

Articoli/4

Baudrillard as modernist

Jean Baudrillard and Michael Fried on Photography

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We could not perhaps imagine a less likely pairing than the radical ‘post-modernist’ Jean Baudrillard and the well-known modernist art historian Michael Fried. Baudrillard is anti-aesthetic, while Fried defends art against minimalist anti-aesthetics. Baudrillard calls himself a nihilist, while Fried is widely regarded as conservative in his aesthetic choices. And yet both end up saying very similar things about photography. Why is this, and what does this unexpected connection or even coincidence have to tell us about Baudrillard’s work more generally?

I.

Of course, the conventional image of Jean Baudrillard is as an absolute radical. He is understood to belong to a generation of post-war French thinkers who sought to tear down every convention, every taboo, every shibboleth. These thinkers would constitute a kind of anti-Enlightenment, insofar as they believed in nothing. Indeed, Baudrillard, in his own rather grandiose and even self-aggrandising words, once described himself as a «nihilist».¹ And, as such, he and his colleagues were a favourite target of cultural conservatives in the 1990s in an anti-theory and perhaps even anti-intellectual backlash. Baudrillard, for example, was amongst those singled out in the infamous Sokal scandal, in which a hoax contribution by a disgruntled physics professor, made up largely of the clichés of post-modernism, was accepted for publication by the social sciences journal *Social Text*. As Sokal writes in his assumed voice:

¹ J. Baudrillard, *On Nihilism*, in *Simulation and Simulacra*, Ann Arbor 1994, pp. 159-66.

For another critique of the hidden ideology of contemporary particle physics, see Kroker *et al.* The style of this critique is rather too Baudrillardian for my staid taste, but the content is (except for a few minor inaccuracies) right on target.²

Or, in a slightly more considered or at least more straightforward critique, Baudrillard was widely considered one of those referred to by Princeton moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt in his wildly (if momentarily) popular *On Bullshit* (2005), a denunciation of the obviously absurd, in the sense of being ant-commonsensical, positions held by a variety of post-modern thinkers. As Robert J. Antonio writes in 'The Passing of Jean Baudrillard', making the connection:

Baudrillard and other 'academic', radical epistemic relativists have likely fuelled and legitimated, at least in some circles, the profusion of 'bullshit' and the consequent irresponsibility and failure to face realities, problems and crises.³

But what if—proof above all of the short-sightedness and lack of imagination of conservatives in their inability to see those who are potentially on their side – Baudrillard had more in common with those who make the accusation of «bullshit» with regard to post-modernism than with those accused? What if he were not the proponent of a valueless and boundaryless post-modernism, but sought to critique it – a critique that admittedly can only be undertaken by taking post-modernism in its own terms, pushing its logic as far as possible and watching it turn upon itself? What, however, is the evidence for this? Of course, his texts first of all, which we will come to in a moment, but perhaps in a more immediate way Baudrillard's taste in art. For Baudrillard's taste is not the iconoclastic, ultra-radical end of art that is often put forward in his name, but aesthetic, coming to a halt several stops before this end. It is, if not actually anti-post-modernist, we are almost tempted to say modernist. Certainly, he has great respect for Duchamp and his readymades, whose consequences in ushering in the sign in art he entirely acknowledges, but when he is speaking for himself his taste is revealed as being for something like American post-War abstraction. He was a colleague of and occasional catalogue writer for the Swiss artist Olivier Mosset. And very little else in Baudrillard's writing reaches the unself-conscious fervour of his response to the great American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko as seen in *Cool Memories 4*:

The idea of a wind that would blow in all directions at once. A magical idea, like that of a vertical horizon. Thought realises this idea. Or the art work in Rothko's conception, which opens up and closes itself off in all directions at once.⁴

² A. Sokal, *Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, «Social Text», 46/47, 1996, p. 239.

³ R. J. Antonio, 'The Passing of Jean Baudrillard' (https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4_1/antonio.html).

⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Cool Memories 4*, New York, 2003, p. 104. More generally, on Baudrillard's attitude towards art, see *Objects, Images and the Possibility of Aesthetic Illusion*, in Nicholas Zurburg (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artefact*, Sage, London 1997, pp. 7-18.

Our hypothesis is that Baudrillard's taste in art is revealing, that it indicates what he is arguing for not only in art but in his work more generally. But what we also want to suggest is that, if we read what Baudrillard says about art carefully, it allows us better to think the wider aspects of his work. We might take here as the most obvious example Baudrillard's writings on photography, which is obviously the art form closest to him, insofar as he took photographs himself. And to help us read what is at stake in Baudrillard's writings on photography, we would like to adduce a comparison or even a coincidence that occurs some time after Baudrillard makes his original arguments about the medium. It is a comparison that is unexpected, insofar as it involves a writer on photography who is widely regarded as somewhat conservative in his taste and certainly one of the chief theorists in art history of modernism (although this designation, as with Baudrillard's post-modernism, is too simple). It is the prominent American art historian and critic Michael Fried. Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008) is by now a well-known and much-discussed book that in its provocative re-reading of Barthes' seminal *Camera Lucida* has become one of the touchstones of contemporary photographic discourse. Here, however, what we simply want to point out – leaving aside the specific details of this for a moment – is the striking coincidence between Fried's arguments about photography and Baudrillard's. It is a coincidence that does not entirely escape the notice of Fried – there is admittedly a single footnote to Baudrillard in the 400-odd pages of *Why Photography Matters* – but here we want to draw it out in more detail as we believe it throws a fascinating light on both, and allows us to say more clearly not only what is at stake in Baudrillard's writings on photography but in his work more generally.

II.

Needless to say, Baudrillard's and Fried's vocabularies, intellectual backgrounds and likely motivations in writing about photography are entirely different, but it is extraordinary how similar the kinds of photography they are attracted to are and how close they come in their respective theorisations of it. Let us begin indeed with our conclusive example: the fact that both write at length on the 1990's French photographer Luc Delahaye's series of portraits of passengers taken on the Métro, Baudrillard in the book *L'Autre* (1999) and Fried in the chapter on portraiture in *Why Photography Matters*. As is perhaps well known, they are photographs that Delahaye took of whoever entered the frame of his hidden camera as the doors closed while he sat travelling on a train in Paris. Thus, amongst the portraits of *L'Autre*, we have images of a slightly dishevelled middle-aged man staring off to the right of Delahaye, an attractive young blonde woman seemingly staring straight at Delahaye but with eyes unfocussed and in one particularly striking image Delahaye himself reflected in close-up in another passenger's mirrored sunglasses. Altogether, *L'Autre* comprises some 90 portraits of Delahaye's fellow passengers taken over a two-year period from 1995 to 1997,

all of them seemingly unaware of the photographer's presence directly opposite them (if at times slightly below them, if they were standing), taking their picture.

Delahaye's project of 'candid' photography is shared by any number of other photographers today, most notably the Swiss 'street' photographer and videomaker Beat Streuli, who uses a tele-photo lens to capture pedestrians walking in crowded city streets, and American Philip-Lorca diCorcia, who in a similar way records a series of urban streetscapes, although with a slightly greater sense of implicit drama. However, as Fried makes clear in his book and as Baudrillard surely knows, Delahaye's practice is thoroughly indebted to that of the great 1930's and '40's American photographer Walker Evans, who some six decades before Delahaye sat opposite passengers on New York's subway with a box camera carefully hidden beneath his coat to produce his *Subway Portraits* of 1938-41. In other words, it was Evans who first explored this idea of a photographer taking pictures of subjects who were not merely unaware of being photographed, but – and this is of more interest for Fried – who should somehow be aware of being photographed. As Fried writes in *Why Photography Matters*, citing Evans: «The *Subway* series is 'a rebellion against studio portraiture... It was partly angry protest – not social, but aesthetic – against posed portraiture'»⁵. And this is the important aspect for Fried, and as we will see also for Baudrillard, and what allows him to align a certain strain of photography with the wider project of 'anti-theatrical' absorptiveness in the works of art he likes:

