
Notes on Jean Baudrillard and Critical Theory

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Abstract: These notes present some ways of calibrating critical theory to each phase of Jean Baudrillard's developing problematic of the relation of subject and object formations. These figure in his transition from critical to fatal theory – from his critique of the subject of history to his extrapolation of the objective strategies that challenge “integral technological reality.” I identify them according to Baudrillard's writing primarily with the categories presented in critical thought as the proletariat, the masses and the mass media. These connect with themes of manipulation, emancipation, revolution, resistance, and with historical formations of subject-object relations based on a rejection of models of reification, alienation and commodity fetishism. I have focused mainly on Baudrillard's writings themselves to draw out the subject-object relations as they alter from power over the subject to the fatal strategies of the object. This parallels Baudrillard's increasing interest in the “destiny” of the object in his later writing. I then offer some less-known variants on the role of objective strategies he addresses in the final phase of his writing in relation to ‘radical alterity’.

Jean Baudrillard's thought is a challenge to critical theory because he sees its interaction with its object of criticism as problematic. If critical theory's traditional role is to identify existing social problems and foster social transformations, then his response is to articulate and question the character of this association in which a theory addresses and assumes representation of the object of its thought. Baudrillard's claim is that theory has become a mirror to the forces it symptomatizes and diagnoses. It is the investment in the *representation* of its object (class, labour, commodity fetishism, alienation) where this complicity lies. This is in keeping Baudrillard's project, which is in general an interrogation of signs of the real that generate, or exchange themselves for, (social) reality. It is the

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theoretical context for the exchange between critical theory and emerging articulations of state and economy in the social and cultural formations of state capitalism, and the integration of society in this order. If the problem of critical theory is one of representation, the transformations in the scale, structure and composition of its object amplify the challenges that face critical theory in accommodating this abstraction and differentiation under global hegemony.

With the rise of international multi-corporate capitalism, and the emerging dominance of the internet and global media networks, the role of critical theory becomes still more difficult to identify as the object of its critique becomes more abstract. This is not to say that many critics do not maintain the need for critical theory to recalibrate itself to this changing condition in advanced capitalism²

Baudrillard's engagement with critical theory is oblique, and its adherents are not afforded detailed examination. It appears rather as a character in his general thesis on the role of theory and representation in relation to economics, society and culture. He subsumes critical theory under other labels ("critical thought", "theory") and his later aphoristic form of writing and interview "fragments" further disperses his earlier, more direct engagement with the problematic of theory, which had culminated in *The Mirror of Production*.

While not often explicitly identified in *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard addresses the assumptions of critical theory in relation to the historical and structural transformations of the commodity in the context of the Marxist analysis of political economy, and semiological analysis of economic exchange in commodity circulation and consumption. This challenge to Marx (and by extension critical theory) led back to his work on symbolic exchange and to his emphasis in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* on simulation and the precession of simulacra.

With the arrival of simulation as Baudrillard's dominant model, critical theory may be seen primarily in its emphasis on social theory in rela-

2 Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory Today: Revisiting the Classics." (accessed in <https://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell10.htm>)

tion to the problematic distinction he draws between “class” and “masses”. As Baudrillard’s employment of “fatal theory” and “theory-fiction” becomes the guiding principle of his engagement with theory, the role of metaphor and narrative in developing a type of representation and strategy for theory defines the final phase of Baudrillard’s project. I will address these two phases below, but first I will connect Baudrillard’s early writing on critical thought in relation to Frankfurt School theory, before addressing his critique of critique in relation to Marx.

Baudrillard and the Theorist

Baudrillard’s critique of critical theory bears comparison with Horkheimer’s essay on the position of the theorist as well as the role of critical theory in relation to its subject-of-history, the proletariat. Horkheimer describes its experience and conditions as one shared with the figure of the critical theorist. He attempts to form a coherent and shared subject position for them, but is aware of the contradictions that beset this unification. In his version of the relation between the critical theoretician and society, the former passed judgment on eliminating the irrationality of society. But theoretician and theory are not mirrors to its object, “with thought then, as it were, recognizing its own reflection in the product of these forces.”³ Rather, the subject who wants a new state of affairs and “better” reality also brings it forth; there is a relative objective detachment of the theorist. This critical separation requires the resolution of some contradictions: “It is the task of the critical theoretician to reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks.”⁴ Critical theory, no longer the mirror that comprises traditional theory, and its subject, are yoked together in tension and subject to the same forces.⁵

3 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 217.

