

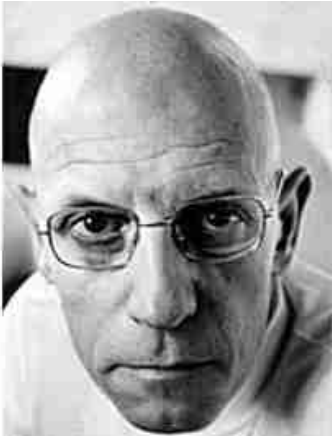
# **Postmodernism**

(in a nutshell)

# Note on Terminology

- Very few of authors regarded as 'Postmodern' consider themselves postmodernists!
- Most intellectuals considered 'Postmodern' are French (or French Canadian)
- 'Postmodern' is often used as a term of derision (especially by neo-Marxists and conservatives)
- 'Post-modernism' is often used interchangeably with 'Post-structuralism' although these mean different things in different fields.

# Some (in)famous “post-structuralists”



Michel Foucault  
**Knowledge = power**



Jacques Derrida  
“Deconstruction”



Edward Said  
“Orientalism”



Jean Baudrillard  
“Hyper-reality and  
Simulations”



Jean-François Lyotard  
“End of Meta-narratives”

# Postmodernism: *within* or *beyond* Modernity?

1. **Opponents of ‘postmodernism’:** We still live in the same old, modern society. These people use the term “postmodernism” to refer to **a cultural reaction *within* modern societies**, e.g. a sense of disillusionment.
2. **‘Postmodernists’:** Even though they don’t call themselves ‘Postmodernists’, these authors argue (or are understood as arguing) that **we have entered a new era *beyond* modernity**.

# Some tenets of 'Post-Modernism'

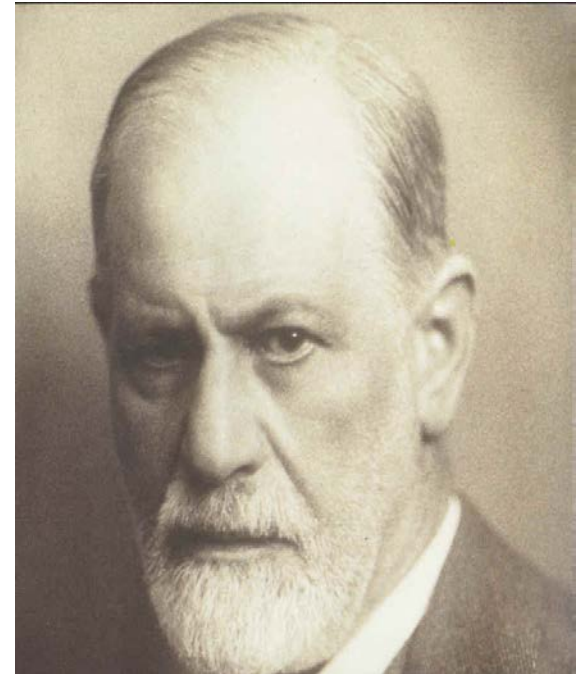
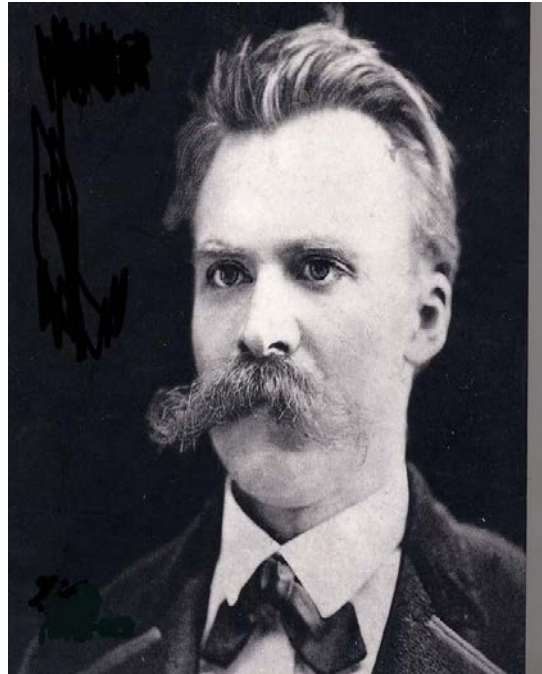
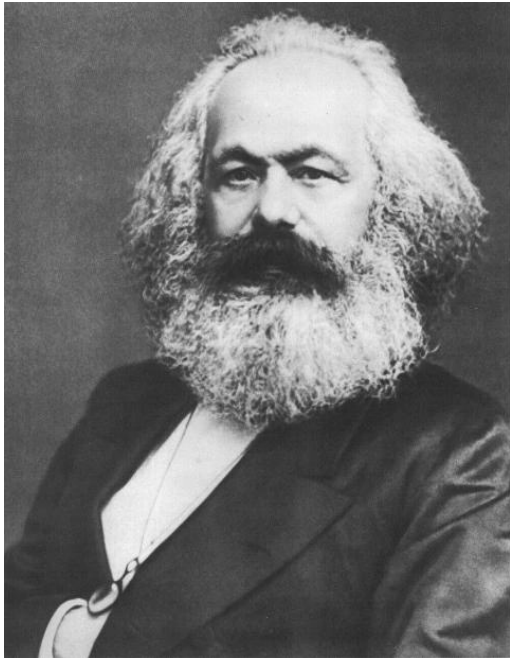
- Opposition to universals, 'meta-narratives', and generality; critical of the Enlightenment.
- History isn't progress
- There is no 'Truth' (or Truth has no 'foundations')
- People ('subjects' or 'subjectivity') are products of power, and power is everywhere [Foucault]

