



***Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film:
Fatal Theory and Education***
By Kip Kline

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Abstract

Kip Kline's new book Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film: Fatal Theory and Education, is an important new book that analyzes contemporary depictions of American youth in recent film, drawing on the philosophical foundation of Jean Baudrillard's media theory. In this review, Gabriel Keehn discusses the strengths of the book as well as how it fits into the landscape of contemporary educational theory. He also offers some critiques of certain Baudrillardian assumptions that underlie Kline's arguments.

Keywords: *media studies; Baudrillard; film; youth studies; education; Lacan*

In writing *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film: Fatal Theory and Education*, Kip Kline has performed what I see as an extraordinarily valuable service to our field. Bringing the thought of Baudrillard into the fold of educational theorizing is critical not simply as an expansion of the theoretical resources available to philosophers of education, but also because Baudrillard brings with him a much-needed critique of the way our discipline has traditionally gone about its own critical task. One of the central claims of the book is that ideological critiques of content have become outmoded and unproductive against the recent iterations of global capitalism (evidenced in Kline's discussion of critical media literacy in Chapter Four). Kline, along with Baudrillard, suggest the need for a shift to analyses on the level of form, a la McLuhan's famous contention that "the medium is the message." This insight is long overdue in educational thinking and critique. Specifically, we all must take heed of the ways in which many of our supposed criticisms of the system are actually already built into its own code, and encouraged for purposes which ultimately support the foundational structure of the current order.

While there is much to be said about, and in praise of, Kline's detailed and thoughtful treatments of the teen films he analyzes in the book, I want here to focus on a few of the underlying theoretical points that the films are meant to illustrate. First, I wonder about precisely how to locate the problem when it comes to the various hyperreal simulations of teens that the films he analyses proffer. It seems that there are two avenues that one could take when critiquing these simulacral images. On the one hand, one might think that the problem with the depictions of teenagers in these films is that they are false, showing teenagers in a light which does not accurately or fairly

represent the way real teenagers are in the real world. There are passages in the text that might lead one to think that this is Kline's line of critique, as when he says that "It could be the case that this is what is called for in response to the simulacra of the adolescent in films that end up informing discourses about youth as *really* shallow, *really* immoral, *really* ineffectual" (p. 84). However, what is critical to realize here is that the emphasis in this claim is not on the shallow, immoral, and ineffectual, but on the *really*. Kline makes clear that his objection to the hyperreal simulations of teens as shallow, immoral, and ineffectual is not that these representations are false, since in the latter two orders of simulacra, representations cease to be truth apt at all, or at least precede their own truth or falsity. As he says, "the question of the film's relationship to reality becomes moot as we approach the fourth order of simulacra" (p. 48). For Kline, the problem with the simulations of teens in films is not that they fail to accurately represent real teenagers, but that the images which are created by those simulations lead to unfortunate and violent outcomes for actual people in the actual world. The problem, as he puts it, is that "this kind of movie does reinscribe, exacerbate, and sustain problematic discourses about youth that promote the kind of violence I have in mind here" (p. 76). Thus, when Kline laments that "it is increasingly difficult to find spaces in which teens are understood to be political or social agents" we can assume that this is lamentable not because teens *really are* political or social agents, but that it would be better for them (and perhaps for us) if we *understood them to be* political or social agents (p. 66). I think there is a problem with this way of construing the issue as well, however. I wonder if, in casting the type of violence done to teenagers in this way, Kline hasn't run afoul of his own arguments that we must focus on forms of violence rather than the content thereof. For Kline, it seems that the problem with the hyperreal simulations of teenagers is that their *content* results in negative outcomes for teenagers in schools, and that the solution is that we ought to substitute the negative content for something more positive (i.e. that teens are socially and politically agentive subjects, have rich inner lives, are to be shown human and cultural respect, and so on). However, if we are true to the form over content dictum in this case, isn't it more accurate to say that the violence done by these simulations of teens doesn't consist in the fact that the teens are simulated as apathetic and disengaged, but in the fact that the teens are simulated at all? Doesn't simulating teens in a way such that we understand them as politically agentive do exactly the same type of *formal* or *structural* (as opposed to contentful) violence that simulating them in any other way whatever does? Doesn't simulating teenagers at all, even in a positive way, take away the very agency that Kline hopes to allow them? Isn't the problem with simulated identities the very fact that they are forced onto us, regardless of their content, as Kline himself eloquently argues in Chapter Five with respect to *The Breakfast Club*? Recall here that part of the point of *The Breakfast Club* is that the various identity simulations which are foisted on the characters are fundamentally the same in their structure, and hence operate by the same oppressive logic. Whether one is simulated as a nerd, jock, popular girl, or rebel, one is simulated, and that is the important thing. If this is the case, I wonder why Kline here chooses to focus on the content and outcomes of the simulations of teenagers as the source of violence, rather than their forms.

