SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE: A STUDY OF JEAN BAUDRILLARD

AND THE COLLAPSE OF CRITICAL THEORY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Jean Baudrillard uses the concepts of critical theory and structuralism to develop a theory of neo-capitalist culture. He shows how the transformation of social objects into signs constitutes the field of consumption and rationalizes the symbolic dimensions of social life. Baudrillard's work is conceived in the thesis as a focus for the confrontation of critical theory and structuralism. Critical theory reveals the structuralist concern with systems of order and classification as social reification; in turn, structuralism challenges dialectical criticism to interpret the social object. Among critical theorists, Theodor Adorno recognized that the object was not reducible to the subject; but he viewed interpretation primarily as the dialectical limit of critique. Baudrillard attempts to go beyond this stance in his interpretation of the "system of objects." His work broadens the conceptual framework of critical theory, and in so doing, sketches its ideological frontiers.

RESUME

Cette thèse explore l'appropriation que fait Jean
Baudrillard des concepts de la théorie critique et du
structuralisme dans le but de formuler une théorie de
la culture néo-capitaliste. Il démontre comment la trans-
formation d'objets sociaux en signes sert à la fois à
constituer le champ de la consommation et à rationaliser
les dimensions symboliques de la vie sociale. L'oeuvre
de Baudrillard fait donc fonction dans cette thèse de
site de la confrontation de la théorie critique et du
structuralisme. La théorie critique fait voir l'attache-
ment structuraliste aux systèmes d'ordre et de classement
en tant que réification sociale; tandis que le structura-
lisme défie la critique dialectique d'interpréter l'objet
social. Parmi les théoriciens critiques, Theodor Adorno
reconnaissait que l'objet ne se réduisait pas au sujet
mais l'interpretation demeurait essentiellement chez lui
la limite dialectique de la critique. Baudrillard cherche
à dépasser cette position par son interprétation du
"système d'objets." Sa recherche élargit le cadre con-
ceptuel de la théorie critique et, ce faisant, permet d'en
esquisser les frontières idéologiques.

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INTRODUCTION

The criticism of culture is, in a relatively original way, an integral part of culture itself. There is an ebb and flow between concepts of society and their "referents" which gives rise to a continuing sense of paradox. Indeed, the whole process, not only that of culture, but of its transformation into an object of description, analysis, evaluation, critique, even prediction, might be conceived as a kind of multistable phenomenon, resistant to exclusive points of view, to final statements, or "closure." Clifford Geertz alludes to the source of this complexity, it seems to me, when he states that "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and that the study of society would, therefore, not be so much "an experimental science in search of law as an interpretive one in search of meaning."[1]

But if Geertz is correct — and it is my assumption throughout this thesis that his statement is substantially correct for all the "human sciences" — then it is difficult to see how the most abstruse theory about art or society can avoid stating its own intérest not only in the culture on which it comments, but in its own contemporary frame of reference. If one admits that one is engaged primarily in an activity of interpretation, then one must also concede that one is involved in a process of creating meanings — in short, that one is, if only implicitly, contributing to the way a society defines itself, and thus, perhaps, influencing its

history. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, the very idea of culture "embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it has developed." But he adds that to recognize this situation is to reach "literally a moment of crisis . . . when the most basic concepts . . . are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems, not analytical problems either, but historical movements that are still unresolved."[2]

There is a substantial group of thinkers who, because they have made this problematic of the interdependence of theory and society, concept and object, or subject and object, the explicit basis of their work, can be placed in the intellectual orbit of "critical theory." It is toward the sense of a "crisis" — by which Raymond Williams seems to indicate a crisis in understanding which is <u>continuous</u> with a crisis in society itself — that critical theory has directly oriented its discourse as a response. But this paradox of involvement and detachment — the fact that the motive of criticism is interestedness, but its mode is distance — implies a necessarily ambiguous context for the practice of critical theory. It is ultimately in this context that the cultural criticism of Jean Baudrillard must be seen.

Jean Baudrillard is an assistant in the Faculty of Sociology in the University of Paris at Nanterre. His output in the last dozen years of ten books and numerous articles has established him as a social critic to be reckoned with in France and, to a lesser but still significant

degree, in the English-speaking world.[3] In 1968, he
published Le système des objets: la consommation des
signes,[4] a detailed interpretation of the social being
of objects in modern capitalist societies, particularly
France, where cultural life was in the midst of an impor-
tant transition, and vestiges of traditional ways of life
were still very much in evidence. In 1970, Baudrillard
followed this with a macrological treatment of the same
theme in La société de consommation: ses mythes, ses
structures.[5] In both works, the influence of structuralism
was obvious — especially the inspiration of Claude-
Lévi Strauss's semiological approach to primitive cultures
and Roland Barthes' reading of contemporary "mythologies."
But the unorthodoxy of Baudrillard's structuralism was fully
confirmed in his third book, Pour une critique de l'économie
politique du signe (1972),[6] a collection of essays on theo-
retical problems he had encountered in the previous studies.
There was no doubt, in this work, that Baudrillard had
been working from the beginning with a concept of reification
which derived from the very different intellectual tradition
of critical theory, a current of European Marxism which is
usually traced to the work of Georg Lukács in the early
1920's and which found its most characteristic expression in
various thinkers associated with the "Frankfurt School,"
such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin
and also Herbert Marcuse.

As I shall demonstrate in my thesis, Baudrillard's
theory of the social object was, in significant part, born

in the confrontation between these two traditions. Yet
the tension between them, which informs at least the four
of Baudrillard's works to be discussed in this thesis,
has never been adequately explored. The critical theory
of society outlined by Lukács, Marcuse and the Frankfurt
School provided the general context in which Baudrillard
would put the micrological techniques of semiological cri-
ticism to work. But it was in a way the "metatheoretical"
self-assurance of critical theory itself which suffered
the greater loss of pride in this difficult collaboration.
This was especially evident in Le miroir de la production
(1973),[8]   a polemical dissection of both traditions and
their failure to come to grips with the cultural dynamic he
saw emerging in the United States and Western Europe during
the postwar years.

I try to do two things in this thesis. Both of them
are related to my explication of the theory of the object
in Baudrillard's early work. I demonstrate that Baudrillard's
double grounding in critical theory and structuralism is
neither an arbitrary syncretism nor an exotic juxtaposition,
because it yields important insights which are coherent in
terms of both traditions. But I also show that in spite
of the striking fit which Baudrillard is able to establish
between these orders of discourse, he is not attempting
an intellectual synthesis, at least, not in the sense that
others have tried to combine Marx and Freud. The relation-
ship between the two traditions in Baudrillard's work is
best described as mutually "deconstructive." In terms of

the problems Baudrillard's work addresses, structuralism and critical theory are peculiarly suited as standpoints for the interpretation and criticism of each other's approach.

Perhaps I should also make clear what I am not attempting to do. Baudrillard's method is to present social and cultural issues as staging grounds for competing theories and explanations. Out of the turmoil which ensues, he fashions the terms for an interpretation of the problems he has raised. This procedure, not always explicitly fore-grounded in Baudrillard's work, necessarily results in an intricate and demanding dialectic. Baudrillard distances himself from structuralist terms as he uses them. He abandons the categories of Marxian critical theory as he attempts to deepen them. Often, he will apply concepts positively which on principle he clearly rejects as inadequate. This is true, for example, of his use of categories such as "production" and "structure," to name only two. Of course, Baudrillard's discursive tactics are liable to produce anxious readers. Because his meanings are not obvious, and due to limitations of space and time, I have had to forego discussion of other currents in his work. Unlike the majority of post-structuralists, for example, Baudrillard is skeptical of the concepts of desire which have emerged in France in the wake of existentialism and structuralism (as if to suture up the ravaged relations of subject and object). But I have omitted any mention of his ambiguous development of Freudian themes, since they

could not be addressed adequately in anything short of an additional thesis. For the same reason, I have limited my discussion of Georges Bataille to a few remarks in Chapter I. The problem of desire is much more prominent in Baudrillard's later work, although it evolves from his way of appropriating the two traditions I <u>will</u> be discussing.

In the first chapter, I shall introduce the reader to the most important themes of Baudrillard's early work: the idea of reification, as Lukács elaborated it on the basis of Marx's theory of "commodity fetishism;" the idea of interpreting the social object as an element in a system of signification, as suggested by various structuralists, in particular Lévi-Strauss; and the general concern with objects, and with an object-like existence, which affected French culture in the 1960's, the period in which Baudrillard's ideas were forming. In each of these three sections of Chapter I, the presentation is necessarily schematic because the aim is only to establish the connection between the basic themes before developing them more fully in subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter, I have also divided the material into three sections. I explain how the object was interpreted as a problem by critical theorists, and how they attempted to project a solution in a particular theory of the social subject. I trace this theme in Lukács and Horkheimer respectively, and show how their approach tended to short-circuit the hermeneutic moment in critical theory. In the concluding section, I situate the structuralists in relation to the theory of reification,

and outline the way Baudrillard uses structuralism as a model for the interpretation of reified phenomena, and I show how this use renders his grounding in critical theory and also in structuralism ambiguous.

In Chapter III I discuss the work of Theodor Adorno briefly in order to show that the Frankfurt School was in fact grappling with the problems which Baudrillard's work addresses, but failed in many ways to go beyond Georg Lukács' position because critical theorists generally refrained from questioning the models of political economy and society inherited from Marx.

Chapter IV is entirely devoted to a discussion of Baudrillard's theory of the organization of objects and consumption in contemporary, or neo-capitalist societies.

In the final chapter, I interpret Baudrillard's theory of consumption as a historical mutation of traditional status systems. This explains, in part, how the sign becomes all powerful. When the system of status is generalized it loses its determinate meaning, and the type of signification it engenders spills over social boundaries and invades the social body. This is followed by a brief summary of Baudrillard's critique of the concepts of need, use value and production in political economy and once again I interrogate the status of interpretation in critical theory. I show that critical theory posits an axiological totality which, although it is historical, effects a premature closure which requires the antidote of interpretation. I show that Baudrillard achieved this by inte-

grating the problematic of the sign into the critique of
political economy. Finally, in my conclusion, I show that
Baudrillard's first four books form a coherent theoretical
project, and that he was only able to achieve this by
leaving the dimension of the symbolic uncharted — thus
setting the stage for his later work.

The title of this thesis should not be taken too liter-
ally. To give it an emphatic interpretation would have
required a long discussion of Jürgen Habermas at least;
but even among those who have written extensively on his
work, there is no agreement whether it proposes a defini-
tive break with that tradition, or its renewal, on shifted
ground. Like Habermas, Baudrillard is of two minds on
this issue. It is clear, in The Mirror of Production
(1973), the last of Baudrillard's works to be discussed
in this thesis, that he no longer believes that social
criticism can base itself on the axiological coordinates
of Marx's critique of political economy. Yet in that same
work, as I show in my conclusion, he still wants to
rescue the spirit of Marx's enquiry, if only by "relati-
vizing" Marx's model(s) in the way he had already done
with structuralism. As for Baudrillard's later work
it can be debated whether he has succeeded
in this enterprise, or simply betrayed the possibility
of rational criticism. Some have argued that Baudrillard
has slipped into the mode of "criticism for criticism's
sake."[9] In his defense, I would argue mainly that in a
genuine sense Baudrillard's argument has been faithful to

the real ambiguities of critical theory, to the point
where his discourse has begun to embody them, almost to
act them out.

Social criticism has always based itself on the
opposition of truth and ideology, on the claims of the uni-
versal and the necessary against the narrow perspective of
the particular and the contingent. Ideology is considered
to be ideology because it does not represent the interests
of all mankind; it represents "the interests of a parti-
cular class at a particular time in history," etc. But
what if, like Baudrillard, one no longer believes in uni-
versals, in substances of value, in the concept of "nature,"
or in the necessity of history? This suspicion is not just
a matter of philosophical taste in Baudrillard. His work
reveals that it is precisely this universalism which
underlies modern ideologies, and precisely the appeal
to axiological substances, such as the self-sufficient,
self-producing subject, or the "use-value" of the object,
which guarantees the ineffectuality of all critiques of
"reification," "commodity fetishism," and "alienation."

Baudrillard's critics would of course reply that his
attempt to escape these references in his pursuit of the
social forms of particularity, "symbolic exchange" and
"seduction"[10] — a pursuit which becomes much more pressing
in his later work — is only a case of throwing the baby
out with the bathwater.   The argument that the apparently
false "shadow" really owes its existence to the apparently
real "substance" which casts it does not provide grounds for

disposing of the substance. If reification or commodity
fetishism — in the sense critical theory uses these
unfortunate words — only appears in societies based on
production, utility, and rational consumption, as Baudrillard
claims, is this an argument for rejecting production, the
principle of utility, and the ideal "to each according
to his needs"? But before trying to answer this question,
no one should ignore Baudrillard's very compelling demon-
stration that "reification" is not just an illusion, not just a
a mental reflection of the alienated conditions of produc-
tion which can be wiped away in a turn of consciousness.
For there is a valuable irony in Baudrillard's assessment
of contemporary culture which is usually overlooked. As
Samuel Beckett wrote in Molloy: "The shadow in the end is
no better than the substance."[11]

NOTES — INTRODUCTION

[1] Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

[2] Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11.

[3] In France, Baudrillard's new books are regularly the subject of reviews and essays in the prestigious journal Critique. His books are reprinted in cheaper, pocket-sized editions and he is generally recognized as an important social thinker, although his reputation is far from established. Baudrillard has consistently failed to enter the mainstream of French social theoretical discourse. This may have something to do with his tendency to encourage the popular image of him as a bête noir: an intellectual alliance with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze was apparently scuttled in 1977 when he published a short study of these two prominent thinkers, provocatively entitled Oublier Foucault. (Mark Poster, personal communication) And in the influential weekly, Le Nouvel Observateur, he has been portrayed as a loner whose stark diagnosis of the collapsing infrastructures of "Western Civilization" are ignored because they are frightening, or taken out of context by ideologies of left and right. Gerard Bonnot, "Le Terroriste de Nanterre," Le Nouvel Observateur (Lundi, 16 juillet, 1979), pp. 42-44.

In North America, Baudrillard's work has not been widely discussed. But two of his books have appeared in

translation, and short selections have appeared in
Sub-Stance, 15 (1976), pp. 111-117; and in the Australian
"Working Papers" Collection, Language, Sexuality and Sub-
version, eds. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris (Darlington:
Feral Publications, 1978), pp. 88-98. (These selections
are contained in the full translations listed below, notes 6, 8).
Apart from scattered references, however, Baudrillard has
excited only moderate interest, and little direct discussion.
An exception is Marshall Sahlin's Culture and Practical
Reason (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976). Marcel
Rioux's Essai de sociologie critique (Montréal: Hurtubise
HMH, 1979) is also worth mentioning. But there has been no
major published discussion of Baudrillard's early work,
especially the first two books, where the complicated media-
tions which form the basis of his later, more popular, more
speculative books were originally worked through.

I should add that before Baudrillard became an instructor
of sociology at Nanterre in 1965 he was a professor of
German. He has published translations of Peter Weiss's
play Marat/Sade and Wilhelm E. Mühlmann's Messianisme
revolutionnaires du tiers monde (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

[4] Le système des objets: la consommation des signes
(Paris: Denöel/Gonthier, 1968). All further references
to this work will appear in the text as (S.O.).

[5] La société de consommation: ses mythes, ses structures
(Paris: Gallimard, 1970). All further references to this
work will appear in the text as (S.C.).

[6] <u>Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe</u> (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Translation: <u>For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign</u>, trans. Charles Levin and Arthur Younger, introd. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981). All further references to this work will be to this translation, appearing in the text as (<u>Critique</u>).

[7] The term "critical theory" is often used inter-changeably with the epithet "Frankfurt School," after the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) at the University of Frankfurt, where many of them worked before 1933. In fact, this group did not form a "school" in the sense that the term "critical theory" referred to a rigorous basis of common agreement, as Benjamin Snow explains: "Critical theory was never a fully articulated philosophy meaning the same thing for all the members of the Institute. It was more of a set of shared assumptions that distinguished their approach from bourgeois or "traditional" theory. "Introduction to Adorno's 'The Actuality of Philosophy,'" <u>Telos</u>, no. 31 (1977), p. 113.

Walter Benjamin kept up a loose association with the Frankfurt circle until the end of his life, and his influence continued to be felt in the work of Adorno.

Georg Lukács was never a part of the Frankfurt circle, for by the time of the Institute's formation he had become trapped in the Stalinist sphere of influence. But in many ways he can be said to have laid the groundwork for critical theory in the 1920's by helping to stimulate "the recovery

of the philosophical dimension in Marxism." (Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of The Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950 (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 42. Of the many other figures from this period of Marxist renewal, perhaps Karl Korsch is the most significant. His work is not addressed in this thesis.

[8] Le miroir de la production: ou l'illusion critique du materialisme historique (Tournai: Casterman, 1973). English translation: The Mirror of Production, tr. and introd., Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975). All further references to this work will be to this translation, appearing in the text as (M.P.). All citations from French texts are translated by me, except where otherwise indicated.

[9] Karlis Racevskis, in an interesting article, claims that "Baudrillard's project is, in the main, a quarrel with the intellectuals." This is, of course, true in the sense that it is true of all renegade thinkers. But I think it confuses Baudrillard with Foucault, for it is Foucault, not Baudrillard, who believes that intellectuals are "a class or caste continuously engaged in socializing, politicizing, acculturating the masses." Racevskis misses the sense of Baudrillard's critique of structuralism (and of Marxism). For Baudrillard, structuralism is not really a false theory, but a description of the way meaning is actually organized in what Marcuse calls "one-dimensional society." "The Theoretical Violence of a Catastrophical Strategy," Diacritics (September, 1979), p. 41.

[10] Jean Baudrillard, _De la séduction_ (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1979).

[11] Samuel Beckett, _Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy; Malone Dies; The Unnameable_; trans. Patrick Bowles in collaboration with the author. (New York: Grove Press, 1955, 1956, 1958), p. 26.

CHAPTER I

THE BASIC CONCEPTS: APPROACHES TO THE OBJECT

Baudrillard's works have focused from the beginning on the aesthetic status and ideological role of objects in society. In his first book, Le système des objets (1968), the reference in the title to the possibility of analyzing a "system" of objects draws clearly from two traditions of social theory which had yet to be brought together on this theme: the Marxist theory of the commodity in capitalist society and the structuralist analysis of systems of social signification. The first level of this relationship can be stated as follows: Baudrillard has resorted to the analytic techniques of semiological criticism in order to flesh out categories of critical theory such as "exchange value," "commodity fetishism," "reification," and "culture industry" (the term favoured by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to designate the emergence in the 1940's and 1950's of the "consumer society"). Unfortunately, the communication between critical theory and structuralism has been indirect at best, and there is by no means an exact fit between concepts which coincide in shared terms like "system," "subject," "object," and "ideology." Indeed their respective readings of Marx are quite different at several crucial points. In view of these difficulties, I shall introduce the theme of the social object in separate sections devoted to critical theory and structuralism respectively. In the third section of this chapter, I shall outline briefly some related themes prominent on the French postwar intellectual scene.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COMMODITY

Karl Marx defined commodities as "something two-
fold, both objects of utility, and . . . depositories
of value" — in other words, as both use values and
exchange values.[1] The use value of a commodity is its
aspect as "an object outside us, a thing that by its pro-
perties satisfies human wants of some sort or another."
(Capital, p. 35) According to Marx, there can be no
commodity which does not comprise some use value. But
there can be use values which are not commodities, because
the commodity is also an exchange value, and the exchange-
value of an object is never intrinsic to the object itself.
"Turn and examine a single commodity . . . as we will . . .
it seems impossible to grasp it «i.e., exchange value»."
(Capital, p. 47)

> Value . . . does not stalk about with a label
> describing what it is. It is value, rather,
> that converts every product into a social
> hieroglyphic . . . We try to decipher the
> hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our
> own social products; for to stamp an object
> of utility as a value, is just as much a social
> product as language. (Capital, p. 74)

For Marx, this "secret," in abbreviated form, is
labour. "Human labour-power in motion . . . creates va-
lue, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its
congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object."
(Capital, p. 51) Consequently, exchange value, unlike

use value, is an abstraction, and "the exchange of commodities is evidently an act characterized by a total abstraction from use-value." (Capital, p. 37) Exchange-value has no relation to the particularity of the object; it is the common property of all objects produced in capitalist society, i.e., an "expression" of "the labour-time socially necessary for its production," (Capital, p. 39) or "abstract human labour." The result of this fact, Marx argued, is that "«exchange-» value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity." (Capital, p. 47) In fact, if use values are, in a sense, the substance of objects, exchange value is the form which makes them interchangeable, delivers them over to a system of exchange which is indifferent to the concrete qualities of objects as such. But what makes the system complete — what closes it into the fully-developed capitals it forms — is the commodification of labour itself. When the system of exchange value achieves this level of autonomy, the commodity, as an element in that system, appears to forsake all reference to its origins in human labour, and becomes "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." (Capital, p. 71) Marx described this subterfuge of the object as "commodity fetishism."

Critical theory may be said to have begun, if not with Marx himself, then with Georg Lukács' adoption of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as the basis for a theory of capitalist socio-cultural development as a pro-

cess of "reification." In his classic work on Marxist philosophy, History and Class Consciousness,[2] Lukács was attempting to move away from the positivistic and economistic tendencies of institutionalized Marxism which had developed since the Second International and the Bolshevik Revolution. The theory of reification, set forth in the long essay, "Reification and the Proletariat," was a brilliant elaboration on Marx's classic chapter on "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof" in Capital.

In the metaphor of fetishism, Marx was of course restating the theme of the producer's alienation from his own product in the capitalist system of production. The worker's labour reappeared as an alien and hostile force, in the form of capital, or accumulated exchange value. . In short, the fruits of his own labour were turned against him. But the term "fetishism" also seemed to allude to the cognitive problems posed by the capitalist system. Clearly, the consequences of the rise of the exchange value system were not only social, but epistemological. In a sense, therefore, Marx was not only explaining how the capitalist system worked, but accounting for previous failures to understand it. Such, at any rate, was Georg Lukács' reading of Capital.

