



# Unwrapping Christmas: Barthes, Baudrillard, and Disney Holiday Specials

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*Abstract:* This essay explores the transformation of Christmas in contemporary culture, using Roland Barthes' and Jean Baudrillard's theories. It examines how Christmas, traditionally a Christian holiday, has morphed into a secular, commercial event in the media, specifically through holiday specials. By analyzing the shift from religious to secular and the creation of a "hyperreal" Christmas, it discusses the broader implications of this change on cultural narratives and societal perceptions. It further explores potential methods to understand and engage with this transformed cultural landscape.

## **Introduction**

Recently, I was watching the Disney Holiday special for this year, 2023. As I watched, I wasn't overly interested in the fact that it was called a "Holiday" special rather than a Christmas special - we live in an inclusive time, and Disney is no stranger to that. What I did find interesting, however, was the fact that they could get away with effectively having a Christmas special while still referring to the holidays broadly in both the title and little reminders throughout. Toward the end, they had multiple short video clips of families offering a little greeting, with at least one of those families appearing to be celebrating Hanukkah. The hosts, at times, noted that this celebrated all holidays, Christmas, Hannukah, and Kwanza. But the content itself was all Christmas music, Christmas sets, and Christmas attire. Now, the commentary ought to count for something, but it would be hard to argue that anyone was listening to a musical holiday special primarily for the commentary. Had they not reminded the audience that they were doing a holiday special, most would've likely assumed it was a Christmas special without question. Thus, I began to wonder, who is the "holiday" thing really for?

If you were the sort of person who celebrates Hanukkah and doesn't want to watch a Christmas sort of thing, you would still leave thinking that this was a Christmas special that gave the slightest of head nods to your holiday. If you were somebody who exclusively celebrates Kwanza, you wouldn't be satisfied because they mentioned Kwanza one time; you would be thinking that the entire thing was dedicated to a Christmas-oriented audience. Thus, we can't rightly assume that as they described the target audience, they believed it would primarily be these holidays that are much less common than Christmas in the English-speaking world. No, the most popular winter holiday is the same one that inspired the entire soundtrack: Christmas. So, why say, "Happy Holidays"? Why let everybody know that you're being inclusive?

On first sight, it manifests as performative inclusivity. It's letting the people know, "We are doing an inclusive thing! Despite all appearances, what you're witnessing here represents all holidays." What I want to do throughout this essay is unpack the implications of that idea. What does it mean to take what seems to be a Christmas special and tell people it's a broad Holiday special? Then, with that analysis as a jumping-off point, I will argue for an even more pessimistic view.

## The Mythologies of Barthes

To begin, I will be drawing heavily on the work of Roland Barthes, who wrote the book *Mythologies* early in his career. Later on, he would become perhaps more post-structuralist without ever becoming a full post-structuralist.<sup>1</sup> Although he critiqued his earlier work, he didn't abandon the principles. He seemed to believe that times had changed, and his work had become insufficient, yet the work of *Mythologies* was to be extrapolated rather than abandoned.

Barthes' cultural semiotics developed from the work of Saussure, who posed semiotics (semiology) as a science<sup>2</sup> of symbols. In semiotics, there is a signifier, such as the word "rose," and the signified – the thing the rose points to – passion or romance. Saussure understood that linguistics, his area of focus, was only one part of semiotics, but there are other areas of study. To use the example given, the word "rose" can act as a signifier in the same way that a physical rose might, with the signified being passion or romance. The signifier and the signified, rarely being mutually exclusive, together form the sign.

Barthes takes this a step further and suggests that, in actuality, the sign is not the end of the story, but becomes something else. The linguistic sign then

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<sup>1</sup> He seemed to be an anomalous liminal figure at the intersection of structuralism and post-structuralism.

<sup>2</sup> In France in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of "science" was used more broadly than it is today.

becomes drained of its richness and its history and is filled with myth. More precisely, the sign, which is the pair of signifier and signified in the linguistic semiotic order, becomes the signifier of myth. This is a second-order semiotic system. For clarity's sake, Barthes introduces some new terminology.

He says that, in the linguistic sense, the sign could be called the "meaning." That is, when being considered in its fullness, prior to being absorbed into the myth. When the meaning is drained of its history and richness and taken as a signifier of the myth, it is called a form. Think of the form as the emptied-out sign that becomes the new signifier of the mythic. That form and its signified (called "concept") taken together are the new sign of the myth, which he calls the "signification."

