

an incomplete pataphysic sortie

# Edison's Introduction To Pataphysics home study guide

Excerpt 1.1

Baudrillard Duchamp Alfred Jarry Foucault James Joyce  
John Cage Ionesco Picasso Breton Borges McCartney  
Jacques Lacan Apollinaire Miro Artaud

or even so was not there; although like **James Joyce, Duchamp, Picasso, and Artaud**, the Beatle songwriter Paul McCartney was a big fan of pataphysics. The word "pataphysics" was famously sung by McCartney at the start of his skull-busting pataphysics song: *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*, on the Beatle's gigantic *Abbey Road* album:

“Joan was quizzical – studied *pataphysical* science, in the home...”  
 (“...bang bang Maxwell's silver hammer came down on her head...”)

**McCartney's song** is a deliberate allegory. The event of realizing the non-linear realities focused on by pataphysics has traditionally been referred to by acolytes and practitioners as “de-braining.”

**This event process of de-braining** is allegorically very close to Zen's signature event of sudden enlightenment – but obviously with some interesting difference in conception of procedure and the goal state. Pataphysics might be thought of as a process for enlightening writers, artists, scientists, philosophers, etc., as to an understanding and avoiding of inferior habits of linear thinking and communicating.

**Pataphysics might also be** described as a way of learning, as with Zen, to focus on the individual self, and its eccentricities and particularities, rather than on community conformist practices and restrictive common perspectives. Pataphysics involves practices to that effect.

**French philosopher and writer, Alfred Jarry**, is well known for being a main intellectual mentor of Surrealism and Dada. He was born in 1873 in the town of Laval, a century after Immanuel Kant established his enduring Surrealist philosophy, by publishing the groundbreaking *Critique of Pure Reason*. Jarry is remembered for his influential critique of how, as Baudrillard might put it: we're conceptually living in a virtual simulacrum which we construct through maladaptive reasonable reliance on linear assumptions about language and other referential symbols.

**Jarry's critique addresses how** our unwarranted direct linear assumptions regarding words and other symbolic referentials traditionally prevent us from entertaining and sharing unusual sophisticated and nuanced ideas such as those expressed for example in Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, or Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.<sup>1</sup> Exemplary works by three of the best-known acolytes of pataphysics.

**The Renaissance inherited strong linear thinking**, syllogistic logic, contrapposto, and single-point mathematical perspective from long previous Classical times. Picasso blew that all away in *Demoiselles*. There is no trace of the Greeks' linearly isomorphic direct mapping whatsoever between Picasso's referential drawing and the group of ladies it represents. It's a complex abstracted metaphor. Definitely not Masaccio.

**Masaccio (“Big Tommy”) is at the opposite end** of the spectrum. His seminal mural at the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence in 1427 was nearly 100% non-abstracted. It was a linear projection. It was the first noticeably close-to-perfect, single-point-perspective painting since the fall of Rome. So close to perfectly isomorphic that one could take measurements from

its two-dimensional surface, and then perfectly project all of the linear measurements and angles in the three-dimensional chapel represented in the painting. Definitely not Picasso. In Masaccio's pre-Renaissance times that isomorphic *tromp l'oeil* was stunning.

**It's not theoretically possible** for the subject of a word, a metaphor, or any other kind of referential symbol to ever conflate in a perfect linear way with its own object. Never a perfect match; and sometimes (particularly in postmodern art and literature) a relationship between the subject and object of a metaphor or other symbol may be so obscure as to not be initially obvious at all. Or it might even be designed with a permanent vacancy in part, or even all, of the meaning.

**Pataphysics is about** half-addressed allegories, augmenting adjectives, generic signifiers, and deliberately focusing on exaggerated advantages in the fact that all words, sentences, and other symbolic or referential communication can, at best, be only fuzzy representations. They can never amount to more than some significant degree of allegory or metaphor.

**Jarry was a youth prodigy and** a knowledgeable amateur mathematician who hung out with the sophisticated and infamous fin de siècle Paris literati; as well as the Symbolists; and especially the likes of such artists as Bonnard, Vallette, Picasso, and other avant garde bohos at Montmartre ("Martyr's Mount" a Parisian artists' enclave lasting several generations, located on the little hill where the city's patron, Saint Denis, was murdered).

**Those were the heady days of French Symbolism,** Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Moreau, etc.; and only a generation after Charles Sanders Peirce was organizing and publishing his groundbreaking fundamental studies of symbols and semiotics (Peirce coined that discipline-definitive word).

**Paul McCartney modeled his song *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*** after an anthem written by pataphysic theorist Alfred Jarry, simply titled: *Chanson Décervelage (De-braining Song)*. The protagonist of the Beatles' song (*Maxwell Edison, majoring in medicine*) with his little silver brain-hammer, is a pataphysics intern, allegorically administering plaque-busting debraining therapy to his unenlightened conventional friend Joan. With his little brain hammer, Edison turns on the electric light for Joan, eliminating her dysfunctional habits of straight linear thinking. (And then McCartney's song tells us, Maxwell Edison administers *décervelage* to the policeman and the judge as well.)

**Words and all other referential symbols** are by nature always different in some respects from whatever it is they represent or refer to. There's no such thing as a perfect description, or flawless non-fuzzy representation of anything. Aside from some kind of direct mind-to-mind transfer of information (like a straight linear Vulcan mind-meld): all communication is therefore composed to some degree of art, of creativity, or of imagination on the part of both the sender and the receiver-observer. Very much resembling the problem of *superposition* in quantum physics.

