

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (NY: Semiotext(e), 1983).

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The overview of Baudrillard's early works presented here is based on Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford University Press, 1989). Following that are my notes on Baudrillard's *Simulations*.

B's early works (*Le système des objets*; *La société de consommation*; *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*): combine semiology and Marxism. Here B is close to analyses of everyday modernist / Fordist life proposed by the French: Lefebvre, Barthes, and situationists – Debord, Vaneigem and by the Germans: Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno, etc., and in a less Marxist way by Americans: Vance Packard, David Riesman, John Kenneth Galbraith. New Left awareness of culture: as Fordism / modernism: Benjamin (art and mechanical reproduction = mass production / mass consumption); Horkheimer and Adorno (culture industry). Once again, we must avoid both Old Left reductionism and cult stud idealism (as Thomas Frank would put it). Culture (advertising, entertainment, sports, consumption itself) is neither ideology / brainwashing, nor free floating site of “contestation” and “resistance”: rather it is site of body politic formation: complex patterns and triggers of material flows: bodies can be wired / re-wired, but this is collective work that often takes a long time and is not necessarily progressive.

Baudrillard is analyzing modernist “conformist, consumerist” society of French 60s. How does the subject make sense of the objects surrounding it? Or better, how do the objects surrounding it form the desires of the subject? Objects form structures of signs w/in which the subject finds itself. These structures change rapidly (“technological society” thesis of Ellul, and others) and so political revolution is undermined, since it is based on changing production. But consumers aren't interested in production, just consumption.

Consumers must purchase a systematic array of objects regulated by a code. Such a consumption code masks the production process (here B is classically Marxist). Where B is different and interesting is his use of semiological analyses: consumers consume signs which differentiate them from other consumers. Thus B criticizes the rational ego model of consumption whereby a natural hierarchy of needs is first satisfied and then there are calculations of marginal utility for whatever is left over. For B, there's no natural needs: it's culture and signs all the way down.

Is B an idealist here? It's true that no one eats “food”, but a particular type, region, brand, of food. Thus signs are always consumed. But they're always consumed on a biological base of energy transformation from chemical processes. Now it may be true that someone would “rather starve than eat that” but that's not a purely semiological preference speaking, but a body political formation of disgust and nausea (and there are “human nature” universals here at the limit concerning food too close to shit and vomit: those gag reflexes are natural and universal). So B's isolation of signs consumption from biological consumption (or his saying that sign consumption replaces biological consumption, even if I admit that all biological consumption is significant) is idealist, and only possible in a modernist welfare state in which starvation and homelessness are socially outlawed. For Marx in the 19th C – and for many today in all the “Third Worlds” – it's fear of not meeting bodily / natural need that drives wages down – the utility of displays of homelessness.

For B, consumption is productive social activity: everyone buys into the system of signs and moves about within this system, reinforcing it with each consumption. Consumption becomes the primary social bond: shopping as fun is only a reflex of that: it's also our patriotic duty, etc. But consumers are un-organized: they are like the 19th C proletariat: unconscious of their class position.

B's third book, *For a Critique of Political Economy of the Sign*, introduces a key concept: *sign value*. K says here B is joining Veblen's “conspicuous consumption” – extended to everyone in consumer society (true enough, but only Fordist / Keynesian / modernist society makes citizenship a guarantee of entry into consumer society – plus, W Europe and N American consumer society must be seen in global context of ongoing primitive accumulation) and Saussure's differential semiology (and the critique of everyday life).

B here makes a crucial distinction between symbol and sign: symbols are unique and personal (a wedding ring), while signs are impersonal and equivalent (you can change jewelry rings at will, as you position yourself within a social code of prestige: thus wearing a particular ring at a particular time = consumption of the sign value of that ring – in relation to all other rings, but also in relation to all the other objects of your life. Thus there is a relation of the exchange value of the ring and the potential sign value you read it as having: the possibility of the “bargain.”)

For B, the subject of consumption has become rationalized and replaceable, just as the subject of abstract labor in the logic of production. Subjects of consumption are just machines for calculating the relation of exchange and sign value based on social codes. The codes come first; the subject is just the point of realization of the code. There are thus no singular subjects of

consumption; all consumers are replaceable (classic Fordist modernism). This induces a consumption anxiety, a feeling of being judged by your taste in consumption.

