II

POWER AND SEDUCTION
CYNICAL POWER: THE FETISHISM OF THE SIGN

Arthur Kroker and Charles Levin

The whole chaotic constellation of the social revolves around that spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness: the masses. A statistical crystal ball, the masses are "swirling with currents and flows", in the image of matter and the natural elements. So at least they are represented to us.

J. Baudrillard
In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities

C'est le vide qu'il y a derrière le pouvoir, ou au cœur même du pouvoir, au cœur de la production, c'est ce vide qui leur donne aujourd'hui une dernière lueur de réalité. Sans ce qui les réversibilise, les annule, les séduit, ils n'eussent même jamais pris force de réalité.

J. Baudrillard
Oublier Foucault

Talisman

The representative problem of modern French thought is the problem of representation. The whole movement of thought in France has been toward the specification of representational features not reducible to subject and object; and then the rediscovery of energy (desire), force (differance) and power within the terms of the language paradigm itself. But, as the articles to follow all suggest, the structuralist and post-structuralist programmatic attention to representations has achieved only ambiguous insights into the power of representations as such. A synoptic review of the structuralist tradition indicates that the founding premises were never outlived and indeed that they always acted as the gravitational centre for later ventures. It is almost as if structuralism and post-structuralism together form a kind of closed universe of discourse in which questions are interesting but like Hegel's night the answers are indistinguishable. Once entered, such a universe is difficult to escape; yet the postmodern project has achieved the coherence of a hermeneutical tradition with the ineluctibility of a rite de passage. The journal has chosen the work of Jean Baudrillard as a talisman: a symptom, a sign, a charm, and above all, a password into the next universe.

New French Thought and the Metaphysics of Representation

The critique of the Metaphysics of Representation depends paradoxically on the assertion of the autonomy of representations. This peculiar turn of ideas takes us back nearly a century to Nietzsche's pragmatism: all world views are arbitrary because they are all equally motivated. The same problem emerges in the modern controversy of the sign. Where in the chain signifier-signified-referent-reality does one find the determinate link that guarantees communicable reference? Is it "reality" — so that language is reduced to a collection of
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tokens? Is it in the "signifier", reducing reality to a blurred hyle? Or is it somewhere in the middle, in the regions of the illusive concept or of naive realism? What gave Baudrillard his leverage in this debate was his awareness that the basic formalization of the meaning process (Saussure, Jacobson, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser) was in fact a vicious circle of motivation-immotivation designed to exclude the act of reference while retaining the value of the referent. Post-structuralism saw this too, and proposed by way of solution the simple non-value of value and the non-meaning of meaning. Baudrillard's work was allied to this, but remained independent in certain crucial respects. He did not deny a certain necessity to the formal abstraction of the sign-logic, but he saw this as a historical concatenation (thematized in terms of the commodity), rather than as a universal condition of experience and language. From the vantage point of Baudrillard's critique of the political economy of the sign, he was able to argue that the heirs of structuralism, in their haste to expunge the vestiges of naturalism, had naturalized the arbitrary, the aleatory and the contingent, thereby creating a new ideology, an ideology without content — an ideologist's ideology.

In the nineteen-sixties, the various attempts to formalize the logic of representations in social anthropology, linguistics, poetics, marxism, and so on, conveyed a markedly positivist ethos. Yet, however rigidly defined they were, the language models heralded as the unifiers of all science actually discouraged a complete regression to nineteenth-century Positivism. Perhaps it was this narrow and continuing scrape with the Positivist temptation that generated the most fruitful tension within the structuralist movement as a whole. Structuralism never succeeded in establishing itself as a purely formal method; yet the original project has remained implicit in the unshakable assumption that an exclusive attention to the problem of representation can produce a new, non-metaphysical, thoroughly agnostic paradigm. The sheer resilience of this belief-system has obscured the fact that structuralism could only save itself from the internal threat of positivism by returning to metaphysics — this time in the form of an intimate (d)enunciation of it. What has remained constant throughout, concealed in the rigor of its attention to representation, is the metaphysical desire to determine the nature of the reality alluded to and falsified in the representational systems under structuralist scrutiny. The specific concern with semiotic, differential, textual, oppositional, decentred, rhizomatic and molecular models is designed from the outset to guarantee certain statements about the nature of the context within which representation happens. Each model attempts to preclude the question of its context on the grounds that such a question can only be answered with another model — and so each model builds within itself as its own predicate the model of its context and possibility of reference. The result is a theoretical trope which declares that reality is always going to be a model and that this model will try to foster the illusion that it is grounded in or tending toward something outside itself. The general picture is similar to what Michel Serres called (without intending to raise any problem) "an isomorphic relation between force and writing."
The critique of the Metaphysics of Representation is based on the assumption of a deductive (or structural) causality: the representer and the represented are always preceded as effects by their representations as cause. Thus, deconstruction, schizo-analysis and genealogy return us, in spite of their own warning, to the determinate linearity of the cause-effect sequence. Indeed, the more one looks at post-structuralist developments, the more one is impressed with the movement's failure to break with the past. Henri Lefebvre referred to structuralism as the "New Eleatism" because it resembled in its naive scientific phase the classical idealization of the concept as pure generative form. Ricoeur called Lévi-Strauss' structuralism "Kantism without a subject." And if there was a repudiation of the phenomenological and Hegelian traditions at the beginning, these soon returned, like the repressed, in the form of all the neo-structuralist problematics of the body and desire in the work of Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan, Deleuze and Barthes. This was not only a resurgence of dangerous materiality; it was felt that these issues could be accommodated within the generalized model of terminological combination and exchange. Everything fitted into a new Master Metaphor of production through marking or inscription (the body's action upon itself?). The Nietzschean revival opened a gap in social-philosophical discourse for the "return to Freud," and so Freud was quickly structuralized. The "seething cauldron" was turned from a 'content' into a 'form', from a drive into a signifier (which retained the force of a drive), and from something which is substituted into the principle of substitution itself. Yet in spite of the influential claims of the Lacanian language model, the post-structuralist version of Freud usually meant a recuperation of instinctual atomism and its attendant nineteenth century energy and engineering models. Those hoary representations of representation in general, tended to be exclusively epistemological efforts to discover the irreducible particles or "constituent elements" of Being. Lévi-Strauss's tabular cultural unconscious and Lacan's master-slave theory of desire were fused and generalized. Everything was seen in terms of the laws of combination and substitution. The microphysics of power, the primary polytextual perversity, and various speculative libidinal dynamics all participated in the original excitement of the Freudian scientific imaginary. The Deleuzian version is especially remarkable in that it presents a theatre of industrial strife in which the personalities of the actors are expressed as machine-like apparatuses whose experiences of others take the form of infantile part-object relations, breaks, flows, grafts, disjunctions and displacements. Any attempt to grasp the idea of another person out of all this is condemned as an Oedipal repression of the levelling flow of libido, whose ideal representation is the "rhizomatic" spread of grass. Like structuralism before it, the more recent French thought is a powerful agent of reduction. It tries to constitute a unified field in which all "effects" are in principle accounted for before they happen. There is something bureaucratic about this: indeed, the scribal models allude to the bureaucratic forms of power. Foucault's power is the omnipresent police state: Fascist, rigid, controlling. It appeals to social scientists. The Derridean model is more like a parliamentary democracy:
ambivalent, flaccid, and obfuscating. It appeals to the literati. One is infinitesimally efficacious, the other, indefinitely absorptive.

Structuralism absorbs difference by making everything different in the same way and for the same reason. The post-structuralist gesture extends and realigns the structural field, but in so doing, it only intensifies the procedures of reduction and abstraction. In Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss (Of Grammatology), post-structuralism performs this operation directly on the body of its predecessor. The redoubling of the method emerges as an effort to expunge systematically any residues of informality still apparent in the structuralist analysis. Thus, what appears to us in Lévi-Strauss as schematic rationalism and a naive realism of the concept, strikes Derrida as “anarchism”, “libertarian ideology”, and “Anarchistic and Libertarian protestations against Law, the Powers, and the State in general...” (131, 132, 138). In Derrida’s example (Tristes Tropiques), Lévi-Strauss is trying, rather clumsily, to think the otherness of the Nambikwara: he does this in terms of the oppositions non-writing/writing, Festival/State, community/bureaucracy, speech/coding, etc. Derrida points out that these oppositions have already been absorbed, that writing is (always already) everywhere, and that the Nambikwara are consequently the Same. Every suggestion of their difference is dissolved into the metaphysic of presence. Against the thesis of colonial violence, Derrida advances the arché writing — the immemorial “unity of violence and writing.” (106) The whole operation is achieved by what Derrida himself calls the “aprioristic or transcendental regression.” (135) The terms of every problem are reduced to an a priori structure of indifference: a field of formal features is delineated and prepared for “incision.” Henceforth, any hints of difference in the text to be constituted can be redesigned as the effect of the play of signifiers, so that reference is centripetally trapped. It is a method of “mimesis and castration.” (Positions, 84)

Given the power of these uniform fields of seamless interrelationality, it is less surprising that Baudrillard, with one eye on the social terrain, the other on successive waves of metatheory, has begun to conceive the only possibility of difference, otherness and the symbolic, in terms of a violent eruption. Baudrillard has been too often misunderstood on this point, for it is natural to assimilate this commotion (as opposed to theoretical “conjunction”) of his work to the Gallic theme of the epistemological break, transgression, reversal and rupture. But there is an important distinction, which follows on the Baudrillardian conception of difference and otherness in the Symbolic. It is in these terms that we may be able to perceive, through reflection on Baudrillard, the outline of a group of important questions which perhaps only structuralism could have raised, but which it has also suppressed in the sameness of its answers. If the continuity of structuralism has been to establish a General Isomorphology, which can only be achieved through progressive formalization, whether positivistic or metaphysical, then the Critique of Logocentrism and the Metaphysic of Representation would appear to have been undermined from the start. In fact, insofar as the whole antilogocentric project came to be tied to a
reflection on “ontological difference” (Heidegger), it was bound to fail, for
difference and “alterity” are not likely to be secured ontologically, any more
than they may be perceived or appreciated with the tools of formal epistemology
alone. This problem arises in Lacan’s work, where the symbolic is grasped
through the ontic-ontological distinction of the Phallus, a kind of Ur-signifier
which “inserts” the subject into the field of language by inaugurating a serial
process of substitutions. Here Lévi-Strauss’s idea of meaning as an instantaneously
generated network serves to absorb the problem of the other (the symbolic) into
the combinatory matrix (Patrix?). In contrast, the theme of difference for
Baudrillard is neither epistemological nor ontological in the schematic
structuralist sense, but social and psychological. In order to secure this domain
beyond the purview of formalization-rationalization, Baudrillard defined the
symbolic in opposition to the substitutive logic of the sign. The “critique of the
political economy of the sign” thus emerged from the standpoint of an
irreducible social symbolic excluded from formal fields of coded signification.
The uniqueness of this approach was that it allowed Baudrillard to resituate the
critique of representation (and logocentrism) in terms of the suppressed
question of the relation of the model to reality. Seizing on the ontological
ambiguity of the language paradigm, Baudrillard answered this question by
developing the theme of operationalization in terms of structures of social
signification. (L’Échange symbolique et la mort)

The most powerful metaphor in Baudrillard is precisely the loss of metaphor
with the advent of a science of “meaning”. The ultimate representation, the
apotheosis of the subject-object dialectic, then appears as the imaginary
deflation of all symbolic tension — a kind of materialization of rationalism
through the actualization of the model. In the radical form of this thesis,
however, the difference of the symbolic is dissolved in the sign’s absorption of
otherness, a development which entails nothing less than the “end of the social”
and the expiry of measured critique (In The Shadow of The Silent Majories)
Baudrillard is forced to shift the burden of his symbolic stance onto the category
of ambivalence. This allows him to recover the expressive dimension of
symbolic exchange, but at the cost of having to view the latter as the immanent
principle of self-destruction at work in all social forms. This explains
Baudrillard’s return to the mode of a skeptico-transcendental critique of worldly
representational illusions: a sort of theory and practice of anamorphosis. (Les stratégies fatales)

Baudrillard’s Double Refusal

Baudrillard is like Nietzsche to this extent. Each of his writings are works of
art which seek to arraign the world before poetic consciousness. In Baudrillard’s
theorisations, there is a certain return to a tragic sense of history, and this
because his imagination moves just along that trajectory where nihilism, in its
devalorized form as a critique of abstract power, is both the antithesis of and
condition of possibility for historical emancipation. Baudrillard’s tragic sense
derivates directly from his understanding of our imprisonment in the carceral of a
cynical power, a power which works its effects symbolically; and which is,
anyway, the disappearing locus of a society which has now passed over into its
opposite: the cycle of devalorisation and desocialisation without limit.

But if Baudrillard can be so unsparing in his tragic vision of abstract power as
the essence of modern society, then this is just because his theoretical agenda
includes two great refusals of the logic of referential finalities: a devalorisation
of the social; and a refusal of the autonomous historical subject. More than, for
example, Foucault's theoretical critique of a juridical conception of power which
reaffirms, in the end, the privileged position of the social in modern culture,
Baudrillard has taken structuralism to its limits. Baudrillard's thought seizes on
the essential insight of structuralist discourse: the eclipse of Weber's theory of
rationalization as an adequate basis for understanding modern society, and the
emergence of McLuhan's concept of the exteriorization of the senses as the
dynamic locus of the modern culture system. Baudrillard's theorisation of the
meaning of consumer society begins with a radical challenge to sociology as an
already passé way of rethinking society as a big sign-system, and with a refusal
of the privileged position of the politics of historical emancipation. The
ambivalence of Baudrillard is just this: his culture critique (la société de
consommation, De la séduction) is the degree-zero between the historical
naturalism of Marxist cultural studies (Baudrillard's structural law of value is the
antithesis of Stuart Hall's ideology as the “return of the repressed”) and the
sociological realism of critical theory. Against Habermas, Baudrillard (In the
Shadow of the Silent Majorities) reinvokes the sign of Nietzsche as the elemental
memory of the tragic tradition in critical theory. Against Foucault, Baudrillard
(Oublier Foucault) nominates a purely cynical power. And beyond Marxist
cultural studies, Baudrillard breaks forever with a representational theory of
ideological hegemony. Just like the bleak, grisly, and entirely semiological
world of Giorgio de Chirico's Landscape Painter, Baudrillard's thought introduces
a great scission in the received categories of western discourse. And it does so
just because all of Baudrillard's cultural theory traces out the implosion of
modern experience: the contraction and reversal of the big categories of the real
into a dense, seductive, and entirely nihilistic society of signs.

1. The Devalorisation of the Social

A speechless mass for every hollow spokesman without a past.
Admirable conjunction, between those who have nothing to
say, and the masses, who do not speak. Ominous emptiness of
all discourse. No hysteria or potential fascism, but simulation
by precipitation of every lost referential. Black box of every
referential, of every uncaptured meaning, of impossible
history, of untraceable systems of representation, the mass is
what remains when the social has been completely removed.

J. Baudrillard
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Baudrillard is explicit in his accusation concerning the death of the social, and of the loss of the “referent” of the sociological imagination. It’s not so much that sociological discourse, the master paradigm of the contemporary century, has been superceded by competing ensembles of normative meaning, but, instead, that the privileged position of the social as a positive, and hence normative, referent has suddenly been eclipsed by its own “implosion” into the density of the mass.

The social world is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline objects which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an in vacuo aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social.

Two, in particular, of Baudrillard’s texts — l’effet beaubourg and In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities — trace out, in an almost desperate language of absence, that rupture in modern discourse represented by the reversal of the positive, normalizing and expanding cycle of the social into its opposite: an implosive and structural order of signs. This is just that break-point in the symbolic totality where the “norm” undergoes an inversion into a floating order of signs, where strategies of normalization are replaced by the “simulation of the masses”, and where the “hyperréalité de la culture” indicates a great dissolution of the space of the social. Baudrillard’s theorisation of the end of sociology as a reality-principle, or what is the same, the exhaustion of the social as a truth-effect of a nominalistic power, privileges a violent and implosive perspective on society. “Violence implosive qui résulte non plus de l’extension d’un système, mais de sa saturation et de sa rétraction, comme il en est des systèmes physiques stellaires”.

In the text, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, Baudrillard provides three strategic hypotheses (from minimal and maximal perspectives) about the existence of the social only as a murderous effect, whose “uninterrupted energy” over two centuries has come from “deterritorialisation and from concentration in ever more unified agencies”. The first hypothesis has it that the social may only refer to the space of a delusion: “The social has basically never existed. There has never been any “social relation”. Nothing has ever functioned socially. On this inescapable basis of challenge, seduction, and death, there has never been anything but simulation of the social and the social relation”. On the basis of this “delusional” hypothesis, the dream of a “hidden sociality”, a “real” sociality, just “hypostatises a simulation”. And if the social is a simulation, then the likely course of events is a “brutal de-simulation”: “a de-simulation which itself captures the style of a challenge (the reverse of capital’s challenge of the social and society): a challenge to the belief that capital and power exist according to their own logic — they have none, they vanish as
apparatuses as soon as the simulation of social space is done".  

The second hypothesis is the reverse, but parallel, image of the delusional thesis: the social, not as the space of delusion undergoing a "brutal de-simulation", but the social as residue, "expanding throughout history as a 'rational' control of residues, and a rational production of residues". Baudrillard is explicit about the purely excremental function of the social, about the social as the "functional ventilation of remainders". It's just the existence of the social as itself "remainder" which makes of the social machine "refuse processing"; a more subtle form of death, indeed the scene of a "piling up and exorbitant processing of death". "In this event, we are even deeper in the social, even deeper in pure excrement, in the fantastic congestion of dead labour, of dead and institutionalised relations within terrorist bureaucracies, of dead languages and grammars. Then of course it can no longer be said that the social is dying, since it is already the accumulation of death. In effect we are in a civilisation of the supersocial, and simultaneously in a civilisation of non-degradable, indestructible residue, piling up as the social spreads."

