

Seduction as a Game of Reversals and Death. Understanding Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction* through Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault*¹

(La seducción como un juego de inversiones
y muerte. Comprender *Seduction*, de
Jean Baudrillard mediante *Hallucinating
Foucault*, de Patricia Duncker)

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RESUMEN

Se estudia la teoría de la seducción de Jean Baudrillard mediante el análisis de la novela *Hallucinating Foucault*, de Patricia Duncker, para mostrar que el proceso de lectura es un acto seductor y un juego obsesivo entre lector y escritor. Estas características se comprueban con la inversión de las jerarquías presentes, del cambio de roles y de una muerte literal y metafórica. *Hallucinating Foucault* muestra la complejidad entre lector y escritor, vistos como compañeros de juego, parte de una relación que respectivamente alimenta su imaginación y su creatividad.

ABSTRACT

Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction is studied by the analysis of the novel *Hallucinating Foucault*, by Patricia Duncker, to verify that the process of

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reading is a seductive act and a compulsive game among readers and writers. These features are shown by the reversal of the hierarchies present, the changing of roles and a literal and metaphorical death. Thus, *Hallucinating Foucault* shows the complexity between readers and writers, seen as playmates and partners that mutually feed one another's imagination and creativity.

Palabras clave: Jean Baudrillard, seducción, Patricia Duncker, *Hallucinating Foucault*, muerte, jerarquía

Keywords: Jean Baudrillard, seduction, Patricia Duncker, *Hallucinating Foucault*, death, hierarchy

Jean Baudrillard and His Work *Seduction*³

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a French theorist, philosopher and sociologist whose work is associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism. He worked as a professor at the University of Paris—X Nanterre and IX Dauphin—and was involved in the events of May 1968 in Paris.⁴ After stopping teaching full time, he devoted his time to writing. Baudrillard's themes range mostly from the way technological advances affect social change to an array of subjects, such as consumerism, gender and politics. He was a notable journalistic commentator on topics such as AIDS, cloning, the Gulf War, and the attacks to the World Trade Center. Sylvère Lotringer⁵ describes Baudrillard as follows: “not an academic philosopher, [... Baudrillard] was more of a philosopher than most, being an artist in thought, a prophet of the present, capable of anticipating with a hallucinating precision what shape our world would take in years or decades to come. Contrary to what most believed, he was by far the most realist thinker in our time.”

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

⁴ The year 1968 is known for a series of student protests against the then current French educational system and employment situation, which caused a general strike in Paris. It was fostered by the left-wing and supported by many relevant French thinkers of the time, such as Jean Baudrillard.

⁵ Sylvère Lotringer, “Jean Baudrillard: Asymmetrical Philosopher.” *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* IV, 3. October 2007. Web. 4 Aug 2008, <http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/obituaries_slotringer.html>.

For Baudrillard, seduction is a ludic performance involving the feminine figure, and it is game that reverses the order of things and positions. Baudrillard begins by stating that Freud was right in asserting that masculinity is the only sexuality; for the feminine can collapse or be absorbed by or collapsed by the strength of the discriminative forces in society of the “phallus, castration, the Name-of-the-Father and repression.”⁶ But according to this critic, the strength of femininity lies in the game of seduction, as “an alternative to sex and power, one that psychoanalysis cannot know because its axioms are sexual. This alternative *is* undoubtedly of the order of the feminine, understood outside the opposition masculine/feminine.”⁷ Seduction, then, is a game of challenges, duels and a strategy of appearances of reversibility instead of opposition. The feminine does not oppose the masculine but reverses the roles in order to seduce. Baudrillard moves on and states that “seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe.”⁸ Thus one can conclude that the feminine rules the symbolic order, that of feelings and emotions, while the masculine rules the real order, one of power and regulations.

Exploring the idea of power, Baudrillard notes that “[a]ll masculine power is a power to produce. All that is produced, be it the production of woman as female, falls within the register of masculine power. The only, and irresistible, power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction.”⁹ When Baudrillard speaks of the feminine, understandably, it is not woman *per se*, but the idea of the feminine that can exist in both men and women. Thus, the game of reversals can occur: it is not necessarily the man seducing a woman, but a person’s masculinity seducing another person’s femininity, and the

6 Baudrillard, 6.

7 Baudrillard, 7.

8 Baudrillard, 8.

9 Baudrillard, 15.

latter playing the game, challenging the other and letting themselves be seduced. For Baudrillard, the most common perception of seduction is that “which women have been historically consigned: the culture of gynaeceum, of rouge and lace, a seduction reworked by the mirror stage and the female imaginary, the terrain of sex games and ruses,”¹⁰ a idea completely opposite to the seduction that he presents in his book. Seduction, in turn, becomes in reality an ironic form that breaks with the norm of referential sex, a place of challenge, play and defiance. The game of seduction is in constant movement, “I shy away; it is you who will give me pleasure, it is I who will make you play, and thereby rob you of your pleasure,”¹¹ but it is not necessarily a game that always implies sex or sexual practices. It contains “a strategy of displacement (*se-ducere*: to take aside, to divert from one’s path) that implies a distortion of sex’s truth.”¹² This strategy is stronger than sexual games because for the reversal of roles and positions seduction requires a movement that goes beyond the imposition of a hierarchy of power roles.

