

Baudrillard in a 'Post-Truth' World: Groundwork for a Critique of the Rise of Trump

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Abstract

This paper takes the view that Baudrillard's work on the West's fascination with reality is as insightful as ever. The paper traces the rise of this fascination across four areas of his work: the critique of the commodity form, the rise of objective reality, hyperreality, and integral reality. I then argue that Baudrillard provides us with a means for adequately understanding and engaging with the current post-truth scandal. My claim is that the essence of 'Trumpism' is not to be found in a lack of reality, the notion that there is not enough truth in play; it is to be found in the overproduction of a surplus reality that veers out of control into hitherto unknown forms of absurdity, or, in Baudrillard's terms, into integral reality.

If media is to be believed, reality is now choking. The recent 'post-truth' scandal suggests that reality has been left gasping for air and is in desperate need of resuscitation. Amidst voluminous recent writings and a Twitter storm on the subject, Kurt Anderson warns us that America has become 'untethered from reality' (2017). It is this untethering, since the rise of 1960s counter-culture, that has allowed the emergence of an unhinged miscreation such as Donald Trump. Anderson's warning echoes many pundits and intellectuals who lay this situation firmly at the feet of postmodernism. As Bruno Tertrais contends, 'postmodernism and French intellectuals paved the way for "post-truth" and "alt-facts"' (2017). Highly-esteemed historian, Richard J. Evans, also felt compelled to tweet: 'If I am wrong, and postmodernist disbelief in truth didn't lead to our post-truth age, then how do we explain the current disdain for facts?' (2017). And consider the now commonplace emphatic tone of headlines such as 'Elon Musk's big battery brings reality crashing into a

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post-truth world' (Hollo 2017). Along with the Twitter storm, such headlines suggest that a high stakes battle between the objectively real and the illusory and fake is well underway.

This paper will trace the stakes of this battle by looking at Baudrillard's work. In the recent post-truth context, his long-term engagement with Western culture's fascination with the real is particularly prescient. I will focus specifically upon this fascination and the rise of the general imperative of being in synch with reality across four areas of Baudrillard: the critique of the commodity form, the rise of objective reality, hyperreality, and integral reality. I will argue that Baudrillard provides us with a means for adequately understanding and engaging with the current post-truth scandal. I will offer a Baudrillardian take upon post-truth and Trumpism, as it has been constructed in media. This take focuses upon the conditions for the rise of Trumpism and post-truth. My claim is that the essence of the present media scandal is not to be found in a lack of reality, the notion that there is not enough reality in play; it is to be found in the overproduction of a surplus reality that veers out of control into hitherto unknown forms of absurdity, or, in Baudrillard's terms, into integral reality. 'The real does not', Baudrillard tells us, 'efface itself in favour of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favour of the more real than real: the hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1990b, 11), and, ultimately, integral reality. In a reversal of what might be considered to be common sense logic, the problem of Trumpism and post-truth is not that reality is diminishing, it is that there is too much.

I would have to admit that if the aforementioned pundits and intellectuals are right, then surely Baudrillard's work should be abandoned at once. After all, is he not postmodernism's high priest! (Miles 2001, 86). But what better description could be offered for this 'post-truth' crisis other than Baudrillard's point about the surplus of reality, and that the 'reality of the world is ... a reassuring hypothesis' that 'dominates our value system today' (2008, 48). The laughter at and against 'Trumpism', which animates much of the aforementioned Twitter storm, confidently asserts that there is a clear difference between objective knowledge and speculative constructions. For objective thinking, speculative ideas are dangerous. Knowledge of reality as it actually is, that is facts piled upon facts, provides a bedrock of security against this danger. As the well-known astrophysicist, Neil deGrasse Tyson, puts it, in an echo of Martin Luther King, 'I dream of a world where the truth is what shapes people's politics, rather than politics shaping what people think is true' (2017).

It is precisely Trumpism's lack of objectivity that is at the centre of this public scorn (Swaine 2017). The problem is that in the post-truth situation objective facts about the world are less influential than feelings, beliefs, and personal opinions (Institute on equality and democracy 2017). This situation is scandalous precisely because objective facts, seemingly, should be taken as more valid, as more real than feelings, beliefs and opinions. Herein lies the value of Baudrillard's thought. Rather than the problem of validity, his work

considers the preconditions for such scandals. If reality is in need of resuscitation, if the stakes are so high, does this not suggest that reality is suspect? Baudrillard's work compels us to consider how reality has ended up being so vulnerable.

The Reality Compulsion

What is interesting about Trumpism is that the surrounding scandal is unexceptional. It is unexceptional because the language of reality has begun to engulf us. From the rise of reality television, to the political claim that 'real Australians say welcome' to refugees (Williamson 2017), to the branding claims of Pataks' authentic Indian curry sauces and Continental's real chicken stock, it would not be remiss to say that contemporary culture is marked by a general fascination with what is real. Of course, I would be the first to admit that the issues surrounding Australia's mythologisation of refugees are more critical from the perspective of politics and communication than the trite branding of Continental's real chicken stock. Yet it is curious that the claim to be real has such a widespread purchase across media culture and politics. This fascination with reality is expressed in the enthusiasm for the authentic over the fake, the natural instead of the synthetic, objectivity as opposed to feelings, use value over exchange value, and scientific truth rather than political ideology. Even though this is a diverse list of oppositions, each has a common element. Each claim that it is imperative to access the real thing or situation. The real thing insulates us from evil, saves us from wrestling with uncertainty, and guarantees that the social order remains as it should be. *Isness* is immediate rather than mediated, and is considered to be that fully revealed 'outside' that is completely independent from the representations that disclose it. The current fascination with reality is thus a contemporary version of naive realism that now takes the form of a social and political imperative.

