

Searching for Cosmic Signs in the Real: A Baudrillardian Interpretation of J.M.G. Le Clézio's *L'Inconnu sur la Terre*

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Articulating similar concerns as Jean Baudrillard, the Franco-Mauritian writer's fiction asserts that the real treasure that we should valorize is life itself, as opposed to a distorted, symbolic representation of it. Le Clézio compels the reader to embrace concrete reality once again and to dismiss artificial images that have been carefully manufactured for the sole purpose of generating revenue. Given the ubiquitous nature of the simulations that incessantly bombard our television, computer, Iphone, Ipad, Ipod, and smart phone screens, Maurice Cagnon notes that a salient feature of the author's diverse *œuvre* is to help liberate contemporary man that is "coping with the separation of the self from 'le réel'" (227). Although many scholars have mentioned the intertextual relationship between Baudrillard and Le Clézio in passing, this subject merits a more systematic investigation.² This brief exploration represents a point of departure that will hopefully encourage other colleagues to delve further into the nuances of these intertextual connections.

Heavily influenced by Amerindian thought, *L'Inconnusur la terre* is a complex work that resists simplistic categorization. On the back cover of the Gallimard edition, the author reveals, "Cecin'est pas tout à fait un essai [...] C'est une longue histoire, qui pourrait être celle d'un oiseau, celle d'un poisson et celle d'un arbre [...] Ceci est peut-être aussi, tout simplement, l'histoire d'un petit garçon qui se promène au hasard sur la terre" (n.p.). Despite the fact that the writer blends several different genres in this experimental narrative by his own admission, *L'Inconnusur la terre* could merely be described as the story of the aimless wanderings of a young boy "who has no name nor history" (Ridon 717). This enigmatic child is sensitive to the beauty of the physical universe to which he is inextricably linked. However, the unidentified protagonist's fascination with the inner workings of the cosmos should not be interpreted as an effort to escape mundane reality.

Highlighting that the adventures of the mysterious boy from *L'Inconnusur la terre* are emblematic of a deep yearning to (re)-attach oneself to fundamental ecological realities from which the human race has become progressively detached, Cynthia Ruoff explains, "In retaliation against today's society which attempts to dominate

nature, the narrator/author embarks on an exploratory journey, the creative process through which he searches for the real" (133). Ruoff further elucidates, "the text invites the reader to join the narrator/author, identified with the unknown boy of the title [...] to make contact with the real" (133). Drawing a similar conclusion as Ruoff, Claude Cavallero asserts that both *Le Chercheur d'or* and *L'Inconnusur la terre* are "roman(s) initiatique(s)" that incessantly delve into universal laws which govern the existence of every organism on this planet including human beings (37). Instead of being indicative of a flight from quotidian reality, *L'Inconnusur la terre* urges the alienated modern subject to free himself from all of the simulated artifice that concretizes much of our daily existence. Directly revealing the importance of his artistic project itself, the author/narrator adamantly maintains, "Ce sont les choses qui se passent réellement, ici" (142).

Beckoning the reader to examine the sterility of our fully-mediated, hyper-real environments more critically, the author/narrator declares, "Mais ce n'est pas la vie qui vous traverse ainsi. C'est une frénésie de l'esprit, nourrie des mots du langage des promesses du logos [...] Il n'y a rien d'autre que l'évidence que vous sentez, rien d'autre de ce que vous sentez, rien d'autre que ce que vous voyez" (161). Similar to Baudrillard, Le Clézio insists that happiness will elude us if we continue to search for fulfillment and self-actualization in seductive, commercial signs (Frank 215). Moreover, the author affirms that these enticing images of contentment and existential meaning that surround us everywhere we go are far removed from concrete reality. When a client acquires a given item, he or she is actually attempting to purchase a pre-fabricated vision³ of what it means to live the good(s) life. Whereas earlier Leclézian protagonists such as Bea B. and Tranquilité do not appear to find any lasting solace from the empty promises of the alluring simulacra that incessantly bombard them, the young boy from *L'Inconnusur la terre* possesses an insatiable thirst for life. This enigmatic child has yet to be entirely consumed by the "signs of happiness" that are unable to deliver on their lofty guarantees given that these chimerical simulations only exist in the realm of symbolic representation (Frank 215). The narrator's progressive transformation into a fully-automated consumption machine that impulsively buys a steady stream of gadgets in a misguided attempt to maximize happiness is not yet complete. In this experimental narrative, the Franco-Mauritian author seems to be more cautiously optimistic about the future of humanity in comparison to the earlier aforementioned texts. Perhaps, the remedy for the ontological anguish and cosmic disconnection experienced by numerous Leclézian protagonists is to make a concerted effort to (re)-establish contact with material reality itself.

