that is not fully teased out.

Our argument is that because Wes Anderson generates a highly predictable form of interpretation, we may miss one of the most powerful opportunities to counter this predictability. If there were to be a Baudrillardian film philosophy, it would always seduce. Anderson's aesthetic proclivities indicate that banal art has a stranglehold on the explanatory fields, both critical and academic, and Baudrillard can provide a form of poetic intervention.

As Kaufman reverses signification, Anderson reverses aesthetics, confronting more widely accepted and industrially produced fare.

The broad questions of this chapter are:

1. How can Baudrillard's seduction function as a decisive apparatus to challenge banal aesthetics in film philosophy?
2. How can this version of seduction be deployed to foreground a discrete aesthetic encounter for a viewer of Wes Anderson's films?

We build on our use of signs and reversibility by advancing deeper into Baudrillard's poetically charged territory to demonstrate how another key conceptual application can aid and enhance interpretation. Film interpretation, criticism, and analysis can be seductive, taking the reader's thoughts in a specific direction, potentially challenging ordinariness and predictability. Anderson highlights this propensity to develop a predictable vocabulary. Baudrillard's iconoclastic disregard of traditional approaches to meaning and value was calculated to hyperbolically exterminate the 'fundamental laws of the human world' (1993a, pp. 197-8), or deflect the banal conception of value itself. Baudrillard's wager is that if we shift the foundations of value, what he calls extermination of the foundations, thinking returns to the subject's control, and seduction of the other and their interpretations becomes a possibility. We intend to do this with Anderson.

The motivation of a Baudrillardian film philosophy might be to deploy reversibility to seduce interpretation back to the control of the viewer and away from any institution of explanatory dominance. To do this, it is first necessary to recognise the semiotics that influence and put these signs into reversal, the foci of the previous two chapters. Of course, all we present here is another strategic seduction, a move towards power that is inescapable in interpretation. However, at this point, the rules of the game are that seduction is always at our behest. When

the other tries to seduce us, we change the rules. Baudrillard moves from semiology to what may be termed theory fiction for this very reason, and we advocate the same policy. When we undertake this with Wes Anderson, a new vocabulary of interpretation for his films is possible.

This chapter will follow a similar trajectory as the previous two. First, we established how Kaufman is a Baudrillardian filmmaker in the way he disrupts traditional semiotics and encourages reversion. We showed how Kaufman 'liberated' the sign from its pedestrian referent and encouraged its reversion, as outlined in the first two chapters. This has created a novel philosophical space. If there is a Baudrillardian film philosophy, it recognises in the work of Charlie Kaufman a philosophical space in which to think afresh.

We now turn to a Baudrillardian rendering of aesthetics and build on reversion, as Baudrillard did, by rupturing and making certain cinematic banalities 'disappear'. Concisely, as Kaufman facilitates, the image will be seduced. The proliferation of the production of images has given them a seductive potential that we can challenge with seduction of our own. From Part One of the thesis, where we challenged the philosophical notions of self and mind, we are now invited to think anew about aesthetic space by challenging and reversing semiology. However, we expand and extend this trajectory to move deeper into Baudrillard's critical vocabulary, attempting to encourage a more self-generated direction of thought. This chapter is dedicated to Baudrillard's exploration of seduction, deployed as a key device to continue to investigate and respond to the interpretative vocabularies of cinema that are all too often accepted as given.

The advantage of this challenge is twofold. Firstly, it assists in our capacity to do the same critical reversal to film theory, as we will see below with cognitive theorist David Bordwell. Bordwell seduces what the cognitivists disparagingly termed 'Grand Theory' away from the

direction in which they saw it heading. In addition, seduction also allows us to give our own seductive reading of Wes Anderson, whom we argue is a similarly seductive filmmaker in the precise manner as Baudrillardian seduction intended. The choice of Bordwell is intentionally exemplary. We see his seductive work and demonstrate the powerful results of seducing the seducer with regard to film interpretation. Baudrillard uses his own seduction to cross the metaphysical horizon of dialectics and the epistemological horizon of psychoanalysis. In other words, his metaphysics is not interested in truth, but rather in ownership or control of information in an information-saturated environment. His rejection of psychoanalysis is geared to elevate seduction above the contested positions of Jacques Lacan and Freud in having ownership of the workings of the subconscious.

As we argue, seduction becomes a critical tool to unshackle thought from the 'utility of the economic' (Teh, 2008, n.p.), towards the poetic. Bordwell's modest claim for cognitive analysis will be seduced away from itself because seduction unsettles universally. We chose Bordwell, fully aware of his adept analysis for critical contrast, as he stands as far away from a Baudrillardian film philosophy as we could imagine. Bordwell wants to make a rational assessment of film; we simply choose to move in another direction.

### **3.2 Seducing banal simulation.**

When the state of a film object is subject to reversal it does not revert to its opposite, but is 'seduced' into a potentially transformative entity if the viewer is open to providing a seductive challenge of their own. We see this in the cinema with the work of many films as diverse as Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2016), which reversed a raft of western genre signifiers to render any elucidation highly ambivalent, or Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012), which reversed the typical teen flick road movie genre to produce surreal social commentary. Baudrillardian seduction is, when seen this way, a judicious means of

challenging aesthetics because it energises constant thinking into modified spaces, with thinkers acknowledging they are trying to resist already-existing seductions.

The complex field of aesthetics can be treated with this Baudrillardian notion. The engine room of reversibility is seduction because ‘art is proliferating wherever we turn’ (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 14), and this proliferation changes what was once a stronger unifying signification to something much more diluted. The bombardment of mediated images can lead to a ‘waning of affect’ (Jameson, 2003, p. 11) that not only leads to depthlessness, but to stupefaction of all judgement at worst, or a diminishment of meaning and value as traditionally conceived at least. Eventually, many are more likely to buy what they are sold compliantly and without interrogation. A proliferation of advertising testifies to this. As Joseph Tanke (2007) asserts, speaking of Baudrillard providing:

... therapeutic doses administered to save us, quite literally, from ourselves, that is, from the effects of our fascination with the Same, our expurgation of alterity, and the resulting immunodeficiency. (n.p.)

When the variety of meanings explodes, the potential for a singular subjectivity and hermeneutic weakens. This is observable in the aesthetics of contemporary cinema where stupefaction comes in the forms of repetition, cliché, and cross-media saturation, definitively Tanke’s fascination with the Same. Films intended to begin a franchise are a case in point. One example of this phenomenon is Andrew Stanton’s *John Carter* (2012). Meant to be the first of a trilogy, the film’s immense budget and concomitant marketing costs were never recovered. In this case, repetition clearly contributed to John Carter’s commercial disappointment as the film failed to overcome audience indifference. These films have a form of ‘textual transparency’ (Olsen in Miller, 2000, p. 531), where most audiences are positioned and comfortable with this position, regardless of their stance or the ideological motives. They are either seduced or compliantly comfortable with being seduced.

The repetitive signification in mainstream cinema is often dominated by industrial paradigms, narrowing the means of presentation to only suitably approved forms. The production process, demanding profit, selects what it comprehends as sure bets, often relying on franchised films with predictable plots and narratives. Hence this form of cinema typified by the high-concept action genre with worldwide recognised stars is often wary of straying from narrative predictability and constricted *mise-en-scène*. Baudrillard saw aesthetics embodied in this ‘cultural exploitation’ (2005, p. 71), where the art object is used as a prescription of value, destroying the singular relationship between art object and viewing subject. This leads to simulation of value but, more strategically, an ideologically encoded form of value. This can be construed as ‘bad simulation’, as Baudrillard would have it, propping up a destructive system. We can challenge simulation with illusion, with images that play with appearance rather than dictate it. We sense this with the many franchised films that repeat rather than expand signs.

Baudrillard shows us that images, including cinematic images, can cloud cognitive flexibility through their intrusion into daily life. In other words, we think the film object has meaning and value, whereas it has, in fact, become more and more an effective ideological simulation to hide that meaning, and value has diminished. This is the seductive strategy of the machinations of power, yearning to exterminate illusion in favour of the ideologically nuanced codes of consumption. Akin to his contemporary film theorists, Colin MacCabe and Jean-Louis Baudry (who write specifically on the nexus of film and ideology and how the film object and its concomitant apparatus shapes and contours the viewing subject), Baudrillard challenges us to see ourselves as precarious subjects rather than autonomous ones. MacCabe declares when speaking of Louis Althusser that he produces ‘subjects that are masters of both language and desire’ (MacCabe, 1985) and it is these subjects that Baudrillard explores. Baudry supports MacCabe by arguing that ideology is both conveyed

and ‘concealed’ (Baudry, as cited in Nicholls, 1985) allowing the viewer to locate themselves in a very Althusserian manner as being called. What delineates Baudrillard from film theorists such as MacCabe and Baudry, as well as social theorists such as Althusser and Foucault, is that Baudrillard is preoccupied with revealing nothingness—a zero point of nihilism that lies at the heart of ideology thus rendering Baudrillardian thought as a political project muted. What this means for a Baudrillardian film philosophy is thus located in the exposure of the ideological apparatus with little Marxist accentuation. Baudrillard does not want to expose ideology as resuscitation of a political project, but to perhaps expose the futility of such a project in contemporary times.

We can, therefore, construct an epistemological response to aesthetics that attempts to confront this simulation. Here, a ‘bad simulation’ is that which buttresses the seductive power of the status quo, but as we see, Baudrillard saw proliferation also supporting the status quo. In typical Baudrillardian fashion, he retorts we now have a ‘profusion of images in which there is nothing to see’ (1996, p. 5). Baudrillard shows us that images, including cinematic images, can cloud cognitive flexibility through their intrusion into daily life. In other words, we think the film object has meaning and value, whereas it has in fact become more and more an effective ideological simulation to hide that meaning, and value has diminished. This is the seductive strategy of the machinations of power, yearning to exterminate illusion in favour of the codes of consumption.

Seduction’s critical value is the rule we are to subvert and that we have been summoned to produce (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 133). The cinema of Wes Anderson reverses bad simulation and produces seductive, aesthetic energy of its own. In effect, our reading of Anderson is intended to subvert those already produced. Vreeland (2015) argues Anderson continually reverts to a state of childish optimism (p. 42), which typifies much criticism fascinated with

Anderson's relationship with childhood, dysfunctional families, and recalcitrant fathers (Tyree, 2013, p. 25). A vocabulary that pigeonholes Anderson leaves less room for challenge. Therefore, when an object appears, it is accompanied by a force that will ensure a minor questioning, then perhaps occlusion. Anderson is often pilloried for his aesthetic energy and has been appropriated so often that a 'Wes Anderson effect' is occurring. Here, everything from café architecture to art shows is being labelled as Anderson-esque or Andersonian. Tony Bravo (2015) renders typical homage to Anderson, observing:

The year everyone started embracing coloured beanies coincided with *The Life Aquatic*. And that same year, the number of ironic '70s Adidas tracksuits on Valencia Street doubled, although there was already a presence because of the red warm-up gear featured a few years before in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. I also blame Wes Anderson for facial hair; we can definitely trace beards back to him via *Tenenbaums* and *Life Aquatic*, and there's also a strong moustache story to all of Jason Schwartzman's adult Anderson roles (not to mention Owen Wilson's blond pilot Stache in *Life Aquatic*). (n.p.)

With this, Anderson acolytes can be accused of a form of repetitive and predictable simulation. The idea of Anderson is seducing itself in what we could call a negative manner. The original Wes Anderson is slipping away to be replaced by a simulated version of himself. This poor simulation is, to bastardise Baudrillard, becoming more Anderson than Anderson, rendering Anderson everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Anderson, like a good artist, is not disappearing or making his work harder to quantify but is becoming an obscene version of himself. His ubiquity simultaneously valorises and destroys him.

We activate seduction as a claim to power, to think and correspond with Baudrillard, against all we perceive as attempting to seduce us in the cat-and-mouse game of challenge. Baudrillardian seduction does, indeed, lead us astray, but more specifically it unhinges a signifier constantly displacing and diverting (Doel, as cited in Clarke, 2009) from the

signified. This is true for a political system, a philosophical theory or a film object. The lure of a seductive entity is indestructible (Baudrillard, 2005).

There are, of course, many nuances to Baudrillard's rendering of seduction and its interpretation. However, the commonality through all commentators of his concept is its use as a tactic against that which is claimed to be produced, especially in a world of increasingly dominant signs. Reaction to the image is given full intensity to actually see how the image is stable. Its deliberate destabilisation is the seductive process of critical inquiry. Of course, paradoxically it is open to seduction itself.

This is true for a political system, a philosophical theory, or a film object. The lure of a seductive entity is indestructible (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 204). There are, of course, many nuances to his rendering of seduction and its interpretation. However, the commonality through all commentators of Baudrillard's concept is its use as a poetic ruse against that which is claimed to be univocally produced, especially in a world of increasingly dominant signs. Reaction to the image is given full intensity to see how stable the image actually is. Its deliberate destabilisation is the seductive process of critical inquiry.

This inquiry concedes that art has a multiplicity of interpretations; the vocabulary is often restricted by the forcefully prosecuted binary of same/different. We see seduction as that which constantly ruptures this binary signification as the default ontological position. The shifting between these poles and the liberating potential of interpretation may be enhanced, and greater connections between explanatory responses can be accommodated. Whatever a system projects as obvious and apparent, seduction ensures it will return to its illusory status. Same/different cannot cover all possibilities but can only enhance their semiotic dominance. As Baudrillard (1990a) argues:

... the magical seduction of the world must be reduced, annulled. And it will be so the day when all signifiers receive their signifieds when all has become meaning and reality. (p. 151)

Therefore, the strength of engaging seduction as a methodological mechanism is to see the deficiencies it exposes, as well as how it powers and facilitates reversion in its multiplicity of forms. Baudrillard's form of seduction, while being seductive in itself, allows the development of a more singular vocabulary in response to the film object. Thinking through a seductive frame reduces any binary to secondary importance behind the poetic.

The relevance of this project is enhanced by what we see as a repetitive and predictable vocabulary to confront a specific film object, especially when we talk of aesthetic response. This is most pressing with regard to the vocabulary developed to encounter Wes Anderson. The important frame that our reading of seduction occupies is that seduction is all-pervasive and as such makes interpretation itself precarious. Advocating a singular vocabulary for the film object is a seductive strategy that can be seduced in turn. We choose seduction to follow a chapter on reversibility because we read the Baudrillardian deployment of seduction initially as a co-conspirator in 'halting reality from disappearing' and therefore disenfranchising the dominant systemic semiotics from imploding filmmaking itself into vapid entertainment. Baudrillard constantly warns against accepting the sign as a permanent marker. When we are told that a film object is X, we are on our guard against being seduced by univocality. In return, we speculate about X by apprehending it as a simulated signification before it is held to contain specific meaning and value. Baudrillard (1998) states:

... if illusion is understood, not as a simulacrum or unreality, but as something which drives a breach into a world that is too known, too *deja-vu*, too conventional, too real. (p. 71)

From this, we conclude that seduction is utilised to drive a breach in signification against systematised declarations of meaning and value and in turn create a more singular vocabulary of our own.

### **3.3 Positioning Seduction as a Film Philosophy.**

In 1979 Baudrillard wrote his seventh book *Seduction*, building on his 'turn' from traditional academic sociology towards a form of 'theory poetics' that would mark the rest of his writing life. This turn is a seduction in itself, marking Baudrillard as a seducer of theory, turning luminaries such as Marx, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Lacan (in Baudrillard's terms) into simulators of thought. In effect, Baudrillard is always turning thinking against itself, both observing the appearance of thinking and its own delirious demise. It is not a straightforward rejection of thinking, but a seduction, steering Marx away from Marx and Foucault away from Foucault. It is a conversation with his contemporaries where the interlocutors each strive for the upper hand. Marx is seen as a perpetuator of use value (Grace, 2000, p. 10), and as such reinforced the economy of the sign. In rejecting sign value for symbolic exchange Baudrillard (1975, p. 51) frees up the relationship between consumer subject and consumed object that Marx could not relinquish. Seduction as a potential encounter with film philosophy provides the same structural process, allowing the viewer to play with signification and offer more self-generated responses. This veers theory away from theory as a combination of personal autonomy and seductive irreverence. If we follow the same route, seduction as film philosophy destabilises the power of any theory to claim precedence. Baudrillard (1987) saw Foucault as mirroring the power he himself describes and claiming the dominant interpretative position for human social and psychological relationships. Baudrillard claimed power was always at the mercy of reversibility. This was his seductive riposte.

Below we will apply the same reversion to cognitive film theorist David Bordwell, reversing his seductions as an example of this strategic critique of meaning and value as applied to thinking about cinema. As stated in the first half of the thesis, Baudrillard's shift from semiosis to a more pataphysical incarnation of the theory is a deliberate attempt to frustrate theory on his own terms, a conclusion about which his predecessors and contemporaries were not so overt. The result is that seduction, or seductions of seduction, always produce another angle to the theory that is not a rejection but a challenge to it. As Baudrillard reminds us, his 'metaphysical and transcendental curiosity' was 'always thinking about the next horizon to be crossed' (1993b, p. 133). We read this to mean he is always attempting to imagine or write himself free of the grip of theory or systemic classification. Even if we concede this as a practical and theoretical problem, the process of attempt is the key here to resist seduction.

In contrast, Baudrillard's writing becomes his art form, which is seductive in and of itself, forcing or challenging counter thought by taking an idea towards or beyond its own logical limit, thus rendering thinking itself an aesthetic declaration of being. Wes Anderson's aesthetics provide a perfect springboard for such an endeavour because his distinct form is also a seductive challenge in itself. It is not only highly stylised but subverts or counteracts expectation, never deviating from its pure artifice, as if commenting on the role of filmmaking art itself. We would never question the veracity of *cinema verite* in its depiction of supposed reality because its form does not subvert but gives the illusion of reflecting the minutiae of everyday life. One message of Anderson's form is that art's inner necessity is to subvert and that a form that is pure artifice is a subtle way of achieving this. His narrative would be mere kitsch without thinking this way because the subversion is subtle enough to be missed.

As such, for Baudrillard, seduction is that which reverses energy and appearance and thus achieves a universal effect that counters production of meaning and interpretation. The energy and appearance of film theory in terms of aesthetics are under scrutiny in this fashion.

Baudrillard (2005) argues:

Art is profoundly seduction, and although I have spoken enthusiastically about seduction, I do not want to fall prey to the seduction of art. That is we have spoken about seduction more in terms of simulation and simulacra-reflecting a skeptical, critical, paradoxical position and raising a challenge to both the naïve exercise of reality and the naïve exercise of art. (p. 98)

Seduction may be in part cosmological and mystical, as Gary Genosko (1994) interprets it (pp. 80-1), or a purely theoretical challenge, as Gerry Coulter describes it (Coulter, 2012, pp. 59-61). Clearly, seduction can never be captured, only glimpsed in the world of appearances, which are produced then seduced in a spiral-like effect as subject and object come into proximity. A cinema that aspires to a strong aesthetic intensity produces an appearance that begs a specific and banal interpretation, and meaning is produced that, depending on intensity, attempts to defy seduction. We argue Wes Anderson produces such an effect because his stylistic flourishes are all too easily responded to with a commonplace vocabulary, what Frederic Jameson (2015) refers to as ‘typological expectations’ (p. 74). The impulse to deploy this form of expectant vocabulary for the viewer is strong but not unassailable.

We can now develop an argument that suggests Anderson's aesthetic strategy is to develop a set of personal cinematic ‘rules’ that are often misinterpreted and mislabelled as ‘quirky’ and ‘whimsical’ but can be more singularly conceived as a commentary on art as artifice. Anderson’s form is seductive because it defies expectation, not through shock and subversion but through hyper-stylisation, disturbing the curatorial space. This is his strength reimagined as a film philosophy. The filmed space of an Anderson canvas may force us to think about

our own expectations of cinematic space itself when we can position his films as seductions of banal aesthetics.

### **3.4 Seduction, Family and *The Royal Tenenbaums*.**

A voiceover begins the film, and we enter the world of the Tenenbaums via a royal flag affixed atop the family home. Paying homage to Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1948), Anderson's house is in frame, and the laconic 'novelistic third person' narration connotes striking similarities between Welles and Anderson (Zoller-Seitz, 2013, p. 120). To paraphrase Mario Rodriguez (2015) discussing Baudrillard's notion of simulation, 'there is not enough distance between the film object itself and the system it operates in' (n.p.). The operating principle of seduction is a celebration of artifice and ritual. The film begins with artifice as a deliberate provocation, as Anderson one-ups Welles and swings the camera through and down the house bathed in soft yellow light and traversing the rooms of the three precocious Tenenbaum children before revealing their father Royal (Gene Hackman) arriving on the front step. This is a traditional piece of narrative exposition, except the deliberate artifice is ritualistic in the sense that there is an exchange initiated by Anderson with Welles. It is an homage, but Anderson plays with camera movement, light, colour, and musical soundtrack. We deploy 'play' here in a very specific Baudrillardian manner. We argue that Anderson plays with visual and aural construction to affirm a primary aesthetic predilection to form rather than content. According to our interpretation of Anderson at this point, his is a narcissistic flourish, a Wes Anderson stamp he will go on to exaggerate over his career. It professes his love for cinema and his capacity to produce amorous incarnations of it. It can be characterised as narcissistic effrontery, and indeed it often is.

However, this highly homogenised and predictable interpretative discourse wants to seduce us back into a more normatively conceived world by labelling this type of filmmaking with

terms such as precise, controlled, mannered, and ultimately quirky. But when we interpret Anderson as playing with form rather than smugly controlling it, we can observe its seductive potential. It allows us to embrace the distance between what Anderson presents and what he leaves out as a form of critique of the latter. The explanatory system wants to label Anderson as ‘quirky’, not just to label this work but as importantly to manifest its other. Wes Anderson re-establishes this distance through taking the central organising principles (codes) of the system and allowing them to play directly on these codes. There is no ultimate transcendent meaning here, and the term ‘play’ is definitive because it promotes the ambivalence of Baudrillardian thought. To reiterate, these organising codes both accede to and shape aesthetic taste. They include the attitudes conveyed by simple plot outcomes, identifiable empathic virtuous versus malevolent characters, predictable effects, awe-filled spectacle and common, predictable experiences. Our response is to always see these identifiable features as ambivalent, thus capable of promoting play rather than control.

So, when Anderson introduces us to the adult Tenenbaum family, the impudent idea of Orson Welles’ introduction of the Amberson family is taken to an extreme and predictable *mise-en-scène*, which is doubled back against itself. Anderson seduces this form of introduction and style of presentation, encouraging the viewer to appreciate the homage to Welles as artwork without sacrificing the importance of the presentation to the narrative. His homage to Welles suggests this gesture of tribute is a deliberate challenge to conformity. However, in this situation, conformity is the avoidance of obvious deliberate repetition rather than merely subscribing to the coded opening of the conventional. The seduction here preys on the viewer, who cedes control to the filmmakers. As Baudrillard quips as we have stated, he ‘does not want to fall prey to the seduction of art’ because it is a ‘naïve exercise’ (2005, p. 98).

Jonathan Romney (2002) terms this opening to *The Royal Tenenbaums* an ‘outrageous flouting of film’s show-don’t-tell rule’ (p. 13). Welles’ film sets the tone with a light-hearted arrangement of set pieces as Eugene Moran (Joseph Cotten) is seen conveying the fashions of the times, gesturing to the foppish nature of his character. Anderson will do the same thing with a different tone, as his characters are introduced with less subtlety and more unique individual characteristics. As one of Anderson’s staunchest enthusiasts, Matt Zoller Seitz (2009) observes:

Both directors prefer to use wide-angle lenses that distort screen space and make it seem almost more figurative than literal. Most of all, Anderson, like Welles, is a visually bold, wunderkind director who has an affinity—some might say a weakness—for virtuoso shots, shots so logistically impressive they momentarily and perhaps purposefully take the spotlight off the movie and shine it on the director. (n.p.)