It is precisely a fascination with authenticity, or the truth of reality that makes any commodity genuine and any political claim formidable. The latter Freud of 'Beyond the pleasure principle' perhaps provides an apt basis for this fascination with what *is*. Trumpism's assault upon reality has engendered a sense of loss and, perhaps, trauma. Alderson's concern about the genuineness of the sport commodity also betrays a sense of possible loss. We can thus read the Twitter storm around Trump, with its expressions of unpleasure, disbelief, and (re)assertion of the realness of reality, as a form of compulsive behaviour. Freud found in the unpleasures of the repetition-compulsion a serious theoretical problem. While 'there exists', Freud writes, 'in the mind a strong tendency towards the pleasure principle' there are 'certain other forces or circumstances' that 'cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure' (Freud 1955, 9-10). For Freud, the pleasure in the unpleasure of these other forces suggest a governing principle, or perhaps the lack of a governing principle beyond the pleasure principle. He thus asks, what can possibly be gained in the repetition of unpleasure? With the dominance of the pleasure principle in doubt, as I read it, Freud promptly set about showing how the repetition-

compulsion relates to, and is constantly reinforced by, factors governed by the pleasure principle. In one well-known instance, the repetition-compulsion is staged as a function of the ego. In the child's play of the *fort-da* game, repeating 'unpleasurable experiences' enables them to 'master' that unpleasure 'by being active' rather than 'merely experiencing it passively' (35-36).

Online expressions of rage, ridicule, and dismay are surely a form of repetition-compulsion: Trump's despicable postmodernism must be stopped! However, Baudrillard complicates this compulsive process. Rather than the loss of reality, which results in the aforementioned *fort-da* game of mastery, the present situation is not that of loss, it is, as I have suggested, that of excess. The aforementioned examples reveal the drive that marks our time to valorise everything that is real. The world is sorted into the categories of the desirable and real and the less desirable and less real. This sorting — Is Trump truly presidential? — takes the form of a panic. 'We seem to be driven', Baudrillard maintains, 'by a huge and irresistible compulsion that acts on us through the very progress of our technologies ... — a compulsion to draw ever closer to the unconditional realization of the real' (2000, 65). We might thus say that this current fascination has less to do with loss than with the repetition-compulsion to assume reality is vulnerable and that it must be perpetually made to happen.

Precision is required here. By the unconditional realisation of the real, Baudrillard means that the Western world arrogantly assumes it has discovered an unassailable sense of the reality of reality. Media representations never aver from this view (Phelan 2014). As I have suggested, we are faced with the absurd situation in which all interlocutors and political opponents stake their claim upon the bedrock of the real. Both Trump and his detractors make precisely this claim. Both claim they are the real America! If we follow Baudrillard, the crucial question here is, as I have suggested: what conditions have produced this absurd situation? Baudrillard's claim is that current political and social phenomena demand to be understood and responded to in terms of the meaning making logic in which they are produced. In the most rudimentary of terms, his position is that there has been a profound and elusive shift in the configuration of the real across time (even the term, 'reality', itself is one of these effects).

I want to turn now to methodically trace Baudrillard's engagement with the fascination with reality across his work. The aim here is twofold. Firstly, I aim to show that the roots of post-truth and Trumpism can be found in the ongoing intensification of the West's fascination with what is real. And secondly, I aim to show what a Baudrillardian perspective contributes to our understanding of the current post-truth situation. We need to consider four critiques of reality's production: the critique of the commodity form, the rise of objective reality, hyperreality, and integral reality. These areas can tentatively be taken as nodal points. I say tentatively because these points are not rigid and linear. They

are points of intersection and intensification, and are all, along with reversibility, to varying degrees still in play within the context of contemporary capitalist society. Baudrillard is as much interested in the tensions between objectivity and hyperreality (1997a, 32-42) and the return of symbolic exchange (1993a), for instance, as he is in the 'hegemony of total reality' (2010, 41).

The trajectory of the following argument takes the form of a long, non-continuous arc. The initial discussion focusses upon the early Baudrillard, at a blurry distance from post-truth and Trumpism. This lays the groundwork for Baudrillard's ongoing critique of the fascination with the reality principle. As I proceed the Trump/post-truth object will begin to appear and become more in focus.

The Authentic Commodity

One of Baudrillard's earliest forays into the fascination with reality comes in the form of a critique of Marx's theory of the commodity (the context in which Baudrillard's early work is formed). What is at issue for Baudrillard is Marx's appeal to an authentic outside as a means to critique the inauthentic commodity of capitalist exchange. Marx doesn't escape being fascinated with reality. For Marx, use-value refers to 'the physical properties of the commodity' (Marx 1990, 126) that satisfies social needs, and 'the exchange relation of commodities is characterised precisely by its abstraction [in the form of money] from their use-values' (127). Abstraction is a problem, for Marx, because in capitalist societies the production of useful commodities is eclipsed by the production of commodities for exchange. And since the working class do not own the means of production, they do not control the production of use-values. Instead, they must sell their labour power to produce commodities for exchange to obtain the necessary means to live. They are thus subject to exploitation, and forced to produce commodities that are designed for saleability and the production of surplus value rather than actual usefulness. Against the claims of political economists such as Adam Smith (1776, Book I, Chapter V), for Marx the saleability of commodities is not a measure of usefulness. The situation can thus be overturned only by the working class seizing control of the means of production and producing socially useful products. Marx's clarion call is for a system of production in which workers produce goods to meet their objective needs. Use-value is clearly in an antagonistic relationship with exchange value.

Baudrillard problematises Marx's appeal here to the real in the form of the usefulness of the commodity. He claims Marx's critique of the commodity does little to disrupt capitalism, since capitalism produces the very reality, the use-values, that Marx claims as the basis of critique. Capitalism produces reality as authentically real, as objectively useful, rather than avoids it. We thus need to engage with the production of this reality. In effect, Baudrillard is arguing that Marx's logic mirrors the logic of the marketing of Continental's

real chicken stock. It could be pointed out, of course, that the authenticity of chicken stock bears little or no resemblance to the classical political economists' views of usefulness and socially necessary labour. For Adam Smith, as it is for Marx, water and shelter have very little exchangeable value but are very useful commodities. These are indisputably necessary for life. Diamonds, on the other hand, serve no practical utility but are more valuable precisely because they are exchangeable for other commodities (1776, Book I, Chapter V). The key point is that there clearly is a distinction between value in use and value in exchange. From Smith's perspective, this means if you want to make money you had better sell diamonds or some other exchangeable commodity. From Marx's perspective, the aim to sell exchangeable commodities is precisely the problem since, as I have stated, workers end up being alienated from the means of production.

