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# Social Ontology, Spectacle, and Hyperreality: A Critical Examination of Searle, Debord And Baudrillard

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SOCIAL ONTOLOGY, SPECTACLE, AND HYPERREALITY:  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SEARLE, DEBORD AND BAUDRILLARD

by

NATHAN DOUGLAS WARD

Under the Direction of Dr. Jessica N. Berry

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the philosophical views of John Searle, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard. These thinkers have radically different methodologies and theoretical alignments, but they are not entirely dissimilar. John Searle argues that there are two types of facts—those independent of human observation and those whose meaning depends on agreement. Guy Debord posits that modern society has replaced authentic social life with mere representation. The “spectacle” has replaced real interactions with others so that meaning itself is no longer authentic; it is treated as a commodity or currency. Jean Baudrillard argues that society has replaced reality with signs and symbols. Thus, human experience consists only of simulations, not reality itself. Each of these figures maintains that meaning is socially constructed. After examining the key assumptions of their respective theories, I demonstrate that their accounts are compatible and argue that their accounts are most cohesive when considered together.

INDEX WORDS: hyperreality, postmodernism, Baudrillard, spectacle, Debord, Searle,  
ontology, nihilism, meaning

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Georgia State University

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## **I. Introduction**

Is meaning an irreducibly human phenomenon, or does meaning exist independently of human perception and judgment? Has meaning been eclipsed and replaced by meaninglessness in our modern technological era of image driven consumerism? Have our interactions with others suffered as they have become increasingly mediated by images? John Searle, Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord explore these questions; my claim is that they are all concerned with the status of meaning.

I will argue that a synthesis of John Searle's, Jean Baudrillard's, and Guy Debord's accounts of meaning, how it comes about and why it is valuable in particular, is superior to any of their accounts alone. A synthetic account of their views provides a new perspective; one that I think possesses wider explanatory scope and greater internal consistency than any of their accounts do on their own. This claim will appear counterintuitive to those familiar with the philosophical work of these men. What could a contemporary analytic philosopher (Searle), an idiosyncratic Marxist (Debord), and a French critical theorist (Baudrillard) have in common? I think they have more in common than is generally thought, and my hope is that my thesis will demonstrate how this is so. I will demonstrate some of the ways their accounts are conceptually compatible and then advance my own arguments from the implications of this synthetic account.

My first tentative claims are as follows: I think that Searle's arguments can form the necessary ontological basis for articulating a socially constructed account of meaning. I also think that Debord's account is consistent with Searle's ontology; it provides an explanatory principle to account for the varied functions of images within capitalist socio-economic conditions. Baudrillard's concepts are also compatible with Searle's social ontology (with minor qualifications); he also builds upon Debord's concepts to develop his own account of



“hyperreality” and how it arises from certain conditions created by postmodern capitalism. Baudrillard shares Debord’s concern that we can no longer distinguish between what is and is not real. In Searle’s terms, we can no longer distinguish mind *independent* facts from mind *dependent* facts. Debord and Baudrillard both focus upon ways in which meaning in society, which is what Searle would call social reality, is or could be eroded and lead to negative consequences for human well-being.

My goal is to show that, at their core, Searle, Debord, and Baudrillard are all concerned with the status of meaning in society, how it is created, remains stable, and whether or not it is being eroded. My central assumption is that their respective accounts are neither incommensurable nor necessarily opposed. With these considerations in mind, I will develop my own arguments based upon the synthesis of the above accounts and advance my own conclusions. First, because it is necessary to thoroughly grasp Searle’s ontology and his basic propositions to illuminate how and why Debord and Baudrillard’s accounts are consistent with his, I will provide an overview of Searle’s account, followed by Debord’s and ending with Baudrillard’s.

## **II. Searle on Meaning**

Searle subscribes to epistemological realism—the proposition that a “real” world exists independently of the ideas and perceptions of conscious entities—and a correspondence theory of truth—the proposition that a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts in the “real” world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Smith explains Searle’s specific stance succinctly; he says, “The thesis of basic [epistemological] realism is not, in Searle’s eyes, a theoretical proposition in its own right. Rather—and in this, he echoes Thomas Reid—it sanctions the very possibility of our making theoretical assertions in science, just as it sanctions the attempt to build a comprehensive theory in philosophy. This is because the theories that we develop are intelligible only as

He asks what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for humans to create a reality that is epistemically objective but exists only in virtue of collective recognition and acceptance, and is thus ontologically subjective (Searle in Grewendorf & Meggle, p. 14; Searle, p. 8).<sup>2</sup> Searle rightly emphasizes that social reality is not all there is to reality and that, whatever radical idealists may say, there *is* a physical environment “out there” (Barnes, p. 248). Searle’s account of social reality is “designed to complete an overall philosophical vision founded on external realism, a thoroughly physicalist ontology and a correspondence theory of truth” (Barnes, p. 248). Some of the living organisms within natural systems, through the process of natural selection, have evolved nervous systems, which produce and maintain a conscious mental state. Barnes writes, “Searle wants us to acknowledge an ontological continuity between biology (itself ontologically continuous with physics), and culture” (Barnes, p. 248).

According to Searle, consciousness is a physical *and* a mental state that gives rise to *intentionality*, which is the mind’s capacity to represent, to itself and to other minds, objects and or states of affairs in the external world (Searle, p. 6, 9). Collective intentionality is a capacity found primarily in humans and exhibited in shared intentional states, such as beliefs and desires (Searle, p. 23). A group of rioters might act such that their intentional states, based upon their beliefs and desires, lead them to act in a collective manner—i.e., they all act according to shared beliefs, desires, and perceptions. For Searle, social objects count as what they are by virtue of *human agreement*, but he does not mean that they result from the mere coincidence of vast numbers of independent individual intentions. Searle says that a good rule of thumb for

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representations of how things are in mind independent reality. Without the belief that the world exists, and that this world is rich in sources of evidence independent of ourselves—evidence that can help to confirm or disconfirm our theories—the very project of science and of building theories has the ground cut from beneath its feet” (Smith, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> See also their section, “Social Reality” in *Speech Acts, Mind, and Social Reality*; 247-93.

determining whether the features of an object exist by human agreement is to ask whether a given feature X could exist without any human beings (Searle, p. 11). The specific sorts of agreements that create and sustain meaning are what Searle would call “status functions”; these must be understood not as mere coincidence, but as the product of “collective intentionality” (Searle, p. 14-17, 23). For Searle, any fact involving collective intentionality is a “social fact,” and collective intentionality is “a biologically primitive phenomenon that cannot be reduced to or eliminated in favor of something else” (Searle, p. 24-26). People readily adopt a ‘we’ orientation according to Searle, and routinely act with reference to what ‘we intend’, and not what ‘I intend’, to bring about. Social objects are what they are because all relevant individuals act in coordination on the basis of the appropriate ‘we’ orientation (Barnes, p. 250).

Searle distinguishes between “brute” and “institutional” facts to establish that at least some aspects of our reality exist solely because of human agreement, while others exist independently of human thought or design (Searle, p. 27). Smith says, “For Searle...there is one single level of brute facts—constituted effectively by the facts of natural science—out of which there arises a hierarchy of institutional facts at successively higher levels. Brute facts are distinguished precisely by their being independent of all human institutions, including the institution of language” (Smith, p. 8). Searle gives logical priority to brute facts over institutional facts simply because there *can be no* institutional facts *without* brute facts for them to derive from, and all institutional facts must “bottom out” in the physical at some point (Searle, p. 34. 55-56). Brute facts exist *regardless* of whether humans do or not, whereas institutional facts can exist *only* within and because of, human institutions. For instance, Searle would maintain that Mt. Everest would still exist *regardless* of whether humans were around to name it, but in order for it to be deemed the “tallest mountain on Earth,” or even to be named ‘Mt. Everest’, the

human institutions of language and measurement are necessarily required.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, marriage, traffic lights, and laws also depend upon human beings in order to exist as the things they are. Searle posits that institutional facts can exist *only* within a structure provided by certain sorts of social rules. Those rules may be either “regulative” or “constitutive” (Searle, p. 27). Regulative rules do exactly what they advertise; they regulate, rather than constitute, existing activities, whereas constitutive rules create the very *possibility* of certain activities (like chess, for instance, where without the rules you are just pushing around pieces of wood aimlessly) (Searle, p. 27). Searle claims that it is *constitutive rules that provide the structure for institutional facts* (Searle, p. 28). Thus, institutional facts are logically dependent upon brute facts; our social reality is dependent upon the underlying brute facts of physical reality. Searle says, “An institutional fact cannot exist in isolation but only in a set of systematic relations to other facts” (Searle, p. 35). This hierarchical structure of social reality creates and maintains systematic relationships among institutional facts, and institutional facts *cannot* exist outside of such a hierarchically structured social system. For example, we cannot have money without numerous other social and institutional facts that govern its creation and use.

