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Review of

Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film: Fatal Theory and Education

by Kip Kline. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.

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Kline's book *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film* starts out with a rather provocative statement: "These are desperate times for children and adolescents" (p. 1). Though this statement is somewhat problematic in my mind—in that it always seems that young people are in *desperate times* according to the adult world—Kline's book is genuine in its contention that the North American West, though steeped in a rhetoric of "what's best for the children" (p. 1), is actually, and has always been, rather hostile towards young people. Young human beings are generally assumed to be in a period of rebellious transgression and/or complete and utter confusion. Whether adolescence is naturally imbued with a defiant and rebellious tendency or these dispositions are adopted by youth through countless years of adult suggestion and imposition, the adolescent subject, or "teenager," is typically perceived as unable to understand how the world operates; that is, how to see things from an adult perspective. It is of course not adolescents who make such claims about themselves, but the adults who write about them, for them, and most importantly, *as* them.

Kline's book is unexpectedly unique in its analysis of adults' representation of teens through Baudrillard's radical social theory and philosophical system. Though the book emphasizes Baudrillard's theory of media and provides rare insights into the depiction of adolescents in American teen movies of the past forty years, it is Kline's main argument that makes his book so alluring. He contends that these cinematic depictions produce very troubling results, "namely the contributions they make to the discursive violence towards young people that ends up finding an entrenched space in adult-controlled modern institutions" (p. 2). Throughout modernity, young people have been represented through a vast array of cultural products and materials; a fairly specific discourse of youth has been delineated through everything from early chapbook adventures like the Cornish fairy tale *Jack the Giant Slayer* (1760) to the ubiquitous reproductions staged through teen mini-series (such as creator Brian Yorkey's teen suicide mystery drama, *13 Reasons Why* (2017). Kline suggests that "contemporary American movies often contribute to the post-modernization of some of G. Stanley Hall's more dubious claims about Adolescence" (p. 2). Indeed, Hall's theories—mainly taken from his *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (1905)—continue to hold tremendous clout in how the adult world tends to understand young people. Hall viewed adolescence as a period of inner turmoil and vulnerability—seemingly referencing Goethe's classic *Sturm und Drung* (Storm and Stress) novels like *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)—requiring adult supervision and

intervention. While a historical and cultural genealogy of the modern public imagination surrounding young people is both fascinating and vital in understanding the forms of violence in which Kline seems interested, his book takes a different focus. Kline's book "is to explore the meanings and effects of the simulacra of adolescents in American movies through a Baudrillardian analysis, to subsequently tease out the problems of the portrayal of youth in film and finally, to suggest Baudrillardian responses" (p. 4).

Kline's first chapter is an exploration of what might be imagined as the experience of childhood throughout contemporary American history. This chapter utilizes Stephan Mintz's and Thomas Hine's historiographies of American Childhood, which point directly at the changing atmosphere surrounding the concept of "young person" in the mid-twentieth century. Though there was a fear of rising delinquency during the middle of that century, actual delinquent crimes were often at an all-time low. Films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) were decidedly used by the film industry to "help … promulgate the notion of the rise of delinquency" (p. 17) and thus buttress the "media popularization of a particular moral panic regarding youth" (p. 17). This chapter also discusses the establishment of a targeted youth and child market, a market potential first recognized by Eugene Gilbert and subsequently discussed in his *Advertising and Marketing to Young People* of 1957.

The theoretical foundation of the book is laid out in the second chapter. There, we are referred to Baudrillard's insistence that films, and certainly TV, "disrupt the dialectical relationship between reality and illusion" (p. 40). Kline subsequently offers explanations as to the consequences of such a disruption. He briefly invokes the work of Walter Benjamin, for where "Benjamin thought that mediated art and mass media … had revolutionary possibilities" (p. 37), Baudrillard understood the work of art in the age of reproduction "as the beginning of the end of the dialectical relationship between illusion and the real" (p. 37). I think it worth mentioning that I have some reservations about Baudrillard's recourse, as evidenced in Kline's book, to a particularly Marxist dialectical understanding of the relationship between the "real" and what counts as "illusion," as this suggests a somewhat narrow approach of false consciousness. If we are to invoke a dialectical understanding—where illusion is placed as polar to reality—what then would be the next logical step of mediation, and thereby transcendence, in such a scenario? What teleological end or absolute truth does the pulse of the Hegelian system, in this case, push our understanding towards? Would not a disruption between reality and illusion, as Baudrillard mentions above, *be* the mediating result? If Baudrillard desires for the viewer to be ever aware of the viewed film *as* representation of reality (something of a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, a necessary and strategic alienation), then we are only locating contradictions, whereas a true dialectical approach seeks resolution in transcendence. Thankfully, Kline does address this concern in later chapters and, although it doesn't clear up my personal reservations, offers enough explanation that one feels safe in further following his lead.