It is still debated to what extent Marx wished to carry the fetish metaphor beyond the production model of a subject making an object — to apply it to the "communication" model of subjects interacting with subjects in

society generally. Marx made frequent use in Capital of a number of highly suggestive phrases: "the language of commodities;" (p. 52) (emphasis added) "the enigmatical character of the equivalent form which escapes the notice of the bourgeois political economist;" (p. 57) "the mystical character of commodities;" (p. 71) "the magic and necromancy which surrounds the products of labour ⟨in capitalist society⟩;"(p.76) the "riddle" of the commodity, the commodity as a "social hieroglyph," and so on. Along with this, he conjured up a picture of the capitalist world as, in part, "an immense accumulation of commodities;" (Capital, p. 35) and he described the realm of commodities as a kind of society within society, with a life of its own, interacting with itself, all to the amazement of the human onlooker. "The relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour." (Capital, p. 72) "Their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them." (Capital, p. 75) It seems clear that Marx wanted his critique to embrace not only the commodification of labour and the direct mechanisms of exploitation, but also, at least, the alienated character of exchange relationships as such. The statement of the metaphor, the sense of the displacement of meaning from one realm to another, appears over and over in the text: "The mutual relations of the producers . . . ." Marx says again, "take

the form of a social relation between the products."
(Capital, p. 72)

Now, there are, very broadly, two schools of inter-
pretation with regard to the theme of fetishism in this
"mature" work of political economy. The first, which
Lukács and later critical theorists wished to refute,
treats commodity fetishism as a kind of "veil" which is
torn aside as soon as Marx's explanation is grasped. This
is supported by Marx's own forcefully reductive termino-
logy, in which "the characters who appear on the economic
stage are but the personifications of the economic rela-
tions that exist between them." (Capital, p. 85)   But
Marx also stated that his own discovery (of abstract human
labour, and its general form of equivalence) "by no means
dissipates the mist through which the social character
of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the
products themselves." (Capital, p. 74) (emphasis added)
And Marx seemed to grant the illusion of this "objective
character" a measure of historical, if ambiguous, reality,
when he stated, for example:

> The life process of society, which is based on
> the process of material production, does not
> strip off its mystical veil until it is treated
> as production by freely associated men, and is
> consciously regulated by them in accordance with
> a settled plan. (Capital, p. 80)

Marx's "mystical veil" was nevertheless an embodied mystical
veil — embodied in real social relations which, ipso facto,
would not "dissipate" until the social system itself was
fundamentally altered.[3]

Lukács seized on the implication that the commodity ruled more than just the economic life of capitalist society, and transformed it into the key to a socio-philosophical interpretation of Marx's work. Casting the whole issue in Weberian terms as a-crisis of understanding, Lukács attempted to show that the commodity in fully-developed capitalist society was becoming "the universal structuring principle" and that the "commodity structure" could "penetrate society in all its aspects and . . . remould it in its own image."[4]

> The problem of commodities must not be consi-
> dered in isolation or even regarded as the cen-
> tral problem in economics, but as the central,
> structural problem of capitalism in all its
> aspects. Only in this case can the structure
> of commodity-relations be made to yield a
> model of all the objective forms of bourgeois
> society together with all the subjective forms
> corresponding to them.[5]

To the extent that the emergence of the commodity form signalled a gradual but "thorough-going capitalist ration-alization of society as a whole,"[6] Lukács described the process generically as "reification," and uncovered its influence even in the forms of cognition themselves, as they were expressed in the classic antinomies of "bourgeois" thought. What appeared to economists, sociologists and philosophers as an opaque "second nature," with its own intrinsic laws of movement, Lukács would conceive as a dynamic, historical totality, the product of a human agency which had not yet come to grips with its own constitutive powers, not yet achieved true, historical self-consciousness.

Lukács' attempt to reclaim the Hegelian dialectic for historical materialism, and thereby to restore the constitutive role of the subject in Marxist philosophy was greeted at the time with mixed feelings in the Communist establishment, but it had a profound influence on members of what came to be known as the Frankfurt School who were interested in problems of culture in Capitalist society. In particular, this perspective was adopted by Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute for Social Research, in his programmatic essay "Traditional and Critical Theory;"[7] but it exercised an enduring influence on other writers associated with the Institute, such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse,[8] and also Walter Benjamin.

In France, after the Second World War, Maurice Merleau-Ponty devoted an important chapter of Adventures of the Dialectic to Lukács' work, and described the tradition which Lukács had inaugurated as "Western Marxism."[9] It should also be noted that Lukács' History and Class Consciousness, in which he elaborated the theory of reification, became available in French translation more than a decade before it appeared in English.[10] His work was given much consideration by prominent Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers associated with the Arguments group, such as Kostas Axelos, Pierre Fougeyrollas, Edgar Morin and Henri Lefebvre, who also translated and discussed the work of critical theorists such as Herbert Marcuse.[11] However, Lukács' boldly anthropocentric schema was not received well among French structuralists, who were beginning to dominate

the intellectual scene at this time. Louis Althusser, for example, denounced Lukács' theory of the historical mission of the proletariat as an anachronistic avatar of Hegelian subject-object identity, and linked his "humanism" with Marx's "immature" Paris Manuscripts, although these had still not been published in 1923, the year Lukács worked out his interpretation of Marx.[12] Furthermore, Althusser viewed Marx's chapter on commodity fetishism in Capital as a regression from his "mature," production-centered "science," characterizing it as "regrettable" because "all the theoreticians of alienation and reification have founded their idealist interpretations on it. . . ."[13] Althusser correctly argued that the theory of reification — at least as Lukács had presented it — would ground the critique of political economy in the experience of the subject. He bitterly opposed any such perspective, and declared this "last trace of Hegelian influence" an anamolous intrusion on the "correct" analysis of the capitalist system. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Lucien Goldmann, an important Marxist sociologist and literary critic who played a significant role in the structuralist movement, was perhaps Lukács' most persistent advocate in France during the 1960's.[14]

THE VALUE OF THE SIGN

In contrast to the critical theorist's attention to problems of reification and alienation in society, the structuralists have tended to emphasize the _active_ function of the object in any subject-object "dialectic." No doubt, this is one way of grasping the mutual hostility of Hegelian and structuralist thought. But, as I shall be arguing throughout, it is also the basis for an extremely interesting counterpoint in Baudrillard's early work, up to and including The Mirror of Production (1973). Structuralism does not serve merely as a foil for critical theory in Baudrillard's work; it also provides a method for _interpreting_ the commodity culture posited by critical theory, and thus for exploring the "physiognomy" of reification. In the words of Theodor Adorno:

> Life transforms itself into the ideology of
> reification . . . Hence, the task of criticism
> must be not so much to search for the particular
> interest-group to which cultural phenomena are
> to be assigned, but rather to decipher the gen-
> eral social tendencies which are expressed in
> these phenomena . . . Cultural criticism must
> become social physiognomy.[15]

For Baudrillard, the key to this task lies in the characteristically structuralist inflection of the language paradigm.

The structuralist perspective on the social object can be traced back to the work of Durkheim and Mauss in Primitive Classification:

> It was because men were grouped, and thought
> of themselves in the form of groups, that in
> their ideas they grouped other things, and
> in the beginning the two modes of grouping were
> merged to the point of being indistinguishable.
> Moieties were the first genera, clans the first
> species. Things were thought to be integral
> parts of society, and it was their place in so-
> ciety which determined their place in nature.[16]

This hypothesis of an intimate bond between social organi-
zation and the social meaning of objects reappeared in
Lévi-Strauss's Totemism and in The Savage Mind.[17] The
significance of his approach, however, lay in another di-
rection from Durkheimian functionalism: the object would
no longer appear as a homogeneous, unified "thing," but
as a type of meaningful relation — in other words, as a
sign. This was crucial to Lévi-Strauss's approach not
only because it suggested a link between systems of ex-
change and systems of meaning (such as myth), but because
for Lévi-Strauss "the promotion of the object to the rank
of sign"[18] encapsulated the immemorial transition from
nature to culture which inaugurated all societies, and
language itself. Taking inspiration from Marcel Mauss's
"precept that all social phenomena can be assimilated to
language,"[19] Lévi-Strauss declared: "Whatever the moment
and circumstances of its appearance in the chain of animal
life, language could only have been born in one fell swoop.
Things could not have begun to signify progressively."[20]
In effect, it was as if a sudden convergence of signifier
and signified had carved up the mute world into discrete
entries in a limitless and circulating lexicon. Objects

were immediately social, immediately endowed with significance.

In answer to the question "whether all phenomena in which social anthropology is interested really do manifest themselves as signs, such as a stock of tools, various techniques, and modes of production and consumption,"[21] Lévi-Strauss replied that "a stone axe can be a sign . . . ‹insofar as› it takes the place of the different implement which another society employs for the same purpose."[22]

> One cannot study the gods without knowing their
> icons; rites without analyzing the objects and
> the substances which the officiant makes or mani-
> pulates; social rules independently of the things
> which correspond to them . . .   If men communi-
> cate by means of symbols and signs, then, for
> anthropology . . . everything is symbol and sign,
> when it acts as intermediary between two sub-
> jects.[23]

This was effectively a proposal to develop the "science that studies the life of signs within society," whose province had been "staked out in advance" by Saussure.[24]   But if the territory was conceded without struggle, there were nevertheless several pockets of resistance which lingered, and Baudrillard would make these into reference points for the themes of critical theory.

Umberto Eco has described the essence of the semiologi-cal approach in the following words: "A cultural unit is defined inasmuch as it is placed in a system of other cultural units which are opposed to it and circumscribe it. We are concerned with values which issue from a system."[25]

In fact, this deceptively straightforward statement contains a very complex problematic. To begin with, for the concept of the sign to be generally applicable in the way Lévi-Strauss suggests, it must be conceived as an essentially arbitrary unit of meaning. This leads the structuralist, in turn, to posit meaning as a function of the systematicity of signifying elements. If structuralism were to transcend the level of truisms, it had to argue that the meaning of anything functioning as a sign must derive from the differences between the elements of a conventional system of signification. This leads to a rather intractable ambiguity. For on the one hand, meaning appears to be an endowment of the system — it comes, in a manner of speaking, from the "object" or sign, but not from what the sign "refers" to, insofar as that appears to be located outside the system.[26] But if it is the "system" which "motivates" the sign relationship (signifier/signified), in the absence of a functioning referent, there still remains some question as to the motivation of the system. In short, either there is some agent outside the sytem, which constitutes the system, or else the system itself, as a whole — as a determinant structure — is not arbitrary, but "natural," "given."

It is in the latter sense that structuralism tends to posit the immediacy of systems and the derived character of intentionality and human agency in general. But I have hedged this objectivism around with the caveat of "tendency" because in fact there is an ambiguity in the structura-

list notion of "system" which overlaps the epistemological
status of the structuralist's "model-building" activity.
Most accounts of the "structuralist activity" have a some-
what rationalist character. The model constructed by the
observer is conceived as abstracting the essential and
eliminating continuous features so that the model is formal
and its elements are all discrete, allowing for substitu-
tions and variations within the system.[27] As Roland
Barthes explained:

> Structure is . . . actually a simulacrum of
> the object . . . The imitated object makes
> something appear which remained invisible or,
> if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural
> object. Structural man takes the real, de-
> composes it, then recomposes it . . . The
> simulacrum is intellect added to object . . . [28]

From this point of view, structure implies a constituting
activity. But does this intentional character of the
"simulacrum" apply also to systems which the structuralist
cannot claim to have constructed, such as a "linguistic
system," or the "system of exchange value"? It is not
clear that the structuralist's models of such "objective"
systems are also objective; conversely, the critical theo-
rist would point out that the objective character of the
systems themselves — especially of the signifying systems
with which semiology is so fascinated — appears to be an
extrapolation from the formal, systemic and discrete qua-
lities of the structuralist's model — in sum, the object-
ive systems are reifications.[29]

, Now, as Lévi-Strauss has stated, "The notion of
structure has a structure."[30] And it is, according to
one commentator on Lévi-Strauss, ultimately to the (uni-
veral) structure of the human unconscious which the struc-
turalist's model must refer if the model itself is to make
any sense.[31] Thus, structures and structural models appear
to be both consubstantial with the observed object, and at
odds with it. Although they are about the object, they
are also, in a sense, the object itself:

> Structural analysis is confronted with a
> strange paradox, well-known to the linguist:
> the more distinct the apparent structure,
> the more difficult it becomes to grasp the
> deep (unconscious) structure, because consc-
> ious and deformed models are interposed as
> obstacles between the observer and his ob-
> ject.[32]

Lévi-Strauss presents his model as a hidden plane of the
observed reality. Yet an element of constructed formality
still intervenes. As he says, "Social relations consist
of raw materials out of which the models making up the
social structure are built, while social structure can,
by no means, be reduced to the ensemble of the social re-
lations to be described in a given society."[33] Here,
structure functions both as the determining property of
human objectifications — a kind of all-embracing <u>code</u> —
and as a construct of the anthropologist which refers to
them. In effect, Lévi-Strauss writes as if actual social
relations ("raw material," "conscious and deformed models")
are an abstraction compared to his putative structural

model ("social structure"). He gives no hint that the·
danger of reduction may be proceeding in the opposite
direction, in that he is attempting to assimilate actual
social relations to the <u>model</u> of "social structure."

It is precisely to the extent that this epistemology
ranges in a limbo between embodiment and abstraction that
Baudrillard has placed the semiological approach in the
service of a critical interpretation of contemporary cul-
ture. But in order to achieve this, Baudrillard had to
purge structuralism of its claim to uncover an ideal sys-
tematicity and to reinterpret this claim instead as a res-
ponse to the ordered abstraction of commodity culture and
the self-regulating impersonality of systems of exchange
and of signification in complex, neo-capitalist societies.
In this sense, the formal elements of structural analysis —
the arbitrary nature of the sign, the constitutive status
of the system (as opposed to its user), and the manipulation
of discrete, fungible terms according to the rules of a
code — appear in Baudrillard's analysis as embodied fea-
tures of commodity culture and contemporary social experi-
ence. In <u>Le système des objets</u>, Baudrillard proposed these
aspects of the sign as historically relative characterist-
ics of the object emerging in the age of standardized pro-
duction and mass consumption whose consequences for the
experience and meaning of social existence could in part be
deciphered through semiological reconstruction. This meant
that Baudrillard would treat the structure of the sign, its

systemic autonomy, and its tendency to favour metonymic

relations of meaning, as properties of modern culture

rather than as inherent and exclusive feature of all so-

cial signification. Hence, the sign becomes for

Baudrillard a kind of structural model of reification;

(Critique, p. 163) and structuralism presents itself some-

what equivocally as both interpretans and interpretant.

But it is important in this context to recognize that

Baudrillard is no longer concerned with structuralism as

a particular doctrine, but as a cultural expression of

the generalized appeal of social theories stressing the

determinant powers of form, structure, system, order, re-

gularity and pattern. In this light, to use one example,

Marshall McLuhan's popular slogan, "the medium is the

message," appears as "the very formula of alienation in

a technical society."[34] According to Baudrillard, McLuhan's

hypotheses about social communication are "worth reexamin-

ing" because of the way they seem to reflect and confirm

the "abstraction" of social life through the "imposition

of models." (Critique, p. 175)

A NOTE ON THE THEME OF REIFICATION IN FRENCH LITERATURE
AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Apart from structuralism and critical theory, however,
there were other, more general and secular sources for
Baudrillard's orientation toward social object. Perhaps
the most important of these was the widespread belief, in
postwar France, that American capitalist culture bore with-
in itself universalizing and levelling tendencies which
were quickly spreading to the Continent. Together with
the appearance of television (which was still very gradual
in France in the early nineteen sixties, in contrast with
Britain),[35] the rapidly expanding market for mass-produced
commodities was perhaps the most potent symbol of this
cultural transition. France has for some time been notor-
ious for the power of its technocrats and the rapid pace
of its modernization programs in industry, energy and archi-
tecture. The destruction of Les Halles and its replacement
by an imposing new "cultural centre" named in honour of the
late President Pompidou remains one of the most prominent
signs of the entire "modernizing" trend.[36]

In response to this process, there was a general
movement within French social theory during the decades
after the war to draw attention to the growing impoverish-
ment of "everyday life." At the center of this tendency
was the eminent philosopher, sociologist and ex-member of
the French Communist Party, Henri Lefebvre, one of

Baudrillard's colleagues at the University of Paris (Nanterre).
Lefebvre published a series of books on the theme of
everyday life after the war,[37] drawing not only on the
insights of critical theory, but, to a certain extent,
on the language paradigm favoured by the structuralists —
although he persistently criticized their objectivist
orientation and authored a series of rebuttals to Althusser.[38]
In Marxist circles in general (outside the CP) there was
an outcry in defense of the "particular" (as against the
rational or Hegelian "universal") which paralleled similar,
though earlier developments in critical theory. This was
reflected especially in certain tendencies of structuralism
typified by the work of Roland Barthes, but also in the
attempts to synthesize Marxism and phenomenology or exist-
entialism. In his lengthy Critique of Dialectical Reason,
Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to combine the specificity of
micrological analysis with the totalizing sweep of Marxian
dialectic, and cited Lefebvre's "progressive-regressive
method" as a means of accomplishing this.[39]

Not far removed from this activity was the work of
two other groups which achieved some notoriety in the 1960's.
One was the Socialisme ou Barbarie collective, which in-
cluded Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean-François Lyotard and
Claude Lefort, a student of Merleau-Ponty.[40] In connection
with Baudrillard, their work — particularly that of
Castoriadis — is most significant for its growing awareness
of certain repressive dimensions in Marx's work. The other
was the Situationiste Internationale, a neo-Surrealist anti-

organization which included activist students such as
Raoul Vaneigem, and Guy Debord, who published a scathing
attack on the commodification of culture, entitled La
société du spectacle, in 1967.[41]

Many of these writers, including Baudrillard and
Lefebvre, became involved in one way or another in the
extraordinary "eruption" — "les événements de mai" —
during the spring of 1968, when university students evolved
a sustained and demonstrative protest directed at De Gaulle's
regime — which was nearly toppled — and against what was
perceived as the mindless conformism of the consumer society.
Although the focus of the general strike which ensued be-
came increasingly conventional as the large trade unions
became involved, the overriding issue, as far as the stu-
dents were concerned, was the semantic crisis of capitalism.
Students compared the irrelevance of much of their univer-
sity training to the meaningless routine of most productive
labour; and many workers agreed with this analysis, scaling
their demands toward a wholesale reorganization of work
relationships and working environments.

Many of the issues of the strike came in a direct
line of descent from the Surrealists, whose politicized
aesthetic, enunciated in such manifestoes as André Breton's
"Surrealist Situation of the Object," combined easily with
the argument of Marcuse and others that the commodity cul-
ture falsified human desires and stifled the creative im-
pulse to transform the status quo and humanize the political
process.[42] It was from the perspective of a Marxism fused

with existentialist and Surrealist values that many involved
in the uprising would interpret the structuralist movement
as an ideological expression of technocratic consciousness
and authoritarian order. The connection was perceived es-
pecially in the structuralists' tendency to set aside or
abolish the issue of linguistic and symbolic reference, and
to reduce human and social activities to closed signifying
systems, thus "autonomizing" their own discourse in a self-
justifying and self-referential circle reminiscent of the
strategies of bureaucratic power.[43]

No one had anticipated this response to structuralism
more than Henri Lefebvre, who located the "decline of
referentials"[44] as a major feature of the "bureaucratic
society of controlled consumption," and of a "discarded,
decayed, functionalized, structuralized and 'specialized'
everyday life . . ." from which "a cry of loneliness
rises . . . the intolerable loneliness of unceasing commu-
nication and information."[45] It was in fact Lefebvre who
had coined the term "everyday life" and who had been one
of the first to call for responsible Marxist analyses of
modern culture in France, which he then pursued himself in
a series of books which culminated in La vie quotidienne
dans le monde moderne, published the same year as
Baudrillard's Le système des objets. Although Lefebvre was
well known for his hostility to structuralism, like Paul
Ricoeur he demonstrated that it was possible to appropriate
many of its insights without succumbing to its neo-positi-
vist epistemology. Lefebvre did not deny that a certain

cooperation between linguistic, aesthetic and anthropolo-
gical views was proving fruitful in the study of "neo-
capitalist"[46] culture, and he integrated these into his
own critical sociology.

Lefebvre's somewhat Lukácsian motif was the fragment-
ation of society into progressively more specialized par-
tial and disconnected systems; everyday life itself had
already become the stagnant backwater in this constellat-
ing process. Even language was succumbing to the tendency
to break up into separate spheres of interest of increas-
ingly unrelated content: communication in everyday life,
according to Lefebvre, was marked by the growing preval-
ence of signals.[47] This observation drew not only from
Lefebvre's own special concern with the dehumanization of
the urban environment, with its automated inefficiency,
but from the prolific growth of an anonymous commodity
culture. "We are surrounded by emptiness, but it is an emptiness
filled with signs," he declared.[48] The connexion with
what Roland Barthes had said in Mythologies with its
apparently eccentric but illuminating collection of
feuilletons devoted to various items of modern popular
culture, seems obvious now. But whereas Barthes, from
a resolutely structuralist point of view, saw the "refer-
ential illusion" as the essence of ideological thinking
in Western cultures, (of which realism in literature was
but one example), Lefebvre saw the "decline of referentials"
as an historical phenomenon intimately bound up with the
ongoing dissolution of traditional society, the ominous

"progress" toward a cybernetic civilization and the realization of the structuralist obsession with reified systems, self-regulating order.

The theme of declining (or illusory) linguistic and symbolic powers of reference has always been near the heart of the various rhetorics of social and conceptual "crisis." It was Husserl's preoccupation when he proposed a science of the lebenswelt which would restore the pre-scientific experience of the world as the ground of natural and mathematical knowledge.[49] Existentialism had already begun to thematize the issue as a crisis of collective faith; the sense of the "arbitrary" as a decisive new dimension of social life was summed up in the concept of the absurd, and situated historically in the suggestion that God had died sometime during the nineteenth century. And, although positivism's reaction to these problems was perhaps best expressed in the name positivism itself, it boldly joined the discussion with charges about the meaninglessness of traditional references and with proposals for a new language to suit the age. From this point of view, it is possible to see structuralism as, in part, one of the heirs of the positivist program.