The “strong” version of Searle’s thesis relies on the claim that institutions require language because the facts within those institutions are language dependent (Searle, p. 60).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Smith notes, “it is of course necessary to use language in order to *state* brute facts, but the latter nonetheless obtain *independently* of the language used to represent them” (Smith, p. 8). Searle says, “In explaining these notions I am perforce in a kind of hermeneutic circle. I have to use institutional facts to explain institutional facts; I have to use rules to explain rules, and language to explain language. But the problem is expository and not logical” (Searle, p. 13). See also the section in *The Construction of Social Reality* entitled, “Does Language Require Language?”; see also Searle, p. 72-75.

<sup>4</sup> Searle writes, “If institutional facts require language and language is itself an institution, then it seems language must require language, and we have either infinite regress or circularity. There is a weaker and a stronger version of my claim. The weaker is that in order to have institutional facts at all, a society must have at least a primitive form of language, that in this sense the

Searle claims, “only beings that have a language or some more or less language-like system of representation can create institutional facts, because the linguistic element appears to be partly constitutive of the fact” (Searle, p. 37, 60). So without language or a comparable system there can be no hierarchical structure of social facts *at all*. The simplest and the most complex social and institutional facts require cooperative behavior. Searle says, “the key element in the move from the collective imposition of functions to the creation of institutional facts is the *imposition of a collectively recognized status to which a function is attached*” (Searle, p. 41, emphasis added). This is achieved via constitutive rules, which always take the form “X counts as Y in C,” where the X is an object, the Y is a function ascribed to that object, and the C is a given context (Searle, p. 44). The Y term must assign a status the object *doesn't already have just in virtue of satisfying the X term* (Searle, p. 44). Essentially, this means that the status and its function do something beyond the intrinsic brute features of the object in question. Furthermore, there must be *collective agreement* in the imposition of said function on the object in the X term and about its function (Searle, p. 44-45). Money is *not* money *because of* its intrinsic feature of being paper or metal, it is *only* money because of *collective acceptance*. For example, one could not hold out a machete and declare it is a hammer, because there would *not* be any collective agreement that that was the case. The “institutional move” is that “form of collective intentionality that constitutes the acceptance, recognition, etc. of one phenomenon as a phenomenon of a higher sort by imposing a collective status and a corresponding function upon it” (Searle, p. 88). In other words, the status exists *solely* due to its collective acceptance, and the function requires the

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institution of language is logically prior to other institutions.... The stronger claim is that each institution requires linguistic elements of the facts within that very institution. I believe both claims are true, and I will be arguing for the stronger claim. The stronger claim implies the weaker” (Searle, p. 60).

status in order to be performed; thus, it is essential to the function that the status be collectively accepted (Searle, p. 117). In essence, then, the three core concepts of collective intentionality, the assignment of functions and constitutive rules give us a picture of the creation of an institutional reality in which organisms like ourselves, acting with collective intentionality assign functions to objects (the assignment of function), and some of these assignments are of functions which can be performed if and only if there is collective recognition or acceptance of the function (status functions), and these status functions are imposed according to the structure “X counts as Y in C” (constitutive rules) (Searle in Grewendorf and Meggle, p. 15). Without those conditions obtaining there cannot be social or institutional facts, according to Searle, and they always take the form above.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The following provides a useful outline of the finer points of many of Searle’s distinctions and concepts. The first distinction is between non-mental brute facts and mental facts (Searle, p. 121). Non-mental brute facts would be ontologically objective facts such as there being snow at the summit of Mt. Everest. Mental facts would be ontologically subjective facts such as having a desire or being in pain. The second distinction is within the class of mental facts; Searle distinguishes between intentional and non-intentional mental facts (Searle, p. 121). An intentional mental fact would be something like wanting a drink of water (something you have control over), whereas a non-intentional fact would be something like being in pain (something you don’t have control over, strictly speaking). The third distinction is between singular and collective intentional facts (Searle, p. 121). This is essentially the difference between an individual wanting something and a group wanting something. The fourth distinction is within both individual and collective intentionality (Searle, p. 121-22). Searle distinguishes between those forms of intentionality that assign a function, “this is a screwdriver,” and all others, “I want a drink of water.” The fifth distinction is between non-agentive functional facts, e.g., “the function of the heart is to pump blood,” and agentive functional facts, e.g., “the function of hammers is to drive nails” (Searle, p. 123). The sixth distinction is between functions performed solely in virtue of the “brute features” of the phenomena and functions performed only by way of collective acceptance (Searle, p. 124). Agentive functions become institutional facts after a function is collectively imposed upon some person, event, or object and that function cannot be performed solely because of its physical composition. The function can only be performed as a matter of collective acceptance or recognition (status functions) (Searle, p. 124). The seventh distinction has three parts and deals with how status functions, and the corresponding institutional facts, are classified: (i) by subject matter, linguistic, economic, political, religious etc. (Searle, p. 124); (ii) by temporal status, we can distinguish between the initial creation of an institutional fact and the continued maintenance of said fact, and the eventual destruction or

Crucially, the formula “X counts as Y in C” can be *iterated*. Status functions can be imposed upon other status functions (Searle, p. 80). What this means is that the X term from higher up in the hierarchy can be the Y term from a lower level and the C term from a higher level can be the Y term from a lower level (Searle, p. 80). To use Searle’s example, only a U.S. citizen (X) can become President (can count as Y), but being a citizen means that you have a previously existing status function (i.e., the Y term of ‘being a citizen’), so the C term from a higher level in the hierarchy of social facts can also be a Y term from a lower level (Searle, p. 80). He adds that status functions can be imposed upon speech acts (which are already a form of institutional fact), so essentially speech acts become the status function of imposing additional status functions (Searle, p. 81).

The underlying logical structures of complex societies are explained by these iterations (Searle, p. 81). Iterated status functions create complex hierarchical social and institutional facts that enable certain phenomena like marriage and property to exist *without* a person having to actually be present— i.e., no “brute” sort of physical possession or proximity is required. Thus, “we don’t have to rely on brute physical forces to sustain the arrangements...and we can maintain the arrangements even in the absence of the original setup” (Searle, p. 81). For example, a wedding ring signifies that two people are in a committed relationship, it symbolizes a sort of possession and makes it unnecessary that those two people remain in close proximity. Similarly, a title deed to a parcel of land replaces one’s actual physical presence on said land with a recognized set of relationships that substitute for actual physical proximity (Searle, p. 81).

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replacement of said institutional fact (Searle, p. 124); and (iii) we can also classify institutional facts in terms of the logical operations such as negation and conditionalization on the “basic structure” we accept (S has power (S does A)) (Searle, p. 125). The eighth and final distinction concerns the types of logical iterations Searle describes—i.e., the Y term of one level can be the X term or the C term of higher levels within the power hierarchy (Searle, p. 125).

Searle deems these “status indicators” (Searle, p. 85).<sup>6</sup> Searle makes another distinction between language-dependent and -independent *thoughts* and language-dependent and -independent *facts* (Searle, p. 61).

Rather than give a full account of language, Searle focuses on the parts of it relevant to social reality, which are “symbolic devices such as words, that by convention mean or represent or symbolize something beyond them” (Searle, p. 60). Searle lists three essential features of linguistic symbols: they must symbolize something beyond themselves, they must do so by convention and they must be of a public sort; if an institutional fact is to be an institutional fact, it requires language so that it can be “publically understandable” (Searle, p. 60-61). In order for a fact to be of the language-dependent sort, two conditions must be met: mental representations (such as thoughts) must be partly constitutive of the relevant fact, and the representations themselves must be language dependent (Searle, p. 61-62). Searle concludes that the “move” from X to Y is *already of a linguistic sort*, because once the function is imposed upon the Y element it symbolizes something beyond itself (the Y element), and that the capacity to attach a sense or symbolic function to an object that does not have that sense intrinsically turns out to be the *precondition* of both language and institutional reality (Searle, p. 63, 73). Essentially, language is “epistemically indispensable,” social facts must be “communicable” by definition, the representation of complex social phenomena requires language, and the continued existence of social facts requires an independent means of representation through time (Searle, p. 76-78).