Welles and Anderson prefer to seduce this power back by infringing on expectations. Here the codification of film expectation is taunted, not only moving us into another world but also making the Baudrillardian in us deeply suspicious of the one we left. Here is the power of appreciating seduction as a stratagem for encountering cinema. The strong interpretation of Anderson is not just to see that he has precise control over the imagic construction of the Tenenbaum family but is open to the very idea of what a film is supposed to be. Here, the family of Tenenbaums given to us in the opening of the scene as an artificial construct is not just Anderson’s fictional world, but the chance to self-fashion the actual world as fictionalised in itself. Just as Anderson is playing with the expectations of the procedure of narrative construction of cinematic presentation, we can also apply this in both directions to the fictionalised Tenenbaum family and any actual family. When we see both as fictionalised constructions, replete with ideologically controlled characteristics, we can play in both directions ourselves.

We can assert that there is no family until one is constructed, not observed. Anderson transforms the traditional family drama against expectations as a seductive strategy, a characteristic of all of Anderson's tradition-challenging cinematic work. Dignan in *Bottle Rocket* (1996) is no traditional criminal, Steve Zissou (Bill Murray) is surrounded by unconventionality in *The Life Aquatic* (2004), and the three Whitman brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) work against stereotype. The teenage Sam and Suzie are not easily characterised in *Moonlight Kingdom* (2012), and Fox is not quite an anthropomorphic version of a fox in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009). Anderson creates worlds that are illusory, but that also mirror the illusory nature of this world. A Baudrillardian riposte to the claim that Anderson creates worlds is to argue that Anderson in presenting his unique worlds draws attention to the illusory and seductive nature of the world from which he draws motivation. We see in the Tenenbaums a hyper-aestheticized family with each child's precociousness exaggerated and presented in typical Anderson tableaux. Chas is an economic whiz-kid, Ritchie a star tennis player in waiting and Margot a precocious writer. They are unique but are all destined to a life of pain as if they are projections of the familial imaginary that we all fear for our children, seeing their talents wasted and exploited. The warped sense of values that exists in the world that is used as criteria for success (economic, sporting, creative) is manipulated by Anderson and imposed upon the Tenenbaum children as a searing social commentary. The seduction of the real world is dangerous when mishandled.

This is the antithesis to what we may term a 'soap opera impression', where the viewer mistakes actuality for artifice and confuses the minutiae of the quotidian as staged drama. Here, the artifice resonates as artifice. It winks at actuality by aligning itself so close to it without ever being it. In part, Romney (2002) agrees in arguing that:

He furnishes his characters' world to the point of saturation, making them seem not more realistic but more fictional—or rather, making us wonder if we can tell the difference, (p. 14)

We would extend Romney's argument to a Baudrillardian frame by claiming that in a world that is self-consciously fictional and purposefully simulated, the language and criteria of critique cannot be imposed wholly from a classical theory base. The fictional world of the Tenenbaums is then not a comment on the role of art in the world, but the role of art *as* the world. This is the paradoxical seductive effect of reframing Anderson's work.

It is seductive because it can steer us away from a rational, scientific accounting of the world towards a more poetic, romantic version—which is, of course, another seduction in itself. Anderson can mirror back to us the ambivalence of reality when we encounter reality transformed into pure art. His detractors reject this and label it 'twee' or 'self-indulgent'. The paradox is we can allow ourselves to be seduced by Anderson and not see the full ambivalence in his work. We claim the reality of the world is as much an artifice as that of cinematic fiction. Here Romney's point emerges with full seductive energy because when we cannot tell the difference between actuality and the diegetic space the filmmaker from which is seducing us away, the banal world takes on a more creative frame. We just have to hold the idea Anderson is twee and not twee at the same time.

This is why we argue Anderson gives us a semblance of actuality framed in a very unnaturally geometric manner to let these two factors continually collide. His commentary on art, through art itself, is more than a reflexive dissertation on the nature of art, but also on its role in being self-critical. By a deliberate pronouncement of a filmic world as a specific entity adjacent to actuality, it allows the viewer to juxtapose this Anderson-world with other film-world forms, specifically the aesthetic intent of these forms. These worlds attempt to normalise these spaces through constant aesthetic banalities and predictabilities.

We can then see the artifice of many normalised everyday scenarios such as the office space, the sporting arena or the train carriage. In our reading, this is what aligns Anderson with Baudrillard. At one level, they are both fictionalising an already fictional or illusory world to expose the subtle shifts occurring outside of this realm. They are both seducing the world. Baudrillard solicits a response to support or deny this artificial banality. Anderson tells us through his film that the world, not just his film, is all artifice. This supports his inspiration as art as illusory, but as social reality as well. Therefore, there is no family because there is no model that we can draw upon to frame one.

Anderson can achieve this effortlessly and has done so in all his films to date. Here again is the viewer's opportunity to see Anderson's *mise-en-scène* as not only the introduction to the narrative but also the introduction to the narrative as an explicit art form. This conclusion can temper the capacity to interpret the film with a banal vocabulary. Anderson is disturbing presentation by constantly and consistently drawing attention to it, by pushing the boundaries of the filmed space through the deliberate use of framing, palette, and choreography to non-naturalise the naturalised in a startling yet subtle manner. The result is that a singular vocabulary of interpretation is difficult to produce. The default of quirky and whimsical is appealing but ultimately can be unsatisfying because it abruptly pigeonholes the film into a specious differentiation with other filmmakers charged with the same banal accounting. In support Romney (2002) declares that:

Anderson cultivates symmetries to a degree unseen since Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, characteristically shooting down the centre of tables, or framing Chas' boys like mirror-image putti. (p. 13)

Anderson's renowned balanced frame conceals just how effective is our yearning for a universally aestheticised world where everything is perennially calculated. His composition could be thus seen as a commentary on this human deficiency. In this opening scene, the

frame is bathed in yellow pastel, which accentuates the reds and gives each shot a hint of similar nostalgia and melancholy and introduces a tone of the filmmaker, indeed taking a 'sad song and making it better', feeding into this Pollyanna filter he applies, which we claim is paradoxically masquerading the bleakness of actuality. This is Anderson's virtuosity and pretension unfolding simultaneously. His meticulous set design, lighting, music and character attitude evolve from his debut feature *Bottle Rocket* (1996) onwards, creating an effect that is striking and awaiting interpretation.

Other notable family melodramas of the same time (such as Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale* (1997) tell of fractured family relationships where the adult characters live in a state of confusion. Lee and Baumbach's conventional direction and the ensemble cast acting gives both films a strong degree of realism that traverses the same broken dynamics but with a similar 'textbook' focus. Baumbach ventures into a dark territory with his thematic content and Lee's precise direction accounts for similar harrowing content of the character's psyche. In both films, the relationships deteriorate to the point of crisis and strong signifiers (a storm and a heart attack respectively) bring the films to a narrative resolution. Families are bruised but healed.

Anderson chooses to place a barrier between theme and content by adopting a more non-naturalistic form. It could be deduced that Anderson does not want to confront the darker side of family dysfunction. We would argue that Anderson is not pursuing a psychological or sociological insight into family as Lee and Baumbach do but uses this family narrative as a driver for an aesthetic experience. Divorce is at the heart of all three films, but the soul of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is drawn on a uniquely artistic palette.

For meaning, Anderson is seducing and reversing the family genre film at every available level. Welles' clever and impudent effrontery to classic cinematic narration is echoed by

Anderson's pushing of the *mise-en-scène* until it reverberates on itself. His meticulous set, symmetric shot alignments, deadpan character delivery, use of slow motion, and intertitles all declare the art first and foremost as art, not just disrupting the content-driven narrative space of the drama, but also disrupting the expectations of the presentation of the content. Romney (2002) continues:

The literary conceit (or conceitedness, as some will surely see it) is a sublimely dandyish move on the part of Anderson and his star/co-writer Owen Wilson.(p.12)

From here we argue that this dandyism is always a comment on those who see a dandyism/non-dandyism world as same/different. For many, this dandyism is too much to bear. Maximillian Le Cain in *Senses of Cinema* (2002) talks of the:

... root of the film's dramatic falseness. It pretends to be about a human situation but is content with simply cataloguing a series of events in a way designed to show off the smartness of its author instead of the feelings of its characters. (n.p.)

We argue instead that Anderson can be read to play with the idea that taking his formal aesthetic seriously so the heart of the film, as with all of Anderson's films, papers over what art really hides: the fact there is no art until it is simulated out of nullity. Artistic renditions of the family traditionally seduce us towards conclusions of banality. Le Cain wants to seduce his readers toward this conclusion. He desires the narrative to complement the stylistic flourishes, and also suggests at times that the narrative is also 'sterile and flawed'. This is the self-consciousness of Anderson, as the artifice is exaggerated to the point of exposing all film as artifice. Anderson curates his own world to demonstrate the aesthetic sterility of the one we occupy.

This is not to critique art in the Platonic sense, as Plato was distrustful of art that swayed the subject away from the truth. Our argument is Anderson's art claims that the truth is contingent, and thus cinematic truth is *de facto* illusory. Through Anderson, the viewer can

now be immersed in a world where the inability to distance themselves from the very fact they are in a film world either weighs them down or allows them to glimpse the ‘white magic’ of cinema. It also dictates the vocabulary they choose to articulate this effect. For example, a positive journalistic critique such as that of *The Guardian’s* Peter Bradshaw (2002) concludes:

Every single character in *The Royal Tenenbaums* is drawn with terrific wit and intelligence, and we grinned our way through it. But is it possible to feel moved by any of them, as Wes Anderson evidently expects? The answer - for all the soundtrack-melancholy that the director conjures up with vinyl classics from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s - is no, because, unlike the more humanly ordinary *Rushmore*, the *Royal Tenenbaums* are a quirk away from real life. (n.p.)

Whereas the negative view is exemplified by Rob Nelson’s (2008) summary that:

Wes Anderson's basic strategy in all his films: to test whether the most absurd flourishes of character, costume, and set design can combine to deny those few "universal" truths (at least for white guys) about friendship (*Bottle Rocket*), school (*Rushmore*), or family. That *The Royal Tenenbaums* has to do with death as well helps to make it more resonant and melancholy than its predecessor. (n.p.)

Again, the responses here are dominated by the ‘quirk’ and ‘absurdity’ of the *mise-en-scène*, and the measurement is always compared to classically generated style. Much aesthetic intent is attributed to Anderson, but we want to argue that the zero point of the tone of this film is not the moment the viewer realises they are in an Anderson film, but when the viewer realises *The Royal Tenenbaums itself* is seducing the very presuppositions of filmic presentation and value. In Baudrillardian terms, this is the seductive import where the fatal is opposed to the banal, where the clichéd opening shot, the hackneyed shot and counter-shot, and the predictable, naturalised and normalised characterisation begins to ‘go into reverse’. Both journalists above sense this ‘seductive reversal’, but react in their own seductive but predictable ways, merely reinforcing the production of banalities. These journalistic

assumptions are also often evident in academic theory concerning Anderson and his form. One exemplary way to prosecute this argument is to look at how the idea of family is constructed. Anderson's Tenenbaums demonstrate in a Baudrillardian manner that there is no family.

### **3.5 Family does not occur.**

Our argument is that any claim to a *pre-factum* social realism can be challenged, especially any attempt to align realism in the cinema with consistent foundational actuality. At this level, Anderson's film provides a sociological critique of family dynamics, but also a critique of the cinematic portrayal of family that is often far too dogmatic in its representation of social veracity. Anderson gives us a family that engages with the viewer's preconceptions of the cinematic family and facilitates a seductive critique of the cinematic family and its filmic genealogy. When we say there is no family, akin to Baudrillard, we mean that there is no family until we make one appear and sell the seductive idea to those eager for commentary.

Cinematic images are representations of a specific version of reality made to appear to be what is best described in psychoanalytic terms as 'phantasmatic'. The viewer is confronted with a realism contoured by a subjectivised perspective. Referring to Spielberg's invasion on Omaha beach in his *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the sounds of bullets tearing through flesh can be perceived as real partly because the viewer believes (usually without any direct experience) that this is a true account of the event. It becomes 'the truth' as Spielberg's creative presentation seduces them toward it. Without considered research, this is not possible. There is no simple way to validate the auditory veracity without having the historical experience of battle, but the viewer would rarely contest the legitimacy of the presentation. We would like to extend this critique of realism to incorporate more quotidian human experiences—in this instance, the issues surrounding the contemporary family. If the

viewer can feel like they are present at the Battle of Omaha and efface any imagined memory of the battle with Spielberg's recreation of it, the same can be said for the more mundane recreations of realism: the present-day family melodrama. Independent cinema has a partiality for family drama, especially the genre denoted as 'smart', which Claire Perkins (2012) suggests that:

Across the body of smart films there are directors who repeatedly deal with the dynamic between blood relations or their substitutions. (p. 76)

Perkins declares Wes Anderson to be one who 'demonstrate examples of the thematic fixation' on family relationships (p. 77). This is inextricably entwined with what Deleuze termed the unsteadiness of the American Dream in all its aspects (Flaxman, 2000, p. 28). The idea of upward social mobility and an egalitarian, democratic state is a fixation Anderson also helps to expose. Anderson's family dynamics, pursuing this upward social mobility as exemplified in *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore* as well as *The Royal Tenenbaums*, reveals more truth than fantasy. It is also this fixation that we argue is seductive in the sense that it is often interpreted as 'quirky' and 'eccentric', but in actuality is more accurate and general than is acknowledged. Anderson may not be especially unique in this among independent/smart directors from the point of view of depicting dysfunctional families, but he is unique in what we argue is the members of these families' attempt to match their unique self-fashioning projects, mirrored or reflected by his unique style. His 'confectured' and 'whimsical' diegetic space intentionally grates against these characters' attempts to complete their own unique individual undertakings. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, all the major protagonists are at odds with any diegetic space ascribed as 'whimsical'. From the gruff and tired countenance of Royal Tenenbaum in the opening scene, framed symmetrically by plush scarlet chairs and ornate chandeliers and textured with Anderson's signature colours of red and yellow, he sits uncomfortably in the frame while being interrogated by his three children. What Anderson

has done is set the family genre into formal reversal as the film paves the way for a similar duel to be affected by the content.

Murray Pomerance (2008) suggests the family is a cultural dream obsession to which we return over and over (p. 1). This dream obsession manifests, at one level as a quest for realism that grows out of a narrative engine that is 'structurally central' (p. 3). But Anderson's point of extreme difference, misdiagnosed as quirky, is that there is no real family, and that striving to document it will be bound to fail, especially in Baudrillard's terms because of the simulated nature of representation. Thomas Schatz (1981) defines this family melodrama genre as fixated on:

Its interrelated family of characters, its repressive small-town milieu, and its preoccupation with America's sociosexual mores. (p. 224)

In the area of what Michael Newman (2011) terms 'indie realism', we would argue that the effects of independent filmmakers to create a rhythm that accords to actuality is merely another branch of independent narrative tendencies rather than fidelity to actuality. As such, Wes Anderson seduces the filmed space of family away from its simulated presentation by engaging in a critique by the contrary presentation. He exposes that there is no family through the seduction away from our own perceived truth of the family. It is the form of this critique rather than the content that signifies Anderson's singularity.

The viewer can conclude that Anderson is presenting a dysfunctional quirky family such as the Tenenbaums without considering the fuller implications of what is happening onscreen. While some filmmakers strive to portray a true-to-life *mise-en-scène* through the 'naturalistic' dialogue and 'ordinary' set design, often depicting the dystopian tone of contemporary *ennui*, our argument is that the actuality is a distorted representation of the more accurate state of an existential incoherence and uncertainty. Indie realism, in films such

as Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) are not mirrors of contemporary American life. Life is, for many, a radically disjointed, stumbling set of randomised encounters, with a directionless ambiguity as the measuring stick of actuality. Goals and an overarching sense of teleological certainty become retrospectively accounted for, and more often its opposite applies at any given moment. In short, the more disjointed and fragmented independent offerings such as those of Anderson, and Kaufman might at one level be a more accurate depiction of actuality. Anderson achieves this by locating characters deficient or hamstrung in their self-fashioning projects, encountering physical spaces that are perfectly manicured. This serves as a metaphorical disjuncture, emblematic of the existential *ennui* common to contemporary life. Each Tenenbaum child is captured in their anxiety-ridden world-weariness which, again, jars against Anderson's vibrant, symmetrical frame. The form of his perfect framing draws our attention to the severe imperfections of not only his families, but those of all families.

Moreover, the depiction of the family in both *The Royal Tenenbaums* (and *The Darjeeling Limited*), announce or more appropriately accuse the melodramatic, realistic cinematic encounter of being a true account of Baudrillard's third level of simulation. This is where the copy (film object) has no need of the original (actual family). The actual family does not really exist until it is seduced into appearance and is generated and supported by a phantasmatic account lodged in the social imaginary drawn upon to inform the viewer they are on the 'right track'. Therefore, any attempt to label this film whimsical or quirky cannot be anything but a questioning of the illusory status of actuality. It is not that there are whimsical films and/or serious films to make types of films. They cannot be added together to make a whole (Grace, 2000, p. 38). The definitions are subject to this illusory status and can only be contained within a model that accepts the dual or binary outlook. Instead, a Baudrillardian film philosophy may see *The Royal Tenenbaums* as encroaching on and transforming the

viewer's idea of what a family can ever really be. Instead, the moment we treat the 'mainstream cinematic family' as being other to the indie family, new aesthetic battle lines are drawn. Cognitive film aesthetics would rightly conclude that the patterns and predictive tropes of form and style produce a certain aesthetic, but for Baudrillard, this goes deeper. The mainstream system is putting forward its other to occlude the fact that it does not exist in reality, but merely in simulation. A customised aesthetic would address this, dissolving the binary and searching for its own more authentic seductive response.

If the rhythmic verity of indie realism is a construction, aping the wish fulfilment of a social desire for a real that was fluid, temporally elegant, predictable, and meaningful, then an argument can be made that this verity is, in fact, unfaithful, especially to the phenomenological perspective of the common existential *ennui* or the everyday. Taken at this level, Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* is an accurate embodiment of what is actual. This is because the actual family is only a mirrored rendition of its fictive counterpart. There is no actual family because each family can only envisage itself as 'other' to the social imaginary, establishing a phantasmatic distance to this 'other' that does not actually exist. They could articulate this as "Our family is nothing like the family on American sitcoms." But what makes this declaration possible is the imaginary 'other' to this family, which never truly existed in the first place, but was a construction of mainstream cinema and television. Hence the viewer can see that the eponymous Tenenbaums at one level are indicative of an every-family, while at the same time being the quirky other to the common-sensical family of the social imaginary. They function as both and neither consecutively, depending on our seductive prejudices.

Therefore, Anderson allows the viewer to appreciate the same seductive movement between the raw diegetic presentation and any attempt to account for it. Yet this connection has also

engendered accusations of a self-referentially induced claustrophobia. Dana Stephens (2007) writing in *Slate* magazine argues:

Wes Anderson is an ongoing source of bafflement, especially for those of us who still have any patience for his films. Ever since *Rushmore*, we've been waiting for him to realize his tremendous potential as a filmmaker. But if Anderson is J.D. Salinger—the writer whose presence hangs most palpably over his work—*Rushmore* may be destined to be his *Catcher in the Rye*: a note-perfect coming-of-age story whose status as an adolescent classic paralyzes its author for the rest of his career. His subsequent films have been more like Salinger's Glass family stories. They're miniaturist studies of haute-bourgeois anomie that, however deftly sketched, ultimately shut down on themselves. (n.p.)

J. D. Salinger's characters reflect cynicism and weariness that can be aligned with many of Anderson's studies. But the status of *The Royal Tenenbaums* as a film investigating the family blighted with anomie, dysfunction, or eccentricity can also be challenged with a Baudrillardian attitude. We think close attention can be paid to Anderson's precise wording here. He claims he has imitated and stolen from Salinger. But this could also imply that his simulated Salinger could always be an ambivalent rendering, not a simulated copy, thus making it a homage to the form rather than the content of Salinger.

### **3.6 Using seduction as a critical tool: An engagement with Bordwell.**

We can now turn to Bordwell as an exemplar of the prosecution of the banal. While Bordwell is interested in the response to cinema generated by empirical observation, he precludes or minimises the necessary ambivalence we are trying to establish. Anderson's take on families is, from our point of view, 'truthful', and Bordwell's conclusion is that he is 'turning adults into toy people' (Bordwell in Zoller Seitz, 2016, p. 240).

We contend that Anderson has absorbed some lessons from mainstream cinema in more specific ways. Since the *Star Wars* series (1977-ongoing), Hollywood has been seen ever more eager to try "world-making"—adapting the traditions of fantasy, science-fiction and

comic books to creating separate realms governed by their own contingent rules. Our point is that the created world whether it be a Death star, a school populated by Vampires, or the earth heading for spectacular ecological disaster do indeed reflect some philosophical questions about the actual world we live in. The Death star films reveal the Machiavellian quest for power and its ethical implications, the Vampire films explore the nature of heroism and the ecological disaster films challenge our relationship between individual and collective responsibility. These films turn worlds into toy worlds but with deep real resonances in the actual world.

According to Fredric Jameson (2015), Bordwell takes a ‘paradigmatically technical approach to cinema’ (p. 140), avoiding the non-technical for what David Rodowick (2007) argues is ‘wedded to science’ (p. 99). The problem Rodowick and Jameson see is that Bordwell and his cognitivist allies do not ‘philosophise’ (Rodowick, 2007, p. 109) in a classic sense, but prefer an analytical and logical dependence on ‘plausible hypotheses’ (Turvey, as cited in Wartenburg & Curren, 2005, p. 24). They want their film worlds to be more phenomenologically coherent with scientific interpretation, which would include the most cryptic and experimental of film worlds being responded to in this same reasoned manner. They want to ‘wed reality to theory’ (Price, 2014, p. 64) which, apart from being anathema to Baudrillard, would infer that there is a clearer cut distinction between Anderson’s frame and any putative real world.

In contrast, we assert that toy people are actually all there are. Bordwell (2018) argues that Anderson (alongside children’s authors J. M. Barrie and G. K. Chesterton) invites us to imagine a richer, livelier realm behind prosaic reality. We would argue instead that, with Baudrillard, we would see nothing behind the prosaic reality other than more prosaic signification. Anderson is certainly concerned with the artistic presentation of childhood, but

the emphasis is primarily on the art. Here, Baudrillard's notion of seduction can respond to the cognitivist desire for 'dialectical responsibility' (Carroll, as cited in Wartenburg & Curren, 2005, p. 14) because it undermines the attempt to frame any analysis in same or different binaries, as outlined above. For Bordwell, analysis is most satisfying when it establishes this binary. However, if we see the film work exposed to the power of seduction, this binary again comes under scrutiny. Seduction counters claims for empirical analysis because these claims are often disguised ideology or operate ideologically on the film viewer. Seduction scuttles ideology by playfully yet ceaselessly usurping ideological claims. The first ramification of reading *The Royal Tenenbaums* in this way is to eschew empirical analysis of the film in favour of a singular one that refuses the seduction of any broader systematic assumptions.

To illustrate, there is a moment in Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* that exemplifies our claims. This moment occurs toward the end of the film when Royal Tenenbaum is buried. The set piece is typical of Wes Anderson's work. The camera pans around a 180-degree arc, and the mourners are grouped according to the affiliations they have developed over the course of the film. Etheline Tenenbaum (Angelica Houston), stands with her new partner Henry Sherman (Danny Glover), Royal's associates Dusty (Seymour Cassel) and Pagoda (Kumar Pallana), Margot Tenenbaum (Gwyneth Paltrow), and Chas Tenenbaum (Owen Wilson), Raleigh St. Claire (Bill Murray) and Dudley Heinsbergen (Steven Leacock) each hold one hand of an umbrella. As the camera sweeps past a black tracksuited Chas Tenenbaum (Ben Stiller), he signals to his children to discharge their B. B. guns in salute.

