

## THE ARC OF A DEAD POWER MAGRITTE/BAUDRILLARD/AUGUSTINE

Arthur Kroker

**Thesis:** *This essay is intended to recover the radical insight of contemporary structuralist theory into the existence of ABSTRACT POWER by blasting through the evasions of the structuralist discourse to its suppressed metaphysical implications. What follows, then, is in the way of a circling around from the artistic imagination of René Magritte and the radical semiology of Jean Baudrillard to the hidden genealogy of modern power: Augustine's De Trinitate. Augustine's doctrine of the "trinity" and Baudrillard's theory of the "sign" are presented as reverse, but parallel, images of the other. And why? Simply because they represent the metaphor of a "dead power". This is the region of Nietzsche's power as a "perspectival appearance". Kant is reduced to a disenchanted expression of the primitive Christian doctrine of the "will to will"; and Augustine, as the perfect embodiment of Paul's closing of the "eye of the flesh" and the opening of the "inner eye" to an abstract power, is viewed as the anti-Nietzsche. And POWER? It's everywhere now, and for just the reason that Baudrillard gave in Oublier Foucault: Power doesn't exist; it was always only a "perspectival simulation" of itself. This is a discourse, then, on the PURELY ABSTRACT UNITY which is at the centre of western experience; and on the remarkable convergence of the trinity/sign as the magical formula of the "fictitious unity" of the modern episteme.*

René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist painter, is the artist of modern power. His work is, perhaps, the closest approximation in this century to the artistic imagination demanded by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*. Magritte is the artist who deals in error, cruelty, and evil if only to work a deep reversal against the purely perspectival, and thus fictitious, unities of the "reality-principles" of western experience: judgement, truth, sociality, normativity, utility. Indeed, the paintings of Magritte are perfect texts for the study of power as a "perspectival illusion": an abstract power which produces its (symbolic) effects through a slight *trompe-l'oeil* in which, as Nietzsche has remarked, "the conditions of (our) preservation are projected into predicates of existence".<sup>1</sup>

There can, in fact, be few more searing depictions of the purely topographical universe of an abstract power than Magritte's *The Door to Freedom*. This painting, which was intended anyway to show the circular logic at work in the now obsolete representational viewpoint, is in the best of the pastoral mode. It consists simply of a landscape viewed through a window. There is, however, an odd and disconcerting difference. The window is shattered; and on the bits of glass — which explode inwards, not outwards — there are clear traces of the image of the image of the landscape. Now, representational art, and with it the classical (also representational) theory of power depended for its very existence

ARTHUR KROKER

on the preservation of a privileged and substantive distinction between the sign and its referent. Power, in this case, always stood for something *real* outside itself: a referent like use-value, sovereignty, justice, democracy which would, and this simultaneously, concretize the regression into nothingness in the will to power and provide an after-glow for a power which had already disappeared into the "vanishing-point" (McLuhan) in western consciousness. Following Nietzsche's insights into the "in vain" of the ellipse traced by the will to power, Foucault has said that power in the modern era could only function on the condition that it hide its (real) existence as a purely cynical power. When the



René Magritte – *The Door to Freedom*/*La clef des champs*

horizon is wiped clean, who could tolerate the knowledge of a cynical freedom, an absent power, an existence falsely unified by the "fiction" of perspectival appearances? Magritte has recovered the reality of the non-existence of modern experience, and thus of its *structural* basis in the will to power, as nothing but a pure relation. In *The Door to Freedom*, we are suddenly ejected from the comforting illusion of an antinomic, and thus representational, theory of power into an "empire of signs" (Barthes) which consists only of a plunging downwards through an endlessly refracted imagery. A perspectival illusion is at work here which produces an image of the real (the antinomies of window and landscape)

## DEAD POWER

only as a symbolic-effector to disguise the disappearance of the real into the endless curvature of the mirrored image. The significance of the traces of the image of the landscape on the broken glass lies, in fact, precisely in the circularity of its symbolic effect. We are very close to Nietzsche's impossible knowledge of the *regressus in infinitum* in modern experience when we reflect on Magritte's disclosure that the pure sign-system of *The Door to Freedom* reveals, after all, that the antinomic basis of western knowledge was only a perspectival *trompe-l'oeil* leading away from the reality of the mirrored language of analogy, similitude, and likeness. Signifier/signified; unity/variety; inside/outside: the antinomies are transformed into purely perspectival sites in the mirror of power. And what unifies the antinomies of the Sign, projecting them outwards as predicates of existence and then, in a quick reversal, dissolving them from within as purely symbolic effects already on their way to disintegration, is the existence of power as a process of abstraction and disembodiment. We are in the presence of a sign-system which functions on the basis of the liquidation of the real. Magritte's imagination is surrealistic to this extent: it teases out that precise point in the curvature of the ellipse of modern power in which power, abandoning its association with the psychology of sacrifice prepares to re-enter its own cycle of disintegration in the symbolic form of the psychology of seduction. This is the reverse side of Nietzsche's power/sacrifice: not the side of "conscience-vivisection and self-crucifixion"; but the dark side of conscience-cancellation and self-absorption. Like the exploding images in *The Door to Freedom* which collapse inwards only to reveal an endless, didactic recycling of the same image, power/seduction and power/sacrifice are reverse, but parallel, expressions of the same circuit of abstract power. It was Magritte's finest contribution to reveal that the real terrorism in Kant's antinomies has to do with the free-fall effect which they induce in the eye of power. Magritte's universe is decentered, silent, and metaphorical: his paintings, ranging from *The False Mirror* to the stereotype of *La Reproduction Interdite*, point to our incarceration in the downward plunge of a structuralist experience. As Nietzsche also knew, power can exist now only in exchange. Like Marx's abstract labour before it, power has an abstract (symbolic) existence as the illusionary (and thus metaphorical) form of the imposition of the "fictitious unity" of the categories of the real. Paradoxically, the abstract value of power in circulation depends on the constant disappearance from view of that mysterious force which has always been the inner dynamic of modern power: the "will to will". In *The Door to Freedom*, the "will to will" has a purely perspectival existence. It is the disciplined, optical effect by which the eye traces out a smooth, unbroken curvature between the shattered image and its recycled mirror-image: the instantaneous optical operation of dividing, and thus privileging the antinomies of foreground and background. While the imposition of a willed continuity is, in fact, the secret form of power in the "door to freedom", there is also a reverse, cancelling motion at work in the painting. There is also the censoring of the scream of Nietzsche's "in vain" as the eye projects a reality-principle into the tautology of the mirrored image.