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<sup>6</sup> Because institutional facts exist only by human agreement they often require some form of official representation. This official representation is what Searle calls a “status indicator..” The basic idea is that status indicators identify that which has already been constituted, without them one would presumably have to reconstitute the creation of proof of status every time it was required. Status indicators symbolize status functions without the formal need of words to convey status (Searle, p. 120).



In essence, symbols of some type are *necessary*, but they are not (necessarily) sufficient, for meaning in society.<sup>7</sup> Searle claims that this “pattern of creating new institutional facts via performance of speech acts, which impose functions on people, objects, and events, characterizes a large number of social institutions” (Searle, p. 83).<sup>8</sup> What this boils down to is that creating new institutional facts is often achieved by using an object that *already* has a status function (like a sentence) to perform a speech act of a certain type that culminates in the creation of some new additional institutional fact (Searle, p. 84).<sup>9</sup> The creation of new institutional facts *really* means that new status functions are imposed upon phenomena that have *already* had status functions imposed on them. Speech acts are a special class of institutional fact, as they are essentially the function of imposing a status function (Searle, p. 116); this is what allows the iteration of status functions to occur. Searle says, “In principle there does not appear to be an upper limit to this type of iteration of imposed status function on imposed status function” (Searle, p. 116). Searle also claims that humans are more inclined to require institutional facts to be created by explicit speech acts depending on how important said institutional fact is, i.e., by how much *power* it confers (Searle, p. 116). Institutional facts persist so long as “...the individuals directly involved

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<sup>7</sup> I think symbols are necessary but not always sufficient for meaning because it is possible to think of examples of symbols in society that, despite being able to convey a meaning, nevertheless fail to do so. One can easily imagine graffiti satisfying the necessary but not the sufficient conditions of creating *and* conveying meaning.

<sup>8</sup> Searle notes that there is no clear demarcation between social facts and the subclass of institutional facts. Social facts simply “label the intentionality and its manifestation,” e.g., going for a walk (Searle, p. 88-89).

<sup>9</sup> Searle posits that all one has to do to test for the presence of institutional facts is to consider whether or not the rules governing them could be explicitly codified. Many institutional facts have been explicitly codified with laws, such as marriage, property, money, or governments. Other, informal institutions (un-codified ones, such as friendship, cocktail parties, etc.) are not (usually) codified but *could* be (Searle, p. 88). However, Searle claims that doing so deprives them of the “flexibility, spontaneity, and informality that the practice has in its un-codified form” (Searle, p. 88).

and a sufficient number of members of the relevant community continue to recognize and accept the existence of such facts” (Searle, p. 117).<sup>10</sup>

Searle’s analysis raises the following question: what are the possibilities and limitations of institutional facts? In other words, what sorts of facts can human beings create by collective agreement? Searle says, “there is no simple set of relations among motivation, self-interest, institutional structure, and institutional change” (Searle, p. 92-93). Hence, there is no obvious reason or set of reasons that explain *why* people in a given society continue to accept institutional facts. Institutional facts ultimately boil down to structures of power relations: “everything we value in civilization requires the creation and maintenance of institutional power relation through collectively imposed status functions” (Searle, p. 94). As he explains, “Because the creation of institutional facts is a matter of imposing a status and with it a function on some entity that does not already have that status function, in general the creation of a status function is a matter of conferring some new power” (Searle, p. 95). In essence, *the Y term names a power that the X term does not have solely in virtue of its X structure* (Searle, p. 95). The “X counts as Y in C” formula places no inherent restrictions on subject matter, so the vast differences, as well as the similarities between cultural institutions appear less relativistic (Searle, p. 87, 96). Searle asserts that status functions can be imposed on people and groups, objects, and events. However, the category of people and groups is fundamental because the imposition of status functions on objects and events works *only* in relation to people: if there are no people to impose a status, then that status *cannot* exist (Searle, p. 97). Since human society in all its variations is purportedly built upon Searle’s formula, if there are no humans to collectively impose status functions, to attach *meaning* to people and groups, objects, and events, then there can be no human society. In

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<sup>10</sup> If we take this claim at face value it has some interesting implications for my later analysis of Debord’s concept of the spectacle, but I will set this issue aside for now.

essence, relations of mind-dependent status functions—i.e., symbolical *meanings*—inherently structure our societies (Searle, p. 99-100).

Searle explains social power in terms of “deontic” powers: “The point of having deontic powers is to regulate relations between people. In this category, we impose rights, responsibilities, obligations, duties, privileges, entitlements, authorizations, permissions, and other such deontic phenomena” (Searle, p. 100). The content of (at least a large part of) institutional facts is that of power relations; in general, the creation of a new status function confers some new power of the sort that cannot exist without collective acceptance (Searle, p. 68-69). If X is a person, it is he or she who acquires power; if X is an object, then the user of the object (who can now do things which he or she could not do solely in virtues of X’s intrinsic structure) acquires power (Moural, p. 274). How Searle conceives of power is concisely stated by Josef Moural, who says, “Power is to be understood here in a very general sense of shaping the area of one’s possibilities: it conveys any form of what one is able, entitled, expected or required to do within a certain framework defined by collective acceptance” (Moural, p. 274). The logical form of deontic power relations as explained by Searle is: We accept ‘S has power (S does A)’, where the S element is an individual or group of individuals, the A element is an action, possibly of a negative character (abstaining, refraining), and the phrase “has power” stands for either “is enabled” or “is required” (Moural, p. 274). Searle claims, “the two basic modes of conventional power are those where we impose authorization on an agent and those where we impose a requirement on an agent, and these can be defined in terms of each other plus negation” (Searle, p. 108). Searle concludes, “we simply have creations and destructions of conventional powers at different levels within the hierarchy of institutional facts” (Searle, p. 110-111).

The basic idea, as I understand it, is that all collectively imposed status functions can be translated into terms involving “conventional powers,” which are nothing more than variations and iterations of the aforementioned basic structure, and humans have the ability to impose status functions by nothing other than collective agreement (Searle, p. 117). Power grows out of organizations, i.e., systematic arrangements of status functions (Searle, p. 117). Because social institutions survive on continued acceptance, in many cases “an elaborate apparatus of prestige and honor is created to secure social recognition and maintain acceptance” (Searle, p. 118). This acceptance amounts to the “basic structure” (S has power (S does A)). The formula “X counts as Y in C” applies to both the creation *and* the continued existence of the phenomenon (Searle, p. 119). This is because the constitutive rule is a device for creating the facts, and the existence of the fact is constituted by its having been created and not yet destroyed (Searle, p. 119).

Searle argues that institutional facts, as well as our ability to create them, presuppose the existence of a “background” of capacities (Searle, p. 126). The thesis of the background is as follows: “intentional states function only given a set of background capacities that do not themselves consist in intentional phenomena” (Searle, p. 129). Searle defines the background as “the set of non-intentional or pre-intentional capacities that enable intentional states of function” (Searle, p. 129).<sup>11</sup> The basic idea is that the functions assigned to entities, objects, or events in collectively intentional acts need not contain the intentionality of the *original* imposition (Searle,

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<sup>11</sup> The background is not to be understood as analogous to the idea of the unconscious mind. In fact, Searle is quite dissatisfied with the notion of the unconscious. “Since Freud,” he says, “we have found it useful and convenient to speak glibly about the unconscious mind without paying the price of explaining exactly what we mean. Our picture of unconscious mental states is that they are just like conscious states only minus the consciousness. But what exactly is that supposed to mean?” I think Searle is incorrect here; his thesis of the background has more in common with the idea of the unconscious mind than he perhaps gives it credit for. I think that both the background and the unconscious mind are attempts to provide workable and empirically testable meta-psychological frameworks to explain certain features of human internal mental and external physical behaviors.

p. 126). The argument Searle provides in favor of the background is that the literal meaning of a given sentence determines its truth conditions *only* against a background of capacities, etc., which are *not* part of the semantics of the sentence itself; and any given intentional state functions (determines truth conditions) *only* against a background set of abilities or capacities that are not already part of the intentional content (Searle, p. 131-32). For example, think of the sentences “Nate cut his thumb cooking,” “I cut the cake,” or “Cut the crap and get to the point”; in each expression, the verb “cut” has a constant meaning, but the same verb determines *different* truth conditions in different contexts because what counts as cutting varies contextually (Searle, p. 130). This is supposed to illustrate that despite the literal meaning of the verb “cut” remaining constant, in each sentence our interpretation of it varies depending on our background capacities, abilities, and this partially structures our experiences.