K criticizes the early B for his quasi-structuralism: the subject works at differentiation by active labor within sign system, but can never become aware that there is a code within which he works. Plus this code can never be reworked, sabotaged, or dropped out of, by subjects (this is true if one defines subject as consumption subject: but then the relation of consumption subject to "person" -- the potential to form other, political, subjects -- needs to be clarified, as well as the relation of "person" to body politic). All consumption can do is temporarily assuage consumption / prestige anxiety, which then quickly reappears. Thus consumption is integrative and homeostatic: it always returns the system to the starting point. In this way, K claims, B reproduces the capitalist imaginary: passive, anxious, unreflective and apolitical consumers. Also, B doesn't take into account conflicts w/in the prestige code: why singular "code" and why not plural and conflicting codes? Advertising is all about trying to induce change in the relative sign value of products. Plus, B never integrates consumption and production, thus replicating the capitalist fantasy that production comes after the expression of consumer desire, rather than showing that capitalist market forces (capital accumulation, profit, market share, manager vs share holder vs worker struggles, etc.) form the context of consumption. For while consumers look for a good ratio of exchange to sign value in the market place that confronts them, producers look to shape that very market place. It is true that organized consumers (through civil society institutions or through government in modernist forms) can try to influence the market (safety and quality standards, truth in advertising, etc.), these efforts are always playing catch-up.

B;'s middle period: the break with Marxism on the basis of Bataille and symbolic exchange: *Mirror of Production and Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

B criticizes Marx as bourgeois utilitarian, as simply wanting a better society of labor (although M really wants "freedom" beyond labor: what Kojève will criticize as the sex and sports happy animal). First, B shows M misreads primitive societies by missing the sumptuous expenditure of the rulers as the driving force of social organization (rather than as just wasting the excess after needs are met – for Bataille, it's excess all the way down). Thus capital is un-natural holding back of expenditure for re-investment, accumulation (and forced labor to meet needs imperilled by produced lack). Symbolic exchange for B is result of challenge: human expenditure and sacrifice must challenge the gods to provoke their expenditure. So the real conflict is not capitalism and socialism, but capitalism and symbolic exchange societies (and symbolic exchange practice within capitalist societies). Echoes here of DG's micropolitics.

K sees B as "Left variant of theories of post-industrial society, information society, cybernetic society or postmodern society." Here it's control of the code that regulates sign value that is more important than production. At the limit signs come to refer only to other signs, not to things. Meaning is completely semiological and serves as a cybernetic steering mechanism for social control, foreclosing any escape: the sign "new" or "revolutionary" or "subversive" is just another sign regulated by the code. K criticizes B for idealism and monotheoretical position: we need multiple theories that aim at thinking the relations of culture, politics, and economics.

"The Precession of Simulacra"

Introduction: map story. Definitions: hyperreal = production by models of a real w/o origin or reality. "The map precedes the reality." With genetic models, the real is always already reproduced innumerable times. DNA code as model of production. (This is typical cybernetic fantasy, the genealogy of which our next course will examine closely.) Simulation = reference

only w/in system of signs: equivalence, binary opposition, combinatory algebra. Simulacrum = sign that is the "origin" of the "real." Implosion = the sucking into the system of equivalence and simulation of everything that once was symbolic and real.

The Divine Irreference of Images: simulation more threatening than dissimulating or feigning, which leaves reality principle intact. Symptoms of illness. Icons, Iconoclasts and Iconolaters. Successive phase of the image (p. 11).

Rameses, or Rose-Colored Resurrection. Ethnology and the "primitive": the Indian driven back into the jungle becomes the simulation model for all primitives before ethnology. Ethnology of the civilized: analysis of society. Museums and the symbolic past. The recreation of the past.

Hyperreal and Imaginary: Disneyland and LA. Where is the real America? Disneyland is only there to conceal the fact it is the real America (it is the model for the hyperreal America of the prefabricated suburb and the historical heritage theme

park: "Colonial Williamsburg", etc.). Just as prisons are there to hide the fact of the carceral society: we willingly lock ourselves into gated communities with CCTV surveillance, around the clock security patrols, etc.

Political Incantation: Watergate was not a scandal, but only means to regenerate a moral schema for society. In fact, capital is not immoral, but amoral. It is not linked to society by a contract so that left thought could reform it by calling it to a just relation to society. Rather, capital is a monstrous attack on symbolic exchange, and hence must be responded to as a challenge.

