



**Title:** The consumption and hyperreality of nature: Greater affordances for Outdoor Learning

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## The consumption and hyperreality of nature: Greater affordances for Outdoor Learning

In this paper we explore young people's engagement with outdoor learning in nature by drawing on Jean Baudrillard's<sup>1</sup> theorising of consumption and hyperreality<sup>2</sup>; the postmodern condition of amalgamating physical and virtual realities. The analysis presented briefly examines i) nature as hyperreal, ii) social media, and iii) parents as consumers for affordances of young people's engagement with (hyperreal) nature. We argue, contrary to popular arguments, that young people's opportunities for engagement with nature are unprecedented. In doing so we challenge the widely held view as stated by Gray (2018) that "Children's alienation, disassociation and lack of connection with nature has become a valid concern for parents, educators, health professionals and environmentalists alike" (p.146). We briefly<sup>3</sup> consider the work of social theorist Baudrillard and argue that social media provides opportunities for greater exposure to "nature" and additionally, we consider how engagement with nature is mediated by 21<sup>st</sup> century 'helicopter parenting' as agents of consumption. However, following Baudrillard, we identify how these affordances are fundamentally shaped by phenomena of multinational corporations, urbanisation, and circulation of images to create nature as simulated stimuli for consumption. Such phenomena mediate experiences of nature so that meanings of nature become symbols and signs of a simulation of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Probably best known for: Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra & Simulation*. Featured in *The Matrix* a Hollywood film.

<sup>2</sup> In semiotics and postmodernism, hyperreality is an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies.

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive critique of Baudrillard

We present this here as a useful way of conceptualising nature and the outdoors since Baudrillard does not currently appear in the outdoor learning literature. For example, no mention is made of Baudrillard in field-leading texts including *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Outdoor Learning* (Gray and Mitten, 2018), the *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies* (Humberstone, Prince, and Henderson, 2016), or, more pertinently, *Outdoor Adventure and Social Theory* (Pike and Beames, 2013). Therefore, in this paper we seek to demonstrate potential lines of enquiry and how utilising Baudrillard's thought might help us to understand contemporary affordances with nature.

We begin by situating hyperreality, intense distortions of the real, as a component of Baudrillard's broader analyses of advanced capitalist cultures to accentuate the importance of social organisation and phenomenology, and emphasise engagement with the genesis and ubiquity of *simulacra*, rather than mechanical application of hyperreality as a stand-alone concept. Therefore, we introduce the theoretical focus of Baudrillard's opus, and our analysis, to facilitate conceptual clarity and rigour through analysis of nature as hyperreal; image circulation of outdoor experiences through social media; and parents as agents of consumption.

### **Hyperreality: Theoretical Underpinnings and Trajectories**

As an innovative thinker and prolific writer, analysing and provoking on key contemporary cultural phenomena, it is difficult to tie Baudrillard's thought to one central organising concept. It may be useful here to consider Baudrillard's work as both theory and critique. Theory about how we construct and "simulate" reality - drawing on philosophy, sociology, semiotics, history and media studies - and as a social-cultural critique; the application of

theory to criticise aspects of culture, especially American and capitalist consumerist culture and politics. In his classic text *Simulation and Simulacra*<sup>4</sup> (Baudrillard, 1994) seeks to examine the relationships between reality, symbols, and society, in particular the significations and symbolism of culture and media involved in constructing an understanding of shared existence. For some clarity; *simulcra* is Latin for likenesses, similarity, copies or a representation or imitation of a person or object. There is a secondary association of inferiority; that is an image without the substance or qualities of the original. A *simulation* is an imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system. The act of simulating something first requires that a model be developed; this model represents the key characteristics, behaviours and functions of the selected physical system or process. For example, artificial surf parks, such as world champion surfer Kelly Slater's Surf Ranch<sup>5</sup> situated in the Californian desert, provide copies, *simulacra*, of 'perfect' waves to ride. This has "transformed how authenticity is constructed and contested in the surfing world since the new technologies that have displaced ocean waves as the main referent for surfing culture, what Baudrillard (1983) refers to as the 'precession of the simulacra'" (Roberts and Ponting, 2018, p.14).

