Post-Structuralism as Ideology

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Part One

J. Baudrillard: A Paradigm Case of the Post-Structuralist Path to Conservatism

At the recently held 'Futur * Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity' conference,[1] over 1000 people — mainly young — packed into lecture theatres to listen to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, or at least, by an appropriate irony, make do with his image relayed to adjacent theatres by closed circuit television. Jean Baudrillard: post-structuralist, post-marxist, and interpreter, as he would have it, of the post-modern, post-social, post-political world. This conference was an instructive and significant event marking the convergence of a current of contemporary intellectual thought with an emerging new style and sensibility in youth culture. The signs of a new phase of youth culture have been around for some years — new hair-cuts, new looks, new scenes — but who could have said whether this was just the flux of fashion or the signs of a changed sensibility? Post-structuralist thought has been a force in Australian intellectual life for at least a decade. It has become central to the new disciplines of media studies and film theory and developed into a vigorous challenger to orthodox literary and art criticism. It has shaken traditional approaches in almost all the disciplines of the arts and social sciences, as well as seeming to

offer itself as a metadiscipline or metadiscourse linking them all. This has been a gradual and uneven process: at first a few people speaking of new authors and using a seemingly incomprehensible language; later the emergence of identifiable groupings around conferences and new journals. In response most academics initially hoped that, like an ugly fashion, it would go away before they were forced to read the books and confront the arguments. But post-structuralism has been making ground amongst graduate students and younger staff members and getting represented on the curriculum. Yet, while it has become a force in the universities and colleges, post-structuralism hardly struck one as a likely candidate for popularization. It is highly abstract, requires an understanding of the complex and technical terminology of semio-linguistics, and undercuts commonsense and taken-for-granted understandings; worse, it is often wilfully obscure and paradoxical, addressed to the already initiated as though to both mock and repel the 'general reader'. As such, post-structuralism seemed a new species of elitist academicism in retreat from the demands for political engagement and social relevance characteristic of the late 1960s early 1970s period.

Yet at the Futur * Fall conference there was this convergence of the high academic with a new current in youth culture; and it strongly intimates that we are not looking at short-lived new fashions on the surface of academic or wider social life but at a level of sensibility and orientation deriving from general and deep-going social experiences rather than from the local effects of isolated discourses or scenes. Such a convergence characterized the late 1960s early 1970s period when the aspirations of the intellectuals and intellectually trained groupings, as expressed in the student movements and the counter-culture, found diffuse echoes through youth culture generally and into the wider culture. The sense of a new era having arrived, of new aspirations for liberation emerging and a new determination to achieve them, reverberated both in the works of the likes of Herbert Marcuse and in the lyrics of rock and roll songs; for a while it seemed as though the universal blue jeans were a sign of the 'great refusal' of one dimensional society. If the Futur * Fall conference is an early sign of the emergence of a new and broadly based sensibility then it will certainly lack the radicalism and utopian aspirations of the 1960s-1970s. A high or popular Baudrillardism would at best be a-political , non-radical and nihilistic; at worst it could shape up

1. This conference was held at Sydney University during the August vacation, 1984.

as a cynical and decadent hedonism whereby people immerse themselves in the spectacle, the possibilities and the ironies of a thrilling society heading for catastrophe.

All those 'posts' associated with Baudrillard's position — post-structuralist, post-marxist, post-modern, post-social, post-political — mark a distinct boundary between the present and the sixties-seventies era. Baudrillard, and his commentators, see a 'break' in his work after *The Mirror of Production*: a book in which he speaks of marxism as a theory which shares the logic or code of the system of which it claims to be the antithesis. With this work he sees himself as having broken with marxist discourse (and indeed has come increasingly to doubt the possibility of *any* radical transformative practice); he sees this breaking free from illusions as having allowed a more appropriate and revealing analysis of the new era. Similarly, it seems the local 'Baudrillard scene' of *avant garde* theorists and artists is in conscious reaction against the marxism of the sixties/seventies era — especially perhaps the cultural revolutionary and counter-culture influenced marxism which looked back to the past for models of an authentic national or working-class culture. For a very useful insight into the way Baudrillard has been taken up in Australia it is worth reading Mick Carter's essay 'From Red Centre to Black Hole' in the recently published *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene*.

> So what were the new crop of cultural producers presented with when they began to pick up their pens, Super-8s and Portapaks, eager to make their way in the world? Right in the centre of the target was a Marxism wedded to the idea that cultural authenticity was possible via the discovery of a real Australian history and the construction of a true national identity through an autonomous, home grown culture. It was a Marxism that was profoundly productivist in character, having turned itself into a cultural wing of the Trade Unions and the Labor Party, desperately clinging to an archaic and romantic model of socialism that had died in the thirties. Furthermore it was a Marxism that was — because of its nationalist inflection — incapable of recognizing let alone theorizing, what it was like to live here and now, to live in a culture which was mediatised, internationalised, and tied indissolubly in its ruling spectacle to the moment of consumption.[2]

For this generation Baudrillard 'tells it like it is'; from two different starting points he and this generation converge in their understanding of the world: one deriving from the trajectory of French intellectual life which has seen phenomenology, marxism, and

2. Mick Carter, 'From Red Centre to Black Hole', in Andre Frankovits ed., *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene*, Glebe, Stonemoss Services, 1984, pp. 68-69.

structuralism yield ground to post-structuralist approaches; the other having its source in a new generation's spontaneous experience of a changed world, especially that generation's advance guard: its image makers and interpreters of images — students of art, fine arts, media studies, film studies and literary criticism. This convergence is doubly challenging to the left; it is both a political and an intellectual challenge.

In this article I will attempt to develop an interpretation of the forces which have constituted this convergence. In part one I will try to characterize the trajectory of Baudrillard's work relating it to some of the general concerns and characteristics of post-structuralism — especially to the mode of active subjectivity which post-structuralism either explicitly or implicitly assumes. This analysis will suggest the reasons for the conservatism of Baudrillard in particular and of post-structuralism in general. In part two I will begin to outline an alternative to post-structuralist accounts of the contemporary world and will also outline the social conditions in which post-structuralism emerges. To telegraph a few punches, I will be attempting to show that post-structuralism is an (not the) ideology of contemporary intellectuals responding to and interpreting a world being transformed by abstract thought and techniques, themselves derived from intellectual practice. The reasons for the convergence of the academic/intellectual theories and spontaneous experience of the world will be sought in the way in which contemporary society forms the person to create a mode of subjectivity which finds in post-structuralism a congenial theoretical representation and justification of itself and of its mode of relating to the world.

Baudrillard's Early Position

Baudrillard's early work has a dual focus: firstly, a concern with the signs, codes and meanings of the consumerist and media penetrated world of contemporary capitalism; secondly, a critical engagement with theories, especially marxism and semio-linguistics, which he sees as trapped within the logic of the dominant code rather than being able to break from it. In these works of the early 1970s, of which *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*[3] and *The Mirror of Production*[4] are available in English

3. J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St Louis, Telos Press, 1981, (first published in France in 1972). Hereafter referred to as *For a Critique.*

translation, there is an interesting trajectory at work. At the level of intention and aspiration he seeks to develop a critique of marxism and search for a more fundamental and uncompromising radicalism beyond marxism; the spirit of the events of May 1968 is strongly present in these works. To contemporary consumerist capitalism, which appears as an immense spectacle of circulating signs, he brings the insights into signs, codes and meaning systems of semio-linguistics and structuralism. This approach does indeed allow the ways in which commodities can carry meanings to be systematically explored; it allows for the realm of cultural meanings to be related to some characteristics of the social structure. Much of this work on consumerism is important and interesting. But as Baudrillard relentlessly pushes his deconstruction of consumerism and marxism to the limits, his radical impulse and commitments become increasingly attenuated and are finally abandoned. So with Baudrillard's post-structuralism we have a trajectory of development in which there emerges a relentless radicality at the level of critique and interpretation, but a disengagement from and rejection of practices of political and cultural transformation. This trajectory is one shared by many other post-structuralists and it makes Baudrillard an instructive figure to analyse.

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign announces itself as an attempt to deconstruct the ideology of consumption.[5] Baudrillard attacks the categories through which we spontaneously experience and theoretically examine objects; that is, as 'things' which through their functional and useful properties enable us to meet our naturally and culturally determined 'needs'. Against this prevailing view Baudrillard asserts the centrality of the sign function of objects.[6] He calls for a method capable of registering the subtle, complex progression of difference and nuance characteristic of consumerist capitalism. Consumer capitalism represents a new era of the signification of social difference: an increase in general abundance and standard of living has transferred the discriminatory function from exclusive possession by distinct classes of people of distinct classes of objects to a nuanced hierarchy of models, series and options. It is a society in which people are allowed a novel level of freedom to put together their own ensembles of objects. Baudrillard argues that analysis of the range of consumer lifestyles reveals a semiology or syntax of objects which has behind it the

4. J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St Louis, Telos Press, 1975, (first published in France in 1973).
5. Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

organizing force of a formal code.