[Evans' project] is in some way an updated version of the Diderotian project of depicting figures who appear deeply absorbed in what they are doing, thinking and feeling, and who therefore also appear wholly oblivious to being beheld.⁶

This is Fried's characterisation of Evans in an early chapter of *Why Photography Matters*, but actually the main polemical thrust of the book, as indicated by its title, is the renewed possibility of photography as art today. Why is contemporary photography in Fried's terms now the chief art form in which the long historical struggle between a self-conscious theatricality and its overcoming as an unself-conscious absorptiveness to be seen? How is it that a certain kind of photography – what Fried calls a new *tableau*-style that is principally to be found on the walls of art galleries and not in the pages of a book – comes to take on the usual role of painting in this regard? How is it that, in this ongoing battle between what we might call modernism and a kind of anti- or even post-modernism, it is not possible simply to repeat previous solutions to the problem, but new forms must necessarily be found? And it is at this point that we might return to Baudrillard. Fried's deep historical point, after noting that Evans' subway photography appears a solution to the Diderotian problem of the self-consciousness of the sitters in front of the camera, is that this

⁵ M. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, New Haven, 2008, , p. 221.

⁶ J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 102. Fried originally outlines his project of modernist anti-theatrical absorptiveness in his now classic study of French 18th-century art, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago 1980.

solution is no longer available to subsequent photographers. It is not enough simply to show the sitters for a photograph unaware of being photographed in order to create a successful portrait. Nowadays, in an increasingly sceptical media-saturated world, we find it hard to believe that anybody could be unaware of being photographed, that we could see things in the world just as they are, as though there is no photographer there already seeing them for us.

We might, however, slow this down a little and recount Fried's argument in greater detail. What Evans (and Delahaye) is trying to do in his subway shots is attempting to photograph people as they really are, without them putting on a pose or otherwise arranging themselves for the camera. The assumption behind this, consistent with Evans' wider 'social realist' tendency – he is, after all, the creator of that great Depression-era document, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) – is that he would thereby capture a more truthful unmediated reality, without the photographer coming between the photograph and what he photographs. And both Fried and Baudrillard – and Roland Barthes too in his *Camera Lucida*, which both Fried and Baudrillard draw on – have a clear preference for these kinds of photographs. Indeed, in various ways this lack of mediation is understood by both to be the unique power and even defining quality of photography. Of course, all of this is consistent with Barthes' polemic in *Camera Lucida* against what he calls the «studium», in which we have the sense that the photographer has either arranged the scene to be photographed or photographed it to convey a predetermined meaning. It is what Fried characterises, using a Diderotian diction, as a 'theatrical' photograph, in which the subjects within it appear aware of being seen by a potential spectator and specifically arrange themselves for their gaze⁷. And this is also what Baudrillard means when he writes in his text 'Poetic Transference of Situation' of the way that photography must seek to capture its object in the absence of the subject, to imagine a world before or outside photography, in the attempt to make a photograph of the photographer's (and therefore the spectator's) absence:

No one is looking at anyone else. The lens alone sees, but it is hidden. What Luc Delahaye captures, then, isn't exactly the Other (l'Autre), but what remains of the Other when he, the photographer, isn't there.⁸

But today – and this is the point of Fried's shift of attention from Evans to Delahaye – this aesthetic solution is no longer sufficient. Indeed, Fried makes the point that, if Barthes does not approve of the stadium, in which the photograph is deliberately set up to be read by the spectator, it is also not enough merely to have the subject unaware of being photographed. That punctum he theorises is more than that. And we see something very similar in Baudrillard. Certainly, after suggesting that the decisive aspect of photography is to take the world

⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 100.

⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Poetic Transference of Situation*, in L. Delahaye (ed.), *L'Autre*, London 1999.