The third hypothesis speaks only of the end of the "perspective space of the social". "The social has not always been a delusion, as in the first hypothesis, nor remainder, as in the second: But precisely, it has only had an end in view, a meaning as power, as work, as capital, from the perspective space of an ideal convergence, which is also that of production — in short, in the narrow gap of second-order simulacra, and, absorbed into third-order simulacra, it is dying." This, then, is the hypothesis of the "precession of simulacra", of a "ventilation of individuals as terminals of information", of, finally, the death of the social ("which exists only in perspective space") in the (hyperreal and hypersocial) "space of simulation".

End of the perspective space of the social. The rational sociality of the contract, dialectical sociality (that of the State and of civil society, of public and private, of the social and the individual) gives way to the sociality of contact, of the circuit and transistorised network of millions of molecules and particles maintained in a random gravitational field, magnetised by the constant circulation and the thousands of tactical combinations which electrify them.

2. The Refusal of Historical Subjecthood

Baudrillard also has a hidden, and radical, political agenda. His political attitude is directed not against, the already obsolescent "perspective space of the social", but in opposition to the ventilated and transistorised order of the simulacrum. In the now passé world of the social, political emancipation entailed the production of meaning, the control of individual and collective perspective, against a normalizing society which insisted on excluding its oppositions. This was the region of power/sacrifice: the site of a great conflict where the finalities of sex, truth, labour, and history, were dangerous just to the
extent that they represented the hitherto suppressed region of use-value, beyond and forever in opposition to a purely sacrificial politics. In the perspectival space of the historical, power could be threatened by speech, by the agency of the emancipatory subject who demanded a rightful inclusion in the contractual space of political economy. A politics of rights depended for its very existence on the valorisation of use-value as a privileged and universally accessible field of truth/ethics; and on the production of the emancipated historical subject as an object of desire.

With Baudrillard, it's just the opposite. His political theory begins with a refusal of the privileged position of the historical subject, and, what is more, with an immediate negation of the question of historical emancipation itself. Baudrillard's is not the sociological perspective of disciplinary power in a normalizing society (Foucault) nor the hermeneutical interpretation of technology and science as "glassy, background ideology" (Habermas). In this theoretic, there is no purely perspectival space of the "panoptic" nor free zone of "universal pragmatics". Baudrillard's political analysis represents a radical departure from both the sociology of knowledge and theorisations of power/norm just because his thought explores the brutal processes of dehistoricisation and desocialisation which structure the new communicative order of power/sign. In the new continent of power/sign (where power is radically semiurgical): the relevant political collectivity is the "mass media as simulacra"; the exchange-principle involves purely abstract and hyper-symbolic diffusions of information; and what is at stake is the "maximal production of meaning" and the "maximal production of words" for constituted historical subjects who are both condition and effect of the order of simulacra.

It's just this insistence on responding to the challenge of history which draws us on, trapping us finally, within the interstices of a vast social simulation: a simulation which make its autonomous subjects only the strategic counterparts of the system's desperate need, given its previous disfigurement of the social and of the real, for the surplus-production of meaning and of words.

Now, Baudrillard's world is that of the electronic mass media, and specifically, of television. His nomination of television as a privileged simulacrum is strategic: television has the unreal existence of an imagic sign-system in which may be read the inverted and implosive logic of the social machine. The "nebulous hyperreality" of the masses; "staged communications" as the modus vivendi of the power-system; the "explosion of information" and the "implosion of meaning" as the keynote of the new communications order; a massive circularity of all poles in which "sender is receiver" (the medium is the message: McLuhan's formula of the end of panoptic and perspectival space as the "alpha and omega of our modernity"); an "irreversible medium of communication without response": such are the strategic consequences of the processing of (our) history and (our) autonomous subjectivity through the simulacra of the mass media, and explicitly, through television. In a brilliant essay, "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media", Baudrillard had this to say of the intracation of the mass media in the social or, more specifically, the "implosion of the media in the masses".
Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence done to meaning, and in the fascination which results? Is it the media which induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses which divert the media into spectacles? Mogadishu Stammheim: the media are made the vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but, simultaneously, in the most total ambiguity, they propagate the brutal fascination of the terrorist act. They are themselves terrorists, to the extent to which they work through fascination... The media carry meaning and non-sense; they manipulate in every sense simultaneously. The process cannot be controlled, for the media convey the simulation internal to the system and the simulation destructive of the system according to a logic that is absolutely Moebian and circular — and this is exactly what it is like. There is no alternative to it, no logical resolution. Only a logical exacerbation and a catastrophic resolution.24

Baudrillard's refusal of the "reality" of processed history is based on this hypothesis: the new information of the electronic mass media is "directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it." 25 Information, far from producing an "accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus-value of meaning homologous to the economic plus-value which results from the accelerated rotation of capital", 26 dissolves the possibility of any coherent meaning-system. Confronted with this situation of the "doublebind" in which the medium is the real and the real is the nihilism of the information society, our political alternatives are twofold. First, there is "resistance-as-subject", the response of the autonomous historical subject who assumes the "unilaterally valorized" and "positive" line of resistance of "liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution... (as somehow) valuable and subversive". 27 But Baudrillard is entirely realistic concerning how the "liberating claims of subjecthood" respond to the nihilistic demands of the information order of mass media.

To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this reflects the system's previous phase, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the system's current argument is the maximization of the word and the maximal production of meaning. Thus the strategic resistance is that of a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word — or of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception. 28
Against the emancipatory claims of historical subjecthood, Baudrillard proposes the more radical alternative of "resistance-as-object" as the line of political resistance most appropriate to the simulacrum. To a system which represents a great convergence of power and seduction, and which is entirely cynical in its devalorisation of meaning, the relevant and perhaps only political response is that of ironic detachment.

This is the resistance of the masses: it is equivalent to sending back to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting, like a mirror, meaning without absorbing it. This strategy (if one can still speak of strategy) prevails today because it was ushered in by that phase of the system.

Baudrillard thus valorizes the position of the "punk generation": this new generation of rebels which signals its knowledge of its certain doom by a hyperconformist simulation (in fashion, language, and lifestyle) which represents just that moment of refraction where the simulational logic of the system is turned, ironically and neutrally, back against the system. Baudrillard is a new wave political theorist just because he, more than most, has understood that in a system "whose imperative is the over-production and regeneration of meaning and speech", all the social movements which "bet on liberation, emancipation, the resurrection of the subject of history, of the group, of speech as a raising of consciousness, indeed of a 'seizure of the unconscious' of subjects and of the masses" are acting fully in accordance with the political logic of the system.

Notes


2. Michael Weinstein in a private communication to one of the authors has suggested this important insight into "exteriorisation of the mind" as the structuralist successor to Weber's theory of rationalisation.


4. Ibid; p. 6.

5. For Baudrillard's most explicit discussion of the simulacrum, see "L'hyperréalisme de la simulation", L'échange symbolique et la mort, pp. 110-117.


7. J. Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, p. 68.
18. Baudrillard's refusal of the "perspectival space of the social" is aimed directly at Foucault's theorisation of the closed space of the "panoptic". Baudrillard's closing of the ring of signifier/signified or, what is the same, his theorisation of simulacra in conjunction with the structural law of value breaks directly with Habermas' hermeneutical interpretation of ideology.

19. Against Habermas and Foucault, Baudrillard theorizes a non-representational and non-figurative spatialized universe.


WHEN BATAILLE ATTACKED THE METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLE OF ECONOMY

Jean Baudrillard

Continuity, sovereignty, intimacy, immanent immensity: a single thought in the work of Bataille, a single mythic thought behind these multiple terms: "I am of those who destine men to things other than the incessant growth of production, who incite them to the sacred horror."

The sacred is par excellence the sphere of "La part maudite" [the accursed share] (the central essay of this seventh volume of Bataille's works), sphere of sacrificial expenditure, of wealth [luxe] and of death; sphere of a "general" economy which refutes all the axioms of economy as it is usually understood (an economy which, in generalizing itself, overruns [brûle] its boundaries and truly passes beyond political economy, something that the latter, and all Marxist thought, are powerless to do in accordance with the internal logic of value). It is also the sphere of non-knowledge [non-savoir].

Paradoxically, the works collected here are in a way Bataille's "Book of Knowledge," the one where he tries to erect the buttresses of a vision which, at bottom, doesn't need them; indeed, the drive [pulsion] toward the sacred ought, in its destructive incandescence, to deny the kind of apology and discursive rendition contained in "La Part maudite" and "La Théorie de Religion." "My philosophic position is based on non-knowledge of the whole, on knowledge concerned only with details." It is necessary, therefore, to read these defensive fragments from the two antithetical perspectives [sur le double versant] of knowledge and non-knowledge.

The Fundamental Principle

The central idea is that the economy which governs our societies results from a misappropriation of the fundamental human principle, which is a solar principle of expenditure. Bataille's thought goes, beyond proper political economy (which in essence is regulated through exchange value), straight to the metaphysical principle of economy. Bataille's target is utility, in its root. Utility is, of course, an apparently positive principle of capital: accumulation, investment, depreciation, etc. But in fact it is, on Bataille's account, a principle of powerlessness, an utter inability to expend. Given that all previous societies

knew how to expend, this is, an unbelievable deficiency: it cuts the human being off from all possible sovereignty. All economics are founded on that which no longer can, no longer knows how to expend itself [se dépenser], on that which is incapable of becoming the stake of a sacrifice. It is therefore entirely residual, it is a limited social fact; and it is against economy as a limited social fact that Bataille wants to raise expenditure, death, and sacrifice as total social facts—such is the principle of general economy.

The principle of utility (use value) blends with the bourgeoisie, with this capitalist class whose definition for Bataille (contrary to Marx) is negative: it no longer knows how to expend. Similarly, the crisis of capital, its increasing mortality and its inmanent death throes, are not bound, as in the work of Marx, to a history, to dialectical reversals [péripéties], but to this fundamental law of the inability to expend, which give capital over to the cancer of production and unlimited reproduction. There is no principle of revolution in Bataille’s work: “The terror of revolutions has only done more and more [de mieux en mieux] to subordinate human energy to industry.” There is only a principle of sacrifice—the principle of sovereignty, whose diversion by the bourgeoisie and capital causes all human history to pass from sacred tragedy to the comedy of utility.

This critique is a non-Marxist critique, an aristocratic critique, because it aims at utility, at economic finality as the axiom of capitalist society. The Marxist critique is only a critique of capital, a critique coming from the heart of the middle and petit bourgeois classes, for which Marxism has served for a century as a latent ideology: a critique of exchange value, but an exaltation of use value—and thus a critique, at the same time, of what made the almost delirious greatness of capital, the secular remains of its religious quality: investment at any price, even at the cost of use value. The Marxist seeks a good use of economy. Marxism is therefore only a limited petit bourgeois critique, one more step in the banalization of life toward the “good use” of the social! Bataille, to the contrary, sweeps away all this slave dialectic from an aristocratic point of view, that of the master struggling with his death. One can accuse this perspective of being pre- or post-Marxist. At any rate, Marxism is only the disenchanted horizon of capital—all that precedes or follows it is more radical than it is.

What remains uncertain in the work of Bataille (but without a doubt this uncertainty cannot be alleviated), is to know whether the economy (capital), which is counterbalanced on absurd, but never useless, never sacrificial expenditures (wars, waste ...), is nevertheless shot through with a sacrificial dynamic. Is political economy at bottom only a frustrated avatar of the single great cosmic law of expenditure? Is the entire history of capital only an immense detour toward its own catastrophe, toward its own sacrificial end? If this is so, it is because, in the end, one cannot not expend. A longer spiral perhaps drags capital beyond economy, toward a destruction of its own values; the alternative is that we are stuck forever in this denial of the sacred, in the vertigo of supply, which signifies the rupture of alliance (of symbolic exchange in primitive societies) and of sovereignty.
POWER AND SEDUCTION

Bataille would have been impassioned by the present evolution of capital in this era of floating currencies, of values seeking their own level (which is not their transmutation), and the drift of finalities [la dérive des finalités] (which is neither sovereign uselessness nor the absurd gratuitousness of laughter and death). But his concept of expenditure would have permitted only a limited analysis: it is still too economic, too much the flip side of accumulation, as transgression is too close to the inverse figure of prohibition. In an order which is no longer that of utility, but an aleatory order of value, pure expenditure, while retaining the romantic charm of turning the economic inside out, is no longer sufficient for radical defiance [au défi radical]—it shatters the mirror of market value, but is powerless against the shifting mirror [le miroir en dérive] of structural value.

Bataille founds his general economy on a “solar economy” without reciprocal exchange, on the unilateral gift that the sun makes of its energy: a cosmogony of expenditure, which he deploys in a religious and political anthropology. But Bataille has misread Mauss: the unilateral gift does not exist. This is not the law of the universe. He who has so well explored the human sacrifice of the Aztecs should have known as they did that the sun gives nothing, it is necessary to nourish it continually with human blood in order that it shine. It is necessary to challenge [défier] the gods through sacrifice in order that they respond with profusion. In other words, the root of sacrifice and of general economy is never pure and simple expenditure—or whatever drive [pulsion] of excess that supposedly comes to us from nature—but is an incessant process of challenge [défi].

Bataille has “naturalized” Mauss

The “excess of energy” does not come from the sun (from nature) but from a continual higher bidding in exchange—the symbolic process that can be found in the work of Mauss, not that of the gift (that is the naturalist mystique into which Bataille falls), but that of the counter-gift. This is the single truly symbolic process, which in fact implies death as a kind of maximal excess—but not as individual ecstasy, always as the maximal principle of social exchange. In this sense, one can reproach Bataille for having “naturalized” Mauss (but in a metaphysical spiral so prodigious that the reproach is not really one), and for having made symbolic exchange a kind of natural function of prodigality, at once hyper-religious in its gratuitousness and much too close still, a contrario, to the principle of utility and to the economic order that it exhausts in transgression without ever leaving behind.

It is “in the glory of death” [à hauteur de mort] that one rediscovers Bataille, and the real question posed remains: “How is it that all men have encountered the need and felt the obligation to kill living beings ritually? For lack of having known how to respond, all men have remained in ignorance of that which they are.” There is an answer to this question beneath the text, in all the interstices of Bataille’s text, but in my opinion not in the notion of expenditure,
nor in this kind of anthropological reconstruction that he tries to establish from the "objective" data of his day: Marxism, biology, sociology, ethnology, political economy, the objective potential of which he tries to bring together nevertheless, in a perspective which is neither exactly a genealogy, nor a natural history, nor a Hegelian totality, but a bit of all that.

But the sacred imperative is flawless in its mythic assertion, and the will to teach is continually breached by Bataille's dazzling vision, by a "subject of knowledge" always "at the boiling point." The consequence of this is that even analytic or documentary considerations have that mythic force which constitutes the sole—sacrificial—force of writing.

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Notes


2. Translator’s note: Only two essays from this seventh volume have been translated into English—"Le sacrifice" (dated 1939-1940), a portion of La Limite de l'utile (an abandoned version of La Part Maudite); and "Notice autobiographique" (dated 1958). Both essays have been translated by Annette Michelson and appear in October (Spring, 1986) respectively as "Sacrifice (pp. 61-74) and "Autobiographical Note" (pp. 107-110).

A number of Bataille's works have been translated into English. In addition to Visions of Excess (Minnesota 1985), translated by Alan Stoekl, these include: Literature and Evil (Urizen Books 1985; orig. 1957), translated by Alastair Hamilton, and Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo (Arno Press, 1977; orig. 1957).

3. The "Puritan mania of business" (money earned is earned in order to be invested ... having value or meaning only in the endless wealth it entails), in that it still entails a sort of madness, challenge, and catastrophic compulsion—a sort of ascetic mania—is opposed to work, to the good use of energy in work and usufruct.

4. Destruction (even gratuitous) is always ambiguous, since it is the inverse figure of production, and falls under the objection that in order to destroy it is first necessary to have produced, to which Bataille is able to oppose only the sun.

BAUDRILLARD’S SEDUCTION

Brian Singer

Peut-être fallait-il arrêter cette hémorragie de la valeur. Assez de radicalité terroriste, assez de simulacres—recrudescence de la morale, de la croyance, du sens. A bas les analyses crépusculaires!

Les stratégies fatales

The following essay was written to come to terms with an abiding fascination with the work of Jean Baudrillard. To be fascinated implies, at least at a first moment, that one is attracted to something despite oneself, that one is drawn in wide-eyed with all belief suspended. Many times I have put his work down, sometimes violently, only to return charmed, nay seduced by the sublime irony of Baudrillard’s sense of the absurd. Having recently translated one of his more pivotal works, Seduction, I find myself compelled to explain this fascination, with all its accompanying ambivalence, and explore its implications. Perhaps the reader shares this fascination, in which case s/he may recognize something of his or her own contrary reactions in my own, and will wish to share my line of questioning. Or perhaps the reader has never read Baudrillard. Perhaps the reader refuses to read his works because of their language, style, fashionability or politics. In this case the reader may consider this as an incitement and a guide to reading Baudrillard, for he cannot, I submit, be approached naively and read like any other author.

The book Seduction presents itself as an attack on the notion of truth, its pretensions and imperialism. A post-modern common-place, to be sure. But this is no mere defense of relativism, with its multiple or partial truths. Nor is it a search for some metaphysical fissure that would render the idea of Truth impossible, yet insurmountable; nor even the uncovering of some motive that would reveal the search for truth as our ultimate illusion. Here the strategy is different, and possibly more radical. Call it nihilism if one will, but only if this is not the last word.

Truth, Baudrillard begins, is associated with the realm of depths, and is to be attacked along with all the other figures of depth: that of the essence behind the appearance, the unconscious desire behind the symptom, the true nature behind the artifice, the sphere of production beneath the superstructure, the relations of force or power beneath the ideological or normative shell—in short, all the “realities” unearthed by science, interpretation, critique or some combination thereof. In opposition to truth with its underlying reality lies the realm of
IDEOLOGY AND POWER

appearances. And the book presents itself as a defense of appearances—including frankly illusory appearances—against depths. Seduction itself involves the play of appearances, their manipulation, their mastery.