It could also be countered that when Marx is read in relation to Lacan, such as in Samo Tomšič's *The Capitalist Unconscious* (2015), use-value should not be understood as antagonistic to abstract exchange and alienation. Instead, use value is post facto posited by the symbolic, and as such serves as a generator of production. For Marx, in this reading, production always produces a surplus in excess of usefulness, even when in its most natural state. Capitalism frees the productive forces and is, in Marx's view, a gateway toward communism. Baudrillard's point, however, is that in the current techno-capitalist West the division between usefulness and exchangeability is difficult to define. This has less to do with post facto use value than with the loss of the clear distinction between use and exchange value. Despite Tomšič's inversion of the standard reading of Marx, in his reading use value remains as an alibi for production. Baudrillard argues that capitalist simulation disturbs this relation.

Consider a basic commodity such as drinking water. In the techno-capitalist West a distinction between tap water and bottled water, and between acidic and alkaline water has emerged. In both examples, the former turns out to be an inferior product. In the case of the superior product, bottled, alkaline water, brands such as Fiji Water® claim that their water is not simply water. Their water is the 'Earth's finest water®. Bottled at the source, untouched by man' (Fiji Water®). Fiji Water® is not ordinary, we are informed, 'because of its extraordinary source — a protected artesian aquifer found deep underground in the remote Fiji Islands' (Fiji Water®). Leaving aside the exoticism that underpins such claims (see Connell 2006), this necessary commodity is an example of usefulness that takes the form of exchangeability. Fiji Water® is an elite commodity which, as Jones, Murray, and Overton point out, abounds with 'celebrity endorsements – reaching as high as [former] US President Barack Obama' (2017, 112). This elite status derives, in large part, from the assumption that Fiji Water® is more real than ordinary water. The rather rudimentary distinction between use value and exchange value doesn't seem to hold in any straightforward way.

Baudrillard's work connects with Boltanski and Chiapello's contention that the commodity form no longer works in the sense outlined by Marx. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that capitalism responded to the 1960s demand for liberation from the standardised commodity of industrial capital with 'products that were "authentic" and "differentiated" in such a way that the impression of massification would be dispelled' (2005, 442). To 'earn the label "authentic"', they continue, 'these goods must be drawn from outside the commodity sphere, from the "sources of authenticity"'. The 'authentic thus assumes reference to an original that is not a commodity good, but a use-value defined in a unique relationship to a user' (443). The use of commodities is thus authentic when the user expresses their real self. In other words, the commodity becomes authentic when it lines up with the cultural meaning of authenticity. Fiji Water® is authentic because it is both elite and excessively natural.

In this account of the commodity form, use-value is drawn from an original outside to authenticate the product in relation to the user. Continental chicken stock, for instance, is genuine since it is made from real rather than synthetic chicken, and the user is able to express their socially defined skillfulness in cooking authentic dishes. Use-value is thus an outside that underpins the commodity's exchange-value. If we follow Boltanski and Chiapello, the antagonistic relation between use-value and exchange-value that was crucial for Marx has thus collapsed. Under the conditions of the new spirit of capitalism, the relationship between use-value and exchange value shifts. Instead of conflict, 'the commodification of the authentic made it possible to revive the process of transformation of non-capital into capital' (ibid.). In other words, capital expands its horizons by colonising use-value and exploiting this as a marker of authenticity.

As Baudrillard puts it, in his standard reading, for Marx use-value 'represents an objective, final relation of intrinsic purpose ... which does mask itself and whose transparency, as form, defies history (even if its content changes continually with respect to social and cultural determinations)'. However, Baudrillard claims 'use-value — indeed, utility itself — is a fetishised social relation, just like the abstract equivalence of commodities'. Use-values are, in fact, 'an abstraction of the *system of needs* cloaked in the false evidence of a concrete destination and purpose' (1981, 132). In other words, needs themselves, what counts as need, cannot be separated from the social system that produces them. This is precisely why a value in use, such as water, directly links with abstract value in exchange. 'To be abstractly and generally exchangeable', Baudrillard explains, 'products must also be thought and rationalised in terms of utility' (131). Fiji Water® is thought and rationalised as a pristine natural substance that is more authentic than tap water. Consider this branding:

Tropical rain falls. Purified by equatorial trade winds.

In a pristine rain forest. Surrounded by ancient, dormant volcanoes.

Slowly filtered by volcanic rock. It gathers minerals and electrolytes that create Fiji's soft, smooth taste.

Collecting in a natural artesian aquifer. Protected and preserved from external elements until you unscrew the cap (Fiji Water®).

Here the utility of nature is fetishised. Fiji Water's® natural authenticity and its exchangeability as a commodity are clearly inseparable. There is no external objective reality in a formal antagonistic relationship to the abstract terrain of commodity exchange, even in the case of something as basic as water. If we follow Baudrillard, Marx's appeal to utility as revolutionary ground and goal for workers struggle needs to be rethought.

Baudrillard's reading and critique of Marx and Marxism has been much debated (Koch and Elmore 2006). It is not my aim to take this up here. I am interested in charting what I take are the contours of Baudrillard's work upon the West's fascination with reality. In terms of Marx, Baudrillard (provocatively) contends that he falls into the trap of assuming that reality serves as a ground for political change. In this way of thinking, capitalist exchange is less real than the materiality of utility and social conditions of the working class. Politics thus involves confronting capitalist abstractions with this material reality (today this politics takes the form of 'speaking truth to power'). Baudrillard is arguing that Marx's thinking misrecognises the political problem, and can only provide a limited critique of capitalism. Objective use-values form the basis for both Marx's critique *and* for capitalism's production of the authenticity of the commodity. This congruous relationship means that both Marx and capitalism are claiming to be authentically real. However, capitalism is not less real, in the sense implied by this reading of Marx. Baudrillard claims:

We will never defeat the system on the plane of the *real*: the worst error of all our revolutionary strategies is to believe that we will put an end to the system on the plane of the *real*: this is their imaginary, imposed on them by the system itself, living or surviving only by always leading those who attack the system to fight amongst each other on the terrain of reality, *which is always the reality of the system*. (1993a, 36)

The struggle envisioned by Marx takes place on the terrain of reality that is already laid out in advance. On this terrain, resistance is absorbed and, quite possibly, even strengthens capitalism's grip. At any rate, as capitalism has become more deeply entrenched, the absorption of resistance now seems to be more fully developed (Fisher 2009, Bloom 2016). What is required instead, Baudrillard maintains, is a shift in the way we approach the problem of the real. I will take up this point in the concluding sections of the paper. At this point, it will suffice to say that it is precisely the terrain of reality that is at the centre of the

post-truth scandal. I will now turn to consider the production of reality itself, and Baudrillard's arguments about the effects of this production. The current fascination with reality derives, in no small measure, from the rise of objective forms of knowledge.