‘unawares’ or capture a subject that «does not lack me»⁹, he realises that this is not enough or that this status is not so easy to maintain. This insight can be seen most demonstrably in his essay on the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle’s well-known performance *Suite vénitienne* (1980), which involved her following a man she had met in a party at Paris down to Venice where, unbeknownst to him, while he was walking around taking a holiday she followed him, taking photos of where he had been. As Baudrillard describes it in his essay ‘Please Follow Me’: «She expects nothing of him, she does not want to know him. He does not particularly please her»¹⁰. But, of course, as Calle continues to photograph the man from behind and from a distance without him knowing it, it can begin to appear that she exerts a kind of power over him. It would be as though she is not merely photographing where he has been but where he *will be*, that it is not the camera that points to where he is but he who comes to stand where the camera points.

Nevertheless – and this is the crucial twist that Baudrillard suggests and that Fried equally implies Evans is struggling against – it is possible that the man, rather than being unaware of Calle following him, gradually becomes aware of her. However, instead of simply confronting her, which of course would be the end of the game with all of Calle’s previous advantage remaining intact, he feigns now to be unaware and leads her around, taking her where he wants. In other words, the man in Calle’s game is not unaware but merely *pretends* to be. Again, as Baudrillard writes:

The other, having detected the stratagem can turn the situation around and submit her to any fate he chooses. He is not a victim, basically his power is the same as hers.¹¹

And – this is the game of seduction unleashed by Baudrillard’s hypothesis – Calle can then take *this* into account, the man can take *that* into account, and so on. Far from the man being unaware of Calle and Calle not aiming to have her subject have any effect on her audience (the first of whom is herself), both of these possibilities are undeniably raised by the very act of taking a photograph. And this is the case for Fried too with Evans, and indeed any previously successful resolution of the problem of theatricality. It is *always* possible that the subject is aware of being photographed and that the photographer intends to have an effect on us – or we cannot but read the photograph this way today, thanks in part to the very anti-theatrical effect of photographs. That is, the apparent ignorance or indifference of both the subject and the photographer can always been seen to be a ruse, part of a wider strategy.

It is this, as we say, that is at stake in the turn from Evans to Delahaye, and the reason why that new type of photography Fried argues for would have

⁹ J. Baudrillard, *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality*, in P. Weibel (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Photographies 1985-1998*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1999, pp. 130, 132.

¹⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Please Follow Me*, «Art & Text», 23/4, March-April 1987, p. 103.

¹¹ J. Baudrillard, *Please Follow Me*, cit., p. 104.

to find a different solution from that within modernism. This for Fried is to be seen in the very over-emphaticness of Delahaye's project, the fact that his faces are so obviously unaware of the photographer who is at such a close distance from them and that Delahaye's 'solution' is repeated so often, with some 90 images in his book. In Fried's words:

What one finds in Delahaye's photographs in *L'Autre* is at once an acknowledgement of the untenability, as of the mid-1990s, of the *Subway Portraits* paradigm... and an attempt to thematise that awareness.¹²

It is Fried's way of acknowledging that the notion of the simply 'unaware' subject of a photograph is endangered or even impossible today, and that therefore it has to be emphatically or even over-emphatically asserted against these doubts. And this is also what Baudrillard says, or at least how we can read the otherwise difficult aspects of his text on Delahaye (and this is part of the point of our comparison with Fried). In 'Poetic Transference of Situation', Baudrillard makes the point that not only must the subject be unaware of being photographed, but there is also something in the photographs that goes beyond Delahaye's own intention and artistic control, his ability to know in advance what he has done:

Photography again becomes the art of the camera obscura... the exaltation of what the camera sees in its pure self-evidence, without intercession, concession or embellishment.¹³

Of course, for both Fried and Baudrillard, this is essentially the point of Barthes' punctum. If for Barthes it is not merely a matter of the subject being unaware of the photograph, it is because the photographer must also be unaware of what they are doing. The punctum – the 'essence' of photography¹⁴ – is precisely what arises in a photograph after the photographer has made their image. It has not been put there by the photographer. It is not so much a subject unaware of being photographed as an object or world without a photographer; but paradoxically this would take place only within the photograph, because of photography. It is what Fried means when he writes that

Barthes's observation that the detail that strikes him as a punctum could not do so had it been intended as such by the photographer is an anti-theatrical claim in that it implies a fundamental distinction, which goes back to Diderot, between 'seeing' and 'being shown'.¹⁵

¹² J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 222.