To prove that sex has a minor role in seduction, Baudrillard notes that it is a banal expression of seduction, where the pinnacle is reached in the quick moment of the orgasm, which is just the fulfillment of desire. On the other hand, seduction is more complex:

The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends. And cannot end since the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible. And because there is no limit to the challenge to love more than one is loved, or to be always more seduced—if not death.¹³

10 Baudrillard, 21.

11 Baudrillard, 22.

12 Baudrillard, 22.

13 Baudrillard, 22.

In this view, sex can be part of seduction, but it is never the goal. Whereas sexual intercourse is the end of the chase of desire, the game of seduction has no end, unless one or more of the players die. In short, seduction is not a game with a finish line or a goal at the end or a definite span of time in which to be played. Seduction is, then, a power of attraction and play which subverts the norm of the sexual orgasm oriented society and moves toward an inversion of roles.

Baudrillard holds power as the tool of anti-seduction. On the one hand, he states that power can seduce because it is haunted by reversibility only when the dominated and dominant no longer exist, only when there are no more victims and executioners. If power fails to change and does not reverse roles, then it cannot seduce. Analyzing his own concept of seduction, Baudrillard states that it is “stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal.”¹⁴ As mentioned above, power belongs to the order of the real, as a creator of rules and limits, while seduction belongs to the order of the symbolic, of feelings and emotions.

Baudrillard mentions that seduction is a sort of dynamic cycle. For him, “The cycle of seduction cannot be stopped. One can seduce someone in order to seduce someone else, but also seduce someone else to please oneself.”¹⁵ Thus, the flux of characters in this cycle can be varied and broad in the game of seduction. There is no real, concrete subject or object because the forces of seduction keep changing: one can be the seducer one day and the seduced the next. In this sense, seduction is quite a giving practice because there is no sole giver. According to the critic, a person is able to seduce if he or she has been seduced before. Baudrillard describes seduction as “a power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination, a power that cause [*sic*] the collapse of not just sex, but the real in general—a power of defiance. It is never an economy of sex or speech,

14 Baudrillard, 46.

15 Baudrillard, 81.

but an escalation of violence and grace, an instantaneous passion that can result in sex, but which can just as easily exhaust itself in the process of defiance and death.”¹⁶ These lines bring back the notions of the strength of seduction, as well as of its capacity to reverse roles.

Baudrillard proves that seduction is a game or challenge by noting that the vertigo produced is reciprocal; both seducer and seduced feel it. Moreover, seduction creates in itself a reversal of roles “a kind of insane relation, quite unlike relations of communications or exchange: a dual relation transacted by meaningless signs, but held together by a fundamental rule and its secret observance.”¹⁷ Therefore, seduction must always be paired and acknowledged by both parts, not like an investment, but like an agreement.

The system of seduction can be analyzed in the following way: the seducer does not necessarily want to love, cherish or please the other but wants to seduce him or her. Also, the seducer does not necessarily expect love, cherish or pleasure back from the seduced. Baudrillard calls this a form of mental cruelty because either the seducer or the seduced cannot fall into the trap of love, desire and sex. Desire, and all that it entails, becomes a “hypothetical prize”¹⁸ and not the goal of seduction. In seduction, the goal or end is never clear, for the pair of players might be unaware of other games: “The person might not even know what has happened. It might be that the person seducing actually loves or desires the person seduced, but at a deeper level another game is being played out, unbeknownst to the two protagonists who remain mere puppets.”¹⁹ The only possible and probable end of seduction is death, where death is, again, not the destiny, but the *rendezvous*.

16 Baudrillard, 81.

17 Baudrillard, 82.

18 Baudrillard, 86.

19 Baudrillard, 86-87.

The Novel *Hallucinating Foucault*²⁰

The plot of Patricia Duncker's novel *Hallucinating Foucault* must be summarized as a basis for understanding how it can be analyzed using Baudrillard's theory on seduction. The story begins in 1993, when the readers are introduced to the protagonist, a graduate student from Cambridge who is writing his doctoral thesis on the French novelist Paul Michel. Since the story is narrated from a first person point of view, readers are never told the name of the student. Over the course of his research, the student meets a young woman who is writing her thesis on Schiller. They start a romantic relationship which sets the plot of the story because it is she who tells him that if he is writing about Paul Michel, he should know everything about him and know exactly where he is, and if need be, put himself at risk to save the author from any harm. She, whom the narrator calls "the Germanist," prompts the student to find out where Paul Michel is and helps him in his quest.