Immediately one will ask, no doubt, how one can speak of appearances without seeking to account for them in terms of some underlying truth? And a somewhat different question, how can one write a piece of "sociology" that does not seek to penetrate the social surface in order to extract some deeper truth about society? (Note, we will be speaking here of something more than a work of sociology fiction which, if it follows the general canons of mimetic representation, demands the appearance of truth, that is, verisimilitude).

Consider a first response, one that directly addresses the first question while directly appealing to the problem of seduction. Seduction, if it serves to master reality, does so not by narrowing the gap between reality and appearances in order to eliminate the latter and act directly on the former. On the contrary seduction acts indirectly, widening the gap by manipulating the appearances in order to trick one's sense of "reality." Those who act in accord with the underlying reality signalled by the appearance, or who follow the "truth" of their desires, find themselves entrapped by their own search for a transparent truth. In this sense the indirect method, by virtue of its playfulness, artfulness and agnosticism, subverts the functioning of the solemn truth of depths. The manipulation of appearances has a backhanded superiority over the direct manipulation of reality because capable of having the last laugh.

One may, of course, respond that the "real truth" behind the appearance of truth constructed by the seducer lies with the strategy consciously produced by the latter. But what if the seducer is seduced by his/her own game, and finds that s/he has little control over his/her strategy? What if both seducer and seduced are seduced by the realm of appearances such that it is the latter that determines "reality" (as opposed to reality determining appearances)? What if large areas of society operated according to a seemingly non-conscious, unmotivated logic of seduction? Must one think that appearances are merely an extension, alibi or front for something that lies beneath? Can they not convey imperatives or determinations (that is, a power, and a potentially superior power) of their own? Beyond the truth behind appearances can we not speak about a truth of appearances?

But then are we really talking about an attack on the notion of truth? Are we not simply supplementing one truth with another, that of depths with that of appearances? Is Baudrillard not simply telling us that we can no longer simply claim that society functions according to some underlying logic, whether functional or conflictual, teleological or aetiological, or that texts embody some underlying intention or structure... that we must also look at the play of surfaces, the strategies the latter embodies, the possibilities it affords. The science (or hermeneutics) of depths can no longer reign supreme. It will have to make room for a second branch of knowledge dedicated to analyzing the "truth" of appearances and (why not?) a third that examines the play between depths and appearances. One then imagines the first moving vertically in an attempt to decode the social text, the second moving horizontally to examine the latter's
recodings, while the third would move between the two, examining their
conjunctions, intrusions, interferences and inversions—in short, their “commu-
nication.” The pretensions of the first may be severely curtailed, but the final
result will not be so radical. The content will have changed but the project, its
finality relative to a notion of truth, will have been preserved intact.

Baudrillard, however, is not (or is not simply) seeking to establish a new,
 supplementary area of study, even one that throws a curve at all knowledge as
heretofore constructed. By speaking of appearances in and for themselves, (that
most visible of spheres which remains, nonetheless, outside the vision of the
social sciences), he is not seeking to add a new field to the store of knowledge,
one that, admittedly, is full of ironic inversions and subtle revenges. To claim the
latter would be to miss the deep pessimism of his epistemology and, even more,
the deeply pessimistic character of his analysis of present tendencies relative to
epistemology. In effect, for Baudrillard history has epistemological effects: it is
not just that science or knowledge have a history, but that the very terms science
or knowledge suppose as ontological preconditions—here terms like appear-
ances, depths, truth and reality—are also to be radically historicized. With the
ultimate claim being that the tendencies of the present are such that these terms
can only be sustained with increasing difficulty. More particularly, the problem,
according to Baudrillard, is that the distinction between appearances and depths
is collapsing, and that, as it were, from both sides.

Consider first the appearances collapsing into reality. Suppose the enlighten-
ment dream is being realized and we are living in an increasingly transparent
society, a society without secrets or areas of darkness, without veils, blinders or
illusions, a society where what was hidden is becoming visible and all that is
visible is, as a result, becoming substantial. It would be a society of appearances
because without underlying realities. It would be a society where all appear-
ances would be real, equally real and, accordingly, equally unreal. (One often
encounters in Baudrillard social utopias—and theoretical utopias—shipwrecked
by the logical extension of their premises to their ultimate realization).

Now consider the other side of the coin, reality collapsing into appearance.
Suppose the appearances substitute themselves for the underlying reality and
become that by which we gauge what is “truly real” in place of (or in the absence
of) any real functioning referent. In this case one has moved beyond a world of
verisimilitude, where appearances appear real, into a world of simulation,
where appearances appear more real than reality—what Baudrillard calls the
“hyper-real”—because “reality” as we experience it is modelled on appearances
(rather than appearances being modelled on reality). Again one confronts a
society of appearances (in the form of simulated models), where appearances
are “real” and “reality” (as expressed in the hyper-real) appears as the most
significant of “illusions.”

In both cases, whether reality collapses into appearances or vice versa—and
the two cases are indistinguishable in their consequences—the very meaning and
value of truth begins to fade. And how could it not fade given the loss of the
underlying reality of a referent with which to anchor appearances? One’s very
sense of reality teeters when confronted with an excess of unassimilated (and
unassimilable) information, or with a host of hyper-real images which pre-
construct the "reality" of desire, not to mention the quasi-compulsory visibility
of a confessional culture. History does not simply affect epistemology; in the
living future of the present it is seen to subvert the very possibility of epistemol-
ogy, particularly in its quotidian forms. And with truth losing its meaning and
value, it only follows that meaning is losing its meaning and value its value. With
all the notions that these terms nourished beginning to fade in tandem. The value
and meaning of the social and the political, not to mention social or political
action, of history and the event, of sex, war... with each book the list of
"referents" destined to disappear grows longer. On the horizon of Baudrillard's
radical historicism, the vanishing points are to be taken literally—even as these
"referents" are sometimes denied their substance less in terms of a fade-out than
by way of their parodic excess. As such, an analysis of the realm of appearances
provides, at best, an anti-climactic, funereal truth (as if the owl of Minerva were
turning into a vulture, even as it was flying away). Again one wonders: if with the
disappearance of any underlying reality, meaning and value are withering away
along with truth, how then can one write a work of sociology? Indeed one
wonders how one can write anything at all?

And yet, to state the obvious, the work has been written and it is, if not
sociology, then social theory. In order to understand the apparent paradox of its
writing, let us begin by saying that Baudrillard is not (or not primarily)
concerned with writing a work of "truth." He is more interested in throwing
down a challenge to those who are so concerned. To all those "social scientists"
who believe themselves to be explaining something of society by reference to
its underlying reality, Baudrillard is saying that they are not (because seduced by
and entrapped in their own theoretical simulations) and that they cannot
(because the underlying reality they are proposing to describe, for all intensive
purposes, no longer exists). And that he himself, by not trying to write such a
work, will write something that resonates our present predicament with much
greater force. In short, he will beat them at their own game. Though by so doing
he will have changed the rules, for writing social theory will now truly be a
game. And consequently, we the readers will, without having entirely left the
"real," familiar world, find ourselves entering a very different terrain, with
different expectations and different stakes. This becomes immediately evident
when one considers the absence of that tone of high seriousness that generally
marks works of social theory. Baudrillard's writing is, by contrast, hilarious—and
this despite its fin de siècle (or fin de millénaire?) melancholia.

Consider something of the nature of this "game." The first thing to note is that
concepts take on a different character, with a new, strategic value. In most
works, and independent of the theoretical modality, concepts are constructed
as instruments of interpretation that enable one to penetrate below the surface
obstacles constituted by appearances (be they composed of false objects or false
concepts) to the reality below. By contrast, Baudrillard treats concepts as all
surface; for he, as it were, brackets their referents—that is, the underlying reality
to which refer—and thus their truth value. (It is as though one were being placed
before an inverted version of the phenomenological inversion). In effect, just as
Baudrillard is claiming that society is becoming all surface, he tends to treat concepts as though they were all appearance, and thus had a reality of their own. One can, to be sure, perceive a structuralist influence here: the signs or concepts being constituted less in relation with their referents than with other signs or concepts. The bracketing, however, proceeds beyond the referent to the signifieds, the meanings themselves, thus freeing the concepts from too serious a concern with their finalities, whether descriptive, interpretative or explanatory. And once they have been delivered from the ballast of referent and function, Baudrillard is free to play with them, to call upon their symbolic resources (though not, as in Lacan, with reference to an unconscious), combine them in new ways, place them in new logics and, more generally, put them to flight. Does he believe in what he is saying? The implication here is that, with the truth value of the terms momentarily bracketed, the question is beside the point (at least at a first moment). Thus one should not be surprised to see him trying out, one after another, different, even contrary hypothesis, without any of them being either rejected or retained. (Think of the multiple us of the words “or else”...—as in the book’s second page). Or consider more generally the conceptual escalation to theoretical extremes. For once they have lost anchor the concepts are able to circulate with breath-taking rapidity in a manner simultaneously declamatory and poetic. The contrast with more conventional forms of social analysis could not be more blatant. Where most theorizing, with its unassuming prose, holds to a steady course in order to move ever closer towards its object and carress its details, here the looking glass has, as it were, been turned the wrong way round. One finds oneself pushed away from the objects under analysis, forced to observe them from an astonishing distance, and in rapid succession. The velocity of the text’s movements is dizzying, and it appears a miracle if any underlying substance sticks.

Nonetheless, even when the concepts are in rapid motion, something of their reference and meaning must necessarily be retained (even if on occasion one finds oneself dragged willy-nilly by a runaway metaphor). After all, to bracket a concept’s truth value is not to deny the latter, which returns, as it were, almost immediately. If the text is to make any sense at all, if it is to be more than just sound and fury, something must stick, if only by association. It is as though the process Baudrillard describes—the hemorrhaging of truth and meaning—is simultaneously a premise of his writing. But by the same token, this writing also supposes, if it is to retain even a shadow of sense, that the process is never complete, that “society” can never be completely bloodless—only anemic. It is not just that this societal anemia enables the concepts to lose much of their referential weight, or that the relation of societal anemia to conceptual lightness provides the work with much of its social resonance. It is because of this relation, presumably, that we are able to learn something about society from reading Baudrillard, but often, as it were, on the wing. Perhaps we should not speak here of “truth” but of “truth effects.” For what we “learn” sometimes appears as a kind of serendipitous byproduct of the conceptual play, whereby suddenly we glimpse something in a completely untoward and unexpected manner. One finds oneself gasping: between two commas one could easily drive
an expository truck; single sentences could easily be turned into books. This is, no doubt, part of the work's fascination, its vertigo.

However, one cannot stop here. It is not just in terms of its conceptual play, but in certain of its larger traits that the work breaks (and breaks with) the "laws" of doing social science and takes on the character of a game (as the author himself describes it, most notably in the chapter in Seduction entitled "The Passion for Rules"). One might wish to see the apparent lack of concern with truth, or with the referentiality supposed by the notion of truth, as reflecting the book's game-like character (games do not have an external truth: their "truth" is entirely immanent, which is to say they know neither truth nor falsehood). Or one might see as indicative of its ludic nature the fact that the book avoids the single-minded character of a linear and cumulative progression, but instead seems to jump from topic to topic while simultaneously circling in on itself, with a prose that sometimes takes on a repetitive, almost ritualistic quality. But most of all, the game-like quality of the writing is to be seen in the relation it establishes with the reader—a relation that can best be described as a duel. Baudrillard is constantly throwing his readers' challenges—challenges to their credibility, challenges to their tolerance.

It must be clearly stated that there is something in his work to upset everyone. One finds for example a defense of astrology (and in another work, of the arms buildup). Even more typical is the brutal assault on feminism, psychoanalysis and Marxism (though in the latter case one is merely dealing with the after-shocks of The Mirror of Production), not to mention structuralist semiotics and the Deleuzian politics of desire (all the currents of the right-thinking left, all those who would be on the side of truth, justice, history and the Revolution—in short, all his potential readers). Baudrillard's attacks are often quite "deep," but they are never in depth; they are always rapid, almost scattershot, often bold, sometimes outrageous.

Consider some of the different, but interrelated strategies of these attacks. First, there is the rejection of the radicality of intellectual currents under attack. They are, it is claimed, secretly complicit with what they would criticize: they are part of the same imaginary, they hold to the same logics and reveal the same blind spots (Marxism shares with market ideology a naively utilitarian view of the object, feminism shares a phallocentric dismissal of appearances, etc). Second, there is the rejection of the ontological foundation on which the current seeks to ground itself and acquire its critical leverage: (use value is not a natural property of the object, but the other face of exchange value; feminism, at least in the version parlayed by Luce Irigaray, swims in a simulated biology, etc). Third, there is the denial of the very object of the school (there is no unconscious; there is only one sex and it is masculine), or at least of its continued existence (there is no longer any desire, only sex, which itself is being neutralized by the violence of pornography), or perhaps only its continued relevance if it still exists (the sexual difference is becoming less significant socially because defined biologically: the social is brain-dead, but artificially maintained on a life support system to maintain the warmed-over corpse of a political project). Fourth, one must speak of the play of reversibility, whereby
upper and lower, dominant and dominated, manipulator and manipulated, knower and known are made to exchange places by way of all the subtly ironic strategies that play with appearances so as to ensure that things are not what they seem (the mute impermeability of the masses as a strategy of resistance to the despotism of enlightenment, frigidity as a subversion of male desire). And last but not least—for implicit in all of the above—there is the quick, continuous, theoretical outbidding, often followed by the mirror play of reverse hypothesis (e.g., there is no longer a working class, nor is there a revolutionary subject, nor any subject whatever, whether collective or individual... and if the subject is disappearing, the object must be too... but then maybe the object is seeking its revenge and claiming the position, autonomy and sovereignty of the subject, and this outside all reference to “alienation”).

The rapidity of the analysis, the exaggerated character of the claims, the fast and loose experimentation with theoretical propositions, the apparent unconcern with logical or any other form of consistency, not to mention the content of what is being said—all this is shocking. A fact that is perhaps in itself shocking. After all, we have been told that in this age of post-modernism cultural modernism is passé, and precisely because it has lost its capacity to shock—in which case, social theory may well be the last refuge for cultural avant-gardes (which might explain the attraction of Baudrillard for artistically inclined circles). One certainly does sense in Baudrillard a pleasure of transgression, even as he tells us that such pleasures belong to an earlier period, when the law still held sway and deviance had not yet been banalized.

The point here is that Baudrillard is not to be taken literally (how can he be taken literally, when he tells us that nothing else can?). He has created an artificial, simulated space within which to play his hand (and games suppose the most artificial and simulated of spaces because they require no reference to a reality outside themselves). This is not a political space (which, without excluding a certain gamesmanship, must seek its foundations in notions of law, justice and, yes, truth, incompatible with a ‘ludic universe). As such, it is somewhat beside the point to respond to it politically. Even less helpful would be to respond simply with outrage, and refuse to read any further. One cannot take up the challenge by quitting the game, while trying to change the rules would be equivalent to cheating.

Of course one might ask, why play at all? Presumably, because the game is not simply a joke. Because it is not without seriousness, because there are what I termed earlier “truth effects,” because the text resonates beyond the printed page, because the attacks often hit their target, because the stakes are “real”—because, in short, it is more than a game. How then does one play? How does one respond to Baudrillard’s challenge? Simply by purchasing and reading the book? But presumably, by purchasing the book, we are in a somewhat better position than those who dared the absurd by responding to the advertisement that asked one to send a dollar. And presumably, by reading the book, we are doing more than subjecting out intellectual convictions and good conscience to the thrills of an avant-garde rollercoaster ride? There must be some way to respond actively. It cannot simply be that Baudrillard is duelling with himself while we,
the readers, look on dumbfounded, absorbed in that newest of spectator sports, social theory.

Before, however, one can respond, even indirectly, to the problem of "reading Baudrillard," one must take another look at his analysis and its impact on what for him must be the problem of writing. Such a query must necessarily include another look at games as they are played both within and without the text.

Throughout his work, Baudrillard sets up a series of interconnected oppositions—truth vs. illusion, depth vs. appearance, production vs. seduction, the law vs. the game-rule, to name the most important. And in each case the second term, which has almost always been denied, derided or treated as frivolous, is recovered and, indeed, celebrated. Now Baudrillard is rescuing and reviving these terms not so much because he holds that the first term cannot exist without the second (at least some of the oppositions, as noted earlier, are collapsing: appearances are becoming reality and reality becoming all appearance); nor because he believes that their opposition holds the promise of some dialectical overcoming (the collapse of the opposition between appearance and reality is producing an ob-scene world—one might, perhaps, speak here of a regressive dialectics). The second term is not, or not necessarily, residual relative to the first, that is, constituted by its opposition to the dominant principle, and thus formed by and reflective of the latter. For Baudrillard the opposed terms each have their own "logic" and so form two different universes which, though they may "communicate," are fundamentally incommensurable. In other words, the world of truth, reality, production, law and desire is shadowed by a parallel world of appearance, illusion, seduction and games which can be exalted in a manner both forceful and ironic by virtue of its "logical" autonomy. But then the question becomes, if the second world has been for so long occluded by the first, particularly in the realm of social theorizing, how did Baudrillard discover it, let alone explore its continents? If it appears so residual within the present, how has he been able to endow it with its own principle?

At this point one is brought face to face with a terrible nostalgia. Over and over again one is referred to a notion of the primitive (which in previous works was conveniently condensed in the concept of "symbolic exchange"). The primitive here acquires its critical leverage not as a point of origin that would give some anthropological foundation to the human adventure, but as a point of maximum alterity which speaks of societies that operated according to altogether different principles, independent of all the master schemata of truth, representation, equivalence or desire so familiar to us. With the primitive Baudrillard would conjure up a time when rituals commanded social being, games were at the heart of social life, seduction was omnipresent (not just relative to the other sex, or other people, but to the gods), words could be delivered of their meaning in incantation, and death (and fate) could be willingly challenged and embraced. In other words, for our author the primitive represents that state where the "world" formed by the "second terms" functions with maximum autonomy and maximum effectiveness.

