

# *Baudrillard's Nihilism and the End of Theory*

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The key question today is how to maintain a “critical” position in the face of dramatic global transformations which seem to absorb all opposition. The failure of 1968, the decomposition of the working class and their unions, the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989 and the growing acceptance of neo-liberal thinking makes the end of this millennium a difficult time to be radical. This may not be the end of history as Fukuyama claimed, but it threatens to be the end of critique. Within this new context, radical intellectuals are now unsure of where the battle-lines are or even what kind of war they should be fighting. Yet Critical Theory has never been more necessary, for the very reason that all opposition seems to be incorporated into the system. It is now, with the apparent collapse of critique, that the curious case of Jean Baudrillard becomes relevant. Although his earlier writings rejected Marxism as not radical enough because it was always already trapped within capitalist categories, Baudrillard has been overwhelmed by the emergence of global capitalism and the demise of Marxism. In the context of this postmodern order, he has renounced all critique and, instead, opted for nihilism. Although this nihilism is extreme, it is not completely idiosyncratic<sup>1</sup> and, consequently, it usefully points to where Critical Theory went wrong. Baudrillard's later

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1. Arthur Kroker and Debra Cook, *The Postmodern Scene* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), would be examples of this nihilism. Alex Callincos' *Against Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), Christopher Norris' *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's *Postmodern Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1991), and Douglas Kellner's *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991) similarly see this nihilism as widespread.

writings demonstrate exactly what critical theorists must *not* do. His earlier writings, echoing the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, suggest ways to think against the current hegemony.

***Baudrillard's Early Period: The Critique of Industrial Capitalism***

Maintaining that Marx's critical project failed, because it did not go far enough, Baudrillard first sought to subvert industrial capitalism through a critique of the ideology of production, use and exchange value.<sup>2</sup> Despite his intentions, Marx himself uncritically employed the very concepts of labor, production and use-value which were fundamental to capitalism and therefore, supported the very order whose dissolution his writing sought. "Failing to conceive of a mode of social wealth other than that founded on labor and production, Marxism no longer furnishes in the long run a real alternative to capitalism."<sup>3</sup> For Marx, the problem with labor under capitalism was that it failed to live up to the definition provided by capitalism. The objective quantity of work put into commodities was disguised by the fetishism of the commodity, but Marx never questioned capitalism's claim that labor had an objective value. Rather, the problem was that capitalism obscured that objective value, so that workers earned less than their labor was objectively worth and were thus exploited. Baudrillard's key claim is that labor is never objective, but always culturally defined, and that turning labor into something with an objectively discernible economic value, which no one can dispute and which is 'fair', is already a crucial step in the establishment of capitalist hegemony. Critical Theory must go beyond Marx to see that claims to material objectivity are themselves part of capitalist hegemony. Once the objective productivity of labor is accepted, Critical Theory has already lost most of its theoretical leverage, conceding as obvious one of the central mechanisms by which the order is established and legitimated. Conceding that the value of labor is objective means that it is beyond political negotiation. Consequently, the objectivity of labor is a central element in capitalism's disarticulation of economics from politics.

Writing over a century later, Baudrillard was able to see beyond these

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2. Baudrillard's early period refers both to the period from the late 1960s to about the mid-1970s and includes his first four books *Les Systèmes des Objets* (Paris: Denoel, 1968); *La Société de Consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); *Pour une Critique de l'Économie Politique du Signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); and *Le Miroir de la Production* (Tournai: Casterman, 1973).

3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, tr. by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), p. 29.

concepts. In place of Marxist categories of use and exchange value, labor, production and alienation, he deployed anthropological accounts of primitive societies as a resource for the radical critique of capitalism. In particular, he employed notions of sacrifice, symbolic exchange, duel, gift, ambiguity, challenge and reversibility. In contrast to the economic categories of capitalism, and despite capitalism's claims of naturalism and inevitability, he emphasized symbolic exchanges found in gift exchange in primitive cultures as the real universal economic categories.

In contrasting the exchange systems of other cultures with capitalism, Baudrillard drew on the anthropological tradition and, in particular, the writings of Mauss<sup>4</sup> and Sahlins<sup>5</sup> concerning the gift. He highlights the gift economy in contrast to capitalism because, in the gift economy, exchanges are always symbolic and, from this, he concludes that there are, in fact, no objective systems of production and exchange but all systems of production are always symbolic. As Georges Bataille argued, there is no such thing as an economy of necessity — there is always surplus, the extent and nature of which is the result of socio-political arrangements. In addition, the symbolism of exchange means that it always represents the individual and his relations. Furthermore, in non-capitalist cultures, the gift is always a challenge which threatens the subordination of the receiver if the receiver cannot reciprocate. Therefore, the gift is always ambiguous. By contrast, in capitalist political economy, the meaningfulness of the gift (which is an expression of personal relations and contains both elements of friendship and challenge) is reduced to generality. “*All ambivalence is reduced by equivalence.*”<sup>6</sup> In place of that equivalence, Baudrillard demands the return to a symbolic economy, which allows the possibility of individualistic relations.