David Bordwell suggests Anderson creates an 'absurd geometry and a deadpan humour' (Zoller-Seitz, 2015, p. 239) with this effect. However, by stating that the geometry is absurd, Bordwell makes an interesting implicit declaration. There must be a 'reasonable' or 'rational'

geometry, a counter to the absurd to represent a framed shot. Bordwell gestures to a more haphazard geometrical realism, aligning the film world with the real world. A real funeral should not be so carefully choreographed. However, we are back in the realm of same/different and are implicitly preferencing one over the other. In terms of cognitive analysis, the mind's attempts to reconcile Anderson's choreography with the film object cannot be made comfortably and, in Bordwell's words, it must be absurd.

Hence, Anderson's use of the 'absurd' denaturalises the film space/mental space and can be alternatively labelled using the humdrum markers he does. This may allow the typical viewer to demarcate between the actual and the artificial and to attach various categorisations to Anderson's work. The application of the term 'absurd' highlights an expectation of the non-unification of the filmed funeral space. The expectation is that a funeral should be one where choreography is not that apparent. What Bordwell claims as naturalised is an arrangement lacking in geometric symmetry; Bordwell can only see the absurd geometry of Anderson and as such would not commit to the absurdity of social reality itself. This is true but restricts the viewer from also concluding that Anderson's world is an aesthetic commentary on filmed objects themselves. Anderson's deployment of symmetry and carefully choreographed character placement allows an aesthetic appearance to emerge as a curatorial challenge to accepting any appearance as naturalised or unified.

The seductive resonance of his frame is not located only in the realm of absurdity, which appears as a primary interpretation, but also in reversion, where the standard filmed funeral is interrogated by his stylised filmed funeral. Consequently, Anderson's accentuation of geometry is not only empirically absurd but also occludes the incongruous and irrational use of geometry as an aesthetic statement again about the absurdity of cinematic appearances themselves. Hence, we can conclude that the film world of Anderson is not only a self-

enclosed creation marked by whimsical geometric conformity and deadpan melancholic characters, but also a transformative rebuke to the claim that the non-diegetic is any more empirically valid either. Seduction in its Baudrillardian configuration allows the viewer to critically examine and challenge both. The movement of thinking is clear here: the viewer takes the semiotic claim of absurdity and pushes it past the absurd/rational binary and sees it as interrogating the world using the binary as its most potent weapon.

Bordwell also argues that Anderson's use of the camera and stringent choreography of the characters is not new, and he suggests that often Anderson forces us to look into a framed world where the characters often look back at us (Zoller Seitz, 2015, p. 239). But Anderson does not just create a world we can immerse ourselves in but creates a world that by inference critically engages with other film worlds. This is accurate for this funeral scene. However, we could also think more adventurously and suggest that his characters also are looking into the film world itself as a challenge. In a similar vein to Kaufman's outrageous funeral scenes in *Synecdoche, New York*, Anderson 'pushes' his choreography and symbolism beyond reason, as if to steer the viewer's attention away from the narrative resonance of Royal's death and back to the filmmaking aesthetics itself.

If Bordwell decrees a funeral scene as needing to contain non-geometrical character placements, staring at the burial plot rather than staring at the camera, what may be Anderson's aesthetic statement? The ramification of using seduction as a conceptual maneuver is to see that this normality and naturalism of, in this instance, funeral arrangements is a seduction that can best be countered and challenged by selecting a funeral scene and taking it to an extreme, as Anderson and Kaufman do. We do not have to accept that funeral scenes must contain specific looks and bodily gestures both inside and outside the diegetic space. Anderson stresses this and elicits a counter-reading to the unsurprising

interpretation by filming it according to his own aesthetic rules. This is a funeral scene that is highly stylised, choreographed and shot surreptitiously. In framing the action, narration, costuming, voiceover, and soundtrack, Anderson has no intention of creating a facsimile of reality, but rather a facsimile of the way cinema represents reality as seduction.

To continue, the argument takes issue with Bordwell's observations not in terms of their 'accuracy' but on the level that his analysis is always preliminary. Exhaustive and extensive, Bordwell's notion of aesthetics or 'historical poetics' is a call to empirical classification based on scientific principles that are partly a response to the cultural wars of the 1980s, when competing film theory schools were at their most combative (see Rodowick, 2007). Our argument embraces the idea that Bordwell is attempting to make his approach paradoxically occlude the film object in favour of a community of like-minded epistemologically consensual interpreters. As such, he tries to steer us away from what he conceives as non-empirical, as they are 'vague and equivocal' (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996, p. 17). But vagueness and equivocality are the domain Baudrillard strives to inhabit. While Bordwell wants to situate his work in the empirical, Baudrillard wants to make vaguer and more equivocal and hence inhabit that domain as a means of writing about the world.

This is why we can also stress affinity with Royal's tombstone, which impishly states: Died saving his family from a sinking battleship.

This is a spit in the eye of conventionality, suggesting that his death is not symbolically captured yet and that death is not the cultural finality we work so feverishly to assert. Royal's death on the battleship is no death at all because he has the temerity to lie on his headstone. While Royal has established paternal authority *post-mortem*, he has also prosecuted the last act of seduction and ended the game with a delirious checkmate. Bordwell asserts Anderson's form is 'other' to what the cognitive apparatus of the film viewer 'expects', which may be

empirically accurate. However, this very expectation is what Anderson exploits. The difference between our conclusion and Bordwell's, who describes Anderson as achieving an almost 'ceremonial' (Bordwell, as cited in Zoller Seitz, 2015, p. 238) formalism, is in how we can read the confrontation with this expectation.

Instead of resorting to Bordwell's accurate yet predictable vocabulary, which often refers to film viewing as a psychological process of 'excessive obviousness' (Hayward 2000), we do not have to conclude Anderson is 'other' to more mainstream filmmakers. Anderson's framed world, as Bordwell puts it in his essay (Bordwell as cited in Zoller Seitz 2015), implicitly creates the notion that there is a real, actual, empirical world from which to judge it. For Bordwell, where we want to go requires 'unconstrained association' (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996, p. 23) which is, in his terms, true. But there is an alternative approach in operation. Rodowick (2015) takes Bordwell to task for his 'rational agent theory' (p. 30) arguing that Bordwell ascribes far too much intentionality to the film viewer. As such, he neglects the unconscious processes at work on the viewer that may frustrate agency and place the whole notion of ideological interpellation in neglect.

On a deliberately tangential level, our argument is to see how Anderson confronts this attempt to frame a world, or any world, an impossibility. A 'traditional' reading could be either to read Royal's tombstone literally and take it as part of Royal's mischievous, specious nature, or metaphorically, as Royal in a sense has saved the family from sinking by his late-life intervention. Taking our cue from Baudrillard, the aesthetic resonance of this scene is achieved by envisioning its totality as a seductive commentary on filmmaking's failure in aesthetics, or more pointedly, Anderson highlights the failure of cinema to be truly aesthetic. What we argue is that what is meant here is aesthetic 'judgments are inconclusive' (Rodowick, 2015, p. 194) and should be the site of constant revaluation and contestation.

Anderson achieves this by seducing both form and content, having the thematic narrative arc and the mise-en-scène both gaze back at the viewer as a means of excessive challenge and destabilising manoeuvre.

We can see in Anderson's film, as repeating the excessive formality his notion of cinematic 'art', a deliberate resistance to the way it is practised in more mainstream fare, but simultaneously opening himself up to the severe criticism he receives from commentators. In this funeral scene he inhabits a quasi-realist depiction of a funeral, then takes the semiotic impositions of a typical funeral and rearranges them into an antirealist formalised composition. This is hyper-materialised with the ultimate focus on the impishly concocted gravestone. Hence the diegetic space occupies a strong formal dimension that we can conclude stands in for nothing except for comment on the process of filmmaking itself. The narrative and thematic resonance of Royal's funeral is depressed by Anderson's formalist flair, drawing our attention to the absence of ultimate meaning in filmmaking itself. In summary, Anderson seduces us towards his narrative and thematic imprints by concocting interpretable signs of the funeral—the coffin lowered, the dark coloured dress of the mourners—then away at the same time by the ordered, stylised choreography. His aesthetic statement read this way is overtly political because it strikes back at filmmaking itself, which privileges the semiotics of funeral scenes to be matched by, not jarringly contrary, to the form of the film. In this way, Anderson's entire oeuvre post-*Bottle Rocket* uses form and content seductively. By considering his aesthetic style as establishing an other to mainstream filmmaking fare, we do not just see a 'carpentered' world (Bordwell in Zoller Seitz, 2015, p. 285), but he also questions any external objectivity.

This norm of objectivity is what foregrounds an interpretative appearance, but it can also stifle explanatory originality. Through the option to move toward a more singular vocabulary,

or at the very least to develop a broader more self-generated vocabulary, we can see *The Royal Tenenbaums* aptly demonstrating how Anderson and his protagonists aesthetically rearrange the ‘subject’s desire for knowledge and power’ (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 36), over the aesthetics of the filmed space. What could be an innocuous plot device in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, such as providing backstory to Margot Tenenbaum’s actions, is presented in such a way that could be, as Bordwell observes, cutting ‘whimsy with grotesquerie’ (Zoller-Seitz, 2015, p. 237) to explain Margot Tenenbaum’s missing finger. This narrative backstory produces the simple account of Margot’s true biological father and her missing digit. Margot is estranged, and her entire countenance throughout the film is one of dark and bitter melancholy. However, the severed finger and the circumstances in which it is framed deliberately creates an informational ‘excess’ that cannot be fully captured nor rationalised with theory. This excessive aesthetic over-coding by Anderson also accentuates the way Baudrillardian seduction is conceived. A metaphysical acknowledgement of seduction tempers the interpretative fullness of an art piece that may be deliberately constructed to frustrate interpretation. No matter what explanatory claim is put on the way he explains the missing finger, be it Lacanian, semiotic, or Deleuzian, the claim can only be tactical. In attempting through language to capture an object that is essentially visual, this excess is exposed. Anderson’s strength is in the implicit subtlety infused in this explicit choreography.

Anderson deliberately accumulates an aesthetic effect, making it too real, becoming a ‘triumphant parody’ of the filmmaking version of the narrative backstory itself. Our reading has Anderson refusing to be considered as whimsical by this very hyper-aesthetic, thus rendering the staging as observation or commentary as much as narrative. This is a ‘planned’ ambivalence depicting an ‘aesthetic effect’ that hides the absence of any transcendent aesthetic reality outside of the diegetic space. A deliberate excess is a strategy to expose that

in actuality it is no excess at all because it does not have a norm to which it can be compared. It makes aesthetics possible and frustratingly inadequate at the same time.

To acknowledge an intellectualised aesthetic response to forms of cinema, such as those of Bordwell, allows the viewer to acknowledge the attempt to sense the empirical, cognitively biased representation of film. The excess that cannot be acknowledged or captured is the magical-poetic or the domain of the symbolic. In Baudrillardian terms, any system will always be undone by its own 'systemacity' (2000b, p. 78). Even by those who criticise it assume that criticism is other to systemic thought, whereas it is actually an integral part of it. Therefore, Bordwell (2000) declares on his website:

When film scholars talk about movies, they usually also offer interpretations: claims about the non-obvious meanings we can find in films. Interpretations can be thought of as particular sorts of functional explanations. An interpretation presupposes that aspects of the film (style, structure, dialogue, and plot) contribute to its overall significance.

We can conclude that Bordwell is precisely right about the combination of style, structure, dialogue and plot, but the significance it purports cannot explain how the repetition of these can be undermined through the sheer weight of their own repetitiveness. The viewer may recognise the narrative trajectory of the film from shot to shot, and rationally account for it, but at the same time tire of the explicit manipulation of emotions and bodily sensations being affected.

The iconic image of an explosion where stunt actors complete a forward somersault at the camera may be repeated relentlessly but if the audience is unaffected, the filmmakers will adjust or ratchet up their approach. Hence, Bordwell unfolds a form of aesthetic language that is methodological, but Baudrillard also postulates an expanded aesthetic seduction that challenges the system in preference to explaining it. They both start with the image and explore how the films reflect culture. Both want to work with the image to determine how it

works in the 'real'. For Bordwell, it is an empirical entity, both rational and coherent, but for Baudrillard, it is exactly the opposite.

By introducing more ambivalence into interpretation, the viewer can resist strong readings as a transformative entity that is always establishing a reality such as Bordwell's claim of Anderson's childlike 'sense of innocence' (Bordwell in Zoller Seitz, 2015, pp. 238-240) becoming irreversible and obscene. That is, if you characterise Anderson as creating a world of childlike magical realism, you simultaneously elevate the 'real world' as containing elevated aesthetic truths. We could think here of the everyday television soap opera, where the notions of ambivalence are replaced by a very banal and restricted set of anticipated filmed outcomes. We know that the soap opera is a ruse when it comes to 'reality'. But this is merely a counter-ruse to hide the fact that solid social reality does not exist anywhere other than where the interpreter simulates it. The seductive nature of the soap is reliant on faux-surprises, and plot turns and characterisations being wholly predictable. This complements the form that the viewer expects, but in Baudrillardian terms, the obscenity lies in its very use and predictability. A seductive filmmaker in this manner can challenge this predictability by exposing it as simulation, 'real'-ising the film's artifice as an engagement with artifice itself. The seduction is, therefore, making interpretation say what it does not want to say (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 53). We do this by strategically avoiding the banal interpretation and seeking a more poetic response, one in which the film object generally conceived is replaced by another object. Here, *The Royal Tenenbaums* is re-theorised as not merely a film about dysfunctional families, but one that seduces this form away towards a more idiosyncratic vocabulary.

### 3.7 Conclusion: Paving the way for a fatal theory.

*The Royal Tenenbaums* demonstrates a filmmaker who, at face value, offers these easy targets to expose the paucity of the vocabulary of his critics. Anderson is important and perhaps decidedly important because he best exemplifies the Baudrillardian attitude of taking this (simulated) ‘reality’ and making it ‘reverse on itself’. Hence Anderson, in our construal, is the consummate seductive filmmaker, reconstituting ambivalence through his challenge to weak simulation. This is because his presentation, as stated, can encourage the viewer to develop a vocabulary that contravenes this banal reading, effectively seducing banality by reversing banality back into itself.

This exposes, highlights, and finally critiques the simulated nature of classic cinema we are trying to avoid. As soon as a ‘typical’ Anderson scene is offered for analysis in juxtaposition, *both* scenes appear as simulations. Anderson constantly frustrates the frame by doing this. In *Bottle Rocket*, a store heist is suddenly estranged by the thieves Dignan (Owen Wilson) and Anthony (Luke Wilson), inexplicably placing sticking plaster on their noses. In *The Life Aquatic*, an interview between Bill Murray and Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett) is alienated by a killer whale swimming past. Anderson’s strategy is to constantly skate between realism and fantasy, with the *mise-en-scène* dominated by an artistic eye never fully jettisoning actuality. The typical melodrama is a simulation, but this can only be fully appreciated through taking Anderson’s presentation into account. Anderson’s is not a whimsical version of its other, but rather the other is a simulated version of a filmmaker attempting to work with a set of external rules that do not exist. Anderson from this point of view has no set of rules and thus could be said to be blissfully negligent in establishing them. Put another way, to seduce the term ‘whimsical’ away from its accepted domain (as the deviation by mere caprice) and utilise it to challenge its very own definition is a metaphysical

endgame. Hence Anderson does not take whimsical deviations from reality, but reality itself is always whimsically deviating.

Art has become too self-aware of itself as art and thus loses this ambivalence. It suffers from the attempt to consolidate itself as art, which for Baudrillard forms an 'objective irony' (2005, p. 204). We read this as a confrontation with art, the art industry and theory because, as Baudrillard maintains, we have lost 'the desire of illusion' (2005, p. 25); the most prevalent aesthetic characteristics that motivated Baudrillard's appreciation for 'art'. Film is an aesthetic medium that is also responsible, from this point of view, of becoming in many ways too obscene, destroying the aforementioned desire and illusion that promotes ambivalence.

This chapter has argued that we can counter simulation with ambivalence and that perhaps a true Baudrillardian aesthetics seduces what is already reversing. Aesthetics is seduction, but the point of the chapter was to demonstrate how Anderson has a specific aesthetic that duels with and seduces traditional aesthetics away from itself using a hyper-banality as his most potent weapon. This, in turn, becomes a new aesthetics, what may be termed anti-aesthetics inasmuch that it can represent and challenge its other at the same time. We open up a horizon for Baudrillardian 'fatal theories', which is the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Rushmore and Fatality: An encounter (there is no art).**

### **4.1 Introduction: Why not Deleuze? The challenge to sameness.**

With attending to seduction come the dangers and exhilaration of Baudrillardian fatality. The argument we have made thus far is that the excessive influx of signs can lead to an epistemological confusion in which the Real is eclipsed by its simulated other, and this can be fatal. Fatal is meant as both a form of destiny and a form of mortality, fostering a living death where the viewer can act as a mere relay in a system, a blind adherent to the codes of the monolithic arrangement of behaviour. We saw with *The Royal Tenenbaums* that this simulation is represented as a dysfunctional family, while we argue that all families are distinctly and uniquely dysfunctional; yet the film viewer often defaults to banal interpretation to ward off this confusion. There is a form of psychological safety in defaulting to banality. With this in mind, we deliberately align Baudrillardian fatality as an endgame of seduction to further accentuate how the interpretation of cinema as art is muddied by the contemporary zeitgeist. In other words, a fatal theory is always on the interpretative horizon.

Contemporary times, for Baudrillard, are producing a world burdened by opinion and devoid of meaningful response—the frightening result of death by social media, which, we would argue, is destined to accelerate the death (fatality) of meaning. It is a means of pushing seduction and reversibility to their limits to see the system of interpretation and value and meaning challenged. Ubiquitous social media platforms give everybody a voice to articulate an opinion, but these opinions do not have to be reviewed or signed off for authenticity or truthfulness. The result may be dangerous for the current political process as evidenced by the seamless rise of far-right politics or even the domination of free-to-air television

programming of so-called ‘reality television’ where once again opinion both in and of these transmissions adds to the plethora of potential views.

There is a dangerous inevitability about a world in which images are overrepresented as intellectual stimulus. We may go either of two ways: one is to fatally subscribe to over-obedience (Wernick as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 70), resulting in the aforementioned banality through developing an explanatory vocabulary akin to all others, or attempt to make this vocabulary disappear. In the first instance, illusion is destroyed and may become irreversible, and a fatal outcome is assured. In the second, we may open up a Baudrillardian-inspired film philosophy that is, in turn, a fatal blow to banality.

The central proposition developed in this chapter is to exchange Wes Anderson’s work with ‘fatal’ filmmaking when filtered through our Baudrillardian paradigm. This important use of fatality builds upon the diagnostic means of seduction developed in the previous chapter and, if we accept Baudrillard’s pivotal premises or deploy the form of his thought, allows us an even more dexterous approach to cinema. To document this position, this first section of the chapter will examine the intersection of our reading of Baudrillard’s articulation of ‘fatality’ as it meshes with Gilles Deleuze’s broader philosophic concepts of cinema. This generates a means of encountering the film image with a vocabulary that does not replicate that which is often enunciated. Distinguishing Baudrillard from Deleuze is undertaken to show how two singular thinkers operate, but not to prefer one over the other. The exemplar of this chapter will be Wes Anderson’s 1998 film *Rushmore*, which we argue can be read as an example of Baudrillardian ‘fatal’ filmmaking. The aim is that by deploying the similarities and differences between Baudrillard’s and Deleuze’s respective systems, a ‘banal’ rendering of *Rushmore* is circumvented. ‘Fatal’ and ‘banal’ are our specific Baudrillardian terms that

denote his response to the object—in this case, the film object. As such, the key questions of this chapter are:

1. What is a fatal encounter in the cinema?
2. How can Baudrillard be used to fatally encounter *Rushmore*?
3. What is the productive outcome of envisioning Deleuze's cinema through a Baudrillardian paradigm?

As established in the previous chapter, when Baudrillard argues that he 'sides with the object', he is putting forward the strategic proposition he has jettisoned the idea of the subject as a mere phenomenological assertion, rather than any transcendent epistemological primacy. His strategy is 'fatal' in that the subject (or any systemic thought) can only suspend, not defeat the object. It is the fate of the object to avoid capture in a transcendent universalised meaning. The subject is always trying in vain to describe and give meaning to the world, and meaning and value are contingent and temporary. As such, Baudrillard duels with banality as a methodological strategy that, at the very least, allows us to expose the triteness of systemic thinking that can dominate film encounters.

Baudrillard's hyperbolic line of attack is to challenge the subject to 'side with the object' by offering counter-meanings in an ironic contest with the subject at the behest of the object. Of course, there is an implicit logical fallacy here (Baudrillard is forever the subject), but the end result is always a 'fatal strategy' that undermines the constant repetitive triviality of the subject in a world where thought is typically the repetition of cognition, what Deleuze describes as the 'dogmatic image of thought' (Maratti, 2003, p. 83). Both Baudrillard and Deleuze stridently oppose this 'dogmatism', albeit with different intentions. Deleuze builds a system of opposition charged with a philosophical genealogy, but Baudrillard prefers to push the serving systems to their demise. Deleuze is seeking the essence of cinema to delineate it

as an art form in its own right, but Baudrillard has no such intention, preferring to eschew essences, feeling essences had somehow slipped us by and passed into the object (Baudrillard, 1993b, p. 182). For Baudrillard, this means that the essence of art should remain secret and illusory. In our reading, this is a Baudrillardian fatal strategy: to push through the complicity of conformity because of its deadening effects. Here the viewing subject deflects or defers seduction operating on them and return seductions by the viewing subject. This in part distinguishes Deleuze from Baudrillard but also makes their work, when taken together, a useful way to develop a new vocabulary.

There is no tension in this strategy except in the form of the ultimate objective. Our objective in the first section of this chapter is to apply some broad Deleuzian observations to *Rushmore* and then filter them through Baudrillard's notion of fatality as we conceive it to see what form of vocabulary can emerge. In this conception, we cannot utilise Deleuze alone. That would just create another system, albeit a creative one. Consequently, the first section of this chapter will take *Rushmore* as a film object and push an elementary Deleuzian reading of it towards a fatal reading. The second section of the chapter will then take this methodology and apply it to the critical reception of *Rushmore* with the same intention. The previous chapter presented the value of apprehending *The Royal Tenenbaums* with Baudrillardian seduction as a critical tool for a specific form of encounter with cinema and aesthetics. This chapter begins with a dialogue between a Baudrillardian interpretation of *Rushmore* and some synoptic concerns of Deleuze's deeply original writings, specifically his work in his two books on cinema. The purpose is to not preference one over the other, nor to see obvious similarities and pronounced differences, but rather from a Baudrillardian perspective to apprehend how Baudrillard's fatal theory seems to have the last word, rendering Deleuze's theory itself eventually fatal.

We can see here why Baudrillard denounced the ‘art industry’ that was making art banal to the point of economic hagiography. The application of language to make the art world more real was a primary target of Baudrillard’s career trajectory (Baudrillard, 2005). The idea of a ‘fatal theory’ in this chapter is to make the (film) object more elusive, mysterious, and illusory such that banality disappears into its own meaninglessness. A fatal encounter is one in which the object ‘outwits’ us by being wary of a banal encounter. Of course, the danger in that fatality is that we can outwit ourselves (Wernick in Clarke, 2013, p. 70). In a film world where franchised tentpole cinema abounds, and celebrity adoration drives much film content, an intervention could be a remedy for invigoration.

The fatal view reacts to the banal with a will to challenge both cause and effect and the systems of power themselves. These systems wish to see what Victoria Grace (2000) terms the logic of non-reversibility’ (p. 135), where the productivist economically governed system ensures that defiance is suppressed. Baudrillard (1994) opined that a highly mediatised world was obliterating the analysis of causes (p. 30), which leaves the disarming idea of simulations re-engineering causes. Giving the film viewing public what they want is, in this case, begging the question.