In application, Barthes would look at culture and see mythologies everywhere. He believed that these cultural mythologies, which he identified in various commonplace things, such as professional wrestling, stripteases, and so on, were examples of ideologically motivated myths. Myths designed not to hide, but to distort. They seek to *naturalize*, rather than eliminate. The history of the meaning is absorbed into the myth, recontextualizing it and depoliticizing it. This process effectively declaws or defangs symbols so that they serve the myth, rather than subvert it.

Think of Che Guevara<sup>3</sup>, who, in the Americas, represents revolution and rebellion – often associated with Marxism. Yet, when college students wear it on a T-shirt, they're purchasing it as a commodity, not for its use-value, as Marx might hope, but for its sign-value.<sup>4</sup> An act which implicitly supports the very systems that spurred Guevara's interventions in Cuba to overthrow the corrupt Batista regime. There's an ironic sense to it, yes, but what has happened is that the symbol, the sign of Che Guevara, has been naturalized. Nobody has tried to hide his history as a revolutionary; it has become part of the myth and absorbed into the concept. As a result, Che Guevara retains only a tamed richness – rebellion within the context of non-rebellion. It's depoliticized speech and no longer a threat. Guevara is initially encountered as a symbol of rebellion, steadfastness, idealism, and bravery – his upward gaze staring imperialism square in the eyes. Behind that myth is the real myth: the commodification of the revolutionary impulse. When symbols of revolution can only be gained by means of the capitalist system, the system must be all-pervasive and wield ultimate authority – or so the myth might be interpreted.

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<sup>3</sup> Barthes uses an example of a French revolutionary, but Che Guevara is much more commonplace – at least in America.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London ; Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007).

Barthes' perspective on myth was complex, acknowledging that myths permeate culture with ideological significance. While he recognized that myths could reinforce dominant ideologies, he also saw the potential for semiotic analysis to demystify these constructs. Unpacking myths, for Barthes, was an exercise in critical interpretation, revealing the socio-cultural underpinnings of what might otherwise be accepted as “natural” or “given” in the fabric of everyday life. This critical work is not necessarily an overt act of rebellion but is a form of intellectual resistance to the passive consumption of ideologies. Therefore, the role of the mythologist is not solely to challenge the status quo but to illuminate the ways in which cultural narratives are constructed and can be interpreted.

The holiday special's substitution of “Holiday” for “Christmas” is illustrative of the Barthesian mythopoeic process. The signifier “Christmas,” historically tied with Christian connotations, has undergone a cultural reinterpretation. Its specific religious significance is abstracted, transforming it into a “form.” This form is then imbued with a new, inclusive myth encapsulating the broad holiday season. Here, “Happy Holidays” is a linguistic signifier aiming to convey inclusivity, while the traditional Christmas images – trees, songs, sleigh bells, snow – serve as imagistic signifiers. These signifiers, once exclusively linked to Christmas, are strategically realigned to evoke a broader “holiday” ethos that ostensibly includes diverse winter celebrations.

However, this realignment reveals a tension – despite the inclusive linguistic gestures, the prevailing imagistic signifiers invoked maintain an exclusive association with Christmas rather than a truly ecumenical holiday spirit. The special's narrative, therefore, navigates a delicate balance, inviting the audience to a shared “holiday” space while predominantly presenting Christmas-centric symbols. The overt corrections in the narrative, which assert the special's “holiday” nature, aim to reinforce the inclusive intent. Yet, they also highlight the semiotic dissonance between the linguistic aims and the imagistic reality.

The transformation of Christmas within the holiday special can be interpreted through the lens of Charles Taylor's notion of the “secular age.”<sup>5</sup> Therein, Taylor's secularization is not the stripping of Christianity from the culture but the cultural shift where traditional religious beliefs and practices are no longer the sole, assumed framework for societal norms and personal identity. In this secular age, a multiplicity of belief systems coexist, and individuals may identify as Christian, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, or whatever else. Christianity is one option among many. The holiday special reflects this secularization by presenting Christmas as a cultural festivity that does not necessarily invoke its religious origins. Several Christmas traditions are maintained – melodies and

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

decorations abound – yet the core religious elements, such as the narratives of the immaculate conception or the nativity, are not emphasized (though they are present in some songs). The original sign (meaning) of Christmas has been repurposed, and it now serves as a mere signifier (form) for the secularized “holiday” myth of a society that has moved beyond a singular religious narrative.