The student discovers that Michel was admitted to a French mental hospital. He travels to Paris and searches the archives for more information on Paul Michel. He finds Michel's letters addressed to Michel Foucault, but then realizes the letters were never sent. In these texts Paul Michel calls Foucault his "Cher Maitre" and admits to Foucault that he is his muse and source of inspiration, and that all he writes is for him.

Finally, the student tracks Paul Michel to a mental ward in a hospital in Clermont. He manages to gain permission to visit him. His first visit is chaotic, but as the days pass the author and student establish a sort of friendship. With time, the student becomes more and more obsessed with Michel and urges his doctor to let him travel with the patient. The permission is granted and they travel to the south of France, to Nice, where they stay at a friend's house.

20 Patricia Duncker, *Hallucinating Foucault* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

At this moment, the student is already in love with Paul Michel, and this gives way to a homosexual relationship between them. The student asks Michel about his relationship with Michel Foucault, and Paul Michel explains the reality of his relationship with Foucault. The conversation ends with Paul Michel telling the student about an encounter he had many years before on a beach in Nice with a boy, who he later found out to be a girl, who promised Michel to read all his books and to know where he was, what had happened to him, and to put herself at risk if she needed to save him. This girl was the Germanist, and the student tells Michel that she was the one who sent him to France. That night Paul Michel dies in a suicidal accident, on the roads of Nice. The Germanist comes to comfort and help the student with all the funeral matters. He goes back to Cambridge and finishes his thesis. To preserve the structural uniformity, the novel opens and closes with dreams he had after Michel's death.

The Analysis Approach

The word *seduction* comes from the Latin *sēdūcere*, which means to lead aside or to lead. A seducer leads the seduced person into a world different from the norm. To lead someone aside means there is a change in the reality of the people involved in the game of seduction. The events that occur are definitely life-altering and expose a rather intimate exchange of actions between the seducer and the seduced. Often love and sex play a major role in seduction. Sometimes seduction is just a game.

Baudrillard's theory on seduction indicates that there can be a type of relationship between readers and writers, which is seductive, enticing and fulfilling, as the acts of reading and writing are entertaining and provide different forms of pleasure to both readers and writers. For Baudrillard, seduction proposes three major guidelines, which are the ludic performance with the feminine figure, the reversal of the order of hierarchies and positions, and death as the only

end of seduction. These three views are interconnected with each other and need each other in order to exist. The notion of a game shows that there must be a shift of positions, a change in the structure of power. Every game must have an end, though in seduction, as Baudrillard expresses, there cannot be a winner, just players.

Baudrillard's tripartite structure of the feminine figure, the reversal of hierarchies and the notion of death, in his theory of seduction can be traced in Patricia Duncker's novel. The characters of *Hallucinating Foucault* are part of different emotional triangles, which are fostered by the seductive game between a writer and a reader. The characters, male and female, play a game where their masculinities and femininities shift in the balance of power, and are also involved in relationships with each other where seduction is the main fuel and death the only end. Paul Michel, the intriguing writer-character of Duncker's novel, once declared, "The love between a writer and a reader is never celebrated. It can never be proved to exist."²¹ This chapter celebrates the relationship between writers and readers, and it is the final proof that it does exist.

The Feminine in Us

Jean Baudrillard opens the discussion on seduction with the affirmation that sexuality is indeed centered on masculinity, thus creating a repressive society which gives the phallus power over everything else. With this in mind, the feminine, for Baudrillard, does not have much space to move around, as he affirms: "There is no use seeking, from within [sexuality], to have the feminine pass through to the other side, or to cross terms. Either the structure remains the same, with the female being entirely absorbed by the male, or it collapses, and there is no longer either female or male."²² In reality, the feminine is more astute than masculinity portrays it. Baudrillard

21 Duncker, 149.

22 Baudrillard, 6.

states that the “strength of the feminine is that of seduction,”²³ because seduction is in itself, a game of appearances, a performance of play. Therefore, as the feminine seduces the masculine, the balance of power shifts, and masculine and feminine reverse roles. In *Hallucinating Foucault* there are many instances where feminine strength imposes itself over masculine discourse and shows its power. This is mostly done by the character of the Germanist, the narrator’s girlfriend, as she is the only main female character in the novel. Other examples seen in the characters of Paul Michel and the narrator portrays more of seduction’s ludic traits.