¹³ J. Baudrillard, *Poetic Transference of Situation*, cit.

¹⁴ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York, 1981, p. 49. But Barthes earlier also calls it a 'supplement', p. 47.

¹⁵ J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 100.

It is equally what Baudrillard means when he writes in 'For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality' in much more abstract terms:

It is not the object of the photograph who must pose, but the photographer who must hold his breath in order to create a blank region in time and in his body. But who must also refrain mentally from breathing, and empty his mind, so that the mental surface is as virgin as the film.¹⁶

And because we are concentrating on Baudrillard here, it is obviously this aspect that ties photography in with a more 'fatal' emphasis on the priority of objects over subjects, as argued perhaps for the first time in the chapter 'The Object and its Destiny' of *Fatal Strategies* (1983) or later in Baudrillard's doctoral *habilitation L'Autre par lui-même* (1987). It is, in fact, from around this time in the early-1980s that Baudrillard both first started taking photographs and writing about photography. Indeed, even within his specific texts on photography, there is always the sense of what photography has to tell us about the more general relationship between the subject and object. There is always an implicit tension between the specificity of photography (and, more than this, Baudrillard's contention that the phenomenon he is speaking of is only to be seen within photographs) and the fact that he sees this 'photography' as a more universal 'metaphysical' principle.

Needless to say, the problem is that, once the principle of the punctum is enunciated, it too becomes something that is looked for in the photograph, or sought to be put there by the photographer, so that it might secretly be recognised by the spectator. It is this that is at stake in the objection made by cultural theorist Walter Benn Michaels, acknowledged by Fried himself in *Why Photography Matters*, that the punctum is *subjective*, something that if it is not directly meant for the spectator, certainly can only be recognised by them. As Fried writes, paraphrasing Michaels:

[The fact that it is outside the photographer's intentions] places the punctum squarely on the side of minimalism/literalism's emphasis on indeterminacy of meaning and the primacy of the experiencing subject.¹⁷

And this for Baudrillard too is the difficulty of stating the principle he sees at stake in photography. Not only is it the ambiguity raised by Calle's photographing of the man in Venice – that she in fact *intends* his indifference or his indifference can henceforth only be thought as a strategy on his part – but it is the case more generally in photography. It is what he means when he speaks of the indifference of photography ultimately being indissociable from a strategy on the part of objects, and thus in a way even on the part of the subject:

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality*, cit., p. 134

¹⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 345.

The subject aspires more or less openly to be a master of meaning, a conjurer of meaning. The photograph, for its part, makes appearances meet in the way that gazes meet... It thereby sets up a material collision between the world and ourselves, insofar as the world is a continual 'acting out'.¹⁸

And it is what Baudrillard foresees with absolute prescience as coming to be the case in our contemporary world, as evidenced by Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, in which 'surprise' and the 'absence' of the spectator are entirely incorporated and taken into account:

We are ourselves in collusion with the image now, and each time we are photographed we size up the photographer as they in turn take stock of us.¹⁹

It is undoubtedly for this reason – in again an absolutely uncanny coincidence – that for Fried and Baudrillard it is not finally a matter of the image today not looking at us, and even the presence of the punctum is not definitive. In fact, in a complicated doctrine that Fried transports across from his original discourse on painting, although he is also able to find evidence for this in Barthes, it might even be images that directly face us that we are looking for²⁰. This again is how we might understand the difference between (or even progression of) Delahaye from Evans. The extra closeness of Delahaye to his subjects than Evans, undoubtedly allowed by the less obtrusive camera he was able to employ, means that we have much more the sense that his subjects must be aware of him, and in several cases they *do* look directly at him. For Fried this comports with the idea that the work of art must more and more acknowledge the presence of the spectator before overcoming it. For Baudrillard this is expressed in the strange – and seemingly inconsistent – statement in 'It is the Object Which Thinks Us' that, for all of the absence of the subject in photography, we can photograph an object only if it first looks at us: «We can see the object only if it regards us, looks at us. We can look at it only if it has already seen us»²¹. And is it too much to suggest that we have the embodiment or at least the allegorical stand-in for this figure that at once looks at us and does not look at us – pre-eminently imaged for Fried by the model in Manet's *Olympia* (1865) – in the shadows of the photographer and others we see in a series of Baudrillard's photographs, *Punto Final* (1997), *La Bocca* (1998), *Riversaltes* (1998) and *Cartier* (1998), as well as in arguably the climax of Calle's *Suite vénitienne* when the man does finally turn around and confront Calle and Calle photographs him?