We sense this in the cinema where analysis of the genealogy of cinematic signifiers is obliterated by the effects themselves, so they have ‘complicity with their own simulated form’ (Grace, 2000, p. 185). Strong contemporary cinematic signifiers such as those present in conventional and predictable franchised films can efface the need for richer meaning in the films so that the viewer participates in a collective eradication of meaningless signifier over narrative content. A powerful example of a signifier in this domain would be the character that walks away, often in slow motion, from a major explosion occurring behind their back. The signification is not in their relationship to the explosion they caused and its concomitant

emotion, but the unflinching walk, which is common to every film containing this explosion signification. The scenes have diminished meaning *per se* except for that fact it can be added to a series of films where the same thing happens. Here the viewer is complicit by perceiving the scenes in this series rather than accepting the scenes as part of the singular narration of the film in question. This is banality exemplified. In juxtaposition, Anderson's use of slow motion can also be regarded as banal, except the viewer must account for the specific controlled emotional content for that specific character or characters during the slow motion walk toward the camera without the explosion. Anderson does not negate the slow motion signifier but draws attention to it as artifice: a subtle but profound difference from the intention of the walk toward the camera after the explosion or the slow motion for an important death, or time-lapse, or for a suspenseful ending. When we consider both in juxtaposition, a walk away from an explosion may suffer a fatal blow when it is presented as this empty signifier. This is in direct contrast to Steven Spielberg's use of slow motion as a signifier of human defencelessness in *Saving Private Ryan* or Brian de Palma's use of slow motion in *Carrie* (1976) to signify and foreshadow horror. While Anderson often uses slow motion to support thematic content, at other times it is pure artifice to give the frame an extra dimension of aesthetic sensibility.

Baudrillard's *raison d'être* was also not to negate but to indeterminate, so that the object in question loses its grip as a transcendent specificity rather than positing any higher transcendent order, making any claims for rationality or truth problematic. This leads to a confrontation with the culturally enriched but semiotically dominated image-saturated world with the power of the symbolic. As stated, the symbolic is an elusive conceptual stratagem utilised to run counter to the semiotic, which constantly strives for conceptual clarity. The film object is thus critically seen in Baudrillardian terms as always moving away from the banal to the fatal, exposing simulation as simulation. This encourages Baudrillard to offer a

fatal, symbolic return where his antagonism is derived from thinking against the simulation with a counter-example generated through his iconoclasm. Hence the Twin Towers of September 11 did not collapse, but ‘committed suicide’ (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 43). This outrageous claim was misread as an empirical claim, but what the antagonist Baudrillard was trying to effect was the exposure of the concept ‘war on terror’ as a simulation. Many critics could not see or concede Baudrillard’s point, but his strategy was to highlight the symbolic nature of the attack, which had transcended any actual semiotic analysis and could only really be grasped in any meaningful form poetically.

Similarly, but less dramatically, Anderson’s use of slow-motion definitely pushes the boundaries of banality, but we would argue he is saved by his deliberate complicity with the viewer and the art form rather than merely the form. Yet the dominant mediatised system that textures the reception of Anderson’s work subdues thinking of this fatal kind, as it prefers and spreads banality. As such, the vocabulary used to describe Anderson often becomes trite. Alternative expressions of thinking are stifled or disappear. Yet, in brief, Anderson’s form and content can be encountered in another way, and this is the aim of this chapter. In short, to conflate Deleuze and Baudrillard, we make seduction work for us against the mechanic assemblage of banality.

We could ask then what the fundamental differences between Baudrillard and Deleuze are and how these can be deployed to prompt such an encounter. It is that Deleuze is creating concepts to make the film object appear, and Baudrillard wants ultimately to avoid any conceptual application to film. Deleuze (1989) wants to capture and investigate filmic moments ‘psychomechanically’ (p. 251), drawing together the nexus of movement and time to create assemblages. Baudrillard, on the other hand, wants to consistently challenge the

sociopolitical genealogies of such assemblages. They are akin in their unique and particular methodologies of creativity.

Deleuze's system, loosely derived from Peiercian semiotics and Bergsonian philosophy, is a landmark shift in cinematographic exploration. But while Deleuze gives the image indexicality, disassembling film to reveal its potential, Baudrillard and Deleuze both want the ultimate analysis of film to conclude that the image is holding something back and remaining elusive. Eschewing the idea of indexicality, Deleuze encounters the image as pointing towards time and movement. A Baudrillardian observation, as outlined in the previous chapter, envisages the image emerging through seduction, often underpinned by the hyperreal. The gap between the two is established at this point. However, in terms of our project, this gap is a useful one. Perhaps Deleuze eschews a fatal view for something far more idiosyncratically poetic and illusive. Deleuze can provide creative cognitive content, allowing viewers to reframe their reaction to a cinematic presentation. Baudrillardian fatality extends that thinking to the point where the viewer concedes that the illusion given by the object can never be captured, and a form of concession is made. Examination of the opening scene of *Rushmore* typifies this, and this is the strategy adopted in this chapter and why we have chosen to make a detailed examination of it below.

Deleuze's radical, philosophical approach establishes 'lines of flight' (by which Deleuze with Guattari means that which opens up a space for new conceptual approaches) which could be a synthesis of the entire opus of Deleuzian thought. He thus encourages his film advocates to think against the banalities of everyday cinema-cognitive discourse and instead allow thinking to flow until it has exceeded what exists. This critical metaphor epitomises the Deleuzian project by providing new conceptual vocabularies, or weapons to encounter specific films.

Baudrillard takes the image or cinematographic vocabulary in another direction, encouraging advocates to talk about the seductive nature of the image, not its movement or temporal essence. This could be conceived as an irreconcilable difference, but our plan is to expose Deleuze to Baudrillard's conceptual framework through an encounter with *Rushmore*. Deleuze is committed to keep constructively creating *ad infinitum*. His rhizomatic, conceptual deterritorialisations make thinking an invigorating process. Both he and Baudrillard are concerned with an ethic that rejects the repetition of banal 'sameness'. Baudrillard wants the individual to cede to a form of powerlessness in the presence of the object, thus rendering the individual open to rejecting any form of transcendent ascription to the object and developing a personal or private response. Deleuze wants to render the object a potential for transforming thought.

Deleuze is concerned with 'relationships between elements' and of the 'forms and concepts of films' (Coleman, 2011, p. 11) that build a philosophical system. Baudrillard is concerned with the advocacy of encountering these systems, forms, concepts, and their implications as potentially dangerous simulations. Both are preoccupied with a 'deadlock of imagination' in that they attempt to liberate themselves with their own original thinking. This deadlock is imposed as a result of the highly mediated culture in which we live, and both Deleuze and Baudrillard are experimental thinking warriors. Deleuze railed against static thinking, preferencing a dynamic thought that flowed creatively. This, of course, Baudrillard labels 'banal', where thinking is constantly trying to free itself from what it once was (Marks, 1998, p. 8). Both were involved in the creation of concepts, and both were enamoured with the cinema, both mainstream and art-house. But the major difference is that Deleuze treats cinema as a philosophical text to demonstrate an abstract philosophy of movement and time, whereas Baudrillard engages with cinema to ruminate on its social influence. In short, Deleuze outlines what cinema can be, and Baudrillard outlines what cinema can do.

Both are fatal thinkers and theorists. Deleuze envisions banality—media-driven ‘infantilism and cruelty’ (Marks, 1998, p. 12) and exposes this paucity of thought with thinking as the creation of new and novel concepts. Baudrillard (1970) also decries infantilism, which he poses as the base of a homogenised, consumerist society. Consumers, from this position, often make unreflective viewers. Again choice is often based on fashion rather than utility rendering the consumer subject with a feeling of freedom and volition, but one contained within a limited set of ‘forced choices’ (Žižek 1991) unaware of the full extent of the consequences and genealogy of such choices. The seductive and fatal nature of consumerism, including cinema patronage relies on choice being massaged to a certain extent. Both Baudrillard and Deleuze suspend this yearning for a transcendent primacy of the subject and open up an inventive infinite space of ‘thought’ (not cognition), that defers the universal body of knowledge presupposed by other ‘thinkers’ and imposed upon the minds of the general populace. To combat what they both describe as cognitive and social banality, fatality is conceived and prosecuted as the disruption of the banal. The seductive trajectory of Baudrillard spins faster toward delirium, which is a goal both thinkers have in common. Deleuze’s groundbreaking work, which provides a creative taxonomy of pre- and post-war cinema, is ‘fatal’ in the Baudrillardian sense that it does ‘violence’ to the banal reception of the image. Baudrillard concludes that the banal and mundane are a result of our need for fascination rather than a need for meaning. Deleuze describes the banal as that which cannot generate a conceptual change. When it does, it becomes fatal or, as Deleuze (with Felix Guattari) would call ‘deterritorialising’, albeit with a different aim, it moves thought from the banal to the singular. Of course, this similarity is only on the surface, as both thinkers’ trajectories are vastly and deliberately different, but they are both fatal in a Baudrillardian typology.

Deleuze's Bergsonian 'movement image' and his Nietzschean-inspired 'time image' strike a fatal blow to the attempt to frame the image as an objective icon. In simple terms, he draws a fatality from the object, akin to Baudrillard, claiming that the object will always outwit the subject. The object is cleverer because of its 'power' to retain its secret allure (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 198). Seen another way, the subject's capacity to control the object is surrendered by allowing meaning and value to emerge *as if* it emanates from the object. The command of this framing is the energy it sucks from any system that attempts to determine the ontology of the object. This is a critical strategy developed by Baudrillard as much to negate the subject as to valorise the object. Deleuze's virtuality is a mode of differentiation that emerges under creative scrutiny. Baudrillard also creates these 'lines of flight', only to upend them with a form of fatal reversion, which destabilises any imposed or produced determination of the object's social function. In that light, *Rushmore* becomes a film object that attracts us in a very specific manner.

#### **4.2 Exploring fatal encounters as film philosophy.**

To repeat, in Baudrillard's critically creative world, the concept of fatality is where the 'object rules the subject'. This hyperbolic allegation by Baudrillard could be claimed to be a form of 'pataphysical extremism' (Wernick in Smith, 2012, p. 70), or a place where the subject 'takes the side of the object and surrenders to its strategies, ruses and rules' (Kellner in Ritzer, 2003, p. 325). These are specific readings of Baudrillard that take him to be descriptive of when the system's 'excrecent growth' turns on itself (Wernick in Smith, 2012, p. 71), creating the seeds of its own (theoretical) destruction. In encountering fatality as a film philosophy we maintain sovereignty over the object, in effect siding with the mystical properties of the world and not its scientific rational properties. It is both precarious and potentially liberating, a seduction of theory and an invitation to be negated.

Our reading of Baudrillard adds a slightly variable interpretation, in which we claim Baudrillard is not only describing the simulation that constitutes the world, but also envisages where we are heading if the present is not attended to. Fatal theory is therefore not only a duel with causation and rational order but also of its impending threat. As Baudrillard (2001) notes:

We are traditionally sensitive to the threat which the ‘forces of Evil’ pose for the Good, whereas it is the threat posed by the forces of good which is the fateful threat to the world of the future. (p. 122)

The forces of the good are actually the banal strategies of the subject and the system that desires to invade every part of lived experience. In the cinema, for example, this can manifest itself as the imposing dominance of Computer Generated Images (CGI), the acceleration of pornographic (in Baudrillardian terms) sex and violence, where obscenity is merely its blatant and banal obviousness and ubiquity. It is also embodied in the dizzying ‘affective cinema’, which changes the nature of how we encounter certain forms of cinema (Shaviro, 2010). Baudrillardian fatal theory points us towards these phenomena conceived as ‘good’, but which are in essence infiltrating our capacity to see their voracious potential to dominate the dominion of social reality instead of being dominated by those controlling it. In the process, they mark out other types of or encounters with cinema as ‘minor’ or non-existent.

Fatal theory is one that acknowledges the system’s ‘implacable development’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 47) and counters it with a game with rules of the viewer’s, not the system’s, making. In interpreting cinema, a fatal theory is one that sides with the film over its interpretation by re-problematising it, reconstituting ‘negativity and death’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 65). Death in this instance is the implosion of a system seemingly at its own hand. In the cinema, that is to treat the system’s major significations encountered as invitations and reassign them as challenges.

We would argue that in some ways CGI effects are promoting this view. The viewer may marvel at a spectacular scene but tire of being subjected to films lacking any expanded or novel artistic endeavour. Once again, we could invoke Andrew Stanton's *John Carter* (2012) or, perhaps, Colin Trevorrow's *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018) as typical of the audience watching the film that has established initial box office success, but is overburdened by spectacle and little else and loses momentum, at least in box office figures. These films then receive poor reviews according to popular review-aggregating websites and a cycle of negativity is promoted. Those who follow these reviews will be less likely to choose the film. Negativity is a systemic reversion where the ultimate fate of the film, in these cases, cannot be critically saved by CGI spectacle alone.

Baudrillard feels we can assist this recklessness by developing a strategy and rules of our own, but history tells us it may not be necessary, as the fatality of a system is often embedded in it from the start. The system comes with its own negativity, and cinema as a system is not immune. For example, the sheer, outrageous capacity of computer-generated imagery now makes the recreation of 'history' possible, but to the detriment of actual historical verisimilitude. As a result, those who rely on historical 'knowledge' from these presentations are led astray, losing accuracy. As such, the presentation of history effectively helps erase it. It becomes the bogus familiarity of a simulacrum (Laist, 2015, p 226). As Frederic Jameson (2003) reminds us that when history is commodified it becomes something other than history, and we could say the same for film interpretation. A commodified vocabulary makes film interpretation more real than real.

Baudrillard asks us to see the imposition of 'knowledge' as the elimination or diminishment of counter-argument, where counter-argument is always present and immanent and never transcendent. In this reading, negativity (and death) is the prosecution of 'thinking' to

reconnect the world and the subject. Negation is also the moment of realisation we are being forced into re-cognition: we are not thinking for ourselves and are advocating constant transcendent appeals that are the product of appearances traded as reality. A fatal theory would acknowledge this and render re-cognition more impotent in the face of illusion and uncontrollability.

The methodology, here once again, is not to see where Baudrillard is right, but to understand that, once viewers declare a critical viewpoint, to concede that gaps and cracks will always appear in critique. In essence, we can never claim that the subject rules the object, or that as Deleuze (and Guattari) tell us we exist on a 'plane of immanence', but that in the moment we conceive, we may have the potential to develop a singular vocabulary as we did in the previous chapter, and a critical fissure opens for exploration. This methodology will be applied to *Rushmore*. This chapter asks: what if, encased in Anderson's film object is not a story of adolescent desire and power trapped in a whimsical and confected shell, but a fatal approach to encountering art? How is a 'fatal' approach to these banal assertions to be confronted?

This is not simply a nuanced response to what the combination of Deleuze and Baudrillard could bring to interpretation. Our wager is that Deleuze's perspicacious insight into the movement-image and time-image allows us to utilise Deleuze's acumen. By grasping the major aesthetic, conceptual tools of Deleuze as a first step in encountering *Rushmore* as an aesthetic event, we move on to enhance this engagement, comprehending this Baudrillardian aesthetic event from within a creative yet fatal prism. The implications of such thinking are not to denigrate the theory of Deleuze, but to see the instability of becoming totally entwined with his thought. This can be achieved by reading *Rushmore* through Deleuze *into*

Baudrillard. The result is fatal theory because it offers a critical response to the sameness of the commonality of vocabulary developed by mainstream viewers to encounter *Rushmore*.

We take as our marker here that a fatal theory is one that attempts to put a distance between a banal theory and the film object, but by playing by the same rules. Therefore, by combining Deleuze and Baudrillard to explore *Rushmore*, the mode of interpretation does not attempt to capture it with a theory but perhaps encourages it to expand. Of course, this is anathema to Baudrillard's project in the sense that theory was a target of dismissal. However, we cannot dismiss the theory, as this is of course merely another theory and should include itself in its attempt to exclude itself. But Baudrillardian theory is an expansive fatal theory because of the velocity it generates in its pataphysical attempt to escape—that is, its saving grace in a world that is hyper-realised, managed, and controlled in so many forms.

#### **4.3 *Rushmore*: Encountering fatal theory with Deleuze and Baudrillard.**

From its opening seconds, *Rushmore* can provoke a fatal view, a search for ideas and responses that move away from the mortified sameness of interpretation. *Rushmore* begins with some definitive Anderson tropes. Those viewers returning to, or reading *Rushmore* retrospectively, will be quieted by its repetition of his visual and aural signifiers. These include a 'futura' font title, light capricious music, and a painting of a family portrait that is arguably simultaneously banal and disturbing. The viewer familiar with Anderson's signature themes may interpret the position of Herman Blume (Bill Murray) in the portrait, as well as the exhausted grimace of *ennui* on Blume's face, a cigarette poised as an attachment, the distance between Blume and his wife, her slyly ironic and knowing grin, the semi-mischievous chortle of his sons. What signification does Blume generate here? For Deleuze (albeit with Guattari), Blume is a 'machinic assemblage' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995, p. 38; Deleuze, 1986, p. 91); that is, a relationship between these static elements is dependent on

Blume (or Murray) whose visage alerts us to the overall coherence of the painting, giving it a melancholic, fractured energy which ‘breaks the flow’ of expectation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995, p. 38). The command of the frame has seductive energy because of the excessive nature of Blume’s countenance. It generates a multiplicity of questions, challenging banal interpretation. Here is where the architecture of Deleuze’s (1986) observations is most powerful. His attention to the face asks:

... what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel? Sometimes the face is thinking about something, is fixed onto the object, and is the sense of admiration or astonishment that the English word wonder has preserved. (p. 91)

For Deleuze, there is a ‘virtuality’ in Blume’s countenance that can emerge when we resist an immediate appropriation of banality. What bothers Blume is infused with Anderson’s political interrogation of the fundamental arrested development of artistic ambition, not just with the banal conclusion that his principal characters are adolescent adults. They are only adolescent adults in a world where adults are signified as those who think and act according to a set of encoded laws. These concede to the dominant idea that the adult is a satiated, consumer-driven advocate of economic rationality. If we argue that Blume’s impact on the screen reverses the redundancy of the typical cohesive family portrait and take this to a new conceptual abstraction, then through expanding fatal theory, Baudrillard wants to take that to an extreme that encounters Blume as ‘thwarting twisting and distorting value’ (Teh, 2008, n.p.). This is a destructive reading of Blume rather than, or more precisely, a Deleuzian line of flight. We can frame Blume’s aforementioned frozen countenance in full Baudrillardian mode as reflecting back a pure appearance, one that resists this ‘line of flight’ and instead entrances us with its non-signification.

Blume is not merely the subject of abjection, but he ironically signals that imaginably, the lack of credibly authentic art in the world is what makes this abjection. The naively realistic

portrait of Blume's family could be Anderson's caustic nod to much of contemporary art's capacity to be symptomatic of this despondency. Anderson's entire corpus of work is geared towards examining how the individual is restricted in his or her own ethic-aesthetic liberation. A fatal theory will always encourage this because it may choose to embrace the object ironically, as we are arguing Anderson has done. The painting becomes a potential critical object of the system, not just Blume's character in itself. To repeat, Baudrillard famously declared himself on the side of the object, but this strategy provocatively elevates the fatal theory of pataphysics, charged with the genealogy of situationism into a performative game against any specific strategy/theory asserted regarding the order of the object. Therefore, to attach negative connotations to Blume is to operate on the side of the subject against the Blume-object. Instead, by arguing that Blume evades interpretation because of the vicissitudes of the system that produces Blume is to turn the focus on the system rather than its objects. Analogous to blaming criminals for their crimes, this strategy challenges the viewer to explore the irony evident in Blume's placement in the painting-object. We could claim that Blume is despondent, but we could also claim his despondency is rooted in a failure to perform to the codes of adult behaviour, and the rest of the film reveals him 'descending' into childishness. This may not be the fault of Blume but of the system itself.

Deleuze's thought encourages us to question what Blume is questioning through his call to create, and this spurs us to suggest that Blume is not articulating his own personal *ennui*, but rather the world-weariness that comes from losing the battle to live well in a system that thwarts personal aesthetic flourishing at every turn. However, Baudrillard (2000b) may suggest that the enigmatic chasm between Blume's countenance and our reading of it is what Baudrillard calls the 'world's definitive opacity and mystery' (p. 74). We argue this may also be Anderson's motivation. He selects Blume to initiate Blume's trajectory towards

flourishing by encountering the more (Nietzschean) free-willed protagonist of *Rushmore*, Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman).

This repetitive strategy of distorting banal value is found throughout the film. *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan (1998) declares that Max is ‘monomaniacal enough to make people uncomfortable, getting increasingly off-putting the more he tries to please’ (n.p.). Instead of appreciating Max in this way, we could insist that Max’s resolve to frustrate the systems attempting to corral him makes his approach fatal insofar as these conventions require Max appear in a certain way when he rarely does. His flamboyant stage plays, hyper-realised to the point that some conclude that Max is ‘derivative and unoriginal’ (Browning, 2011, p. 19), are in their opulence and extravagance not a critique of Max’s ambition, but of a world that craves overproduction *as* art. Hence Max’s plays are fatal because they take theatricality itself to an illogical limit, thus exposing theatricality’s systemic shortcomings. We should not just put the spotlight on Max, but perhaps also see his work as a critique of the theatrical embellishment of Broadway and the West End.

This irony is not, however, only reserved for Blume, but for Bill Murray himself, who adds another dimension to Blume’s countenance. This is because his facial configuration is constantly eluding capture, affording a form of playful intertextuality that the informed viewer can think through. The point is not to search for this purity with language (or purity of sensation, in Deleuzian terms), but to see pure appearance as the diagnostic means for teasing out the banalities implied by appearance itself. Admittedly, Blume can be encountered as repetition of some everyday formal and conceptual elements. He is suffering *ennui*, depicts archetypal misery, and exemplifies a midlife crisis. Yet it is in Bill Murray’s countenance that Anderson’s aesthetic skill may lie and the reason why Murray appears in six of Anderson’s films. He is the ‘clown crying on the inside’ (Zoller Seitz, 2013, p. 83). By employing

Murray in this way, Anderson allows Blume —frozen in form and time —to expose the immanent nature of angst and *ennui*: that is, contemporary banality. Blume will rail against his two pathetic, violent, non-contributive sons, his recalcitrant wife, and his uninspiring employment. The character of Bill Murray brings this to many of his roles. In the opening painting, his spatial separation, his anamorphic eye line, and the precariously poised cigarette are as much Murray-esque as part of Blume. Murray's presence, especially in retrospect, is too strong with his historical work output unable to be separated from his Blume identity. The fatality here lies in this retrospective incapacity to frame this painting as a cohesive, singular part of the narrative. Blume's wife looks directly at us, perhaps to plead for escape from this universe; a world where Blume's *ennui* is obviously stifling.

In a Deleuzian sense, Blume is neither a banal presentation nor repetition of this ennui and angst but the beginnings of a politico-ideological deposition against banality. Much criticism of this disengagement from social norms is economically and ideologically motivated, and some may see it as a psychological crusade to save Blume from himself. Hence, politics is geared towards quantifying and controlling as much of our lives as practicable. This becomes an ideological tool for many market-driven products and services. The market-inspired 'happiness industry' can prey on people, selling them therapy or tying their employment to criteria that demonstrate they are engaged with the system. It would suggest Blume seek therapy, purchase a self-help book or course or practice a behaviour modification programme all fully paid for. Blume maybe unhappy because of the attempt to yoke him *to* this system rather than save him from himself. Deleuze offers us a vocabulary with which to seduce and reverse these more superficial responses to the painting. The advantage of a fatal theory via this methodology is that banality can be univocal and unifying, whereas a fatal theory is multiple and polyvalent. This reduces the possibility of lapsing back into immobilising cliché or sameness.