The anthropology of the gift provides Baudrillard with a powerful critical perspective on capitalism, because it enables him to turn capitalism's claim for the universality and priority of its categories on its head. Thus he asks: “Are we always within the capitalist mode of production? If the answer is yes, then we readily accept the classical Marxist analysis. Are we within a *later* mode, so different in its structure, in its contradictions and in its mode of revolution, that one must distinguish it radically from capitalism (while maintaining that it is always a question of a mode of production

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4. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, tr. by W. D. Hall (London: Routledge, 1990).

5. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

6. Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

which is determinant as such)? Are we, quite simply, within a mode of production at all and *have we ever been in one?*”<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard’s anthropological insights allow him to see that it is not that every other economic form is a capitalist mode of production in disguise and that the political economic categories of capitalism are universal, but rather that capitalism itself is a form of symbolic exchange — even if it denies its true nature. Instead of accepting capitalist concepts at face value, in these early writings Baudrillard situates them anthropologically. Through this contextualization, he reveals the inadequacy of the particular capitalist concepts to the reality they describe. They are partial, because they are politically motivated, thus the putatively impartial and obvious objectivity of labor becomes the exact opposite — a symbolic cultural achievement of a particular class in human history whose achievement is crucial to that class’ hegemony.

### ***Baudrillard and the Frankfurt School***

Baudrillard’s early period culminates in the radical Critical Theory of *The Mirror of Production* and, although Baudrillard does not acknowledge it, the parallels between his own critique of capitalism, the work of the Frankfurt School, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in particular, is striking. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment rejected the mimetic mythological thinking of previous cultures in favor of a scientific method.<sup>8</sup> The mythical thought of pre-capitalist societies represented the variety of nature with a pantheon of idols and gods, each of which symbolized one aspect of the natural world. These representations were obviously inadequate, inevitably excluding important aspects of their object. By contrast, science rejects representation and meaning and looks to the object as an example of statistical laws; as mere examples of a universal and, therefore as eminently interchangeable. Yet, although science demands that it has put an end to mythological and mimetic thought, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that science’s rejection of mythology is deluded. All thinking is finally mythological because thinking is always conceptual and all concepts have to represent their object. Furthermore, since concepts are mimetic, they are always inadequate to their object. There are always features which escape representation. The inescapable inadequacy of concepts to the reality they describe is the central theme of

7. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. by John Cumming (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 5

Adorno's entire philosophy and is discussed at length in his *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, critical social theorists develop their position through a continual consideration of the gap between the concept and the object, and this eternal consideration transforms both object and concept in an upward dialectical spiral of increasing self-consciousness. The object is never known immediately, but only through the mediation of concepts. Thus, for Adorno, "dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint."<sup>10</sup> Rather, dialectics or Critical Theory is only the negative process of deconstructing what is being thought. Of course, as Adorno recognized, in the end, something positive has to be reached and some standpoint adopted if anything is to be said at all, but this should only be at the end of a long process, fully conscious of the fact that this standpoint is inevitably insufficient and temporary. By contrast, scientific thinking rejects the inadequacy of the concept and demands direct access to nature. This demand for direct access is mystified, because that knowledge of nature is always mediated by concepts and, in the end, scientific thought is merely a form of mythological thought, but one which dare not speak its name.

The resemblance between Baudrillard's early writings and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emerges with particular clarity when Horkheimer and Adorno connect scientific thought with the bourgeois capitalist economy. "With the extension of the bourgeois commodity economy, the dark horizon of myth is illumined by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose cold rays the seed of the new barbarism grows to fruition."<sup>11</sup> This new barbarism is the reduction of all individuals and all individual exchanges to dead equivalence. Like the rabbits of scientific experiment, the individual in the market is a mere example of a general statistical law. As Baudrillard argues, not only is the reduction of individual exchange to a universal formula tyrannous, stifling self-expression and development, but like science, it is an illusion. "The dismissal of sacrifice by the rationality of self-preservation is exchange no less than sacrifice itself was. The identically persistent self which arises in the abrogation of sacrifice immediately becomes an unyielding, rigidified sacrificial ritual that man celebrates upon himself by opposing his consciousness to the natural

9. His introductory claim to that book can be taken as an aphorism for his entire critical method: "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), p. 5.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

context.”<sup>12</sup> Paralleling science, political economy insists that it has eliminated the spirit of the gift and washed economic exchange of any individuality. In fact, all exchanges necessarily involve the embodiment of the giver but, within the capitalist economy, giver and receiver are reduced to enslaved, undeveloping selves.