My second set of questions has to do with the picture Kline paints of what fatal resistance might look like going forward. Simply put, I want some more details on this question. Are there historical examples of this type of resistance to which we might turn for inspiration? Obviously, a large part of the Baudrillardian vision here is that the final two orders of simulacra are *sui generis*, without precedent in human history, so perhaps it is unreasonable for me to demand historical examples of what resistance to these developments could look like. However, if there are no historical examples, what reasons do we have for thinking that fatal resistance will work? How do we

know that hyperconformity to the system will push it to the point of inversion rather than simply push it further into hegemonic domination (if this is even possible)? That is, it seems to me that underlying the argument for fatal strategies that push the logic of current conditions until, as Kline puts it, “they flip” is an assumption that such a flipping point exists. But why make this assumption?

Kline's examples of how fatal theory might be put into practice in education are somewhat puzzling to me, specifically with regard to his idea that hyperconformity to the logic of the system is what is called for. He suggests (p. 123) that we might observe a hard distinction between education and schooling as a way of engaging in this hyperconformity, but it seems to me that if the system, as Kline rightly suggests, muddies the distinction between schooling and education, wouldn't hyperconformity to the system necessitate a push for the total erasure of this distinction entirely? Kline also suggests that “restoring children and adolescents to their own strangeness, encourages a sense of inner alterity and radical otherness” is also a way of hyperconformity in a system which is precisely contrary to these goals (p. 123). Again, this to me seems more or less like traditional resistance, which aims at disrupting a system through advocating its opposite. On my reading, hyperconformity would seem more like performing reductios of the current system so as to expose its rotten inner logic. I am reminded of an exasperated response to current testing regimes offered by a professor of mine, who suggests that we ought to expand testing to include kindergarteners and preschoolers, and begin administering tests on every single school day not needed to prep for the next test. Thinking historically, and noting as Kline does, the influence of the avant garde art world on Baudrillard's thought, I thought of the actions of the anti-authoritarian art group, Orange Alternative (OA), which formed in Poland in the 1980s and advocated what they called “situationist communism.” OA performed public “happenings” which were meant to ironically take the logic of the oppressive Polish political climate to their absurd conclusions. For example, at one national festival, OA members gathered around a statue of the founder of the Polish secret police and sang songs about how much they loved the police. When the members of the group were arrested during this spectacle, they thanked the police and praised their work loudly. The idea here was to expose the absurdity and ultimate vulnerability of a political regime that is forced into the position of arresting people for proclaiming love of the police. Similarly, OA members organized an event entitled “who is afraid of toilet paper?” in which they publicly and freely distributed toilet paper, then a very scarce commodity in Poland, and were ultimately arrested for doing so, again forcing out the absurdity of the political regime. I bring up these examples to attempt to inspire further thinking on the issue of what fatal hyperconformity might look like. Are these examples like what Kline has in mind? If not, why not? And what in their place?

Finally, I want to push on another objection that Kline attempts to defend Baudrillard from, namely that he is a sort of nostalgic primitivist, critiquing the contemporary decline into sign fetishism and semiotic identity codes which have replaced the “unmediated, face-to-face, messy human relations” (p. 92) of symbolic exchange. As Kline outlines, Baudrillard's “lament for the loss of symbolic exchange in modernity and after” is deeply informed by the anthropological insights into indigenous societies and specifically the idea of the Gift in the works of Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille. For Baudrillard, the gift as the exemplar of symbolic exchange represents “that which is outside of the capitalist code.” (p. 78). Baudrillard distinguishes between the messiness of direct symbolic exchange and the “cool” modernity of communication. Kline quotes him: “Whoever had the idea of 'communicating' in ancient societies, in tribes, in villages, in families? People don't need to communicate because they just speak to one another.” This fall from our tribal, symbolic origins into our current semiotic space is also referenced in the discussion of