Referring to the paintings on the walls of the French caves of Lascaux—and their contemporary gift shop replications for mass consumption—Kline points us to another of Baudrillard's contentions. He insists that in the state of *integral reality* the real and apparent worlds completely collapse into a full realization of the simulacrum, which "results from the loss of specificity of the one and of the other" (p. 39). I wonder, then, if this is not exactly what so many anti-Hegelian theorists have levelled against the dialectic's power to necessarily negate. If the loss of specificity between one thing and another propels us into complete simulacral realization, it seems very much like the process of a dialectical progression through history, where only certain aspects are retained *as* history and the many singularities, or

differences in events, are mediated or negated away and out of the conceptual system altogether. We no longer worry about the multiplicity of events that have actually happened, only the events that have lasted through the mediation of the dialectic. In the Baudrillardian case, we no longer need wonder about the *real* that may have existed before the third or fourth order of the simulacrum; we have lost "the specificity of the one and of the other" (p. 39) resulting in their being disconnected from anything that may have once been real and thus assuring that they no longer exist in the active social imaginary. For me, this question remains open, but Kline moves us quickly away from these dialectical considerations—and rightly so for this is not a book about Baudrillard, Neo-Hegelianism, and the critics thereof. Our attention is moved to considering the representations of youth in American films and how they can be compared with Baudrillard's third order of the image and the "integral reality" of the fourth order. For those not having read Baudrillard's 1981 philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*, nor having a base understanding of his *Fatal Strategies* (1983), Kline chaperones his readership through this dense theory, attentively, effectively and with explanatory skill.

Kline's book, however, is certainly no chronicle of American teen film, and our author assures us that he is not interested in documenting trends or in exhibiting a host of simulacral instances. He is, however, deeply concerned with "how simulated and hyperreal youth in movies serve to reinscribe certain anxieties and the ways in which that phenomenon ends up functioning as a means of social control" (p. 41). As an example of this, we read about the popular early-eighties film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982). Though Cameron Crowe, both writer of the book and director of the movie, "did not want to become yet another adult writing about adolescents and *the kids* from an adult perspective" (as cited in Kline, p. 43), Kline reminds us that "in the literal sense there is no getting outside of Crowe telling us a story about teenagers from an adult perspective" (p. 43). In her now canonical book *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction,* distinguished literary critic Jacqueline Rose states that texts specifically for young people "set up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver), and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but neither of them enter the space between" (Rose, 1984, p. 2). Indeed, the same relationship exists in the world of contemporary teen film. Larry Clark's "faux documentary"-style film *Kids* (1995), reminiscent of the 1970s era of Problem Novels such as Beatrice Sparks' *Go Ask Alice* (1971) and M. E. Kerr's *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* (1972), exaggerates the plight of the teenager—often in an overtly decontextualized portraiture of urban teens and over-the-top depictions of drugs, sex and violence—in an attempt to reveal the *true* struggles that *real* teens are said to experience. No matter how genuine the intentions of the author or director to show truth, to show the real, we would do well to heed Baudrillard's words, as quoted by Kline: "It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful, and most in conformity with reality that the image is most diabolical" (p. 45). Indeed, the naturalism of an Émile Zola can never capture the actual lived experience of the street prostitute that such an author aims to reveal, but only allows for a simulated reproduction. Kline is quite sure that the hyperreal nature of contemporary teen film seeks to do the same, missing its mark in such a way as was never possible to hit, and instead creates simulated events detached from anything that may have once been grounded in the real.