Writers like Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and later, in France, Henri Lefebvre, attempted to situate these debates on the more mundane level of experience in ordinary life. Viewing the whole problem of reference in the structured historical perspective of Marx's critique of political economy, they interpreted the crisis not as

the death of meaning, but as a series of _shifts_ in meaning
which had a concrete basis in changes in social life, mu-
tations in social structure, and developments of "material
production." These shifts could be formulated in terms
of _things_ as well as language, which meant, of course, that
the emerging "critique of everyday life" could with justi-
fication frequently adopt the point of view of a bygone,
artisanal, and perhaps more genuinely communal era in order
to gain historical perspective on the rise of the "commodity."

This emphasis on the communal "other" of capitalism
was particularly evident in the writings of Georges Bataille,
whose career, like Henri Lefebvre's, spanned the period
before and after the war, and included an early association
with the Surrealist movement. But what is especially imp-
ortant about Bataille's work, with respect to any interpre-
tation of Baudrillard, is his critical perspective on
classical political economy, from which he did not ultimate-
ly exclude Marx. Bataille was convinced that the essence
of societal structures prior to capitalism could not be
deemed "economic" in the sense that the significant social
object was always the means of expressing a symbolic and
ritual transcendence — or "transgression" — not, as Marx
believed, as the means of the _material_ reproduction of
life.[50] He disagreed with the standard theory that primi-
tive economies were based on barter and, not unlike Lévi-
strauss, drew on the authority of Marcel Mauss's study of
The Gift[51] to formulate a counter-theory of exchange whose
basis was "not the need to acquire which (exchange) satis-

fies today, but the contrary need of destruction and loss." "The archaic form of exchange has been identified by Mauss under the name of potlatch," he pointed out.[52] In Bataille's view, the primitive relation to the object was not consumption, but consumation, a non-rationalizable social process related to his theory that important meanings could only arise out of nonmeaning, or from uncodified or decodified social material.[53] For Bataille, meaning always arose in and through excess, and excess — or transgression — was by definition beyond the rational ends of production. It was very much in the context of Bataille's part maudite that Baudrillard received Lévi-Strauss's theories of primitive exchange as a clue to an alternative to exchange based on equivalence in capitalist society. But Bataille did not only foreshadow the theory of symbolic exchange. His rejection of Western, productivist economies implied that Marx's critique of political economy had not gone as far as it should in getting to the root of the capitalist malaise.[54]

The Surrealists were notorious for their fascination with the aesthetic possibilities of randomly juxtaposing ordinary, everyday objects, and stripping them of their utilitarian dimension. As I have already noted, the theme of random juxtaposition resurfaced in France after the war in the structuralist tendency to privilege relations of contiguity in general. The watchwords were discontinuity and the death of the subject. The relations of meaning were arbitrary, not necessary or intentional, and therefore

there was no point in trying to ground them in human
agency. Taken to an extreme, this emphasis on aleatory
parataxis could be interpreted as reflecting or conjuring
up a world entirely devoid of human intentionality — a
mere collection or "heap" of things. This was exactly how
the world appeared in the novels of Robbe-Grillet.
According to one critic, Robbe-Grillet's "Nouveau Roman"
seemed to propose "the idea of a universe in which people
are merely objects and objects are endowed with an almost
human hostility."[55] Lucien Goldmann, the Lukácsian socio-
logist and literary critic, attempted to demonstrate that
there was a "rigorous homology"[56] between the structure
of social reification and the structure of the Nouveau
Roman. For Goldmann, the analogy between Robbe Grillet's
work and the ordinary experience of capitalist society was
"marked by the appearance of an autonomous world of objects,
with its own structures and its own laws and through which
alone human reality can still to a certain extent express
itself."[57] Roland Barthes, on the other hand, was less
disturbed by the social implications of Robbe Grillet's
aesthetic than by the fact that it seemed to be an attempt
to vindicate novelistic realism; but he did point out that
there would be an "inevitable inference from the [hypothe-
tical] non-signifying nature of things to the nonsignifying
nature of situations and men,"[58] and added, with a note
of irony, that "if nature signifies, it can be a certain
acme of culture to make it designify."[59]

. The relation between what Goldmann saw as an
increasingly alienated social experience and the concerns
of modern fiction were made even more explicit in a short
but compelling novel by Georges Perec entitled _Les choses_,
which appeared in 1965 and won the Prix Renaudot.[60]
Les choses depicted a young married couple, Sylvie and
Jerome, living in a state of almost total absorption in a
kind of netherworld of commodities, things, objets d'art.
But the novel's central concern was this _demi-monde_ of
consumption itself; Sylvie and Jerome only wafted from
object to object, almost unnoticed, merging with the
system of objects. Their relationships were quite liter-
ally "reified." Nothing in the novel escaped the metonymic
terror of things, their differences, their substitutions,
their relationships with each other.[61]

NOTES — CHAPTER I

[1] Karl Marx, Capital, 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Richard Aveling, ed., Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 47. All further references to Capital in this chapter will be found in the text.

[2] Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971).

[3] Still, it is worth remembering that Marx would probably not have used the phrase "mystical veil" if he had not believed that these social relations were but the superstructure of the productive system. Reification would disappear with the mode of production which gave rise to it.

[4] Lukács, p. 85.

[5] Lukács, p. 83.

[6] Lukács, p. 171.

[7] Max Horheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in Critical Theory: Selected Essays, trans. Matthew J. O'Connel, et al., (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 188-243. The article first appeared in 1937.

[8] Marcuse's concept of "one-dimensionality" extends Lukács' theory of reification to account for developments in American capitalism since the New Deal. Baudrillard develops Marcuse's concept of "repressive desublimation" in La société de consommation. See Herbert Marcuse,

One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

[9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectic, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

[10] A translation by Kostas Axelos appeared in 1960.

[11] A brief discussion of the affinity of the Arguments group and the Frankfurt School is contained in Mark Poster, Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), especially p. 248, n. 81.

Other writers, including Mikel Dufrenne and Jean-François Lyotard showed an early interest in the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno.

Baudrillard himself frequently refers to English sources in his work, including Thorstein Veblen, David Reismann, Daniel Boorstin, John Kenneth Galbraith. Together with his facility in German, this must have given him relatively privileged access to Frankfurt material not yet available in the French language.

[12] Louis Althusser, For Marx, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 222, n.

[13] Louis Althusser, "Avertissement aux Lecteurs du Livre I du Capital," in Karl Marx, Le Capital: Livre I, trans. J. Roy (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), p. 22.

[14] Goldmann never failed to draw appreciative attention to Lukács' work in all his numerous publications. See his Introduction à la Philosophie de Kant (Paris: Gallimard,

1967), which was originally published in 1948.

[15] Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in Paul Connerton, ed., Critical Sociology (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 271.

[16] Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Primitive Classification, trans. and introd. Rodney Needham (London: Cohen and West, 1963), pp. 82-83.

[17] Claude Lévi-Strauss, Totemism, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); The Savage Mind (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

[18] Georges Charbonnier, Conversations with Lévi-Strauss, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 125.

[19] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in Marcel Mauss, Sociologie et Anthropologie (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), p. XLIX.

[20] Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction," p. XLVII.

[21] Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Scope of Anthropology, trans. Sherry Ortner Paul and Robert A. Paul (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 18.

[22] Lévi-Strauss, Scope, p. 18.

[23] Lévi-Strauss, Scope, p. 19.

[24] Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 16.

[25] Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 73.

[26] Jonathan Culler, _Structuralist Poetics:_
Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature
(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 18: "Pre-
cisely because the individual signs are unmotivated, the
linguist must attempt to reconstruct the system, which
alone provides motivation."

[27] Culler, p. 14: "Whatever the rights of the
linguistic case, for the semiologist or structuralist
concerned with the social use of material phenomena the
reduction of the continuous to the discrete is a methodo-
logical step of the first importance." (emphasis added)

[28] Roland Barthes, _Critical Essays_, trans. Richard
Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972),
pp. 214-15.

[29] See Baudrillard's _For a Critique of the Political_
Economy of the Sign, especially the essays "Fetishism and
Ideology: The Semiological Reduction," and "Towards a
Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign." A similar
argument has been made by John Fekete in _The Critical Twi-_
light: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American
Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan (London: Routledge
and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 195-97. I am indebted to his
formulation of the structuralist issue.

[30] Claude Lévi-Strauss, _Structural Anthropology_, trans.
Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York:
Doubleday, 1967), p. 170.

[31] Yvan Simonis, _Claude Lévi-Strauss ou La "Passion_
de l'Inceste": Introduction au Structuralisme (Paris:

Aubier Montaigne, 1968), pp. 170-71.

[32] Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, p. 274.
I have altered the translation slightly to conform to the
original. Incidentally, Lévi-Strauss's statement brings
out his affinity with systems thinking on the other side
of the Atlantic. As Karl W. Deutsch put it, when pre-
scientific notions based on "experiences of the dialogue,
of struggle, and of historical process" were applied to
problems of human "organization: self-sustaining or self-
controlling or self-enlarging as the case may be . . .
the only model used to describe these processes was human
society itself" which proved "baffling to those who tried
to understand it while participating in its conflicts."
(The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication
and Control (New York: Free Press, 1966), pp. 35, 38.

[33] Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, p. 271.

[34] Jean Baudrillard, "Compte Rendu de Marshall
MacLuhan (sic): Understanding Media: The Extensions of
Man," L'Homme et la Société, no. 5 (1967), p. 230.

[35] John Ardagh, The New France: A Society in Transi-
tion, 1945-1977 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican Books,
1977), p. 630.

[36] One of Baudrillard's recent publications analyzes
the new structure very unsympathetically. L'Effet Beaubourg:
Implosion et Dissuasion (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1977).

[37] The first of these was entitled Critique de la vie
quotidienne 1: Introduction (Paris: Grasset, 1947) re-
printed (Paris: L'Arche, 1958). A second volume appeared

in 1962 under the subtitled <u>Fondements</u> <u>d'une</u> <u>sociologie</u> <u>de</u> <u>la</u> <u>quotidiennété</u>. In 1968, Lefebvre published <u>La</u> <u>Vie</u> <u>Quotidienne</u> <u>dans</u> <u>le</u> <u>Monde</u> <u>Moderne</u> (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

[38] Most of these essays can be found in Lefebvre <u>Au</u> <u>delà</u> <u>du</u> <u>Structuralisme</u> (Paris: Anthropos, 1971).

[39] Sartre explained his plan to use this method in <u>Search</u> <u>for</u> <u>a</u> <u>Method</u>, trans. and introd. Hazel Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 51. The original French version of this work was published together with the <u>Critique</u> in 1960.

[40] On <u>Socialisme</u> <u>ou</u> <u>Barbarie</u>, see Poster, <u>Postwar</u> <u>Marxism</u>, pp. 201-209. See also, Richard Gombin, <u>The</u> <u>Origins</u> <u>of</u> <u>Modern</u> <u>Leftism</u>, trans. Michael K. Perl (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), which serves as a good introduction to the radical political background of Baudrillard's work.

[41] Guy Debord, <u>La</u> <u>société</u> <u>du</u> <u>spectacle</u> (Paris: Buchet/ Castel, 1967); Raoul Vaneigem, <u>Traité</u> <u>du</u> <u>savoir-vivre</u> <u>à</u> <u>l'usage</u> <u>des</u> <u>jeunes</u> <u>générations</u> (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). On the Situationists in general, see Gombin, <u>Origins</u>, passim. The Situationists organized conferences on everyday life, practiced "guerilla theatre" and, like <u>Socialisme</u> <u>ou</u> <u>Barbarie</u>, generally dissented from the staid traditionalism of the mainstream left in France, especially the French Communist Party.

[42] See André Breton, <u>Position</u> <u>politique</u> <u>du</u> <u>Surréalisme</u> (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1962).

[43] See, for example, Epistémon (pseudonym), <u>Ces</u> <u>idées</u> <u>qui</u> <u>ont</u> <u>ebranlé</u> <u>la</u> <u>France</u> (Paris: Fayard, 1968), pp. 26ff.

[44] Lefebvre, _Everyday Life in the Modern World_, pp. 110-127.

[45] Lefebvre, _Everyday Life_, pp. 124-125.

[46] This is Lefebvre's term. Many words and phrases have been coined to suggest the passing of competitive industrial capitalism as Marx understood it. Since Lefebvre's solution seems the least prejudicial, I have adopted it throughout.

[47] Lefebvre, _Everyday Life_, p. 62.

[48] Quoted in Dick Hebdige, _Subculture: The Meaning of Style_ (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 117.

[49] Edmund Husserl, _The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology_, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). Among other things, Husserl was concerned about the "superficialization of meaning" attendant on the "mathematization of nature" in which "one operates with letters and with signs for connections and relations . . . (such that) the original thinking which genuinely gives meaning . . . is excluded." (pp. 44, 23, 46)

[50] For a similar argument, which can be compared to Baudrillard's analysis of the art auction in _Critique_, see Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in _The Interpretation of Cultures_, pp. 412-453.

[51] Marcel Mauss, _The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies_, trans. Ian Cunnison and introd. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

[52] Georges Bataille, La part maudite, précédé de la notion de depense (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), p. 31.

[53] See Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in Writing and Difference, trans. and introd. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 251-277.

[54] Michel Foucault's 1963 essay on Bataille, "A Preface to Transgression," comes nearest to Baudrillard's reading of Bataille in many respects. In particular, the following passage invites close comparison to Baudrillard's conclusions about the failure of Marx's critique of political economy to "transgress" the problems of the "society of consumption":

> In a form of thought that considers man as worker and producer — that of European culture since the end of the eighteenth century — consumption was based entirely on need, and need based itself exclusively on the model of hunger. When this element was introduced into an investigation of profit (the appetite of those who have satisfied their hunger), it inserted man into a dialectic of production which had a simple anthropological meaning: if man was alienated from his real nature and immediate needs through his labor and the production of objects with his hands, it was nevertheless through its agency that he recaptured his essence and achieved the indefinite gratification of his needs. But it would undoubtedly be misguided to conceive of hunger as that irreducible anthropological factor in the definition of work, production, and profit; and similarly, need has an altogether different status, or it responds at the very least to a code whose laws cannot be confined to a dialectic of production.

Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. and introd. Donald

Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon
(Ithaca, New York: Cornel University Press, 1977),
pp. 49-50.

[55] John Ashbery, "On Raymond Roussel," in Raymond
Roussel, How I Wrote Certain of My Books, trans. Trevor
Winkfield (New York: SUN, 1977), p. 52.

[56] Lucien Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel,
trans. Alan Sherican (London: Tavistock, 1975), p. 7.

[57] Goldmann, p. 139.

[58] Roland Barthes, Critical Essays, p. 199.

[59] Barthes, p. 203.

[60] Georges Perec, Les Choses (Paris: Editions
"J'ai Lu," 1965).

[61] The novel is briefly discussed in Le système
des objets, pp. 235-238.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL THEORY: THE PRIMACY OF THE SUBJECT

Georg Lukács: The Collective Subject and the Totality

Max Horkheimer: The Epistemology of Reification

Structuralism, Critical Theory and Baudrillard

Notes

GEORG LUKACS: THE COLLECTIVE SUBJECT AND THE TOTALITY

In the progression from Baudrillard's Le système
des objets in 1968, through his study of consumption in
La société de consommation, (1970) to the collection
of theoretical essays in For a Critique of the Political
Economy of the Sign, (1972) there is a movement of ten-
sion between the praxis-orientation of critical theory
and the relatively objectivist thrust of structural semi-
ology. (In fact, Baudrillard only begins to make his
awareness of this movement explicit in the last mentioned
work, in which he develops a critique of key categories
in both camps.) The value of this tension can perhaps
be formulated most succinctly in terms of the problem of
reification, as Lukács delineated it, and the structura-
list answer to it.

Most arguments between critical theory and structura-
lism can be viewed as struggles over the interpretation
of the relation between subject and object. Lukács formu-
lated the central issue very clearly:

> From systematic doubt and the cogito ergo sum
> of Descartes, to Hobbes, Spinoza, and Leibniz,
> there is a direct line of development whose cen-
> tral strand, rich in variations, is the idea
> that the object of cognition can be known by us
> for the reason that, and the degree in which it
> has been created by ourselves.[1]

The quandary which pits critical theory against structura-

lism has to do with the nature and significance of this human agency. Few dispute that the social world must, at some level, be interpreted as a human construct. But is this construct characterized by certain invariant features which are ultimately beyond conscious dominion, as some structuralists have argued? Or will increased understanding of historical and social dynamics permit men and women to expand their intentional control over their own destinies to a greater degree than in the past? How are we to grasp the seeming paradox of language, which is a preeminently human creation, and yet can be treated quite plausibly, as not only the structuralists have done, as though it were an "object" constituting the "subjects" who speak and write it? As Lukács wrote: "History is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man."[2] Many would agree; but they would also point out that historical "change" is not necessarily conscious "overthrow," and that it is rather dubious to conceive of "man" as a "substance" which takes priority over "external" "forms." The structuralist would add that it is surely misleading to exaggerate what can be derived from the truism that "man makes his own history." The often anonymous, socially constituted rule system, codes, languages, and conventions which in a gross sense govern different aspects of social life and link them together (what the structuralists refer to as langue in opposition to parole), can not be made identical to patterns of conscious,

formative activity in such a way that the totality of a
culture is accessible in principle or essence to intro-
spection and self-reflection.

It is well-known that Lukács attempted to go beyond
the epistemological limitations and antinomies of the
idealist and/or rationalist notion of the constitutive
subject by historicizing the subject-object dialectic
and grounding it in a praxis-oriented ontology. Lukács'
insight was to reinterpret the cognitive problems of tra-
ditional European philosophy (such as the problem of the
"irrational," the "thing in itself," the antinomial charac-
ter of reason) as expressions of the individual's failing
ability to grasp the social totality under the increasingly
complex circumstances of the emerging capitalist system.
In other words, Lukács argued, as the purview of market
relations extended deeper into social life, the links be-
tween subjective intentions and objective results were gen-
erally split apart — an experience which was reinforced
by the individualist ideology of the market place — and
praxis became severed from cognition. The task Lukács
set himself was, in effect, to rediscover the points of
continuity between subject and object, and to teach how
to strengthen their convergence. As we have seen, he
found the key to the problem in Marx's analysis of the
commodity as a product of an essential human praxis
(mostly labour) which had become caught up in an indepen-
dently functioning system exercising social and economic
control over the producers themselves. Reification was

no illusion — no veil of mist clouding the eyes of
perception; it was real and could only be transformed
through concrete praxis.

Thus, Lukács saw the possibility of historically
achieving a harmony of subject and object in "the relati-
vizing or interpenetration of the subject and the ob-
ject . . ."[3] The subject's fractured relation to the
totality could be restored, insisted Lukács, but not
through an individual act of mind:

> "Bourgeois thought judges social phenomena . . .
> consistently from the standpoint of the indivi-
> dual. No path leads from the individual to
> the totality . . . The totality of an object
> can only be posited if the positing subject is
> itself a totality.[4]

The way beyond reification was accessible solely from the
standpoint of the whole. But "In modern society only the
classes can represent this total point of view."[5] In
addition, such a "total point of view" could only arise
through an active relation to the object, and this would
only occur in the class which was oppressed by the reified
totality, and wished to transform it.

> This image of a frozen reality that nevertheless
> is caught up in an unremitting, ghostly movement
> at once becomes meaningful when this reality is
> dissolved into the process of which man is the
> driving force. This can be seen only from the
> standpoint of the proletariat.[6]

With the progress of reification from intensive to exten-
sive forms ("to embrace the whole of society"), "the way

is opened up for an infinite progression leading to the thorough-going capitalist rationalization of society as a whole." But, "For the proletariat . . . the 'same' process means its own emergence as a class."[7] In other words, the prospects for transcending reification lay in the conditions being laid down by history for "universal history."[8]

In Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty took up Lukács' theme of the "interpenetration of subject and object," but no longer as a measure of the potential integration of a rational totality. Instead, for Merleau-Ponty, the "relativization" of this traditional polarity was the source of real ambiguity in the world, an index of the formidable tasks of interpretation which still lay ahead before (in Lukács' words) "the antitheses of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity, «could» be held to be solved."[9] As Merleau-Ponty phrased it:

> The Marxism of the young Marx as well as the
> 'Western Marxism' of 1923 lacked a means of
> expressing the inertia of the infrastructures,
> the resistance of economic and even natural
> conditions, and the swallowing-up of 'personal
> relationships' in 'things.' History as they
> described it lacked density and allowed its
> meaning to appear too soon. They had to learn
> the slowness of mediations.[10]

Lukács' insistence on a "total point of view" as the only antidote to the problem of reification effectively ruled out the possibility of an interpretative dialectic. In its influential disposition as the "standpoint of the

totality," critical theory had developed an unfortunate response to its positivist rivals which consisted not so much of seeking to understand the datum in relation to a context as of reducing it to that context. In a way, this was a parody of explanation which viewed the "object" as an abstract appearance of an essence (the subject): a totality and its accompanying contradiction. In his insistence that "no path leads from the individual to the totality," Lukács had ruled out the dialectic of part and whole and reduced his postulate of the fluid boundaries between subject and object to a kind of absolutism of the subject obsessed with asserting its domination of all meaning: before reified social reality could be interpreted, Lukács would simply dissolve it back into the subject.

In contrast to Lukács, members of the Frankfurt school were less sanguine about adopting Hegel's principle of "substance as subject."[11] But his promethean tendency to interpret the "interpenetration of subject' and object" as a solely pragmatic rather than also as a syntactic or hermeneutic principle continued to exercise a decisive influence on the alternatives to Soviet Marxism. Again and again it appeared, at least implicitly, as the key to a praxis conceived as the dissolution of the object (with unwelcome overtones of reductive univocity and even intimations of a kind of dematerialization of the social environment). In 1960, Jean-Paul Sartre, in the context of an attempt to amend Marxist universalism with the existen-

tialist concern for particularity, went so far as to declare that "our historical task, at the heart of this polyvalent world, is to bring closer the moment when History will have only one meaning, when it will tend to be dissolved in the concrete men (sic) who will make it common."[12] One could argue that this problematic derived from critical theory's failure to make a careful distinction between the reified organization of society and the existence in society of "things" as such. There is after all, a difference between the autonomy and multiplicity of aesthetic and moral objectifications — human and social expression — and the anonymous systems of institutional and economic control which constituted the prime focus of Lukács' (and Marx's) critique. But it also appears that, to a certain extent, the very conception of emancipation had become bound up with a subjectivist philosophical anthropology which was, in Theodor Adorno's words, "hostile to otherness,"[13] and consequently tended to ignore any possible need to examine the features of reified phenomena at close quarters.[14] This tendency can be traced even in Horkheimer's conception of critical theory, as he outlined it in his important essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory."