identity formation, where Baudrillard seems to suggest that our pre-semiotic life of danger, risk, and a genuine fight for survival has been supplanted by what is referred to as an “experimental life” where our identities control our existence and we are forced to artificially create situations which simulate the immediacy and messiness that we once enjoyed in the symbolic. Implicit here is a sort of evolutionary claim about the development from the pre-capitalist symbolic into the semiotic current era. Kline suggests that it is mistaken to read Baudrillard as simply fetishizing “symbolic cultures that he never actually experienced” (p. 78). I think that this defense of Baudrillard is correct, but there is a related critique that I want to now suggest, drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. From a Lacanian point of view, the problem with Baudrillard is not that he problematically fetishises the sign (a transparent misreading) or that he fetishises cultures that he never actually experienced. Rather, Lacan would suggest that problem here is not that Baudrillard never experienced these symbolic cultures, but that they never existed in the first place, at least not as Baudrillard has imagined them. The difference here is both anthropological and theoretical. Where Baudrillard draws on the insights of Mauss and Bataille, as Kline points out, Lacan pulls anthropological insights from Strauss, arguing that, when it comes to identity formation and cultural signs, there is no significant difference between semiotic modernity and the tribal pre-modernity promoted by Baudrillard. Baudrillard, on Kline's presentation, seems to argue that our identities are foisted upon us in a violent way by the simulacral representations to which we are subject in our daily lives. For Lacan, these types of precoded identities exist long before the simulacral signs of modernity, namely in the very existence of language. Evolutionarily, Baudrillard seems to view humanity's pre-semiotic life as fundamentally natural in its symbolic messiness, unencumbered by the identity codes of modernity. For Lacan, this naturalness never existed, and as soon as man has entered into what Lacan calls the symbolic order, his identities exist as pre-coded by language itself. As Lorenzo Chiesa puts the point, “Lacan postulates a primordial biological discord between man and his environment, centred on premature birth and a subsequent disorder of the imagination, from which language and the Symbolic immanently arise.”¹ Crucially, Lacan's investigation into these matters, which he undertakes most notably in his early seminars on desire and language (1953-1955), take a decidedly and necessarily anti-Darwinian line, suggesting ultimately that the emergence of the symbolic order and humans as desiring subjects (as opposed to purely animal, instinctually-driven ones), cannot be explained through the usual Darwinian mechanisms of gradual evolution and adaptation. Lacan specifically states “the dimension discovered by analysis is the opposite of anything which progresses through adaptation, through approximation, through being perfected. It is something which proceeds by leaps, in jumps.”² It is this primordial break which creates the opening out of which the symbolic comes, an opening over which we cannot cross since we are always already in the symbolic order as human beings due to our boundedness in language. To concretize this discussion, Kline and Baudrillard point out the precoded identities in modern simulacral capital of the Jock, the Stoner, the Princess, and so on (as in *Breakfast Club*) and suggest that in pre-semiotic symbolic societies, these sorts of identity formations do not structure the social space in the same way that they do in the latter orders of simulacra. Lacan counters this by pointing out, along with Strauss, that the figures of, for example, the Shaman, the Priest, the Chief, the First Son, and so on structured what Baudrillard fetishises as pre-semiotic society in precisely the same way that the *Breakfast Club*-esque identities

1. Chiesa, Lorenzo. “The World of Desire: Lacan Between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory,” *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 55 (2009): 200-225.

2. Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. Norton, New York (1991): 86.

structure our own society. There is no human ego without prestructured identities, since we are always already subject to the dictates of the symbolic order, i.e. language (what Lacan calls “the big Other”). Put succinctly, a Lacanian perspective would ask of Baudrillard, what it is that is so special about the symbolic? Why think that pre-semiotic cultures were entirely or even relatively without the sorts of precoded identities that Baudrillard objects to in modernity? Why think that an unmediated subject or unmediated hot interactions between subjects existed before the latter orders of simulacral capital? On page 101, Kline explicates Baudrillard's notion of the fractal subject, the individual who is captured by the identity simulations of his time but who perceives himself as liberated by the proliferation of choices of precoded identities. For Lacan, on the other hand, all subjects are fractal, for as soon as we enter into the law of the symbolic order, the rules of which bind our identity formation from before we are born (e.g. in our parents choosing a color for our baby-room) we have lost control of our own subjectivity in a way that can never be regained. I wonder why Baudrillard and Kline think that this era of subjective immediacy in identity formation and interaction ever existed, and what their proposal is for recapturing it.

Gabriel Keehn is a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University in the Social Foundations of Education. His work focuses on anarchist education, individualism and identity, and contemporary liberalisms. His work has been published in *Educational Theory*, *The Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook*, *Philosophical Studies in Education*, as well as a number of edited collections.