> It is certain that objects are the carriers of indexed social significations of a social and cultural hierarchy — and this in the very least of their details: form, material, colours, durability, arrangement in space — in short it is certain that they constitute a code.[7]

However, Baudrillard recognizes that this code which organizes the sign objects does not completely of itself determine how individuals or classes will put together their ensembles of things. The discourse will be spoken with class accents: it will reflect the dialectic of hope and despair which grips people — hope for a better life, despair at breaking out of the conditions which lock them into their class positions. In short, each particular performance of the coded discourse will be shaped by the class logic peculiar to the person's situation.

Therefore Baudrillard sees the code of consumer objects not just as a medium for marking difference but also as a mask for essential differences. The emergence of a seamless hierarchy of objects and life styles destroys the appearance of formal social barriers and the sense of qualitative social inequalities; this situa-

6. This distinction between the 'use function' of objects and the 'sign function' of objects may mystify those readers unfamiliar with the basic ideas of semiology and structuralism. We are used to taking for granted that food is for nourishment, houses are for shelter and that clothes are for protection or 'looking nice'. To point to the sign function of such objects is not to deny that things have uses and functions; rather, it is to recognize that they do so within a system of cultural signs, codes and meanings. Take food: the theoretically edible (non-poisonous and nourishing) environment is divided into edible/non-edible — for us slater beetles are out as a form of high protein; it is further divided into foods which are edible but explicitly or implicitly tabooed — pork for Jews, horse for Anglo-Saxons; there exist rules of complementarity and opposition which determine what can be served together; we employ categorical oppositions such as raw/cooked, sweet/sour, savoury/bland; there are menu rules governing the timing, ordering and appropriate elements and modes of preparation which bear upon the organizing of daily, weekly and ritual meals. Semiology as a study of signs in general could chart the codes, rules, conventions and meanings of the food system. Food in this sense is not a thing which fulfills a need by being nourishing or tasty but a thing which has a sign function; food is a system of cultural meanings which people use to distinguish themselves from or identify with others, it is part of the classfication of the natural world, it marks the division of the day and year, it is the material of rituals, it can be the medium of expression of love, respect, conformity etc. Semiology enables us to lay bare the signifying practices which constitute the world of cultural signs in which and through which we live. See, for instance, R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1978, pp. 23-41.
7. Baudrillard, *For a Critique, op. cit.*, p. 37.

tion finds its theoretical expression in an empiricist sociology of status and stratification.

> There is a double mystification. On the one hand there is the illusion of a dynamic of consumption, of our ascending spiral of satisfactions and distinctions towards a summit where all would enjoy the same prestigious standing. This false dynamic is in fact permeated by the inertia of a social system that is immutable in its discrimination of real powers. On the other hand is an illusion of a democracy of consumption.[8]

On the contrary, consumption does not have the same meaning at the top as it does lower down the social scale. Those at the top, in addition to being privileged consumers also have access to economic, social and political power. As manipulators of people and things, as well as signs, they inhabit a different world to those

> who are consecrated to consumption, triumphantly resigning themselves to it as the very sign of their social relegation, those for whom consumption, the very profusion of goods and objects, mask the limits of their social chances, those for whom the demand for culture, social responsibility, and personal accomplishment are resolved into needs and absolved into the objects that satisfy them.[9]

To this point Baudrillard's analysis of consumerism could be seen as a bolstering of marxism by filling in an area which it had not been able to integrate into its general theory and interpretation. It is consistent with a marxist mode of ideology critique in revealing the oppressive reality behind the appearances of the consumer society. It speaks for the victims of consumerism whose 'real needs' as human social subjects — 'culture, social responsibility and personal accomplishment' — are denied and a mess of signs given to them instead of meat.

However, as Baudrillard attempts to generalize his argument about the nature of signs and the code, the trajectory of his argument leads towards a distancing from marxism. Baudrillard tries to place his argument about the centrality of the sign function of objects in the consumer society into the context of a general theory of exchange. Contemporary capitalism he sees as a compound of commodity exchange and sign exchange which he refers to as 'general political economy'. He develops an argument that there is an homology between economic exchange value and sign exchange value: what they share at depth is a common form or logic — that deriving from an homogenizing, systematizing and reductive code. Baudrillard sees this logic as emanating from the very nature of the sign, the arbitrary fixing of a relationship between a signifier and

8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

a signified. The sign form and the commodity form are both coded exchange systems which forge relationships of equivalence in social and cultural exchange. This code, with its principle of equivalence, destroys and supplants symbolic exchange, with its principle of ambivalence. This contrast of commodity/sign exchange with symbolic exchange is a major point of divergence from classical marxism. For Marx the distinction between use value and exchange value — the former concrete, the latter abstract — is a fundamental one; it allows him to distinguish the situation which existed prior to commodity exchange, to deliniate the character of capitalist exchange, and it allows his to outline the general nature of socialism. Baudrillard rejects use value as an opposite of exchange value; it is, rather, the alibi of exchange value, its lived reality structured by the code of political economy.

> The system of use value . . . involves the resorption without trace of the entire ideological and historical labour process that leads the subject in the first place to think of himself as an individual, defined by his needs and satisfactions, and thus ideally to integrate himself into the structure of the commodity?[10]

The before, opposite and the beyond of the exchange code of the commodity and sign is not to be found in use value but in 'the symbolic'. The symbolic or symbolic exchange has its historical embodiment in those primitive societies which practise what, in the tradition of Marcel Mauss, is called gift exchange. The gift object is distinctly different to the commodity object: in gift exchange the object does not lead a separate existence, 'it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons'.[11] The gift object becomes able to symbolize that relationship but cannot carry a value dissociated from that particular relationship; because gift objects cannot take on autonomous abstract value they are not codifiable as signs. Hence, for Baudrillard there is on the one side 'general political economy' constituted by the commodity/sign form and their common code; on the other is symbolic exchange characterized by full human presence in exchange, and by ambivalent meanings rather than the repressive pre-fixed structure of the sign. In the context of the analysis based on this distinction radical opposition to contemporary capitalism consists in actions which attempt to demolish the agency of the code. For all its grand abstract inclusiveness as a political project, all we are given by

10. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 183.
13. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production, op. cit.*, pp. 129-147.

Baudrillard as concrete examples of such a politics are the revolutionary gestures and graffiti of May 1968,[12] or the spontaneous utopian acts of revolt by marginalized groups such as women, blacks, or youth.[13]

May 1968 and Post-Structuralism

The student uprisings, and the widespread workers' strikes that they triggered, in May 1968 were a decisive influence on French intellectual life. Terry Eagleton in his critique of post-structuralist modes of literary criticism sees May 1968 as being decisive in turning the French intelligentsia's concern away from practices of political and cultural transformation.

> Post-structuralism was a product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least was likely to beat you over the head for doing so. The student movement was flushed off the streets and driven underground into discourse.[14]

Certainly Baudrillard has taken this wide and easy path away from commitment to any practice of comprehensive political change, and May 1968 is a central and recurring point of reference in his writing. Yet, in spite of their undoubtable impact on French political and intellectual life, it is too simple to see post-structuralism as being produced by those events. We need to look to the more deeply set constitutive conditions from which both May 1968 and post-structuralism have emerged.

The broad summary, given in the previous section, of the general thrust of Baudrillard's position in the works of the early 1970s lays the basis for a closer look at the ground from which his current anti-political nihilism has emerged. I will focus on a number of problems and tendencies in which can be identified the breaks and continuities in Baudrillard's development from a utopian May 1968 Left radicalism to the implicitly conservative variant of post-structuralism of his recent works. The following three sub-sections will focus on these areas: firstly, Baudrillard's tendency to over-essentialize the logic of exchange systems; secondly, the disappearance of social determination and its replacement by determination by the code; thirdly, the contradictory elements and values which Baudrillard tries to fuse into his concept of the symbolic.

14. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 142.