## ARTHUR KROKER

Magritte's insights into the tautological and metaphorical basis of power have their theoretical analogue in the radical structuralism of Jean Baudrillard. In a brilliant series of works, extending from *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* to *Oublier Foucault* to *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Baudrillard has explored the meaning of a "dead power". In *Oublier Foucault*, Baudrillard has sensed something of the awesome truth that power which functions as a metaphor for that which has no existence is fascist in character. It presents itself in the "aesthetic ritual of death"<sup>2</sup> as a power which has no signification, except in purely symbolic form, outside of itself. And power can do this because it has no representational function: the secret of power's existence is quite simply, that "power does not exist".<sup>3</sup> Limitlessness means that power is the name given to a certain coherency of relations: the terms to the relation (the "antinomies" of modern experience) vanish; and the "radical relationalism" which is the form of power as an abstract medium works to exterminate embodied experience. For Baudrillard, at the heart of power is a "radical semiurgy" in which the real is forced to undergo a continuous process of resymbolization. The result is the spread of a "dead power", a void, which in a desperate strategy of concretization seeks to embody itself in the "reality-effects" of human speech and social action.

Jean Baudrillard is then the theoretician *par excellence* of a dead power, of a power which owes its seduction to the "imminence of the death of all the great referents" and to the violence which is exacerbated by their last, desperate attempts at representation. This is power, not on its expanding and symbolic side (the side of a *political and representational* theory of power), but on its reverse side: the side of symbolic reversal, just where power affirms itself as void, as having only a cynical existence.

This universal fascination with power in its exercise and its theory is so intense because it is a fascination with a *dead* power characterized by a simultaneous "resurrection effect", in an obscene and parodic mode, of all the forms of power already seen — exactly like sex in pornography.

(*Oublier Foucault*)

*Oublier Foucault* is Baudrillard's accusation against a purely representational theory of power. In this writing there is traced out a great figurative movement in which power, abandoning its association with force relations, agency, structure and distributional vectors, coils around and presents itself as an empty cycle of exchange: reversible, relational, and seductive as "challenge". Baudrillard's theorisation of power as a dead sign, and consequently as a relational and optical term, is as close as any modern writer has come to Nietzsche's dark meaning in *The Will to Power* when he suggested that power exists now only as a *perspectival appearance*. For Nietzsche then, as for Baudrillard now, what drives power on, making it so seductive as a purely symbolic medium, is *not* the expanding and accumulative side of power: the side of consumption *par*

## DEAD POWER

*excellence*. No, Power's secret lies in its intimate entanglement with death. It's just the existence of power as a challenge unto death, as a sign without a founding referent, which is the secret of the modern fascination with power. What Nietzsche described as the "will to will" (the abstract nucleus of a simulational model of power), Baudrillard denotes power as "challenge". This is power, then, *without* a reality-principle.

Indeed, in Baudrillard's estimation, Foucault's error was his almost nostalgic desire for power with a limiting term. In *Oublier Foucault*, Baudrillard notes that Foucault misinterprets the purely relational quality of modern power, just because he wished to tame power by closing the distance between power and its referents. The sociological vision of a normalizing society, or even the closed space of the panoptic, is not dangerous: Foucault's privileged world of the panoptic is just the positive space where power surrenders its non-existence as "challenge" and incorporates itself without a murmur of dissent into the valorized order of finalities (politics, sexuality, commodities). For Baudrillard, the dark side of power, the site where power is made dangerous once again, is just at that moment of reversal and cancellation when power, exploding beyond its *historical* signification by an order of referentialities, announces itself as a simulacrum and says that to accept its "challenge" is to enter a vortex of nothingness. It's just this *nihilistic* expression of power that Baudrillard theorizes; and not the positive order of representationality associated with *sociological power* (power/norm), *economic power* (power/commodity), or *political power* (power/sovereignty). Baudrillard's relational theorisation of power negates the affirmative order of reason only in order to recover the mythic origins of power. This is why, perhaps, Baudrillard can relativize Foucault's writings on the modern discourse of power/sexuality as the already obsolescent description of an era that is "now in the process of collapsing entirely".