MAX HORKHEIMER: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF REIFICATION

"The critical theory of society," argued Horkheimer, "is, in its totality, the unfolding of a single existential judgement" involving the "characterization of an economy based on exchange" whose "inner dynamism . . . dominates social reality" and "contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era."[15] Following from this, Horkheimer proposed essentially two tasks for critical theory, comprising a two-pronged attack on the problem of reification. The first was to demonstrate at every level the real contingency of historical and social reality:

> A consciously critical attitude . . . is part
> of the development of society: the construing
> of the course of history as the necessary pro-
> duct of an economic mechanism . . . implies
> here a struggle to change it from a blind to
> a meaningful necessity. If we think of the
> object of the theory in separation from the
> theory, we falsify it and fall into quietism
> or conformism.[16]

Secondly, critical theory had to defend against the hypo-statization of reason as "a thing or an idea rather than an act," for if this "subjectivist view holds true, think-ing cannot be of any help in determining the desirability of any goal in itself."[17] But Horkheimer astutely recogni-zed a problem for a theory based on these conceptions, these particular integrations of fact and value:

> In many areas of the theory there thus arise
> propositions the relation of which to reality
> is difficult to determine. From the fact that
> the representation of a unified object is true
> as a whole, it is possible to conclude only
> under special conditions the extent to which
> isolated parts of the representation can validly
> be applied, in their isolation, to isolated
> parts of the object.[18]

In this statement, Horkheimer advances at least an implicit

qualification of the Hegelian principle of subsumption

under the category of totality, or the "total point of

view" of Lukács' historical "subject-object identity" (the

proletariat). The "basic form" to which he refers, "which

contains within itself the internal and external tensions

of the modern era"[19] is not to be taken as a mechanical

formula for generating an exhaustive picture of the social

totality. But Horkheimer still posits critical theory as

a totality in response to a totality — "the unfolding of

a single existential judgment" — and nowhere in the essay

evinces a clear awareness that the theory does not take

sufficient account of the problem of interpretation or,

as Merleau-Ponty phrased it, the "slowness of mediations."

This apparent oversight boomerangs in Horkheimer's recogni-

tion that the theory itself tends to resist interpretation:

"There are no general criteria for judging the critical

theory as a whole, for it is always based on the recurrence

of events and thus on a self-reproducing totality."[20]

Since the theory cannot be detached from its object at any

significant point, the problem of the truth of critical

theory itself is relativized, consigned to the historically

temporary but irrational exterior of its own "totality."[21]

Having posed the cultural-historical problem of reification, Horkheimer asks how it is that people, "confronted with the persisting contradictions in human existence and with the impotence of individuals in face of situations they have themselves brought about," remain passive and affirm the rationality and/or the necessity of the world as given.[22] In spite of the historical and relative character not only of the object, but of the "perceiving organ," "the individual perceives himself as receptive and passive in the act of perception."[23] For Horkheimer, as for Lukács before him, the reified immediacy of the subject's relation to the object (and to society) is compounded by a strange dichotomy: "Reflecting on themselves, men see themselves only as onlookers, passive participants in a mighty process which may be foreseen but not modified."[24] The individual, in his dependency, is rigidly opposed to society itself, which appears as "an active subject, even if a non-conscious one and, to that extent, a subject only in an improper sense."[25] The "activity" of society as a kind of decapitated agent stands over and against the passive, thinking individual, only confirming his isolation and impotence. For Horkheimer,

> this difference in the existence of man and
> society is an expression of the cleavage which
> has up to now affected the historical forms of
> social life. The existence of society has
> either been founded directly on oppression or
> been the blind outcome of conflicting for-
> ces ... .[26]

Thus, although the object is "shaped by human activity,"
its subjective character has been occulted and decollecti-
vized by historical oppression or "the blind outcome of
conflicting forces." Society is "a subject only in the
improper sense."

The solution which suggests itself in the light of
Horkheimer's formulation is deceptively simple, for the
epistemological problem has been made to coincide exactly
with the dynamic of reification. Plainly, the contradic-
tion must be resolved, and this can only be achieved by
making society "a subject in the proper sense," that is,
an expression of the "unified, self-conscious will" of an
"all-embracing subject, namely self-aware mankind," which
"will for the first time be a conscious subject and acti-
vely determine its own way of life" as the "result of
conscious spontaneity on the part of free individuals."[27]
Everything has been (or will be) telescoped in the formula
of a knowledge which is not circumscribed or determined by
its object. This is why both Lukács and Horkheimer must
tie their transcendental critique of reification to the
standpoint of the totality. Both problems will converge
in a common solution: the elimination of the object as a
specific determination. With this must also disappear
the real, social and synthetic mediations of the subject,
which are always mirrored analytically in the particulari-
ties of interpretation and the ambiguity of the object.
Yet these are surely the very threads with which not only

the reified social fabric but a new pattern of social
freedom would be grasped and woven. Here, ironically,
it is reification itself which is reified, reduced from
a process to an entity, just as the subject has been re-
duced, in principle, to an abstract and simple totality.

STRUCTURALISM, CRITICAL THEORY AND BAUDRILLARD

> *It is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy.*
> Theodor Adorno[28]

There has been no systematic structuralist survey of critical theory, but the outlines of such a confrontation can, I believe, be discerned in Louis Althusser's celebrated strictures on "Marxist humanism."[29] As we have already seen, Althusser was bitterly opposed to the view, elaborated by Lukács and shared in part by Horkheimer and his colleagues, which follows from the assumption "that the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism . . ."[30] Althusser was concerned to rebuke "every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man."[31] He depicted the Marxist humanist "philosophy of man" as a kind of fiction about the alienation and reappropriation of human destiny in history:

> History is the alienation and production of reason in unreason, of the true man in the alienated man. Without knowing it, man realizes the essence of man in the alienated products of his labour (commodities, state, religion). The loss of man that produces history and man must presuppose a definite pre-existing essence. At the end of history, this man, having become

> inhuman objectivity, has merely to re-grasp as
> subject his own essence alienated in property,
> religion and the State to become total man,
> true man.[32]

In place of this metaphysical "historicism,"
Althusser proposes a model of the social formation in
which there is no "centre" — or, at least, in which "man"
is no longer at the center of the social process:

> Marx shows that what determines a social forma-
> tion in the last instance, and what provides
> knowledge of it, is not the spirit of an essence
> or a human nature, not man, not even 'men,' but
> a relation, the relation of production . . .
> This is not a relation between men, a relation
> between persons, nor is it inter-subjective,
> psychological or anthropological, it is rather
> a double relation: a relation between groups
> of men concerning the relation between these
> groups of men and things, the means of produc-
> tion. It is one of the greatest possible mysti-
> fications of theory to think that social rela-
> tions are reducible to relations between
> men . . . for it is to suppose that social re-
> lations . . . «do not» also concern things, the
> means of production , drawn from material
> nature.[33]

It is interesting to note that in spite of Althusser's
attempt to suggest a decentered model of the totality by
stressing the role of "things," he nevertheless assimilates
social objects to the production process ("the means of
production"), a "theoretical" procedure which, in effect,
reproduces the promethean vision of Marx in objectivist
form and provides the social formation (and history) with
a new center — production — which is at least as arbi-
trary as the "humanist" stress on the subject. In a sense,

the relation of Althusser's version of Marx to that of
"humanism" — and by extension, to critical theory's ver-
sion of Marx — appears more _metonymic_ than "scientific."
Althusser does not so much abandon the concept of totality
as substitute a version of totalization which is taxonomic
rather than dialectical. In his typically structuralist
emphasis on _relation_, Althusser loses the specificity of
historical differences. He reduces them to the _overdeter-_
mination of one sector of the social formation in relation
to the others, but never accounts for actual changes with-
in the sectors — including production — which might
transform the _nature_ of the relations between them. If
Althusser is correct to attack certain forms of Marxism
for proposing a theory of "false consciousness" which
hypostatizes the "truth" of the subject in inescapably
Hegelian-theological terms (the basis for Althusser's
distaste for the theory of reification), he nevertheless
repeats the same error in the objectivist form of naive
realism by reifying the Hegelian-Marxist concept of
(spiritual or social) "contradiction" as the "motor" of
history. The most important point for our purposes, how-
ever, is that Althusser's insight that social relations
include the relations between things, his attempt to
"decentre" Marxist theory, is not intended to confront
Marxism or critical theory with the problem of interpre-
tation, but simply to shift explanatory power away from
the transcendental subject and give it to the allegedly
"objective" category of production.

Since Baudrillard's work emerged when the
structuralist movement in France was at its height, it
would be useful at this point to introduce a broad dis-
tinction within structuralist thought in order to clarify
Baudrillard's relation to it. Structuralism can tend
roughly toward two poles which determine the significance
of semiological approaches such as Baudrillard's in entire-
ly different ways. The scientistic tendency in structur-
alist social theory, such as Althusser's (or to a lesser
extent, Lévi-Strauss's), inclines toward the taxonomic
construction of totalities. It likes to reduce the parti-
cular and the individual to instances or cases of general
laws, and holds to the implicit assumption that one
"subject" can objectify the entire object domain without
presupposing communication with others or the reciprocal
understanding of co-subjects — in other words, without
presupposing the hermeneutic character of the "subject-
object relation" in the social sciences.[34] Instead, it
tries to adopt a natural scientific model of data as re-
peatable, exchangeable material. This kind of structura-
lism treats semiological analysis as the experimental
production of possible instances of a fixed code. As I
have already noted, Baudrillard has interpreted this para-
digm of structuralism as a model of repressed and repressive
communication which combines with the functioning of the
commodity system to produce what he has called "the politi-
cal economy of the sign." (Critique, chapter 8)

The other structuralist pole might be characterized
generally, in Paul Ricoeur's term, as a "hermeneutics of
suspicion."[35] While retaining the general distrust of
subjectivity common to all structuralism, it develops this
suspicion heuristically rather than dogmatically by ex-
tending it to the "objectivity" of the structuralist
object-domain, where it uncovers a surreptitious "totali-
tarian" purpose — that is, an objectifying project which
presupposes the totalizing capacity of a subject or a
structural "centre" to the object.[36] This "post-structur-
alist" inclination may be compared to critical theory in
its effort to recall, against the grain of most structura-
list discourse, that meaning is not always a closed form
to which the subject must unilaterally adapt, but an open
and problematic process. It tries to "deconstruct" the
assumed immediacies and objectivities of conventional
structuralism by demonstrating that the systems of meaning,
codes, languages, etc., identified by the semiologist as
"given" are in fact constructed in the biases of theory
and method, mediated by contemporary social and philosophical
concerns which may have been left unexamined. This post-
structuralist "suspicion" enfolds not only positive social
science with the insight that "language bears within it-
self the necessity of its own critique,"[37] but insists
even more profoundly on qualifying critical thought itself,
for "we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition
which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic,

and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks

to contest."[38] It is to this, rather than the scientistic

current of structuralist thought, that Baudrillard's work

may be compared. As one reviewer of Le système des objets

has remarked:

> Here we are far from the neutral — that is
> to say, profoundly conservative — scientific
> rigour of 'structuralist' thought. If it owes
> something to the method of the 'structuralists,'
> Jean Baudrillard's project is nevertheless not
> simply to describe phenomena and to establish
> the laws which preside over their organization.
> Such quietism, which is elsewhere considered
> respectable, is, it seems, foreign to him.[39]

Consequently, it would be misleading to view

Baudrillard's adoption of a semiological perspective on

the "system of objects" as an objectivist embellishment

of critical theory, as if structuralism would provide

a conclusive supplement to the other's hypotheses and

insights. I have spoken of a progression in Baudrillard's

early work which traces a kind of counterpoint or tension

between the two forms of social theory. If in Le système

des objets and La société de consommation the relation of

the two theories appears to be ambiguous, in For A Critique

of the Political Economy of the Sign and The Mirror of

Production, Baudrillard's next two works, it is clear that

their interaction has been mutually "deconstructive."

Both the structure of the commodity and the structure of

the sign are called into question, and with them, the self-

assurance of semiotic and Marxian criticism. Looking at

the commodity from the point of view of the sign,
Baudrillard was able to show that Marx had posited an
overly utilitarian basis for his critique of political
economy in which he tended to assume that the social
existence of objects could be rationalized in a histori-
cal dialectic of needs and production. (As I shall at-
tempt to show briefly in the next chapter, this is also
a latent tendency of critical theory.) Baudrillard's
reading of Marx's philosophical anthropology, which he
interpreted as the axiological basis of Marx's critique
of political economy, meant that the field of political
economy would have to be redefined so as to include the
process of signification and the social relations organ-
ized around it. "The object of this political economy,"
concluded Baudrillard

> that is, its simplest component, its nuclear
> element . . . is no longer today either com-
> modity or sign, but indissolubly both, and
> both only in the sense that they are abolished
> as specific determinations, but not as form.
> This object is quite simply the object, the
> object form, on which use value, exchange
> value and sign value converge in a complex
> mode that describes the most general form of
> political economy. (Critique, p. 148)

For Baudrillard, this amounts to positing a social form
in which "signs can function as exchange value . . . and
use value" and "the commodity can take on, immediately,
the effect of signification — not epiphenomenally, in
excess of itself, as 'message' or connotation — but be-
cause its very form establishes it as a total medium, as

a <u>system</u> <u>of</u> <u>communication</u> administering social exchange."
(<u>Critique</u>, p. 146)

This sense of the repressive potential of the structuralist sign is made especially evident in Baudrillard's analysis of Roman Jakobson's model of communication, in which Jakobson had elaborated a series of terms mediating the relation of "transmitter" and "receiver" and classifying the nature of their communication.[40] As we saw earlier, the structuralist analysis of meaning depends first on "the reduction of the continuous to the discrete." For Baudrillard, this operation describes the essence of the sign, and explains the abstraction of an arbitrary adequation of signifier and signified — or sign and "reality." If the sign is a "simulation model of meaning," then Jakobson's communication model is a "<u>simulation</u> <u>model</u> of communication. It excludes . . . the reciprocity and antagonism of the interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange." (<u>Critique</u>, p. 179) The structure of communication described by Jakobson is comparable in its effect to the arbitrary structure of the Saussurian sign. (<u>Critique</u>, pp. 179-80) "Two terms «transmitter/receiver» are artificially isolated and artificially reunited by an objectified content called a message." (<u>Critique</u>, p. 179) The specificity and indexicality[44] — the, so to speak, "indiscrete" qualities — of actual communicative exchange have been abstracted and rationalized in the model, though not only, according to

Baudrillard, in the name of an idealized simplification,
but in order to facilitate the practical "circulation of
information" — or "messages," which have the structural
form of exclusion and separation and therefore of calcu-
lability and interchangeability.

> The code becomes the only agency which speaks,
> which exchanges itself and reproduces through
> the dissociation of the two terms «transmitter/
> receiver» and the univocity «signifier/signi-
> fied» . . . of the message. (Likewise, in the
> process of economic exchange, it is no longer
> people who exchange; the system of exchange
> value reproduces itself through them.) So, this
> basic formula succeeds in giving us, as a re-
> duced model, a perfect epitome of social ex-
> change such as it is . . . (Critique, p. 179)

But with the emergence of this "form," which combines
"object" and "message," exchange value and "information,"
utility and meaning, and which therefore collapses the
classical existential distinctions between political econ-
omy and culture, production and consumption — and also,
in a sense, subject and object — traditional critical
discourse is thrown into a conceptual crisis:

> It is here that the concept of alienation proves
> useless . . . The code of political economy,
> which is the fundamental code of our society,
> does not operate by alienating consciousness . . .
> A parallel confusion arises in the view of
> "primitive" myths . . . Here the pregnant
> effects of mythic contents are held to bind soci-
> ety together (through the "cohesion" of belief
> systems). But actually, these myths make up a
> code of signs that exchange among themselves,
> integrating the group through the very process
> of their circulation . . . Likewise . . . the
> code of political economy . . . rationalizes and
> regulates exchange, makes things communicate,
> but only under the law of the code and through
> the control of meaning. (Critique, p. 147)

To paraphrase Lévi-Strauss himself, Baudrillard was "attempting to transcend the contrast between 'base' and 'superstructure' by operating from the outset at the level of the sign."[42] But if "the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the very heart of the sign," then not only the concept of the sign, but indeed even Baudrillard's critique of the political economy of the sign must at certain crucial points be complicit in the general political economy they help to construct and to criticize. As Baudrillard himself admitted in his conclusion to La société de consommation, "it is critical discourse which closes us into the mythic, prophetic teleology of the 'Civilization of the Object.' critical discourse which is so fascinated by the object," In fact, "This counter-discourse, which establishes no real distance, is just as immanent to the consumer society as any other of its aspects." (S.C., pp. 315-16) In consequence, Baudrillard would attempt to develop new concepts of the subject and object beyond the sphere of political economy, beyond the "logic" which always reduces one to the other. For Baudrillard, this could only be articulated, signified, in terms of "what is other than the sign," of what the sign "excludes and annihilates" — a social dimension in which "is rooted a type of exchange which is radically different from the exchange of values (exchange values and sign values)." But of this other subjectivity, and its restored relation to the otherness of the object,

Baudrillard proclaims, with a note of irony, that "we can say nothing, really, except that it is ambivalent, that is, it is impossible to distinguish respective separated terms and to positivize them as such." This is the "symbolic exchange" which "is foreclosed and abolished by the sign." (Critique, pp. 160-61)

I have tried to show that what is particularly striking, and somewhat confusing, about the confluence of structuralism and critical theory in Baudrillard's work is the way that it plays off the sense, in each tradition, that the other is guilty of reifying or hypo-statizing the social constituens. As we have seen, the signifying systems semiology views as constitutive of the subject appear to critical theory as reifications. For his part, Baudrillard does not finally reject either position. As far as the issue of constitutive human praxis is concerned, he is quite "ambivalent," as we have just seen, which may account for the apparently deliberate inconclusiveness of his work. On the one hand, Baudrillard seems committed to the concept in critical theory of emancipation, and in particular to the ideal of a non-instrumentalized human praxis; his theory of symbolic exchange stresses the liberating potential of the speech situation and the direct interaction of subjects evolving new meanings independently of codes and the systemic ab-straction of the sign. On the other hand, he conceives

these possibilities in terms of an historical "rupture,"
or radical discontinuity, which is reminiscent of the
structuralist belief in an "objective" history, or
Foucault's progression of "epistèmes."[43] More important
for present purposes, however, is the fact that
Baudrillard does not conceive the subjective relation
to reified systems of social signification as fundamentally
passive and contemplative, as do both critical theory
and structuralism in their own way. His grasp of the
phenomena of reification through semiology allows him to
see them as positive meanings rather than as purely nega-
tive falsifications of the subject, and thus enables him
to conceive the subjective relation to reification as
constitutive and active, if still severely limited and
compromised by the quasi-autonomous, systemic character
of the universe of commodities, signs and technology
which he describes.

But if the category of the subject is ambiguous in
Baudrillard's work, this may only be a reflection of its
uncertain status in both critical theory and structuralism.
Indeed, the rhetoric of some of the structuralists on
this point is sometimes difficult to fathom. Many of
them — but one thinks of Althusser and Lacan in particu-
lar — describe even the experience of subjectivity as an
entirely ideological product: the "subject" is presented
as a kind of "position" within social structure or the
institution of language. Yet no structuralist has succeed-
ed in showing that there can be a social process without

subjects of some kind. The very writers who stigmatize
the "subject" as the ultima ratio of all ideology tacitly
assume that the construction of the subject is a necessary
process: no subjects, no society, no language. In short,
the structuralist argument leaves us asking exactly the
sort of question raised by critical theory, namely — what
kind of subject (and by extension, what sort of conscious-
ness) is it desirable for society to evolve? But the
structuralist approach leaves us further behind in some
ways, for the substitution of the notion of "ideological
construction" for the truism that subjects are social
leaves the idea of "structure" itself entirely adrift
from any kind of activity or practice; the practices of
particular subjects are always seen as having been insti-
tuted by structures, and never the other way round.
Structuralism indeed becomes a kind of parody of the pro-
cess of reification Lukács described. And the subject-
object metaphysics with which Althusser, Lacan and others
would charge critical theory remains entirely intact,
for if the subject is determined in the sense that it
remains a term within a larger system or a "position"
within language, and not also a creator and animator of
structures, then the only way beyond "ideology" (through
revolution or science) would be an absolute transcendence
of structure. Since for these structuralists the subject
is a localized product with no reciprocal powers over what
produces it, the projects of social change, science and
structuralist objectivity in general would have no recourse

but to claim, in relation to the constituting structures they describe, a non-positional, _extra_-structural status — a sort of "relationality in itself," either a total structure, or an omnipresent, omniscient conscious- ness — all of which sound suspiciously like Lukács' "subject-object identity." Essentially, then, it appears that the structuralist habit of claiming that there is something specifically ideological about the concept of the subject as such is itself ideological. In Theodor Adorno's words, it is no solution "to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject." For his part, Baudrillard's aim is not to turn the 'object' into an "idol," as Adorno warns, but to develop a nexus of critical and structural categories in which the object takes on special status as a problem for interpretation within these traditions.

NOTES — CHAPTER II

[1] Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p. 112.

[2] Lukács, p. 182.

[3] Lukács, p. 142.

[4] Lukács, p. 28.

[5] Lukács, p. 28.

[6] Lukács, p. 181.

[7] Lukács, p. 171.

[8] Lukács, p. 186.

[9] Lukács, p. 142.

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Adventures of the Dialectics, p. 64. For direct references to Lukács' theory of the dialectical interpenetration of subject and object, see pp. 30-31ff. and p. 69.

[11] Lukács, p. 142. See G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind, trans. J.B. Baillie and introd. George Lichteim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 80.