**Pataphysics is about focusing** to a blatant awareness of this situation. Such as the state of mind, for example, that one must come to experience in attempting to parse out the exact intention of pataphysician James Joyce's abstracted nouns, metaphors and mediated allegories in his

masterpiece *Finnegan's Wake*. Consider for example the fuzzy meaning and the metaphorishness<sup>ii</sup> of the word *quark* in *Finnegan*:

**“Three quarks for Muster Mark.”**

**The sentence stands alone**, disregarding its minimally-relative context. The interested reader must participate in inventing some kind of suitable meaning or at least an abstract categorical kind of understanding for the word *quark* here; and then a passable meaning for what the whole fuzzy sentence might be representing or getting at.

**The obvious start is surmising** from syntax that the word *quark* is probably a noun. And then: the word sounds like *quack* and *quart*; maybe there's a clue there, but we don't know. *Muster Mark* could be a person who is to receive the *three quarks*. But then *muster* is the act of recruiting or assembling soldiers or workers, so maybe the *three quarks* are to be used in effecting a *muster* of type *Mark* (a markish mustering). Joyce's reader gets to experience a conundrum of connotation, grammar and syntax. There's definitely some recognizable meanings in the sentence, but definitely not enough for normal satisfaction. It's an unusual literary experience which requires way more user participation than usual.

**One might call Joyce's *quark*** a Rorschach metaphor. We don't know what it refers to. Quark here is like a metaphor, but deliberately to a higher degree. It's a semantic metaphor, probably with an indeterminate noun as object. The ultimate test of meaning is how the reader or observer deciphers an abstract Rorschach ink blot, or similarly, one of Joyce's linguistic Rorschach metaphors.

**The use of that low contrast word** by Joyce here incidentally became one of the best known tropes in modern literature; especially after Nobel physicist Murry Gell-Mann established a high-profile position elsewhere for the word *quark* itself.

**Complementary to its focus** on the friends and family of metaphors, and the indeterminate curved and crooked links between subjects and objects, pataphysics is about thereby escaping conventional restrictive habits of linear thinking and conceptualizing. Freeing up the mind, from hidebound dysfunctional ossification. Exactly what the turn-of-the-century French avant garde was longing for. The French term *décervelage* or "de-braining" is an arguably-fitting metaphor of such escape, and that mordant term, speaking to the avant garde, is often featured in early pataphysical literature.

**One can imagine how** a painting by Bouguereau or Watteau, for example, might have depicted or represented a group of prostitutes in Avignon. But in his cracked and crooked referential of oil-on-canvas, Picasso greatly exaggerates the distance of incoherence between his crude subjective colored scratches and their object (the imagined ladies-of-the-evening d'Avignon). And Picasso thereby produces on canvas a huge amount of unexpected information and ideas which could never have been accomplished with the contemporarily accepted linearly-isomorphic paradigms of representation.

**Regarding that unexpected information**, and conceptualization, etc. which one absorbs from a serious viewing of *Demoiselle*: it's a non-verbal, intuitive, imagination-stimulating, stylish kind

of information and fuzzy untouchable data. Very nuanced and unlike what one gets from a Bouguereau depiction of ladies. Pataphysics salutes and recommends that kind of blatant distance between subject and referential object. It calls an observer's attention to the significant natural non-linear fuzziness of all referentials and perforce all communication.

**Jarry, who had intended** a career in the sciences, generally kept up with the unusual contemporary discoveries in late century math and physics, notably the theories of Kelvin and Maxwell, which he makes substantial use of in his writing. He won awards for poetry. He was very well-versed in the literatures of several languages, was infamously wild and louche; and he tended to densely pack his writings with both popular and obscure references to modern and classical literature, history, science, math, philosophy, alchemy, various mythologies, and culture in general. He was a definitive poète maudit; who habitually brandished a pistol about, which his amigo Pablo Picasso purchased after his death.<sup>iii</sup>

**Jarry's gapped and non-linear paradigms** of conceptualization and language, which he termed *pataphysics*, still even now after a century, continue to intrigue artists and intellectuals, and to gather interest and study.

**As well as for Surrealism**, Symbolism, Situationism, and Dada in general: Jarry's pataphysics have been a documented important direct influence for many influential writers and artists, including Duchamp, Picasso, Joyce (*Ulysses* and especially *Finnegan's Wake* are so distinctly pataphysical), Miro, Tinguely, Apollinaire, Borges, Calvino, Artaud, Ionesco, Jacques Lacan, Julian Barnes; and not to mention the renowned tres moderne composer John Cage who famously noted that pataphysics "influenced everybody".<sup>iv</sup>

**John Cage also said that** in his opinion James Joyce, with his extremely creative and unconventional writing, makes better use of Jarry's pataphysics than any of the other creative luminaries within Jarry's wide contemporary circumference of influence. (Obviously though, in comparing a pair of "dissimilar texts", one might argue whether Joyce's non-linear warpings of traditional literary structures in *Finnegan*, for example, are so much more profound than what Picasso similarly does to the structures of rational visual representation in his 1907 *Demoiselles d'Avignon* – which he painted in the year Jarry died.)

