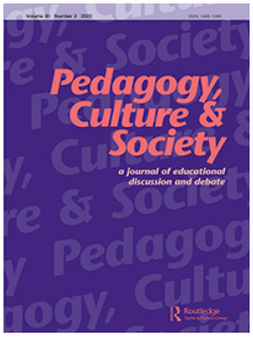

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Review Symposium

Jean Baudrillard and radical education theory. Turning right to go left, by Kip Kline and Kristopher Holland, Brill, 2020, pp. 72, £29 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-04-44535-2

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Heretical thinking in educational research: Baudrillard's radical edge

Mark Fisher once said that Baudrillard is the unacknowledged prophet of our time (2011). What Baudrillard started to observe at the end of the twentieth century – a world constructed of signs without reference, where the simulated becomes more real than reality – has only worsened into persistent daily horror. Still, many refuse to embrace the prophetic vision of Baudrillard to navigate these times. Analogously, *Jean Baudrillard and Radical Educational Theory* begins with a challenge to the educational research field: 'Baudrillard's ideas are conspicuously absent from most educational literature' (1) and instead we see a troublingly deep attachment to 'the Greeks, the Enlightenment philosophers, John Dewey and other American pragmatists, critical theorists' (62) and so forth. As authors Kline and Holland point out, desperate attempts are occasionally made to shoehorn Baudrillard into chapters on postmodernity in educational guides and introductions, or worse, Baudrillard sometimes 'serves as a straw man to either illustrate or articulate a displeasure with the postmodern condition' (1), but broadly he remains an absent figure in educational thought. The latter is true of academic discourse far beyond the field of education, of course, but what Kline and Holland immediately call into question is, if Baudrillard *is* the unacknowledged prophet of our uncertain times, why is he not called upon more regularly?

Multiple cases are made in response to this question throughout the book. For example, the authors note how, though critique of education has long pointed towards the complex relationship between education and capitalism, and many submit to the visible 'demise' of education amidst neoliberalism, the tools regularly employed have produced little in the way of effective results. Kline and Holland contend that commonplace, grant-attracting research only complicates the coded nature of educational reality, and thus becomes subsumed by the very capitalist monstrosity that it supposedly critiques. The book therefore acts as a challenge to our desire for 'excessive information, excessive visibility, excessive certainty' (23), for these things are both unobtainable in the logic of postmodernity and ultimately unhelpful. Henceforth, Kline and Holland seek radical thoughts, not critical thoughts, contravening the paradigmatic educational impetus. Pithy swipes are taken at leading bodies in educational research to emphasise the misguided missions they take in their navigation of the status quo. The authors attack calls for *more* of the sort of methodology so commonly employed in educational research, despite its ability to do little in unravelling the code of the edu-politcal sphere. Indeed, as Kline and Holland point out, the 'constant proliferation of information' (31) we now undergo is unwieldy to the point of becoming empty within itself.

Though broadly theoretical, there are some speculations on material problems here (if this is a binary the reader upholds). A strong example is the consideration of the 'strict, technical-oriented concept of pedagogy having fully realized itself in fairly recent phenomena such as highly scripted lessons' (25), contextualised by the authors in the COVID 19 pandemic. Kline and Holland posit that what has been established is really a pedagogy without substance, a hollow imitation of pedagogy that has no pure original. Such thinking calls for serious interrogation of the traditions on which we think teaching relies. An inquiry into the omni-presence of techno-gadgetry is also made, and they intimate that such technophilia only contributes to the simulated mode of pedagogy currently embraced, something that adheres to the logic of late-capital.

Coherent descriptions of the precession of the simulacra litter the guide for those who are new to Baudrillard. It is in the understanding of this most essential concept that the majority of his ideas become easier to grasp. Baudrillard's Disneyland example is cited in detail – that Disneyland, with its costuming, endless commodification, and libidinal capitalisation, may present itself as a simulation, but it is in a sense the *real America*. America itself is the simulation, but Disneyland's overt fictionality disguises that 'reality' is now Disneyfied. Importantly, this theory of simulacra raises the idea that life imitates art, rather than the inverse, something that Kline and Holland note in both Baudrillard and Wilde (a theory also exhorted by Lacan). Reality, like fiction, 'is ruled by rules (codes), maps, mores, etc' (44). Such a line of thought of course raises troubling questions about education: how has education been structured by art, that is, by fiction, or fantasy?