Simulation 1: Objective Reality and Its Effects

The notion of reality, of the this *is real* rather than invented, coincides with the development of objective thought (as opposed to abstract belief). Objectivity is, of course, a difficult term to pin down. Objectivity in everyday life works in different ways from objectivity in the science laboratory, or in politics and art. There are also several competing and overlapping concepts of objectivity: as judgement free from prejudice (Simmel 1950, 402-408), as judgement free from prior assumptions (Dworkin 1996), as a necessary condition or instrumental set of established procedures for testing hypotheses (Popper 1959), or as accurate representations (Russell 1971, 129). Nevertheless, despite these differences, which hinge upon the problem of how reality can be accurately apprehended, the realness of reality itself is rarely questioned. Today there is no doubt at all that the objective and discoverable world exists outside systems of representation.

The lampooning of Trumpism, for instance, seems to strike a chord with 17th Century philosophers such as Descartes, for whom objective truth is a straightforward matter. He writes, 'I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it ... the word "truth", in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object' (1991, AT II 597). Descartes' development of the foundations of epistemic certainty was a key aspect of, as Toni Negri reveals, the 'history of the bourgeoisie's humanist revolution' (2007, 207). Yet Descartes' radicalism has long since subsided and such a view is now casually maintained. Take Sokal and Bricmont's famous 'challenge' to the so called postmodern threat to the rational real. They calmly assert, with no justifying argument, that reality is clearly objectively real. This is why, they proclaim, 'the scientific community' come 'to conclusion X because X is the way the world really is' (1998, 98).

For Baudrillard, however, objective reality, is not as straightforward as it appears. Following Hannah Arendt, he claims objective reality is a product of the modern age. It emerges 'with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world (on the basis of the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is definitively alienated' (Baudrillard 2009, 10). At this point in history, it became possible to understand knowledge as a distinct entity from both the material world of nature and from subjective influences such as our emotions, needs, and desires. Donna Haraway calls this Archimedean point, this view from nowhere, 'the god trick' (1988, 587). And in Foucault's account of the rise of 'man' and modern science, the Archimedean outside allowed power to hide behind objective knowledge. In

concert with various architectural innovations, prison reform, and political developments, objective knowledge aided the emergence of disciplinary control (1977).

For his part, Baudrillard directly challenges the ontological certainty of objectivity. He asserts:

the world ... is never what it seems. It presents itself as one thing, but it's something else ... the world plays with us, in a manner of speaking, and we have a subjective illusion — the illusion of being a subject. Whereas the objective illusion derives from the fact that the world presents itself as one thing, but it is not really this at all. (1997a, 40)

We need to tread carefully here. It is possible to read this idea of the objective illusion of the world as Baudrillard claiming that the material world is merely a product of the imagination, or, in his terminology, simulation and simulacra. In other words, the claim would be there are no objects to be discovered outside of our cultural constructions and systems of representation. The world thus consists of mere simulacra, that is, copies of copies of a reality that does not actually exist. It is precisely in terms of this denial of objective reality that Sokal and Bricmont claim Baudrillard is one of those 'French' authors who make no 'pretense at "scientificity"', and whose 'underlying philosophy (to the extent one can be discerned) tends toward irrationalism or nihilism' (1998, 13). With his 'lackadaisical attitude toward scientific rigor' (1998, 207), Baudrillard's work is merely a form of 'nonsense and word games' that 'displace[s] the critical and rigorous analysis of social realities' (206). However, contrary to such denouncements, and others that claim his is a postmodern denial of the materiality of the world (Goldman and Papson 2015, 248; Fuchs 2016, 338), Baudrillard does not hold an anti-science position or deny the fact that 'our real world ... obeys precise physical laws ... that, thanks to the progress of analysis and technique, we actually discover' (Baudrillard 2000, 73, 75).

We could thus argue that his thought resonates with Adorno's non-identity thinking and, to a lesser extent, with Morton's object orientated ontology. Statements such as 'Life forms recede into strangeness the more we think about them' (Morton 2011, 165) bear a resemblance to Baudrillard's claim in the quotation above. At any rate, Baudrillard's (perhaps Nietzschean) position is that objective reality, as it is understood, is a diminished form of the world of objects. He calls this real world a 'restricted materiality' which clearly 'obeys precise physical laws' (2000, 73). However, the discovery of a physical law itself is 'not enough to make it true, since this relative coherence is only the paradoxical consequence of this "ontological" simplification' (ibid.). Objective reality is thus an effect of the sign, a 'truth effect', that, as Baudrillard puts it, 'hides truth's non-existence' (1990a, 35). In an earlier work Baudrillard states it this way: the real is only the 'simulacrum of the symbolic, its form reduced and intercepted by the sign' (1981, 162).

To be clear, Baudrillard's work thus does not contest the existence of the world of objects, or that objects can be studied (after all, he does make statements about the world in his books and photographs). Ultimately though, the question of whether things exist outside our representations or not is banal and meaningless (Baudrillard 2005, 39). Brian Massumi is, then, mistaken when he contends, 'Baudrillard sidesteps the question of whether simulation replaces a real that did indeed exist, or if simulation is all there has ever been' (1987, np). Defending Deleuze and Guattari's affirmation of both simulation and the real beyond it, Massumi argues 'simulation is a process that produces the real, or, more precisely, a more-than-real on the basis of the real. "It carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced"' (ibid.). In this reverse of the Platonist view of simulation as an inferior copy of a real or original (which is how the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* conceives of it), for Deleuze "'real" entities are in fact undercover simulacra that have consented to feign being copies' (ibid.). In this view, simulacra are productive entities. As Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* puts it, 'simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*' (1990, 262).