### **Nature as hyperreal**

Scholars have reflected critically on what might be considered "real", or indeed meaningful or authentic, outdoor environments and experiences (e.g. see Brown and Beames, 2016).

Following Baudrillard's theoretical lead, we are prompted to consider more carefully what is assumed to be "nature." Baudrillard's theorising draws prominently on anthropological

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<sup>4</sup> As featured in the Hollywood classic *The Matrix* (1999) starring Keanu Reeves

<sup>5</sup> See details at <http://www.kswaveco.com/>

studies of “primitive cultures” [sic] to highlight changes in the constituent elements of cultural practices and values. The concept of a simulation makes sense in light of Baudrillard's thinking on symbolic exchange and the privileging of primitive society. For example, in primitive society nature is seen as an original and specific presence which stands in contrast to culture. In the modern world nature has tended to be reduced to something carefully groomed, managed, policed and tailored to the needs of humans. For example, those spending childhoods in semi-urban and suburban environments, early exposure to nature is playing in gardens, and parks, which are a simulation of nature and the natural world (Terashima & Tiffin, 2005). Hyperreal nature in our gardens and parks often entails grass lawns with uniform stripes made by the lawnmower and neat plants and flowers in tidy ‘weed free’ flower beds, surrounded by hedges with evident carefully topiary. Individuals may find themselves, for different reasons, more in tune or involved with the hyperreal world and less with the physical real world. This is relevant to outdoor educators whose practice obviously moves beyond the back garden, but, we contend, not hyperreality. National Parks around the world are managed, policed and have carefully groomed trails, tailored to the needs of humans. For example, the upland mountain environment of the Lake District National Park in the UK is often perceived as a wild adventurous space. However, this is a fiction. Aside from the human management and farming of the land, it has been portrayed as a healing force and as a primal setting that is good for us since the time of the Romantic poets and artists. Coleridge and Wordsworth, helped to redefine the concept of hyperreal nature as a healing and spiritual force and Turner and Ruskin painted images of the wild and emotive scenery. As such, hyperreal nature is not a new phenomenon. We now consider how this manifests itself in contemporary society.

## The Image and Social Media

In this section we argue that the technology of social media (as an example we choose Instagram) provides greater affordances with nature than has been possible in previous generations, in the light of nature, hyperreality and authenticity as discussed above. For example, 'bbcearth' from the BBC and 'natgeo' from National Geographic, provide a daily stream of images from internationally renowned publishers, that are free of charge. The impact of images and their affordance with nature can be evidenced on a large scale. For example, the BBC Blue Planet 2 show and associated images circulated on social media arguably did more for awareness of plastics in the ocean in a short space of time than ever before (Hayns-Worthington, 2018).

A central challenge of social media is the presentation of heavily edited and idealised representations of events and people and the impact this has on their health (Goodyear and Armour, 2018). In this section we reflect on the potential insights of Baudrillard's thought based on assumptions of young people using social media. As such images, including but not limited to the ubiquitous distribution and consumption through social media, becomes the main social referent for outdoor activities. Importantly, for Baudrillard, *representation* supposes equivalence between the sign and the real, however, representation has been replaced with simulation because events may occur on the screen, but nowhere else. Thus, images are not a copy but the mediation of affordances by simulacrum to the point where images come to precede activities as models. They generate events, including emotions, rather than reflecting them in the 'precession of the simulacra' (Baudrillard, 1994). Social media, then, that locates students-as-consumers in the code by begetting perpetual

feedback-as-participation. Through replication, and arguably overexposure, of the signs of adventure, nature, risk, and enjoyment, the meaning fades and the process of overexposure and overexposing itself (“I’m addicted to selfies”) manifests in the “ecstasy of communication” where subjects and subjectivities are enmeshed in instantaneous communication of images and information casting us as “a pure screen a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks” (Baudrillard, 1988, p.27).