The hazy border between fiction and the real is thus ceaselessly explored by Baudrillard, and so too is it explored by Kline and Holland throughout their book. We see this in the importance of Baudrillardian 'theory fiction', for example, where theory and fiction are hybridised so to free critique from the capitalist code. Baudrillard's concept does not just entail the utilisation of fictional fragments to allegorise or deepen 'real' research, though; it is the fiction itself that stands as the theory. Such hybridity frees theoretical discourse from metrics or value and diverges from the normalising frame of academia. For, it is these very frames, metrics and values that stand as capitalist structures to subsume the sort of thinking supposedly critiquing capitalist structures. Of course, it is for these reasons that theory fiction would likely prove most repugnant to the academic sphere – fiction transgresses the boundaries of the article or monograph as its effectiveness cannot be measured, nor its methodology grounded, nor can it be peer reviewed. It appears to some as the work of an academic heretic, but this is perhaps what Baudrillard, Kline and Holland would desire. Though attempted by unconventional thinkers like the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick in the nineties, such a form has yet to penetrate mainstream academic circles. Perhaps, one might read this guide, therefore, and be inspired to take on the dissenting ideas and questions posited here. A challenge to the hegemony of the academic article in the form of theory fiction stands as one such move, but there are darker suggestions here too. Baudrillard's ontology of 'siding with "object"' (64) presents objects like capital as possessing an agency of their own. It causes us to re-evaluate our supposed mastery over the world and see how we may be at the whim of enormous entities out of our grasp. *Our* sense of agency and subjectivity is challenged by siding with the object, and might education, perhaps, exist in a similar way? Maybe education is too an object of terrifying proportions that has come to dominate our subjectivity, much like that of Baudrillardian capital. Kline and Holland just *start* to brush up against these heretical ideas, positing that education may be enacting some sort of revenge on the philosophers that think they master it (a wonderful and terrifying image that needs deepening), but one feels this idea could go further when viewed through the Baudrillardian lens.

Indeed, one wonders if the ideas proposed within the book are *radical enough* for Baudrillardian lines of flight. Though the authors recognise the guide is not meant to be comprehensive, there are perhaps stones left unturned. Critique is aimed at educational concepts like pedagogy and educational technology, but the very simulated nature of, say, the school, is left unaddressed. Though they note, we 'should create institutions that teach counter-intuition in order to oppose the enigmatic quality of the world not with clarity but with more enigma' (28), one is left wondering whether such an institution is fundamentally possible in the totalising nature of late-capitalism that Baudrillard was so attuned to.

Nevertheless, I am one of the few readers of this book who needs no convincing, for I have long believed in the essentiality of Baudrillardian thought in education – particularly that of simulacra. But the unconvinced may find themselves swayed by reading Kline and Holland's assault on the educational status quo. Those 'who find contemporary conditions of schooling or discourses about youth lamentable, those who critique prima facie aims of education, the corporatization of schools and universities, etc'. (4) may find Baudrillard has some tools for them that reveal, or *unreveal*, the objects of their interrogation. It seems as if the bulk of philosophers (and indeed sociologists and psychologists) of education may find something here, then, but only if they heed this call, no matter how inimical it may sound to the dominant discourse: 'we must make [the] world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic' (68) so to *embrace* enigma and chaos. This is the reality of the (post)modern age, thus we must meet it with the very structures that it exerts upon us.

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Can we use Jean Baudrillard's theories to challenge knowledge, education, theory and practice?

In *Jean Baudrillard and Radical Education Theory: Turning Right to Go Left*, authors Kip Kline and Kristopher Holland set out on the difficult task of using one of the most inaccessible and often misunderstood theorists as a vehicle through which to challenge contemporary education theory and practices. Jean Baudrillard's work has most commonly been used within the boundaries of cultural studies and philosophical debates, which can often mean his concepts remain in those silos of ever more introspective discussions, despite the fact he addresses a multitude of different elements in his work. It is also perhaps down to the fact that Baudrillard's work can be understood to be both elusive and provocative at the same time, a paradox that makes him one of the most interesting figures in postmodern theory. Although this book is a much easier read than Baudrillard's work, its authors follow in his footsteps by offering stimulating provocations to the reader, both critical and incisive that offer a glimpse towards a new approach to educational theory and pedagogy. The authors value Baudrillard as a custodian and protector of 'enigma, illusion, indeterminacy, myth and the secret' (22) within education, which they rightly point out is not currently valued in mainstream educational discourse. This book begins to move beyond notions of 'contemporary' education, and recognises the value in the unknowable or at best, complex 'hyperreal' world we live in today.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Baudrillard has not been more widely adopted in other fields is because his work is notoriously difficult and esoteric. The authors rightly point out the rationalised nature of educational theory, which Baudrillard's work sits largely outside. Baudrillard's later work in particular embraces chaos on a number of levels and its non-linearity can often feel fragmented and demanding on the reader. This can leave the door open to misinterpretations of his writing or an unwillingness to work through the complexity. However, the authors of *Jean Baudrillard and Radical Education Theory* present excellent summaries of some of Baudrillard's key positions that help instil confidence in the reader that they can go together into what is often complex, dense territory. They also situate these discussions in 'real' (excuse the pun), practical settings that feel current and relevant, which adds a layer of accessibility that other scholars writing on Baudrillard often miss.