Despite Baudrillard’s failure to refer to Horkheimer and Adorno’s work, his early efforts follow a similar path. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, he criticizes capitalist categories from the viewpoint of mythological cultures. Capitalism is only one form of symbolic exchange, but one whose categories deny this symbolism, insisting on an apolitical and materialist objectivism. The dismissal of capitalism’s claims to be different, through a consideration of other cultures, strips away capitalism’s aura of objectivity, undermining the explicitly political interests which are invested in the capitalist order but are disguised by appeals to universality and objectivity.

### ***Global Capitalism and Hyperreality***

Confronted with the emergence of global capitalism, Baudrillard trades his Critical Theory in for nihilism, because he sees this postmodern capitalism as a fundamental cultural transformation. Unlike his earlier work, where capitalism was seen to be just another form of symbolic exchange, he now begins to believe global capitalism’s own self-definition. He no longer situates this form of capitalism within a historical context, but absolutizes it. He sees the emergence of hyperreality, the implosion of external reality into a series of images, as the defining feature of this transformation. “The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyper-real. The truer than true: this is simulation.”<sup>13</sup>

Hyperreality emerges when culture no longer refers to a social reality. Hyperreal culture is not grounded in a reality beyond itself; images float free from any verifying reference, becoming an un-anchored “reality.” The signifier and signified become detached, and the signifier effaces the signified. Hyperreality marks the end of representation, because representation becomes reality and, in this, differs profoundly from any previous culture. Baudrillard’s early writing already distinguished capitalism’s self-definition from the symbolic exchanges of “primitive society.” In these societies, symbolic exchanges occur in sacrifice or in gifts, which

12. Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

13. Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, tr. by Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Neislu-chowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 11.

are images of the reality they represent. In modern capitalism, this symbolism is stultified and exchanges are no longer mythically representative but rather merely mirror the objective value of what is to be exchanged. Despite the self-denials, there is an impoverished form of representation, where that representation is deadened into mere equivalence. In order to communicate this stultified representationalism of modern capitalism, Baudrillard talks of maps, doubles and mirrors, where the signifier and signified become exactly equivalent with no room for difference.

With global capitalism, a radical transformation occurs in which there is no longer any representation. The representation effaces the reality and the representation is all that remains. In place of the dull and equivalent exchange and use values of the modern period, the signifiers of postmodernity signify nothing but themselves. According to Baudrillard, this hyperreal culture is generated by television, for the images on the television screen do not have any external referents, even deadened ones. In order to describe this new hyperreal culture, Baudrillard develops an idiosyncratic lexicon of terms, which stand as metaphors for this new televisual culture.<sup>14</sup> For him, the word "scene" refers to the period of modern (mirror-stage) capitalism when representations are still linked to reality. Consequently, the scene can be interpreted. It can be compared to something else in order to point out its inadequacies. The screen replaces this scene and brings about the end of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> It is automatically decoded in the receiver's mind without any mediation. The process of reading, interpretation and internalization is abolished, and the viewer receives an unmediated message just as the pianola plays music

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14. He writes: "For information and the media are not a scene, a prospective space, or something that's performed, but a screen without depth, a tape perforated with messages and signals to which corresponds a receiver's own perforated reading." *Ibid*, p. 65.

15. Alongside the term "screen," Baudrillard deploys a whole series of words which refer to this same hyperreal phenomenon of the obliteration of the signified by the signifier. Thus, hyperreality is termed "obscene" or "obese" because it is no longer a scene but is bloated on itself. It is described as a "simulation" or "simulacrum," because these bloated images are so real and vivid, or Baudrillard refers to it as "metastasis," "code," "clone," "matrix," "hologram" or "moebius strip," because these images are utterly self-referential, reproducing themselves exactly, untroubled by external referents. Since external reality is obliterated beyond "realer than real" images, the television is free to represent the world in whatever way it chooses and no one is capable of subverting that absolute domination because no one any longer has access to the real world as a reference point. Thus, although, Baudrillard reneges upon his early connection with the Frankfurt School, his bleak political vision of hyperreal culture accords closely with the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer's writing for, in both, political cooption is all but universal while personal autonomy, self-development and, therefore, freedom are all but extinguished.

automatically without the active participation of the pianist. Today's world is one of vivid representations which, however, have nothing beyond them.