Once recovered in its full integrity, signs of the continued existence of the logic of this other world can be detected within the present, in however a
transfigured form. Indeed such is the occasion of many of Baudrillard’s most brilliant *apercus*. But note, the “logic of seduction” is recovered not just where one would most expect it—in courtship rituals, advertising, and entertainment—but also in those areas where one should be least expected to find it, that is, in those areas most invested by notions of truth, power and justice—the macro-realm of politics, as well as the micro-realms of inter-personal communication, sexuality and self (Baudrillard has not entirely forgotten Foucault). In these latter areas the logic of seduction often appears, as one might expect, to form a shadow world which, although dismissed and disparaged, haunts our conceptions of order and coherence, secretly subverting their claims. But just as often in Baudrillard’s analysis, this logic appears to quit the shadows and move to center stage, leaving the other “real world” with only a secondary, cardboard existence. And this is no simple trick of perspective, for according to our author we are entering a brave, new and ludic world.

Consider the fate of politics. It is not simply that politics is no longer what it seems; it is that we no longer live in an era of politics. During the era of politics the fundamental terms of the political imaginary, the terms that give politics its value and meaning—terms like power, law, justice, equality, the public good or the people—still retained their force. Let it be noted that these are “transcendent” terms (and cannot be identified with the reality of society); they form a sort of mirror ideal above society by which the collective gathers itself together, attempts to establish its identity and orientations, determine its actions and give itself the means to carry out these actions. (And as such, these terms are constitutive of and participate in the distinctions between appearances and depths, illusions and realities, truths and falsehoods—and the concern with repression and liberation they entail—which Baudrillard would attack). If one then speaks of a democratic politics, one must add that these terms are not only without positive reality; they are without any definite content, the latter being subject to continuous debate. As a result they give rise to the expression of a division internal to society, whereby the principles supposedly constitutive of that society are subjected to constant questioning and conflict. Now suppose that another social “logic” emerges, in part as a response to, or better, as a way of avoiding any response to the underlying uncertainty of the era of democratic politics, and the public debate, social action and political conflict it calls forth. And that this new “logic” infiltrates the political scene, draining it of its substance and energy, leaving it only a shell of its former self, while imposing on the social order at large a very different mode of operationality, with very different motivations, concerns and stakes. This, of course, is Baudrillard’s claim, with the further claim being that this “logic” is not without links to that “primitive” logic of seduction noted above, with the prominence it gave to games and the play of appearances. If as was suggested, Baudrillard is seeking to recover a world long neglected, then “history,” one might say, is on his side, and the anthropological nostalgia becomes prescient of a living future. But the repressed returns in a very different form, with a troubling, parodic character.

We have already noted that, according to Baudrillard, we live in a world of appearances, but these appearances are of a radically changed character. They
no longer sit astride some invisible and underlying reality; they are becoming reality for us—which is to say that our sense of reality is now modelled on appearances, that ours is a simulated reality made to appear real. In this sense appearances are losing their illusory, imaginary and even representative character; for instead of maintaining their distance from reality, they would overtake reality in the models of the hyper-real. Within this world of appearances, one can speak of seduction (in a world of appearances one cannot but speak of appearances) but it too will have a radically changed character. No more the games of passion with their unpredictable outcomes and high stakes. No more that hot seduction subversive of one’s sense of reality. One must speak instead of a soft seduction, one that acts as a social lubricant to the consumer society, rationing off minimal gratifications in homeopathic doses. Such seduction does not involve the mastery of illusions (thus supposing the difference between appearance and reality); one is less entrapped by illusion than absorbed by the simulated models of a reality that would model the apparent reality of our desire. In effect, the collapse of the distinction between appearance and reality is accompanied by the collapse of that between the pleasure and reality principles. Which in turn must be considered the beginning of the end of that perspectival space within which the self situates its relation to others and their difference, and by incorporating the perspective of others, situates itself and its limits. If one then pushes this hypothesis further, with its elimination of the mirror state (and thus of all relational alterity of self and other), one imagines a radically “narcissistic” or “digital” universe where communication becomes ubiquitous and instantaneous, but also empty and circular, an endless proliferation without external mediation. It is at this point that one begins to perceive the ultimate triumph of a ludic world. But the games played here are those described by game theory—the formalized expression of all possibilities under limited conditions—while the “play” is that of a cybernetic universe—the modulation of a network of multiple connections and disconnections—all in the name of a search for maximization, whether that of operational efficiency or sensual plasticity. Such a world can barely be called fun. Its games do not enchant; they leave the “player” absorbed, transfixed by a numb fascination or by what Baudrillard terms at one point “a psychedelic giddiness.”

Earlier I suggested that Baudrillard would combat the truth of depths by speaking of the superficial reality of appearances. But what is the sense of this combat when truth no longer attaches itself to an underlying reality, when it is appearances that alone are true because the apparent heir to the sovereignty of the real? In the face of such a situation, one might switch strategies, and instead of counterposing superficial truths to the deeper realities (discovered by science, interpretation or critique), quit the realm of truth and reality altogether by entering what in principle is the “un-real” and “un-true” realm of games. But what is the sense of such a feint when the blurring of appearance and truth has produced a ludic reality, and one in which games have lost their defiant and subversive character? A situation all the more problematic when one is not simply writing about games; what one is writing is itself a game. When, in other words, the way the book is written (and the way it is to be read) is made to reflect
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and respond to the content of what is written. But then how can one write a seductive work that would ensnare and entrance its readers when the character of seduction has become so degraded? How can one challenge one's readers when the reading public, its tastes shaped by the televisual media, has become impervious to reflection? How can one even communicate with this public when the language it understands systematically denies all alterity? Or put in another way, what sort of analytic strategy can one devise to counter the rose-coloured nightmare one is attempting to deconstruct? What sort of theoretical response might retain its subversive charge in the face of a world drained of substance, meaning, value and difference?

In this regard there are, I believe, two very different, even contrary responses in Baudrillard's work. The first moves as far outside the cold seduction of the digital universe as possible, towards that point of maximal alterity, the seduction of a primitive world... and that without moral tergiversation. How else is one to interpret the theoretical embrace of the terms of ritual and sacrifice, and the cruel, fatalistic world it implies? And what about the discussion, most notably towards the end of Fatal Strategies, of a universe determined not by universal laws of cause and effect, or those of chance, nor some combination thereof, but by the always particular, charmed and for us, senseless "logic" implied by predestination? As if the world of games would still, by virtue of some final irony or desperate hope, secretly reign supreme. Are we to see this as the hidden determination beneath a transparent world? Or as the dialectical reversal at the end of the end of history? One has the impression that Baudrillard is here creating a myth in the full sense of the word, and that this myth is a gamble in the Pascalian sense—the unreasonable but necessary belief in an invisible and sacred principle that holds the fate of each and all of us in the balance.

The other response moves in the opposite direction, towards that which it describes, appropriating its materials and extending its logic in the hope of imploding it from within. Baudrillard's analysis is extreme and describes a world that is "going to extremes". Throughout he details a sort of logical flight forward whereby, in the absence of the anchorage of referents, finalities, limits, laws or rules, some principle is "doubled," producing an unreal and disconcerting excess. Thus reality is made more real than real in the simulations of hyper-reality, speed becomes faster than fast as it reaches the point of instantaneity, obesity takes one beyond fatness (to take an example from Fatal Strategies), and pornography renders sex more than visible while neutralizing it by its excess. Such an "escalation to extremes" involves both a logic of proliferation—before all the exorbitant "images" of reality, sex, speed or flatulence, one can only reply that it is "too much"—and a logic of disappearance—the disappearance of (the meaning and value of) reality, sex, the body, movement and distance. In effect, within the space of his text, Baudrillard is creating a simulation model of a trajectory identified with present-day tendencies, speeding it up, which he can then watch with what must be a mixture of pleasure and horror as it all collapses in on itself. And in the process he has managed to write something that is truer than true, something that he might call an "ecstatic" truth (ecstasy being defined at one point in Stratégies fatales as "the vertiginous super-multiplication of
formal properties”). Perhaps this is where Baudrillard is upping the ante and throwing down his ultimate challenge, daring the logic to go beyond the point where it can be meaningfully sustained and becomes absurder than absurd. Perhaps this is how, in his imagination, he would seduce and destroy the unreal reality he feels so estranged from, by calling on its resources to trap it within its own movement. Perhaps by its very fatalism such a strategy is (primitively) seductive.

In many ways this is the more satisfying response, and yet does it not threaten to become one with what it describes—a simulacrum of the dystopia of the living future? Does it not, by virtue of its conceptual self-referentiality begin to turn in on itself to the point where it turns to an incantatory prose and begins to lose all meaning? With its theoretical escalation to extremes and its hypothetical exhaustion of all alternatives in the mirror-play of reversibility, does it not deny itself all stakes in the forecast of an unalterable doomsday scenario? And is not the latter not just another one of those banal apocalypses, one of those catastrophes without consequences, which we are, as Baudrillard himself recognizes, so eager to consume in this pre-millenial era? After all the rapid-fire analytic connections and disconnections that play so fast and loose with meaning and value, doesn’t the reader emerge from the book in a giddy theoretical daze? And what is the nature of the fascination? How many of those who are attracted to the work are left literally speechless, in a state of “somnambular euphoria”?

When beginning to write this essay, I told myself that I would be venting my own ambivalence relative to Baudrillard’s work. But now that I am nearing the end I am convinced that the ambivalence is immanent to the work itself. Though written in extremes, it perhaps allows of only equivocal responses. If its claims were to be taken too seriously, or too literally, by either author or reader, then the former should have found it impossible to write the book, and the latter to read it. On the other hand, if the claims could simply be denied, the book would be less than uninteresting. Yet it remains fascinating: a work of sociology that violates all the canons of social science, a work of ethics that would dispense with morality, a radical work that would be without hopes. A work that would reject the very idea(l) of truth, but supposes a residual truth for its impact. And that would quit reality to enter the “unreal” space of games, but as a game would reflect the space that it has quit. It is a work that would shock its readers though they be rendered insensible by the saturation of obscene images; that would challenge its readers though they be inoculated to all but the most formal (and least antagonistic) of dualisms; and would communicate even as communication is increasingly being reduced to what one eighteenth century utopian termed the “language of the bees.” A work that resonates with the unreality of the real, that fantasizes a world without fantasy, and would play in ways that it declares obsolete. A work that bemoans a world of simulation, and would then produce a radical simulation of theory. A work whose major concepts are, like so many tops, sent spinning at such a speed that they would disappear from human history. Simultaneously agonistics and agnostics, augur and agony, it is a marvelously impossible book. Something one can neither accept nor reject. A
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work that both attracts and repels, absorbs and torments. In a word, the perfect
postmodern fetish.

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Notes

1. I said earlier that one could not respond to Baudrillard's texts politically. The reasons are not simply
"epistemological" (he is not writing about the underlying reality of society, nor is he writing a work
of politics—his writing is a game) but also "historical" (the political scene no longer has any meaning
in the present and, therefore, nothing can be expected of it). To be sure, this continuous tacking
between "epistemology" and "history" can produce for the would-be critic a very slippery, even
duplicitous text.
It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of the commodity-structure.

G. Lukacs
*History and Class Consciousness*

Ideology can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.) which expresses and marks the contradictions at the "base". Henceforth, all of this comprises, with the same degree of objectivity, a general political economy (its critique), which is traversed throughout by the same form and administered by the same logic.

Jean Baudrillard
*For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*

In the affluent conformism of the post-war boom, and now again in the post-60s disillusionment of our own mean-spirited and re-disciplined times, critical social thought has revived the Frankfurt School's spectre of a capitalism that has finally mastered its own historicity and so liquidated any endogenous capacity it may once have had for redemptive self-transformation.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the latest avatars of this gloomy entelechy have emerged not from Germany, the land of its birth, but from France; and, at that, from among an intellectual generation that cut its teeth on a polemic against humanized Hegel and dedicated itself thereafter to the philosophical dismantling of all the other crumbling remnants of Western logocentrism. The reasons for this strange paradigmatic cross-over are partly political. In post-Hitler Germany, the neo-Kantian and anti-Romantic turn taken by critical theory under Habermas and his followers was predicated on the recovery of evolutionary optimism. That (West) German thought since then has been able to sustain this liberal mood is in some measure due to the relative persistence in that country of the extra-Parliamentary activism initiated during the 60s. In France to the contrary, May 68 was a bolt from the stars, as deliriously festive and
total as it was ephemeral: hard even to recall in the business-as-usual normality which so rapidly and depressingly followed. Faced afterwards with a choice between the PCF (and Union des Gauches) and Gaullism, it is not surprising that radical French theory should begin to display signs of ultimatism and despair.

But besides these matters of context, French thought in its moment of deconstruction has also come to display profound conceptual parallels with the earlier enterprise of negative dialectics. Both reflect the outcome of a would-be synthetic meditation on Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; both share a mortal fear of the social world's ideological self-enclosure; and both exhibit a modernist determination to demolish systematicity, even at the level of critique itself. For that reason, and despite their otherwise irreconcilable epistemic differences, post-structuralism today enjoys an almost privileged access to the previously inadmissible (because Hegelian and anti-objectivist) terrain of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, and thus also to those thinkers' tragic reading of modern history as the story of Enlightenment's ineluctable progress towards total unfreedom.

Perhaps the clearest and certainly the most sociologically explicit instance of what one might call neo-Marcusian reasoning in contemporary French thought is the work of Jean Baudrillard.²

There is admittedly a world (i.e. an ontology) of difference between Marcuse's one-dimensional society and Baudrillard's code-dominated order of generalized exchange. In the praxis-based categories of the former it is instrumental reason which is identified as the glacially reifying agent; whereas in the latter, founded on a neo-Durkheimian anthropology of moral reciprocity, the culprit is commodity semiosis and the universalized commutability of values. But at a deeper level these critical visions converge in their common projection of advanced capitalist society as a model whose fixed determinations propel the collectivity towards a kind of slow but painless spiritual death. Baudrillard, like Marcuse, has also tried to provide psychoanalytic ground for this dystopian teleology by demonstrating its consonance with the morbid promptings of a systematically repressed desire.³ Likewise, Baudrillard's sociological investigations into mass-mediated consumerism, the main substance of his œuvre, essentially pursue lines of enquiry previously opened up by the Frankfurt School. The guiding assumptions are identical: that the mass cultural instance has become crucial to social reproduction, that it represents indeed a strategic built-in mechanism for ensuring the social order's real statis through all the incipient upheavals it continues to induce, and that this is why the Revolution (if the term retains any meaning) has perhaps permanently missed the historical boat.

There is no doubt that Baudrillard's exploration of these themes is path-breaking. His problematization of what one might call commodity semiosis in the age of televised repetition represents in many respects a significant advance over Benjamin, and certainly over the North American mass society critics he also appropriates. More than any other contemporary thinker he has succeeded in placing the changed articulation of culture and economy in advanced
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capitalist society firmly on the theoretical agenda. But ultimately, I would argue, the theoretical power of his analysis is restricted by the same quasi-fatalistic circularity that vitiated the Frankfurt School's original civilizational lament. In Derridian terms: however decentred and indeterminate, the code that has allegedly triumphed is nevertheless a logos, particularly when identified with death; and such an ascription must itself fall prey to the suspicion of logocentrism. Otherwise put: we do not escape the identity principle simply by identifying the \textit{weltgeist} as a corpse.

More pragmatically, any representation of social reality as culturally (and therefore politically) enclosed in the unidimensionality of a singular psychic space — with Baudrillard this is structural, abstract and at the second degree — is vulnerable to the counterfactual experience of 'actual' history. Theory must be adequate to explain and account for global disturbances like those of the 60s which shake the system of hegemony to its foundations. It is also important to explicate the normal play of cultural and moral politics — struggles over sexual, familial, aesthetic, religious, etc., modes and symbols — which continually mediate, sometimes explosively, the hierarchical force-field of competing material self-interests.

On this score, perhaps, it might be claimed that Baudrillard is in fact somewhat less undialectical than some of his Frankfurt forebears. Whereas in \textit{The Dialectic of Enlightenment} it is critical theory itself which must bear the full weight of opposition,\textsuperscript{4} his own anthropological ontology of symbolic exchange comes close to endowing even the wholly reified world of \textit{la societe de consommation} with a principle of \textit{internal} contradiction. Symbolic exchange, in the primordial forms of gift, festival, and sacrifice, can no more be repressed than language; and so the more the 'structural law of value' dessicats social space, the more its unsatisfied reciprocities, invested with repressed libidinal energy, come to haunt all the corners of social life, threatening constantly to disrupt the repetitive dumb-show that has come to monopolize the stage. Hence, for Baudrillard, the Days of May. And also, the profound significance of even such trivial occurrences as the great New York graffiti outbreak in 1972,\textsuperscript{5} and (in a darker vein) of that more permanent round of media-attuned symbolic-come-actual political violence to which the Western world has become accustomed over the past two decades:

\begin{quote}
In the face of purely symbolic blackmail (the barricades of 68, hostage-taking) power falls apart: since it lives off my slow death, I oppose it with my violent death. And it is because we live off a slow death that we dream of a violent one. This very dream is intolerable to power.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

But if Baudrillard's social topology does provide a space for otherness and by the same token for crisis it nevertheless takes for granted that the prospect of class upheaval has passed and that capitalism's contradictoriness has come to be confined to the plane of its cultural determinations. Occluding the play of
interests and contra Marx, transformation is only imaginable in this perspective as the quasi-magical irruption of symbolic politics so that we are left wondering whether Baudrillard has abandoned all hope of there being any actual exit from capitalism at all. Moreover, the antagonism he posits between symbolic and semiotic exchange is pitched at so abstract indeed metaphysical a level that the whole theoretical construct, despite itself, effectively replicates the historical closure that forms the 'real' object of its critique. In this sense, however self-critically, Baudrillard's sociology remains trapped within the order of the simulacrum. Far from having smashed that mirror, his deconstruction of political economy serves ultimately only to shift its angle; so that where it once reflected the code of production it now reflects the code of the Code in a metapsychological simulation of the fourth degree. Correlatively, and beyond a certain level of increasingly poetic abstraction, Baudrillard's formulations leave the mediated and conflictual institution of commodified culture in real history, and the actual politics to which that process gives rise, deeply in the theoretical shade.