**Somewhat reflective of the singular** *Tristram Shandy*, a century prior, Jarry's writing<sup>v</sup> is an exhibition of how wide-angle metaphors, pataphors, augmenting adjectives, and other language used in non-linear and anti-rational ways can often actually be the most efficient manner of communication. Such pataphysical techniques can also often better address important non-linear, fuzzy, and incomplete concepts which might be impossible to more than outline, with our delimited-but-misaligned labeling, categorizing, and linear grammars, e.g. consider again *Finnegan's Wake* in this regard.

**Or consider Duchamp's** *RRose Selavy* (Eros, c'est la vie) with her *Eau De Voilette*;<sup>vi</sup> or Duchamp's amazing artistic and mathematical "infra-mince" based on Isaac Newton's imaginary but infinitely-pragmatic (no pun intended) fundamental principle of Calculus (universally referred to in math and physics classes as the vanishingly small "delta-h").

**Now, over a century after** Jarry's time, there are still point-missing armchair-pundits who proclaim pataphysics to be just satire, simple parody, or a joke. And there are as well many pataphysical organizations and institutes around the world; and pataphysical literature in several languages, specializing journals, and doctoral theses, etc. (Google it...)

**Dada icon Marcel Duchamp**, like Jean Baudrillard (the studied contemporary writer, glittering postmodern cultural critic and simulacrum theorist) was long a member of Collège de Pataphysique in Paris, and both wrote directly about pataphysics, as did Umberto Eco, Breton, Lacan, and Foucault, among many others.<sup>vii</sup>

**Picasso memorized passages from Jarry's plays**, and collected some of his original writings and his famous pistol; and he produced portraits and illustrations of Jarry and his literary protagonists. F. T. Marinetti (founder of the Futurist movement and author of the *Futurist Manifesto*) called Jarry "the unquestionable literary genius of the underworld." Surrealist writer and philosopher Andre Breton said Jarry was "the master of us all". Patriarch of Dada and Surrealism, and instigator of absurd "readymade" (store-bought) sculpture, Marcel Duchamp, proclaimed that "Rabelais and Jarry are my gods, evidently."

**Postmodern psychologist and philosopher** of Structuralism and linguistics, Jacques Lacan, made good use of Jarry's ideas and referred multiple times in his writing to Jarry, to his non-linear linguistics, and his protagonist (and alter-ego) Ubu Roi. It's been reasonably argued that Charles Sanders Peirce, and Jarry with his demonstrative research into linguistics and the structures of meaning, are the main gray-eminence radices of Structuralism.

**Almost half a century after Jarry** was focusing pataphysics attention on the fuzziness and the inherent but mostly-unnoticed indefinite nature of words and language, Lacan's friend and colleague, the postmodern thinker and theoretician of Post-Structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, formalized some of the complexities and more nuanced elements of language and its conceptual structures.

**One of Lévi-Strauss' more** fundamental and enduring ideas was the formalized concept of what has been called the *Generic-Signifier*: a word, referential, symbol, myth or other meme which refers to some idea, concept or object which is indefinite, fuzzy, or not fully defined. (Some have referred to this as *Empty-Signifier*, and Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, along with some others, prefers the term *Incomplete-Signifier*.) This generic non-specificity of words and other referentials is a prime concern of Jarry's pataphysics, and it's hard not to see the strong reflection of Peirce and Jarry in Lévi-Strauss' work here.

**Traditional examples of these generic-signifiers** are words such as *populism* and *justice*. Everyone knows the "general" denotation of these referential words, but the words by themselves are very fuzzy and spare. There is no linear one-to-one correspondence between the referential word and a specific real thing – just an inexplicit general or categorical meaning.

**As such words are used** in communication, people must fill in particular definitions from the context at hand, and from their own personal experiences, prejudices, and predilections – thus promoting those terms in the user's mind from being general and categorical to being specific and particular. Pataphysics pays special attention to such stuff.

**As Lévi-Strauss describes** the situation: readers or listeners each think they recognize and already know what these partially-defined *generic-signifiers* mean. They perceive them as fully-meaningful, while unconsciously filling up the missing portion of meaning with their own connotation, experience, particulars, eccentricities, etc. And the actual fuzziness of the words goes unnoticed (except of course by linguistic technicians such as Lévi-Strauss and pataphysicians).

**Joyce's quark goes** to the extreme of all this. It's generalized to a fault; in-your-face completely undefined. His reader or observer is forced to come to terms with the fact that the signifying word *quark* is so nebulous or vacant that any meaning whatsoever must be personally provided by the observer's own pataphysic imagining.<sup>viii</sup>

**Jarry's writing is** a demonstration of how incompleteness, double-coded non-truths, absurd ironies, broken or soft-targeted allegories, elliptical or permissive metaphors, and parsed parody can sometimes offer the best approach to unusually complex or amorphous concepts and difficult descriptions.

**Due to their several conceptual similarities,** pataphysics is naturally likened by some to quantum physics. Jarry's pataphysics were promulgated by the posthumous publication of his *Dr. Faustroll*, six years after Einstein introduced quantum physics in 1905, with his paper on the photoelectric effect – proving that photons (wave/particles of light) are impossibly both waves and particles at the same time.

**In their natural unobserved state,** photons always remain as both waves and particles, as well as neither waves nor particles – at the same time. Physicists call that fuzzy semi-defined state *superposition*. Very strangely and absurdly, an electron or other wave/particle in superposition only “collapses” into our observable reality (either as a distinct particle or else a non-distinct energy wave) – upon being observed or measured by consciousness. This is obviously absurd and nonsensical, but the impossible fact of quantum theory has precisely been called the best-proven theory in all of human science, after tens of thousands of confirming experiments and supporting mathematical proofs.