### ***Baudrillard's Terrorism***

In the light of hyperreality and our increasing domination by free-floating images, traditional forms of critique have become obsolete. Dialectical critique demonstrates the deliberate and politically motivated inadequacy of the concepts of dominant groups by pointing out the gap between the way those concepts represent social reality and the nature of that social reality, even though that social reality is itself never finally objective but always constructed. In the context of hyperreality, however, there is allegedly no social reality — even a constructed one — in which to situate hegemonic concepts and demonstrate their inadequacy. Fragmented images of the television screen, uncoupled from social reality, have become “realer than real.” There is no context outside the screen or, as Baudrillard would say, there is no scene, but only obscene images.

Since critical analysis operates by means of interpretation, at one stage removed from social reality, Critical Theory assists in the emergence of hyperreality. Academic theories are mere interpretations of a hyperreality already separated from social reality. Thus they themselves become simulacra, doubly removed from life. In the attempt to justify themselves, academic theories do not render their explanations more convincing but lose sight of the very object of study. “The frenzy to explain everything, attribute everything, footnote everything. All this becomes a fantastic encumbrance — the references all living off each other and at each other's expense. An excrescent system of interpretation develops with no relations to its object. All this comes from a headlong flight forward from the hemorrhage of objective causality.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the academy compounds the problem. Academia becomes self-referential through its need for theoretical validation and, consequently, the object (hyperreality) disappears from view. Dialectical critique never even starts to confront hyperreality but only adds to it.

As a result, Baudrillard turns his back on Critical Theory, insisting that “the dialectical stage, the critical stage is empty.”<sup>17</sup> A new method of resistance must be developed, which Baudrillard calls “terrorism” and by which he seems to mean violent political action and the taking

16. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, *op. cit.*, p.12-13.

17. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, tr. by Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), p. 161



up of arms against a sea of simulacrum. Academics, however, can wage a more sedate form of terror. "I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us."<sup>18</sup> In calling for terrorism, Baudrillard begins his aphoristic and anti-academic phase. Bryan Turner has defended this strategy and has argued that Baudrillard's difficult and fragmentary style is designed not to analyze contemporary society in a usual academic manner, but rather to communicate an understanding of that society through textual imitation.<sup>19</sup> "Baudrillard can be admired and praised for capturing this postmodern experience of flaneurism through the production of sociological fiction. . . . The disorder of the maxims thus provide a perfect simulation of the disorder of society."<sup>20</sup>

Like the simulacra Baudrillard describes, these texts have no apparent reference point, but leap from subject to subject (as viewers jump from channel to channel) and are mutually inconsistent, even incoherent. These writings are "terroristic," because they force readers to experience the stifling incoherence of a culture of simulacra. They terrorize them, forcing them to acknowledge the true nature of their culture. Through the infuriating bewilderment the later texts cause them, those readers will be driven to oppose hyperreality itself. If Baudrillard is still serious about his own political radicalness and the subversiveness of his texts, then this is the objective he pursues in his later writings.<sup>21</sup>

In the context of hyperreality, theory must no longer try to represent the object it seeks to explain and critique. That is the failure of both Foucault and Deleuze, whom Baudrillard criticizes for sustaining a traditional notion of reality. Theory must become its own reality by cutting itself off from external reality, from "its term," and making itself dizzy by turning

18. *Ibid.* p. 163.

19. Bryan Turner, 'Cruising America' in *Forget Baudrillard?* ed. by Chris Rojek, Chris and Bryan Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 154.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 154 and 157.

21. In an interview with Baudrillard, Sylvère Lotringer sums up the objective of "hyperreal" theory. "SL: 'You've cut yourself off from every system of reference, but not from referentiality. What I see you describing is not a challenge to the real but a challenge internal to theory. You don't criticize the genealogical attitude or libidinal position, you send them spinning away like tops. You wholly embrace the movement that animates them, you amplify their concepts to the maximum, pulling them into the vortex of your own dizziness. You draw them into an endless spiral which, like the treatment of myth by Levi-Strauss, leads them bit by bit to their own exhaustion.' JB: 'That's right. Thus theory is exterminated. It no longer has any term, literally. You can't find an end for it anymore.'" Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, tr. by Nicole Dufresne, Philip Beitchman, Lee Hildreth and Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), p. 131-2.