# Postmodern buzz-words and slogans

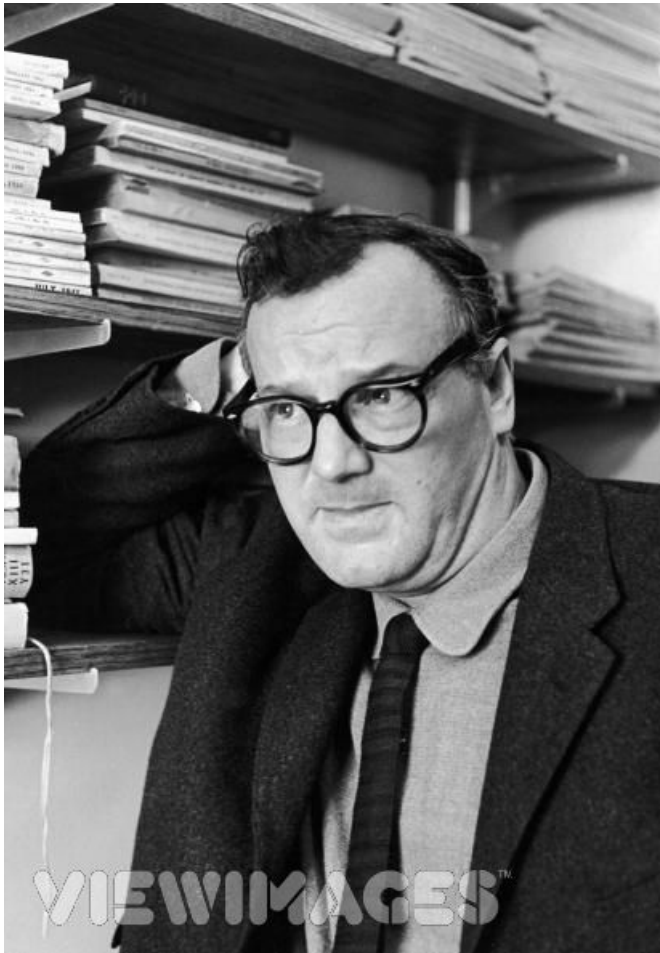
- Opposes **essentialism, binaries and binary thinking, the 'subject', Western meta-narratives,**
- Supports *sub-altern peoples*, marginalized, identities, **'the Other'**.

# “The Masters of Suspicion”

- Three intellectual figures can be regarded as the three most important progenitors (originators) of Postmodern thinking:
- Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (although Marx is considered a modernist)