[12] Jean Paul-Sartre, Search For a Method, p. 90.

[13] Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 191. (This work was originally published in German in 1966.)

[14] The one major exception is the reification of the labour process itself, which has been the subject of many studies. An excellent recent example is Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

[15] Max Horkheimer, Critical Theory: Selected Essays, trans. Matthew J. O'Connel and others (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 225, 227.

[16] Horkheimer, p. 229.

[17] Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason, 2nd edition (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 6, 7.

[18] Horkheimer, Critical Theory, p. 227-228.

[19] Horkheimer, p. 227.

[20] Horkheimer, p. 242.

[21] See for example Critical Theory, pp. 234, 236, 238 and 240, where Horkheimer tries to reconcile the conception of critical theory as a "unified whole" with the contrary principle that the theory must change to adapt to changing social reality. On the one hand, "the theory as a whole is caught up in an evolution," (p. 238, emphasis added), but on the other, it retains an unchanging core since the "basic economic structure" remains "identical." (p. 234) One can already feel Lukács' edifice crumbling in the essay, for Horheimer has to admit that the theory cannot entertain the idea "of an absolute, suprahistorical subject or the possibility of exchanging subjects;" (p. 240) yet he will not allow that for critical theory to remain sensitive to change and difference, it cannot claim to be a totality, especially a unified one. Horkheimer can only conclude with the rather equivocal statement that "To speak of the constancy or changeableness of truth is strictly meaningful only in a polemical context." (p. 240)

[22] Horkheimer, Critical Theory, p. 204.

[23] Horkheimer, p. 200.

[24] Horkheimer, p. 231.

[25] Horkheimer, p. 200.

[26] Horkheimer, p. 200.

[27] Horkheimer, pp. 208, 241, 233, 200.

[28] Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 181.

[29] Louis Althusser, For Marx, passim. A comparable sentiment is expressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, p. 262: "We need only recognize that history is a method with no distinct object corresponding to it to reject the equivalence between the notion of history and the notion of humanity which some have tried to foist on us with the unavowed aim of making historicity the last refuge of a transcendental humanism: as if men could regain the illusion of liberty on the plane of the 'we' merely by giving up the 'I's' that are too obviously wanting in consistency."

[30] Lukács, p. 170.

[31] Althusser, p. 227.

[32] Althusser, p. 226.

[33] Quoted in Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 81-82. «Louis Althusser, "Est-il simple d'être marxiste en philosophie?" La Pensée, October, 1975, pp. 27-28.»

[34] This generalized portrait is drawn from Karl-Otto Apel, who states, for example, that "a modern 'logic of

science' that does not reflect upon ultimate a priori presuppositions has just by this very fact inherited a tacit presupposition of traditional epistemology; namely, that one solitary subject of knowledge could objectify the whole world, including his fellow men. To put it another way, it inherits the presupposition that the knowing subject can, in principle, win objective knowledge about the world without at the same time presupposing knowledge by sign-interpretation or intersubjective understanding, which cannot have the character of objectivity, and nevertheless may be improved upon in a methodical way." "The A Priori of Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed., Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 294.

[35] Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32f.

[36] See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Writing and Difference, trans. and introd. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-279.

[37] Derrida, p. 284.

[38] Derrida, pp. 281-282.

[39] Jean Aubert, "Compte Rendu de Jean Baudrillard: Le système des objets," L'Homme et la Société, no. 11 (January-March, 1969), 230.

[40] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in T.A. Sebeok, ed., Style in Language (Cambridge, Mass.: 1960), p. 353ff.

[41] On the indexicality of everyday communication, see Kenneth Leiter, A Primer on Ethnomethodology (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 107ff.

[42] Lévi-Strauss's statement reads: " . . . I had tried to transcend the contrast between the tangible and the intelligible by operating from the outset at the sign level." The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 1, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 14.

[43] For a brief discussion of the problem raised by Baudrillard's discontinuous model of history and social change, see Mark Poster's introduction to The Mirror of Production (M.P., pp. 14-15).

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL THEORY: THE PRIMACY OF THE OBJECT

The Object: Nonentity or Nonidentity?

The Riddle of Interpretation

Signing Off Critical Theory

Notes

THE OBJECT: NONENTITY OR NONIDENTITY?

If the "subject" is difficult to disengage from its
transcendental shadow, the concept of the object is no
less problematic. The very word "object" conjures up a
sense of ontological groundedness, of "givenness" which
is reassuring, but illusory. The theory of reification
is in part an attempt to dispel this "illusion" by medi-
ating the distance between the dialectical polarity of
the "object" as an epistemological concept and thinking
about empirical social objects as such. In critical
theory, the avenue joining these themes, as I have already
suggested, is itself an analytical construction: Marx's
commodity form. Now this dialectic obviously poses a
host of difficulties. Baudrillard's interpretation of
the problem of reification in terms of the semiological
model of the signification process makes the most sense,
I believe, if it is viewed not just as a positive doctrine,
but as a response to some of these difficulties. In this
regard, it would be useful, in order to get at the diffi-
culties more precisely, to examine briefly Theodor Adorno's
reflections on commodity fetishism and reification.
Adorno was perhaps the most radically skeptical of the
critical theorists; yet in the light of Baudrillard's
work it can be shown that Adorno did not carry his project
of immanent critique far enough to penetrate the ideo-
logical residues hidden within Marx's critique of political

economy itself.

Adorno characterized the task of contemporary philosophy and critical theory as <u>interpretive</u>,[1] and defined his own philosophical project as an effort "to use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity."[2] Adorno's animadversions were directed not only at "bourgeois" philosophy, but at critical theory itself, especially that of Lukács. As early as his inaugural lecture in 1931, Adorno enunciated a general principle the consequences of which he would spend the rest of his life elaborating — that "philosophy «and critical theory» must first reject the illusion . . . that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real."[3] On the surface, this dictum would not seem to conflict with Lukács' views, since Lukács insisted on the cognitive role of praxis and argued that the "standpoint of the totality" was only possible from the point of view of a collective subject. But Lukács' hypothesis of the revolutionary proletariat as the subject-object identity of history struck Adorno as an idealist betrayal of Marxian materialism. Adorno believed that difference — even the difference between the subject and the object — must be articulated and nurtured if freedom and individuality were to have any hope of surviving in the modern world. This called for determined resistance to the synthetic juggernaut of "identitarian thinking." In <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>,[4] which Adorno wrote with Horkheimer,

he opposed the identification of the principle of equivalence with rationality, and unearthed this principle and its hostility to particularity in social exchange — especially in the universalizing abstraction of exchange value which, with Marx and Lukács, he deplored as the basis of social interaction in capitalist society. But if Adorno was always sensitive to the problem of reification, he denied it the philosophic scope Lukács had accorded it on the grounds that "the truth content of a problem is in principle different from the historical and psychological conditions out of which it grows."[5] According to Adorno, "nothing more is given to ⟨philosophical interpretation⟩ than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings."[6] It was only in this partial and heuristic sense that Adorno would grant significance to Lukács' claim to have discovered the solution to the (subject)-object problem.

Above all, Adorno was skeptical of the tendency we have already noted in critical theory to understand the recovery of an active historical subjectivity as the implied dissolution of the object. "The thinker may easily confort himself by imagining that in the dissolution of reification, of the merchandise character ⟨commodity⟩, he possesses the philosopher's stone,"[7] he noted scornfully. But "there could be no dialectic without the element of solid things . . . ."[8] Adorno's concern was that an attempt to eliminate all "alien" otherness in a philosophy of pure

praxis would not make the object go away — but it might

serve as an alibi for repression and intensified reifica-

tion of social life. "Consciousness," he argued,

> 'reified' in existing society, cannot ultimately
> be recovered as constitutive source. Whoever
> treats objectivity or 'thing'-quality as radi-
> cally evil and aims to dissolve reality as a
> whole in pure praxis or self-production, tends
> to be animated by hostility to the Other or
> stranger . . . that is, by hostility to that
> domain of non-identity which would provide free-
> dom not only for 'consciousness' but for a
> reconciled humanity.[9]

Adorno's argument is an extension of the Frankfurt

critique of instrumental reason and the ideology of the

domination of nature. The clue to this interpretation

lies in Lukács description of the reified appearance of

the social world as a "second nature." Lukács was appalled

at the way the contradictions of capitalist societies were

habitually grasped at the level of a problem in the "admi-

nistration of things." But Adorno's implied criticism

seemed to be that Lukács' will to reassert human control

over the refractory, reified reality of society would

mimic the logic of the domination of nature and translate,

in practice, into the domination of human beings. Indeed,

he believed this had already occurred.

> We can no more reduce dialectics to reification
> than we can reduce it to any other isolated
> category . . . The cause of human suffering,
> meanwhile, will be glossed over rather than
> denounced in the lament about reification. The
> trouble is with the conditions that condemn
> mankind to impotence and apathy and would yet
> be changeable by human action; it is not pri-

> marily with people and with the way conditions
> appear to people. Considering the possibility
> of total disaster, reification is an epi-
> phenomenon . . .[10]

Unfortunately, there are serious ambiguities in
Adorno's attempt to redress the balance of the subject-
object dialectic. In his hostile treatment of Lukács'
work (like Althusser, Adorno identifies this with the early
Marx), it is not clear whether Adorno wishes to distinguish
the object and the integrity of human objectifications
from the social process of reification (a useful distinc-
tion which would clarify many confusions in critical
theory), or whether he simply wishes to identify the object
with reification, to characterize even art as reification,
and thus dismiss the whole issue as a false problem. At
several points in his argument, Adorno describes reifica-
tion as "the reflexive form of false objectivity . . , a
form of consciousness" — or, in other words, as a matter
of false consciousness.[11] But if this characterization of
reification as simply "the way conditions appear to people"
and as a "form of consciousness" is taken seriously, then
it would seem that Adorno was resurrecting precisely the
essentialist spectre of a "true" consciousness which he
wanted to exorcise from critical theory. On the one hand,
it reduces the issue to the ignorance of social subjects
and implicitly defines the experience of reification as a
deception with no objective social reference; on the other,
it revives the old dichotomy of subject and object which

Lukács had so ably criticized, and situates critical
theory on the horns of the classical idealist dilemma:
either reification must be tolerated in perpetuity as
the human condition, or the subject must "transcend" the
object by, in effect, reabsorbing it into his body.[12]
Some have argued that Adorno, in an attitude of growing
resignation and despair, acquiesced to the first of these
options. But it is not my intention to reduce his position
to either of these tendencies; only to indicate that he
did not entirely circumvent them, as he had intended. I
do believe, however, that there is another difficulty in
Adorno's position, a difficulty which may turn out to have
been the source of his ambiguous appropriation of dialec-
tical thought and of the theory of reification. With the
help of Baudrillard's analysis of commodity fetishism,
I believe this ambiguity can be traced back to Marx's
basic definition of the commodity and the theory of feti-
shism which he derived from it.

THE RIDDLE OF INTERPRETATION

At the metatheoretical level on which Adorno
habitually operated, the difficulty in Adorno's
position crystallizes in his interpretation of the pro-
blem of interpretation. Apart from Walter Benjamin, who
influenced Adorno deeply and whose work I shall discuss
briefly in the next chapter, Adorno was unique among his
generation of critical theorists for recognizing the need
to develop a theory of interpretation adequate to address
the historical problems which Marx, Lukács and others had
posed. But Adorno defined this interpretive dimension
almost exclusively in terms of the limitations which her-
meneutic problems placed on the purview of critical thought,
and rarely developed the positive aspects of the inter-
action of hermeneutic and "critical" approaches. Adorno
conceived the contingency and partiality of interpretation
as a check on the pretensions of critical theory rather
than as a clarification and strengthening of the critical
disposition. In his eagerness to preserve the "unidenti-
cal side" of the object, he tended to reduce the whole
issue of interpretation — an issue which he believed,
and I think correctly, that Lukács had sidestepped too
easily — to the recognition of enigmas. This follows
directly from the classical German philosophical assump-
tion that particularity lies, in some essential way,

beyond the grasp of Reason, which is always universal in its applications.[13] But Adorno did not resort to an abstract opposition of Reason and Imagination or Explanation and Understanding. Instead, he attempted to reverse the whole tradition by positing a negative dialectic and insisting that the mystery and inaccessibility of the particular must be defended against the universal, that philosophy and critical theory must take the other's side, the side of that which was never successfully subsumed under the rubric of general concepts and rational forms. Thus, one of the arguments for which Adorno is most noted is that the enigmatic distance of individuality is precisely that which critical theory has the task of defending in an age of universalizing instrumental rationalization and domination.

But this way of compromising between critical theory and interpretation led to an uncritical adoption of the Hegelian-Marxian definition of particularity — an antinomial definition which still weighted the dialectic in favour of the universal, quasi-self-sufficient subject over his contingent interactions with the world. Adorno had no theory of the harmonious social co-being of subjects and objects, in either the epistemological/ontological or the empirical, social sense of these terms — a lacuna which is especially glaring in the light of Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange. For Adorno, human objectifications and the human relation to things in general were

always antagonistic; he conceived no form of social process which could pose an alternative to the ambiguous "dialectic of enlightenment" and the technical imperative of controlling the object. What was worth preserv-ing, according to Adorno's critique of reification, was precisely that which could not be subordinated to the general categories of understanding or of praxis — it was almost as if Adorno had constructed a socio-historical version of the very "thing-in-itself" problem which he denied Lukács the distinction of having explained away.[14]

Yet Adorno sometimes attempted to write as if "to contemplate all things from the standpoint of redemption,"[15] to criticize in the name of a "reconciliation" in which both "the undistinguished unity of subject and object «and» their antithetical hostility" would be transcended by "the communication of what was distinguished," the "reali-zation of peace among men as well as between men and their Others." Adorno described this peace as "the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct parti-cipating in each other."[16]

What Adorno lacked was a means of articulating the connexion between what stands in opposition to the "pre-vailing reality" and what transcends the antagonistic conditions in "reconciliation." Since Adorno rejected the idea of the constitutive subject on which Lukács and to a certain extent Horkheimer had based the possibility of transcending reification, he needed an immanent interpreta-

tion of reified phenomena. Here, in Adorno's antinomy
of emancipatory reason and the non-identical side of the
object, critical theory reaches the limit established by
its own failure to examine the basis of its social and cul-
tural critique, namely Marx's critique of political economy.

In Adorno's specific cultural analyses of reification,
he often resorted to Marx's critical definitions of poli-
tical economy without examining their identitarian and
transcendental presuppositions. The limitations of this
approach were particularly evident in Adorno's discussions
of the non-utilitarian dimensions of modern culture, such
as popular music and jazz, which he condemned unreservedly
as the triumphant extension of fetishized exchange value
— a paradigm case of reification.

> All contemporary musical life is dominated by
> the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist
> residues have been eliminated . . . The con-
> sumer is really worshipping the money that he
> himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscan-
> nini concert. He has literally 'made' the
> success which he reifies and accepts as an ob-
> jective criterion, without recognizing himself
> in it. But he has not made it by liking the
> concert, but by buying the ticket.[17]

Marx had defined the nonidentical side of the commo-
dity as its "use value." As Baudrillard has paraphrased
Marx's analysis, use value is "always concrete and parti-
cular, contingent on its own destiny, whether this be in
the process of individual consumption or in the labour
process . . . Exchange value, on the other hand, is ab-
stract and general . . . So it appears that commodity

fetishism is not a function of the commodity defined simultaneously as exchange value and use value, but of exchange value alone." (Critique, p. 131) Adorno adopts precisely this schema in his account of cultural reification, but the anomaly of resorting to the concept of "use value" to indicate what has been lost in the apparent reduction of cultural objectifications to the economic logic of consumption and prestige is never examined and only ambiguously acknowledged.[18]

> To be sure, exchange-value exerts its power in
> a special way in the realm of cultural goods . . .
> If the commodity in general combines exchange-
> value and use-value, then the pure use-value,
> whose illusion the cultural goods must preserve
> in completely capitalist society, must be re-
> placed by pure exchange-value, which precisely
> in its capacity as exchange-value deceptively
> takes over the function of use-value. The
> specific fetish character of music lies in this
> quid pro quo.[19]

Adorno's mistake is precisely to subsume the moment of particularity under the universal concept of "use value." In fact, Adorno attempts to orient his entire critique of the culture industry from the perspective of this category. And although he insists that "the concept of musical fet-ishism cannot be psychologically derived,"[20] he resorts to a psychological explanation by positing an "illusion" of use value in the consumption of exchange value, without recognizing that use value is precisely the ideological legitimation of the "consumption" of exchange value — or the sign-object, as Baudrillard calls it. (Critique, ch. 6) By locating reification — commodity fetishism —

in the moment of consumption itself (as a fetishized
economic act), Adorno's analysis participates in the ra-
tionale of political economy and fails to come to grips
with the systematic, subject-independent functioning of
reified phenomena. By reducing "fetishized" music to
the hypothetical intentions of composers, musicians and
"consumers," Adorno inhibits the possiblity of interpreting
reification as a socio-historical reality of the object,
or as a type of arrangement of objectifications. He reduces
it to the subjects who constitute it without resolving
the problem, raised by this sort of analysis, of the inten-
tions, or lack of intentions, of the producers and consumers.
Both Adorno and Horkheimer relied at times on a rather con-
spiratorial view of the link between cultural and "everyday"
life and the systemic properties of capitalism. Although
his analyses could be sensitive to quotidian minutiae,
Adorno habitually saw behind them only further examples of
the "opium of the people" theme which runs through so much
vulgar Marxist social criticism. Indeed, he sometimes
seemed to conceive the allegories and messages of "popular
culture" on the model of fascist political propaganda —
a not unnatural reaction at the time of some of his impor-
tant writings, but misleading in the context of the more
"advanced" state of American capitalism. If the dominant
class, through its media managers, sought to divert the
people from their true interests, Adorno never explained
how such a diabolical plot could succeed so thoroughly in

integrating its aims into the very structure of ordinary life. The notion of a whole style of existence being imposed by the machinations of the culture industry had its limitations.

SIGNING OFF CRITICAL THEORY

At this point, it would be useful once again to look

at what Marx actually said. In fact, the roots of the

problem can be found in a distinction which Marx made

between the "historical character" of commodities — which

he located generally in the combination of an exchange

value system with the use values of all socially produced

objects — and the "meaning" of commodities, a somewhat

woollier question which he seems to have wanted to leave

to bourgeois speculation:

> The characters that stamp products as commodities
> and whose establishment is a necessary prelimin-
> ary to the circulation of commodities, have al-
> ready acquired the stability of natural, self-
> understood forms of social life before man seeks
> to decipher, not their historical character,
> for in his eyes they are immutable, but their
> meaning.[21]

As Marx went on to suggest, deciphering the "meaning" of a

commodity always returns us to the yardstick of prices (and

therefore, perhaps, of social status, as it is reflected

in incomes, purchasing power, etc.). As we have seen, this

is essentially Adorno's reading of the "meaning" of commo-

dity culture. It was as if the analysis of culture, in

order to remain true to Marx in the last instance, must

commit itself to finding as little of a social nature as

possible behind the "reified screen" of the exchange value

system and the strictly "ideological illusions" it threw

up for individual consumption — except "the social

character of private labour."[22]   The paradox of critical

theory is that in its effort to defend the idea of culture

(and the integrity of the individual) against the logic

of capitalist economic "development," it refused to draw

the theoretical consequences of its own awareness that the

commodity was not purely an economic category; not only

prestige and status, but even "use value" and "exchange

value" are also social significations which, although they

can be related to specific "modes of production," cannot

be reduced to them.

Lukács had argued that "the problem of commodities

must not be considered in isolation, or even as the central

problem in economics, but as the central, structural

problem of capitalist society in all its aspects."[23]   But

he had also stated that "under capitalism," art "can

exercise no determining influence upon the production of

consumer goods and indeed the question of its own existence

is decided by purely economic factors and the problems

of technical production governed by them."[24]   Thus, al-

though critical theory readily conceded the commodity as

a kind of _form_, and even as a _social_ form (acting as a

constraint on the human _content_ of society), it never dev-

eloped this insight to the extent that the commodity

appeared in the light of an aesthetic logic, a logic of

signification. Marxism and critical theory were satisfied,

on the whole, to answer with abstract, generic categories —

economico-anthropological categories like "need" and "use value" — which tended to dissolve the specificity of objects. The Frankfurt School seems to have sensed that any attempt to deepen Marx's categories in order to account more concretely for cultural determinations might throw critical theory into a crisis. In consequence, Horkheimer and Adorno tended to presuppose Marx's critique of political economy as given and achieved, and to conceive their own work as a philosophical elaboration of Marx along social and cultural lines. As soon as a critical theorist like Adorno or Marcuse had identified some aspect of culture and everyday life as having been invaded by the commodity form, he then had a tendency to view the activity informing that aspect of culture as fetishized economic behaviour — so that jazz enthusiasts and young couples out for an afternoon drive end up being described (by Adorno) as "temple slaves" prostrating themselves "before the theological caprices of commodities."[25] For the Frankfurt School, culture in general became "purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market."[26] In such examples, as Baudrillard points out, the critical theory of culture becomes something of a parody of Christian anti-paganist, anti-materialist discourse, and of rationalist, ethnocentrist anthropology in general. (Critique, p. 88)' Sensing that critical theory would never make good on its critique of commodity culture if it remained at this impasse, Baudrillard attempted to reexamine the whole problem of the "meaning" of the commodity

(Marx's somewhat fortuitous phrase) by integrating an entirely new level of analysis. But by introducing the concept of the sign, Baudrillard brought on the crisis in critical theory which the Frankfurt School had deferred and threw open Marx's political-economic categories for cultural interpretation.

The difference between Baudrillard's work and that of the Frankfurt School can be summarized in a very simple idea, to wit, that Baudrillard effects a fundamental break with Marx by treating commodities not as elements in a problematic value system but as terms in a problematic signifying system. Baudrillard did not articulate all the theoretical implications of this shift explicitly until after he had completed major interpretations of the object and of consumption in contemporary capitalist culture. Indeed, in Le système des objets, there is no clear indication that anything fundamental in Marx or critical theory is due for reconsideration. Nor, for that matter, does structuralism appear particularly problematic. Baudrillard seems merely to be using semiological methods to put flesh on the bones of a number of connections which can be found in the work of Marcuse (One Dimensional Man), and Adorno.