1. The over-essentializing of the logic of exchange systems

At many points of his argument Baudrillard runs into problems which derive from an urge to define the essential principles of difference which distinguish societies based on different logics or codes. The sign/commodity form of exchange and symbolic exchange are conceived of as being mutually incompatible — a society will be governed by one or the other. This emphasis on essential differences deriving from the code leads Baudrillard into an a-historical, essentialist and dichotomous model which has no place for social forms which have combined gift and commodity exchange. Examples of mixed forms abound: Godelier's work on the Baruya shows a tribe who exchange salt bars internally in the gift exchange mode but circulate them as commodities with other groups; the Greek polis combined a mode of economic and political life based on the claims of both modes; and even in advanced capitalism the family and friendships remain enclaves based predominantly on reciprocal or symbolic modes of exchange. This is a fault to which Marx was also sometimes inclined: the belief that certain social forms, which analysis could show as being universal in one sphere — such as the market — could come to extend their sway over all areas of social life. For instance, Marx had a vision of the universal extension of the commodity form leading to a society where

> the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given but never sold; acquired but never bought — virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc. — when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is a time of general corruption, of universal venality, or to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value.[15]

While one can recognize such a process at work, it is another thing to claim that it has been or could ever be completed. Even while eroding it, advanced capitalism is dependent on a prior level of concrete personal commitments and symbolic modes of exchange on which it relies for a grounding of socio-cultural stability, and even for the motivations for entering the market sphere to work and to buy. Any fully developed general theory of exchange adequate to understanding our present situation would have to account for the constitutive conditions of these levels, their interaction and the contradictions which may emerge between them.[16]

15. K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1966, p. 29.
16. The ideas of constitutive abstraction and the relationship between relatively more and less abstract levels of society, which are central to this article, are drawn from Geoff Sharp's recent work. See for instance 'Intellectuals In Transition', *Arena* 65, 1983, pp. 84-95.

However, where Marx qualifies his vision of the universality of the commodity form by an account of the contradictory values and practices which emerge from class experience and struggle, Baudrillard grants to 'the code' an almost total sway across economy, politics, ideology and culture; in the works of the early 1970s only marginal groups, such as the students in May 1968, may transgress and overthrow the code; in the later works its hold is seen as being total.

Another problem which relates to this essentializing urge is the attempt to link the very form of the sign (the relationship of equivalence between signifier and signified) to the logic of commodity exchange. The elaboration of this argument at some points threatens to extend itself into the absurd implication that language itself, with its arbitrary fixing of the equivalence of a cluster of phonemes and a concept, is in essential conflict with symbolic exchange. Certainly Baudrillard's argument that sign exchange and symbolic exchange are based on essentially different and mutually exclusive codes is difficult to sustain when analysing actual social contexts of gift exchange; often the classes of objects deemed to be appropriate for gift exchange are very formally and rigidly coded as signs. Surely the sign form when applied to cultural meanings is a form of such generality that it must be seen as underpinning both gift and commodity exchange. Baudrillard's urge to ground the separateness and incompatibility of exchange systems in the logic of the sign and logic of the symbol, blinds him to questions of the interdependence of sign-like and symbol-like aspects of language and systems of cultural meaning; it theoretically precludes an investigation of the social conditions under which one mode comes to predominate or be preferred over the other.

2. The disappearance of social determination and the hypostatization of the code

Another characteristic of the trajectory of Baudrillard's interpretation and theory is the way in which the focus on symbol, sign and code goes along with a trend towards discounting or ignoring the shaping force of the social. The social relational aspects of society lose any determining capacity, being swallowed up by or seen as emanating from the code; in his later work this tendency becomes an explicit and central theme in his pronouncements on 'the end of the social'.[17]

17. J. Baudrillard, '. . . Or the End of the Social', *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, (published in France in 1978).

In those reciprocal societies of symbolic exchange when a gift is made, the person is, as it were, giving part of themselves: the social relationships established are essentially personal and concrete. But according to the contrast that Baudrillard is trying to draw, the sign behaves quite differently:

> the sign object is neither given nor exchanged: it is appropriated, withheld, and manipulated by individual subjects as a sign, that is, as coded difference. Here lies the object of consumption. And it is always of and from a reified, abolished social relationship that is 'signified' in a code.[18]

This short passage warrants close attention. Looked at from the perspective of the loss of human immediacy and presence with the passing of societies of symbolic exchange, sign exchange may *seem* like the abolition of a social relationship. Baudrillard is saying that in place of the concrete relation between persons symbolized in the gift, is the relationship between individual subjects and a code. The code of general political economy is one where social relations of the symbolic type are abolished and in which all interactions will be determined by a code which forges equivalences, abstracts and homogenizes. The code is a set of exchange rules and combinational laws which denies 'speech' in the symbolic mode, allowing only 'messages' consistent with the sign and commodity form. So Baudrillard is attempting to define the structuring logic behind the historical process of transition from reciprocal societies where human social relations are immanent in exchange, to advanced capitalist societies where social relations are abolished in the code. However his particular theoretical formulation of these historical changes is a consequence of becoming locked into concepts and metaphors drawn from semio-linguistics. In the commodity/sign object, social relationships are not abolished; rather they are abolished in their concrete reciprocal mode and reconstituted in a more abstract form. It is one of the virtues of Marx's account of commodity fetishism that it is seen as both being constituted by a code (that controlling the transmutation of use value to exchange value) *and* as being an outcome of social relations of a new type (those of the capitalist market where both commodities and labour power can be bought and sold).

> In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.[19]

18. Baudrillard, *For a Critique, op. cit.*, p. 65.

As Marx goes on to suggest, these social relations of commodity circulation not only mask the mutuality of social labour and the mechanism of class exploitation, they also provide the context for experiences upon which are built meanings, values and theories. These social relations are 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man', 'the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham'.[20] This line of analysis of the constitutive character of the abstract social relations of commodity exchange is, of course, supplemented by analyses of how the social experience of relationships within and between the classes are constitutive of oppositional meanings, values and theories. However, while Baudrillard continues to draw on Marx's insight into the more formal and coded aspects of commodity exchange, the analysis of the constitutive character of social relational forms disappears. The social sphere becomes an effect of the code.

Baudrillard's argument becomes most strained when he attempts to formulate this relationship between the order of signs and the social order.

> There is no object of consumption before the moment of its substitution, and without this substitution having been determined by the social law, which demands not only the renewal of distinctive material, but the obligatory registration of individuals on the scale of status, through the mediation of their group and as a function of their relations with other groups. *This scale is properly the social order,* since the acceptance of this hierarchy of differential signs and the interiorization by the individual of signs in general (i.e. of the norms, values and social imperatives that signs are) constitutes the fundamental, decisive form of social control — more so even than ideological norms.[21]

The logic here strains and breaks down. The 'social law' of which Baudrillard speaks must be an historically contingent one — one which does not apply in societies of symbolic exchange; indeed, it only comes into being at the moment when symbolic exchange is substituted by sign exchange. Yet he wants to say this substitution is determined by this law. This logical contradiction has grown up in a gap common to many synchronic structuralist or functionalist analyses: it is a consequence of the inability to account for the way in which the determining code or structuring logic are themselves constituted by historical social processes. This 'social law' to which he refers functions to assign persons to hierarchical positions on a status scale. In this formulation Baudrillard grants agency to an hypostatized social law and implies the existence of a pre-existing

19. K. Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, pp. 165-166.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
21. Baudrillard, *For a Critique, op. cit.*, p. 68.

fixed hierarchical structure to which people are registered to waiting places. Yet in a series of slides and jumps this 'social law' and hierarchical structure are collapsed into being an effect of the essential nature of signs and the code. In this formulation the sign and code take on something like the function that ideology has in Althusser's theory. Where, for Althusser, ideology constitutes persons as subjects, for Baudrillard signs and the code assign subjects to their places in an hierarchical social order and locks them into a discourse which allows only commodity and sign exchange.

This conception of determination by the code treats the social subject as passive: the code is the active agent. The way Baudrillard talks of it assigning persons to places in a social hierarchy evokes feudal or caste societies more readily than it does the situation of advanced capitalism. What his formulation is unable to account for is how the social relations of contemporary capitalism form the person in such a way as to compel him or her to be self-active subjects. Marx's proletarian freely entered the market under the compulsion of the 'choice' of either starving or selling his or her labour power. Similarly modern persons, born into a world where the old closed group contexts — tribe, caste, village and even the class groupings of the earlier phase of capitalism — have been destroyed or eroded, find no place waiting for them; they must through their own self-activity, with the materials and opportunities available, make a life and identity for themselves.[22] The consumer is exactly such a subject, compelled by the absence of a place to reach out via the market and construct one for him or herself with commodities and the meanings which attach to them.

In short, in seeking the essential character of consumerist capitalism in the sign and code, Baudrillard cuts himself off from an understanding of how contemporary meaning systems such as consumerism depend upon a specific mode of subjectivity and hence it also cuts him off from understanding how such a subject is constituted by the social relational forms of contemporary capitalist society.