But what if Foucault spoke so well to us concerning power — and let us not forget it in *real* objective terms which cover manifold diffractions but nonetheless do not question the objective point of view one has about them, and concerning power which is pulverized but whose *reality principle* is nonetheless not questioned — only because power is dead? Not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us, dissolved by reversal, cancellation, or made hyperreal through simulation (who knows?)

*Oublier Foucault*

In Baudrillard's world, power is always haunted by an "imaginary catastrophe" at its centre: the dilation of power now, after centuries of expansion, into a "single pure sign — the sign of the social whose density crushes us".<sup>4</sup> And if the "redoubled simulation" of power as it passes into its own simulacrum means the imminent death of all the great referents then it may also signify that fascism

## ARTHUR KROKER

is the precursor of a purely relational power. "As the violent reactivation of a form of power that despairs of its rational foundations, as the violent reactivation of the social in a society that despairs of its own rational and contractual foundations, fascism is nevertheless the only fascinating modern form of power".<sup>5</sup> And fascism's secret? It's just this:

Fascist power is then the only form which was able to reenact the ritual prestige of death, but in an already posthumous and phony mode, a mode of one-upmanship and *mise-en-scène*, and in an *aesthetic* mode — as Benjamin clearly saw — that was no longer truly sacrificial.

*Oublier Foucault*

For Baudrillard, fascism could remain the "only fascinating modern form of power" because it occupied that space in the cycle of power where politics in its sacrificial mode passes over, and instantaneously so, into the distinctly modern (cynical) region of power and seduction. And if fascism had about it an "*already nostalgic* obscenity and violence", if it was already passé as soon as it appeared in history, then this may only indicate why fascism remains the emblematic sign of modern power. "An eternal inner simulation of power, which is never already (*jamais déjà*) anything but the sign of what it was".<sup>6</sup>

Fascist power is, then, the political analogue of Magritte's *The Door to Freedom* and the paradigmatic expression of Baudrillard's "dead power". Baudrillard's world begins with the devalorisation of the social and with the loss forever of the autonomous historical subject. It's just this collapse of a rational foundation for power, the breakdown even of rationalization and its replacement by the new sociological principles of exteriorisation and simulation of the silent masses, which makes fascist power the dominant sign of the modern century. The loss forever of an embodied subject, of power with a reality-principle, also means that a fascist power is purely structuralist. On the side of the politics of seduction, Baudrillard's dead power is structured from within like Magritte's *The Door to Freedom*. In both instances, power is a pure relation: its structural code is tautology, metaphor, and lack.

That Baudrillard has been able to achieve such an austere deconstruction of power to its nihilistic traces may be due to the more sweeping fact that his imagination revolves around the conception of experience as a *simulacrum*. In his most metaphysical text, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Baudrillard remarked: "L'hyperéal n'est au-delà de la représentation que parce qu'il est tout entier dans la simulation. Le tourniquet de la représentation y devient fou, mais d'une folie implosive, qui, loin d'être excentrique, louche vers le centre, vers sa propre répétition en abyme".<sup>7</sup> For Baudrillard, we live now in the aesthetic inversion of the secret order of surrealism. Where once surrealism offered the possibility that privileged areas of "banal experience" could be transformed into special, artistic insights into the "hallucinatory" quality of modern experience, now "toute la réalité quotidienne . . . déjà incorporé la dimension simulatrice de

## DEAD POWER

l'hypperréalisme".<sup>8</sup> The eventual outcome of the transformation of experience into a *simulacrum* (a pure medium) is the introduction of an inner *redoublement* into the cycle of power. "C'est l'euphorie même de la simulation, qui se veut abolition de la cause et de l'effet, de l'origine et de la fin, à quoi elle substitue le redoublement".<sup>9</sup> In the *simulacrum*, the critique of the non-reality of a "real space" between the sign and its referent reveals the "referential illusion" at work in the interstices of (abstracted) experience for what it always was: "L'hallucination pathétique du signe et l'hallucination pathétique du réel".<sup>10</sup>

Baudrillard's *simulacrum* and Magritte's hallucinatory world of empty mediations *en abyme* spiral into one another as convergent texts because both contain a common, theoretical insight into the genealogy of modern power. Magritte and Baudrillard have, in fact, done the impossible: they have read social experience *in reverse image* in order to force the *imaginaire* of power to the surface. And they have done so by deciphering the enigmatic "code" of the deep, structural continuity in western experience: by, that is, interpreting the hieroglyphics of the "sign" as, at once, the DNA of the structural logic of experience, and the *limit* within which there takes place a relentless metamorphosis of embodied experience (labour, reflection, sex, death) into a language without passion.

