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Subjectivity in Circulation: Jean Baudrillard and the Image as Objective Reality

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SUBJECTIVITY IN CIRCULATION: JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND THE IMAGE AS OBJECTIVE REALITY

by

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to examine Jean Baudrillard's theory of the image in both historical and philosophical terms and propose that his understanding of the image as disconnected from any sort of objective reality is an important starting point for further discussion of the photographic image. This thesis seeks to answer the question – how does Baudrillard's theory of the photographic image shape our contemporary understanding of images, and what are the implications of his removal of the referent to reality within photographic images on mass culture, society, and the current state of image creation? This paper seeks to investigate Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of the image and how it can be applied to various contemporary movements in photography and image generation, ultimately working towards an understanding of the photographic image as a gateway into subjective mystery rather than a confirmation of the existence or proof of an objective reality. With specific reference to the Baudrillardian ontology of the image and Baudrillard's discussion of the disconnection between images and reality, this paper also seeks to apply Baudrillard's severance of the referent to reality in photographic images to the contemporary state of images and discuss the alienating effect this removal has on mass culture and politics, ultimately calling for a renewal of a Baudrillardian view of the image in discussions about the image's reality.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, there is a cultural and philosophical assumption that the photographic image provides a sort of direct representation of rigid and objective reality. Thinkers like Roland Barthes and André Bazin reference the photographic image's representation of reality as being strong and intact, with Barthes stating in *Camera Lucida*:

> "A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent (as is the case for every other image, encumbered from the start, and because of its status-by the way in which the object is simulated): it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier (certain professionals do so), but it requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection. By nature, the Photograph (for convenience's sake, let us accept this universal, which for the moment refers only to the tireless repetition of contingency) has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures," (Barthes 5-6).

Many thinkers, like Barthes, intuitively take a photograph of an object to be confirmation of the existence of that object and emphasize the photograph's strong connection to the object. French theorist Jean Baudrillard contributes to this discourse with his examination of the fact that images are not simply referring to or reflecting reality and representing them back to us but are rather totally new constructs with their own *reality* not anterior to themselves (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 16). In this view, then, images do not necessarily serve as sites of objective

truth, and they cannot offer us an objective view of the world in the traditional sense. In the context of his conception of *simulacra*, images create their own realities unrelated to the objects they are supposedly representing, which contributes to the contemporary state of simulacrum and works to build a mass culture, thus in turn contributing to a loss of meaning in the cultural and social sphere and serving to further blur the line between simulation and reality (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3).

This Baudrillardian delineation of the reality of the image, that images are not recreating objective reality but are creating something entirely new, is in stark contrast to the common cultural conception of the way that photographs function and in contrast to the position held by many significant philosophers of the image, as expressed in the above quote from Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Baudrillard's theory of the image opens new questions about the effect that this cultural and philosophical misconception has on society and mass culture collectively. Furthermore, recent developments in artificial intelligence and the proliferation and spread of images generated by machine learning systems and AI can easily be understood in the context of Baudrillard's positing the image as an easily reproducible representation with no connection to reality. Ultimately, much of the discussion around contemporary images and image-making implies there is a strong connection to reality – in a world subsumed by hyperreality and simulacra, that intense commitment to reality is thus challenged.

Images have served an important purpose in communicating and creating meaning throughout history – one might look to the early cave paintings of prehistory for an example of representation being used to communicate meaning. With the development of the photograph in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, images developed mechanically and technologically into more accurate and realistic representations that are also quickly reproducible

and much easier to circulate (Gernsheim et al. 41). With the invention of this photographic technology and the subsequent developments in pictorial technology throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a sort of psychological dependence on the image as having some sort of integrity in terms of representation was developed. In the contemporary state of photography, with images becoming easier to produce, manipulate, and circulate every year, that psychological dependence on the image as being a direct representation of reality is challenged. If Baudrillard is correct and the reference principle of the image must be doubted, one could simply lose faith in the image and be forced to return to new ways of meaning-making. As a result of the development of photography as a technology, human culture has developed itself around images and representation more than ever before in human history. When a central tenet of that dependence is challenged and we lose faith in the integrity of the image, a void is created in the way that we generate meaning in daily life.

For Baudrillard, reality and mass culture are fundamentally about circulation, with signs and symbols in constant exchange. Through his many works, most notably *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard delineates four phases of an image, described as four orders of simulacra – in *What is a Tank?*, published in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, theorists Ryan Bishop and John Phillips describe these four orders as "describing the changing fortunes of representation and simulation," (Bishop 138). The first order is described as a simple and direct representation of reality. In the second order, the representation no longer directly represents reality but is an imitation of it, and a detachment from reality is proposed. In the third order of simulacra, there is no longer any referent to the *real world*, this is well-known as Baudrillard's conception of *hyperreality*. Still, within this third order, images are generating a sense of reality, it can be understood as a simple simulation of images circulating. In the fourth

order, the representation becomes a simulation of a simulation, even further removed from reality than in the third order. Again, here, there is no connection to the initial referent, and it becomes even more difficult to distinguish between reality and simulation. This phase of representation can be understood as a complete disintegration of the image itself – if the first three orders are about our relationship with images and reality, this fourth order leaves reality behind entirely and places us solely in the realm of image (Tofoletti 29).

Baudrillard is ultimately using these phases of the image to explain that signs and symbols, in contemporary society, have become detached from materiality or their initial referent. In contemporaneity, images become simple copies without originals being exchanged without a connection to any sort of initial or underlying reality. The result of this process is a disconnection from authenticity, and the line between reality and simulation becomes impossible to distinguish.