Searle describes numerous features of the background, although he adds that his list is not exhaustive. First, the background enables linguistic interpretation to take place (Searle, p. 132). Second, the background enables perceptual interpretation to occur, as when we bring certain background skills to bear upon the raw perceptions themselves (Searle, p. 133). Any and all (normal) cases of perception are cases of *perceiving as*, where the perceiver always assimilates perceived objects to some background category or other that is *already* of a familiar sort (Searle, p. 133). Third, therefore, the background *structures* consciousness (Searle, p. 133). Individuals possess certain unique sets of “motivational dispositions” and they condition the structure of our experiences. For instance, my beliefs partially structure *my* experiences, and Searle is claiming that what gives sense to those beliefs are the aforementioned motivational dispositions (Searle, p. 135). The background also facilitates certain kinds of “readiness,” which basically means that at any given point in time one is ready for some things to occur and not others. Searle claims, “my

background capacities determine a set of readiness's that structure the nature of my experiences" (Searle, p. 136). The last feature of the background is that it disposes one to certain types of behavior—i.e., laughing at certain things and not others, eating certain things and not others, etc. (Searle, p. 136).

Searle's core claim concerning the background, so it seems so to me, is that one can develop certain sets of abilities that are sensitive to intentional structures (i.e., institutional facts), but which are *not* constituted by the intentionality of those intentional structures; humans have evolved a mechanism for remaining sensitive to rule structures that *need not* be itself a system of rule structures (Searle, p. 145). Remarkably, the agents operating within an institutional framework need not be *consciously* aware of the formal structure of institutional facts (the status function imposition), and most often they are *not* (Searle, p. 145). Once imposed, the status functions are invisible, and we simply operate within a world full of ready-made expectation and fulfillment patterns and, I would add, parameters. The underlying structure may remain hidden, but we can cope smoothly nevertheless (Moural, p. 276). According to Searle, most of our behavior within the framework of social institutions does not have the form of rule following (conscious or unconscious); rather, it is performed due to our non-intentional background capacities. Searle says, "I want to propose that in many cases it is just wrong to assume...that our behavior matches the structure of the rules because we are unconsciously following the rules. Rather, we evolve a set of dispositions that are sensitive to the rule structure" (Searle, p. 145). It seems the background can be causally sensitive to the constitutive rules of institutions without representing them in any way.<sup>12</sup> In other words, what happens is that we develop a set of

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<sup>12</sup> We need not have ever explicitly articulated or become conscious of these constitutive rules, although it is possible that one *could* become conscious of such rules and eventually slide back into behaving in accordance with them according to certain background dispositions.

dispositions that are sensitive to the rule structure and allow us to behave in accordance with the rules *without* our having to form the intention to consciously follow them (Searle, p. 140-41, 144-47; Moyal, p. 277).

### III. Debord and Baudrillard

I will now develop some of the ways in which Debord and Baudrillard are conceptually consistent with, and related to, Searle's account. I begin with a brief overview of Baudrillard's concepts and core presuppositions. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard presents his views on "the postmodern."<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard rarely defines his key terms or concepts, nor does he regularly qualify the scope of his claims. If we proceed with caution, however, it is possible to make good sense of his thought. He begins by describing a short fable from Jorge Luis Borges called "On Exactitude in Science."<sup>14</sup> In the story, an empire creates a map on an exact 1:1 scale with the actual world it tries to represent.<sup>15</sup> The map completely covers the empire's territory and settles over the top of it, but when it begins to decay the inhabitants can no longer discern what was "real" and what was the map. Baudrillard's point is that an analogous situation now exists in

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<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Since it is such a short piece, I include the entirety of Jorge Luis Borges fable, "On Exactitude in Science." (<http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/08/bblonder/phys120/docs/borges.pdf>): "...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the inclemencies of Sun and Winter. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography."

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Guy Debord also refers to this Borges fable in §31 of *The Society of the Spectacle*: "The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which exactly covers its territory. The very powers which escaped us show themselves to us in all their force."

real life and is deserving of our attention; we can no longer discern the territory of the empire from the map that covers it, so to speak (Baudrillard, p. 1). Baudrillard says, “It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*” (Baudrillard, p. 1). In essence, I believe Baudrillard is both criticizing the appearance and reality distinction as a historical concept and saying that we simply cannot discern what is and is not “real” any more, where “real” is understood in the broad sense of an object capable of functioning as a referent for an image or representation of some sort, i.e., a sign.

In fact, though, Baudrillard thinks our situation is worse: in our case, the map now *precedes* the territory itself; it has become indistinguishable from the “original” territory; where we could once discern the difference between a “map” and its referents, we can do so no longer. Baudrillard says, “It is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction” (Baudrillard, p. 2). In essence, reality and its human representations have become indissolubly confused. Baudrillard uses this example to make a more general point: Abstraction is not the same as it once was. Baudrillard says, “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance” (Baudrillard, p. 1). The simulations and models that we use are not *really* simulations or models at all, because they are not actually based upon anything *real*. They are based upon other simulations and models; every simulation is now an *iteration* of another, earlier simulation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard is remarkably close to Searle here, although some nuanced differences remain. For Searle, iteration need not be of an identical or near-identical copy of a given social fact, although nothing in his account rules this possibility out. Baudrillard, on the other hand, is thinking more



Simulation is distinct from outright pretending or faking; it happens at an unconscious level, whereas faking and pretending are conscious phenomena (Baudrillard, p. 3). Simulation remains similar to pretending, but is distinct from it due to its occurring at an unconscious level. Simulation blurs the boundary between what is real and what is imaginary because it is often unconscious; it confuses and ultimately displaces reality as such. Baudrillard discusses the difference between dissimulating and simulation; he says, “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t. One implies a presence, the other an absence” (Baudrillard, p. 3). Dissimulation retains a relationship, or conceptual connection, with some “true” or genuinely real state of affairs. Thus, Baudrillard is arguing that dissimulation *leaves the reality principle intact* (Lane, p. 85). For example, if someone goes to bed and *pretends* to have an illness, without actually having one, simply by saying that he or she feels unwell, then they are *dissimulating*. The *simulation* of an illness is more akin to hypochondria: the person in bed *actually produces* some of the symptoms of being ill. In the latter case, how are we to know what the real state of affairs *actually* is? The point Baudrillard wishes to make, in a roundabout sort of way, is that we can *identify* that the subject *actually has* good health *and* that they are feigning its absence (Lane, p. 84-85). Baudrillard writes, “It is against this lack of distinction that classical reason armed itself in all its categories. But it is what today again outflanks them, submerging the principle of truth” (Baudrillard, p. 4). In other words, in cases of dissimulation, we can still negotiate the differences, at least in principle, between a true and a false state of affairs. With simulation, however, we can no longer negotiate the differences, and so the differences themselves are threatened—the *reality* principle is threatened. Baudrillard

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along the lines of iterations of copies—copied copies, more or less. Where Searle would say a Y term can count as the C term of a higher level status function in the social hierarchy, Baudrillard would likely say that once we reach a certain level of abstraction the process becomes meaningless, the Y term loses its meaning and status.

says, "...the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalencies" (Baudrillard, p. 2). Baudrillard's crucial distinction shows that both terms involve a feigning and a faking, but "where dissimulation masks reality, and ultimately reaffirms it, simulation devours the real, the representational structure and space it depends on, leaving behind nothing but commutating signs, self referring simulacra which feign a relation to an obsolete real" (Best, p. 53).

In many ways, Baudrillard wishes to test (and to go beyond) conceptual limits established by his predecessor, Guy Debord. Debord was heavily influenced by Marxist critical theory, and was involved for a time with a French group known as the Situationists.<sup>17</sup> Debord's basic thesis is: "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was once lived directly has become mere representation" (Debord, §1).<sup>18</sup> The spectacle, according to Debord, is "not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, §4). The spectacle is "not a supplement to the real world, it is the heart of the unrealism of the real society" (Debord, §6). Debord thinks the spectacle, as a concept, "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Debord, §10). The spectacle is everywhere in our society, as Debord says: "The society which rests on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is

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<sup>17</sup> The Situationists were a short-lived French group who "combined the more outlandish aspects of the modernist art movements surrealism and Dada, to create a revolutionary moment through the fusion of aesthetics and politics"; the Situationists sought to create "moments" or "constructed situations" to redefine the urban cityscapes through "free-play, chance, anarchy, danger and passion (Lane, p. 19).

<sup>18</sup> Debord's work is here cited by section or aphorism number, rather than by page.

fundamentally *spectaculist*. 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” (Debord, §14).