in on itself (just like hyperreality). It can no longer be interpretative, explanatory or representative as it was before hyperreality. “From that point on, theory maintains absolutely no relation with anything at all; it becomes an event in and of itself.”<sup>22</sup> Once theory becomes deliberately and consciously self-referential and autonomous, just as television images are separated from the reality which they have taken over, it becomes a useful critical tool again. In dismissing reality, theory graphically communicates to the reader a feeling of a void and thereby the dizziness which is induced by hyperreality.<sup>23</sup> In performing this un-mediated communication of hyperreality, theory becomes “suicidal, but in a good way.”<sup>24</sup> It turns on itself, but in self-destructing like a kamikaze, it aims to sink the titanic hulk of post-Fordist hyperreality. The meaning of Baudrillard’s initially obscure demand for the revenge of the object (“crystal revenge,” as he sometimes calls it) becomes clear in the light of the role he assigns to theory. Its attempt to communicate the hyperreal immediately can be described as a return to and the revenge of the object itself. “The pure object is sovereign because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it in its own trap. The crystal takes revenge.”<sup>25</sup>

In communicating hyperreality directly, Baudrillard’s later writings seek to pass the traditional sovereignty of the subject over to the object. Like hyperreality, the crystal is transparent, but it is impossible to see anything through it. It merely refracts light, so that in examining it one does not see a reality beyond it, as if it were a pane of glass, but only images of the different edges of the crystal reflected by itself. The notion of “crystal revenge” is, then, a shibboleth for all of Baudrillard’s later writings, wherein he seeks to obviate the failings of traditional critique in order to communicate hyperreality directly. He wants to allow this crystalline object to speak for itself, since any subjective intervention or interpretation merely assists the growth of this object. In a world where there is no outside, the subject is rendered powerless. Traditional critique, which seeks to undermine hegemonic ideas by demonstrating their inadequacy to the social reality they putatively describe, and which was central to Baudrillard’s early writings, become irrelevant because there is no external social reality.

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22. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-9. “If theory — or a poem, or any other kind of writing (it’s not endemic to theory) — indeed manages to implode, to constitute a concentric vortex of implosion, then there are no other effects of meaning. Theory has an immediate effect — a very material one as well — of being a void. It’s not so easy to create a void.”

24. *Ibid.*, p. 128

25. Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

### *The Self-delusion of Baudrillard's Terrorism*

For Baudrillard's later writings to be sustainable, two conditions have to be met. First, Baudrillard's terrorism — his attempt to communicate hyperreality to the reader immediately, allowing the crystal its revenge — must be theoretically coherent and possible. Second, his description of hyperreality as a unique transformation of culture, in which an external social reality is eclipsed in the vivid representations of the screen, must be an accurate account of recent developments.

The most sympathetic reading of Baudrillard's later writings is to read them as literature, as Turner and Mike Gane do.<sup>26</sup> This is a legitimate strategy so long as what is produced is literature. In other words, in demanding that he is no longer writing sociology, Baudrillard is committing himself to being judged by the equally rigorous, though different standards, which are applied to creative prose. This is where he falls into difficulties, for his later writing cannot really be said to be creative prose. They retain their academic form and still seek to provide a commentary on hyperreality. They do not open up a fragmented world, but rather stand back from that world, offering detached criticisms and generalizations about it. Baudrillard does not communicate the vertiginous flicking from one television channel to the other, but comments on the meaning of these changing images.

Like the academic he remains, Baudrillard makes claims about the general features of this culture, rather than using narrative to communicate a message, as is typical in literature. Moreover, there is no divide between Baudrillard and the narrative itself; there is no ironic use of character or detachment from the text. His writing is merely an earnest but stripped form of academic writing, which moves from *asserted* claim to claim, rather than from *sustained* claim to claim for the slow but rigorous building of an argument.<sup>27</sup> Once his obscure lexicon is deciphered, and readers realize that by "code" and "matrix" Baudrillard refers to the fact that hyperreal culture simply lives off itself, never coupling with a reality beyond itself, then his sentences become assertive and static. The only point he makes is

26. See Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 179-181. Unlike academic writing, this literature does not stand back from its subject but draws the reader imaginarily into the world it describes through the creation of a text which echoes that world.

27. Typically, he comments on rather than describes hyperreal culture: "The Father and the Mother have disappeared, not in the service of aleatory liberty of the subject, but in the service of a matrix called code. No more mother, no more father: a matrix. And it is the matrix, that of genetic code, that now infinitely 'gives birth' based on a functional mode purged of all aleatory sexuality. The subject is also gone, since identical duplication puts an end to this division." See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-7.

that television culture is hyperreal — signifiers now float free — and the only way in which this sentence communicates that point is by positing these crude metaphors of “code” and “matrix.” Stylistically, Baudrillard’s terrorism baldly states that contemporary culture is like a hologram, a code, a matrix or clone, because it is wholly self-referential but it does not actually communicate what it is like to experience this culture.