3. Baudrillard's conception of the symbolic

In the concept of 'the symbolic' or 'symbolic exchange' Baudrillard attempts to combine two quite distinct elements. The first is the

22. For an account of how this notion of the way in which the person is formed as an active subject by the social form of modern society can be applied to an understanding of consumerism and advertising see G. Gill, 'The Signs of Consumerism', *Arena* 53, 1979.

principle of gift or reciprocal exchange characteristic of primitive societies. The second is the post-structuralist critique of the structuralist sign (that is, the sign as understood by Saussure and taken up by Levi-Strauss). Both these elements are conceived of as being the antithesis to what is essential to contemporary capitalism. The symbolic as gift exchange represents that which existed prior to the abstract coded commodity mode of exchange; the symbolic object is not abstracted from concrete human interchange but inseparably suffused with the presence, actuality and ambivalence of the human relationship. Having argued that the sign and the commodity share a common logic or code, the sign is seen as a form specific to its era and hence potentially able to be broken with. Behind Baudrillard's critique of the sign is the work done in the 1960s and 1970s by Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva and the *Tel Quel* group generally.[23] He explicitly shares their rejection of the sign as fixed equivalence of signifier and signified, and endorses Derrida's critique of Western culture's privileging of the signified.[24] Baudrillard takes into his notion of the symbolic their alternative view of signification as an endless play of signifiers where the sign is never fixed to a signified or referent but floats in shifting relations to other signs. This is the source of Baudrillard's principle of ambivalence which defines the symbolic and distinguishes it from the sign.

> Of what is outside the sign, of what is other than the sign, *we can say nothing*, really, except that it is ambivalent, that is, it is impossible to distinguish respective separated terms and to positivise them as such. And we can say that in this ambivalence is rooted a type of exchange that is radically different from the exchange of values (exchange values or sign values). But this symbolic exchange is foreclosed and abolished by the sign . . . [25]

As I suggested above, this attempt to ground gift exchange in ambivalence or the floating play of signs is impossible to square with evidence that in societies of gift exchange there is, typically, a high degree of sign-like fixity and stability in the meaning systems. Yet Baudrillard ignores such contradictions and asserts that the symbolic is the universal and essential opposite of contemporary capitalism. The symbolic is a notoriously unspecific concept in his work, for instance: 'But the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this very reason be named except by allusion, by infraction.'[26] It is an ineffable

23. See Baudrillard, *For a Critique, op. cit.*, Chapter 8, especially pp. 156-163.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 160-161.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
26. *Ibid.*

blank space into which Baudrillard can pour his deepest utopian aspirations without having to explore whether they are contradictory, or how they might be enacted in practice. If we put aside the contradictions and problems that this concept presents and ask what values and aspirations inhere in the symbolic, we will get a better sense of the direction of his theoretical and political project. By ignoring the social structure of kinship ties and by ignoring the sign-like meaning structures (such as totemism) which together provide the framing context for acts of gift exchange, Baudrillard is in effect abstracting the intersubjective moment of interaction in gift exchange from its socio-cultural context. It is as if he wants to see the essence of gift exchange as the moment in which two subjects, unconstrained by prior structures or pre-forged equivalences such as the sign and in full mutual presence, forge their relationship and create the symbolic meaning of their objects. This intersubjective moment which Baudrillard has abstracted from gift exchange has much in common with the active reader of post-structural criticism who deconstructs and constructs the text; who, far from being disconcerted by the play of signs and the ambivalence of codes, revels in the experience of active de-centred subjectivity.

However, where Barthes and others were heading, as Eagleton would have it, away from politics and into discourse, Baudrillard in these works of the early 1970s maintains the rhetorical shell of May 1968 radicalism and can imagine a politics of the symbolic — a politics of spontaneous, unstructured active intersubjectivity.

> as soon as one posits ambivalent relations it all collapses. There is no code for ambivalence; and without a code no more encoder, no more decoder: the extras flee the stage.[27]

and again

> The symbolic consists precisely in breaking the univocality of the 'message', in restoring the ambivalence of meaning and in demolishing in the same stroke the agency of the code.[28]

Where would one find examples of such a total but contentless political programme? — in the events of May 1968.

> The real revolutionary media during May were the walls and their speech, the silk screen notices, the street where everything was an immediate inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic.[29]

Were the graffiti and slogans of May just another code opposed to the dominant one? 'No', Baudrillard replies, 'it simply smashes the code'.[30]

27. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

We cannot and need not pursue the adequacy of such a politics here, its moment has passed, its hopes have failed historically, and its rhetoric has disappeared from Baudrillard's later work. However, it is worth noting some of the continuities of values and impulse which are shared by the May 1968 sensibility and post-structuralism. May 1968 was not so much about the particular demands for an end to the Vietnam war, for educational reform and for a radical curriculum; it was about the liberation of the imagination from the restrictive structures of bourgeois life.[31] If one looks at that characteristic slogan, 'under the paving stones the beach', daubed on the walls of Paris at this time, one can sense the continuities. The paving stones of ancient avenues were dug up by students to hurl through the tear gas at the riot police. Yet this act of rebellion was also a metaphor of deconstructing or breaking through the structures and forms of the old order to reach the beach: the beach, a place of play and holiday, that exciting ambivalent place where the elemental earth and sea meet and contest. While post-structuralism and deconstruction have shed the utopian project of liberating the imagination through social revolution, they retain a sense of liberatory deconstruction and active subjectivity in relation to texts and cultural meanings. May 1968 (with its parallels in other centres of the advanced capitalist world) and the post-structuralist sensibility are contrasting expressions of a deeply set desire for liberation and autonomy characteristic of our era.[32] Baudrillard's work reflects the continuities as well as the disjunctions and confusions of the movement between these moments.

Baudrillard's Recent Work

If concern with 'the symbolic' in Baudrillard's works of the early 1970s was essentially a concern with and yearning for unstructured, unconstrained, unmediated intersubjectivity and a utopian radical politics oriented towards its enactment, then the later works would seem to constitute a decisive break. The language and aspirations of liberated subjectivity — action, will, desire, liberation, judgment, project, strategies, etc. — are systematically excluded or rejected by a pattern of metaphors which emphasize the

30. *Ibid.*, p. 184. For a discussion of Baudrillard's post-marxism in relation to his attitudes to the May 1968 events see P. C. Botsman, *Baudrillard: Hello/Goodbye*, Sydney, Local Consumption Occasional Paper 1, 1984, especially pp. 22-26.

31. See A. Quattrocchi & T. Nairn, *The Beginning of the End, France, May 1968*, London, Panther, 1968; for instance pp. 104, 105.

32. See G. Sharp, 'Intellectuals in Transition', *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

object-like qualities of persons, groups and social processes. In *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities*[33] and in *Simulations*[34] social entities and processes are characterized and explored through metaphors drawn from astro-physics.

> The social void is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline clusters which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an *in vacuo* aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social.[35]

According to the analysis conducted in the terms of these metaphors, the mass is no longer conceivable as having the potential to awake from its silence and passivity to become the subject of history, agent of revolution or seeker of liberation. This mass is an object, but one of a special type: it is not one which can be shaped and manipulated by politicians, advertisers, or revolutionary intellectuals; rather, its massive gravitation and inertia absorbs and neutralizes all meaning, information and force directed towards it. As Baudrillard sees it, the discourses on thwarted subjectivity of the masses, which emphasize their alienation and passivity, are inappropriate and romantic survivals of a past era. The hyperconformity of the mass, its immunity to meaning and manipulation is its strength.

> The secret of manipulation has been sought in a frantic semiology of the mass media. But it has been overlooked in this naive logic of communication, that *the masses are a stronger medium than all the media*, that it is the former who envelop and absorb the latter — or at least there is no priority of one over the other. The mass and the media are one single process. Mass(age) is the message.[36]

Yet, while this denial of subjectivity and emphasis on the object-like character of social entities is a change from the earlier works, the identifying of the determining source of this in the code and the sign system is a major point of continuity. Certainly Baudrillard has made new ground in relation to the characterization of sign and code; no longer is there emphasis on the contrast between the essential logic of the sign and the symbol. In its place is a schema of stages in the historical development of the image. Cultural images, he claims, have changed from being grounded in 'representation' to being caught up in the logic of 'simulation': from the point of view of representation, the sign and a thing in the real

33. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, op. cit.*
34. J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, (published in France in 1978).
35. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

world are equivalent; simulation is a state of affairs where there is a circulation and exchange of signs which cuts them off from any real referent.

Baudrillard conceives the successive phases of the image as follows:

> — It is the reflection of a basic reality.
> — It masks and perverts a basic reality.
> — It masks the absence of a basic reality.
> — It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.[37]

In our era of consumerism, mass media, opinion polls and information, we have made a transition from the phase where the image masked and perverted a basic reality; marxism epitomized this phase with its project of unmasking ideology and disclosing the truth about history and society. Now signs, in immense profusion, float and circulate according to the logic of the code, no longer tied to any reality or any truth. With the coming of this new phase of the image, ideology critique has lost its relevance.