Much of the contemporary state of images can be understood as an extension of Baudrillard's fourth-order simulacrum, and that "disintegration of the image" becomes the normal state of images (Tofoletti 29). Images in modernity can be understood as existing in this post-disintegration state. Baudrillard delineates that there is no longer integrity in the image, and we have found ourselves in a state where the image has broken down within itself. We can no longer trust the images that we orient ourselves around, a contention that has been emphasized and made more important through the increasing proliferation of images and their spread even since the time that Baudrillard was writing.

The intent of this thesis is to examine Baudrillard's theory of the image in both historical and philosophical terms and propose that his understanding of the image as disconnected from any sort of objective reality is an important starting point for further discussion of the image. This thesis seeks to answer the question – how does Baudrillard's theory of the photographic image

shape our contemporary understanding of images, and what are the implications of his removal of the referent to reality within photographic images on mass culture, society, and the current state of image creation? This paper seeks to investigate Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of the image and how it can be applied to various contemporary movements in photography and image generation, ultimately working towards an understanding of the photographic image as a gateway into subjective mystery rather than a confirmation of the existence or proof of an objective reality. With specific reference to the Baudrillardian ontology of the image and Baudrillard's discussion of the disconnection between images and reality, this paper also seeks to apply Baudrillard's severance of the referent to reality in photographic images to the contemporary state of images and discuss the alienating effect this removal has on mass culture and politics, ultimately calling for a renewal of a Baudrillardian view of the image in discussions about the image's reality. Through this examination, one must also consider the direct consequences of Baudrillard's understanding of the image and discuss the dangers of fully committing to this understanding of the image. The paper is divided into the following sections: a discussion of the history of the ontology of the photographic image and its philosophical background; Baudrillard's theory of the image and its consequences; counterarguments and potential responses; and a conclusion.

II. THE ONTOLOGY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

BAZIN, FLUSSER, BENJAMIN, AND THE HISTORY OF REPRESENTATION

In his seminal paper, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, critic and film theorist André Bazin describes photography as ranking highest in the order of surrealist creativity as it produces an image that is a "reality of nature, namely, a hallucination that is also a fact," (Bazin 9). Through this paper, Bazin fundamentally argues for the image's objectivity, underscoring that strong ability to represent reality that sets it apart from earlier mediums in the plastic arts. Bazin further describes the mechanically reproducible potential of the image as a contributory factor in its realism (Bazin 6). This view, that the image is inherently linked to the photographed object, colors much of the theory and criticism of the photograph following Bazin. The idea that the image is linked to the photographed object, or the referent, is also intuitive and seems to be the view that many hold when contemplating the function of a photograph; upon seeing a photograph of an event taking place, most people take this as confirmation that the event did in fact take place.

Prior to the advent of the photographic or mechanical image in the late nineteenth century, the *image* as a pictorial representation had still been around for a long time, and human beings had already developed a strong reliance on image and representation for creating meaning. Cave paintings and pictorial representation date back many centuries, and there is significant evidence of human beings using pictures or images in a primitive sense long before the invention of the mechanical and easily reproducible image through the photographic camera (Freedberg 10). This exists on a sort of continuum – images have historically been used alongside other representations of reality (i.e. literature, sculpture) in order to communicate meaning and inspire a subject to reflect upon their own existence. Bazin argues that the invention of the camera and the photograph in the

modern sense is a massive historical break with important and significant effects on our understanding of reality and objectivity.

Bazin, particularly, is emphasizing that the photographic image is unique in the history of representation and the plastic arts in that it has a particularly strong representative property in comparison to painting or earlier art forms. To Bazin, the fact that the photographic image is more lifelike or realistic than a sculpture or a painting is a very significant feature of the medium, lending it superiority as a representation of reality. Bazin also underscores that the photograph of an event is able to preserve its reality for future interpretation and consumption, and particularly emphasizes that photography has had an emancipatory effect on the plastic arts in freeing their fixation on realism by providing an objectively superior way to represent reality – "photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness. Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism," (Bazin 7). Still, Bazin does not account for the fact that as early as there is photography, there is the manipulation of the image – deliberately fake images or fraudulent photographs are not new phenomena. The existence of these altered images certainly challenges their position as pure objective representations of reality as Bazin describes even during the earlier days of the photograph's existence.

Vilém Flusser and other philosophers of the image build upon some of the ideas Bazin presents – in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser describes the traditional distinction between realism and idealism being *overturned* by photography, "it is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera's program – only the photograph is real," (Flusser 37). This sentiment initially seems Bazinian in a sense, in that the photograph is not so

much a representation of reality as it is reality itself, but Flusser goes on to reverse the Bazinian idea about representation in photographs and comments on the lack of criticism of what he calls *technical images* – "this lack of criticism of technical images is potentially dangerous at a time when technical images are in the process of displacing texts – dangerous for the reason that the 'objectivity' of technical images is an illusion," (Flusser 15). The danger of images, then, is that they provide a mistaken sense of objectivity, and mass culture ultimately comes about as the result of images and their processes. To Flusser, furthermore, technical images absorb the whole of history and form a "collective memory," or *mass culture*, which serves to create a collective understanding of the way society functions (Flusser 19). According to Flusser, human beings rely upon images to make the world, which is not immediately accessible, more comprehensible. Flusser is correct that human beings undeniably have had a historical reliance on images and representation in order to comprehend their own existence, as evidenced by the creation of narratives, language, painting, and primitive representation in all forms. The issue is that contemporary images, through mechanical reproduction and the illusion of objectivity, become impossible to decode, causing human life to become a function of images rather than the other way around (Flusser 10). This reversal of the role of images, wherein life is a function of images, is distinctly Baudrillardian and provides significant context for Baudrillard's delineation of the abandonment of reality in fourth-order simulacrum.