The myth of a non-denominational winter holiday season seeks to encompass various belief systems under its aegis. Here, the glaringly obvious point that emerges is that Christmas can be celebrated entirely on its own without reliance on religion, as it is by countless people of different faiths – atheists, non-practicing Christians, and so on. Indeed, in many, if not most, American households, people feel no need to mention religion, religiosity, or religious narratives during Christmas celebrations. So, presumably, there would be no need to deal in the muddy waters of differing belief systems. This is, however, a category error. The issue being circumvented here isn’t one of the packaged religious frameworks that necessarily come with the holidays themselves but of cultural expressions, religious or not. The secular myth has already been naturalized, now operating as the default narrative within the broader cultural context. It’s not that the religious roots of Christmas have been forgotten or entirely dismissed; rather, they have been subsumed by a more commodified, secular celebration that easily coalesces with the consumerist ethos prevalent in many societies, particularly in the United States. In this sense, the secularization process has not so much eliminated the religious significance of Christmas as it has broadened its appeal to include those who may not subscribe to its religious origin story. The “merry” in “Merry Christmas” no longer necessitates a Christ-centric joy, but rather a universally accessible sentiment of goodwill and festivity.

### **The Hyperreal of Baudrillard**

In order to explain why that sentiment is both concerning and demonstrative of a broader cultural phenomenon, I would like to – perhaps rather abruptly – introduce Jean Baudrillard’s idea of “hyperreality.” As stated before, Barthes moved from the more structuralist approach to *Mythologies* toward more post-structuralist approaches, especially of literature and texts. He didn’t lose all concern for broader cultural myths, but they were a bit less pertinent, and certainly, he saw his structuralist approach to them as insufficient. Baudrillard developed Barthes’ ideas in what seems to be a proper direction. Indeed, Baudrillard’s hyperreality, ideas of media influence, and lamentation over the loss of referents seem more relevant than ever in the Digital Age and are still relevant in contemporary scholarly dialogue.

Baudrillard was a postmodern theorist who extended the semiotic exploration of Barthes into a more disillusioned terrain. If Barthes saw myth as a second-order semiotic system that reshapes reality into a cultural narrative, Baudrillard took it further, suggesting that in contemporary society, we are not just interpreting reality through myths but are instead immersed in a “hyperreality” where the simulation is indistinguishable from or even replaces the real.<sup>6</sup>

Barthes believed that myths’ function was to distort, but not to hide. By contrast, Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” is contingent on hiding or obfuscating. It describes the progression by which representations become increasingly detached from their original referents:

1. **The first order** of simulacra is a faithful image or copy, clearly connected to a real referent.
2. **The second order** distorts reality; the signifier still suggests a link to the referent but misrepresents it.
3. **The third order** masks or denies the existence of a profound reality; the signifier claims to represent something real but has no relation to it.
4. **The fourth order** is pure simulation, the simulacrum, which is entirely unrelated to any reality—it is a creation unto itself.

Within this framework, the simulacrum doesn't just distort reality but becomes a reality of its own, a “hyperreality” that is more palpable than the original. Applying this to Christmas, the holiday's commercial expression has transformed from an altered form of a religious tradition to a hyperreal phenomenon. This “hyperreal” Christmas, adorned with shopping frenzies and Santa Claus, is no longer tethered to the nativity story but is a culturally dominant form of celebration in its own right – that is, it can make do without a historical referent.

### **Disney’s Holiday Special = Disneyland**

To pick up where I left off earlier: the signification process that took place during the “Happy Holidays” special and every other special like it is a farce. They weren't engaging in a war on Christmas. The war on Christmas has already been lost. The Christmas that they drained of its essence was no longer Christmas at all. It was a simulacrum. The signifiers that pointed to Christmas were not pointing toward something wrapped up in religiosity. They were distorting – in a

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994). See also: Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, n.d.).

Barthesian way – a simulacrum called Christmas. When Ryan Seacrest said that the holidays are all about our loved ones, his substitution of “holiday” for “Christmas” is enough to draw attention toward the intentional broadening of Christmas themes. But with the jarring and obvious word-shuffling, attention is drawn away from the value statement: the holidays or Christmas are primarily about loved ones. The statement required no malicious intent; it drew from the dominant cultural *milieu* surrounding Christmas.

Baudrillard provides analysis in his most famous work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, of Disneyland. He conceptualizes it as an exaggerated representation of reality – a hyperreal space designed for refreshment and escape. It's a simulation intended to make the outside world appear more authentic upon your departure. However, Baudrillard posits that this differentiation between Disneyland and the “real” world is illusory. We don't return to reality; we step back into a world increasingly dominated by the hyperreal. The media landscape – encompassing news and social media – filters and frames our perception, providing a distorted representation of reality. In this mediated world, the line between the genuine and the constructed becomes blurred, and the hyperreal becomes our new baseline for understanding the world around us. Disneyland serves to further obfuscate “real” reality from the hyperreal. You're meant to see how exaggerated Disneyland appears and differentiate it from the outside world. By contrast with that land of naivete and excess, the rest of the world appears to be vastly more real. You're meant to say, “That was a nice vacation, but now it's back to the real world.”