> It is no longer a question of the *ideology* of work — of the traditional ethic that obscures the 'real' labour process and the 'objective' process of exploitation — but of the scenario of work. Likewise it is no longer a question of the ideology of power, but of the *scenario* of power. Ideology only corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs, simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs. It is always the aim of ideological analysis to restore the objective process; it is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum.[38]

Baudrillard does not present a comprehensive argument for this position with a grounding in clear definitions nor does he give us a comprehensive demonstration of where the phases of the image apply historically. Rather, he lays them out as a range of models which he illustrates by brief allusions to what he asserts are representative examples. His argument that our era has entered the phase of simulation is built up through discussions of Disneyland, nuclear weapons systems, television shows, mass media, opinion polls, IQ tests, contemporary architecture and Watergate. These discussions of the contemporary scene hover between analysis from a theoretically elaborated position and an evocation of their bizarre unreality through the metaphor of simulation.

With Baudrillard's formulation of the present as the era of the mass-like silent majorities and the simulacra, the process of attenuation of his commitment to any sort of radical political change is

37. Baudrillard, *Simulations, op. cit.*, p. 11.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

completed. He sees the demands made by subjects — for liberation, autonomy, participation, speech, the making of history with will and consciousness — as being no longer revolutionary or emancipatory attempts to assert oneself against a system that wanted to turn one into an object; rather, they serve a system which works through solicitation of the subject's self-active participation.[39] He recommends instead an abandoning of all the subject oriented values and practices in favour of allowing the implosive processes of society to complete their own logic, to reach their destiny and their limits. In place of the struggling subject we are implicitly enjoined to allow ourselves to become objects caught up by the logic of the system and be swept towards its implosive catastrophe. Baudrillard embraces and recommends the politics of a despairing and contemplative nihilism.

> . . . it would be admirable to be a nihilist if radicality still existed — as it would be admirable to be a terrorist, if death, including that of the terrorist, still had meaning.
>
> But this is where things become insoluble. For opposed to this nihilism of radicality is the system's own, the nihilism of neutralization. The system itself is also nihilist, in the sense that it has the power to reverse everything in indifference, including that which denies it.[40]

You must yield yourself up to the nihilism of the system, surrender yourself to its logic and velocity, with a backward look of regret and melancholy, but not without a hint of breathless anticipation of where it might take you.

Baudrillard and the Ambiguities of a Post-Structuralist Mode of Address

This sketch of the direction of Baudrillard's more recent work is not simply given with a view to letting its hopelessness become apparent by mere exposition — although many readers might think this a valid enough response. It has been done to provide the ground for characterizing some aspects of his mode of addressing issues of general concern and of addressing his audience. These

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108. This bears some resemblance to what has been referred to in *Arena* as 'the ideology of autonomy', see especially G. Sharp, 'Intellectuals in Transition', *op. cit.*, p. 95. However, where Baudrillard wants to totally eschew subject-oriented actions, the *Arena* position argues for a reflexive insight into how these values are formed and for a recognition of the destructive consequences of unconstrained projects of autonomy and liberation.

40. J. Baudrillard, 'On Nihilism', as quoted in (and translated by) Paul Foss, 'Despero Ergo Sum', in Frankovits ed., *Seduced and Abandoned*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

characteristics, I will argue, are typical of post-structuralism and deconstruction.

I will look, firstly, at some general characteristics of Baudrillard's mode of discussing issues which might once have been described as issues of common concern. The metaphors he uses for social processes and entities — the masses and the social as an imploding black hole, the 'code' as socio-cultural DNA — evoke the social as a vast otherness controlled by great anonymous universal forces which, by their nature, are inaccessible to conscious intervention or change. The corollary of this is that in Baudrillard's discourse there is no attempt to constitute a sense of common identity, common goals or values with this mass. His implicit stance in relation to the social and the masses is one of abstracted distanced contemplation. There is no sense of him addressing his readers in such a way as to try and constitute a *we* who share common circumstances, who might, on the basis of shared understandings and orientations, come to act in concert to change our world or to avoid a common catastrophe. This is not the abstracted, distanced perspective of positivism which objectifies in order to manipulate and control; it is an abstractedness and distancing which aestheticizes the social, making it an object to analyse, have responses to, explore the self in relation to, entertain ideas about, but in the end to remain separate from and uncommitted to. It is the relation one might have to a text rather than to a life.

The extreme point of Baudrillard's refusal to address a public with whom he identifies can be seen in his discussion of nuclear weapons and the logic of deterrence, which he wants to interpret as an example of the simulating image and as a manifestation of the code. He wants to argue that the 'balance of terror' is the 'terror of balance': the creation of a global system of such scope and extremity of consequences that 'the stakes' of traditional politics, conflict and rebellion are neutralized. The nuclear standoff is only a simulacrum of conflict concealing the fact that 'real' politics have disappeared; rather than moving relentlessly towards a real nuclear war, all nuclear powers have a common interest in perfecting a global system of control. This is why nuclear proliferation 'increases neither the chance of atomic clash nor of accident'.[41] This is because the real fallout from the bomb is the imposition of systematic control, security, censorship and self-deterrence. The whole thrust of his argument is to subsume the actual threat of massive destruction or global annihilation into a great simulacrum governed by the code.

41. Baudrillard, *Simulations, op. cit.*, p. 60.

> There is no subject of deterrence anymore, nor adversary, nor strategy — it is a planetary structure of the annihilation of stakes. Atomic war, like that of Troy, will not take place.[42]

So while the thrust of the argument is to confirm deterrence theory and deny the possibility of nuclear catastrophe, there is this paradoxical, glib academic, bet-hedging disclaimer; the Trojan war did, of course, eventually take place. Not even Baudrillard can feel absolutely confident that the logic of the code will prevail. But even in the face of this masked acknowledgement of the possibility of nuclear annihilation, he retains his abstracted perspective. Even if for understanding some of the effects of nuclear weapons on global politics his argument has some validity, it is bizarre and callous to treat the Bomb solely in terms of its being a sign organized by the code. The Bomb has a materiality and such a magnitude of human consequences that it exhausts the metaphors of semio-linguistics: can one speak of a sign which threatens to deconstruct us all?

Even in the face of this dire universal threat to the species, Baudrillard does not abandon the abstracted distanced perspective to speak of a common fate which *we* could act together to avoid. However, this is not a private sin of J. Baudrillard; rather, because of a peculiar honesty in following the logic of his position to its bizarre conclusions, he reveals in stark form a central tendency of post-structuralist and deconstructionist thought. The enterprise which holds that any system of cultural meanings can be deconstructed and which values the moment of seeing through the hold of code, structuration, closure, or 'the real', is very difficult to reconcile with the enterprise of politics: that is with the struggle to build a public realm in which there is a common basis for the discussion and interpretation of issues, and with the effort to find a basis for common actions and commitments to change in shared cultural meanings and aspirations. Derrida's dictum that 'there is nothing outside of the text' may have heuristic validity in interpreting the play of signs and mutual constitution of meaning and subject in a text. However, if this dictum is explicitly or implicitly extended to embrace the interpretation of comprehensive social practices as texts, it takes on paradoxical implications. To believe and act as though one can deconstruct a 'social text' of which one is a part and in which one has been formed, is to believe that one can deconstruct and be emancipated from the structuring framework of its meanings, concepts and categories; that is, that one can as far as possible stand outside them or stand abstracted from them.[43] I am not arguing that it is impossible to break free of the hold of

42. *Ibid.*

taken-for-granted or deeply embedded meanings or concepts; on the contrary, abstract thought, critique, the various modes of meditative and systematic reflection that the medium of writing makes possible, have always allowed varying degrees of standing outside or abstraction from the given cultural framework. However, what is distinctive about deconstruction is that instead of believing that the moment and results of abstract or theoretical insight ought to be reintegrated into or subordinated to social practice, it wishes to prolong indefinitely and extend as far as possible the moment of deconstructive seeing through. One can deconstruct the constructions of others, or deconstruct the deconstructions of others, or deconstruct one's own prior deconstructions. But by having no theory (or ethics) of how or when the moment of deconstructive seeing through should be reintegrated into shared collective practices and meanings, the dictum that 'there is nothing outside of the text', when extended to social interpretation, places one in abstraction from (and in that sense outside) that society. Texts are amenable to endless interpretations; but of life — we have only one. This truism would seem too banal to utter were it not for the spectacle of the sophisticated callousness and stunted morality of Baudrillard's discussion of nuclear weapons and the revelatory relation this bears to the anti-political character of the post-structuralist project.

