

Hierarchies of Knowledge, Negated Agency, and Competing Realisms?

Deron Boyles
Georgia State University

Trevor Norris does an excellent job of laying out key relationships between consumerism, schooling, and what knowledge counts as valid (or, perhaps more accurately, more valid than other knowledge). Indeed, from the outside looking in, it might appear as though I would not find anything disagreeable in Norris's essay. He rightly indicts corporate interests influencing school policy (I am reminded of the Colorado school superintendent who ordered teachers to let students out of class so they could buy Coca-Cola products in order to meet the sales quota imposed by the exclusive contract he signed), the curricula (for example, the pasta sauce lab experiments from a few years ago that came complete with corporation-written lesson plans for teachers, centered on the burning educational question, is Prego thicker than Ragu?), and perhaps most importantly, the students themselves (who often amass large logo-ridden wardrobes and focus, in the words of Maxine Greene, on "having more rather than being more"¹). Further, by utilizing Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation, Norris extends the myriad examples of corporate influence on and in schools to include a critique of consumption in a theoretically grounded and philosophically interesting way. My response, then, is merely an effort to extend Norris's work. I seek clarification about what I take to be two unintended outcomes and raise several questions regarding Baudrillard's metaphysics. I start with the unintended outcomes and move to metaphysical questions, essentially working backward through Norris's essay.

Norris uses media theorist Carrie McLaren's work to illustrate both the pervasiveness of corporate logos and a kind of consumer literacy that appears to trump a form of earth science literacy. The concern is that instead of correctly naming plants and trees in their neighborhoods, the students are far more adept at naming corporations from their brand logos. As Norris aptly notes, this is similar to the segment of "Super Size Me," when students cannot identify pictures of Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus but *are* able to identify corporate logos. The concern may be defensible, but I wonder if there might be another, unintended meaning represented by the overall issue of competing knowledge. Is it the case that corporate logo literacy would also not make it in, say, E.D. Hirsch's lucrative extension of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, namely, his Core Knowledge Curriculum? Are Mother Theresa, Jesus, and King included in Hirsch's book list and curriculum, but McDonalds is not? There seems to me to be an irony here in that Norris cites Hirsch's lament about the decline of common knowledge, but puts forward the claim that there already is a common consumerist language — and still, at least initially, sets the consumerist language up as a problematic, less valuable literacy when compared to earth science literacy. Said differently, if Hirsch is wrong in his lamentation, is not McLaren wrong, too, when

she laments a lack of arborist knowledge versus consumerist knowledge? Does common consumer student language exist as an elbow in the ribs of the conservative Hirsch, positively, negatively, or as a possible site for engagement and critical student agency?

The second unintended outcome is an extension of the last point. If the extent of students' knowledge of their world, simulated though it may be, is marginalized or subsumed in a hierarchy of better and worse literacies, what happens to the potential for student action? In effect, if we negate what students already know without using it as, for example, object lessons to develop critical awareness of the corporatization and consumer materialism symbolized by the logo they know so well, what else are we to do with the knowledge they already have? Are we to continue privileging what Michael Apple calls "official knowledge"?² Norris ultimately gets to a version of this point, but does not seem to be troubled by what I will call a critical theorist's dilemma: condemn the infiltration of consumerism and corporate literacy on one hand, but hold up students' lived experiences as vital aspects in developing critical literacy — even when those experiences are overwhelmingly corporatized.

Finally, I invite Norris to help me more fully grasp Baudrillard's metaphysics by answering a series of questions. The orders of simulation Norris offers (that is, an original, a counterfeit, a mechanical copy, and a copy of a copy) oddly remind me of Plato's Forms and his indictment of mere material manifestations taken as True. A copy of a copy, for Plato, is at least two steps removed from ultimate reality. But Baudrillard is no Platonist, so what does he advance? Is it the "new realism" of Ralph Barton Parry and William Montague in which immediate perception and the independence of objects is central? Or is it something more akin to the "critical realism" of J.B. Pratt and others who hold that the mind is a mediating factor between physical objects, perception, and meaning? Differently still, is Baudrillard an anti- or non-realist, or something else altogether?³

When Norris explains that each signifier, for Baudrillard, signifies only itself and "reality loops around itself," what does this actually mean? Might a response to this question help us with the first two issues noted above? With regard to codes and systems, Norris interprets Baudrillard as deploring the dominance of codes and the proliferation of signs to such a degree that reality is either eclipsed or killed. To illustrate, Norris uses Jim Munroe's novel *Everyone in Silico* in which no one can know that the sky is blue because of all of the advertising masking reality. But what is real here? As I understand the illustration, our perceptions stop at the billboards. The billboards are real and, as such, mask anything that is possible behind them. How does our truncated perceiving lead to the conclusion that the sky no longer exists (or is knowably blue) behind the billboards, though? I ask this not in a rhetorically dismissive way; I ask because my reading of Baudrillard suggests something slightly different.

On the Norris-Munroe doctrine, Baudrillard claims that reality is eclipsed by signs. In effect, as Norris writes, "Baudrillard's account...points toward the

simultaneous experience of the loss of reality and the encounter with hyperreality.” Yet Norris goes on to write that signs proliferate indefinitely in order to fill up the gap left by the “absence of reality.” So which is it? If there is a reality that is eclipsed by signs, then there is a reality, for if there was no reality eclipsed by signs, there was no reality behind the signs in the first place. But Baudrillard, writing about exchange value and use value, puts it this way: “there is no reality or principle of reality other than that directly produced by the system and its ideal reference.”⁴ Doesn’t this mean that the billboards become reality and replace the sky in some version of constructivism? If not, then what?

At root, should we be most concerned about what competing systems there actually are? On one reading of Norris (and of others, including myself), schools are not competing with consumerism; they are advancing it as a part of the system of consumption. If this is true, circling back to an earlier concern, what happens to human/student agency? Can schools (that is, students, teachers, and administrators) break free from, problematize, and overcome their consuming reality of consumerism in order to become a competing system? If they cannot become a competing system, do we find ourselves caught in predeterminism without agency or critical engagement? Norris hopes not, as he clearly advocates student discourse that deconstructs and reconstructs the meanings of corporate infiltration into schools. I think, in support of his project, then, that a bit more needs to be teased out to avoid some of the confusion that so easily comes with the sophisticated logic of Baudrillard.

1. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 22.

2. Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3. See Bruce Kuklick, *Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); David L. Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003); and Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (New York: Open Court Publishing, 1987).

4. Jean Baudrillard, “Beyond Use Value,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Martyn J. Lee (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 25.