Magritte, this exemplar of Nietzsche's artist, always understood the fatalistic tendency in the nightmare that he was exploring; and thus, there is no break in his imagination as he journeys deeper into the hidden recesses of power and the sign. *The False Mirror*, *Hooded Lovers*, *Memory*, *The Therapist*: these paintings are almost clinical diagnoses of the structural laws of value of a disembodied power. Magritte instructs us, and this carefully, in the invisible architecture of the binary language which forms the horizon of our imprisonment in a dead power. However, Baudrillard's project is different. His critical intention was, at first, more circumscribed: to project the radical implications of the theory of the sign into the domain of political economy. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard proposed to subvert Marx's *Capital* by showing that the sign was the structural code, the nuclear structure, of the commodity-form. For Baudrillard, the sign was the secret destiny of the commodity: the purely topographical structure of an "empty, symbolic exchange" within which there took place the fantastic "double-metamorphosis" in the circuit of capital. It was, in fact, Baudrillard's intention to disclose that the transformation of the commodity into the sign (*mercantilist* value-form into the *structural* law of value)<sup>11</sup> was the secret destiny of capital in the twentieth-century. This is why Baudrillard spoke of the "fetishism of the sign" and why, perhaps, so much of his early writings represent an ironic dialogue with the vanishing "object" of *Capital*. But it was also Baudrillard's fate to be the unwitting sorcerer of the Marxian legacy. His writings have teased out the Nietzschean regression which always existed on the dark side of Marx's "circuit of capital". By disclosing that the theory of the sign was the *morphology* of the double-metamorphosis of capital, and thus the structural genesis of the "magic" and "alchemy" of the fetishism of the commodity. Baudrillard also revealed that nihilism now takes root, not in the ideal substratum of Christian

## ARTHUR KROKER

morality, but in the culture of consumption itself. The “lack” which is the *imaginaire* at the centre of the culture of consumption is identical to the *abyss* which drives on the *ressentiment* and howling “spirit of revenge” in Christian metaphysics. The difference between the accumulation of grace and the cyclical movement of capital is only perspectival: this is the inverted region of the surrealist slide between the two sides of *The Will to Power*. On the *historical* side of the cycle of a nihilating power, revenge (against embodiment) is structured in the form of the psychology of sacrifice. The “signs” of sacrifice are idealistic projections of conditions of preservation: dead grace, dead love, dead spirits. On the *materialistic* side of the will to power, *ressentiment* speaks in the language of seduction. But the “signs” of seduction, which depend anyway on the “pumping out” of concrete labour into the carcass of “dead labour” (Marx) are only the *camera obscura* of the sickness of a sacrificial culture: hysterical consumption, charismatic technology (the new, material site of Heidegger’s “will to will”), and mutilated bodies. In consumer culture, labour does not exist nor does value. The shattering forever of the chain of referential experience means, in fact, that the prime players of ontology — labour, need, use-value, utility — are the symbolic horizon of the *simulacrum* at the centre of the circuit of nihilism. Thus, what is the *trompe-l’oeil* of *Capital/The Will to Power* but a perspectival illusion as the single cycle of exterminism in western culture, having achieved a frenzied moment of high abstraction in the psychology of sacrifice, now hurtles back towards the original locus of power — the body — for a second colonization. This time, though, nihilism in the value-form (the “sign”) of capital seduces the flesh with pleasure, not torture. But it’s all the same, and it’s exactly what is hinted at in Baudrillard’s discourse. *Capital* is a grisly, almost post-modern response, to Nietzsche’s haunting question: “Nihilism is standing at the door. Whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?”<sup>12</sup> *Capital* is forced to enter its own *simulacrum*, and to make a true confession of its continuous existence as a recitative of the “will of power”. All of Baudrillard’s thought has, as its gravitation-point, a violent and unpredictable discourse between Marx and Nietzsche: it is a brilliant reading of Marx’s critique of political economy as the sign that the cycle of nihilism is entering its last, and perfect, phase of seduction.

Perhaps it was Baudrillard’s stubborn insistence on seeing the Nietzsche in Marx: in taking the cyclical movement between “inertia and ecstasy” in *Capital* for what it was, a “stratégie fatale”, which plays out, in banal form, the *redoublement* of *The Will to Power*? Or, perhaps, it was his fundamental insight that the sign represents the locus of disembodiment and abstraction always sought, but never achieved, through the exteriorisation of the senses in the commodity-form? Whatever the reason, Baudrillard has stumbled upon the hidden reservoir of signs in western experience. In an almost mad rush of creativity — as if the sign could no longer tolerate the symbolic disguises behind which it was forced to hide its existence as a skeptical power — all of the structural canons of the *simulacrum* tumble out of Baudrillard’s thought. This is only to say, though, that Baudrillard makes explicit at the theoretical level what Magritte recognized

## DEAD POWER

immediately, and perhaps instinctively, in a purely artistic gesture. Magritte discloses the, optical, because metaphorical, rules by which the *imaginaire* constitutes the inner horizon of western experience. And Baudrillard? His writings represent a careening tour of the semantic norms governing the endless circulation of a bi-polar structural power. If Magritte's paintings reveal the hidden face of terror in Kant's "antinomies", then Baudrillard shows precisely the *semiological code* by which the antinomies transform concrete experience in the direction of the *simulacrum*. In Baudrillard's world, we are in flight through a vast, social apparatus which has, as its principle of motion, an inner, semiological transformation of every particle of experience — bodies, labour, power, money, speech — through an empty cycle of abstract, symbolic exchanges. The inner circulation of embodied experience into a downward spiral of exterminism only means that the *simulacrum* fulfills Nietzsche's aphorism that "nothing wants to be preserved". The rules surrounding the "cycle of liquidation" at the heart of power and the sign remain constant: a fantastic "semantic cancellation" at the centre of the exchange process; a relentless "semiological reduction" of experience to the tautology of binary language; the "satellisation of the real"; an "inner semiurgy" which works to impose symbols without original referents; the sovereignty of the "structural law of value".<sup>13</sup> In short, Baudrillard reveals that *The Door to Freedom* involves the liquidation of experience by the empty language of the sign; and that the sudden convergence in the modern century of power/sign is nothing less than the grammar of the culture of nihilism.