In a discussion on the historical development of representation and what sets technical or photographic images apart from more simple representations such as paintings, Flusser states the following – "the camera illustrates this robotization of work and this liberation of human beings for play. It is a smart tool because it creates images automatically. Photographers no longer need, like painters, to concentrate on a brush but can devote themselves entirely to playing with the

camera. The work to be carried out, imprinting the image onto the surface, happens automatically," (Flusser 29). Similarly to Bazin, then, Flusser is pointing out that the technical capabilities of photography are what set it apart from earlier forms of representation. Photography is an automatic process that makes photographic or technical images entirely different from earlier instances of representation such as realistic paintings. The hyperrealistic painting and the photographic image are different in that the latter is happening automatically through a vastly different apparatus. The traditional photograph is also vampiric in the sense that it is a machine that is generating a representation of what is going on outside of itself and reproducing it automatically, it is *feeding* on reality in a way that the painting is not. This is relevant to some of Flusser's arguments about the technical image's absorption and reproduction of all of human history and culture – this automatic process and the actual technical process lends a reproducibility to the photographic image which is unprecedented in the history of representation.

If, as Flusser states, there is a reversal in the function of images in modernity, the way that human beings generate meaning is completely transformed. As Flusser states, "Human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination," (Flusser 10). If the purpose of image-making, to begin with, is to understand the world around us better and to generate meaning through representation, the automatic process of the photograph upsets this process through its automation and its reversal of this relationship – "human beings take their tools as the model of themselves, of the world and of society," (Flusser 78). In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser isn't prepared to necessarily make any further conclusions about the effect that this will have outside of the simple recognition that it will be a seismic shift in the way that meaning is created and the way that human

beings understand photographic representation. This undoubtedly seems like a very modern problem, or at the very least a problem that continues to worsen as technology advances and image creation becomes easier. Baudrillard, ultimately, will pick up some of these ideas and delineate further the detrimental effects this process has on mass culture and meaning-making in contemporary settings.

Walter Benjamin, writing before Flusser, takes up similar questions and provides important context for Baudrillard – in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin expresses the idea that the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction holds more political and revolutionary potentiality as the aura of the work diminishes and we move further away from the artwork's ties to ritual (Benjamin 6). In looking at the current state of images, in particular, images generated by artificial intelligence and machine learning, one could make the argument that images are now significantly more reproducible than ever before. Using Benjamin's terms and understanding of image production, through this incredible level of reproducibility afforded by new forms of image generation and digital manipulation programs, the works have moved further away from their ties to ritual than ever before – images with incredible political and revolutionary potential can be generated in seconds. Baudrillard, picking up these ideas from Benjamin, would apply this to the cultural and political state of the world and ask how the connection between images and culture changes as reproducibility becomes easier and the distance between the referenced object and the images grows. Benjamin is in opposition to a position like Bazin's, as Bazin underscores how the reality of the image is intact, while Benjamin (and by extension Baudrillard) emphasizes how the reproduction strays further from the initial object and further away from authenticity. Benjamin, like Flusser, also describes how the artwork is subsumed into

a mass culture as we move away from more ritual-based and singular forms of art and towards photography, an art form that is easy for the masses to consume and easily reproducible.

Benjamin contributes a deep understanding of the role that reproducibility plays in modern image-making - "in principle, a work of art has always been reproducible … mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new," (Benjamin 2). Regarding the Flusserian notion about the relationship between human beings and our representations being overturned in modernity, Benjamin supposes that it is the reproducible nature of modern images that makes this reversal possible. For Benjamin, reproduction is destroying *the aura* of the reproduced object, it is removing the uniqueness and permanence – "unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by unarmed eye," (Benjamin 5). Through the diminishing of the aura, the reality produced by the reproducible image is more malleable and rooted in a political or cultural context – "instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics," (Benjamin 6). The artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction thus holds more political and revolutionary potential as the aura diminishes and we move further away from the artwork's tie to ritual, ritual is replaced with politics, and the image's political potentiality grows.

The artwork then becomes subsumed in a *mass culture* as we move away from more ritual-based mediums like painting and towards art forms that are easily reproducible and easier for consumption. The photographic image's reality is much more malleable than a thinker like Bazin proposes, and the way in which images function in the modern day suggests that Benjamin's suggestion that the reproducible artwork is increasingly based on politics rather than ritual is a more accurate understanding. Baudrillard would directly pick this idea up from Benjamin, and it serves as one of the underlying assumptions of many of his works – that because the image or

representation is a *reality* or appears *objective* does not mean that it is not subject to ideological bias or deception.

Bazin provides an understanding of the ontological reality principle of the image, the lifelikeness of which sets it apart from earlier forms of representation like sculpture and painting. Flusser and Benjamin, on the other hand, emphasize reproducibility – through the easily reproducible process that the photographic camera provides, images can be generated faster and faster as technology advances. Both of these aspects – the quality of representation and the reproducibility afforded by photography – set the stage for Baudrillard's fourth-order simulacrum and his understanding of mass culture. Baudrillard picks up many terms and aspects of this discourse about the philosophy of the image, particularly from Benjamin, and takes them further through circulation and the precession of simulacra. A basic foundational point picked up by Baudrillard is the loss of authenticity caused by the diffusion and circulation of images; the image is fully detached from its real-world referent, moving further away from truth or authenticity as it is circulated.