Now what is noteworthy about the Baudrillardian circle, beyond the profundity of the pessimism which motivates it, is that it derives from a conceptual reduction at the centre of what is at the same time its most incisive socio-historical insight: namely, that in late capitalism sign and commodity have fused, giving rise to a new form of object (the sign-commodity) and a new order of domination (the ensemble of institutions and discourses which make up consumer culture) neither of which operate any longer according to the dictates of a strictly capitalist (i.e., economic) logic.

The problem is that in thematizing this development Baudrillard has conflated two quite different aspects of the process: the transformation of signs into commodities, ultimately represented by the rise of the culture industry, and the transformation, via mass marketing, fashion and status competition, of commodities into signs. It is the latter which interests him, providing as it does a framework for analyzing how the sacred and socially essential realm of symbolic value has been effectively evacuated by public discourse. But the other moment, the penetration of culture by the commodity form, which to be sure also has far-reaching consequences for systemic integration, needs to be separately considered. Not only does Baudrillard fail to do this, but by palming the commercial dimension of post-industrial cultural formation under the sign of the Sign, his attention is deflected from any direct consideration of the cultural dynamics associated with the broader and always ongoing process of commodification as such.

If, then, the Baudrillardian problematic is to be potentiated as the starting-point for a fresh round of enquiries and reflections on our historical situation, its crucial elisions must be addressed, and the totalism of the model correspondingly deconstructed in the light of the complexities which that would introduce. It is in that spirit, and with the admitted risk of falling back into the swamp of second-order, i.e., political economic simulation, that the following very preliminary considerations are put forward. Above all, their main aim is to
open up the question of how, besides providing the basis for a new (post-class?)
mode of hegemony, cultural commodification and the impact of commodifica-
tion on culture can create the space for a kind of politics.

II

Commodification as cultural provocateur

The expansionist principle built into the accumulation process, wherein
market survival necessitates growth, has created a form of society whose
development to an unprecedented degree has followed a path of constant
upheaval and self-overhaul. Evidently, and here too capitalism has changed, the
material contradictions of class and economy analyzed at length by Marx by no
means exhaust the list of pertinent effects. For besides generating an ever more
elaborate, differentiated and at the same time internationalized play of interest
antagonisms, and mediating it throughout, capital has also tended to make
socio-cultural waves as its imperatives and modalities have steadily imposed
themselves and their restless dynamic over the entire surface and depth of
social life.

The waves that have emanated from capitalist dynamism at the point of
production are perhaps the most familiar aspects of this process. Since the
dawning of industry it has been clear that the technological revolution ushered
in by the Renaissance and installed by market society at the permanent centre of
its production process was bound to transform not only the physical and social
environments but the character of experience and the nature of ideology as well.
The meditations of classical sociology on industrialism, bureaucracy and
securalization were fixed precisely on that point; and critical theory's own rich
discourse on technocracy, scientism, and instrumentality has in turn radicalized
the analysis and incorporated it into the conventional weaponry of anti-
capitalist critique. More recently, the rise of linguistic interests and the,
incipient obsolescence of print have led a non-Marxist current of thinkers
culminating in Innis and McLuhan to push the question to a still deeper level by
considering the cultural impact of ever-advancing technology within the
communication process itself.

However, much less attention, and certainly less than deserved, has been
given to the equally profound effects of capitalism's parallel but distinct
tendency to extend the range of the price-system and the commodity form \per se
as a universal model for social relations. Even when posed moreover this issue
has proved difficult to disentangle from the former, cross-cutting, problematic
of technique. Thus, Lukacs' pathbreaking theory of reification effectively
assimilated Marx's category of commodity fetishism to Weber's category of
instrumental rationalization; and Benjamin's formative theses on the crisis of
art similarly devolve, in the end, on a purely technological point. For all his
semiological confluations, Baudrillard's singular achievement in developing and
updating this line of thought has been finally to confront the cultural impact of
commodification on something like its own, economically concatenated, ground: in terms, that is, of how an expanding circulation process has transformed the nature of social exchange.

But if Baudrillard has thereby helped emancipate the critical theory of culture from its one-sided pre-occupation with *techne* he has maintained its one-sidedness in another respect by thematizing the cultural dynamics of commodification (which he disdains to examine in any but its most contemporary forms) exclusively from the perspective of that process's conservative moment. Behind the problematic of contained consciousness to which his figuration of the sign-economy responds lies an archaic and paradoxically economistic formula according to which systemically derived ideology functions solely to pacify contradictions that emanate just as solely from interest antagonisms at the base. In Baudrillard's case, adhesion to this schema is contradicted by his explicit rejection of the orthodox class paradigm, and so here the occlusion of commodification's disruptive cultural moment actually leaves a logical gap.

To be intelligible, any system of hegemony must be understood in terms of what threatens it. But what threatens the social order guaranteed ideologically by the Code? Not, apparently, class conflict; and the *revanche* of symbolic exchange is itself a contingency beyond the scope of all control. We are left then with the mere tautology of a structural law of value for which self-replication — *la répétition* — is simply a mode of being. Missing from Baudrillard's account, in short, is an appreciation of how the whole normative apparatus of the sign-commodity, publicity and consumer culture is mobilized, at least in part, to manage the cultural tensions provoked by that same extension of the commodity-form which produced the one-dimensional world of consumerism itself. An analysis of the latter ought properly to begin therefore by considering in what these former might consist. In the first instance, let me suggest, the cultural tensions of commodification take the form of conflicts and struggles over mundane ideological values; and they are provoked all along the seam of economy and culture where the market's lust for expansion rubs up against pre-existing forms of normativity and moral value.

It would be misleading to represent this dialectic, as both conservative and radical opponents of the advancing market have been prone to do, in terms of a simple opposition between an amoral force and a moral object. For the freedom of commodities to circulate and the freedom of buyers and sellers to exchange what they will without external interference acquires the force of a moral argument; one whose central principle, the autonomized individual, rests its appeal on a whole ideological tradition, stretching from Reformed Christianity to contemporary libertarianism. This is not to deny that "personal freedom," like all ideologies, can be championed in stunningly obtuse or cynical bad faith. There are, rather, two points:

First, the social relations of commodity production — which in their immediate operation always centre on the nexus of exchange — are thoroughly saturated in the medium of normativity, without which they could not function. The market, as Durkheim would say, rests on a moral basis. His argument can be
extended. Established commerce requires not only that the terms of trade be contractually agreed upon, but also that there be a social consensus over what is for trade and over the conditions under which (if at all) that trade is allowed to take place.

Correlatively, and this is the second point, the constant advance of the market into symbolically loaded sectors of social life precipitates at the ideological level in each significant new instance a binary counterposition of pro-market liberalism and anti-market conservatism, communalism, nationalism, familism, etc., whose respective supporters fight like football teams to establish a succession of symbolic lines beyond which (temporarily at least) neither the market nor its enemies are allowed to encroach. Outcomes, whether in the form of truce, compromise or complete rout by one side or the other, are periodically arbitrated by the state on the terrain of law.

The perennial Canadian contest between partisans of free trade and protectionism provides a kind of paradigm case. Symbolically at stake in continental economic integration is the reduction, break-up and de-auratisation of a so-to-speak nationally sacralized signifier. Mainstream policy debate has been conducted in that context as a pragmatic but ideologized negotiation between nationalists and liberals over the extent to which the boundary of the border should be emphasized or de-emphasized in the face of a mounting circulation of goods, capital and information which constantly threaten to erode it. The point is not just that economic politics are lived out as ideology, but that the economic process has ideological ramifications which create the basis in itself for a form of politics.

From the very beginnings of capitalist development the sphere of consumption, originally and without irony conceived as private and public leisure, has been especially subject to the eruption of such conflicts; and the more so the more an expanding productive complex has been able to extend and cultivate the range of enjoyments from orgasm to esteem that money there can buy. The court-imposed sumptuary laws of late Medieval absolutism and the seventeenth century puritan ban on theatre provide early as it were Thermidorean examples. More latterly, the growing sex and drug industries, each inconsistently and fuzzily divided into licit and illicit zones, have provided advanced capitalist society with its own nodal points of cultural tension.

Whether and in what degree to permit the commercial circulation of (addictive) stimulants and (degrading) sexual services in fact touches modern culture on a particularly sore nerve: our chronically inconsistent attitude towards the gratification and control of somatic impulse. Daniel Bell has even argued that this motivational ambivalence, which he attributes to a deepening antagonism between the emergent norms of leisure and work, represents capitalism’s primary cultural contradiction. His model of the problem is simplistic and ignores the role of consumerized commodification in its genesis. Nevertheless it remains true that particular issues of permissible consumption (today, par excellence, those pertaining to pornography and censorship) can resonate deeply with broader issues of social reproduction.
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It is precisely for this reason that the market, and still more the volatile liberal individualism that is its ideological shadow and harbinger, have such a dangerous edge. The normative limits, in some cases taboos, against which they press are not merely (in fact decreasingly) traditional survivals but symbolic markers of operant mechanisms of control. For the same reason, the moral issues of circulation tend to get linked up, and at the limit generalize on the plane of an ongoing social contest which draws in all the major ideological institutions and players over how the axial principles governing instituted normativity as a whole are to be defined.

Market pressure to shift the moral boundaries, to some degree a necessarily discontinuous process, always runs the risk of opening up a radical cultural space. But such openings, when order is finally restored, can themselves prove merely to have facilitated the passage from one matrix of market-regulating obedience to another. Such indeed has so far been the main axiological drama of post-war North America: first, the establishment of a surplus-repressive cultural hegemony; then its ultra-liberal dissolutions; and then, with suitable adjustments and continuing instabilities, "the return of traditional values" (to quote a 1976 liquor ad) and normalization.

If in late capitalism market penetration at the point of consumption (i.e. of private life) has become the main axis of what we can call circulation politics this is because the development of consumption as a productive force has replaced the geographical extension of the industrial system as the central motif of economic growth. Nevertheless it should be emphasized that analogous modalities of conflict continue to be generated at the point of production also. (A rigorous distinction needs to be made here between the properly cultural contradictions that attend the displacement of natural by exchange economy and the political-economic ones that flow from the economic inequality and exploitation which the market organization of production comes to install. We may think of the former contradictions as processual, the latter as structural, except that, just as in the case of the commodification process at work in the sphere of consumption, the normative inertia against which the spread of commodified production must contend has synchronic significance in the wider process of social reproduction as a whole).

The cultural dynamic associated with the initial establishment of capitalist production is of course largely played out. Artisanal ideals, local particularisms and traditional kin structures have lost their vitality in the industrialized heartlands and only resist the expanding system at its Third and Fourth World margins. However, even on mature capitalism's internal frontier, there are still two respects in which the market penetration of production is incomplete and continues to generate major cultural perturbations.

The first concerns the spread of economic exchange relations into such relatively (or ambivalently) non-commodified sectors of social activity as religion, the family, higher learning and the arts. In none of these diverse instances is the persistence of a pre-capitalist mode of association and work a mere case of culture-lag, for that mode is vital to their functioning as well as to
the authenticity on which the credibility of their various products depends. Under the circumstances the market, whether through example, through the emergence of fully commercialized rivals, or through the actual mobilization of material interests, can only advance slowly. As it does so what comes to be established on each institutional site is a semi-permanent force-field of conflicting pressures internalized by the actors themselves (clergy, housewives, students, artists, etc.) as role-conflict and externalized as tendency struggles between competing moral/ideological currents and movements over the relative virtues of liberal accommodation and traditionalist hostility to the forces of progress.

These frictions are hard to regulate from above. Indeed they are exacerbated by the ambivalence with which they must be officially regarded. On the one hand, the charter values of Truth, Knowledge, Love, Beauty, etc., ceaselessly activated in value-transmitting institutions by the irritant of creeping commercialism, play an important rhetorical role in capitalism's traditional legitimation as a civilizing force; but when roused they can also function as genuine transcendentalists that provide troublesome reminders of loss, supercession and difference. Thus, for the churches of the West, where Christianity was thought to have been tamed, the 'rise of TV evangelism and other quintessentially business enterprise forms of priestcraft represents not merely an economic threat in the competition for congregations\textsuperscript{12} but a repulsive counter-pole of 'bad religion' against which countervailing currents of increasingly radical transformism have been driven to define themselves. As one important corollary the previously cosy relation between organized religion and the capitalist state has begun to be radically upset.

Another, and perhaps more primordial, level at which structural resistance to the market penetration of production relations provides ongoing cultural conflict concerns the pressing into circulation of that strangest commodity of them all: labour-power. Quite apart from the shattering of traditional ties and attendant socio-cultural explosions that greeted the initial establishment of a mass-market for 'free labour', conflicts have continued to arise thereafter by virtue of that dynamic propensity of the market to redefine all work-functional energy as commercially available, regardless of the instituted status of its alienable owners. The resultant ideological dialectic is analogous with the one already described in the case of commodification at the point of consumption, except that here the codings at issue mark human agents, and indeed at the very juncture of their literal inscription within the differential orders of wealth and power.

Also, the process can cut more than one way. Where the change in status implied by the commodification of labour-power represents real demotion or loss of autonomy (one thinks here of small family farms and independent professionals) it will naturally be opposed by those affected in the romantically conservative name of the symbolic order thereby displaced. But the reverse can occur when labour market participation provides the basis for rescuing ascribed social categories (women, Catholics, blacks, etc.) from the even more subordinate
status, outside the real world of exchange-economy, to which they would otherwise be culturally relegated. Here resistance to the expanding labour market comes from those already in it, while its newest recruits appeal to exchangist ideology against the continued application to themselves of the old, discriminatory norms.

Within the labour market itself, these latter, reflecting pre- (or trans-) capitalist hierarchies of race, age and gender, crystallize out as so many mechanisms of dominant group protectionism: which function to ensure that insofar as inferiorized categories are not excluded from paid employment altogether, they enter its equivalence system on markedely non-equivalent terms. The point here, as with the contradictions of commodification in general, is that over and above the material conflicts they provoke, such instances of unequal exchange are shot through with ideological contradictions which can become active in their own right. 'Minority' movements for equal opportunity that get blocked tend to radicalize by transvaluing that which has set the collectivity they represent stigmatically or condescendingly apart. Conversely, cultivation of cultural identity among the oppressed can trigger struggles for justice.

The ideological contradictions attending the application of equivalency norms to women in the face of patriarchal gender ascriptions have been particularly dense and slow to resolve. As early as the 1780's, Mary Woolstencraft showed how the abstract egalitarianism of possessive individualism could provide the basis for a critique of patriarchal restrictions on legal rights; and since then successive waves of feminist agitation, bolstered both by the gradual delegitimation of explicit male supremacism and by the increasing de facto normality of extra-domestic female employment have extended the battleground to every sphere of life. However, even more than in the case of racism, which frequently articulates with deeply rooted imperial/national legitimations of the state, the freedom of women to circulate on the same economic and social terms as men has also been resisted not just because it challenges an entrenched system of power and privilege, but because the patriarchal ideology that justifies that resistance (always circling around the claim that women are somehow “different”) has continued, through all the vicissitudes of cultural liberalization, to play a crucial role in the maintenance and motivation of capitalist order. At this level, the need to sustain effective social mechanisms of biological reproduction has functioned largely as an alibi not only for the continued valorization of an asymmetrical gender code but also for the maintenance of the hierarchical family/class system which that code underwrites.

In the biblically resuscitated imaginary of early industrialism, the cultural identification of wage-labour with the 'masculine' roles of breadwinner and household head played a crucial pacifying role — over and above its various economic advantages to capital — by securing for the subordinated male worker a kind of compensatory, Adamic self-respect. At first, lacking the cumulated cultural force to wage a direct attack on the triadic fortress of family/church/school erected to protect this productivist nexus, the women's
movement and the equivalency principle it championed gnawed away instead at juridical inequalities in the fields of family law, civil rights and the franchise. Later, as the fortress began to collapse under the weight of more technically and socially developed conditions, it became possible for second wave feminism to crash over the sacred boundaries of hearth and home and finally confront the eternal verities of constructed gender difference at their intimate institutional source.

Here as elsewhere, however, capitalist modernization brings no guarantees of fundamental progress. For the displacement of work-centred religio-morality by and within the theatre of consumerism merely shifted the register of genderic contradictions without ceasing to engage intractable issues of global integration and control. In this respect, it is of more than token significance that the book by Friedan which did so much to popularize the modern women's movement in North America was based on an insider's critique of fashion magazines. Above all, it was the entry of signs, particularly iconic ones, into mass commercial circulation which gave patriarchal ideology a new lease on life by facilitating the spectacular passage of ideal femininity, as abstract signifier of status and desire, from the esoteric world of art to the ubiquitous iconography of mass culture and publicity. In that realm, the mythological female has come to embody not just the reward and condition for work but the promised happiness of consumption as well. Thus we see how a ruse of commodification has evolved a new obstacle to the process wherein the egalitarianism implicit in universalized market exchange strives, ever more powerfully, for independent realization.

The dialectic of course does not simply terminate in the victory of the Playboy syndrome; and a quarter century of feminist and market pressure, the latter operating by way of a pseudo-equalizing extension of sexual objectification to the male, has begun to seriously undermine consumerism's heavy masculinist ethos. Sexual bias will only finally be eliminated from consumer culture when the commodity's pleasure principle has become (dysfunctionally) polymorphuous. So, even on the second-order plane of media imagery, the structural character of the contradiction is likely to persist.

III

The sign-commodity and hegemonic regulation

The cultural provocations of commodification and the politics of normativity to which they give rise do not unfold in a vacuum but in a field already indexed to issues of hegemonic regulation and already occupied by that whole range of institutions from political parties and churches to showbiz and schools which are engaged in the collective formulation and dissemination of values.