¹⁸ J. Baudrillard, *It is the Object Which Thinks Us...*, in *Jean Baudrillard: Photographies*, cit., p. 146

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149. See also, amongst many similar passages, «The virtual image contains nothing of this precision, this punctum in time (to use Roland Barthes' expression), which existed in the photo-images of not so long ago, and which bore witness to the fact that something had been there, and was there no longer», J. Baudrillard, *Violence Inflicted on Images*, in J. Swinnen and L. Deneulin (eds.), *The Weight of Photography: Introductory readings*, Brussel, 2010, p. 220.

²⁰ For Fried on Barthes' admiration for photographs in which the sitter directly looks at the camera, see J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., pp. 107-12.

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *It is the Object Which Thinks Us...*, cit., p. 145.

Let us again, however, slow this down a little and elaborate it in more detail. Of course, the real point of Calle's game of 'Please Follow Me' and the photographs she takes to document it – and Baudrillard's point in his essay, as we have previously suggested, is that these photographs *are* the game or that photography is always involved in a similar kind of game – is that, even when the man turns around and confronts Calle, seemingly bringing the game to an end, this could be merely another move in the game. In other words, despite his apparently looking at her, a kind of distance between them always persists and he is also not looking at her. Rather, he is looking *through* her, a little like Manet's Olympia. And it is this that Fried suggests is at stake in his latest anti-theatrical attempt to defeat the necessary presence of the spectator in front of the photograph: that it is to be done only through the closest acknowledgement of a «to-be-seeness» and a «resolve, against all the odds, not to succumb to theatricality»²². It is this that allows photography to count as art – hence Fried's designation of it as such in the title of his book – in overcoming the mere literalness of the indexical recording of reality in order to become something else, to become in effect something like painting for the modern age. (This is the paradox of Barthes' punctum in Fried's new, anti-theatrical reading of it: it is not, as is usually understood, a sign of photography's indebtedness to its origins in the indexical recording of reality, but a sign of its *breaking* with reality, the fact that it is more than literal reality.) And this is the case also for Baudrillard. Indeed, the final formulation of his photographic theory – if we can say this of something so fragmentary and frequently taking such a poetic form – is that it is not so much reality that photography presents as an absence of reality. And it is this absence of reality in turn that stands in for or is exchanged for a missing look or a missing subject. As Baudrillard writes:

Rather than having the presence and representation of the subject foisted upon the object, the point is to have the object become the site of the absence and disappearance of the subject.²³

On another occasion, we might relate both Fried's and Baudrillard's conceptions of photography to Lacan's notion of a symbolic reality – let us call it art – that comes about through the exclusion of but standing in for a certain gaze as *objet a*²⁴. It would be a way of understanding Fried's notion of a 'non-literality', that is, a non-reality, coming about through a certain blind gaze on the part of the subject of the work of art, at once seeming to look out at the spectator and yet not actually seeing them. It is also perhaps a way of understanding Baudrillard when he speaks – in what at first seems almost the opposite manner in which he is usually taken up – of the way that photography appears to offer a certain

²² J. Baudrillard, *Why Photography Matters*, cit., p. 223.

²³ J. Baudrillard, *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality*, cit., p. 133.