III. BAUDRILLARD'S REMOVAL OF THE REFERENCE PRINCIPLE

THE REFERENCE PRINCIPLE OF THE IMAGE

If Baudrillard's broader project is to delineate the ways in which reality has been swallowed up through the hyperreal and how meaning has decayed through mass culture and the dispersion of images, one of the foundational tenets of this project is his removal of any referent connecting the image to reality (Mirzeoff 146). *The Evil Demon of Images*, a 1984 lecture given by Baudrillard, provides much of the foundation of this argument about the removal of the referent to reality in images:

> "*A propos* the cinema and images in general (media images, technological images), I would like to conjure up the perversity of the relation between the image and its referent, the supposed real; the virtual and irreversible confusion of the sphere of images and the sphere of a reality whose nature we are less and less able to grasp. There are many modalities of this absorption, this confusion, this diabolical seduction of images. Above all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true. As simulacra, images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction. Benjamin, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, already pointed out strongly this modern revolution in the order of production (of reality, of meaning) by the precession, the anticipation of its reproduction." (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 13).

By using Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* as a starting point, Baudrillard underscores that we need to doubt the *reference principle* of the image, or "this strategy

by means of which [images] always appear to refer to a real world," (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 13). Through this passage, Baudrillard is very straightforwardly describing the falsity of the view that images always appear to refer to the real world, to real objects, or are merely reproducing something *chronologically anterior* to themselves. This idea, that the reference principle of images must be fully doubted and the inclination to believe the image is always referring to something anterior to itself is fundamentally wrong, serves as the foundation of a philosophy of images that seeks to reinforce how meaning is destroyed through the proliferation and dispersion of images.

This is a major movement in the context of the broader discussion about representation and the ontology of the image and a major separation from the commonly understood function of images – Bazin and prior philosophers of the image maintained that the image had some tangible connection to the photographed subject and much of the conversation centered around the accuracy of that representation and the reality principle. Even where the image's accuracy or reality was doubted, there seemed to be some implicit understanding that the photograph relied upon the subject for its existence, or that the reality of the photograph relied upon the reality of the subject which existed anterior to the photo. For Baudrillard, this discussion around the efficacy or the accuracy of the representation is entirely irrelevant. If the image is truly sinister in its illusion and the reference principle itself must be doubted, then this conception of the photograph's ontology is distinctly anti-Bazinian in the sense that there is no reference to the real world inherent to the image at all. In Baudrillard's view, the photograph is not necessarily reproducing something that is chronologically or logically anterior to itself – the entire existence of the image and its role as a representation of reality comes to be doubted as a result. That common and intuitive view, discussed in the introduction, that the image communicates objective reality and that images "bear

witness to a world with a naive resemblance and touching fidelity" is thus refuted (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 14).

If Baudrillard is correct that the photograph does not rely upon the reality of the subject, the question arises, what is the reality of the image? In other words, if the image is not referring to a tangible thing in the *real* world, what is it doing? Baudrillard's answer to this is that images are not recreating objective reality in any way but are actually creating something entirely new, the image is generating its reality not dependent on the subject it is supposedly representing. Images are not referring to the real but are a form of the real in and of themselves. In this way, we have surpassed the discussion about representation and are completely subsumed in the reality of the circulated image. Still, it seems undeniable that the photograph is an incredibly accurate representation that, to many, intuitively feels like adequate justification for the formation of beliefs, as thinkers like André Bazin proposed.

It is this situation, wherein the photographic image provides a representation that is very technically accurate and believable and yet contains its own reality not dependent on the subject, that makes this process a diabolical one for Baudrillard. It is clear that the diabolical nature of images stems from their strengths as representations:

> "It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical – and our technical images, whether they be from photography, cinema or television, are in the overwhelming majority much more 'figurative,' 'realist,' than all the images from past cultures. It is in its resemblance, not only analogical but technological, that the image is most immoral and most perverse." (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 14).

Photographic images do seem to us to be accurate and good representations intuitively, and it is this convincing power that makes them inherently dangerous. Ultimately it is this "increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality" that removes the possibility of representation as such – as Baudrillard states, "I do not believe in a dialectic between image and reality, nor therefore, in respect of images, in a pedagogy of message and meaning … The secret of the image must not be sought in its differentiation from reality, and hence in its representative value, but on the contrary in its *telescoping* into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally, in the implosion of image and reality," (Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images,* 25-26).

In order to fully discuss Baudrillard's philosophy of the image and apply it to a contemporary setting, it becomes necessary to establish an understanding of the various terms unique to his project and his delineation of image circulation. *Simulacra and Simulation*, by far his most famous text, lays out two separate representational tenets of a postmodern society – the *simulation* and the *simulacra*. In the very famous opening of the text, he lays out quite simply his definitional differences between the two terms – the *simulacra* is a more simple representation with no original, while the *simulation* involves the creation of an entirely new reality and moves beyond simple representation. Baudrillard begins by quoting Ecclesiastes – "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true," (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 1). A few paragraphs later, Baudrillard contrasts this with simulation – "by crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials," (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 2). In this dichotomy between simulacra and simulation, the photograph exists as a sort of simulacra, a signifier with no original precedent that is circulating, contributing to a state of hyperreality, wherein the real and the simulated become impossible to decode. The

question of the original referent, then, is really a non-question since there was never an original to begin with. Everything is centered around the circulation of images, which as previously established, do not refer to anything tangible or real at all.

THE ROLE OF CIRCULATION AND REPRODUCIBILITY

Similarly to Walter Benjamin, who emphasizes the role of reproducibility, Baudrillard credits circulation with contributing to the proliferation of simulacra or contributing to a contemporary state of hyperreality. As previously discussed, for Baudrillard, the contemporary photographic image is fully detached from any real referent to begin with – to take this further, the image is then circulated and exchanged. Through this circulation, Baudrillard's *hyperreal* comes about:

> "The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere." (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2).