If we follow Massumi, the problem with Baudrillard's work on simulation is that it is impossible to determine if he is a vulgar Platonist or not. The assumption is that Baudrillard argues that simulations are a copy of an original real which has become simulacrum, that is, a mere copy of a copy without reference to an original real. However, Baudrillard actually departs sharply from the Platonic treatment of simulation. In the much-cited *Simulacra and Simulation*, this clear explanation is offered: 'simulating is not pretending' (1994a, 3). This is precisely because pretending 'or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false", the "real" and the "imaginary"' (ibid.). Baudrillard's account of simulation thus bears a resemblance to Deleuze's reverse Platonism, to the extent that simulations trouble the relationship between the original and copy, but rather than producing an incomplete more-than-real reality ('the actual' in relation to 'the virtual' in Deleuze's more developed conceptual vocabulary), Baudrillard contends simulations (reality) are a crime against the ambivalence of objects.

The problem with the fully realised, unambivalent object is not its incomplete potential in relation to an inexhaustible virtuality, as Deleuze's expressionism would contend, it is that *it is dead*. The ontological complexity of the object is reduced, and rather than an active and dynamic object we are left with a passive, inert mass. Herein lies the key difference between Deleuze and Baudrillard. Deleuze's dualism consists of the positive and yet incomplete expression of the virtual dimension of reality in the dimension of the actual (the object is thus ambivalent). Baudrillard's dualism, or, more accurately, *duelism* consists of

the negative relation between reality and the world of illusion. For Baudrillard, the problem with simulations is that they negate the object. Simulations represent an outside Truth when all the while there is nothing save the illusion of the world of objects. In *The Perfect Crime* Baudrillard sets forth his most straight-forward account of this position. The world is, he announces, a radical and intolerable “illusion” that we strive to make exist and signify at all costs’ (2008, 17):

[We] take from it its secret, arbitrary, accidental character, rid it of appearances and extract its meaning, divert it from all predestination and restore it to its end and its maximum efficiency, wrest it from its form to deliver it up to its formula. This gigantic enterprise of disillusionment — of, literally, putting the illusion of the world to death, to leave an absolutely real world in its stead — is what is properly meant by simulation. (ibid.)

The crucial point here is the inverse relationship between simulation and the secret, arbitrary and accidental character of the object. The more reality is realised the more the object fades. The more the world is exchanged for signification and meaning the more the world disappears from view.

It is precisely in terms of this sense of disappearance that Baudrillard controversially states that *The Gulf War did not take place* (1995). He is making the straightforward claim that the atrocities, human suffering, resistance and social upheaval that characterise war (as a complex object) have been overwritten by the slick simulations of the American military machine. The object thus disappears. Consider the more recent development of ‘war porn’, the military footage available via YouTube. The camera located on the Apache helicopter captures images of actual air strikes upon military targets. The soundtrack consists of the voices of pilots and operatives engaged in the formulaic language of battle, deliberating about the possible identity of the targets. In a typical example, ‘Apache helicopters take out Taliban fighters’ (Broadbent, 2017), ‘insurgents’ appear as pixelated white blobs in the low resolution black and white image. In the later section, these blobs become engulfed in white flashes and dust as the ‘hell fire’ machine gun blasts at them. Yet, the bloody violence and horror of this scene does not appear on screen. In these images, the suffering people literally disappear beneath flashes of bright white and black pixels. As opposed to the requirements of accurate or realist representation, these military images serve the dual purpose of high functionality and low information (what McLuhan might call cool media), as well as emotional distance from the ‘target’. In these images, human beings are ontologically simplified by the simulations of the military machine.

As can be seen, simulations are not without effects; they produce, in fact, particular kinds of material effects, such as the dehumanisation of the other in the aforementioned example. If we accept the proposition that reality is a simulation, does this mean, therefore, that we

have no grounds to challenge Donald Trump's apparent disregard for facts? Can we not question propaganda, fake news, and campaigns of misinformation? As I have stated above, Baudrillard does not question the veracity of facts in themselves. There is nothing in his thought that would invalidate challenging Trump's claims. However, the problem is more complex than simply combatting Trump with the truth. Trump's supporters are, in fact, quite prepared to accept that his claims can be demonstrated to be false, yet despite this, as Nyhan *et al.*'s comprehensive study reveals, they support him anyway (2017). The problem of Trumpism, from Baudrillard's perspective as I see it, is thus not is Trump correct or incorrect on established matters of fact (a banal problem), it is what does this phenomenon tell us about the contemporary principle or concept of reality itself. It would seem, as I suggested at the outset of the current discussion, that reality is under threat. Therefore, the problem to be posed is: how is it possible that reality could be placed under such strain?

To find the solution to this problem we need to look closely at the gigantic enterprise of disillusionment and its particular effects. Reality is made real via this enterprise, but the process of realisation also becomes an end in itself, so much so that the production of reality spirals out of control. As Baudrillard argues:

By our technical exploits, we have reached such a degree of reality and objectivity that we might even speak of an excess of reality, which leaves us far more anxious and disconcerted than the lack of it. (2008, 65)

I want to turn at this point in the discussion to the concept of hyperreality. This is the effect of the gigantic enterprise of disillusionment. Baudrillard tells us the reality hypothesis continues to be propped up, though in less than straightforward ways, by the order of the hyperreal. The hyperreal is a representational logic in which the real emerges as excess, or more real than the real. The variation in this formulation from Massumi's formula of the more-than-real is important. In contrast with Deleuze's expressionist dualism, which consists, as I have stated, of the virtual and actual, Baudrillard posits the hyperreal, whereby the real exceeds its own principle of objectivity.

Simulation 2: Hyperreality

'The real does not', Baudrillard tells us, 'efface itself in favour of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favour of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true' (1990b, 11). The compulsive fascination with authenticity and what is real becomes hyperbolic within the orders of the hyperreal. The hyperreal, or hyperbolic real, can be found in the fascination with so-called superfoods, in the vitamin supplement that contains twelve oranges worth of vitamin C, in so-called 'life hacks', in the discourses of securitisation (in which terrain is secured and made predictable through the application of predetermined schemas), in opinion polls, in the continual appeal to nature and the natural, and in the

authenticity of the artist, the politician, the Italian restaurant, craft beer, and so on. In each, the ambivalent object disappears and is replaced by the calculable, meaningful, and profitable object form of late capitalism.