## II

Now, without irony, I wish to work a historical reversal of the surrealist imagery of the sign. I wish, in fact, to complete the fantastic discovery by Baudrillard and Magritte of power as a sign of "that which never was" by tracing the genealogy of abstract power to its genesis in the structural logic of early Christian metaphysics. If the existence of power as a pure sign-system can be so accurately described by Magritte and Baudrillard, then, maybe, this is because the arc of a dead power is already in reverse motion, tracing the path of an ellipsis which takes it back to its origins in the disembodiment, and even disempowerment, of power itself. What I want to theorize concerning the history of nihilism is simply this: the "sign" is but the disenchanting expression *par excellence* of the trinitarian formulation in Christian metaphysics. The sign is the *form* assumed by the will to power on its contemporary side, the side of the psychology of seduction; the trinity is the *structural code* of the will to power on the sacrificial side of its cycle. There is, however, one significant difference: in the language of the sign, but not in that of the trinity, the presence of the "will to will" as the third term unifying the poles (the mirrored antinomies) of signifier and signified is suppressed from sight. The sign is, therefore, the trinity with its essential secret — the *abstract will* — made invisible.

The genuine originality of the discourse of Baudrillard/Magritte, and I could

also add the great, radical insight in New French Thought, extending through the structuralism of Derrida, Kristèva, Deleuze, and Foucault, is that, however unsuspectingly, they force us beyond the rubicon of representational theory. Their work provides a quick passage right through the eye of Nietzsche's will to power; from the side of (our) disenchantment in the society of the "sign" to the dramatic inversion of power in Christian dogma. The suppressed truth of structuralist discourse is precisely this: there is no fundamental discontinuity in the history (metaphysics) of power in western experience. The "sign" is, in fact, not antinomic, but trinitarian. And it is trinitarian because the discourse of the sign is but a concretization in the direction of banality and inertia of the primitive Christian doctrine of the will. What is nihilism on the "Christian" side of the will to power? It's the (semantic) reduction of experience to the "semiological code" of the trinity: an anthropology of the *imaginaire* in the value-form of "God", which was, anyway, only a semantic substitute for the disappearance of the embodied will. And what is nihilism in the contemporary century? It's simply this: structuralism reinvested by the will to power in the name of seduction. Baudrillard's *simulacrum* is canonical power with the head of God exploded from within.

This radical discovery of a deep continuity in the structural morphology of power commits us to follow through the Nietzschean regression which is, today, what the culture of nihilism is all about. We are plunging through the inner reversal in experience, past the nihilism of *Capital*, past the reality-flashes of dead money, dead status, and dead prestige, to the silent, inner reservoir of a cynical power, a cynical history, and a cynical God. The arc of a dead power traces a great trajectory back to a specific historical moment, and this not in the twentieth- but in the fourth-century, to where there took place the assassination of Christ (the elimination of *embodied* will) and the birth of God (the empire of abstract power). It is, indeed, the fateful figure of Augustine who stands at the beginning of the ellipse of modern power; and it is towards his theorisation of the metaphysics of a purely rhetorical power that society now dissolves. It is as if Augustine marks a great threshold in western consciousness: the silencing, on the one side, of the cynicism of the *amor fati*; and the eruption, on the other, of the *lack* which drives forward the *simulacrum*. In his texts — vast regions of theoretical discourse — Kant's judgement, Nietzsche's insight into power as a "perspectival illusion", Marx's "dead labour", and Baudrillard's "dead power" — suddenly fuse together as particles in a great and common field of discourse: a discourse which has its structural genesis in Augustine's fundamental inversion of the order of western experience. Augustine's texts, ranging from the *Confessions* to the *City of God* to *De Trinitate* are the fundamental rupture from which everything explodes outwards in a furious burst of nihilism: an explosion of the "in vain" which now becomes more visible to the extent that power, as a sign of nothingness, spreads out in the social form of banality.

We can capture something of Augustine's importance as the limit and horizon of the modern project by understanding his theory of power for what it is: the reverse image and completion (on the side of sacrificial power) of the