This mimics Benjamin's earlier argument about the shift from earlier forms of representation to mechanically reproduced art diminishing the work's *aura*, or its authenticity. The constant circulation of image and representation contributes to the creation and proliferation of simulacra, and with Baudrillard's contention that the photographic image in the first place does not have an attachment to a real referent, a state of hyperreality is thus created, wherein the distinction between reality and simulation becomes blurred.

Baudrillard, again, is asking – what if images are not referencing a thing in the real world? One obvious consequence of this, to use Benjamin's terms, is that we no longer have authenticity anymore, but for a thinker like Baudrillard, that ultimately does not matter to the discussion. In postmodern society, and in Baudrillard's work, this conversation about authenticity or the lack of it does not matter. There is an entirely new production of meaning taking place, and as images are not referring to anything real, to begin with, we cannot compare one image's authenticity to another. Another consequence of this is that, as the reproducibility of the image increases, so does its potential as an ideological and political tool for belief formation and dissemination. Images, then, have a significant political potentiality while maintaining their detachment from any real referent. The result is a politics of the hyperreal, wherein the image is able to change minds, influence an audience, and help establish a narrative about mass culture and human interaction.

SIMULATION IN CONTEMPORANEITY

Consider, in modern American politics, the way that images, symbols, and representations function – one might look at Shepard Fairey's 2008 Hope poster, designed for the Obama campaign, or Donald Trump's use of the Make America Great Again hat to represent his political philosophy. In the case of the 2008 Obama Hope poster, for instance, the image of Obama becomes a simulacrum or representation of the man rather than simply a photo of the man himself. It loses its connection to the man, Barack Obama, and comes to stand in for, in this instance, a set of beliefs or a political philosophy. While this hyperreal object begins as a simple photographic image of the presidential candidate, it begins to take on a life of its own and becomes a stand-in for a designated set of beliefs (in this instance, political optimism and hope). The meaning of the poster then has no connection to the man Obama at all – it is imbued with ideology and ceases to simply pictorially represent Obama the human being. In its state as a simulacrum, it is further diffused through social

media, printed posters, and mass media, becoming a reproduced image and symbol. It is through the image's disconnection from the original referent that this process is possible – the image or representation, in this case disconnected from the man Barack Obama himself, moves beyond the original and takes on a life of its own through reproducibility and the lack of the reference principle of the image. In the case of the Obama poster, it is easy to understand how this functions, but in a more complex image or an image that appears more alike to its supposed referent, this process becomes much more nebulous. This situation is Baudrillard's diabolical one – where the representation seems to share a direct connection with the supposed referent but carries a life of its own, perhaps a political ideology or a meaning disconnected with the subject of the image.

Throughout modernity, we have seen images move further away from the analog and towards the easily reproducible digital. Social justice movements are increasingly predicated on the capturing of abuses via photographic image – once the image is taken, its own reality is *generated* and becomes impossible to ignore. Our shared reality is increasingly shaped by images and is generally defined by what is photographed versus what is not. The circulation of images increases, and new realities are communicated through digital representation – but *reality* and *truth* are separate concepts, an image has its own reality or its own narrative set apart from the supposed referent, but does not tell us anything about our objective, shared reality, the one in which the supposed referent is existing. In the Baudrillardian view, the photo does not necessarily make available what is real but communicates a reality with its own ideology and subjectivity within it. In epistemic terms, the photograph cannot provide the justification for knowledge. Taking that central tenet of Baudrillardian philosophy in doubting the reference principle of images and removing their referent to the real world, one sees further how reality is generated through images

beyond the initial object and how the distinction between reality and simulation becomes increasingly difficult to discern.

IDEOLOGICAL IMAGES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

To briefly return to the earlier discussion about the circulated image's political potentiality, both Benjamin and Baudrillard emphasize that the image's political potentiality increases as reproducibility becomes easier and more prevalent. Benjamin discusses the image's move away from ritual and towards politics in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

> "An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics," (Benjamin 6).

In essence, Benjamin is expressing that mechanical reproduction and the dissemination of the image is inherently linked to ideology. Baudrillard seems to pick this up, at least in part, by recognizing the political effects of reproducibility on the contemporary state of images, acknowledged as *hyperreality* in his writing. While Benjamin recognizes this process by describing the reproduced image's movement away from ritual and towards politics, Baudrillard expresses through various essays that reality has now become a political and media spectacle, and

reproducibility directly contributes to this process. In his 1991 article *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Baudrillard expresses the following:

> "Everything is therefore transposed into the virtual, and we are confronted with a virtual apocalypse, a hegemony ultimately much more dangerous than real apocalypse. The most widespread belief is in a logical progression from virtual to actual, according to which no available weapon will not one day be used and such a concentration of force cannot but lead to conflict. However, this is an Aristotelian logic which is no longer our own. Our virtual has definitively overtaken the actual and we must be content with this extreme virtuality which, unlike the Aristotelian, deters any passage to action. We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual," (Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 27).

Baudrillard is pointing out that everything moves to the virtual through the process of hyperreality, and specifically in this case, war, and political ideology. Through this movement to the virtual, facilitated by the reproduction of images, our understanding of the war becomes entirely mediated through images with no connection to reality. The political consequences of this process are significant, and the image becomes fundamentally ideological in that our understanding of politics and mass culture becomes entirely mediated through the image and its representation.