4 Ibid.

5 Contrast this with Horkheimer’s conception of traditional theory, in which theories, “on the contrary, which are confirmed or disproved in the building of

Horkheimer's equation attempts to resolve the differences between their positions by identifying their mutuality, but recognises that critical theory contains in itself the specific means to alter the prevailing conditions: "If, however, the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges."⁶

The role of theory is to resolve contradictions between its subject-position (the theorists, their experience, intellectual classes) and oppressed humanity in the face the increasing contradictions of the commodity economy. Leaving aside Horkheimer's analysis of the role of theory in relation to praxis, to move from diagnosis to intervention, we can observe critical theory's affiliation with the subject against the object, which here is the capitalist economy in general and the commodity in particular. It is here that Baudrillard's stance on critical theory and its objective and subjective status emerges. Recognition of his allegiance to its project appears in several readings, but one that most emphasises his connection to both critical theory and the role of the object arises in a psychoanalytic register. This is Charles Levin's account of Baudrillard's thought as nothing other than "an attempt to elaborate a theory of reification à la Lukacs, 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."⁷ Such misunderstood objects return to haunt the subject and spoil their experience. The role of the critical theorist in this perspective is to restore to the subject their

machines, military organizations, even successful motion pictures, look to a clearly distinguishable consumer group, even when like theoretical physics they are pursued independently of any application or consist only in a joyous and virtuous playing with mathematical symbols; society proves its humanness by rewarding such activity." Horkheimer, 217.

6 Ibid. 215.

7 Charles Levin, "Jean Baudrillard, Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 15:1-3 (1991), 172.

freedom, by identifying the damaging and deceptive qualities of the object.

The phases of Baudrillard's thought determine different types of interaction or transaction between subjects and objects. The subject and object differ according to the theme he addresses and the scale at which he sets the involvement or operation between them. They are related to each other in keeping with Baudrillard's interest in terms of sign exchange and symbolic exchange. We can consider the exchange between subject and object as conducted in a field constitutive of relations that Baudrillard had critiqued as outmoded, chiefly the field of power and desire.

From his critique of political economy through his separation from Marxist thought in the mid-1970s there is a shifting conception of critical theory in Baudrillard's thought, characterized as a changing articulation between subject and object in terms of their dynamic relation.⁸ They figure as constant poles in a developing analysis of their effects on each other in forms of exchange which he identifies and rejects as meaningful forces: power, desire, resistance and control. Baudrillard asserts that the action lies elsewhere, in seduction, fascination, indifference and fatality. He offers in his critique alternative types of exchange that are arranged under the themes of seduction, fatality, symbolic exchange, reversibility. In the books *Fatal Strategies*, and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* Baudrillard performs a transformation of the traditional subject of critical theory (for example, the proletariat) into an object (termed "the masses"), which as an object of political theory or media representation occupies a different relationship to the capacities of the subject to control, represent or account for it.

These changes take place according to his changing emphasis from the role of the subject in critique, and the position of critical theory as the subject to its object (the social, the cultural and production), and to the

8 It is tempting to locate Baudrillard's theory of the object with Adorno's "primacy of the object" over thought, and his non-identity thinking that shows the dependence of concepts on objects, and the irreducibility of objects to concepts. This would lose the non-dialectical force of Baudrillard's thought, from the perspective of symbolic exchange and death.

increasing centrality of the object. Where critical theory sided with the subject of history (for example the positive actions of the class subject) Baudrillard takes it as a relationship that founders once the subject it becomes problematic. This is compounded by his increasing interest, by the late 1970s, in what Gane termed “rather obscurely and inconsistently defined object-mass strategies of resistance [sic] (thus of resentment, though he rarely uses the term).”⁹ These following four sections suggest how the critique in Baudrillard bears the traces of his major concerns of symbolic and sign-exchange as they appear in his writing over four decades.

The Critical Mirror

Mark Poster argues that Baudrillard’s links to critical theory are forged then broken as capitalism shifts from market and entrepreneurial to monopoly and stage capitalism with the consumer society, scientific and technical organization of society. For him, Baudrillard’s developing analysis of consumption was initially “fully historical because it subordinated semiology to critical theory.”¹⁰ Baudrillard’s semiological analysis revealed signification in a new phase of commodity production, and this offered “a new critical theory that captured the interdependence of technology and culture, production and symbolic exchange.”¹¹

Baudrillard’s first major engagement with critical theory and its semiological turn appears in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, published in French in 1972. He attempts to tie the logic of commodity exchange to its circulation as a sign. Just as the commodity circulates with its use value or utility as its alibi, its sign-exchange value exploits its status as signifying form: “The object-become sign no longer gathers its meaning in the concrete relation between two people. It assumes its

9 Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 139.