In a strikingly prescient observation made prior to the ubiquity of smartphones and social media, Baudrillard (2001) posited the individual as “an interactive, communicational particle, plugged into the network, getting continuous feedback” (p.106) and ultimately a prosthesis, an addendum to digital technology making the aforementioned implosion of distinctions, in this case, between the real and the virtual becoming the obsession of our age (Baudrillard, 2006). Baudrillard (2001) demonstrates how despite contention of *meaningful* connection related to events, meaning is fundamentally shaped by the technological conduits in which meanings are circulated and framed. In Baudrillard’s analysis, technology (and therefore social media) must be thought of as a network, with individuals as “terminals of multiple networks” (Baudrillard 1998, p.16).

Simulation collapses the real and the imaginary. Representation seeks to absorb simulations as false representations. Even knowing an image is fake has little importance. For example, the striking image of a great white shark breaking the oceans surface went viral on social media in 2016. The chief National Geographic photographer Bob Burton was awarded the society’s ‘photo of the year’. The only trouble was that there’s no such award and no such

photographer<sup>6</sup>. The image is in fact digitally manipulated by a Russian 3D graphic artist called Alexyz3d, readily found on their Shutterstock profile. Simulation absorbs representation as a simulacrum, to the point where, ultimately, identities, not just of people but also fields such as outdoor learning, images, models, and the code determine the understanding and experience of these things.

### **Parents as Agents of Consumption**

A useful starting point here is the definition of consumption as dominating social organisation, individual behaviour and subjectivity in advanced capitalist societies. In such societies, daily acts of purchase and consumption are implicitly and inextricably located within cultural systems of signs and signification. Therefore, patterns of consumption become defined by signification (i.e., sign-value) rather than utility (i.e., use-value) of commodities. As such, Baudrillard (1973/1981) addresses how objects (e.g., commodities and technologies) begin to dominate our understandings of ourselves, others, and our societies. Such a focus is practically eponymous in Baudrillard's (1968/1996) first book, *The System of Objects*. Here Baudrillard examined signification in the organisation and presentation of everyday objects of the home (which should immediately orientate the reader to note that Baudrillard's work is not exclusively focused on media and technology). Baudrillard (1968/1996) presents an early, cynical mediation on the emancipatory potential of objects whereby, in the case of the home, the configurations of space and objects (e.g. a washing machine) operationalise and perpetuate the authoritative position of the patriarchy.

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<sup>6</sup>See <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/12/shark-pictures-not-fake-brain-skerry/>



Baudrillard (1998) highlighted how we have witnessed a massive expansion in the number and significance of the new means of consumption. The debit and credit card, the ATM and payment Apps have undergone meteoric expansion. Themed shopping centres/malls, are ubiquitous, and the rise of ski resorts, with artificial snow cannon and alpine style ski-lodges, continue to grow. The all-inclusive nature-based holidays/vacations, Las Vegas-like casino/hotels have all expanded. Theme parks such as Disneyworld®, Center Parcs and Club Med are global brands and are hyperreal simulations in which a person can get lost; for as long as the money lasts! Cruise ships continue to grow in physical size and number and may contain their own simulations of surfing waves and climbing walls; traditional adventurous outdoor learning pursuits. As such we argue that parents with disposable income, afford children and young people opportunities for engagement with outdoor learning and outdoor pursuits that are simulations in a hyperreal nature. Indeed, the simply found traditional outdoor activities of camping or kayaking are simulations in a hyperreal nature themselves.

Baudrillard recognises technological developments provide liberation only from the task itself, not *the code* – the systemic influencing of social relationship through reproduction of economic imperatives that structures everyday life. Similarly, for outdoor learning, Beames (2017) and Thomas and Munge (2017) identify liberating aspects of technology in the outdoors. However, for us, the code applied to the outdoors defines potential meanings of nature and experiences therein, at the very least by positing nature as a resource for human consumption either directly or in the development of character.