As such, one key to Deleuze's counter-political argumentation is found in *Cinema 2* (1989), where he argues 'we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving' and therefore ultimately 'only perceive clichés' (p. 20). This astute rendering of viewers' ideological encounters with images then encourages viewers to re-orient their 'sensory-motor perception' away from clichés and towards a broader, more creative (and ultimately fatal) target. Here we transition from Deleuze through to Baudrillard. To see Blume as a deflated, middle-aged man afflicted by self-loathing is to miss the opportunity to see that Anderson could be siding *with* Blume against the world because of Blume's limited access to a richer aesthetic life. The richer life, perhaps with the painting signified by the ethereal accompaniment on the harpsichord, is not Andersonian whimsy, but the tension between what is and what is possible. While Anderson is often described as artistically effete, we argue here he is at his most deeply political. He is encouraging a juxtaposition between the raw world of clichés, embodied by the three archetypal characters in the painting and the film's elder protagonist, who is deflated by the scenario in which he is immersed. In the Deleuzian frame, Blume is restricted from 'becoming' because a dominant hegemonic system overpowers him. He cannot flourish, and Anderson's political message is conveyed by the creation of a world where the becoming-aesthetic is painfully resonant. Like being trapped in the world without recourse to creative thought, the film begins with Blume anchored in time. As the film progresses, Blume is liberated from his loveless marriage, his monotonous job, and his predictable world because he is consumed by the Max Fischer-effect. This fatal encounter with Max is not just the emancipation of Blume, but also could be apprehended as the destruction of the system that produces Blumes.

In a similar Andersonian register as Dignan (Owen Wilson) in *Bottle Rocket*, Steve Zissou in *The Life Aquatic*, Captain Duffy Sharp (Bruce Willis) in *Moonrise Kingdom* and Monsieur Gustave H. (Ralph Fiennes) in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, all are drowned in the enforced

banalities of their milieu, yearning for a fatal encounter. They hanker for a different lifestyle but are foiled by the heavily codified world in which they are trapped. For Dignan his amoral crime 'style' is betrayed by the personal treachery of Mr Eddie (James Caan); for Zissou, economic circumstances inhibit his artistic endeavor; for Sharp, unrequited love curtails his development; and for Gustave H., social propriety forces what Nietzsche called the 'art of living' to be restricted. Anderson recognises and exploits this 'art of living' by tracing characters who never reach it. Anderson's 'confected' worlds are akin to wish fulfilments to lament the untapped virtuality of characters browbeaten by their incapacity to escape on an aesthetic plane. The so-called 'confected' world of Anderson becomes fatal when the viewer concludes that, by pushing *mise-en-scène* to hyper-stylisation and combining meticulous wide-framed shots with deadpan acting, Anderson's attack is against a world devoid of artistic sentiment. The advantage of framing an interpretation this way is that it explores sameness as a recursive political strategy. The retarded growth of all of Anderson's protagonists can, therefore, be read as his critique of the system: that is, of a highly rapacious consumer-driven mentality that constantly promotes sameness and devours and repackages difference for its own ideological purposes.

These enforced banalities are constantly accentuated by Anderson through materialising a world where a form of play can dominate. Our argument is that Anderson's strategy is also one that simultaneously presents the role of art in both narration and images. Life is often denuded of art when it succumbs to the quotidian banality of the everyday. In response, Anderson 'confects' the quotidian as aesthetically charged by wrenching the viewer back into an encounter with everyday reality as the actual confection. A world dominated by consumerist banality is *the* confection, not Anderson's representation of it. Here, a hyper-stylisation can move us to think this way. Life emerges from this humdrum banality into an

imaginative play space, not one that reflects a whimsical world, but one that directly critiques those viewers who cannot value the creatively aesthetic over more banal incarnations.

The familiarity of Anderson's screen is fatal. This is due to its capacity to be what, Deleuze (with Guattari) broadly suggests, is subject to 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 401). We argue that Anderson's frame, because of its aesthetic singularity, pushes new, creative boundaries or territories, and the reterritorialisation is that attempt to capture the meaning of this frame. In Deleuzian terms, a 'territorialising flow' is that which attempts to escape the coded features which are attached to the subject, and means that the typical (banal) response to *Rushmore* can be distilled down to a catchphrase denoting the hybrid form of a 'coming-of-age text' infused with Anderson's (reterritorialised) 'mannered whimsy'. Here, these terms are part of a marketer's discourse to sell and promote and part of the ideology of aesthetics designed to articulate the distinction between types of film. Mannered whimsy, in this case, has negative connotations because its opposite—whatever that may be—is preferable to those who utter it. Anderson's frame is mannered and whimsical, but only in a world where such signifiers are used as a seductive ruse for power. We would argue that Anderson's intentional whimsy is a part of his interrogation. It is perhaps Anderson's yearning for a less stern world or something to measure our harsh realities against.

But Anderson is not easily 'contained'. His repetitive aesthetic economy initiates something else. For Deleuze, this is a deterritorialisation where the organisation of the frame indicates not only the banality of an aesthetically stylised representation of the teen coming-of-age-genre but also the formation of a study of restricted force doubly located within the film's protagonist and the banal spectator. The territory of Anderson's frame gestures at this force, always threatening to erupt. Max Fischer is a force trapped in an adolescent body, and

Anderson frames him as captured by Rushmore Academy and its investment in social control. The same can be said of Anderson's frame, which takes style to its boundary or limit. This is often hastily read as a confection, but our argument is that this deliberate 'confection' reflects Max's situation. The social machine that restricts Max, disallowing him full aesthetic license for his life, is the same as the social machine that demands Anderson pull back and present in a normatively 'acceptable' manner. This is the fatal gravity of such a presentation. In this sense, *Rushmore* is a film about a character straining to deterritorialise *Rushmore* in a film that is aiming to deterritorialise aesthetics.

Of course, the portrait of the crumbling family signals another trait of all of Anderson's work; that is, the exploration of the connection between (interconnecting) people. But another distinct allure of Anderson is his capacity to structure these interconnections, so we never can be quite sure of the motivation or rationale for why they are what they are. Behind the curtain is an illusion, what the viewer may find difficult to resist materialising in a mirror of reality. In one way, we are invited to enter a world that is a commentary on the unsuccessful 'real'-isation of the world. It is not just that Anderson creates his own universe with its own idiosyncratic rules and significations, but it is the world of the viewer that is also idiosyncratic, lacking definitive rules of social reality. This highlights the desperate, failed, but necessary attempt to naturalise or integrate art and life. But the interpretation must always fall on the side of art. Our argument is, as established in the previous chapter, that Anderson's world of artifice is a signal by Anderson himself that artifice is all we have. Anderson's world in many ways is *our* world as a mirror of the radical uncertainty of human existence rather than the teleological certainty often postured by the heavily over-coded conventions of mainstream cinema.

Again, we can travel via Deleuze into Baudrillard. This would be the purpose of a fatal theory: to see that this litany of accusations against Anderson are only the banal declarations of those who believe they have determined his essence. But what if we think from the side of his film object? To return momentarily to the opening frame of Blume's enigmatic facial gesture, accompanied by the 'confected' musical score, it is feasibly simplistic to attach 'mannered' to this scene. It raises the question of the forces of this composition that are energised by the combination or juxtaposition of the harpsichord's melody with the gloomy downcast eyes of Blume/Murray. The energy here is not 'mannered' if these forces of articulation gesture towards the socio-symbolic reality that produces them, rather than the actor who portrays them. We are just about to enter a world of artistic/aesthetic repression where the protagonist Max Fischer is thwarted from aestheticising his life by the 'system' in which he finds himself. The education system wants him gone, he has an unrequited love for Miss Cross (Olivia Williams), and his capacity for acceptance is severely hampered by the psychological state brought on by the early death of his mother.

Therefore, there is a manner here, but not in a pretentious way that critics may describe Anderson. Instead, it is in a way that draws attention to the artifice of the world so we are not just entering Anderson's toy world but having our consideration drawn to the artificiality of the world we inhabit. It is a social commentary materialised in the forces at work in Anderson's style. The preoccupation with criticism is usually organised around Anderson's directorial style and meticulous arrangement. Anderson's work is not just character-driven, but it allows his characters a delirious challenge to the 'system' to which they find themselves enslaved. We can make this (political) observation across all of Anderson's films. Dignan's amoral attempt in *Bottle Rocket* is to be a successful career criminal; while he is ethically misplaced, it is an exercise of self-fashioning that is unstitched by the banal interventions of others. The entire set of Tenenbaum children is overburdened by social

expectation: Chas, Richie, and Margot all are victims of their own precocious childhood, as misdirected by their mother, Etheline. Their respective self-fashioning is impinged upon by similar social expectations. Steve Zissou's desire to create underwater documentaries is derailed by fiscal constraints and Zissou's aesthetic, which is a pivotal but pilloried part of this fashioning. The children in *Moonrise Kingdom* are stymied by the moral disapprobation of the adults. Finally, Monsieur H.'s predilection for gerontic sex is similarly vilified. So, it is with Max Fischer and his desire to self-navigate his own environment. They all have their own creative lines of flight thwarted by the encoded structures of the socio-symbolic, oppressed, as it were, by banality. We argue the same fate has been bestowed upon Anderson.

#### **4.4 Fatal form and interpretive systems: *Rushmore* characters reframed.**

After the credits, a second curtain draws back to reveal the eponymous Rushmore Academy. This gives the film the denotation of a play script of which Max Fischer will be the star (Browning, 2012, p. 16). These thematic devices aid intellectual and 'emotional distance' (Browning, 2012, p. 170). But Anderson's self-reflexive curtain also registers what Baudrillard (1984) termed the 'evil demon of images'. As mentioned above, those who write about the distance Anderson's work establishes between a fixed referent and the image, present models of the referent aimed at seducing the strange back into the familiar, a domestication of the image that could resist this absorption. Following Baudrillard, we can see the attempt to rationalise Anderson's trope here as 'theatrical' and again 'whimsical', drawing the film into a far too stable referent, and realising the status of the film too strongly. The form of the presentation becomes fatal when it questions, challenges, reverses or impedes the 'structuration and power' of these banal readings (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 85). Instead, we can respond by suggesting that the work of art here is resisting the common denominators, refusing attempts to bring meaning fully into the open.

These strong meanings are essentially simulations of the world that invite reversion by fatality. Anderson chooses to go in the opposite direction of surrealism and appropriates a hyper-stylisation to unsettle the spectator. This strategy infuses Anderson's presentation with ultimate impenetrability because hyper-stylisation creates a world we may only approximate. The form of Anderson's frame, the movement of his characters and the initial access to his soundtrack, all allow the viewer to think that his work can be captured by attaching banal signifiers to them. But the hyper-stylisation is also an aesthetic strategy too for our purpose of forcing these signifiers into submission. The viewer can conclude that Anderson's work is on the same affective plane as surrealism where the element of surprise is often encountered at an aesthetic level, inviting juxtaposition between work and spectator. Yet, while surrealism can plunge the viewer back into the chaos of life through its juxtaposition with conventional reality, Anderson pushes the Baudrillardian-inspired viewer back into confronting the perceived sterile reality, and, hence, fatality of life. The film compels the viewer to see the 'violent strategy of the real'. The return to reality is enabled by appreciating the vocabulary of 'confected', 'whimsical,' and 'mannered' as the imposition of the real on art. When we encounter *Rushmore* as a fatal form, a separate vocabulary about this artwork can emerge.

To exemplify the conclusions reached by not exploring Anderson's capacity to explore reality itself, Christopher Kelly (2012) argues:

Anderson's early promise devolved into sterile affectation —a vision of the world as an elaborate dollhouse, populated not by characters but by ambulant figurines. *Rushmore* (1998) admittedly had a heart, perhaps because its story of a misfit prep school kid [Max] ... was inspired by personal experience. (Anderson attended St. John's School, in Houston, in the eighties). Unfortunately, the visual style he developed for that film —wide-angle shots with the characters centered perfectly in the frame; hyper-detailed, self-consciously artificial sets; a seventies-era Tupperware color scheme —soon became his singular preoccupation, to the point where he shut down any possibility of genuine emotion. (n.p.)

In contrast, we can contradict Kelly's conclusion that 'genuine emotion' is overwhelmed by Anderson's sets and stylised presentation. Kelly demands genuine emotion but this misses the point of Anderson's preoccupation with artifice. It is not that Anderson does not have a heart, nor a singular preoccupation, but a capacity to expose these deficiencies outside the aesthetic boundaries of his frame. Anderson's wide-angle shots with the characters centred perfectly in the frame; hyper-detailed, self-consciously artificial sets and seventies-era Tupperware colour scheme are not his singular preoccupations if his *mise en scene* is an end in itself. Anderson also deploys these stylistic choices to fatally juxtapose against the more banal screen presentations of his contemporaries. Anderson's screen comes alive on his own terms. We can valorise Max's attitude to the world and the systemic oppression of Rushmore Academy, the constrictive world of adult sentimentality, and side with him in his battle. In the end, the irony and whimsy are not directed at Max but from Max as he consistently fights to develop a Nietzschean-inspired aesthetic persona in a sterile and banal world. Max's grandiose schemes such as building an aquarium without permission or starting a fencing team at Grover Cleveland High School can be seen as eccentric, misplaced, callow narcissistic desire, but also as Max's creativity, ironically expressed in hyper-project form. Max's excessive aesthetic expenditure in the entire gamut of his life makes him a target both inside the diegetic space and in the actual world. We see the problems as emanating from Max, but these problems are also foisted upon him by a sign-drenched system that demands empty signifiers such as 'mature' and 'serious' for him to subscribe to.

These signifiers are also evident, for example, in the work of Deborah Thomas (2012) who describes Anderson's affect to argue:

Ironic distanciation and affective dissonance is ... displaced by a pronounced sense of affective gratification and arousal we come to expect from realist films. Music by The Faces adds an up-beat, although not overly sentimental feel to these scenes. Thus, while it is

apparent that unorthodox stylistic techniques and strategies of performance problematise the ‘structure of sympathy’ in *Rushmore*, the film’s finale cements a discernable level of character allegiance. A positive cognitive and emotional response towards character is secured —particularly in relation to Max. Overall, *Rushmore* displays a humanist integrity by striking a delicate balance between eccentric, comic irony and touches of affective realism that impart a comprehension of the fragility and poignancy of life. (n.p.)

While Thomas’ conclusion is that the comic irony laced with affective realism captures the dissonance of the film, the critical tendency is to see the source as Max, not the domineering system in which he is placed. In terms of education, romance, and artistic endeavour, Max is burdened. Yet it is as if Max and Anderson are in collusion to stick a finger in the eye of interpretation. Max will not ‘grow up’, and Anderson will not let his film(s) ‘mature’.

Therefore, in *Rushmore*, the relationship between illusion and reality, artifice and the real is playfully presented. It also accentuates the tension that has arisen between the Anderson aficionados and the Anderson critics. As Huw Walmsley-Evans (2012) observes, Anderson’s critics affix the labels ‘contrived’, ‘artificial’, ‘mannered’, ‘confected’, ‘stylised’, and ‘smug’ to conclude that his films are ‘devolving’ and thus a paean to artifice, contradicting any filmmaker ‘status’ (n.p.). Walmsley-Evans accuses Anderson’s critics of repetitive accusations and mounts a spirited defence of Anderson *qua* Anderson: namely, that his form necessitates the content. We offer here not a rebuttal of Walmsley-Evans’s defence of Anderson, but a counter-claim as both support and challenge.

While the hyper-stylised space is meticulous and often sumptuous to look at, characters like Max and Blume that inhabit this space are forlorn and cannot be accommodated. It really matters that their morose countenance ‘inhabits’ the meticulous backdrop because the confected physical world is an idealisation of a dreamscape they should be pleased to be in. From the suburban sass of *Bottle Rocket* through the wondrous undersea world observed from the *Belafonte* in *The Life Aquatic* and on to the palatial rooms of the Tenenbaum household,

Anderson constructs a material world of aesthetic perfection that cannot provide the psychological succour that their inhabitants desire. Max inspires a genuine emotion that is directed against the banal, as most of Anderson's protagonists do.

The space constructed by Anderson is a mainstream space in one sense, but the heterogeneity of the space, banally accorded as mannered and whimsical, could also present a metanarrative about the loss of aesthetic space. How characters are framed and how they move through the space, and how the music accompanies them is so often in juxtaposition that the materiality of the space clashes with the disposition of those who are framed. This jarring *in toto* is often overlooked by those who are obsessing over Anderson's preoccupation with physical detail. There is an intensity developed in this clash that could be read as the director gesturing to the genealogy of malaise by casting characters adrift in a world that is hyper-stylised. They fit into the more desolate and fragmented *mise-en-scene* of the independent film where the physical locations match the character's interiority. Examples include Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997) and The Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta* (1999), where the despondent protagonists inhabit a world reflected by the formal construction of the frame. These are bleak worlds that harmonise with bleak mental countenances. This matching of mental (interior) and physical (exterior) creates a world of specific dislocation, where the sentiments of the directors are aimed at establishing a gritty realism for a politically motivated commentary on this veneer of the social fabric.

In contrast, Anderson, by placing anguished characters into his symmetrical and ordered backgrounds, draws attention to a yearning for the confected, posing a paradoxical but parallel argument. While Korine and the Dardennes engage with a direct attack on social dislocation, Anderson's attack is subtly ironic in this case. In all three of these films, the central characters are dislocated and disaffected; it is the solutions offered that vary

markedly. In our reading, Korine and the Dardenne's yearn for political engagement, while Anderson in a more Nietzschean (and hence Deleuzian and Baudrillardian) manner wants an artistic or aesthetic response to the world. Indebted to and deliberately appropriating and repackaging Bataille's Heterology, Debord's Spectacle and Canetti's Dead Point accord Baudrillard the opportunity to write in his idiosyncratically artistic manner. These three influences had an overarching goal; to challenge what they saw as the implicit crises in everyday life. 'Heterology' was a term appropriated by Bataille that, in summation embodied his challenge to the general economy and was surely an influence on Baudrillard's work. Both writers open up the possibility of a constant challenge to orthodoxy. Concomitantly, Canetti's dead point' designates where history 'stops' and reality disappears which for Canetti was a moment where there is a palpable lack of distinction and discrimination for meaning and knowledge as information becomes impossible to slow down (Baudrillard, 1990a, p.14). This was a conceptual abstraction and homage that Baudrillard returns to repetitively. What is left, combining Debord, Bataille and Canetti is the absence of a historically grounded authenticity, replaced by a spectacle of simulated proportions that has diffused the capacity to acquire knowledge in a world awash with images and information.

All Anderson's central protagonists, from Dignan in *Bottle Rocket* to Monsieur H. in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, make Nietzschean political statements about the self-fashioning aesthetics that are dampened by the coded modes of social control. In effect, his protagonists fight simulation and reterritorialization. Anderson's hyper-aesthetic serves the purpose of questioning its very construction. Therefore, the banal reading is to terminate at the physical properties of his *mise-en-scène* and neglect how the intensity of the clash between the extremity of the frame and the interiority of the characters in it has evolved. His frame is a fatal form. Thomas (2012) argues that characters such as Blume 'are the antithesis of popular Hollywood representations, which tend to conform to American ideals constructed around

beauty, success and affluence' (p. 99). Blume is antithetical and Thomas' 'affective dissonance' is confirmed when we respond cursorily to the painting and the subsequent unfolding of Anderson's world of Rushmore Academy. We argue that this affective dissonance or the tendency to label it thus occludes the capacity of the viewer to develop a response to one of the political undertones of the film, rather than trying to establish an allegiance with the players in the film. Anderson's film is deeply political in this sense, as all the characters are hindered from aesthetic flourishing by their contingent circumstances. The problem here is that to suggest the cause of Blume's malaise is only Blume himself is to miss the wider implication of the frame. In short, the banal conclusion that the locus of the shot is Blume closes down the avenue of finding more qualities of the fatal form emerging from the painting object.

Anderson's screen and camera movements introduce Max as a strange stranger (Morton, 2010, p. 15), a fantasist for sure, but a fantasist who resists the cardboard template of the traditional schoolboy model. He, like us all, may be destined for a fall, and our issue with Mark Browning in this sense is that his delusions are also his ideological critique of the monolithic system he finds himself in (Browning, 2011). He is only a deluded fantasist if by fantasist we mean that he is fully subscribed to the system, which he clearly is not. He does not go to the simulation of an American high school with familiar symbolic boundaries. There are bullies as in many teen films, but Anderson gives us one who is exaggerated and Scottish. Max is as much a fantasist as the next character when we concede all worlds are propelled by and underpinned by fantasy. Max appears to be in one place (the fantasist), but he also appears to also be outside that place. When we first meet him, he is daydreaming about solving a complex geometry theorem, but not just to receive the intellectual admiration of his school, but to control the one possible thing he cannot seem to control: his grades. Our map for Max places him outside that map, as he is never just the outsider wanting admittance.

In Baudrillard's (2000) terms, he 'creates holes in the metastatic fullness of culture' (p. 21). He is merely a highly creative and motivated boy who is comfortable with his strange otherness within the confines of the domains he can control and create. The standard expectations of the viewer are subverted by this failure of total interpretation, only to be reignited by the transition to the next scene, revealing that 'it was all a dream' and reintroducing us to the equally enigmatic Herman Blume.

Blume, in his opening dialogue of the film, encourages his audience to 'take dead aim at the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs and take them down'. Blume's minimalist delivery and perfunctory speech again begets obvious analysis. There is a clear anarchic, political inflection to Blume's speech, but here 'rich' has a metonymic effect, read across a spectrum of interpretation, canvassing the possibilities of poetic license. Blume could be referring to the wealthy elite, but he could also refer to, in the context of the *Rushmore* world, those who adhere to the helm of the social levers as if he is delivering a Nietzschean aphorism. For Blume, life is an encounter with those who seemingly 'have it', but this encounter is mysterious and inaccessible. At this point in the narrative Blume, clearly suffering from existential *ennui*, yearns to be liberated in some form.

One point of Anderson's representation of Blume's character is we can and will never know the true motivation for his actions, a similarity aligned more with the actual world than much of classical cinema, where motivation is clear-cut, rational, and teleological. If Blume yearns for a Nietzschean-inspired liberation, then Max Fischer may just be living it. When Dr Guggenheim (Brian Cox) tells Blume that Max is one of the worst students at Rushmore, we cannot help registering the smirk on Blume's face. Is this an acknowledgement that Fischer tickles Blume's perverse sense of humour, or he that realises that Max has something missing from the other significant objects in his life, such as his Neanderthal sons and distant wife?

We will never know, and we comprehend this is one of Anderson's narrative strengths. The subtle smile delivered in juxtaposition to Guggenheim's conservative exasperation hints at Anderson's affection for the eccentric, strange stranger in a sea of banal, predictable countenances.

Blume/Murray's deadpan delivery, rendered as 'twee' or 'whimsical', is in actuality an extension of the everyday countenance. Only 'classic' film declares interiority as a rationally derived articulated entity that both privileges and informs spectator identification and assuages anxieties we may have about receiving the intended messages to which we are exposed. As with psychoanalytic theory, the message we are supposed to be receiving always eludes full articulation. The desire of the classic film viewer is that the decoding of the film is complete. If not, anxiety begins to creep over us. *Rushmore* as a film-object then stands to be decoded, but all we have at our disposal are the manifestations we have managed to historically and contingently acquire. We may find it difficult to 'get' *Rushmore* because the desire to decode and interpret runs headlong into manifestations that cross the wires of regular cinema objects. In Lacanian terms, interpreting *Rushmore* is not our desire, but the object cause of our desire, the vehicle from which we can state we have decoded the puzzling essence of the film. But in this attempt at mastery, we are 'constrained and haunted by the very fact we can never know the secrets that Max and Herman possess'; such is the wit and creativity of Anderson's *mise-en-scène*.