10 Mark Poster, “Technology and Culture in Habermas and Baudrillard”, *Contemporary Literature*, 22:4 (1981), 468.

11 Ibid.

meaning in the differential relation to other signs.”¹² Baudrillard’s critique of the commodity as sign-exchange form is built on the foundations he had established in *The System of Objects* (1968), which for Levin took from Lukacs the recognition that “the structure of commodity relations can be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.”¹³

In this context Baudrillard focused on the technical object and commodity of mass production and consumption, and he mirrors critical theory’s focus on the commodity as it constitutes, deforms and replaces social relations. If he can be said to be involved in the project of critical theory this is because he too is invested in an analysis of commodity form. Yet his reference frame differs in terms of the literature on which he draws, and certainly he refuses to adopt critical theory’s attempts to find alternative means to bring about positive social change.

Baudrillard’s critical theory has a trans-Atlantic bias; his references are mainly American popular academic writings on technology, marketing, advertising and product design: Lewis Mumford, Vance Packard, Ernst Dichter and David Riesman. Roland Barthes appears as the primary European theorist. His mirror here is one that intends to reflect onto subjective forms (in their integration in the system of objects) the regressive and limiting processes of technological organization and process: “Our technological civilization is no exception to the rule: techniques and objects therein suffer the same servitudes as human beings - and the process of material organization, hence of objective technical progress, is subject to exactly the same blocks, deviations and regressions as the concrete process of the socialization of human relationships, hence of objective social progress.”¹⁴

His emphasis on the penetration of the technical structure of the commodity form in abstract and concrete terms establishes him within the

12 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press), 66.

13 György Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1971), 83.

14 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 124.

field of critical theory but marks his differing methodological approach. This reference frame marks out his phenomenological, psychological and sociological interrogation of the technological environment and its object as a form of critical theory which occupies its territory but performs its work on the commodity as practical objects. These are “related to one or more structural elements, but at the same time they are all in perpetual flight from technical structure towards their secondary meanings, from the technological system towards a cultural system.”¹⁵

What begins to demarcate him clearly from critical theory is his publication *The Mirror of Production*, in which critical theory itself becomes an object of critique. He recognised that the circulation of signs is central to commodity exchange, with nothing left to be salvaged by the subject: the sign-object has its meaning already encoded, so that objects are detached from human involvement in their systematized self-referencing and the subject is excluded completely. His credentials as a critical theorist become strained when his critique of the political economy of the sign penetrates not only the commodity form, but also its prevailing Marxist critique.

Shifting the emphasis from labour and its divisions to the system of consumption, he extended his analysis beyond the interrogation of the object as commodity and unit of economic exchange to a signifier in a structure of sign exchange. In Baudrillard’s view the consumer object, indissoluble as a sign that exploited its use value as an alibi in order to ensure its circulation, also applied to Marx’s critique of capital. Baudrillard’s critique of the political economy of the sign placed Marx’s emphasis on labour in the same position as the function of utility: Marx’s critique relied on the signified of *homo economicus* and the ethos of labour as the reference point to elaborate his theories, in the same way that commodities circulated according to the alibi of their utility. Baudrillard seizes on Marx’s dialectical conception of labour, where Marx writes, “Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate,

15 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 8.

and in which man of his own accord start, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and nature."¹⁶ Baudrillard quotes Marcuse's contention that labour is grounded in "an essential excess of human existence beyond every possible situation in which it finds itself and the world."¹⁷ And Marcuse's separation of play as a separate activity is for him an indication of an absolute idealism of labour in which "continuation, the sphere of play is merely the aesthetic sublimation of labour's constraints."¹⁸ Play as non-work is a projection of the ideological ground of labour, and for Baudrillard there is an absurdity in asking subjects to pretend that under labour they are 'other' and that their deepest desire is to become themselves again. His opening remark, that the "critical theory of the mode of production does not touch the principle of production"¹⁹ immediately consigns critical theory to a misrecognition of the object of critique.