Debord has much more to say about the concept of the spectacle, but these passages capture the core of his concerns and are useful for setting up how Baudrillard picks up where Debord leaves off. Lane writes, “This reads very much like the shift from the real to the simulation, although at this point it is not clear if Debord’s spectacular society takes place in second- or third-order simulation” (Lane, p. 97). Baudrillard rejected Debord’s concept of spectacle for several reasons: first, it implies an obsolete distinction between subject and object that hyperreality renders untenable, and second, Debord conceived of the spectacle as the abstract extension of commodity logic *instead* of the product of increasingly abstract iterations of semiotic signs. Baudrillard also thought Debord’s account unsatisfactory because it was still “structured in the classical sense of a division between the empowered and the disempowered, a division that Baudrillard regards as collapsing and functioning in different ways in the hyperreal” (Lane, p. 98). Lane makes the *extremely* lucid observation that Baudrillard “takes the proposition from the first section of *The Society of the Spectacle* and radicalizes it in terms of structuralist/semiotic theory” (Lane, p. 98). Concerning Marxism, Baudrillard was initially an adherent of Marx’s basic suppositions. Baudrillard mapped out the modern world of consumerism using Marxist logic, focusing upon use-value and exchange-value in particular, but ultimately he found Marxist logic unsatisfactory. For Baudrillard, the fact that objects are now divorced from production and symbolic value reduces them to functioning as abstract signs; we no longer have use-value and exchange-value alone, now we have “symbolic” exchange-value (conspicuous consumption, more or less, the display of consumer goods for their *perceived* status), and the different logics of consumption become easily confused and jumbled (Lane, p.

72-74). Now, we have a “system of consumption where the act of buying a product is as abstract as the ways in which the products are made in the first place” (Lane, p. 72).<sup>19</sup>

Baudrillard is more than willing to draw out the implications of Marxism and Debord’s concepts just to see how far they can be stretched. He thinks modern society has transitioned *beyond* Debord’s commodity-driven “society of the spectacle.” Images, and image-objects, are now circulated and consumed at breakneck speed, there is an inherent uncertainty about how images function and for whom in a given context (Toffoletti, p. 16). Best writes, “Behind the society of the commodity and its stable supports, we transcend the society of the spectacle and its dissembling masks, and we enter the society of the simulacrum, an abstract non-society devoid of cohesive relations, social meaning, and collective representation” (Best, p. 51). The spectacle relativizes *everything* until *anything* can pass as meaning or reality. “The image has changed from reflecting reality, to masking reality, to masking the absence of reality, to having no relation to reality whatsoever” (Toffoletti p. 17). For Baudrillard, we are now living in a thoroughly “postmodern society” comprised of “simulacra”; there are no cohesive social relations or collective meaning any longer. Society is to be understood in terms of “sign value,” *not* in terms of the spectacle or commodity as understood by Debord or Marx.

Baudrillard’s work can be seen as an attempt to assess the catastrophic fallout of the abstraction process traced by Marx and Debord. Whereas Marx described the reduction of materiality into quantitative commodities, and Debord described the absorption of the commodity world into a specular empire of images, Baudrillard describes an even more advanced state of abstraction where the object is absorbed altogether into the image and dematerializes in closed cycles of semiotic exchange (Best, p. 51). Here, use and exchange

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<sup>19</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of the specific points of disagreement and agreement that Baudrillard has with Marxism, see Lane’s chapter four, “Reworking Marxism.”

value<sup>20</sup> remain, but the commodity is produced, distributed, and consumed for its “conspicuous” social meaning (Best, p. 52). No longer constrained by an objective reality, or moored to a simple binary relation, the signifier is “free to float and establish its own meanings” (Best, p. 52).

These preliminary presuppositions of Baudrillard’s are useful for understanding his concept of the “precession of simulacra,” a thesis that outlines how image use in society has changed through time. Baudrillard describes three stages, which he calls the “precession of simulacra.” These three orders correspond loosely to the pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras:

1. First order (or *pre-modern*): For Baudrillard, the orders of simulacra align with different time periods. Here, Baudrillard refers to the period from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution.<sup>21</sup> In the first order of simulacra, a given sign is only *one* level of abstraction removed from a real item. This would be like taking a photo of a flower; it is an accurate, true-to-life depiction of an ontologically more “basic” entity in reality, Searle would refer to a flower as a “brute” ontologically objective fact. However, the sign is a *clear counterfeit* of the real; the sign is just an illusion or place marker for the real. Simulacra of this era aim to imitate nature, but they do so in overt ways, in which the imitation is clearly recognized: “the difference between the image and its referent is obvious to the viewer” (Toffoletti p. 20).

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<sup>20</sup> Lane defines use-value as that which “arises from productive activity to construct something that fulfills a need, such as shoes or clothing,” and exchange-value as “an expression of the labor-power necessary for the production of a commodity. It is an abstract expression because it does not relate to the commodity itself...but to the cost of the labor needed to make the commodity” (Lane, p. 65).

<sup>21</sup> Of course, images existed prior to this, but according to Baudrillard they occupied a pre-modern era of social relations characterized by symbolic exchange—a time before objects accumulated value in the economic or aesthetic sense that we are familiar with today (Toffoletti p. 17).

2. Second order (or *modern*): The second order of simulacra corresponds to the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of mass production techniques that change how objects and images function, along with how they are valued (Toffoletti p. 20). In the second order of simulacra, a sign deviates in some way from the real item it is meant to depict. The second order of simulacra comes into play when the distinction between truth and falsity is compromised because simulation is no longer recognized as such; *it* begins to be taken as real. Toffoletti uses the example of Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans* as an example; they capture the serialized nature of image production in this era of simulacra and convey uniform equivalence even as they masquerade as "different" from one another (Toffoletti, p. 23). Mass production creates a rift in our conception of what is real, it turns reality into technique of production, and now what is real is whatever can be multiplied *ad infinitum* in a reproducible medium.

The curious result of this process is that our notions of an "original" object are obscured and ultimately rendered meaningless. What we see are potentially infinite copies or iterations of an object that can be confused for the original, in fact, *they might as well be the original*; and therein lies the potential for simulacra to devalue meaning. *Nothing* is unique or sacred any longer, nothing is more or less original than anything else. Such mass-production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it. However, there is still a belief that, through critique or effective political action, one can access the hidden fact of the real. But this is a belief that Baudrillard patently decries as false: Images no longer function as clear copies or imitations of some original referent, now "objects and images are made in order to

generate *equivalencies* with the things they depict, and come to be understood relative to each other” (Toffoletti p. 21).

3. Third order (or *postmodern*): Here, a sign has *no* relationship to reality at all; Facebook is a perfect example of this, as one can now carefully tailor one’s online appearance for others. I could create a profile and make it *seem* to others as if I am a comedian or a famous chef. The life represented is *no longer the life actually lived*; one’s life is not accurately represented by the abstract slice seen on Facebook or other social media sites. It is, in fact, extremely easy to lose oneself and become unaware that the life online is not identical to the one offline. “It is in the third schema that any discernable distinction between images and reality begins to fall away completely” (Toffoletti p. 24). An image seems more “real” in this stage, but it is in fact *entirely* removed from reality. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only simulation, and in this sense, things are now “hyperreal.” In third order simulation, the model precedes the real (the map precedes the territory). Lane says, “This does not mean there is a blurring between reality and representation; rather, there is a detachment from *both* of these, whereby the reversal becomes irrelevant” (Lane, p. 84).

Baudrillard’s classic example of a third-order simulacrum is Disneyland, of which he says, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (Baudrillard, p. 12). In other words, Disneyland exists as a reminder that it is *unreal* and to imply that the “real” is outside of Disneyland, but this is a false reminder because *nothing is real any longer outside of Disneyland either*; the real has died and given way to the hyperreal. Baudrillard says, “It is no longer a

question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard, p. 12-13). Baudrillard argues that people go to Disneyland, and other theme parks in general, not for the element of fantasy involved, but the fantasy it creates *within its own walls* that everyone inside *shares* together. Not only does Disneyland portray itself as a miniature version of American culture and values, it is also an example of a third-order simulation; it fails to be a representation of America at all, because such a representation could not be real any longer anyway. It exists solely to hide the fact that it *is not a miniature of anything “real” in the first place*, it exists as a “mass hallucination and hypnosis machine” that serves only to help people *forget* that the entire country surrounding it is *also* a fiction of sorts (Baudrillard, p. 12-13). Simulacra and the systems of simulations they create effectively *destroy* reality, because they obscure and twist our conception of what is and is not real so effectively that meaning implodes.