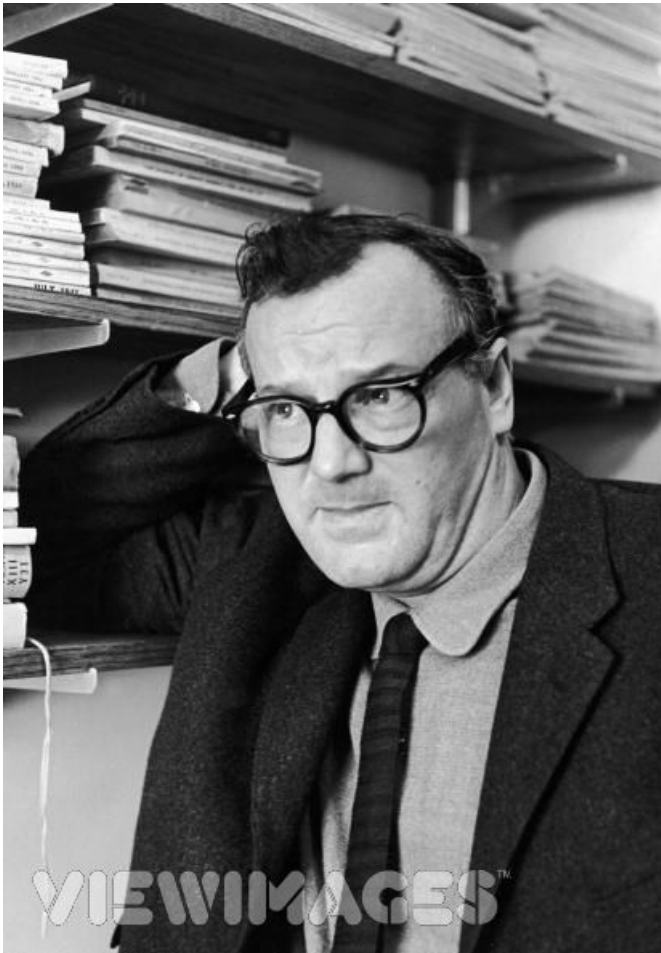
# C Wright Mills



- Postmodernism as **“fourth Epoch”**
  - Our ways of thinking are inherited from a world that no longer exists.
- Rationality has *not* lead to increased freedom
  - The Idea of Reason and Freedom are of no practical significance anymore.
  - Freedom cannot exist without reason