There is no absolute sense in which any of these ideological apparatus can be considered structurally dominant since their forms of influence are incommensurate and there is always a degree of free play between them in
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which the relations of inter-institutional force can radically and conjuncturally alter. Nevertheless there is one institutional complex within the superstructural configuration of advanced capitalism which can claim some kind of signficative priority in that it is through the omnipresent refractions of its lens (in every sense a screening) that the whole process of cultural formation is continuously and publicly represented; and this is the one comprised by the (for the most part) commercially operated organs of mass communication along with all the related industries for the production of news, publicity and entertainment. In addition to its importance within the game of capitalist self-maintenance this sector is also significant systemically as the very incarnation of the commodity-form's seductive penetration of culture. And so it is precisely here, in the repressive desublimations and codifying biases of the culture/consciousness/sign industry that we confront the puzzle of commodification's other, i.e. conservative, integrative, dimension; and with that puzzle, as I have suggested, the broader mystery of how the universalizing commodity in its articulation with the cultural process establishes automatic mechanisms to regulate the normative disorder it simultaneously helps to provoke.

The automatic character of mass consumer culture's ideological operation needs to be stressed for it is the very hallmark of its work, an unprecedented indication that here at last is a consciousness-shaping institution which by its very nature functions functionally and can never get wholly out of hand. Explanations of this functionality in terms of class political manipulation — evocative phrases like Ewen's 'captains of consciousness' spring to mind — miss the point entirely. The rise of Madison Avenue, Disneyland, Tin Pan Alley and the whole corporate capitalist dream machine marks a decisive shift away from personalized ideological powers and the emergence, to the contrary, of a fully programmed cultural sphere wherein, to use Laingian terms, 'praxis' on both sides of the production/consumption divide has been effectively superceded by 'process.'15 In effect, the powerful ideological inflection of commercial mass culture, whether in the direct form of culture-for-sale or at the second degree as selling-by-culture, is no more than a by-product of the accelerated circulation and increased surplus it makes possible. That inflection has therefore to be accounted for in the same way: in terms of the culture industry's inner economic determinations and the effect of these on its manner of processing and representing potentially hot cultural materials.

Baudrillard's crucial refinement of this thesis is that at the most basic level the ideological element of mass-mediated culture is determined by the interplay established there between mass-produced signs and mass-produced commodities; and, further, that this new alignment of sign and commodity is responsible not only for its systematically biased content but also, and more fundamentally, for bias in its very mode of signification as well. The saga of the sign he unfolds reads like a post-modernist update of alienation theory. Infinitely replicable, displaced from symbolic time and place, converted into commodities in their own right, signifiers become free to float independently of any organic communicative process; and in that condition like landless proletarians they
rejoin social reality artificially in the form of the semiotically-endowed mass consumable commodity. Finally, as arbitrary markers linking the corporate game of product differentiation to the consumer merry-go-round of status and fashion, the signifying elements of design, packaging and promotion are drained of meaning in the self-referential play of their coded differences, which is exactly how, in deadening abstraction, they come to rule. Consciousness, in Baudrillard’s account, is not so much falsified as headed off at the pass: the media factories of commercial semiosis prevail, in his pregnant phrase, by “fabricating non-communication.”

Without denying that such a tendency towards enforced meaninglessness is relentlessly at work, it would be premature however to declare it complete. Even advertising copy has become a zone of ideological controversy, and outraged responses to media stereotypes of women and ethnic groups testify to their continuing referential power. This being so, the axiological content of mass-mediatised culture, and not just its semiological or, for that matter, sensory forms, remains relevant to an understanding of its cultural effectivity. In fact at the level of communicative substance, the semio-economic determinations of the culture industry doubly stamp its effluvia as token-bearers of a would-be pacifying ideology. On the one hand, the subject-object inversion prescribed by their consistently consumerist mode of address occults class and makes a world without capital unimaginable. On the other hand, the pseudo-reconciliations of gender, nature/culture etc., made possible on that mythological basis, and positively reinforced by the premium placed on popularity values, serve to exorcize culturally-based sources of conflict as well. The former of these mechanisms, consumerism, is perhaps too familiar to require further elaboration. But the latter, which might be dubbed the middle-of-the-road effect, does call for some comment: not only as a comparatively unexamined topic, but also because the consensualist modality of mass culture holds the key, or so I would argue, to the riddle of the commodity’s limited but effective capacity for cultural self-control.

With respect to this issue, Baudrillard’s insistence on the centrality of commodity semiosis within the mass cultural ensemble while not wrong is unhelpful, and further clarification depends on our disentangling the relation he condenses between that moment, represented by publicity, and its obverse, the commodification of signs, represented by entertainment. What we discover in fact is that within this same complex duality the order of effectivity is here reversed: in the case of cultural tension management as opposed to that of consumerist inversion it is entertainment rather than advertising that provides the dominant paradigm for a type of normative intervention which the culture industry, just by virtue of what it is, is driven to make.

The golden rule of show business is not to antagonize the audience, for that is the hand that feeds. Indeed, its members should be positively stroked, both as the fine people they are and for the decent or at any rate normal values they hold. To be entertained is above all to be made to feel good. Where the audience is live, local, and socially homogeneous, the collective totems must be very
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precisely acknowledged; but the more mass and therefore ideologically diverse it is, the more general the level of conventionality to which appeal must be made. Where there is not merely diversity but conflict, the task of flattering and in the same moment defining the collective identity of the audience is particularly difficult. The most cliché-ridden depths of popular myth must then be plumbed, and awkward topics, controversial issues, and even potentially abrasive accentuations of genre and style must be avoided. A safe strategy for maximizing sales, box-office and ratings, in short, is to go mid-market and assiduously hug the middle-of-the-road.

Of course, if the entertainment industry, throughout all its branches, exhibited nothing but this entropic tendency, then its equally important need for constant thematic and stylistic innovation could not be met. But in this dialectic, the experimenter's licence to practice is granted in return for bearing all the economic risks, and successful novelties are rapidly co-opted, converted into mannerisms, and embalmed for later recycling as pseudo-historical nostalgia.

Only in popular music has this controlled oscillation ever gotten at all out of hand. The reason is not hard to find. Because of its intimate relation to ritual, emotion and physicality, music as the least directly representational art-form is also the least susceptible, whatever the technological and economic mode, to whole-scale serialization. It is the one sector of mass culture truly haunted by the return of symbolic exchange, and its history has constantly intertwined with that of the national, class and generational movements whose tragic, rebellious or celebratory moods it has been able, with fluctuating degrees of immediacy, to express. A central thread in this story has been the emergence of Afro-American music and its phased appropriation by successive layers of white working and middle class youth as a quasi-Dionysian dance cult. However, the point should not be over-emphasized; for even at this relatively organic level the major ruptures with middle-of-the-roadism — rag-time, jazz, swing, rock, reggae, punk — have been ambiguous in their meaning and ultimately subject to absorption by, or even as, the industry-dominated mainstream.

While the entertainment industry's penchant for self-censorship, cultural compromise and normative conventionalism has been a genuine expression of its own bad essence, these tendencies have of course been strongly reinforced by its ties with the whole machinery of mass media advertising. The degree to which advertising revenues directly pay the costs of mass entertainment varies from medium to medium, although given the extent of financial and functional interlock these differences may be misleading. In the limit case, American network TV and radio, the subsidy is total, and so too is the revenue-dependence of the medium on the size (and to a lesser degree the mix) of the audiences its programming can command; for it is on the ratings that advertising rates themselves rigidly depend. Here also, where they are compulsory, the conservative ideological implications of popularity values are most rigidly in evidence. Even less than media programmers, commercial sponsors cannot afford to alienate potential slices of their market. In effect, a double vigilance must
therefore be maintained: on the one hand to ensure that only acceptable cultural risks are taken in satisfying and competing for the medium’s own audience; and on the other to ensure that the advertising material itself hits absolutely the right consensual spot when addressing its target market.

In its actual functioning, advertising in fact represents the degree zero of show business audience technique. The flattery of the performer was at bottom always a form of self-promotion. In consumer advertising, however, the trick is refined by naturalizing and in the full sense normalizing the conventional cultural values which that flattery sought to confirm, and which, mutatis mutandis, are here invoked to valorize the product. The sales aim of commodity semiosis is to differentiate the product as a valid, or at least resonant, social totem, and this would be impossible without being able to appeal to taken-for-granted systems of cultural reference.

In this sense advertising must go even further along the path of popularity than entertainment. The latter, faced by embarrassing cultural divisions, can retreat to jokes and good humour. In so far as conventionality is torn or contorted by ongoing ideological contradictions advertising, however, is constrained to at least construct the appearance of a non-contradictory value-consensus. This is obviously the case where the product’s intended market, e.g. for “feminine” cigarettes or “masculine” perfume, is by definition ambivalent toward the cultural codings prima facie associated with it. But in a more diffuse sense, the whole discourse of publicity, including, by extension, the subsidized programming which colonizes the mass consumer market as an audience, absolutely requires a normality-pole. The creative genius of advertising and its platforms of associated messages is that it is able to establish one, mythically; and in such a way, moreover, as to occlude the consumerist ontology that anchors it, to reconcile all the cultural antinomies of an unstable ideological universe, and then — through an iconography that adheres even in its most stark typifications to the canons of realist representation — to pass the whole thing off, despite its uncanny resemblance to the familiar world in which we live, as a wistful dream.

IV

Breaking the circle

During the 1960’s advertising was the most, perhaps the only, stable medium of mass ideological communication. Besides the downplaying of technological futurism and the increased use of sexual themes (the latter a cause of disturbance in itself), publicity’s ideological feathers seemed hardly ruffled by the culture-storm blowing, apparently, all around. Yet that storm did break out; and, as I have tried to indicate, the superstructural decalage within which it brewed and grew to hurricane force expressed a determinate historical moment of that same dialectic of culture and commodity which was also responsible for the spell-binding integration of the commercialized sign.
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Baudrillard, who ignored the mediations by which both these moments are connected to capitalism's commodification drive, was transfixed by the Manichaean absoluteness of their opposition. Had the mediations been attended to, the operations of artificial semiosis would doubtless have seemed less omnipotent and the mass outbreak of the Symbolic less conjuncturally mysterious than he made them out to be. Of course, it is hardly surprising that the Edenic epiphanies and street-fighting psycho-dramatics of 1968 nowhere ushered in the New Age: the requisite programme, organization and political forces were altogether lacking. But what that temporary breakdown of normal cultural controls did demonstrate, against all the end-of-ideology soothing of the previous decade, is that at the ideological level par excellence the development of post-industrial capitalism is as conflictual as it is consensual; and, indeed, that under the right circumstances accumulated cultural tensions can even engender a global social crisis.

Theory and the evidence of history thus combine to provide grounds for hoping that the circle of the commodity-form's normative self-regulation can indeed be broken. To what extent such a fateful outcome can be deliberately strategized is, however, a different question. Because of the complexity of the process wherein cultural politics arise, the rectilinear relation its issues bear to matters of class hegemonic control, and the potentially self-undermining character of any transparently instrumental intervention into hot zones of consciousness, we may doubt the feasibility of anything so ambitious as a co-ordinated, multi-level, plan of cultural campaign. But in a more circumspect and ad hoc sense, Marx's directive to enter the "real battles" of the world in order to "show it what it is actually fighting about"¹⁹ does retain here its moment of activist truth.

Of course, for us it is the commercial media more than organized religion which require demystification; and within the field of cultural politics considered in this paper demystification is hardly enough. The positive deployment of transcapitalist discourse and symbology is also necessary, indeed crucial, since unlike the recognition struggle of master and slave which underlies Marx's concept of class conflict the cultural dialectic of commodification has no truly inner principle of sublation. This, on the plane of trade-union consciousness, and leaving aside its Jacobin inspiration, is presumably what Lenin meant by saying that revolutionary consciousness had to come "from without." On the plane of normative consciousness and in a spirit of preparatory attentisme an even more idealist formula could easily be proposed: the stronger and richer the transcendental cultural resources lying to hand at the moment when some fresh round of superstructural troubles break out, the more likely it is that something truly human will strive to emerge — and the greater the chance, perhaps, that we finally will.

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IDEOLOGY AND POWER

Notes


2. In this essay I am focussing mainly on Baudrillard's early writings, particularly Le Système des Objets (Gallimard 1968); La Société de Consommation (Dengel 1970); Pour une Critique de l'Économie du Signe (Gallimard 1972); Le Miroir de la Production (Casterman 1973); and L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort (Gallimard 1976). For English translations of the latter, see Mirror of Production (Telos 1975); For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (Telos 1981), and the excerpts from L'Échange Symbolique in J. Fekete (ed.) The Structural Metaphor (Univ. of Min. Press, 1984).

It would require a whole separate analysis to consider whether, in switching from a sociological to a metaphysical exploration of nihilism in the later texts like Oublier Foucault, La Séduction and Stratégies Fatales, Baudrillard's social ontology of sign and commodity has remained basically the same.

3. This is the basic motif of L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort.

4. Pessimism about proletarian consciousness and correlative elevation of (critical) theory's role within the social dialectic, while absolutized in this 1944 text, was an explicit theme of Frankfurt thinking from the early 30's. See M. Horkheimer, Critical Theory (Herder and Herder, 1972) pp. 211-216.


6. Ibid., p. 73.


8. The lament simulates what it projects, and for neo-Kantians (aren't we all?) there can be no escaping the fictitious character of the world. For Baudrillard's most explicit attempt to place himself outside this circle, see L'Échange Symbolique, pp. 7-10 and pp. 110-17.

9. The classic statement is to be found in E. Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society (Free Press, 1964) Chap. 7.


12. Ecclesiastical ecumenicism, from the angle of religion's absorption into the culture industry, represents a movement towards cartelization between the largest enterprises. The perverse Paisley protest has its moment of truth here.-


14. For the notion of 'dominance' in this context see L. Althusser, Ideology and the State' in his Lenin and Philosophy (NLB, 1971). Althusser's formulation is much too rigid, however. It is crucial, especially, to disentangle dominance (of an apparatus) vis-à-vis individual formation from the question of inter-institutional influence and power within society as a whole.

15. For a good social psychological elaboration of this ultimately Sartrian distinction see A. Esterson, The Leaves of Spring (Tavistock, 1970).

17. Although they do not elaborate the point, a recent essay by G. Murdoch and P. Golding, 'Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations' states the main issue very well:

"... the determining context for production is always that of the market. In seeking to maximize this market, products must draw on the most widely legitimated central core values while rejecting the dissenting voice or the incompatible objection to a ruling myth. The need for easily understood, popular, formulated, undisturbing, assimilable fictional material is at once a commercial imperative and an aesthetic recipe". Curran, Gurevitch and Wollacott, (eds.) Mass Communication and Society (Edward Arnold, 1977) p. 40.

18. This evocative phrase was coined by H. L. Nieburg in his insightful anthropological study of 1960's counter-culture, Culture Storm: Politics and the Ritual Order (St. Martin's, N.Y., 1973).

BAUDRILLARD, CRITICAL THEORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Charles Levin

Introduction

This essay presents a condensed version of an argument about the sign, the object and the symbol. Its purpose, then, is to suggest how psychoanalytic thought, particularly "object-relations theory", may provide a way out of the stalemate in critical theory.

The theory of reification, although essential to critical theory, is itself based on intellectualized reifications of what it means to be a "subject" and not an object. The traditional theory of reification is described in the light of Baudrillard's work and then rejected in favour of another which views reification as an obsessional project of closing down or emptying out "potential space".

The phrase "potential space" was coined by D.W. Winnicott to refer to a dimension of "transitional" phenomena intermediate to subjectivity and objectivity. My most basic theoretical assumption is that the "space" of the "transitional object" is a place where people actually live, where they are creative, where they interact in depth, and where things are invested with meaning.

I

The best general approach to Baudrillard is through the philosophical tension in his work between structuralist social theory (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes) and critical theory (Lukacs, Marcuse). These are the two modern traditions, dragging their French and German antecedents with them, which are most obviously at work in Baudrillard's early texts. It would be a mistake, however, to think that he ever synthesized them, although it is true that the interplay of structuralism and cultural Marxism determined, to some extent, Baudrillard's own distinctive way of choosing a post-structuralist position. The net theoretical effect is more like the introduction of two corrosives which, having devoured each other, leave nothing behind but a luminous theoretical vacuum. Baudrillard's writing has, since L'Échange symbolique et la mort, increasingly approximated a blank surface reflecting only the awful terror of what it had once tried to name.

What is interesting about critical theory and structuralism together (at least, in the medium of Baudrillard) is the dilation of their theories of the object. A reading of Baudrillard makes one want to return to these traditions simply to listen to the way objects are talked about. Baudrillard caught this element in their discourse early on, and developed it rapidly. Armed with just the two
theoretical languages, the neo-Marxian and the structuralist, he abandoned himself to the world of things.

Jean Baudrillard has a knack for a kind of McLuhanesque "in depth participation," and he turns the two theoretical languages into quite precise tools of description which evoke the object world with amazing poetical force and tension. Although in the end he virtually destroys both structuralism and critical theory (something Baudrillard does to almost everything he touches), he has managed to extract and deliver a lot of what is interesting in the two traditions before bringing them into mutual disrepute. Most of this material has to do with objects.

Before Baudrillard critical theory had a great deal to say explicity about objects, which is odd because critical theory has always claimed to be more concerned with the fate of subjects. It can be argued, however, that critical theory has very little of value to say about subjects. According to critical theorists, subjects are beings that make things; they experience a world (usually one they have made themselves without knowing it); they transfer their feelings onto the world, and they internalize authority. In other words, subjects are beings who (according to critical theory) produce, project and introject.

Structuralists aren't much better on this score, although on the surface they may appear to be more sophisticated. Usually, a structuralist begins by arguing that the subject is not an ontological category. There is some value in this argument. But then the structuralists go on to imply that subjects are not epistemological categories either. They do this by arguing that the subject is "decentered". This is true, but not very interesting by itself, and not very different from what critical theory has already said. After all, what does decentering mean, if not producing, projecting and introjecting? The only difference is that critical theory disapproves of this sort of heteronomy, and wants to get rid of it, whereas structuralism thinks it is a good thing, and wants to extend it. Both traditions agree that the subject's experience is false, but not on the reasons why. There is nothing new in these arguments, taken by themselves, but something quite interesting happens when Baudrillard plays them off, one against the other.