First, the Germanist is the most dominant character in the entire novel. This point coincides with Baudrillard’s notion that proclaims that “the sovereignty of seduction [is] feminine.”²⁴ The first description the narrator makes of the Germanist is purely physical, as she “had a mass of curly brown hair and wore tiny, round, thin-rimmed glasses. She was bony and quick in her movements, skinny as a boy, oddly dated in her manners, like a mid-nineteenth-century heroine.”²⁵ Though the narrator tries to initiate a conversation with her, she does not want to talk, so he withdraws. However, it is she who finally starts the relationship between them as she directly tells the narrator that she will sleep with him. This situation illustrates two aspects of the nature of seduction: first, the Germanist reverses her feminine role of being submissive by adopting the masculine perspective and stating she is willing to start a sexual relationship with the narrator; second, the Germanist’s femininity is taunting the narrator, showing him that she can be powerful and control her own decisions, proclaiming her sovereignty, as Baudrillard pointed out, because seduction is “women’s true being.”²⁶

23 Baudrillard, 7.

24 Baudrillard, 7.

25 Duncker, 7.

26 Baudrillard, 8.

This empowerment evident in the Germanist continues as the novel progresses. Baudrillard describes femininity's power in seduction by confirming its "ability to turn appearances on themselves,"²⁷ a fact that explains the Germanist's distaste for skirts and other female attire, but also confirms her decision to have her bedroom as a "decadent mass of reds; a scarlet beadsread threaded with gold, and old Turkish carpet.... lampshades, adorned with tassels of red lace, [as if they] had escaped a Regency brothel,"²⁸ a space that recalls passion, sex and seduction. The Germanist is overpowering and in control of her surroundings, not only with the narrator, but also with her fellow graduate classmates. As mentioned above, she is the one who initiates a relationship with the narrator. He adds that "It was clear, however, that she had fairly ferocious ideas of her own. She also had decided ideas about what should happen between [them] in bed,"²⁹ a sign that shows she controls the relationship, and especially, the sexual act. In addition, she uses the same direct manners to tell the narrator to drop his trousers, as she does when she comments on the other graduates' papers, so she ends up being dreaded by them and has no close friends.

The Germanist's tools for seducing the narrator are not the typical ones because she is not the feminine archetype of beauty and softness, and she is actually described to be boyish and rude. Mike, the narrator's roommate, doubts the narrator's reasons for dating the Germanist because she is neither pretty nor perceived as a nice person, so he asks the narrator of their conversations because he cannot imagine her being involved in a romantic relationship. The narrator answers that they talk about "everything. Her work. [His] work."³⁰ The Germanist is not affectionate with the narrator as he expresses that she "never used any terms of endearment, never told [him] she

27 Baudrillard, 8.

28 Duncker, 11.

29 Duncker, 10

30 Duncker, 18.

loved [him], and never held [his] hand.”³¹ So, discarding good looks and an agreeable disposition, the Germanist seduces the narrator with her intellect and her controlling manners in bed.

In the same way that the Germanist plays with her sexuality in seductive terms by controlling and taunting the narrator and their relationship, the narrator and Paul Michel play the game of seduction that Baudrillard describes. The game consists of chasing and shying away, as the “seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends.”³² The narrator initiates this game long before Paul Michel, since the writer does not know he is being looked for. The narrator travels from England to France, and once he reaches this latter country, he searches for the writer in two cities. After these two characters meet, the narrator describes a passage of their relationship that closely resembles the game proposed by Baudrillard:

Whenever I was put out, puzzled, locked away from [Paul Michel], he would immediately come towards me. When I prevaricated, he was direct. If I half spoke a thought he would finish my sentence. It was I who was sensitive, prickly, easily hurt. He knew things about me even when I had not explained myself. He always answered my real questions, the genuine demands, with uncanny intuition.³³

Now that the narrator has physically found and reached Paul Michel, they play an intellectual game because the narrator is obviously attracted and seduced by Michel’s writing, even though the latter has not written in over ten years. However, as seen in the previous example, Michel is the one who finishes the narrator’s sentences and the one who answers his questions. It seems that the writer is filling the narrator’s gaps. Michel is also enthralled by the narrator’s interest and attentions. Though the narrator is not a fiction writer like

31 Duncker, 18.

32 Baudrillard, 22.

33 Duncker, 111.

Michel, he is writing his thesis on Michel's novels, a fact that can be appealing to Michel's ego. Baudrillard affirms that seduction is "an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and proves a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance."³⁴ This can be seen in the relationship between the narrator and Paul Michel as they become seducer and seduced first as a reader and a writer, and then as lovers in a homosexual relationship.