Despite my enthusiasm for Kline's book, there is one aspect of Chapter Three that I view with some concern that once again invokes a dialectical contemplation. Kline's constant reference to the 1980s films of John Hughes, which Kline views as perhaps "among the last of Hollywood's teen films (foregrounding rebellion, the party) that maintain a modicum of what attracted Baudrillard to cinema— illusion" (p. 57), is juxtaposed with contemporary films like Michael Bacall's *Project X* (2012), which

Kline offers as an example of a fourth-order simulation *par excellence*. This constant juxtaposition continually prompts us to view the last forty years of teen films as progressing through the Hegelian dialectical system—a dialectical progression through history. It is only now, in the present day with films like *Project X*, that this particular progression has seemingly negated most other forms of the teen film, thus proceeding, or transcending, into the fourth simulacral stage rather than staying in the second and only slightly illusory stage which characterized the films of the 1980s. If the teen party film has indeed actually *become* the party, as Kline insists *Project X* has, and crosses into a stage of simulation from which there is no return, what about films that decidedly do *not* incorporate found footage, such as the young-adult-novel-made-film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012)? If we hold to Kline's claim that we have indeed reached the "end of the teen film," experienced as the fourth simulacral stage, teen films up until this supposed end have indeed progressed dialectically through a "teen film history" of sorts, negating one form for another, until, in this case, the mediating synthesis is but a further level of abstraction where there is no longer any relation or relevance to a once more simple, albeit illusory, reality. It is at this point that movies like *Project X* no longer represent an out-of-control teenage party, but that "the film is the party it seeks to simulate" (p. 62).

Chapters Four and Five explore "real time" exhibited through Sophia Coppola's film *The Bling Ring* (2013)*,* and Kline subsequently offers a terrific analysis of teenage character archetypes and the "demand to produce a personality in late capitalism" (p. 102) through John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Chapter Four discusses the drawbacks of "critical media literacy's emancipatory strategies [as] impuissant" (p. 86), with Kline suggesting, like Baudrillard, that "the simulacrum of the teenager requires a fatal strategy—one that fights sardonicism with even more sardonicism, that pushes conditions until they flip" (p. 85). This would seem to invoke once again the power of the dialectic to supposedly reverse the binary of a contradiction in thought. The real jewel of Chapters Four and Five is found close to the end where Kline entices us towards "Baudrillard's way out of the simulated identities in the particular context of youth" (p. 93). Invoking the Baudrillardian methods and tools we have all now acquired, Kline navigates us into the last chapter entitled "Fatal Strategies for a New Education: Resistance After the Murder of the Real." Kline, however, provides for us a word of caution: adopting Baudrillardian fatal strategies "will mean abandoning our projects, even our favoured progressive ones" (p. 112), for "a reversal of the discourse around young people and education involve[ing] an effort to render the world enigmatic for them" (p. 122).

If fatal strategies are about restoring illusion, and Kline says this is so, then I once again have some reservations about who exactly decides what kind of illusion is to be restored. Despite my skepticism, I would say that Kline's real contribution to his field is found in his insistence that Baudrillardian radical thought, and what he calls "postmodern hope," might actually allow for a way out of the seemingly endless critique of representation and misrepresentation of young people, whether I agree with said strategies or not. In a scholarly area where "the preponderance of arguments [are] based in classical (mostly Plato and Aristotle) and modern (mostly Dewey and critical theory) thought" (p. 114), Kline's appeal to a Baudrillardian framework actively dismisses the tactics of snark and accusations of incredulity so commonly found in the arsenal of critical pedagogues. He tells us that these methods only end up reinforcing the rationality of the present late capitalist system, amounting to an "outmoded dialectical critique adorned with the accoutrements of the social media age that ends up adding to a set of signs to be consumed" (p. 116).

Kline's last chapter nicely clears up issues pertaining to the limits of a dialectical critique and his use of the Baudrillardian fatal strategies allows for the theorist's very dense and yet incredibly applicable work to be both accessible and, more importantly, usable. We are therefore, and with many thanks to Kline, in a better place to understand the violence done to real living young people through the inscription of hyperreal teenager archetypes into films ostensibly made for them. Kline's journey is one of "restoring children and adolescents their own strangeness, [and] encouraging a sense of inner alterity and radical otherness" (p. 123), and I would suggest to educators, students and everyone who genuinely cares about how our world represents, structures and interacts with the lives of young people to earnestly consider adding Kip Kline's book to their reading lists for serious study, and to their personal libraries for continual inspiration.

References

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About the Author

Mark Houghton is a Ph.D. candidate in OISE's Department of Social Justice Education at the University of Toronto. His main areas of interest are philosophy of education, rhetorical theory, subculture studies, and how emotion affects precarious forms of work, labour and identity. Through each of these areas, Mark looks for helpful epistemologies that aid in deterritorializing modernity's cultural constructed discourse of "young people."