It should be noted that the basis for Baudrillard's reading of Marx's political theory as a mirror of production is for some scholars based on misrecognition of Marx's methodology. Mackenzie criticises Baudrillard for among other things reading into Marx metaphysical assumptions and taking "dialectics for an antagonistic and jagged but essentially linear chain of causality."²⁰ For him, Baudrillard's critique is launched from received interpretations of Marx from mainly the 1960s and 1970s: "Baudrillard thus reads Marx through the lens of the disappointments of the Paris Spring of 1968."²¹

But while Baudrillard may view Marx through the events of May 1968, critical theory is now caught in a mirror game with labour, the commod-

16 Karl Marx, *Capital* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House), Vol. 1, 42-43.

17 Herbert Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor", *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973), 22.

18 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 40.

19 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 17.

20 Graham Mackenzie, 'Through a Glass, Darkly: Jean Baudrillard and the Mirror of Critical Theory' (accessed at https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fast-capitalism/12_1/Mackenzie-Through-Glass-Darkly.htm)

21 Ibid.

ity form, and by extension, the field of consumption and the “culture industry”. The threat to critical theory is that it will not be able to accommodate itself to a critical horizon beyond what Baudrillard has identified as objects operating under the sign of production. These include commodity fetishism, alienation and reification, and the class formations under capitalism. They are signs not simply detached from history and reality, but generated from models and codes, and constitutive of new forms of subjective and objective interaction under what Baudrillard calls the third order of simulacra: simulation. Critics such as Douglas Kellner had asked for theories that “articulate both fragmentation and new forms of social structuration, that stress disorganization and reorganization”,²² and Baudrillard delivers an analysis that not only articulates the object of theory in these terms, but eventually fragments theory itself as a strategy in the face of this dissolution. Before this, however, he has to bring his work on symbolic exchange and death, and on simulation, into alignment.

Critical Sacrifice

Baudrillard stated that *The Mirror of Production* “was the break with Marx, with the emergence of symbolic exchange in prospect”²³ *Symbolic Exchange and Death* brought to the fore Baudrillard’s riposte to sign-exchange and the system of objects in mass consumption. If Baudrillard’s critique of Marx had aligned thought with the world in a complicit relationship that attached itself to the subject’s freedom to and from work (and emancipation), then this next step would detach from this critique of the subject-position and side with the challenge and reversibility of the object. Baudrillard drew on psychoanalysis, sociology and anthropology to do this, in “the intercalation here of themes from Freud, Durkheim and Mauss, at a key moment, precisely at the point in the argument when the analyses of the fetishism of, or need for, objects comes to the fore-

22 Douglas Kellner, “Critical Theory Today: Revisiting the Classics.” (accessed in <https://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell10.htm>)

23 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

ground.”²⁴ Baudrillard must salvage fetishism from his dismantling of Marx, but refashioned according to the theory of symbolic exchange.

Returning to Horkheimer’s portrait of the critical theory from the perspective of psychoanalysis and object-relations theory, Levin points to a separation from the theorist and critical theory in Baudrillard’s methodology. He calls this Baudrillard’s moment of “self-doubt in the act of critique.”²⁵ He notes Baudrillard’s self-denunciation as a critical theorist and doubt about critical theory. This observation signals the separation of Baudrillard from identification with critical theory, because he cannot maintain the fiction of the alienated subject in the face of the mystifying object. For Levin, in *The Mirror of Production* “this moment of doubt redeems the recalcitrant object, and that there is no salvation without the object.”²⁶ Levin suggests that critical theory expects so much from the subject that it can only explain away the damage by attributing fantastic, demonic power to the object. There is no possible resolution the death of the subject or the nihilating absorption of the object. “When critical theory is at its worst, what it wants, what it strives for, is a world without objects . . . 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.”²⁷

In psychoanalytical mode, Levin attributes to critical theory a depressive position, which would be reparative if it could “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.”²⁸ He concludes with the observation that Baudrillard has potentially opened up a transitional or

24 Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 81.

25 Charles Levin, “Jean Baudrillard, Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 15.1-3 (1991): 175.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. 176.

28 Ibid. 181.

lived space, where the subject can engage with the object in a mode of reparation, of world-building. This for Levin is the ground of symbolic exchange.