The game of seduction between the narrator and Paul Michel has two stages. First, Michel—the writer—creates something that makes the narrator—the reader—fall for him. This cannot be intentional because Michel is completely unaware of the narrator's existence until they meet in Clermont. The real seduction game occurs later because Michel is no longer a hypothetical person for the narrator. When they meet, the narrator comes up with a new challenge, and that is to get Michel out of the mental hospital. Baudrillard notes that there is a "strategy of displacement"³⁵ in seduction that means that there must be a change in the current balance of power in the seducer-seduced relationship. At first, the narrator is the one in charge, still convincingly rational to the rest. As the two main characters get to know more of each other, the situation changes. In Duncker's novel, once the narrator and Michel have become friends and the first visits the latter every day, Michel's doctor, as someone who sees the events from the outside, notes how their relationship has changed and the implications of their actions. Dr. Vaury tells the narrator that he "comes here, courting [Michel] like a lover. What is going to happen to [Michel] when [he] go[es]?"³⁶ The narrator discards all the rational notions made by the doctor and admits to himself that "For years [his] life had already been dominated by Paul Michel."³⁷ The displacement produced by seduction is not just about which character is in control or which character

34 Baudrillard, 21.

35 Baudrillard, 22

36 Duncker, 113.

37 Duncker, 113.

is subdued, but about the occurrence of the change. This example provides evidence that seduction can obscure the mind and make people behave irrationally, by dismissing any logical implications of the game and therefore losing control of any situation at hand.

The last two points of the previous paragraph will be further explained below where the reversal of roles is analyzed as the main component of seduction, as well as a recurrent motif present in *Hallucinating Foucault*. Baudrillard analyzes the word seduction as “*seducere*: to take aside, to divert from one’s path”³⁸ which calls for the displacement of positions and hierarchy of power. Thus, we will see how in one moment of the novel the narrator is in total control, and later Michel takes charge of the situation and of their relationship. As mentioned above, to seduce is to lead, and we will continue to see a change in the leading role among the characters of Duncker’s novel.

Shifting Hierarchies and Role Reversal

Jean Baudrillard acknowledges that power seduces, but not entirely in the sense that it seduces because it can be controlling, but because “power seduces by virtue of the reversibility that haunts it.... No more dominant and dominated, no more victims and executioners.”³⁹ Therefore, power becomes a seductive force that makes a relationship dynamic, for it implies a movement of hierarchies and reversal of roles. This point can be exemplified by the relationships present in *Hallucinating Foucault*: the Germanist and the narrator, and the narrator and Paul Michel. In the first case, though the Germanist is mostly in control, there is an instance when the narrator becomes the one in power; in the second, the narrator starts controlling his relationship with Paul Michel, but their roles reverse, thus drawing a very fine line between sanity and madness.

38 Baudrillard, 22.

39 Baudrillard, 45.

As noted before, the Germanist actually initiates the relationship with the narrator, and most of the time she tells him exactly what to do. At the beginning of the novel she tells him that she lives “in a two-room flat” so the narrator cannot move in, but that she would “like to go to bed”⁴⁰ with him. The narrator does not give evidence of disliking this situation; perhaps it is something completely new for him, and he is used to being the overpowering masculinity in previous relationships. It is clear that the narrator agrees and likes what he has with the Germanist. Baudrillard affirms that “power is realized according to a dual relation, whereby it throws a challenge to society, and its existence is challenged in return. If power cannot be ‘exchanged’ in accord with this minor cycle of seduction, challenge or ruse, then it quite simply disappears.”⁴¹ The Germanist, by being in control and dictating what to do, is challenging the society that places men as the head of a relationship.

The narrator, aware of this situation, motivates a brief reversal of the power structure in their relationship. The night the narrator meets the Germanist’s father, she shows evidence of letting him play the controlling role for a change. That night is memorable for the narrator because he witnessed how the Germanist changed in her overall behavior when she was in front of her father. The narrator declares that she “was transformed from the intense, abrasive graduate into a merry child. She chatted, giggled, told stories, wolfed chips... .”⁴² Amid the discussion of both his and her thesis, the narrator admits he does not know Paul Michel’s whereabouts. This ignorance triggers the Germanist’s fury because he does not know Michel is secluded in a mental hospital. After her harsh words, she leaves for the restroom and appears moments later accepting the narrator’s excuse that Michel’s life was not a means to interpret his writing. At that

40 Duncker, 9.

41 Baudrillard, 45.

42 Duncker, 20.

moment she tells the narrator that if he loves Paul Michel, he must know where he is and try to save him if he is in danger.