The result of all this, for Baudrillard, is a nihilistic outlook. Baudrillard thinks that society is composed solely of systems and iterations of various simulacra, and that as a result we now live in an entirely different sort of reality, a “hyperreality” of sign and images. This is, according to Baudrillard, the result of a long trend in history, outlined in the three orders of simulacra, where what is natural and “real” in the objective sense, is replaced with abstract signs and images of those real or natural referents. Baudrillard thinks that all we have in modernity are abstract signifiers, simulacra, with no referent whatsoever—i.e., without any relation to the “real” world. A simulacrum is an image or representation of something from the real world, usually of an unsatisfactory imitative sort; they are (or purport to be) abstract instantiations of the “Real.” However, as simulacra become increasingly more complex (i.e., as the manifestations of different stages in the “precession” of simulacra through time), they divorce themselves more



and more from reality. Baudrillard thinks that simulacra are essentially meaningless, since they undergo constant replacement and change their meanings under the capitalist system of production.

First and second order simulacra *preserve* the sense of the real, and how well a given simulacrum imitates reality can be measured. The first and second orders of simulacra *maintain*, in varying degrees of course, the separation between an object and its representation, while the third order largely *eliminates* the element of separation; images “are no longer different from reality, but generate our sense of reality” (Toffoletti p. 28-29). Crucially, the difference between the first two orders of simulacra is that the first order creates an analogy between the “real” and the mere imitation (the simulacra), whereas the second order attempts to be equivalent to the “real.” In essence, Baudrillard claims that what we have lost is our perception of the perspectival distance between a *sign* and its *representation* in the world. The real *thing* and the *concept of* that thing are no longer distinct concepts.<sup>22</sup> All of this is supposed to point out that simulation is *not* the same as representation. Baudrillard says, “Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Baudrillard, p. 6). In representation, the idea that a sign or symbol meant to represent something (an image, a concept, a feeling, etc.) reinforces how “real” that something actually is. Simulation, however, presupposes that the sign or symbol is *as* real as what is being simulated, and largely ignores or denies the reality of the original thing itself. Representation

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<sup>22</sup> In essence, the proper sense of the word ‘abstraction’ itself has been lost *precisely* because everything has been rendered abstract; there is no longer any firm conceptual mooring from the referent to the sign.

preserves the connection to the original, along with the distance needed to recognize the original *as the original*, whereas simulation *destroys* both the connection and the distance.

Baudrillard's primary concern lies with third order simulacra because this order removes the "real" completely and generates new conceptions of the real that do not connect to the "real" world in any way. According to Baudrillard, our present postmodern society, with all of its technology, is comprised primarily of the hyperreal, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, p. 1). Baudrillard strongly suggests that our postmodern society has become deeply distracted, and ultimately transfixed upon, such meaningless hyperreal signs. He says, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real..."(Baudrillard, p. 2). Unfortunately, the reality behind the hyperreal has been entirely obscured; humans are increasingly unable to relate to what is real because of our immersion in what is hyperreal. Baudrillard laments, "People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contact therapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality..."(Baudrillard, p. 13). Reality is no longer represented in any recognizable way, and we have been so saturated with the hyperreal that we no longer recognize the real as such.

Eventually, Baudrillard thinks, hyperreality will predominate and determine our notions of what is and is not real (Lane, p. 84-85).<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard thinks that we have lost the critical distance needed to discern what is and is not real precisely because we are constantly immersed in visual representations that all masquerade as real. Hence, representation is no longer an

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<sup>23</sup> Toffoletti and Lane both highlight that one *must not* read Baudrillard as attempting to deny the existence of reality entirely; rather, he is saying that images now generate our sense of what "reality" actually is and that *this* shift is brought about by simulation (Toffoletti p. 29).

accurate reflection of the world or the “real” *because representations and images have become the “real”* (Toffoletti, p. 30). Hyperreality arises when our experience of the world becomes mediated such that it is “primarily derived through signs that have come to replace reality”; at this point signs have meaning only in relation to other signs, not in relation to any “real” sort of referent (Toffoletti, p. 24). The hyperreal is the end result of a historical simulation process where the natural world and all its referents are gradually replaced with technology and self-referential signs. The real, for all intents and purposes, is “vanquished when an independent object world is assimilated to and defined by artificial codes and simulation models” (Best, p. 54). In this new postmodern world, images and signs proliferate to the point where previous distinctions between illusion and reality, signifier and signified, subject and object, *collapse*, and there is no longer any social or real world of which to speak, but only “a self-referring hyperreality of meaningless semiotic signs” (Best, p. 41-42). Baudrillard appears to think that all our culture (in the broadest sense of the word) can do is reproduce endlessly these meaningless signs. The hyperreal entails the *death* of the real. Now, power is consumed, prestige is bought and sold, and in turn new principles govern how society is organized.

#### **IV. Unexpected Connections**

Now that I have discussed Baudrillard’s core concepts, I will turn to my explanation of how his and Debord’s accounts are compatible with specific concepts from Searle’s social ontology. Searle defines intentionality as “the capacity of the mind to represent objects and states of affairs in the world other than itself” (Searle, p. 6). My contention is that both Debord *and* Baudrillard’s views depend upon singular and collective intentionality of the sort Searle has in mind. In particular, the spectacle and simulacra are conceptually dependent upon a given

subject's mind being receptive to the intentional acts of others. The entire purpose of the spectacle is to perpetuate a system of artificial needs and desires that it itself dictates to workers and consumers. I think the very concept of simulacra *presuppose* conscious entities capable of creating and maintaining intentional states: cave paintings did not appear out of the blue, and neither do advertisements! Further, the very purpose of simulacra is (sometimes) to convey the intentional states of their creators: for instance, "buy this" or "this will result in such-and-such an emotion." Debord claims that the spectacle is an abstract social relation among people that is mediated by images, and simulacra are images that are essentially identical with the spectacle; one might even call the spectacle the sum total of the systems of simulacra that comprise the sorts of hyperreal simulations Baudrillard discusses. Hence, my contention is that the spectacle, and the concept of hyperreality meant to go beyond it, are best thought of as examples of abstract collective intentionality, and that neither the spectacle nor simulacra could exist without entities capable of intentional states.

Searle argues that brute facts exist independently of any human institutions or minds; they are essentially the objective facts of the world. For example, gravity and the sun would exist regardless of whether humans were around to perceive them. What Baudrillard calls the "real" is essentially equivalent to what Searle calls brute or mind-independent facts. Hence, I will treat the two terms as equivalent because I think they are entirely consistent with, and identical to, one another. Although one might be led to think that Baudrillard believes brute facts (i.e., the real) no longer exist, my contention is that he could still maintain that they do. This is because Baudrillard does *not* outright *deny* the existence of brute facts; he only maintains that our *attitudes about what is and is not real have changed*. What Baudrillard considers to be the brute facts appear to be entirely different from what Searle takes them to be, but for him brute facts (of

some sort) nevertheless exist.<sup>24</sup> In this way Baudrillard can present a radically new vision of reality without actually having to go so far as to deny completely that reality *simpliciter* exists. Similarly, Debord would not, nor could he, deny the existence of brute facts and remain consistent. Debord's entire analysis proceeds from Marxist assumptions, and it is difficult to see how he could deny the existence of brute facts and still maintain the Marxist importance of material conditions on social reality.

Searle defines institutional facts as the portions of the real world that consist of objective facts that depend on human agreement (e.g., money, marriage, governments) (Searle, p. 1). Institutional facts can exist *only* within and because of human institutions. My contention is that the spectacle and hyperreality can be described, with slight alterations of the locution, in terms of the "X counts as Y in C" formula of Searle. Debord claimed that the spectacle was a social relation between people mediated by images, and Baudrillard took this a step further by pushing the abstraction process of the spectacle to its limits, resulting in an image saturated society desperately trying to preserve its sense of the real, ironically producing hyperreality in the process. Essentially, the spectacle and hyperreality are high level, abstract iterations of institutional facts, in the form of images, resulting from the distorted and manufactured collective intentionality of consumer capitalism. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is the result of institutional facts, but it *appears* to be a sort of brute fact. But, as I explained

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<sup>24</sup> Searle says, "It could not be the case, as some antirealists have maintained, that all facts are institutional facts, that there are no brute facts, because the analysis of the structure of institutional facts reveals that they are logically dependent on brute facts" (Searle, p. 56). I do not think that Debord can feasibly deny the existence of brute facts of the type Searle discusses. Baudrillard, on the other hand, manages to avoid the antirealist label precisely because he thinks only that what we *consider* as brute facts has changed, not that there are no such brute facts *at all*.

previously, this is because of the way our attitudes about what is and is not real are altered under hyperreality, leading us to alter what we consider *as* brute and institutional facts.