Compare this style of writing with J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* — a novel providing a very successful (and deliberately obscene) description of post-modern culture. It recognizes that culture’s bodily indulgence, and knows that it does not liberate the individual but reduces the body to a machine for pleasure, just as the car is a machine for speech. The car-crash and the sex-act are the moments when the wholly technical machineries of the car and the bodies are decomposed in an instant of pain that is transformed (for ironic effect) into one of intense pleasure for the perverts who populate the book. In communicating this new, debased ethic of bodily pleasure, where the delight in bodily mutilation parallels a correlating spiritual disfigurement, Ballard describes a questionnaire about car crashes which Vaughan, the central figure in the book, has prepared and which lists every conceivable injury: “Lastly came that group of injuries which had clearly most pre-occupied Vaughan — genital wounds caused during automobile accidents. . . . the breasts of teenage girls deformed by instrument binnacles, the partial mammoplasties of elderly housewives carried out by chromium louvres of windshield assemblies, nipples sectioned by manufacturers’ dashboard medallions; injuries to male and female genitalia caused by steering wheel shrouds, windshields during ejection, crushed door pillars, seat springs and handbrake units, cassette player instrument toggles.”<sup>28</sup> The descriptions Ballard provides of both cars and bodies are wholly technical and anatomical, emphasizing that, in this culture, both “bodyworks” are (obscenely) reduced to the same level. Against Ballard’s rich, self-developing text, Baudrillard’s writing is flat and strained. He simply breaks down his academic text into aphoristic gobblets and draws on a

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28. J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 133-4. *Crash* is used deliberately, since Baudrillard himself has referred to it as providing a commentary on postmodern culture. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-19. The most effective use of this stylistic technique in this passage is Ballard’s use of the phrase “windshield during ejection,” where the image of sexual orgasm and the lethal propulsion of passengers out of the car are superimposed. In addition, since the extensive listing of different types of injury reduces the meaning of each, Ballard is ironically able to mount a critique of a culture which sees no value in anything beyond the technical operation of sexual excitement and ejaculation, which is equivalent to a “windshield ejection.”

lexicon of dead, static metaphors. In the end, Baudrillard falls between the two stools of demanding that academic writing is inadequate to the analysis of hyperreality, but still writing according to its conventions and thereby vitiating either the academic or the literary merit of his later work. However, even if Baudrillard wanted his later writing to be read as literature and even if he had been successful in producing text which could be judged as literature, the project of this later writing would still have been irretrievably self-deluded. Even if his terrorism were a successful form of literature, it could never (as he claims) communicate hyperreality to the reader directly, for all writing is necessarily mediated; all writing is an interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Unavoidably, his terroristic writing is an interpretation of hyperreal culture, which does not obviate the necessity of interpretation, however directly it tries to communicate hyperreality.

In insisting on representing hyperreality directly, Baudrillard does not, as he claims, present a clearer idea of hyperreality but, on the contrary (and ironically), a less illuminating and less direct one. As a result of his demand to present hyperreality directly, he simply stops at the first point of the interpretive process and presents his initial assumptions as the definitive statement on contemporary culture. Thus, he does not provide a clearer insight into the true nature of televisual culture but rather obscures the role of television with an assertive and arrogant hypostatization of an immediate concept. His terrorism halts the dialectical process at its first and most inadequate initial point, before the critical process has begun. Instead of developing his concepts through a thorough immersion in "hyperreal" culture, refining his interpretation to make it more adequate to that object, Baudrillard reifies his first impressions into absolute truths. In breaking off the dialectical engagement with the actual social practices of postmodern culture, he hypostatizes his crude standpoint into "the truth."

Ironically, in trying to present hyperreality immediately, Baudrillard falls into exactly the same error for which he so effectively criticized Marx. Just as Marx failed to provide a truly radical alternative to capitalism by employing the concepts of capitalist political economy, Baudrillard's

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29. Baudrillard's demand that his later writings achieve the impossible feat of becoming non-textual text cannot be met and, in the end, replicates the same error as Artaud's failed "theater of cruelty." Artaud rejected classical bourgeois theater, which sought only to represent real life, because it thereby lost its critical power over that life. With his "theater of cruelty," Artaud insisted on going directly to the life he sought to communicate: "Restored to its absolute and terrifying proximity, the stage of cruelty will thus return me to the autarchic immediacy of my birth, my body and my speech." Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), p.190.