After the narrator and the Germanist leave her father, she tells the narrator she is sorry for her sharp comments, and he kisses her. The narrator remembers that moment as “the first time [he] made love to her rather than the other way around.... That night she felt brittle, fragile.... Like a defeated revolutionary she abandoned her sexual barricade. Something broke within her, gently, quietly, reluctantly.”⁴³ Here we see how these two characters reverse their roles and change the dynamics in bed in an unspoken act, letting the narrator be the one in control. In addition, in this scene the Germanist shows supposedly feminine attitudes assigned by society, like her volatile temper during dinner, and her softness and vulnerability during the sexual act, which indicate that role reversal occurs on different levels in their relationship.

Baudrillard continues with the idea of power, seduction and the reversibility of roles by saying that “Power seduces only when it becomes a challenge to itself; otherwise it is just an exercise, and satisfies only the hegemonic logic of reason.”⁴⁴ This idea can be exemplified with the relationship between the narrator and Paul Michel since it begins as a challenge for the narrator and evolves, and the hierarchies also changed in this relationship.

At first, the narrator tries to be imposing and controlling because he is meeting with Paul Michel, a man who has a history of violence, who has attacked policemen and sent a man to the hospital, and who now is in mental hospital and has tried to escape several times. The narrator faces Michel as a madman, so he must be the sane one. During their first meeting, Michel is defiant and the narrator realizes that he must control the situation, otherwise he will lose any chance to get close to the writer. To show his command, the narrator exposes the reason why he is in Clermont looking for

43 Duncker, 24.

44 Baudrillard, 46.

Michel. But he loses his composure when he yells at the writer that he is not writing about him but about his fiction. The narrator recalls that just after this incident “Paul Michel looked at [him] with vindictive respect.”⁴⁵ Moments later, the narrator must answer the writer in a rude manner due to Michel’s provocative remarks and notes that “[Michel’s] whole face changed. The lines changed places, his eyes widened suddenly. He smiled.”⁴⁶

Perhaps Michel’s reaction is evidence of his sudden affinity with the narrator, a sign that he recognizes the narrator’s character after his actions, or a foreshadowing of the outcome of their relationship in the future. For several weeks the narrator is in control and Michel is submissive. The narrator brings small gifts to the writer, like cigarettes and sweets, which he uses to win Michel’s confidence.

The narrator seduces Michel by showing him that he cares and that he can provide for his needs, even if they are cravings or things the narrator thinks Michel might like. The narrator seduces Michel with his constant companionship, since he is granted permission to visit the writer every day, for several hours, even on Sundays. The narrator gives the writer not only sweets and trinkets, but also his complete attention when Michel talks about his writing or about his illness. The narrator describes the days they spend together in the mental hospital as charged with “a sinister beauty.”⁴⁷ This shows that the narrator and Michel are fully immersed in the game of seduction, given that it can be satisfying yet dangerous.

Of course the game changes later, and Paul Michel gains control over the narrator. Seduction is not supposed to be an ironic situation, though it can be seen as such when the seducer becomes the seduced. Baudrillard formulates the following questions: “Doesn’t the seducer end up losing himself in his strategy, as in an emotional labyrinth? Doesn’t he invent that strategy in order to lose himself in

45 Duncker, 95.

46 Duncker, 95.

47 Duncker, 111.

it? And he who believes himself the game's master, isn't he the first victim of strategy's tragic myth?"⁴⁸ The irony in the novel is that the narrator becomes more irrational than Michel, who is the madman confined in a mental hospital, therefore losing control over the person who is seen by everybody as mentally unstable.

There is an event that marks the role reversal between the narrator and Michel. The night they go out to the town, they end up causing a fight inside a restaurant. After having spent the whole day together outside the hospital, the narrator and Michel have dinner in the Quinze Treize restaurant. Part of their conversation is devoted to discussing the narrator's knowledge of Foucault's ideas about Bedlam. As their discussion evolves, the narrator asks Michel if he could talk to him about Foucault. Michel's negative answer is "a bullet, savage, furious."⁴⁹ Michel is about to leave when a man behind pushes him, and they start a fight. Michel is dragged out into the corridor and the narrator goes after him. In the street, the narrator apologizes and Michel kisses him on the mouth. The narrator recalls how he felt as "Paul Michel was utterly calm and [he] was shaking with fear."⁵⁰ Three days later the narrator admits that Michel "had made no specific demands upon [him], and yet [the writer] demanded everything [the narrator] had; all [his] time, energy, effort, concentration. For something had significantly changed between [them] since the disastrous night out at Quinze Treize. The balance of power had shifted. [The narrator] was no longer in control of the affair and the outcome was radically in doubt."⁵¹ The narrator clearly recognizes the change of direction in their relationship and accepts that now Michel is the one in control.