Nevertheless, in this tradition of critique, Le système des objets is something of a tour de force. No one had ever provided such a coherent survey of the range of things in industrial societies, from the automatic starters in automobiles to ashtrays made out of sea shells, coffee

grinders and the aesthetics of drugstore malls. In
retrospect, I believe, the germ of a fundamental shift
in perspective can be detected. If objects could weave
such an elaborate skein out of the ideological, spiritual
and experiential anomalies of life in an "alienated"
culture — if the infrastructure of the everyday life
which everybody leads could be shown to be determined by
questions of meaning before the issue of "value" (and its
source) ever arose — then it would be difficult to con-
tinue framing the problem of objects in terms of their
purpose in sustaining or reproducing a productive system,
and naive to reduce it to any kind of psychology, however
sociologized and historicized, of human needs. In effect,
Baudrillard had asked the question, what social role do
objects play in the absence of reification? As we have
seen, Adorno, who provided perhaps the most sophisticated
reply, could answer only with the abstract category of
difference — an interesting response, but an inadequate
one in the light of the differential semantic strategies
of semiotic systems and the saturation of the cultural
environment with signs. Indeed, this general condition
of semiosis in capitalist cultures, which Adorno himself
recognized, makes his definition of reconciliation in terms
of the non-antagonistic co-presence of differences and
"the distinct participating in each other" almost useless
without further clarification of the nature of social
significations and of the generic function of objects in

social life. Individual relations with things, and the
larger function of objects, have always been complex,
opaque, psychologically explosive, ungainly. For
Baudrillard, the problem was to distinguish between this
"ambivalence," as he called it, and reification as such.
He would look for an historic <u>shift in the social being
of objects</u> — in their relations, functions and meanings —
and not for their sudden emergence on the scene of social
history, as if capitalism alone had created the problem
of the thing and its symbolic "value."

NOTES — CHAPTER III

[1] Theodor Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosphy," _Telos_, no. 31. (1977), p. 126.

[2] Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, p. xx.

[3] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," p. 120.

[4] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, _Dialectics of Enlightenment_, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

[5] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," p. 128.

[6] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," p. 126.

[7] Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, p. 190.

[8] Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, p. 192.

[9] Quoted in Fred R. Dallmayr, _Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions to a Post-Individualist Theory of Politics_ (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 136. I have quoted from Dallmayr's translation in this instance, and would have in other instances if it had been possible, because the Ashton translation of Adorno's _Negative Dialectics_ is confusing and sometimes misleading.

[10] Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, p. 190.

[11] Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_, p. 190. Cf. Theodor Adorno, et al., _The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology_, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 21.

[12] Theodor Adorno, "Subject and Object," in _The Essential Frankfurt School Reader_, ed. and introd. Andrew

Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978),
p. 499: "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."

[13] On this theme, see Lukács, History, pp. 110-149,
especially pp. 114ff.

[14] Adorno, "Subject and Object," p. 507: "Such non-
identity would come quite close to Kant's thing in itself."

[15] Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia, trans. E.F.N.
Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), p. 247.

[16] Adorno, "Subject and Object," pp. 499-500.

[17] Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music
and the Regression of Listening," in The Essential Frankfurt
School Reader, Ibid., pp. 278-279.

[18] See for example, Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic
of Enlightenment, p. 158.

[19] Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," p. 279.

[20] Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," p. 278.

[21] Karl Marx, Capital, p. 75.

[22] Marx, p. 76.

[23] Lukács, History, p. 83.

[24] Lukács, History, p. 236.

[25] Adorno, "Fetish-Character in Music," p. 280.

[26] Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment,
p. 158.

CHAPTER IV

THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

The Sphere of Consumption

The Relativity of Structuralist Terms

Gripping the Functional Sign

Functional Dysfunctions

Notes

THE SPHERE OF CONSUMPTION

For Baudrillard, the rise of competitive industrial
capitalism marks the tentative but accelerating emergence
of the object from its symbolic social nexus, and its
accession to the commutative versatility of signs. This
"formal liberation" of the object defines the field of
modern "consumption," particularly in the sense that the
commodity form ruptures traditional practical and symbo-
lic social constraints on the object, and on the "prac-
tice" of objects. Further, the transition is complement-
ed by the extirpation of social significations from their
referential contexts in social life — a kind of gradual
disengagement of the signifier — which produces the mat-
erial and the conditions for new kinds of reflective so-
cial discourse, including the discourse of consumption
itself.

> The object-become-sign no longer gathers its
> meaning in the concrete relation between two
> people. It assumes its meaning in its differ-
> ential relation to other signs. Somewhat like
> Lévi-Strauss's myths, sign-objects exchange
> among themselves. Thus, only when objects are
> autonomized as differential signs and thereby
> rendered systematizable can one speak of con-
> sumption and of objects of consumption.
> (Critique, p. 66)

Insofar as the sign-object (or commodity) is exchanged
(and not merely projected into an "abstract" domain of
circulation), it no longer retains the symbolic dimension
of the act of exchange itself, as a function of the social

relationship. Nor, at the macrological level, is the
sign object attached to a symbolic schema of general so-
cial proportions. Even the most obvious and widely ac-
cepted "symbols" of status (which, incidentally, usually
commence as indexical signs) are subject to a process of
more or less indefinite commutation. Because the commo-
dity form breaks free of social symbolic constraints
(only some of which concern status), and eventually des-
troys them, it becomes adaptable as a term in a system of
signification, the communicative basis for an extended
sphere of consumption. Yet this is an intensely private
sphere — its meanings are not shared in the sense that
the group or the community is able through them to trans-
cend the regularities of everyday life in common pursuits.
Everyday life, according to Baudrillard,

> is not just the sum of everyday facts and ges-
> tures the dimension of banality and repetition —
> it is a system of interpretation . . . in which
> the individual recognizes work, leisure, family
> and personal relations in an involutive
> mode . . ." (S.C., p. 33)

Everyday life is "triumphant and euphoric in its effort at
total autonomy and of reinterpreting the world 'for internal
use only.'" In short, consumption represents for Baudrillard
a new kind of articulate "praxis," and everyday life is the
field of this — virtually uninterrupted — appropriative
activity, the target zone of "mass culture" in which the
individual assiduously and metonymically recomposes the
world from bits of advertising, news, entertainment, re-

presentations of glamour, happiness, wealth, power and violence. If "from the objective viewpoint of the totality, everyday life appears impoverished and residual," (S.C., p. 33) it is nevertheless continuously replenished with spectacular, sometimes redemptive, always intimate images of violence which sustain and justify a "moral economy of safety" (S.C., p. 34) in which "the society of consumption wills itself as a sort of encircled Jerusalem, rich and menaced." Everyday life, for Baudrillard, is almost a field within a field — an ethnographer's pipedream.

THE RELATIVITY OF STRUCTURALIST TERMS

The emergence of the sign-object can be viewed from a number of angles. Baudrillard's polarity of symbol and sign — though it is not really a structural opposition, for it condenses too many historical and social nuances — might be taken as an organizing theme for a range of structural terms describing a complex pattern of transformation. If the commodity is, like the sign, arbitrary and discrete, suggesting combinative possibilities and an external relation to the subject, the symbolic or artisanal object might, in contrast, be described as "motivated" and continuous. The symbol, especially the object in symbolic exchange and ritual, is fused with the meaning of its context in space and time and the relationships which define its purpose. (Critique, pp. 64-65) It cannot be "abstracted" like the sign. Conversely, the sign-object is never absolutely subordinated to any particular social form; it can be juxtaposed quite freely with other sign-objects, and in this sense can be described as fungible and "unbound," susceptible to metonymic "displacement," or what the structuralists call a "chain of signifiers." Even on the functional plane, the sign-object couples parataxically, and tends to block the "transitivity" of the subject, since the "functional design" of the structural object is at least partly defined in opposition not only to the artisinal, but to the "Kitsch" object. Indeed, both the modular, functional object and Kitsch emphasize

stylization to the point where marks of adaptation to

human use and proportion are either effaced, overlaid, or

else transmuted into <u>signs</u> of functionality and efficient

adaptability. This not only serves indirectly to produce

definitions of the past, but singles out differences in

less versatile or streamlined objects as connotations of

that "past," and leads to the possibility of superimposing

defunct stylistic features onto practical objects, like

doorhandles, in calculated opposition to the functional

simulations of modern and "post-modern" design — thus

reproducing both the Kitsch and the "International," the

past and the future, in a seemingly unstoppable cycle of

representations.

The symbolic object, in contrast, is incapable of

this kind of semiotic versatility, but the reasons for

this are by no means entirely technical in origin, that

is, they cannot all be laid at the door of a mode of pro-

duction; even a hand crafted implement — but certainly

a ritual symbol or a gift — reflects social boundaries

which place restrictions on the ability to transfer, ex-

change or substitute things. Thus, one might say that

artisanal, symbolic and ritual objects belonged in a hier-

archy of social meanings epitomized by an interior and

transitive relation to a subject — whose marks the object

bore in the traces of its origin, possession and human

function. If the sign-object appears as a perpetual met-

onymy, closed in a formal system of horizontal relationships,

then the symbolic object was, in a sense, a kind of meta-

phor, a paradigmatic link, a vertical concentration.

Still other categories lend themselves to interpretation along this axis of metaphoric and metonymic modes originally proposed by Jakobson. I have already mentioned continuous/discrete; to this can be added analog/digital, semantic/syntactic, relationship/entity (or "content").[1] This binary series can be linked up, through the pair motivated/arbitrary, to similarity/contiguity and thus, eventually, metaphor/metonymy and symbol/sign, the pair we began with. Baudrillard makes interesting use of other polarities, as well, especially, as we have already seen, ambivalent/univocal (or plurivocal), style/ambience, together with transcendence/immanence and a host of others.

Obviously these oppositional categories scarcely tell us anything by themselves, and it would be an error to imagine that the sign-object simply emerges on a preestablished grid in which one column represents the "symbolic" universe and the other the rise of capitalist culture. To begin with, the pairs simply fail to "line up" without considerable mediation, and frequently even the terms within one specific opposition do not match logical levels. It is in fact debatable whether similarity and contiguity are strictly comparable types of relation. It can also be argued plausibly that metaphor and metonymy are really special cases of each other, not opposites. For Baudrillard, even the most basic pairings, such as motivated/arbitrary, are themselves arbitrary, constituted and relative. "In the system of objects, as in every lived

system (_système_ _vécu_), the great structural oppositions
are always other than they seem: what is a structural
opposition at the level of system may be a coherent ra-
tionalization of a conflict ʼat the level of actualityʼ."
(_S.O._, p. 53)

Baudrillard's attempt to revise the theory of commo-
dity fetishism follows straight from this argument: the
objectification 'of structural oppositions describes the
process of fetishization, and _reification_ is constituted
by the _system_ of these conceptual "fetishes." Thus, inso-
far as Marx wandered from his definition of the commodity
as a social _form_ (comprising the opposition use value/
exchange value), and described commodity fetishism instead
as the alienation of a consciousness — implying an animist
projection onto an object — Baudrillard rejects the theory
as an ethnocentric European myth. A similar difficulty
plagues Lukács' theory of reification. According to
Baudrillard, reification is not a "veiling of consciousness,"
but the experience of systemic closure, a "totalization
via signs." (Critique, p. 101) The paradigm case of this
experience of reified systematicity lies in consumption,
not production.

Thus, in critical theory's use of the terms "fetish-
ism" and "reification," we discover how interpretation is
blocked in a general failure to distinguish between the
fact that social relations are mediated by objects and the
very different problem of the commodity. Even Adorno
tended to confuse fetishism with psychological investment

in the object, which brought him dangerously close to reducing the intentional process of meaning to a pathology. The semantic act always involves "projection," if only because meaning can never arise solely from a subject's relation to itself — there must always be an_other_, and this other never has the status of a transparent consciousness, as Adorno himself taught. The problem, in Baudrillard's view, is not the consumer's emotional involvement in the object as such, but the place of the object in an independent system of signification. Consumption, as he defines it, is not the appropriation and enjoyment of the object, but the metonymic ingestion of reified systematicity through the valorization of a sign. It is, as he calls it, "the passion for the code." (Critique, p. 92)

Here, it is useful to recall Baudrillard's argument that the sign owes its discrete character to the structuralist's reification of the signifying process. But the sign-object itself implies this reification. In a sense, then, structuralism, and its systems of opposition, describe a real reduction of the continuous to the discrete at the level of social relations. But even basic structuralist categories like the arbitrary (versus the motivated), the discrete (versus the continuous) must be relativized in their use, for they are produced by the problematic of the sign itself. (Critique, pp. 149-52) This is true, for example, of the metaphor/metonymy pair. For Baudrillard, these terms function generically only in rather impoverished codes, (S.O., p. 223) such as the

system of objects, which is not a language since it lacks an adequate syntax and functions with a "repertoire" rather than a diction. (S.O., p. 222) The system of objects is more like an "order of classification" — in other words, a taxonomy. (S.O., p. 224) On this basis, consumption can be interpreted as the performance of meta-phoric and metonymic operations on a structural grid. At the level of contrasting social configurations, however, the metaphor/metonymy pole only summarizes abstractly the difference between the symbolic object's grounding in a subject or social relation and the sign-object's formal autonomy as an element in a system of signification which is comparatively context-free.

As far as the meaning of isolated objects is concerned, the same terms, together with pairs like transcendence/ immanence and interiority/exteriority, serve as well or better to highlight the differences between bourgeois so-ciety at its height and contemporary "mass culture" than to contrast capitalist and pre-capitalist modes. A whole progression can be traced from the traditional, pre-capi-talist household through the bourgeois home to "modern" accommodations. In the latter, for example, the communal features of the traditional household — one thinks of the rich, multi-levelled references of the hearth, which com-bined the facilities of heating, cooking, gathering, work-ing and sleeping all in one convivial space — have been replaced, at the other extreme of modern "domesticity," by a modular style of organization, or "syntagmatic calcu-

lus," (S.O., p. 24) in which functions are broken down, recombined, and redistributed according to a "technical" logic which is not necessarily always practical. Half way along the scale, in the bourgeois home, this reorganization into separate functions has already begun (elaborate spatial divisions). Individual objects begin to take on a metaphoric significance (on the axis public/private) which has little to do with the sense of symbolic exchange, but is still less arbitrary than the sign, since the "anthropomorphic" dimension of symbolic relations has not been fully abstracted in the commodity system. Thus, the bourgeois mirror is metaphoric in relation to the contiguous logic of modern interior design, for example. (S.O., pp. 27-28) The almost overbearing symbolism of the mirror, and its function as spatial witness to the interiority and identity of the family, (and to the reassuring redundancy of the opulent surroundings), can be weighed against the living room television set, "isolated in a corner on a pedestal . . ." such that "the TV constitutes an eccentric pole opposing the traditional centrality of the room," which is henceforth "redistributed as a field of vision," etc. (Critique, p. 56) As for the mirror itself, it has been taken out of its frame and shattered into a series of smaller, "functional" reflecting surfaces, each designed for the specific types of "living space," and sometimes incorporated into the household "combinatory" as a design feature employed in order to create "ambient"

illusions of space, abundance and movement. This pure
"immanence" (as opposed to the implied transcendence of
the bourgeois mirror) is also the fate of the centralized,
symbolically charged clock, particularly the grandfather
clock and the mantlepiece clock, (S.O., p. 29) which have
since been diffused throughout the household as a sub-
ordinate component of innumerable other objects: the ra-
dio, television set, stove, wristwatch, various timers,
alarm devices, and ornaments.

GRIPPING THE FUNCTIONAL SIGN

The basic notion of an historic shift in the social
being of objects is of course implicit in Marx's account
of the rise of the exchange value system. But Marx
grasped the object primarily as a means, whose end was
the maintenance, and eventually the improvement, of life.
The perspective from which he viewed and criticized the
commodity system was the production of use values and the
problem of their allocation according to needs — their
rational distribution. What Baudrillard wanted was a way
of conceptualizing the commodity as a change in the form
of the social object — as a cultural transformation —
and for this purpose, the notion of use value proved in-
conclusive.

In Le système des objets, Baudrillard was concerned
almost exclusively with the way objects are practiced
socially — and this presented a number of problems, not
the least of which had to do with how these object-practi-
ces could be articulated critically without reducing their
meaning to ready-made categories. At this level, at any
rate, the critical frame of reference could not be struc-
tured around allegedly "authentic" values without destroy-
ing the moment of specificity on which interpretation de-
pended. It was pointless to speak of "alienation,"
Baudrillard argued, even with respect to the sometimes in-
tense personal psychological investment in apparently tri-
vial or illusory differences between products because

"they are real from the moment they are valorized as such.",

> How does one question the satisfaction of some-
> one who buys a waste bin with flower designs
> or an 'anti-magnetic' razor? No theory of
> needs permits us to give priority to one lived
> satisfaction more than any other. If the de-
> mand for personal satisfaction is so profound
> that in the absence of anything else it incar-
> nates in 'personalized' objects, how can this
> movement be condemned, and in the name of
> what "authentic" essence of value? (S.O., p. 182)

Another problem lay in the technical status of objects. In his first book, Baudrillard grasped the emergence of the object from its symbolic nexus in traditional societies primarily against the backdrop of the industrial revolution and the rise of competitive capitalism as Marx had described it in Capital. Hence, the obvious heuristic schema for situating the issue of technicity was the gradual, but, as Marx had shown, socially and historically decisive, replacement of artisanal labour by serial production. (S.O., pp.58-60) Not only could one begin to generalize about technical organization with reference to these con- trasting modes of production, but one could even speak of the very different social concepts which would tend to cluster around the products of mechanized industry as opposed to the things produced by craftsmen. This was, in fact, one of the great themes developed by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[2]

While Benjamin was concerned with the "loss of aura"

implicit in the serialized object (the reproduction of
works of art was his paradigm case), and the way in which
serial production eliminated the unique presence of the
object, its reference beyond the sphere of objects, or,
in other words, its symbolic, "vertical" tie with a human
origin and purpose, he was also sensitive to the new con-
stellations of meaning and activity surrounding the object,
and how technical developments interrelated with, or even
produced, qualitatively different forms of experience. In
this sense, it is possible to imagine that Benjamin would
intuitively have understood McLuhan's phrase, "the medium
is the message," and like Baudrillard, that he would have
related it to the form of reification and to the develop-
ment of a new social logic of signification. However,
precisely where Benjamin identified the forms of reified
sociality with the greatest specificity, as with the film
industry, his critical acumen seemed to be overwhelmed by
the immediacy of technologically fostered collective ex-
perience and mass political organization, which seemed to
him to herald a possible rebirth of community and defeat
of the authoritarianism implicit in the "aura" of symbolic
objects. In effect, he presented a highly ambiguous alle-
gory about a democracy of objects whose underlying moral
seems to have been the positive value of accessibility to
the "masses," against which the "aura" of traditional ob-
jects had always militated through its economic link to
an archaic system of privilege.

It is not difficult to see how Marx's great metaphor of the "socialization of production" under capitalism determined some of Benjamin's conclusions. In his analysis of the upheaval in perception engendered by the advent of moving pictures (the "sense of the universal equality of things"[3]), he concentrated on the possibilities of the new medium for segmentation, rearrangement, analysis and "permeation of reality."[4] Apparently, the "crisis" of the stage brought on by the advent of film appeared to him as a crisis of capitalist culture itself. In the increased division of labour which film imposed on theatrical performance, (the fragmentation not only of the actor's performance, but also of the conceptualization of his role), Benjamin saw paradoxically a liberation of the actor: "For the first time — and this is the effect of the cinema — man has to operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing his aura."[5] Similarly, in the massive, functional extension of the reading public associated with the explosion of popular presses, Benjamin believed that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its character," and that publication is now a theoretical possiblity for "any gainfully employed European."[6]

But the collapse of traditional authority signalized in this new social ontology of things designed by and for reproducibility is not entirely salutary. In a later essay, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin stressed the loss, in the new technical ethos, of a kind of Weberian social enchantment. Here, aura is no longer defined as the haughty

distance of ritual authority, mirroring the aesthetic
and political passivity of the masses. It becomes the
"reciprocity" of the crafted object whose human and social
origins are still legible: "To perceive the aura of an
object we look at means to invest it with the ability to
look at us in return."[7] In contrast to this, Benjamin
comments that "the eye of the city dweller is overburdened
with protective functions" in which "there is no daydream-
ing surrender to faraway things," and quotes Goerg Simmel
to the effect that "Before buses, railroads and trams . . .
people were never put in a position of having to stare at
one another for minutes or even hours on end without ex-
changing a word."[8] Here, Benjamin comments on the muteness
not only of serial experience and social organization, but
of the standardized object which mirrors them. And
Benjamin's allusions to the lost "personality" of the tra-
ditional or ceremonial object and to a kind of social
dialogue once implicit in the aura of things anticipate one
of Baudrillard's major themes: the repression of symbolic
exchange by the sign form. Benjamin had profoundly and
suggestively grasped the manner in which the emerging
hegemony of the commodity form would recompose an expressive,
relatively anthropomorphic social environment into a field
for the play of unbound elements in a system of "communi-
cation."

The esteem in which Benjamin's work is held may be
evidence that a measure of very general agreement about the
different significance of the artisanal and industrially

produced object is possible. But this does not necessarily simplify the problem of interpretation. As Baudrillard points out, serial production has by no means eliminated the artisanal or symbolic object, whose relics connote unique, natural and authentic qualities — references to a kind of "origin" — which "seem to escape the system" of objects and to "contradict the demands of a functional calculus in order to respond to the vows of another order." (S.O., p. 89) The contradiction can be seen clearly in terms of something as basic as living accommodations:

> Whatever one's social level in France today «1969», one's domicile is not necessarily perceived as a 'consumption' good. The question of residence is still very loosely associated with patrimonial goods in general, and its symbolic scheme remains largely that of the body . . . For the logic of consumption to penetrate here, the exteriority of the sign is required . . . One must avoid the appearance of filiation and identification . . . Only a certain discretionary income permits one to play with objects as status signs — a stage of fashion and the 'game' where the symbolic and the utilitarian are both exhausted . . . In France, at least — the margin of free play for the mobile combinatory of prestige or for the game of substitution is limited. (Critique, p.69)

However, it is, I believe, not difficult for Baudrillard to show that the symbolic schema of the house is not "irreducible" and that "even this can succumb to the differential and reified connotations of fashion logic."