**And just as a single superpositional q-bit** in an operating quantum computer can impossibly hold and not-hold a number of various contradictory values all at the same time, so can a pataphysical word, sentence, image, or other referential meme. It's like a reflection, or an iterative allegory.

**To borrow from the operation and curtilage** of quantum physics: pataphysical words and texts will remain in a state of inexplicit *superposition* until they're conceptually observed, in the particular (no pun intended), and thereby mentally “collapsed” around an assisted fungible meaning – exactly in the same way as that occurs when an inherently-fuzzy quon (quantum particle) collapses from superposition into distinct particular boundaries once it's observed (“measured” is the technical term) by some observer. Pataphysics takes careful deliberate aim at this interesting and opportune situation.

**Given the isomorphic relationship** and mirrored reflections between the basic structures of pataphysics and quantum physics, it's easy to perceive an outline of coherence between these

two very different enterprises. We can at least call that an interesting haptic synchronicity, or perhaps it's the zeitgeist, or better yet: a covalent topological conceptualization of the tenor of the times; i.e. simply a result of both Alfred Jarry and Albert Einstein breathing in the same fresh new Twentieth Century, non-Euclidian airs.

**And additionally of significance:** the unexpected discovery by physicists of surprisingly non-linear “quantum logic” which does the same thing to the rational cause-and-effect logic of classical physics as pataphysics does in re-paradigming the classical rational structure of human language and perforce most of all other surliminal interpersonal communication and thought.

**It's coincidentally interesting** that the quantum particles getting the most press these days are the six-flavored, super-tiny, recently-discovered components of protons and neutrons, to which Murry Gell-Mann, a fan of *Finnegan*, gave the name *quarks*.

**Physicists and pataphysicists have tried** to find some intuitive, common-sense metaphor, allegory, or understanding of superposition; but the two best allegories physics has come up with are a how a clock could actually be running both forward and backwards at the same time; or else the famous case of pioneering quantum physicist Erwin Schrodinger's Cat, which was virtually explained as absolutely being at one point both alive and dead at the same time. (Due to a tricky death machine with its trigger locked to an energetic particle temporarily in superposition.)<sup>ix</sup>

**Schrodinger's Cat is a famous and** definitive pataphysical riddle. *Superposition* is a granted fact of quantum physics – proven absolutely over a century, both by irrefutable math and by extraordinarily extensive experimentation. But superposition is so strange and non-intuitive that nobody can think of an explicit description or even a decently-descriptive metaphor for how it works. Normal indicative language fails. We have neither the words nor the grammar for this. Nor any plausible ideas. It just doesn't fit any non-absurd model of reality.

**A colleague of Schrodinger explained** that this is not about a sick cat; this is about a normal healthy cat in a situation of quantum superposition; being both actually live and actually dead at the same time. The fundamentals of quantum physics require that this strange situation, though not obvious at human scales, is in fact a normal part of the real world.<sup>x</sup> (Einstein originally thought it was crazy, but he's been proven solidly wrong about that.)

**This absurd fact of nature** cannot be well-addressed by any known sensible metaphors, let alone rationally indicative words. Though an extreme example, it obliquely illustrates the bailiwick of pataphysics. And it illustrates as well the importance of keeping an open mind (décervelage) regarding non-linear paradigms, and algorithms for dealing with areas which are conflicted by uncertainties, paradox and absurdities. It's all very non-Euclidian.

**Western civilization has been mostly** bounded by direct linear paradigms developed in classical Greece, particularly by Euclid and Aristotle, back in Alexander's time around 300 BCE. Euclid gathered and formalized scattered pieces of geometric knowledge into a unified comprehensive and completely-coherent system, regulated by absolutely sequential linear proofs. It was a groundbreaking milestone tour de force. Ground apes had never before encountered an



integrated system of absolute regulated linearity. Much less one that could be easily be taught, and could reasonably be understood broadly by the educated classes.

**Euclid's geometry was basically** founded on principles such as parallelism, and on isomorphism between two triangular shapes (iso=same, morph=body/shape). He organized a formalized system for proving that two triangles had exactly the same shape (isomorphism), even though they were rotated from each other and/or different sizes. (For example having the same "angle-side-angle" or "ASA" proves that two differently-appearing triangles are isometric i.e. isomorphic.)

**Then for many centuries students** were trained to learn competence with reason, rationality, and linear thinking from Euclid's geometry before being considered intellectually ready to address any other academic subjects.

**Euclid's contemporary, Aristotle,** introduced his enduring linear-cause-and-effect syllogistic logic; and at least from Rousseau's pessimistic perspective we could say that it's been downhill ever since.

**The Painter Paul Gauguin, who was** associated with the Symbolist movement, concurred with that assessment. He held that the canonical Greek linear isomorphisms in philosophy and art were all typified by the rules of contrapposto, which revolutionized Greek sculpture around the time of the Battle of Marathon (a century and a half before Alexander). Gauguin referred to contrapposto, and its linear rules, as "the Greek mistake", and explained how its rigid linearity has bugged artistic expression and innovation for two thousand years.

**After two linear millennia,** in the late Nineteenth Century, creative scientists, presumably suffering some *décervelage*, began revolutionizing important areas of mathematical thinking by coming up with non-Euclidian mathematics. They devised such absurd things as mathematical spaces where parallel lines can, or even must, meet and cross each other. As a mathematician, Jarry was certainly influenced by all that, as was Einstein (necessarily) and so many other important thinkers, scientists, and artists.