# C Wright Mills

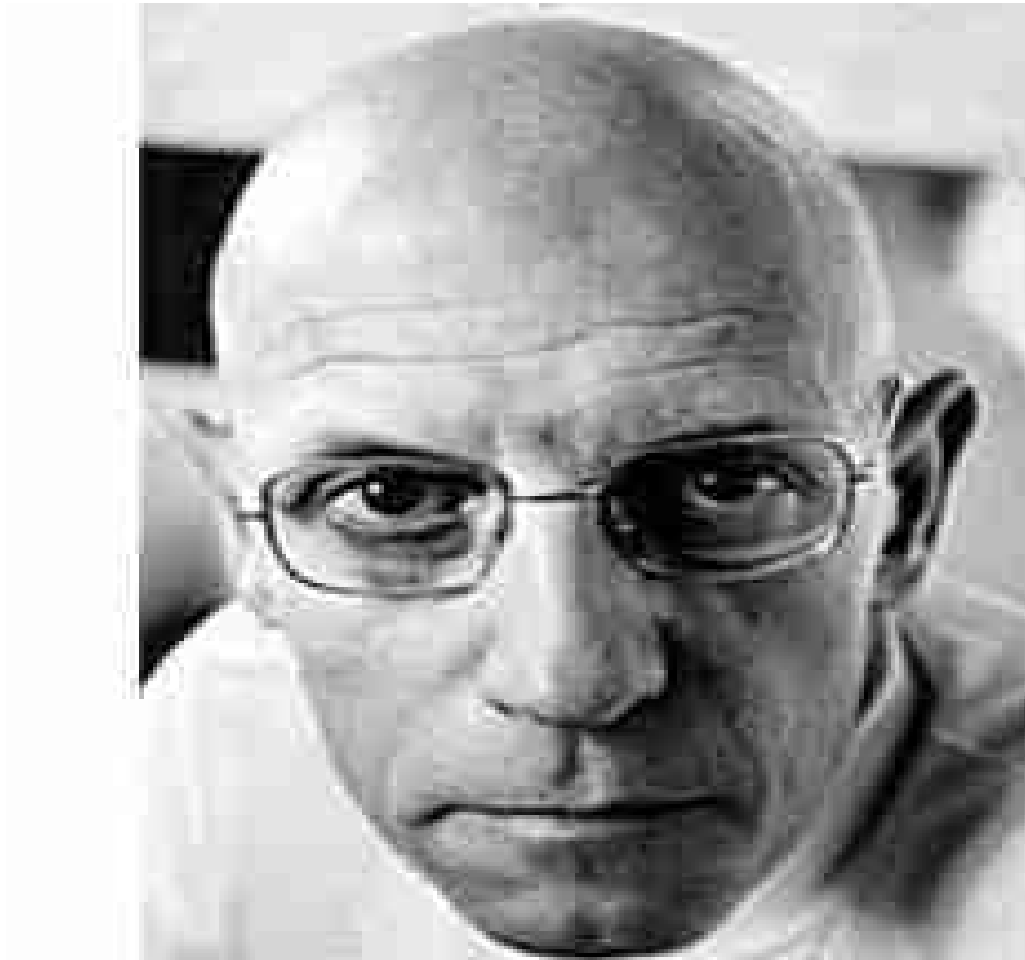


- Note: Mills is generally ***not*** considered a 'postmodernist' despite the fact that he was the first sociologist to use the term! He argued that we had entered a postmodern age.
- Foucault and Baudrillard, however, are regarded as 'Postmodernist' but didn't use the term!

# Are we becoming “Cheerful Robots?”



# Michel Foucault Power/Knowledge



# Power/Knowledge

1. Knowledge is always made possible by a “will to power” (Nietzsche’s term). Knowledge *is* a form of power.
  - Foucault adopts Nietzsche’s radical *perspectivalism*.
2. The individual is an effect of power.
  - Focuses on how our bodies and emotions are shaped by power.
3. The enlightenment was not emancipatory.
  - Merely another apparatus of power/knowledge. There was no “progress”.

# Power/Knowledge

- **Basic Idea: Truth is produced by power.**
- What *counts as knowledge* differs across societies and across time. Foucault argues that the idea of progress is illusory: **knowledge does not make one free.**
- **Each society has its own ‘truth discourse’ (e.g. religion, science, etc.) which presupposes some social power relationships.** What we think of as Western ‘progress’ is really just another form of domination and control. We replace one experience of reality with another...

# Power/Knowledge

- This is similar to the adage that “Knowledge is power”, but this usually just means that we can acquire personal power if we study a lot or if we are ‘in the know’. For Foucault, the identity of power and knowledge also contains an epistemological (philosophical) meaning, in the sense that ***what counts as knowledge*** always depends on social relations.
- In other words, he brackets or suspends the question of the **Truth** of knowledge, and instead examines its pragmatic effects. Because knowledge is always produced and communicated socially, he looks at the social correlates of knowledge, the social causes and consequences of different forms of knowledge, its social (i.e. institutional, organizational, relational) preconditions and effects. In short, everything is (reduced to) power! Unlike Habermas and Chomsky, **Foucault does not believe in a universal Truth, Human Nature, or Justice.**



# Power/Knowledge

- Foucault is suggesting that power is *not* a tool that individuals or groups of people use; rather **we are the tools of power**. In Foucault's analysis, power becomes the subject or agent of history. You may be not far off to say that he **anthropomorphizes power**.
- For Foucault, **there is no outside to power**. We cannot escape it. We are always embedded in the web of power relations.

# Power/Knowledge

- How to Study Power:
  1. Focus on ‘capillaries’ of power; power at its end-points, rather than at its centers; less focus on legal power
  2. Power is *not* always conscious or intended; *do not ask ‘why people want to dominate others’*
  3. *Power is not possessed, but rather **circulates*** in a web or network
  4. “We all have a fascism in our heads”, or “We all have a power in our bodies”

- *“The Soul is the Prison of the Body”*



# Foucault on Sex and the 'Repressive Hypothesis'

Basic Argument: ***power produces that which it represses.***

- *Power is productive; production is primary*
- *17<sup>th</sup> Century entailed a “proliferation of discourses about sex”; people became obsessed with talking about sex!*
- Example: Confession

# Foucault on Sex and the 'Repressive Hypothesis'

- Foucault argues **against** the so-called “Repressive Hypothesis” held by Reich and Freud. The Repressive Hypothesis states that sex has historically been repressed in Western society. Power is that which says ‘NO’ or ‘Thou Shalt Not.’
- Foucault argues that power has produced or “incited” numerous discourses on sex and sexuality. Power is not only that which says “No”; rather, power affirms, incites, and generates. Power “deploys” sexuality, and generates rules and etiquette for when to speak about sex and when to remain silent. Foucault counters that the cultural obsession with sex, **and its constitution as an object of knowledge** (religious, ethical, scientific, medical, etc.) is a consequence of power.

# Criticisms of Foucault: Giddens

1. Giddens rejects idea of 'subject-less history' (i.e. that history is dominated by forces of which people are totally unaware.)
  - He develops his *theory of structuration* to counter this view. There is no transcendent subject, but there are definitely knowledgelable human subjects. Remember Marx: "men make history but under conditions of their own choosing."
2. Giddens rejects idea that Power is the real agent of history.
  - But prisons were built by state authorities with specific aims in mind.