#### **4.5 Conclusion: Fatal characters.**

To conclude, when the opening shot reveals a classroom traversed by the 180-degree pan of the camera, the disruptions are rapidly foregrounded by the unfounded point of view of the camera; the world we enter may not be the askew world of Anderson, but a reflection of the solitary self, struggling to make sense of any world. This chapter has discussed that the world

is often banal to the point of fatality where the game is to expose the banal, and Anderson does this consummately through his own (misperceived) banality. The deadpan delivery of the mathematics teacher on the arcane matter at hand and the revelation of Max is standard introductory narrative. Yet Browning (2011) suggests we should be alerted to the fantastical nature of the scene, the idealised version of Max as a dilettante and the unreal position of the camera throughout (p. 16). As we have argued, Browning's reading of the 'fantastical' comes with negative connotations because for Browning, Max will not play the role of imposed normativity but instead exposes its banality. The entire rendering of this scene with Max's fluid movement through the room, the camera placed from the point of view of the blackboard, and Schwartzman's cocky visage elevate Max to an untamed object that is like Blume/Murray evading capture. It is, again, that system that wants to reduce Max to a fantasist because his dreams do not align with the typical normatively prescribed productivist logic of behaviour. Whether through ease of recognition or repetitive and banal thinking, we have shown there can be other ways to encounter Max and *Rushmore*.

Thomas (2012) argues that our introduction to Max is by way of 'figural distortion', rendering him an immediate outsider (n.p.). Anderson has always thrived on figural distortions as a trademark accentuation of the filmed space as an aesthetic counter to the actual space and as a materialised corollary of his characters' existential predicaments. He is a fatal filmmaker because his characters always expose banality through constant juxtaposition.

Again, it is the supposed insiders, trapped within their own banalities, that want to pigeonhole Anderson and characters like Max into a world of filmmaking where the rules are blindly enforced. Browning concludes that Max is a deluded fantasist, yet Max's daydream here and his self-idealised appearance as one in total control of his environs cannot be reduced to his

narcissistic imitations of ‘adult’ behaviour. Instead, Max may be refusing to accede to this derogatory pigeonholing, demonstrating the enigma of his appearance as a seductive ruse, defying a totalising interpretation. Max has a handle on Rushmore and its environs. He is no *Übermensch* in the making, but he reads Rushmore Academy with assured confidence. He becomes a mythical supplement to the school and as such, in a world that demands more and more results and scientific assessment. He is marked for a fall, but that fall is measured in terms of the prescribed rules of behaviour rather than his own fatal demise.

On the other hand, Max is a master of this universe, controlling with effusive creativity and naïve resilience a portfolio of (nineteen) responsibilities for which he appears highly skilled and appropriate. In the extended montage of his club and society involvement, Max dominates each screen with an affected pose that can radiate power, control, and individuality. To the contrary, Orgeron (2007) describes this tableau as Max’s idealised form of himself, a deprecating attack intent on wrenching Max from his world of Rushmore and interpreting him back into his idealised version of the world he inhabits. He claims it is Max’s desire to present himself in a certain light and extends this analysis to many of Anderson’s protagonists across the body of his work (n.p.). Yet this singular manifestation of the montage of clubs and societies also overshadows the energy and fidelity Max inscribes into the cinematic space, his physical investment in the school and its people. Again, the extra-diegetic intertitles with Anderson’s trademark font can reinforce this world as positivity and potential, the effect of a man and his passions fused together.

We could say in Deleuzian terms that there is an intensity in this presentation that refuses to be totally identified. Difference is affirmed because of its uncanny sameness. Out of Max Fischer a singular creative energy flows, and the intertitles, music and *mise-en-scène* coalesce

to perturb the traditional cinematic space. The aural backdrop of the montage is supplied by sixties band The Creation's song "Making Time" with the poignant lyrics:

Why do we have to carry on always singing the same old song, same old song, the same old song... (Pickett and Phillips 1966)

There is no way Max can be accused of standing still; his *jouissance* is attached to a *joie de vivre* enabled by Rushmore's facilitation of his grandiose plans. The school fosters his intensity and then is unable to cope with it. Max's life is akin to the everyman struggle, as Miguel de Beistegui (2010) talks of the problem 'to affirm difference beyond its own tendency to negate itself in identity' (p. 55). It is the intensity of Anderson's filmic stylistics that seduces us away from normalising its effect. Max is never fully a quirky, nerdish adolescent struggling with the death of his mother. Seen from another angle, he transcends any imposed reality we attempt to put on him and fatally seduces the filmed space. Here Baudrillard is instructive. As established in the previous chapter, he describes seduction as opposed to production. In other words, to name Max as 'quirky' is to produce a real effect for him whose appearance attempts to dominate any other names we may choose for him and, in turn, any larger narrative we may wish to pursue. Yet this larger narrative is one of shadowy proportions where our affection for Max's plight eludes us enough to realise that his relationship with the screen is just over the horizon of interpretation. As such, when we drop the appeal to any transcendent signification as a totalising potency, we see production as a forceful realisation that automatically and naturally invites a reaction against it. Because Orgeron's language, often couched in the definitive, matches film moments to a produced version of reality that attempts to bring everything into full view, to account for and measure the total energy of the scene only serves to accentuate this explicit failure. This failure or seduction of what is produced is, according to Baudrillard (1990), 'the ineluctable dimension of each and every thing' (p. 166).

Across his body of work, Anderson's characters are at odds with the world: Dignan (Owen Wilson) in *Bottle Rocket*, Margot Tenenbaum (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Steve Zissou in *The Life Aquatic*, all three Whitman brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited*, and Mr. Fox in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. All are distanced through Anderson's 'withdrawal' of characterisation. It is here we must pause and question the nodes of connection between Anderson's world(s) and our own. The commonplace assumption is that this array of 'eccentric' characters creates a disquieting world affectionately embraced by his admirers. Anderson's world, which emerges from his amalgam of meta-cinematic techniques, provokes an affective response quickly synthesised as eccentric by default. The disquieting visages of Anderson's faces alert us to this world. This is the operational strength of fatal theory. With this form of film and the presentation of character, we can expose the banality of both the film worlds and the actual world.

Yet the problems of value and meaning still inhibit us from finding a respite from banality. And from our vantage point, as it was for Baudrillard, meaning and value continue to spin out of control so that simulation still reigns supreme. In the last chapter, we enter Baudrillard's world of the fractal and bring Anderson and Kaufman together to address it.

## **Chapter Five: The Fractal. Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman did not happen.**

### **5.1 An approach to animation in an animated world.**

In this last chapter, we consider the fractal. For Baudrillard, this fourth level of simulation was where there was no need for the original, as the copy had a life of its own. This theoretical gambit is where the value is exceeded through sheer exhaustion and proliferation. For our purposes, the excess of repetitive cinematic banality begins to efface referential certainty, leaving the viewer spectacle and little else. Signs spin out of control and reproduce malignantly, effectively ‘killing’ reality. This murder manifests in the proliferation of the banal, aided and abetted by computer-generated effects from the insidious propagation of social media to the destruction of political debate in favour of divisive populism. For Baudrillard, this flagged a world where simulation claimed a malevolent victory. In simple terms, the subject becomes a relay in this system or a terminal where there is ‘merely exchange information’ (Genosko, 2007, n.p.). This is a true Baudrillardian moment where he claims we have been absorbed so deeply into the system that all that is left are ‘haphazard sequences’ (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 57). Fighting the fractal is a show of defiance. This fight promotes a more singular aesthetic vision, as it promotes a disruption of the system that is determined to continue to murder reality for its own profit.

We live in the fractal when we suffer the hallucination that all is normal. Our argument is that the cinema’s contribution to this fantasy is exemplified through its predilection for and fascination with animation. The arrival of the digital has accelerated this. In their own minor way, animated films have augmented this simulation of hallucinated normality. A world with animated films in it is rarely questioned within an ontological framework because analysis is limited to studies of the form itself rather than its effects on the social reality. The

conventional animation is never a separate world from the actual, in Baudrillardian terms, but a smokescreen to hide the conclusion it is the actual world that is animated, a pure simulation of reality. Baudrillard termed this the fractal. We argue from this ontological perspective that nowhere is cinema more fractalised than in the animated film industry. As animated cinema has grown exponentially, so has the capacity to apprehend the fractal. It is with this in mind that we argue Anderson and Kaufman's effort in this non-actual cinema provides a deep and endearing *détournement* with the fractal. Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and Kaufman's *Anomalisa*, directed with Duke Johnson, are antidotes to the fractal. In a world Baudrillard saw spinning out of control, Anderson and Kaufman present a challenge to the banal assertions of the fractalised codes of the system. These codes annul power by absorbing challenge back into the system. The debate over climate change is a case in point where valid science has been tainted with a sceptical brush, making scientific claims appear theoretical rather than evidential. These administrations of signification create distinctions and value fusing use value with exchange value. The exponential growth of mobile technologies is also a working example. Communication becomes fractalised when the device's brand is as important as its function. We need weapons to counter such occurrences. Animated cinema can be a powerful political weapon against ideology when it is encountered more broadly than it often is. In what follows we can see the merits in following a political 'animation theory' to which we can add Baudrillard's contributions to the fractal. As such, the salient questions of the chapter are:

1. What is the Baudrillardian fractal, and how can it be relevant to film philosophy?
2. How does animation reveal the fourth level of simulation? How do we avoid being subsumed into the vortex of the fractal as a viewer?
3. Why does Wes Anderson resist being absorbed? How does his 'animalism' absorb banality?

4. How does Kaufman provide the last challenge to a Baudrillardian film philosophy?

We will negotiate the fractal as a means of demonstrating how the cinema's most strident fractality is entrenched with this fascination with animation, obscuring what we see as more pressing challenges. This probing concept of the fractal, perhaps misunderstood by Baudrillard's critics, is his umbrella term to evaluate and respond to the contemporary ontological zeitgeist. In his terms, we have become too analytical, peering behind the appearance of objects, searching for techno-scientific justifications for their existence. Too shackled to an inflexible form of reason, the demand for answers is often coupled with scientific exclusionism, resulting in a theorist 'discovering' what lies behind appearances. Baudrillard wagers there is nothing behind appearance, as all need to be simulated. In the animated world, there is no transcendent animator.

In a world where an animated television show such as *The Simpsons* often displays as much political insight as any other current affairs presentation, we have a state of affairs theorised by Baudrillard as a loss of gyroscope (1988, p. 87), where a haphazard proliferation of value destroys value itself (1990b, p. 5). Reality is becoming fictional, and the fictional becomes a reality. The problem with political action is that in a simulated world, action is also simulated. Polls are taken, protests are held, but the system remains resolutely inoculated against change. In Baudrillardian parlance, the 'murder' of reality is where subjective assertions are disguised as objective facts as we have observed in what he addressed thus far. Our wager here is that the present enchantment with animated cinema disguises the idea that we live in a world increasingly dominated by the fourth level of simulation where seduction is effaced by the total proliferation of signs, leaving reversibility muted. When we have discussions about selfhood based on Doctor and Del Carmen's 2015 *Inside Out* (2015) or dignity based on Allers and Minkoff's *The Lion King* (1994), we may lose sight of the historical politico-philosophical import of these terms as they become closed to interrogation.

We may effectively let these animated films exert unwarranted influence over behaviour when we don't explore the full ideological import of their narratives. This may encourage the viewer to slip further into a fractalised morass.

Baudrillard encounters the fractal as simulation overtaking itself. By this, he implies the restraint of critical perspicacity where the ontological landscape of the individual is shaped so much by simulation that the capacity to identify the simulation is lost. The present state of geopolitics is a case in point. The putative lurch to the right has allowed the political discourse to be simulated more than ever. As such onto-political confusion is exacerbated; a form of fractal politics emerges.

The problem is that all is simulation and we can never escape it. The strength of the simulation is what is in play. In the cinema, a Baudrillardian film philosophy may encounter the fractal at all times. The preponderance of and perhaps overuse of hand-held cameras, the overabundance of CGI, the use of 'celebrity' to cover up aesthetic/artistic deficiencies could all be evidence of the fractal. When simulation overtakes itself, it is victorious in the sense that it completes the job of simulation, which is to 'capture' reality and eliminate the critical inquiry into itself. Therefore, when we allow film to overuse any of the above fractal characteristics without resistance, then simulation is the winner. Reversibility and ambivalence become difficult to ascribe. We could then encounter and still enjoy cinema that combines all of these fractal tendencies such as Zack Snyder's 2007 faux-Spartan animated fantasy action 'film' *300* as a piece of purely fractal cinema. The relationship between actual history and cinematic fiction is rarely raised.

The important methodological outcome that the examination of fractality serves for film philosophy is that it helps further distinguish between the disruptive influence of signs and their seductive propensity. As such, we can deal a fatal blow to this viral colonisation of

abstraction, where the actual is taken over by irreversible simulation. We should be disturbed by living in an animated world where simulation triumphs in political, aesthetics, and the mundane. We will, as a result, turn animation against itself to critically examine the effects of the untrammelled simulation of the fractal. The project terminates here because it reaches the apogee of Baudrillardian thought with his hyperbolic examination of the fractal.

This thesis ends with animated cinema because we argue its proliferation reflects a deeper malaise in society itself. Therefore, we argue an effective intervention is to give to the digital world (in our case, the cinematic world) the gift of stop-motion animation of Anderson and Kaufman. This is a form of nostalgic counterbalance to not only the proliferation of digital animation that reflects the fractal, but the thematic content of both also asserts a form of greater singularity, which is the ontological other to the fractal. If ever we were searching for a singularity, these two films stand as an example of it. They are not just nostalgic reveries but seen from a Baudrillardian perspective are gifts that are in a sense designed to challenge through juxtaposition the banal simulations of contemporary animation.

For Baudrillard, the fractal is where ‘value can no longer be located’ (in Genosko, 1994, p. 52). This rhetorical claim centres on the dispersion of values (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 76), brought on by an interminable simulation and reproduction (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 6). Therefore, the fractal is a state where judgement is shackled to an overabundance rather than a paucity of information. In the twenty-first century, heavily over-coded by social media, information is both omnipresent and metastatic. Baudrillard (2000) tells us there is a ‘metastatic development of culture’ (p. 20), by which he means that art is becoming incapable of challenging culture, only reflecting and reproducing it.

The prolific rise in animated films over the last half-century has an unexplored effect when exposed to this Baudrillardian film philosophy. Just as Baudrillard (1994) wrote that

Disneyland, one of animations most prolific producers, exists to convince us that the rest of the Americas is real, animated films also exist to convince us that the non-animated world is rational and logical, populated by coherent autonomous selves with judicious agency, living lives of existential profundity. It reflects the simulated world of actuality or is at least assumed to. It is the axis point of the fractal. If this assertion is accepted, we can formulate one of the most powerful tools of a Baudrillardian film philosophy by looking at two animated films that challenge the mainstream animated film industry's most cherished ontological foundations of social unity and harmony. This is, in a way, a form of alienation by animation. The viewer feels safe in the animated world because all the vicissitudes of the actual world are always neatly solved.

A highly technological society that is increasingly immersed in the virtual and social networking has less need for traditional forms of communication and creativity. What they may do is participate more in simulation without discernment, extending this alienation. The fractal is an 'extreme phenomenon' (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 47) that we may observe all around us. From the obsessive fascination with statistics in sports, the exponential proliferation of 'reality television', the accelerating dominance of 'gaming' and 'gamers' as a recreational pastime, to the excrescent augmentation of the ubiquitous shopping mall, the manic obsession with polling, to the repetitive and homogeneous images in mainstream cinema that bear little narrative or aesthetic justification, all imply that the fractal is all around us. *Hakuna Matata* is assured.

## **5.2 The utopia of achieved banality.**

Contemporary cinema can be seen to manifest this through the rapid circulation of images, and images about images that can also leave meaning diminished. Perhaps Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) is both emblematic and foreboding of the fractal. It is a triumph of

technical prowess but also a metaphor for technical reproduction of reality out of control. Similar to some mass news media's propensity to control rather than report the news where the monster, in this case, is that which devours access to the truth. It pervades our contemporary social lives and is increasing at a rate that may disturb. The capacity to regenerate animals from another period without consideration of the ethical implications is symptomatic of a fractalised ontology dictating the imagination rather than a more classically considered approach. Consider the fascination with genetic engineering to enhance longevity rather than premature death or the manias that surround body image as examples of the meshing of the technical with ontology and teleology of the human.

We can now see the overall project of Baudrillard cohering into a formidable tool to encounter the contemporary zeitgeist, even more than ten years after his death. In a world that is rapidly mirroring his early preoccupation with hyper-reality, the image is absorbing traditional conceptions of politics, language, human subjectivity, and activity. These are tools of political and religious fanaticism that bombard us with images devoid of measured content-absorbing debate into moments of pre-packaged, linguistically desolate pseudo-messages. These range from high film production-value beheadings used as political terror to presidential social media campaigns, whose excess overwhelms any form of corrective reply swallowing the old 'reality' and replacing it with new image-sodden ideologically charged messages, often condensed to less than one hundred and forty characters.

The proliferation of signs and their reversal produces and is produced by seduction and fatality, but also leaves the system, while bloated and rhizomatic, overburdened by what Baudrillard observed then termed the fractal. Old prophylactics such as religion, science, or rationality will not be enough because we have less and less of a foundation to anchor them to. The ability to be singular is caught up or occluded within the constant desire for more of

the same. Baudrillard envisions this as an ‘overgrowth’ where it has found a ‘logic in its own proliferation’ (1993b, p. 43). This proliferation has a negative effect on the competence of the individual’s capacity to discriminate between the actual and the simulated. We were once competent to ascertain the difference between the actual and the virtual, but now with this excrescence of information, this is much more difficult. Our language is overburdened by excesses of signification. For Baudrillard (1998), language is a means of establishing a separation from the world, yet this distance is narrowed by the excessive information that infiltrates our capacity to seduce through language against formidable opposition.

Anderson and Kaufman’s ‘excess’ of signification, where they deviate from ordinary filmic construction, could provoke an expressive reaction, but for most viewers little political resistance to this excess is demonstrated. We have argued that Kaufman demonstrates by juxtaposition how the sign, when allowed to metastasise, presents an overbearing simulation. The technological age, hallmarked by the unbridled flow of information, has normalised and then neutralised itself, resulting for many in a form of functional passivity. They may not see animation as a ‘critique of agency action and power’ (Herhuth, 2015). If the viewer participates willingly and cooperatively in this one-way flow of cinematic information, then they contribute to its excessiveness without realising the potential power it invites in their capacity to discriminate between actuality, and its simulation of the challenge may be lost. The first victim of this damage is language, and the second victim is the response to the image. The symptom is the decrease in our capacity to respond, or as Baudrillard would have it, to make our own rules. As we have seen, this is especially relevant for contemporary cinema because the control of signification inhibits a poetic response, and we have argued that this excess of images also retards reversibility.

We have traced this infraction of language mediated by signs throughout the thesis. Interestingly, this final stage of the sign reversing on itself and becoming fatal is not a state of ontological confusion. That has passed to a state of paradoxical, frenzied indifference. The production of images becomes unchallenged, and as such the image is no longer a playful simulation of the illusion of the world, but a replacement of it, indifferently verified by a compliant society. There is a lack of distinction that results in an ‘indifference to everything’ (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 134). As such the loss of the sense of illusion of language and its capacity to respond to a system’s attempt at implicit simulation is neutered. The more real we think things are, the less capacity we have to respond to this state. The excess of information creates the ‘fractal’ imagination where the ‘supremacy of the medium and the neutralization of the message’ occurs (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 72) and ‘reference points disappear’ (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 49), allowing a state of generalised equivalence to dominate. For us, animation allows fiction to overtake reality.

For Baudrillard, the prosecution of an argument against the fractal’s most pressing and claustrophobic effects transmitted by economic exchange was a symbolic exchange. His lifelong work, especially in its later manifestations, was to resist being absorbed into the system (Gane as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 211). The relentless proliferation of the economic that enters all areas of many viewers’ daily lives is often devoid of a critical counterpoint. The focus on consumption as an ontological base for existence is a mystification (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 112-4), which goes unchallenged because unbridled consumption is deemed natural. Consumption is banalised, and Baudrillard’s critical response was to use symbolic exchange as a fatal comparison. Cinema is often consumed in this way and loses its ‘white magic’ when it is controlled and banalised by systemic forces and reinforced by predictable interpretative mechanisms.

Baudrillard coined the conceptual term for this extreme phenomena the fractal as both an extension of the third level of simulation and a frightening warning of its omnipresent potential. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and Charlie Kaufman and Duke Jones' *Anomalisa* also can be used to issue a similar warning. They are Anderson and Kaufman's gifts to expose and then challenge the fractal. In their way, they are singular moments of filmmaking that highlight, by contrast, the operative methodology of the system that Baudrillard terms fractal. They allow us to experience what Baudrillard saw as an 'other scene' (2005, p. 77) where art becomes other to the banal significations of an undifferentiated simulation. We may say for argument's sake that the film studio Pixar is Anderson and Kaufman's other, providing fractalised animations because of their monodimensional narratives and characterisations. These films have a repetitive 'struggle/conflict/discovery/redemption' pattern. From David Hand's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) through to today's Pixar extravaganzas, the same patterns are apparent. Baudrillard's encounter with this world also left him no choice but to see this simulation as a formidable rival, and his response was to stage his thinking against the fractal, allowing him to highlight the potential damage these technologies might do to the psychic economies of those who were not attuned to the systemic attacks on those economies.

As such, we can follow Baudrillard's hyperbole as a performative tool, examining how others encounter the images to ensure we are not (as he was not) ensnared in the banal and unreflective world of interpretation. Instead of being enveloped in the world of the fractal as we see it, we can give back to the world (and its systems) a poetically nuanced engagement with it. Our phenomenological experience of cinema is the fragment that can directly oppose the fractal. Our phenomenological experience is not 'part of the world' (Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 40) and is where a poetic response to the world may have its most pressing currency.

We are careful to assert the digital implies, for our argument, not the end of cinema or the rise of total animation, but the waning of discrimination and the ‘appearance’ of claims of truth.

As Elsaesser and Hagener (2010) acutely assert:

On the contrary, the Pixar films “think” cinema in its wider context at the same time as they are rethinking cinema’s relation to the animate and the inanimate, to life and the life-like, to subjectivities and objects. In particular, they seem deeply involved in the question of what a thing is, an object, and what kind of object relations can a subject have with the (things of the) world. Many philosophers and psychologists have understood human social and psychic reality as being determined by object relations: after all, they establish and shape our access to the world. (p. 181)

Baudrillard is such a philosopher. He saw the fractal as where the digital is colonising the subject. As stated, our focus is on the viewing response to the screen, even if the screen is merging with the computer (Rodowick, 2007). The result is, in Baudrillardian terms, a world that is increasingly a reflection of ‘miniaturised projections of ego’ which has the paradoxical effect of diminishing the self rather than proliferating it. While Rodowick is concerned with the ontology of the cinema itself, we are concerned with the ontological footings of the viewer when they are interacting with this changing aesthetic and technical experience.

We began in Chapter One with the sign and argued there is no self. We end with the fractal that argues we live in a simulated (animated) world in which the dominant expression of selfhood is to assert the projected ego into all we do. The digital world becomes the conduit and ‘social media’ the platform for fractality. Cinema reflects and encourages this and propagates it with social media playing a strong role in perpetuating, reinforcing, and consolidating fractality. Baudrillard died before social media took its vice like hold of the social imagination, but he forewarned us when he asserted the media was ‘driving the masses to hysteria’ (2002b, p. 174), where the ‘political economy of the sign’ structures many social

imaginings. There is a diminishing set of otherness propagated at the hands of social media, and this must contour a proportion of the ontology of the viewing subject.