However, what this reparative reading of ambivalent relations between subject and object in a shared space omits is the role of destruction in symbolic exchange. Baudrillard has not retrieved an object structure from behind the mystifying veil that critical theory has erected in order then to tear down. Nor is it a “positive presence”, autonomous in the face of the subject who deals with it in the social world. The Baudrillard-object is not located on a balance sheet of positive and negative affects. The object, in symbolic exchange, is one predicated on challenge, reversibility and death, with no resolution between it and the subject. In symbolic exchange the subject is not in a position to desire mastery over the object, but is open to being analysed by the object in a relation of reversibility.

There is a broader theoretical and historical context for this change of emphasis, which disrupts the basis for political economy and consequently arrests the activity of critical theory. This is through his reading of Mauss via Bataille, the latter proposing that useless expenditure challenges capital’s “restricted economy” and exchangeability.²⁹ Lotringer notes Baudrillard’s debt to Freud’s Death Instinct, and links it to historical circumstance. For Lotringer post-Fordist modes of labour (in the Italian Operaist movement, and in writings by Guattari, Negri and Baudrillard himself) are now integrated with consumption, and immaterialized labour has penetrated the field of consumption: “Labor and non-labor time (exchange value and use value) became harder to differentiate.”³⁰ Against this interpenetration of labour into all aspects of life itself, Baudrillard’s response was through Bataille’s sacrificial economy.³¹ So he writes, “we must maintain that the only alternative to labor is not free

29 See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (London and New York: Routledge 2002).

30 Sylvère Lotringer, “Introduction”, in Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, 16

31 See Bataille, Georges. “The Accursed Share, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley,” *New York: Zone Books* 14 (1988), 135-36.

time, or non-labor, it is sacrifice."³² The reversibility is, for Baudrillard, symbolic exchange, which "has been the radical basis of things. Our market is one of challenge, of one-upmanship, of potlatch, and hence of negation, the sacrifice of value."³³ It is on this basis of death that Baudrillard rebuilds his critique of Marx: production does not extract from man their surplus value (from which alienation and false consciousness and the mystified subject should be freed), but instead subjects them to a sacrifice. By converting his death into a wage, the worker can only freed himself by putting his death up as a challenge: "As labor was slow death, only an instant and violent challenge could possibly free one from it."³⁴

Critical Simulation

In his posthumous publication *The Agony of Power*, Baudrillard returns to his work on simulation in the context of a distinction he draws between hegemony and domination. Domination was characterised by the master/slave relation, "a relationship of forces and conflicts."³⁵ In the hegemonic system the emancipated slave internalises the master, so that there are no dominators or dominated. These are now annexed as hostages to a consensus. Indeed, "the alienated, the oppressed, and the colonized are siding with the system that holds them hostage."³⁶

Where does critique reside in this? Baudrillard argues that critical thought continues along its trajectory "where there is nothing left to analyse in the hope of subverting it".³⁷ However, the critique of alienation and spectacle remains as a consolation, becoming melancholy as the desire for transgression and subversion loses popularity. Baudrillard offers examples of the ways power ransacks critique and uses it for itself, such as the banker denouncing capital and its financial mechanisms

32 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 3.

33 Jean Baudrillard, *Passwords*, 18.

34 Ibid. 21.

35 Ibid. 33

36 Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e) 2010), 37.

37 Ibid. 41.

("truth coming out from the mouth of Evil").³⁸ This follows from his claim that we are no longer in a "critical situation" (such as the domination of capital), but in a closed-circuit that has captured the negative value: "If the corrupt have no respect for this protocol, and show their hand without sparing us their hypocrisy, then the ritual mechanism of denunciation goes haywire."³⁹

In this assumption of critique by its object, which performs a critique of itself, we see how subject and object change polarities and absorbs criticality. This absorption is most marked in the opposite direction, in Baudrillard's description of the transition a subject of history into an object of hegemony. This appears in his text *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. Here, the strategies of the object succeed those that Baudrillard described in symbolic exchange. The object is now a third-order simulacrum, its representation and reality now effects of the code and its operations. This object, once termed the proletariat (which is also the subject of history), is now "the mass" or "the masses". As an object of critique, or subject of history, it no longer performs according to its place within a model of critique formerly accorded it in traditional critical theory. The silent majority replaces the working class, and "No one can be said to represent the silent majority, and that is its revenge."⁴⁰ The mass is not an authority or reference as was formerly class. Now silent, they are no longer "(a) subject (especially not to – or of – history) . . . they can no longer be alienated."⁴¹ As the object, its mode of defence and retaliation is to be inaccessible to "schemas of liberation, revolution and historicity . . ." The object is encouraged to speak, to be asked for information, but its counter-strategy is an absence of response. It is here that the Baudrillardian formulation of the object of simulation appears. This is rephrased from his original essay *Requiem for the Media*, in which mass media institute a mass communication model without response from the social. But this

38 Ibid. 37.

39 Ibid. 38.

40 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 22.