> This . . . demonstrates the futility of any attempt to define the object empirically . . . Is a house an object? Some would contest this . . . The definition of an object of consumption is entirely independent of objects themselves and exclusively the function of the logic of significations. (Critique, p. 67)

But at the level of technical organization, the coexistence of disparate objects, however adaptable to a system of "personalized" semantic complementarity (S.O., p. 98) remains a problem. To begin with, the schema craft/ manufacture does not exhaust the ideological nuances of technicity:

> Perhaps, after studying the structures of the animist Imaginary, and then the energist Imaginary, we will have to study a kind of cybernetic Imaginary, whose focal myth would no longer be the organicism or functionalism of the previous modes, but an absolute global interrelationality. For the moment, however, the everyday environment is divided in unequal proportions between the three modes. The traditional buffet, the automobile and the tape recorder coexist in the same circle. (S.O., p. 142)

The difficulty is compounded by what Roland Barthes has called "the universal semantization of usages."[9] "As soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself."[10] This precludes the possibility of making a simple distinction between "practical" purposes and semiological "appearances." As I noted in Chapter I, Lévi-Strauss defended his semiological approach partly on the grounds of precisely such a distinction. But Lévi-Strauss's claim that "a stone axe can be a sign . . . (insofar as) it takes the place of a different implement which another society employs for the same purpose" — in other words, the idea of comparing the different cultural incarnations of constant functions, "the equivalents of choices which society seems to make"[11] — would only lead to an inconclusive, comparative inventory of cultural

signs if confined purely to the level of objects as
signifiers. Not only is the presence or absence of func-
tion and utility a cultural signification in its own
right — which the aesthetic forays of a Duchamp have
shown to be of increasing ideological complexity in our
society — but functionality and usefulness can be built
into the object as a redundant sign which becomes only
one of a panoply of connotations and takes on its meaning
in an extended system having nothing to do with a tradi-
tional "plane of practical mediation between a matter to
be transformed and a human who transforms it." (S.O.,
p. 62) Functional choices concerning strength, power,
durability, pliability, material, fit, conformity to the
contours of the hand, simplicity of appearance, etc., are
carried over, as if mobilized in some public campaign
against Kitsch, into areas where such considerations are
marginal or entirely superfluous.

As Baudrillard points out, these choices, and the
"marginal differences" they embody, constitute a sort of
second order language of functionality which, combined
with other signs, enters into a dialectic of "model" and
"series," where the model is continually generated as an
internalized idea of "absolute singularity" out of the
experience of the series, and the series extends itself in
a seemingly indefinite inductive concatenation of the
model. (S.O., pp. 163-172). What emerges is a cultural
system incarnated in objects which is quite distinct from
anything "primitive" and has nothing to do with traditional

"style" — although it is fully capable of integrating elements from these other modes without risking its entirely self-contained and tautological structure. ‹See, "L'objet marginal, l'objet ancien," (S.O., p. 89-102)› The "miracle of the system" (S.O., p. 172) lies in its ability to wed the principle of individuation with social integration and conformity, since the act of selection is inevitable, ‹there is no single model of anything in this system, since this would be "a sign of poverty" (S.O., p. 167)› and each personalized choice reconfirms the socio-economic order.

> To become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign, that is, exterior in some manner to a relation it only signifies — hence, also arbitrary and not coherent in this concrete relation; it acquires its coherence, and thus its meaning, in an abstract and systematic relation to all the other object-signs. This is how it 'personalizes,' enters into the series, etc. It is consumed — not in its materiality, but in its difference. (S.O., pp. 233-34)

In effect, the system of objects and the constraint of consumption impose a "game of substitutions" on the individual which is reminiscent in some ways of Lévi-Strauss's theory of "primitive thought" — or bricolage. But for Baudrillard, as we have seen, this "logic" is fundamentally opposed to symbolic exchange, and to the ambivalence of symbolic objects (such as Mausa's "gift") which are "not autonomous, hence not codifiable as signs. Since they do not depend on economic exchange, they are not amenable to systematization as commodities and exchange

value." (<u>Critique</u>, p. 65) For Baudrillard, the "concrete

thought" implicit in the endless taxonomic play of models

and series describes the operation of a code of significa-

tion which does not express meaning but generates a

<u>simulation model</u> of meaning and of collective social exis-

tence. In other words, for Baudrillard, Lévi-Strauss's

semiotic models are in many respects, ironically, ethno-

centric projections — a criticism which has been echoed by

social anthropologists:

> ‹Lévi-Strauss's anthropology› is a Cartesian
> anthropology that strips cognition of meaning
> and affect, denies the integral relations of
> theory and praxis, and thus represents men as
> the eternal victims of their brains, ceaselessly
> driving to assemble and disassemble mental
> elements, forced forever to enact these <u>ad hoc</u>
> schemes in an imitation of life. <u>These are</u>
> <u>images</u> <u>of</u> <u>our</u> <u>own</u> <u>alienation</u> . . ."[12]

For Baudrillard, the autonomy of the sign always

implies the destruction of the symbolic and the "abstrac-

tion" of its social forms. The contemporary "decay of

gift giving," to mention one example, was also observed

by Adorno, who remarked that the decline of this form of

exchange was "mirrored in the distressing invention of

gift-articles, based on the assumption that one does not

know what to give because one really does not want to."[13]

But Adorno's psychological explanation of the "assumption"

behind the gift "item" seems hardly convincing — and the

"embarrassment" he notes is hardly surprising — when one

ponders Baudrillard's observation that the signification

of the sign-object is systemic in origin, and lends its dis-

crete and arbitrary term only awkwardly to the analogic
and ambivalent form of personal relationships. It does,
after all, seem presumptuous to "personalize" others by
bestowing gifts upon them. The act of giving becomes the
moral equivalent of second guessing — a further erosion
of the symbolic dimension.

Thus, argues Baudrillard, the social domain of sign-
objects, in its autonomy and its abstraction, is entirely
contemporary with the expansion of the commodity system —
the direct outgrowth, if not in some sense the essence, of
industrial capitalist culture. And it is fully implied —
not transcended or negated — in the modernist "design"
programs which, in their quest for a "natural" identity of
form and function, usefulness and beauty, only reinforce
the rationalist myth of political economy — that "produc-
tion," "consumption," "needs," and economic values
(including use value) can all be coordinated in a natural
harmony — that, in short, social life can be rationalized
by the judicious manipulation of signs.[14] Any attempt to
project a system of objects (in the unrestricted, autotelic
sense suggested here — and particularly in terms of the
model of sign-consumption) to pre-capitalist, or pre-
industrial societies, would be anachronistic and misleading.
The difference on which Baudrillard insists between the
symbolic context of a practice and the significatory func-
tion of objects has been commented upon by many anthropolo-
gists, including Lévi-Strauss. But the basis of this in-
sight lies in a fundamentally hermeneutic approach to

culture and society, a point made most eloquently, I
think, by Peter Winch in an important debate about the
grounds on which symbolic rituals may be interpreted:

> This . . . is precisely what MacIntyre misses
> in his treatment of Zande magic: he can see
> in it only a misguided technique for producing
> consumer goods. But a Zande's crops are not
> just potential objects of consumption: the life
> he lives, his relations with his fellows, his
> chances for acting decently or doing evil, may
> all spring from his relation to his crops.
> Magical rites consitute a form of expression
> in which these possibilities and dangers may
> be contemplated and reflected on . . . The
> difficulty we find in accepting this is not
> merely its remoteness from science, but an aspect
> of the general difficulty we find . . . of
> thinking about such matters at all except in
> terms of "efficiency of production" — produc-
> tion, that is, for consumption. This again
> is a symptom of what Marx called the "aliena-
> tion" characteristic of man in industrial soci-
> ety, though Marx's own confusions about the
> relations between production and consumption
> are further symptoms of that same alienation.[15]

FUNCTIONAL DYSFUNCTIONS

The result of the argument so far is that the distinction — even the opposition — posited by Marx and the political economists, between use value and exchange value is wanting in precision, at least from the semiological point of view. It establishes an arbitrary distinction between the object's public and private significance, and tends to naturalize the act of consumption. Of course, Marx recognized this when he stressed that "the development of industry suspends . . . natural necessity"[16] through the "production of new needs"[17] and "the transformation of what was previously superfluous into what is necessary, as a historically created necessity."[18] Indeed, for Marx, consumption, together with exchange and distribution, always appeared, in the last dialectical turn, as a function of production. "The object is not the only thing which production creates for consumption. Production also gives consumption its specificity, its character. . . ." "Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object." "Production thus creates the consumer . . . ."[19] In such passages, Marx seems to be admitting that the category of use value can never transcend particular and arbitrary cultural determinations. Ironically, in his very insistence on production as the determinant instance, Marx eliminates the possibility of critical cultural dis-

tinctions and consigns cultural analysis to a hopeless relativism which can never get beyond describing the mode of production and its metaphorical references in the superstructure. (M.P., p. 120)

But the problem of "technicity" does not go away by assimilating function in certain ways to signification. Technicity seems to exist, as it were, in a cross-cultural vaccuum. The form of mass communications technology, for example, has remained uniformly monologic throughout the world, although its rate of implementation has been uneven. There are precious few contexts in which the presence or absence of television services can meaningfully be compared. Such is probably the case for the fully-developed commodity culture, and, perhaps even for the pattern of industrialization as a whole. But the point is that it is difficult to discover incontrovertible criteria for separating out a relatively non-semantic, supracultural level from the domain of signs, because the functionality of techniques and objects seems to be inescapably embedded in contexts of cultural choice.

It would appear that it was precisely in order to respond to these difficulties that Baudrillard discussed Gilbert Simondon's Du mode d'existence des objets techniques in the "Introduction" to Le système des objets.[20] Simondon had written convincingly of "an objective progress of the technical object" in which,

> the real technological problem was that of converging the functions in a structural unity and

not the search for a compromise between
conflicting demands. At the limit, in this
movement from the abstract to the concrete,
the technical object tends to resemble the
state of a system entirely coherent with itself,
entirely unified.[21]

Baudrillard describes this analysis as "essential"
since "it provides us with the elements of a coherence
never lived, never manifest in the real practice of ob-
jects." (S.O., p. 11) With such an analysis of relati-
vely idealized forms serving as a backdrop, the cultural-
ideological variations of different stages of industrial
society could be made to emerge in bolder relief. In
particular, it enabled Baudrillard to exploit the contrast
between a highly articulated, formal coherence of pure
technical features and the heterogeneity of actual design
and everyday use. If Simondon's formal analysis of "tech-
nemes" allowed one to think heuristically of a "language"
of technology, then attention to the way objects are actu-
ally received, adapted and "practiced" would reveal, in a
sense, "how the 'language' of objects is 'spoken.'"
(S.O., p. 15)

Simondon's thesis, however debatable (it suggested an
immanent principle of form governing "pure" technical deve-
lopment), allowed an essentially humanistic interpretation
of cybernetic rationality; if "man" was to avert his mythic
fate of domination by the machine — the ultimate reifica-
tion — he must spurn his own temptation to pervert techno-
logy into a tool of domination; the rational use of techno-

logy implied intelligent respect for the potential of technical forms as open systems; technology could best render its service as a mediation between people and between "man" and "nature" if the advantages of supple interconnection made possible by formal simplicity were not thwarted by instrumental expediency and one-sidedness.

Simondon's morphology allowed another dimension of critical interpretation to emerge. For example, the ideological imperative of efficiency and functionality could be shown to backfire, at a certain point, on these very principles themselves. "The more the object is made to respond to the demands of personalization," Baudrillard explained, "the more its essential characteristics are encumbered by external requirements." (S.O., p. 169) The automobile provides the most familiar example, since from a purely technical vantage point, standard automobile manufacture has converted the internal combustion engine into a formally closed system susceptible to the failure of externally aggregated functions and superfluous automatism: separate heating, cooling, lighting, starting and transmission systems all escape the regulation of the engine itself; the automobile becomes "logically more simple, «but» technically more complex, because it brings together several complete systems."[22] Thus, it is not only more difficult and expensive to build, but also to maintain in running order. Given the technical superfluity and formal dissonance of the battery-run starting system — to name only one servomechanistic device systematically integrated into automo-

bile design — its successful introduction (in place of the handcrank) begs for a certain ideological scrutiny. Just as the exaggerated fins and chrome work characteristic of certain periods of automobile construction function as signs of status, modernity, efficiency, power, elegance and various kinds of stereotyped identity, the "use of a superabundance of automatism in accessories and the systematic recourse to the servomechanism even when physical capacities would hardly be exceeded by direct forms of control"[23] invites an interpretation of "connotations of automatism." As Baudrillard suggests, these effect a kind of parody of dualistic rationalism, a sort of rhetoric of the "ghost in the machine."

> Because the automatized object 'works all by itself,' it suggests a resemblance with the autonomous individual. We are confronted with a new anthropomorphism. Utensils, furniture, the house itself once bore in their morphology, their usage, clear imprints of the human presence and image. This collusion is destroyed at the level of technically perfected objects, but it is being replaced by a symbolism which is no longer concerned with primary functions, but with superstructural functions. It is no longer the specialized gestures, the energy, the needs, and the body-image which man projects into the automatized object; it is the autonomy of his consciousness, his power of control, his own individuality, the idea of his person. (S.O., p. 134)

Whereas artisanal production could permit "inessential" features to vary with the context of the creator and the user, the peculiarity of commercialized technical development is that it tends to build the inessential into the very structure of technology as a permanent and debilitating

feature. (S.O., pp. 131-160; 169) It is precisely this
possibility of repeating the inessential in fixed form
which permits a kind of bias to infest entire classes of
objects in a systematic way, lending a peculiar kind of
entropic resonance to the "ambience" of "everyday life."
Of course, the omnipresence of standardized triviality in
less elaborate objects — coffee cups, doorknobs, lamp
fixtures, cigarette lighters — can be explained away on
any number of grounds. But its systematicity cannot be
denied; and the disaster of the automobile can be documen-
ted endlessly not only on the practical or economic but on
the social and cultural planes. But in the case of those
highly sophisticated commodities which participate in what
Baudrillard calls the "cybernetic imaginary," the function
of semiosis seems almost to move to a level of second order
social commentary. The obvious recuperative saturation of
social dissonance and deferred change by signs during the
"one-dimensional" phase of capitalism is replaced by an
interpretive dynamic which seems to herald a new social
order for which there exists no metalanguage, no principle
of rational criticism. "Objects have become more complex
than the human behaviour relative to those objects,"
states Baudrillard. (S.O., p. 68) The operative infra-
structure of techniques is rendered less and less accessible
to the user, who is caught up in the vertiginous illusion
of absolute personal control fostered by a proliferation
of dials, buttons and registers. It is as if social life
had been placed on automatic pilot. "In this tendency

away from a fluid and open structuration of practices,"
Baudrillard suggests, "man reveals what is in a sense
his _own_ meaning in a technical society: that of the
most beautiful multipurpose object, an instrumental model."
(S.O., p. 135) "Man is rendered incoherent by the cohe-
rence of his structural projection." (S.O., p. 69)

NOTES — CHAPTER IV

[1] See Paul Watzlawick, et al., The Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), pp. 51-54; 60-67. On metaphor/metonymy, analog/ digital and other binary oppositions drawn from structuralism and communication theory, see Anthony Wilden, System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange (London: Tavistock, 1972), passim.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn and introd. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217-254.

[3] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," p. 223.

[4] Benjamin, p. 234.

[5] Benjamin, p. 229.

[6] Benjamin, p. 232.

[7] Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn (London, NLB, 1973), p. 148.

[8] Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, p. 151.

[9] Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 42 (Elements of Semiology).

[10] Barthes, Elements, p. 41.

[11] Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Scope of Anthropology, pp. 18, 19.

[12] Eric R. Wolf, "Foreword," in Stanley Diamond, In Search of the Primitive (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1974), p. xii. (emphasis added)

[13] Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 42.

[14] See "Design and Environment" (Critique, pp. 185-203) and cf. Jeremey J. Schapiro, "One-Dimensionality: The Universal Semiotic of Technological Experience," in Critical Interruptions, ed. Paul Breines (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 136-186.

[15] Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) pp. 182-183.

[16] Karl Marx, Grundrisse, p. 528.

[17] Marx, p. 408.

[18] Marx, p. 528.

[19] Marx, p. 92.

[20] Gilbert Simondon, Du mode d'existence des objets techniques (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969).

[21] Simondon, Objets techniques, pp. 25-26.

[22] Simondon, p. 25.

[23] Simondon, p. 26.

CHAPTER V

THE DISPLACEMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURES

THE SELF-GOVERNING SIGN: FROM   STATUS SYSTEM TO CODE

> Consumption\can be conceived as, in effect, a
> characteristic modality of our industrial civil-
> ization — but only if we detach it from its
> current acceptation as a process of satisfying
> needs. Consumption is not a mode of passive
> absorption and appropriation to be opposed to
> the active mode of production, in order to
> balance naive schemas of behaviour (and of ali-
> enation). We must see clearly from the begin-
> ning that consumption is an active type of rela-
> tion (not only to objects, but to the collecti-
> vity and to the world); consumption, as a type
> of systematic activity and of global response,
> serves as the basis for our whole cultural
> system. (S.O., p. 232)

It is a truism that "consumption" has a tendency to

be organized around some system for articulating and dis-

tributing social status. The arrangement of status can

be — and is usually — highly complex, and since its dis-

position would always be primarily semiological, it is no

doubt susceptible to a kind of intrinsic analysis. As

soon as any element of social life becomes imbued with

"standing" (or the lack of it), it immediately becomes a

sign or mark of that social station. The peculiarity of

status signification, then, would be that its referential

system is, in a sense, relatively self-contained, its dis-

course is self-generating, so that status is always fully

"present and accounted for," as it were, in its own signs.

The logic of status differentiation generally has

a faintly tautological air about it, and taken in

isolation, it provides an excellent example of the sort of

conventional system of meaning, "produced" by the "play of

differences," and governed by a code, which structuralism
tends and often prefers to equate with "language" in the
strictest as well as the broadest senses.

But if, as a kind of "sign logic," status systems
may be granted a certain provisional, structural independ-
ence in the larger symbolic and practical contexts of soci-
eties as a whole, this "autonomization" of status must be
viewed as an oversimplification. It is not a question of
denying (or admitting) the theoretical possibility of
reading everything social in terms of such signifying sys-
tems. But everything social cannot be generated from or
reduced to this kind of controlled signification. An order
of privileges will usually bear some reference to material
conditions (as the exalted status of the impoverished pea-
sant farmer in traditional Chinese society would seem to
indicate[1]); and more importantly, in pre-industrial soci-
eties, the semiological power to order and graduate the
social field is generally contingent on symbolic restric-
tions and indeed frequently subject to all out symbolic
resistance. The tribal chieftain is excoriated, and his
authority turned on its head;[2] the initiate passes through
a "liminal zone" of symbolic universals which transcend
the parochial order of conventional society or suffuse it
with unsettling ambivalence;[3] and the unfortunate or less
privileged can paralyze the status quo with dramatic threats
of spiritual violence.[4]

In all such cases, the logic of the sign, which would
embody structured asymmetries of privilege, wealth and

power, is deconstructed in the <u>aqua regia</u> of "symbolic
exchange" which, to paraphrase Baudrillard, is an ambiva-
lent, always reciprocal process opposed to the abstraction
of the sign and its basis in the segmentation and hierar-
chization of social material.[5]

   According to Baudrillard, it is only when the "social
code" is "liberated" from its symbolic constraints that
its form becomes generalizable and the manipulation of
distinctive marks and abstract signs acquires an indepen-
dent sphere of operation. In Baudrillard's interpretation,
this is precisely what the commodity achieves; or rather,
the generalizability of the commodity form epitomizes this
historical development of political economy. As in Lukács'
theory of reification, the onset of capitalism is marked
at the social level by the gradual separation of spheres
of practical action and of social meaning. Baudrillard
demonstrates, however, that the process does not stop there.
With the teleology or "end-product" of each sphere reduced
more and more to the circulation of exchange value on the
one hand, and a "democracy" of signs on the other, the dim-
ensions of practical activity and of social discourse are
able to converge again in a kind of abstract stratum of
"sign-objects" which describe the sphere of "mass-mediated"
everyday life. The commodity is thus properly neither
simply an element in a system of use and functional need,
nor an integrated dimension of a complex symbolic or
ritual whole; it becomes an arbitrary term in a free-floating
discourse operating independently of symbolic and functional

referents, but actively assimilating the sense of both
to the "logic" of the sign-object.

However, with the extension of the commodity form
even beyond the threshold of human labour and market and
out the other side — an extension which suggests
the imprecise label "neo-capitalism" — the issue is no
longer one of status in the traditional sense, but precise-
ly the opposite: a tendency toward the homogenization and
interchangeability of forms, of differences, the elimination
of ceremony — in short, the realization of that autotelic
potential of the pure sign which was only latent in the
diacritical features of traditional status systems. Indeed
it is arguable that it was precisely this development which
permitted Veblen (and Marx, among others) to adopt such
a caustic and derisive tone: Veblen was not so much dis-
covering the social nexus of status and consumption as
witnessing its volatilization; "bourgeois" standing,
however much longevity and security it achieves, has always
seemed an illegitimate contrivance.

Consequently, the "code," which Baudrillard often
describes as "governing" social life and everyday practices,
is not a "social code" in the ordinary sense, but a code
in the semiological or communicational sense. It does not
prescribe rules for consumption, or impose a coherent struc-
ture on the "practice of objects" so much as progressively
absorb the social world by reproducing the "model" of con-
sumption itself. This model is highly abstract and adapt-
able; it might be compared with Jakobson's communication

model briefly discussed in Chapter II. It places a premium on transmission, with relatively little regard for the standard ideological coordinates of consumption, such as the ethics of possession, distribution, individual or collective identity, all of which become subject to modification, fluctuation, obsolescence. It is like a form through which everything passes — a McLuhanesque "medium," whose message is so universal, its content is a matter of relative indifference. Rather than sort and exclude messages, the code prefers to reinterpret or neutralize them.