# Criticisms of Foucault: Giddens

3. Prison and factory are too closely related by Foucault.
  - Work-place is not a “total institution” to use Goffmans’ term. Workers are forced into the factory. Docile bodies are not so docile after-all!
4. Foucault underplays the real gains made by liberal freedoms. Liberalism is not despotism.
5. Like Marx, Foucault over-generalizes “the state” - there is no ‘the’ state, only multiple nation-states

# Habermas on Foucault

## 1. No normative basis for criticizing power

- Nancy Fraser writes: Why fight at all? Foucault can't provide normative reasons for resisting power. Hence his *cryptonormativism*.
- Performative contradiction: If Foucault is correct, his own discourse is without foundation, and only an effect of power. On the other hand, if his truth claims were merely illusory effects, then the undertaking has no point.

# Habermas on Foucault

2. His philosophy is a ***monism of power***. It is also *ahistorical*.
3. Foucault's theory lacks a mechanism of social integration, e.g. language.
  - Are we to explain the socialization of children, for example, as arising solely through a confrontation with power?

# Other criticisms

- Foucault fails to recognize that different objects of knowledge are self-referential or self-generated *to varying degrees*. Foucault's analysis of power, then, is more appropriate to the social sciences than to the natural sciences. By failing to recognize this, Foucault over-generalizes the scope of his analysis.
- In addition, he fails to articulate criteria by which we can evaluate the relative importance of different forces in the construction of domains of knowledge.

# **Jean Baudrillard**

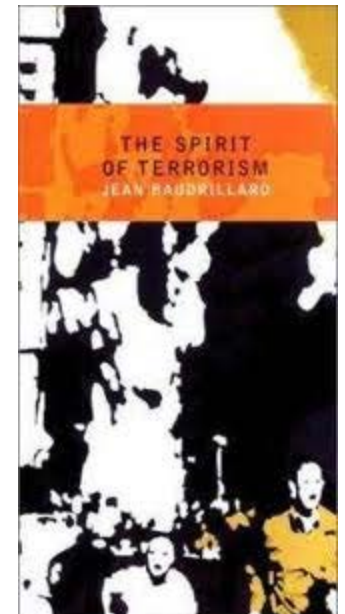
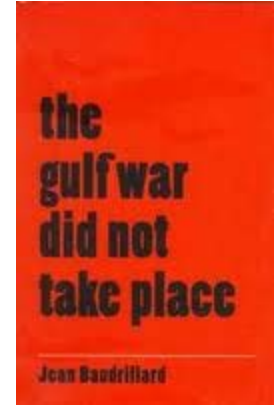
## **Simulations and Hyper-reality**





# Introducing Baudrillard

- The Gulf War did not take place!
- The World Trade Center bombing of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> heralded the (fractal) Fourth World War!
- History has reached its end, the Crystal has taken revenge!
- There is no truth!
- **Hyper-reality**: it's more real than real, to the extreme!



# Baudrillard's influences

## 1. Marx

- Now production is eclipsed by re-production.

## 2. Guy Debord's idea of “**society of the spectacle**” We become passive spectators. Images and symbols exchange like commodities.

## 3. Nietzsche

- Perspectivalism. Truth is a simulation.

## 4. De Saussure and semiotics theory

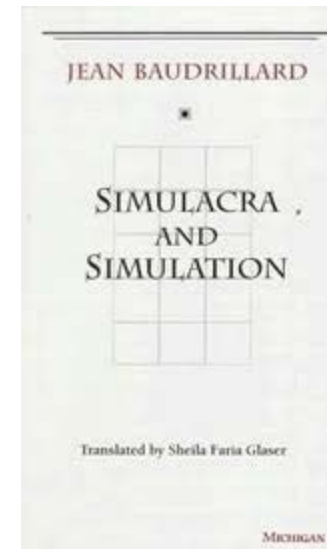
- Sign and signifiers
- Baudrillard argues that **signs only refer to other signs**