However, while there is in Baudrillard's more recent work no attempt to constitute a *we* who might act about nuclear weapons or other issues, there is nonetheless implicitly, but without it being acknowledged, a group who do not share the object-like qualities of the mass. These books and essays assume a reader (their model reader[44]) who will to a high degree be an active subject, understanding and extending metaphors, picking up allusions to other texts, appreciating the ironies of the overturning of established positions, and bringing to bear their knowledge of a diverse range of theories and subject matter. Central to Baudrillard's style is a delight in turning things upside-down, 'transversalizing', seeing

43. Of course, Derrida recognizes that the language, although it is saturated with the assumptions of centredness and presence, cannot be discarded but must be used against itself and problematized. The solution is to hold the key cultural and metaphysical concepts — thing, essence, substance, God, man, is , origin, sign, etc. — 'in erasure': that is, 'to write [the] word, cross it out, and then print both the word and the deletion' (see Gayatri Spivakz, 'Preface' to *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

44. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, London, Hutchinson, 1979, especially 'Introduction', 0.2.3., Model Readers for open texts, pp. 9-10.

through, and in rupturing the conventional view of things. So, implicitly there is a group, unlike the masses, who operate as active subjects. There is an unacknowledged and undiscussed distinction between intellectuals (such as Baudrillard and his readers) on the one hand, and the inert object-like masses on the other. Even if intellectuals are said to be incapable of being subjects able to change society, they are implicitly subjects capable of active interpretation.

This contradiction between the matter and the manner of his work is indicative of a general failure of reflexive self-awareness into the nature and influence of intellectuals and of abstract thought in contemporary societies. It prevents an investigation of whether intellectuals or intellectually trained people are differently constituted as persons to other social groupings. More importantly it blinds him to a consideration of questions about the central role played by intellectuals in those institutions and processes which he sees as manifestations of the code: mass media, computers and information, nuclear weapons systems, cybernetics, industrial production. Most importantly, this failure of reflexive insight prevents an exploration of the socio-cultural conditions which generate the active mode of subjectivity characteristic of contemporary intellectuals. As such his work naturalizes and celebrates this mode of subjectivity and by implication naturalizes and remains committed to the conditions within which it is formed: the highly wrought division of mental and manual labour, and the modes of engaging and remaking the natural, social and cultural worlds that abstract intellectuality affords.

Part Two

The World of Signs and Its Interpreters

From what perspective does the world look like it does to Baudrillard and others professing or convinced by similar post-structuralist perspectives? By what processes do they find themselves seekers of emancipation by active or deconstructive interpretation but also as anti-political or contemplative observers of social reality — one which appears as a great spectacle of signs obeying logics and forces beyond the scope of human intervention? These questions ask us to explore post-structuralism as an ideology. However any account of post-structuralism as ideology would also have to account for the apparent success of this approach in characterizing and interpreting some central characteristics of the present.

The realm of cultural meanings in contemporary capitalism is indeed to a substantial degree constituted through mass media and often appears as a massive flux of images: semio-linguistics and post-structuralism have undeniably provided means of analysing such cultural meanings. So these ought to be a legitimate expectation that anyone who proposes a critique of post-structuralism as ideology should also outline an alternative account of the present which preserves or reformulates the substantive achievements of this approach.

This double task of a critique of ideology and the outlining of an alternative, if it were to be adequately developed, would be a task beyond the time and space available even if it were within my capacities; it would be, by its nature, a long-term and a collective project. As a preliminary and outline sketch I propose to take Baudrillard's four phases of the image and recast them in such a way as to reintroduce an element of social determination, especially in relation to the formation of the person, and tie this to the general characteristics of sign systems. I will also try to suggest how a radical political practice could be consistent with such an analysis.

It is worth repeating that Baudrillard's phases of the image mark stages between the poles of representation and simulation. The phases are:

1. '— it is the reflection of a basic reality'
2. '— it masks and perverts a basic realiy'
3. '— it masks the absence of a basic reality'
4. '— it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.'[45]

Phase 1: 'it is the reflection of a basic reality'

Societies in which the image is experienced as being in the representational mode vary considerably. For my purpose here, where I am trying to maintain a sense of relationship between the form of the social relations and the form of the sign system, it is necessary at least to make a distinction between primitive classless societies and pre-capitalist class societies.

In primitive societies the sign, as we find it in myth and ritual, is constituted by a metaphoric logic which fuses together the natural and the social; Levi-Strauss' analyses of totemism and myth would provide the classical examples here. These signs are arbitrary only from a perspective which through an abstract synchronic

45. Baudrillard, *Simulations, op. cit.*, p. 11.

analysis, tries to reconstruct the moment of origin of the totemic or mythic system — the moment of the fusing of a relationship between signifier and signified. From the point of view of the logic of the totemic system it does not matter whether a particular group is signified by a hawk or an eagle, a crow or a raven; anything which was sufficiently naturally distinct could serve to illuminate the social difference. However, as it functions and is experienced socially in primitive societies, the sign is not in the least arbitrary but seems always already grounded in the nature of things. One could say that the sign is not so much a reflection of reality as a part of it. Such societies, characterized by largely equalitarian reciprocial exchange and by face to face relationships organized through the kinship system, experience the order of signs, the social order and the natural order as a single undifferentiated collectively binding order. Of course, the fixity and stability of the sign is not total; examples abound of adaptation of myth and ritual to changed environmental and social circumstances or simply through the vagaries of oral transmission. Such changes are made possible by those characteristics of language emphasized by post-structuralism: the ambivalence of metaphor, the slippage of signifiers, the play of signs. However it is as if these capacities and characteristics of language and signs are systematically repressed or effaced.

In pre-modern class societies the sign system continues to represent and justify the social structure; but here the social structure is characterized by the systematic inequalities of class. The metaphoric fusion of the natural and social world is, typically, reformulated in a more abstract mode. The signs of communal identity are recast according to the principles of abstraction and hierarchy. The gods become more remote, eventually coming to stand outside the material world where they can only be approached or supplicated through the mediation of a literate priesthood or a divinely ordained ruler. The structural inequalities of class are interpreted and justified by seeing the principle of hierarchy as being in the nature of things. One could develop an argument that these principles of classification — abstraction and hierarchy — grow directly out of the medium of writing (which has behind it an impulse towards a rational and exhaustive ordering of all signs) and the temporally and spatially extended social relations which writing makes possible. A highly developed example of such a sign system would be the 'great chain of being' conception of the cosmos: here the abstract God — a *primum mobile* — stands outside its creation which takes the form of a perfect and exhaustive hierarchy in which all classes of individual things — angels, humankind, animals, plants, minerals — stand in a rank

order like links in a chain hanging from the foot of God's throne. This basic conception, dating from late pagan times and entering Europe through the Christian church, has been the dominant cosmological scheme in the West until as late as the nineteenth century. Such a sign system, constituted and maintained in the medium and social relations of literacy and the book, and sustained by class inequalities, is mediated to other social classes through organized religion's monopoly of the rituals associated with birth, death and marriage and of the rituals of seasonal and social renewal. The more concrete and particular meanings and values of the various social classes are subordinated to and framed by such an overriding cosmological schema. So, unlike the situation in primitive societies where the signs are collectively generated and commonly binding, the signs of pre-capitalist class societies are held differentially. The men of the book, whose accomplishments and practices sustain and recreate the orthodoxy, have a different access to the central cultural meanings to that of other classes and groupings whose various levels of engagement with those meanings are through the ritual practices appropriate to their station.

What both the primitive and traditional class societies have in common in relation to the mode of working of their sign systems is their mode of forming the social identity of the person. Both these sign systems could be characterized as being embodied in linguistic and ritual practices in such a way as to cast the person's identity so that he or she fits the social place and role which was, as it were, awaiting him or her. It is as if the system of cultural signs, and the ritual practices in which it is embedded, is the active agent casting the person into his or her place in society and the cosmos.

In short, to understand how an image seems to reflect a basic reality we need to go beyond semiotic or linguistic theories. We also need a social theory which places our understanding of the mode of operation of the sign system in the context of the social relations in which they are constituted and circulate, and especially in the context of the way in which cultural signs are implicated in the processes of personal formation.