Moebius-Spiralling Negativity: the political field of the mid to late 70s is "unhinged by simulation": the possibility of agents provocateurs can never be eliminated; it is impossible to tell what is a real event and what is only a scenario of deterrence: "trying to regenerate a moribund principle by simulated scandal." Deterrence here means homeostatic mechanism: negative feedback returning the system to equilibrium.

Strategy of the Real: Transgression and violence are less dangerous to the system than simulation, for they contest only the distribution of the real. Simulation hints that law and order themselves are only simulations. Thus all sniper rampages, theater hostage-takings, etc. are hyperreal events, are simulations, because they conform to the media script: they are planned in advance according to how they will play in the media. It was capital that first worked to establish equivalence and hence destroy reference and use value. This produces fascism at times: nostalgia for a real society of power and reference.

The End of Power: reality TV shows as aesthetic of the hyperreal. The Louds as sacrifice for mass society. This is no longer the panopticon of surveillance, but a system of deterrence where you can no longer distinguish active and passive.

Orbital and Nuclear: MAD as end of war: deterrence as neutral, implosive violence of the system of universal security which excludes any real event. (Al-queda cannot be deterred though: there is no balance of terror with them as we had with the Soviets.) The spread of the social as the deterrence of any chance: everything is planned (statistics and molarity). The stakes of the Vietnam war was really to get China into the system of peaceful co-existence. They were being tested to see if they would take the side of utility against primitive symbolic exchange. They passed the test, as did the North Vietnamese, so the US could withdraw, since the communists are even more effective in liquidating pre-capitalist structures than the West (e.g., Pol Pot). But "a war is not any the less heinous for being a mere simulacrum – the flesh suffers just the same ... What no longer exists is the adversity of the adversaries" (70).

"The Orders of Simulacra"

Counterfeit:	Renaissance	/	Classical:	natural	law	of	value	[automaton]
Production:	modern:	industrial:	commercial	law	of	value	[robot]	
Simulation:	postmodern:	code:	structural	law of value	[DNA]			

The Stucco Angel: counterfeit and fashion with bourgeois break with caste and rank, which were cruel societies of hierarchy. With Renaissance we get the liberated sign, which can counterfeit previously caste-bound prestige, which passed for "natural." Thus here signs counterfeit the natural. Stucco, the baroque, the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits.

The Automaton of the Robot: automaton always a trompe l'oeil, a first-order simulacrum, with reference to the real; the robot is a second-order simulacrum, which establishes the industrial real as what is reproduced.

The Industrial Simulacrum: Absorption of the original and the introduction of the series of indifferent repetitions: the generalized law of equivalence. Benjamin and McLuhan see technique as medium, as form and principle of a new generation of sense: reproduction is the end; there is no more end use value. Production no longer makes sense: it just makes. At this point we see the shift to generation by models, the third-order simulacrum.

The Metaphysic of the Code: a universe of structures and binary oppositions. Cybernetics, DNA, linguistics. "Digitality is its metaphysical principle (the God of Leibniz) and DNA its prophet." Again, here is B's interesting ambiguity: does he really believe this stuff? Or is he articulating the fantasies, the imaginary, of the technocrats? Social control by anticipation, simulation, and programming (111): war scenarios, leaks, polls, stock prices, economic indicators, interest rates, all linked together by feedback loops run through various power centers: Pentagon, World Bank, Federal Reserve Board ...

The Tactile and the Digital: polling and the question/answer system (the question preforms the answer because the questioned anticipate what the questioners want to hear, which itself was foreseen by the questioners). Neutralization in advance of the political: the referendum instead of reference. McLuhan and "the medium is the message." Polling and

the simulacrum of “public opinion.” The two-party system as flexible because it involves feedback in polls and elections: but then voting moves from a right to a duty: you must vote to tell the system how to adjust itself, to allow the parties to move closer to each other (132). The doubling of the towers of the WTC (135): is 9/11 then the end of postmodernism, not in the stupid right’s “see the real is still there” but as the move to empire, which pomo and its deterrence and cyberneticism can’t handle? Is empire then post-post-modern, with the real problem not Cold War deterrence, but al-Queda as the virus of the state?

The Hyperrealism of Simulation: the digital deterrence space versus the modernist police space of “raw industrial violence.” The hyperreal, etc (146 ff.)