fragmented aphorisms are unable to provide a critical alternative to hyperreality, because they are so thoroughly embedded in and dependent on the very cultural forms they are intended to oppose. The fragmentation of Baudrillard's later writing does not serve the critical purpose for which it was intended, but rather, if it has any effect, it sensitizes the reader to the global media culture Baudrillard wanted to resist. His attempt to portray a culture in which allegedly there is no longer any reality beyond its representations, is the academic extension of that culture. Contrary to his own intentions, it is the very intellectual path he has insisted on taking, which turns its back on careful research and close critical analysis, which makes the desert of hyperreality grow. It robs the reader of any critical understanding of contemporary culture. Moreover, it denies the importance of developing alternative knowledge and understandings, which would undermine media representations of the world because it asserts that these alternative visions would always already be incorporated into hyperreality. It is not enough simply to say that television is a false reality; one must try and reconstruct a reality in which political freedom and critique are possible, even though any constructed reality must itself always be subjected to critique. Consequently, against Baudrillard, an appropriate form of academic resistance would be to insist upon even more rigorously researched and detailed work.<sup>30</sup> In particular, the dialectical method which demands the constant overhaul of concepts, whereby nothing is taken for granted, would have prevented Baudrillard from falling into the hyperbolic reification of mere assertions.

### *The Fictitiousness of Hyperreality*

In severing the dialectical process of interpretation at its first and most assertive point and in raising his most cursory impressions of television culture to a definitive analysis of that culture, Baudrillard seriously misrepresents the transformations which have occurred over the last three decades. Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality cannot be defended as an account of recent cultural transformations, although he is undoubtedly correct to point to the importance of television as a central element in contemporary culture. It is a startling development that in the last thirty years, practically everyone in the West is able to see footage of events from almost anywhere, and this footage is invariably misleading, even though it is apparently so compelling and "realistic." However, Baudrillard is wrong

30. Mike Featherstone calls for precisely this in "In Pursuit of the Postmodern: an Introduction," in *Theory, Culture and Society* 5, Nos. 2-3 (1988), p. 207.

to leap to the conclusion that reality is obliterated by the television screen.

Television does not create an entirely false reality either in its representation of the world or with its reception by viewers. Television coverage is informed by the understandings and interpretations of the society to which it broadcasts and by those who work in it. Thus, any footage is an interpretation of the world according to a particular culture and, consequently, it is necessarily limited. Programmers try to render this interpretation of the world as compelling as possible to attract viewers and to sustain their claims, but those images are always and necessarily "social"; they are the historical products of a particular culture. Then the images are not free-floating, mere simulacra but, on the contrary, concrete moves in a cultural practice. They refer not so much to the reality of the situations they portray but rather to the society to which they communicate these images, and they only make sense to viewers insofar as viewers are thoroughly embedded in that culture.

Similarly, television viewers do not regard these images as empty, referenceless and fragmentary. On the contrary, just as the creation of these images is embedded in the interpretive practice of making sense of the world, so the viewers try to interpret these images to make sense of their world. Whether the program be a soap opera or news footage, viewers interpret the images according to their cultural understandings<sup>31</sup> — although those understandings are under constant revision in order to make sense of new information. Rather than becoming the primary and prior cultural factor in contemporary society, television is embedded in and dependent upon pre-existing and historically produced understandings. Furthermore, the footage does not exist above and beyond the lives of viewers but, as the briefest autobiographical consideration will reveal, television is employed as a resource, wherein new interpretations derived from its footage are used in the renegotiation of social relations. Viewers discuss what they watch and use what they see to make sense of their own lives.

In the end, Baudrillard's discussion of hyperreality degenerates into technological determinism. As Raymond Williams has argued, technical development always presupposes a social and political context in which innovative technology is regarded as useful by particular groups, given their self-understandings. Consequently, the development and use of

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31. See, for instance, John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1984); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Culture, Media and Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980); Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), pp. 5 and 11.

any technology must always be analyzed in terms of the political realities which gave rise to it and in which it remains embedded. From this opposition to technological determinism, Williams develops a critique of cultural pessimism because, for him, the belief in technological autonomy must lead critics into political quietism and pessimism. If technology determines social development and emerges independently, then political resistance is futile. In line with his claim that any technical development is always embedded in and employed in a social context, Williams rejects this cultural and political pessimism by arguing that, since technology is always social, it cannot only be resisted but, more importantly, it is always potentially open to creative usage by opposition groups.<sup>32</sup>