Photography is necessarily a narrative medium, through representation, a story is told about a subject and their environment. In many ways, there is an ideological thrust inherent in the creation of an image – one can consider the numerous decisions that are made when taking a photograph, i.e., when one photographs Object A instead of Object B, or decides to photograph Object A at one point in time rather than another. These choices, made either intentionally or unconsciously, constitute the creation of a narrative within the photograph. For Baudrillard, as

images communicate a created and simulated reality, they are necessarily political and contribute to the creation of a political narrative as they contribute to a mass culture. Benjamin, in many ways, lays the foundation for the politics of the image which seems to come about as a result of the reproducible image – for Benjamin, as the image becomes reproducible, it moves from being based on ritual to being based on politics (Benjamin 6). As ideologies are now increasingly represented through images, and those images are not connected to an objective reality in the traditional sense, it seems as though the political realm is fully immersed in spectacle, as described by Baudrillard, the consequence of which is a society and politics that does not know where to look for structure. Humans, naturally, orient themselves around images – we create and look to images for meaning and structure, particularly in the political realm. As traditional images transition into simulation in the postmodern era, they become more difficult to decode, and human life becomes a function of images. If the purpose of images is to comprehend one's place in the world and their own existence, when this comprehension is built upon false images or hyperreality, one's sense of self and their fundamental ideological perspective becomes severely affected.

The reality of the image is ultimately very malleable and subject to ideological biases. Because they contain a narrative or can communicate an idea, or because they appear to refer to something existing in the real world, does not necessarily mean they are *real* or *true* themselves. The narratives produced by photographic images may even appear more objective than the narratives produced by other mediums through their fidelity and diabolical nature – consider the way that Nazi propaganda and political images were used to communicate narratives about Jews (Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, 1935). The image becomes a site of political struggle as our political understanding becomes entirely mediated by images and simulation, and the photograph increasingly becomes a tool used for political ends. Images have always been used as

an ideological tool, but what makes them a site of increasing ideological struggle in modernity is the reproduced image and the increasing dispersion of images. Ease of reproducibility and increased fidelity in modern images also contribute to this state. Our understanding of the world and its structures increasingly becomes built upon the consumption of images and their circulation. Our perception of our own reality can easily be manipulated through the image, which as established, can provide a sort of diabolical comfort in its supposed objectivity, as it appears to represent something real while maintaining its own reality and narrative unrelated to the supposed referent. As Flusser states in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, "human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination," (Flusser 10).

BAUDRILLARD'S HYPERREALITY AND THE IMAGE

Much of this is already well-known and well-written about. Baudrillard's prolific body of work has a significant place in philosophical and literary history – he is an incredibly important figure in semiotics, aesthetics, and the history of representation, and this goes without saying. The intent of this paper is not merely to reiterate well-understood points about Baudrillard's hyperreality, but to ultimately establish them as a foundational starting point for the examination of images in contemporaneity, that is, images even more recent and modern than those images that Baudrillard was writing about – one might consider how digital photography has progressed since his death in 2007: the proliferation of the cell phone puts an instant digital camera in anyone's pocket, the invention of social media puts the circulation of images at an all-time high, and recent developments in artificial intelligence make the generation and creation of images easier than ever before.

But the question arises – what is all that different about these more recent examples? Many fret over the increasing prevalence of images generated by artificial intelligence and the potential for deception, but as previously mentioned, as long as the photograph has existed, so has the fake photograph and the hoax. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, images were often manipulated in their own ways, with daguerreotypes being hand-colored or double-exposed (Rosenblum 44). By the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, digital manipulation came about with programs like Photoshop becoming easily available. So, what is all that different about even more modern images and the way that they are manipulated?

Developments like A.I. generation tools, such as DALL-E or Midjourney, force the audience to reconsider their relationships with images in the first place – A.I. imagery simply illuminates a mass cultural and philosophical misconception about what the photograph actually is and what it is doing to begin with. In much of the discussion about photography, there is an implicit assumption that the photograph is a site of objective truth, a verifiable and always correct foundation upon which we can always rely, this assumption can be seen as Bazinian. Throughout the twentieth century, Baudrillard's suspicion about the diabolical nature of the image comes to fruition – there comes a sociological and cultural dependence on images serving as a form of objective truth and evidence. A.I.-generated imagery is not necessarily a wholly new development that shifts the function of photography, it merely forces the audience (a mass culture fixated on the image's objective reality) to reconsider that this cultural dependence on the photograph may have been extremely misguided to begin with. A.I., then, is not undoing the image's rigid objectivity, it is merely exposing the fact that the rigid objectivity that we assume was there actually never existed – as Baudrillard puts it, "above all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world…"

(Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 13). The conversations around the effects of artificial intelligence make the assumption that we can trace an image back to something that makes it authentic to begin with. Baudrillard provides us a way of looking at this problem differently by asking the question, what if we never could trace images back to anything resembling authenticity in the first place?

Many, without realizing it, work with a Bazinian understanding of the photographic image – that the photographic medium provides us with an underlying realism and objectivity which does not need to be doubted or reconsidered in any way. When approaching developments like artificial intelligence with this understanding of the modern image, one is necessarily led to falsely believe that the A.I. generated image is undoing the objectivity of the photograph which we have been previously relying on. This is really not true at all – through Baudrillard, we are able to see that the standard photographic image is just as detached from reality as the image generated by artificial intelligence. The latter example is doing nothing more but exposing that our understanding of the former may have been misguided to begin with.

Much is still left to be understood about the effects that A.I. image generation platforms like DALL-E or Microsoft's Designer will have on mass culture, but it feels safe to say that the images and videos produced by programs like this will continue to increase in their fidelity, their accuracy, and their speed of generation. In straightforward terms, artificial intelligence simply takes a large quantity of inputs, processes them, and provides an output generated entirely from those inputs. Functionally, programs like DALL-E and Midjourney use machine learning to generate images as a response to text prompts provided by a human user, with the computer generating an output based on examples that have been fed to it.