Baudrillard is usually thought of as a structuralist or a post-structuralist thinker rather than as a critical theorist in the tradition of the Lukacs/Frankfurt School. But in fact, he remains deeply involved in the latter tradition. It is true that he has made his name as a debunker of Teutonic theory and is notable for being openly anti-dialectical. But Baudrillard is not just contra Marx: he is also contra Foucault, contra Saussure, contra Levi-Strauss, contra Freud, contra Deleuze, etc. In fact, Baudrillard is against any thinker whose ideas he takes seriously. To use a word of Marx's, he is a "counterdependent" thinker. His arguments nearly always depend on the credibility of the categories of the other thinkers he defines himself against. This feature of Baudrillard's discourse is quite typical of critical theory, and secretly dialectical. Perhaps he is saying that if dialectics are not, in his view, an intrinsic property of the world, they are certainly a feature of discourse about subjects and objects. At any rate, when
Baudrillard launches his critique of critique in *The Mirror of Production*, his tone is not so much that of a dyed-in-the-wool structuralist as that of a critical theorist denouncing himself.

There is another, more fundamental reason why Baudrillard should be considered a critical theorist. In fifteen years, since his first sociological publications, which were a review of McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and his own *Le système des objets*, Baudrillard has not written a single thing which was not an attempt to elaborate a theory of reification à la Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse — with a strong dose of Benjamin. The theory of reification is of course a story about a struggle between subjects and objects in which objects appear, if only temporarily, to have gained the upper hand. Broadly, a theory of reification is not only a theory of misplaced concreteness or of false objectivity (which implies a false subjectivity, of course); it goes further and claims that when objects are misunderstood in this way, they return to haunt the subject and spoil his whole experience. The theory of reification which Baudrillard works with has definite roots which go all the way back to Georg Lukacs and Karl Marx. Like Lukacs' important work, all of Baudrillard's work is a meditation on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. This makes Baudrillard a critical theorist. There is nothing more essential to cultural Marxism than the theory of reification, which at root is always based on the idea that the structure of the commodity is in some way the abstract essence of capitalist life. If in his later work Baudrillard seems to part more and more with the rationality of critical theory and its interest in the emancipation of subjects, I think it is because his theory has developed gradually into something quite different from the traditional critical theory of reification: it has turned into what Baudrillard now calls "simulation". But this is still a theory of reification.

In order to explain this development, it is useful to return to Baudrillard's very clear analysis in *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. The argument is quite complex, and it depends first of all on a reading of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

Marx argued that objects (i.e., produced goods, or use values) are turned into commodities when they acquire through a complicated socio-historical development the additional characteristic of exchange value. Apart from the details which make this development specifically capitalist, one can say that, in Marx, to the extent that objects seem to become pure exchange values, they enter into a system, the commodity system, which appears to act independently of their producers and consumers. The origin of objects in labour and their purpose in satisfying needs tend to be obscured from public view. This is the argument that Lukacs elaborated into the theory of reification. It claims that this false and borrowed power of objects can operate on three and perhaps even four levels: 1) the socio-economic; 2) the epistemological; 3) the practical; and 4) sometimes also the erotic.

Through the lens of critical theory, Marx can be read as having said or nearly having said: 1) that social beings are deprived of their social ground by a process of *extraction*, which robs them of economic power; 2) that they are thereby also
deprived of their (social) knowledge by a process of abstraction which is induced by the systematic and objectivistic quality of exchange value: 3) having been economically reduced and cognitively seduced, people begin to forget how to respond: they can no longer act or reciprocate. They can only react to what is “given”, as if what is given were an intractable “second nature”. And finally, 4) we might add, following the arguments of many critical theorists, that there is a fourth dimension to the effects of reification — the one that I have described as erotic. Social beings not only tend to lose their power to be, to perceive and to act: reification also neutralizes or restricts or damages their ability to fantasize, which lies at the very root of everybody’s ability to think.

Of course, this last dimension owes something to Freud. All told, reification amounts to a very serious charge to make against anybody, let alone a whole society. It means that commodity fetishism — or if you like, falsely perceived objects — are such a powerful force that they penetrate deeply enough into the lives of individual subjects to control their inner worlds. It sound like a paranoid fantasy, like something Judge Schreber might have thought up.

Now there are two things about this theory of reification that are important to note. The first is that it is hard to imagine how critical theory could ever do without it, for the notion that the commodity forms somehow congeals all the bad contingencies of an historical era is fundamental. How can critical theory continue to be critical in the absence of some such hypothesis? The second is that it is hard to imagine how the theory of reification could possibly be true.

Now, these questions have been raised in a way that is obviously slanted for the purpose of discussion Baudrillard’s work. Some detail may be distorted, but the underlying issues are fundamental, and Baudrillard has responded to them in a highly original way which is still coherent with the critical tradition. Equipped with the theoretical language of structuralism and some insights from French writers such as Bataille and Foucault, Baudrillard waded into some very deep water indeed in the mid 1970’s, and he took critical theory along with him. There was something quite innocent about this at the beginning. In his 1967 review of McLuhan, he said that when you generalize the slogan “the medium is the message” you have the “very formula of alienation in a technical society”. He was interested in looking at the commodity as a medium of social values and as a model of public discourse. The idea was very simple.

All that Baudrillard did, in fact, was to point out that the object becomes a commodity not only by virtue of being an exchange value, to be measured and exchanged against other exchange values; the object is also and especially a commodity because it is a sign. (This seems so obvious to many of us now that perhaps it should be disputed in order to make the whole discussion more interesting.) It means of course that the commodity is a signifier and a signified, with all the features of abstraction, reduction, equivalence, discreteness and interchangeability implied in the Saussurean theory of the sign. A commodity is not just an exchange value which obscures its origin in labour as an object of, by and for utility; it is an object which has been inserted as an arbitrary term into a purely self-referential system of signifiers which decides the object’s meaning.
before anyone can possess it or consume it or give it away. The commodity is an object in a system of objects; it is consumed as a sign of that system.

Baudrillard calls this phenomenon the "sign-object". He replaces Marx's notion of the commodity form (which is a social form tending to obscure the object's content) with the idea of an "object-form". This object form is also a social form, like Marx's commodity, but it has much deeper implications. What it "veils in mystery" is not the object's real value: its origin in labour and its finality in the moment of consumption — i.e., its use value. What the object form conceals is the object's own "nullity". The commodity is a res nulla: a symbolic absence. Or to put it another way, the object form (the commodity as sign) exhausts and evacuates the social space it occupies. It hides the fact that its meaning does not exist in a relationship between people (what Baudrillard would call Symbolic Exchange), but in the inner relations of signs and commodities among themselves.12

As a structural model of reification, this "object-form" is a much more radical hypothesis. It cuts deeper and gets to the 'real' sub-stratum of the social object: its use value. With the logic of signification as his tool, Baudrillard pries apart the bundle of relations which constitute the commodity, only to discover that use value does not designate the otherness of political economy at all, but its ideological groundwork. For included in the object form is precisely the assumed functionality and utility of commodities that Marx had wanted to restore to society by liberating the means of production and abolishing exchange value. According to Baudrillard, use value is simply a product of the alienated system of exchange itself. It is not the meaning of the object, anymore than the signified is the meaning of the sign; it is the effect of the play of signifiers. To use a phrase of Adorno, use value is not the "non-identical side" of the object; it is not a moment of particularity or of quality, such as might be found outside the form in the 'real' act of "consumption". Perhaps this explains the somewhat strained atmosphere of the Frankfurt School's attempts to explain the fetishization of culture in terms of exchange value.13 For use value turns out to be an alibi for the exchange value system, rather than its hidden or repressed truth. It does not escape the logic of reduction, equivalence and fungibility imposed by political economy. On the contrary, it is political economy — its ideal and ideological referent.14

The consequence of this argument, of course, is gradually to shift the stance of traditional critical theory away from anti-objectivism to an intensified critique of naturalism. Eventually Baudrillard will carry this forward from the naturalism of Political Economy and Marx's critique of it to the functionalism of the Bauhaus, to the naturalism of the unconscious in various schools of thought, from Surrealism on to Deleuze, and finally to the "hyper-reality" (as Baudrillard calls it) of constituted self-regulating systems, which range from the naturalization of coded difference in molecular biology (DNA) to the cybernetic design of social life itself.15

But the critique of the political economy of the sign remains the centrepiece of Baudrillard's work. One cannot read his earlier books on objects and
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consumption without anticipating this re-evaluation of all socio-economic values. The new model of reification that emerges transforms the whole problematic of the commodity, which has been the core of critical theory and cultural Marxism since Lukács. And all of Baudrillard’s subsequent work flows from this conceptual realignment. The key to it, of course, was to read semiology right into the process of political economy, to find the logic of signification in the very structure of the commodity. What is important to grasp, however, is that this is not just another synthesis. There have been plenty of attempts to combine Marx and Freud. Baudrillard’s inspiration was different. He wanted to use structuralist theory as the mimetic description language of reification as such. In Baudrillard, the Saussurean model of language really becomes the action language of the commodity; and the apparent self-sufficiency of the structuralist model of the sign delineates for him the form of reification as a social phenomenon. An interesting consequence of this in the later books, beginning with *L’Échange symbolique et la mort*, is that the equation commodity = sign = reification evolves with the internal transformations of the theory of the sign. As semiology begins to devour its own tail in post-structuralist discourse and in the work of Derrida in particular, the theoretical description language of structuralist discourse is no longer projected into the commodity, but hypothetically reembodied as the pure medium of reification, so that the opaque involutions of theoretical language come to serve as the perfectly transparent and unwitting surface of social reality. Baudrillard calls this involution, “simulation”, which is nothing other than reification as total semiosis, which now includes the body — or corpse — of social theory itself.

II

If the cutting edge of this conceptual reconfiguration is Baudrillard’s attempt to introduce the question of meaning to Marxian discourse, this does not mean that he is able to tell us so much about the nature of social life today that we might not already have guessed. For this cutting edge is turned almost completely inwards, toward critical theory. Looking through the closing pages of *Le système des objets* or *La société de consommation*, the early works, we already find a host of disclaimers which testify, sometimes in a brilliant way, to the profound moment of self-doubt in the act of critique. What is relatively new in Baudrillard is the recognition that this moment of doubt redeems the recalcitrant object, and that there is no salvation without the object. The analysis of consumption begs the question of interpretation; it forces critical theory up against the consequences: it’s interpretation or die. Échange symbolique or la Mort.

The fact that critical theory has systematically avoided this question is nowhere more obvious than in the traditional theory of reification, or more precisely, in the doctrine of commodity fetishism, which underlies all of critical theory’s and cultural Marxism’s vision of the modern age. Marx was never interested in the interpretation of commodities. He was concerned with their
"historical character", but not with their "meaning", which he dismissed as an
ilusion in the early chapters of Capital.17 We can hardly blame Marx for not
being attracted to the problem, but it is difficult to forgive the Frankfurt School,
which professed to be concerned with culture. For what they fail to achieve, on
the whole, is any charitable understanding of the role of things in the lives of
people. Instead, the standard discourse of critical theory is laced with old
Christian sentiments about people destroying their souls by worshipping
powers they do not understand because they have projected them onto material
objects. This is another way of saying that people are worshipping a false god, a
given image. Adorno was something of an exception to this at the theoretical
level, but he was just as intolerant in practice. He described jazz enthusiasts as
"temple slaves" prostrating themselves "before the theological caprices of
commodities". He described people going to a Toscanini concert as worshipping
the money they had spent on the ticket. This is the theory of commodity
fetishism. It is part of a kind of religious or moral controversy, a sort of
monotheistic attack on animism.

When critical theory is at its worst, what it wants, what it strives for, is a world
without objects. The projected ideal is a kingdom of ends, the end of mediation.
There is nothing outside absolute spirit anyway. It does not interpret; it decrees.
The traditional theory of reification implies that so long as the totality remains
inaccessible in its totality to the subject, the subject has been deprived of its
essence. It is a vision of social reality which tends to equate emancipation with
omnipotence.

Interpretation is impossible for critical theory during these bad theoretical
moments because it does not approve of people endowing objects with magical
properties, or projecting human qualities onto the world of things. Instead, they
are expected to exercise magical control over objects. This is written directly
into the theory of commodity fetishism. Objects can only have use value;
everything else is mystification. As soon as people attach meaning to things,
they plummet into false consciousness. The end of reification would amount to
rational knowledge of the totality. People would have totally transparent
relations with each other, either because there would be no objects to get in the
way, or because objects would only exist insofar as they were rationally
distributed according to need (presumably from a centre), or because they are
only objects of disinterested aesthetic reflection, a type of relationship to an
object which presumably does no harm to the spirit. This is why Marx must have
preferred capitalism to feudalism: it was more rational, it made the real social
relations clearer, there was less meaning to cloud the vision.19 On this view,
commodity fetishism is simply a residue of the old barbaric consciousness.
The commodity elicits a sort of social projection which disguises the real
relations underpinning it. The object hides social reality. It must be eliminated.

Baudrillard's critique of the sign tries to cut through all this metaphysics.
Reification ceases to be a mystical veil, a trick of consciousness, an alienation
of the subject's power, the robbery of an essence, or a primitive projection based
on ignorance. Instead it is a positive presence in its own right. It is physical and
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it is organized in a describable way. It doesn’t hide social relations; if anything, it is a tendency to prevent them from occurring. The self-sufficient object demands a self-sufficient subject. This autonomization and social isolation is achieved through what Baudrillard calls the "semiological reduction", which erodes the possibility of symbolic exchange. Where the commodity is, there the subject shall not be. But this is not the same as Marxian fetishism. It is the opposite, for the problem with the commodity as a systemic object is not, according to Baudrillard, that people attach emotional importance to it, but precisely that they cannot, because the commodity is already a sign. The logic of signification is no longer something to be ignored because it is a superstructural aspect of things which conceals a more profound economic logic, as critical theory once believed; the logic of signification lies, as Baudrillard writes, at the “very heart of the commodity”. And because the sign-object is systemic, it comes with its play of meanings already coded. So the problem of reification, at least at the cultural level, is not that people have projected their powers onto things, but rather that objects have become increasingly closed off from human interaction in their systematic self-referential play. People probably have an incorrigible tendency to “fetishize” objects anyway; but the logic of signification blocks even this symbolic relation, and invites people to fetishize systems of relationship which are abstract and without much personal significance. This, I believe, is what Baudrillard means by the paradox that consumption has turned into a “system of interpretation” without meaning. There is no meaning because there is no symbolic exchange. The symbolic is always about the potentiality of a relationship. The semurgy of social objects reduces the availability of things for mediating social relations (symbolic exchange) and assigns them to mediating systems of signs instead. If commodity fetishism exists, it is because in our culture the object has become too rational: commodities come pre-fetishized.

III

Traditional critical theory has tended to parody the pattern of reification that Baudrillard describes to the extent that it holds out the vague promise of returning to a world of simple objects administered by simple subjects. But there can be no such world. In the sphere of culture, objects are never objective — but then they are usually not subjective either: they are neither neutral or natural facts nor hallucinations. This is even true for the real fetishist. For the interesting thing about a fetish, presumably, is that it is never clear what it is — whether it is really an object or whether it is part of the self. A fetish is probably undecidable, and for this reason, it can be thought of as existing in a free space between the subject and the object. But for the fetishist, this space is charged with an extraordinary amount of tension. The fetishist cannot tolerate his object’s ambiguity, and wants to resolve it. What might have been a symbol, the symbol of a connection, has turned into a curse of sorts. The fetishist is like a lover who doesn’t have a lover and therefore, in a sense, cannot have an object either. He cannot share his failed desire to merge with his lover with his lover’s
failed desire to merge with him. He is alone with a thing that is not a thing —
neither an other nor himself. He cannot wholly possess it because it is not self
and he cannot abandon it because it is not other. The space between the subject
and object where the fetish object oscillates so painfully is simply too
dangerous. He wants somehow to close this space, but he cannot, because
neither subjectivity nor reification are ever complete except in the moment of
suicide.

The new model of reification changes our view of the subject. The subject is
no longer a theory-praxis construct whose perception is clouded by the trickery
of things. The subject is now an ambivalent psychological being whose space
for living is gradually being closed off. Another way of saying this is that the
subject cannot be, and has not been, strictly demarcated from the object —
découpé. The realm of freedom cannot be abstracted from and separated from
the realm of necessity, except as a sign — but this sign happens to be the
ultimate illusory referent of the industrialized world, capitalist and communist.
On this question, the only difference between the great blocks of political
economy lies in their theories of distribution: the bureaucratic version is quite a
bit more obsessive about controlling objects in the name of freedom.

The subject and the object cannot finally be distinguished. They overflow
into the ambiguous space that exists between them, where people actually live,
and things have meaning. This is where culture takes place. It cannot be wished
away. It cannot be completely destroyed in a whole society, even by reification.
It can only be more or less restricted, attenuated, under threat. We have lived in
this ambiguous space ever since we were children, and we will never succeed in
completely sorting it out into the categories of what is properly subject and what
is object, or of what we actually made or thought up and what we simply found
by luck or accident. Critical theory demands of us an impossible and debilitating
maturity. We rationalize the ambiguous space as much as we can and as much as
we have to, but we never do away with it because then we would not be able to
live, we would have no where to play. This is what Baudrillard originally meant
by symbolic exchange, and what he meant when he argued that the logic of the
sign eradicates the social symbolic. (I cannot find any other meaning for it.) So
reification ceases to be anything like the object's stolen powers returning to
haunt the subject, and becomes more like the relative closure of a psychosocial
space where, to borrow another phrase of Adorno, we might live in "harmony
with the object", and with our own ambivalence.

The psychoanalyst Winnicott called this intermediate area "potential space"
— it is where the transitional object exists for the child, between the more or less
"me" and the more or less "not me". The transitional object is not an elimination
of difference. It just leaves the paradox unresolved.21 "This potential space is at
the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and
phenomena outside omnipotent control."22 The child is not challenged as to the
logic of the situation. It is not expected to decide whether it really conceived this
thing, or whether it just found a trivial piece of the objective world that it
suspects it cannot control. The child is allowed to have its intense symbolic
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experience. Nobody tries to define the object. Nobody tells the child, “that’s just your imagination”, or “that’s just a bit of dirty old stuffed cloth”. The child is allowed to play.