41 Ibid.

is one value attributed to the masses. By the time of *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, simulation, the generation of the real from models (such as opinion polls, phone-ins, a census), places the subject-object relation into a “double-bind”. The masses adopt the values of the subject and object as an alternating or reversible strategy. The silent majority is constituted by the media, by the political class as *both a subject and object*. This is a non-dialectical turn in which two strategies exist according to a demand from power. To the demand to be a submissive object it adopts disobedience and emancipation – the resistance-as-subject is promoted as positive. To the demand to be subject (to be a liberated, speaking, revolutionary subject) it opposes its being as object: as passive, hyper-conformist and idiotic. For Baudrillard this has “superior impact” which the demand of the media and the political class attributes to alienation and passivity. In this polarity of the (non-)response of the masses, Baudrillard sides with its indifference, but does so in order to claim that what he calls the “liberating practices” grasp only the condition of the masses as an object (one to be rescued from its alienation or false-consciousness). He maintains that it ignores the other feature of the demand for meaning: the incessant call or the mass to constitute itself as a subject (of media): to hear its opinion, vote, decide and “play the game.”⁴² Baudrillard’s strategy here is to close the circuit between subject and object in order to show how a complicit relationship emerges: “All the movements which only bet on emancipation . . . of speech as a raising of consciousness, do not see that they are acting in accordance with the system, whose imperative today is the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and speech.”⁴³

In critique, under simulation, Baudrillard offers a model where forces and references exchange between two bodies (here, the media and the masses), and where each body switches its polarity. His deployment of the media or the political field in his argument invites close analysis, first because it is operating as transformational subject-object itself. In other words, just as the masses exist in two states, subjective and objective, so

42 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 108.

43 Ibid.109.

too the media field alternates. Thus, Baudrillard can assign to this other body that exists in addition to the masses its own two contradictory modalities, but only in relation to its social other, the masses. Baudrillard is then in a position to pose the same question to the media that he has asked of 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 the fascination that results?"⁴⁴ Like the object, this technological subject of history also reverses.

We return to the metaphor of the mirror, but this is no longer the mirror of representation, where one reality reflects another as illusion, or in which a medium mediates between two realities. The reflective surface Baudrillard proposes is one to, and in, which the masses send back to the system its own message, as if in a feedback loop.

Returning to Horkheimer's concern with the figure of the critical theorist, we can see that Baudrillard would present him as a fragment of the mirror to the social. In *Fatal Strategies* he writes, "But this idea of alienation was never more than an ideal perspective of philosophy for the use of the hypothetical masses. It never expressed anything but the alienation of the philosopher himself, that is, the one who thinks he is other."⁴⁵ As "other" the philosopher projects alienation onto the masses, but according to Baudrillard the masses have renounced power and responsibility not through alienation or enslavement but through "un-will", "the wish to hand one's desire over to another."⁴⁶ These others are the media, the political class, and the "philosophers", who suppose the desires of the masses. The latter off-load their desires onto these professionals.

We are a long way from reification, and of a world in which potential subjects misrecognise themselves in reified objects, in order to restore both within a potential space that critical theory attempts to identify in reference to the contradictions it seeks to resolve. Now these poles either

44 Ibid. 105.

45 Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 125.

46 Ibid. 126.

amplify their opposite terms or switch them, power/media and masses/meaning being Baudrillard's main examples. If this recognition leads him to observe that "negation or critique is no longer an effective optic for analysing fashion, advertising or television"⁴⁷ this is because for him critical theory is "indexed on the immediately prior state of the system."