A utopia of banality is the implicit perfectionism that is, on the one hand, achieved through digital animation, where the character rendering is a small-scale version playing out of this process. When the animation is ‘perfect’, as in most Pixar productions, this hesitance and defectiveness are masked. Additionally, the content of these animations with their tendency to anthropomorphise these banalities become the *raison d’être* of human activity. This allows the explicit messages of the film to be channelled and for banal lifestyles and cultural mores to be accepted. One of the most successful animations of all time, Disney’s *The Lion King*, renders the jungle, which can be read as a microcosm of this banal world. Authority is invested in the lion Simba who is given religious approval to return and usurp the throne. He is flanked by ethnically stereotyped underlings, reinforcing the banal stereotyping of ethnic minorities staying ‘in their place’. In return, the lion who would be king does not eat them, which defies his biological destiny. He is only a lion in human form, playing out a phantasmatic ethical dilemma restricted solely to anthropomorphic conundrums.

There is no immediate ethical dilemma with *The Lion King* because the capacity of the viewer to assemble such esoteric charges is fairly limited. What becomes more pressing is that destiny is embedded in just causes where this is not the case. For Baudrillard, destiny was neither rational nor teleological. On the contrary, destiny was a game of aleatoric rules where morality and rationality played no part. In this sense, the moral implications of *The Lion King* are banal in signification, where we counter-argue that the film instrumentalises destiny for its own quasi-religious purposes. We have achieved the utopia of banal signification when we accept this as the way the world is. Instead, we are ‘the destiny of the

other' (Baudrillard, 1990a, p. 114), where vast, powerful socio-political machines turn many into compliant viewing objects who take the utopia of banality as an ontological fact.

Animation theory is a growing theoretical occupation in cinema studies and one where the literature is growing. Scholars are arguing vociferously about where animation fits into film philosophy and its place in the questions around what actually constitutes cinema. Eric Herhuth (2017) advocates that:

Animated films have become a model for explicitly addressing the instabilities involved in processes of judging, from knowing and evaluating the world. (Herhuth, 2017 p. 25)

Animation, we assert, has an impact on lived experience because it invites us to explore the notions of the materiality of objects as well as the concepts of time and space. More importantly the animated film invites a juxtaposition with the materiality of ideology, and following Althusser we would pursue how the politics of everyday experience is teased out through this juxtaposition. Whether sentient or not, animation encourages the audience to contrast the real with the virtual, which no matter what age of the viewer is a constant exploration of both the lived experience of the viewer and its potentials.

In summary, what has happened to animation is that its inherent otherness has been reabsorbed back into the system of general equivalence and hence is unable to be recognised for the radical alterity it has to inhabit, not being actual, not existing anywhere but on a screen. Our argument is by investing in Baudrillard's deployment of the fractal we can develop a creative vocabulary for animation that exposes the mundanity of apprehending animation, especially animation that anthropomorphises animals because, as stated, the animals merely stand in for humans and face only human dilemmas. This is akin to Baudrillard's fourth level of simulation, where the animation demonstrates this paucity of meaning, where information becomes fractal, and where a Baudrillardian film philosophy

may emerge into its own dominant methodology. What Anderson does is re-problematise animality because Fox is never human in Fox form; he is a Fox in human form, and this complicates the underlying message Anderson may be attempting to convey back to the world of contemporary cinema. Similarly, the protagonist of *Anomalisa*, Michael Stone (David Thewlis), is deliberately rendered as non-human, the anti-hero that banal cinema desperately and ideologically attempts to avoid.

The fractal is exposed here because animation, in its conventional guise, is in one form an ‘aesthetic commodity’ governed by economic principles, as opposed to an aesthetic provocation without the compulsion to cause a fissure in the general public’s taste. Many filmmakers have been able to complete the same fissuring effect in taste, such as David Lynch (1986 *Blue Velvet*), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975 *Salo*), Harmony Korine (1997 *Gummo*) and Michael Haneke (1997, 2007 *Funny Games*), and their work would make excellent cases for examining seduction and reversibility. This fissure, most pressingly articulated by Adorno, saw, in his case, popular jazz music causing a rupture in the antecedents of aesthetic musical history. As Robert Witkin (2003) said in regard to Adorno’s evaluation of this fissure:

An art that aims to transform itself into an instrument for the construction of effects has turned its back on history, on the living process of life. Such an art no longer serves the self-development of the subject. It is an art that has lost all distance and autonomy in relation to collective forces; it has become their instrument. ( p.10)

While Adorno sees the loss of reference that can be reclaimed by rigour and intellect, Baudrillard is more pessimistic and suggests that all may be lost. What Anderson and Kaufman do is also reveal this fissure while at the same time inhabiting the confines of traditionally animated paradigms. All is not lost, but Baudrillard’s critique brings the threat to a head inviting a seductive challenge in response.

It is not the animated film here that is in question; it is the ontological reflection of the actual world compared to the animated world that is much more interesting. We argue that, following Baudrillard, the fascination with animation is a result of our fascination with realising the world. This is the search for understanding, categorising and labelling all with which we are continually confronted and besotted.

This quest for realisation, with its absorption in designating a homogenous terminology and understanding the intimate machinations of how things actually are, has a deleterious side effect when it comes to animation. We can project onto the animated world what we are attempting to avoid in the actual world. For example, the explicit violence of the cartoon is seen as the correct place for violence because it is not physically harmful nor rarely permanently fatal. Daffy Duck's head explodes and he grows a new one. Many enjoy this state because it can abrogate the viewer's responsibility for acknowledging the relentless violence of the actual world. We have failed to assuage this violence despite the understanding, labelling and categorising. Instead of investing in the diminishment of this violence, it is refracted back into the animated and allowed to expand. This is no way a yearning for political correctness, but instead, a warning that the virtual and the actual are merging in terms of judgement, value and meaning. For Baudrillard, the digital and the fractal will suppress this. Consequently, the attraction to a banal fractal conformity means 'value radiates in all directions' (Baudrillard, 1990b, p. 5).

And yet discussion, opinion, and expression of value are everywhere. Baudrillard concludes that this excrescent proliferation effectively cancels itself out, and we are left asking ourselves 'what are we doing after the orgy?' (Baudrillard, 1990b). Paradoxically, instead of being more of something, there is less, more information means in Baudrillardian less meaning, less sexuality, less fashion, less aesthetics. In summary, for Baudrillard, there is less

reality, and the utopia of achieved banality is consolidated. His political project, hyperbole aside, is to draw our attention to this and respond in the most singular and individualist manner we can muster. To respond with a predictable, banal repetition of the same, as we argue most animation does, is to exacerbate rather than alleviate the situation.

Our proposition is that Anderson and Kaufman also reply to these attacks in kind. Their animated films *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Anomalisa* respectively confront fractal filmmaking partly through analytical association and repudiation of the digital in favour of stop-motion animation. The recourse to stop-motion animation is more than a gesture to nostalgia. It is to demonstrate the beauty of imperfection, the monstrosity of a 'perfect, fully realized world' (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 8), which is in this case represented by digital animation. Our thesis is that seen this way, stop-motion animation counters fractal digital film-making in a variety of challenging ways.

### **5.3 The symbolic resistance of animated filmmaking: Wes Anderson and a fox that kills.**

Animation typically focuses on broad ethical conundrums associated with anthropomorphised human problems and their vicissitudes. Regardless of the object of animated delivery, be it cars, insects, emotions, toys, animals, monsters, or dragons, the narrative is typically the human problem of worthiness. For example, John Lasseter's 2006 film *Cars* deals with anthropomorphised automobiles, demonstrating the value of sportsmanship and remaining loyal to home. Similarly, the Darnell and Johnson 1998 film *Antz* explores the paradoxical notion of insects as individuals, with the main protagonist questioning blind conformism. One response here would be to valorise the notion of allegory and metaphor for the human condition. The cars and the ants stand in for humans who cannot reach the lofty heights of their animated counterparts.

Our Baudrillardian argument, however, is that the empirical proliferation in animation presentations is partly due to the absence of certainty about the self and complex abstractions surrounding human worth. Simply put, we do not understand ourselves and our relationships very well at all, so we immerse ourselves in animations partially to pretend we can assuage the aleatoric nature of human interactions and engagements. If ants can learn individuality, we can follow. This, of course, is the way we maintain our ideologically underpinned ideas of self-identity, as we have argued from the beginning of this thesis. To fight the fractal, we can alternatively see ourselves as fragile yet singular, not something to be infinitely reproduced. In a fractal world, where self-assertion is glorified, discrimination is lost by inserting replications of ourselves into the world at every available opportunity. Contemporary animation may often contradict this by asserting a much more homogeneous view of the world.

The outcome, from a Baudrillardian perspective, is implosion. Animated cinema and its proliferation can be framed as contributing to the collapsing of the poles of meaning in such a pronounced way that we cannot predict the reaction of the masses because they have no compass to which to align themselves. If we take the very Aristotelian virtue of bravery as an example, most mainstream animated films portray this integrity repetitively. However, the animated character's capacity for physical bravery exceeds the actual capacity of human physics, and death is always temporary and oft repeated. We can then admire this reality-defying act of bravery and lose the capacity to define actual bravery when we encounter it. The psychosocial structure of this is important as the inability to discriminate in the world of lived experience leads to the fractal where there is a 'contamination of values' (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 75)—where the capacity to name and discriminate between rashness and cowardice implodes. Simply put, with this lens, all values are indistinguishable.

Implosion as a political phenomenon can then be observed. Here implosion refers to the 'brutal loss of signification' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 79) where the information dissolves meaning and content. Baudrillard (1994) argues that in this state of heightened simulation, we cannot tell 'beginning from the end' (p. 31). This is the depletion of discriminatory faculties due to the fractalised nature of a bombardment of images. In an animation, the childhood audience will not lose signification, but the danger might be a rise in indiscrimination or confusion about the genealogy of virtue itself. Bravery then becomes confused with impetuous rashness because the animated character is written to be impervious to destruction.

Anderson takes this sentiment and pushes it to ludicrous boundaries. As a dialectical reversion, we see the animated act of bravery effacing the viewer's competence to truly recognise bravery outside the domain of the animation. The rise in animation and its capability to present virtues, such as bravery and moderation to name but two, blurs the capacity to see what the actual practice of bravery and moderation might look like. In short, we can at least become indifferent to real virtue, or at worst unable to tell the difference between actual and false applications of it. Of course, live-action cinema has the same deleterious effect, but because of the nature of animation, the collapse of the poles of meaning is more pronounced. We may choose in opposition not to participate in the game of attempting to name this mass viewing activity, to participate with indifference. This indifference can be to play into the system itself, becoming a culprit in the spread of the system that relies on indifference. As an alternative, we may recognise those moments of activity that refuse to participate in the game by seducing the game away from itself. We argue this is what *Fantastic Mr. Fox* does as an animated work. In the realm of bravery, Fox is a ruthless killer and thief whose bravery can be questioned because of his unethical motivations. But Fox's bravery is displayed as he steals from a ruthless corporation, and so his debonair charm erodes our capacity to see him as anything but the film's hero. We are not

going to make a case for an ethical assessment of Fox, but to suggest that the rise or proliferation of animation in cinema is being used to make us more indifferent to the claim that our daily lives are being fractalised.

We can now make a case for *Fantastic Mr. Fox* being resistant to this form because Wes Anderson inscribes into the film moments where anthropomorphism and moral rectitude is seriously questioned. Anthropomorphic views of the world are dependent on viewing animals as containing human equivalences. These signs clearly work to denaturalise animality and replace it with anthropocentricity. Anderson frustrates this by disallowing Fox from being a fully interchangeable human, letting him revel in the true brutality of the animal. However, this interchangeability is the grist of animated cinema because it closes the distance between the 'protagonists of the action' (Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 75) in the viewer and the animation. *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, filmed as stop-motion animation rather than computer-generated, contains moments where the investigation of selfhood and human dignity so common to animation is continually undermined.

When many look at an animated work, they want the anthropocentric world reflected back at them to consolidate their opinions and beliefs regarding their projects and aspirations. John Stephenson and Mark Osbourne's *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) exemplifies this. The titular hero had to be Americanised and given characteristics before the film was financed (Geisen & Khan, 2018). So, even if viewers are watching animated monsters, animals, superheroes or sentient sponges, many expect to see themselves mirrored. However, in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, this reflection is distorted and problematised. Fox is not a human played by a fox, but a fox playing a human playing a fox. The film could be described as Baudrillardian because Fox's resistance to his pursuers is an allegorical treatise on Baudrillard's 'symbolic' resistance to globalisation. Seen this way, we can see the fractal as this film's other. Anderson resists

being absorbed into the fractal because Fox is clearly and identifiably animal before he is human, never ceding authority to the anthropomorphic.

The smooth hyper-realist animation companies of Disney and Pixar deflect this point. In their most successful animations, the moral dilemmas are solved. Matt Zoller Seitz (2017) argues Pixar has a collective fear of aging and irrelevance, which means the protagonists whether they are cars or monsters or fish or robots will always triumph against adversity. As such the hideous and recalcitrant ogre finds love and compassion; the insects work cooperatively to overcome their enemies; the panda learns to use Kung Fu for good. We are not watching monsters, insects, or Pandas, but our framing of them *as* humans. Mr Fox never fully achieves this because he cannot help tearing the head from a chicken. Fox, pondering the nature of his existence, utters:

I'm saying this more as, like, existentialism, you know? Who am I, and how can a fox ever be happy without a, uh ... .. you forgive the expression, a chicken in its teeth? (Anderson & Baumbach, 2009)

The frivolity of this claim is premised on a serious Baudrillardian assertion. Fox is not striking a blow against his menacing pursuers Boggins, Bunce, and Bean. Even if they were not there, he would inflict terror on his prey, what Baudrillard comprehends as those who cannot admit 'the spectre of opposition' (2002, p. 63). Fox's essentialist and reductive reflection on his nature is not possible for humans. He 'cannot sign up to our universal gospel' (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 63), because he is a unique and singularly devoted animal. In animated films, regardless of the object/animal/Lego brick that conveys it, there is no humanism at the essence of things, only nihilism from which to build. In the animals/objects/Lego bricks we do not see animals/objects/Lego bricks that happen to have humanistic qualities, we see entrenched humanism itself. Here the standard reaction is to see the animation as a metaphor, effectively assuaging the desperate cry to make humanism

appear in the virtual if it cannot be located in the actual. This is, to paraphrase Žižek (1997), the hidden fantasy of animation. It is not only the ability to defy gravity, death, or logic that gives these animations their energy, but their competence to locate humanism as phantasmatic support in an increasingly trans-human world. In the trans-human world, there is no meaning 'because they can have all possible meanings' (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 51). For Baudrillard we grasp this situation at the point where they become trans-political; that is, Baudrillard encourages us to pinpoint the moments where we pass into the dizzying orbit of the 'trans', where fractality takes over. Fox helps us to provide this.

By admitting his animality, Fox asserts the radical alterity of his nature in which he realises he cannot ever totally conform to an anthropomorphised version of what we would call human selfhood. He claims he is a fox, a beast, and that animality decrees acts of targeted violence. If anything, the violence that Fox inflicts on chickens is a morally justifiable strength that is licensed by the natural order of the food chain, which we cannot say about human violence. This alone makes the character in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* stand out. Most anthropomorphised animals rarely revert to their instinctive character; even the universally luckless Coyote never eats the Road Runner. In *The Lion King*, the lion surprisingly does not feast on the meerkat, which would surprise a fundamentalist interpretation of animation. In point of fact, *The Lion King* might be the moment where animation passes over to the fractal, as the law of the jungle succumbs to *Hakuna Matata* (no worries) because animals truly have no worries of being eaten by lions. The lions are effectively benevolent vegetarian dictators, ruling the world as if they are men dressed in lion suits. This is an instance of gross wish fulfilment, where social harmony is foisted upon the animal/robot/Lego brick kingdom.

This metaphysical inquiry where Fox questions his own animality can be theorised beyond the child audience and many of the adults who would be unfamiliar or unconcerned with the

philosophical notions of Fox's selfhood. His reflexive admission of his own bestial proclivities excludes Fox from the idea of anthropomorphism unless you equate Fox's penchant for chicken with our own rapacious desire for violence, but this is not the case. Because Fox cannot be fully inscribed into an anthropomorphic framework, the tendency would be to dismiss this blip and reclaim Fox as mostly human.

#### **5.4 How animalism counters the fractal.**

Because we cannot frame animals any other way, they must be absorbed into the horizon of our anthropic being. In many ways, Anderson does not quite attempt to do that, and Fox remains a fox encased in his own animality. The more hysterically we try to frame humans objectively with technoscientific rationality, the more we expect cartoon animals to behave according to this rational paradigm. There is a case to be made for an inversely proportional relationship between the more we know about our neurobiology and genetic anthropology, the more the frame at which we look at the world is impaired. As Baudrillard (2001) argues:

... as soon as the human is no longer defined in terms of freedom or transcendence, but in terms of biological equilibrium and functions, the specificity of human beings is eradicated and, with it, the specificity of humanism. (p. 48)

Animation reaches an interesting point with Pete Docter's 2015 film *Inside Out* that poeticises and anthropomorphises human emotions themselves, and attempts in a humorous way to make sense of the inner workings of our subjectivity. Predominantly taking place inside a little girl's head as emotions compete for control over the vicissitudes of her life, the film suggests that even the innermost reaches of our conscious and unconscious selves can be explained and characterised into an animated narrative. The emotions, in turn, have emotions that belie their titles (Joy, Sadness, and Anger). The main character Riley (Kaitlyn Dias) does not seem to have free will, as her emotions struggle to get her to adjust to her new home in San Francisco. The overarching message of the film might be the importance of family and

teamwork that (necessarily) eclipses the tautologies of the plot. The blind chemical actions dictated by our neurological processes are fully humanised and anthropomorphised, so we are not dealing with the chemical-ness of emotions but with humans pretending to be chemicals pretending to be coherent emotions. In this way, *Inside Out* is a highly fractal film.

The unsubtle message of the film is the same as that of every Pixar animation: overcoming obstacles and succeeding. The problem with much mainstream large scale animation is it posits rationally motivated creatures/objects pursuing goals in a logically accountable world even though the surface presentation is fantastic. A talking car or panda or broom is received regardless of the physical improbability. Even in the surreal abstract worlds in which emotions are trapped, *Inside Out* operates with a form of rational coherence. Our deep subconscious memories are humanised. Not so with Mr Fox, whose animality is still foregrounded by Anderson. Fox's fox-ness imposes on his ontological and ethical outlook.

Hence these films subtly but consistently reinforce behaviours that mesh seamlessly with a system that is perpetuated by global corporate money. According to the web site *Statista* (2018) as an example, the Star Wars franchise had accumulated 32 billion dollars in merchandising by 2016. *Cars* and the *Toy Story* franchises had amassed 19 billion dollars. The enormous figures demonstrate how the products can be present in the viewers consciousness and is probably not limited to children. The implicit messages that come with these presentations, whether it the triumph of good against evil or the benefits of hard work and cooperation get prominence through sheer patronage are validated with their intertwined relationship with corporate financing. If we take Pixar's biggest successes such as Docter and Silverman's *Monsters Inc.* or Lasseter's *Cars*, we see highly organised societies that require monsters or cars to work and produce, and in which have the same dreams and aspirations as humans do. We exist in precisely the same system. This valorisation of succeeding at work

hides the notion that ‘work’ can be an alienating process hinging upon production and consumption principles that are aimed at homogenisation and interpellation. This provokes what Williams and Srnicek (2015) call a ‘production line of scripted interactions, coupled with global supply chains’ (n.p.) in our case of ideas and values where these animated films consolidate scripted behaviours. At the same time, they sell us associated toys, confections, clothes, stationery, jewellery, books, fast food, and much more that reinforces and normalises all the ideological transmissions they are peddling.

Monsters are traditionally other, but the anthropomorphic characteristics of these creatures mean we could easily remake the film as an alternate universe populated by human subjects whose vocation it is to produce energy via children’s fear. Similarly, for *Cars*, we can do the same by replacing the eponymous cars with the humans that drive them. The film is about humans turned into cars, an anthropomorphised film not about cars becoming human, but humans pretending to be cars pretending to be human. But Fox cannot suffer the same metamorphosis because he is *Vulpes Vulpes*, not *homo sapiens* pretending to be one.

Consequently, in every orthodox animated film, it is possible to see the hyper-realisation of the world through this distorted refraction. If we take, for example, one of the three biggest grossing animations of all time, Lee Unkrich’s *Toy Story 3* (2010), we can see this refraction effect emerge. The toys are placed in a childminding centre and are tortured at the hands of a recalcitrant, damaged bear ‘Lotso’ (voiced by Ned Beatty). The narrative is simple, and the major themes are obvious: friendship will overcome tyranny. The distinctly humanistic characteristics of egalitarian and democratic justice are played out as Lotso is punished for his wickedness and the toys find ultimate refuge in a safe house where they can be treated with love and affection. It would seem the crypto-religious message is clear. Despotism in all its guises will not be tolerated and will be overcome by truth and righteousness. Again, this is

In contrast, Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach's script for *Fantastic Mr. Fox* may confuse this market-driven paradigm. A genetic cousin to Peter Lord and Nick Park's *Chicken Run* (2000), Fox's yearning for self-validation is constantly trumped by his animality. We cannot replace Fox with a human because he is always essentially a chicken-killing creature, and this killing is arguably not part of human nature. In *Chicken Run*, there is a proletarian revolution, and the elements of a class struggle are present in both films but the chickens are more anthropomorphised. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is never a total validation of market systems because the animality of Fox absorbs the attempts at homogenisation. This animalism is brought to life by Anderson's visual style, bringing into stark relief the world of *Anthropos* and the world of mainstream animation. Powered by the novel's original sentiments, Anderson adds a visual style that rejects full anthropomorphism for the *sine qua non* of *Vulpes Vulpes*: they kill for survival. This is not merely a charming film, as many critics have branded it. It is also a cry for a return to animality. For Baudrillard, global power appreciates singular forms as heresies, absorbing all in its voracious path. The only way many cinema viewers can absorb Fox and his family, and friends is to see them as humans in animal costumes, but given that Fox is animicidal the allegory fails, and the viewer is unable to perceive Fox as an anthropomorphic exemplar. The obstacle to Fox and his friend's happiness are the rapacious farmers Boggins, Bunce, and Bean, who stand in for corporate capitalism and its relentless march to overturn all obstacles in its way. Fox is the pebble in their shoe, and try as they might, they can never absorb his animality into their corporatism. Fox does not just consume their chickens; he steals them because he is built to. He is outside simulation and outside human reality. Fox gets in the way of corporate capitalism because his essential nature gets in the way of his (human) culture. Now the sentiment here is to be on the side of Mr. Fox because he is opposing the evil farmers with his charm and wit. But we suggest we should also identify with Mr Fox because his animality refuses the grand simulation of corporate

capitalism and yearns to make an anthropocentric ‘violent’ statement with a mouthful of live chicken.

This singularity is the mortal enemy of capitalism and production because they rely on the subscription to the notion of a universalised desire for tightly controlled consumption. Here the fractal plays into the hands of the corporate world because for every idea and homogenised desire there is a product to satiate it. Hence, we cannot just read *Fantastic Mr. Fox* as a recreation of Dahl’s mischievous text, but equally as a paean to singularity. It ‘creates holes’ (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 21), in the culture of presentation and representation because when seen as a defiance of the fractal, it brings the language of interpretation ‘down to its singularity’ or, put another way, it promotes an exchange in conversation rather than governing it.

In this way, as mentioned in the introduction, one of the film’s most unique highlights becomes Fox’s confrontation with the (wild) wolf. This meeting takes place as Fox escapes Boggins, Bunce, and Bean and heads back home through the adjacent fields. In the distance is a (wild) black wolf that Fox engages. Eventually, he declares “What a beautiful wild animal”, and they part, but not before both raise their fists in the form of solidarity for their animality. The scene is interpreted as Fox and the wolf expressing their solidarity with *Canis Lupus* and *Vulpes*. But it is also a deeper expression of the ultimate failure of domestication. Deep down, Fox is still *Vulpes*, and he acknowledges the essential wildness that can never be fully extracted from him. This wildness is the part of human subjectivity we suppress. The connection to what Baudrillard calls the ‘radical strangeness to reason’ (1994, p. 129) is what we have to eliminate. Therefore, to say the connection between Fox and the black wolf is a brotherhood of canine-ness is not precisely correct. It is also the acknowledgement of the impossibility of a direct connection with this animality as the founding structure of humanity.