Paul Michel does not waste time when expressing what he wants from the narrator once they reach their holiday destination and

48 Baudrillard, 98.

49 Duncker, 121.

50 Duncker, 123.

51 Duncker, 123.

share the same bed. The narrator remembers how the writer “laid his cards on the table at once, without hesitation or embarrassment.”⁵²

Michel tells the narrator that sex should not be an issue between them, so the narrator must join him in bed. The narrator is relieved and disappointed but Michel tells him to “yield,”⁵³ so the narrator lets himself go.

Baudrillard acknowledges that the challenge in seduction can drive people insane, an element which is part of role reversal since seduction involves, as seen above, the change and rupture of power structures, which can be life-changing for someone. Baudrillard affirms that the game of seduction produces a reciprocal sense of vertigo, “an insanity borne by the vertiginous absence that unites [the two people involved].... it inaugurates a kind of insane relation, quite unlike relations of communication or exchange: a duel relation transacted by meaningless signs.”⁵⁴ In *Hallucinating Foucault* the theme of insanity and obsession plays a major role, for Paul Michel is a mental patient. In addition to Michel’s mental history, there is also a shift in the roles between the narrator and Michel to determine which one is more rational than the other.

Baudrillard’s form of madness-inducing-seduction presents the seducer committing to a rule, so the seducer affirms, “I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you, but to *seduce* you—and my only concern is not that you love or please me, but that you are *seduced*,”⁵⁵ a rule that Paul Michel follows in the novel. Because he is a diagnosed schizophrenic, he does not deal with emotions and close relationships as normal people do. Dr. Jacques Martel describes schizophrenics like Michel as “incapable of loving.... They aren’t like us. They are usually very perceptive. It’s uncanny. They have a human dimension that is beyond the banality of ordinary human

52 Duncker, 138.

53 Duncker, 139.

54 Baudrillard, 82.

55 Baudrillard, 86.

beings. They can't love you as another person would. But they can love you with a love that is beyond human love."⁵⁶ With this trait of Michel's insane personality in mind, the reader of Duncker's novel sees how he would be one that can seduce because he is far more perceptive than the rest, and he aims to attract readers with his work. The love between a writer and a reader is not necessarily a romantic association, but a seductive form that invites the latter to become totally involved with the former.

When the narrator is finally able to locate Michel in France, he has taken very personally the promise made to the Germanist to save Michel from danger. When he departs from Paris heading towards Clermont-Ferrand and towards his writer, the narrator remembers how he had felt at that moment, showing signs of obsession and lack of rationality:

Looking back, I see now that I had become obsessed, gripped by a passion, a quest, that had not originated with me, but that had become my own. His handwriting, sharp, slanting, inevitable, had been the last knot in the noose. His letters had spoken to me with a terrible unbending clarity, had made the most uncompromising demands upon me. I could never betray those demands and abandon him. No matter who he had become.⁵⁷

Even Michel recognizes the narrator's state of mind as he tells the narrator that "only a madman would have come all the way to Clermont to find someone who had been incarcerated for nearly ten years.... Without knowing who [the narrator] would find."⁵⁸ Then, the narrator becomes so blinded by his feelings towards Michel that he is no longer rational. Michel, the insane one, makes decisions regarding the outcome of their relationship. When their vacation time is near to end, the narrator wants to keep Michel for himself and

56 Duncker, 45.

57 Duncker, 80.

58 Duncker, 120-121.

plans to obtain permission for the writer to permanently leave the mental hospital. Michel, in turn, tells the narrator: “You are twenty-two and very much in love. I am forty-six and a certified lunatic. You are much more likely to be insane than I am.”⁵⁹ In the end, the roles change, and Michel commits suicide a few days before having to return to the hospital, and the narrator has to face his author’s death, with the help of the Germanist and Dr. Jacques Martel, who both arrive to France to deal with all the funeral arrangements.

Death: The End of the Affair

Baudrillard makes clear that seduction is an on-going game that can take one person to another, and so forth, with sex as merely one stage in the game but not as the ultimate prize, for the real prize is to seduce and be seduced. But, like any game, it must come to an end somehow, and Baudrillard points to death as the only sign of conclusion. Though death is inevitable, the players involved in the seductive game are not aware of their fates or the fate of their affairs, which is why Baudrillard calls death “a rendez-vous, not an objective destiny.”⁶⁰ In this respect, there are three important deaths in *Hallucinating Foucault* that mark the end of a seductive partnership—the death of Michel Foucault, the death of Paul Michel and the end of the relationship between the narrator and the Germanist. These characters, as writers and readers, or as romantic partners, are involved in the game of seduction.