²⁴ See here, amongst many other places in Lacan's work, the section 'Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*' in *The Four Fundamentals of Psycho-Analysis*, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 67-119.

reality, but only because of a certain prior or enveloping illusion. That is to say, Baudrillard in suggesting this appears to go against two doxas or commonplaces concerning his work. The first is that his discourse is implacably opposed to the real in advocating a kind of simulation that does away with it. The second is that photography is simply real and has nothing to do with illusion. On the contrary, as opposed to both of these, he proposes that photography is real, but a real possible only *because of* a certain illusion. As he writes: «For illusion is not the opposite of reality, but another more subtle reality which enwraps the former kind in the sign of its disappearance»²⁵.

III.

There are undoubtedly any number of ways to understand the coincidence we have remarked upon here. One is to suggest that, in terms of artistic taste at least, Baudrillard is not too far from Fried. There is some truth in this; but it does not go deep enough, and it is to suggest that Baudrillard's interest in photography is fundamentally aesthetic when it clearly is not. Another is to suggest, unexpectedly, that there is something 'Baudrillardian' about Fried, which is perhaps to point to the fact that there is some analogy between the dispute between absorption and theatricality in Fried and the reversibility between subject and object and difference and indifference in Baudrillard. There is arguably something in this, but we do not pursue it here. However, underlying both of these possibilities is a certain conception of the 'Real', which we will briefly try to elaborate in what follows. We might start with Fried. As we have already suggested, what is at stake in contemporary photography for Fried is that it is seen to carry on the long art-historical battle to produce an absorptive art in a manner that arguably is no longer possible for painting. It is able to do this insofar as it is able to create works that are able to give the impression that they do not need to be seen by the spectator – to use Fried's distinction, taken from Diderot, that are 'seen' and not 'shown' – and, alongside this, complementing it and even strengthening it, is that 'punctum' to be found in photography, which is proof, as opposed to the studium, that the photographer has not put anything in the photograph in order to be 'shown'.

However, as Fried's colleague Michaels comments, the very fact that we can see this in photography necessarily also invalidates it. Precisely now all of this is made or produced to be seen, to serve as proof of photography's 'truth' status. Fried seeks to deal with an earlier version of Michaels' argument in the 'Conclusion' to *Why Photography Matters*; but it is arguable that he does not entirely grasp the consequences of what Michaels is saying, reducing it to a matter of whether the punctum is an effect of the spectator's subjectivity. This is Michaels in his subsequent *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015) more fully elaborating the same argument:

²⁵ J. Baudrillard, *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality*, cit., p. 131.

The theoretical solution to absorption's aesthetic problem is simultaneously the transformation of absorption's aesthetic indifference to the reader or beholder into a programmatic *appeal* to the reader or beholder.²⁶

And, indeed, we have much the same thing in Baudrillard. As we have previously suggested, his essay on Calle's *Suite vénitienne* is as much about photography as the actual photographs Calle takes as part of her work. In particular, Baudrillard can be seen to be writing there about the constant back-and-forth between the subject of the photograph and the photographer taking it, the fact that – as can also be seen to be the case in Fried – we can no sooner remark that the subject is unaware of being photographed than it can be shown that they are merely feigning this indifference, and that indeed the photographer herself is trying to produce an effect through this indifference, that this indifference is put there by the photographer (or the one speaking for them). This would be more closely what Michaels is proposing with regard to Fried. But now at this point we would want to say – in a way beyond both Fried and Baudrillard and their critics – that it is this impossibility of knowing how to take the photograph, the fact that we could no sooner say that the subject is unaware than they would be revealed as faking this unawareness, that we could no sooner say the that subject is aware of being seen than this must be understood to be the only way to be indifferent, that at once *is* the Real in photography that does not exist before it and is that *pre-existing* Real that photography must be understood as always falling short of²⁷.