Searle distinguishes between intrinsic and observer-relative features (of the world), between brute facts and the “real.” Intrinsic features of an object or the world exist *regardless* of whether or not a conscious entity is around to assign a function to them; they are basically a description of some ontological X without any sort of human descriptors regarding a use or function (Searle, p. 10). The spectacle and hyperreality masquerade as intrinsic features of the world due to their high level within the social ontology, but they *cannot* exist without conscious entities like ourselves to create the necessary preconditions (society) for Searle’s iterative process to begin. In other words, neither the spectacle nor hyperreality are possible without collective intentionality to allow the iterative process (of the “X counts as Y in C” formula) to begin. Observer-relative features are the functions conscious entities ascribe to objects (e.g., this is a computer, that is a screwdriver, and so on); they are ontologically subjective because they do not add any new material objects to the world, but they can add epistemically objective features to reality, where the features in question exist relative to observers and users (Searle, p. 10). My contention is that the spectacle and hyperreality are *not* intrinsic features of the world; they are observer-relative features of the world that arise within modern capitalist societies.<sup>25</sup> Now we consider hyperreality and the spectacle as brute facts, instead of thinking of them as *institutionally derived observer relative features of the world that exist at a high level of abstract iteration* (of the “X counts as Y in C” formula) in the social ontology as a whole.

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<sup>25</sup> I say capitalist societies here, but I can see no reason why, at least in principle, any sufficiently automated economic system, predicated upon a high turnover rate of consumption and production, could not generate phenomena similar to the spectacle and hyperreality.

I think that Debord and Baudrillard are both fundamentally concerned with the status of meaning in society. Debord's conception of the spectacle entails an increased level of abstraction, in the sense that images and their meanings, the more that they iterate themselves, become increasingly divorced from reality and are no longer entirely reflective of it. Further, consider Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, wherein images are abstracted such that the difference between them becomes doubly irrelevant owing to how they are abstracted from both referential reality *and* other images; any meaning they retain is retained *only* in virtue of comparison to other largely meaningless iterated signs. Clearly, both of these concepts deal with the abstraction of images, but Debord failed to make the temporally tiered distinctions (the orders of simulacra) that Baudrillard did that reflect the process of increasing imagistic abstraction in capitalist society. To my mind it seems as if an examination of Searle's position can inform the other two in many respects.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

How and where does the spectacle fit into Searle's ontology, if it can fit? And can or does his formula become iterated to extremes in a capitalist framework, such that a hyperreal reality usurps mind-independent reality? Explicitly, Searle's formula provides an explanatory principle for how social and institutional facts are created. Facts have some meaning or other by definition. But implicitly, I think that Searle is providing a formula that can account for the abstract *meaning* attached to social facts and objects in human society.<sup>26</sup> My claim is that

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<sup>26</sup> Searle uses examples that often focus explicitly upon "Western" (i.e., "developed") capitalist countries. However, Baudrillard and Debord often use examples of comparatively less developed societies to inform their analysis and as examples, in addition to using more modern examples. This is not problematic, though, because Searle's formula can easily accommodate meaning as it

Searle's formula is applicable to abstract systems of meaning, such as images, in *addition* to deontic systems of power, and that it does so in a fashion consistent with Debord's concept of the spectacle and the notions of sign and simulacra of Baudrillard. Language is essentially sounds attached to abstract and arbitrary symbols and loaded with meaning. It is the necessary prerequisite for Searle's formula to exist at all; that is to say, language requires language (Searle, p. 37, 60). Searle *must* think that meaning in society is fundamentally reducible to the formula "X counts as Y in C," because it is hard to see how the imposition of a status function via collective intentionality does not reduce ultimately to what sorts of meanings we attach to an object X. For example, Searle would say X (a knife) counts as Y (a murder weapon) in social context C (say, a murder trial). What we have is the concrete imposition of meaning—i.e., "this is a knife"—and the creation of a newer and more abstract meaning that exists parasitically upon it—i.e., "this is now a murder weapon." This is consistent with Searle's formula because the knife (Y term) has now been assigned a new status (it is a murder weapon), and it did *not* already have that status simply in virtue of being a knife (Searle, p. 44). Essentially, I think that this formula can be applied *specifically* to meaning as it becomes manifest in images. Hence, we have a formula that can iterate on both the concrete *and* the abstract levels.

I suspect that the spectacle can be explained as conceptually parasitic, in a sense, upon the "X counts as Y in C" formula, but rather than "counts as" functioning as the logical locution we get "is valued as" or "means" instead. When this conceptual schema is pushed or iterated to extremes, we arrive at something akin to Baudrillard's hyperreal. The "X counts as Y in C" formula is inverted, so that artificial value replaces genuine value and genuine meaning (in the

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appears in either developed or primitive societies simply by positing more or less "iterations" of the formula, and his account works out the ways this is possible.



linguistic sense) is replaced with the pseudo-meaning of the spectacle, and under the capitalist system of production this drives the eventual break between reality and appearance. In other words, we begin to value what is essentially *valueless* to such an extent (driven by the spectacle) that we ourselves form the wedge between what is and is not real and allow the conditions for this curious occurrence to continue. Social reality gives way to the preconditions of hyperreality *precisely* at that point where X is “valued as” Y in context C becomes invisible (i.e., it exists *as* the spectacle). In essence, my claim is that Searle’s initial formula, which is capable of infinite, or indefinitely many, iterations (at least in principle), is only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is the “valued as” locution. This “new” formula, with its hidden value-laden dimension, eventually forms iterations that result in the sorts of “simulacra” and “simulations” (of all orders) that Baudrillard discusses, and it is this “valued as” locution that permits the collapse of meaning to occur. This “valued as” locution exists alongside the “counts as” locution in capitalist societies, and the constant barrage of what consumers should value (some object, event, group or person X) is what sets the stage for the collapse of meaning and signals our entry into hyperreality.

Further, it is easy to see how this can occur when we consider Searle’s concept of the background. Searle says, “Even in cases where the status function is assigned in collective acts of intentional imposition, the subsequent use of the entities in question *need not contain the intentionality of the original imposition* (Searle, p. 126, emphasis added). What this means is that subsequent generations do not necessarily have to consciously think about imposing status functions via collective intentionality; they simply assimilate certain social facts without having to do so actively. In essence, “What was once the explicit imposition of function is now *assumed* as part of the background” (Searle, p. 126). Hence, I think it is plausible that the spectacle and

hyperreality are now *assumed as part of the background as well*. This claim is important because it further clarifies how the spectacle and hyperreality remain ubiquitous and invisible. It is not simply that they are highly abstract iterations and are thus difficult to discern, nor is it that they have so undermined our critical faculties that we cannot discern their presence. They are now part of the very structure of our conscious experiences; they have become a part of our background mental capacities.

Debord's concept of the spectacle and Baudrillard's concept of simulacra are linked in key ways, that much should be obvious by now. Both Debord and Baudrillard aim to show that our image-laden society has taken on a narcotic aspect, the spectacle and simulacra both serve to blur the distinction between the real and the man-made, as well as the iterations upon man-made images and objects. In addition, the two share a common theoretical background in Marxism, although Baudrillard later moved away from this position. Steven Best argues that in the theories of Debord and Baudrillard, "capitalism has become a reified and self-legitimizing system where the object world assumes human well-being is defined by the (conspicuous) consumption of goods" (Best, p. 41). Baudrillard initially argued that the commodity form has developed to such an extent that use and exchange value have been superseded by "sign value" that redefines the commodity primarily as a symbol to be consumed and displayed (Best, p. 43). Before capitalist society, commodity production existed, but always marginally in relation to other activities. Capitalism is thus the triumph of the economy over its human producers. The simple satisfaction of needs was once the goal of production, and money was simply a mediating element, now the realization of surplus value (profit) is the goal of the system, and commodities are mere mediating figures, "no longer tied to commodities except accidentally" (Best, p. 43). In other words, both Baudrillard and Debord maintain that the goal of commodity production is not the

creation of use value, but exchange value, and not exchange value *per se*, but exchange in the form of commodities (Best, p. 43). Baudrillard and Debord both depend upon the Marxist notion that “with the spread of money, commoditization, and quantifying logic, a general abstraction process envelops society,” and it is this abstraction process that brings the possibility of obscuring crucial aspects of social reality (Best, p. 44). The inversion that occurs in the economy—that is, the inversion from satisfying needs to manufacturing needs—affects the whole of social life and is directly transferred to the cultural and personal realm where commodity fantasy, or “commodity fetishization,” begins (Best, p. 45).