The death of Michel Foucault marks the end of Paul Michel’s writing because Michel’s muse and reader is gone for good. This is noted by the Germanist early in the novel when she explains to the narrator the importance of Foucault in Michel’s work. The Germanist affirms that for Paul Michel, Foucault’s death in 1984 “was the end of writing. His reader was dead.... Why bother to exist if your

59 Duncker, 145.

60 Baudrillard, 73.

reader is dead?”⁶¹ The narrator does not believe her and tells her that she has made everything up, so she challenges him to go to France and ask Michel personally.

The narrator finds out Michel’s answer even before he meets the writer. In the letters that Michel wrote to Foucault he is very clear declaring that the French philosopher is his muse. According to the narrator, Foucault is the person “who has more absolute power to constrain [Michel], or set [him] free.”⁶² In another letter, one of the last that Michel wrote to Foucault, the writer admits to the philosopher that his greatest fear is to lose his reader, the person for whom he writes. The Germanist was right, but the narrator does not want to let his writer fade away in a mental institution. At last, the narrator asks Michel if he still has any more messages to send. The writer responds negatively and adds: “And what is there left for a novelist to do when he has sent out all his messages?... Rien que mourir.”⁶³ There is nothing left but dying. And that is how the platonic affair between Michel and Foucault ended, and how Michel’s writing ended as well.

Baudrillard’s concept of death as the end of seduction has an interesting nuance evident in the affirmation that “We seduce with our death, our vulnerability.... The secret is to know how to play with death in the absence of a gaze.”⁶⁴ Therefore, it seems that death can be both the end and the beginning of seduction. In the novel, the Germanist writes a letter to Michel as if the narrator had written the letter too. In it she tells the writer that he had no right to abandon her and the narrator since they were his readers too, not only Foucault. A part of the Germanist’s letter takes the readers back to Michel’s letter to Foucault when the writer expresses that what he feared most was “the loss of [his] reader, the man for whom [he] wrote.”⁶⁵ On the contrary, the Germanist writes that she, and the narrator as well,

61 Duncker, 36.

62 Duncker, 59.

63 Duncker, 151.

64 Baudrillard, 83.

65 Duncker, 72.

does not fear losing him because she will never let him go. She ends the letter saying that Michel “will always have all of [her] attention, all [her] love.”⁶⁶ In death, and through Michel’s writings, the game of seduction will continue to take place with the Germanist and the narrator, and other readers of his work. Death ends up by immortalizing Michel and his work. Baudrillard uses the analogy of the death of film stars to solidify immortalization through death. By being dead, a film star can be idealized because the star is perfect. He affirms that “*death itself shines by its absence*, that death can be turned into a brilliant and superficial appearance, that it is itself a seductive surface,”⁶⁷ thus making the dead—person, work of art or relationship—remain perfect in the eyes of the others.

The narrator’s involvement with Michel marks the end of his relationship with the Germanist, though it is not fully described in the novel. The narrator tells the Germanist everything that happened with the writer when he comes back to England to finish his thesis except “Michel’s encounter with the boy on the beach”⁶⁸ because the narrator recognizes that moment was the Germanist’s secret with Michel. It appears that the narrator and the Germanist were still involved for a while back in England, and when the narrator asked her to meet his parents again, she refused “with unnecessary aggression.”⁶⁹ The initial roles they played at the beginning of their affair seem to have continued for some time after Michel’s death and then they go back to their country. The last piece of information presented in Duncker’s novel is that, with time, the narrator wins the Foucault Travel Prize, uses the money to travel, and later teaches in a London college, while the Germanist works in the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar. They write to each other for over a year, but the narrator loses touch with her. The last thought the narrator devotes

66 Duncker, 166.

67 Baudrillard, 97.

68 Duncker, 170.

69 Duncker, 171.

to the Germanist is his intention to buy the next book she publishes. The reader-writer relationship is reinforced in the novel once again.

Conclusion

A remark in the Germanist's letter to Michel expresses an honest idea about the relationship between writers and readers as seducers and seduced because she expresses that Michel gave her "what every writer gives the readers he [or she] loves—trouble and pleasure."⁷⁰ The reader-writer relationship becomes, then, a form of seduction, hazardous and alluring yet gratifying. As seen above, the novel deals with different readers and writers who all play the game of seduction, reverse their roles by being both the seducer or the seduced, and suffer after the symbolic death of their affairs. The game of seduction, as Baudrillard describes it, is intense, dangerous, engaging and dynamic. The actions of reading and writing share these same traits. Patricia Duncker, in *Hallucinating Foucault*, presents this game mainly framed in the reader-writer relationship, one which she describes and celebrates as well.

70 Duncker, 165.