Williams' insistence on the cultural embeddedness of television and opposition to technological determinism has important implications for Critical Theory in the postmodern era, and allows a re-application of Baudrillard's early critique of capitalism to this later post-Fordist period. Just as Baudrillard argued that the notion of the objectivity of labor was a central political principle for the development of capitalism, because it seemed to render the market system indisputable, so is the apparently unstoppable development of brilliant new forms of technology in post-Fordist society employed to legitimate the contemporary political economic order and obviate political discontent and debate. The fantastic development of new technologies seems to divide post-Fordist society from all other social forms, demonstrating the indisputable superiority of this society. In such an apparent technological utopia, political opposition seems to become absurd and obsolete. Yet, despite its construction as an objective, inevitable and utopian force, technology is as deeply political and cultural as any previous capitalist cultural category and, therefore, anything but inevitable and objective. Given his early writings, Baudrillard should have seen through this ideology of technology and not have been tricked into pessimism by its utopian and monolithic representation. He should have seen through the rhetoric of the objectivity of technological development, just as he saw through claims about the objectivity of the market system to see why certain groups would want to represent new forms of technology in this way.

Had he immersed himself in the actual production and consumption of new technological forms, such as television, whose practices undermine

32. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), "Culture and Technology," pp. 128-151.



the rhetoric of technological utopian determinism, it is doubtless that he would have done so. Then, just as Baudrillard claimed that capitalism was not a new political economy but only a symbolic system of exchange which dare not speak its name, so he would have seen that televisual culture, despite its technological novelty, is an unoriginal interpretative and symbolic social practice. Since these everyday practices and constructions of social reality belie official hegemonic accounts of reality, the close analysis of them offers a route to a genuinely oppositional critical position. As Piccone has argued: "With the dogma of a monolithic modernity engendering one particular self-referential cultural model no longer encumbering critical thought, it may be possible to vindicate particularity, specificity and otherness in really existing communities of people constituting their social reality through personal interaction and direct participation in most of the decisions affecting their life."<sup>33</sup> This engagement with diverse popular practices is necessary if Critical Theory is to have a voice in the post-Fordist order, but, true to the spirit of early Baudrillard (and Adorno), this engagement with popular practices must never make the error sometimes detectable in cultural studies of lapsing into a facile and uncritical populism, which automatically legitimates anything these groups choose to do.<sup>34</sup> The popular practices with which Critical Theory should engage must themselves be subjected to critique where popular constructions of reality are themselves not assumed to be correct.

In light of the necessarily interpretive nature of supposedly hyper-real culture, Baudrillard's rejection of Critical Theory becomes unnecessary and incorrect. Instead of hypostatizing his own initial interpretation of the emergence of television as a new cultural phenomenon, Baudrillard should have taken his initial interpretation as a starting point, which would have driven him to more detailed empirical research by which his own understanding would be developed dialectically. Such concrete research would have demonstrated to him the actual way in which

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33. Paul Piccone, "From the New Left to the New Populism," in *Telos* 101 (Fall, 1994), p. 189.

34. Although their work was often expressively critical and historical, The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural occasionally slipped into this kind of populism; see John Clarke, "The Skinheads and the Magical Recovery of Community," Tony Jefferson, "The Cultural Responses of the Teds" in *Resistance through Rituals*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Harper Collins, 1976). More recent examples of this facile populism in contemporary cultural studies would include, *The Adoring Audience* (London: Routledge, 1992), ed. by Lisa Lewis and Gerald Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), Harold Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (London: Routledge, 1992).

individuals conceive and construct their social reality, rather than his taking at face value commonsensical and hegemonic notions of social reality.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Baudrillard's career serves a useful and dual didactic purpose. It demonstrates the path that Critical Theory and intellectuals should not take, and points toward an effective critical stance. Consequently, although the development of Baudrillard's writing from the 1980s should be rejected, he is an important figure in reconstructing the kind of Critical Theory which might at least begin to be adequate to the emergence of a post-Fordist global order. Critical Theory cannot be a dismissive or pessimistic nihilism; it must engage with and learn from actual individuals and their social practices in order to make itself aware of wider social reality against hegemonic accounts of that reality. Being critical in the era of global capitalism requires, therefore, not taking the shibboleths of this new political-economic order seriously, but always deconstructing such assertive claims through revealing how they deliberately misrepresent social reality for explicitly political ends. The importance of Baudrillard lies in the fact that he both demonstrates the most extreme symptoms of contemporary intellectual malaise and simultaneously provides the cure for that disease. Although many other contemporary figures share the later Baudrillard's nihilism, the writing of no other individual represents both critical and pessimistic moments quite so dramatically. It is in this contradiction that the lasting importance of Baudrillard's work resides.

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35. In place of hypostatized assertions, Baudrillard might have undertaken detailed studies of the production and consumption of television, similar to those carried out by, e.g., David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); *Family Television* (London: Comedia, 1986).