Here, then, critical theory might be then a nostalgia for resurrection of signs of the real, of liberation of the unconscious and of meaning: "Even critical theory, along with the revolution, turns into a second-order simulacrum, as do all determinate processes. The deployment of third-order simulacra sweeps all this away, and to attempt to reinstate dialectics, 'objective' contradictions, and so on, against them would be a futile political regression."⁴⁸

Critical Alterities

If critical theory is lagging behind the order, Baudrillard asks, is there a theory or practice that is subversive because it is more aleatory than the system itself, "an indeterminate subversion which would be to the order of the code what the revolution was to the order of political economy?"⁴⁹ At this stage, Baudrillard attempts to extrapolate the way critical thought is bound to its object at one level, and yet unable to capture it. This contradiction is brought to the fore in his aphoristic writing, most notably *Fragments*, where he asks, "What becomes of a thinking when it's confronted with a world that is no longer exactly the critical world, the world of crisis and critical thought? Thought must be both homologous with its object and must at the same time be able to mark itself off from it one way of another."⁵⁰

He poses this question in the mid-1970s, and I suggest there are two main types of response, two categories of indeterminate challenge.

47 Baudrillard, Jean, *Revenge of the Crystal* (London and Stirling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999), 32.

48 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 3.

49 Ibid. 4.

50 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 74

The first figures in Baudrillard's interest in alternative economies, based on sacrifice and destruction, and his reading of Mauss and Bataille. Even at the height of Baudrillard's engagement with simulation, its principles were grafted onto the system in place of now-outmoded strategies of the order of production. These were founded on the act of defiance. Defiance is predicated on Baudrillard's counter-gift that refuses the exchange of value. This is not dialectical or oppositional; it is destructive of the structural relation of each term (of the relation of the subject to the object), of the one who hurls the challenge. It abandons a contractual position or anything approaching a "relation." This challenge has nothing to do with relations of force, or meaning, or identity. For Baudrillard this is a suicidal position, but a triumphant one, in a defiance of meaning or existing as such.⁵¹

The second response considers the symbolic order a fatal strategy which sides with the extremes of the object. As Lotringer puts it they are "not about securing the sovereignty or prosperity of the subject but are deployed by forces enigmatic to us: evil genies, sly objects, ironic events, and spanners in the works which escape the centripetal will and best laid plans of the individual."⁵² Against the desiring subject are the seducing object⁵³ and the possibility of substituting for critical theory an "ironic theory."⁵⁴ Baudrillard's writing becomes fragmented and aphoristic in which "thought must move faster than things, faster than the world. [...] The 'conservative' type of thought, which assumes thought to be a reflection of the world, will always lag behind."⁵⁵

The object and the world are no longer registered according to the political economy that critical theory mirrored. How can we speak of capital, Baudrillard asks, when it is its destiny to go to the limits of exchange

51 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 69.

52 Sylvère Lotringer, "A Belated Introduction to the Orgy," in Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 15.

53 Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 141.

54 Ibid. 120.

55 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 78.

and self-destruct the case with the economy when it is based on financial flows and international speculation? Having lost its essence it becomes integral and virtual. In contrast “capital in its historical form appears to be a lesser evil.”⁵⁶

I want to distinguish here between the fatal strategy of the object that challenges the subject, and the extreme phenomena of systems (codes, models, simulations) that for Baudrillard constitute ‘integral reality’. There are two modes of relationship: one which poses the object that eclipses the subject, and the other as an extreme phenomenon that disengages from classical capitalist political economy. The former often appear in Baudrillard’s writing as singularities, unique events that cannot be accommodated or absorbed by integrated reality or the hegemonic order. A singularity “doesn’t resist, but constitutes itself as another universe, with another set of rules, which may conceivably get exterminated, but which, at a particular moment, represents an insuperable obstacle for the system itself.”⁵⁷ These can include terroristic acts for example. The latter are scenarios in which the system overextends itself and thus threatens its own integrity, by sending it to extremes. Computer viruses and spiralling financial speculation are typical instances.

In the midst of his thesis on fatal strategies Baudrillard returns to the object and its “destiny”. This is no longer the alienated object, but the one which challenges the subject. In *Impossible Exchange* Baudrillard sees that critical thought thinks it holds up a mirror to the object and the world, but in line with symbolic exchange, this impossible demand is not reciprocated: the object has no mirror stage and cannot be represented according to this thought. Baudrillard proposes this constitutes a duel, in which the object makes the subject lose sovereignty. He writes, “When the subject discovers the object – whether that object is viruses or primitive societies – the converse, and never innocent, discovery is also made: the discovery of the subject by the object . . . the object, too, does more

56 Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e) 2010), 44.

57 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 71.

than just 'discover' us; it invents us purely and simply – it thinks us."⁵⁸ This is the late stage in the ontology of Baudrillard's object, which is now construing the subject through its own laws.