Phase 2: 'it masks and perverts a basic reality

This phase corresponds to capitalist society as analysed by Marx. Here the commodity form and market relations become the universal forms for the production and circulation of goods. In the process capitalism begins to generate its own system of signs: wage, labour, price, capital, profit, etc. These signs are based in the day to day realities of working, buying and selling, but also

become theoretically elaborated in disciplines such as political economy, and become institutionally recognized in law. As this ensemble of commodity form, market social relations, and their signs becomes universal it becomes constitutive of further signs and values: individualism, abstract rights, freedom, equality, property, Bentham. However this whole ensemble of forms, relations, signs, values and ideologies characteristic of capitalism is constituted in and through abstraction: the code which converts concrete use value into abstract exchange value, and the market relations established through the impersonal medium of money and commodities. The appearance of freedom, equality, and universal rights breaks down and is contradicted by other aspects of social reality. The starkly apparent structural inequalities of the classes challenges the signs of the abstract realm drawing attention to the very different concrete points of entry into this sphere. From this perspective instead of being equal commodity owners freely entering into contracts to exchange equivalents

> he who was previously the money owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on his business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but — a tanning.[46]

This gulf between appearances throws doubt upon the representational qualities of the signs of capitalism, and Marx's enterprise was to reveal the mode of deception in their constitutive processes (commodity fetishism), their underlying reality (class exploitation) and to participate in the political processes of their overthrowing.

So the signs of this system mask and pervert a basic reality; or to be more precise, they reflect an abstract reality which masks, perverts and feeds off a more concrete level of social reality. It is true of course, as Baudrillard, Habermas and others argue, that Marx's productivist interpretation of human praxis through the concept of social labour leads him to see this more concrete level as one wherein basic needs are met by the useful qualities of things. This is indeed blind to the cultural meanings, the symbolic significance of objects, and the ritual elements of this more concrete level of life. Implicitly Marx recognized that the worker entered the abstract market sphere in order to return with the means for living at the more concrete level. In *Wage-Labour and Capital*, for instance, he asks whether the worker who spends twelve hours in toil sees his labour as a 'manifestation of his life, as life?'

> On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours labour, on the other hand,

46. K. Marx, *Capital, op. cit.*, p. 280.

> has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc., but as earnings, which brings him to the table, to the public house, into bed.[47]

For Marx the needs evoked here are the basic ones of food, drink sex and sleep. We would recognize these now (sleep perhaps excepted) as typically heavily coded, meaning laden and ritualized activities. It is in the name of these cultural meanings bound up with the elemental commitments to family and kin that people work, buy and sell. These cultural signs, meanings and commitments were formed within the relatively closed group contexts of class and parish, and by the over-arching rituals and cosmology of religious worship. This level of cultural signs in the nineteenth century capitalism described by Marx, was probably as taken-for-granted as being grounded in the natural scheme of things as that typical of primitive societies and earlier class societies.

In short, Baudrillard's second phase of the image (that which masks and perverts a basic reality) would be reformulated to recognize two different levels, one abstractly constituted, the other more concretely constituted. Marx was able to unmask the abstract level and show it as ideological, but largely took the other for granted. Paradoxically the very capacity to unmask the abstract realms of capitalist society derived from another realm of constitutively abstract practices: those of the intellectual culture which produced persons like Marx who could come to see the historical process as a whole. However, the central characteristic of marxist socialism was concern and sympathy for the actual conditions of life of the people, and its theoretical insight was put into service in their struggle for a better way of life. This central motif of the integration of theory and practice, of the abstract and more concrete levels of practice, is of course, in stark contrast to the post-structuralist mode.

Phase 3: 'it masks the absence of a basic reality'

For Baudrillard this phase comes about when the image takes the form of a simulacrum organized by the code. From the perspective being developed here it represents a heightening of the contradiction between the abstractly and more concretely constituted levels of society and culture. The fundamental form of the contradiction, between the abstract sphere of commodity exchange and the more concrete level of socio-cultural life, still exists along the lines of Marx's analysis; but it does so in massively changed circumstances. There has been a decisive break with the earlier phase of capitalism (and with all previously existing societies) as areas of socio-

47. K. Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital.*

cultural life previously constituted in a more concrete mode get drawn into the ambit of more abstract forms. This has been a consequence of that epoch making change brought about by the intersection of the intellectual culture with the sector of production.[48] This intersection has not only meant the massive expansion of productive capacity which stands behind the affluence of the consumer society, but has also meant the reconstitution of many other sectors and contexts of social and cultural life. Just to evoke some of these changes I will simply list some which have been discussed in the pages of this magazine over recent years: nuclear weapons and the threat of self-extermination which now frames the existence of the species;[49] the new technologies of computers and robotics which bring with them the prospect of a permanent sector of socially redundant unemployed, both locally and on a global scale, as a high-tech capitalism establishes a new international division of labour;[50] the recasting of the international financial system and division of labour;[51] the universal penetration of social life by the mass media, and the attuning of politics, advertising, propaganda and public spectacle to such mediation;[52] the new vistas for remaking the natural world and for the transcending of natural sexuality that genetic engineering and *in vitro* fertilization open up to us.[53] This list, far from exhaustive, is intended to conjure up the scope and depth of the changes born of practices deriving from abstract intellectuality.

This epochal transformative process has also fundamentally changed the cultural realm; it has changed the mode in which personal and colletive identity is formed, and has changed the character of the system of signs and meanings.

Let us look first at the changes in personal and collective identity formation. The penetration of society by abstract and intellectually derived technique has been underpinned by a huge increase in the

48. G. Sharp, 'A Praxis after Sunday', *Arena* 50, especially pp. 5-9.
49. J. Hinkson, 'Beyond Imagination? Responding to Nuclear War', *Arena* 60, p. 45.
50. G. Sharp 'The Right Consensus', *Arena* 66 p. 3.
D. White, 'Structural Unemployment: The Meaning of the Microprocessor', *Arena* 52, p. 42.
51. J. Hinkson, 'The Financial Crisis and the New Division of Labour', *Arena* 67, p. 2.
52. G. Gill, 'The Signs of Consumerism', *Arena* 53, p. 28.
P. James, 'Australia in the Corporate Image: The New Nationalism', *Arena* 63, p. 65.
53. D. White, 'In Vitro: Towards the Industrialization of Birth', *Arena* 58, p. 23.

number of people completing higher levels of education. More people, that is, are drawn into those extended open networks of the intellectual culture.[54] Education has been one of the ways in which large numbers of people have been lifted out of the more parochial closed patterns of social relationship and meaning. The training in thinking hypothetically and systematically about the world requires that the ego separate itself from identification with particular pre-given roles and norms of closed group life. An ego formed in this mode must become responsible for maintaining its identity in a variety of social settings and in relation to a whole range of competing beliefs and values which it will confront in the process of negotiating a life history. Following Habermas, we could call this type of self an 'ego identity'.[55]

The expansion of higher education has transformed the numbers of people formed in this mode from a small elite into a mass. People so formed identify not only with the more concrete roles and norms of family, locality, class group or even the nation, but with more abstract ones such as academic disciplines, the polity of formally equal citizens, humankind, or — at its furthest reaches — the self and others as fellow autonomous subjects. Often, as the groups with which people identify become more extended and abstract, the bonds at the more concrete levels are relaxed and attenuated; one looks back to them nostalgically as at the scenes of a period movie, or as one would through a box of old family photographs — the modern equivalent of seeing one's childhood as 'through a glass darkly'. This is reflected at the political level by the politics based on class perspectives giving way to a politics which promises, as far as possible, to maintain the conditions in which people constituted as ego-identities can make their lives with a maximum of openness of possibility and a minimum of constraint.

However, this new cultural mode of identity formation does not only extend itself through education but also — and ultimately more importantly — through the way in which the abstract intellect materialized in technology, mass media, and computers dissolves and shrinks the more concrete contexts and replaces them with more abstract ones. One brief example will have to suffice here. Take the way in which the mass media has been implicated in the consolidation of those suburban privatized life patterns which have

54. G. Sharp & D. White, 'Features of the Intellectually Trained', *Arena* 15, p. 30.
55. See J. Habermas, 'Moral Development and Ego Idenity', *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1979.

replaced those more communal ones of the industrial slums, villages and small towns. There has been a shrinking of the centre of the life-world from the community to the nuclear family, with a simultaneous expansion of the setting of that centre from the parochial boundaries of the community to a more universal national and international culture. To a large extent this mode of connection of the family to the wider social and cultural world is the abstract 'mediated' one established through the mass media. With the dissolving of the old communal contexts in which identity was formed and in which signs and meanings seemed fixed and stable, persons must reach out through the media for information, models, norms and signs in order to get the cultural material with which to construct their lives. Where Marx's worker sold his or her labour on the market in order to get the material means to live according to the taken-for-granted meanings and rituals of their group, the person of today must increasingly go to a more abstract level for cultural signs and meanings. He or she is compelled to become more like the ego-identity of the intellectual in that the person has less and less by way of taken-for-granted roles and signs to place and identify him or herself, and must increasingly develop a more general and abstract sense of self: one that stands outside particular roles, norms or signs and is responsible for constructing its own identity.