The spectacle redefines the worker in that it allows and encourages the worker *also* to act as a consumer and works to constitute the worker’s desires and needs as a consumer (Best, p. 48). Money once dominated society as the physical representation of general equivalence, allowing the exchange of incompatible use values. In late capitalism, the postmodern era, however, the hegemony of money is *indirect*, mediated through the production of images, which allow a more “generalized” equivalence (Best, p. 49). Marx spoke of the degradation of *being into having*; all that Baudrillard and Debord have done is extend this. Best writes, “Debord speaks of a further reduction, the transformation of *having into appearing*, where the material object gives way to its representation as sign” (Best, p. 48). This is another area where Baudrillard and Debord are quite similar. They share a general concern that if (although, for them it is perhaps more like *when*) the image determines and overtakes reality, then life is no longer lived directly and actively, but indirectly and passively. “The spectacle escalates abstraction to the point where we no longer live in the world *per se*...but in an abstract image of the world” (Best, p. 48). In this endless stream of abstract images and signs, subjects are misled into thinking that they constitute their own lives, where in actuality all they do view the glossy

commodity world streaming by, and, driven by manufactured desire, march forth to the markets and dutifully purchase the “newest” and “best” consumer items.

The spectacle is not merely a blanket term for the mass media present in capitalist society; it also refers to the various technical and institutional systems of capitalism, such as the political, military, and educational institutions (Best, p. 47). The power of these systems, according to Debord, is that the critical and creative aspects of humanity have been compromised, which, in turn, allows the spectacle to remain largely hidden. The spectacle is a tool of pacification; it stupefies social subjects and distracts them from recovering the concrete totality of human activity through social transformation. Further, it increases commoditization of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and permits the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure and everyday life (Best, p. 47). Where qualitative differences previously were erased in the serial production of objects, now they evaporate in the stratosphere of images *and* signs (Best, p. 49). The spectacle is the super-reification of image-objects as a massive unreality, an inversion of reality and illusion (Best, p. 49). The spectacular society, which is what Baudrillard would call the postmodern society, is explicitly concerned with the production of all types of “counterfeit” life (Best, p. 49). In this sense, the spectacle is something akin to the “opiate” that Marx thought religion was for the masses, only it is spread through the economics of conspicuous consumption and what Baudrillard would call sign logic: “The Situationists saw the most recent stage in social control as based on consensus rather than force, as a cultural hegemony attained through the transformation of commodity society into the “society of the spectacle” (Best, p. 46-47). In this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own (Best, p. 47). It is best to think of the society of the spectacle as a more abstract commodity society, comprised of vast institutional systems that

work (without outside force), to regulate human subjects to the critical and creative margins of society and to obscure the nature and effects of its distorting power (Best, p. 47).

I think that trying to preserve and explain meaning primarily motivates each of these accounts. Searle is not concerned that meaning is *eroded* or *lost*, as Debord and Baudrillard are; he is concerned with power relations changing through time, rather than with meaning changing through time. I think it is apparent by now that Debord and Baudrillard are both concerned that meaning is no longer *directly* communicated. Given that Baudrillard and Debord both think that the subject-object distinction is now irrelevant, they must rely upon some sort of mediated communication to enable humans to speak to one another. This puts them in the awkward position of negatively critiquing the very concept that would enable communication, even in the negative sense attached to it, in their *own* accounts. I do not think that either Debord's or Baudrillard's account can remain coherent if they outright deny the subject-object distinction, because many of their concepts *necessarily* depend upon that distinction. How would (or could) the spectacle or simulacra work without people to form collective intentional states? I contend that Baudrillard and Debord are more coherent if their claims are attenuated such that the subject-object distinction is not eliminated entirely, but is merely obscured, owing to the influence of the spectacle and the orders of simulacra. Searle's concept of collective intentionality necessarily presupposes an "other" in the form of a linguistically equipped human, and intersubjective communication depends upon the subject-object distinction remaining. However, I see nothing in Searle's account that would render it inconsistent with a blurring of the distinction between subject and object.

My concern is that if we take Baudrillard's conclusions as they stand, it appears that we no longer even have the *possibility* of non-imagistic mediated communication. I conclude that

resisting the influence of the spectacle, and avoiding the slide into hyperreal perceptions and the accompanying nihilism, is both possible and necessary. I will briefly outline some reasons why Baudrillard's nihilistic stance is unjustified: It effectively destroys the possibility for resisting the spectacle and the hyperreal, it implicitly denies the possibility that non-imagistic communication could remain viable in our postmodern era, and it fails to consider the possibility of resisting the influence of the spectacle and learning to discern the levels of simulacra to avoid the slide into hyperreal perceptions. I have in mind here resistance in the form of instilled digital literacy. My claim is that if people were better able to discern the spectacle from the real and discern the levels of simulacra that their connections would become more obvious and their influence lessened. My strongest argument against Baudrillard's nihilistic conclusions is that it is rather tricky to *prove* the existence of a simulated reality, or a hyperreality of the sort he describes and argues exists. This is simply because any sort of evidence can be immediately claimed as yet another simulation, and so on down the rabbit hole we go. In essence, we are faced with a vicious regress as a result of Baudrillard's account that I think renders it untenable; we simply have no way to distinguish simulated reality from any ontologically real or brute physical reality *because we have no way to bring meaningful evidence to bear on the matter.*

The loss of non-imagistic communication, along the lines that Baudrillard posits as resulting from the implosion of the meaning of signs, would signal the death knell of philosophy. Losing non-imagistic communication is negative because it entails the loss of key aspects of human communication. For instance, we would lose the perception of the qualitative features of communication tied to facial and gestural nuances, the pitch and tone of voice, and various other nonverbal communicative indicators that form crucial parts of meaningful human communication. We would also lose the subjective aspect of communication in "real time,"

imagistic communication results in temporal differences of a sort that make instantaneous real time communication impossible—even real time video is not real time. Images are *divorced* from time and place in a way that real time personal communication simply is not.

The scope of my claim is limited: it is *not* that we must ban or eliminate the use of imagistic mediated communication if we are to avoid the possibility of nihilistic conclusions along the lines of Baudrillard. In other words, we do *not* need to prevent the iteration of simulacra into second or third order levels of abstraction. Rather, my claim is that all that is required is education in image literacy. Just as reading and writing are now considered mandatory, learning to “read” imagistic communication (i.e., seeing through the spectacle and discerning the levels of simulacra in a critical fashion) is necessary to reduce the influence of the spectacle and the encroachment of the hyperreal. It should be clear by now that every simulation is now an *iteration* of another, earlier simulation and that this process entails a problematic implosion of meaning. In essence, what I think is required to assuage these concerns are more accurate to life depictions of objects, events, people and groups. Some pure initial sense perception of an image must exist as the template against which to compare others. In Searle’s terms, we must have a pure concept to serve as the “background” for such phenomena. In essence, Searle’s background thesis is not only compatible with the radical theories of Debord and Baudrillard, but it can actually serve to help alleviate their concerns. My claim is that to serve as a background concept, a given X must be, if not the original, then as close to the original as possible. Obviously, some things cannot reasonably have such a conceptually “pure” template to serve as a background for future conceptual comparisons. However, I think that this claim remains worthwhile because it could still be applied in the future; we could preserve the identity of the original, the reality principle, thus allowing meaning to remain comparatively more stable

through time. This would mean that the iterative process described above could be stopped, we would not slide into perceiving second- and third-order simulacra as real because we could draw upon our “pure” background conceptual template to say “that X is not a real X, it is a second or third order simulacra.” In Baudrillard’s terms, we must provide a template of sorts from which to measure simulacra against that is *not* also a simulacrum. Even if a person educated in critical image literacy remained unable to discern simulacra from brute facts or other simulacra, and remained unable to tell the real from the hyperreal as a result, I think the tendency towards encouraging healthy skepticism and interpretive nuance towards images and their meaning would remain valuable. This is because it would encourage *active engagement* with such images, as opposed to the narcotic and *passive acceptance* encouraged through the spectacles influence and implicitly sanctioned by the encroachment of the hyperreal.

In sum, I have outlined numerous reasons why a synthesis of John Searle’s, Jean Baudrillard’s, and Guy Debord’s accounts is superior to any of their accounts alone. I discussed many conceptual connections that I think demonstrate the compatibility of these seemingly disparate accounts. I hope my account has shown these thinkers to be not wholly incompatible. I argued that Searle’s ontology is consistent with both Debord’s and Baudrillard’s accounts and outlined how they align with certain concepts of Searle’s. I then advanced my own arguments aimed at providing a way of resisting the influence of the spectacle and the encroachment of the hyperreal to assuage the prematurely nihilistic conclusions of Baudrillard.



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