This is undoubtedly a complex point, and if we had more time we would attempt to explain in more detail how it is the simultaneous theatricality and overcoming of theatricality that produces a kind of 'Real' in Fried, like the famous 'mousetrap' in *Hamlet* or as seen in such documentary films as Joshua Oppenheimer's *Act of Killing* (2012)²⁸. But here is perhaps the place to explore it in a little more detail with regard to Baudrillard. Against the usual readings of Baudrillard as actively seeking to do away with the real or alternately arguing that the real has already disappeared, he in fact wants to assert a certain Real against our prevailing systems of simulation. How does he do this? It is certainly not to insist on some pre-existing real outside or before simulation. It is just this, as he diagnoses in his third (and fourth) orders of simulation, that at once leads to simulation and is possible only because of simulation. Rather, it is a Real that arises within simulation, a Real that precisely means that simulation is all. But

²⁶ W. B. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, cit., Chicago, 2015, p. 49.

²⁷ Of course, the reference here is to the Lacanian Real, characterised by Slavoj Žižek in the following terms: «[The Real] is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access; the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing», *In Defence of Lost Causes*, London 2008, pp. 287-88.

²⁸ An analogy, we feel, would be the ecstasy of the performance of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* that emerges precisely through the literalist recording of Douglas Gordon's *k.364: A Journey by Train* (2011), as discussed by Fried in his *Douglas Gordon's k.364: A Journey by Train*, in *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand*, New Haven 2014, pp. 222-249.

again what could be meant by this? To take two brief examples. In the short text *The Evil Demon of Images* (1987), Baudrillard diagnoses a general loss of reality due to simulation, including the idea that any external reality would be itself merely an effect of simulation:

The image is interesting not only in its role as mirror, but also when it begins to contaminate reality and to model it, when it anticipates it to the point that the real no longer has time to be produced as such²⁹.

However, as he is well aware – hence his allusion to Descartes’ “evil demon” in the title of his essay – his ability to think *this*, this lack of external reality, *is* the very reality outside of simulation. It is not that all is not simulation, but that this is possible only because of something outside of simulation. Similarly in the text ‘The Year 2000 Will Not Take Place’ (1986), Baudrillard posits that the year 2000, shorthand for the apocalypse, has not happened because it already has happened; that the fact or effect of the apocalypse, we might say the apocalypse of simulation, is that we do not have a apocalypse because we no longer have the means to realise it: «Time is annihilated by pure circulation. These [present] generations will perhaps never wake up. The year 2000 will perhaps not take place, but they remain oblivious». ³⁰ But, again, there is a certain ‘apocalypse’ implied in thinking *this*, a certain before and after, a certain ‘now’ or time in what is otherwise the end or loss of history.

In both cases, simulation is all, reality is lost; but this cannot be said without something outside of it. There is a certain contradiction or even self-contradiction both in these systems of simulation and in Baudrillard’s discourse about them. And this self-contradiction *is* the Real, the Real Baudrillard opposes to simulation. As we suggest, if this Real is what we must imagine this self-contradiction arising in response to, in a way always falling short of, as though there were some irresolvable enigma out there, in another way this Real *is* only this self-contradiction within discourse, to be seen nowhere outside of it. And to conclude – and this is why we have chosen photography as our “subject” here, how it as it were operates as a kind of allegorical stand-in for Baudrillard speaking about the relation of his own theory to reality – this is what we also see in photography. Photography does not capture reality directly. Indeed, if anything, it testifies merely to the loss of reality or is itself the loss of reality. Rather, there is a contradiction in photography, which might be expressed as it being the attempt to capture what is done away with by photography, the disappearance of reality. It is the fact that photography gets rid of reality, but that this disappearance can be realised only through photography. It is *this* reality, which takes the very form of its loss, that *is* reality (or better the Real). It is all that Baudrillard means when he writes: «Only what comes into being in the

²⁹ J. Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, Sydney 1987, p. 16.

³⁰ J. Baudrillard, *The Year 2000 Will Not Take Place*, in E. A. Grosz et al. (eds.) *Futur*Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity*, Power Institute Publications 1986, p. 25.

mode of disappearance is truly other. And yet that disappearance has to leave traces, has to be the place where the Other, the world or the object appears». ³¹ It is a process that, as Baudrillard suggests, is always incomplete, brought short by photography at the very moment photography brings it about.

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³¹ J. Baudrillard, *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality*, p. 131.