## 5. Marcel Mauss (anthropology)

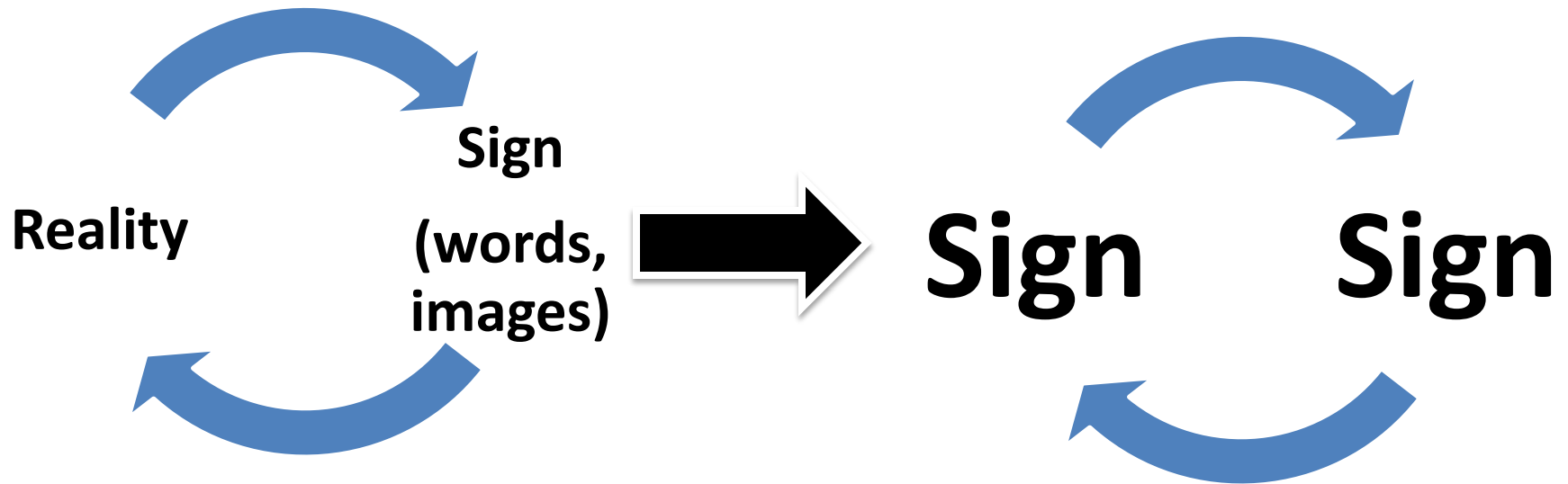
- The “gift” as opposed to exchange.
- The idea of the potlatch

# Baudrillard's influence on culture

- Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* appeared in the first *Matrix* movie.
- Baudrillard argues that there are only appearances! There is nothing underneath illusion, just other illusions!



# Signs deter the Real



**Signs deter reality;** Just as the legal system functions by utilizing images of punishment in order to make unnecessary real punishment, so to **signs anticipate and substitute for the real:** "simulations deter every real process via an operational double" (SS, 2).

# Simulations and Signs

- **To simulate** = “to feign to have something one does not have”
  - {To dissimulate = “to feign *not* to have what one has”}
  - The term “simulacrum” goes all the way back to Plato, who used it to describe a false copy of something.
- Phases of the image/sign:
  1. The reflection of a profound reality;
  2. A mask of a profound reality;
  3. A mask of *the absence* of a profound reality;
  4. A simulacra bearing no relation to reality whatsoever



# Simulations and Signs

- Phases of the image/sign:

1. The reflection of a profound reality;
  - **The image of god *is* God (e.g. a God-king)**
2. A mask of a profound reality;
  - **A name or image re-represents (symbolizes) God**
3. A mask of *the absence* of a profound reality;
  - **Talk of God conceals the fact that God doesn't exist.**
4. A simulacra bearing no relation to reality whatsoever
  - **God is a simulation (??)**

# Three Orders of Simulation

1. The emergence of **counterfeits** (fakes)
2. The **reduplication of signs** in an infinite series during the Industrial Revolution
  - (what Walter Benjamin called the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in which the singular aura of objects is lost).
  - The legal system of right and wrong also corresponds to this order.
3. The age of **hyperreality** and **simulation**.
  - Can you 'fake' a bank robbery?

# Simulations

- “All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this meaning exchange- God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it no longer but a gigantic simulacrum- not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without circuit or circumference.”  
(SS, 6)





# Hyper-Reality of Disneyland

- "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas Los Angeles [is] no longer real, but belongs to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation."



# Hyper-Reality

- Although the US lost the Vietnam war on the ground, they won it in the hyperreal realm through films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, which fantastically replay the war not as the story of defeat by a determined enemy, but as that of internal division.