Decrying the simulated life of opulence lauded by the mainstream media and underscoring the inability of manipulative signs to fulfill genuine human needs that cannot be procured in a shopping mall, Baudrillard elucidates, "Le miraculé de la consommation lui aussi met en place tout un dispositif d'objets simulacres, de signes caractéristiques du bonheur, et attend ensuite [...] que le bonheur se pose [...] L'opulence, l'affluence n'est en effet que l'accumulation des signes du bonheur"

(27). According to the simplistic ideology of consumerism, an automatic correlation exists between the acquisition of material possessions and inner contentment. However, unfortunately for consumers, the seductive image that they desperately long to live has little connection to the actual product itself. After the unmitigated failure of these commercial simulacra to render the customer happy, the modern subject has nowhere to turn given the pervasive nature of the signs that follow him everywhere. In other words, Le Clézio and Baudrillard wonder if any meaningful distinction between public and private space still exists. Since simulations of the real including their hidden, dubious intentions are constantly being transmitted to us by a proliferation of digital screens at home, work, and school, is our problematic “search for happiness” doomed to inhabit the same artificial space as everything else in our symbolic world of representations (Cederman 20)? Is there any “reality outside the image” deconstructed by Le Clézio and Baudrillard (Mannathukkaren 419)?

In his seminal essay *La Société de Consommation*, Baudrillard suggests that we have arrived at a critical juncture in global society in which “la consommation saisit toute la vie [...] où l’environnement est total, totalement climatisé, aménagé, culturalisé” (23). Le Clézio clearly appears to share these same concerns regarding the hyper-real environments in which every image of happiness is carefully packaged and disseminated to us. Yet, *L’Inconnu sur la terre* provides a faint glimmer of hope that we might one day be able to transcend the realm of simulacra in order to experience true contentment once again. Although it is easier said than done because of the omnipresence of the nefarious signs that endlessly transmit the same message (i.e. ‘thou shalt consume’), Le Clézio contends that if we can momentarily “quitter les refuges et les chambres closes” happiness is still possible (13).

Instead of spending our entire day immersed in simulations of the real despondently trying to emulate a pre-existing model of success and self-actualization, the Franco-Mauritian author encourages the reader to (re)-connect with material reality. This fusion⁴ can only take place if we temporarily eliminate all of the obstacles that society has erected which prevent us from having a primordial understanding of the physical realities of the universe to which we belong. As the author/narrator explains, “Je voudrais qu’il n’y ait pas de différence entre les éléments et les hommes, entre la terre, le ciel, la mer et les hommes [...] Ce qui sépare les hommes du monde réel va disparaître, toutes les vitres, tous les murs, enfin le monde va venir” (142-143). For Le Clézio, it is impossible to begin to understand the complexity of material reality in complete isolation from it. Furthermore, how can we comprehend our small place in the cosmic mystery that encapsulates us and of which we are a small part if we never leave the confines of the hyper-real?

In conclusion, Le Clézio juxtaposes the authentic search for “les signes réels de la vie” with the narcissistic desire to accumulate signs of happiness in *L’Inconnu sur la terre* (325). In an affirmation which closely resembles Baudrillard’s assertion that “c’est nous qui sommes devenus l’excrément de l’argent” (245), the author/narrator of *L’Inconnu sur la terre* confesses, “Je veux écrire [...] pour que les mots ne soient plus

les esclaves de l’argent” (387). In a society in which everything has been reduced to a mere object of consumption that generates colossal profits for transnational behemoths, Le Clézio and Baudrillard attempt to restore human dignity. Both authors urge the modern subject to embrace reality once again as opposed to a simulation of it. Although it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a space that is free from the taint of the enticing simulacra that incessantly illuminate our myriad of screens, Baudrillard and Le Clézio compellingly assert that the stakes of living in the hyper-real are far too great to fall on deaf ears.

Notes

1. See, Thibault, Bruno. *J.M.G. Le Clézio et La Métaphore Exotique*. New York : Rodopi, 2009, pp. 19-25. ; Walker, David. *Consumer Chronicles: Cultures of Consumption in Modern French Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. ; and McIlwaine, Geraldine. “The Threat of the Urban Space in Three Novels by Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio.” *Threat: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Visual Culture*. Eds. Georgina Evans and Adam Kay. Oxford, England: Peter Lang, 2010: 125-139.
2. In two separate publications (*The Fiction of J.M.G. Le Clézio: A Postcolonial Reading*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012; *Le Clézio: Le Procès-verbal*. Glasgow Introductory Guides to French Literature 51. Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2005.), Bronwen Martin underscores that Le Clézio and Baudrillard’s fears regarding consumer culture, hyper-reality, and alienation are quite similar. Martin also notes that Le Clézio’s concerns predate those of Baudrillard. Nonetheless, Martin only dedicates a few lines of her aforementioned critical works to exploring these intertextual links.
3. In *La Société de Consommation*, Baudrillard explains that consumers are indoctrinated from birth to identify with pre-existing models that have been created for them. Even forms of ‘resistance’ have been carefully embedded into the code. If an individual wishes to express ‘anti-establishment’ sentiments, he or she dresses and talks in a certain fashion.
4. Numerous Le Clézio scholars such as Hervé Lambert, Marguerite Le Clézio, and Jens Olivier Müller have delved into the nuances of the metaphor of fusion in the author’s diverse writings. See Lambert, Hervé. “Fuite et nostalgie des origines.” *Sud* 85-86 : 85-94; Le Clézio, Marguerite. “L’Etre sujet/objet: La vision active et passive chez Le Clézio.” *Ethique et esthétique dans la littérature française du XXe siècle*. Ed. Maurice Cagnon. Saratoga, CA: AnmaLibri, 1978 : 113-121; and Müller, Jens Olivier. “L’Exotisme intérieur dans *Désert* et *Le Chercheur d’or* de J.M.G. Le Clézio.” *Lendemain* 24(95-96): 32-46.

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