There are notable discussions on the intentionally obtuse directions used in Las Vegas, which the authors define as an emblem for Baudrillardian space as these signs do not help with navigation, but inhibit and interrupt the ability to move around the city. There are also reflections on the terrorist attacks on September 11th in New York. The explorations on 9/11 are a particularly poignant moment in the book that offers direct reflections of experiencing the event but also responding to the hyper-real constructions in the subsequent months and years. This clear discussion was in some parts unsettling as it clearly explores the complex world Baudrillard tells us we are unable to escape from, making the link between theory and everyday life. Kline and Holland weave between personal experience, reflections and Baudrillard's key concepts, which was engaging, informative and clear.

A large proportion of the book centres on these explanatory passages that seek to contextualise the main provocation that comes in the final chapter. The authors explore the world around our educational system, which is an important consideration in this context as our educational system is a product, or to coin a Baudrillardian term, 'object' within our environment. This educational system, aligned with capitalist neoliberal ideology has, in their words, created the unjust unequal society we currently find ourselves in. We need to learn to 'die nicely' (63) or we will continue with the 'empty' pedagogy, policies theories and analysis that have ultimately failed to challenge the increasingly quantified, individualised, educational system.

The question is then, how do we use Baudrillard's ideas to confront our failed education practices? The authors provide a compelling argument that hinges on empowering us to realise the world and social conditions Baudrillard tells us is there. However, once we can discern our circumstances we should not use this elevated awareness to attempt to challenge this hyper-reality with rationality, precision or truths. Indeed, this would be counter-intuitive as that rational striated approach has, in some quarters, been the focus of the educational project since the mid twentieth century. Educational discourse and policy seeks to measure, understand and quantify educational practices, which in Baudrillardian terms is a futile exercise. Ultimately, we are unable to live outside of the hyperreal world we live in, so once we are equipped with a Baudrillardian reading of the way the world may be, instead of attempting to challenge this troubling analysis we should embrace it or 'undergo' it. Not only should we accept it, we should turn it in on itself and produce more simulations and simulacra. Here the authors are perhaps leaning towards a position informed by accelerationist tendencies, theorising and suggesting a challenge through a battle of post-truth, post-information, post-educational practices, although what that might look like in practical terms is left to the reader to explore themselves. Reading Baudrillard in this way the authors are asking us to embrace the unknown and unknowable, to cast aside the desire for knowledge or understanding and accept the chaos. Again, where this leads to is not entirely clear; a Baudrillardian reading might postulate a further order of simulation but perhaps that theoretical leap (and the complex discussion that might need) is too much to include in this well-formed book.

Placing Baudrillard's theories clearly in the current problematic capitalist, post-truth world we can all relate to is perhaps the greatest strength of this book. This grounding allows Kline and Kristopher to directly challenge the negative presumptive, defeatist readings of Baudrillard's work and use his analysis as a vehicle through which to challenge the current educational system that we have. This introductory exploration could lead to a larger body of analysis that begins to embrace the irrational, qualitative, chaotic nature of education through Baudrillard's work. The only question is whether the suggested recognition and re-creation of hyper-real practices and objects will be enough to bring about the change the authors clearly state is needed.

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Wake up, dead souls

Jean Baudrillard and Radical Education Theory is a title published within a series of guides to scholarship in education, and as such is a shorter text that offers more of a provocation than an application. The authors make a variably convincing argument that the academic field of education (but by implication, also its community of practice) *need* to 'turn right to go left'. This contribution stops short of guiding us onto the counter-path it insists we must take, restricting its ambition to an account of the problem, that '*one of the events that philosophers of education are lagging behind is the death of the philosophy of education*' (70).

An important disclaimer for readers here is that, unlike other work in, for example, the Routledge series in which a critical theorist's key ideas are directly applied to the field (a notable example being Stephen Ball's well-thumbed *Foucault, Power and Education* (2012), the series also covered Marx, Freud, Said, Dewey and Du Bois), this is an extended essay, over four chapters, working through two strands – first, the way that, the authors argue, educational theory and research is framed by, and apparently accepts, the discourse and logics of the late capitalist code, and second, how Baudrillard's fatal theory, a resistance to the impulse for critical thinking to be productive in order to explore theory's own futility as the philosophical endeavour, offers, obliges even, a way out – left, via right.