## DEAD POWER

theory of power/seduction proposed by Baudrillard and Magritte. There is, indeed, almost a family resemblance between Augustine's purely topographical world of "serenity" and Magritte's tortured, but also silent and serene, world of violently detached fragments of experience. Magritte's vivid depiction of the referential illusion at the centre of modern existence has its (philosophical) origin in Augustine's liquidation of the warring tension in the field of embodied experience. Magritte is, in fact, only releasing in the medium of painting the scream which has been suppressed in western consciousness by the cancellation of the finitude of the body (through Augustine's "conversion"), and by *our* reduction to the will to truth of a vast, delusional system of signs. Thus we might say that Augustine's conversion is the philosophical anthropology of Magritte's *The Door to Freedom*.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, there is an actual, written account of the exact moment at which there took place a fundamental rupture in the interstices of western consciousness. Augustine's conversion in the garden at Cassiacium marks a great threshold in the western mind: a fundamental, seismic division between the warring antinomies of classical experience, and the "serenity" of the undivided will (the "will to will") of modernism. Augustine's account of the bitter struggle of his conversion is, in fact, a metaphysical exploration of the desperate struggle of the will to overcome the finitude of the body. The "conversion" is, really, from one philosophical *épistème* to another: from the impossible tensions of classicism (symbolized by the skepticism of stoicism and the dogmatism of Platonic rationalism) to the "serenity" of the will breaking in upon itself in the (reified) form of its own simulation. "Thus soul-sick was I, and tormented, accusing myself much more severely than my wont, rolling and turning me in my chain, till that were wholly broken, whereby I now was but just, but still was, held".<sup>14</sup> Augustine's project was to close forever the "eye of the flesh" and to open the "inner eye" to a God (who was not there), to an *abstract* power. And thus when Augustine says, "And now it spake very faintly. For on that side whither I had set my face, and whither I trembled to go, there appeared unto me the chaste dignity of Contineny, serene, yet not relaxedly, gay, honestly alluring me to come and doubt not",<sup>15</sup> he is midway (psychologically) between the finitude of the embodied will and the *imaginaire* of the will to will. Augustine's conversion ("a light of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away")<sup>16</sup> marks a fundamental divide in the western mind: it is at this point, in fact, that the will to will (the sole condition of possibility for the liquidation of "doubt") is transposed into a predicate of existence. Indeed, it could even be said that Nietzsche's project of diagnosing the "sickliness" of "two thousand years of Christian morality" is in the way of a circling around to that epochal moment when Augustine "nilled" embodied experience (Nietzsche's "becoming") *from within* by transforming the will into a pure, abstract medium. The free-fall into the *imaginaire*, which Baudrillard will later identify as the "eternal, inner simulacrum" of power and which Magritte will paint as a world horizoned by a relational will to truth, has its philosophical genesis in that slight *trompe-l'oeil* of the first fall into the "inner

## ARTHUR KROKER

eye" of power. And everything is driven on, psychologically, by a fierce "spirit of revenge" against the body: "But Thou, O Lord, are good and merciful, and Thy right hand had respect unto the depth of my death, and from the bottom of my heart emptied that abyss of corruption. And this Thy whole gift was, to nill what I willed, and to will what Thou willedst".<sup>17</sup> From this moment on, the will, disembodied and having only a *rhetorical* existence, is fully implicated in a topographical empire of delusion. Having no (real) existence of its own, the will discovers its truth-value (Nietzsche's "fictions") in a dominion of signs which undergo an endless metamorphosis in a mirrored world of tautology, metaphor, and simulation. After Augustine, power could only exist on the condition that it operate as an abstract medium. The inner "surrealistic slide" (Barthes) at the centre of abstract power (a sign-system without a real referent) was counterpointed, and thus disguised, by the hysterical compulsion of canonical law. That Augustine was also obsessed with the creation of a complex system of liturgical signification (the functionality of the *ordo conditionae nostrae*) only meant that the inner regression which drove on an abstract power depended for its very (simulated) existence on the deployment of a functional and symbolic replication (at the corporate level) of the body. As an early father of the Sign, Augustine also illustrated that the psychotic inversion (apparent over embodied unities) represented by the circulation of abstract power would operate in a language which was functional, reductive, and hyper-real. It is the silent terrorism of the "aesthetics of the hyper-real" which is, in fact, the object of Magritte's artistic imagination. And why? Perhaps because since Augustine nothing has changed in the deep, structural code of western experience: it has all been a ceaseless "outring" or "ablation" of embodied experience into the medium of abstract power. From Augustine's conversion on, the structural logic of western experience remains the same. What changes, and this continuously, is the specific truth-effector (metonymy) which horizons the exteriorisation of the senses into the *simulacrum* of the abstract will: grace (Augustine), critical reason (Kant), normativity (Spencer), fear (Hobbes), communications (McLuhan).

But if there is a startling topographical filiation between Magritte and Augustine and if, in fact, we can claim that Augustine set in motion the structural code of nihilism, then this is only because Augustine's primary contribution — the doctrine of the Trinity — is an early, but never superceded, description of the inner circuitry of the sign. There is, perhaps, no more fundamental account of the limits of the modern project than Augustine's *De Trinitate*. This text is, and this implicitly, an extended reflection on the metaphysics of the conversion experience. It exists now as one of the central documents of western thought because of its explicit and detailed analysis of the discursive formulations surrounding the inner, genetic structural logic of modern society. *De Trinitate* is on the other, positive side of *The Will to Power*. It is so because the "trinitarian formulation" is disclosed to be the basic condition of possibility for the operation of the modern mind. It is, in effect, the structural logic of the trinity which has been projected outwards as the basic categories (metaphorical) of western existence. Everything that Nietzsche says