If this approach is applied to an interpretation of consumerism then we get a quite different account to that which either structuralism or post-structuralism would give. Instead of seeking for the essential character of consumerism in the logic of the sign or the code, it would place emphasis on the social conditions which constitute the subjects who seize the signs and put them together; and on the social conditions which constitute the levels of social abstraction in which signs circulate. To illustrate this I will draw on the foregoing discussion to schematically outline the cluster of conditions in which consumerism emerges. Firstly, as a background condition is the universality of the commodity form wherein the objects are produced and circulated through the abstract code of exchange value and in the impersonal social medium of the market. Here objects no longer symbolize the reciprocal social relations, rather the social character of labour is masked and there appears to be 'material relations between persons and social relations between things'.[56] This situation allows the commodity to float free of discourses on mutuality, co-operation and reciprocity, and allows it to be drawn into the individualistic, self-formative and status discourses of late capitalist society. To the background condition

56. Marx, *Capital, op. cit.*, p. 166.

of the commodity form, are added two new circumstances which must come into play before the consumerist variant of capitalism can emerge. The first is the supercharging of the productive sector by high technology and by Taylorist organizational efficiency; this stands behind the general abundance of advanced capitalism. The second is the changes to the socio-cultural form discussed above wherein the old closed group contexts are eroded and persons have to begin to self-actively construct a meaningful life-world. The combination of these circumstances means that capital has had to seek to make objects desirable by making them meaningful to people; people have a desperate need for meanings with which to make their lives. The abstract realm of the commodity, via publicity, draws upon meanings from the more concrete levels, linking objects to images of sexuality, parental love, rites of passage, the regenerative powers of nature, and even to the signs of status of the old-style classes. People, compelled into active self-formation, draw upon objects from the abstract realm plus their constructed meanings, using them to build their identities and life projects. In these circumstances objects become a highly 'arbitrary' sign system as the subjects of production and the subjects of consumption endlessly encode, decode and recode objects as they travel between the more abstract and more concrete levels.

So, what Baudrillard sees as the era (ours) when the image masks the absence of a basic reality, I am recasting in terms of a new phase of the penetration of more abstract practices into areas of culture previously constituted in a more concrete mode. This is especially significant in the area of cultural meanings where there emerges a more fluid, open and arbitrary sign system which is brought into being with the self-active, self-synthesizing mode of subjectivity demanded by the social form. This is the world in which post-structuralism has emerged as a persuasive ideology amongst intellectuals in the 'interpretative' disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. This ideology has been produced by and taken hold amongst people who are formed as 'ego identities' in the open forms of the intellectual culture, they confront a world being penetrated and transformed by abstract intellect, and are placed at a distance from its more concrete practices by the highly wrought mental/manual division of labour. They are active subjects who stand in an abstract relation to an increasingly abstract society. These circumstances are reflected in the notions of text, reader, reading and interpretation central to post-structuralism. For Roland Barthes '*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*'.[57] This activity of production is a reading which vivifies or rewrites the text; the text and reader join in a single signifying

practice where each opens and explores the virtualities of the other. Barthes speaks of this as *jouissance* or a sexual coming together. Such a conception of reading is not concerned with the exploration of common meanings, values and experiences in the group, but is concerned with an individual exploring and elaborating his or her own subjectivity; in experiencing the production of the text such readers are experiencing the production of themselves.

This has much in common with the mode of interpretation which Derrida affirms. Instead of interpretations which attempt to close or centre the play of signs in some being, presence or value such as God, Man, humanity or community, he recommends to us

> the Neitzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.[58]

Again the site of this active interpretation is a subject which celebrates the joys of the moment of release from fixed or externally imposed meaning, which enjoys dancing around those closures or centerings which would arrest the play of signs. But for all post-structuralism's and deconstruction's claims to decentering, to doing without the 'transcendental signified', they really introduce and depend upon a centering on a particular mode of subjectivity — that implied by Barthes' writerly reader or Derrida's 'active interpretation'. This is not some fundamental mode of subjectivity to be found or set free when the restricting codes, tied down signs, centerings, or other manifestations of longing for presence or origin are abolished by a deconstructive reading. Rather, it is a mode of subjectivity constituted in specifiable social and cultural forms: those abstract, open and extended forms of the intellectual culture, of the society transformed by its products, and in the relationship between intellectual and manual labour.

So, implicitly the promotion and generalizing of the post-structuralist and deconstructionist project is a commitment to the social conditions which generate and maintain its distinctive mode of subjectivity. In its naturalizing and celebrating of this mode of subjectivity, while masking its constitutive conditions, post-structuralism is an ideology with a spontaneous attraction to the social-interpretative, philosophical, literary and artistic wing of the new class of advanced techno-capitalist societies. Yet the *jouissance*

57. Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image — Music — Text*, Great Britain, Fontana, 1979, p. 157.

58. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 292.

of Barthes or the joyous affirmation of Derrida's active interpretation, as formulations of the 'peak experience' of unconstrained self-creating subjectivity, are not pleasures necessarily confined to intercourse with literary, aesthetic or philosophic texts. One could have such experiences in relation to consumerism, fashion, creative play with the home computer and its VDT and synthesizer, deconstructing and remaking one's sexual identity, even perhaps with wine and travel. The abstract society offers no end of possibilities, just so long as you can forget or remain distracted from the darker possibilities behind its glittering facade. Some of the *dramatis personae*, like Barthes and Derrida, will come to this Eden of creative subjectivity, emancipation, liberation and autonomy smirking self-importantly and absorbed in their business. Others such as the poor and the socially redundant will be either kept out of the garden or have to be content with its lesser offerings: the absorbing emptiness of television, computer games, spectator sport, and video. They will join the *hibakusha* of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the working class of the Third World free trade zones, and peoples dispossessed of their traditional ways of life, as the damned, excluded and ignored of the abstract society.

Phase 4: 'it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum'

In taking Baudrillard's phases of the image in the evolution from representation to simulation, and recasting them in terms of contradictions between the more concrete and more abstract constitutive levels of socio-cultural life, one reaches certain limits with this final phase. According to the position being outlined here the more concrete level, even though it may be shrunken, attenuated or enfeebled, is a permanent and essential level of human existence. A society and culture entirely constituted in the abstract mode is an impossibility. Yet in particular areas one can see developments and aspirations which would seem to press towards this limit. Post-structuralism and deconstruction, when their logic is pushed to its conclusion, become an ideology of transcending all prior limits of human existence. Take Derrida on the implications of the Nietzschean mode of interpretation. This mode of interpretation,

> which is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology — in other words, throughout his entire history — has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.[59]

Derrida of course understands this project of surpassing man and

humanism in terms of the realm of signs and ideas; the Nazis perhaps better understood the implications of what this project might look like if lived as a full-blooded social practice. However, in the present the surpassing of humankind, and other projects for supermen, can be seen in their materialized form in the possibilities open to us by the ability to transcend the givenness of sexuality and genetics through genetic engineering and *in vitro* fertilization techniques, in nuclear power and weapons, and in the decisions which are reshaping the global division of labour. It seems that as we approach or yearn towards the point where such projects and ideologies of the abstract society are materialized or enacted, we approach one form or another of catastrophe.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I spoke of post-structuralism as a challenge to the Left; it is so in a number of senses. Firstly, it must be challenged as a conservative ideology implicitly committed to the present division of intellectual and manual labour and current relationship between abstract intellect and other levels of socio-cultural life. Secondly, it needs to be contested by approaches and intellectual practices which challenge its determined blindness to the social and which contribute to the emergence of a revitalized Left public realm concerned with developing common understandings and values as a basis for political action and social change. Thirdly, it needs to be challenged within the Left itself, where over recent years the post-structuralist mode of concern with liberation and emancipation have been felt to be not only compatible with socialism but to be definitive of the real political issues; this has often turned the Left into the advance guard of the ideology of the abstract society.

However, if the general line of interpretation of post-structuralism which I have been developing here has anything going for it, the challenge of post-structuralism is inseparable from the challenge of the era which has produced it. The marxist concern with the conditions of the people, of analysis of the modes of exploitation and ideology, with struggle and organization, have not lost their relevance. But they must be set within an analysis and interpretation which can comprehend the changed cultural circumstances of contemporary society. If the Left is going to be able

59. *Ibid.*

to speak to people in a way which seems relevant to contemporary sensibility and is able to fire the imagination with a sense that a fundamentally different future is possible and worth struggling for, then it must be able to draw the outlines and show the directions of a practice in which the more concrete and more abstract levels might enhance and constrain one another. Ultimately the challenge to the abstract thrills of Barthian reading, Derridian deconstruction or of Baudrillardian enthralled despair lies in being able to generate a vision, a politics and a way of living which not only opposes them but which can gradually remake the conditions from which they have sprung.

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