**Painters, in particular,** set out to murder their predecessors' single-point-perspective and its ridged isomorphism. The avant garde were quick to approve multiple-point perspective and the rejection of Euclid.

**Pataphysics' clear parallels** in the evolution of both haut-theoretical and pedestrian philosophies are highlighted, not just by Kant's un-reasonable groundwork, but also by Kurt Gödel's decisive 1931 two-pronged attacks on the radix of Positivism, proving mathematically that no information system whatsoever can possibly be complete in itself; and thus that all possible indicative explanations are deficient and fuzzy to some degree.

**And Gödel proved absurdly that** if a formal system is consistent then it will necessarily be unable to prove its own consistency. And that within any functioning system there necessarily exist problems which can never be solved by any algorithm or artificial intelligence. It's been rumored that Gödel was conversing with space aliens.

**And it's been pointed out that** Gödel and Kant were both in the same business: Kant arguing that there's no way for humans to know truth, and Gödel proving that claim mathematically.

**Aside from its fundamental importance** to pure math, high-level computing, and cryptography, one consequence of his proving *Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem* is the coherent reflection that words, and all combinations of words, therefore have ultimately-immeasurable fuzzy meanings, and always must. So aside from a Vulcan mind-meld (or the direct mind-to-mind transfer Tang Dynasty Zen masters used to pass the dharma between generations) – all other inter-personal communication is necessarily composed from the family and cousins of metaphor and allegory.

**Similarly, only one year after** Gödel published this proof that information must always be fuzzy and Incomplete, Werner Heisenberg received the 1932 Nobel Physics Prize for proving that all energy and mass itself must always be fuzzy and uncertain. Heisenberg's *Uncertainty Principle* proves that even the physical world is at its base random, answerless and uncertain. Heisenberg proved that fundamental particles, which alone constitute the tangible world (including ourselves), do not even have exact locations or speeds as they travel in space-time.<sup>xi</sup>

**Quarks, protons, electrons, etc.,** our fundamental particles: though they're stochastically predictable, are random actors on the lowest level. And they shockingly do not play by the linear rules of cause and effect – at that level everything is simply, randomly, decisively and tangibly stochastic.

**A physics student using Schrodinger's** genius wave function can pretty easily calculate the numerical value of the statistical chance that an atom from his navel might, within some given minute, randomly take a leap to the surface of the moon. (Locations in space/time are not absolute, but are inherently fuzzy, uncertain, and randomly stochastic.) It's a very small number, but there is a calculable stochastic chance of that random happening. Our reality is actually shockingly different from how we normally perceive it.

**Irrespective of** our mediated perceptions, physical reality at its root is "Incomplete" and "Uncertain" and with any very-fine-grained precision it's precisely indescribable.

**It's a similar paradigm** of indeterminate imprecision that pataphysics energetically acknowledges, and promotes for the sake of expanding awareness – regarding all referential communication, illustration, symbology, and categorization, etc.

**An acute pataphysical awareness** of that inherent fuzzy imprecision throws open whole new areas of creative conceptualization and communication; and according to pataphysics: breaks down (décervelage) one's limiting and overly-rigged, linear mental structures. Operationally analogous to Maxwell Edison's little silver debraining hammer.

**Renowned pataphysicist, lexicologist,** and theoretician of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, warns that modern western cultures have pushed generic-signifying semiotics to the breaking point; and our community languages now subsist to a large degree on signifiers which reference only other inexplicit *generic-signifiers*, – which then themselves point only to more of the same.

**In the beginning**, Baudrillard explains, words and our other referentials signified real things, and discourse was based on actual reality. But so much of our language and communication has now devolved into generic abstractions that we end up conceptualizing and discussing things – which instead of being based in reality, create new imaginary versions of reality and become ever-less-connected to real things.

**Baudrillard refers to these** new unmoored conceptual substitutions as the *simulacrum*. He says this new *hyper-reality* is similar enough to reality that we dysfunctionally take it for the real thing. And he says that we often now hold the simulacrum to be more real than actual reality, and that it dysfunctionally alters our perceptions of truth, power, and authenticity. Baudrillard can get a bit complicated, but understanding this situation is ‘pataphysics in action.

**Beyond the inherent fuzziness**, and the consequent immersible literary opportunities, which are initially made obvious by a deliberate and conspicuous understanding of Lévi-Strauss’ *generic-signifiers*, pataphysicians often go a step further with the employment of *incoherent-signifiers*.

**Such *Incoherent-Signifiers*** are subjective adjectives, metaphors, or other referentials which are so far divorced from their referent object that at least on first glance the connection appears to be incoherent or absurd.

**For example, consider Vonnegut’s** elementary “vacantly pretty”, or his “giddy terrace”. Or consider the even more obtuse phrase “apothotic critics of outsider art”. Apotheosis is well-defined and understood, but that concept does not automatically connect to the concept of “critic”. There’s no obvious relationship between subject and object for Lévi-Strauss to take for granted, or to automatically understand by filling in with personal particulars. We’re really out in the weeds here – with only an implied suggestion that some exotic unexpected connection is likely available for our discovery.

**One has to imagine**, according to their personal perspectives, how it is that a person might sensibly consider critics of outsider art to be apothotic. And the task of determining a meaning for this pataphysical *incoherent-signifier* obviously goes way beyond what is normally required to unconsciously auto-fill a Lévi-Strauss *generic-signifier* such as “populism” or “justice”.