## DEAD POWER

about the *inverted*, structural logic of modern consciousness exists, in crystalline form, in this text. Power as a "perspectival appearance", an inverted order of reality with the power of death over life, the reign of "apparent unities", the "fictions" of form, species, law, ego, morality, and purpose: Nietzsche's searing insights into reality as an illusion have their genealogical root, and reverse image, in the *simulated* categories of *De Trinitate*. Indeed, long before Kant (repeating the radical discovery of Augustine) abandoned knowledge of immediate experience and retreated to the *simulacrum* of procedural and regulatory knowledge unified by abstract judgement, Augustine had already undertaken a similar phenomenology of the western mind. It was Augustine's unique accomplishment to overcome the *stasis* in classical experience, represented by the antinomies of idealism and positivism, by seeking a new, *purely formal but internal*, principle of unification. As the Canadian thinker, Charles N. Cochrane, has claimed in his classic text, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Augustine transformed the Athens-Jerusalem debate into a new, and more dynamic, synthesis by the simple expedient of abandoning the search for an "external mediation" of experience.<sup>18</sup> Augustine subverted the representational logic of classical experience with the introduction of a *tautological, metaphorical, and rhetorical medium of symbolic exchange* as the source of a new, internal mediation of experience.<sup>19</sup> Augustine's trinity is a vacant exchange process in which the divided will of embodied experience is transformed, through an "inner semiurgy" (Baudrillard), into the serene transparency of the "will to will". Augustine is the precursor of the modern world because he succeeded, where others had failed, in discovering the magical formula of western experience: the transformation of (our) formal possibilities for survival into absolute categories of existence.

This is just to say that Augustine formulated the rhetorical rules surrounding the sign-form as the locus of modern experience. Augustine's trinity represents in emblematic and almost diamond-shaped form the secret origin, and destiny, of western consciousness. There is, indeed, no need to look further than the trinity for the genealogical source of a society which disintegrates into the dark night of nihilism. The trinity contains in codified form the whole structural logic of institutional action which is at the epicentre of the structure of western experience. And it does this, of course, *not* as a religious doctrine (God was always only a reality-effect disguising the simulation) but as the structural logic of identity (the identitarian logic of the sign) which informs the mystery of unity/contradiction in the deepest interstices of being. In its metaphysical, but really semiological, formulations, we discover the most reductive, and transparent, description possible of the "apparent unity" in which the (regulatory and procedural) conditions for our preservation are transformed into "predicates of existence". When Nietzsche said that "nothingness spreads", then he may also have had in mind the imaginary, and thus fictitious, quality of the trinitarian formulation. For the very existence of the trinity depends on a succession of structuralist principles, each of which is a recitation of nihilism. Everything is there: *the substantialisation of the imaginary* (Augustine remarked that the riddle of

finite experience was solved when he realized that "spirit was substantial"); *the extermination of corporeal existence as a referent of the real* (the "nilling" of the flesh); and *the privileging of the crede ut intellegas* (the precursor of Nietzsche's "will to truth").<sup>20</sup> To examine anew the formulations of *De Trinitate* is to gain special insight into the modern project, at the very moment of its inception and from the inside out. It is, in fact, a rare moment when the hidden, metaphysical locus of the western mind spreads itself out for scrutiny, when, in effect, the structural code which will come to limit experience is compelled to disclose its secret. Long in advance of the "perfect nihilism" of the modern century, the trinitarian formulation signifies the incarceration (and resymbolization) of corporeal existence into an abstract and semiurgical sign-system: an imperialism of the sign which declares that, henceforth, power will be rhetorical because the *signs* of power (the triadic and simulated trinity of being/will/consciousness) are only "perspectival unities" masking our plunge downwards into the *regressus in infinitum*.

Baudrillard's *simulacrum*, this wonderful statement on the purely rhetorical structure of modern power, is only in the way of a final coming-home to the doctrine of the trinity as the invisible text of the will to power. We are speaking now of fully commensurable texts, of parallel theorisations of the sign-form which fly towards one another as perspectival points on a common ellipsis. There is, in fact, almost a perfect fit between Baudrillard's theorisations of the inner circuitry of the sign and Augustine's formulations of the rhetorical principles of the trinity. Baudrillard's celebrated insight into the "semantic cancellation" at work in the *simulacrum* is an echo of Augustine's earlier, philological reduction of the sign-system of the trinity (father/memory as signifier; son/intelligence as signified; and voluntas/will as the perspectival closing of the tautology) to a "sound which is made by no language".<sup>21</sup> And Baudrillard's "semiological reduction" is nothing more than Augustine's insight that in the mirror of the trinity, signifier and signified circle back towards one another as refracted (and simulated) images in a common tautology. Between the simulacrum and the trinity, there is a great logic of equivalence. Baudrillard speaks now of the "radical questioning of the real" which takes place through the exercise of a "dead power"; Augustine had already formulated the dead signs of "beauty, truth, and goodness" as *simultaneous* extermination-points of the real and simulations of "apparent" life.<sup>22</sup>

Like the sign-form, the trinity is nothing-in-itself; it is a pure "perspectival illusion" which functions by pumping out the domain of the real, and by reducing experience to its *inverted form* in a semiological logic of abstraction, simplification, and equivalence.