### **Implications for practice: And so?**

For us, there are two important considerations for practitioners. First, nature as currently “consumed” in adventure education and outdoor learning occurs in a hyperreal nature “practically equivalent to that of all the dimensions of the real” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 74) yet totally beyond what is sustainable. Experiences and learning opportunities are realer-than-real, generated from ideas (not the symbolism of nature) and defined by models. In other words, practitioners must reflect on whether their practice operationalises a hyperreal, untenable social logic. The commodification of nature, typified best by ski resorts and surf camps, but applicable to outdoor learning fieldtrips too, is predicated on the assumption, persuaded by the advertisers’ litany of a “legitimate inalienable right to plenty” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.32) at a societal level. When nature is taken as the antidote to the pressures of modern life, it is framed within a hyperreality of perpetual growth. Outdoor learning predicated on affordances with nature, as designated in a binary logic of the code from the urban, are “restoring nature after it has been eliminated in reality” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.89). Indeed, Baudrillard comments “nature was never glorified quite so much before it was everywhere laid waste” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.101). Hyperreal outdoor learning, then, becomes little more than a cover for systemic problems, a compensatory mechanism for poor urban planning, limited play opportunities and standardised testing school curricula as exemplified by Stroud (2016 cited in Gray, 2018) relaying her frustrated message, “I’m more valuable as an assessor, an examiner, a data collector” than as a teacher of pupils.

Secondly, being outdoors, no matter how remote, is not inherently to be in nature. In advanced capitalist societies outdoor learning and adventure education are simulations because “nature” is defined without reference to origin or reality, but it’s binary opposition.

Contra Beames and Brown (2014, p.122) whose consideration of Disneyization focuses on indoor climbing and skiing facilities because they are “‘contained’ within a defined space and are removed from the geographical locations in which they originated and developed”, Baudrillard (1994, p.12) argues “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make use believe that the rest is real.” From such a perspective, symbolic order of nature as “an original and specific presence” (Ritzer, 1999, p.12) is defined against the indoors and obviously constructed environments, and reduced to prefigured and predetermined meanings and experiences that being outdoors is then expected to provide. In other words, Disneyization, for Beames and Brown (2014) and McDonaldization for others, (Loynes, 1998), presents an obvious distortion of the real. Physical distancing is viewed as a false, ideologically-driven representation of the outdoors. However, hyperreality pushes understanding of the business principles, market logics, and consumerism affecting nature directly and “concealing the fact that the real is no longer real” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.10) thus hyperreal nature operationalises and perpetuates authoritative positions of the field and identity. The driving principle of outdoor learning, then, is not nature as an original referent (Roberts and Ponting, 2018) but “panic-stricken production of the real” (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6). Consider Baudrillard’s (1994) argument:

Nature, in the form of a countryside trimmed down to the dimensions of a mere sample, surrounded on all sides by the vast fabric of the city, carefully policed, and served up ‘at room temperature’ as parkland, nature reserve or background scenery for second homes, is, in fact, a recycling of Nature. That is to say, it is no longer an original, specific presence at all, standing in symbolic opposition to culture, but a simulation, a ‘consommé’ of the signs of nature set back in circulation - in short, nature recycled (p.120).

At this particular level of analysis, it is easy to see how most, if not all, of the outdoor opportunities we provide to young people are situated within groomed, curated, and highly-

managed settings. Indeed, although it pains us to acknowledge this, much of the structuring of the environment still functions according to the logic of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Acclimatization Societies (see Osborne, 2001) albeit with 21<sup>st</sup> Century ecological knowledge. Fundamentally, the social logic structuring interaction in the outdoors functions through prefigured and pre-planned meaning and experience (i.e., the code), structured according to pre-existing notions and concepts. Imagination and meaningful experience, manifest in the ability for young people to define meanings in and of nature for themselves is not provided for.

### **Conclusion**

Jean Baudrillard became well known, or more accurately notorious, amongst the literati for proclamations regarding 'the real' Gulf War (Baudrillard, 1995) and, from our perspective, misconstrual primarily, if not exclusively, as an ontological argument. In this regard Baudrillard is viewed as a sardonic cultural critic whose insight is tarnished by a crude and vulgar ontology. To reiterate from Baudrillard (1968/1996) *The System of Objects* this perspective does not dispute events, but prioritises the relationships in presentation, circulation, and consumption surrounding events. Thus, the concept of hyperreality facilitates understanding of consumerism and heavily mediated nature of contemporary social life where representation and experience cannot be simply disentangled.

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