This is not unchartered territory, Nick Peim's call for thinking in and of itself as 'method' in education research puts a range of 'Baudrillardian' lines of sight to work (2018), albeit more via Derrida, whilst with regard to media and education, Bennett, Kendall, and McDougall (2011) explored the tensions between the empirical ideal subject and simulacra in both institutional and critical framings of pedagogy and curriculum a decade back. And Will Merrin's (2014) re-appraisals of Baudrillard operate at the intersection of postmodern theory and a meta-discourse about 'Media Studies 2.0'. These are a few examples from a broader range.

But the specific series of reversals elaborated here do intend an original contribution by way of triggering a counter-intuitive escape from various traps, peeling the scales from our eyes to reveal our complicity in an 'ecstatic pedagogy'. In Baudrillard's thinking, ecstatic forms are those which have become empty by virtue of having rendered their opposites obsolete, and become pure simulation. In pedagogy, the authors argue, this is the point where teaching is prescribed as a purely technical operation, an idea of a 'perfected' pedagogy.

This is one of the direct applications of Baudrillard to education, in this case his 'anti-pedagogy' and ecstasy of communication together as:

> Ecstatic pedagogy is pedagogy that absorbs all of the energy of education without method – if that is anything like the opposite of pedagogy. And when it does so, it becomes pure and empty. (26)

Beginning with a reflexive account of the authors' personal histories of reading Baudrillard and their respective seductions, the book offers a narrative of how, together, they come to these observations about educational research and theory. Moving on to a partially formed (in this short volume) critique of the philosophy of education, which tends to be conflated in this book with educational theory, research, teacher-training, classroom practice and its remote equivalents, they argue that contemporary tensions in 'ed tech', remote learning during the pandemic, teaching to the test and the failure to respond with critical agency to 'post truth', algorithms and deep fakes can (only) be resolved through the deployment of a fatal theory of education. Educational philosophy, theory and research, they claim, are unable to be liberated from flawed, enduring and existential assumptions which continue to separate subject from object, human from technology and thus privilege concerns about control over immersion in the hyper-real, the state where the image replaces what it represents, so that signs and images become more real than reality in this sense, this is reality as simulation.

Chapter 2 makes the case for the end of traditional critique in education, foregrounding the fourth order of simulacrum (whereby the simulacrum has moved away from any reality, we can no longer, and no longer want to, distinguish between representation and represented) and challenging those of us who champion interdisciplinary and methodologically eclectic research, autoethnography and 'identity politics' as contributing to the 'democratisation of evidence' that Baudrillard would see as ecstatic forms that obscure knowledge. The problem is not the good intentions of the research, with regard to diversity and de-centring, but the *forms of critique*, or in the authors' words:

> Here we are introducing the Baudrillardian arguments against traditional critique and applying those arguments to critical theoretical work in education that continues its commitment to producing more and more traditional critique. We also introduce Baudrillard's concepts of radical thought and fatal theory as correctives to the dead end of traditional critique. (33-34)

But chapter 3 returns to a re-reading of simulation and lacks *any* discussion of education. This is frustrating as the contemporary events explored – deepfakes and algorithmic social systems, among others, are so 'on the radar' of education, for example the call for media literacy as a resilience safeguard and to data literacy for both protection from harm and to re-set democracy via new digital civics, that a development of this neo-Baudrillardian counter-script with specific regard to these meeting points of the fourth order and education as an empty signifier would be worth turning towards. On a broader level, this is returned to in a sketching out (authors' words) of a theory, by way of a dialogue between Marx, Baudrillard and Beradi and then a return to Nietzschean tropes around treating chaos with chaos, so educational theory must use intelligibility against itself, stepping out of the subject/object distinction which it, the book argues, clings to.

In their use of Baudrillard's theories in their own lived experiences and with regard to their contemporary significance, the authors work with 9/11 as a trigger point for a meta-awareness of displacement and deterrence; echoing Baudrillard's (in)famous Gulf War analysis. They discuss Las Vegas and main streets and simulated Africa in the 'Disneyverse'; the specific

'spin off' of Trumpian post-truth set in motion by Rudy Guiliani; the remake of *Casino Royale* and da Vinci's *Salvator Mundim*; Wikipedia, code control and its manifestation in voting maps – especially pertinent in the UK at the time of writing – concluding, reasonably, before moving onto the call for fatal theory in and of education, that:

> This algorithmic homogenization of the world, its flattening (and disappearance) as codes that 'make correct' that which is outside of the norm, outside of the chosen reality code is what Baudrillard's work on simulation and proposal for fatal theory hopes to point out and strategize resistance to. (72)

This work is theoretically super-charged but surprisingly short-handed in the follow through. Much of the space is devoted to a (re)reading of Baudrillard, and readings of readings, with the conviction of the prescribed turning point for educational theory itself, to paraphrase a congruent idea, endlessly deferred, along with some key aspects of the theorising itself also remaining elusive, '*without the space and time to address*' (19) some substantive areas of this re-presentation of Baudrillard. The philosopher in question is, as the writers see it, under-appreciated by philosophers of education, this term, again, used interchangeably with research and theory and, in particular for the institutionalised framing of the field as manifested in the American Education Research Association (AERA), for whom the authors reserve heightened concern:

> … one of the most powerful organizations in academic research in education has backed itself into an aporetic situation owing to its thinly veiled connection to the modern disorders of hyper-rationality, objectivity, and arithmomania that operate explicitly and in the midst of its critique. (43)

Unlike the aforementioned 'Key Ideas' series, this work does not intend to put Baudrillard in dialogue with the field of education, or offer examples of how his theories have already been and/or could be applied to issues and debates or used as theoretical foundations or conceptual frameworks for research. Rather, Kline and Holland seek to invoke Baudrillard to disrupt beyond repair 'the field'.

This is significant, in so much as Baudrillard's relationship with educational theory has been less apparent than that of Foucault. Whilst both resist 'application', the latter's work on the processing of subjects, discipline, power and the panopticon in particular have tended to offer more of a way in than Baudrillard's more impervious offering. For this reason, what Kline and Holland have attempted here is very difficult, to spark the necessary interest of a community in a theoretical way of seeing education that is more of a reflex than a method, a reflex to resist empirical observation, rather than to put disruptive ideas into that form of critique, as we might with Foucault, on power, discourse and epistemological orders. Indeed, as '*Baudrillard writes on, and sometimes the world catches up*'. (Hegarty 2004, 1)

If we take the philosophical argument of the book as sound, there are binary issues that work against it and blind-spots to more critical spaces. On the one hand, setting up educational philosophy in this way reduces the nuances and complexities of decolonial activist-research and indigenous methodologies to a set of discursive practices around empirical evidence of a 'form of critique'. On the other, there is the problem of claiming that ecstatic pedagogy can be seen to be at work in the enthusiastic adoption of 'ed tech' for some kind of neutral instrumentalism or an outmoded anxiety over human and machine. The argument here is that the late capitalist code is combined, in educational theory, with a presumption of value. This might be a valid line of attack to level at educational governance and futuring discourses of the post-pandemic, but not entirely of the research field, in which there is a

proliferation of work which disrupts the ecstasy of teacher fused with technology in favour of socio-material reversal – see Bayne et al, (2020); Carrigan, (2020); Gourlay (2021); Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020); Selwyn and Heffernan (2021); White (2021); Williamson and Hogan (2021), – in the last year alone. This could have been a much longer list and doesn't extend to the proliferation of post-human and socio-material explorations of 'thing power', walking methods and the living literacies of dynamic learning. This work isn't just generating more and more evidence through the 'traditional' form of critique, these scholars *are* creating new spaces for critical distance, a new relation to the object. To this reader at least, they are far from aporetic and look like they want the same thing as Kline and Holland.

There is no doubt that this is a very well judged and powerful addition to the body of work on the significance of Baudrillard for post-truth in covid times and the fatal flaws of language game traps that make life so hard for 'The Left'. There is also little to say in resistance to the failure of our education of the Anthropocene to deliver the equality, diversity and mobility it still perpetuates as myth, despite all evidence to the contrary (see Peim, 2019). The credibility of this call for education theorists to 'die artfully' may be, though, undermined by the over-stating of our readiness to 'let the world disappear', perhaps we are somewhat built of straw for this purpose. Much recent work in the field *does* take the agentive position of the object and accept the urgent need to break the code of theory, I wish the authors had the space, or taken the time, to identify such work or extend their argument into a starting point for praxis, at least directions for a half-turn.

> "Someone take these dreams away
> That point me to another day".
> (Curtis 1979)

Of course, reviewing *Baudrillard and Radical Education Theory* and coming to the conclusion that we are left wanting for the latter, as the offer here is more a conversion to 'do Baudrillard' than a radical theory itself of or for education, *does* create an uneasy feeling of maybe just not quite getting it, perhaps as an symptom of the 'lagging behind' on the part of this dead soul which would, by the thesis presented, be inevitable, always-already the wrong turn.

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