Disney's Holiday special serves the same function as Disneyland. We're meant to look at it and say, by contrast, “I like Christmas. That's old school. I like traditional Christmas. My family's a real old-school family.” Here, I think of the Bing Crosby and David Bowie cover of “Peace on Earth” and “Little Drummer Boy.” It begins not with singing but with a dialogue between them. Bing is talking to David, a young man at the time, and he asks him if he knows any of the older stuff. Bowie says, “Oh, sure.” And he talks about The Beatles, and Bing says, “Oh, you go back that far,” in a, perhaps slightly mocking, sort of way. After a few more lines, they begin to sing one of the older songs they both turn out to be familiar with: “Little Drummer Boy” (mixed with “Peace on Earth”).

However, the “Little Drummer Boy” song only goes back to 1941 and wasn't recorded/popularized until the 1950s. The little drummer boy himself was certainly not part of the biblical narratives, yet is placed there alongside the Magi in various Christmas media. So, the “old” that Bing refers to is the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fairness, when contrasted with Bowie's career, that is old; certainly, when contrasted with 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christmas, it seems very old. But it's still around 2 millennia too late to be considered a representation of the referent

that the song serves as a reference for. In fact, in its modification of the nativity *via* the addition of a character, it serves to distort the barrier between the representation (the song or movie) and the real (the original nativity narrative). This is precisely the impact of the simulacra and the defining trait of the hyperreal.

We may know the history behind the development of Christmas traditions, but such knowledge isn't a necessity to engage with the thing we call "Christmas" today. Why should there be 9 reindeer? Why should Rudolph be one of them? The questions, presumably, have answers, but the celebration of Christmas is self-sufficient whether we have them or not. It can be celebrated independent of its religious and historical roots; Rudolph can be on our lawn and in our songs without us knowing why. In this hyperreal tradition, the "why" fades into the background, overtaken by the "what" – the immediate experience of Christmas as it's been presented to us. Saint Nicholas, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Bishop, is represented in the figure of *Sinterklaas*, a second, or perhaps third-order representation. Still, the Santa Claus, whose likeness is owned by Coca-Cola, the one most familiar to American audiences, is a North American figure. It doesn't bother with claiming a historical origin. It *is*, and *what* it is turns out to compel us more than its predecessors do.

The Christmas Holiday special presents a collection of signifiers traditionally associated with Christmas but recontextualizes them within a new framework. The viewers, unless they internalize this recontextualization, might challenge it by saying, "Hey, that's Christmas stuff!" However, what they're actually engaging with is not the traditional Christmas but a reconstituted version—a simulacrum. This hyperreal version does not simply distort the original meaning of Christmas; it creates a new narrative where the traditional elements of Christmas are mobilized to signify a constructed reality that stands apart from the historical and religious origins of the holiday.

## The Way Out

The question of how to escape the trap that Holiday specials have laid for us and, in turn, subvert the hyperreal is a troublesome one. Baudrillard argued in *Seduction*<sup>7</sup> that the thing to do is engage in "seduction," not in the erotic sense, but in a very specific, Baudrillardian sense. This would involve a sort of free play of symbols that subverts their utilitarian and functional purposes. That is, symbolic exchange absent of traditional ideas of value, such as functionality – for example, on the basis of aesthetics. Think of the exchange of memes online.

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Pr., 2007).



These are divorced from their referents knowingly. They are exchanged precisely because they do not claim to point to a profound truth of any sort – which Baudrillard was highly skeptical of. The memes facilitate a shared cultural experience that transcends the matrix of functionality that Baudrillard thinks to be so problematic.

I find this solution dissatisfactory simply because history hasn't supported its effectiveness. The Digital Age has undoubtedly ushered in all manner of acts of Baudrillardian seduction, yet the functional always caught up. Think of early YouTube prior to monetization – it was like the Wild West, but monetization caught up, and now videos are bound by algorithmic influence. Moreover, I am unconvinced that the hyperreal can be laid solely (or primarily) at the feet of functionalism, utilitarianism, or even consumerism. Rather, those are symptoms of the broader process of secularization.