In the modern day, the new production of images through artificial intelligence and machine learning seems to be a literal outworking and manifestation of Baudrillardian ideas. Of course, there have been fake images for as long as there have been images, and digital manipulation has already existed for a significant period of time, so the real fundamental difference between those images generated by artificial intelligence and those images manipulated through traditional digital platforms is the level of reproduction which is possible and the speed at which this reproduction is performed. This difference between the two does not affect authenticity however – the digital image prior to recent developments in artificial intelligence was just as detached from an authentic original, it does not make sense then to compare the authenticity of one to the other.

In the case of image generation, if the original inputs are Baudrillard's *simulacra*, the result just takes it one step further – it is a copy of many other copies with no original, no real referent. This is just more of the same type of image circulation we have already been experiencing since the invention of the photograph, just with a new, even easier form of reproduction. Should the technology prove to be popular and adopted by many, we could see a future wherein hyperrealistic or genuinely believable life-like images are generated in seconds. But ultimately, this situation is precisely the same one that Baudrillard proposes in his discussion about traditional photography – the technical image produced by the photographic camera (in the traditional sense) is just as detached from the subject or the referent as the image generated by artificial intelligence. If we are living in a post-truth society, perhaps we have been in this situation longer than we think. If Baudrillard is correct in his assertion that the photograph is detached from any real referent and has its own reality not anterior to itself, we have had misguided confidence in the truth of images since the very invention of the photograph.

IV. COUNTER-ARGUMENTS AND RESPONSES

BAZIN AND STRONG OBJECTIVITY

Because Baudrillard's ideas are still certainly controversial and are not fully agreed upon in the philosophy of images, it is pertinent at this time to consider various counter-arguments and accusations weighed against Baudrillard's philosophy of images and his system of thinking. The most major disagreement comes from Bazin himself, who again underscores the image's strong objectivity in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*:

> "This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction," (Bazin 7-8).

Bazin, coming from a modernist framework, emphasizes the strong objectivity of the image and very much disregards the social and cultural construction of the image displayed in Baudrillard, and is in complete opposition to the doubting of the image's connection to the real referent. Bazin endorses that connection between the referent and the representation – there is a real referent existing in the world which the image is referring back to, the photographic image is thus a referential undertaking which does refer to something real.

While Bazin's perspective was certainly useful in building a foundation of the philosophy of photographic images as the technology advanced in the early twentieth century, his commitment to the objectivity of the photograph is short-sighted and committed to a modernist worldview which comes to be questioned and doubted by thinkers like Baudrillard. There are complexities

introduced as digital photography becomes prevalent and as the circulation of the image increases which call into question this connection to the real referent – images come to be imbued with ideology as circulation increases, and our trust in the image decays as manipulation becomes easier. The manipulation of the image was also prevalent in the time that Bazin was writing, but in the modern day, digital manipulation has completely collapsed any lingering trust about the image relaying to us something that is actually happening (Rosenblum 44). Bazin goes on to underscore that the photographer plays a diminished role in the creation of the photograph than does the painter in the painting:

> "The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind. Although the final result may reflect something of his personality, this does not play the same role as is played by that of the painter. All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty," (Bazin 7).

This insistence that the photographer is more detached from the photograph than the painter is from the painting is also misguided. Throughout the twentieth century, we come to see just how important the role of the photographer is, and their role as an auteur and a determining creative voice in the constructed narrative of the photograph has come to fully be understood. One might look at how different sides of the political spectrum use photographs to relay political narratives or to tell a specific story with their intention organically incorporated in. Thus, this understanding of the photographer as a mere documentarian who is simply relaying an objective reality back to the audience is entirely unfounded.

KELLNER AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF SUBJECTIVITY

Douglas Kellner, in his *Jean Baudrillard: A Critical Overview,* provides a critical outline of Baudrillard's work, and at one point describes a potential consequence of a Baudrillardian view:

> "Yet growth, acceleration, that the ecstasy of excrescence is accompanied by inertia. For as the society is saturated to the limit, it implodes and winds down into entropy. This process presents a catastrophe for the subject, for not only does the acceleration and proliferation of the object world intensify the aleatory dimension of chance and non-determinacy, but also the objects themselves take over in a "cool" catastrophe for the exhausted subject, whose fascination with the play of objects turns into apathy, stupefaction, and an entropic inertia," (Bishop 22).

Kellner and other critics of Baudrillard describe a potentially pessimistic or subjectivist nature in Baudrillard's system of thought, where Baudrillard addresses many of the problems plaguing modern culture without providing an adequate solution or path forward. While it may be true that Baudrillard addresses many issues with mass culture and the construction of reality without providing a solution or path forward, his project, in my view, is to provide a framework for understanding how power works in modernity and how images affect power structures and mass culture. Ultimately, this reflects a central tension in 20th-century French thought, and while many Marxist thinkers might stop at the means of production in their analysis of mass culture and the way reality functions, Baudrillard asks us to go further into a deeper, symbolic level. In this Baudrillardian state, many critics would point out we are simply stuck in endless image circulation with no way of building real meaning or finding structure that reflects truth and objective reality. Kellner seems to imply a critique that tries to point out that if Baudrillard is right, we are left with no solution. Where can we look for meaning in a world subsumed by images, wherein those images

maintain no connection to the real world? If everything is a media event, and we are in a state of constant image circulation, what is the direction forward?