Wolves, Rats, Cockroaches, Viruses

In *Revenge of the Crystal* Baudrillard proposes that narrative can be valuable as form of theory.⁵⁹ As he transferred his analysis from the alienated social subject of modern industrial society, Baudrillard spoke about his resistance to resistance, proposing instead the precedence of the viral and of singularity as models that replaced what he considered the pious, illusory and out-dated world of critical, rebellious and subversive thought.⁶⁰ These offered models that could not be absorbed by reality. Singularity represents, however temporarily, another set of rules and another world. It may be destroyed but it presents an insurmountable obstacle to the order. "Virality" presents itself as an invasion that penetrates the reality and exploits it to its advantage.

Baudrillard's final engagement with forces of attack and resistance suggests a genealogy less known than his famous orders of simulacra. This is one of wolves, rats, cockroaches and viruses.

First are the wolves: enemies, including humans, attack us head-on, and we construct walls, barricades and ditches as defences. We defend directly, against a visible enemy. Baudrillard remarks, "You might say, up to Marx's class struggle, that was still the pattern."⁶¹ Then the rats come, dispersed, and underground. We resist these using prophylaxis, hygiene and poison, to stamp them out. Next are the roaches: they do not attack in three-dimensional space, but through the cracks in these dimensions. They get everywhere and one has to defend against everything. Finally comes the virus, which attacks inside the body, and resistance is no longer possible, at a certain level. We move from classical mode to the

58 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 23.

59 Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal*, 24.

60 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 71.

61 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 72.

secret systems of rats (intrigue, agents), parasitism (roaches as attaching to other systems) to viral unknowns.

Baudrillard proposes that an armed defence against a visible enemy is out-dated. Against reaction and resistance, he poses abreaction: the expulsion of the attack without a fight. This amounts to a “dissatisfaction” which is not able to channel through a “critical consciousness, and is no longer able to arm itself against a visible enemy.”⁶²

As these attacks are more elusive, he suggests that we should become invisible and elusive ourselves. The thought must itself become viral, and fighting the enemy with its own weapons is a possibility: “a thinking, that in order to pose a challenge, is a match for a system that is paradoxical, elusive and random.”⁶³ In a world which Baudrillard argues is no longer a critical one, where virtual and digital orders prevail, thought must exist in a structural contradiction, “capable of creating different chains and unchainings of thought from those of objective or even dialectical criticism.” Immersed in the world’s virtuality but standing opposed to it, Baudrillard’s final model for critical theory arguably poses a contradiction between thought and its object.

How can we make sense of these successive strategies of attack, reaction and abreaction in relation to critical theory? Kellner argues against what he sees as Baudrillard’s leap into the “delirious postmodern implosion of all boundaries, abstractions, and distinctions in the vertiginous flux of the hyperreal.”⁶⁴ Despite this he also recognises that critical thought must move beyond previous social theories into the “brave new world of simulations, media, information, DNA, satellites, terrorism, postmodern art and so on ...”⁶⁵ Theory must accommodate and penetrate the technological dimensions that now abstract in new ways the classical

62 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 73.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Douglas Kellner, “Boundaries and Borderlines: Reflections on Jean Baudrillard and Critical Theory”, (accessed at <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell2.htm>)

commodity form. Kellner notes that critical theory analyzed a range of processes of social abstraction that demanded necessarily abstract categories “to capture the mode of abstraction actually being produced by capitalist development.”⁶⁶ Yet he argues that versions of “New French Theory” see these abstractions as mystifications. Baudrillard’s writing on reality, representation and meaning is one example. However, I suggest Baudrillard’s theory has not become absorbed with its object, the technologically integrated reality or code; neither is it compromised owing to what Kellner claims is its will to mystification of all formerly reliable abstractions (such as labour power). It offers innovative readings which suggest how new commodity forms create different modes of challenge and refusal. These may be generated the system itself, against itself; or adopted by subjects who use strategies replicated from the system, in viral modes that Baudrillard describes.

In identifying the extremes of global capitalism’s development Baudrillard offers models that, instead of replacing those identifying the commodity form and its social and psychological effects, offer additional descriptions of a new form of commodity as exchange and circulation through information and data, in global flows. Baudrillard’s implicit critique of critical theory extends the limiting terminology critical theory brings to the increasingly complex actions between subjects and objects in what he defines as the technological world order. His singular contribution is to describe and foreground the object’s ability to perform those acts of abreaction (perhaps even of resistance) that critical theory accorded to the subject.

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