**The reader or observer** of this incoherent signifier must now slow down, lay out the subject and object, and try to intuit or imagine just how the concept of “apothotic” might augment the simple meaning of “art critic”. The connection between subject and object here, at minimum initially appears to be incoherent, or slightly beyond that: maybe even absurd.

**Joyce’s *quark* in *Finnegan*** is obviously an incoherent signifier, though of a different type than, for example, Vonnegut’s “giddy terrace”. When inherent fuzziness reaches the absurd extreme then ‘pataphysics reaches a new plateau of understanding.

**‘Pataphysics studies the pragmatics** of meaning, and any serious investigation into meaning itself must necessarily extend to consider the final interface between meaning and the absurd, i.e. the absence, the complementary opposite, of meaning per se.

**Jarry's investigations into meaning** and absurdity significantly contributed to the content and tenor of Dada, Surrealism, and the other art, literature, and theater of the absurd. In recognition of this contribution, the groundbreaking avant garde playwright Antonin Artaud even named his influential collaborative absurdist project the *Theater Alfred Jarry*.

**Once broached, around the turn** of the century, faculties and facilities of the absurd itself quickly became an ends of their own. Well into the middle of the Twentieth Century many artists and thinkers followed in Jarry's footsteps, experimenting with various seemingly-paradoxical ways to coax interesting information and meaning out of absurd literature, situations, narratives, paintings, music, theatrical passages, etc. And other memes of different sorts.

**Consider in this regard** pataphysician and postmodern composer John Cage's absurd and influential *Radio-Static Symphony*, or Duchamp's outrage-producing *Fountain (a store-bought urinal)*, or again at least some of the passages in *Finnegan's Wake*; or the absurdist works of Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, or Pinter, etc.

**It's noteworthy how contemporarily parallel these** pataphysical artistic and cultural experiments with absurdities are to the similar paradoxical scientific absurdities being revealed by contemporary discoveries of space-time relativity and quantum physics. The space we occupy is not linear, whether we're talking about three-dimensional space-time, or the pataphysical spaces of language, literature, art, and communication.

**Einstein proved just after the turn** of the century that time is neither absolute nor linear, and that it runs faster on high mountains, and on the moon for example, than it does at sea level. Nobel physicist Richard Feynman demonstrated time running backwards at the quantum level; and experiments showing *effects* which occurred earlier in time than their *causes*.

**Iterated hundreds of the famous "double-slit"** experiments with superposition show such paradoxical things as an electron or other particle being shot through two separate and distant holes in a metal plate at exactly the same time. One particle in two places at the same time – observably true but absolutely paradoxical and absurd from our hidebound linear perspectives. We really do need some perspective adjustments. But then that brings to mind physicist Brian Greene hoping that his dog could learn calculus.

**Einstein also proved that we** are actually travelling through time at the speed of light, as long as we are sitting (relatively) still. (If we're moving in our three-dimensional space then our motion through time slows down by an adjustment factor trigonometrically proportional to the hypotenuse of our speed through space.) Motion through space slows down our clock. Motion close to the speed of light brings time almost to a standstill. True, but completely paradoxical and absurd.

**Among other interesting absurdities:** sometime in the recent past, between the various iterations of anthropo-Paleolithicus and say the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, there was obviously a first time, a historical event, when some human conceived of and spoke to another about the paradox of whether time had a beginning or not. The time when Sapiens first began trying to conceptualize the nature of time per se.

**But the idea of a beginning**, “before-which” there was no time, is absurd and makes no sense, and then so likewise is the complementary idea that time, in fact, did not have a beginning. Both of these possibilities are mind-benders.

**Much more recently physicist Steven Hawking** famously “solved” this situation by using equations with imaginary numbers and tricky geometry to construct his touted “no-boundary boundary” theory of time’s no-beginning/beginning.

**Regarding this paradoxical situation**, there’s not even agreement on which metaphors or allegories best describe Hawking’s arrogatory explanation for how the beginning of time “was” (equally and oxymoronicly) a non-beginning of time as well.

**One popular interpretation is that Hawking** proved time did not exist back at the Big Bang “when” the universe began. Strangely, instead, there were just four dimensions of normal space back “then” at the “non-beginning beginning”.

**Then “after” that**, according to Hawking’s mathematically-proven theory, gradually one of these spatial dimensions evolved into what we now experience as time – leaving the three other dimensions to remain as space. Therefore, if we were to go back far enough in time we would find that it actually never did begin – but “prior” to there being time there “was” (past tense) just a special extra dimension of space.

**Nice try.** Regardless of how exactly correct Hawking’s math and geometries are, an explanation of how a spatial dimension evolved into what we know as time does exactly nothing to eliminate the paradoxical absurdity inherent in the situation. Like *the sound of one hand clapping*, it’s a truncated allegory that won’t compute.

**Academic scientists have to ignore** all the paradoxes and absurdities they encounter in their research. Their job is just to observe and devise mathematical isomorphisms to fit their observations. Pataphysics, on the other hand, often focuses directly at the absurd paradoxes, and considers them a primary source of meaning and interpretation.