To be precise, the hyperreal is characterised by the repetition-compulsion to perpetuate reality, to continually realise the 'this is'. This compulsion, however, unleashes an implosive logic. As reality is more and more realised it becomes excessive and, paradoxically, the objectivity of reality (the reality principle) is cast aside. The crucial point is that in the hyperreal situation the referential outside, that objective representation both posits and aims to mirror, is folded back into representation itself. Representation no longer mirrors the real. At the same time, the disappearance of the reality principle is concealed. This is what gives rise to the fascination with reality. The hyperreal acts as though the loss of the reality principle has not happened. As Baudrillard puts it: the 'terms "simulacra" [and] "simulation" ... summarise this liquidation [of every possible value], in which every signification is eliminated in its own sign, and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality' (2010, 35). This means that the perfected reality of the hyperreal can appear to be *unheimlich* [unhomely], to use the language of Freud. The hyperreal can be unsettling, and this is not because it is strange but rather because it is a reality that is experienced as genuine and real when it is merely a simulation. Hyperreality is too proximate to reality; it is more real than real.

Exemplary of this is Peter Weir's film, *The Truman Show* (1998). It would be tempting to read the film as a cynical statement about the rise of reality TV, in which a producer, Christof (Ed Harris), enslaves an unwitting character, Truman Burbank (Jim Carey), in the constructed town of Seahaven. Unaware he is being watched by millions of viewers, and that the people he encounters on a daily basis are actors, Truman lives what he thinks is an ordinary middle-class suburban life. The audience is fascinated by Truman's authentic responses to the highly contrived situations he encounters. However, a moment arises in which it occurs to Truman that the reality in which he lives seems strange. This is because its everyday rhythms seem too regular, too perfect. This moment of unhomeliness precipitates a series of encounters with his entrapment, until he finally discovers the truth about his constructed world and manages to escape. The TV audience rapturously applauds his escape and then, predictably, quickly loses interest. The audience itself is merely caught up in the media spectacle. What the film reveals is that it is precisely the excess of reality that marks the hyperreal and its *unheimlich* effects. But the most crucial point is stated by the producer, Christof. Before Truman escapes through the door to the reality outside the TV studio, Christof insightfully pleads, 'there's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you' and, 'you [Truman] were real. That's what made you so good to watch'. Here, *The Truman Show* takes a more radical turn than *The Matrix* films. The outside is no less contrived than the reality TV studio, and if authenticity is to be found it,

paradoxically, comes in the form of Truman being blissfully unaware of the simulated nature of the town. Christof's plea reveals the truth of the system. Authenticity does not need a real reality to function. In fact, the implication of Christof's insightful plea is that authenticity itself is more achievable in his simulated world than the real world outside.

Is it not precisely Trump's lack of presidentiality and political experience that makes him a more real president? The scandal of Trump is not that he perverts the real dimensions of the office (as if this dimension actually exists), and it is not this perversion itself that makes his presidency more real (as if there is such a dimension to pervert). CNN's Dean Obeidallah misses the crucial point when he declares, 'we deserve a president who is thoughtful, informed and focused on working for all Americans. Instead we have Trump, who seems preoccupied with creating a televised spectacle' (2017). The crucial point is that the televised spectacle has long been a key feature of the presidency. What Trump reveals is the centrality of this spectacle. As Baudrillard points out, 'all those who outdo themselves with arrogance (Le Pen), cynicism (Le Lay), pornography (Abu Ghraib), mythomania (Marie L.) unmask the truth of the system in their abuse of it' (2010, 39). Surely Trump (corporate chauvinism) outdoes himself in the same manner and reveals the truth of the system. Trump unmask the spectacle and reveals that there is nothing beneath it.

From the perspective of social theory, the problem of politics as spectacle is all too familiar. Žižek argues that contemporary capitalist culture is marked by the ideological slippage between knowledge and belief. Through processes of displacement and fetishisation, subjects supplement knowledge with belief. Arguing for a 'new way to read Marx's formula "they do not know it, but they are doing it"' (2008, 29-30), Žižek explains that, unlike Marx,

the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of social reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing as if they did not know. (ibid.)

This is why belief, Žižek maintains, is crucial. Subjects within capitalism tend to consider objects as meaningful even when they objectively know that the object cannot possibly mean in this way. This is because, Žižek tells us, subjects fetishise objects. The object does the work of meaning for us, even if we know this meaning is not possible. In this process agency is displaced. The Trump supporters, cited above, can clearly be understood in this way. They know Trump is factually incorrect yet they support him anyway! Fetishisation produces strange phenomena such as coffee without caffeine, nutrition without food, exercise equipment that produces no pain, household cleaning products that eliminate work, a president without a political career, and so on. The crucial point is that substances,

such as decaffeinated coffee, are stripped of their actuality yet still function in the form of reality.

The fetishised object may seem trivial in relation to decaffeinated coffee. In the context of politics, however, it produces detrimental effects. For instance, rather than engage in actual political action that produces substantive change, subjects prefer, it would seem, expressing political opinion through social media. Here agency is displaced onto the social media object, as if this object itself will do all of the political work (Dean 2009, 31-42). Similarly, politicians and celebrities become fetish objects when they speak out against the system. This speaking out suggests that politics is well underway, and the public need do nothing since the system, as everyone knows, is being challenged. In this way of thinking, Trump is a fetishised object. We might thus say, along with Peter Gordon, that Trump is 'just another name for the culture industry' (2017, 52). This means 'Trumpism, though it masquerades as society's rebellion against its own unfreedom, represents not an actual rebellion but the standardization of rebellion' (ibid.). The standardization of rebellion manifests in the 'punchy sound bites [of journalists] and outraged tweets, and the polarised, standardised reflection of opinion into forms of humor and theatricalised outrage within narrow niche markets' (50). Trumpism is thus fetishisation par excellence.