The tragedy of critical theory is that it has never been able to theorize this potential, transitional, symbolic space, although it has always been concerned with it. Critical theory expects so much from the subject that it can only explain away the damage by attributing fantastic, demonic power to the object. It leaves nothing human in between. There is no possible resolution but the destruction of one or the other: the death of the subject or the nihilating absorption of the object. It is ironic that it was the greatest of critical theorists, Theodor Adorno, who presented these abstract alternatives to us most forcefully; and yet it was also he who grasped the life-saving compromise in the “nonidentical side of the object”. The nonidentical side of the object, or symbolic exchange or the potential space of the transitional object are all names for a possibility which must be kept open, and opened further if reification is to be defeated.

Let me suggest, briefly, an extension of this thesis. The term potential space implies that there is a dynamic gap between the two relative poles that Winnicott — but also Habermas — call the subjective world and shared objective reality — or, in Habermas’ terms, the “inner, private world” and the “outer, public world”. My additional reflection is that this intermediate dimension, the world which grows out of the transitional object, has to be enriched and expanded before any idea of a publicly shared objective world such as Habermas envisions can be constituted in a genuine and healthy way. This is a crucial issue for cultural politics because there can be no “ideal (public) speech situation” without a foundation that openly and honestly embodies the pre-logical, symbolic root of action, relationship and meaning. Reification is ultimately nothing more than a betrayal or denial of this social symbolic root — which is why structuralist formalism makes such a good model of reified culture.

The main battle among critical theories and cultural Marxisms today seems to be over the definition of this potential space. French theory has occupied it and called valuable attention to it. My criticism of the New French Thought is simply that in having called attention to intermediate areas of social experience, it has had a tendency to autonomize them as unbounded media (without subject and object), as pure media where signs literally devour their own meaning. So what I have been calling transitional space and what Baudrillard used to call symbolic exchange, Foucault now calls power, Deleuze and Lacan call desire, Derrida calls text and Baudrillard calls simulacrum. There is little effort in these trajectories to recover the constructive potential of the pre-logical symbolic dimension of experience. There is alternatively a tendency to stress the equivalence of three all-embracing terms: power = totality = irrationality, full stop. Foucault and Baudrillard and Derrida ultimately fail to solve the problems of critique because they reproduce, in their autonomous theoretical models of “power” and “text” what Baudrillard had originally described as the “very formula of alienation in a technical society” — The Medium is the Message. Instead of articulating an alternative, they reembody the old Hegelian theory of reification they attack.
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The problem with Baudrillard's later work — the books that follow the *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *The Mirror of Production* — is that what began as a critique of naturalistic categories has grown steadily into an obsession, a kind of desire to expunge nature itself, or more precisely, to convert it into an enormous and meaningless cycle of collapsing culture. Baudrillard's simulation is just another word for reification; it is a type of reification bearing no reference to any subject or object, without any counterpraxis. The consequence is that theory — even critical theory — is always faltering behind: it can only mirror what passes it by, with the same aimlessness of simulation itself. Simulation means the death of play in the total omnipresence of play. Baudrillard has autonomized the intermediate area and gotten lost in it, forgetting the virtual difference between the me and the not me which structures human play. He has turned culture inside out and made it a natural process. Play has become simply the function of the universe. And so you have the French Ideology, and Jacques Derrida. Against this catastrophe, Baudrillard has only one strategy left: symbolic exchange, which finding that it can no longer define itself in opposition to the sign, abandons exchange for absolute irreversible reversibility in death; in other words, nihilism.

Baudrillard's argument that reification is not false consciousness but the systematic closure of autotelic signifying systems probably leads fairly inevitably to this nihilism. But it is still an interesting argument because it forces critical theory to begin theorizing the area of transitional phenomena. Whether it is the commodity alone which produces the social effect of reified constriction or whether the commodity has only been the most convenient theme for a critical hermeneutic is another question. There is no inherent reason why the problem of reification should be posed exclusively in terms of consumption. The point of Baudrillard's argument is that we feel not so much mystified by the commodity as excluded by it. We feel excluded from the sign object in much the same way that we feel excluded from (and even hostile toward) a closed group with its exclusively internal system of reference. We tend to get lost in such systems, however, because we feel we have no choice: we have to have objects, partly because we have to have meaning, and sometimes we will take whatever we can get, even though nowadays we often don't expect it to be very significant.

IV

The intention of this paper can be summarized in a slightly different set of terms.

Critical theory has tended to skirt around the issue of interpretation. There are plenty of exceptions, work that comes out of Benjamin for example, but on the whole this at least has been my experience of critical discourse. What this means in knowledge terms is that critical theory won't come to grips with the fact of uncertainty. Hence the tremendous reluctance, until recently, to open up Marx's categories for cultural interpretation.
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In psychoanalytic terms, interpretation probably means learning how to live with oneself after one has tried to destroy the object. We all try to destroy the object, even if only in fantasy. The wisdom of Melanie Klein and others is that if the object survives our bitter attack, then we can not only love the object, but learn to use it as well. But before we can achieve all this, we have to grant the object just enough independent existence so that the possibility of its loss is real, and we can learn to mourn this possible loss.²⁵

True, this means a kind of depression. But depression is not so bad — if we have the courage to repair the damage it was caused by. After all, we ourselves have already imagined this destruction, perhaps willed it, without realizing what we were doing. The very idea of our own destructive potential makes us paranoid, because we didn’t know what it meant until we had tried it. But if we can be so violent without meaning it, then so can others, even when they don’t mean it. This is the essence of paranoid thinking: they’re out to get me, even though I know they aren’t.

Depression is much less catastrophic, though it is very painful. Recent critical theory is a case in point. Think of the titles: Negative Dialectics . . . The Tragedy of Enlightenment . . . The Dialectic of Defeat . . . The Critical Twilight . . . L’échange symbolique et la mort . . . La Stratégie fatale. It all sounds depressed. But this is probably a healthy depression, a reparative one, perhaps a depression that will lead critical theory to shift its attention away from all the bad things it wants to get rid of in the world, and onto the new things it wants to put into it. This is not just a therapeutic suggestion, it is a tactical necessity, because certain things will never go away completely, they can only be crowded out by something better. Pornography is an excellent example.

Critical Theory must try to find ways to open up transitional areas of experience, so that we can all breathe more freely. And so that eventually paternalistic systems will not be able to trap us with the impossible decision whether we made our own lives and language, or whether we just found them or got them from somebody else and owe them back. But Critical Theory won’t achieve this level of creativity until it admits it is (metaphysically?) depressed — because only then will it have the impulse to repair the damage.

Adorno probably understood this. He was so impressed by his own violence as he saw it mirrored in the violence around him that he wanted all of us to get down off our “royal thrones” and commune with the object. But Adorno couldn’t translate this theoretical understanding into practice. Neither have we — though in certain ways as a generation we may have begun in the 1960’s, with the counterculture, and feminism. At any rate, Adorno was probably too old, and reluctant to give up his rage.

The possibility of any future practice, and the key to interesting interpretations, will depend on our realization that objects are never simply there to be used in the way we merely choose — for in the last, depth-psychological analysis, they always represent another person, and the idea of a relationship with another person.
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Appendix: Theses on Critical Theory

I

After Marx, Freud revived the whole idea of bad animal nature as a kind of psychic myth, and resurrected evil as the political problem of human self-definition in history. Marx was right to have concentrated his attention on social relations instead, but Freud’s regression was also very fruitful: in the end, he saved the imagination. After Freud, bad animal nature could be construed even more fundamentally as ‘bad’ relations between internal objects and their split-off, repressed ego counterparts. This does not mean, as a Marxist would say, that bad social relations are simply “reproduced” in the individual. Although bad animal nature is certainly a kind of myth, a hypostatization of bad relations in history, the ego defenses are quite real.

Sometimes the “bad object” has to be taken inside if the possibility of future love and pleasure is to be preserved somewhere in the imagination. We blame ourselves to save others and their love; and then we blame others to save ourselves. In all this effort to control and eliminate pain, love can wither. This is a tragedy that Marx overlooked.

The ego defenses are part of the distinctive organization and energy of psychic reality. They are not ‘created’ by bad relations, they are provoked, nurtured, encrusted, moulded — and they are powerful in their own right. At relatively crude levels, the form and perhaps even the content of social life are recognizably those of the ego defenses, and this is especially true during early emotional maturation. They are catalyzed prefigurations of human relations, and psychoanalysis is very little or nothing at all if they cannot ultimately be distinguished from the behaviourist thesis.

II

Critical theory should be more playful.

The inner world is fantastic. It is already in formation before cognition and emotion are prepared to join intelligently with the environment. The inner world, or psychic reality, is composed not of impulses or “instincts”, but of internalized relations, which are not easily changed. Very early on in this inner world, there are at least good and bad. Neither the good nor the bad can develop into anything real or reasonable in life if they are not allowed to play. But the fantastic opposition of the good and the bad can generate so much anxiety that play seems impossible.

III

Critical theory is insufficiently fantastic.

Fantasy is thought and action before the imagination and the world have mutually adapted. Melanie Klein, following Freud, linked fantasy and play, and then demonstrated an inverse relationship between fantasy and anxiety. The more of one, the less of the other. But the relationship is not balanced. An inhibition in play is a sign of anxious rigidity; but it is never clear how one reverses the alignment in favour of fantasy and play: why elaborate a fantasy that provokes anxiety? Perhaps it will come true?
In this way, psychoanalysis restores the imagination to the life of the body politic — but at the price of its de-idealization.

IV

Freedom can increase.
There is no longer much reason to doubt that early experience (which is thankfully still beyond direct social control) is decisive in the formation of a reactive self governed by a compliant ego — or in the formation of its alternative, an active self centred on a critical ego. The problem is that where the alternative is not well-grounded in psychic reality, it is difficult to choose it (often for the best of reasons). Yet Sartre was probably right that the alternative is still a real choice. It is even a kind of choice in a deathcamp. Still, pure expressions of freedom, however modest, are very hard to reconcile with the continuities of psychic and social reality. The therapeutic lesson of psychoanalysis has been from the beginning that every recognition or understanding of determinism implies an act or experience of freedom and vice versa. There is no necessity to determinism, but it is necessary to be determined to be free.

V

Critical theory is generated within a very narrow band of human experience; it doesn’t create enough space for itself.
An unusual environment is required if the active, wanting, willing tendencies of a baby are to be reconciled with the emotional challenge of separation and individuation. In the absence of such a tender environment, action, wanting and willing are likely to be split-off and hidden away, remaining for ever infantile and sorely helpless.
Nobody outlives the pleasure of being alone, yet still in the safe presence of the (m)other, once they have had it. We are always in transition and we always create some kind of “space” for this process. It cannot be played out.

VI

The fragility of the potential space between the subject and the object can be so attenuated in life that play becomes a desperate effort to sustain the meaning of a few hardened symbols which are easily coerced and harnessed. The space in which the unity of earlier and later experience is preserved as the growing fund of the self’s life in the world and the psyche’s life on the planet can be overrun by the conquering drive of subject or object, or collapsed in pathological identity, omnipotent fusion, and the logic of defensive control, none of which ever outlast what they destroy. Critical theory should be much more aware of all this.

VII

On the other hand, the unusually tender environment which fosters the growth of the active self is precisely what makes the prospect of separation and individuation so painful. It is very hard to learn to create this environment for oneself, and harder for society. A certain amount of “aggression” is needed on all sides if the process is to be carried through — a fact observable in mammals generally. But the human psyche is initially so adaptive and responsive and innately intricate in potential that its birth is never easily achieved. “Nature” has refined a process of specialized differentiation to the point where not only its

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meaning but its substance are astonishingly symbolic.

The price of intelligence is probably symbolism which thrives on
indefinition which reflects difficulty but the higher forms of pleasure too.

VIII

Critical theory has made a great deal of fuss about (what should be called)
secondary adaptation — as if this is some sort of recognition of psychoanalytic
truth. Over and over again, we hear that the individual is “produced” by the
culture. In the same breath, psychoanalysis is dismissed as conformist because
its theme is the adaptive growth of the individual. Critique is cheap when it
ignores or laughs at the needs and strategies of the child. Human beings are
always dependent — either in an infantile or a nature way — but dependent
nevertheless.

IX

Coercion can be brutally external and social but its conditions of possibility
are usually laid down in subtler ways. To achieve a genuine integration of
psychoanalytic insight, critical theory must see how primary psychological
adaptations are not always in detail directly concerned with the culture at large:
they are not political decisions, they are obscure movements within the
immediate psychic environment in a context of infantile dependency. Such
awareness would weaken the grandiose illusion that critical dialectic can so
easily penetrate the social veil; but it would strengthen understanding
immeasurably.

X

Nature is perfectly capable of pathology, which is contained grossly in the
painful difficulty of choice. Choosing and symbolizing are perfectly natural —
we only pretend that they are opposed to nature because we forget that choosing
is living, symbols are breathing, and neither choice nor symbol flicks on and off
in dimensionless moments of pure rationality and morality. Nature can decide
itself, but it often does so in painful and difficult ways, and a lot of this is
localized in us. Being human is like being told that the result depends on you but
fie on you if you think you know what the process is.

As painful, difficult, deciding parts of the universe, we need mediations. For
this reason, critical theory should pay a great deal more attention to the
symbolic and to the pressures and limits of the symbolic because it is at this
deep level that we actually play out the limits of nature. We create the
mediations we need ourselves and we are responsible for the quality of the
mediations we create. Or to put it another way, we are almost entirely symbolic
in our difference, but this is a responsibility rather than a transcendence:
symbols are natural beings.

XI

We should not be overly ashamed of our feeble-mindedness with regard to
the Symbolic, however. Critical theory continues to elaborate its fantasy without
imagining too seriously that it can ever bring the Symbolic to heel. That is
probably a good thing, for the exciting alternative is only an illusion: the illusion
of Power, the hallucination of the elimination of the object — all in the name of
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personal or collective transcendence. People are liable to call for the end of the object (which might be another person) because as everybody knows it is so easy for us to project the unwanted onto the object. But not only can nature not be transcended, it cannot even be tricked. Obsessional control, paranoid vigilance, schizoid detachment, psychotic misery — all are relatively useless paralyses of human fantasy.

The bad object has its place; it may be the loser, but it never ceases to exist as a possibility which must be accounted for in the existence of the good object. If prolonged, splitting, perhaps the most basic form of control, destroys the mediating power of symbolization. This is why potential space cannot easily be divided up in a worthwhile way. The bad, after all, is every bit as symbolic as the good.

Montréal

Notes

1. This is a slightly altered version of a paper delivered at the CJPST's "1983 Theory Workshops" University of British Columbia, Learned Societies, June, 1983.

2. The trend away from classical mechanistic atomism in psychoanalytic theory has been developing in Britain since the 1930's in a variety of quite different ways which have been grouped together under the heading "Object-Relations Theory." The object-relations theorists include, notably: Melanie Klein, Joan Rivière, and Hanna Segal (all of whom have never been able to give up the idea of a "death-instinct"); W.R.D. Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip (theoretically the most coherent group); and D.W. Winnicott and Marion Milner.

   The term "Object-relations theory" can be extended to include the work of some American psychoanalysts, such as Edith Jacobson and Otto Kernberg, and more remotely, the late Heinz Kohut. But this important American work has been hampered by clinging to dubious orthodoxies such as "primary narcissism" and "narcissistic libido."

   A prominent Canadian member of the British school is W. Clifford M. Scott, in Montreal.

   It is difficult to summarize briefly the object-relations point of view. It involves a clinically-inspired shift away from concern with instinctual development and management to an exploration of the emotional layerings of emerging ego-object structures. The potential ego is no longer viewed as inherently the "servant of three masters" — the somewhat schizoid defense centre of classical Freudian theory. Very often, however, so much of the ego is split off or repressed during development that a detached, reactive surface structure is all that remains of the outwardly functioning personality.

   (Some reflections on critical theory from an object-relations point of view are sketched in the Appendix to this article.)

3. The fundamental anxiety which underlies this ever-collapsing distinction is discussed from a psychoanalytic and ecological point of view by Harold F. Searles in The Nonhuman Environment (New York: International Universities Press, 1960).


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9. The deep inner connection between this short-circuiting of social communication and the structure of the commodity is analysed by Baudrillard in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign. Ch. 8.

10. I am referring to the fact that since L'échange symbolique et la mort, Baudrillard has made a nonsense of critical theory as it is understood by most of its practitioners, especially the followers of Habermas.

11. For Baudrillard, the rise of the commodity coincides historically with the passage from symbolic to semiological societies. The recent development is not the rise of the sign (consumerism), but the collapse of the rationality of signification, which has shifted the problem of the social object away from the commodity and onto simulated totalities.

12. It should be pointed out that this argument by itself does not commit Baudrillard to radical indeterminism. On the contrary, his argument seems to be, not that there is no longer any referentiality in neo-capitalist culture, but that there is altogether too much of it: reference is no longer an act; it is something received in combinatory forms.


14. See the article, "Beyond Use Value" in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.

15. See "Design and Environment," in For a Critique: L'échange symbolique et la mort and all subsequent works by Baudrillard.

16. See L'échange symbolique et la mort, where Baudrillard's expressions of utter despair at the involution of post-modern social life can be read as brilliant parodic critiques of Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva. Baudrillard's Oublier Foucault (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1977) is perhaps the best example of his technique of dilating a mimetic theoretical description language.


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21. “I am drawing attention to the paradox involved in the use by the infant of what I have called the transitional object. My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved (by) flight to split-off intellectual functioning…” D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971), p. xii.

22. Winnicott, p. 118.

23. “Once radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself.” Theodor Adorno, “Subject and Object,” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p. 499. Congealed fantasies of devouring the other or of being devoured by the other are of course often discovered at the roots of persecutory anxiety and guilty thinking.


26. These reflections owe something to a midsummer night’s conversation with John Fekete on Prince Edward Island.