Science as a Screen: Reclaiming the Human Lost in *Homo Sapiens*

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Coincident with the impressive advancements in science particularly over the last two centuries as reinforced by continuing technological developments, *modern* discourse has frequently elevated science to be indistinguishable from the truth; so much so that even direct experience has been superseded by the allure of scientific "objectivity": *science is reality, and reality is less than science*. Baudrillard provides a framework within which to understand this epistemological transformation. Crucial to his analysis is the concept of *hyperreality*. For Baudrillard, all experience is mediated through concepts, i.e. simulations. When one draws a circle and comprehends it as an abstract form rather than as a particular *sui generis* reality, he is imposing a simulacrum (namely, the mathematical form of a circle) onto his experience and thereby experiencing not reality but a simulation of reality. Arguably, this simulation maintains a referent in reality, i.e. the reality of a circle. On the other hand, some simulations nest together so as to forget their referent and eschew their status as simulation, instead portraying themselves as real:

> Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality — we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things...[1]

Baudrillard refers to this phenomenon as *hyperreality*. Returning to the domain of science, scientific investigation conveys a simulated view of reality. Sophisticated models of nature are developed such as in meteorology and physics with the intent of predicting the future. Often met with great success, these simulations gain credibility as models of reality. Irresponsible discourse subsequently exaggerates both the power and significance of such methods and the distinction between model and reality gradually dissolves. Consequently, the models are no longer tested against reality but reality against the models. Any observed incompatibilities are therefore less likely to be diagnosed as errors in the model and instead relegated to a realm of uncertainty: "You put out an item of information. So long as it has not been denied, it is plausible."[2] Baudrillard sardonically goes on to suggest

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1. Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (Verso, 2001), 176.
2. Baudrillard, 85.

So, news of the weather can run precisely counter to what you see out of your window, but it is true *in simulation*, since it is deduced from the various data of a model scenario... The presenter will take account of the errors in the previous day's forecast, of the consideration that the weather cannot be bad three weekends running (the population would not stand for it)... to the poetic uncertainty of the skies we must daily add the arbitrary uncertainty of meteorological discourse.[3]

This metaphysical reversal—from simulation to reality—fulfills the perennial "exorcism of the ghost in the machine" and prompts dual offspring: pseudoscience and scientism.

Pseudoscience fundamentally exploits the popular perception of science as congruent with truth. It is only upon this false presumption that meaningless conjunctions of unrelated scientific jargon could ever prove compelling. In the absence of such baseless credulity, scientific-sounding claims would not be afforded the *de facto* credibility they so often are. News outlets prey on this phenomenon by inserting statistics and misleading interpretations of scientific research into their headlines so as to garner unwarranted trust. Political discourse is consistently marred by statistical rap-battles and meta-analysis confetti such that merely the appearance of scientific consensus is conveyed, with the actually relevant details left to the wayside. It is in this way that science acts as a screen, by providing a medium through which the appearance of truth may be borrowed.

Scientism similarly revels in its purported access to *true* reality. Liberated from the shackles of subjective experience, science exalts the diligent inquirer to the heights of objective reality. Relentlessly reductive, the so-called *illusions* of morality and minds evanesce in the illuminating presence of ultimate scientific truth. Bask in Her gentle yet unyielding apricity and you too will come to know truth... Such metaphysical prejudice stems directly from science's state of *hyperreality* as described above. Having escaped the humility of simulation, science usurped reality and in its ultimacy precluded all other avenues to knowledge. Such a mindset pervades professional science as well as popular perceptions. Consider, for example, the status to which moral knowledge has fallen. Once revered as the highest form of knowledge, it's now not uncommon to come across denials of moral truth altogether. The reasoning is quite straightforward. If all knowledge comes from science—

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3. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 86–87.

as scientism asserts—then moral truths take an especially queer form and thus can't be known and likely don't exist.[4] Yet, such a conclusion entails a rejection of deeply intimate and obvious moral truisms such as that it is **wrong** to torture a baby for fun. Even moving away from moral truths, basic metaphysical claims such as one's own existence and epistemological claims such as the reality of sense-experience escape scientific investigation. Most devastatingly, the underlying thesis of scientism is not scientifically verifiable, thereby rendering itself invalid. Thus, in light of the immediate and abundant counter-evidence, scientism's persistence must be understood as merely a prejudice upheld by a *hyperreal* view of science.

What, therefore, is the antidote to *hyperreality*? How may we begin to reclaim the human lost in homo sapien, so to say? Baudrillard offers an unexpected response. First, it's worth pointing out a deep irony. Baudrillard is no stranger to aphorisms. Yet, when stood in relation to his unrelenting skepticism, this literary disposition towards totalizing truisms presents a screaming irony of which Baudrillard was surely aware. Indeed, he must have realized that much of his writing exhibits the very same tendencies of dogmatism and appeals to the authority of mathematics and science (e.g. fractal dimensions[5] and the uncertainty principle[6]) which he ruthlessly criticizes. What is to be made of this? It seems we must reframe Baudrillard's analysis to be less so a critique and more so an observation. In this light, Baudrillard wholeheartedly acknowledges his own entrenchment within simulation. His subsequent call to action is not to "take the red pill" but quite oppositely to engage the "blue pill" and actively construct reality as one sees fit. Alongside Sartre and Camus, Baudrillard advocates an agent-based approach to value-construction such that Sisyphus oughn't accept the meaninglessness of his existence but ought actively to confront it and triumph. The inevitable consequence of such an approach is that the "truth" of meaning rests in no more than *the will to power*. Baudrillard's solution, therefore, bears a heavy cost and is far from undisputed. Alas, length constraints forcibly postpone a discussion of alternative frameworks of value to a later date. What's been accomplished thus far is a partial analysis of scientific epistemology in the vein of Baudrillard and quick subsequent commentary on the appropriate response to such conclusions.

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4. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977).
5. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 85.
6. Baudrillard, 86 & 89.

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