Just as decaffeinated coffee is coffee without caffeine, social media and other forms of opinion, are democratic expressions without politics. Žižek thus usefully points to the detrimental ideological effects of the compulsion for objects to be meaningful, but, from Baudrillard's perspective, this does not go far enough. If for Žižek a political unreality is produced through the fetishism of the interpassive subject, for Baudrillard the seeming unreality of politics is a feature of hyperreality. From this perspective, the problem of decaffeinated coffee, if we use this as an exemplar, is less that it is a fetishised copy of a post facto original, as it is for Žižek, than this coffee unsettles this relationship. The key point is that the collapse of the real and copy results from the representational system drawn up around the commodity form. The consumer thus drinks, as all marketing of decaffeinated coffee has it, a coffee just like regular coffee except without all the caffeine. For our purposes, this means that as opposed to being marked by the absence of reality, which the fetish compensates for, decaffeinated coffee is a form of reality that claims to harbour no sense of loss, lack or gap. This is the hyperreal. The coffee ought to be experienced as coffee even though it is not coffee in its original form. We should note, as well, that this does not mean that coffee in its original form literally ceases to exist. However, the original becomes irrelevant since the 'copy is no longer a copy' (Baudrillard 2005, 68). Baudrillard's point is that the original is no longer necessary for what is considered to be, what ought to be, a real rather than fake experience. In fact, simulated coffee might possibly become the model against which the authentic taste of coffee is defined. From this perspective, decaffeinated coffee is a simulation that is, perhaps, even

more real than the real (the authentic taste and the benefits of antioxidants without the effects of caffeine!).

The correct formula is thus not the cynical ‘they know it but they are doing it anyway’, it is the anxious ‘they may or may not know it, at any rate it must be authentic’. In the Baudrillardian formula, the authentic is compulsively posited (‘must’ is read here not as a form of knowledge, as ‘is’, but as the imperative, should be). Baudrillard contends, in fact, that the original, ultimately ends up becoming too limiting for the free circulation of signs and commodities. The original gets in the way of the authenticity that is produced in the more real than real hyperreal. He writes:

... we immediately substitute a copy – the only version appropriate to our universe, where every original constitutes a potential danger and all singularity runs the risk of hindering the free circulation of value. ... We secretly prefer not to be confronted with the original any longer (1994b, 75, 76).

The illusion Žižek locates on the side of belief, as opposed to knowledge, thus makes no sense in the Baudrillardian formula. For Baudrillard, the key point is that despite simulation, and even possibly because of it, practices are considered to be real. This means that any slippage between knowledge of the original, if I may be permitted to put it this way, and the fetish belief, or the copy, collapses. As Baudrillard puts it, ‘it is not illusion which conceals reality. It is reality which conceals the fact that there is none’ (1997b, 90).

It is precisely the disturbed relationship between the original and copy that helps us understand the phenomenon of Trumpism. As I have suggested, Trump reveals the truth of the system. Politics today is not grounded in an immutable reality. This claim does not mean, I must point out, that Trump is somehow defensible and redeemable. After all, does he not show us the truth of the system! And it also does not mean that we might argue, along with Žižek, that Trump is much more preferable than what would have been the duplicitous inertia of Clinton (Žižek 2016). The claim here is that the virtue of Trump, if any can be found, is that he might possibly ‘awaken’ the fractured left. In other words, he is a true enemy, a real (in the sense of rupture) producer of antagonism. If we take the perspective of Baudrillard, the key point, one that might overlap with Žižek, is that Trumpism takes the form of obscenity. However, in the current conjuncture this obscenity does not open up the potential for a truer form of left politics. What the scandal of Trump does open up is the shifting terrain of the hyperreal. There are key aspects of the Trump phenomenon that suggest a deeper analysis is required, one that cannot simply be undertaken via concepts of the hyperreal. We now need to turn to a discussion on Baudrillard’s account of integral reality, as he calls it.

Beyond Simulation: Integral Reality (and to Conclude with the Problem of Trumpism)

Grappling with Baudrillard's complex concepts is like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together with pieces that don't fit. This is not helped by his dire conclusions about the dangers of the widespread fascination with reality, which seem to be purposefully overstated. As Mike Gane suggests, 'Baudrillard is one of the very few thinkers to have taken Althusser's own conception of philosophy at all seriously' (2015, 28). This he explains, citing Althusser, comes in the form of an injunction to 'think in extremes ... which means within a position from which one states borderline theses, or, to make thought possible, one occupies the place of the impossible' (ibid.). As such, we can read Baudrillard as an extreme thinker attempting to shake critical thought away from its complacency with respect to the disappearance of the real.

I want to turn now to consider post-truth and Trumpism more closely, in the light of Baudrillard's statements about integral reality. It would be tempting to understand the Trumpism scandal as a clash between postmodern hyperreality and objective reality. However, I think this misses the mark. Trumpism has emerged in a context in which reality is troubled. The fact that newspapers announce this in precisely these terms — as in the recent *Guardian* headline, 'In the heat of the political battle, objective reality is having a tough run' (Lewis, 2017) — is a clear indication that the reality is under siege. If we follow the Twitter storm and pundit opinion pieces, with which the current discussion begins, the clear solution is to speak truth to power. Facts, it would seem, serve as a corrective to ungrounded and corrosive effects of post-truth and the Trump regime. This corrective strategy, however, misses the mark, and perhaps even deepens the battle lines that have been produced by the troubling of the reality principle. My contention, following Baudrillard, is that Trumpism exposes the ungrounded nature of the political system itself.

What Trump makes explicit has long been the case — presidentiality is inseparable from media spectacle (Kellner 2005). In fact, even the notion that actually existing politics is underpinned by an objective relation to a world of facts, as opposed to ideology, has long been challenged (Edelman 1988, Debord 1967). Moreover, Trump also makes explicit the direct link between the White House and corporate capitalism. Rather than operating through the more opaque and indirect route of career politicians, capital has now taken direct control. The opaqueness of behind the scenes lobbying and party donations, and the corresponding political lip service declaring governance for all, has given way to the transparency and obscenity of Trump, the corporate chauvinist. I want to argue that this shift from the opaque to the transparent is a symptom of integral reality. Of course, in the specific case of Trump it could be that this shift is by no means permanent. The opaque route of capital could possibly be re-established, no doubt with triumphant declarations that Trump was an aberration, everything is now back to normal, and there is nothing to

see here. Nevertheless, Trumpism, I think, provides us with an important glimpse of a possible obscene corporate future, which may already exist.