Yet, paradoxically, this essence is the very thing we try to neutralise and scientise. Control of the human subject infers the victory of rationalism and reason. It is to separate ourselves from our genealogy of animality. But if there is one thing we know about the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there is an inverse proportional relationship between the claims of scientific precision and wicked human behaviour. Our culture is paradoxically the more wild the animal the more it claims not to be. Anderson's animals never let us forget this, and with all their anthropomorphism they still regress to their basic drives.

The final scene of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* presents the major animal characters dancing in the supermarket which they have just invaded. They dance in ecstatic tribute to their animality and their survival. The inability of the system to control them is reflected in this delirious dance of defiance. Animated films deny the banal significations of reality because they are not subject to the codes of actuality. When pushed to an extreme, albeit in an exceptionally challenging and subtle way, we sense the presence of the fractal. No better is this exemplified than in Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson's *Anomalisa*, where we glimpse an application of Baudrillardian film philosophy in all its seductive and illusory audacity.

### **5.5 Singularity: The missed anomaly of Lisa.**

The moment of singularity in Kaufman's *Anomalisa*, scripted by Kaufman and co-directed by Duke Johnson, is the moment the fractal can be obliterated. The narrative of the film is straightforward. A motivational speaker Michael Stone, voiced by David Thewlis, suffering from an existential crisis receives an instant moment of relief from the banality of his humdrum existence in the form of Lisa Hesselman, voiced by Jennifer Jason Leigh. This banality is signified in the film by the change in voices that Michael hears throughout the film. Up until the point he meets Lisa, all other characters are voiced by Tom Noonan, but the moment he encounters Lisa, she transforms with a distinct and unique voice.

It is with this moment of singularity that we will conclude our examination through Baudrillard. We argue that *Anomalisa* is a deeply optimistic film, that despite Kaufman's widely acknowledged existential pessimism and his career-long obsession with giving his protagonists the same career-life *ennui*, the viewer can see the pivotal moment of the film its powerful, ethical, intimately ontological, fractal-defying message.

Michael Stone lives in a world that Baudrillard (1996) describes where the more:

... illusion faded as technological prowess increased. The more we move towards that perfect definition, that useless perfection, the more the power of illusion is lost. (p. 30)

His life as a motivational speaker is mired in cliché and unoriginality, yet his verbiage seems highly functional and technically competent. His world and ours are overburdened by pop psychology, and Kaufman's script highlights that once Stone's pop psychology makes the world appear highly 'real'-ised, it is at its most vulnerable for contestation and challenge. Only the most dedicated proponents of this psychology would see it as beneficial and enlightening, whereas Stone comprehends the self-fraudulence of his trite mechanical wisdom and yearns deeply for release.

These yearnings place him on a trajectory to attempt to glimpse the singular, something that does not conform (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 32). What Stone wants is for something to emerge with 'radical uncertainty' (Baudrillard, 2000b, p. 68) that the ontological foundations of his existence will be shaken. The lesson here is instructive. By seeking out a moment of singularity, Stone allows the world to blossom in ways he could not conceive of, but the delicate nature of this singular moment is lost. That becomes Stone's millstone, and the film articulates just how difficult it is to shift from the humdrum of repetition to etch out the singular. As Baudrillard reminds us, as demonstrated in *Anomalisa*, Stone is reabsorbed into

the fractal because he does not have the capacity to deny the overwhelming burden of the system. Instead, he returns home and succumbs to the banal.

However, our sociocultural reading of the film can lead us to conclude that the political implications of pursuing the singularity are clear. If you do not, you run the risk of being drawn straight back into the mundanity of the everyday. Baudrillard resisted this by being gently antagonistic, ensuring that all the elements of the sociopolitical system were constantly being challenged by his observations and writing. The everyday was his target, so that everyday living was not the banal, humdrum repetition of the same, but the opportunity to be much more creative and thus singular. In *Anomalisa*, the message from a Baudrillardian perspective is similarly clear: the search for a singularity is the energising force or the antidote to *ennui*. Ultimately Baudrillard could be reduced to the one who railed against the negative impact of a systemic attempt at universalisation. He tells us it can provoke a new form of resistance.

One of Kaufman's strongest particular strategies is the deliberate use of Tom Noonan to voice all the characters, announcers, and even singers that Michael Stone encounters until he meets Lisa. The very fact he is staying at the Fregoli Hotel alerts us to the fact that Kaufman is mischievously alluding to the 'Fregoli delusion', whereby the individual psychotically believes that all people are in fact the same person. Stone experiences a world where the same monotone voice ubiquitously haunts him, but to read this merely as a psychological malfunction would be to miss the strong sociological metaphor that is also operating here. Our reading is that *Anomalisa* is a metaphor for the enforced universalising tendencies of the fractal society. The phenomenological world of Stone is one of infinite reproducibility, where sameness is unnoticed by everybody except Stone. This is the paradox of the Fregoli delusion, seen in Baudrillardian terms. Somebody who suffers from this condition perceives

one person as all, but isn't this the process the system demands, where the real difference is replaced by predictable reproducibility? We all try to impose the Fregoli delusion on the world because that is the guaranteed reproducibility of the system. Sameness is encouraged, and singularity is marginalised.

Yet from the early moments of the film the stop-motion animation that makes no secret of the broken face lines, which could have been eliminated in post-production but, as Kaufman opines, it was felt as unnecessary because it gave them a 'broken and fragile quality' (Giardina, 2015, n.p.). Stone is 'broken' and suffers from the existential effects of imposed reproducibility. The reality may be that the Fregoli delusion is the default teleology of the system itself. When all around is familiar, and sameness dominates, we may be less likely to be anxious. A fractal universe demands integration and absorption. This is the constant appropriation of difference whereby singularity is captured and repackaged by the codes of the system.

Reality has become so virtual that the only way to depict the virtuality of reality is not to present reality in all its gritty actuality, like a Dardenne Brothers film, but to go to the other end of the scale and animate reality to expose its extreme virtualisation, as if we have come to the end of reality. In other words, to expose the fragility and uniqueness of what we have, we need to turn to its most extreme other. Kaufman and Duke do not try to hide the line across the puppets faces, which are a necessity of construction. This line is signifying more than just a broken fragility; it may also represent a form of inauthenticity that permeates the whole idea of stop-motion, but at the same time occludes the very idea of the actuality of inauthentic lives themselves. Put another way, the deliberate 'disfigurement' of Kaufman and Johnson's puppets leads to the shallow conclusion that the flaw is not just a flaw of stop-motion animation, but a flaw of the human condition. These puppet people are not fully formed

because they are playing humans. The sooner we realise, accept, and work with our nebulosity, we can challenge the fractal. A Baudrillardian film philosophy would encourage a singular reading of *Anomalisa* rather than the shallower responses to the film.

This superficial form of thinking demands the concession to absorption, and integration is resisted. In short, the fractal world of Michael Stone, where his audio and visual track is one of homogenised banality, can be seen as mirroring our world. The social reality of the Fregoli delusion is that it is everywhere around us when we care to look. Baudrillard's fourth level of simulation is where we cannot tell the difference between original and copy to the point where the original is redundant. But it is also where the system wants us to be, as it is the endgame of capital. Kaufman gives Stone an out clause with his attitude to the arrival of Lisa. His world is disrupted by this genuine event, and the coordinates of his psychic economy are rapidly rearranged. He pursues Lisa and is mesmerised by the singularity of her voice juxtaposed with the predictable dross and banality of the others that surround him. He grasps this moment and seduces Lisa, but the next morning the gloss wears off, and she is reduced back to the banality of Noonan's voice and a list of habits which quickly irritate Stone. His poetic encounter with Lisa cannot be sustained, but instead of radically overhauling his life, he submits and reverts back to mundanity.

The most striking thing about Michael Stone's brief moment of bliss is that, despite having access to a singularity, he 'fails' to see that his own is infinitesimally momentary. He pursues it relentlessly, quantifies it and thus turns the brief relationship into a banality, a repetition of the same by demanding Lisa become something she clearly cannot. Stone becomes Stone again after momentarily losing himself and glimpsing the potential liberating effect of challenging the fractal. This is not exclusively pessimism, but the poetic answer to the question that has troubled him for the entirety of the film: "What is it to ache?" The answer

could be that existential ache is countered by singularity, by searching for or creating moments of it and, of course, a singularity can never be repeated.

The viewer also is invited to do the same in interpretation with Stone. Whatever the poetic resonance is between Lisa and Michael, his one-night stand with its intense sexual encounter is worth consideration for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is fumbling and inarticulate. Secondly, the characters' bodies are depicted against type. Finally, the choreography of this scene imitates the narrative trajectory of the film. While Stone is obviously sexually attracted to Lisa, his desire for an authentic encounter overwhelms his capacity to perceive its fleeting necessity. We too could see the momentary contact between them as symbolic of what to seek rather than what to avoid. If we take one lesson from the film, it is that the very search for singular moments makes for an enhanced existence.

Kaufman and Duke choreograph Stone and Hesselman's sex with a precise realism that is antithetical to a more typical Hollywood sex scene. He makes amorous advances, and she coyly accepts, but he accidentally tickles her, is too eagerly aggressive, etc. The whole encounter is realistic, not a choreographed moment of soft-core pornography. Cleverly filmed, the bodies of Stone and Hesselman are everyday bodies and their groans of pleasure are pitched at a register that frames an actuality of sex, an inverse to Baudrillardian 'obscenity', and this can make audiences uncomfortable rather than voyeuristic participants of identification. Many laugh at this scene. Our theory is that this is an uncomfortable laugh because of the mirror effect of the encounter, rather than just the fact that animated characters are doing it. They expect the banal clichés of filmed sex, but these are puppets replete with genitals who are fumbling through a quick and intense physical encounter.

Our principal point here is that the delivery of an actual realistic sex scene has been effected by puppets and stop-motion animation. Animated characters from the mainstream do not

have sexual encounters; if they do, they are always off-screen. This is not just because of censorship ratings and family values, but because animation sex is undiscussed. However, in *Anomalisa*, Michael and Lisa's encounter comes closer to human reality, and the irony is not lost on us. As Fox allows his animality to texture his encounter with the world, effectively giving it a more singular hue than audience watching him, Michael and Lisa's singular sexual tryst is unencumbered by pretence and repetition. In summary, the viewers are perhaps expecting a fractalised sexual presentation of soft-core porn and instead get an encounter with a documentary feel.

This scene, often treated as comic by the audiences, fails to supply any of the filmic clichés that accompany more orthodox and anticipated affairs. There are no acrobatic gyrations of lithe bodies, but the paunch and animality of Stone and Hesselman's basic needs. If contemporary sex scenes are obscene in their Baudrillardian incantation, here the discomfort felt by audiences is that we are subject to our own physical insecurities and fantasies. Kaufman's 'animality' here is akin to Anderson's Fox; their capacity to show the frailties and mysteries of humanity cannot be achieved by actuality but is exemplified by puppetry. With animals 'seduction achieves its purest form' (Baudrillard, 1990c, p. 88), and what we can glean from this is this sex scene in its pure animal mating trope grating against our expectation of aesthetic or pornographic demands.

The point we can take here from Kaufman is the moment of rapture that Stone encounters with Lisa, this anomalous moment of singular wonder that should be a tonic for his painful mundanity. But he regresses back and goes home defeated and aching. We can conclude here that Stone cannot see the genuine payoff of his singular moment; the ache he questions in his lecture at the conference is the ache he questions in his lecture at the conference. What Stone

does not realise is that the ache he is feeling is a universal ache; the Sisyphean task is to search for the next singularity.

## **5.6 Singularity avoided.**

The imagined world of Cincinnati in *Anomalisa* is one of quasi-dystopic banality. The monotone voices, the soft auburn colour palette, and the preponderance of shadow externalise the drab interior contents of Stone's existence. It is this banal subsistence that is most accentuated by all the people and objects that Stone encounters. His resistance to the accepted reality that is humdrum and predictable spurs him into action. His acolytes at the conference mouth platitudes of entirely exchangeable vapidities. This world 'shows totally fluctuating effects of good and evil' (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 86), there are few illusions, and here Baudrillard is at his most sociologically acute; an illusion has the authority to seduce any form of production away from itself (1990b, p. 70). A fully realised world that has reached a form of banal perfection is one devoid of illusion, a world where banality underpins our ontological deportment.

Kaufman's script highlights the utopia of achieved banality through this preoccupation with quotidian blandness, as most of the characters have succumbed to the imposed rules of the society that exploits them. From the very beginning, there is a distinctive irony deployed through the use of stop-motion animation. We see a plane flying through the night sky, but the animated plane is physically contracted, and the animation is clearly drawing attention to itself. Our response to this is the notion that Kaufman is providing the ultimate Baudrillardian metaphor here. Charlie Kaufman cited on the website *Open the Portal* that:

As we move into an increasingly virtual society, I find solace and comfort in the hands-on, human imperfection of the stop-motion process. It is to me both heart-breaking and beautiful. The imperfections of the humans who create these works make it so. And, oddly

perhaps, because of this, these puppets make me feel more connected to those sweet aspects of us as human beings.

Therefore, as the plane descends into the Cincinnati airport, the path it traces through the clouds is the minutiae of the puppetry and exposes the imperfections of those who created the film and the imperfections of reality itself, its illusions and singularities. So, it's not the fear of flying joke that opens the film and the physical connection the two passengers share, but the acknowledgment that these moments of uniqueness make up our existence. Like the burning building in *Synecdoche, New York* or the portal in *Being John Malkovich*, Kaufman's inventive imagination counters banality with singularity. *Anomalisa* is a study of singular moments that is perfectly suited to the stop-motion animated form because of this. Kaufman calls our attention to imperfection in a world that is supposed to be perfect. Those antagonised by the animation believe its imperfection is not deliberate. For instance, Paul Heitsche (2015) opines on the Amazon website:

Didn't finish. Why are we watching the main character do completely inane stuff in his hotel room for 10 minutes? (Other than to dazzle us with the technical flourishes in the animation - "oooooh that gesture while he was lighting his cigarette was \*so\* lifelike ... ") Why just the one male voice for \*all\* the secondary characters? That was confusing at first, and then distracting, and finally too annoying to continue tolerating. So - animation was deft, tons of technical virtuosity there. But compare how much story Pixar can cram into a 10-minute opening sequence or a 2 and a half minute montage sequence vs. how long it took for \*any\* story to begin to emerge here? My time is a non-renewable resource, and this was a presumptuous waste of it.

Heitsche desires his animation to be more modernised and seamless and his characters resistant to mental aberration. And so, it is with much of the critical reception of the film itself. Rather than appreciating it as an instructional treatise on grasping the singular, critics have been more eager to see Kaufman as a pessimist who thinks that life is desultory and stop

there. Ian Freer (2015), writing in *Empire Magazine*, is typical; having his review stop at the banal conclusion Kaufman that is offering us a surreal exploration of *ennui*. He argues:

You'd be right to expect that, given Kaufman's history of surreal twists and unlikely storytelling, it isn't likely to end well or in any sort of obvious manner (an ancient Japanese sex toy is involved). But what stays with you isn't the puppetry or point-making about the corrosion of individuality in the modern world. Instead it's the poignant consideration of just how fragile we all are. (n.p.)

As such, the affair between Michael Stone and Lisa is an entry into the singular, rather than to comply with the much more banal legislations of the everyday. It is a paean to the minutiae of the singular that can be expressed virtually through stop-motion animation. Life is a series of interconnected infinitesimal gaps that blend together to give the impression of seamlessness and fluidity. Stop-motion animation challenges this fluidity, and therefore both *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Anomalisa* could be appreciated as metaphors for interventions into this appearance of fluidity and seamlessness.

By way of challenge, we offer stop-motion animation as a rebuttal of seamless destiny and highlight the small insignificant moments and objects of our time. We are flawed instances subject to the arbitrary and absence of meaning. Michael Stone is trapped in the destiny of the 'other', where the homogenised and brutal sameness of the world he encounters is the baneful state of his existence. His encounter with the anomaly Lisa is the intervention into this existence, a chance meeting that opens a fissure in his lifeworld allowing us to glimpse the potentiality of the singular. He cannot grasp it because he does not have to. Kaufman's film ends with him returning to his home defeated and compromised.

At this point, his family receives him casually but with an underlying antagonism that ends with the obligatory, "Fuck you, Michael", a phrase we have heard in many situations throughout the film. Stone is left to ponder the life he is living and the existential pain he has

encountered. He never considers that the momentary glimpse of the singularity he got with Lisa was the attitude he needed to adopt to confront the *ennui* of his existence. However, it is only Kaufman who recognises this singularity, and he laments it as he has done through his career. All his main male protagonists fail to express any gratitude for their unique views on life.

This fragility does not necessarily dictate the response we can have to personal psychological aches. All of Kaufman's male protagonists feel this pain, and each time they get trapped. Kaufman captures the singular without fully advocating its restorative powers. Charlie Kaufman's public persona is one of a man dealing with this same *ennui*. His creative outlet is to imagine characters who have exaggerated versions of this crisis. Craig Schwartz, the writer Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation* (2002), Joel Barrish in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and Caden Cotard in *Synecdoche, New York* all have momentary glimpses of the singularity, and all fail to confront and integrate the necessary ache that accompanies it. Their artistic endeavour is usually thwarted and overwhelmed. The utopia of achieved banality is, of course, to stop searching and let the banal significations of the world fatally seduce you. As Baudrillard said, the trick is to disappear, so this banality is pointless for you.

### **5.7 Conclusion: Wes Anderson and Charlie Kaufman did not occur.**

In the end, a Baudrillardian film philosophy counters the fractal by the only means we know possible. This to expose the fractal as a hyper-real form, to dissuade the simulation from effacing the real and to ensure that any signs are reversed, seduced, and precariously positioned. Over the course of the thesis, we have attempted to affect this position and have deployed Baudrillard to demonstrate how Anderson and Kaufman have also played with signification in this seductive manner.

This chapter has traversed the animated films of Anderson and Kaufman to demonstrate the yearning to implicitly simulate reality with a version of it that deflates the anxiety of the real itself. The banal attitude to the real is one of control and manipulation; for Baudrillard, it was one of mystery and illusion. Animated films can demonstrate mystery, and we advanced this argument with Fox's animality and the singular moment of mysterious sublimity that Michael Stone encounters.

To counter the imposed banal signs that are all too easily given credence in filmmaking and its interpretation, the viewer may choose to challenge this banality. The plentiful amount of animated cinema is a rich source of such an endeavour. We would argue that provoking this challenge to banality via the mundanity of animated cinema is an excellent place to begin.

In his acidic obituary for Baudrillard, Carlin Romano (1997) wrote reprinted in *The Australian* newspaper:

Baudrillard, though, maybe the screw-up who endangered the brand. His published writings were so bad and his publicity-hound manner so obvious that the image of incomprehensibility and clownishness attached itself to the respectful profile drawn by his advocates and they couldn't rub it off. (n.p.)

This thesis is not just a defence of Baudrillard, but an engagement with the Romano position by challenging it. Romano is correct, but only in the sense that he operates within a world of value and meaning specific to Romano. The entire methodology of this thesis is premised on the argument that signification is fluid and transient and, most importantly, while appearing to be self-sustaining it is self-destructive. In Romano's world signification is much more unified, reducible to a single principle that there is one form of 'comprehensibility' that Baudrillard clearly does not attain. In this way, he is 'right'. However, suggesting that Baudrillard is 'incomprehensible and clownish' in a world where signification is fluid, transient, and destined to turn on itself opens up Baudrillard to another form of encounter:

that of theory-fiction or a poetic view of the world, where transient thoughts are used to challenge the claims for unity to see ‘what happens next’. Therefore, it is not so much the truth quotient of Romano’s claim that Baudrillard’s writings were ‘so bad’ but the intensity of the appearance of this writing, its capacity to frame a reality, and its measure of dominant appearance in the world that is interesting. Again, Romano is right if and only if there is a transcendent world full of specific universal and eternal ‘good’ writing. But this is not simply a relativistic exercise, but a measurement of the intensity of what Romano can generate. He has made a different way to disappear and as such traps the unsuspecting reader into assumptions of banality, where it can only be merely concluded he did not like Baudrillard.

We claim (or in Baudrillardian, ‘make appear’) that there is no eternal, universal and transcendent signification and thus track Baudrillard in terms of what will make critique ‘disappear’, that is, what will challenge his thought to see it fatally collapse. This requires a fundamental shift in the metaphysical approach to the world, which Romano et al. (necessarily) refuse. The world is truly an animated, illusory, precarious entity, and Baudrillard engaged full tilt with it by fighting illusion with illusions of his own creation. Sometimes film philosophy should do the same.

## **Baudrillard as a film philosopher. A Coda.**

Cinema is a cornerstone of contemporary human experience. Commercial cinema is a mammoth enterprise, generating billions of dollars and texturing many aesthetic encounters. However, concurrently, a dominant and ubiquitous logic is encircling the world (Grace, 2000), and the work of Jean Baudrillard ensured he was as unencumbered by this logic as possible. This logic wants to rid the world of the negative, of opposition and of radical otherness. In the writing of this thesis, this logic has proliferated a form of passive engagement with the world that often will not accept the challenge of re-engineering the semiotic dominance that accompanies this logic. The result is a world run by a language that not only supports this indifference but also encourages benign irreversibility. A world like this facilitates its own implosion and runs perilously close to the fractal state Baudrillard postulated.

This is especially true in our interactions with the commercial and aesthetic imperatives of cinema. Far too often cinema 'is complicit with its own simulated form' (Grace, 2000, p. 185). A fractal imploded irreversible form of cinema renders a film world without irony, an artistic world without the possibility of difference. We would argue that some mainstream cinematic fare is giving us this now, and more than ever we need Anderson and Kaufman and their ilk to establish a front of resistance. These are the points of connection between Baudrillard and Kaufman and Anderson we have been attempting to establish.

Our powerful cultural markers validate this because politics, commerce, sport, and entertainment all exhibit tendencies to quash challenge, and the inexorable march of a fractal world looms large. Baudrillard exhaustively wrote himself out of this morass and paved a way in form as well as content to inoculate thought from these dangers. Many of us are in the opposite field, where we are 'infinitely vulnerable to its own needs being met, desires being

fulfilled, autonomous identity being recognised, and given due consideration' (Grace, 2000, p. 184). The opportunity for self-fashioning through reversibility is diminished if the challenge is not actively embraced. This creative mode of thought is the invitation to seduction through the recognition of and opposition to blatant banal simulation, whether it is practised by a corrupt politician, a ruthless corporation, an avaricious sporting body, or a greedy film industry.

We have focused on cinema to articulate such opposition and highlight how reversibility can foster a more authentic language of response. Those who proffer interpretation are often complicit with the systemic prosecutions we have fought all along. The cinema of Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson fight this same battle and have over the journey of their respective careers enhanced their reputations as seductive and challenging filmmakers. They invite a symbolic response, with the full knowledge that it is both temporary and illusive. At the time of writing, they have new projects in the pipeline. We can only hope that they continue to make art that continues to frustrate through complexity and aesthetic retorts to the banal simulations of their peers.

Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson did not happen. Forms of them are made to appear, but we desire them in a form of our own that can seduce and reverse. Then they can playfully challenge the world of cinema and its orthodoxies, banalities and its homogeneity. All singular forms are heresies, a challenge to global power (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 97). Fox knew the black wolf was a heretic, but we will never know why. Knowing is not the main criteria. It is the heresy that is.

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