**Jarry insisted that ‘Pataphysics should** always be spelled with a leading apostrophe; a rule that’s been mostly honored in the breach. The point of having the little hair sticking out from the front of that word is obviously both to display fuzziness in the word’s physical appearance, and also to suggest an occult appendix of some kind to the meaning. Everybody recognizes the apostrophe as a meaningful literary symbol, but there’s no antecedent to shed light on what it could mean in this context. It simply leaves the readers with the knowledge that there is some adjunct meaning indicated here which they are unable to fathom. (As ‘pataphysics assiduously continues to point out regarding all other words, symbols, semiotics, and conceptualizations.)

**As trivial and obvious as it** may seem, on a most fundamental level pataphysics reminds people that all semiotics, including words and other referentials, only apply approximate meanings to the communications of real things, events, and concepts. Over the years, as Baudrillard’s theory complains, it’s become common practice to mindlessly hold words and other symbols as real and complete objects in themselves, rather than to remain mindful that all referentials are only

vaporous abstracted pointers. It makes a real difference he says. Different kinds of meaning are involved.

**‘Pataphysics is about** the pragmatics of “meaning” – which is even per se impossible to address properly. Buddha said: “Meaning is different from words. True meaning will not be made manifest by means of words.” He also said: “Meaning is entered into by words in just the same way that objects in a room are revealed by a lamp”. Plainly, those are both insightful pataphysical statements. They’ve both have been learned and passed down as wisdom through around a hundred generations;<sup>xiii</sup> though they both do solidly resist reasonably-explicit precision or a linear unpacking.

**Jarry said that pataphysics is** the science of sciences; that conceptually the way we approach each other and the world is basically all pataphysics. Our regular assumptions of perfect one-to-one matching linearity and isomorphic definition are erroneous and harmfully misleading. It boils down to a recognition that it’s all a big waveform of fuzzy, indeterminate references and defective indicative definitions, which need instead to be, at least to some extent, interpreted individually, personally, intuitively and often creatively.

**Jarry said pataphysics is** about understanding the science of “imaginary solutions”. Imaginary solutions is a term Jarry appropriated from mathematics; he detoured both the idea and the terminology. It means exactly what you think it does.<sup>xiii</sup> (In math that term essentially references inclusion of the fourth dimension.)<sup>xiv</sup>

**Jarry’s “imaginary solutions” statement** here is absolutely indicative, but it doesn’t automatically index to any unique meaning. It’s half-empty. It’s a linguistically perfect statement, and not meaningless – but some personal imagined particulars must be employed to solve for the meaning Jarry intends to convey. In the formal Structuralist world of Lévi-Strauss, what Jarry has here is a *generic-signifier*. One can pretty quickly discover a sort of categorical or generic meaning for the referential term.

**Around the year 1450**, Johannes Regiomontanus, a German mathematician, imagined that the solution to some previously insoluble equations would involve the square root of -1 (negative one). But obviously there is no number (given the normal meaning of that word) which will equal -1 when multiplied by itself. And for one to imagine that is completely unreasonable, not rational, and conventionally absurd. (This odd putative “number” is un-measurable and therefore cannot be ratioed or rationalized).

**This amazing imaginary** number of Regiomontanus has now been solving difficult equations for over half a millennium. Modern math and science would be lost without it. In the world of mathematics and science, the universal symbol for this extraordinarily useful pata-number is Rene Descartes’ nomination: a lower case i, for “imaginary”.

**Imagine a space-alien carpenter with** a floor tile which measures i on each side. The actual measurement of the area covered by that tile is exactly “minus the number one” – whatever that might mean in fungible parlance. It’s conceptually absurd, and without any normal intuitive meaning.

**It's interesting that** Steven Hawking could only find a mathematical solution for his famous “not-boundary boundary” model of the absolute beginning/non-beginning of time itself (at the Big Bang), by using equations with *i*, this imaginary number – which of course can never be counted or fractionated like an actual number. A notable success for imaginary solutions; Jarry would certainly be pleased.

**Pataphysicians argue** that conceptualization and communication are fundamentally comprised of non-specific *generic-signifiers*, – incomplete until filled in by the reader or observer's particulars. According to Jarry that's just the nature of conceptualizing and communicating with any language or other symbolic referentials.

**Jarry employs a convoluted maneuver** in examining the nuances of this point. Rather than getting muddled up in Lévi-Strauss' complex niceties of *generic-signifiers* and their significances, Jarry goes directly to the opposite extreme and begins to consider the situation from the contrapositive perspective at the other end of the spectrum. Jarry wants to talk about *absolutely-explicit-and-particular-signifiers*.

**Obviously such a perfect adamantine signifier** is an oxymoronic virtual thing which could not exist in reality. Such a referential would cease to be referential. Subject and object would collapse into an isomorphic conflation.

**Jarry tells us that** achieving knowledge of this non-existent virtual perfect referential is a definitive goal of pataphysics; it's like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Great Carbuncle*. So we should then turn around and forget the fuzzy end of the spectrum for the moment. Forget the whole thing with fuzziness and imaginary solutions.