This is mostly a strong counterargument, and in many ways, Baudrillard's broader system cannot escape the accusation that it maintains a subjectivist view of reality. This purpose of this paper is not to say that Baudrillard was right about everything or that his system provides answers to every lingering question or even fully explains why that referent principle functions in the way it does. Baudrillard merely provides a framework for understanding why that reliance on objectivity was misguided (because that image was never referring to a thing in the real world), but Kellner and other modern critics of Baudrillard are correct in pointing out that it is not entirely clear what we are supposed to do about it. It is clear that there is still space for a reinvestment in images and their power (as evidenced by the many social justice movements now predicated on using images to display injustices or to inspire optimism), but it is unclear what we are left with when we come to accept the total removal of that reality referent. This brings us back to foundational questions which have existed since philosophy's very beginning – one might look to Plato's *Republic* and its dialogues about the origin of justice or might return to twentieth century conversations about the origin of meaning through structuralism or phenomenology.

Much of Baudrillard's writing exists in the context of the Cold War and many of his references and cultural implications are deeply wound up in that historical context. Since the time of Baudrillard's writing, there has seemed to be multiple brief periods of optimism which directly followed the 1990s and that distinctly Baudrillardian era of strong postmodern thought and pessimism regarding image circulation. One might look to examples like the 2008 Obama campaign or the Arab Spring as a reinvestment in images and their power for good. Following this brief period of optimism towards images, recent developments have rapidly shifted the function

and production of image-making even since these more recent examples. It seems again that with developments in artificial intelligence and the way that we create images constantly changing, we are again in a position of diminished hope in images similar to the historical context that Baudrillard was writing in. Optimism in the truth of the image is eroded, and with good reason. Ultimately, this back-and-forth pendulum swing suggests that perhaps this process is not as linear as it appears, however.

We have held onto things that provided meaning throughout history, with representation seemingly being a foundational touchstone that we have come back to, and the belief in the efficacy of representation has played an important role as a social belief, contributing to the formation of beliefs and historical narratives (Freedberg 8-9). But the twentieth century, in many ways, seemed to be the century of the photograph – we held on to it for meaning and structure, but it seems that we may begin to lose it as Baudrillard's understanding of the image as completely detached from the referent becomes more prescient. Baudrillard was correct in doubting the image, and when faced with the reality of increased photographic manipulation, one might begin to catch on that there was a misguided reliance on the objectivity of the photograph.

While Baudrillard does not necessarily provide a step-by-step normative system of thought with a delineated plan of action to undo the condition we find ourselves in, the value of the framework that he has provided still stands, and a path forward within that framework is still entirely possible, even if it is not fully delineated for the reader. The intent of this thesis is not to answer where meaning comes from or where we should look for the creation of meaning after that reference principle is severed, but merely to keep open the possibility of a path forward within that Baudrillardian framework while maintaining his position that the image contains no connection to the *real world*. There are certainly aspects of Baudrillard's thinking which help us understand the

way images function in contemporaneity, which might be incredibly useful without committing wholly to Baudrillard's metaphysics and epistemology. Baudrillard's theory of the photographic image, as delineated in *The Evil Demon of Images*, provides an incredibly strong starting point for a modern understanding of how the image functions, and this can be acknowledged without one having to commit to a wholly subjectivist viewpoint wherein this self-referential system of circulation constitutes and entirely subjective reality.

V. CONCLUSION: A RENEWAL OF A BAUDRILLARDIAN ONTOLOGY OF THE IMAGE

To reiterate, throughout human history, we have held onto objects or symbols that provide meaning, with images and representations being a fundamental pillar of this meaning-making. The invention of the photographic image represented a seismic shift in the history of representation, and historically and philosophically, there has been an assumption that it provides a sort of direct representation of rigid and objective reality, as expressed in Bazin's *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*:

> "Again, the essential factor in the transition from the baroque to photography is not the performing of a physical process (photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of color); rather does it lie in a psychological fact, to wit, in completely satisfying our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part … The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making," (Bazin 7-8).

In building on various earlier theories of the photographic image, and Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in particular, Baudrillard seeks to show that, through circulation and reproducibility, the photographic image provides a sort of false sense of meaning, and that in relying on the photographic image for understanding the world around us, a mistake is being made. This is in direct opposition to the sentiment expressed in Bazin's *Ontology*, that the photograph is not merely a representation of the real but is the real in and of itself.

Baudrillard's ontology of the image, by asserting that images are not recreating objective reality but are creating something entirely new not anterior to themselves, helps to explain the contemporary state of images. With contemporary advancements in digital photography and image

generation, the psychological and philosophical dependence on the image as objective reality is challenged, and a central tenet of our meaning-making in contemporary society is diminished. Baudrillard's removal of the reference principle of the image serves as the foundation of his philosophical project, which seeks to show that many signs and symbols in contemporary society have become entirely detached from their materiality, and that they no longer represent any initial referent. The result of this entire process is a complete disconnection from authenticity, wherein reality and simulation become indistinguishable. The photographic image, not representing any initial referent, plays an undeniably important role in this system.

To answer the central question this paper sought to respond to – Baudrillard's theory of the photographic image shapes our contemporary understanding of images by creating a skepticism towards representation and the reference principle of images, opening a pathway for us to challenge images and interrogate their meaning beyond the supposed efficacy of their representation. Once we establish that images are, as Baudrillard is describing, detached from a real referent, we can begin to properly examine how their circulation affects our mass culture, ideologies, and seeks to establish historical narratives. Images generated by artificial intelligence, ultimately, are not challenging the objectivity of the photographic image, they are merely revealing that our confidence in that initial objectivity was entirely misguided to begin with – this is just another development in the long decay of collective trust in the photographic image. The implications of his removal of the referent to reality within photographic images are significant; our culture is increasingly built on image-making and image circulation, and in understanding these images as communicating their own reality unrelated to their supposed referent, we can begin to truly understand how images are used to communicate ideology and establish historical narratives. In order to challenge the way images are used and to truly understand the role they play

in the construction of mass culture; one must begin with the Baudrillardian assumption that there is no original referent which they represent.

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