On the collective level, the code may "operate" in terms of distinctive oppositions such as those which define classes (capitalist versus worker) or sub-groups in relation to others or in relation to a perceived norm; thus a number of analysts have discussed long hair and beads, punk rock, student rebellions and the like in terms of a kind of "semiological guerilla warfare."[6] But in a Baudrillardian diagnosis, these strategies do not engage with the code directly. They attack selected models which have come to represent the "status quo," the "establishment," or ideological conformity. These models are not, strictly speaking, codes — they are already imbued with too much content. They are particular constellations of signs which may do battle with one another. However, from the point of view of the underlying code, (if such a perspective is possible), no distinctive opposition is decisive for the system of consumption. Indeed, the frequent battles of signs only

absorb social conflict in order to mark it for consumption, not only on television and in other forms of mass entertainment, or in styles of dress, but in a constant process of hijacking specificity and decompressing human exchange in everyday life. In short, the code "plays" with the models, recycles old codes, refurbishes defunct styles, regenerates sets of oppositions — but its own operation works strictly in terms of a pure "logic" of marginal differences which in quite real terms can be elaborated indefinitely.

Baudrillard's code is a process of radical semiosis. Marginal differentiation which, as I have argued, was formerly confined within the symbolically restricted domain of status differentiation, becomes an abstract (therefore, relatively context-free) self-sustaining principle for the unlimited conversion of social life to sign values. Transgression and conflict are no longer inherent possibilities of the system. Their symbolic tension can not be sustained in the liquidity of the semiotic environment. Distinctive oppositions are simply reduced to the short life spans of circulating signs, models, and simulations which flood everyday life. According to Baudrillard, this occurs even with respect to the formerly most concrete social differences: "At the level of signs, there is no absolute wealth or poverty; not even opposition between the signs of wealth and poverty; these are only variations on the clavier of differences." (S.C., p. 126)

The relativization of social meaning makes conformity automatic at the level of signs and consumption, (S.C., p. 133) and the traditional practical sense of "social contradiction" becomes all but meaningless. The real issue becomes the potential reduction of all spheres, levels and dimensions of social life to semiotic labour and the appropriation of signs. Since the specificity of contextual meaning is always threatened by this system, and the conflictual opposition of symbolic difference has been transmuted to the relative difference of signs, the prospect for a resurgence of the symbolic and the ambivalence of reciprocal exchange (as against the rationalizing equivalence of economic exchange) lies, in Baudrillard's view, in opposition to the form of the code itself, not just in opposition to the form of commodity production; that is, in the deconstruction of the code's abstract and digital bias as transmitted through the structure of the sign, and as "consumed" in the sign-object.

USE VALUES AND NEEDS: THE END OF NATURAL TRANSCENDENCE

> To say that the system of needs is a system of
> general equivalence is no metaphor: it means
> that we are completely immersed in political eco-
> nomy. (emphasis added)   This is why we have
> spoken of the fetishism of use value. If needs
> were the singular, concrete expression of the
> subject, it would be absurd to speak of fetish-
> ism. But when needs erect themselves more and
> more into an abstract system, regulated by a
> principal of equivalence and general combinative,
> then certainly the same fetishism attached to
> the system of exchange value and the commodity
> is at play here in a homologous system which
> expresses the latter in all its depth and per-
> fection. (Critique, p. 135) (translation slightly altered)

In Chapter IV, I argued that Marx's category of use

value could not, with respect to a critical interpretation

of commodity culture, articulate an adequate alternative

to political economy.   Any broad conception of use value

as the non-reified or, in Adorno's idiom, nonidentical side

of the object founders on the logic of the sign, and its

capacity to multiply terms free of encumbering references.

But the problem goes deeper than this, in Baudrillard's

view.   Use value is not an ineffectual category by any means;

it is a structural articulation of value directly implicated

in the economy of the sign.   In fact, use value, at its

most exalted, serves as a kind of transcendental signified

for the whole system of political economy, and its ultimate

myth: "delivering the goods."   This is especially evident

in a certain kind of Marxist discourse which never funda-

mentally challenges the rationality of centering social

systems on production.   It is simply assumed by these theo-

rists that the "contradictions" of industrial capitalism

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will be removed once production for exchange (i.e.,
for profit) is replaced by production for use. But in
both theory and practice, this amounts to embracing the
same productivist imperative on the very grounds proposed
by political economy itself. (Critique, ch. 7)

From the point of view of utility, the only possible
kind of 'critique of commodity culture lies in the argument
that capitalist production distorts the purpose of the
object with irrelevant meanings which dupe the consumer
and sap his budget. This is a possible criticism, but
it doesn't go far enough. It preserves the idea of utility
as the "truth" of the object, a drab ethic of calculation
which hypostatizes the recovery of this truth in an economic
act; use value becomes "the moral law at the heart of the
object." (Critique, p. 133; cf. S.C., p. 48)   The perspec-
tive usually leads to a kind of naive semiology in which
the sign appears primarily as the signifier of a substance —
or a diversion from it. Either way, this is precisely the
schema which legitimizes the commodity system: just as the
ideology of design is supported by its reference to func-
tionality, the systemic play of the sign-object finds its
anchor in the ultimate promise of use value. (Critique,
p. 191)   In fact, for Baudrillard, use value actually
provides the axiological basis for the abstract equivalence
of exchange value: "To be abstractly and generally ex-
changeable, products must also be thought and rationalized
in terms of utility. Where they are not (as in primitive
symbolic exchange), they can have no exchange-value."

(Critique, p. 131)

> There is a homology between the 'emancipation'
> in the bourgeois era of the private individual
> given final form by his needs and the functional
> emancipation of objects as use-values. This
> results from an objective rationalization, the
> surpassing of old ritual and symbolic constraints.
> In a radically different type of exchange, ob-
> jects did not have the status of 'objectivity'
> that we give them at all. But henceforward
> secularized, functionalized and rationalized in
> purpose, objects become the promise of an ideal
> political economy, with its watchword 'to each
> according to his needs.' (Critique, p. 132)

Use value is not the "other side" of the object, or the

standpoint which, as Marx sometimes thought, allows one

to transcend political economy in order to criticize it.

To interpret that system as an ideology without putting

utility itself into question only leads, in the end, to a

naive conception of the sign as an ideological screen con-

cealing the exploitation of labour: the origin and telos

of the object is explained and justified as man's production

of use values for man; capitalism is held merely to distort

this process. (M.P., p. 25) In this regard, the critique

of political economy only reflects people in the same "mirror

of production" which confronts them everyday in the commodity.

Culture is reduced to an elaborate epiphenomenon, the meta-

phorical expression of production. "Even today," writes

Baudrillard, "the only 'Marxist' critique of culture, of

consumption, of information, of ideology, of sexuality,

etc., is made in terms of 'capitalist prostitution,' that

is, in terms of commodities, exploitation, profit, money

and surplus value." (M.P., p. 120)

The whole issue of use value brings us inevitably
to the concept of need, its complementary term. Here, as
over the problem of utility, Baudrillard is rather unsympa-
thetic, for the concept of need, on his view, tends to
short-circuit interpretation. The objects of political
economy (or of Marx's critique of it) are always produced
in order to satisfy a need. But like use value, need appears
to be an altogether unspecifiable substance — in this case,
a psychological one. It "explains" the adequation of a
subject to an object, in fact, it actually sanctions the
very idea of such an equation — or rationalist reduction.
(Critique, pp. 70-72) According to Baudrillard, the
"dialectic" of needs and use-values — or of consumption
and production — is almost invariably tautological:[7] it
begins and ends with the teleology of man-the-producer-of-
value. (M.P., pp. 30-33)

> A form of the chimerical dialectic of being
> and appearance, soul and body still persists
> in the subject-object dialectic of need. Ideo-
> logical speculation of this sort has always
> appeared as a 'dialectical' game of ceaseless
> interaction in a mirror: when it is impossible
> to determine which of the two terms engenders
> the other and one is reduced to making them
> reflect or produce each other reciprocally, it
> is a sure sign that the terms of the problem
> itself must be changed. (Critique, pp. 79-80)

The trap for critical theory lies in the temptation to
extend the series of binary oppositions already in play —
true consciousness/false consciousness (on which the theory
of alienation is based); use value/exchange value (on which
the critique of the commodity is based); and finally, real
needs and false needs (or healthy needs and unhealthy needs,

as the case may be). The charge against capitalist culture then becomes, predictably, that the system of exchange value generates false needs because it produces for exchange instead of use; and the familiar counter-position of utility and profit-seeking deception is recycled at the level of individual psychology. (Critique, p. 136) The weakness of this approach is that it is as impossible to draw a line between true and false needs as it is to define "true" consciousness, (unless one assumes the constitutive primacy of production, and refers back solely to the critique of political economy as the basis of one's value judgements). Even if it were possible to work with a distinction between primary and secondary needs, the ensuing observation that many capitalist societies fail to respect this scale of priorities is remarkably unenlightening. (Critique, pp. 80-82) Marx himself was quite aware that the minimum subsistence level was a social variable, dependent "to a great extent on the degree of civilization of a country."[8] "Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth."[9]

But Marx's insight that production "not only creates an object for the subject, but a subject for the object"[10] requires clarification. According to Baudrillard, it is misleading to imply that needs are produced and "conditioned" directly by production, for there is no strict relation of functional dependence between newly expressed needs and

the emergence of new commodities. (S.C., p. 102) Such
a putative equation is logically reducible to the argument
that specific needs correspond to particular objects.
(S.C., pp. 102, 107) But needs are no more inclined to
appear in discrete packages, one by one, than are commodi-
ties; they articulate a pattern which cannot be analyzed
into the mode of production — even the form of production —
alone. As Baudrillard argues, the problematic of consump-
tion gets us nowhere if it is conceived as an isolated,
passive appropriation of a substance. But if consumption
is an active relation, as, he argues, this is not to hypo-
thesize the "free will" of the agent of consumption, or to
assert that demand has the power to regulate supply.
(S.C., p. 99) But it does mean that the system of consump-
tion would be inoperative — an ideological failure — if
it did not encourage a constitutive moment which engages
the subject. Consumption, in the sense Baudrillard has
defined it, never involves an immediate relation of a need
to an object (any more than use value can institutionalize
an ideal transparency of the subject with respect to his
functional and economic goals). (Critique, pp. 140-142)
The interposition of the sign between subject and object may
"destroy" the problematic of intentionality in the strict
sense, [11] but it still requires an articulation within the
bounds of the code. The mind of the consumer is not simply
"a shop window or a catalogue;" (S.C., p. 102) and specific
advertising campaigns are "not all powerful." (S.C., p. 103)
If anything, the function of advertising would be to con-

tinue to transmit the imperative of consumption as such,
to generalize the sign form by saturating the environment
with an anxiety of signifiers to be read, deciphered and
recombined — but the needs thus articulated are not spon-
taneous expressions; they are coded, "like a system of
communication and exchange, a code of signs continually
emitted and received and reinvented: like a language
system «langage». (S.C., p. 134) The historicity of needs,
and the arbitrariness of consumption which Marx observed,
derive not from the determinations of the productive system
(which, at any rate, Marx regarded as historically more
or less necessary); they reside in the mediation of produc-
tion and consumption by an intervening system of needs —
a "culture" — which entails, in the case of political-
economic societies, an analysis of the system of objects.
(S.C., p. 103; Critique, p. 79f.) As Marshall Sahlins
has stated, in an emphatic echo of Baudrillard:

> Historical materialism has failed to answer to
> the nature of use-values, or more precisely,
> to the cultural code of persons and objects
> which orders the 'needs' of such use-values. The
> generation of productive finalities, hence of
> the 'system of labours,' is left unexplained, a
> theoretical void: attributed to an unexamined
> historical variability, or else reduced, even
> with relations of production, to the natural
> necessities of eating and drinking. The absence
> of cultural logic in the theory of production
> becomes a standing invitation to all sorts of
> naturalism.[12] (emphasis added)

CONCLUSION: THE CLOSURE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

This last point of Marshall Sahlin's sums up the theoretical intention of Baudrillard's stress on the role of consumption within the system of political economy perfectly. When Baudrillard states, in reference to the play of values in the structure of the commodity, that "we are completely immersed in political economy," he means, "in so far as Marx's model is correct." But Marx could not have totalized the whole system, because he was not able to stand completely outside it, as we have seen in the analysis of use value, need, production. The naturalistic axiology on which Marx based his critique thus serves a double function in Baudrillard's discourse. On the one hand, it demonstrates the immanent finalities of the system: it is an immense tautology, a perfect clo-·sure which rests on the generic definition of "man" as the producer of values; his self-realization appears as the appropriation of an essence — always the consumption, in some sense, of the values he has produced. This is the argument of The Mirror of Production. With respect to this movement of closure, which defines the system, Marx was substantially correct — although he did not always know just how correct he was. But even at the level of his own self-understanding, Marx was right to argue that the generation of surplus value was unnatural, an anomaly on political economy's own terms; for even the latter had

defined production and value as its own ratio: the generic foundations of man's collective "metabolism" of nature.

For Baudrillard, the completeness of this conceptual system reveals the real meaning of "fetishism:" systemic closure. (Critique, pp. 88-101) This brings us to the second dimension of Marx's theory. As Baudrillard says: "To become an end in itself, every system must dispel the question of its real teleology. Through the meretricious legitimacy of needs and satisfactions, the entire question of the social and political finality of productivity is repressed." (Critique, p. 71) The point is this: the naturalistic circle of political economy, whose description Marx, in a sense, completed in the very act of criticizing it, can never be final. If it were, reification would be total — but there must be some opening in the system through which interpretation can slip.

This is the reason for the analysis of consumption. "One of the fundamental problems posed by consumption," says Baudrillard, "is the following: do people organize themselves as a function of survival, or as a function of the meaning they give, individually or collectively, to their lives?" (S.C., p. 50) Baudrillard was proposing an "exploratory hypothesis" which "postulates a dialectical continuity between the political economy of the commodity and the political economy of the sign (hence, the critique of the one and the other)." (M.P., pp. 123-24) His purpose was not so much to propose consumption as the new cen-

ter — least of all as a generic definition of "man;"
the emphasis on consumption was more nearly aimed at
displacing production, removing it from the center which
it held not only in political economy, but in Marx's cri-
tique. This displacement was made possible, as I have
shown, by viewing how the sign intervenes in the system,
a dynamic which Marx had never been in a position to theo-
rize. "What we are attempting to see here," explains
Baudrillard, "is to what point Marxist logic can be res-
cued from the limited context of political economy in which
it arose, so as to account for our contradictions."
($\underline{M}.\underline{P}.$, p. 123)

The critical theorists — Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse —
had seen this opportunity, but lapsed into superimposing
an analysis of culture in the mode of Marx's critique. As
Richard Bernstein has stated, "we do not find in Horkheimer
any systematic attempt to refine and develop an historically
relevant critique of political economy. Instead, he simply
refers to Marx."[13] This, I believe, was basically true
of the whole school. Adorno and others asserted the ir-
reducibility of cultural determinations, the dialectical,
bilateral interaction of "base and superstructure;" but
they failed to extend this insight to the level of axiologi-
cal concepts, where the problem of culture alters the terms
of Marx's critique. Instead, critical theory appears in
retrospect as the phase where Marx changed the terms of
culture critique, a necessary development, but not sufficient.

Returning to Baudrillard, we see that the sign serves as an inlet through which interpretation can flow back into the system of political economy, and negate its closure. But this possibility is grounded as we have seen, in the emergence of a <u>new</u> phase of political economy, a structural mutation: the passage, so to speak, from a "<u>metallurgic</u> into a <u>semiurgic</u> society." (<u>Critique</u>, p. 185) In this phase,

> <u>the sign is much more than a connotation of the</u>
> <u>commodity</u>, than a semiological supplement to
> exchange value. It is an operational stru̶c̶
> ture . . . This super-ideology of the s̶ . . .
> sanctioned today by the new master disciplines
> of structural linguistics, semiology, information
> theory, and cybernetics . . . has replaced good
> old political economy as the theoretical basis
> of the system. This new ideological structure,
> that plays on the hieroglyphs of the code . . .
> ⟨and⟩ on the faculty of producing meaning and
> difference, is more radical than that which plays
> on labor power. (<u>M.P</u>., p. 122)

The only standpoint, however, from which this new phase — the political economy of the sign — can be viewed critically, is that of the symbolic: the reciprocity of symbolic exchange, and its ambivalence, which escapes the structuration of the sign. Baudrillard sketched the relationships this way:

$$\frac{\text{Exchange value}}{\text{Use Value}} = \frac{\text{Signifer}}{\text{Signified}} \quad / \quad \text{Symbolic exchange}$$

(<u>Critique</u>, p. 128)

In my introduction to this thesis, I quoted Raymond
Williams to the effect that basic concepts in the theory
of culture can turn out to be problems, "historical movements
that are still unresolved." This has certainly been the
fate of the critical and structural concepts which
Baudrillard has combined in his theory of "the political
economy of the sign." Signifier, signified, use value, ex-
change value, commodity, sign, fetishism/reification, alien-
ation, subject, object, production, consumption — all of
these terms, to one degree or another, have been taken for
granted by structuralists or critical theorists, and all
of them appear highly problematic in Baudrillard's thought,
converging, implicating each other, failing to transcend
each other's limitations, and yet, in crucial ways, true
to the unresolved form of the issues they evoke. This is
the sense of interpretation I have employed in situating
Baudrillard's work in the apparently opposed traditions of
critical theory and structuralism, and in reflecting back
on them through his discourse: what Baudrillard's work
suggests is not just a reading of modern culture, but a
corresponding and intimately related reading of some of the
concepts which characteristically define it.

Of course, Baudrillard's work is also subject to such
a reading. In his formidable will to distanciate himself
from the contemporary system of culture, he has woven an
ambiguous tale about the symbolic which flirts with the
"metaphysics of presence," a problematic which Baudrillard

himself would agree is not unrelated to the rationalist
utilitarianism he has opposed so vigorously. In his
extraordinary unmaskings of the pretensions of critical
theory to propose the axiological outlines of an alterna-
tive civilization, Baudrillard himself seems to lapse,
at times, into a discourse that plays an implicit game
of "false" and "true" immediacies: the symbolic versus
the structural, the concrete versus the abstract, the sin-
gular versus the general, the unique versus the fungible,
the continuous versus the discrete. No doubt, the ambiva-
lent reciprocity of symbolic exchange is itself a problema-
tic standpoint. Does it emerge, in some way, as an "effect"
of the contemporary play of signs? Baudrillard says fre-
quently that the symbolic "haunts" the sign. One thinks
of the way Marx made the rule of equal exchange, the
political-economic law of equivalence, haunt the factory
owners of his day. Perhaps Baudrillard's dream of trans-
cending this law of equivalence in the non-reductive
reciprocity of symbolic exchange is only the ghostly theo-
retical effect of that radical change in the mode of signi-
fication he describes, in which "the signified and referent
are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signi-
fiers, of a generalized formalization in which the code no
longer refers back to any subjective or objective "reality,"
but to its own logic;" and where "All «social» reality
then becomes the place . . . of a structural simulation."
(M.P., pp. 128-29)

Symbolic exchange allows Baudrillard a critique of the political economy of the sign; but he cannot escape that system through it, for the symbolic cannot be articulated at a distance, except in the terms of the sign, as its other. Symbolic exchange is, perhaps, as chimerical as Marx's use value, a pure effect of the system of "sign exchange" — perhaps even, like use value, its deepest expression, its "alibi." In For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign and The Mirror of Production, Baudrillard seemed to recognize this possibility as he developed his critique of structuralism. It was at this point that his work began to veer more aggressively toward the theme of "simulation." This concept, always present in Baudrillard's discourse, but now, in L'échange symbolique et la mort and subsequent works, something of an obsession, refers to the end of that referential system on which genuine conflict in industrial societies had been based.[14] Simulation appears as the definitive exclusion of the symbolic, its nadir. But, ironically, as one reads through these later volumes, the two concepts seem to grow together; the symbolic seems less distinct from the system.

Such, Baudrillard teaches, are the vicissitudes of critique.

NOTES — CHAPTER V

1 The richest merchant was considered the social inferior of the lowest peasant in the Confucian scheme of things.

2 Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), pp. 19-37.

3 V.W. Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Ithaco, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969). On the ambiguity of social boundaries, see Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (London: RKP, 1966). For an application of Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas to Western society, see Sherry Turkle, "Symbol and Festival in the French Student Uprising," in Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology, ed. S. Moore and B. Myerhoff (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 68-100.

4 See I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

5 On the difference between ambivalent, reciprocal symbolic interrelationships, which are singular and even nominalist in the sense that they do not involve fixed, abstract meanings, and modern systems of signification, see Stanley Diamond, In Search of the Primitive, passim. Plato's blueprint for a rational society is seen as a major turning point in modern history, signalling the repression

of "ritual drama." According to Diamond, "The progressive reduction of society to a series of technical and legal signals, the consequent diminution of culture, that is, of reciprocal, symbolic meanings, are perhaps the primary reasons why our civilization is the one least likely to serve as a guide to the 'unshakable basis of human society.'" Ibid., p. 280.

6 For example, Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 105. The exact phrase is "semiotic guerrilla warfare," coined by Umberto Eco. Hebdige interprets various youth styles in Britain as struggles "for the possession of the sign." (Ibid., p. 17) In his analysis, social protest participates in the same alienated model of signification as the society as a whole, only reversing its structural valences. Baudrillard would qualify this analysis on the same grounds he holds reservations about Eco's proposal to develop alternative codes as a mode of contestation. (Critique, pp. 183-184)

7 As Joan Robinson explains: "Utility is a metaphysical concept of impregnable circularity; utility is the quality in commodities that makes individuals want to buy them, and the fact that individuals want to buy commodities shows that they have utility." Economic Philosophy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 3.

8 Karl Marx, Capital, p. 171.

9 Karl Marx, Grundrisse, p. 92.

10 Ibid.

[11] Jean-Claude Giradin, "Toward a Politics of Signs: Reading Baudrillard," _Telos_, no. 20 (1974), p. 128.

[12] Marshall Sahlins, _Culture and Practical Reason_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 148.

[13] Richard Bernstein, _The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory_ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 182.

[14] Jean Baudrillard, _L'échange symbolique et la mort_ (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 53-62, 85-117.

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