**'Pataphysics, Jarry now tells us,** purposes a focus on the inextricably “particular”, rather than the “general and the categorical.” Extreme precision, exceptionally particular. We're now diligently searching for the opposite of all those fuzzy *generic-signifier* peregrinations. In this regard Jarry significantly said that Pataphysics involves grasping

**“the law that governs exceptions.”**

**Jarry's definitive words and** grammar here are inerroneous, as in the case for example of Zen's “*Sound Of One-Hand Clapping*.”<sup>xv</sup> But logistically the concept is similarly a circular conundrum, an oxymoron. It's again paradoxical and absurd. An “exception” to a law or generalization is the odd outlier, to which a law's definitions specifically do not apply. So all exceptions are obviously by definition contrapositive in a situation where any governing law is applicable. To the putative contrary though, in the 1970s, the Collège de Pataphysique in Paris published an explanatory corollary; perfectly complementary to Jarry's riddle:

**“A law is fundamentally just the exception to an exception!”<sup>xvi</sup>**

**Pataphysics intends that** acolytes and practitioners should fully understand the consequential inherent fuzziness of language and all other systems of symbols and semiotics. We should be always aware that a non-categorical absolutely-particular referencing is impossible; and that all communication is open to a variety of different augmentations and interpretations, some

situations much more so than others. And we should recognize the restrictive ignorant consequences of our conventional linear paradigms, and appreciate at least the exemplaries we encounter in overtly pataphysical works by luminaries such as Joyce, Picasso, Cage, Lacan, and Ionesco, etc.

**In accord with Heisenberg, Gödel, Postmodernism’s “Incompleteness”,** and the tenor of *Collège de Pataphysique* in Paris: pataphysical documents may have no formal beginnings or endings, elliptical or second degree logic, meanings transmitted only in subtexts or overtones – and per Jarry’s Dictum, reader/user input is often required to imagine more precise definitions for superpositional or otherwise inherently inexplicit vocabulary and syntax.

**Pataphysics, like Zen, quantum physics, Dada, Surrealism,** and a significant percentage of modern and postmodern art and literature, specifically engages and consorts with the paradoxical and the absurd. Each of these enterprises has made it a business to pursue conceptualization, truth and information in unconventional, irrational, non-linear arenas and spaces.

**Despite their significant differences,** like Zen, pataphysics is a conceptualizing and communications practice not detrimentally restricted by unjustifiably-assumed structural linearities and the liabilities of traditional paradigms; and yet if one would assiduously cobble together the surfeit of unrestricted elementary conceptals made manifest in many of the other such

## — Veritas in Lorem Ipsum —

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<sup>i</sup> ...often derogatorily referred to as *Explosion in a Shingle Factory*.

<sup>ii</sup> Joyce’s word *quark* here is what Structuralism theorist Lévi-Strauss would have to call a *completely-empty-signifier*. The word references some absolutely indistinct or indefinite object. It’s an odd type of metaphor which requires what Jarry terms the “science of imaginary solutions” to determine what that referred-to object might be.

<sup>iii</sup> ...but Apollinaire said that he disarmed Jarry at a wild party where Jarry fired off a few shots at one of the fellows attending. And another report has it that Picasso was given Jarry’s pistol by Apollinaire.

<sup>iv</sup> Hugill, *Pataphysics, A Useless Guide*, 2015 MIT Press, Cambridge MA (a 266 page history of pataphysics its influences, and followers. This is an exceptionally well-researched scholarly book about Jarry and his writing; with an interesting biography, and specific details regarding his influences on art, culture, and a variety of well-known, writers, artists and theorists. It includes many passages from other pataphysic writers and little stories about Jarry’s crowd at Montmartre.)

<sup>v</sup> *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Adventures in Pataphysics, Ubu Roi, Supermale, The Ubu Plays, Days and Nights, The Garden of Priapus, Caesar Antichrist, Three Early Novels, Visits of Love*



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- vi Note the reversal of the diphthong: Duchamp's perfume is referencing a little veil, not a violet.
- vii Hugill, *Pataphysics, A Useless Guide*,
- viii ...unless of course homonyms or onomatopoeia might provide some useful direction.
- ix Many much-more detailed descriptions of *Schrodinger's Cat* and the paradoxical nature of superposition can be easily found on the net, and in a huge number of books about science etc.
- x ...but usually hidden from our macro-world's notice due to the stochastics of our massive size (our bodies contain about  $10^{30}$  quantum particles each). (A million trillion trillion). For a complicated but interesting discussion about the implications of Schrodinger's Cat and confounding "quantum decoherence" see chapter 11 of Murry Gell-Mann's *The Quantum and the Jaguar* (1994).
- xi Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is actually that no particle can have an exact location, and an exact momentum (speed\*mass@direction) at the same time. Their total uncertainty is limited by Plank's Constant. (About 6 and a fraction times a billionth of a trillionth of a trillionth.)
- xii ...if we figure that an average parent's age at the birth of their middle child is about 26 years.
- xiii ...according to both Claude Lévi-Strauss and pataphysics.
- xiv It's an extra dimension, orthogonal to our standard three in Cartesian space.
- xv The *Sound Of One Hand Clapping* is obviously a pataphysic riddle, as it employs an in-your-face blatantly-Empty Signifier. The point of the riddle is to stun the listener's rational mind with a metaphor (one hand clapping) which makes perfect sense but refers to an absolutely impossible object.
- xvi Op. Cit., pp.85
- xviii ...ergo in hoc signa vinces.
- xix In accord with Heisenberg, Gödel, Postmodernism's "Incompleteness", and the tenor of *Collège de Pataphysique* in Paris: pataphysical documents may have no formal beginnings or endings, elliptical or second degree logic, meanings transmitted only in subtexts or overtones – and per Jarry's Dictum, reader/user input is often required to imagine more precise definitions for superpositional or otherwise inherently inexplicit vocabulary and syntax.



## Edison's Introduction to Pataphysics A Home Study Guide

Evaluating the Inherent Breadth of  
Conceptual Relativity, Uncertainty  
and Incompleteness

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