Integral reality stems from, what I have been calling the reality compulsion. The production of reality has been so successful that a condition emerges in which it becomes too excessive. The reality principle is, ultimately, Baudrillard maintains, overbearing and life in a fully-realised world ends up being intolerable. We could say that the unhomeliness of *The Truman Show* is a general condition of everyday life. As he puts it, 'we can no longer bear this world, which is so prey to reality, except by way of a radical denial. And this is logical: since the world can no longer be justified in another world, it has to be justified here and now in this one by lending itself force of reality, by purging itself of any illusion' (2005, 26). The only way to deal with the sheer weight of the reality principle is to eliminate it. This is accomplished, as Baudrillard provocatively argues, through the 'murder of the sign' (2005, 67).

If in simulation the referent – reality – is a compulsively produced effect of the sign, in integral reality the illusion of reference disappears altogether and the sign itself becomes the referent. Today we have lost, he maintains, 'the sign and artifice and are left with absolute reality' (2005, 67). What this means is that instead of standing in for an outside object, as in reality and hyperreality, the sign itself ends up becoming the object. In other words, the artifice of referentially that characterised the sign has been eliminated. All that remains is a functional, instrumental sign, or, perhaps more accurately, the virtual or informational sign. With integral reality, crisis gives way to the relentless positive production of meaning. The sign no longer simulates a dual relationship with the referent, it is the referent. The world is thus completely programmable. In it 'everything is realised and technically materialised without reference to any principle or final purpose' (Baudrillard 1993b, 18). Baudrillard writes:

We have found ourselves confronted with the undertaking of realising the world, of making it become technically, integrally real. Now, the world, even freed from all illusion, does not lend itself at all to reality. The more we advance in this undertaking, the more ambiguous it becomes, the more it loses sight of itself. Reality has barely had time to exist and already it is disappearing (2005, 17).

The crucial point here is that it is not Trumpism's fakeness or authenticity that is the problem. Against the assumptions of his supporters, Trump is not a cynical subject who blusters in public and then performs real work behind the scenes (this would surely be preferable). There is nothing, no true self, behind the Trump mask. His pronouncements do not refer to a referent, they are the thing itself. He is convinced that there is no distinction between what is pronounced and reality. In fact, reality and pronouncement, from this

perspective, are one and the same. This is the logic at work in corporate chauvinism. Trump resides in the world of big business and finance capital, a world in which reality is routinely constructed in image management and corporate branding (Klein 2010), investor confidence (Lazzarato 2014), and ‘thinking like a billionaire’. As Trump explains:

[in] a world of more than six billion people, there are only 587 billionaires. It’s an exclusive club. Would you like to join us? Of course, the odds against you are about ten million to one. But if you think like a billionaire, those odds shouldn’t faze you at all. Billionaires don’t care what the odds are. We don’t listen to common sense or do what’s conventional or expected. We follow our vision, no matter how crazy or idiotic other people think it is.

Trump continues:

Sometimes people are surprised by how quickly I make big decisions, but I’ve learned to trust my instincts and not overthink things. ... Whenever I’m making a creative choice, I try to step back and remember my first shallow reaction. The day I realised it can be smart to be shallow was, for me, a deep experience. (Trump and McIver 2005, xiii, xxii)

Leaving aside the obvious narcissism here, these statements reveal three crucial aspects of the subject of this corporate integral reality. Firstly, this is a chauvinist subject for whom seemingly insurmountable odds are a motivating challenge. The chances of becoming a billionaire are so slim that surely such a subject is the most unique and special of all. And we should note that the very notion of odds itself reduces the world of billions of people to simple categories. The billionaire does not belong with the rest. Secondly, this is a subject for whom sole and visionary ideas are both necessary and powerful. The task is to avoid the trap of compromise and unwaveringly convince others that their visionary ideas are, indeed, unstoppable. Here the subject must be a fundamentalist, of sorts. Purged from any illusion they occupy a non-dual relationship with the world. They accept ideas and practices that shore up their vision, and reject anything and anyone that challenges it, even existing rules and laws. And thirdly, this is a transparent subject who makes no apologies for being a unique billionaire. The aim to be wealthy is not couched in a justifying discourse (to make the world a better place), it is self-justifying. There is thus no distinction between the thought of the visionary and the world. The world is and will be as the corporate chauvinist imagines it to be. In fact, corporate image management and branding is an ‘elusive transparency’ in which it is impossible to demarcate the difference between image and world. Branding works without irony via signs with no referent, signs that no longer simulate. The brand is the image and the image is the brand. For Trump ‘this elusive transparency, which separates us definitely from the real, is as unintelligible as is the

window pane to the fly which bangs against it without understanding what separates it from the outside world' (Baudrillard 2014, 116).

As I have suggested, such a position presents thorny problems for critical thought. Naomi Klein (2017) is correct when she makes the point that Trump is a superbrand and saying no to his regime's shock tactics is simply not enough. Klein argues that a credible and captivating counter-plan, a yes, for the future is both urgent and necessary. What might Baudrillard's work contribute to the shape of such a future? Firstly, from the Baudrillardian perspective post-truth and Trumpism is not really a problem concerning a disregard for objective facts (this is not say, as I pointed out above, that facts are no longer relevant). The problem relates, instead, to the reality principle itself. How is it possible that reality can be under siege? The most obvious answer to this is that reality has been denied. This is why post-truth and Trumpism are scandalous. Trump's disregard for facts has produced a politics that is caught up in a dangerous illusion, perhaps delusion, that threatens the social fabric. However, the counter-intuitive response from a Baudrillardian perspective is that the problem is that illusion has been dispelled. The scandal of Trump is that he is under no illusion concerning corporate power and its capacity to transform the world. Against this lack of illusion facts are a rather weak weapon (just as use-value in Marx is a limited critique of capital).

Trump's non-dual relationship with the world could be disrupted by rediscovering what Baudrillard calls the vital illusion. 'If there is a secret to illusion' he writes, 'it involves taking the world for the world and not for its model. It involves restoring to the world the formal power of illusion, which is precisely the same as becoming again, in an immanent way, a "thing among things"' (2008, 90). It is precisely such a restoration that would disrupt the West's, Trump's, chauvinistic tendency to dominate. Instead, the subject takes up a dual relationship with others and the world, rediscovers the ethical, the ironic, and the uncertain play of the imagination. A figure such as Trump would surely be unable to flourish in such a context.

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