Despite *The Matrix* paying homage to Baudrillard – Neo was using a hollowed-out copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* to store his hacking paraphernalia – Baudrillard was highly critical of *The Matrix* franchise for 3 main reasons:

1. It drew too clear a distinction between the simulated and the real, whereas his theory emphasized the lack of clarity.
2. It was a movie that required and benefitted from the very thing it critiqued.
3. It failed to employ his preferred method of escape – seduction.

There are a few reasons why at least 2/3 of these critiques demonstrate a misunderstanding of the franchise, but I want to focus on the first critique. He claimed that *The Matrix* was too Platonic<sup>8</sup>; it didn't describe an unclear distinction between simulated and real, but humans simply unplugged into the real. This is shown to be an erroneous interpretation by the Architect scene in *The Matrix: Reloaded* and by the whole of *The Matrix: Resurrections*, but if we only had access to *The Matrix*, it would be a valid critique – if the Wachowski's were only interested in expressing Baudrillard's thoughts. But, if the Platonic idea<sup>9</sup> of an idealized world beyond the veil of the material world *did* exist, or at least if everyone believed it existed, it would present a more suitable method of escaping the hyperreal.

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx, trans., "The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview with Jean Baudrillard," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, October 13, 2018, <https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/the-matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur-interview-with-jean-baudrillard/#:~:text=The%20actors%20are,classical%2C%20Platonic%20treatment>.

<sup>9</sup> I use this phrase solely to echo Baudrillard – certainly all expressions of a world beyond the veil don't belong to Plato.

Nietzsche was very hard on Plato<sup>10</sup> for his popularization of the *Hinterwelt*, the behind-world which was realer than the material world. He found it cowardly, as though Plato and all other *hinterweltlers* were simply looking for a way out so that they didn't have to make do in the material world.<sup>11</sup> But, when the hyperreal has been woven into the material realm, and seduction has failed, the behind-world bears a certain appeal, even to the irreligious. Conceptually, the transcendent is a way of escaping the entangled real/hyperreal. Practically, a collective belief in such a world, irrespective of its actual existence or non-existence, allows for appeals that the ancient philosophers would've greatly appreciated: appeals to the unchanging.

### *In Praxis*

Returning to the ~~Christmas Holiday special~~ Hyperreal Space of Refreshment, transcendence allows for at least 1 of 2 possible circumventions of its façade:

1. I can appeal to some transcendent Form of Christmas.
2. I can sift through the façade and find the Christmas spirit in it, even if it's greatly obscured and fragmented.

For the former, numerous theological and traditional approaches might be taken. For the latter, we need merely to argue for a depth dimension<sup>12</sup> to the disparate or spurious elements of the special. The Christmas tree, as with all trees, is loaded with symbolic import and cross-cultural significance throughout history. The gift-giving may be viewed from a consumerist lens, but it may also be viewed from the lens of the lively virtue of charity. "Peace on Earth and goodwill toward men" goes without saying.

These abstract notions can be abstracted further to serve as signifiers of the ultimate signified: God. And story elements of the greatest story ever told: the Gospel. Gift-giving at its best is charity, a free-giving as grace is freely given to us. All elements of pagan origin, such as the Christmas tree, the Yule log, mistletoe, etc., can be understood as pagan elements conquered by Christ. The spirit of peace, joy, goodwill, and love of family that characterizes the Christmas spirit can also be said to characterize the Kingdom.

By introducing this depth dimension, the Christmas and Holiday specials lose their superficial, ever-shifting grip over our imaginations. Instead, they are

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Alexander Tille, and M. M. Bozman, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (London: Dent, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, he described his philosophy as being anti-Plato. The more immediate, the better!

<sup>12</sup> I'm thinking here of Tillich's theology of culture and/or Jung's archetypes.

recontextualized as only the expressions and manifestations of timeless truths, and it is those timeless truths we focus on.

## Conclusion

The hyperreal landscape, as it was manifested in the Disney Holiday special, is interesting – an odd and deceptive blend of ideas that obfuscates our ability to identify what Christmas is. I’ve argued that it a new version of Disneyland, a place where we’re meant to attend and say, “that’s phony, I know the real Christmas,” perhaps even engage in a pseudo-culture war that we’ve already lost. But, if there *is* a true and transcendent meaning to Christmas – not that Baudrillard would’ve agreed that there was – then it won’t, and necessarily cannot be stamped out by any sort of layers of falsehood, be they commercial or whatever.

Baudrillard’s seduction is insufficient for escaping, at least this expression of, the hyperreal. We ought to focus on the depth dimension of Christmas – those values that make it Christmas.

*“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*  
(Philippians 4:8)

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