Almost in the image of the "empty, symbolic exchange" at the centre of the *simulacrum*, the trinity is a circulating medium in which everything, having been resymbolized into the value-form of *memory* (the "semiological reduction" of time) and *truth* (the value-form of liquidated imagination) is thrown into a cycle of exchange. Like Baudrillard's "seduction" which drives on the cycle of exchange of an abstract power, and which is, anyway, only a disguise of the will

## DEAD POWER

to power; the trinity is mediated by *caritas* which, like its later counter-part in seduction, only means the charisma of the will to will. With its transformation of experience into a tautological, metaphorical and regulatory cycle of exchange, the trinity is only on the other side of the disenchanted world of the *simulacrum*. It's all the same: the semiological rules of operation are identical — analogy, similitude, and refraction. And in the logic of the sign-system, whether that of the trinity or the *simulacrum*, the simulated poles of experience (memory/truth; signifier/signified) collapse towards one another in an "inner slide" of co-referentiality and co-laterality.<sup>23</sup> An inner cycle of the elimination of the real is at work. That is why, perhaps, Baudrillard's "structural law of value", the "aesthetics of hyper-realism", and the nightmarish vision of experience thrown into its own "inner semiurgy" is but the rediscovery of Augustine's insight: the trinity owes its charisma, *not* to the preservation of the real, but to the disappearance of the real into its own vanishing-point. The "unmoved mover" which is the locus of death at the receding centre of the "inner eye" is just what Baudrillard will later say: It's "lack", the "void" which drives on consumption and which makes our extermination in the simulacrum an entirely satisfying condition for (our) preservation.

### III

Is it not, at least, ironic that we have always lived within the horizon of *De Trinitate*? And is it not a significant contribution by Baudrillard and Magritte that they have compelled us to confront a cynical power? Nietzsche reported on only one side of the will to power: the *sacrificial* cycle of exchange symbolized by the enchantment of the world with the *ressentiment* of "grace". It's our fate now to live in that dark region where power suddenly passes over into its opposite, the plunging downwards of society into the last cycle of the Nietzschean regression. This is the side of hyper-materialism as nihilism. We thus live on the imploded side of the will to power: the side of empty seduction, dead labour, and abstract power. And symbolic of the modern century is the radical disenchantment of the sign. What else can explain our taking delight in images of dead society, fragmented bodies, and video ideology as signs that, at least, we know we are trapped in the "joke" of a cynical history. The age of "perfect nihilism" is recuperative to this extent: we are the people who know that Nietzsche's "joke" continues. The convergence of trinity/sign as structurally identical value-forms means that we have *never* escaped "two thousand years of Christian morality". Barthes had the formula of modern anguish right: the metaphor (trinity/sign) abides; the metonymy (sacrifice/seduction) alters.<sup>24</sup> That Baudrillard and Magritte force us back to the genealogical traces of nihilism in Augustine only means that we are being swept away, once more, in the reverse motion of the eternal recurrence.

Department of Political Science  
Concordia University

## ARTHUR KROKER

### Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1968, p. 276.
2. Jean Baudrillard, "Forgetting Foucault", *Humanities in Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter, 1980, p. 110
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid*; p. 105.
5. *Ibid*; p. 110.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976, p. 114.
8. *Ibid*; p. 115.
9. *Ibid*; pp. 114-115.
10. *Ibid*; p. 115.
11. *Ibid*; p. 76.
12. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 7.
13. For Baudrillard's most comprehensive description of the critique of the political economy of the commodity-form, see his text, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972. In this text, Baudrillard explores the significance of "la réduction semiologique" for a critique of the referent of production. Baudrillard discusses the "satellisation of the real" in two important essays, "L'économie politique comme modèle de simulation" and "L'hyperéalisme de la simulation", both of which appear in *L'échange symbolique et la mort*.
14. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, translated by E.B. Pusey, New York: Collier Books, 1961, p. 129
15. *Ibid*; pp. 129-130.
16. *Ibid*; p. 131.
17. *Ibid*; p. 128.
18. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940. It was Cochrane's thesis that Augustine's development of the "trinitarian formulation" provides the "creative principle" for the imminent unification of western experience that classical discourse had always sought for in vain. For an extended reflection on the significance of Cochrane's metaphysical analysis of Augustine, see my earlier article, "Augustine as the Founder of Modern Experience: The Legacy of Charles Norris Cochrane", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol.3, No.3, Fall, 1982, pp. 79-119.
19. St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963. Augustine's "trinity" fuses the ABSTRACT REFERENTS of knowing/willing/knowledge as co-relational predicates of each other. It's not that becoming is its own ground, as much as the

## DEAD POWER

opposite: the abstract referents of experience simulate the ground of unification to which concrete experience will be delivered. Augustine says, for example, "But in these three, when the mind knows itself and loves itself, a trinity remains: the mind, love, and knowledge; and there is no confusion through any commingling, although each is a substance in itself, and all are found mutually in all, whether each one in each two, or each two in each one. Consequently, all are in all". This is the metaphysical genesis of the simulacrum because the three *relations* in the trinity are *abstractions* from embodied experience. *The Trinity*, p. 227.

20. In *The Confessions*, Augustine emphasized the possibility of the "direct deliverance" of consciousness. "For I AM, and KNOW, and WILL; I AM KNOWING AND WILLING; and I KNOW myself to Be, and to WILL; and I WILL to BE, and to KNOW". p. 234.
21. St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, p. 483.
22. The trinity provides an abstract unity for western experience, a simulated coherency which is carried forward, on the side of sacrificial power, by the referents of beauty, truth, and goodness. This is also Nietzsche's combination of the will to virtue, the will to truth, and the will to judgement as the ABSTRACT COHERENCY of the will to power.
23. The abstract unity of western experience traces an internal curvature in which the categories of existence refract one another: Augustine remarks that "the mind should know itself as it were in a mirror". *The Trinity*, p. 298.
24. R. Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972, p. 242.